

## The Fall 253

### Chapter 253: Rats and Champions

Zac wasn't overly worried about drawing the ire of Nenotheop Medhin. Part of the strength of the Medhin Royals was their armies, and even if the Emperor might be able to keep up with him using [Loamwalker], there was no way that the normal soldiers would.

After learning more about the situation he resumed heading toward the central area. Since he wasn't climbing the mountains to loot the summit palaces this time around he was making time, and in less than half a day he passed almost as many mountains as he visited the first two weeks in the hunt.

He was staying away from the mountains altogether now that he knew the situation, instead opting to run through the middle of the valleys between. The monsters were extremely densely grouped there and he also avoided other cultivators who were more likely to stay closer to the mountains.

Beasts were constantly pouring at him, and he had unceasingly swung his arm back and forth for hours. Zac guessed that he'd already killed more beasts since returning compared to the whole week down in the caves. He wasn't even able to properly stop for dinner and instead kept swinging away while eating dried jerky with his free hand.

His guess had been correct about the strength of the animals. After he'd moved this far inland the average power of the beasts was 10 levels higher compared to the edge he started at. If this trend continued then the innermost part of the hunting ground should be filled with beasts close to the bottleneck, perhaps even with a few E-Grade alphas in the mix.

Zac really wanted to go there, but he also knew that was likely where the E-Grade cultivators were stationed. He wasn't ready for that sort of confrontation, so instead he started veering toward the mountains looking for people. However, this time he was looking for people to set up alliances with rather than to gather information.

The mountains this far inside were more populated, and he quickly found a couple of cultivators, sometimes even small groups of them who stayed together to more efficiently hunt the valley beasts. Not everyone could be a one-man army who could freely roam the forests below without any worries to his life.

However, finding people that filled all the criteria wasn't quite as easy. They needed to not only be from Earth, but they also needed to be the leader of a town, unaffiliated to the New World Government, and also have a teleportation array. It was only after finding, or rather cornering, ten individuals or groups of people that he found someone who fit the bill.

It was one of the Scandinavians Zac heard about during his first visit to the New World Government, and Jonas was surprisingly enthusiastic about entering the agreement. Zac was pleasantly surprised since he had been prepared to essentially force the alliance upon people.

But it turned out there was an Incursion close by that they had a hard time keeping in check. The invading force kept growing stronger while they couldn't improve as fast. Zac simply told him to open the Teleporter for trusted people and he would come by within a week after returning.

During the next hours he managed to find three more people who fit the bill, though two of them weren't very close to any Incursions. But at least it would increase his options and open up possible locations for new Thayer Consortia branch stores.

When everyone heard that he could provide shops with both better equipment and lower prices than the System-run stores they were extremely enthusiastic. Good gear was still hard to come by since the stores in the system only provided extremely basic stuff and it was extremely hard to gain equipment-gaining quests.

But the next target he found was pretty surprising. It was one of those rat-like things that Salvation had caught and turned into Silver Soldiers. At that time Zac had thought they were something local, but now that he spotted a living one he saw that it possessed ladder positions.

Zac grew extremely curious and hurried over to catch it. The ratman possessed a dexterity-based class, and it desperately tried to dodge Zac's pursuit. It even used its tail to change direction mid-leaps, but in the end it wasn't enough to escape from [Loamwalker]. Finally, it took out its token, but Zac was prepared and threw a rock that smashed into its wrist, making it drop it.

Zac flashed over and immediately snatched the token before resuming the pursuit. A minute later he had cornered the ratman against a cliff wall, and when it saw there was no escape it looked at him with fear. It didn't say anything, but instead frantically gestured at Zac, but Zac had no idea what it was trying to convey.

"What are you doing? Can you speak?" Zac asked.

"Oh, you're one of the ones gifted with the language skills," the ratman said with a decidedly feminine voice. "Please don't kill me, your ladder position is so high, I won't make a difference. I have people relying on me back home."

"I won't kill you," Zac said. "But I am curious where home is. I haven't seen your kind before, and as far as I can tell there are only participants from two worlds."

"I am from the world with different species. Ishiate, humans, and Zhix," the ratman quickly said. "And I know who you are. You're the human champion of our world, the Super Brother-Man"

"How do you know that?" Zac asked.

"Because we met the other species in the tutorial. We also got a lot of them spawning with us afterward, but most of them are dead now..." she said. "I know about all the ladders."

Zac frowned as he looked at the fidgeting humanoid in front of him. It looked like the mystery of the missing people could be explained through this thing. But what did she mean by most being dead?

"Did your kind kill the humans?" Zac said as he let some of his aura leak out.

"No! We have lost most of our people as well! It's the Incursion! Those crazy golems fill our tunnels and towns with magma, killing us by the millions sometimes," she quickly said.

"Explain," Zac said with a frown.

“Our kinds have lived underground before the integration. We’ve done so for thousands of years. This hunt is the first time I see the sky,” she said and quickly explained her origin.

Apparently, they truly were ratmen like Zac had initially expected. But they weren’t always burrowers in their homeworld. A long time ago their sun started heating up, making life on the surface almost impossible. Decade by decade it just got worse, and it was quickly becoming a mass extinction scenario.

First, they started to move their cities into caverns so that the mountains could shield them from the heat, but soon that wasn’t enough. They kept burrowing deeper and deeper into their planet to escape, to the point that they soon were tens of kilometers below the surface. Their bodies changed to accommodate this life, and they soon shed their fur and gained excellent night vision.

The integration was somewhat of a relief for them, because the heat from the sun had kept creeping further and further down through the tunnels, and they could only dig so far before heat started rising from below as well. By the point that the integration took place less than fifty million ratmen remained alive, and they had become a minority in their own cavernous cities.

Chaos had taken hold of the underworld, with the Zhix essentially going to war with the other species. But soon it was all moot due to the Incursion. It contained some sort of rockmen, though not the ones that assaulted Port Atwood it seemed. They all possess fire-related classes and were comfortable living underground.

For the first months, the rockmen passively defended their territory as they stripped the ground of its resources, turning into pretty lucrative hunting targets. They gave far better rewards than killing the various beasts that lived in the underground cave-systems. Killing and looting a rockman as it returned to deposit what it had mined would yield an enormous profit. No one had been interested in closing the incursion, and they only realized their mistake too late.

The fire-golems hadn’t been just mining about, but they had also been secretly digging massive tunnels all the way down to enormous pockets of lava. One day the whole world rumbled as the golems unleashed the lava upon the underground cities, causing massive casualties.

Now all four species were desperately fighting to both close the Incursion, but the lava had somehow empowered the golems, making the battle a losing one. Even now the remaining populations underground were desperately battling the golems so that they wouldn’t be able to keep building those tunnels and lead even more lava toward them.

Zac was shocked that such a thing had taken place without anyone on the surface having any idea. He was also surprised to hear that both Joker and Enigma were people from the underground, and were the leaders of the human resistance. They had been consistently at the top of the ladders since the start, but no one had known their identities until now.

But they weren’t the only ones on the ladder. It turned out that the subterranean humans and ishiate were heavily overrepresented on the Wealth Ladder. Greed, Little Treasure and Smaug were all people from the underworld as well.

“Why haven’t you built any Teleportation Arrays?” Zac couldn’t help asking. “It would allow you to flee up to the surface.”

"We have, but we've never seen any arrays apart from our own. Now that I have a better picture of the situation I think that either the distance is too long or that something is blocking us. We are surrounded by pockets of Nexus Crystals and other heavy elements we haven't seen before, perhaps that interferes somehow," she said with a shake of her head.

Zac's eyes widened and he couldn't help but feel some greed. It sounded like the underground was just a treasure trove waiting to be looted. There was also an incursion down there that needed to be closed.

"Hmm... I own a mine on the surface. I will see how far down it reaches, and place a teleportation array as far down as possible. Perhaps I will be able to reach you that way," Zac finally said. "Accept the alliance, and you will see if it works within a week after this is over."

"You're letting me go?" she hesitantly said as she quickly accepted the prompt for the alliance.

"I merely wanted to speak with you from the start, but when people see my ladder positions they try to flee or crush their tokens. So I have to be a bit forceful, but I am only looking for allies right now. The Incursions have killed enough of our people. The situation on the surface isn't much better than underground. But we will strike back as soon as this trial is over," Zac said.

She quickly nodded in agreement.

"I am Justa, I hope I will meet you again," she said as Zac started to walk away.

Zac nodded at her before he resumed his journey. He was pretty surprised there being a fourth race on Earth, but he already knew it was a possibility since Julia told him about the missing people all those months ago. In fact, the situation might be a big opportunity for Port Atwood. If he managed to connect with the underground there was a fortune to be made.

They were clearly loaded with Crystals and precious metals underground, but they were lacking in many other things. If he could destroy the Incursion he could capitalize on the wealth, and also work as the connection between the above-ground and the underworld. He could probably make a fortune in just transportation fees.

He resumed his relentless carnage in the valleys as he moved toward the next mountain, and he soon found himself back in his routine. As he searched for allies he also encountered a few of the roving Medhin squads, but they were either quickly killed or sent back to their homeworld depending on how they acted.

Many of them had tried to quickly send off various skills into the air, and Zac guessed that the Emperor had ordered them to quickly share their location if they found him or other important targets. But every action in that direction was met with a swift and decisive swing of the axe, quickly killing them.

However, the monotony of his grind didn't last forever. Suddenly a shape barreled toward him from the forest crowns when he was in the middle of a valley. It was the first time he'd seen a cultivator this far into the woods, with most staying close to the mountains so that they had a venue of retreat.

Zac frowned the incoming man, but since his danger sense didn't give any signals he held off on attacking. However, he did activate both his physical and mental defensive skills to prepare for anything. He also activated [Inquisitive Eye], and while the information he received was pretty sparse it was enough to identify this stranger.

It seemed that Beruv Ylvas had some business with him.