

## The Fall 255

### Chapter 255: The E-Grade

Since the two had agreed to work together provisionally the slightly tense situation had abated somewhat at least. Zac chose to not reactivate his defensive skill, though he still kept [Mental Fortress] active. However, there was one issue that was weighing on Zac as he looked at the slightly wretched form of the Berum champion.

"I am sorry, but your current condition is a bit... Will you even be able to fight like you are now?" Zac probed.

The man truly looked worse for the wear, and he didn't inspire much confidence as a potential combat partner.

"I know my shape does not inspire much confidence at the moment. Repubat injured me in a last desperate assault, and the attack was filled with his Dao. That attack weakened me and drastically slowed my natural healing," Ylvas said with a slightly helpless shake of his head.

Zac nodded knowingly since he had personally been on the receiving end of such an attack; the poison wound from the Corpse Lord. That wound had refused to heal no matter how many pills he ate. Dao wounds were simply far harder to heal, and if that was what ailed Beruv Ylvas their plan might be doomed before they even started.

"However, I have already pushed out the foreign Dao from my body, and my body is currently rapidly healing. My plan is for us to assault the Emperor's mountain on the last day after I've completely healed. Hopefully, we would be able to thin out his forces by hunting the roving squads until then. That way we would weaken their side while gathering information," Ylvas quickly added after seeing Zac's troubled face.

"Sounds good," Zac agreed.

If what Ylvas said was true about his wound then Zac would be able to observe a rapid restoration during the next day. If he still looked wretched at that point then he was lying about his condition. Waiting a few days to assault Nenotheop would also allow him to focus on his goal to hunt beasts and find more potential allies.

"But one condition. I am looking for people from my world to ally with. You can't kill them," Zac added.

"I have no interest in fighting them, especially not in my current condition," Ylvas agreed without hesitation. "Do you think they would be amenable to working with us?"

"I doubt it to be honest," Zac admitted. "I only have a few friends strong enough that they could help out. In general, our world is far more splintered than yours seem to be. In fact, when we find people you should stay out of sight so no rumors of us working together have a chance to spread."

"Agreed," Ylvas nodded. "I have to say I am a bit surprised you still are looking for allies when you're the strongest human on your planet. I would have expected them to approach you by now."

"Well, it's a bit complicated," Zac said with a sigh. "For one I got randomized to an island in some remote corner of our planet. The only way for me to find other people is to use my Teleportation array, and no

one keeps their arrays public when the world is in chaos. There have also been some false rumors about me floating about."

"I pray you will be able to unify your world quickly, Mr. Atwood. I have seen the aftermath of those you call the Dominators in this hunt. They are bloodthirsty and even stronger than the Medhin Clan. You will need many allies to bring them down," Ylvas said with a serious face as he started walking toward the central area.

Zac only nodded and followed in tow. Since Ylvas was hurt he avoided battle as much as possible, leaving the task of clearing a path to Zac. Since Zac's goal was to grind beasts he didn't mind, and he soon was back to his routine of clearing out beasts by the dozen.

However, since a stranger was traveling with him he held back his power to a pretty large degree. He didn't use [Loamwalker], and the length of the fractal edge he displayed was only three meters long. He didn't even launch it at packs, not wanting to provide the intelligence that he could use ranged attacks. Finally, he refrained from using any Dao, not that it was really needed in any case against some random beasts.

It might have been overkill, but months of listening to tales of betrayal from Ogras it was pretty much by instinct that he tried to avoid leak any critical information about himself. Ylvas did not speak much either, apart from sometimes making some random conversation.

It turned out that the planet of Berum wasn't completely devoid of Cosmic Energy before the integration in contrast to Earth. Their world had been essentially medieval, and there had been a few people who had the 'Gift'. It wasn't nearly as pronounced as now that the world was integrated, but those with the Gift could be a few times stronger than normal people.

Beruv Ylvas was one of these people, and it seemed he had been some sort of general or royal protector in their old world, though it seemed he was unaffiliated now. Zac didn't probe into that subject though since it seemed a bit delicate. Ylvas had started at level 23, and he received his class inside the Tutorial after only two days.

The reason Ylvas grew so strong was a mix of reasons. He had a headstart, and since he already was an experienced warrior he underwent very hard missions in the tutorial. He had then distinguished himself in the quickly escalating wars against the Medhin Empire, and he quickly became a symbol of the resistance.

Many had voluntarily provided him with treasures such as attribute fruits or Nexus Crystals in hopes that he would get powerful enough to defeat the Medhin Emperor. The world of Berum had celebrated in the streets when they learned that he was the first warrior to pass the bottleneck, which was the first step in resisting the monstrously powerful royals.

"So, what's the difference between E-Grade and F-Grade?" Zac suddenly asked after a bit.

It was a subject he was pretty interested in, especially now that he was closing in on the bottleneck himself. He actually knew less about the E-Grade compared to the D-Grade, since he at least knew that you formed a Core at that stage. He had Asked Alyn about it, but she had refused to talk about the subject, citing that one shouldn't get ahead of oneself.

"Hmm... Well, most importantly you get far more attributes per level," Ylvas said after mulling it over. "I gain almost ten times the attributes per level now."

Zac already knew that the E-Grade provided much larger gains per level, but he was still shocked by the sheer number of attributes. It was no wonder that he had such trouble with Inevitability. Even if the Dominator only had an uncommon class he would have gained over 1500 attributes between the levels 75 and 100.

He finally understood what Ogras meant when he said that the low tiered Titles that gave flat boosts would be mostly useless at the end of E-Grade. Even with his huge number of Titles, his accumulated bonus flat attributes were only worth something like 5 levels in the E-Grade.

"But leveling is harder," Ylvas added with a sigh.

"Well, hasn't that been the case since the start?" Zac asked as he dragged himself out of his musings. "Every level requires more Cosmic Energy."

"It's not only that," Ylvas said with a shake of his head. "To gain a level now it's not enough to gather up enough Cosmic Energy through kills or cultivation. You also need to break open a Node in your body."

"A node?" Zac asked, but suddenly remembered the mention in the introduction to formations.

It had said that minor nodes existed in the body, helping the two major nodes which were the Spirit Gate and the Cosmic Core. It hadn't explained exactly what they were though, only mentioning that they contained power.

"It is like a mini-bottleneck. There are spots all through your pathways that need to be awakened, and each node gives you a level. Every time that you break open a node it feels like you break a chain shackling you. Cosmic Energy flows smoother through your pathways, and your body feels lighter," Ylvas continued. "From what I've gathered there are 75 ordinary Nodes, but also a few hidden ones."

"Hidden?" Zac asked with interest, even turning over toward Ylvas while he kept swinging to mow down beasts in front of them.

"Yes, apparently it's special nodes that do not give levels but instead great increases in power. The truly gifted can sometimes open one, or even a few. But it's not needed to evolve to the next stage," Ylvas continued. "As to the method to find and open these hidden nodes I have no idea."

"So they give free attributes like titles?" Zac asked.

"No, from what I understand they give things that are harder to quantify. One might make your sight and reaction far better. Another makes you more in tune with the Dao. That's just examples I've made up myself though, the Tutorial Pixies didn't give any information, and I couldn't afford information about those things," Ylvas explained. "It also seems that different people have different hidden nodes."

"How come?" Zac asked confused.

"Bloodlines and constitution," Ylvas said. "This is something that does not apply to most people. But some clans and races have special bloodlines, and these bloodlines may contain special hidden nodes that give specific powers. Other people have somehow gained special constitutions that have special

Nodes. A fire constitution might have a hidden node that helps the cultivator come in tune with flames for example, or even form it within one's body naturally."

Zac nodded thoughtfully. The talk of bloodlines made his mind turn toward his own heritage. At first look it might seem pretty normal, but in truth it was anything but. His mother was a lofty Technocrat, and such a group might possess special bloodlines.

There was also his newly gained Draugr heritage, and such a species might very well have some hidden nodes to help with Miasmic Cultivation. That would explain their superior handling of the death-attuned energy. Zac's heartbeat sped up in anticipation, but he quickly cooled his mind.

Even if he might possess special nodes he had no idea how to access them. He had no connection with the Technocrats, and he was afraid to even try to contact them as things were now. If they found out about the thing inside Kenzie it might lead to untold troubles for her, so he even prayed that their existence had been forgotten by their mother and her people.

It was the same with the Draugr, and he was a bit leery about that as well after hearing Ylvas speculations regarding Karmic Links. What if the Draugr woman did not act out of benevolence, but for very different reasons? Planting those runes inside his head might be a way to form a Karmic Link, which would allow her to find the splinter from the [Heart of Oblivion].

She had mentioned that he walked on the path of oblivion, which indicated that she was familiar with the [Heart of Oblivion]. And he wouldn't be taken to her place if she had no connection to a splinter since all the other visions were connected to the [Heart of Oblivion]. Perhaps she was collecting splinters for herself.

But he would definitely look into these hidden Nodes when he got back since he had other avenues to find information. There were Brazla and the inheritances, both prime sources for such information. Perhaps it would be possible to buy a dossier about common hidden nodes through Calrin as well.

"So the max level for E-Grade is level 150 then?" Zac asked after he had digested the information.

"Yes, that's correct," Ylvas confirmed. "Every node is harder to open though, and from what I've understood most cultivators simply do not have the talent to open up all 75 of them. The majority get stuck on the road of breaking open the nodes even before reaching the real bottleneck of forming a Cultivator's Core."

After asking a bit more he learned that the method to open the nodes was to grind them down with the help of one's cultivation technique and Dao. This made Zac frown with worry, since he simply had no cultivation manual to utilize, and it seemed the Dao alone wouldn't work.

Of course, there were other ways as well. Some pills and treasures could be utilized. But they often came with side effects and were generally only used when you were right at the end and just needed a final push to get to 75 nodes.

Zac frowned when he learned of the different ways to level up. The pills and treasures that could open up Nodes would likely not be too easy to come by, and such treasures usually only worked once like the Fruit of Ascension. Was there truly no way for a mortal to advance without the help of treasures

though? He knew that the path of progression for mortals was harder, but it shouldn't be closed-off like that.

"Is there truly no other way to open up the nodes?" Zac couldn't help asking.

"Well, there is one more way," Ylvas answered after some hesitation. "But it is a bit suicidal."