

## The Fall 256

### Chapter 256: Pits and Tracks

Suicidal wasn't really what Zac wanted to hear, but he internally sighed and indicated for Ylvas to explain what he meant.

"From what I understand you can brute-force the nodes as well. That's what some try when they are all out of options. You can see every level as an empty glass. When you cultivate or kill enemies you fill the glass with water, and you can keep doing this until it is filled," Ylvas began.

Zac nodded since the explanation was pretty much the same as how he imagined it, though he rather saw it as an experience bar from a video game. When the bar was filled up he would need to level up. Otherwise, he wouldn't gain any more experience.

"When the glass is full of water you need to open up another node, in other words get another glass to fill. Until you do the water will just spill over the edge and not stay with you. Until you break through the cosmic energy will dissipate out from your body.

"But you can also forcibly trap the energy inside your body until the accumulated energy burst the Node right open by force. However, using that method is to dance with death. The more nodes you open the more energy you need, and your body might simply not be able to handle it. The glass of water would shatter from getting too much water crammed into it. In other words, your body would explode.

"And even if you succeed your body will be severely wounded, and you will need to recuperate for a long time afterward. If you include the recovery period it's likely faster to just be patient and slowly grind the Node open with your cultivation," Ylvas added with a shake of his head. "Besides, you would need to kill an ungodly amount of beasts or waste a massive wealth on crystals to accumulate enough energy to force open the nodes, far more than just filling up the glass."

Zac shook his head when he understood how the last method worked. It seemed inferior to the others, working more or paying a fortune for worse results. It looked like the difference between a mortal and Cultivator would start to make itself truly known in E-Grade. Zac wouldn't be surprised if it only got worse on the higher grades as well. He really needed to figure out a way to become a cultivator himself.

But he also had to say that he felt he was pretty suited for such a method. Not only was his body extremely sturdy due to his high Endurance and Vitality, but he also had another important advantage. His body had been tempered by far worse conditions not once, but twice, before.

First was when he jumped into the Cosmic Water and ate the Fruit of Ascension, his body had been ripped to shreds and reformed countless times by the two energies within his body. The second time was when his Duplicity core was formed from killing far too many zombies. That time his body was instead ravaged by life- and death-attuned energy.

Hopefully, those two harrowing experiences would help him out as he brute-forced his nodes open because he did not see many alternatives for him to advance in the future.

The two kept moving through the forests toward the area where the Berum forces were stationed. Apparently, they were spread out and hidden in caves on four different mountains. The resistance

leader had also luckily mapped out the areas with both the emperor and where the two Dominators had been seen recently.

The emperor had set up camp right in the core, claiming a handful of mountains as his own. The two Dominators seemed to move around a bit more haphazardly, though they stayed in the same general area. The two forces had also avoided each other until now, which Zac and Ylvas could explain now that they had a better picture of the situation. In a sense, they were part of the same force.

The only reason that Zac didn't turn away then and there was the fact that the Dominators didn't seem to be completely harmonious with the Medhin Empire. While the Dominators avoided the royals Ylvas seemed to be under the impression that they killed even more Medhin soldiers than they killed people from any other force. Perhaps things were a bit cut-throat between the various factions under the Great Redeemer.

They weren't in a hurry to head right over though since Ylvas was still hurt and they needed information, so they stayed a decent distance away from the mountain grouping that the Medhin army controlled. Zac spent most of the day hunting beasts apart from when they went looking Medhin squads.

Everything went according to plan, and Zac even made two new alliances thanks to Ylvas' map and his scouting skills. However, things took a bad turn after catching a Medhin squad.

"What did you say?" Zac said as he lifted the final living soldier by his throat in anger.

"Crown Prince Vasidas has captured the woman called Thea Marshall, and she is now held by the side of the great Emperor Nenotheop. The Emperor promises she is untouched and unspoiled, and that she will be released upon the forfeiture of your ladder position. This offer only lasts until 12 hours before the hunt ends, at which point Thea will be executed," the soldier wheezed out, clearly having been forced to memorize that exact speech.

Zac's thoughts were in chaos and he blankly stared ahead, unsure of what he should do. Suddenly a white flash went past him and the head of the captured soldier fell to the ground with a thump. Zac frowned and looked over at Ylvas who had already sheathed the thin rapier that hung by his side.

"I feared he was trying to stall for time to announce our whereabouts," Ylvas quickly explained when he saw Zac's displeasure.

Zac wasn't too sure about that motivation, but he wouldn't make a big deal about it. He understood why Ylvas wanted the captive to stop talking, and Zac honestly wasn't sure what he should do at this point.

"Is she your ally?" Ylvas said as he looked over at Zac.

"Yeah," Zac simply answered with a somber nod.

He couldn't but help sigh in defeat. This very situation was the reason why he had struggled so hard to find his sister as quickly as possible. The worst thing was that he couldn't comply even if he wanted due to the splinter hidden away in his brain. He could give his whole Cosmos Sack to the emperor and still maintain his position, and the Emperor probably wouldn't believe his excuses.

He honestly would have been happy to dump the [Heart of Oblivion] on the old emperor, especially if it helped save Thea. But now it had caused even more trouble for him instead. It truly was a cursed object.

"You cannot make any deals with the Medhin. Both the Emperor and Vasidas will turn on you the minute they have what they want," Ylvas quickly said. "They barely consider anyone human, apart from their own family members."

"I know," Zac said. "But it still makes our job harder."

"I don't think it changes things. The emperor must keep her alive to lure you in, but we can simply pretend you don't know about the situation. We'll keep hunting squads and weaken their forces," Ylvas said.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea anymore," Zac said. "If certain squads start dropping now they might realize someone is coming for them, losing our small element of surprise. It would give our position away."

"Fair enough," Ylvas said.

"Thea is one of the three strongest cultivators of our world," Zac slowly said. "Freeing her would also bolster our forces. I will quickly set her free first while you occupy the emperor. After that, I'll hit the personal guard as planned."

Beruv Ylvas seemed to consider the options for a bit until he slowly nodded.

"That works as well. However, you must hurry. I am not a match against Nenothep in an even fight, and if he's empowered by his personal guard I will not even last for thirty seconds. You quickly need to dispatch the personal guard and help me lessen the burden or I will fall," Ylvas said.

"Agreed," Zac said.

It truly seemed that there was no getting off this train now. The Emperor and his son had forced his hand. Anger was starting to build up inside him as he kept killing the beasts around them, but he forced himself to keep calm. He couldn't do something hotheaded that risked both the operation and Thea's life at this juncture.

So he tried to maintain his calm as the two went back to traveling between the mountains to look for allies and beasts. But an odd sight suddenly entered their eyes. As they traveled they spotted a huge pit in front of them. At first, Zac assumed someone had dug a trap for the beasts.

However, as soon as they walked over they could quickly discount that possibility. While the pit was over ten meters deep there was no evidence suggesting that they had found a trap. There were no spikes in the bottom, and the walls weren't sheer so even a normal human would be able to simply walk out of the pit.

The two kept walking and after thirty more minutes they had lost count of how many pits they'd seen. Both were completely befuddled at this point, and it even started to make them a bit uncomfortable. They truly couldn't understand what was going on, and it almost felt like they were walking into a trap somehow.

"Animals?" Zac finally ventured with an unsure voice. "Like rats or moles."

"No, these are man-made," Ylvas said. "They are simple holes go straight down, there's no burrows or tunnels either so they would serve no purpose for shelter. But I do not understand why someone would dig so many holes. Burying array flags? But then the holes should be filled and hidden afterward..."

"Tracks over here," Ylvas suddenly said as he looked at the ground. "Some huge bugger by the size of the footprints, weighing at least 150 kilos, likely more."

Zac readied his weapons as the two silently followed the footprints for another fifteen minutes. Luckily due to the size of the one who left the prints they had no problem following them even if Ylvas whispered that they were a few hours old.

Oddly enough it didn't lead toward a mountain, but rather straight into the core of a large forest in an extra-wide valley, and weirder still was that there were no animals around. Since they had entered the zone with the pits there had been fewer and fewer beasts. Zac started to worry that one of the Dominators had moved its camp and scared away all the wildlife.

Suddenly they heard a thundering sound from the distance, and both of them quickly got ready for battle. But they soon realized the noise was actually snoring, and they speechlessly looked at each other. Zac immediately guessed who it was and he wryly smiled as they followed the tracks until they looked at a shoddily camouflaged camp.

Someone had simply broken off a few smaller trees and put them in a circle around a clearing. But the cover wasn't high enough the two of them could easily see the ramshackle structure in the middle. Two enormous feet were sticking out of a much too small cover made out of sticks, and the thundering snoring came from the man inside.

"Stay here, for now. I know who this is. He's an ally, but a bit special. He is also quite strong, so if we can get his help we will have a great array breaker on our side," Zac said as he started to approach the crudely built tent.

"Billy, are you awake?" Zac said as he poked Billy's feet with a stick he picked up. "It's me, Zachary. The Super Brother Man."

There snores continued for a while until they abruptly stopped. The next moment Billy rose from his slumber, causing the whole campsite to collapse in splinters and broken twigs.

"WHO WOKE BILLY?" Billy growled as his eyes wildly looked about.

In his hand was the huge club he'd seen him wear before, looking like a tree trunk with an enormous cranium stuck at the end.

"It's me, Billy. Zachary, the Super Brother-Man," Zac tentatively said as he threw away his poking stick.

"Oh, it's you," Billy said with a snort after he spotted Zac. "I am mad at you."