Chapter 352: The Three Paths

The seconds passed but the darkness of true death never arrived, forcing Zac to finally look up to see what was going on. The cyborg still loomed above them like a mountain, completely unmoving. But the terrorizing aura it emitted up till now was gone, making the thing seem like a hollow shell.

"Is it dead? What did you do?" Ogras soon ventured with a weak voice, also realizing something was up.

"I didn't do anything," Zac croaked, confusion filling his mind.

He wasn't sure what to do since he hadn't received a shred of cosmic energy, something that usually entailed that his enemy was still alive. He was afraid that any sudden action would rekindle the life of the thing, which would end with their death without a doubt. Ogras didn't have any such compunctions as a blast of shadows hit the cyborg right in its head.

Zac groaned inwardly as he scrambled for anything to use to protect them in case it responded, but the hulking humanoid simply toppled over. It slammed into the ground with a thud that launched Zac a few centimeters up into the air, but that was it. His body was wracked with pain but he still lunged at the humanoid, putting it into one of his Cosmos Sacks.

The demon sighed in relief as he immediately took out a handful of array disks before eating a healing pill. Zac followed suit, and he also took out two E-Grade Miasma Crystals. He still didn't want to transform into his human form, just in case some scanning device remained in the area. The Nexus Hub would only be blocked for a couple of more minutes, after all.

Normally he would have completed a sweep to look for such a thing, but there was simply no way. His right arm was broken in at least 5 different places, and most of his ribs on the side that tanked the last punch were broken as well. Luckily he didn't need his organs in his current form. Otherwise he would likely have been in a far more critical situation.

Neither of the two spoke for over thirty minutes, both focusing on restoring themselves from their critical states. Thankfully the battle against the other Technocrats was over, and there was no movement at all in the area.

"What the hell is going on?" Zac finally muttered with incredulity, still not believing he had survived that thing.

"Perhaps it ran out of lifeforce? Or perhaps the Heavens wouldn't allow for its continued existence," Ogras ventured.

"How was that thing even allowed though the Incursion in the first place? High Tech was supposed to be confiscated?" Zac complained, still rattled from being so close to death.

"Heaven's rules have always been negotiable. If the cost outweighs the benefits it will usually back down. The Technocrats might have directly paid for the Ruthless Heaven's to look the other way. Or they might have paid by hiding the seed from Heaven's Eyes. Either way, bringing a thing like this through the Nexus Hub would no doubt bankrupt a clan like Azh'Rezak," Ogras said with a shake of his head.

Zac slowly nodded, suddenly remembering how Greatest was able to keep the System at bay to allow him to have a conversation. Besides, while the Cyborg was closing in on D-Grade power by the end it didn't start out that way. Its first attack could conceivably come from a peak F-grade being if it was using its life-force to empower its strike.

Perhaps the machine or parasite that was put inside the Foreman was just peak F-Grade at the start, but rapidly pushed the host to greater heights by draining its life force or something. It would explain why it only lasted less than a minute before shutting down.

"A hybrid of the Dao of Technology and Cosmic Energy," Ogras muttered with a raspy voice, echoing Zac's thoughts. "It's was not a true fusion, but it's not too far off. These heretics are something else. Perhaps they can only keep such a thing alive for a few strikes, but it is still a terrifying accomplishment."

Zac nodded in agreement, but the small movement made him grimace in pain. It was truly a scary thing put inside someone. There likely were no more than 5 people on Earth, including the invaders, who would be able to survive that thing's onslaught. The two of them would have turned into mush if he didn't have [Immutable Bulwark] and the Seed of Hardness to drain enough of the final strike's momentum.

"Isn't this something common among the Technocrats?" Zac asked as he ate another healing pill. "I thought blending technology and cultivation was just their thing."

By now he started to feel strong enough for a short battle in case it was needed, so he kept his eyes trained on the Nexus Hub. There might be other Technocrats who were waiting for an opportunity to reach the Teleportation Crystal. Some might have been sent away on missions or handling the enormous drill that was digging toward the surface. He needed to defend the Nexus Hub for another 8 hours to make sure that there were no escapees.

The cyborg's punch had thrown them a few hundred meters away, and they had fallen onto an outcropping that overlooked both the battlefield and the small Technocrat outpost. No one would be able to reach the Hub without them noticing unless they possessed some sort of cloaking technology that could move.

"A true integration of technology and cultivation is impossible since the Dao of Technology is not accepted. The Technocrats always has to work around this inviolable fact, and the way they do this differ. It's generally known in the multiverse that there are essentially three main paths of the Technocrats," Ogras explained as finally got up to a sitting position from lying down on the ground like a dead fish.

"The first is the Machine God Faction," Ogras said. "They go all-in on technology, avoiding the System as much as possible. Some of them might be level 1 but still possess the capability to kill B-Grade hegemons. You can't consider them mortals though, as their lifespans have been prolonged through technology rather than Race upgrades."

Zac nodded as that was his original impression of the Technocrats after reading about them.

"The second group are the Technomancers. They use a mix of both systems. They might get a ranger class but use technological guns, like the rifles we took during the Auction. It's a slightly annoying path since they still would have to exert twice the effort to improve. Their kills with their technological

weapons would give no energy or merits," the demon continued. "But they usually have destructive capabilities that are far stronger than normal cultivators. Just look at the weapons that these things used."

"The final group are the Transcenders. They use technology to augment themselves, but they fully utilize the class- and cultivation systems of the Ruthless Heavens. But they might swap out their body parts with those of a dragon, or forcibly instill themselves with rare and powerful bloodlines. They are mad scientists using their own bodies as laboratories," Ogras said.

"How is that possible? Does the System allow such a thing?" Zac asked skeptically. "If it's possible to become stronger like that, won't everyone do it?"

"From what I hear that such modifications are in defiance of the Heavens, and it enacts a terrible price that most would say supersedes the gains. I don't know the details, but such modifications are banned in most Empires. There are unorthodox sects who walk similar paths though, but they work fully within the bounds of the System," Ogras said hesitantly.

"The goals of the factions are also different. The purists want to destroy the Ruthless Heavens altogether by pushing the Dao of Technology to the point that they create something even greater than the so-called System; The Machine God,"

"The Technomancer and Transcenders on the other hand partly work somewhat within the rules of heaven, and their goal is to change it rather than destroy it. They want to force the Ruthless Heavens to accept the Dao of Technology through raising an Apostate or forcing the creation of technology-based races," Ogras explained. "Judging by this ugly thing I'd say this Firmament's Edge is part of one of the latter factions."

"Are the Technocrat factions enemies with each other if their goals differ?" Zac asked.

"No idea, but when the whole multiverse is their enemy I would guess that the three factions would stick together. The three factions are something most people in the multiverse know of, but I have no idea about the specifics. This is my first time actually seeing technocrats in the flesh," Ogras said with a shake of his head.

"For one they wouldn't deign to come to my homeworld, and secondly they wouldn't enter the territory of the Horde unless necessary. The multiverse is filled with old monsters stuck in bottlenecks who are ready to risk their lives for a chance at breaking through."

Zac nodded in thanks after Ogras explained the situation further. He had pretty much avoided the subject since he learned of his mother's origins, but he knew that he couldn't stay ignorant for much longer. That became doubly true when remembering the Abbot's words. The Mystic Realm was the key to the fate of Earth, and it might be of Technocrat origin.

But all that would have to wait for later, and Zac opened his status screen instead of mulling on the topic any further. The results of the battle were above expectations. He had gained 5 full levels in the short but intense battle, even more than when he fought the extremely powerful Nenothep who was a far larger threat than the four bodyguards combined. It put Zac at level 70, just a short bit away from the peak of F-Grade.

The four bodyguards gave a good boost, but Zac remembered that the largest source of energy actually came from the enormous robot earlier. The surge he got when he killed the alien in the cockpit was at least twice that of killing one of the lightning cultivators.

He put the free points into Strength before checking his other gains. Shockingly enough he had upgraded his Dao of Hardness in the heat of battle, though he wasn't sure exactly when. Perhaps it happened when he tried everything in his arsenal to block the final strike of the Cyborg.

Hardness (High): Endurance +50, Wisdom +10.

Zac gained another 25 Endurance and 5 Wisdom from the upgrade, effectively doubling the boost from the Seed of Hardness. He wasn't surprised at all that the seed still almost only gave Endurance since his definition of Hardness was pretty much solely about enduring strikes.

The good news didn't end there, and he noticed that [Immutable Bulwark] had evolved as well, pushing it to Middle Mastery. He wanted to check out the differences, but he didn't want to cause any energy fluctuations while they hid within the illusion array. But one thing hadn't gone according to plan. Zac was surprised to see that the quest was still active even though he had got the prompt telling him that he had conquered the area.

"Is your quest active as well?" Zac asked the demon who nodded after a second.

"We might need to wait until the hub is closed. Or perhaps more Technocrats are hiding in the area," Ogras mused, echoing Zac's earlier thoughts.

"Will you be able to heal up in 8 hours?" Zac asked.

"I am afraid not," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "But I'll be able to walk at least. I will need a couple of days to reach prime fighting condition."

Zac grimaced, knowing his situation wasn't much better. But at least they would be able to rest up while looking for the missing army. They would need to travel for over a week since such a large sector was blocked off by the interference.

"I'll stay here and recuperate until the hub is closed," Zac said and arduously got up to his feet. "I am not able to scour the area just yet, but perhaps we can catch some people trying to return through the hub. Are you staying or do you want to go back? I could buy the teleporter for you."

"I'll go back as soon as the quest is complete," Ogras said after mulling it over. "My Daos aren't optimal against the undead, so I'll have a talk with the dragonling again before we set out."

"Dragonling?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Smaug, apparently it's the name of an old dragon on your planet?" Ogras snorted. "Gutsy to name yourself after a primordial species. They'll rip him into pieces if they find out. But you could buy the teleporter over by the Hub. It might make any late arrival believe that we have left."

Zac nodded in agreement and got out of the hiding spot to place the teleporter in a conspicuous location before scurrying back. Just that quick walk make him shake with pain, so he hurriedly sat down again with a groan to refocus on healing up.

His state was still quite horrid, but he slowly got better as the hours passed. No one had come or gone while the two waited, and Zac started to worry that any remnant Technocrats had fled the area, making them nigh impossible to find in the short run. But a small movement in the distance the two freeze.

It was one of the inconspicuous scouting drones that were used for keeping watch over the perimeter of the Technocrat Incursion. It had appeared straight out of a solid cave wall on the other side of the settlement, as though it was a ghost.