

The Fall 383

Chapter 383: Final Hours

The meeting with Thea was surprisingly tense, but Zac guessed it wasn't anything too surprising considering how her last month had been. It was obvious that she was both physically and spiritually exhausted after fighting the zombies for so long. He could only shrug off the uncomfortable feelings as he proceeded with the things on his list.

He visited his settlements one after another to see whether there was anything that required his attention. Luckily things were running quite smooth so far. The former Incursions had vast swathes of unclaimed land around them, and there hadn't been a single dispute over territory so far. Not that anyone would dare encroach on his domain.

Next he headed over to the Atwood Army, which once again was embroiled in a protracted war against the second undead horde. The soldiers looked at him with awe as he stepped toward the frontline, and he saw Ilvere hurry over from the distance.

"Is there something wrong?" the demon asked with confusion since he hadn't been forewarned about Zac's arrival.

"I'm leaving in a bit," Zac said after making sure no one else was within earshot. "I thought I could thin the herd a bit for you guys before that. Do you know a good sector to strike?"

The general's eyes lit up and he immediately started to think of a plan.

"I'd stay away from the innermost core, even if I were you. The young master mentioned that there is an extremely strong array in there, he barely got out before it closed in around him. There are a few places we call command clumps in the inner area though. They're far into the horde, but not so far as you enter the array of Unholy Beacons," the demon eventually said.

Zac nodded as he had heard Ogras mention it earlier as well. It was the same reason that Thea hadn't dared another assassination attempt. It was pretty much impossible to head into the core unless you were ready to risk it all in taking the General down, and Zac wasn't ready to reveal all his cards before fighting the Lich King.

"Command clumps?" Zac asked curiously, focusing on what he could help with at the moment.

"Clumps with highly intelligent zombies that commands the rest of them. They're what stopping the stupid ones from simply walking off into the woods. We generally try to find and kill solitary leaders like that to fracture the horde one piece at a time," the demon said.

"Won't I cause a stampede if I kill a command clump then?" Zac asked skeptically.

"The clump is surrounded by the strongest zombies. If you kill them as well only the rabble will remain," Ilvere said. "We will be able to handle the weaker ones now that we have the underworld army to help."

"How have things been working out with the Council so far?" Zac asked.

The Underworld Council was the last thing he needed to check in on before returning to Port Atwood. The Atwood Army relied on the strength of the Councilors to keep the Undead General in check. Now

that Alea was out of commission only Janos and Ilvere remained. Both had gotten a decent power-up from the Dao Funnel, but they also had a much lower starting point compared to the Undead Empire.

They alone weren't a strong enough deterrent, but with ten councilors to help out, even the undead General would have to think twice before moving out.

"They are competent fighters," Ilvere said with approval. "Much better than the rabble of the Sino-Indian Alliance. But they are also holding back, and they appear to have sent out quite a few scouting parties toward the wilderness."

"They're no doubt looking for places to set up proper towns," Zac said, before changing topic. "By the way, how's your progress on [Cyclic Strike] coming along?"

"I've mastered it, thanks to the opportunity you and the young master presented," Ilvere said with some pride. "I managed to push both my Daos to Peak mastery. Everything went extremely smoothly after that. As soon as my soul healed I tried it out, and it almost came naturally, as though the two Daos wanted to form a cycle on their own accord."

The mouth of Zac started to twitch with some annoyance since he couldn't say that he had enjoyed the same success the past days. He had renewed his efforts of mastering [Cyclic Strike] now that both his Seed of Trees and Rot were at peak mastery. But his control hadn't really improved at all, and he wasn't even halfway to being able to activate the skill properly, let alone using it in a fight.

Was this the result of having 0 affinity with the Daos? Was he forced to stay a dumb brute who had to smash his head against every trial that came his way? Was the path of the refined cultivator forever out of his grasp?

He had the demon display the strike a few times, and Zac had to admit that its might was a bit shocking. It almost felt like the large metal ball was infused with a Dao Fragment rather than two Dao Seeds as it shot out in the direction that Ilvere targeted, and the power was enormous for someone at Ilvere's level.

Yrial had said that the attack was nothing much, but was he simply saying that from the perspective of a C-Grade hegemon? [Cyclic Strike] was not too important for Zac who already possessed a real Dao Fragment by now, but what if he managed to form the Life/Death Fragments? How powerful would the skill be if it was powered by Fragments rather than Seeds?

Zac kept having Ilvere repeat the strike over and over, and he asked all kinds of questions to make sense of why the demon mastered the skill so effortlessly. He asked about everything from how he controlled his Mental Energy to even minor details like how he breathed during the infusion.

Zac was determined to learn the skill during his stay in the Tower. If he couldn't manage that much in 100 days he might as well jump into a well and stay there out of shame.

He didn't immediately find out any solution to his inability to combine his two Daos, but he did get a few clues on how to act going forward. It was all he could do for now, and he returned to the subject of thinning out the zombie horde.

It quickly became apparent that they would need the assistance of the Underworld Council if Zac started rampaging inside the horde, so Zac set off to the nearby, and much larger, camp belonging to the

Council. He was immediately showed inside a command tent with great courtesy, and he spotted a few familiar faces there.

"I barely see any of the molemen around?" Zac asked with confusion after going through the customary greetings. "I thought they'd jump at the opportunity to see the sky again after all this time."

"Old habits die hard," Lararia, one of the molemen councilors, said. "We have lived beneath the surface for thousands of years. The darkness and stone have become part of us. Not all are ready to leave their sanctuary just yet, or perhaps ever."

"I see," Zac slowly nodded, understanding their feeling.

The concept of 'home' was something built into one's wiring, and Zac had felt slightly oppressed the whole time he spent down in the tunnels. Coming back to the surface was like he could suddenly breathe again, so he could understand how the opposite held true for the molemen. Perhaps his dreams of creating large underwater towns would end up as a pipe dream unless he could find some amphibious races to join his force.

"So what brings you here today?" another councilor asked.

"I will be busy taking care of a few unavoidable matters for a bit over a week," Zac explained. "So was planning on thinning the horde a bit before I leave. I was hoping I could count on your cooperation."

"No problem. These undead have proven a great whetstone for our armies," Lararia said without hesitation. "We don't mind getting our blades wet some more."

Zac nodded in thanks and immediately set out after ironing out the details of his assault. Ilvere had already prepared his people, so Zac didn't go back to the Atwood camp. He put on the amulet he got from Ogras back then and flashed straight into the huge sea of zombies, and he found himself mostly unencumbered.

The both good and somewhat frustrating thing about the zombie horde was that it wasn't tightly clumped. It allowed Zac to simply walk between the millions of undead who were just milling around, but it drastically decreased the lethality of any area attacks aimed to take out a lot of them in one go. It was nothing like the tightly cramped zombie hordes you could see in the movies where they were crammed together like sardines.

He couldn't be sure whether it was the efficacy of the amulet, or if the general had already decided to not meet Zac's head-on, but Zac managed to find the clump without much hassle and unleashed the first two stages of [Deforestation], causing a huge swathe of scorched corpses.

Just as Ilvere warned chaos immediately ensued, but Zac stayed on for another hour to rip apart the larger clumps of Zombies with his fractal blades. However, even if he wanted to take this opportunity to get more accustomed to his Fragment of the Axe he chose to not display it here, and he also refrained from using [Hatchetman's Spirit] and his Undying Bulwark class.

He wanted to keep his aces hidden for the final clash in the Dead Zone in a few weeks.

Between the coordinated efforts of Zac, his army, and the Underworld Council a week's worth of zombies were felled in the span of a few hours. Zac wanted to do more, but he needed to get going. He

could only pray that his small help on the frontline would give his people a breather and delay the terraforming a day or two.

He returned to Port Atwood and gave some instructions to Adran and Abby, and he also took the opportunity to plunder the town coffers of another 800 million nexus coins. The money came from a mix of taxes and sales of Nexus Crystals, along with some plundered wealth from the underworld.

His final destination was the secluded valley between the mountain, and Zac was happy to see that Calrin already had accomplished his task. Alea's crystal coffin was shrouded in a green mist that seeped out from a grate next to her, and even the poisoned Tree of Ascension seemed to benefit from the Amanita's mist.

Zac didn't say anything as he looked down at Alea who seemed to simply sleep in her crystal encasing. She neither looked better or worse compared to when he saw her last, which Zac guessed was the best he could hope for. A tired sigh escaped from his lips as he lightly touched the coffin before he left.

He had finally crossed off everything on his list, allowing him to head to the Tower of Eternity with a clear mind. For the people of Port Atwood he would only be gone for 10 days at the most, but for him it would be over a hundred days. He didn't want to carry a nagging feeling that he had missed something for such a long time.

He finally returned to his compound and found both Emily and Kenzie in his sister's courtyard. The three had a dinner where the two seemed to compete in bragging of who had the greatest gains from the Dao House. Zac was relieved to hear that both of them were doing good, and it seemed that everyone had already woken up from their comas by now.

There was still the issue of latent dangers, but at least it seemed like a possibility that people's souls had simply been overtaxed after being forced to ponder on the Dao too intensely. Luckily even those who had fallen unconscious had made great gains, and there were now over 15 people from Port Atwood on the Dao Ladder.

His sister had even managed to crash into the 6th position, while Joanna just missed the top ten at 11th. Emily, who had chosen to use her real name for the ladder, was currently in the 87th position. She would likely have been a lot further ahead if it wasn't for her late start.

It felt good to have a relaxed meal, but Zac knew he couldn't put things off any longer. He finally headed toward his courtyard to meet up with Ogras, with the two girls following behind.

The demon already stood ready, but no one else was there to see them off. Only a very select number of people knew that Zac was about to leave Earth for a bit as Zac was afraid someone would use his absence to cause damage to Port Atwood or his people. He wanted to use his identity as a deterrent even when he wasn't around.

He took one last look in his Cosmos Sacks to make sure that he hadn't missed anything, before nodding at the demon.

"Stay safe, both of you," Kenzie said. "And you know... See if you can find any news of her?"

"I will," Zac said with a smile as he crushed the token while placing his hand on Ogras' shoulder. "Take care of things while I am gone, ok?"

He looked at his sister for ten seconds as the space around them started to shudder and twist until the System swallowed the two to send them on their way.