

## The Fall 402

### Chapter 402: Whittlecreek

The trio soon enough reached the main gate of the ramshackle wall surrounding the village. It looked like the fortifications were erected hundreds of years ago, but the townspeople had let it deteriorate. The only sign of recent maintenance was a hole in the wall that had been filled with rocks and logs in a clumsy effort to close the gap.

The gate was open, but an old guard gave them a glare as he blocked the path into the town. Zac didn't sense any threat from him, and he could tell that the guard was around level 40 at best. There was also no aura or pressure emanating from him, telling Zac that the old man was wholly unimpressive and likely without even a Dao seed. He was most probably a mortal who had gotten to this point by fighting the local animals and splurging on the occasional Nexus Crystal, and the chances of reaching E-Grade was next to zero.

"Who are you lot?" he gruffly asked as he looked back and forth at the trio with a clear hint of suspicion. "What do you want with Whittlecreek?"

"We're adventurers who heard of the plight of your fair town," Ogras said as he righteously slapped his chest. "We have come to investigate the appearance of those dastardly Goblins."

"Oh, did the guild send you?" the guard said, his eyes immediately brightening in anticipation.

"The Guild? Ah, yes the Guild did send us," Ogras nodded after a brief lapse. "I am sure you've been instructed to co-operate properly?"

"Great! I will inform the Mayor! My name is Keldor, just find me if you need help with anything! I wish you the best of luck," he said as he hurried away toward a large manor at the other side of the town.

Zac gave Ogras an amused glance, not used to his heroic demeanor from before.

"What? Might as well have some fun with it," Ogras shrugged as they passed through the gate. "Once again, remember the rule. Do not kill innocents inside the Tower. There have been many reports of extremely powerful old cultivators jumping out of nowhere when the normal citizens get killed rather than the targets of the trial."

"I heard you the first time. Besides, do I strike you like a person that would run around killing people willy-nilly?" Zac snorted.

"Well, not really," Ogras conceded before he threw Zac a scathing glance. "But you also didn't strike me as the type of person who would obliterate the shop of one of the most influential forces in the star sector, so what do I know?"

Zac was about to refute the demon but he realizes he didn't have a lot of leg to stand on. Ogras still wasn't aware of the whole story regarding the Splinter, so even he must have felt that the whole thing looked like the actions of a madman.

"Well, I am all better now. I won't do something like that again," Zac sighed.

“I’m sure,” the demon snorted before he got serious again. “So what do you want to do? Find the Goblins or investigate the source?”

Zac was stumped for a second before he looked around the picturesque town for a bit. It was easy to forget that he was actually undergoing a trial, and that he was inside a mysterious tower in some hidden pocket dimension of outer space.

He hadn’t really considered his tactic before coming. He had just planned on smashing through everything as quickly as possible before going back to Earth. But after having walked past the beautiful fields and having arrived at this place he felt the same sense of calm as when he sat in the courtyard gazing up at the stars the other day.

Those moments of tranquility were hard to come by in his current reality. The moment he stepped out of the Tower he would have to enter a series of life-and-death battles to take out the last enemies on Earth. But he was now given a hundred days to slow down and adjust his state of mind for a bit.

He knew he couldn’t treat the Tower as a vacation, as the higher floors took time to complete, but he also didn’t need to rush to the peak. He would be weakened for a while longer due to his wound, so he was in no hurry to rush to the harsher floors.

Besides, he felt that what Galau said about learning to think made a lot of sense. He had been fighting tooth and nail for a year since the integration, but there were still huge holes in his knowledge. He knew a bit about arrays and how to swing his axe, but nothing else. Completing the trials the intended way was a chance for him to actually widen his skillset.

“Are there any benefits to completing levels quickly?” Zac asked.

“Not really, except that it gives more time for the difficult trials further up,” Galau said with a shake of his head.

“I thought so,” Zac nodded. “Let’s try to complete the quests the normal way for now. We can start pushing harder if we notice we’re running out of time.”

Galau didn’t have any objections, not that he had much of a choice. He could go ahead and kill the Goblin Leader if he wanted to, but if he exited the first level without Zac and Ogras, then they would be separated for the rest of the climb. They would have to physically touch every time they stepped into a portal or otherwise their cooperation would end.

“Let’s split up,” Ogras said as he started to saunter toward what was obviously a tavern. “Just ask around for any clues you can find.”

“I will assist... in the tavern,” Galau said with a cough.

Zac wryly shook his head in response before he started walking in the other direction. He didn’t mind that the two didn’t care about the mission as he wanted to get a feel for how the trials worked for himself anyway. He tried to put himself in the shoes of an actual adventurer who truly had arrived due to the Goblin threat.

Provided that they weren't able to eradicate the whole Goblin tribe with a swing or two with their axe, how would an adventurer go about solving this matter? Zac started to walk up to one townsman after another, trying to find clues to the situation.

The whole town was full of farmers, and Zac was a bit confused as to why they all stayed in the town rather than tending their fields. But he soon understood that it was due to the goblins who would stream out of the forest and kill solitary farmers when the opportunity presented itself.

They only went out in large groups now to tend the fields once every week, and they had to let the crops fend for themselves most of the time now. A lot of people worriedly talked about weeds and parasites ruining their crop, or that they wouldn't be able to pay this year's tax to the local lord.

Zac was shocked by the reality of it all, and he could understand that there was no consensus on whether these people were real or not. He even tested mentioning the Tower of Eternity and the System, but they truly simply ignored those things like he said nothing at all.

Ogras was proven right as it was no secret where the Goblin Tribe stayed. They had taken up in an abandoned mine some ways' into the forest. The villagers had tried to root them out with the help of their strongest warrior, the Mayor. The campaign ended in an embarrassing defeat, resulting in the mayor still being on bed rest to recuperate.

But no matter who he asked he couldn't find a hint of why the goblins suddenly had arrived. The villagers all assumed that it was simply bad luck, or that the goblins perhaps had been pushed out of their old domain by a rival tribe. They didn't look too deeply into the matter, and most of them seemed to take it as a general inconvenience that would soon enough be sorted by the Lord and the Guild.

Zac sighed in exasperation after having walked around for thirty minutes questioning the townspeople. The base of the Fallen Goblins was easy enough to find, but he was not one step closer to completing the actual mission. Was he unsuited for this type of work, or was he simply asking the wrong questions?

A sudden movement in the periphery of his vision suddenly caught his attention though, and he flashed over to see what was going on. He had noticed this type of movement multiple times already, but he had ignored it since his danger sense didn't warn him at all.

Sharp pain in his side immediately made him regret using [Loamwalker] to move around, and he grimaced as it felt like getting stabbed. His scrunched-up face also had the additional effect of scaring the daylights out of two small children who had been spying on him from behind a large bale of hay.

The young boy who looked no older than five immediately jumped into the bale in an effort to escape, while the even younger girl stood rooted in place like a deer in headlights.

"I'm not someone dangerous, I am from the guild," Zac said as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I'm here to help your parents."

He felt a bit weird lying to children about who he was, but at least it seemed to have the desired effect as the girl visibly calmed down.

"Mister, are you here to beat up the goblins?" the girl curiously said as she looked up at Zac with big eyes.

"I am," Zac smiled as he tried to remember how to talk to children. "But I am also trying to figure out why they came here in the first place. I don't want any more of them coming here after I've left."

"It's the ghosts!" the girl said with certainty in her eyes. "The grownups don't believe me, but I saw it!"

"Jinny, shh!" the subdued voice of a young boy emerged from within the hay. "We'll get in trouble again."

"What ghosts?" Zac asked with piqued interest.

He didn't know what connection some ghosts had with goblins, but this was the first hint of something out of the ordinary since he arrived here.

"Me and Bulb were visiting the tower, and we saw a ghost! Then the goblins came not long after," the girl exclaimed.

"Jinny..." an entreating voice emerged again as a snot-nosed face popped out of the haystack.

"We are not allowed to go into the forest, but we snuck out when the grown-ups were busy," Jinny said with a low voice. "We saw the old man ghost in the tower! He looked like a bad man."

Zac started to understand what was going on after a round of questioning. These two kids had gone exploring the forest while their parents were out tending the fields roughly two weeks before the goblins first appeared. They had happened upon a large tower, and they saw what they believed was a ghost walking around its base.

The sight had scared the wits out of the children, and they had immediately run back to town to inform the villagers. Eventually the mayor and few of the townspeople went over to scour the area, but they came up with nothing. The parents thought they were lying, and simply punished the two for going into the dangerous forest alone.

"Thank you for the information," Zac smiled. "I will make sure the ghost doesn't cause any trouble."

The kids enthusiastically nodded before they skittered away, and Zac walked over to one of the villagers to ask about the tower.

It turned out that the tower was once a part of the defensive line of the Bravorian Kingdom, but the country had expanded its borders 300 years ago. The war transformed Whittlecreek from a border town to a safe village in the heartlands. The guard tower was abandoned soon enough, and it had stood in the mountains untouched for centuries without causing any trouble.

Zac couldn't be sure, but it certainly sounded like the clue for a simple mystery fitting to the first level of the Tower of Eternity. Armed with this knowledge he turned to the saloon, where he found Ogras chatting up a cute farmer's daughter working double as a waitress. Galau wasn't as talkative, and he rather seemed determined to drink himself into oblivion.

A full barrel of some locally brewed liquor was placed next to him, and Zac saw that it was half-emptied already.

"How does buying things work here?" Zac asked curiously as he sat down opposite them with a groan.

“Nexus Coins,” Ogras said with a grin. “But you will usually not be able to bring anything outside.”

“Usually?” Zac asked with piqued interest, almost forgetting why he came here.

“It’s a gamble,” Galau said with slurred speech. “It’s a small chance anything you find is real.”