

## The Fall 456

### Chapter 456: Dr. Fried

It sounded to Zac like corporations had something very similar to the Heritages of the traditional factions. But instead of Cultivation manuals and instructions on what classes and Titles to get, the Technocrat Corporations instead had manufacturing blueprints and lists of components that worked well together.

"Are everyone in your company equally strong if you have the same components then? Sounds like a weakness for a force," Zac said skeptically.

"Well, some parts are custom made to fit with our soul frequency, and compatibility with standard components differ between people," Jaol explained. "So there will always be some differences."

"Does it matter where you buy the components from though, as long as the compatibility is high? Isn't the same no matter where you go if all technology is old?"

"I'm sure two swords crafted by two different blacksmiths are not the same. One might have better materials or benefit from a secret crafting technique. It's the same with us. There are billions of Class-1 Materials out there, meaning there is an almost endless number of combinations of body parts to choose from.

"A good component might perform a few percent better than a similar one from a competitor, and certain components might have a synergy that improves performance even further. These incremental advantages really tack up when you consider the number of components a single Transhuman carries. Elite Class-1 Transhumans from peak forces can easily annihilate a Mid Class-2 Transhumans with shoddy components," Jaol said.

Zac nodded in understanding, and he couldn't help but find some humor at how similar things between Technocrats and Cultivators were, even though they were of completely opposing philosophies. The situation was exactly the same as the one he found himself in. He had gained one incremental advantage after another with the help of his titles and second class, and these small advantages had tacked up into something immense by now.

There was no comparing himself with an average cultivator like the weaker Demon Warriors. He would be able to take out them by the hundreds, if not thousands, by now. The System played favorites, and the average cultivator was nothing but fertilizer for the elite few.

"So you can't change jobs if you want to keep upgrading?" Zac asked. "Because of component synergy."

"There are often some rules where we can still contract our old employer for a set amount of years after changing job, but most choose to do a large overhaul of components to reform their core if they change force. This will incur a huge cost, but it will allow them to incrementally improve by swapping out components one by one again with the help of their new employer," Jaol said. "Real elites are even given welcoming packages of full component sets upon getting headhunted."

The two kept talking as they waited for the doctor to return to his office, and Zac quickly got a pretty decent understanding of the Technocrats, or at least the Machine God faction that Jaol belonged to. And

just as he had expected, they weren't better or worse than any other people he had encountered before.

They simply represented a different world-view compared to the factions working within the System's rules. But it was also clear that they weren't any better than the ruthless factions that could slaughter each other for a little bit of wealth.

The struggle for resources was extremely intense, and there were huge societal differences between the classes. The lower classes worked themselves to the bone to be able to upgrade to higher Classes and provide a better future for their progeny, or just to prolong their lives with the technologies that emulated the effects of Race upgrades.

Meanwhile, the massive corporations and families held almost all of the wealth and technology to themselves, almost making themselves into gods among men. Zac himself wasn't very convinced by Jaol's world view. Personally, he felt the System was like the weather. You couldn't control it and it sometimes screwed you over, but it was part of life. It certainly had a hand in a lot of the struggle across the multiverse, but things might become even more chaotic if it disappeared.

Zac wasn't just interrogating Jaol to make conversation and distract himself from the whispers of the Splinter, but it was also to understand the technology he had back home. He had gotten his hands on whole production lines and massive fabricators, so he had hoped he'd be able to produce massive weapons that would be able to blow The Great Redeemer to kingdom come if he showed up.

But it appeared that there were multiple issues with his plan. Not only would such powerful weapons be powered by his soul, but he would also need the blueprints for that kind of weaponry. There was also the issue of his fabrication machines. The ones he owned were no doubt Class-1 fabricators, and would therefore be unable to manufacture higher-class items.

Finally, there was the issue of retaliation. Small infractions didn't seem to bother the System, but if you went too big relying on technology you'd land in a heap of trouble, just like the Little Bean did by launching orbital strikes.

He also wanted to know as much as possible of how cultivation worked among technocrats to better be able to help and protect his sister. With Jeeves in her head, she could be considered a technocrat, and it looked like he would have to somehow come up with a Soul Strengthening Manual for her. Normal components put a strain on a technocrat's soul, and he could only imagine that miraculous technology like Jeeves would be even more demanding.

He even tried making Jaol download the Soul Strengthening Algorithm he used, but it seemed as though there were heavy restrictions to stop any such theft. Zac also wasn't comfortable letting Kenzie onto the Neural Network because of the risk of getting exposed. At least he hoped she hadn't found her way onto the network yet. The System was blocking Earth from the multiverse, and he could only pray that it also included the network.

Unfortunately, it looked like the doctor was quite tied up somewhere, and over an hour passed without anyone entering the lab. The long bout of inactivity along with the raving Splinter started to take its toll, and Zac eventually had no choice but to stab his two shoulders and resume his experiments.

A fountain of blood erupted in all directions as a bronze flash burst out through his arm and decimated some machinery near-by, leaving Jaol gobsmacked at the other side of the room.

"What's taking so long?" Zac panted as his murky eyes filled with killing intent were trained on the comm's officer.

"I- ah..." Jaol stammered after he saw the outwardly unhinged actions of Zac. "I don't know. If it's alright with you I can access our network to see if anything has happened."

Zac thought for a moment before he walked over next to the comm's officer as he dragged out the bleeding daggers from his shoulders.

"Do it. No funny-business," Zac reminded.

Jaol hurriedly nodded as a screen appeared in front of him. A series of screens and rows of texts appeared in rapid succession, and Zac had no way to understand what was going on. Was this what it felt like for his grandfather when Zac set up his computer back before he passed?

"Something odd has happened," Jaol eventually said. "There are over ten incident reports due to mutations, causing problems all over the ship. There are usually some things that need fixing since we acquired the cargo, but not to this degree."

"The Shard has become more active?" Zac asked with a frown.

"It seems like it," Jaol said before he shot a hesitant look at Zac. "It seemed to have started shortly after you boarded the ship."

"So you don't think the Doctor will be coming back here? He's busy putting out fires?" Zac asked.

"I don't think so? He has never helped with repairs before. I think Dr. Fried is more interested in taking readings of the Shard than helping the Little Bean, but that also means he probably will come back here to go over the results sooner or later," Jaol ventured.

Luckily they didn't have to wait too much longer as the door suddenly opened as Zac sat poised to strike. However, instead of a person a small ball flew inside, and alarm bells immediately set off in Zac's mind.

He pushed forward to rush out of the laboratory, but his eyes widened in alarm as [Loamwalker] refused to activate. Only then did he realize that he was in outer space, whereas the skill needed to be connected to the earth to work. The ball detonated in a massive shockwave the next moment, and Zac found himself thrown into a wall as he was almost blinded by a piercing light.

His ears were ringing and he was completely blinded, but his eyes weren't the only way for him to see what was going on. Dozens of fractal trees rose from the metallic ground inside the lab and the area outside the next moment, and Zac was once again inside a forest.

The augmented vision from [Hatchetman's Spirit] showed that a dozen robots were waiting outside, seemingly controlled by two Technocrats standing behind with an array of screens in front of them. There was also somber-looking Transhuman wearing a white robe spectating from behind, and Zac immediately recognized Dr. Fried from a picture Jaol had shown him.

His conventional vision was just a blur from the grenade, but he still navigated himself outside as a storm of leaves spread out around him.

"It's an intruder!" one of the two guards exclaimed with shock.

Had they just thought they were dealing with some corporate espionage or some curious crewmember who wanted to take a gander at the doctor's research? Zac felt he had caught a lucky break as he shot out a rapid series of Fractal Blades. The blades managed to destroy half the machines, but the remaining ones unleashed an unrelenting barrage of attacks. Both the technocrats were unscathed as well as dense shields had blocked the two strikes he had launched at them.

Zac dodged most of the attacks even if he was blind, but he found out that the projectiles automatically detonated into a kinetic storm that contained some mysterious energy that almost completely ignored the leaves of [Nature's Barrier] and caused painful wounds across his body.

But to a warrior who had an effective Endurance of over two thousand, the lacerations could barely be considered a wound at all, and Verun lit up in a sanguine glow as Zac appeared right between the two controllers. A wide arc of death ended with the two Technocrats falling into puddles of blood and what looked like mercury, but Zac had already moved on to his real target.

Zac grabbed the throat of the old researcher before he had a chance to react at all. He looked pretty much like a normal human in his thirties, except for being silver. Was this the mark of higher-tier components? The mechanical parts of Jaol were easily discernable, but Zac could barely tell that the throat he was gripping wasn't actually skin.

"I am working for Deramex Dynamics," Dr. Fried said with a calm voice as he looked into the eyes of Zac. "You should know the price we've paid for retrieving this item. I do not know which force you belong to, but we will respond in kind if this mission goes awry. My private emergency vessel is untraceable and anchored at the end of that corridor, it requires no authorization to use. Leave now and this will be the end of it."

"The Undead Empire would welcome your company's attempts at revenge. I am sure some Lich would find your weird bodies an excellent source for experiments," Zac smiled, ignoring the offer.

Blaming the Undead Empire for his actions had become almost ingrained by now. Some day Karma might come knocking, but for now they made an excellent boogieman to blame all evil on. It was less convincing when he was in his human form, but the undead probably had a bunch of living lackeys that got things done for them in the life-attuned territories.

The doctor only snorted in response, and Zac's eyes widened when the man's head disintegrated into nothing as a massive blast was released from the torso of the researcher. There was no warning at all, and Zac was flung into a wall with a searing pain in his chest. However, he had managed to activate one of the defensive charges of his robes at the last moment, which had absorbed over half of the damage.

The surprise attack wasn't the real issue though, it was the fact that the doctor seemingly had blown his own head up. How would he use the man's special authorization to get to the Shard if he was dead?

"Behind you!" Jaol suddenly shouted, and Zac immediately looked back only to see a floating head fleeing in the distance.

A cannon-ball ripped through the air and knocked the head into a wall less than a second after the shout, and Zac flashed over and picked up the seemingly unconscious Dr. Fried. There was no stream of energy entering his body at least, which indicated that the technocrat was alive. In fact, he hadn't even got any energy for "killing" the two controllers, and Zac was starting to suspect that you needed to destroy the souls of the warriors of the Machine God faction, or at least destroy some sort of core component.

Zac looked down at the head in satisfaction as he jogged back toward Jaol. He had barely needed to use any energy to capture his target, which would allow him to go all out against the defenses surrounding the Shard.

The Machine-God faction didn't have key-cards, but this was the second-best thing. Now that he knew that the head could teleport he was also infusing it with the Fragment of the Coffin to keep it in place, which hopefully would work with Technocrat tech as well.

As for whether the doctor was actually unconscious or acting, he didn't care. Unless the man had planted a bomb inside his head he was likely not a threat any longer. It was fine by him if he wanted to play dead as long as he managed to get past the massive security doors and their accompanying shields that were currently blocking his path.

Jaol had moved out from the lab sometime during the battle, and he was currently looking at the destruction around him with dismay. Zac felt a bit bad about the fate waiting for the guy, but he suddenly had a thought.

"Do you use Nexus Coins?" Zac asked.

"No, but we can trade them with Bits for a small fee," Jaol mumbled with a hollow voice.

Zac nodded and immediately transferred 100 million Nexus Coins to the comm's officer. Jaol's eyes widened in shock, probably because 100 million Nexus Coins was more than he'd make in a decade, perhaps a lifetime, at his current post.

"You no longer need to stay undercover on this ship," Zac smiled as he said with a voice that carried far and wide, which quickly changed Jaol's face from excitement into horror. "Thank you for your assistance, I wouldn't have come this far without you. There is a ship down that corridor according to the doctor, I suggest you take it before reinforcements arrive."

With that Zac flashed away with Dr. Fried's head in his grip.

Jaol looked at the receding back of his captor with mute incomprehension for a few seconds, before his eyes turned to the two unmoving controllers on the ground. Indecision gnawed at him, but only for so long.

He rushed inside the lab and he quickly put everything valuable and untraceable into his Subspace Container. He would need every resource he could get if he had to flee to a lawless zone where Deramex Dynamics wouldn't be able to find him.