

## The Fall 542

### Chapter 542: Crusade

Zac returned to his compound and just visited his sister for a bite before turning in for the night. Neither Billy nor Thea had returned from their trials just yet according to Kenzie, which hopefully was a good thing. It might mean they managed to get opportunities similar to himself, where he got an additional trial that increased the time that the trial took.

Ogras' Inheritance had passed quicker, only taking him a few hours. The demon hadn't divulged everything that happened, it did seem like his haul wasn't all too impressive apart from the weird creature he was bonded with. Zac guessed his encounter was similar to Zac's if he only defeated the golem and simply got some contribution points to shop for.

The harrowing experience of using the [Bone-Forging Dust] left him utterly unable to find the tranquility to ponder on the Dao, especially not with his bones still throbbing painfully. His mind was far too muddled to go over any plans for the war with the Zhix traitors as well, so he just fell on top of his bed and entered a dreamless slumber.

He woke up the next day expecting to be met with a wave of pain, but he was surprised to notice that he felt fine. In fact, better than fine. The pain was completely washed away, and his body felt like he just had spent the last hour stretching and limbering up. He didn't know if it was thanks to his high Vitality or if it was just how the powder worked, but he felt a lot lighter as he walked toward the teleporter.

He had already gotten all the pertinent details yesterday from Kenzie, and his destination had appeared on his Teleportation Screen.

Zac cracked his neck before he stepped into the teleporter, ready to withstand an assault at moment's notice. He was expected by the Zhix War Council, but you never knew what that meant. There might be a hundred Anointed on the other side of the teleporter waiting to welcome him with their massive fists for all he knew.

Or even worse, a banquet full of all the disgusting things Ibtep had tried to feed him before.

He appeared in a dark cave the next moment, with ten Zhix warriors standing guard. Two of them shot toward him without hesitation, their short spears aiming for his vitals the moment he materialized. Zac didn't panic at all, and simply materialized the crude club he had used against the Zhix before.

Two hollow bonks later and the two attacking warriors lay sprawled out at the ground at the other side of the room.

"Strength to your hive," Zac said. "I am Zachary Atwood. I am expected."

The still-standing Zhix didn't answer with anything but a bow, and two of them stepped off and led him through an intricate series of tunnels, ignoring their unconscious brethren. Zac looked at the surroundings with interest, as this was the first time he had actually been inside a Zhix hive. He had always meant to revisit his local Hive to meet with Nonet, but there was always some fire or another he had to put out.

Zac had always pictured something a bit like a mix of an Ayr Hive and the town caves he had visited, but he realized he had severely underestimated the love for architecture among the Zhix. It would be fairer to compare the Zhix Hive with a dwarven subterranean city. There was extraordinary attention to detail, no matter whether you looked at the intricately tiled floor or the engraved patterns adorning the walls.

Unfortunately, it seemed like he was walking in a restricted part of the complex structure as he saw almost no Zhix warriors while they proceeded deeper into the hive, and there were no buildings or rooms to give an insight into how they lived their day-to-day. It was clear they walked further into the earth though, into the heart of the hive.

It only took them a few minutes to reach their goal though, a large chamber with no point of interest apart from a massive set of doors. In front of it, a familiar figure stood waiting, and Zac walked over with a smile. Zac looked at Ibtep with interest, feeling that the past months had transformed him from a harmless oddball to a warrior emitting a solid aura. Zac could still discern the inquisitive light in his eyes though, the thing that somewhat set him apart from most other insectoids.

The two hadn't actually seen each other since they split ways at Marshall Manor. Ibtep had been in one long deployment against the undead hordes, both working as a liaison due to his knowledge of humans, and as a scout. Zac had felt a bit bad that this guy wasn't there to join in the opportunity of the Dao Funnel, but it felt like he had improved tremendously even without it.

"Greetings, Lord Atwood," Ibtep said with a bow, almost topping over due to the weight of the massive backpack that he still carried around. "Care for a snack? They are quite delicious, and they can calm a warrior's mind, readying you for combat."

He produced a small jar the next moment, and Zac blanched when he saw it contained a few extraordinarily fatty larvae. It looked like some of the Zhix's odd customs remained, and it made him worry about what came next.

"No thank you," Zac said with a somewhat forced smile. "It's good to see you're okay. How is Nonet?"

"Nonet has fought valiantly for Hive Kundevi and Port Atwood, and our Hive can now join the council," Ibtep said with pride before he slightly deflated again. "Of course, Lord Atwood might be a part of that reason."

"Are the others already here?" Zac asked.

"Yes, they are waiting on the other side of this door. I cannot follow inside, it is not my place," Ibtep explained.

Zac nodded as he looked up at the massive gates once more. They reached over ten meters into the air and were covered in a painstakingly detailed mural that depicted various battles. It was a vivid reminder that the Zhix wasn't just a barbaric tribe of insectoids, but an ancient society with thousands of years of history.

"Your people actually managed to open these things before the integration?" Zac asked as he looked up at the enormous doors.

“Just the greatest of the Anointed,” Ibtep said with a shake of his head. “Normal warriors would never be able to step through these gates. It requires both renown and enough power to actually open the doors.”

Zac only smiled as he put his hands against the doors and pushed. There was some resistance, but they soundlessly opened and let him inside. However, he was still inwardly shocked when he realized just how much power was required to open these things. There was no way that anyone beneath level 40 or 50 would be able to open these doors, proving just how powerful the Zhix Anointed were even before the integration.

However, it was ultimately not a challenge for an E-Grade warrior, and Zac effortlessly entered the inner chambers where over thirty Anointed stood around a table, with another ten normal Zhix warriors standing by at the side. The smaller Zhix obviously weren't as powerful as the hulking spiritual leaders of their race, but Zac could immediately sense that every single one of them was quite strong. He wouldn't be surprised if they all were between level 65 and 75.

The group of Anointed turned toward him as he entered, silently gazing down at him like giants looking down at a small critter. Zac wryly smiled and wondered how this was how it felt to be a Sky Gnome. Zac was about to greet the group, but he inwardly groaned when he felt the aura of one of the largest Anointed blast across the chamber as he started walking toward him.

It looked like Zhix traditions were still going strong.

Zac couldn't help but ask himself if there was any limit to how big these guys could grow. Normal Zhix were slightly shorter than male humans on average, with weaker anointed like Nonet reaching a bit over three meters. Herat, the Anointed he met during the hunt was another half-meter taller than that, but he was far from the largest one in this place.

There were three anointed in particular that towered above the others, each of them well over four meters tall. The largest one was probably approaching five meters. Zac barely reached their thighs, like a young child next to their parents. And it was one of these three behemoths that had decided to test his mettle as he flashed forward and swung a huge fist toward his chest.

It felt like the fist grew to the size of a mountain, but Zac realized it was just an illusion brought on by the massive killing intent carried within. This hulking Anointed had no doubt been steeped in battle the past months to accumulate such a terrifying aura. However, the fist was still as large as his whole torso, and Zac was afraid he'd shoot out like a bullet when he got hit.

The fist accompanied by that dense aura was pretty intimidating, but Zac was no slouch either. A boundless killing intent spread throughout the whole chamber, almost turning into a palpable haze from how thick it was. A few of the attendants even fell down on their knees before they forced themselves back on their feet with embarrassment.

Zac didn't care about the normal Zhix though, but he instead readied his body to receive the strike. He stomped down into the ground to lodge himself in place as he leaned forward. He could only pray that his bones were completely healed from using the [Bone-Forging Dust] yesterday, as this would probably hurt. At least it couldn't be too bad as his danger sense barely acted up.

A deep clap of thunder echoed out across the hall as the Zhix's massive fist slammed into Zac's chest. Even digging his legs into the solid stone tiles wasn't enough, and Zac was pushed back over twenty meters from the furious momentum. It felt like someone had swung a wrecking ball into him and Zac actually had to stop himself from grunting in pain.

The Zhix warrior clearly had almost 8 or 900 Strength, and it also had a dexterity that was almost on par, increasing the speed and destructiveness of the strike. There was even a hint of a high-tiered Dao Seed in the fist, but Zac knew he hadn't actually infused his strike. This was just a normal attack to test his might.

He looked with surprise at the towering Anointed. Had they found a way to move forward and evolve? From what Zac understood the rite of Anointment came at a cost, cutting off their path of advancement. But these were not attributes that a normal F-Grade warrior should have, at least not without a huge number of special opportunities that he doubted that the Anointed would possess.

"You are wondering how I could bring forth such strength, human Warmaster?" the massive Zhix laughed, its booming voice causing ripples in the air. "I have entered the crusade. I will fight for another year or so, then I will join the ancestors. This will be the final War, and my final gift to my Hive."

Zac's eyes widened in understanding, once more shocked at the conviction these people carried. He didn't know the specifics, but it seemed as though the Anointed knew of some technique traded their lifespan for power. It didn't seem to be directly burning life-force though, as Zac had seen that enough times to recognize the unique aura it radiated.

"So I guess it's time for me to reciprocate?" Zac said as he fully unleashed his aura.

The whole cave shuddered, and it only got worse as Zac started moving toward the enormous insectoid.

"Wait, Warmaster," the Anointed hurriedly said as he took a step back. "If there is one thing we have learned over the past year is that our hives cannot only rely on the old teachings to survive. We must also adapt and move forward. There is no need for you to carry on with that archaic tradition, let us instead talk about the looming threat."

The other Anointed hurriedly nodded as well, immediately launching into a discussion while pointedly looking away from Zac and his rapidly dwindling momentum. Zac speechlessly looked on with his fist still in the air.

So I just ate your fist for nothing? Zac thought as he looked at the shameless Zhix with mixed feelings.

"I am Rhubat. Strength to your hive. Nonet said you might be able to provide a tactic that would expedite our crusade?" the shameless Zhix said.

"Is this room secure?" Zac asked with a sigh, finally dropping the subject.

"Everyone who has not yet entered the crusade, leave this room," Rhubat said without hesitation, and a small group of Anointed along with the group of normal Zhix warriors left the chambers.

However, almost all the Anointed stayed, including Nonet who stood to the side, looking almost like a child next to some of its larger colleagues. However, Zac noted that Nonet must have grown by something like 30 centimeters since he had seen the hive leader last time.

“You too?” Zac asked with a frown as he looked over in Nonet's direction.

“The Anointed exist to serve the Hives. The crusade is our highest order. This is the final crusade, after which the Zhix will be eradicated or have no need for the Anointed any longer. Our era is coming to an end,” Nonet said, and the other Anointed nodded in agreement.