

## The Fall 620

### Chapter 620: Sankhara-Dukkha

Zac knew his people weren't out of the woods just yet, but he still scanned the prompt that had appeared in front of him before deciding on his next move.

Sankhara-Dukkha (Training (6/9)): Emerge victorious and seize the Spatial Drill. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/2)

[NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of 2 levels.]

He didn't know what the quest name was referring to, but the task was more straightforward. It also confirmed the importance of the Spatial Drill to the point that it almost felt like the System had sensed his hesitation and told him 'do what you want as long as you get the drill'.

The problem was what he should do now. He had just killed the Second Elder a few seconds ago, and his death had instantly roused the battle lust of the Zhix as they rampaged through the army with newfound vigor. Less than a third of the native army was still standing, with Zac being the biggest perpetrator by unleashing both the third swing of [Deforestation] and [Nature's Punishment] upon them.

He could probably force a surrender as long as they dealt with the two remaining elders, but to what end? What would he do, saddled with thousands of prisoners when they needed to move toward the core of the Mystic Realm?

But could he just slaughter them all just out of convenience?

Was there some sort of middle-ground?

"No!" a wail echoed out from the distance, and Zac turned his head to see the old lady desperately trying to break past the beasts in an effort to reach him, or perhaps the body of the Second Elder.

Her eyes were stained with tears and her old body was covered in bloody wounds. The air around her kept twisting and distorting as Grub constantly switched between slamming his enormous teeth together and releasing his massive bellows. Zac remembered all-too-well the restrictive power those soundwaves possessed.

The elder still pushed forward, shielded by a massive avatar that looked a bit like a huge scarecrow. It was made from hundreds of different plants, with leaves and fruits giving it facial features. Its limbs were made from straw and roots, and it was decked in a robe made from leaves. It stood over twenty meters tall, and it radiated both a life-force that eclipsed Zac's own wooden hand while also radiating the aura of a powerful adversary.

The grass around its feet kept growing taller as flowers sprung up around it. Perhaps it was the avatar of a God of Harvest, something the elder had used to nurture the plants of the clan. But that was obviously not its only function as that avatar alone seemed more than capable to deal with all three of Verana's beasts, even when they were empowered by a group of elite Beastmasters.

It wasn't very quick, but its attacks contained an enormous force. Slither tried to block as the elder and her champion pushed through Grub's restraints, but the old lady was on a rampage. A single punch from the avatar threw the snake over fifty meters away, and it was clearly grievously wounded from the hit.

Lulu harried the old lady while running in circles as she tried to light the scarecrow on fire with her spells, but roots kept stabbing up from the ground leaving deep lacerations on the foxlike beast. It was like nature heeded the old lady's call, lashing out at everything around her.

If nothing changed, then the third elder would soon reach the clashing armies. That wasn't the real problem though. The problem was the look in her eyes as she unerringly stared at Zac. He didn't know the background of this senior, but judging by the bone-chilling killing intent in her eyes as she stared at him, she was more likely to self-detonate than to surrender.

Then something suddenly changed. A ball of extremely concentrated poison shot toward the old lady as Slither unleashed one final attack before it fell unconscious. A series of thick leaves sprouted from the ground, but they were instantly incinerated as the blob flew straight toward the old lady. It contained a corrosive effect of a magnitude that rivaled [Blighted Cut], and even Zac felt some pressure from it.

The elder was finally forced to look away from Zac to meet the new threat head-on. She made a series of seals as the scarecrow hurriedly bent over, placing its two slab-like hands to block the incoming projectile. The already oversized hands of the avatar quickly grew even larger, turning into two meter-thick ramparts.

A storm of purple smoke erupted when the blob hit the wall, and even Zac felt the ground shudder from almost two hundred meters away. That wasn't all the Beastmasters had prepared though. Grub released a piercing high-pitched wail that conjured a tunnel that swallowed the elder in an instant. It didn't seem to hurt her, but it was like time had slowed down inside it.

The elder's avatar was already preoccupied with dealing with Slither's attack, allowing Lulu to fire a massive pillar of white flames straight at the old lady, incinerating the air itself. The elder moved like in slow-motion inside the pillar, but a storm of golden leaves flew out to block out the attack.

Zac breathed out in relief as he started running over. The trio had gone all-out, but it still looked like the elder would come out unscathed. However, the situation had given him a window of opportunity where he could quickly restrain her with the help of the restraint module he still carried with him. If he could capture her with the help of that thing, the war would be over since the grand elder was already wounded thanks to the Anointed's surprise attack.

His approach was immediately spotted, and a ruthless gleam shone in the elder's eyes as she looked at him. It looked like she had given the massive scarecrow some sort of order as well as it was slowly turning toward him, its hands mostly corroded away. But Zac didn't care as he rushed toward her.

However, a familial form soundlessly rose from the ground like the soil was made from water, appearing right behind the old woman. There was no hesitation as Rhubat made his move the moment he saw an opening thanks to both the elder and the avatar being preoccupied.

"Wai-" Zac said as he rushed forward, but it was too late.

The elder seemed to have realized something was wrong the moment Rhubat appeared as well, and dozens of vines appeared behind her to tie him up. But the roots were instantly turned to ash as Rhubat exploded with radiant flames; the flames from burning one's lifeforce. Rhubat's fist gained a golden glimmer as it punched straight through the vines and then the torso of the Cartava Lady, instantly killing her in one blow.

Her gaze never left Zac's though, not even in death.

The foliage and fruits that made up the twenty-meter avatar rapidly started to wither and rot away as it slowly curled into a fetal position. A second later it was just a putrid ball, but simply standing in its vicinity caused Zac's Danger Sense to go off. Something was brewing inside that ball.

"Quickly, get away!" Zac shouted, allowing the Anointed to scramble out of the way just before the crumbling avatar exploded, disintegrating the old lady and the surrounding fifty meters.

"Thank you, Warmaster," a bloodied Rhubat rumbled as he appeared next to him.

"No problem. Here, take this," Zac said as he threw a large Longevity Pearl to him. "Eat this thing. It might help you a bit."

Rhubat shrugged and swallowed the pearl in one go, its massive size making the pearl seem like a small pill.

"Longevity," Rhubat said as he looked down at Zac with surprise. "This is a great gift."

"I can't have you leave us just yet," Zac smiled, happy that the pearl seemed to have at least some effect on restoring Rhubat's remaining lifeforce.

"Not while the crusade is unfinished," Rhubat agreed.

"Help me with the last one," Zac said as he looked over at the Grand Elder. "I have an item that can completely restrain him."

They had already come this far, so Zac felt he might as well take this war all the way. The old man was bleeding all over, but the others in the group were even worse-off by now. The massive explosion had actually saved the lives of two of the Anointed, but one was already dead on the ground. Killing the third elder had come with a cost.

The death of the second elder had made the old man freeze and look over, allowing the other Anointed to barely jump out of the way of a beam of electricity so intense that it lingered in the air like a scar on reality. Only Billy's aura was still somewhat stable, but he was covered in scorch marks from head to toe, his lungs working like bellows as he greedily swallowed air.

Everyone was unwilling or unable to make the first move, putting them in an impasse for a few seconds. The old man's eyes moved from the crater to Zac, and finally to the rapidly crumbling army of his clansmen. There was fury in his eyes, but more so helplessness. But then there was finally tranquility and a dash of insanity as he smiled at Zac.

"Cartava, forever standing!" the man suddenly roared as he lit up like a beacon, causing massive waves of lightning that forced Billy and the Anointed to back away.

A collective roar erupted among the remaining Cartava soldiers, and each of them turned into beacons as well as a blazing lightning eye appeared above their heads. The whole area shook from the outburst of Cosmic Energy, and Zac got a sinking feeling as he saw the madness in the old man's eyes.

"Shit, they're blowing themselves up!" Zac screamed as he looked on with wide eyes as he launched a barrage of fractal blades at the Grand Elder.

The fractal blades didn't even get close before they were turned to ash, and Zac was all out of powerful moves. His blitz had been short and brutal, and [Rapturous Divide] was still on its cooldown.

"RETREAT!" Rhubat roared as he erected his series of earthen shields to protect his grievously wounded brethren.

The Port Atwood army had already disengaged, with everyone running for their lives as hundreds of people joined each other in death. The world turned white a second later, and Zac almost felt like the whole Mystic Realm was falling apart. He could only open his eyes a few seconds later, only to see hundreds of craters littering the battlefield, the largest one unsurprisingly the Grand Elder's handiwork.

"Are you okay?" Zac asked as he turned to the Anointed.

"We're fine, Warmaster," Rhubat sighed as it gazed at the elder's crater. "A valiant ending."

"Hmm," Zac hummed, feeling something was amiss, though he couldn't put his finger on it.

Those thoughts were thrown into the back of his head though when he spotted a familiar figure in the distance.

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"It's over," Tictus sighed, a wave of desolation emanating from his body. "It's all... over."

"Grandpa," Leviala sighed with a forlorn expression.

"I know father would have wanted to say goodbye, but he was out of time. This way our elites will be able to bring him away, giving the clan a final chance at survival. Perhaps an opportunity will arise if they hide until after the treasure matures," Tictus said as he put away his tablet.

"What about you?" Leviala whispered. "You can still..."

"We're standing outside the field. If they try to help us, they'll expose themselves and break the illusion. They are probably already gone," Tictus smiled.

"I'm sorry," Leviala said. "If not for..."

"Don't be. I'm happy to accompany you, child. It's not right for you to be left alone after all you've sacrificed. Besides... Mala, my children... All have already gone ahead. I'm... tired," Tictus smiled as he looked down at his niece.

Leviala only felt hollow inside as she deactivated her bloodline skill. She had seen enough. Her curse almost felt like a blessing at this point, shielding her from the suffering around her. People she had grown up with, people she had looked up to or despised. A fragmented clan bound together by their common plight.

So many gone in just an instant, crushed by a vengeful judgment. The hair on the back of her neck suddenly stood up as an immense aura came closer, and she could hear the sounds of bare feet walking through the grass a few seconds later.

“Anything to say for yourself?” Zachary said, and she could feel his eyes boring into her.

Leviala opened her eyes and turned toward the source of the sound. She couldn’t see him, but yet she could. He towered in front of her like a force of nature itself. She was blind, but she felt that she never had seen so clearly before, not even when awakening her bloodline back then.

Zachary Atwood was an aberration, an entity that should never have been provoked. Fate swirled around him, drawn to him like fireflies were to fire. To go against him was to go against the Heavens themselves. Yet she also knew one fundamental truth.

He was just one. One among many.

One star that shone a little bit brighter in a vast universe of stars and blazing suns, each of them swallowing everything in their surroundings in their unceasing ascent to the peak. People like her and her clan were just the soil that would help these stars grow, and a sense of exhaustion and helplessness washed over her.

But then there was peace.

“In my next life, I pray that I will not become a cultivator,” Leviala whispered as she closed her eyes forever.