

The Fall 633

Chapter 633: The Gift of Life

Ibtep took a deep breath before activating the teleportation array. They had spent the last two days traveling from hive to hive to better prepare for their mission. Zachary Atwood's warnings had made Ibtep worry that their preparations weren't enough, so they had gone ahead and collected another ten billion Nexus Coins just in case.

Of course, this also put Ibtep under even greater pressure, as more and more Zhix knew of their goal. Ibtep didn't know whether they would even dare return if they failed. Ibtep would definitely get hanged by their antennae as a warning to young warriors, their precious larvae farm scorched to the ground.

But Ibtep was ready. They had gone through all the wise teachings of Nonet's predecessor and their backpack bulged with preparations meant to tackle every scenario. They had even brought their tastiest grubbies this time, each of them full of flavor and energy. Even a vaunted otherworlder should be impressed by such fine specimen, no?

Ibtep touched their hand against the large Nexus Hub, their heart beating with a mix of fear and excitement. As far as Ibtep knew, they would be the first Zhix to ever set out from their home planet. Who knew, perhaps songs would even be written about this journey in the future? A screen appeared, and they unhesitantly pressed the button that would activate the teleportation to a place called 'Zerathar'.

The talisman in their hand started buzzing, and the Nexus Hub emitted a deep pulse that somehow swallowed Ibtep's surroundings. The grand structure housing the crystal disappeared, as did the doorway to the outside. Remaining was only darkness. The dark only lasted for an instant though as an energy pillar of unimaginable power shot out of the crystal, stretching out into eternity.

Ibtep's mouth widened into an 'o'. The Seeker in their heart wanted to properly study the marvel, but they hurriedly jumped into the pillar in case it only lasted for a short while. Ibtep found themselves hurtling through the darkness, shot through who knows how great a distance. It felt extremely novel at first, but even Ibtep started to get bored after ten minutes had passed.

Just how far was this place?

Their wait was soon over though as the darkness was finally replaced with a flash of light, and Ibtep found themselves in a beautiful garden. Ibtep was immediately transfixed as they looked around. Not only was the Corruption, no Cosmic Energy, of unmatched density in this stretch of paradise, but even the sky was different than anything Ibtep had seen before.

Rivers of light ran flowed across the firmament, showering the plants and the ground in a warm light. Ibtep could actually see some fishes jumping about in the river, somehow ignoring the laws of gravity. Even some of the plants seemed to be able to float in the air, forming small pockets of greenery bobbing about.

Calls of various critters echoed across the gardens, but they created a beautiful melody rather than a discordant cacophony. Ibtep couldn't be sure, but they actually felt it was by design. Ibtep stood transfixed in place, a storm of emotions wafting over them. This was it, what their somewhat surly

brethren disregarded in favor of normalcy and tradition. The sense of adventure, the beckoning call of the unknown.

Ibtep was doubly happy to have taken on this mission. How would they ever encountered such a marvelous place otherwise? It wasn't just like soup for the soul, but Ibtep even realized they had actually gained a level just from breathing in the aromatic atmosphere. Granted, some of the boost came from the unique properties of their Seeker-class, where visiting new places gave a boost.

But Ibtep had never gained energy anywhere close compared to what they gained just now just by standing around for a few seconds.

"Move, you're in the way," a gruff voice echoed out from behind, prompting Ibtep to jump up in a scare.

A large humanoid with six arms glared at Ibtep as he passed, but he didn't do anything further as they left along a cobblestone path. Each step took the cultivator hundreds of meters, and he was gone in an instant. Ibtep breathed out in relief, realizing they had forgotten themselves. Zachary Atwood had warned about the dangers of this place, and an example had presented itself so quickly.

The six-armed warrior was powerful, shockingly so. Ibtep's antennae had been completely overwhelmed when the man passed by, and they could only guess that the man was in the peak of E-grade at the least, or likely even higher. It was shocking. A random chance encounter in this place had put them face to face with a being more powerful even than the greatest Anointed or Zachary Atwood himself.

A sudden cough drew Ibtep's attention, and only then did they realized that there was another person close-by. It was a human, and she looked at Ibtep with a slightly crooked smile, seemingly hesitant whether she should talk with them.

"Hello, I am Ibtep. May I ask the directions to the Zethaya Hive?" Ibtep asked as they walked up to her.

"The Zethaya clan? This whole building is part of the Zethaya Pill House, Zerathar Branch..." the guard hesitantly said as she looked Ibtep up and down.

Ibtep knew that look all-too-well. She was no doubt hoping for a bribe. Ibtep grimaced in reluctance, but they still decided to follow their guts. First impressions were important.

"Thank you, my friend. For your troubles," Ibtep said as they placed one of their finer larvae in the human's hand.

The guard's eyes were wide with shock as she looked down at the squirming critter in her hand, and Ibtep inwardly groaned, realizing they might have overtipped this time. Not only were these little critters delectable, but they might even be extremely rare in this part of the universe. Ibtep needed to remember Zachary Atwood's warnings. It was dangerous to show off one's wealth in a place like this.

"Ah... I.. Thank you?" the guard said as she gingerly held the larvae. She found her bearings soon enough though and indicated the same road that the six-armed man earlier walked. "The main lobby is just down this road. Seeing as young master came through the private teleporter, a personal liaison will help you during your visit."

Ibtep nodded in thanks before walking down the path, their eyes curiously peering back and forth. Normally they would have stayed behind and asked the helpful human all the questions that had appeared in their mind, but now was not the time. The mission came first.

Only after a few minutes did Ibtep actually understand what the guard meant about this place being part of the pill house. They weren't actually outside, but rather inside a building of enormous proportions. The rivers in the sky, and the sky itself, were artificial, like carvings of hive-artisans. This place gave a lot warmer feeling than the dour interiors of the base Lord Atwood and the Anointed were exploring though.

But it begged the question; were all otherworlder houses this big? Did they have claustrophobia, the odd condition Ibtep learned about from Emily?

Ibtep eventually reached another part of the massive structure, this one a large hall full of people. Thousands of people, some of them radiating almost blinding power. Even the weakest of them seemed to be in the middle E-Grade, but many were far stronger. Ibtep could immediately sense at least twenty who most likely had reached the next step on the road of cultivation; D-grade.

The scene quickly subdued Ibtep's excitement, and some worry crept into their heart. Anyone in this hall could kill them with a wave of their arm, was this mission even possible to complete?

"Young Master, welcome to the Zethaya Pill House," a man suddenly said, the sudden sound causing Ibtep to jump a few meters in fright. "Ah, my apologies. May I ask what requirements Young Master have today?"

Ibtep turned around and saw a middle-aged male human standing in front of them. He had a short black beard and wore a set of wide robes that made Ibtep think of the acolytes who served the Anointed and prepared the rites of the hives.

This man was far more powerful than the clerics of the Zhix though, and Ibtep guessed him to be in the late stages of E-grade. However, he didn't emit the same type of oppressive pressure as Lord Atwood or the three great Anointed, but rather a soothing aura that made Ibtep think of the moss gardens back home.

"I was sent by Zac Piker," Ibtep said as they took out the second token Lord Atwood had provided. "He sent me here because we require the aid of a skilled alchemist.

"Zac Piker..." the man muttered like he was tasting the name in his mouth as he accepted the token with both hands. His eyes suddenly widened in shock as his eyes turned to Ibtep. "AH? It's him?"

The man had been very courteous before, but Ibtep almost felt like a warlord being led through a conquered hive as the man suddenly ushered them through the large building as a wide smile donned his face. The liaison kept introducing the various facets of the Zethaya hive, and what sort of services they offered on the different floors.

"May I ask how Lord Piker is doing? He disappeared from the Tower of Eternity quite suddenly from what I heard," the man suddenly asked as they entered a secluded hall with a dense earthy smell.

"My lord regrets he cannot come in person. He evolved some time ago and is now focusing on consolidating his cultivation by taking control of a Mystic Realm," Ibtep dutifully said.

"Oh?" the middle-aged man thoughtfully nodded as he led Ibtep into a secluded room with a view of the garden with the flying rivers. "As expected of a hero reaching the ninth floor of the Tower of Eternity. His progress is rapid. May I ask what brought you here today? We'll do our best to fulfill Lord Piker's request."

Ibtep's mouth widened in a grin, feeling that knowing a big shot really had its benefits. Now, Ibtep could only pray that these people could find a solution to the plight of the Anointed. They quickly took out the urn holding the Elixir of Anointment and placed it on the table, and the man curiously looked at it.

"This is...?" the middle-aged man asked with confusion.

"This is the Elixir of Anointment. It is a tonic that will cause a warrior to grow to over twice their normal size and gain massive power for their grade. However, it will make the user unable to cultivate and unable to break through to even E-grade," Ibtep sighed. "There are over a thousand warriors who have taken this elixir on our home planet, and Lord Piker has sent me here with two goals in mind."

Technically it wasn't Zachary Atwood who had sent them, but Ibtep didn't believe that he would mind Ibtep using his name in a way like this.

"An Army Serum," the middle-aged man hummed. "What is Lord Piker's wish?"

"First of all, find a way for those who underwent the Rite of Anointment to keep progressing on the path of cultivation. And if possible, improve this elixir to remove its demerits," Ibtep said, their heart beating quickly as they looked at the middle-aged man with hope in their eyes.

"I understand," the man nodded as he took out a token and infused it with energy. "I have called one of our resident Master Alchemists to take a look at the serum you've brought. He'll be able to give a preliminary estimation."

An old man entered the room a bit later, and Ibtep immediately found himself almost unable to breathe from the shocking pressure the man emitted. However, just as quickly as the pressure came, it suddenly disappeared, allowing Ibtep to breathe out in relief.

"Master Wamon," the liaison said with a bow. "A friend of young master Boje requires assistance, Lord Piker of the 9th floor. He has sent his acquaintance here to seek our help."

The brows of the old man named Wamon rose, and he slowly nodded in understanding as he looked at the urn on the table with a curious glimmer in his eyes.

Have you encountered any problems so far? an aged voice suddenly emerged in Ibtep's head as their antennae vibrated uncomfortably. This little insectoid is just a child, but the main branch has deemed that little lunatic as a Tier 2 personage. We cannot bear the burden if we create a grudge with such an unlucky star.

I ushered the messenger straight here, he should only have talked with the guard at the teleporter, the voice of the liaison answered.

What was going on? Were these two talking with their minds? And why were their words completely exposed as though they were talking out loud? Ibtep couldn't imagine they were aware of them listening

in, and they made sure to keep their face impassive. One of the orders of Lord Atwood was to sound out the situation on the outside, and wasn't this the perfect opportunity?

The two kept talking in secret as the old man opened the urn and caused a few drops of the elixir to float in the air. Ibtep couldn't be sure, but they guessed that the old Alchemist was observing the compound.

"It's a very novel Army Serum, but it seems to be bound to your particular genealogy," the old man eventually said after ten minutes. "There is much room for improvement, but the second request... I'm afraid that the Zethaya Clan will be unable to help you," the old Alchemist said.

"What you have here is what's something generally called an Army Serum in the Zecia sector. These kinds of elixirs help forces quickly nurture a large number of low-grade warriors with strong offensive powers. But these serums always have huge drawbacks, the most common being the one you mentioned; not being able to break through," Wamon said. "There are Army Serums that will allow one to break through to E-Grade, but those are strictly controlled by C-Grade forces. For us to evolve this serum to such a level... Would require the grand elders of the Zethaya Clan, and it would have geopolitical implications. I'm afraid that's far beyond this little branch."

"So there is no hope?" Ibtep sighed, their antennae drooping with disappointment.

"We might not be able to help you improve this formula, but we can help you with the other request," Wamon smiled.

"Oh?"

"We can create an 'antidote' based on this elixir, one that would allow your people to cultivate and break through again. However, you should understand that this type of antidote isn't perfect. Those who take it are unlikely to become proper Cultivators, and reaching D-Grade is highly unlikely. Most importantly; most of the power they gained from taking this serum will be stripped away when taking the antidote," the old man said. "But it will allow them to break through."

"Yes, please. Do that," Ibtep quickly nodded. "How much does an antidote cost?"

"This is a small matter, the clan would be upset if they learned we charged the friend of Lord Piker for something like this. We will analyze this compound and prepare ten thousand doses free of charge," the alchemist said. "Incidentally, young master Boje wanted to present some small gifts to Lord Piker in case he appeared in this branch, but we do not know what he requires. Would young master Ibtep perhaps know what he desires?"

Ibtep forcibly stilled their fast-beating heart before thinking back to their interactions with Lord Atwood since the time they first met. This was important, and a way for Ibtep to both make use of months of observation while also giving back to Zac! So, what did Zac desire? Zachary Atwood was mostly busy killing things all over the planet, so that should be his biggest interest. Unfortunately, there were no good gifts to give in that regard.

But he had shown a predilection for something else.

The first time Zac set out from his island out he came back with Emily, the one he called his mascot and who now lived in his private compound. The second time he came back with almost a hundred young

females, all of them beautiful according to human standards. The third time he came back with his kin and two more young females. There was also the one called Thea Marshall, along with the odd alien Verana Tir'Earel.

Lately, his speed of collecting females had decreased, but that was understandable considering how busy he was. Besides, perhaps his requirements were increasing as his powers grew?

Ibtep had spent a lot of time learning about human culture, and this behavior was clearly out of the norm considering the standard human coupling was a monogamic pairing. It was a unique desire of Zachary Atwood. This was perfect. Zachary Atwood had given the Zhix the gift of life, the continuation of their culture through arranging this meeting. This way Ibtep could give the gift of life right back.

"Lord Piker likes younger females," Ibtep said, making the two humans freeze. "The hundreds he has are not good enough. If you can get the word out that the Lord is looking for better ones to take his seed, I am sure he will be most grateful."