

## The Fall 297

### Chapter 297: Changing Course

"WHAT?" Zac exclaimed with anger. "Why the hell would they do that?"

"Control and self-preservation, I would guess," Henry said. "After learning about The Great Redeemer from Thea we believe that the Dominators have promised them sanctuary in exchange for subservience. That they will be spared when that monster arrives. Either that or they simply needed strong allies against you and my granddaughter. They might not even believe The Great Redeemer to be real."

"They would have to be crazy to jump into bed with those things. Even crazier than regular Zhix," Zac said with disbelief.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps they simply feel out of options. The Dominators are already so much stronger than them. What about a peak D-Grade powerhouse? They likely believe there is no way for us to prevail, and took a desperate gamble to get a shot at surviving," Henry said. "People will go to extraordinary lengths to survive."

"Is that why Thomas Fischer is improving so rapidly?" Zac asked.

"Yes, we believe that the Dominators have provided him with some sort of opportunities. He has always been strong, but he had shown not only a rapid gain in level but also a power that belies that level lately. He also cleansed a large part of the New World Government shortly before entering the hunt. It is still officially a democratic alliance of free states, but it is more or less an autocracy by now. The official explanation was to rid the cabinet of the shapeshifters, but a fair deal of humans were put to death as well," Henry continued.

"Will they actively work against us?" Zac said.

"I discussed this with your assistants yesterday. We believe, same as you, that the Dominators wish for the Incursions to be closed. So we will likely not encounter resistance at this stage. However, we should be ready for a civil war the moment the foreign threat is dealt with," Henry said. "You have already been painted as a traitor of humanity due to the company you keep. They might launch assaults at us under the guise of emancipation from the final threat, and they would be assisted by the Zhix hordes."

"Not all of the hordes," Zac said. "The council of the Anointed is preparing for a final Holy War against the Dominators. Where does the Ishiate stand?"

"They have been neutral so far," one of the advisors answered. "Not even Starlight seems to have a great drawing power with their people, and they generally stay in small cliques. That is why Everglade Refuge was forced to open their teleporter to the public even though they are a decent-sized settlement."

"So we are pretty much alone," Zac sighed.

"Our forces are a bit smaller, but we have more elites," Henry said. "But it would help our side if we were the ones who discovered and liberated the Underworld."

"What about Salvation?" Zac said, changing the topic. "Do we know where the Cradle of God is located?"

"It has been located, but..." one of the aides started. "We believe that attacking that man at the moment would be at least as dangerous as attacking one of the Top Tier Incursions."

"It doesn't matter, we need to prioritize killing him," Zac said without hesitation. "He's turning people into weapons, and he is a real disciple of the Great Redeemer. He must be removed as quickly as possible."

"It's not that simple," Henry said. "He has hundreds of thousands of those puppets, and he's turned the whole zone around him lifeless. It's impossible to get close without alerting him. We have tried multiple times to gain intelligence, but our scouts get killed by swarming puppets who simply explode themselves."

"Then I'll simply head straight in," Zac said. "There must be a limit to his power. There is no way he can control hundreds of thousands at the same time. We already saw he couldn't freely control a thousand in the hunt. We were able to destroy hundreds of them without the things reacting."

"I agree," Thea added from the side. "Killing Salvation should be a priority. He might even be able to open up a portal for the Great Redeemer. He did possess a protective talisman containing a whisp of his soul. Who knows what else he has? Perhaps he simply hasn't gathered enough sacrifices to open the portal yet."

In the end it was decided they would attack Salvation soon after Zac had closed a few Incursions and reached level 75. Thea would join as well in case the Undead armies stood down and returned to the Incursion. If not he would have to do things himself.

The meeting went on and one point after another was decided, and after another four hours Zac had a proper picture of how he would proceed the following weeks. There were some uncertainties, depending on things such as whether they could find the underworld and the response of the New World Government.

There were a lot of risks involved, especially to Zac himself. But if everything went according to plan earth would be free of any foreign invaders in less than two months. There was still the issue of the Dominators and the Great Redeemer, but they would have to take things one step at the time.

But just as he was about to call an end to the meeting Zac realized something odd.

"Wait, what about the Church of the Everlasting Dao?" Zac exclaimed. "They're not in the information packets."

"That's the oddest thing..." Henry muttered. "We simply can't find them."

"How is that possible?" Zac asked with suspicion. "They are possibly the strongest force apart from the undead. How is it possible that they haven't made any waves?"

"We are not sure what is going on either," an aide said as he started typing away at his laptop.

The next moment a screen of a torched village appeared.

"Up until two months ago, we could regularly find the aftermath of their crusade. They have burned hundreds of towns to the ground, leaving no survivors. The crusaders were part of a completely mobile

force that never went back to their Incursion to resupply, and they had no pattern to their slaughter. In fact, we do not even know where their Incursion is located," the aide said.

"But some time before the Hunt all their activities stopped. We still do not know the reason. Some even speculate that they have left," Henry said, though he didn't seem too hopeful about that prospect.

"What we have learned about those lunatics makes that unlikely though. I fear they are planning something big."

Zac slowly nodded, but Alea didn't seem as convinced. She touched her pouch and the next moment a piece of Springroot was thrown to every one in the room.

"Eat up," Alea said. "If not you'll be fed something far less appetizing."

Zac frowned at her manner, but he did agree with the sentiment. He felt it was a bit odd that the Marshalls never tested them once, and he hadn't seen anyone else using Springroot either since arriving. Had the Marshall clan been infiltrated?

The tension in the room rose to an entirely new level as the two sides looked at each other in silence, and energies were swirling in the air. Finally, Thea shrugged and ate the piece of the root, and the moment she backed down so did the rest. Even Henry bit down on the root after a bit, though his facial expression wasn't great.

"Happy now, miss?" he said as he turned a stern glare at Alea, who only smiled sweetly in return.

Zac felt it was lucky that no one had mentioned she was a poison user. If they knew that then the situation might have gone out of control. However, it was as though Ogras was whispering in his ear that the Marshalls weren't necessarily innocent just because they ate the springroot. They might still work with the Church.

In the end, Zac could only make a mental note of trying to gather intelligence on his own. His network wasn't anything special, but it was at least better than before the hunt. Since they were done with everything Zac exited the meeting room with great relief. Having spent most of the day in the stuffy meeting room he went out in the garden to enjoy a breath of fresh air.

"Sorry," a slightly helpless voice said from the side a few minutes later.

Zac looked over and saw Thea walk over and sit down next to him on the bench.

"For what?" Zac asked with some confusion.

"It feels like we're taking advantage of you. You're the one who will be risking your life over and over, while we have a much easier job. One could even say we are using the zombie hordes as an opportunity to power level our people," Thea said. "But I honestly can't find any better ways to do it. Only you can destroy the Incursions with relative ease at the moment. Your actions against that golem incursion made that extremely clear."

"Well, that's how things are," Zac said with a shrug.

"It just pisses me off," Thea muttered. "No one has done more for Earth than you, yet people are talking behind your back all over the world. Even some people in Westfort believe the nonsense the government is spreading."

"It's that bad?" Zac said with a grimace.

"Well... Nevermind," Thea said after a bit. "You know, the reason that grandpa wants me to become famous on the battlefield is not to compete with you. It's the opposite."

"How so?" Zac asked with a skeptical look.

"We decided to reorganize after the hunt. The Marshall Clan will mainly focus on business in the future, and we are looking into the means of getting hold of a Mercantile License," she said. "But we need some renown first. We're an old family but we have always been low-key, so very few know about us. This war is also meant to showcase our wares and set up a foundation."

"That's why you refused to give Calrin a monopoly," Zac realized, getting a nod in confirmation. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because of you, of course," Thea said with a shake of her head. "You are so far ahead of everyone else that it would be foolish to become a competitor in creating the World Capital. The New World Government still doesn't understand your power, but I do."

Zac was unsure how he felt about having forced them to reorganize like this. Would there be resentment in the future?

"Don't worry about it," Thea said. "We were businessmen from the beginning. It was only due to the Integration grandpa saw an opportunity to become something even greater. But I think this is for the best. It makes my life easier at least."

"I can tell Calrin to stop his expansion in Westfort if you want," Zac offered.

"There's no need. From what we understand we will not be able to get a license in the short run. It might even be good for us to see how a proper multiverse Consortium does business," Thea explained.

"I am sorry to disturb," Alea's voice suddenly came from behind, making the two turn around. "Nonet and Ibtep has returned."

Zac nodded and got to his feet, but only after throwing the poison mistress a slightly suspicious look. Was she popping up when he and Thea were alone on purpose? But he could glean nothing from her face, so he only shrugged his shoulders before turning to Thea.

"I'll have to see what they found out," Zac said.

"Have fun," Thea said with a wave, clearly intent on staying outside to enjoy the sunset.

Zac breathed out in relief when he saw the two Zhix were in mostly good condition. Nonet had a decent-sized wound in its chest, but Zac had a feeling that was due to their peculiar manner of greetings.

"Did everything go well?" Zac asked when he saw them.

"Hive Dahiti was luckily part of the traditional faction, allowing me to return alive," Nonet said without any facial expression.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm as he realized that he didn't know whether the hive next to this place was part of the Dominator's sphere of influence. He had simply assumed they were part of the normal Zhix since they had come to a ceasefire with the Marshall Clan.

"Your meeting with Herat in the hunt was known by Hive Dahiti. Herat is a highly regarded warrior, and his word has some weight with the council. He asked me to relay the message that they are ready to join you in battle, though we should do so soon," Nonet continued.

"Is something happening?" Zac asked.

"We are losing hives to the Dominators at a steady pace," Nonet said. "All pretenses have been dropped by now, and we are at war. Dozens of hives have been eradicated in the last weeks. Just as many have chosen to join them."

Zac nodded with weariness.

"I plan on fighting it out with them as soon as the Incursions are dealt with," Zac said, explaining the current situation to Nonet.

The large Zhix mulled over the information for a bit, until it spoke up again.

"I believe I will need to visit Hive Dahiti once more," Nonet said. "I heard of the undead from Ibtep and my warriors. They are true abominations. It will also sharpen our blades for the Holy War. The Zhix legions will want to join in this battle."