

The Fall 545

Chapter 545: War Machine

"I'm no-" Thea was about to interject, but she just shrugged and accepted her new title in the end.

Zac only smiled wryly as he stepped into the teleporter with Thea, the squad of ten Zhix scouts and Ibtep following close behind.

It looked like the town didn't get a lot of visitors as the guards reeled with shock when their group stepped out of the teleporter. The reclusive Marshall Scion wasn't immediately recognized, but the small German town exploded with activity when the guards realized who they were.

The mayor, a shockingly rotund middle-aged lady, came rushing over with such momentum that she almost only looked like a spherical blur.

"Our armies are passing through here," Thea said without preamble when the breathless mayor appeared. "More Zhix will come. A lot more. Tell your people to stand down. And close the gates to make sure our presence isn't leaked."

Zac nodded when he saw the Mayor give a rapid series of orders into a walkie-talkie without hesitation. Bringing a big shot like Thea rather than some random guide was already proving to be the right choice. He needed to hold up his part of the bargain though, so he turned to the group of scouts who all seemed fully focused on the mission.

"We'll go on ahead," Zac said as he took out his leaf. "Can you stay here and make sure there's no trouble?"

"Sure," Thea nodded. "I'll catch up with the army."

The group of scouts stepped onto the leaf after some explaining, and the group of 12 shot out toward the enemy hive. They stayed close to the ground to avoid getting spotted, though Zhix surveillance was seldom not performed aboveground. They rather built scouting chutes designed to catch the vibrations from the surface, sending the signals back to the hives as an early warning.

It only took them thirty minutes to reach their destination, a dense crop of forest on the opposite side of the hive. Zac figured that the array of Lübeck should be unaffected when activating the Jammer at this position, though the thing hadn't been through enough testing to ascertain its exact limits. This would be a learning experience for him as well.

The leaf stopped just above the ground and the group of scouts nodded at Zac before they spread out through the forest, soundlessly moving between the trees like ghosts. Only Ibtep stayed behind in case he was needed to communicate with the Zhix army. Zac stepped down from the flying treasure as well and took out a concealment array disk to avoid getting spotted.

He took out the Jamming array next, while also prodding the sigil in his mind that connected him to his butler. The small pagoda floated out from his sleeve a second later, after which the ghost appeared.

"My lord," Triv said with a bow as he looked around.

"Convenient," Ibtep muttered from the side, its eyes trained at the small pagoda. "Is it the same magic as that of the Ayr Hive in your base? If the Zhix could use this sort of magic on our hives..."

"I'm not sure," Zac said. "I think only ghosts can live in this pagoda. But the Ayr Hive might be possible to mimic? Not sure how much use it would be though."

"Imagine, one Zhix could carry a whole hive in its pocket, tens of thousands of warriors pouring out when attacked," Ibtep muttered.

"I think it would be a bit uncomfortable to stay in someone's pocket all day. Imagine the shaking," Zac countered, which made Ibtep nod thoughtfully.

"This item is not made for the living," Triv said as it shot Ibtep a cool glance. "There are many ways to create portable worlds though, but all of them are beyond your means."

"Some further thinking is required on this matter," Ibtep only murmured, his eyes clearly spinning with ideas.

Zac shrugged and turned back toward the Jamming Array. The thing was pretty much idiot-proof thanks to his sister, so he only needed to place it down on the ground and insert Fifty E-Grade Miasma Crystals. He started to get to work, and Triv couldn't help but float over and look at the jammer with interest.

The preparations were soon finished, and Zac performed a cursory inspection before he sent a message to Thea to start calling over the Zhix. His job was essentially done by now, and he only needed to make sure no one messed with the jammer.

"The modifications are crude, but they can't hide the amazing ideas they were built upon. To think that it would be possible to rework the array this way. The person who did this is definitely a genius," Triv muttered before it turned to Zac. "It's your sister, isn't it? She is a unique talent when it comes to understanding and modifying energy paths."

Zac thought for a second before he nodded in affirmation. It wasn't like it was a big secret, especially not after Kenzie had helped Triv create his cultivation cave.

"You might want to consider sending her to one of the powerful Craftsman Sects in the Sector," the ghost said. "It comes with some restrictions, but she will get proper guidance and she can return home as a resident Array Master after having reached a certain level."

"Why would a sect be generous enough to train people before letting them go?" Zac asked with skepticism. "That would be like watering someone else's fields."

"They take a tax. If your sister returns to your force, you will have to pay a fee based on her attainments, part of which would go to the sect as remuneration for the training," Triv said. "It is mostly just academies and craftsmen sects that do things this way though. Joining a combat-focused sect is generally a more permanent decision."

"Pay a fee? For life?" Zac asked with a frown.

"No, until enough benefits have been provided," Triv said. "She can also work off that debt herself as a roaming cultivator or by staying inside the sect."

"So you essentially become an indentured worker until you can free yourself?" Zac sighed. "Doesn't sound like a good place to send Kenzie."

"It might sound harsh, but such are the rules of the universe. No one will go out of their way and share their arduously accumulated heritage for no return. Just working off the debt over a few centuries isn't too bad as it will also help you improve on your craft, and there is no lack of applicants to such places. The best ones require both great connections and heaven-sent talents," Triv said.

Kenzie's future was something Zac had thought about, but it was ultimately up to her what path she wanted to take. She would need to find some environment that suited her unique gifts, and Zac knew that place wasn't by his side. He needed mountains of enemies to cut his way through in order to progress, but she seemed far more suited to orthodox cultivation.

Jeeves could help her improve both her class and her skills, and she also made tremendous progress by just cultivating inside his cultivation cave. She might be able to make huge gains if she entered some of those ancient places and gobbled up and improved all the great manuals and skills for herself. Just the thought made him both a bit excited and jealous.

"What about me?" Zac asked. "Isn't there some good opportunities for me like that as well?"

"Well... Perhaps," Triv said hesitantly. "Young Master might be better off joining an army or a mercenary band and fight at the borders."

The borders in this case were referring to the space outside the properly integrated space. The Zecia sector was huge, and it turned out that less than 3% could actually be considered part of some force's domain. Most star systems might officially be within the domain of an Empire or Sect, but there was no way that they had the man-power or resources to keep a presence at the more remote zones.

The planet he was sent to for his Hegemony quest was a prime example of that situation. The planet was integrated and part of the Allbright Empire, but it was so weak and declined that the System only provided the barest of functions. Most unclaimed territories were just a bunch of junk planets with low potential, but millions of clans, sects, and mercenary groups traveled those zones to find riches.

There was always some treasure hiding among the mountain of trash. You never knew when you might find an unclaimed Mystic Realm, precious remnants, or valuable treasure.

There were also the even more chaotic danger zones, such as the massive area full of Spatial Anomalies close to the Allbright Empire. There were no doubt far more opportunities there compared to the unclaimed areas, but there were also far more dangers. Only the craziest mercenaries decided to risk their lives in such a place, contending not only with the pirates and unorthodox forces, but with the fickleness of space itself.

Zac still hadn't decided on his future course of action, but he instinctively felt unwilling to join a mercenary band or some army like Average. First of all, there was the risk of someone higher up in the organization becoming interested in digging out his secrets. But there was also the simple fact that Zac enjoyed his freedom.

His life had become a lot worse by most metrics since the integration, but one big plus was the huge degree of freedom he enjoyed.

"They're all through," Thea said through the crystal, waking Zac up from his dreams of the future.

"Do it," Zac nodded at Triv, and the ghost infused its miasma into the Jammer.

The Array immediately hummed into life, and Zac felt a weak pulse spreading out from where they stood. However, the wave immediately turned invisible after less than ten meters, and Zac knew there was no way the Zhix would be able to find the source. He jumped up to sit on the branch of one of the taller trees and it gave him a secluded vantage of the hive far in the distance.

Now it was up to the Zhix to deal with the rest.

Nonet walked at the forefront of the army, the warriors of Hive Kundevi following close behind. The chaos in the human settlement caused by their appearance had been cause for some amusement, but it couldn't shake the sense of heaviness that gripped the heart of the army. It wasn't natural. Using corruption to fight other Zhix because of their use of corruption.

Of course, the situation wasn't as simple as that, but that was still how it felt among some of the army. There were no doubt still many Zhix inside the enemy hives who believed in the old precepts as well, but it couldn't be helped. The corruption needed to be cleansed once and for all, and no roots of evil left behind.

"Get ready," Rhubat rumbled from his position at the vanguard, and Nonet looked up and saw the hive in the distance.

The walls were lined with soldiers standing in wait, but Nonet only needed a single glance to realize that the defenders were both outnumbered and lacking in power. This wouldn't be a battle, but a slaughter. A few warriors of Hive Kundevi seemed to have reached the same conclusion, as some struggle appeared on their faces.

"Remember the cause, remember the precepts," Nonet said with a heavy tone, and the warriors shook themselves free from any stray thoughts.

There were no negotiation and no posturing. Rhubat started increasing his steps as they came closer to the hive, and the Anointed lit up with corruption as the vast army behind them started running to keep up with their leaders.

Hundreds of Punishment Spears, each of them dozens of meters long, appeared in the sky, all of them shuddering with unbridled killing intent. A rumbling roar was finally unleashed from the hundreds of thousands of warriors that covered the vast plains, and the air shook as a red cloud spread across the area.

The haze was made from the congealed killing intent of the army, and it smoothly entered the fractal spears, empowering them with conviction. The Punishment Spears sucked in more and more, and the first group of attacks finally soared toward the hive as Rhubat, Vanexis, and Raha each launched their spears forward with a mental command.

Their power was far beyond that of the other Anointed, and they were able to carry the will of the Zhix with far greater grace than Nonet could ever dream of. The whole mountain vibrated as the spears

soared toward the standing army, but a massive shield sprung up to block them out. It looked like someone had stolen a piece of the night sky, a vast cosmos that enclosed the whole mountain that held the Dominator Hive.

It was them. It was the undeniable mark of the Dominators, the proof of their corruption. Only they had the ability to drown the world in night like this. However, the scene didn't deter the Crusaders in the slightest. It only bolstered the conviction, and dozens of spears shot into the shield the next moment as the Anointed poured everything they had into the projectiles.

They all carried the momentum the Zhix had accumulated for millennia, the will to break free of the chains of the Dominators.

The shield barely managed to hold against the attacks, but they weren't done there. A ten-meter insignia depicting the seal of Hive Kundevi appeared behind Nonet, and similar scenes played out all across the front of the army. The seal shone down at Nonet, causing its frame to grow another meter as the Regalia of the Crusade covered its frame.

The power of the Anointment coursed through Nonet's veins, and all hesitation and worries were burnt out of its mind. The future didn't matter any longer. Only the Crusade mattered. Nonet's feet turned to a blur as the leader shot toward the galactic shield, its ceremonial dagger already glowing with radiant luster.

A terrifying shockwave spread out as Nonet slammed into the wall, and small cracks spread out from where the dagger hit the barrier. The other Anointed had done the same, and the earth shook as one massive attack after another was launched. The shield finally couldn't take it any longer, and the night-sky dissipated like it had just been a dream.

Nonet didn't need to give a signal on what to do next. The warriors of Hive Kundevi followed close behind as Nonet made its move. A squad of traitors was butchered with one swing of Nonet's dagger, and the Kundevi Warriors made short work of the survivors. There were a lot of traitors still outside, but Nonet didn't focus on that as it pushed itself into the cramped entrance in front of it. Nonet had a mission to perform, and there would be others to deal with the warriors on the slopes.

The furious war machine of the Zhix was had once again awoken to face the threat of the Dominators, and not a single soul would be spared.