

The Fall 743

Chapter 743: Catching Up

Emily's brows were furrowed from a mix of worry and hesitation as she hurried toward the Dao Repository. Something was going on, and not just with the emergency meeting the Stargazer had called. Something was different with the atmosphere in Port Atwood since she had returned from the Tower of Eternity.

It wasn't just the seemingly endless amount of resources that had appeared out of nowhere just before she left. They were sent back by Zac according to Joanna, and it wasn't out of the norm for him to do things like that. Her own care package had allowed her to even match the performance of Thea Marshall even though her class wasn't purely combat-oriented.

There were some odd undercurrents, weird glances like some core members of Port Atwood were keeping something from her. Were people already starting to get restless from Zac's absence? That definitely spelled trouble. After all, it was still a few years until Zac could be expected to return at the earliest.

And she knew that she wasn't strong enough to protect Zac's interests on her own in case some people had started to eye the vast fortunes of Port Atwood. No matter if it were those aliens from the lab or the demons, her level 87 cultivation wasn't enough to stop either of them. If a rebellion really was brewing, they might be in for a rough one.

Thankfully, there were the Valkyries, and Emily smiled when she saw Joanna waiting outside the gates of the Towers of Myriad Dao.

"You're here," Joanna smiled.

"Were you waiting for me?" Emily asked with confusion.

"Well, you know how that guy is. Standing on the steps until the meeting starts is preferable to getting berated," Joanna helplessly shrugged.

"He gets nicer if you visit more often," Emily giggled as the two walked inside, where the conference table was already set up between the towering statues.

"Well, we might need his assistance this time around, so please help keep him happy," Joanna whispered.

"Just what's going on?" Emily asked with a low volume as they entered the halls, a bit surprised to see the old Monkeyman and the gem turtle present as well.

Perhaps she had let her thoughts run wild. If these people were present, the meeting wasn't related to rebellion from the looks of it. But the group waiting in the Dao Repository still gave some indications that the matter was big. Apart from the two leaders of the Mystic Realm refugees, there were also Ilvere and Janos, along with Mr. Trang, Alyn, and Calrin who looked as confused as she was.

However, none of the various officials of Port Atwood were present, such as the Mayors of the colonies or Adran. Neither were there any leaders of the civic departments, from agriculture to the tax bureau. It

was clear; everyone present was part of or represented the elite fighting force of Port Atwood. For them all to be gathered, there had to be a threat that had appeared out of nowhere.

Was war really brewing?

"You'll find out soon enough," Joanna sighed when she saw Emily's questioning glance. "We're still waiting for the final members to arrive."

"Other people? Aren't everyone here?" Emily asked with confusion as she looked around the room.

Joanna was about to open her mouth, but she stopped herself and shook her head, indicating for Emily to wait a bit. Emily rolled her eyes in response and walked over to mingle with the others.

It had been some time since she saw some of these familiar faces. She had stayed a full 9 months in the Tower of Eternity and immediately entered seclusion in the Dao Chambers of the Atwood Academy upon her return. The building constructed by Kenzie had helped her consolidate her gains and push her second Dao, the Seed of Flow, to Peak Mastery.

She had already managed to evolve her Seed of Spark to Fragment of the Setting Sun, symbolizing the end of summer. Her water-based Dao would eventually form as the foundation for spring as she walked the path of nature. At least that was the plan. Zac had talked about the importance of a path until she feared her ears would fall off, but it still felt like she didn't resonate with her path like Zac did with his.

Well, whatever. She would figure it out sooner or later, and the more she traveled and experienced the closer she would get to her truth. Her current progress had been enough to gain an Epic class she was happy with – [E-Epic] Razor Sun, a class that not only pushed her old shamanic skillset to the next level but also added some devastating offensive capabilities that she had felt herself missing in the Tower of Eternity.

She knew how Zac's crooked brain worked by now. The more she veered toward a support class to help him out, the less likely he would be to take her along on his adventures. He would just feel he was risking her life for some buffs to himself, taking advantage of her. That was obviously stupid, but men often were.

So she needed to prove her ability to protect herself first, after which she could figure out how to help him. For now, that meant figuring out what the hell was going on here. A series of steps dragged Emily out of her thoughts, and she saw that three people were arriving, each of them emitting an all-too-familiar aura.

The aura of death. Emily's eyes widened as a scorching halo erupted behind her back, and a fiery lizard two-meter long appeared by her side, a familiar created with [Apostle of Autumn].

It felt like all three of them were a threat to her too, especially the woman in the middle. She wore an elegant black dress so long that it dragged behind her like a wedding dress, with blue details studded here and there. She had long white hair that was tied back with a bejeweled pin, and sported odd tear streaks on her cheeks made Emily's mind shudder.

The most striking were her eyes, two orbs that both commanded attention and forced her to look away. The blue streak that formed a thin pupil seemed to hold a terrifying power that threatened to suffocate Emily's very soul.

It looked like she was a mourner heading to a funeral, and her companions looked just as odd. To her left walked a woman who was very clearly blind, with two hollow sockets where her eyes should be. However, inside the gaping holes, two small turquoise storms raged, giving the revenant a manic appearance.

She wasn't as striking as the other woman, but an odd fleshy eye hovered over her shoulder, making Emily glance over at Abby with hesitation. A distant cousin, perhaps? Or more likely, a conjured ability like her own lizard, perhaps there to provide the blind Revenant with the ability of sight.

The craziest part was, Emily recognized this person. It was Leviala, the traitor of the Mystic Realm who had almost gotten them all killed. Emily started to get a sinking feeling as she put two and two together, and her eyes turned to the third person who towered over the other two. It was like he exuded an oppressive darkness, and he wore a large hood that covered most of his features.

However, a white snout stuck out from the shadows of the cowl. Emily didn't recognize the beastman, but someone else certainly did.

"You! Cervantes!" Hekrux Vira shouted with shock as the appearance of the largest newcomer was exposed.

Helo's reaction was even greater, with dozens of gems across his body erupting with almost blinding radiance as his aura veritably exploded. A massive hammer made from dark-blue steel appeared in his hands, and the whole chamber was suffused in an aura of immense weight. It almost felt like Emily had been transported to the depths of an ocean, with billions of tons of water weighing down on her shoulders.

"It would appear you gentlemen knew my predecessor," the huge werewolf said, removing his cowl before he bowed at the other two beastkin. "However, while I share a body with Cervantes, I am not he. My name is Rhuger Blackwood, captain of the Einherjar."

"Pika Blackwood, captain," the second revenant said, leaving only the mysterious woman in the middle.

"Leviala..." Hekrux Vira sighed as he glanced at Joanna, who clearly wasn't surprised to see these new arrivals. "So this was your fate."

"What the hell is going on?!" Emily finally cut in as she glared back and forth between Joanna and the undead. "What has Zac done?!"

"I think you already understand," Joanna shrugged. "This was one of Lord Atwood's plans to protect Earth and make use of the unique nature of our planet."

"That rascal," Sap Trang muttered before he took a deep drag from a pipe and sat down.

"He really raised a bunch of Zombies instead of expanding the Academy? Don't we have enough trouble on our hands already?" Emily said with a stomp before she glanced at the revenants. "No offense."

"None taken," the woman in the middle smiled. "I am Vilari, leader of the Einherjar. If it's any consolation, we have no connection to the Undead Empire. Zachary Atwood is our progenitor."

"The Einherjar is like the Valkyries," Joanna nodded. "They are only loyal to Lord Atwood."

"So we have a secret Revenant Army? As general of the forces, I am a bit hurt I wasn't made aware." Ilvere snorted as he looked the Revenants up and down. "Well, no matter. Our force is so diverse already, what's a few of the unliving? So, why has this meeting been called? If hidden cards like these... Einherjar... are being brought to the light, it cannot be a small matter."

"The truth would be exposed sooner or later, but we originally had planned on keeping it a secret at least until Lord Atwood returned," Joanna nodded. "But something has changed, which is why we called this meeting. Please, everyone. Come sit down."

"We fought those zombies for years, and that guy just goes and creates new ones," Emily muttered, getting an emphatic nod of agreement from Sap Trang, but she still sat down at the table.

"Port Atwood has received a quest, and as Lord Atwood is busy searching for opportunities, it has been handed over to me," Abby said. "This world has been presented with an opportunity, most likely thanks to the young master's impressive performance. An opportunity to sharpen our elites. We have been awarded an incursion."

Exclamations erupted in the room, with peoples' expressions ranging from excitement to disgust. Emily felt a chaotic jumble of emotions running through her head. She knew that Zac was getting further and further away from them all, to the point that he might eventually discard Port Atwood altogether in search of greater heights. An Incursion meant another round of Origin Dao, quests, titles, and unique treasures.

A way for herself and Port Atwood to keep pace.

But she remembered all-too-well the kind of terror and suffering the integration forced upon an unsuspecting world. She remembered the sense of helplessness of her siblings disappearing into thin air, desperately struggling against an increasingly hostile environment. Of being exposed to the ugliness of mankind when society collapsed. Could she really bring herself to deliver such suffering on others?

"Is this normal?" Hekruv Vira asked with a frown. "Our records about newly integrated worlds are limited, but I haven't heard of such an opportunity being dispensed by the Heavens to such a fresh world. From what I understood, the first century is meant to slowly adapt and nurture the first generation of proper cultivators, at which point the assimilation will take place."

"This is not the standard procedure, but it is not unheard of. Zachary Atwood has accomplished many mindboggling feats... Yet his force," Abby sighed. "You are too weak."

"Too weak? Too weak for what?" Emily frowned.

"To survive what's to come," Joanna said.

"And what is that?" Ilvere asked.

"War," Vilari said. "War is coming. Our master released the madness of war in the Tower of Eternity, and now conflict has come knocking at our door. Lord Atwood is inexorably linked to this struggle. As we are now, we will not be able to assist Lord Atwood, let alone be able to protect our world. We will be swept away by the currents, fodder for our enemies."

Fear gripped Emily's heart, and she remembered the warning in Zac's letter. He had indeed told her about this, saying that war was coming to the Zecia Sector. However, it was one thing to hear about some diffuse and distant conflict, and another to be presented with a draft notice.

"The Einherjar and Valkyries will enter the incursion in full force," Joanna added. "The world we're invading is not like Earth. It already has cultivators, and the limit of expedition members is level 100. We expect the opposition to be harsh, far more so than the scattered resistance Earth put up. But it is the only way for us to keep moving forward for the foreseeable future. Opportunities on our planet have grown scarce."

"What about the Demonkin?" Ilvere asked.

"Anyone with Port Atwood as Alignment can enter," Abby answered. "Which excludes some of you."

Ilvere grimaced a bit, but he slowly nodded. The demon glanced at Janos, who imperceptibly nodded in agreement.

"If you'll have us, we are willing to take that step once more. We have been through it once already, and while we got steamrolled, we still possess some unique understanding that might prove useful," Ilvere said, and Joanna nodded in agreement.

"I... Cannot," Sap Trang sighed with a shake of his head. "This old man cannot in good conscience take that step... I will stay and guard our home in your stead. Don't worry, nothing will happen with me and Little Bau patrolling the waters."

"I... I..." Emily stammered, frozen with indecision.

Her thoughts were a jumble, and she couldn't decide what to do. Suddenly, a calming wave soothed her mind, and she looked over as the mysterious revenant had walked over.

"Child, no need to fret," she said as she produced a token and a letter. "Our master has prepared another path for you. It will be dangerous, but it is an opportunity to broaden your horizons and become stronger."

Zac opened his abyssal eyes as the storm in his Soul Aperture slowly subsided. A smile spread across his face as he had taken yet another step forward in his cultivation. It had taken eight months of arduous work, but he had finally managed to infuse six revolutions of his Life-Death Array with his Dao.

The extra layer had resulted in a soul storm of unprecedented ferocity, but the gains were also demonstrably greater compared to using just five infusions. The storm had generated almost 15% more motes that turned into fertilizer to the core of his soul, which was now almost four times as large compared to when he started to cultivate his soul in earnest.

In fact, the core of his soul wasn't the only thing that had changed over the past eight months. The oceans themselves kept some of the infused meaning from each revolution, and they teemed with energy by now. In fact, if Zac focused, he could sometimes see vague scripts forming in the waters, markings containing the truths of Life and Death.

They only lasted for an instant, but it was a testament to how much meaning Zac had managed to impart into the oceans. Of course, most of it was thanks to absorbing all that Twilight Energy, setting up an extremely sturdy foundation to cultivate upon. If he had cultivated in his own cave back on earth, it would probably have taken a decade or two to reach this point.

Even his Soul Aperture itself had been considerably strengthened by the constant clashes between life and death, and Zac suspected that his natural resistance to soul attacks had become a lot stronger compared to before. All-in-all, he was in a far better state to deal with the upcoming challenges. Zac was about to continue his Cultivation Session by focusing on expelling some of the toxins in his body, but he froze as he suddenly sensed something.

A presence.

It was weak like a candle in the wind, but it had appeared out of nowhere, right in his temporary cultivation cave. Zac sprung into motion as the coffin took its place on his back while a spare axe appeared in his hand. He had been discovered, and no matter who had managed to find this place, it couldn't possibly be good news.

“Well, you’re a weird one. A Draugr cultivating Life touched by the Buddhist Sangha. No wonder you managed to travel this deep into the chasm,” a booming laugh suddenly echoed through Zac’s cave.