

The Fall 837

Chapter 837: Ensolus

Zac knew he had gotten continuously stronger in the Orom World, but that sense had always been skewed and suppressed because of the prison brand. But the gain in attributes was absolutely shocking, even surpassing all his breakthroughs during the Twilight Ascent. Then again, Zac knew he shouldn't be surprised considering gains on the path of cultivation were exponential.

The awards from each level during Late E-grade were worth three times those in the early E-grade, for example.

And just like last time, each mote of Chaos he managed to drag into his body had opened a node without him even noticing, saving him a lot of time dealing with the final hurdles on his path to peak E-grade. As long as he pushed himself, Zac believed he would be able to reach peak E-grade within a year. Of course, that didn't mean he was ready to make his D-grade push just yet.

But he was getting there.

Thanks to all the experts in the Orom World, his foundations and understanding of Cultivation had been shored up immensely. It wasn't only a matter of the techniques he had learned with the help of Pavina and Heda, but it was a matter of vantage. Over the past years, he had discussed cultivation with dozens of talented Hegemons and Monarchs, some of which were more powerful than even the top powerhouses of the whole Zecia sector.

Their worldview had helped broaden Zac's own, and he better understood what was required to keep going where others encountered roadblocks.

Having confirmed everything was in order, Zac completed another customary sweep of his body. Unfortunately, the results were the same. Even now, he had no earthly idea just how Iz Tayn managed to find him. He had gone over the course of events and her words innumerable times over the past month, and there was no doubt in his mind – she had come for him.

But why?

Was it because he called her a lunatic before escaping? Was it such a big deal after she tried to kill him? And if it really was the cause, then why didn't she emit a speck of killing intent when she appeared in front of him? Zac had only realized that after making his escape, but she hadn't actually tried to attack him. He had just been too preoccupied with the stress of the situation and her guardian's aura to notice.

Had she perhaps spotted how he changed race during the Battle of Fates? It wasn't impossible. He hadn't noticed anyone looking at him when he converted into his Draugr form, with everyone too occupied with their battles to notice a change in one of the corpses on the ground. Except for her. No one dared even approach Iz Tayn, giving her ample room to observe the situation from that sun of hers.

But would someone like her care about a Life-Death Edgewalker, even if knew what was going on? Zac eventually shook his head, no closer to figuring the reason behind her actions than before. Only that woman herself knew her motivations for tracking him down, probably coming all the way from the central regions of the Multiverse to this desolate edge of the System's domain.

As for his body, it was getting better. Having absorbed four motes of Chaos had been a bit too greedy, and taking on eight of them next time was out of the question. His pathways were mostly mended by now, but they were weakened by the lingering effects of the motes. The same was true for his Nodes, but they had reached a point they would withstand a battle or two without breaking by now.

He figured that another month or two would suffice when using his Healing Arrays, at which point he could visit Yrial again. Having lived in the Orom World for years might have lessened the benefits his ghost master could provide, but there were still some blanks that the Lord of Cycles might be able to fill in.

Most importantly, Yrial might be an Edgewalker himself, which would mean he could hold the key to forming a Cultivator's Core containing two opposing forces. In contrast to Pavina and Heda, he also knew his real situation with his two races, which might allow him to provide more incisive advice. Of course, the two Monarchs who had taught him back in the Orom World might have known his situation as well, but neither he nor they ever broached the subject.

The hours passed, and Zac finally felt himself gain a sense of balance. He better understood why all those Hegemons and Monarchs in the Orom World took regular breaks from cultivation, their rest sometimes lasting years. You couldn't just keep rushing headlong, you were bound to hit a wall sooner or later.

He still was impatient to gain power and rescue Kenzie, let alone dealing with the more immediate issues such as saving Ogras and helping Alea, but haste makes waste. He needed to digest all he had been through before taking the next step. Still, he was getting a bit antsy sitting around in his courtyard, but he sensed Triv was actually already hovering outside, waiting for the deadline.

"Come in," Zac said, and the butler appeared in the courtyard a moment later.

"My apologies for rearranging things without young Master's permission," Triv said as they appeared in the courtyard.

"I like it," Zac said. "I can feel there is a budding spirituality connecting my whole forest. It must have been a lot of work setting it up."

"It's not just young master's compound. With the assistance of your followers, the whole archipelago has been transformed into something worthy of being the capital of the Atwood Empire," The ghost said. "In fact, the population of Port Atwood has already surpassed ten million."

"That many?" Zac exclaimed. "Won't it affect the energy density?"

"Not at all," Triv said. "The Spiritual Vein has kept growing beneath this island, and it is now many times stronger than before. A few of the islands have, however, become hotspots with Miasma due to this archipelago being placed right between Pangea and Elysium, as the second continent has been named. There is more on the subject in the reports I have arranged for the young lord."

"Good work," Zac nodded. "Was there any commotion from the tribulation cloud?"

"None," Triv said. "It was explained as another elite having formed a Dao Branch, but their identity kept secret."

“Another?” Zac exclaimed with a raised brow.

“The young general is terrifyingly talented, as expected of the progeny of the young lord,” Triv sighed.

“Lady Vilari formed her first Dao Branch two years ago, and I hear rumors she formed a second one on the other world.”

Zac nodded, once more marveling at Vilari’s talents. Just who was that scary girl that Vilari’s body once belonged to? Not only had she essentially insta-killed him during the Battle of Fates, but her constitution had helped birth such a powerful Revenant. Someone like her was far more likely to be a scion like Iz Tayn than some frontier elite.

“Anyone else?”

“Lady Joanna is reputed to be at the precipice, only lacking a spark of inspiration. The same goes for the Demon gentleman and a few others,” Triv said. “But most have found it hard to progress their Daos after forming Fragments, even with a second helping of Origin Dao.”

Honestly, Zac was more surprised that Joanna had reached the threshold of forming a Dao Branch herself, even if he knew that final step was something that would elude most cultivators for their entire lives. Joanna was different from Vilari, or even more grounded examples like Thea. Her talents weren’t bad, but they weren’t stellar either.

She must have pushed herself extremely hard during the incursion to make such rapid progress.

Zac eventually turned his attention to the reports and infused a wisp of his consciousness into the crystal. Immediately, pages upon pages of information and data flooded his mind, thousands of pieces of information dating back all the way since he left.

Clearly, Adran or Abby had erected this database the moment Zac left and continuously added information to it. Now, it constituted volumes of data that would have made his head spin before the Integration. Everything was listed, from obvious things like revenue streams and larger political changes, to detailed data such as tallies on tens of thousands of Atwood Academy Graduates.

There were reports on citizens’ classes as well, and a quick scan proved that Port Atwood was not only making rapid improvements for their armies. The huge sums he had poured into raising craftsmen were finally beginning to pay off, with many promising talents having reached middle and even late E-grade with craftsmen professions.

Three years ago, Port Atwood even saw the birth of its first Spirit Tool from the hands of one of the Ishiate craftsmen, though it was a low-quality one that was unlikely to even reach E-grade. Of course, that was also discounting the growing repository of synthetic Spirit Tools that Clan Volor could create with the help of their crystals.

However, as he skimmed the mountains of data, there was one thing he was missing.

“What about Emily?” Zac asked. “She hasn’t returned to Earth yet?”

“The young miss returned two years ago, but she left soon after realizing the Lord had not yet returned. She said she was heading back to the arena, and that she was joining some sort of trial,” Triv said.

“Heading back?” Zac muttered with surprise.

He had left two single-use Teleportation Tokens to his disciple. One led to the main continent of the Allbright Empire, the token that Pretty Peak had given him. The second one led to the Big Axe Coliseum, and it looked like she chose to use the latter, which didn't surprise Zac in the slightest. He figured she'd be right at home among the orcs, minotaurs, and other tribal species.

But for her to say she was heading back must mean she had made a name for herself over there, either by getting her hands on another token or by officially gaining access to the Teleportation Array. Both were quite difficult, especially the latter one. It both required getting some renown in the arena, and then having one of the arena masters give out difficult quests to complete.

"If the Lord wants, I can arrange a message sent through the merchants," Triv offered.

"No, let her follow her path for now," Zac said with a shake of his head. "I'll go visit her later."

Zac kept perusing the documents for a few minutes, filled with satisfaction and pride, though he had to admit there was a small hint of... he didn't quite know. Reading how his followers continuously kept pushing Earth and the budding Atwood Empire toward new heights proved he had surrounded himself with competent people, but it also meant he wasn't as integral to the continuation of Earth as he might like.

He had been gone for over six years, twice as long as he'd stayed behind post-integration. Yet Earth was fine. Great, even. Certainly, he knew much of their accomplishments were only possible thanks to his infusion of resources, but he had to admit that running a kingdom wasn't his strong suit. If someone needed to get chopped, he was the man for the job, but all these things listed in the reports?

They might be better off without him interfering, essentially turning him into a deadly figurehead.

"Ah right," Zac suddenly said, dragging himself out of those complex thoughts.

"Is there anything else, master?" the ghost asked.

"Here, take this. A small thank you for tending my place over the past years," Zac smiled as he threw Aia Ouro's Spatial Gem over toward the ghost.

Inside were a pile of resources meant for Spectral Cultivators, including a couple of cultivation manuals. Zac didn't know if Triv, a non-combat cultivator, could make use of them, but it wasn't like there was anyone else around that could benefit from those things. Seeing as how Triv had maintained and even improved his whole compound for years, Zac figured he might as well give them to Triv.

"This! This is," Triv stuttered as it scanned its contents. "This is too precious! Where did master find this?"

"I was attacked by a young master of an Eidolon Hivemind. This was the spoils of that encounter," Zac shrugged.

"The Eidolon? Why would they attack you? Were you in your human form?" Triv exclaimed, looking shocked and a bit confused.

"Things aren't as harmonious in the Empire Heartlands as the citizens of the Kavriel Province are led to believe. There is a lot of infighting, it seems. In the trial I joined, Draugr, Eidolon, and the Eternal Clan fought and schemed against each other. If I didn't kill them, they would have killed me. No need to

worry about it,” Zac said. “After you’ve memorized the manuals, hand them over to the Einherjar. They might come in handy in the future.”

“So things are like that,” Triv sighed, sounding a bit forlorn.

Zac could guess what Triv was thinking. It was probably a disappointment learning that the supposed paradise for undead cultivators was just like everywhere else; filled with schemes and infighting. However, the spectral butler perked up soon enough as the Spatial Gem somehow fused with their incorporeal form, completely disappearing.

“Well, I should have figured. Struggle is Heaven’s Mandate, and not even the great Primo can subvert that decree. And don’t you worry, young Lord. No matter what happens in the future, loyal Triv will always be your most ardent spectral supporter, no matter how many Hives send their invitations my way!”

“Thank you,” Zac laughed as he shifted his attention back to the missive, though he wasn’t too sure how genuine the ghost really was.

But when he reached the section about the Incursion his smile gradually turned into a frown, though Triv’s assurances gained a somewhat comical meaning. The situation was beyond what he had expected, and when he read about the recent changes, he started to get a sinking feeling. It looked like he needed to make a trip to the Ensolus Continent, and soon.

However, there was one thing he needed to confirm first.

Vilari looked up from the stacks of papers just in time to see Ilvere, Rhuger, and Joanna enter her office that adjoined her meditative pond.

“We just got word from Miter’s Hall,” the demon said. “They’ve spotted movement. If all goes as expected, they’ll be here this time tomorrow.”

“Alright,” Vilari calmly said. “Is everything prepared?”

“It’s all dealt with,” Joanna said with a somber expression. “What do you think they’ll choose?”

“If they’re wise, they’ll accept our terms. It’s their one route to avoid calamity, no matter if it is one of their own making or one of the Heavens,” Vilari said.

As though prompted by her words, the whole room violently shook as the energy in the chamber turned chaotic. This was the second tremor of the day – they were getting closer. Vilari was no expert on the subject, but she doubted this world would remain standing in a year unless something changed.

“It’s getting worse,” Joanna sighed. “This might really be the last chance. If the talks fall through, war awaits.”

Vilari nodded in agreement. If tomorrow’s summit failed, an unprecedented war would sweep through this world. Even if they were the strongest party, the enemies would fight with their very existence on the line.

Just like the Ruthless Heavens wanted.

Only when they had arrived at the Ensolus Continent did they realize just how much value the System put on their Lord. Earth was a unique world with its twinned affinities, yet the System actually saw fit to create another one through the integration – fusing a dead world and one teeming with life. It was essentially a gift-wrapped world created in Lord Atwood's image.

It was a shame that no gifts from the Heavens came without strings attached.

"Don't get your hopes up, lass," Ilvere grunted. "I don't know about that old wraith Eomid or his brothers, but I doubt Hanuk will give in without a fight. Strength is the core of their society, it's divine providence. He is the leader of the Mavai Hordes on the basis of being undefeated and unrivaled. To give in to an outsider would deprive him of the mandate to make decisions for the tribes."

"If the demons in your Azh'Kir'Khat can live with people being above their head, why can't these people?"

"It's different," Ilvere shrugged. "It took innumerable years of bloodshed for the Azh'Kir'Khat horde to form. Even then, it can only maintain its stability thanks to the powerhouses on the top and our perennial enemies. It was one thing if we could utterly crush the Mavai, but now... Besides, Hanuk's hands are tied. Even if he believed giving in would be the best option for his people, the tribes might not agree."

"They'd really risk it all than just bend the knee?"

"Would you really accept a situation where the fate of your whole world was in the hands of a stranger?" Ilvere countered. "Your family, your neighbors, the tribes, and everything you had ever known? To risk everything being taken away with but a thought? I know I'd rather risk it all and fight to the death."

"We still have to try," Vilari sighed.

"Ruthless Heavens indeed," Joanna muttered.