

## The Fall 838

### Chapter 838: Impossible Choice

Today's mission was one of diplomacy, but the biggest risk to the proceedings was neither the golden-scaled demons nor the dour wraiths. It was the System, and the quests it imparted to all citizens of the world when the tremors began.

For the natives, it was quite straightforward – emerge victorious against the other planet and the foreigners, and the whole planet would be attuned to your element. From what they'd gathered, the other incursions had gotten similar quests, where the most fitting element for them would stay on if they conquered the world.

It was the same for Port Atwood, until the moment they ousted all the other Incursions, including the very same Undead Empire that had plagued Earth. The moment Port Atwood conquered the Ensolus Continent, thus controlling half of this newly formed world, their quest had changed.

With their performance their quest got upgraded, adding new reward options. Suddenly, Port Atwood had three options to choose from in case they managed to subjugate or eradicate the natives. The first option was the same as before – remove one of the two attunements, leaving only life or death.

Second, and the option they were trying to propose today, was to allow the System to stabilize this planet for another ten years, giving themselves and the natives a chance to find a method dealing with the clashing elements in the center of this world. Since Earth showed no indications of collapse, there had to be a solution. This way, everyone would win without needless bloodshed, though the native forces would be officially subordinate to Port Atwood.

However, with the third option, the System had all but closed the door to peace. Worse yet, the Ruthless Heavens had made sure to share these options with the natives, fomenting the winds of war even further.

"If Hanuk declines, do you think he will just duel for control, or will it be an all-out assault?" Vilari asked Ilvere, who had been responsible for most of the diplomatic endeavors with the Malai tribes.

"If we were all Demons, he might have followed the rites and requested a duel. But with our mottled composition, I doubt he'd consider us worthy of following their traditions," Ilvere said.

"Will we really move back if it comes to an all-out war?" Rhuger frowned. "Losing the resources is fine, but the implications for the Lord are massive."

"I think we all know the Lord well enough to realize his priorities. If we back down, he might lose the qualifications to become a Baron, but our lives are more important. I refuse to believe he'd choose a title over us," Vilari said.

"In a sense, we have accomplished what we came here for. With the opportunities of the Ensolus Continent, our power has skyrocketed. What other force has this high a degree of elites?" Joanna agreed.

"Still, we must do our utmost to not let it come to that," Vilari added. "It's bad enough if we are unable to help Lord Atwood accomplish his goals. If we actively hobble his progress due to our ineptitude, I

don't know how we will make it up to him. For example, if we can bring just one of the two factions into the fold, we can easily overpower the third with minimal loss of life. The biggest risk is if the two join hands against us before turning against each other."

"If only the boss was back," Joanna sighed. "He'd solve this with either a few words or a few chops."

Vilari only smiled in response, though she couldn't help but once more wonder just what had happened in Twilight Harbor. Even if he stayed behind for a while, Lord Atwood should have been back years ago by now. And if he found some opportunity and got delayed, he would no doubt have sent back a message through the teleporter.

Only the core members of the force knew the truth – that their leader was missing rather than training. Still, they could only keep improving, waiting for his return.

Hours passed as the final touches to the summit were dealt with, while thousands of scouts and monoliths scoured the Ensolus Continent for any signs of foul play. Most of the elites were mentally preparing as well. If it really came to blows, they would be pushed to the limits against the very best the natives had to offer.

In this way, the night passed in muted suspension until the guards at the edge of Fort Atwood reported that the first of the two processions were on their way.

"Hanuk isn't with them?" Vilari muttered as they walked toward the gates, feeling something was amiss. "Increase the frequency of reports from our strongholds and sweep the area with the All-seeing Monoliths."

One of her subordinates nodded and walked off, and she stepped out onto the courtyard of Fort Atwood. In the distance, a towering wall rose over fifty meters into the air, every inch of it covered with inscriptions. Hundreds of towers buzzed with forbidding power, their offensive arrays always ready to strike.

Behind her, the incursion pillar still shone from within the inner courtyard which was surrounded by the actual star-shaped fort, showering the area in emerald and grey, its color mirroring the hundreds of banners hanging along the walls. It had cost almost 1,250 D-grade Nexus Coins to erect this fort alone, an exorbitant sum for most forces.

According to Ilvere, Clan Azh'Rezak had spent less than 50 D-grade Nexus Coins altogether on their Incursion. From the native's perspective, they were cheating, but it was part of the rules. The natives had been better prepared compared to the Earthlings, who only survived thanks to Lord Atwood, but they ultimately made the same mistake.

Both the Mavai and the Kingdom of Raun were too cautious, only closing four Incursions on their own. They were too leery of entering the Ensolus Continent and joining the struggle against the invaders and the odd beasts unique to whatever cursed planet had been the source of this war-torn continent.

A few scattered factions understood the grave threat that brewed on the central continent of this world, but they didn't manage to bring the bulk of their people on their crusades. Too many natives were busy enjoying the improved atmosphere and relative safety of their own continents. Why should they risk their lives by heading to Ensolus which was ten times more dangerous?

In the end, it was the Atwood Empire who routed the 20-odd Incursions spread across the Ensolus Continent, taking control of the whole thing while the natives sat on the sidelines. The unique treasures and opportunities that should have gone to the Mavai and Raun Spectrals had mostly fallen into the hands of her subordinates.

Apart from the Neutral Zones with the System-controlled Teleportation Arrays leading to the two other continents, there were also twenty-one lesser battlements surrounding Fort Atwood by now. Together, they formed a grand array of nigh-impenetrable defenses. If the natives wanted to attack, they would have to bear a shocking price in both resources and lives.

Still, with the world at the brink of collapse, it wasn't unthinkable they'd take the risk.

"What do you think?" Vilari asked as she turned to Ilvere.

"It's too hard to tell. Hanuk might be preparing an assault while using these people as a decoy, as you fear," the demon general hesitated. "However, it might not necessarily be a bad thing."

"We'll find out soon enough," Vilari nodded. "What will be, will be."

Eventually, the Demon Contingent arrived, a squad of fifty seasoned warriors covered in golden scales, some of which had runes engraved – a sign they were all elites among elites of the Mavai. The rest of the small army, a thousand elites atop ferocious beasts, stayed outside the walls, but their bloody auras could be felt all the way to where they stood.

Five of the warriors who had entered, in particular, emitted extremely condensed auras, and Vilari sensed three of them were Half-Step Hegemons, while the other two were extremely talented E-grade Cultivators at the peak of the rank. Thankfully, it was a few years too early for scores of Hegemons to appear, even if these natives had a small head-start on Earthlings.

The natives who had already reached E-grade before the integration mostly suffered from the same issues as the prisoners of the research base – exhausted momentum and lacking foundations. Only a few older talents managed to push to the peak of the grade by hoarding some of the abundant treasures that had cropped up.

"The emissaries of the Kingdom of Raun are closing in as well," a scout reported.

"Good," Joanna nodded. "Anything unusual from their side?"

"Not that we can see," the scout said. "They are surrounded by a cloud by miasma, but Eomid is visible in the front. There appear to be around 50 ghosts in total who are heading toward us while the army has taken position some distance from the demons."

"Good, keep us posted," Joanna nodded.

Vilari stood ready, and she let her consciousness suffuse the whole courtyard and its hundreds of elite soldiers. Their exteriors were all calm, seemingly ready to join up in their War Arrays and duke it out with the natives. However, their emotions were like ripples on a lake, unable to hide from her senses.

Eventually, she turned her head toward the gates as they swung open, and the demons riding their multifarious mounts entered. They were full of vigor, and the roars of their tamed beasts put the whole courtyard under an invisible pressure.

"Welcome," Vilari said with a small smile as she opened her eyes, her gaze quenching the clamor in an instant, with only the occasional whimper escaping from the maws of the previously aggressive mounts. "You grace Fort Atwood with your presence. However, I was expecting Warchief Hanuk to appear in person. Perhaps you can explain?"

"I... am Hanuk's third son, Ra'Klid. I am the leader of this party," a slimmer demon with a massive blade slung across his back said, only slightly thrown off balance by her gaze.

His performance was better than Vilari expected, but that wasn't what surprised her. She would have expected Ra'Klid's role to fall to one of the three grizzled warriors at the Half-Step D-grade, rather than this younger warrior. Then again, he was hiding his true strength by the looks of it. His aura was even weaker than the two other elites at the peak of the E-grade, but he would never be able to control these warriors without strength of his own.

Most likely, he wore some treasure to hide the specifics, but Vilari could form an idea with the help of her soul being spread throughout the party. He should be peak E-grade rather than a Hegemon, but with enough accumulations to let him overpower the other five elites himself. In other words, he was a threat – someone that only herself, and perhaps Joanna and Ilvere, could deal with in single combat.

Not only that, but he seemed to contain more schemes than the average demon, who preferred dealing with issues head-on. The ripples surrounding him were exquisite and everchanging. It was an unexpected variable, but she figured it was still better than dealing with Hanuk, the old berserker with god-given strength and irascible temper.

"As to why my father is absent, we do have an explanation," Ra'Klid said before nodding at one of the three elders.

An old man with small bones hanging from his horns, signifying he was one of their powerful shamanistic war priests, touched his Spatial Ring, prompting the warriors of Port Atwood to tense up. However, he didn't take out a weapon, but rather a box wrought from what appeared to be a ribcage.

He opened the lid, and even Vilari was a bit shocked to see the severed head of Hanuk, painted in the customary white and red of the Mavai final rites.

"So it was a challenge," Ilvere muttered.

"You are correct, Warmaster," Ra'Klid nodded. "My father was a great warrior who united many tribes before the Integration, but he was unable to adapt to this new reality. He wanted to lead the tribes, including the old and the young, to a war of annihilation without even hearing what you have to say. I had to challenge him for the sake of our people, and I luckily managed to give him a warrior's end."

A flare of anger caused some waves in the sea of her mind, but Vilari quickly quelled those impulses. It was hard-wired into the souls of the undead that Patricide was a grave sin, and she couldn't even imagine raising her hand against Lord Atwood. However, she knew that cultures weren't the same, and the young devouring the old to maintain the strength of the pack was something you saw every day in the wild.

"And what is your stance?" Vilari smiled, showing no indication of the turbulence the severed head had caused in her heart.

“The continuation of the Mavai is my main goal,” Ra’Klid said. “As such, I am willing to listen to the details of your offer. These five champions are representatives of my newly-formed council, and they represent the will of the tribes. Together, we can speak for the entirety of the Mavai.”

So, he didn’t offer anything more than to keep an open mind.

“The young surpass the old,” a deathly laugh echoed through the courtyard as the undead procession floated through the gate, led by a crown-wearing ghost with decidedly human features, except for the lack of eye sockets.

That space had been replaced by an engraving that formed a half-circle across his forehead; the mark of the Raun Spectrals, a unique race of ghosts the Ruthless Heavens had found in some desolate corner of the multiverse. Vilari’s gaze turned toward the ghosts, once more marveling at death’s ability to find a way.

It was no surprise running into some demons on an unintegrated world. After all, they were one of the more populous species in the Multiverse, only lagging behind Humans and a few others. However, for a civilization of wraiths to appear, a series of unlikely coincidences would have to occur.

The Raun Spectrals had once been human, but as their planet gradually became death-attuned for an unknown reason, they desperately searched for a solution to survive. Eventually, the Kingdom of Raun, the last standing bastion of humanity, had taken a drastic step to ensure their survival. They had managed to shed their mortal coils while still living in a homemade ceremony that infused their souls with death.

The world of the wraiths was apparently slightly more energy-rich compared to the demons’, but their numbers of citizens were much lower. After all, there were only so many who could beget progeny. In the case of these specters, they had to reach Middle E-grade before they were able to cut off parts of their souls and nurture them in specially-made pools of undeath.

Before the integration, there were only so many wraiths who managed to reach this height. In return, those who did were wholeheartedly focused on the continuation of their race. They spawned thousands of ghosts by sacrificing one part after another of their minds until their souls finally crumbled. Their whole society had been centered around raising enough Ancestral Ghosts in the limited environment back then.

Of course, that had changed now that the kingdom had been transported to a D-grade World temporarily teeming with Origin Dao. Now, those Ancestral Ghosts had turned into powerful spectral warriors somewhat akin to the Anointed of the Zhix. They had been fed with all the treasures their world had been able to spawn before the integration, and that culture had continued to this day, even if they didn’t birth nearly as many warriors any longer.

Instead, they used that advantage to shift from venerated birth-givers solely focused on raising ghosts, to becoming the de facto rulers of their tribes. There were already three D-Grade Ghost Kings from what they’d gathered, though the one in front of them was the leader – Eomid.

“Welcome King of Raun,” Vilari continued without missing a beat. “Since we’re all here, shall we enter? We have set up a-“

“Out here is fine,” Eomid snorted, cutting Vilari short. “We have ‘enjoyed’ your exquisite battlements enough times to know better than to enter the den. We have the people we need right here, so what need is there to go any further?”

“The unholy one makes a good point,” the leading shaman of the demons agreed, and Ra’Klid didn’t seem interested in rebuffing him.

“As long as all parties are willing to talk, we are happy to oblige,” Vilari nodded as Joanna waved over a group of attendants who immediately started setting up an outdoor area.

Truthfully, Vilari wasn’t surprised these leaders were unwilling to enter the heart of Fort Atwood, and they had seen this as a probable outcome. They even had preparations in place in case they refused to even pass through the outer gates, with multiple sets of furniture and mobile arrays prepared. Thankfully, they were still willing to enter the courtyard and leave the bulk of their armies behind, which could be seen as a good sign.

Soon enough, a conference table was set up, along with a simple set of isolation arrays to obscure their talks from the guards outside.

“So, Spiritwalker, you have called us here to parlay as cracks spread across our world. Now, what do you have for us?” Ra’Klid said, immediately getting to the heart of the matter.

“Our offer hasn’t changed,” Vilari said, knowing what the new warchief was getting at. “You officially surrender to the Atwood Empire, allowing us to finish our quest to integrate this planet into our force. Your attuned continents will remain under your respective jurisdiction, and you will also have the opportunity to set up settlements on the Ensolus Continent. Together, we will then search for solutions to the imbalance of this world.”

“That’s it?” Ra’Klid frowned. “The same deal as before?”

“The same deal as before,” Vilari nodded. “It is neither better nor worse – it is our only offer. An offer far more generous compared to what any other faction would give. Many dream of joining the Atwood Empire and come under the banner of the Deviant Asura, someone known in every corner of the Zecia Sector.”

“We have more resources than you can dream of, and your elites would both be able to train in our facilities and use our contribution system,” Joanna added. “And should we fail to find a solution, we will do our utmost to evacuate your populations to Earth, which has more than enough room to house both your populations. If you chose war, you know what kind of “

“So nothing’s changed,” Ra’Klid sighed. “You still expect us to put faith in you not choosing to drain our world to bolster your own. I was hoping your Lord would finally make an appearance, providing an actual solution.”

“Indeed,” Eomid said. “Even now, he’s unwilling to come?”

“Our lord is wholeheartedly focused on his cultivation,” Vilari said. “He has left the matter of this incursion entirely to us.”

“Still not here,” Eomid slowly said before his aura suddenly exploded. “In that case... We choose war.”

