

## The Fall 839

### Chapter 839: The Oriole Behind

A beautiful mansion with both an orangery and an actual orange orchard on the main island. An impressive paycheck for a rewarding job as an instructor, along with exclusive access to restricted cultivation resources. A doting, at least by demoness standards, wife who brought splashes of color to his otherwise orderly life.

So where had it all gone wrong? It was that damn boss of theirs, Carl could feel it.

Lord Atwood's madness had somehow crept into Carl's heart unbeknownst to him, its insidious influence transcending time and space. That insanity had tricked Carl into doing something so foolish as to sign up to join the incursion as a lieutenant of the second wave, when he already had everything he needed back home.

The worst is already dealt with, they said. Teleport over, spread the gospel, drink some Origin Dao, and come back a rich man. He should have learned his lesson after that experience in the Mystic Realm. When it came to the boss or even his closest confidantes, there was no such thing as quick or easy.

Three years he had spent in this scary place, fighting one Incursion after another, risking his life at every corner of this blasted Ensolus Continent. Carl was pretty done with this place by now, but the situation had gotten complicated. Too many secrets had been exposed on this alien world. It turned out the mysterious Lord Atwood had actually raised armies of the undead on the hush-hush before jetting off to outer space, because why wouldn't he?

With everyone's levels being essentially the same, it was almost impossible to sign contracts that would hold much water. And with them finding those herbs growing around the ancient ruins, the leaders no longer dared send more than a handful back to Earth at a time. At least not until the boss was back and could shoulder whatever came next.

Some believed the boss had gone and gotten himself killed somewhere off-world, but Carl knew better. There was some truth to the adage that only the good die young – an unlucky star and professional madman like the Lord Atwood would outlast them all.

Of course, if he really wanted to go back, he would have been able to make something happen. He had enough contribution points to take a three-month vacation at least. But how could he leave this place with Lissa refusing to go back? So he was stuck fighting demons, ghosts, and the weird beasts that had made the Ensolus Continent their home.

And now even their own had turned against them, adding yet another layer of horror to the Ensolus Continent.

"Captain! Snap out of it!" Carl shouted as he hesitantly pointed his bow at Rovik, the Revenant warrior he had been assigned to assist when guarding the summit. "Don't think I won't poke a hole in you just because you managed to get your hands on some of the Brewmaster's Rum!"

But while Carl sounded, and hopefully looked, ferocious, he wasn't sure what to do. Should he attack? Rovik's previously pale eyes had turned black while markings appeared had appeared on his forehead,

looking a lot like those troublesome ghosts. It really looked like Rovik had betrayed them, but from what he understood of these undead, they were essentially the boss's children or something similar.

It should be hardwired in their minds to stay loyal. So, was he possessed? Could the undead be possessed? Wasn't that redundant? And would he start some sort of international incident if he attacked? But the Revenant was definitely up to something even if he didn't attack, with his energy surging ominously like that.

Worse, he wasn't the only one, with both living and undead guards suddenly sporting those marks. Carl felt himself sweating bullets as he was locked in hesitation, looking at the shrouded area in the middle of the courtyard for direction. The situation grew even tenser when he saw a weird rune starting to take form above Rovik's head.

But suddenly, a flash of white, and Rovik was split in two, and the rune above his head dissipated.

"Are you crazy!" Carl wheezed, though he was inwardly extremely relieved to see Lissa both alive and unmarked by that rune. "Shouldn't we knock them out or something?"

"It was not the captain," Lissa said, her everpresent smile replaced by a somber frown. "Take a look around, who it is that's acting out. It's all people who have been stationed at either the Dorius Cliffs or Pengem Groves in the past six months. Our people have been replaced somehow."

"Are you certain?" Carl hesitated. "Is it from [Flashfire Scan]?"

"Their souls are extremely weird," Lyssa nodded. "Like dozens of souls cut and sewn together to look exactly like the originals. But they are falling apart now that those runes have appeared. They won't last more than a minute or two."

"So, do you want to hide out in the barracks for a minute or two?" Carl ventured as he furtively glanced at the leaders in the distance. "I doubt they'll miss us."

"You want a talk with lady Vilari, or perhaps that dead wolfman?" Lissa smiled in return.

"I will quash these ghost's dastardly plans before they know what hit them," Carl solemnly nodded as a pitch-black bow appeared in his hand.

An arrow condensed with [Bough of Apollo] and further empowered with his Fragment of the Inferno appeared in his hand, and the air itself screamed from being incinerated when he let go the string of his Spirit Tool. A fiery streak was drawn through the air, weaving through the guards before they hit their mark.

"Not bad, sweetie," Lissa smiled as she saw the two weird ghost-copies collapse, before the third target's miasmic shield exhausted the arrow's energy.

His attack somehow seemed to serve as a wake-up call, and multiple attacks rained down on the shapeshifters who defended as best they could. Some managed to form their runes, whereas others were struck down.

"I much preferred it when you called me Lord Husband," Carl grunted, though he didn't really mind sweetie either.

“Silly human rules of courtship,” she laughed as she melded with the surroundings. “What good are demure women? Of course, if you become a Hegemon, I might consider it.”

“Like I’m not trying to,” Carl muttered as he fired off another arrow.

This time he was too late, and yet another rune had appeared in the air. He tried breaking it apart with a Dao-empowered attack, but impotently passed tight through.

Carl sighed as he willed the arrow to swerve into the head of another shapeshifter, or whatever they were. At least these guys seemed happy to be target practice, only defending and not attacking. The leaders of the incursion didn’t have it as easy, and Carl took a couple of precautionary steps toward the edge of the courtyard upon sensing the ramping auras.

Suddenly, the glistening runes on the outer walls grew din, and a sea of ghosts descended on Fort Atwood just a moment later. Carl’s eyes widened in alarm and he instantly conjured his Arrow Array while activating [Erebus Step], readying himself for a tough fight. If there was any doubt before, it was gone now. It took less than a minute for the Peace Summit to implode.

As Carl launched a stream of arrows targeted at the remaining shapeshifters, one thought struck him – the boss would have loved this.

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How was this possible?

Their arrays had multiple layers of fail-safes, and every single member of the guards was regularly scanned after their experiences with the Church of Everlasting Dao. Yet they had both been infiltrated, and their defensive arrays had been turned off. They had been prepared for the natives to try something, but even Vilari hadn’t expected to be outplayed to this degree.

The fraught emotions were causing a storm across the square, with the change coming too suddenly.

‘I’ll deal with the assault,’ Joanna’s voice echoed in Vilari’s mind as the golden armor enclosed her.

The next moment, she shot toward the incoming tide of ghastly elites, and fifty golden streaks of lights joined her from hidden their positions at the edge of the courtyard. Soon after, a stream of elite warriors emerged from Fort Atwood, their auras soaring as they rushed to meet the avalanche of spectral warriors.

Chaos was quickly descending on the fortress, but the small spot in the center of the courtyard was an untouched lake of tranquility with three leaders and their retainers stuck at an impasse. Both the demons and the undead delegates had sealed themselves into protective bubbles, one in glistening gold and the other in dour black.

“Why are you doing this?” Vilari calmly asked as she released the locks to her spiritual power, causing her hair to dance in the air. “Why give up on the road toward survival?”

“Road toward survival?” Eomid’s laugh emerged from the opaque shield. “Five years have passed and you’re no closer to finding a solution than the day you arrived. If there is one thing the Kingdom of Raun understands, it’s that death can arrive at any moment, and you need to seize the means to survive yourself. And that is exactly what we did.”

Sensing the previously normal-looking souls of the Fort Atwood guards slowly coming apart as they conjured those large shimmering runes, Vilari realized what was going on. She didn't understand the theories behind what had been done, but she did recognize the flavor of spiritual fluctuations.

"You managed to contact the Undead Empire," Vilari stated.

"You think us fools, oblivious to the situation the undead of the Zecia Sector finds themselves in? A singular faction with enemies in every direction. I do not know why you refuse to join the Undead Empire, but why drag the Kingdom of Raun into your madness? Even if we survive, we will end up being cleansed sooner or later," the ghost king growled.

By this point, even a fool would be able to sense the growing fluctuations from within the black barrier. They weren't just staying put – the three Ghost Kings were preparing for war.

"So yes, we managed to contact the elders of the Undead Empire. They were quite enraged to hear about an unaffiliated faction such as yours ousting their incursion, and they provided us with the methods to infiltrate your fortress," Eomid said.

"You created chimeral souls, sacrificing hundreds of warriors to copy the souls of our people," Vilari frowned. "This borders on the unorthodox."

"We can sacrifice everything for survival, including ourselves," Eomid countered.

A peak E-grade spectral warrior suddenly appeared next to her before the Ghost King had even finished his sentence, his dagger already shooting toward her throat. However, Vilari only glanced at the ghost as she activated [Woeful Dejection] releasing a burst of compressed Miasma and Mental energy, and the Branch of Hollow Sensations.

A shriek echoed out as the ghost was blasted over a thousand meters until it slammed into the outer walls whose runes had already gone dark. Its incorporeal form dissipated into a hazy cloud that would soon turn into nothingness. There were no odds of the elite warrior reforming; its soul had already been disintegrated before it hit the wall.

"Are you part of this?" Vilari asked as she turned her gaze toward the demons, many of whom shied away from her stare now that she had unleashed her aura.

She knew what the demons called her; The Soulbright Witch. She wasn't too fond of the moniker, but it did serve its purpose in a tight situation like this. Besides, it was a lot better than her Lord's unfortunate title.

"We have no part in this scheme," Ra'Klid smiled from within the shimmering barrier. "We will let you deal with it before resuming our talks."

"Like the oriole," Ilvere swore as he gave the demons a scathing stare, the two massive boulders already accumulating force above his head. The demon's eyes turned to the elders standing behind the young chieftain, who also didn't make a move. Their only change was taking out their weapons and setting up a defensive perimeter in case the shield was broken. "Is the council of the same opinion?"

“Our chieftain’s will is the will of the tribes,” the shaman nodded. “You speak of leadership, so prove yourself worthy. If you cannot even deal with a challenge to your rule, how could we possibly entrust the lives of the Mavai to you?”

Ilvere only snorted in response, before turning his gaze at the thick barrier the undead elites had enclosed themselves inside. ‘What should we do? I won’t be able to take this thing apart in the short run, and the bastards are clearly up to something.’

‘We cannot discern exactly how these runes are blocking the circuits,’ Ciru’s voice joined Ilvere’s as the Volor Clansman activated his node of Vilari’s [Spirit Council], sending the message from his position deep underground. ‘We have activated the back-up routes and array-breakers, but there is some odd resistance that can’t be simply bypassed. I think...’

‘Large-scale sacrifice,’ Vilari confirmed. ‘Each of those runes contains the will of thousands of sacrificed ghosts. Their latent will impacts everything around us. It can be considered a faith-based attack.’

A huge explosion erupted as Joanna was forced to unleash her [Armament Zone], proof that these invading spectral warriors were the cream of the crop. Vilari was full of reluctance, knowing the implications of not being able to sway these stubborn ghosts, but she knew she had to act to minimize the loss of life.

Hopefully, they could still get the demons to join them in a quick war in exchange for making the whole planet life-attuned, thus salvaging Lord Atwood’s chances of becoming a Baron. She still hadn’t managed to unearth the true secrets of her body, but she forcibly pushed her mental energy into her veins, allowing them to draw the spiritual array with her blood.

A hazy eye appeared above her head the next moment, mirroring her own unique set of eyes. She knew the ability was still just a hollow mimicry compared to what Lord Atwood had described, but it was proof that her hard work had started to bear fruit. Besides, the bloodline avatar was powered by a soul far more powerful than what her body’s previous owner ever controlled, giving it a greater boost.

“So be it,” Vilari sighed. “Since you chose this path, you will have to bear the price.”

The next moment, the pitch-black halo appeared behind her back as she activated [Circle of Decay], and the matching gate appeared above the undead delegate’s barrier.

Two strikes suddenly slammed into the miasmic shield, one a world-breaking strike from Ilvere’s boulders and another a beam of condensed darkness from Rhuger. The two attacks weren’t enough to completely break through the barrier, but it was enough to cause cracks to appear.

“Despair,” Vilari sighed, and desolation fell like rain from the sky.

The world lost its color as the rays of despair fell on the already damaged barrier. The demons quickly moved even further away, not daring to even look at the cascade of death and mental anguish taken corporeal form. It looked like the sun’s rays peeking through a cloud on a hazy day, though the colors were inverted.

Vilari always felt the scene was extremely soothing, but she knew that looking at this attack was enough to create Heart Demons among the weak-willed. She briefly wondered what her Lord would see if he looked upon the attack with his Draugr eyes. Would he see the same beauty as she did?

She shook her head, refocusing her attention on the barrier. Or rather the ghosts maintaining its function. One by one they fell, their minds dragged away to the abyss as Vilari infiltrated the safe zone through the cracks her captains had opened. A few more ghosts tried to bolster its defenses, but a second barrage arrived a moment later, providing Vilari with the opportunity to completely drown the insides with her despair.

Shrill screams echoed out as Vilari felt a series of bursts of kill energy. However, the flow suddenly stopped as a pulse rebuffed the rays coming from above. It was the other two Ancestral Ghosts who had made their move, stepping out from the barrier to deal with Vilari. In their hands, they had their unique spectral weapons, and they were already launching an opening salvo after temporarily dispelling the mental attack of [Circle of Decay].

“Regret,” Vilari whispered as she pointed at the two warriors, and she felt the streaks on her cheeks cool down as two sigils appeared in front of her.

They flashed with sinister lights as they shot toward the Ghost Kings, and they passed straight through the attacks that were aimed at her life. However, she didn’t even spare those attacks a glance as she started drawing another sigil in her mind, one meant for Eomid who still hid inside the mist.

The two attacks were already slowing down, robbed of their vigor by Pika’s [Deceleration Field]. By the time they hit Rhuger’s [Opaque Bulwark], they had already lost more than half of their force. They still managed to break through Rhuger’s defensive skill, but by that point, it only required a burst of mental energy to crush them.

Meanwhile, the sigils of her [Final Asylum] had already reached the two ghosts who finally realized what kind of danger they were in. This kind of mental prison was especially lethal to a spectral warrior, even if they were in the D-grade, and they desperately fought against the suction of the skill. If they relented for even a moment, they would be trapped until they died or managed to exhaust the cage.

However, just as she was about to send a third and final asylum into the churning mists, Vilari sensed a fluctuation that unmistakably contained spatial ripples.

Short-distance teleportation? Vilari’s eyes widened with alarm and she immediately turned to the pillar at the heart of the fort. A moment later, she sensed a burst of deathly energies, and she knew her fears were true. The true reason the ghosts had created those sacrificial beacons to deactivate their arrays was not to provide their army with a point of ingress. The army was just a diversion.

The real plan was to teleport Eomid into the heart of the fort, bypassing the spatial restrictions that were normally in place.

She immediately wanted to rush back and prevent the Ghost King from damaging the Nexus Hub, potentially trapping them on the Ensolus Continent without a supply line. However, the two other ghost kings held nothing back, clearly burning their life force as they destroyed the prison sigils before flashing over to block her path.

Fury turned into despair, and Vilari prepared to forcibly draw on her bloodline to instantly blast these two hegemonies into nothingness, no matter the price.

'No need. This ends now,' a calm voice suddenly echoed in her mind, a voice both so familiar and distant that it felt like a dream.

And in the wake of the voice came a storm.