

The Fall 842

Chapter 842: Prelude to War

The two groups of delegates looked quite eager, though it was no doubt at the prospect of these ominous earthquakes finally abating rather than joining some recently-formed empire. Zac didn't mind. Certainly, he would have preferred willing and wholeheartedly loyal followers, but he wasn't so naïve as to believe these races would follow him based on some agreement after years of war.

Things didn't change so quickly. But give it a few decades, where dissidents were quietly removed, and they should have accepted these new circumstances. After a few millennia, few would even remember life before the Atwood Empire.

Until then, he would have to make sure their actions were loyal even if their hearts were not.

"Should you change your mind after I've spent a fortune on fixing this planet, I will see it as an act of war. I will keep chopping off heads until a representative who is willing to join the Atwood Empire steps forward," Zac said as he looked back and forth. "The treatment of a subjugated force will naturally differ from one joining willingly. That is all."

This was the best solution Zac could think of in short order, the one that would result in the least bloodshed. He was no shrewd politician, so he could only use the method he knew – force. However, he hoped that proving himself by infusing the Twin Spirits before taking over the planet would foster some goodwill that would lessen the problems down the road.

Not much later, a scout report said that a group of humans had been spotted, a bit gaunt but otherwise unscathed, who'd be back within a few hours. It looked like the Ghost Kings hadn't lied before. There was not much else to say at that point, and the two groups of delegates returned to their armies camped outside for the day.

Zac walked back into the fort with Vilari and the other leaders of Port Atwood in tow. Soon enough, they retreated to the conference room originally meant for the peace summit while others dealt with the fallout outside.

"Sorry to throw a wrench in your plans," Zac smiled when they were finally alone.

"I'm ashamed," Vilari said as she bowed deeply. "We used so many resources, yet we had to rely on you to deal with the mess we had created."

"I've read the reports," Zac said. "You expended a lot of resources ousting the other factions, including the Undead Empire. It's no surprise the locals had time to organize, especially with their spiritual heritage."

"This is my mistake," Vilari once more said. "I-"

"No, you did the right thing," Zac said with a shake of his head. "It's not a matter of efficiency, it's a matter of principle. It would have affected morale if we started killing natives so soon after we went through the same thing."

"Are you okay?" Joanna cut in. "We've been worried something happened. We have been trying to find a way to reach that Twilight Harbor but without any luck."

"Don't bother," Zac grunted as he sat down at the table. "It blew up."

"What?!" Vilari blurted, a rare display of losing her footing as a mentalist. "How could such a place blow up? The harbor alone should be able to contend in power with half the Zecia sector."

The others were wide-eyed as well, and some looked at Zac like he was a monster surviving something like that.

"Well, it turns out the Eveningtide Asura is still alive and well," Zac said as he gave a shortened version of what happened in the Twilight Harbor and Twilight Ocean, while glossing over the parts that involved his secrets.

"Amazing," Ilvere sighed. "It's these kinds of experiences that are needed to reach the top? I think I'll stay on as a guard captain."

"Autarchy... B-grade," Joanna muttered with a glimmer in her eyes. "It's so distant."

"It's unprecedented in this sector," Vilari nodded. "But if the Eveningtide Asura could do it, so can young master."

The Valkyries nodded as though it was a matter of course, but the others were not so convinced. Even Hegemony was a distant dream for someone who was born on a D-grade world, while Monarchy required you to subvert fate. Autarchy was not even a dream, something impossible to accomplish the frontier, let alone a weak sector like Zecia. Opportunities like the one Alvod Jondir seized didn't grow on trees.

"And you found the solution for Ensolus when you raided that treasury?" Joanna asked curiously. "Isn't it better to use it on Earth?"

"That was why I took the risk and snatched it in the first place," Zac nodded. "But it won't work. I visited the core of Earth before coming here. It turns out our homeworld already has something similar. It might be a result of the System protecting the planet. Funny enough, I got the realm spirits just days after you accepted the incursion. I wonder if the System knew I'd get them and arranged this planet."

"The Ruthless Heavens has always shown consideration for its chosen," Ilvere said, and Rhuger nodded in agreement.

"That was over four years ago," Joanna said with confusion. "What happened next? Did you visit the Undead Empire?"

"Hardly. I got swallowed by a space fish when I escaped," Zac sighed, and then told them about the Orom and how he was trapped there for years. However, he changed the nature of his escape by saying that the fire golem's attack caused spatial tears in the Orom World, and he had simply jumped through one.

"Death is waiting around every corner in the multiverse," Joanna muttered. "How is one supposed to grow when monstrosities multiple grades higher can appear at any time?"

"That's just it, lass," Ilvere grunted. "Everyone will have to make a choice. You can stay on your homeworld and make steady progress, but you will never reach beyond the limits of the planet. Or you can take the risk to step into a vaster world, provided you have the prerequisite power and

opportunities. You will most likely die from this path; only a few people like young master will rise while billions fall.”

Joanna nodded in agreement, her face a bit downcast. Zac could only sigh, unable to offer any consolation except a pat on her shoulder. What Ilvere was saying was true. His pouring resources over the people of Port Atwood could only push them so far. Not only that, but the more they relied on outside help, the less likely they were to rise to prominence.

You needed to take risks to gain power.

Even then, there was a matter of even having the qualifications to take the risk. Not everyone had his ability to travel freely. Joanna, for example, was locked to Earth unless she asked for his help. And even if she ventured out to dangerous areas in the Zecia Sector, she would most likely end up as fertilizer to someone else’s path.

Part of it was simple statistics. If you joined ten medium-risk adventures with a 30% mortality rate, you only had a few percent chance of walking out alive. If you joined certain-death events like the cataclysmic Twilight Harbor or the Orom’s culling, you were essentially screwed if you didn’t have something unique to fall back on.

That was the second part of the issue – the Multiverse was not equal.

This wasn’t a video game, there wasn’t balance in the sense that everyone had the same chance to reach the peak. Certainly, some people like Alvod Jondir managed to rise to their current heights by finding some supreme treasure. But while some could reforge their futures through a stroke of luck, most people relied on heritage.

Zac relied on both.

It was undeniable that he had braved greater dangers than anyone else on Earth, but a big reason he could do that was his background. If not for his unique bloodline, he would have died ten times over already. If not for Leandra’s clan implanting him with the Duplicity core, Zac would not even have survived Mhal’s attack when he was injected with the Draugr sample.

“There’s no need to compare yourself to others. Cultivation is an individual journey,” Zac eventually said as he looked around the room. “And I can see that you all have made great strides.”

It wasn’t empty praise. Six years was neither short nor long, but it had clearly been enough to reforge the core group of the Port Atwood elites. Their auras were thick and condensed, proving they hadn’t just pushed their levels with the help of treasures. There was both experience and hard work behind their auras, something secluded cultivation couldn’t nurture.

“The Ensolus Continent has provided a lot of opportunities,” Vilari smiled.

“Our last attempt was a bit wretched,” Ilvere said with a wry smile. “But this time we got our money’s worth. Uh, young master’s money’s worth.”

“And I believe the greatest opportunity still remains,” Vilari added.

“The Ensolus Temples?” Zac asked, referring to the mysterious ruins at the center of the continent, after which this continent, and now World, got its name.

"The Ensolus Temples," Vilari nodded. "We have only managed to enter one since its seal was broken-down, but the manuals inside drastically improved our heritage. If you manage to crack open the others, there might be even greater treasures waiting within."

"For now, I have no interest in seizing those things," Zac said. "You have worked for years to secure them, so you keep working on it. I'll try to help out if I can, but right now I have a lot of things on my plate. I'm running a bit behind schedule after getting stuck like that."

Exploring some ancient temples, which Vilari guessed might even predate the System, was obviously an interesting concept, but he really had too much to do at the moment. The temples weren't going anywhere anyway, and they seemed nigh-impenetrable judging by the reports. Judging by the reports, it might require the strength of a powerful Hegemon to break open those things.

If his people still hadn't managed to crack them open before the Assimilation, he'd definitely give it a go. But otherwise, he wanted to leave this opportunity for them to explore.

"Running behind?" Joanna muttered before her eyes lit up. "Are you breaking through?!"

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head. "I'm not in a hurry in that regard. It will be a couple of years before I take that step."

"That long?" Joanna said with surprise. "After seeing your display, I figured you were right at the cusp."

"Our lives are measured in millennia by this point," Zac smiled, still having some trouble coming to terms with that concept. "I don't want to rush things like I did for my last breakthrough. I want to shore up my foundations a bit first."

"It's not quite that simple, I'm afraid," Ilvere sighed. "The war is really coming closer, it was not just a sales pitch. We need some Hegemons to take charge. If not you, someone else."

"I read some of it in the reports," Zac nodded. "Have you found out anything else?"

"There still hasn't been any official response from the peak factions, but the rumor mill is in full spin," Joanna answered. "The top factions are building huge fortresses, each one as large as a planet from what I'm told. Apparently, the invaders are already here, though they are few in numbers, and they still haven't left the heart of the Million Gates Territory."

"The Million Gates Territory?" Zac grimaced.

Between the warnings of the Ogre at the Big Axe Coliseum and Catheya, they had long known that something was brewing. But Zac didn't have any specifics until now, and learning that the Million Gates Territory was at the heart of it all was definitely not good for his plans. Would he have to dodge murderous invaders at every turn when he went to pick up Ogras?

Would it even be possible if he delayed too much?

"Do we know anything about what kind of people the invaders are?" Zac asked.

"That kind of intelligence still hasn't been made public," Ilvere said. "But going by the response of the peak factions, it will be a tough fight. Otherwise, the other empires would have left the Allbright Empire to fend for themselves. They have to fear that the whole sector will fall."

“Conflict,” Zac sighed.

“We got an early warning thanks to you, but even common factions are starting to become aware something is happening,” Ilvere added. “The price of cultivation resources is steadily climbing as everyone scrambles to make last-minute breakthroughs. The auctions are completely void of top-quality treasures by now. The same goes for things like arrays, talismans, and pills.”

“Even if we’re not conscripted, some of us have to go early,” Joanna added. “We need to accumulate contribution points for our planet.”

“What’s that now?” Zac asked.

“We need a few Hegemons to rise before the war reaches Port Atwood,” Vilari explained. “We have gathered information about sanctioned wars for years now, and it is more akin to an incursion than a normal struggle. If it was just a conflict between two factions, only those at the top would matter. But when the System controls the events, even E-grade warriors can participate and gather Contribution Points.”

“The System will set up graded battlegrounds and contested worlds, lessening the danger considerably,” Joanna added. “With the quality of our gear and resources, we have a good chance to perform well even if we still lack experience. However, our survival hinges on being able to nurture warriors with the credentials to become captains and commanders. If we lack these kinds of leaders, we’ll have to take orders from some outsider, which could mean being used as cannon fodder.”

“The System seems to be extremely rigid when it comes to war,” Vilari sighed. “Break the chain of command, and you will face harsh consequences. Of course, it’s within limits, where a nefarious or incompetent leader would similarly come under scrutiny. But that won’t do us much good if we’ve already been wiped out because of a command we couldn’t refuse.”

Zac nodded thoughtfully, feeling the news was a mix of good and bad. Good in the sense the risk of his people being wiped out by some random Monarch was a lot lower this way. Bad in the sense that their foundations were still lacking – the war was coming too quickly.

“Leaders,” Zac muttered. “Is it skill or strength? I mean I think I have qualifications on the former to become some captain at least, but I don’t know anything about tactics.”

“There are multiple variables behind the System’s appointments, from what we can gather,” Vilari explained. “First and foremost is strength. Secondly, nobility seems to be a big factor in who gets handed command. For this, we have a good advantage, with you on the cusp of becoming a Baron.”

“I am?” Zac blurted and opened his quest screen.

Still nothing new, except for the incursion quest he got upon arriving on Ensolus.

“You will become a Baron the moment you control more than one planet,” Vilari smiled. “You might even be awarded a title considering you’re still E-grade.”

“There’s such a good thing?” Zac whistled.

It looked like controlling a faction was useful in more ways than just having people gather resources for cultivation. There was better treatment from the System and even direct boosts to your Strengths. Zac

didn't have any plans on abandoning Earth before, but this actually proved that focusing more of his attention on his budding empire might come with all kinds of unexpected perks.

"So what's this about contribution?"

"Sooner or later, teleporters will appear on Earth and Ensolus," Joanna explained. "But you can join the war efforts earlier by heading to the frontlines yourself. The more contribution the Atwood Empire has racked up before the official start, the better treatment we'll receive. We have explored options to send a few of our elites to the Million Gates Territory to gain experience and contribution. With you back, our odds are even better."

Zac slowly nodded, realizing it was time to spill some of the things he had kept to himself since Leandra snatched his sister. "I haven't told you all this before, but I had been planning on going to the Million Gates Territory for a long time. Mostly to train and pick up Ogras and Billy though."

"WHAT!" Ilvere almost roared, jumping to his feet with wide eyes. "The boss is alive?! Your sister was right? What in the Heavens is going on?"

"I wasn't planning on telling you in case things didn't pan out," Zac sighed. "But with this war, things have changed. When Ogras sacrificed himself to save my sister, he wasn't ripped apart by the Dimensional Seed as it looked like. He was transported to its newly created Mystic Realm. The Dimensional Seed was then attracted to the Million Gates Territory by the strong spatial currents over there."

"How do you know this?" Vilari asked with confusion.

"Because that intelligence was what my sister demanded in return for leaving willingly that day," Zac explained, drawing gasps.

"You don't mean!" Joanna exclaimed.

"My sister wasn't killed that day," Zac confirmed. "She was abducted. Don't ask me by who; it's complicated. They are too powerful, and the less people know, the better. This is why I am struggling to become stronger. To get her back."

"Then Thea," Joanna hesitated.

"No, she was really killed," Zac said with a shake of his head.

"We'll help you," Vilari immediately assured. "Even if it's only to deal with the roadblocks to your cultivation."

"We'll definitely do what we can," Ilvere said, looking visibly moved. "To think that the miss actually did that for our young master."

"Kenzie was ultimately taken, but that doesn't change the immense debt of gratitude I have to Ogras," Zac nodded. "I am definitely heading there, though now it sounds like I'll also have to deal with some invaders."

"We would like to come with," Vilari and Joanna both said, and it looked like pretty much everyone was of a similar opinion.

Zac didn't immediately agree, but he didn't disagree either. Initially, he had planned setting out alone considering the dangers, but perhaps that was being selfish, depriving his people of a chance to progress. The Million Gates Territory would definitely be dangerous, now even more so than usual.

But was it his place to dictate whether they should get to take those risks for the sake of their cultivation? For Earth?

Besides, didn't cosmic vessels require crews? His biggest point of reference was Little Bean, the technocrat vessel. That thing had thousands of people on board, most of them crew members. The vessels he saw fly by in the Twilight Harbor were pretty massive as well, and they probably required multiple people to keep track of things."

Even if he didn't want such a massive ship, perhaps he needed to bring some people to manage the vessel he got from Karunthel's quest.

"Alright, I will talk with the Creators," Zac eventually nodded. "I'll see about getting us a ship. I guess we're about to become space mercenaries, so make your preparations."

Excitement and determination shone in people's eyes, but the moment was ruined by a small tremor that reminded Zac of the most pressing issue.

"But first, I guess I should fix this planet."