

## The Fall 843

### Chapter 843: Ensolus Mines

Zac spent the next few days in Fort Atwood, mostly catching up with everyone. While no one had tales as fantastical as being swallowed by a gargantuan space fish, it quickly became clear that the elites of Port Atwood all had their share of adventure and hardship on the Ensolus Continent.

The most shocking thing was that Janos was presumed dead, gone missing in the mysterious Ensolus Temples. They still held out some hope that the illusionist had somehow lucked into an inheritance, but it had been three years already. Even if he had entered some trial ground, he should have come out by now.

Apart from that, more than thirty Valkyries had fallen, replaced with the next generations of spear maidens. In total, the casualties had surpassed one thousand, most of them coming from the first bloody year when they eradicated one invading army after another.

It wasn't really a big number compared to how many had fallen in Earth's integration, but it was worth remembering that only elites had been taken on this mission. Each death meant the loss of a talent that Port Atwood had invested heavily into, standout warriors who had survived the Integration only to fall a few years later.

The second biggest cause of death was the unstable beast of the Ensolus Continent, with the natives only being a distant third. That alone was somewhat lucky since a couple of skirmishes at the edge of the continent wasn't enough to form some irreconcilable grudge from either side.

Therefore, the negotiations proceeded smoothly, with Zac only participating in a few of them. Vilari and the administrators had a much better grasp on the nitty-gritty details of incorporating a world and hundreds of millions of new citizens under his reign.

He did, however, take time to appear as Arcaz Black in front of the ghosts for a private meeting. He wanted to somewhat allay their worries, once more alluding to his connections to the Undead Empire. And it looked like it had worked, especially after he showed some of the spectral cultivation techniques he had requested Triv to send over.

Of course, he wouldn't hand over such precious techniques just a few days after an insurrection, but it both acted as proof of his connections and a motivator to stay loyal.

After three days most issues were ironed out, where taxation and other issues were dealt with. Essentially, the Kingdom of Raun would be forced to hand over a larger share of their revenue because of their attack, but it would be lowered to the demon's level after they had contributed enough to the war efforts.

In either case, huge shipments of resources would start flowing from the two outer continents on the Ensolus World soon enough, many of them rare materials with their respective attunements. The cessation of war would also allow Port Atwood to drastically expand their operations on the Ensolus Continent, which was still teeming with valuable resources.

With the situation stabilized and the two armies having returned to their respective continents, Zac set out in secret, using one of his flying treasures to head over to a place called the Ensolus Mines. It was

one of the biggest sources of wealth on the Ensolus Continent, a vast Nexus Crystal mine producing both Divine Crystal and Miasma Crystals, a network of tunnels tens of times larger than the mine on his island back home.

More importantly, it contained a secret chute leading into the depths of the planet. Since Ensolus wasn't officially conquered just yet, Zac couldn't just teleport to the mantle of the planet. It was a bit annoying, but it was a small price to pay for strengthening the bond between his force and these natives.

Thankfully, his people had already done all the heavy lifting in their effort to stabilize this world, having dug deeper and deeper for years on end until they reached the same depths as Triv had back on Earth. Even Zac was beset by a wave of vertigo as he peered down from the ten-meter-wide chute, an endless hole leading into the abyss.

"It will take one week to reach the bottom using floating disk," Ilvere, who acted as his guide on this mission, said.

"A whole week?" Zac grimaced. "What if I just jump?"

"I knew you would say that," Ilvere laughed. "I tried it once, it's quite an experience. It will take just over half a day that way. A series of lights will alert you when you're getting close to the bottom. The landing is hard, so you better be prepared to deal with it somehow."

"No problem," Zac smiled. Honestly, even if he smacked right into a floor of solid rock he'd be mostly fine. "Are you coming as well?"

"I'll stay up here," Ilvere said with a shake of his head. "I wouldn't mind another leap, but getting back up is a bit boring. Besides, I need to make sure no one tries to trap you down there or sneaks back into the mines now that they've been evacuated."

"Good," Zac nodded and jumped down.

In an instant, Ilvere's form at the edge of the chute turned into a speck, and a minute later Zac found himself in what looked like a tube that stretched to eternity in both directions. If not for the repeating runes that reinforced the tunnel and the occasional glimmering crystal flashing by, he wouldn't even have been able to see that he was moving.

At first, the experience was pretty exhilarating, but it soon grew a bit tedious, so Zac simply closed his eyes and started to meditate. He hadn't gained any new insights from taking out the Ghost King, but this odd energy of the Ensolus Continent was quite interesting. It was a novel contrast to the surprisingly stable Twilight Energy, and almost a case study in what not to do when trying to fuse the elements of life and death.

On the surface, it should have been perfect; energies of life and death, locked in a perennial struggle. It was a lot like he envisioned his Path and how he should create his Cultivator's Core. Life and death clashing, with everything controlled by conflict. And the swirling mix of life and death was certainly in constant upheaval on the Ensolus Continent, but not in a good way.

There was no balance at all. The energy on the continent wasn't homogenous, and pockets of life and death would constantly form while the other element was pushed away. But soon enough, that would change again, in an unstable and unpredictable swirl. Certainly, it was chaotic in a way that slightly

resonated with the Dao of Chaos, but having this kind of environment in his Cultivator's Core would be disastrous.

He could picture it; sooner or later, tremors similar to the ones that afflicted this world would appear in his Core until it broke apart. Just what was it that prevented this energy from fusing into a more stable Chaos Energy, or at least some subordinate version of it? His memory of the Chaos Pattern had long grown indistinct, but he could still remember that its energy was one whole and extremely stable in its unpredictability.

He needed to recapture that feeling. Minor Chaos was the best solution he could come up with when forming his Cultivation Core, to create something akin to the Motes of Chaos but rather based on his three Daos. With such a core, he should be able to cultivate using either Cosmic Energy, Divine Energy, or Miasma. It would become the first step in fusing his two sides as well, a second bridge to join the [Quantum Gate].

But the situation on the Ensolus Continent and the clear delineation in the Twilight Harbor made him wonder if the Daos of Life and Death could even withstand such a concept. Were they impossible to fuse before elevating them to Creation and Oblivion? If so, what did it mean for his core, which required both?

Should he give up on this idea entirely, and instead aim to create something unattuned and solely based on his Branch of the War Axe? It would certainly be easier, but from what he'd gathered, one's core needed to resonate with all one's Daos, not just one. There were no easy answers, unfortunately, and it wasn't like there was a wealth of information on Edgewalkers, at least not in the Frontier.

A series of flashes in his surroundings made him put the matter aside and open his eyes. It looked like he had been meditating for half a day already, and the bottom of the chute was closing in on him – looking like a fiery eye of a dragon. According to Ilvere, there should be a large cave with a research base waiting for him below, but as he exited the chute, he was rather greeted by a roiling sea of magma.

Zac hurriedly activated [Earthstrider] and took a few steps in the air to exhaust his momentum before slamming into the molten rock. Scorching heat immediately assaulted him from every direction, but also thick streams of both life and death.

It was a mix of pain and pleasure as his body greedily swallowed the energies, but he still activated one of his heat-averting talismans to lessen the pressure on his body. Visibility was essentially zero, but he could get an idea of the surroundings by spreading out his Dao Field. It looked like the tremors had destroyed the protective arrays and breached the cave, filling it with magma.

Thankfully, this place had been abandoned for months due to this exact risk, meaning none of his scientists had been burned alive in this place. After all, most E-grade warriors only had a fraction of his Vitality and Endurance, and they'd get incinerated in minutes.

It quickly became obvious that the floor of the cave had been burst apart, so Zac simply pushed deeper into the magma, getting some serious déjà vu from his time in the Twilight Ocean volcano. Hopefully, things wouldn't get quite as explosive this time around.

The hours passed as Zac descended deeper and deeper into the mantle, but even he was quickly finding the environment unbearable. Eventually, he stopped and activated another flame-retardant barrier,

giving himself some breathing room. Only then did he take out the engraved box holding the twinned spirits and opened the lid.

“I can’t go any further than this,” Zac said as he looked down at the spiraled crystal. “Can you take things from here?”

He had no idea if these things could actually think or understand his words, but he had started talking with them long ago every time he took them out, hoping to rouse their spirituality as they were fading away. Besides, he had sensed that weak hint of fear from Earth’s spirit, so these things might really have some sort of sapience.

The two spirits didn’t answer, but the crystal started to hum and vibrate, its previously flickering lights fast gaining strength. Suddenly a crack echoed out as two powerful pulses of energy shot through the barrier like a spiritual drill, heading straight toward the core of the planet. In an instant, the pulse had left Zac’s scanning range.

“Not so much as a thank you,” Zac muttered as he looked at the fragmented crystal in his box, but he was inwardly relieved.

It turned out those crystals weren’t the actual Spirits, but only something to temporarily house them. Judging by the speed of the spirits, they should reach the World Core within a couple of hours. That meant the clock had started ticking, and he urgently swam back toward the chute. He had no idea how this planet would react upon the World Core being seized by the foreign realm spirits.

Would there be a struggle? Some massive outburst of energy? No matter what, the magmatic mantle couldn’t possibly be a safe place to stay at a time like this.

Zac spared no expense, activating one talisman after another as he plowed through the magma, and he managed to return almost twice as quickly as he had descended. He immediately jumped into the chute and took out a floating platform that started to lift him through the chute. The speed wasn’t impressive, but it gave him the footing he needed to take out something better.

A rocket.

It was quite an odd-looking flying treasure compared to the other ones he’d found in the dozens of rings he had snatched, a sleek emerald crystal needle that was just five meters long and barely wide enough to squeeze into its sole compartment.

It had no defensive arrays, extremely high energy consumption, and it was quite uncomfortable to ride, but it had one undeniable advantage – speed. It was probably used either as an escape pod or for some sort of hobby. Zac crammed inside and shot off, the momentum almost giving him whiplash as the floating platform beneath him crumbled.

The walls of the chute turned to a blur as the needle ship pierced the air resistance and almost space itself, on the return back to the surface. However, after just an hour, Zac felt an ominous rumble, a rumble that soon turned into something much worse – a massive earthquake. It was like the whole planet was screaming in pain, and Zac was currently right in its mouth.

He felt a wetness in his ears, and even his bones and organs groaned in protest as the shakes grew increasingly intense. Even the energy in the air was going out of control, and small cracks started to

appear on his vessel from the vibrations. The arrays on the walls of the chute lit up to resist the shakes, but how could some manmade runes resist a planet having a seizure?

Cracks rapidly spread across the walls, and Zac's eyes grew pitch-black in preparation for what would certainly come next. As expected, the small stones soon started to rain down the chute, and these stones were soon replaced by large boulders. With the immense speed of the needle, he was almost there, but he got a sinking feeling as new cracks appeared on his vessel every time it reduced a boulder to ash by piercing it.

Finally, the transformation finished, and three pygmy skeletons appeared outside the flying treasure. Unfortunately, it was too late, and the vessel broke apart just as a sturdy shield appeared above. Still, the shield protected him from having a boulder slam into him, and he urgently took out another flying treasure.

However, a burst of superheated air interrupted his plans, and even his durable Draugr skin was scalded as he was flung thousands of meters in the air in an instant, pushing him and the falling rocks straight up in the air far quicker than any flying treasure could accomplish. His surroundings became a confusing blur, with only the three skeletons a fixture in a deafening storm of rocks and smoke.

And magma.

"Oh SHI-" Zac wailed, but he didn't get to complete the sentence before the torrent of magma slammed into him like a bulldozer from behind, ripping his defensive skill apart and drowning him in molten rocks imbued with a momentum that no E-grade cultivator could ever hope to generate.

One talisman after another was expended as Zac desperately held on, but just as he ran out, he felt a wisp of fresh and non-scorching air. A moment later he felt himself lurch, and when the magma around him parted, he was shocked to find himself at the top of a massive pillar of lava reaching over ten thousand meters into the air.

Similar scenes could be spotted in every direction, and the mountain atop the Ensolus Mine had already been blasted apart, along with the fortune it contained. Soon enough, Zac found himself falling, and he turned back into his human form after some hesitation. If the energy was agitated before, it was rioting now, and he didn't dare activate [Abyssal Phase] in this kind of environment.

Instead, he utilized the same technique as before, taking a couple of steps in the air before slamming into the edge of a newly-formed lava lake that had replaced much of the Ensolus mines. Blobs of molten rock were falling all around him, and he deftly swerved back and forth, occasionally cutting a boulder in two as he ran away from the collapsed mountain.

In the distance, he actually saw a barely familiar figure wave him over with two swirling boulders in the air blocking any magma from falling on him.

"There you are," a soot-covered Ilvere panted after Zac had rushed over, a wry smile appearing on his face. "I had really forgotten how... extravagantly... you dealt with things."

"Well, that's me," Zac said before coughing out some ashy smoke. "Are you okay?"

"That was a bastard of an earthquake," Ilvere grunted. "But it seems things won't get any worse at least. Hopefully, the lava will cool down in a couple of days and we can start looking into what's salvageable."

“Do you have any method to contact Fort Atwood, to see if they’re okay?” Zac asked.

Ilvere quickly took out a thick stack of papers, and he breathed out in relief when all of them were intact.

“Life effigies collected from people stationed in every outpost,” the demon explained when Zac looked at the stack with confusion. “Since all of them are intact, our settlements should either have been unaffected by the earthquake, or their shields held off any lava that had come their way.”

“Good,” Zac sighed in relief.

“Was... it a success?” Ilvere hesitantly asked, and Zac honestly didn’t know as he looked at the apocalyptic surroundings.

The magma pillar had collapsed into a fountain that ‘only’ reached a few hundred meters in the air. But ash still blotted out the sky while the lava lake was slowly submerging the broken shards of the Ensolus Mine.

“I... think so?”