

The Fall 844

Chapter 844: Three Options

Ilvere looked at the soot-covered Zac before turning to the still-sputtering lake filled with lava so hot and rife with chaotic energies that it created odd apparitions reaching for hundreds of meters into the air.

"Well, if you say it's fixed, I'll believe you," the demon coughed. "The past weeks, we haven't had more than eight hours between tremors. We should have a preliminary result by the time we've returned."

"Right," Zac nodded before taking out a cleansing array, blasting himself and his guide with a storm of scraping winds and water that quickly turned pitch-black before it was flung away. "Let's go."

The two flew away a moment later, using another flying treasure that looked a bit like a spaceship you could see on artwork in the early 20th century. It was sleek and silvery with small fins, though there was no rocket at the end. Instead, there was a viewing deck, since its flight was powered by arrays rather than propulsion.

The reason Zac picked that one was because it had strong shields and an air filtration system, both of which came quite in handy with layers of ash covering the whole area in a dark haze, and the occasional rock still falling from the sky.

Their departure was just in time as well as a second eruption suddenly rocked the area twenty minutes later, its fiery plume of magma visible even through the shroud. Both Zac and Ilvere looked at the scene from the windows with wide-eyed horror, and Zac urgently took out dozens of defensive talismans from his Spatial Ring, activating them just in time before a massive shockwave blasted the area clean of ash and sent the vessel thousands of meters off-course.

The second eruption was even worse than the first, and by the time it abated, a new mountain had appeared out of nowhere and replaced the one that had just been blasted apart. Similar scenes were playing out in every direction, with the Ensolus Continent pretty much getting a second randomization following the integration, though this one was one wrought from fire and brimstone rather than the System's spatial manipulations.

Forests were turned to ash as magmatic tsunamis swallowed them whole, and Zac shuddered as he heard the wails from the wildlife within, inwardly saying a prayer of thanks that the weird beasts on the continent were terrifyingly aggressive and quite literally insane from the chaotic energy. Meanwhile, new towering peaks shot through the ground, perhaps coming all the way from the core of the planet itself.

Furthermore, the series of earthquakes and volcano eruptions had kicked up unprecedented storms across the continent as well, forcing Zac and Ilvere to push the vessel to the limit to avoid getting dragged into supersized tornadoes that contained such ferocity they'd easily rip apart any pre-integration civilization it encountered.

But with the bad, also came some good.

"The energy, it's so dense," Ilvere muttered as he looked through the windows, and Zac had to agree.

These eruptions did not only spew out magma, but also incredible amounts of energy that probably had been locked deep in the planet's core. Currently, the density of attuned energies was more than twice what it was before – and that was far in the sky. If they went closer to the faultlines that now crisscrossed the Ensolus Continent, the energy would be even greater.

It made Zac wonder if the planet had been upgraded to Middle D-grade just by infusing the twinned spirits. Unfortunately, after the apocalyptic upheavals started abating twelve hours later, Zac felt the ambient energy gradually recede as well, but he still believed it would stop at a higher density compared to before.

Ultimately, Zac wasn't too interested in the energy levels of Ensolus. He was more interested in any potential changes the twinned Realm Spirits could bring to the unstable mix of life and death. So he let Ilvere maintain the wheel as he tried to sense any changes, to see if there would be any gradual transition from chaos to order in the air. This kind of opportunity was rare, and he hoped it would help him gain some ideas for the future.

"Ah, it's gone!" Ilvere suddenly exclaimed, waking Zac from his meditation.

Zac looked around as [Verun's Bite] appeared in his hand, but the scene outside was not much different compared to before. The hurricanes had started to peter out when the shakes abated, and now it was just a bit stormy outside, making Zac a bit confused about what the demon was talking about. "What? What's gone?"

"The quest!" the demon explained.

Zac immediately opened his screen. In contrast to Ilvere, Zac still had the incursion quest, but its reward had completely changed.

[The Ensolus War (Incursion): Subjugate the native factions of the Ensolus World. Reward: Choose one of three rewards. (0/2)]

Rewards:

[Option 1: Upgrade Earth to High D-grade Energy and Low D-grade Mass, Downgrade Ensolus to a Peak E-grade Energy and Mass World (redeemable within 1 year)]

[Option 2: Fuse Earth and Ensolus to a Middle D-grade Energy and Mass world (redeemable within 1 month)]

[Option 3: Choose approximate Assimilation Location for Atwood Empire (redeemable within 85 years)]

"You can't see the options any longer?" Zac asked.

"No," Ilvere said as he looked at Zac curiously. "But you can?"

Zac nodded, and he shared the screen after some thought.

"Upgrade, fuse, and choose a location," Ilvere muttered. "I wonder why they have different deadlines."

"Perhaps it would be hard to fuse the planets after the Realm Spirits had completely fused with the World Core," Zac suggested. "So, what do you think?"

"Honestly?" Ilvere slowly said. "I'd pick the third, I believe?"

"Oh? Rather than upgrading Earth?" Zac asked with some surprise. "Getting a High D-grade world by downgrading a low D-grade world is a pretty good deal. Then again, Ensolus might surpass low D-grade on its own now after things stabilize."

"Well, I don't know the specifics of the Assimilation; Clan Azh'Rezak never expected to get that far. But I know how much the location of a world matters. The planets at the edges of the horde back home are always ravaged by the Tal-Eladar. With a massive war coming up, you can place us far away from the carnage, allowing us to avoid the brunt of it," Ilvere said. "You can even wait over 80 years and choose based on the current state of the war."

Zac nodded and indicated for the demon to keep going, interested in what the veteran had to say.

"Increasing the disparity between our world and Ensolus would make sure a subjugated force does not overpower us, but it doesn't seem to be in line with your plans. Neither does fusing planets," Ilvere slowly said.

"Pushing Earth to High D-grade compared to Early D-grade is big, though," Zac muttered. "It will exponentially increase the number of Hegemons Earth will be able to raise."

It was true. In an early D-grade world, the peak factions would generally have one or two Hegemons, most of them at the early stage. One or two cultivators on the planet might be able to push to Middle D-grade by hoarding resources. In contrast, on a High D-grade World, even Peak Hegemons could appear with the right resources and heritage. Furthermore, the larger factions would be able to raise scores of weaker Hegemons.

Certainly, with Earth remaining at low D-grade Mass, the planet wouldn't have enough space for too many peak figures. The higher you climbed, the bigger a support system you needed. If he had been a normal cultivator who relied on his clan for resources, he might have needed to gobble up the resources of half the planet for a shot at Peak Hegemony.

"That's true. Long-term, it would be huge," the demon agreed. "But will it matter for the war to come? An upgraded planet's effects will only make themselves known after generations have passed, where each successive generation is born slightly more talented than the one before. This generation's Hegemons will be born at the battlefield, not in some secluded cultivation chamber."

"Unless a System-based world upgrade brings the kind of opportunities that the integration did," Zac countered.

"Yes, but I think I would have heard of something like that," Ilvere hesitated. "But it doesn't hurt to ask the floating eyeball or the smarter ones."

"That's what I'm thinking as well," Zac nodded. "We'll discuss this with the others when we return. For now, keep these options to yourself."

"No need for the natives to know this," Ilvere agreed. "You've held up your part of the bargain. Now it's time for them to hold up theirs."

As the days passed on their return journey, the absolute lack of tremors following the initial massive outburst all but confirmed that this world was really healing. However, the unstable state of the Ensolus Continent's ambient energy remained the same, making Zac wonder just what the realm spirits changed. Perhaps it would take longer for a more substantive transformation to take effect.

Soon enough, they saw Fort Atwood far in the distance, its grand defensive arrays still running on full power. The surroundings were quite devastated, but both Zac and Ilvere breathed out in relief upon seeing that the fort itself was absolutely fine. However, as they flew closer and closer, the demon started to get a constipated look, like he wanted to say something.

"What is it?" Zac eventually asked with a raised brow.

"It's about Janos," the demon hesitated, and Zac immediately understood what the demon wanted. "I know you have a lot on your plate, so I hate to ask... but..."

"You should have more free time now that the war is ending," Zac said after some thought. "Draw whatever resources you need from the coffers to buy karma-finding arrays or whatever can help locate missing people, and take some talented scouts to make a proper sweep. If you can find any indication of where Janos ended up, I will do my best to help you save him. Unfortunately, I don't have the time to scour the whole place myself right now."

This was the least he could do for the Illusionist who had fought valiantly for Port Atwood many times over. Normally Zac would have gone himself, but with the war looming over everyone's head, he felt there were a million things he had to deal with before it was too late. He couldn't spend months scouring the temple ruins that spanned an area as large as a small country, an area that was riddled with weird arrays and natural formations that were extremely time-consuming to break through.

"Of course," Ilvere hurriedly nodded, a wide smile spreading on his face. "This is more than enough. I will set out as soon as the situation has stabilized."

Soon enough, they were right in front of the powerful barriers, and Zac could see that the two armies were camped out on the large courtyard, no doubt having been let in when the situation turned chaotic. His vessel had obviously been spotted some time ago as well, and the delegates along with the leaders of Port Atwood were already waiting at the center of the courtyard.

Thousands of eyes were peeled at him as he had Ilvere set down the sooty vessel before he emerged from within, the burns that had covered his face thankfully long gone already.

"Lord Atwood, you really did it, you healed this broken world. Let me be the one to thank you first," the ghost king Aouvi said with a deep bow. "We feared the worst when nature ran amok."

"I appreciate your people showing providing sanctuary," the demon chieftain added with a nod after throwing a loathing glance at the spectral warrior.

"It's nothing," Zac nodded, ignoring the friction. "Have you heard anything from your continents?"

"The energies have been turbulent, but we finally managed to get word back yesterday. There was some unrest, but nothing compared to what we saw outside your shields. Just some mild shakes, followed by a clear increase in energy," Ra'Klid said with excitement before a cough from the old warrior behind him made him somber up. "We hear the quest is gone?"

“The global quest was transformed into a private one after I used my own resources to stabilize this world,” Zac explained, though he didn’t divulge the options. “However, there is one thing that remains.”

From there Zac pointedly glanced at the Incursion pillar in the distance, which was still showering the fort with its light.

“Ah, yes, of course. Of course,” Aouvi said. “As ranking Lord of the Kingdom of Raun, I hereby surrender to the Atwood Empire, so that we may join under their banner.”

A moment later, a large suddenly parchment flashed into being in front of the ghost, and both he and Carva put their hands on it after some hesitation. It was a System contact that officially turned the Kingdom of Raun into a subordinate force of Zac’s faction. That meant all system-based functions, including the automatic taxation, came under his control. It also meant that most acts of treason would turn into System-based events, which meant Zac and his subordinates would get a quest to quell uprisings.

The process was simple, but it was only possible thanks to multiple requirements being met. The first was power, where the Atwood Empire had to be ranked higher than the Kingdom of Raun through whatever measurements the System used. Secondly, there had to be a consensus in a surrender, where all the top-ranking members stamped the parchment. If there were a bunch of D-grade Ghost Kings hiding somewhere, it wouldn’t have worked, since Aouvi and Carva wouldn’t have been able to speak for their faction.

“The Mavai will always honor their word. Strength and honor, Warchief Atwood,” Ra’Klid said and repeated the process with three out of the five councilors he had brought. Apparently, the other two weren’t Lords in the eyes of the System, since the process finished without a hitch.

The next moment, the incursion pillar started growing until it seemingly reached deep into space. The whole sky was drenched in emerald and grey for a moment as a familiar surge of energy filled Zac’s body, a sensation he hadn’t felt in some time now. A moment later, the incursion pillar spread out to cover the whole sky before slowly fading away.

Curiously, Zac opened his Title-screen while the others observed the spectacle, and his heart thumped with delight when he saw two new entries awaited him.

[Bloodied Baron: Become a Baron through subjugation. Reward: All attributes +5%.]

[Connate Conqueror: Conquer a planet while in E-grade. Reward: All attributes +5%.]

“You kept your word about fixing this world. I hope you will continue to lead by example, raising our people to new heights,” the young warchief said as the radiance in the sky faded.

“The road we have ahead of us is long with many unknowns, but I will do my best to pave a path for our people,” Zac nodded as he closed his title screen, before imbuing his voice so that the observing armies could also hear what he said next.

“I am not really one for speeches, but let me just say that I’m happy to welcome you all into the Atwood Empire. I don’t plan on treating you any better or worse than the citizens of Earth. Those who perform well and bring something to the table will get access to opportunities and resources that are hard to match in the whole Sector. Those who just coast by will be ignored and left to fend for themselves,” Zac

said, his voice echoing through the courtyard. "And those who act against our interests will be dealt with strictly and severely."

At that point, a burst of dense killing intent was unleashed, showering the whole courtyard for a moment. However, just as soon as it was unleashed it was gone again, but Zac hoped it would leave a mark in the hearts of these elite warriors.

"Now that you're citizens of my faction, you will gain initial access to the Atwood Empire Contribution Store, and in the future our Dao Repositories. Don't look down at what they contain just because we're a newly formed faction. Due to some lucky encounters of mine, we have manuals that can match those of the big Empires in the Zecia sector," Zac continued. "Using them can completely transform one's fate, elevating you from a talented warrior to a powerhouse with the qualifications to leave their mark on history."

"Is that how warchief became so powerful?" Ra'Klid interjected with glimmering eyes, his voice also loud for the benefit of the spectators.

"Well, part of it. Access to resources can help improve your foundation, but most of my power comes from risking my life over and over, finding my path at the edge of death," Zac said, getting approving nods from the older demons.

"In either case, I am not a hands-on leader – I am focused on the path cultivation and strengthening myself, and I urge you to do the same for the foreseeable future," Zac added. "We can start playing politics when we've won the upcoming war."

"It's as you say, Lord Emperor," Aouvi nodded. "With this planet healed and war being over, we shall immediately begin shoring up our foundations. Your... encounter... with King Eomid proved that our strength is truly hollow, something we quickly must remedy."

"From what I've heard, this continent isn't lacking for beasts," Zac smiled before glancing at Vilari, who nodded in confirmation. "Some bloodshed will sharpen you up. My people will soon start posting missions to tame this land. So those who want to contribute to the empire can start earning contribution and valuable resources as soon as they've received their token."

The next moment, a group of soldiers came walking out from the barracks, each of them holding chests full of information crystals. This moment had been carefully planned for, and soon enough all the leaders and a good chunk of the soldiers were fervently scanning the contents.

"What is this!" Ra'Klid almost roared, his eyes as wide as saucers as he scanned the information crystal. "Rich... you're rich!"