

The Fall 857

Chapter 857: The Future of the Empire

Zac's communication crystal had already started vibrating while looking over the Cosmic Vessels, and he was surprised to see that it was Vilari who had tried to contact him. It looked like the mentalist had finally returned to Earth after spending over five years on Ensolus.

A few minutes later, Vilari appeared in his courtyard, accompanied by Joanna.

"Both of you?" Zac asked with surprise.

"Rhuger and Ilvere can deal with things on Ensolus for the time being," Vilari nodded. "With the restrictions of the Incursion gone, we have begun the upgrade of all facilities. Soon enough, both our forts and resource gathering facilities will be impregnable against factions at the level of the Mavai Hordes and the Raun Spectrals."

"With the addition of teleporters, we can move freely across the continent as well, allowing for both reinforcements and evacuation if needed," Joanna added.

"Well, welcome back to Earth, both of you," Zac smiled. "How does it feel?"

"A lot has changed. I read the reports but it's another thing to see it with my own eyes," Vilari nodded.

"I've been back a few times by now, but it's still hard to believe how quickly things change between each visit," Joanna sighed.

"It will slow down soon enough," Zac said. "We are still adapting to the Multiverse."

"How did the inheritance go?" Joanna asked with some longing in her eyes.

Zac glanced at Joanna, feeling it really was a shame. He just realized that she would have been a great candidate to undergo the Blade Emperor's inheritance, even if she used a spear. Having heard the whole story about Irei and his wives from Thea, Zac believed that sincerity was more important than weapon of choice. In this regard, Joanna excelled, having already pushed her Spirit Tool spear to E-grade.

Unfortunately, even if the Blade Emperor Inheritance would open up in a few more years, it didn't matter. The inheritances started at the F-grade, for better or worse. But Zac still made a mental note of making sure with Brazla before handing the spot over to someone else. It simply was a bit inconvenient to be restricted to only selecting F-grade cultivators. By this point, everyone he knew had already entered the E-grade.

"What, is there something wrong?" Joanna asked with a frown.

"Oh, no it's nothing," Zac said as he was dragged out from his thoughts. "The inheritance was okay. My path has diverged a bit from the Lord of Cycles though, so I didn't quite get everything I had hoped from the encounter."

"As we find our paths, outside help is bound to become less and less helpful," Vilari nodded.

"Yeah, I guess that's true for everyone," Zac agreed. "More importantly, I'm heading off-world again in a couple of days."

“So soon?” Joanna said with a small furrow in her brows. “You’ve barely been back for a month.”

“Hopefully, it shouldn’t take too long. Less than a year,” Zac said as he shared the quest screen for [Items for Karunthel]. “I need to go get that worldeater or whatever. From there, it won’t take too long before we can set course for the Million Gates Territory. I just came back from a meeting with the Creators.”

“So we can come with to the Million Gates Territory?” Joanna said with gleaming eyes.

“You’ll have to, whether you want to or not.” Zac laughed. “I need some capable people to help me steer that thing.”

“How many can go? How is the environment?” Vilari asked, and Zac quickly recounted the specs he had seen in the office before.

“These vessels... are far beyond the norm in the Million Gates Territory, in the whole sector, in fact,” Vilari slowly said. “Few can build cosmic vessels of this quality. Only Monarchs and the wealthiest Hegemons will be able to take out comparable vessels. We might need to disguise it somehow.”

“What, really? I know they’re good, but they’re that good?” Zac exclaimed, a bit reluctant to make his spaceship look all grubby the moment he got his hands on it.

“It’s true,” Joanna nodded. “We looked into buying a ship before you returned, and what you describe is on another level entirely. The problem is related to the materials, apparently. You need to know the method of producing unique alloys that can withstand both attacks, spatial turbulence, and the pressure of the universe when phasing between dimensions.”

“Without those kinds of recipes and the skill to forge the alloys, you would have to build the whole vessels out of high-grade materials. That might improve the quality, but the cost would increase one hundredfold,” Joanna said. “Add to that the skill required to infuse hundreds of high-quality Arrays into the ship...”

“Can the Creators mass-produce Cosmic Vessels at this level?” Vilari asked. “If we could put these for sale...”

“These models are unique, with some parts being a quest reward of mine, and others using materials that don’t exist in the Zecia sector,” Zac said, but his heart was still beating with excitement. “However, they will still be able to mass-produce simpler models once their factory is up and running.”

“Simpler models will definitely sell even better,” Joanna said with a smile. “I think you’ve struck it rich.”

Zac’s smile widened as well, remembering Ogras’ exaggerated reaction when he first got his hand on the Iliex Shipyard. It looked like the true value of a Creator Shipyard was about to appear. It was perfect timing. Not only could high-quality vessels help with the war efforts against the invaders, but they would provide an important revenue source for his Empire.

After all, him accidentally stumbling into piles of treasure wasn’t a sustainable source of materials and wealth for himself and his followers.

“Well, that’s something for later,” Joanna said. “Do you need anyone of us to go with you to fetch that animal for your quest?”

“Not this time,” Zac said. “I am planning on sneaking inside among the mercenaries, getting the beast, and leaving. With too many people, things might get complicated. Of course, I am hoping I can simply purchase the thing instead of needing to head too deep into the Void Gate’s territory.”

“Alright,” Vilari said. “We’ll continue the integration of Ensolus. There is a lot of work to be done now that the incursion officially is over. With your permission, I’d like to transfer a few million citizens to this world.”

“Million?” Zac said with confusion. “Do we even have millions of people to spare on Earth?”

“All our facilities on Earth, from mines to spiritual fields and workshops, are fully manned since long ago. The salary and benefits of your employees are known far and wide, and we are flooded with applications every day,” Joanna explained. “Getting a million volunteers wouldn’t take long.”

“The number of applications has only increased now that the general population has been able to glimpse your contribution store,” Vilari added. “And with the new Contribution algorithm, few apart from the elites and employees will be able to accrue enough contribution to get anything worthwhile.”

It was true. Before, anyone who wasn’t actively slacking off would slowly gather contribution points in Port Atwood. But with the new system, you would have to work for it. Even then, it was a pretty generous System. After all, in most factions, only the core members would even get access. For example, in Clan Azh’Rezak, only members of the actual clan could get access to the Clan’s resources.

The millions of citizens who simply lived in their domain would have to rely on themselves while paying even higher taxes.

“Aren’t the natives of Ensolus enough to fill the positions?” Zac asked.

“We want to bring all the races over to better integrate the populations,” Vilari said. “If we keep the two worlds isolated from each other except a small number at the top, Ensolus will remain a colony looking for ways to break out.”

“Makes sense,” Zac slowly agreed as he considered the proposal. “But if we start bringing people over en-masse, the cat’s out of the bag – that the Atwood Empire has both undead and living citizens.”

“I am aware,” Vilari nodded. “That’s why we need your go-ahead first.”

“How have things gone so far in that department?” Zac asked. “How did the soldiers react upon seeing the Einherjar?”

“Things went better than expected, honestly – we were prepared to quell a riot if need be. There were some grumbings in the start, especially among the elites who were harried by the Undead Empire for weeks. But most people understand your undead and the Undead Empire are not the same,” Joanna said.

“I feel that the newly integrated are not as inherently averse to our kin as what I saw on the streets of Twilight Harbor,” Vilari thoughtfully added. “They might consider us unnatural and weird, but there are so many unnatural and weird things happening to them since the integration. Thanks to that, our impact is lessened, and there aren’t eons of bad blood ingrained into our bones.”

“Perfect,” Zac nodded. “Well, I guess it’s about time anyway. We can’t hide a part of our population over on Elysium forever. I’m planning on rearranging the Spirit Vein to turn a section of Port Atwood into a Death Attuned District. That way, the living and undead can live in the same city and start the integration for real.”

“If I may suggest an alternative,” Vilari said as she took out the purification array most people used on the Ensolus Continent. “As you’ve seen, living and undead are living quite well on Ensolus as long as we have these arrays. If possible, I would think it even better to strive for this kind of environment in Port Atwood, where life and death are one, rather than separate.”

Zac suddenly remembered his conversation with Vilari Back in the Twilight Harbor, about how the harbor was not much different from the Zecia sector. The undead had their zones and their stores, while the living had theirs. Even the shared world disks had clear lines between life and death, and comingling was ultimately limited as a result.

The plan he suggested was ultimately the same, even if the stigma of consorting with the ‘other side’ might not be as poignant here.

“Have you noticed any side effects of staying in that kind of environment?” Zac eventually asked.

“Not that we can tell, as long as the purifiers work,” Vilari said. “The real issue is that we honestly don’t know how this mixture is formed. We haven’t been able to recreate it back on Earth just yet.”

“Your plan is not bad, but I think it’s a bit premature to flood Port Atwood with this kind of unstable energy,” Zac rejected. “We can revisit the topic when we can reliably recreate this environment, or even a better one in the future. I’ll allocate more resources to research this and provide some life-death treasures I’ve picked up lately. Until then, the districts will have to do.”

It wasn’t just a worry about the health of his citizens that made him say no. He honestly doubted the plan was feasible in the short run – who understood the difficulties involved with fusing life and death better than he?

“Of course,” Vilari nodded, though Zac could tell she was a bit disappointed.

“I haven’t forgotten what you said back in the harbor,” Zac added. “I’ll do my best to make your vision come true. But we have to take it one step at a time. For now, keep the Earth and Ensolus separated – anyone you hire to head over will sign on for a year at the least. Meanwhile, have the city planners start drawing up the expansion of Port Atwood, but don’t draw any Miasma yet. As soon as I return, we will make things public.”

“We’ll handle it, don’t worry,” Joanna assured. “On a related topic, I have a message from the Stargazer. After analyzing the sector, she wanted to recommend the Kaldran Strait for the Atwood Empire.”

“The no-man’s-land between the Kavriel Province and the Human Empires?” Zac hesitated. “I mean it makes sense with our attunement, but that place is a constant warzone. Even if it’s far from the frontlines of the Million Gates Territory, that place will never see any calm.”

“The Kaldran Straits are enormous,” Joanna said. “It’s risky, but Abby thinks it’s the best place for a life-death attuned world. With the miasmic domain of the Kavriel Province providing energy for one direction, and the counterforce from Zecia itself, it should push the ambient energy of your planets to

the next level. There are also many scattered worlds without any affiliations or powerful leaders, making future expansion easy.”

“There should be parts of the strait that are far from the established battlefronts,” Vilari added. “As long as we pick a dimensional layer that’s not part of the known routes, the odds of anyone running into us by accident should be quite low.”

“We can start looking into it, but we need the Cosmic Vessels first,” Zac eventually agreed. “Let’s focus on the short-term issues first.”

“When are you leaving?” Joanna asked.

“As soon as I have everything I need. Come with me to Calrin’s. I might need your help with something,” Zac said as he stood up. “Or is there anything else?”

“No, that’s it. I’ll start preparing for the expansion and recruitment,” Vilari said.

“You have the best understanding of our people,” Zac said. “If you will, could you start working on a shortlist of candidates to bring into the Million Gates Territory? Apart from warriors, we need medics, array controllers, and so on. That excursion will probably take years, so only people who can handle that kind of pressure.”

“I’ll look into it,” Vilari nodded.

From there, things proceeded quickly as Zac planned out his next course of action. Seeing Yrial’s journey toward Hegemony, and later hearing his embellished tales, had imparted a few important lessons that weren’t related to forming one’s core; how to stay alive in the Multiverse. Wanting to leave nothing to chance, Zac ordered one report after another on the situation on the Salosar cluster.

Soon enough, a proper plan had taken shape. Zac had everything he needed as well, including the high-quality modulator Calrin had gotten his hands on. However, he would have to wait for another ten days before he set out again. It wasn’t that he needed more time to prepare, but rather that things over at Salosar weren’t ready.

Having found himself with a few days of free time, Zac teleported over to his Cultivation Cave with Triv to upgrade it with a few of his recently gathered treasures and arrays. It quickly became apparent that his private forest wasn’t the only place Triv had fiddled with. Apart from being completely repaired since his Soul Reincarnation, every single facet had been refined and elevated.

“You’ve worked hard,” Zac smiled. “I can’t believe the energies have reached this level.”

It wasn’t at the level of the unique environments in the Orom World like the Blackink Mountain, but the energy was still so dense that a haze covered the subterranean forest in this central cave. The only thing missing was that the energy was somewhat hollow now that there was no Origin Energy left – it had the meat, but it lacked the insights that marked top-tier cultivation environments.

“Well, admittedly, the mountain did most of the work,” Triv smiled. “With these purification arrays Young Master has brought, I will be able to improve the cave even further.”

The two toured the three sections of his cave for the next hours, where Zac showcased the various resources he’d gathered, and Triv offered suggestions on how to incorporate them into the cave.

Ultimately, the cave was reinforced with another two layers of defensive arrays, along with the Purification Arrays he bought in the Orom World.

Next, they planted some of the high-quality life-and-death treasures he'd gathered. They'd siphon some of the ambient energy, but the aura they'd exude would improve the quality of what remained. Since Zac couldn't cultivate anyway, losing some density wasn't a big deal. Meanwhile, any added insights in the area, and their clashes with their opposing elements, might help him gain some inspiration for the formation of his core.

It would take a while for the herbs, trees, mushrooms, and other materials to take root and start transforming the environment, but Zac was heading out soon in either case. Triv would take care of things while he visited the Void Gate.

The following couple of days Zac spent on [Beauty Yrial's Great Transformation Skill]. Reforging a skill manually was a bit of a chore, even if your body was unusually adaptable. The biggest issue was that any mistake in either planning or execution could damage the fractal, just like when you upgraded a skill the normal way.

Thankfully, Yrial had set up an extremely simple plan for him, where the skill would reach E-grade after 18 sessions with a one-week rest in-between. Each session, he would add or alter a specific set of pathways, ensuring that the skill would be usable and stable throughout the process. That was the benefit of having a Monarch for a teacher – Yrial's natural understanding of patterns far surpassed his own.

Even if he didn't cultivate the Daos that were the basis for the Specialty Core, he understood enough how to interact with it.

Zac also continued his Soul Cultivation, and he even started analyzing the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation] during his downtime. With such a packed schedule, the ten days went by in a flash. Zac's eyes opened after a long bout of meditation. It was finally time.

First Salosar – then outer space.