

## The Fall 858

### Chapter 858: Salosar Seven

Zac stepped out from the teleporter of Salosar Seven, one of the twenty-two official subordinate worlds of the Salosar Cluster, donning a temporary face. Together with him was Joanna, who was decked out in the liveries of the Space Gate Guild. They found themselves in a gallery inside an enormous hollow tower, the scene almost a bit reminiscent of the Havenfort Chasm, though the scale obviously was much smaller.

Behind them was a stone wall, and their sides were blocked by some sort of obfuscation array. However, the arrays were not completely opaque, and they could see small spatial ripples constantly appear all around them in other, presumably identical, rooms. That left only the front, which led to the edge of the gallery, which wasn't blocked to the sides.

Joanna simply bowed at Zac and activated the teleporter again, disappearing before she could be questioned or inspected by the nearby guard who stood outside the only exit to the room. Zac walked over, making no attempt to hide his aura, which exuded the energy of an Early Hegemon thanks to his modulator.

The thing worked just as Calrin had advertised, but it was pretty demanding to keep running. He would only be able to use the modulator for around two hours before running low on Cosmic Energy, but that was more than enough for his purposes. As for masquerading as a Half-step Hegemon, that was much easier, and he could do that for a full day as long as he wasn't forced to expend a bunch of energy in battle.

"Welcome, Lord Hegemon. It's my honor to receive your excellence," the middle E-grade guard bowed as he imprinted Zac's aura onto a crystal. "May I ask what brought the esteemed Lord to Salosar Seven?"

"Just taking a look," Zac slowly said. "I heard there might be some opportunities here with an unusual Beast Tide."

"That's true," the guard quickly nodded and took out an information crystal. "Any Hegemons joining the mission would become esteemed guests of the Void Gate. There is a specially-erected recruitment station erected in the Larnak Sector of Salosar Prime, all the information you need is in this crystal. I am sorry, but we also require Lord Hegemon to fill in some details at the entry station behind me."

"Why?" Zac frowned. "My clan's reports on Salosar didn't mention anything like this. I don't like my details getting spread left and right."

"It is a new security measure the council has set in place for those arriving from out-of-system," the guard said with another quick bow. "With the Void Gate opening its proverbial gates, many spies have tried entering their domain to cause harm or steal resources. Those who are not part of the local factions will have to fill in a short statement. But Lord Hegemon does not need to worry – these are handled with utmost secrecy, and not a wisp of information will reach any third party or information house."

Zac nodded with a displeased grunt before grabbing the information crystal. From there, he headed over to one of the hundreds of disks at the edge of the walk surrounding the central chasm of the tower, his aura gradually receding into his body.

Truthfully, Zac already knew about these procedures thanks to Calrin, and they had already prepared a background for him as a newly-ascended Hegemon from the Allbright Empire. The disguise wouldn't hold up to close scrutiny, but he had spent almost five D-grade Nexus Coins on tokens, Clan Seals, and other items to verify his identity. It was extremely unlikely these early screenings would spot anything amiss.

A few moments later, Zac expressionlessly stepped out into the hollow core of the tower, gently floating down toward the bottom hundreds of meters below. It wasn't that he had figured out some way to fly to perfect his disguise as a Hegemon, but there was rather a simple gravity array in the center. People were floating down all around him until they reached the bottom platform.

As Zac looked around, it almost looked like it rained people, while there was a constant stream of people disappearing into the outgoing arrays at the lower floors. It wasn't too surprising. Salosar Seven might not sound too impressive due to its numbering, but Salosar Two through Five were mostly closed-off worlds where the powerful clans and factions of the cluster resided.

Thus, Salosar Six through Eight were popular destinations for those seeking entertainment or commerce, and also the worlds where middling families and the more successful wandering cultivators stayed. The other worlds were not as well-off, with eleven and beyond being E-grade worlds.

Those planets, along with the unofficial worlds without a Salosar name, were mostly feeder worlds whose purpose was to produce the everyday resources the residents of the upper worlds required. Apparently, there were arrays as large as countries on those planets, where the ambient energy of vast swathes of land was dragged into the spiritual fields, workshops, or whatever else the families needed the energy for.

It left the rest of the planets extremely energy-starved, and just reaching E-grade essentially required you to work in the facilities that stole all the energy. Learning about the situation was a stark reminder of why it was so important to nurture Earth into a proper faction that could stand on its own.

In fact, a few of the Salosar feeder-planets had once been newly-integrated worlds that didn't amount to much. Either they failed during the integration to one of Salosar's local factions, or they weren't powerful enough to avoid that kind of fate during the Assimilation. Obviously, almost no newly-integrated planet would be able to resist any established factions nearby, but there were some fail-safes in place.

Normally, the world would get some sort of trial to see if they had properly acclimatized after a century, and if they performed well enough, then the local invaders would be barred from forcibly seizing all land and resources. If not, the unlucky planets would end up as feeder-worlds, while the more fortunate would only get levied with heavy taxation to whatever local power whose sphere of influence they had appeared inside.

Such was the fate of the powerless in the Multiverse.

It was the law of the jungle, which could both be considered extremely unfair and fair, depending on how you looked at it. Zac didn't wish for this kind of exploitative hierarchy for his own budding empire, but neither did he have any interest in bringing about social change to the Zecia sector. He wasn't some savior, and neither did he have any problem appreciating the splendor of Salosar Seven even if he knew how this world was supported.

The air was clean, the energy was dense, and the scenery was beautiful. The structures of Salosar Seven were mostly erected with some sort of purple stone with opalescent streaks that lit up when the sun hit them.

They would stay luminescent even after sunset, making for a beautiful and mysterious atmosphere in the evenings. Along with the nearby inland oceans with paradisaical archipelagos, Salosar Seven had become a popular destination for those who needed a break in their cultivation and wanted to spend some time relaxing.

There was still a large commercial sector, but it was more geared toward entertainment compared to its brethren. Of course, it wasn't for the bars or the brothels that Zac had come, and he started to orient himself following the map Calrin had provided him with.

Noticing Zac standing in place as though he was lost, a few people approached him, but they quickly backed away after a shake of his head. Seeing the guides looking for work, Zac felt a pang of regret thinking back to Nala, the half-blood Draugr who had guided him in Twilight Harbor.

He had no idea what had happened to her when the whole Harbor exploded, but Zac knew her odds of survival weren't great. Zac could only hope that Nala's father, the Information House fact-checker, had sensed something amiss through his work and moved the family to the outer edges of the harbor at least.

Salosar had imposed a temporary no-fly rule for everyone except the city-issued ships, so Zac hired a ferryman. Normally, these kinds of limitations would only be seen in the capitals of C-grade worlds, with Hegemons otherwise refusing to comply. But the Void Priestess was simply too powerful, and no one wanted to draw her ire at this critical time.

Zac spent 20,000 E-grade Nexus Coins to check in at a premium Cultivation Cave next, paying a month in advance. However, he didn't spend more than a few minutes inside before leaving, setting out in the wider city by foot. An hour later he walked the streets looking completely different, having taken a cue out of Yrial's playbook to change his appearance inside unmonitored corners or stores or alleyways a few times.

With that, he headed toward his real destination. Zac knew he was probably overdoing it with the counter-espionage, but there were reasons to be wary. For one, interplanetary travel was not that common in the frontier, and any unknown Hegemon popping up out of nowhere would raise some eyebrows even in a flourishing place like Salosar.

It might seem like there was a constant stream of people exiting the tower, but Zac knew that over 99% were locals from the Salosar Cluster. Just a fraction were foreigners, and of those, the powerful would be marked for further investigation. After all, information was both wealth and power in the Multiverse,

and there were a lot of businesses who made a point of knowing about everyone and everything that went on in their local sphere.

Even arriving incognito wouldn't help, since the information houses would start matching you and your aura against possible candidates in their tallies. If there were none, you'd suddenly become even more suspicious since you were not only a stranger, but also trying to hide who you were. That's why Zac chose to go with the somewhat cumbersome method of buying an identity.

No matter if it was needed or not, Zac felt it was good practice – being rigorous about security couldn't hurt. In the visions, Yrial always followed certain procedures when visiting or leaving a new settlement, no matter if he had reason to believe he would be targeted or not. After all, some threats were unknowable, and having his true identity exposed was not the only risk Zac was facing.

Just by appearing in Salosar alone, he might already have gained a target on his back by some enterprising thieves or assassins.

Zac made two jumps with the public teleporters, a luxury few worlds in the Zecia sector enjoyed. They weren't connected to the System's network to facilitate teleportation, which meant anyone could freely use them. In return, they needed to be set up by skilled Formation Masters who had delved into the Dao of Space. Even then, they seldom had the range surpassing that of a planet.

In Salosar's case, the arrays were massive disks that could fit thousands of people, and they activated every time enough money was contributed. Sometimes, it could take hours, but if you had the money and didn't want to wait, you could activate the array early.

By the time Zac reached a residential district on another continent, his expensive robes had been transformed to look like decent but inexpensive leather armor, and he released the aura of an Early E-grade warrior as he took in the surroundings. It was an interesting contrast to Port Atwood, where both had their strong points.

Salosar was a flourishing planet, with dense energies and high quality of living. There was constant foot traffic on the streets even in these somewhat remote corners of the planet, with most people emitting the aura of Peak F-grade. Of course, their levels weren't a surprise.

Peak F-grade was, by far, the most common level on most D-grade worlds. Nexus Crystals and Leveling Pills weren't too expensive, and most people would pick non-combat classes that slowly pushed their level to the peak of F-grade in a decade or two.

But without Origin Dao to cram the Dao down your throat, the vast majority would be forever stuck at the most fundamental bottleneck of cultivation. The difference between these normal citizens was that the ones with money and a decent constitution could evolve their Race and live for 3 to 500 years.

The few who reached E-grade were either decently talented or had the money to splurge on a Dao Treasure or two to force a breakthrough. So even though Zac was emitting the energy signature of an unassuming early E-grade warrior who would barely be considered a cultivator, he still caught quite a few people throwing him jealous or longing looks as he walked the streets.

Zac continued for another hour before he reached a quiet neighborhood where most buildings had decent-sized courtyards or gardens surrounding their mansions. Following the map in his Information

Crystal, he soon reached a manor consisting of five buildings with a walled-in garden of 20 thousand square meters or so.

It was a decent-sized plot of land which would be considered massive in any city before the integration. Even then, it was nothing compared to the mansions in the more affluent sectors that were cities unto their own. This was the kind of building a family with an E-grade cultivator and some foundations could afford, and it usually housed around five generations of a family.

Zac sent a wisp of Cosmic Energy into an array to announce his arrival, and the gate slowly swung up to showcase a young girl looking no more than six years old. She curiously looked up at Zac with confusion in her eyes, rapidly blinking her large eyes though she was trying to remember who he was.

"I don't know you?" the child eventually stated.

"No, you don't. I have come for the skychime you're selling," Zac said.

"Oh! Come in," the child said.

Zac nodded and walked inside, and the child arduously closed the gate behind them. However, they didn't get the chance to take more than a couple of steps before Zac sensed a vague pressure from the little girl.

"Not another step," the child said, her aura rapidly climbing from nothing to past the limits of the E-grade.

The child was a genuine Hegemon.

"Now, who are you, for real this time?" the young girl asked with a dangerous glint in her eyes.

"I'm a friend of Calrin's. He should have told you I'm coming," Zac smiled as he took out the token that would confirm his identity, not shocked at all by the scene. "Are you Triski?"

"So you're the one that thrifty bastard sent," the child muttered as her skin started to change. "I was expecting one of our own."

The next moment, it was not a small human child who stood in front of him, but rather an adult Sky Gnome. This was her true identity – a local information merchant. Or thief, depending on how slow business was at the moment. Calrin had managed to connect with Triski through some old channels of his clan a year after Zac left for Twilight Harbor, and she was the main source of the information the Thayer Consortia had gathered on the Void Gate, Salosar, and its subordinate planets.

"Well, it wasn't convenient," Zac shrugged. "Do you have the report we ordered?"

"Here," Triski said as she threw over an information crystal. "Ship manifest of the 'Lucent Dive'. In total, there are 308 Half-Step D-grade Cultivators and 32 Early Hegemons onboard, almost all of them coming from Ymrid."

Zac nodded in thanks as he scanned the contents. Ymrid was one of the closest major D-grade worlds and the nexus of a cluster of planets much like Salosar. It was close enough that even large commercial vessels could travel the distance within a year if they spent enough energy, meaning there was a lot of travel between the two clusters.

“There is also a vessel coming in from Karbron in two weeks in case this one won’t do, and it’s a big one. Should be almost a thousand Half-Step Hegemons on that one and tens of thousands of E-grade cultivators, but I haven’t gotten my hands on their manifest yet.”

Two minutes later, Zac sighed with a shake of his head.

“Well, you can stay here if you want,” Triski shrugged and pointed at a building. “There is a cultivation cave beneath that structure. I’ll have the next manifest soon enough.”

Zac thanked the Sky Gnome again and entered the building, and he spent the next few days going over the reports and gossip Triski supplied him, for a fee. Finally, the gnome got her hands on the second manifest, and Zac’s eyes lit up when he saw that his chosen strategy would work.

“Gaun Sorom,” Zac said.

“Alright,” Triski smiled. “Do you want him to disappear?”

“No, I have something else in mind.”