

The Fall 861

Chapter 861: Mission Compound

“So creepy,” Gaun muttered as he looked at Zac testing various expressions with his disguise.

“Well, it’s your face,” Zac laughed.

Having spent the past day in what could almost be considered a bonding session the two had gotten a bit closer, even if Gaun had been the only one providing information. The wandering cultivator occasionally tried to pry into Zac’s background a few times, but he had mostly kept his thoughts to himself.

Luckily, Gaun had almost been the perfect target for infiltration. He didn’t know anyone in the Salosar Cluster, apart from some surface-level-connections to people at his level. It was the same with Karbron as well. Just like the missive said, he had only been there for ten years. What the missive didn’t mention was that he had spent most of those years recuperating from wounds he had gotten after losing the struggle for a treasure in the wild.

He did mention a few of his acquaintances that might appear in the area because of the Beast Tide, but it would take another two years at the least before the first ships from the Tumbling Sky Cluster reached Salosar. By then, he should be long gone.

“Alright, it’s time to go,” Zac eventually said. “Do you have any preferred area of the Zecia Sector you wish to teleport to, or do you want me to send you to a random D-grade world?”

“If possible, I want to be sent as close to the Allbright Empire as possible. But not the Red Sector of the empire,” Gaun said without hesitation, clearly prepared for the question.

Zac looked at the Wandering Cultivator with surprise. The fact that Gaun wanted to travel to the Allbright Empire wasn’t too surprising since it was one of the most flourishing parts of the sector. Only a few factions, like the Dravorak Dynasty, were slightly more powerful, but the Allbright Empire was considered more accommodating to wandering cultivators.

However, the fact that he specifically mentioned the Red Sector, the area of the Allbright Empire that bordered the edge of Zecia and the Million Gates Territory, indicated he knew about what was going on over there. Someone like Gaun was unlikely to know about the war already considering how much Zac had spent on that kind of intelligence, even if some murmurs had started to spread.

Zac knew all kinds of details, but that was only because he got an early warning on the Bloodwind World and spent dozens of D-grade Nexus Coins on intelligence reports. It was obviously impossible for a wandering cultivator to do the same.

Even more baffling was that Gaun specifically wanted to avoid the Red Sector, even though the big factions over there were screaming for manpower for everything from building War Fortresses to joining Mercenary Squads. Gaun was obviously not afraid of danger since he had been planning on joining the Beast Tide, so why shy away from that?

“You know about the changes in Zecia?” Zac ventured to make sure.

"I was lucky enough to learn a thing or two while I recuperated. I've worked as a private guard for one of their researchers the past couple of years," Gaun nodded. "I know war is coming. A big one."

"If you know, why not the Red Sector?" Zac asked, not able to quell his curiosity. "That would allow you to join the war effort earlier, which will have all kinds of benefits."

"How can there be such a good thing?" Gaun snorted. "I'm not sure you understand the plight of a wandering cultivator. I barely have the resources to work on my cultivation, let alone the resources needed to travel deep into that weird chaotic area and hunt for opportunities. Even if I manage to join a crew, what role would I get as a stranger in a chaotic place like that?"

Zac immediately understood the problem. The answer wasn't hard to guess – those people would end up as meat shields.

"It's better to spend the next few years in the Albright Empire, looking for opportunities to join established factions as a captain or some sort of bodyguard to their young. With war coming up, the requirements for recruitment should have gone down in the other sectors of the empire as well. It should be possible to sign decent temporary contracts.

"The local factions of the empire should still be among the first to be dragged into whatever's going on, and I will get my opportunities sooner or later. And even if I'm still an outsider, I stand better chances of surviving as part of a large organized force compared to some frontier Mercenary Squad."

Zac looked at Gaun with interest, a bit surprised how quickly and meticulously he had formed a plan for himself after seeing the teleportation tokens. This kind of shrewd thinking was nothing like the short description in the missive, which rather portrayed the axe wielder as some sort of gruff barbarian that was hard to reason with.

Gaun's plan even showed a possible path for the Atwood Empire. Why not do the same as Gaun, though from the opposite side? If Zac could snag a couple of experienced Half-Step Hegemons with a good reputation, he could vastly improve the foundations of his army. His army's resources were unsurpassed for their level, but they lacked hardened veterans who could act as the core of individual squads.

Meanwhile, some Half-Step Hegemons wouldn't be powerful enough to usurp his position or cause any havoc on Earth.

"Interesting. It looks our reports misjudged you. I'll send you to the Lucent Dream Sector of the Albright Empire. It's almost as far from the Red Sector as you can get, so it should suit your plan," Zac smiled.

"Really? You'll really send me to a proper empire?" Gaun exclaimed, his eyes wide. However, his excitement quickly turned to suspicion. "What's the catch?"

"No catch," Zac said. "Except you will have to figure out your background on your own. And the planet you'll arrive at is just early D-grade."

He had just the thing – Galau's token to his hometown. After being tricked by Catheya in Twilight Harbor, Zac had already confirmed with both Heda and Pavina that his remaining tokens were free from any tracking measures. More than half had some rudimentary measures in place, but they had been easily resolved by the two Monarchs, even if they were restrained.

Meanwhile, Zac already had access to no less than 100 teleportation locations in the Lucent Dream Sector of the Allbright Empire, so he had no use for the token any longer. Zac was happy to send Gaun there. He wouldn't be hard to track down later, and he'd make a good informant.

Triski had proved just how useful local contacts could be, and it was about time he and Calrin started setting up a proper network, turning the lies about his organization's reach into reality.

"I'll just say I got a token from a quest and decided to shed my past," Gaun shrugged. "It's common enough. Such a flaky background will bar me from any higher positions, but it's not like I'd get those in either case. As for the grade of the world, it doesn't matter. I hear the planets are a lot closer in the established empires compared to the rest of Zecia. It shouldn't be impossible to get proper citizenship and travel after contributing to the war efforts."

"Alright then, let's go," Zac nodded as his face changed to a random template.

The two made their way toward the very same tower Zac arrived inside, where Zac pretended he was an attendant who kept Gaun company. Soon enough, the tower loomed in the distance, and Zac surreptitiously handed Gaun an information crystal.

"If you find that the opportunities in the Allbright Empire are not up to your expectations, you can try contacting us through this method," Zac said before handing him a crystal. "It's not my place to promise anything, but we are always on the lookout for people who can help us in various ways."

"But I guess you still won't tell me who 'you' are?" Gaun asked.

"No," Zac smiled.

Gaun slowly nodded, but he did take the information crystal containing a method to send a message to the Thayer Consortia through a series of proxies. He didn't immediately resume their walk toward the teleportation station though, but rather leaned in a bit closer.

"I have a feud, with a true Hegemon. He calls himself Ulavo, but it's an alias he uses when traveling. His true identity is an outer elder of the Tumbling Sky Sect, though I don't know his name," Gaun whispered. "He uses his Ulavo identity to do things that would reflect poorly on an orthodox sect. I accidentally found out about it when I saw him kill one of his own sect nephews over a treasure. I hear he might be joining this event as well. Be careful."

"Why didn't you mention that before?"

"I was afraid you'd rescind your offer," Gaun coughed as he scratched his chin with some embarrassment. "This is a huge opportunity for me. But since you treated me with sincerity, I ought to do the same."

"Well, it's no problem," Zac shrugged. "If this Ulavo tries anything, he'll just become another casualty in the beast tide."

Zac wasn't surprised Gaun had some enmities – who didn't after a couple of decades of cultivation? He'd already expected as much after learning about his reason for moving to Karbron. And Gaun's suspicions were true – there was an Ulavo on the manifest of the very same ship as Gaun arrived on, though they traveled in different class compartments.

But seeing as it was some random outer elder of a small local Sect, Zac didn't care. The Tumbling Sky Sect was just another D-grade force semi-attached to the Void Gate like Salosar. Someone like that didn't have nearly the kind of pull needed to cause any waves in this place, and neither did he have the strength to pose any threat to him.

Zac followed Gaun to the teleportation array to personally witness Gaun use his token and flash away. After having confirmed that Gaun had really left, Zac returned to his courtyard where he spent the next few days listening for any news of Gaun somehow managing to betray him. However, Zac felt it unlikely.

It was just like Gaun said – moving to the Allbright Empire was a huge opportunity for him, and forcibly breaking the contract would definitely cost many times more than the reward he could get for selling the information that some unknown entity had bought his identity. Gaun returning to the Tumbling Sky Cluster was even less likely, if his enmity with Ulavo was to be believed.

So as expected, there weren't any issues when Zac set out five days later, joining a stream of wandering cultivators who were ferried over to Salosar Prime by locals in exchange for a nominal fee. Together with tens of thousands of others who intended to answer the Void Gate's call, Zac made his way toward the city-sized recruitment station.

Soon enough, they could see an enormous shimmering barrier in the distance, obscuring what was going on inside. Outside, a physical wall had been erected, which appeared to be guarded by real members of the Void Gate.

With the Void Gate being a monastic faction, their members were mainly divided into two groups – templars and devotees. The Void Templars was a highly trained army geared toward the same type of warrior classes most factions used, though they had their own heritage and subclasses. It was this faction who most commonly left the domains of the Void Gate, seeking experience through battle all over the sector.

The monks and nuns of the devotees were more diverse according to what Zac had gathered, but the details were quite sparse since they rarely left the monasteries. However, the devotees who traveled with the templar armies as spiritual support often had non-combat classes such as healers or supportive classes like array masters or augmenters.

The hundreds of entrances to the recruitment station were unsurprisingly manned by squads of templars, each one of them at the peak of E-grade with very impressive accumulations for a common soldier. In front of every entrance, a large scroll hovered in the air, and it was the first time Zac had seen such large-scale use of System-backed contracts.

Zac had recently gained access to a slew of new features thanks to his nobility being upgraded, but he knew he wouldn't be able to copy this type of method.

"Welcome. You need to sign a Confidentiality Clause to enter the building and learn the details of the mission," the young templar said as Zac approached, his face an impassive mask as he pointed at the contract hovering in the air.

His demeanor did not contain a shred of the cordiality Zac received upon first arriving at Salosar Seven, even if Zac currently exuded the aura of a Half-Step Hegemon. Then again, the young warrior had

probably said the same thing thousands of times the past months, so his bored demeanor wasn't a surprise.

But more importantly, this was the difference proper backing did – even if Zac hadn't entered through the entrances meant for unattached cultivators, he would still have easily been pegged as one by the gear he was currently wearing to impersonate Gaun.

"Alright," Zac nodded and infused a wisp of Cosmic Energy onto the contract after confirming the terms were the same as what was described in the missives.

Thankfully, the contract and its clauses were identical to the one he had gotten through a missive, making things easy. The contract simply said that Zac could not divulge anything he learned inside the recruitment station for the next five years. In return, he'd be able to get some nominal resources that wouldn't amount to much for anyone beyond early E-grade.

The remuneration was just there to make it a binding contract in the eyes of the System, where a quid-pro-quo was a demanded. The real payout would come from the actual beast tide rather than this particular contract. But while the reward wasn't very impressive, the counter-party to the contract was.

The Starfall Monarch.

The Starfall Monarch, or Keon Dakess as his real name was, was one of the most powerful templars of the Void Gate. Altogether, it was estimated the Void Gate had around ten Monarchs, with the Void Priestess being by far the far strongest one. But the others were nothing to scoff at, and the few who had made an appearance in the outer world had performed impressive feats that left a lasting mark.

And since Keon Dakess was the other party to the contract, it meant he was probably somewhere inside the enormous recruitment station – it was no wonder everyone was on their best behavior.

Unfortunately, there was not much else to be gleaned from the contract. It didn't have any other clauses except the non-disclosure agreement, and the only hints of what was going on were listed on large plaques between the entrances

Essentially, they were recruiting everyone from Middle E-grade and up, including supportive non-combat classes. The recruits would be able to choose missions based on the Void Gate's estimate of enemies, timeframe, and danger. However, the Void Gate took no responsibility in cases the challenge would prove harder than expected.

Their only accommodation was the promise that all units and all missions would consist of at least half their own people, which hopefully meant they weren't planning on using the outsiders as cannon fodder in some sort of human wave tactics against the tide.

Since nothing was out of place, Zac signed the contract and picked up the goodie bag with the resources provided. However, he immediately dropped it off at another table as he walked further inside, just like most of the warriors above High E-grade did. Zac didn't think the items had been tampered with, but he simply did not need the things inside.

A small sign said that all resources returned would be provided to young cultivators who studied at the Void Gate's public schools throughout the area. Zac had already heard of those places before. They were

simple schools that taught anyone willing to listen the basics of cultivation. They also had things like gathering arrays and gravity arrays to help set a foundation.

Not only that, but all students who visited would get provided food and a small stipend, which was a big attraction to the less fortunate. Therefore, these schools almost acted as orphanages for children who were down on their luck for one reason or another.

Part of the motive behind these establishments was simply to help the less fortunate, but there was a practical reason behind it as well. It was a cheap method to look for diamonds in the rough, and the Void Gate often recruited from these public schools. Secondly, it was to breed positive karma.

Karma was elusive and intangible, but it was an absolutely real concept in the Multiverse. And even if you didn't believe that the universe would reward you for good deeds, there was still the System to consider. With the Void Gate helping it with its prime directive – raising warriors – the System would help out in various ways in return.

It could be things like the talents getting more attention and better quests, Mystic Realms finding their way to their domains, to lessening the severity of the manmade tribulations the System liked to launch at established factions. Thus, these kinds of schools were quite widespread in the Multiverse. A small fraction of the students got recruited by a proper faction, while most learned the skills to get a job.

The final group became wandering cultivators, unwilling to give up on their path for a more mundane life. In a sense, they chose to go against fate just like a Defier. Many of these wandering cultivators might have the basic foundations to be defined as a cultivator by the System – but so what? Most cultivators didn't make it past the F-grade, especially not those without any connections or opportunities.

Seeing the table and the large piles of offerings left by the wandering cultivators, many of whom had attended the very schools they now donated to, Zac was filled with an indescribable emotion. The struggle and irreconciliation that the table represented resonated with Zac to his very core. However, he didn't get the chance to see if this feeling would lead to something more as someone stepped in between him and the donations.

“Is there something amiss?”