

The Fall 931

Chapter 931: Old Friend

The tranquility of the secluded courtyard was broken as Zac and Ogras stepped through the teleportation array, arriving in Zac's private compound. Looking down at his hands, Zac still barely felt what he'd been through was real. But the quest remained, proving that the visions, the Left Imperial Palace, and the existence of the Ultom Courts were all real.

Unfortunately, neither Perala Janodrok nor his stay at Alpha Vigil had provided any further clues to what it meant to be named a 'Flamebearer of Ultom.' And the talk of the direction of the era and opposing sides to a struggle only muddled the waters further, making it impossible for Zac to know what to expect.

"Still overexerting that brain of yours?" Ogras snorted from the side.

"You're not worried?" Zac asked curiously.

"Not really," Ogras shrugged. "I'll snatch the opportunities I can without getting myself killed. As for the bigshots coming here, they'll hopefully be too busy dealing with each other to bother with some random native. And if worse comes to worst, I'll just go ahead and hide in your shadows."

"Well, isn't that nice," Zac snorted. "What's your plan now?"

"I'm pretty much rested, so I'll go ahead and tour this empire of yours," Ogras grinned. "Just remember to contact your followers so I'm not mistaken for a shapeshifter, if you would."

It was an odd feature Zac learned of when traveling through the Mystic Realm with Ogras and Vai. Ogras' affiliation hadn't actually transformed to Atwood Empire when the others' did. It had stayed as Port Atwood until Zac told him about the situation. Zac had no idea the purpose of something like that, but perhaps it was to combat abuse.

"Alright, have fun. I think you'll find Ilvere's establishments in Azh'Rodum to your tastes," Zac said with a small smile.

The demon's eyes lit up, and he stepped back onto the Teleportation Array. "Good man. I knew I could trust him to fix this boring place."

A moment later, the demon was gone, leaving Zac alone with his thoughts. Before anything, Zac sent out a series of messages that he was back, that the mission was successful, and that he had even brought back Ogras. It took less than a minute before he sensed two auras bearing down on him, and he turned with a smile to see Vilari and Joanna appear in front of him almost simultaneously.

"You're back," Joanna smiled.

"I'm back," Zac nodded. "It's nice to see you two. You've both gotten stronger."

Joanna's aura had become more condensed, while Vilari's had become more ethereal. If Zac had to guess, Vilari had made some improvements to her soul. Perhaps she had practiced [Thousand Lights Avatar] to some degree of success? After all, he had given her the method after returning to Earth.

"I used a few of your Teleportation Tokens while you were gone to hone myself," Joanna nodded. "I've filled up my Limited Titles now, and I even managed to finally form my first Dao Branch."

"First?" Zac said with surprise.

"With the war coming up, I've decided to go for broke and work on a second one," Joanna said with a determined gleam in her eyes.

Zac understood what she meant. The war was a risk but also an opportunity. It was possibly Joanna's best shot to reforge her fate and have a go at something more than becoming an early to middle Hegemon. Of course, this would make her path far more difficult as well.

"Alright, let me know if you need anything from me," Zac nodded. "I found some good things during this trip; they might be useful."

"I think I just need to pit myself against more powerful enemies," Joanna said with a shake of her head. "Using treasures to bolster my path of war would probably do more harm than good."

"You're wounded. Badly," Vilari suddenly interjected with a frown. "Your energy is completely turbid."

She was absolutely correct. Three days of rest on Alpha Vigil was only enough time to do some more patchwork repairs on his body. He was still far from a fighting condition. In fact, he could barely circulate any Cosmic Energy in his human form even if his human pathways weren't that badly off.

The real problems were his Draugr side and his foundations. He had been forced to swap over to his human form soon after the battle ended, leaving his undead side in utter disrepair. Since then, he could not swap back because he had activated the array to hide his constitution. So his pathways for Fetters of Desolation were still mostly broken.

Pathways were easily repaired, but the real problem was the damage to his foundation, which affected both sides. Not only could he still feel the nasty cracks left from activating his two Remnant Attacks, but there was still a lot of invisible damage from being engulfed by his own ultimate blast.

"Things got a bit complicated," Zac grimaced. "I plan to seclude myself and focus on recovery. But I'll be back in business soon enough."

"Is there anything we can do?" Joanna asked. "Do you need some sort of materials? Or-"

"I'm fine," Zac smiled with a wave. "I just need to rest up in my cave."

"Alright, but don't hesitate to call if you need us for something, alright?" Joanna urged before glancing toward the shipyard with some anticipation. "So you did it? You really got the piece needed to upgrade that place?"

"I got it," Zac nodded. "I'll upgrade the shipyard soon. Some things have changed though, so I think we need to have a meeting with the core members."

"The demon friend of yours?" Vilari asked.

"That's part of it," Zac nodded. "But also things about the war. Please have people gather at Brazla's in a week."

“Before that, you might want to visit the Sky Gnome,” Joanna said. “I talked with him the other day, and he was quite troubled. You had left some instructions for him, to look out for certain coded messages? Apparently, he has been bombarded the last month, to the point he wonders if he should respond.”

“Oh?” Zac said with interest.

The only messages he had instructed Calrin to keep watch for were the special channels he had prepared to communicate with Catheya. After hearing Perala’s warning about the Undead Empire, he had already suspected as much, but it looked like the Draugr scion was back in Zecia.

Either that or she had sent a messenger she trusted. It was still impossible to tell whether it was related to his entry into the Undead Empire or Ultom. But judging by how incessantly they seemed to be looking for him, Zac guessed it was associated with the latter.

“I’ll deal with it tomorrow,” Zac nodded. “For now, I have to rest. Is there anything else that’s urgent before I leave?”

Joanna and Vilari glanced at each other before Vilari spoke up. “There are a lot of rumors floating about in Port Atwood. Rumors of undead skulking in the shadows, of clandestine experiments performed by you. We’ve done what we can to curtail it, but...”

“Well, it was inevitable after the Ensolus incursion was closed,” Zac grunted. “I guess it’s time to properly integrate the two sides of the Atwood Empire. Keep things stable for now. We’ll discuss the details during the meeting in a week.”

“Of course,” Vilari said.

A few moments later, Zac sat down on his prayer mat in the undead half of his cultivation cave, letting the soothing waves of death wash over his Draugr form. Everything looked mostly the same, except for the energy having become slightly denser and purer. Part of it probably came from Triv’s incremental upgrades to the environment, while part of it came from the still-ongoing maturity process of Earth.

Gradually, order was imposed on the chaotic mess that was his pathways as Zac redrew one section after another. Between his powerful soul and Peak Mastery [Spiritual Anchor], the process was both quick and almost effortless, allowing him to go over the events.

Just sitting in his hidden cave provided some balance and tranquility, and he gradually started to digest and go over what he’d learned over the past months. Unfortunately, so many pieces of information were missing to draw any clear conclusions. Everyone seemed afraid to say too much, lest it somehow affects fate.

But it felt like the conflict he had been dragged into had multiple layers, where the struggle for an Eternal Heritage was just the surface prize. What were the opposing sides Perala mentioned? Who fought for the direction of the era? The Boundless Path and Heaven’s path, perhaps? Did one side want to use the pillars to dismantle the System, while the others wanted to use them to improve it?

Was that why the pillars were gradually resurfacing? By design, according to Leyara. Was the Limitless Emperor giving the future generations a choice? Or was it related to some other far-reaching plan of his, one that may or may not have gone awry now that he was long gone? Was that what the Vigil was waiting for?

And how did it all relate to him and his bloodline?

There was no way to tell. Yet. Piece by piece, Zac would unearth the truth. And he even had a possible venue to get some more answers, provided his theories were correct – the Undead Empire.

Zac spent the next day getting his Draugr Pathways into a barely functioning order. A lot of detail was still missing, but the framework he'd set up would at least allow for his Miasma to naturally flow through his body. It felt like he could suddenly breathe again, but he only got to enjoy the feeling for a short minute before transforming back to his human form.

A cursory scan of his already accumulating pile of messages confirmed that Ogras' reintegration into society had gone well. The demon was living it up in Azh'Rodum, and the festivities would probably last a few days longer. Zac had received a note of thanks and an invitation from Ilvere to join them, but he, unfortunately, had a bit much to deal with.

Instead, he teleported over to the Mercantile District to visit Calrin. Zac found the Sky Gnome in his office, as usually accompanied by Vikram, Zac's business liaison.

"Ah, Lord Atwood? You're finally here!" the Sky Gnome smiled when Zac entered through the gilded doors. "When I saw the sun part the clouds this morning, I knew this would be a good day."

"Alright," Zac said with a roll of his eyes. "Are you looking for handouts again?"

"Absolutely not," Calrin said with a puffed-out chest. "Things are looking up since your last dona- ah, consignment. Some of the bulk materials you had in your Spatial Rings are extremely scarce in the Zecia Sector. We could deal in tons while others dealt in kilos! Thanks to that, I managed to sign a few lucrative agreements."

"You didn't sell off anything we needed, right?" Zac asked with a frown.

"Most of your materials are only used in specific types of recipes and crafting techniques out of our reach," Vikram explained. "For example, you had over five hundred metric tons of a type of Cinnabar Bark which is a core material for a certain type of ink popular among inscriptionists. That stockpile alone is worth almost two million D-grade Nexus Coins now that demand for talismans has shot through the roof, though it will take some time to unload it all."

Zac's eyes widened in shock, and he remembered how he had almost considered pawning off all that bark in exchange for 100 Contribution Points in the Orom World Merit Store. From what he'd gathered, it wasn't anything special, but Zac had failed to take into account that a lot of useful materials were missing in a frontier sector like Zecia.

"Better yet, it allowed us to sign a trade agreement with the Kalton Clan, a variety wholesaler and direct subordinate of Mount Luminous, one of the nine peak ventures in Zecia. With the suppression of the other two bastards, the Kalton Clan would never dare do so without the go-ahead from Mount Luminous."

"Mount Luminous?" Zac hesitated, feeling it was vaguely familiar. "Buddhists?"

“Not at all,” Calrin smiled. “It’s a joint venture between the Albright Clan and a few other major players in the Albright Empire. We actually got an offer with another one of the nine peak mercantile factions, but we figured you already had some connections to the Albright Empire...”

“That’s perfect,” Zac nodded, not surprised at all the Albright Empire was willing to clash with the other traders for these strategic resources. “Do they know I’m connected to the Thayer Consortia?”

“Unless they’re stupid,” Calrin nodded. “The Tsarun somehow managed to find out even if you killed that brat in the Base Town, and the spies of the other factions should have figured it out by now as well. In fact, the Kalton Clan has sent more than one inquiry, just barely stopping short of actually asking about your situation outright.

“Hm,” Zac slowly nodded.

“If Lord Atwood is interested in my opinion, then I would say that your connection to us being made public is a good thing,” Calrin added.

“It is? Like for marketing?” Zac asked curiously.

“Well, that too,” Calrin said. “But with our recent moves, the mystery surrounding you has grown. With our access to rare materials, seemingly infinite resources, and your sister’s apparent ability to break any low-grade array, some new rumors have started flourishing. That you are more connected than you let on before. That you possibly have already found a benefactor outside Zecia.”

Zac couldn’t help but laugh at that. Honestly, the rumors felt more believable than the truth, that he picked up most of these things from the ground during a battle between Divine Monarchs and an Autarch. Perhaps the Monarchs of Zecia believed some bigshot from a faction like the Radiant Temple had taken him as a Disciple, which wouldn’t be too surprising considering his feats in the Tower of Eternity.

“We kept things vague for now, only hinting but never confirming,” Calrin added.

“That’s good; give me some time to think things over,” Zac said. “So, what’s the total value of the items I brought?”

“In raw materials alone, you’ve reached a net worth of almost 40 C-grade Nexus Coins,” Vikram said.

“However, we have only sold off a tenth for now, because the prices are still rising. We didn’t want to empty our stores too quickly and only sold what we had to in order to secure the agreements.”

A smile spread across Zac’s face as the good news just kept getting better. His own estimate had been at only half that, and that was for the whole hoard. The only thing raining on his parade was Iz’s offhanded comments that crushed his image of a young scion with deep pockets.

“It is harder to estimate the value of the unique treasures, but I’d say the total value is between 4 and 6 C-grade Nexus Coins,” the Sky Gnome added. “But it’s a moot point since we’re keeping those in-house.”

“Anything I can use?” Zac asked.

“Perhaps,” Calrin said as he handed over a list. “Some of these items have no recorded name in Zecia, but through a series of tests, we have pinpointed their use. With a good chunk of the items either having

Life- or Death-attunement, there should be some that can help expedite your cultivation. The lesser ones might be good carrots to keep your new subjects motivated.”

Zac grinned as he took the ledger. He’d been looking forward to this for so long. Years spent in the Orom World, with a treasure trove at his fingertips. Certainly, that was partly his own fault, with his reluctance to take out too many items from his Spatial Rings out of fear they’d be marked by the Orom somehow.

A cursory scan helped him find more than ten items that would help him shore up his foundations before breaking through. They ranged from Life-attuned materials that would speed up the cultivation of his [Void Vajra Sublimation], to rare Dao Treasures and even items that could help search for Hidden Nodes.

Zac couldn’t be sure, but he somehow felt he had tapped out his nodes that originated on his human side. The three nodes of the Void Emperor Bloodline formed a coherent system, and he doubted his original form was meant to have anything else. If he understood the plans of the Kayar-Elu properly, his human side was intended to be a blank slate that would be bolstered through the [Quantum Gate].

Things no longer followed the original script with him becoming a Draugr instead of whatever the Technocrats planned, but the plan was still relevant. So far, he had managed to excavate [Adamance of Eoz], but Zac doubted that was the limits of his Draugr Heritage after seeing how his ancestor was one of the three strongest original Draugr.

Seeing all the amazing items, Zac just wanted to seclude himself and start working on his cultivation, but that wasn’t why he had come here today.

“Great work with all this. You can deal with the rest according to your plan. Only one thing; the upcoming war will start earlier than most expect, so you might need to adjust for this,” Zac said.

“Oh?” Calrin said with a frown.

“Four years,” Zac sighed. “And it will be even bloodier than we feared. Powerful outsider factions are joining in. So, if you see anything up for grabs that can improve our strength and survivability, get it.”

“Four years? Outsiders?” Calrin muttered as he shared a look with Vikram.

“We need to make some adjustments,” the liaison said.

“So we do,” Calrin agreed.

“Let me know if you need anything from me,” Zac said. “On another note, I heard there had been activity through the line of communication I left you?”

“Yes,” Calrin nodded. “If you want my opinion, they are desperate judging by the frequency.”

“Desperate? Have you responded?” Zac asked.

“Not yet,” Calrin said. “The trade is still open.”

“Alright,” Zac slowly said before he took out a notepad and scribbled some instructions. “Here, complete the trade according to this.”

The Sky Gnome nodded, and a screen opened up in front of him. Half a minute later, a box appeared in his hand. Zac opened it up, and a communication crystal waited inside. He scanned the contents, and a wry smile spread across his face.

It looked like he would get to meet an old friend sooner than expected.