

The Fall 933

Chapter 933: Change of Plans

Zac opened his eyes as his alarm buzzed, and he took a deep breath from the dense lifegiving mist. Six days had passed since he secluded himself, most of which had been spent in the depths of death, where he repaired his broken pathways. He had also bathed in refreshing concoctions designed to heal stubborn wounds daily.

They were mixed up by Triv, using all kinds of death-attuned materials Zac had picked up over the years. Even Hegemons would probably be shocked at the expenditure, especially if they learned their only purpose was to double the speed his foundations recovered.

Still, Zac felt it a worthy investment. Four years was not little, but it also wasn't a lot. He had a lot to do, but his current state prevented him from doing any real form of cultivation. Perhaps he could have cultivated his soul with a different method, but [Nine Reincarnations Manual] empowered his soul through destructive collisions – the opposite of what he needed right now.

Zac was most eager about starting up his body tempering, but doing so while there still were a bunch of hidden wounds was bound to leave imperfections. So he could only take it easy and avoid activities that strained the body or mind. So instead, Zac had spent most of his time studying the Book of Duality while bolstering the broken framework of [Thousand Lights Avatar] after repairing his pathways.

He still hadn't dared absorb any corrupted lake water, but Zac had at least confirmed it retained its magical effects even after being taken from its source. He didn't think he needed to be completely recovered to start using the water to speed up his progression, but it still felt a bit premature.

Altogether, Zac felt a lot better after this first week, but he would have to pause his recovery. The meeting was starting in just minutes, so it was time to go.

"My Lord!" a ghostly voice echoed through the chambers as Triv emerged through the ground. "Your aura seems to have stabilized even further."

"All thanks to your help," Zac smiled. "Amazing job as always."

"I am the one who should be thanking young master," Triv said with a bow, their spectral form humming with excitement. "I have been making great progress since young master became a Baron and your Empire was officially sanctioned by the Heavens. Not only that, but the Eidolon manuals young master provided have completely reforged my body. With this sublime environment, I even have a decent chance of forming a Dao Branch."

"Let me know if you need any materials to keep progressing," Zac nodded. "Our faction lacks many things, but Death-attuned cultivation resources are not one of them. Are you joining the meeting?"

"I am afraid this old ghost is of no help to young master's plans," Triv sighed. "I am old and inflexible. Lady Vilari is much better suited to advise on the fusion of your two settlements. With your permission, I would like to continue my work in Elysium instead."

"That's fine," Zac nodded as he started walking toward the teleportation array.

Triv, or Old Man Ghost as the undead children called him on the other continent, had worked tirelessly for years to improve this nascent society's lives. Ultimately, the undead races were supernatural existences, and some things didn't come naturally to them. There was a lot to learn, whether it was the conversion arrays or properly dealing with feral children who hadn't gained their sapience yet.

Triv had done his best to impart what he could without going against the commandments of the Undead Empire. As such, he had gained the reputation of an esteemed scholar among the undead. If not for Zac's inherent connection to his undead 'descendants', Triv would probably have enjoyed a higher status on Earth's second continent.

"Will young master need anything else?" Triv asked.

"No, I'll stay in my human form for a week or so," Zac said after some thought. "It feels like my body is recovering better when I alternate races for some reason."

"Your body is reaching satiety from the environment, I would presume, and the effect on your wounds are lessened after a while," Triv nodded. "I will be back in a week and prepare another round of baths."

"Alright, thank you for the help," Zac nodded, and the two disappeared in the teleporter a moment later, one heading for Elysium and the other for the Towers of Myriad Dao.

It wasn't strictly needed to have the meeting in Brazla's chambers, but it had become the standard for important meetings by now. And you never knew, Brazla sometimes let valuable pieces of information slip by accident.

By the time he arrived, Zac could already hear familiar voices through the opened gates. As he stepped inside, he saw Ilvere talking with Vilari and Rhuger while Joanna gazed upon the Titan inheritance with Pika standing next to her. Alyn and Calrin discussed something together, and Julia stood by herself, lost in thought.

It was a while since Zac saw Julia Lombard, the former World Government official. However, from what he'd read in the reports, she had been a key asset since he left for the Twilight Harbor. She had singlehandedly quashed over a dozen insurrections while most of the elites were stuck on Ensolus. Not only that, but she was the author of the Atwood Codex, the set of laws that fused Old Earth's justice system with the realities of the Multiverse.

Unfortunately, her hard work had left her cultivation lacking, and from what Zac understood, she was planning on making a similar shift like Vai once had. In contrast, Abby wasn't present, nor were any of the leaders from the Mavai or Raun. Some topics that would get discussed today were too sensitive, and they couldn't be allowed to spread from this room. The administrators and new citizens would be brought in for future meetings instead.

Ogras stood alone to the side, looking at his own statue, or rather that of his backhanded master.

"You're looking rosy," Zac smiled as he walked over to the demon.

"At least one of us needs to sire some descendants to keep watch of this place," Ogras grinned. "Such is the burden of responsibility."

“Thank you for your service,” Zac said with a roll of his eyes before nodding at the statue depicting the Umbra. “Have you decided what to do?”

Ogras was already Peak E-grade, and his foundations were rock solid after having spent a decade in an environment that was probably unsurpassed in Zecia. Like Zac, he was already preparing to break through to the next realm. In other words, he had to enter the inheritance sooner rather than later if he wanted to keep it going.

The problem was that the Umbra was just as mercurial as Yrial but with an addition of sinister curiosity. The Umbra had forcibly sown a Ka’Zur Planeswalker into Ogras’s very soul during the first round of the inheritance. Things would have ended in disaster if not for a series of lucky coincidences. Who knew what the Umbra would do if Ogras dared return?

“I think I have to, even if I can wait a bit” Ogras grimaced. “I had the little blue thief look for suitable targets to progress my constitution. There are not many potential targets that look promising compared to the creatures this guy has sealed away in the inheritance. The few I can get my hands on before evolving would be pretty unimpressive, even with your help. I need stronger bloodlines than that to build a proper foundation.”

“Well, I think there are limits to how much damage these remnant souls can do,” Zac said. “Are you ready for the meeting?”

“Is it true what you said before?” Ogras said. “It’s really here, on your other planet?”

Zac didn’t answer, but the smile on his face spoke volumes.

“Just disgusting,” Ogras spat. “I should have guessed as much when you didn’t get a signal before me or your flametouched girlfriend. Whatever, let’s get this over with.”

The others had already sat down around the table upon seeing Zac arrive. This time, Brazla didn’t bother joining them in person and had instead opted to loom a dozen meters above them atop a golden cloud. That was fine by Zac since most topics didn’t require the Tool Spirit’s input.

“Nothing from Emily?” Zac frowned when he saw her chair standing empty.

“We’ve received no response from the Big Axe Coliseum so far,” Joanna said with a shake of her head.

“I’ll check it out later,” Zac sighed as he glanced at the second empty chair.

Sap Trang had also declined the invitation, but he wasn’t off-world. Instead, he had chosen to remain at sea, guarding the borders with his pet Kraken. Zac had been meaning to track him down and have a chat, but there were just too many things to do at the moment.

“Alright, everyone here is busy training and preparing for the upcoming war, so I won’t drag this out any longer than it needs to be. By now, you should all have read the missive I sent out three days ago. The short of it is that the war will officially commence in four years, much earlier than we expected. How are we looking?”

“As usual, we have mountains of resources and unusually powerful elites. But we still lack bodies to fill the ranks,” Ilvere sighed. “We have accelerated our training programs, but four years is simply too little

time for any drastic improvements without something like an incursion or Mystic Realm to whip people into shape.”

“Too many have slowed down their progress after Earth stabilized,” Joanna added. “It might sound odd, but we might have made our cities too safe with powerful arrays and fortifications. Few beast tides can threaten our people, so people aren’t feeling the sense of urgency and pressure from before.”

“I think it’s time we talk conscription,” Ilvere said.

Zac sighed as he looked at the documents on the table. He had already read most of them while recuperating, and they painted a somber picture. As things stood, the Atwood Empire would be able to field less than half a percent of their population for the upcoming war, including support staff. There was still the Zhix Hives, but their numbers were far too small.

The System was originally a tool of war meant to extract as much military might out of the populace as possible. They didn’t know exactly how many warriors the Atwood Empire would have to supply to meet the criteria. Still, they estimated they needed to supply at least 2-3% even if the System lowered their quota for being a newly integrated world.

Another problem was that most of their numbers were made up of the Mavai Hordes and the Raun Spectrals. Just over one million out of four were actually Earthlings, even though there were more humans than the other races combined. Such an army composition wouldn’t work. The newly integrated races were still cautious about whether they would be used as cannon fodder, which might lead to all kinds of problems during the war.

“Do it,” Zac eventually nodded. “Our goal should be 25 million E-grade warriors before the war starts. The Zhix, Mavai, and Raun are already providing a high quota, but see if we can nurture even more by throwing money at the problem. Our main target should be humans, though. Too many have taken their place in the Multiverse for granted. The same goes for the Ishiate. Even if the pacifist faction can’t provide many warriors, they’ll have to supply healers and other support staff.”

“How much are you willing to spend on their training?” Alyn asked. “There are only so many E-grade warriors out there. Most of them we’ll have to raise from scratch. To nurture ten E-grade warriors, we would have to enlist at least 100 recruits, even if we have stringent selections for potential. But that number can be lowered if we’re willing to force some breakthroughs.”

“I will have Calrin transfer 2.5 C-grade Nexus Coins to the Atwood Empire Treasury,” Zac said, drawing a small gasp from Pika, and Ilvere’s eyes widened in shock. Calrin looked queasy, but he reluctantly nodded in agreement. “This will be our war coffer. Hopefully, it will last us until the end of this mess.

“The Thayer Consortia has also managed to secure a deal with a top mercantile house. We will have no problem getting our hands on the basic herbs and materials needed to expand our army.”

“With so many resources, we should have no problem reaching the target, but what about the recruits themselves? There will be a lot of resistance.” Ilvere said. “You earthling humans have peace and individualism ingrained in their bones.”

“Just beat it out of them,” Ogras shrugged, and Zac nodded in agreement.

It was tough, but so was the reality they lived in. He couldn't shield the people of Earth forever. He had seen what happened to planets that didn't live up to the System's expectations, and he alone wasn't enough to protect them from such a fate. Besides, he had already done more than enough for this planet, including opening up the contribution exchange for everyone. It was time for Earth to give back.

"There will be discontent, especially if you plan on integrating the unliving simultaneously," Julia said. "Remember, the Undead Empire killed almost two billion people before they were finally routed. Even if the Blackwoods here are of a different origin, it won't matter to the general public."

"There is not much we can do about that," Zac sighed. "The rumors are already running rampant, and I feel I am doing my undead citizens a disservice by hiding them away like they are a secret weapon. We'll just have to rip off the bandaid and deal with the fallout."

"But how would I do that if most of you are deep in the Million Gates Territory by then?" Julia asked. "I am not able to quash uprisings with my aura. There will be a lot of bloodshed."

"We will borrow the strength of the Zhix, and I am planning to summon some of the experienced warriors of both the Mavai and Raun to teach and maintain order," Zac said before taking a deep breath. "However, there is another change of plans regarding this. I will, unfortunately, not be joining the rest of you. I will remain on Earth for at least two years, only leaving for short shopping trips at most."

"What?" Joanna blurted before looking at Zac with worry. "Is it your wounds?"

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head. "I am getting better by the day. However, I had a few lucky encounters while finishing my quest to upgrade the shipyard. Therefore, I have decided to push for Hegemony before the war starts. I need to seclude myself and focus on my cultivation to accomplish that. I cannot run about in space."

"So we're not going?" Vilari hesitated.

"A squad will still set out as we planned, but it will be captained by Ogras instead," Zac said.

A few looked at Ogras with surprise, while the demon took the news in stride. Of course, Ogras already knew all this after a talk he and Zac had yesterday. At first, the demon had been hesitant to enter the Million Gates Territory without his 'lucky magnet,' but greed soon overcame fear as the demon agreed to set out in search of his second piece for the inheritance.

"I will ferry you all over in a few months when we have our ships ready, but the details of your excursion will be up to you," Zac said. "You can see this as a test. I cannot always be around, and I fear you all won't reach your full potential if I loom over you. Fate has to be seized with one's own hands."

The meeting lasted another five hours, and detailed plans were drawn up. The militarization of Earth was a huge undertaking on its own. Add the integration of the undead, and you had an administrative and managerial nightmare on your hands. Luckily, a lot of plans for both ventures had already been drawn up, and most of the time was simply spent fusing the two.

The construction of training camps across the whole planet would begin immediately, while the integration of the undead would start after Zac had met with Catheya. He was hoping to get some assurances from the Undead Empire first, that they would look the other way like they did with the Twilight Harbor.

They also discussed the Creator vessels, and there was a general agreement on choosing the Yphelion as the first flagship of the Atwood Empire. However, Zac was surprised to hear that both Joanna and Vilari didn't want to use his vessel for their upcoming visit to the Million Gates Territory. Instead, they insisted on using one of the simpler mass-produced models.

Ogras was unsurprisingly reluctant, but he eventually acceded while muttering something about 'netherblasted rivers.'

"We'll have more meetings to iron out all the details before you all set out, but there is one thing I need to bring up before you leave. However, this topic has extreme ramifications, so I will give you all a choice," Zac finally said as he solemnly looked around the table. "If you are willing to risk everything for your cultivation path, to face certain death for a chance of having your fate reforged, stay behind. If not, leave and focus on the tasks at hand."