

The Fall 939

Chapter 939: Starflash

Remembering he could just pawn off the issue of Ultom on Ogras, it felt like a weight had been lifted off of Zac's shoulders.

"I'll think on this a bit longer before sending an answer," Zac said. "Is there anything else?"

"Nothing of great import," Triv answered. "The large movements of troops related to young Lord's new trial has made the rumors of our existence to intensify somewhat, though."

"I guess that's to be expected," Zac shrugged, neither too surprised nor worried.

Every soldier who had entered Ensolus had been under strict control to suppress any rumors of the Einherjar and Elysium. Still, no secret shared by so many could stay hidden forever. The chatter was growing in intensity by the day, to the point Zac had told his administrators not to bother him with the inquiries from the subsidiary factions across Pangea anymore.

But it was about to end, and soon.

Keeping his people separated like this, while hiding the true natures of Ensolus and Elysium, was a logistical nightmare that hampered their preparations for the upcoming war. Besides, Zac had already decided to merge his two societies while visiting Twilight Harbor, and nothing had changed since then. Now, the plans to properly integrate the undead citizens into the Atwood Empire were mostly complete.

A huge walled district meant for the undead was already being built in Port Atwood. The walls weren't there to keep the citizens apart but to contain the Miasma they'd draw from the ground. Even the official structures like the government building would be fitted with miasma-infused wings to allow the undead to work together with the living.

It was a bit of a hassle to create pockets of death everywhere, and it wasn't really a true fusion of life and death. However, Zac still didn't feel confident in trying to create an atmosphere like the one that covered Ensolus.

As a Life-Death Edgewalker, he understood all too well how difficult it was to fuse the two elements, and his instincts told him that the odd energy of Ensolus didn't come without a cost. They just didn't understand what it was yet. Besides, it wasn't like Zac could reform the fundamental nature of the energy covering Earth even if he wanted to.

The Atwood Academy had tried replicating the energy of the Ensolus Continent for years now, but they were no closer today than when they started. Not even a tremendous cash infusion from Zac had made any difference during the time when he visited the Void Gate. For now, pockets of death on Pangea and pockets of life in the cities of Elysium would have to do.

"Alright, just maintain the course and continue with the preparations," Zac eventually said. "We'll wait until Vilari and the others are back before announcing things. Vilari first advocated for this change, and much of the planning has been overseen by her personally. She should be here for the announcement."

"Of course. Do not worry; we will take care of everything," Triv nodded. "Is there anything else I can do for young master?"

"No, that's it," Zac said, his thoughts still mostly on the matter of the Empire elites.

"Then I will take my leave," the butler said with a bow as they sank through the floor.

Zac didn't plan on staying around either. He instead sent out a series of instructions and inquiries as he walked over to the Teleportation Array, and he was soon swallowed by a flash of light. A few minutes later, Zac enjoyed a cup of tea in his private compound as the shadows congealed into a person.

"Something important must have happened for you to finally emerge from your cave," Ogras grinned as he sat down opposite Zac. "Your bad habits have only gotten worse while I was away. You're becoming more and more of an old hermit. You're only supposed to reach that state after sowing your oats and breaking some hearts, you know?"

"I'm pretty happy with my current situation," Zac smiled as he threw over the communication crystal he got from Catheya. "I wanted your opinion on this."

"I'm guessing these two are bigshots?" Ogras eventually asked after listening to the recording.

"Most likely from the strongest clans of the Draugr and Izh'Rak Reavers," Zac nodded. "I can't be sure, but I bet they're of our generation. The Undead Empire should have figured out that much, at least."

"If little princelings have arrived, then so have dangerous Daoguards, like that golem of your fiery girlfriend. You absolutely can't meet with them," Ogras said without hesitation. "At least not now."

"I'm thinking the Undead Empire might be the most promising backer, though. More and more factions will come, most of which we have no connection to," Zac said. "I already have an in with the Empire and have other things to barter with instead of just the inheritance."

"Do you really think they'd care about your weird constitution in the face of the Left Imperial Palace of the Limitless Empire?" Ogras countered. "They might immediately strike you down to secure a spot."

"We still don't know if it's even possible for the seals to change hands," Zac said.

"Certainly, but I believe there is a decent chance for it to work, even if there might be some restrictions," Ogras said. "Your quest told you to gather a full cycle of followers, multiple cycles even. We also know that the Ruthless Heavens have somehow connected this whole inheritance with the upcoming war."

"I think we both know the Ruthless Heavens well enough by now. When has it ever favored peaceful recruitment over slaughter? In fact, I believe getting a piece of a seal is just the first checkpoint to be deemed worthy of the inheritance. Keeping your life and defending your slot after the war starts – that'll be the real challenge."

"You've thought this through thoroughly," Zac smiled.

"I never slack off when it comes to my survival," Ogras winked as a bottle appeared in his hand.

"So what do you think I should do?"

"Keep dealing with your friend instead; use her as a shield to keep the wolves at bay. She shouldn't mind since it would elevate her position. If possible, don't even meet Miss Sharva'Zi in person. Only when

we've entered the inheritance zone can you link up with the undead representatives. They will be forced to play nice with you by that point because of the outside pressure."

"The other trial takers," Zac nodded.

"Exactly," Ogras said. "Their Daoguards won't protect them, and the Undead Empire is an isolated faction in the Multiverse. They won't be able to afford to piss off any potential ally. Certainly, they will eventually turn on you even if things work out. Any old faction will always see to their own interests first. But by that point, you should have already figured out an exit strategy."

"Still, it's easier said than done to string along the Undead Empire for four full years," Zac said.

"So why not trade some intelligence for benefits? You should know a few things about the trial that the unliving still don't. That will both help you in the short run and plant a seed of goodwill. Meeting you in person shouldn't be as important as accomplishing their goal, unless their goal is to snatch your opportunity," Ogras said. "Better stay away from the limelight and have the outsiders fight among themselves for slots."

"You know pretty much everything I do," Zac said. "What should we trade, and what should we keep to ourselves?"

"Everything? I doubt it," Ogras said with his trademark suspicious look. "Anyway, most of the things we've gathered about the palaces should be fair game. The powerful factions will figure out the details sooner or later, so we might get some benefits while our knowledge is worth something. But I don't think you should divulge your new quest under any circumstances. We need to look to our own before feeding our allies."

"If anything, we want the others to consider this an individual opportunity. Even better if we could get these two princelings to compete with and hamper each other. We don't have enough resources or talents to send out more than one or two vessels searching for seals. But I wouldn't be surprised if the Undead Empire were willing to send billions of prospects into the Million Gates Territory to grasp hold of an Eternal Heritage."

"Isn't that what we want, though?"

"Honestly? I doubt it would help us all that much," Ogras said. "The Ruthless Heavens is geared for war, and it's even hiding the Space Gate to ensure it takes place. Unleashing the Undead Empire would get some Kan'Tanu scouts killed, but I bet even more local warriors would get caught in the crossfire and resurrected. After all, the alliance headed by the Allbright Empire is still scouring the place in hopes of somehow stopping the invasion. And having the area crawling with Undead deathsworn would definitely make my job of filling your cycle harder."

"We'll keep the matter of my quest secret," Zac nodded. "But I doubt I'm the only one who will receive it."

"As long as we get a headstart to form a cycle of your own. In fact, the moment your cycle is full, you can share the 'new discovery,'" Ogras smiled. "That way, we'll have more helpers inside the Left Imperial Palace."

"This is all based on one of those two getting a Flamebearer seal, though," Zac said.

“Well, the event hasn’t even started in earnest, and we know of two candidates already. With each one of you needing at least one cycle of subordinates, I wouldn’t be surprised if the trial will involve over a thousand people,” Ogras said. “And the Undead Empire has most likely sent the best of the best, people at the level of Miss Tayn. If they can’t get a slot in a place like Zecia, they might as well go become dirt farmers.”

“It’s good to have you back,” Zac smiled. “All this scheming is exhausting me.”

“As long as you know,” Ogras said with a haughty expression. “Just don’t go do anything crazy while I’m off getting the second piece of my seal.”

“It’s not like I am looking for craziness; it just tends to find me,” Zac sighed.

“Now, isn’t that the truth,” Ogras snorted before his eyes widened with anticipation. “How about the ships? Are they done yet?”

“Just got a confirmation before you arrived,” Zac smiled. “Your ship will be done in an hour or so.”

Three weeks had passed since Zac handed in his quest for the Creator Shipyard, and the Golems had been hard at work completing both the ships required for Ogras’ mission to the Million Gates Territory and a few different models meant to be showcased and sold. Now, the first Cosmic Vessel of the Iliex Shipyard was about to roll out, and the rest would be finished within the week.

“It’s done? What are you waiting for? Let’s go,” Ogras said with excitement written all over his face. “Let’s take the baby for a spin.”

“Sure, but let’s iron out the details on how to deal with the Undead Empire first,” Zac laughed.

Ogras grunted with annoyance, but he still sat back down. And so, the two spent the better part of the hour workshopping various ways to hold the upcoming meeting safely. It had already been a risky endeavor with just Catheya and her Master on the other side since they didn’t know the fallout from Zac’s actions in Twilight Harbor.

But now, the stakes were so much higher, and it involved powerful factions to which Zac had no relation. Without having a good solution to this predicament, Zac was afraid to set foot even on the same planet as the undead delegates.

They eventually came up with a partial solution that had a decent chance of working, though it would depend on Calrin’s abilities to procure some specific tools. By that point, over 50 minutes had passed, and the two were far too preoccupied with the thought of a piping fresh Cosmic Vessel just waiting for them to continue discussing the Undead Empire.

“Alright, let’s just go,” Zac snorted when he saw Ogras glance in the direction of the teleportation array for the 20th time in the last couple of minutes.

Ogras would probably have left already if not for the fact that only Zac had access to the shipyard’s island. Upon hearing it was time to go, Zac only heard the demon’s laugh as they were both swallowed by the shadows. The next moment he stood in front of the Teleportation Array, with Ogras looking at him like a puppy dog waiting to be let outside.

The array flashed to life, and the two appeared in a building that looked just like the reception of the old shipyard.

“Lord Atwood, welcome,” Rahm said with a small bow before nodding at Ogras. “Mr. Azh’Rezak.”

“Good to see you, Rahm,” Zac nodded as he looked around. “I expected you to have changed things up a bit.

“Perhaps if you look out the window,” Rahm said.

Zac and Ogras shared a glance before walking over to the window.

“That’s more like it,” Zac said with a smile.

This was the first time Zac had visited since the Creators’ relocation, and he had to admit they really didn’t half-ass things. The island had been completely leveled and replaced by a thick metal plane that covered its whole surface. The small mountain and its surrounding forest – all gone.

Still, it almost looked like a mechanical mountain had taken its place. It towered nearly two thousand meters into the air and was covered in the squarish scripts of the Iliex. A big exhaust at the top released plumes of smoke, but some sort of array cleansed the exhaust before they left the island’s sphere of influence.

It had to be the foundry where they forged the alloys for the Cosmic Vessels. Zac looked at it with [Cosmic Gaze] to make sure, but the shockingly condensed energies within almost blinded him, forcing him to quickly look away.

“Safety goggles are recommended to look at the forging process,” Rahm kindly reminded from the side.

“Thank you,” Zac said with a crooked smile before turning back to the view.

The foundry was surrounded by ten huge factories, each significantly larger than the old warehouse back on his shore. Everything was connected by thick pipes and floating conveyor belts, and Zac could see how blocks of metals and sometimes finished plates were transported from the foundry into the factories.

There were also a few smaller buildings whose protective scripts were actually denser than the factories themselves. Zac guessed they were the workshops where the master artisans worked on the more delicate parts of the vessels, such as the Ship Cores and Spatial Arrays. Finally, there were five warehouses right next to the reception, and Zac felt his heartbeat speed up when he vaguely saw a huge metallic shape in one of them.

Their first Cosmic Vessel.

“Brat, it’s not often you bring guests,” a rumbling voice echoed through the room as Karunthel appeared.

“Well, you guys are too good at your jobs. Most factions would go mad if they learned the Iliex had a subsidiary in Zecia,” Zac smiled. “Just quelling any rumors keeps me up at night. How can I bring guests?”

“Haha, I’ll take that as a compliment,” the spidergolem guffawed before turning to Ogras. “Hey, little demonling, so you’re the one who’s getting the first Starflash?”

“That’s me,” Ogras grinned.

The upgrade being a System Reward, there were several rules in play. Zac hadn’t gotten access to the millions of designs in the Creators’ repository, but rather nine distinctive designs picked by the System rather than Karunthel. None of them were as fancy as the three options Zac had to choose from when picking his personal vessel, but that was to be expected.

You could still tell the System hadn’t picked these ships at random. They all had great synergy and were designed to be parts of a Stellar Navy, with a mix of destroyers, personnel carriers, logistical vessels, and even a command ship that could link up with and even control the other vessels in the fleet.

There were none of those gargantuan motherships, though, simply because there was no point in having an Early D-grade mothership. Besides, Zac wasn’t sure he’d be able to afford one after seeing the prices on the smaller vessels.

One of these handpicked designs was the ‘IL-28 Starflash’, a destroyer-class ship focused on speed. It was a bulky beast that could comfortably house a standing army of around 2,500 elites, or transport five times that number for shorter stints. It was one of the mid-sized options, yet it cost a whopping 18,000 D-grade Nexus Coins.

Zac didn’t even want to imagine what a Mothership measured in kilometers rather than meters would cost. The IL-28 Starflash had a wide range of use due to its high average performance and agility. For example, it could carry elite squads into hostile territory on critical missions or act as a roving sentry post.

Its scanning capabilities weren’t nearly as advanced as Zac’s Yphelion, but there was not much to do about that. The scout vessel for sale, the IL-32 Farsight, simply didn’t have the defensive capabilities to roam the Million Gates Territory without a support system for very long. As such, the Farsight would warn them of high-grade cultivators nearby, but they would still be at the mercy of the whimsical laws of physics inside the chaotic zone.

Seeing as there were no skilled technicians in the Atwood Empire, they would have to pick vessels that could take a beating and survive long enough to limp back home in case disaster struck.

“Alright,” Karunthel laughed. “I guess it’s time for this civilization to join the spacefaring nations. What did you call it? The final frontier?”

“The final frontier,” Zac said with a smile.