

## The Fall 951

### Chapter 951: Call to Arms

Apart from the difficulties of cinching the deal, Zac knew his little kingdom was far from reaching the status of the Twilight Harbor. Even if he now had the fundamental qualifications, he lacked the strength to protect something too valuable, even with the Undead Empire on his side. You simply couldn't build a solid faction on a foundation of borrowed strength.

So for the first couple of millennia, it would just be a local hub where merchants within Zecia could make some money by getting their hands on rare materials. But it did have the potential to take on an even greater role, where resources would stream into the Atwood Empire even from neighboring Sectors.

This would be a huge boon for him even if he left Zecia in the future, all thanks to the Merit Exchange. He would be able to access parts of his treasury and the Atwood Empire's coffers even when halfway across the Multiverse, as long as he found one of the Furem Harq Golem's subsidiaries. There were even services where he could transfer funds through relay between different banks.

Of course, his long-term plan was only possible thanks to one simple fact; the Undead Empire would stop its expansion in Zecia. They would defend their domains and do the bare minimum expansion through Incursions that the commandments required, but they wouldn't send out crusades. Instead, the representatives had agreed to mobilize the Kavriel Province for the upcoming war against the Kan'Tanu.

Initially, they hadn't planned on full mobilization. After all, they didn't care which living factions were in control of Zecia. They were just different Dreamers, targets for conquest in either case. But now, they had agreed to immediately send armies to join the coalition forces while fully activating their reserves for the upcoming conflict.

In reality, this couldn't be considered the Monarchs accommodating Zac's wishes. It was all about Ultom and the fact the System had somehow mixed the war with the trial. The more people the Kavriel Province sent to the battlefields, the higher their chances were of picking up tickets to the Left Imperial Palace.

The third requirement Zac had put forth was that they would provide materials, untouched corpses, and various resources to help quickly bolster his undead population and their foundations. This included cultivation manuals, awakening arrays, and entire heritages that suited both the Raun Spectrals and the Revenants of Elysium.

At first, Zac thought they were just agreeing with things to extract information from him. That they'd come back in a few months with some 'bad news.' But it was hard to argue with the fifty permanent Skill Crystals and dozen Cultivation manuals Catheya suddenly produced.

The puppet Zac used couldn't activate Spatial Items, but Catheya had shared the screens of both manuals and Skill Crystals. The items were the real deal; high-quality and practical for raising armies. There wasn't anything in the way of top-tier techniques meant for elites, but even Zac felt he could use some of the skills.

The only failure in Zac's negotiations was that he didn't manage to squeeze a single Life-Attuned treasure from their hands. They had been adamant in not providing anything of that element, to the point it almost seemed that the negotiations would fall through if he kept pushing. Eventually, Zac settled on some top-tier treasures for his soul, both death-attuned and unattuned. This wasn't something they had on hand, but they would send it over within a few months.

He ultimately would have preferred Life-Attuned Body Tempering Treasures, but these things would allow him to get closer to the next Reincarnation. Now, he only lacked some Life-attuned treasures for his Soul and Constitution. These items were still difficult to get his hands on, but he had three years to scour the Auction Houses across Zecia for something useful.

There were also the upcoming negotiations with the Allbright Empire that Pretty was hopefully setting up at this very moment. Perhaps he could get his hands on some good things from the Allbright Clan's Treasury as part of his sale of Creator Vessels.

Zac and Ogras went through the meeting a few times over, trying to figure out what traps and schemes the Undead Empire might be planning over the coming years. The biggest one was that they might hide some sort of tracking measure with all the materials they'd send over. But they luckily had Ensolus by this point.

They could simply use all those materials on his other planet. If the Undead Monarchs somehow managed to pierce through the System's Shroud, they still wouldn't get to Zac. And there was no way they'd dare cause havoc on Ensolus in an attempt to flush him out. Doing so would make the negotiations completely fall apart.

"They should have returned by now," Ogras commented suddenly.

Zac nodded. A group of five trusted cultivators had been stationed in the forest, and Zac had set off the moment they had retrieved the puppet. From there, they just needed to travel for a few hours before reaching the closest teleportation array. Zac and Ogras would instead have to travel for two days before reaching another border planet where they could teleport back home.

"Oh, that reminds me," Zac said as he took out his Perennial Vastness Token.

"What?" Ogras blurted. "You had one of those things already? I thought they were rare?"

"They are, but I picked up one inside the Orom world," Zac smiled as he threw it over. "Now I have a spare, so you take this one."

"Exactly what is this?" Ogras asked, and Zac quickly recounted what he'd learned about the Perennial Vastness.

"Do you want me to go scout ahead?" Ogras asked.

"No, I was thinking I'll go in roughly a year before the official start of the war. That way, we will have ample time to break through, especially if the realm has a different temporal ratio."

"You know, the last time the two of us left together for an opportunity, things didn't turn out so well," Ogras said with a raised brow.

"This is different. We'll just keep our head down and get our cores," Zac said.

Ogras only scoffed in response as he exaggeratedly rolled his eyes, but he still accepted the token and stowed it away. "Fine, I'll join you in whatever madness you will bring upon that poor realm. Thank you for this."

"Don't sweat it," Zac smiled.

"So we'll return from the Million Gates Territory in three years. With the speed of your Creator Vessels, that should be enough to give the place a decent run. We'll only be able to cover a small corner of it, but that's to be expected. We'd need centuries to scour that region properly."

"It's ultimately about fate," Zac agreed.

"If I haven't returned one month after our deadline, go without me. We might be stuck somewhere, and I'll use this talisman so that we can join up in this Perennial Vastness."

"One month," Zac nodded.

Thankfully, there were no surprises for the rest of the journey, and the crew returned to Earth two days later without getting into trouble. They could have just waited for the Undead to leave, but Zac feared those shifty Monarchs had left some trap behind.

By that point, the preparations for the announcement were already well underway, and Zac was handed a list of talking points by Vilari the moment he emerged from the teleporter. The whole thing would be transmitted everywhere to be displayed on huge screens, and Zac inwardly shuddered at the prospect of addressing almost two billion beings across two planets.

Zac would much rather fight a Beast King than deal with this, but some things ultimately couldn't be pawned off to his subordinates. He was the one who had chosen this path, so he would have to be the one to bear the responsibility. It was just a matter of time before his announcement was spread across the sector, and he wanted any eventual crosshairs to be trained solely at himself.

Most of the world's leaders had already arrived in Port Atwood, while the representatives of the Mavai and Raun were kept on a separate island. Officially, the reason for him calling the meeting was to discuss the upcoming war and for him to share his plans for the Atwood Empire's future.

Zac barely had time to gather his thoughts before the night had passed, and the time for the world summit had arrived. Zac donned his presence-hiding equipment as he walked toward the Atwood Hall, the ever-growing central government building at the heart of his capital. He was surprised to see the whole town had been transformed for this day, with thousands of banners of the Atwood Empire's crest dancing in the wind.

Countless people were also walking the streets, heading toward the closest screen that floated in the air. Zac flitted through the crowd and entered the Atwood Hall unnoticed, and he found Vilari and the others waiting behind the main stage. Everything looked ready, and Joanna smiled as she handed him a tablet.

It showed a crowded hall with representatives of all the races present. The view panned around, showing the stage he'd take in twenty minutes. Zac's eyes were immediately drawn to the thing in the center – it was impossible to miss. They had created a 20-meter tall crest from pure gold and onyx,

depicting the seal of the Atwood Empire; the four mountains of his island, with an axe and shield beneath.

Right beneath it was the podium he'd speak from, where he'd be lined with more flags of the Atwood Empire.

"What's with this stage?" Zac grimaced as he looked at the ostentatious backdrop. "I'll look like a dictator."

"I mean, you kind of are?" Joanna countered, and Zac rolled his eyes when he saw the excitement on her face.

"Alright, what do I need to do?" Zac sighed, knowing it was too late to change anything.

Zac spent the next twenty minutes reviewing everything while independently dealing with a few things. After that, Zac took a steadying breath as he walked out on the stage. It was as though the air went out of the hall as thousands of people turned quiet at once. The only thing that could be heard were bare feet against stone as Zac walked toward the podium with steady steps. A moment later, Joanna, Ilvere, and ten more Atwood Armies captains followed, forming an orderly line behind him.

If this were before the Integration, Zac would have been shaking like a leaf right now. But he found himself oddly calm as he turned toward the crowd. Not even a ripple appeared in his heart as he looked down at the audience, and Zac's voice was strong and steady as he began speaking.

"Over the past decade, our people have overcome insurmountable odds to eke out a living in this new reality," Zac began. "I am awed at the resilience you have shown, and thankful for all the hard work you've put into rebuilding our collapsed societies. Humans, Ishiate, Zhix, and Underworld Molekin have set aside their differences in appearance and cultures to rebuild what was taken from us.

"But I can never forget the 10 billion lives lost across our species. The tall buildings and other monuments to our triumph over adversity came at a tremendous cost. It is an eternal reminder that there is no such thing as safety in the Multiverse. Under the System, there is a mandate for constant struggle, and our place under the Heavens will forever be contended. A moment of weakness, and we will be dragged down again.

"I am sure that most of you have seen the recruitment stations across Earth by now, and have heard what looms on the horizon. In four years, a war of terrifying proportions is descending on our corner of the Multiverse – the Zecia Sector. The Integration was nothing in the face of what's to come; not even Earth is shielded from the madness.

"To hide or not fight is not an option, not when the System is involved. Neither will our enemies relent. I can tell you right now that there will be no mercy and no negotiation with those people. The invaders are called the Kan'Tanu, and they are an incredibly dangerous unorthodox faction. Should we lose, then most of us will be sacrificed to fuel their cultivators. The rest will be implanted by terrifying parasites and become warslaves.

"Since defeat is not an option, we can only struggle and become stronger. That way, we can protect our world and keep casualties at a minimum. Luckily, we are still in a phase of rapid growth, and four years will give us a small window to shore up our foundations. I have invested multiple C-grade Nexus Coins

into our armies, and I encourage every able-bodied adult to join. We need not only warriors but all kinds of staff to support our military.

Zac took a breath as he solemnly looked across the room. "This time, the actions of a few elites will not be enough to save Earth; I cannot protect you. Only by working together will we survive this storm. So let me be clear. While the Atwood Empire has largely allowed all factions across our planet to do things their way, this is a matter where I won't accept any compromise.

"For now, recruitment is open and voluntary, and those who sign early will enjoy more of the resources I have prepared. But if we see certain factions or cities neglecting their duty, we will move on to conscription. Every race and every force will have to pull their weight one way or another."

A subdued murmur spread through the room, but it was quenched by Zac releasing some of his Aura. "Do not test me on this. I will protect this world even if I have to drag some of you to the battlefields myself."

No one dared speak up, but Zac could see there was more than one person with a dissatisfied expression. Zac didn't care. He was not just speaking empty words. This wasn't a trial where he and a few of his followers could do all the heavy lifting. Still, the stick was best accompanied by a carrot.

"Of course, the System follows the Law of Balance. Where there is risk, there is also reward. Your participation in the war will accrue Contribution Points, which can be used to access a System-run Contribution Store. The greater the feats, the better the reward; some will get their hands on treasures they'd never encounter normally. Between the Atwood Empire's investment and the Contribution Store, this is your final chance to rekindle your fate before our planet is fully assimilated into the sector.

"We still don't know all the details, but we are constantly getting reports from the frontlines. As soon as we know something, so will you. Over the coming years, there will be more summits where details are ironed out. We will also hold large-scale exercises, some on Earth, others off-world. In short, I will do everything I can to prepare my citizens for this trial.

"Our Recruitment Stations are open across the world. If you want to know more about enlisting and what benefits we provide, you are welcome to visit them over the coming days. For those present here in Port Atwood, we will have representatives available to answer any questions you may have. But do understand, we don't have all the answers yet."

Zac glanced to his left, and a small nod from Joanna indicated that everything was prepared for the next segment of his speech.

"Secondly, I will speak on the changes that are taking place on our planet and how the Atwood Empire will adapt to them moving forward. First thing's first. The changes to our world are permanent. Earth is now a Life- and Death-Attuned world, which will continue to generate energy attuned to both these elements.

"This will become increasingly noticeable over the next few years. The Miasma will grow more potent in some regions, but Blessed Lands teeming with Life will also appear. However, most of the energy across the planet will remain unattuned, or at least have so little attunement it will not affect one's day-to-day.

“For those living on Pangea, you do not need to worry overly much. Miasma will not swallow the continent as we feared ten years ago. A balance between Life and Death has been established another way. For those who are unaware, our planet has two continents of roughly equal size. The second continent, Elysium, is the opposite of Pangea. Most of it is covered in Miasma today, even if the Undead Empire never set foot there.

“This kind of unique world has created a unique set of challenges and realities we have to face,” Zac said. “I strongly believe that the reason I’ve found success so far is that I quickly adapted to what the System threw at me. If we keep holding onto old beliefs and outmoded ideals, it is just a matter of time before we get swept away by the river of time.

“I know there have been rumors circulating on this subject, and I am setting the record straight today. Half our world is marked by Death, and I knew early on that we needed to embrace it rather than ignore it. So yes, The Atwood Empire has Undead citizens, citizens who have lived in isolation on Elysium. Until now.”

With that, the door to the side opened, and a procession of warriors with powerful auras walked out as Joanna’s group moved to the side. There were Vilari, Pika, and Rhuger, followed by the captains of the Einherjar. Only the Raun Spectrals were missing since they were slated to make a later appearance.

And in the lead, there was a singular Draugr emitting a towering aura – himself.