

The Fall 952

Chapter 952: Cards on the Table

It almost felt like looking at a mirror as he saw himself, or rather his design for Arcaz Black, walking onto the stage. No matter how one looked at him, he seemed like a powerful undead cultivator. Only Zac would realize that the aura seemed slightly hollow, but the Branch of the Pale Seal mostly masked it.

Zac felt Arcaz Black couldn't be absent for this announcement, so he had looked into temporary solutions. Eventually, Calrin had gotten his hands on three top-tier cloning treasures found in some ancient ruins. They looked like clay dolls and would create a clone that would last 12 hours. You imprinted it with your Daos and some of your soul, and it would create a perfect copy that, in Zac's case, had roughly twenty percent of his attributes.

Its aura was near-identical in strength to his own, making him seem completely real. Even scouting skills would show a normal Draugr warrior rather than a puppet.

Apart from its limited duration, the downside of this treasure was that it had taken Zac almost two hours to form the clone earlier this morning. It could also only stay a couple of kilometers away from himself before he lost his mental connection with it. In other words, it wasn't something he could suddenly take out in the middle of a fight to get a helper.

Still, it was the best Zac could do for now since he wasn't ready for his identity as an Edgewalker to become common knowledge in Zecia just yet. He knew the secret would be exposed sooner or later, but he didn't want to give factions like the Allbright Empire or Calrin's mercantile associates any reasons not to work with him before the war.

Getting a real clone would obviously be better, but actual cloning skills were incredibly rare before the D-grade. The few that existed weren't very good either. These kinds of skills simply required too much Cosmic Energy for the clones to become useful, or at least believable, which was why you needed a Cultivator's Core.

Before then, clones rather used concepts such as illusions or arrays to give the impression of creating multiple bodies, but they rarely had any real combat ability.

Murmurs of unrest spread across the hall as the chill of Death spread out from the scene, and some even stood up to fight or flee. However, it was all quelled as Zac unleashed his aura once more, this time together with his evolved Branch of the War Axe. Those who had stood up to flee were suddenly frozen in place, no doubt feeling like they suddenly had a thousand blades pointed at them.

Slowly, they inched back into their seats under Zac's unrelenting stare, and a suffocating silence spread across the room. Only then did Zac continue his speech.

"In this new reality, abstract concepts like Death have taken corporeal form, which forces us to reevaluate many things we once knew as truth. In this new reality, a different form of Life can and will spring from the depths of Death. As such, it is a natural consequence for Death-attuned worlds to start producing undead citizens," Zac said as he looked across the room.

“Rather than fight the natural order of things and wage an endless crusade against the undead, I chose to integrate them into the Atwood Empire. Today, there are multiple settlements of Revenants across Elysium, and they are an integral part of my force.

“I understand how this feels for many of you. All of us lost a lot of good men and women to the Incursion of the Undead Empire, especially the Sino-Indo Alliance. However, I want to be clear that Revenants have nothing to do with the Undead Empire. I personally killed the leader of their Incursion, along with all those who didn’t manage to flee back through the Incursion Pillar.

“These Revenants are natives to Earth just like you all. They have no more relation to that distant faction than you all have to the old Empires of the Multiverse. They have no agenda against the living and only want to live their lives as the rest of us.”

“That may be, but you know the Undead are at war with the living out there,” a powerful voice said. “Your actions might implicate this whole planet.”

Zac looked in the direction of the voice and inwardly sighed when his eyes fell upon Henry Marshall. This was the first time he saw Henry since returning, even if he’d visited Thea’s grave a few times. The old man didn’t look so old anymore. Just like Sap Trang, he had managed to break through to the E-grade despite his age, and he now appeared to be in his fifties.

Not only that, but his aura was quite deep, and Zac could tell he had reached Late E-grade already. With Henry losing the pillar that was Thea and Zac taking control of the whole planet, Henry decided to shift his attention to the martial path. Politics were ultimately a game of the old world – nothing could be accomplished without strength. Between his inherent talent and the resources of his clan, he was making decent progress, even if he couldn’t compare to the elites of Port Atwood.

“There is a risk of that happening, but I have my reasons for choosing this path,” Zac said. “First of all, I am just following the path the System has laid out for us. As many of you know, Port Atwood has participated in an Incursion of our own over the past years. The result was that we exterminated all the other invaders on that planet before integrating a second world into the Atwood Empire.”

The doors to the scene opened once more, and two rows of people came walking in – the Mavai Demons and Raun Spectrals.

“What you might not know was that the System sent us to yet another Life- and Death-attuned world. A world with natives naturally attuned to the elements of Life and Death. Today, the Mavai Tribes and the Kingdom of Raun have joined the banner of the Atwood Empire, and they will fight alongside us against the Kan’Tanu invaders.”

No one spoke up, and more than one had ruminating looks as they looked at the large group of people on the scene. Zac let the silence stretch on for a bit longer before he continued.

“Do you all know how rare these kinds of worlds are? Twin-affinity worlds naturally producing both Life and Death? They are essentially non-existent across our whole sector. Yet the System has put two of them under my control. I don’t believe for a second this is a coincidence.

“It is an instruction, a path forward for the Atwood Empire. I have no interest in going against the wishes of the System or fighting against the Heavens. I will instead use the tools it has given me to elevate our

faction to the next level. The Undead lands and races will provide the Atwood Empire with unique skills, resources, and manpower; things we desperately need right now.”

This was the official story they had settled on; blame it all on the System. In all honestly, Zac knew he was the most likely reason for the changes to Earth and why they were sent to Ensolus of all places. However, he couldn’t just go out and say that since it would damage the people’s faith in his vision for the Atwood Empire.

This way, his actions could rather be seen as destiny. The System had chosen this route, and as long as they followed through, they would be rewarded. Of course, Zac would still hold the ultimate responsibility for this direction, but they hoped that framing things this way would quell some of the unrest. The next step was to dangle a carrot in front of the leaders.

“Besides, I have some important news on the issue you mentioned,” Zac said. “In the face of the upcoming war, the Undead Empire is calling a semi-permanent cease-fire on the living forces of the Zecia Sector. Instead, they are joining with the other top factions to repel the invaders. As such, the perpetual war between living and undead is ending, and we will not be caught in the crosshairs.

“Ultimately, I believe this is an opportunity. During the past years, I’ve traveled across many worlds to temper myself. Out there, the world is not black and white. I even learned of a place in a neighboring sector called Twilight Harbor, a so-called grey zone where undead and living lived side by side.

“Because of its nature, the harbor has become a natural trading hub between the Undead Empire and the surrounding factions. This trade has made Twilight Harbor one of the most prosperous factions in the area. This is the future I want for the Atwood Empire, and I believe it’s possible thanks to the Undead Empire finally stopping their war against the living factions.

“As such, some changes will take place over the coming months. New districts are being built in Port Atwood and many other settlements across Pangea. These districts will be filled with Miasma to give our Undead citizens somewhere to live. Similarly, neighborhoods are being built on Elysium, places of pure Life where living cultivators can thrive.

“Furthermore, we are opening up our second planet, where vast resources are waiting to be extracted. In other words, millions of job openings will soon appear, opportunities that will allow you to rapidly accumulate Atwood Empire Contribution Points. It’s also possible for private ventures to open up shop in these new realms to help them grow.

“I know it isn’t a small thing I am springing on you all, but I urge you to meet this change with an open mind. Ultimately, the only difference between the living and the undead is that one cultivates with Cosmic Energy and the other with Miasma. Among all the strange and inexplicable things in the Multiverse, this is barely worth mentioning.

“Once again, I want to reiterate that these Revenants and Spectrals have no connection to the invaders that attacked us a decade ago. We will not tolerate attacks against our innocent citizens, living or undead. Any such actions will be considered terrorism and an attack against the empire, and the response will be swift. We are all in this together.

“Remember, the enemies are the invaders, not your neighbors.”

With that, Zac covered the subjects that needed to be covered, and a flashing light indicated his speech was no longer being recorded and transmitted. What remained now was the actual work.

“All the pertinent details will be sent out, and representatives will remain to answer any questions you may have,” Zac said. “I look forward to your cooperation.”

With that, Zac simply turned toward the door and walked away, giving no room for a Q&A. His departure was like the starting signal as a raucous clamor spread across the hall, with people shouting over each other for answers. Zac ignored the noise as he left the scene, but he could still see the situation through the eyes of his temporary clone.

Some were just shouting, whereas the more quick-witted were hurrying toward the neighboring conference area the elites on the scene were already moving toward. They probably realized there would be a reshuffling of resources and power with such large changes to the Atwood Empire. Those who adapted quickly could get a bigger piece of the pie.

Zac didn’t head toward the conference hall, but he didn’t leave the venue either. Instead, he ascended a floor and entered a private meeting room that had been prepared for him already. A few minutes later, the doors opened before four figures entered; Ibtep, Rhubat, and two Anointed Zac didn’t recognize.

They were most likely two of the more powerful Anointed remaining after most of the Anointed Council had sacrificed themselves to kill Void’s Disciple.

“Warmaster, it is good to see you,” Rhubat rumbled as they sat down in one of the prepared jumbo-sized chairs.

“Chainbreaker, your aura has grown stronger yet again,” Zac smiled before turning to the others. “Welcome, sit down. Ibtep, I’ve heard you’ve been busy.”

“Sometimes I feel the world grows more interesting by the day. The more I discover, the more I realize I’ve just scratched the surface,” Ibtep said. “It’s good to see you’re back. We were worried for a while. I should have known better than to doubt your resilience.”

“That was some news you sprung on us just now,” Rhubat sighed. “Working with those tainted things? Did you call on us because you wanted to know the stance of the Hives?”

“That’s part of it,” Zac nodded. “I do not think I have met you two?”

“These two are Kezret and Adrotep,” Rhubat said. “I brought them today to get acquainted with your domain. They are new commanders of the Zhix armies, and I thought them suitable to be our contacts for the upcoming struggle.”

“Of course,” Zac nodded. “Let me know if the Zhix needs anything to prepare. I wasn’t exaggerating how dangerous this conflict will be.”

“You say there is war, but you never said why?” Kezret asked. “Conflict for conflict’s sake is foolishness.”

“If I had a choice, I wouldn’t join this mess either,” Zac sighed as he explained the situation with the Space Gate, the Kan’Tanu, and their origins.

“Unorthodoxy,” Androtep hummed. “You mentioned this word before. These Kan’Tanu walk the same path as the Dominators?”

“I guess you could say that,” Zac said. “The leader of the Dominators and the Kan’Tanu are both unorthodox cultivators. They gain strength through taboo means such as sacrifice instead of cultivating by following the natural order.”

“What is our role in this struggle?” Kezret inquired, prompting Zac to explain more in-depth how sanctioned conflicts worked.

“So we are forced into the conflict by the Heavens,” Androtep said. “To avoid it means punishment. To embrace it means Death.”

“That’s about it,” Zac nodded. “I can’t stop it, so I can only work to make my people stronger and minimize losses. That includes integrating the undead into my faction.”

“My instincts tell me those things are not natural and that I should pierce my spear through their skulls,” Rhubat slowly said. “That they represent a path that ought not to be traversed.”

This was obviously not what Zac had hoped to hear, but he didn’t interrupt the de-facto leader of the Zhix as they mulled over the situation.

“However, the Zhix have been forced to adapt to many realities that clash with the precepts over the past years. It’s come to the point it is hard to trust our senses,” Rhubat sighed. “These unliving, how do you know they can be trusted?”

“The Raun Spectrals is a conquered society,” Zac said. “Truthfully, I don’t trust them, not fully. But the native undead of this planet I trust with my Life. They have proven themselves in the conquest of Ensolus, and I have a few other guarantees as well.”

Rhubat slowly nodded before glancing at the others. “I need to speak with Warmaster alone.”

“These unliving on the other side of our planet. They did not appear naturally, did they?” Rhubat asked after the others had left.

“I raised them,” Zac confirmed. “In a sense, they are my children. That’s how I can guarantee they are loyal.”

“I expected as much, though I don’t understand how you split your unliving side from yourself,” Rhubat nodded.

“Just a small trick,” Zac smiled, not phased by the comment. Rhubat was present during the battle with Void’s Disciple, where Zac had been forced to use both his classes. They were one of the few outside Zac’s inner circle that knew about his situation.

“Be careful. When you feel powerless, and the world is closing in on you, it is easy to make decisions that can come to haunt you in the future.”

“Of course.”

"I will talk with the Zhix; we will not be the cause of instability during this critical time," Rhubat eventually nodded before changing the subject. "As for these unliving. They must prove themselves as warriors and trustworthy allies before the Zhix can embrace them. Your word alone is not enough."

"That's all I ask," Zac nodded.

"This Contribution Store, do you think it carries knowledge?" Rhubat suddenly asked, shifting the subject.

"Knowledge?" Zac said before realizing what Rhubat was driving at. "For your cultivation manual?"

"We have gone from a sprint to a crawl," Rhubat sighed. "Before could at least make small amounts of progress, but we have been stuck in our research for over three years now. Our inquiries through your merchant have not yielded any results either. It's frustrating. I know the Zhix can flourish even in this new environment, but the universe is not giving us enough time to adjust."

Zac thought about it for a moment before making a decision. "I don't know about the Contribution Store, but I may have another solution for the Zhix if you are willing to take a risk."

Ten minutes later, Zac and Rhubat left the room, where Rhubat immediately called the other Zhix for a private meeting. A few minutes later, a Valkyrie would take them to the Ensolus ruins for a chance at the inheritance. As for Zac, he had one more person he wanted to speak with before he left.

Henry Marshall.