

The Fall 960

Chapter 960: The Business of War

"Not bad," Calrin said with a small nod as he worked hard not to seem impressed.

It wasn't easy.

The scene outside was far from anything Calrin had ever witnessed, even if he was toiling under a fate-touched oddity like the little Lord Atwood. That little troublemaker might have visited amazing places, but Calrin had been stuck in the offices of the Thayer Consortia most of his life. He hadn't even gotten to travel much since his clan had lost most of its businesses by the time he started rising through the ranks.

The War Fortress was as large as an E-grade planet, and the thousands of vessels that flew in and out through its gates looked like bees running errands for the hive. But while impressive, seeing so many Cosmic Vessels in one place filled Calrin with some worry. The production capacity of Lord Atwood was only a few vessels a week on average.

Even if the shipyard toiled night and day until the war started, they still wouldn't be able to construct as many ships as Calrin saw right now. And this was just one of many War Fortresses, along with all the actual planets that had been turned into military bases. Would he be laughed out of the offices when he presented his demands?

Worse, would he be made captive to lure out his boss?

Calrin's intestines turned with regret as the War Fortress drew closer. He had taken the bait hook, line, and sinker. So what if the Lord had offered him a 10% commission on the difference between the calculated asking price and the actual price? At that moment, Calrin had forgotten one needed to be alive to enjoy his riches. He could only see the tens of thousands of D-grade Nexus Coins that would potentially enter his pockets.

Besides, through the conversations with the crew aboard this vessel, Calrin knew he might be in for some rough negotiations even if they didn't scheme against him. Time was running out, and there were a million things that needed to be purchased. The Allbright Empire was already stretching itself thin and had been forced to increase taxation twice over the past three years.

At the same time, Calrin's wares were simply problematic when put in context to the Zecia sector. Sure, the vessels he had in his Mercantile Space were much better than the buckets he saw flying outside, but the price was also in a league of its own.

Here in the Red Sector, you could get an Early D-grade Cosmic Vessel for around 1,500 to 2,500 D-grade Nexus Coins. If you dared to use one of the Salvaged Scrap Vessels from the Million Gates Territory, you could go as low as 500 D-grade Nexus Coins. And these were procurement prices, not production prices, in a time when many forces were building their own.

Meanwhile, the models of Lord Atwood ranged between 18,000 and 32,000 D-grade Nexus Coins per vessel. It was more than ten times the average purchase price in the region. Add to that sales taxes, System-enforced import tariffs, and a profit margin, and you were looking at twenty times the price. So for every vessel the War Coalition purchased from the Thayer Consortia, they would be giving up on a small fleet.

Lord Atwood's goal was to make at least five C-grade Nexus Coins before the war started, which meant each vessel would have to have an average profit of almost 6,000 D-grade Nexus Coins. Certainly, such a margin was, in fact, quite modest considering the production prices, just 25% compared to the average of 50%.

As far as Calrin could tell, their only chance was that the unique features and technology would be deemed powerful enough to price the vessels as the equivalent of Medium Quality Middle D-grade Cosmic Vessels. Even if the speed and durability of the ships were better than any Early D-grade vessels in Zecia, there ultimately was a small gap from them being true Middle D-grade vessels when it came to fundamental specifications.

Still, Calrin was ready to fight for his nest egg as the Cosmic Vessel drew into one of the many hangars. Outside, there already were a group of ten people waiting, and Calrin got a sinking feeling when he saw the man in the lead. This man had the aura of a practiced miser, and the air of authority around him indicated he would have a say in the negotiations.

Like that, the nest egg had sprouted wings and threatened to fly away. No! Calrin wouldn't give up after having come so far.

"Esteemed friends, heroes of the vanguard, it is my very utmost honor to make your acquaintance," Calrin said with a wide smile as he walked over. "This one is called Calrin, and I represent the Thayer Conso--"

"Tsymo Sendroska," the haughty man cut Calrin off without so much as looking up from the docket in his hand. "I am a senior quartermaster of the Sixth Procurement Division, and I will be in charge of measurement and quality control of your wares. Along with the potential brokerage of a trade agreement, should the wares be deemed genuine and of use to the Alliance."

"Master Sendroska, a pleasure," Calrin said with a bow. "Pardon my ignorance; I was under the impression I would be met with a representative of the esteemed Peak Family?"

"The Peak Clan is one of the foremost fighting forces of the Allbright Empire," Tsymo scoffed. "They do not have time to deal with some small trade agreements, so they handed the matter to the Sixth. Now, where are the wares? Looking at the specifications, it will take roughly a week to test the products, so we should start as soon as possible."

Calrin felt his smile become increasingly strained, but he couldn't give in now. This man was trying to bulldoze them. If he just bent over here, they would definitely get a bad quote, if one at all.

"The War Coalition should have been sent the specification sheet already," Calrin said with as pleasant a voice as he could. "And as I mentioned, we come recommended by the Peaks themselves. Our specifications may seem like grand exaggerations, but this one can guarantee--"

"The fact you come recommended is the only reason we are wasting our time on this at all," Tsymo said as he finally looked up from his clipboard, only to give Calrin a withering look. "And we should just take the word of a small workshop that proclaims their wares are better than any other shipwrights in the sector? There has been no lack of wartime profiteers who have tried to defraud the Alliance, heedless of the fact that every coin misspent will mean lives lost."

"I assure you, there are no problems with our wares," Calrin said. "Master Sendroska, you should be aware of who I am representing. The young Lord is a million-year genius, which comes with certain unique advantages."

"Climbing towers does not make one a shipwright," Tsymo snorted. "Now, take out the vessels for inspection, or is their portability a lie as well?"

Calrin blankly looked at the presumptuous quartermaster for a moment. Sometimes he wondered if he had strayed down the wrong path. Sometimes, he dreamt he could be like the young Lord, swinging his axe to make all trouble disappear. Was the pursuit of wealth that important? It would feel infinitely more satisfying to throw out a handful of talismans instead. He was even willing to sacrifice a few D-grade Nexus Coins with [Curse of Mammon] if it empowered the talismans enough to blow this bastard to kingdom come.

A gnome could dream.

"These vessels contain some proprietary arrays, and I have not been permitted to freely expose these things without a contract in place," Calrin said, but he still conjured two huge cubes that thumped down behind him. "But out of respect for the Peak family, I will hand over the IL-28 Starburst and the IL-32 Farsight for the Sixth to inspect. With my Lord being a personal friend of Miss Pretty Peak, I trust I can count on your discretion."

"We will take it from here," Tsymo said as he took the two control spheres. "Lead our guests to their quarters."

"You do not want us to oversee what you're doing to our vessels?" Calrin frowned, no longer able to pretend to be pleased with the situation. "It sounds like you are confining us."

"This is a strategic base for the upcoming war. We cannot have civilians running amok," Tsymo said as he nodded at the guards behind him.

Calrin could sense his two guards tense up, and he could only sigh with resignation. "Then we'll be in your care."

From there, they were quickly whisked away to a decent group of rooms far from any important people and resources.

"What should we do?" Tina, one of the two human lasses Lord Atwood had sent to accompany him, asked after they were alone. "It almost seems like this guy has it out for us, and now we're essentially on house arrest?"

"Most organizations have these little barons who let their authority go to their heads. It's but a small bump in the negotiations," Calrin assured. "Luckily, our wares speak for themselves. Some little quartermaster isn't enough to shroud the Heavens."

"Still, it's odd," Tina muttered.

"That it is," Calrin sighed. "No force is without its internal strife, and a shared base like this is even worse. I fear this Tsymo might belong to one of the Lord's enemies. After all, he killed quite a few scions in the Tower of Eternity."

“So what should we do?” Jennifer interjected.

“Worse comes to worst, we will have to create a scene that will force some higher-ups to come,” Calrin said. “That way, we can plead our case to a new party. And the Lord has prepared a few things for us in case the situation goes south.”

“But what if they steal the technology of our vessels?” Tina asked.

“I asked the young Lord about that scenario,” Calrin said. “According to him, they won’t get close to unlocking the secrets of these ships even if they had ten thousand years. I say let them have at it. When they realize it’s futile, we’ll be put in a better position for the negotiations. Don’t worry; ol’ Calrin has the situation under control.”

But as the days passed, Calrin started to feel less and less confident. They were essentially treated like prisoners on lockdown, except that their items weren’t taken away. Being away from the consortia, Calrin didn’t have access to the Mercantile System either, making it impossible to contact anyone for help.

Had their preparations been insufficient? Would he really have to pull that card?

After one long week, they were finally called to a conference hall. By that point, Calrin’s nerves were already frayed, and he didn’t have the energy to pretend to be satisfied upon seeing that they still had to deal with the insufferable Tsymo Sendroska. At least there was one more person in the room; a stern middle-aged woman with a stack of diagrams and schematics in front of her.

A technician, perhaps? Or an Array Master?

“Sit,” Tsymo said as the three were led into the room.

“Being witness to the hospitality of the War Coalition has been a unique experience,” Calrin commented. “I pray my lord and his benefactors will not see it as a slight against their prestige.”

“An army has its rules and regulations; no one is above it,” Tsymo said without a care. “Now, we’ve tested the vessels. While they barely meet the specifications you listed, there are multiple problems. For one, it is impossible to properly gauge many of the technologies you spout. And even if they work, the cost-to-benefit ratio will be abysmal. As such—”

“Excuse me, what do you mean by benefactors?” the woman interjected, drawing a displeased look from Tsymo. “The Peaks? No, that can’t be right. They don’t have the skills to manufacture these types of vessels. They are much too advanced.”

Calrin glanced at Tsymo, and he knew he didn’t have an option. Someone bought this bastard off, and this technician was his best chance at getting fair treatment. The other option was to blow up the whole chamber to attract the leaders of this place. But negotiating from the position of a terrorist was an uphill battle Calrin didn’t feel confident in emerging victorious from.

“While my young Lord is on friendly terms with multiple people from the Peaks, they are only the sponsors for this meeting. The Lord’s benefactor is someone else, though you might not have heard of him,” Calrin said before adding a pause. “He has gone by many names, but my Lord knows him as Alvod Jondir.”

“Jondir?” the technician slowly said before her eyes widened in shock.

“The Eveningtide Asura?” Tsymo scoffed. “Are you trying to threaten us with the name of a dead man? As I suspected, you are up to no good. As such, I see no option but-“

“I hope I am not interrupting,” a calm voice suddenly interjected, and Calrin was both shocked and delighted to see a scholarly-looking man had appeared out of nowhere. He had no aura yet somehow exuded an innate pressure that almost made Calrin bow in deference.

A Monarch.

“Your Royal Highness!” the technician and Tsymo exclaimed when they saw the new arrival, and Calrin was delighted to see Tsymo’s face go deathly pale as he shot to his feet.

“My young friend, I am sorry to have left you waiting so long. I wanted to personally welcome you after my friends told me you were coming, but I was forced to deal with some matters inside the Million Gates Territory,” the man said with a warm smile before turning to the quartermaster. “Tsymo, is it? Why are you just standing there? Why have you not offered our guest some refreshments?”

“Of course,” Tsymo hurriedly said, his haughty demeanor long gone.

“After you’re done, you can present yourself to the Wartime Tribunal. Your employers might be an important sponsor for our endeavor, but they are not above the law.”

Calrin’s face remained impassive as Tsymo served him tea with a constipated look, but his heart wasn’t as calm. This was an even bigger fish than he had expected. Calrin didn’t know if this Allbright princeling was telling the truth or if he had been forced to act because of the threat of the Eveningtide Asura. And Calrin didn’t give a hoot. He only cared about what the shift in reception meant for him and the Thayer Consortia. There were profits to be made here.

The only question was how far he could push things based on a lie.

“Ow shi-” Zac swore as he woke up with a start, but he was surprised to find that he didn’t actually hurt at all.

Zac realized he was lying prone on the ground. He looked around with confusion, trying to remember what had just happened. He remembered Iz pushing her golden sun toward the incoming slash of his [Rapturous Divide], followed by an incredibly bright light. It had felt like it had consumed everything and completely engulfed him, yet both he and his surroundings were fine.

Or as fine as one could expect after such an intense battle. The whole area was scorched and marred beyond redemption, and echoes of his and Iz’s Daos were engraved into the ground. Cracks also reached deep into the ground, an effect of [Arcadia’s Judgment] and the geyser eruption. If this little island had been a barren rock before, then it was now a truly desolate wasteland.

“How are you feeling?” Iz asked, and Zac turned over to see her sitting a few meters away from him.

“Your face!” Zac exclaimed with shock as he saw a small cut that barely missed Iz’s eye.

"Don't worry," Iz said as the wound started burning. A moment later, it was gone, leaving not even a scar behind. "I just wanted to show you how far you had come."

Zac wryly smiled as he got to his feet. A small nick wasn't much of anything, but it still felt like an accomplishment. So his [Rapturous Divide] hadn't been completely overwhelmed at the end.

"What's going on?" Zac grunted as he looked around, trying to figure out what kind of attack had knocked him out. "What happened at the end there? Did you cheat and throw out some treasure?"

"That depends on how you define cheating," Iz said after some thought. "I didn't use any treasures or outside help. I fused two Aspects to allow my Golden Sun to unleash a wave of the Abyssal Star. Its effect is disruption. It breaks apart most skills, and it even disrupted your consciousness for a moment."

"Isn't that too powerful?" Zac muttered.

"Not really," Iz said. "You wouldn't have lost your consciousness had you blocked your sight in time. And if you had avoided letting the light of the Abyssal Star enter your eyes, you would have been able to hold onto your skill better. It would still have broken down, but that is because my heritage has an inherent advantage over certain concepts that particular skill is based on."

"Well, I guess it was a valuable lesson," Zac smiled. "There are only so many kinds of heritages that exist here on the Frontier. Getting exposed to some new things will help me shore up my weaknesses. But what did you mean when you said you fused Aspects? Is it Dao, or those forms? Something I can do?"

Zac wouldn't mind getting a transformation like that based on his Daos. Just the thought of getting Aspects to match his two stances seemed incredibly powerful.

"It has some natal prerequisites," Iz said with a shake of her head, instantly dashing Zac's hopes.

"Bloodline, Inheritance, Dao, Energy Control. You could consider it akin to Dao Intent and Atavism, but slightly more complicated. Truthfully, I don't think it's a path suited for you."

"That's fine," Zac smiled. "I have my hands full anyway. Still, those forms of yours were pretty amazing. Though I have seen more than enough of that terrifying flower."

"It didn't manage to keep you contained," Iz smiled. "And its flames only left some small blemishes."

"So why am I fine?" Zac muttered as he looked down at his body. "Is my new constitution that amazing?"

"Of course not," Iz giggled. "You looked a bit pitiful when you were knocked out, so I poured some elixir on you."

"Never mind," Zac coughed as he dragged his hand over his once-again bald head.

Still some ways to go.