

The Fall 972

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"Thought you'd want to stay to the very end, looting and pillaging," Zac commented.

"Things grew too dangerous. Had to sacrifice my sweet Temptress to get away," Ogras grunted as he threw over a docket. "That place is rough, and it seems like it will only get worse. By the end, even the pirates were running from the deeper regions. There are a lot of invaders in our waters already. Since we found more seals than expected, I decided to leave while we were ahead. Even then, we lost seven of our people."

Zac sighed as he read the report. This was the price of progress. Each step was paved with blood, and not just of your enemies. Two Revenants, one Valkyrie, one demon, a Zhix, the Mavai Shaman, and a non-combat pilot had lost their lives in this outing. Each one of them the best of the best among the Atwood Empire's elites.

"I'll make sure their dependents are provided for," Zac said.

The losses hurt, but the gains were astronomical. Zac knew they'd found a lot of seals because of his quest, but he hadn't expected there to be multiple sets of a few. If things continued like this, he might even be able to form two cycles. Or perhaps lend one to Iz if the price was right and she agreed to keep his followers safe. Then suddenly, a familiar name appeared on the docket.

"Wait, Jaol?" Zac blurted, barely able to believe his eyes. "Is that real? A technocrat navigator named Jaol?"

"It's all too real," Ogras said, his mouth widening into a smile. "He's kept at the compound back on Crimson Edge. Didn't dare bring a Technocrat here, even if he's an exile. I have no idea if it'd create problems for you, or the faction in general, for that matter."

"I can't believe it," Zac whispered. "It's really him."

"I knew it!" Ogras laughed as he slapped the table. "When I heard his story of a shapeshifting lunatic who appeared out of nowhere and blew up his ship, I knew it had to be you. How in the nine hells did that happen?"

"It was the second-to-last level in the Tower of Eternity," Zac said with a wry smile. "The System sent me out of the tower and onto a Technocrat ship that was leaving integrated space. I only realized midway it was real and not another trial."

"Sounds like the Ruthless Heavens, alright," Ogras snickered. "It really doesn't seem to like your ancestors."

"Looks that way," Zac said with a helpless shake of his head. "I can't believe that scaredy-cat became a sealbearer. Some of the other names are pretty surprising as well. Carl Elrod, that's the archer, right?"

"That's him, alright," Ogras snickered. "Complained his way right into the Radiant Court. Either those things are much more common than we thought, or your fate is even more useful. It almost felt like every person you've shaken hands with ends up with a piece or two."

"Wait, this doesn't make sense," Zac suddenly said as he read the report. "My quest is only lacking one seal."

"What?" Ogras said with confusion. "Some of our people were doubles. Shouldn't you be lacking three?"

"Janos is back. He has the seal of the Mercurial Court, making it seven. Emily also returned with a seal, but it was the Radiant Court like Carl. I have no idea who the final person is, though."

"So there's another one?" Ogras mused. "Your undead girl?"

"I think she'd automatically become part of the Undead Empire's team because of the commandments," Zac said, though he wasn't sure.

"Shouldn't be random assignments, either," Ogras said. "We've heard some rumors. People are starting to realize something is going on because of the Kan'Tanu. They're offering exorbitant bounties for sealbearers, except they don't call them that outright. I heard the pirates have already turned a few in. So if everyone who got a seal automatically got assigned to a Flamebearer, you'd probably have completed your cycle already."

"Then who would I know on the outside that might have a seal?" Zac muttered.

"Someone in the Void Gate?" Ogras offered. "Some of them might have picked up seals, even if they're saying they'll stay out of it."

"Maybe," Zac said. "Probably best we'd try to get a spare, just in case."

"We still have some time," Ogras said before his smile widened. "So, Janos is alive, after all? That guy has nine lives. He keeps returning from the dead."

"You should swap pointers with him before we leave," Zac said. "He's lived inside an illusion for the past years. His skills have become quite terrifying. It might be useful with the direction your path has taken."

"I'll visit him later," Ogras nodded. "Are we still leaving in a month? I'm as ready as can be."

"You have a blueprint ready?" Zac asked.

"Most of us sealbearers do," Ogras said. "We knew the war and upcoming trial would become real slaughter-fests. We need to break through sooner rather than later, so we used some of the inspiration from the seals to pave the way."

Zac wasn't surprised. He had done the same, as had Emily. For the people on Port Atwood, figuring out a top-quality design for a core blueprint was probably the best choice for the Ultom-provided epiphany. It wasn't as exciting as unique cultivation methods like the [Void Vajra Sublimation], but it was practical for both their long- and short-term prospects.

The core was the focus of the D-grade, and a proper blueprint and a viable long-term plan was the difference between being stuck right at the start of Hegemony and having a shot at Monarchy.

"I'm pretty much done from my side as well. The only thing left is to check out the Limited Trial to see if I can gain any final burst of inspiration," Zac said. "I haven't heard back from Catheya, though. She might still be inside the Million Gates Territory."

"That's fine," Ogras nodded. "I'll visit the crazy Tool Spirit and get the second piece of my inheritance. I've improved my Body Tempering Method, and I need more creatures. And if that bastard of a soul-whisp tries something this time, I'll add him to my flag."

"Just be careful with that thing," Zac said.

"Don't worry, I've finally found a path," Ogras smiled. "Fake is real, and real is fake. Unorthodoxy is Orthodoxy. I'll reform it before Ultom, though I'll need to head deeper into the night before I can welcome the daybreak."

"Alright, I trust you know what you're doing," Zac shrugged. "I guess I'll go deal with the Technocrat."

"I think you should check up on the spear lass first," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "She's not doing well."

"Joanna?" Zac said with a frown. "What's going on?"

The spear cut through the air in an indomitable arc, soon turning into a mirage as one stab turned into one hundred. Activating [Glorious Advance] moved her over two hundred meters in an instant. Her spear slammed down into the hill, and it was like a bomb had erupted from its heart. A shockwave spread over a hundred meters in each direction as a cascade of weapons stormed out.

Left were broken trees and fragmented stone— a scene of utter destruction. Yet it didn't help. Joanna still felt suffocated. Drowning. But she didn't know what else to do, so she continued swinging her spear, waging war on land to drown out the war raging in her head. Suddenly, an axe met her spear, locking it in place.

The collision pushed away the clouds of dust she had kicked up in her desperate dance, showing Zachary Atwood standing opposite her. She couldn't believe she'd missed his advance, so enraptured with her own problems. The two stood in place for a moment, neither saying anything.

"I failed," Joanna eventually said, trying but failing to keep her voice stable.

Shame, despair, and irreconciliation filled her heart as she looked at the man in front of her. He had grown calmer, to the point he seemed like a non-combat class cultivator. Yet there was an unfathomable depth to him that Joanna had never been able to sense before. It was almost like she was being sucked in, her very existence swallowed by his mere presence.

Once more, he'd elevated himself, climbing further up the ladder of cultivation. More and more, he was becoming the towering tree that protected the whole world. Joanna was happy for him. She knew he wasn't a genius when it came to cultivation, and neither did he have a backing like the scions of the more flourishing regions of the Multiverse.

Each step he'd taken, every morsel of strength seized, had been fought for. He'd walked down one perilous road after another, his life hanging by a thread. And it wasn't even for himself, but for those around him. For Earth. For her and the other Valkyries so that fewer would die under his command. She was happy for him. She really was.

Yet her stomach felt like a pit.

This should have been her chance. If not to catch up to him, at least be able to see the same sky he did. To help him in the upcoming trial while reforging her fate like the others on the trip had. But three years later, she returned the same Joanna Thompson as before. A bit stronger, sure, but she certainly hadn't spread her wings to fly.

"Continue," was all Zac said, and Joanna was happy to oblige.

There was one thing she'd realized over her journey over the past years. Zachary Atwood was fate incarnate. So fighting him almost felt like fighting against the Heavens, which was exactly what Joanna needed right now. The sky filled with spears falling like rain while Joanna launched a ruthless offensive using everything she'd learned.

Zac was far calmer, each movement a work of art as he almost danced through the battlefield, bending it to his will. She couldn't touch the hem of his robes, even when she used skills while he didn't. Soon enough, the ugly feeling she'd felt over the past year rose to the surface, and she couldn't hold herself back anymore.

"Vilari got one," Joanna said as she furiously tried to at least land a hollow hit on her Lord. "That's no wonder. She's the most talented one around. Rhubat, too, I can understand. But Rhuger? I'm just as talented as him, and his body is hundreds of years old, even if he is not."

Zac didn't answer. He only kept swinging his axe, his simple swings putting her under more pressure than the various deathmatches she'd survived in the Million Gates Territory. The whole area shuddered under a tremendous aura of war spread from his body, increasing the burden even further.

"Ibtep got one. The worm-merchant," Joanna continued with grit teeth. "Even a stinking Technocrat pirate we randomly ran into is a freaking sealbearer. And I failed."

She wanted to shut up. She hated that she felt so jealous and cynical, but the words that had stayed pent up in her body just kept pouring out now that she had started. No longer bothering with finesse or skills, she furiously beat at the iron wall of her opponent.

"Since the day you saved me, I've struggled without a break. I've fought, I've bled. I've pushed myself beyond anyone else, both during the second incursion and the Mission to the Million Gates Territory. Yet I'm the only one to come back empty-handed."

More strength, more speed, more precision. Just once. She wanted to hit him just once. But why was it so hard?

"Is this it? Is this my fate? Was I deluding myself, thinking I could be something beyond a somewhat talented captain of a local faction? That I could soar into the sky with the rest of you?"

Her vision clouded, but her arms kept moving as she advanced with everything she had. If she could, she'd even burn her life force to give her a chance at this small, pitiful goal of hers. Because this was unbearable.

"Why? WHY?!" Joanna screamed, tears pouring down her eyes. "What am I missing?!"

Then it coalesced, and Joanna found her spear sneak beneath the axe, piercing right through a vine before punching a hole in his robes. It wasn't a real hit, but it was a hit. Joanna felt her strength

suddenly leave her body, making her stumble. She lay on the ground panting, too emotionally and physically spent to move.

She saw Zac sigh and sit beside her, looking up at the sky.

"Vilari gained the seal of the Anima Court, which makes sense considering her terrifying talent for soul cultivation," Zac said. "Rhubat became the sealholder of the Tethered court. He's the Chainbreaker, the one who ended thousands of years of suffering. He's also consumed with breaking the chains of the Zhix to pave a path for them in this new reality.

"Ibtep and Jaol both are sealholders of the Farsee Court. Both have inherent natures leaning toward exploration. Ibtep comes from an incredibly rigid race, yet he has the most insatiable curiosity of anyone I've met. Jaol has more to him than meets the eye as well.

"Did you know that he somehow managed to flee the equivalent distance of a whole sector through the Endless Storm, until he reached the Million Gates Territory? All while having actual Monarchs looking for him? You've seen what that place is like. To survive that journey as an E-grade cultivator, the Farsee Court sounds fitting.

"Rhuger's body is old, but Cervantes was possibly the most talented Cultivator to ever have appeared inside the Mystic Realm. A place where the Tsarun Clan brought the greatest talents they could find to refine their bloodlines further. Cervantes cultivated the Dao of Lunar Light, while Rhuger cultivates Darkness; a perfect match to the Starfall Court that chose him."

"To me, it doesn't seem that the courts choose people based on combat strength but compatibility," Zac concluded. "Fate, I guess."

"So I'm not fated, after all," Joanna sighed, blankly staring at the sky. "So much for hard work."

Zac looked down at Joanna, slightly smiling. "I have talked with some people who deeply understand the inheritance. I still don't know much, but I know the name of the two final Courts that none of my people have. The first is the Daedalian Court. I don't think it's for you. You're more like me, except you've focused even further on the path of War. That leaves one court."

Joanna's gaze shifted, seeing Zac take out a wooden seal, expertly carved and radiating a fierce aura. "This one, I think, might be more suited to you. Here."

"If things were this easy," Joanna lamented, but she still accepted the carving.

The rune was one she had seen before. It was one of the nine that had haunted her dreams since the Ensolus Ruins. Yet, for some reason, it looked different this time. Was it because Zac had infused his Dao into it, somehow giving it new meaning? It felt incredibly imposing, like a sea of soldiers bearing down on her.

"What's... this one called?" Joanna asked.

"The Indomitable Court," Zac said as he stood up. "I refuse to believe you're not fated for more. I've seen you walk down your path with conviction and determination that would shame most scions of the Multiverse. I rather want to believe your stage has not yet been set. Seeing that seal, where do you think you'll find it?"

"The battlefield..." Joanna instinctively muttered as she looked at the oppressive rune.

"The battlefield," Zac nodded, looking down at her. "Not some old ruins in the middle of nowhere. On the battlefield, where you are the closest to your path. So don't lose hope, and don't give in. Don't bother with the path of others. We all have periods of rapid growth and periods where we slow down to digest what we've accumulated."

"Believe in yourself, that your time is still to come."

Zac's heart was heavy as he left Joanna to her thoughts. He had sounded confident speaking to her, but he really didn't know if he was just making things up about the Indomitable Court. There was a real risk of her not being fated with the inheritance of the Left Imperial Palace. As to whether it was because of lacking affinity or lacking talent, it was hard to say.

This was the reality of cultivation. The Multiverse wasn't lacking for hard-working and dedicated cultivators. Yet few even reached Hegemony, let alone the higher grades. It was hard to say why some managed to continue climbing while others found themselves stuck, even though they outwardly seemed of similar backgrounds. Talent, dedication, opportunities, luck. Not a single piece could be missing, or you'd get dragged under by the river of fate.

Cultivation was ultimately to go against the natural order, to steal from the Heavens. How could it be easy?

Zac could only hope that Joanna would keep going and not give up on herself and her path. Her situation was a tribulation of a sort, one of the heart. Either she would emerge stronger or lose her direction, most likely killing her momentum. It was not something his wealth or treasures could solve, and he wasn't qualified to do more than give some words of encouragement.

He was supposed to teleport back to the border of the Million Gates Territory by this point, to deal with Jaol and the other recruits Ogras had picked up for his 'Shadewar Armada.' But he felt suffocated after seeing Joanna, like he was drowning. He felt a desperate need to push back against fate, so he set course for Ensolus.

To this day, not a single person had passed the final level of the Gates of Rebirth, no matter if it was through the Gate of Life or the Gate of Death. Even the fifth layer seemed out of reach, with less than five entries on each ladder. The final layer was regarded as an impossibility, a hoax to punish hubris.

That would change today.