

The Fall 841

Chapter 841: The Path Forward

Saying that he could save the planet was pretty bombastic, but Zac was somewhat certain he could make it happen. The reason he was late was just to make sure he could put forth his proposal. But first, he needed to make these flighty ghosts and the demons trust him.

“You don’t have to worry about this being some ploy. I don’t need to play any games – if I wanted to, I could simply eradicate both you and the demons now that I’m back,” Zac added. “My strength is my truth.”

His words could be seen as a threat, yet he could sense both the demons and some of the ghosts relaxing somewhat. A few of the demons even looked at him with reverent eyes, their stares creeping him out a little bit. Then again, he had read up a bit on the Mavai, and he knew that his Branch of the Kalpataru must be extremely attractive to a species whose elite warriors had Life-attuned constitutions.

A sudden shake that gripped the whole courtyard made Zac freeze in place, and he felt how the odd energies around him grow erratic. It was an extremely weird sensation, almost the opposite of the Twilight Ocean. There was both life and death in the air, yet they refused to mix. They were like two oils forming a chaotic and everchanging mix, where people had to wear specially designed arrays to cultivate.

In return for the chaos, the energy was weirdly animated, and it was apparently quicker to cultivate in this place than normal as long as you managed to filter the energy. For Zac himself, he could simply rely on the same method here as he did in the Twilight Ocean; use one half of the energy for himself while his [Void Heart] transformed the other half.

“Now, let’s finish this summit before this blasted planet falls apart,” Zac sighed.

“You are the Lord of the Atwood Empire we’ve been hearing about. The Deviant Asura,” the leading demon said with a glimmer in his eyes. “I am delighted to finally meet you, warchief. I am Ra’Klid, the current leader of the Mavai. My son visited the Tower of Eternity three years ago. You are the one who left that tree in the center?”

“That was me,” Zac nodded as his Tower of Eternity-title appeared in front of him, drawing loud exclamations from demons and ghosts alike.

Most likely, this was the most powerful title anyone on this world had ever seen.

“They really spoke the truth. It is an honor standing in front of such a warrior. My shameful son only reached the latter half of the third floor. He said he couldn’t imagine how someone could reach the ninth,” the demon praised before he looked around. “There is another one, yes? Some king of the undead?”

Zac inwardly laughed, feeling that this demon was a bit interesting. Ra’Klid even reminded him a bit of Ogras; a crafty mind surrounded by meatheads. Not that demons were stupid, it was just that most of their subraces preferred straightforward communication – like an axe through a skull.

“Arcaz is dealing with some other matters, but we are both back,” Zac said before turning to the ghosts. “For now, send your soldiers back and have them return my people. Meanwhile, we’ll resume this meeting.”

‘We don’t seem to have any casualties from this engagement, only a lot of wounded,’ Vilari’s voice appeared in Zac’s mind again. ‘Looking at it now, it really seems they were planning on holding back until Eomid disrupted the connection to Earth. No unforgivable sins have been committed either over the past years.’

Zac glanced in Vilari’s direction, knowing what the mentalist was getting at. She wanted him to go easy on the Undead, most likely so that they could become an asset down the road. Zac wasn’t usually in the business of just forgiving someone who attacked his people, but he ultimately trusted in her judgment.

A moment later, the spectral army was gone, leaving a befuddled guard who wasn’t sure what to do. However, after a few barks from the remaining leaders, order was restored. A new table had replaced the one that had been destroyed, and the leaders of the three factions once more sat down, though Zac was the one who represented his side this time around.

“So, as you probably know, I am Zachary Atwood, ruler of the Atwood Empire. I have just returned after a cultivation journey, so I am not up to date with all the details of this world. But I know the broad strokes,” Zac began.

It turned out that his real identity had finally been exposed not long after he left, and all of the Zecia Sector knew his surname was Atwood rather than Piker. It was one of the first things mentioned in the missives, and his people believed it was the result of some unaffiliated citizen of Earth choosing to spill the beans in return for a payout upon visiting the Tower of Eternity.

His name being exposed was honestly a matter of time, and it ultimately didn’t matter. Zac had already confirmed there were no curses or karmic skills that worked from just having a name. Besides, he could still keep reinventing himself every time he left Earth by changing his face. It was, however, a reminder that not even Earthlings could be trusted, and he would have to make his preparations watertight for when Earth finally got assimilated.

Until he reached Monarchy himself, Earth would be a weak point of his, and he needed to make sure it was protected or hidden away.

“This world is about to collapse, and there are no easy solutions. The Kingdom of Raun chose war,” Zac said as he glanced at the wraiths who shuddered nervously. “Meanwhile, the Mavai chose to sit on the sidelines. Trust is the biggest issue, where you are unable to believe in our promises.”

“There was no consensus,” Carva, the Ghost Queen, hurriedly said. “We wanted to avoid war if possible, but with our whole race on the line...”

“No matter. I can understand your position, seeing as I have undead under my banner as well. I probably would have made the same choice as Eomid did. After all, I was the one who personally slaughtered most of the factions who invaded Earth a decade ago, when we were the ones in your current situation,” Zac said, which seemed to have calmed the ghosts down a bit.

Zac extending an olive branch didn't mean he had completely put the matter of the attack behind him. He had faith that Vilari and the others would've pulled through even with this scheme, considering Nexus Hubs weren't something you could just break willy-nilly.

He could also sense the powerful spiritual fluctuations coming from the mentalist next to him. Knowing she possessed two Dao Branches, she should have eventually been able to defeat these forcibly raised Hegemons. However, doing so in an instant might have required some drastic means akin to him using his remnants.

Zac couldn't bear to see her overdraft and damage her soul after what he went through with Alea. Even if she survived, something that could harm her cultivation or even her potential. Him stepping in like that might have cost some warriors breakthroughs in the heat of battle, but the Multiverse didn't lack deadly encounters. The safety of his people came first, and he couldn't just sit idly by even after capturing Eomid.

Of course, Zac would have people investigate this insurrection further, no matter how subservient these two Hegemons acted right now. There might be more instigators hiding in the shadows, ready to strike at a moment's weakness or when he was off-world dealing with his other matters.

That was true for both sides, not only the ghosts.

The demons had chosen to put up a smiling front, but Zac would be a fool to completely trust them. They would be monitored just the same, to make sure there were no threats to him, his people, or Port Atwood. But no matter what he found, he wouldn't condemn a whole population just based on the actions of a few leaders at the top.

Part of it was that he did sympathize with their situation since Earth went through the same thing just a few years before them. In a sense, they were companions in suffering. But there was another reason this incursion still wasn't over; Port Atwood desperately needed soldiers. War was coming, and Earth would not even make up a single squad in an inter-sector war.

The bigger and more powerful his faction grew, the better positioned they would all be down the road.

The population of these two factions was slightly below Earth's, but their civilizations grew up with Cosmic Energy and Miasma. So even if their numbers couldn't match the more populous Humans, their armies were larger, even if Zac included the Zhix hordes. These armies weren't too impressive right now since they still relied on the low-quality heritages they had formed pre-integration, but with time, that would change.

Just like the forces of Port Atwood.

"Your hesitation is justified. I got the quest as well when I entered this world," Zac continued as he looked around. "With one thought, we could drain this whole planet if given control. And even if we honor our deal, there are no guarantees we'll be able to save this world. But what if I can save this world right now, before you even need to make a decision?"

He was talking about the twinned Realm Spirits in his Spatial Ring. Three days had passed already since he returned, yet he only appeared on the Ensolus Continent just now. It was all because he needed to

visit Earth's core. Reading about the shakes that threatened to rip this world apart was pretty ominous, and Zac was worried the same thing would happen back home sooner or later.

If he had to choose between saving Earth and this planet, he would choose Earth every time. However, Earth had been life-death attuned even longer than this one, yet not a single issue had cropped up. It made Zac wonder if the System had done something differently on Earth.

The journey wasn't very complicated thanks to Triv. The butler had used his incorporeal form to go deeper and deeper to help Port Atwood investigate the state of Earth, and he had installed teleporters in the depths. It was too troublesome and expensive to place one beneath the magmatic mantle, but Zac still managed to reach over ten times deeper than the Underworld in just a few minutes.

The actual core was quite far from the deepest outpost, but he had only needed to spend just over a day in the mantle before he got his answer. The Twinned Realm Spirits had stirred, and it was followed by a sense of fear. Fear coming from the depths of the planet.

It turned out that Zac had risked it all for nothing, with Earth's situation already dealt with by the System or by chance. There was already a spirit residing in Earth's core, making the twinned spirits in his ring superfluous. After all, a native spirit was probably a superior fit for Earth compared to implanting the two Realm Spirits he had picked up.

Thus, he had a simple solution for this world, one that shouldn't put Earth at risk, considering the twinned spirits' dubious origin. He was somewhat certain Qi'Sar had really died back when the Twilight Ocean collapsed, but who knew what kind of means that ancient being had. What if a wisp of Qi'Sar's soul hid inside the Realm Spirits, and he infused them with his homeworld? That would be akin to inviting disaster into his home.

It was better to use it on this new world, especially since it would fall apart if nothing changed anyway. Sure, the Realm Spirits might turn into some powerful life-death item upon their death, but if Zac was unwilling to use the treasure on Earth, he was even more hesitant about using them on himself.

Zac had been looking for a world to place his Limited Trial on anyway, the reward for his Sovereignty-quest chain. This way, he could even gauge outsiders' reaction to a life-death world while he used powerful arrays to obscure Earth. If it turned into a neutral trading hub akin to Twilight Harbor, then great.

If this place was targeted because of it, then he would have to tighten the security around Earth even further.

"What!" Ra'Klid blurted, dragging Zac out of his thoughts. "Warchief, you have the means to heal this world? Without the quest of the Ruthless Heavens?"

"With both elements remaining?" the Ghost King added.

"That's right," Zac nodded. "I have found a solution to what ails this world, a way for it to stay on as is, without one element swallowing the other. That way, the main source of conflict is dealt with, and we can all look toward the future instead."

"How is it possible?" Ra'Klid asked with glimmering eyes.

"That, I cannot tell you. It involves some high-grade secrets that will only harm everyone involved if spread. But you should see the results quickly after a short transitional phase," Zac said.

Honestly, Zac had no idea if what he said was true. What did he know about Realm Spirits? If not for there being one in the Twilight Ocean, he still wouldn't have known they existed. However, the shakes should stop as soon as the realm spirits integrated with the core. Hopefully, the process would be quick and painless, which would allow him to quickly move on to his other matters.

"What are your requests?" Aouvi asked, immediately getting to the crux of the matter.

"Nothing comes for free," Zac nodded. "You cannot imagine the cost of stabilizing a life-death world. Truthfully, this whole planet is only worth a fraction compared to the solution I prepared."

"Essentially, Vilari's offer still stands," Zac said. "Both your factions will swear allegiance to the Atwood Empire, and we will name this planet Ensolus after this central continent. The details of the deal will still be negotiated by Vilari and her people as they are better versed in those matters."

"Why are you doing this?" Carva hesitated. "If it is so expensive to heal this world..."

"Two reasons," Zac said. "First, I want to turn this planet into the front-facing side of my Empire, a commercial hub that outsiders can visit after the Assimilation."

"While your world will hide in the shadows," Ra'Klid concluded.

"Exactly," Zac said, not bothering to hide anything. "My identity is sensitive, so I want to hide my planet until I have the strength to protect it. This will shift some of the danger to Ensolus. However, with risk come opportunities. This can drastically improve the prosperity of this world. I will even place an extremely valuable inheritance site on this planet, something your warriors can visit in exchange for a fee. These kinds of things can turn planets into money-making machines that benefit all their citizens."

"I guess it's not much different compared to a normal assimilation," Carva hesitated. "We do not possess the means to hide our world in either case."

Zac only nodded in response before continuing. "As for the second reason, war is coming to Zecia."

"I am not sure how much your people have managed to find out about the bigger world, but you should have been able to gather some snippets of information by now. Simply put, a massive war is about to break out. Standing to the side is not an option, so I need to bolster my forces," Zac said. "The war will break out before our Assimilation, meaning we will stand alone unless we join hands."

"War against who?" Ra'Klid asked with confusion.

"I don't know the details yet," Zac said, glancing at Vilari.

"Something called a space gate has appeared in our sector, connecting our part of space with another one. Normally, it's impossible to travel such distances, but this gate makes it possible. We do not yet know the details of these invaders either, but early indications are the whole sector will soon be embroiled in a massive struggle," the mentalist explained.

"So, what is your answer?" Zac asked.

“The Kingdom of Raun has already surrendered,” Carva said with a bow. “We will accede to whatever demands you have, and we will pay restitution for our actions today. We will discuss the details with your followers.”

“Good,” Zac nodded. “And you don’t need to worry about the Undead Empire. Arcaz Black is a pureblood Draugr with connections of some of the peak clans of the Empire Heartlands. With one word from him, the Kavriel Clan of the Zecia Sector will invite the Kingdom of Raun with open arms, no questions asked.”

Once again, Zac was kind of stretching the truth. It all depended on Catheya’s performance after he fled the Twilight Ascent. If all worked out, she would have spoken for him with the Umbri’Zi Clan and perhaps even the Abyssal Shores. In either case, it would be effortless for them to make some arrangements with a Draugr border clan that could barely be considered pureblooded.

Catheya and he had worked out a few methods to communicate through relay after he returned to Zecia, but he hadn’t been able to check things out yet. Besides, he needed to plan some countermeasures before trying to reconnect with the Draugr Scion. After all, there was a distinct possibility they chose to place the blame of the chaos in the Twilight Harbor on him, an unaffiliated Draugr.

Perhaps some Monarch was lying in wait the moment Zac went to check his messages.

“You lead by strength, and your Dao carries the true divinity of legend,” Ra’Klid added after exchanging a few looks with the elders next to him. “We have no issues joining under your banner the moment this world is healed, provided you continue to lead with truth and honor.”

“Then today’s meeting is over,” Zac nodded, happy things were dealt with so quickly.

This was why Zac made such a grand entrance, putting his Dao and Killing Intent on full blast to the point he even activated [Spiritual Void]. With some shock and awe, a lot of annoyances could be side-stepped. “Both your delegations are welcome to stay either here or camp outside while we iron out the details of this merger. After the quakes have stopped, I will visit you both, and you will officially join the Atwood Empire.”

“You have no idea how lucky you are,” Vilari smiled from the side. “Your future paths just grew quite a lot wider.”