

The Fall 847

Chapter 847: Call to Arms

"The information about the nature of the beast tide is lacking, but the situation has to be grave," the Sky Gnome explained. "It's the first time in recent memory they allow outsiders into their domain."

"Most of those who have entered have failed to return," Vikram added. "Casualties at the battlefronts are reported to be extremely high."

"And people are people still going?" Zac asked dubiously.

"Absolutely. The Void Gate is filthy rich, and their rewards are great. The shortsighted warriors are just doing it for the wealth, while the better-informed wandering cultivators see this as a final opportunity to temper themselves before the war breaks out," the Sky Gnome explained. "After all, no matter how harsh a beast tide is, it cannot compare to the cruelties of war."

"Anything new on the Ferric Worldeaters?" Zac asked.

"I'm afraid not. The only description the Void Gate has provided is that some of the beasts are intangible and that some of the fighting will take place in space, but specialized equipment will be provided," Calrin said as he handed over a couple of information crystals.

"Intangible? Ghosts?" Zac muttered with confusion.

"Not necessarily. There are all kinds of energy-based life-forms out there," Calrin shrugged. "But I haven't been able to find out anymore. I suspect those who join the missions are bound by contracts," Calrin sighed. "Either that or the information houses are leery of angering the Void Priestess. But you might find out more if you head over."

"Alright," Zac nodded. "Do you know of any way for me to masquerade as an Early Hegemon? Or at least a Half-Step D-grade Cultivator?"

"It sounds like you need an Aura Modulator," Vikram offered.

"A what?" Zac asked.

"He's right, for once," Calrin reluctantly agreed. "I'm guessing you're already as strong as a Hegemon, but your aura is clearly that of a peak elite E-grade cultivator? If so, you need a modulator."

"What does it do?"

"It cannot change the strength of your Aura, but it can change the way it appears and continuously infuse it with your energy. Therefore, only elites can use it," the gnome explained. "As long as you have the attributes, a good modulator will allow you to appear as a Hegemon, though it will gradually drain you of Cosmic Energy while your aura is on display."

"They're not very useful for most people. Few can use them, and the ones who do, have no reason for doing so," Vikram added.

Zac nodded in agreement. It generally wasn't very useful to appear as a weak Hegemon compared to an E-grade Heaven's Chosen. Even if the latter was a grade lower, they'd receive better treatment almost

anywhere. Normally, Zac would rather hide his aura if he wanted to go incognito, but he feared that wouldn't be possible this time if he wanted to sneak inside as a mercenary.

"Try to get me one of those things, the higher quality the better," Zac said.

"No problem," Calrin smiled. "While most things are hard to acquire right now, niche items like these are still collecting dust in various auction houses. You should be able to come and collect one in a week or so."

"Perfect," Zac nodded as he took out the rest of his spatial treasures. "Then I'll leave the rings with you. To be clear, I was stuck in a miniature world for five years, which was more than enough time to memorize all the items. So no funny business."

"Don't listen to this screeching little monkey," Calrin said as he waved at Vikram with annoyance. "The Thayer Consortia always act above-board."

"If you say so," Zac snorted before leaving the Sky Gnome to complete the tally.

Zac donned his presence-hiding cowl again as he walked out from Thayer Consortia, his thoughts already having shifted from his treasures to the Void Gate. The more he thought about it, the more suspicious it seemed. How could a faction like the Void Gate find themselves pressed by a beast tide? With the Void Priestess and the Void Monastery secluded at the heart of the Gate, it should be one of the safest places in the Zecia Sector.

Was there a conspiracy at play? Did the Void Gate have some specific purpose in luring wandering cultivators to their side? Or was it related to the war? Zac shook his head, knowing he wouldn't get any closer to an answer from here. He would simply have to head over to Salosar and check things out himself. If it seemed safe, he'd enter under a pseudonym, using that modulator thing to pretend to be a powerful Half-Step cultivator. That should provide him access to the inner sections of the Void Gate without standing out.

If things seemed too sketchy, he'd risk it and send word to Leyara.

Having made his choice, Zac continued down the road toward the main government building, intending to visit Abby next to confirm some details about the Assimilation and operations. However, he suddenly stopped upon spotting a familiar building just ahead.

It was a three-story pub that looked almost exactly the same as before. The only difference was that the surrounding houses had been removed, replaced by a small park where some tables were set. There weren't too many guests considering it was just lunchtime, but there were a couple of groups having a beer under the shade of the trees.

Zac hesitated a few seconds, but he ultimately chose to enter, keeping his cowl on. Thankfully, there was only a single couple sitting indoors, and they were too engrossed with each other to notice any other guests. So Zac simply sat down at his usual spot, taking off his hood.

"Hey, no spells in the bar, I've told you peop-" Ryan muttered as he looked up from a ledger, but he froze with shock when he recognized Zac's face. "It's you!"

"I thought your place would be bigger by now," Zac smiled.

"I, ah," Ryan stuttered a few seconds before he found his wits. "Well, I thought about it, but I eventually gave up on the idea. I like this small and cozy atmosphere. Running a business empire sounds like a pain in the ass."

"Won't it affect your cultivation?" Zac asked curiously.

"I have kind of shifted," Ryan shrugged. "I focus more on the brewing than the barkeeping nowadays. As long as I manage to brew better and better attribute-enhancing mead or liquor, I will keep progressing."

"Let me see the results of your hard work then," Zac laughed, suddenly in the mood for some native brews after being locked in the Orom World for years.

Ryan nodded, and he hesitated a bit before taking up a miniature barrel that couldn't contain more than a couple of pints. It had a golden stopper, and the barkeep gingerly poured what looked a lot like an amber ale into a glass.

"Here you go, one glass of 'Hatchetman's Delight'," Ryan coughed, looking a bit embarrassed.

"That's its name?" Zac grimaced, no longer sure if he wanted it.

Still, it emitted a tantalizing aroma, prompting Zac to take a reluctant swig.

It felt like cutting flames were trickling down his throat, unleashing a conflagration in his belly the moment it had been swallowed. Even Zac with his Vitality passing 13,000 felt a bit tipsy, and the feeling refused to completely go away even after circulating his Cosmic Energy. Meanwhile, Zac felt full of power, and his veins pulsated as though he had taken a berserking treasure.

"What the hell," Zac wheezed. "There are people in Port Atwood who can drink this and not keel over?"

"Well, no," Ryan said as he scratched his head with a wry smile. "You would be the first one to taste it and remain conscious. So, how did it taste? Did you get any boosts?"

Zac shot the barkeep a glare before taking a look at his status screen.

"I got a boost of 350 raw Strength and 200 raw Vitality," Zac said after forcing his drifting mind to focus for a second. "That's pretty impressive for a concoction. Are there any side effects, except the intoxication? Can it be stacked with other methods?"

"It's liquid courage, so to speak, so it should be stackable with berserking treasures and skill," Ryan said. "But the strain on your body would increase. As for side effects, I haven't observed anything except a splitting headache when the test sub- eh, customers, wake up. With your constitution, it should be fine though."

"Alright, can I put in an order for a couple of casks? And if you can do something similar with field rations or dried meat, I want that as well," Zac said. "A few thousand kilos would suffice."

"Thousand? Kilos?" Ryan blurted. "Are you planning on providing rations to the army?"

"Something like that," Zac smiled. "Can it be done?"

In reality, the rations were all for himself. With [Adamance of Eoz] constantly running, he was always a bit hungry, in contrast to most E-grade cultivators who barely needed to eat by the time they reached

the peak of the grade. After a harsh battle, he would almost keel over if he didn't eat something quickly. If he could get some food made by actual professionals like Ryan, he hopefully wouldn't need to eat as much and as often.

"I mainly focus on drinks nowadays, but I do have a few recipes and a meat-searing skill," Ryan said.

"But I know a good chef who has a similar focus as I. We can team up for this order."

"Even better," Zac smiled. "Only High or Peak E-grade meat, if possible, and dishes you can eat on the go with one hand. I'll get you whatever you need."

"No problem," Ryan nodded. "It will take a few days with those kinds of quantities. In return, could you do me a favor?"

"Sure," Zac nodded. "If it's within my power."

"It should be," Ryan said with a hushed volume. "It's about Lily."

"Who?" Zac asked, completely blanking out on the name.

"The pet shop owner I introduced you to. The one you recruited to the Academy," Ryan sighed. "I think something is wrong with her."

"Wrong how?" Zac frowned, finally remembering who he was talking about. It was the young girl he had headhunted for Alyn to turn into a beastmaster with the long-term goal of taking control of the Ayn Hive. "She didn't die or have a mental break, right?"

"No, but something has been... off about her the past few months," Ryan whispered. "I can't pinpoint it, but her eyes sometimes make my hair stand on end. She mentioned some sort of insects long ago... I think something went wrong in her cultivation, almost like she's possessed?"

"I'll look into it," Zac nodded. "There's an extremely skilled Mentalist in my army, though she's off-world. As soon as she returns to Earth, we'll see if there's something wrong with Lily."

Zac wasn't an expert on the subject, but even he knew there were dangers related to forming links with beasts. For example, if the beast became too powerful, it could break the mental fetters and attack its trainer. Was it perhaps possible the controller and controlled could swap places? Zac realized they might have overestimated themselves when trying to control a being like a Hivequeen.

It was literally an entity that controlled thousands of minions with their powerful mind. Even if the Hivequeen was just an infant that hadn't even gained sentience when Zac left for Twilight Harbor, it sounded like something had changed during his time in the Orom World. If so, it could pose a big threat to Port Atwood as long as he or the other elites weren't around to deal with it.

The prospect of Lily having become a puppet weighed on both his and Ryan's conscience, and the conversation grew a bit stilted after that. Soon enough, Zac stood up and excused himself, once more heading for the government building. But he didn't even have time to take ten steps before stopping because he received a slight mental nudge.

"It's always something," Zac muttered, but his eyes were full of excitement rather than annoyance. Any thoughts of meeting up with Abby were already gone as he flashed away, going so far as to activate [Earthstrider] as he passed through Port Atwood like a blur.

He didn't even bother entering his compound through a gate, simply opting to jump straight over the inner wall, passing through the killing arrays thanks to his unique command token. Just a few moments later, he stood in the courtyard of his own manor, where Triv already stood waiting.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you, I figured young master would want to know," the butler said.

"Of course, thank you," Zac nodded as he walked into the death-attuned zone of his courtyard.

The nudge in his mind earlier had come from Triv using the mental communication skill of the butler class. Triv had simply informed him that powerful fluctuations were coming from within his courtyard, and it didn't take a genius to figure out what was going on – Alea was finally ready to come out from her cocoon.

His heart beat like a drum as he entered the illusion array, almost immediately coming face-to-face with the large obelisk he had placed there almost two weeks ago by now. It was much smaller compared to before, having shrunk to just a thin layer covering the coffin. And the coffin was clearly in the final phase of its evolution as it released powerful deathly pulses that shocked Zac with their purity.

Was it because of that odd egg Alea had swallowed just as she entered the void?

A quiet crackling broke the silence that otherwise covered his courtyard as shavings gradually fell from the crystal. Cracks were spreading as well until the obelisk completely shattered from a massive eruption of pure death and a cold cutting force that even managed to leave some bleeding gashes on Zac's arms.

Left behind was a coffin that was both familiar and foreign at once. It still had the same general appearance as before – a black coffin with numerous engravings and chains holding it together. However, its edges were no longer smooth, instead replaced by extremely detailed carvings that seemed to be both ornamental and not. They didn't make up any fractals or arrays, or any other type of legible script Zac could recognize.

But they actually contained a hint of Oblivion.

The closest thing that Zac had ever seen was right in his own body; the patterns on his right shoulder – the ones that had been formed after Oblivion reformed [Cyclic Strike] three times over. The carvings on [Love's Bond] were still quite indistinct though, and Zac probably wouldn't have realized their origin if he wasn't marked the same way himself.

The second difference was that the arrays on the lid had changed. The circular array on the top remained, though it now looked a bit like a porthole. Swirling darkness could be seen within the array, like he was looking at a gateway to the abyss. Meanwhile, the wreath-like arrays were gone, replaced by one vertical line stretching from the circle all the way to the bottom, along with three horizontal lines cutting through it on the lower half.

As for the chains, they were now pitch-black and matte, except for the endless number of patterns that covered the links. It was the runes that had appeared after being marked in the Twilight Chasm, but they had been refined, their meaning deepened. Zac even felt they contained a lot of truths at the level of his own Dao branches.

“How do I look?” a familiar voice echoed from behind, and Zac’s heart almost threatened to jump out of his mouth as he spun around.

It was her – in the flesh.