

The Fall 932

Chapter 932: Upgrade

'You jerk, I know you escaped that space fish over a year ago, and you only contact me now? Every week I record these things like a fool. The elders even started thinking I was lying when I said I knew you. In either case, I have good news. Everything worked out even better than I expected. I even got to visit the Abyssal Shores as a reward for introducing you.

'You have to see that place – it's amazing. And I don't think it's possible to truly unlock our heritage without visiting the Abyssal Lake. It's paradise, though it can also be dangerous, even for Draugr.

'There have also been some new developments, and our representatives really want to discuss some matters with you. It's not convenient to speak like this, but I think you know what I'm talking about. Couldn't even wait one year after coming home before you started creating waves, huh?'

'I know what you're thinking, but I hope you believe me when I say we have strict orders from above to be as accommodating as possible and not to antagonize you in any way. We are ready to negotiate in good faith, and we are willing to agree with any security measures you feel necessary to meet with us.'

'In either case, I look forward to seeing you again. I think you'll be shocked to see how much I've progressed.'

Zac wordlessly looked at the communication crystal as he went over the message. As expected, the Undead Empire seemed very interested in Ultom. They already had the Heart of the Empire, but why be satisfied with one Eternal Heritage when you could have two? Zac could understand why the Undead Empire was so interested. Judging by the bursts of unattuned knowledge Ultom had provided so far, this one might be one of the few Heritages that suited the Undead Empire apart from one dealing with death.

The message also contained some valuable hints, probably left intentionally by Catheya. For example, she had said 'the elders' rather than master or 'my family.' In other words, it looked like she was accompanied by someone other than her Revenant master or some elder from clan Sharva'Zi. It served as a small warning, even if she had said the Undead Empire wanted to discuss things in good faith.

Not only that, but judging by her opening sentence, it sounded like she not only knew about the Orom, but had arrived in Zecia even before he triggered the quest for the Left Imperial Palace. According to Iz, they had only found out about Ultom because of some sort of galactic ripples that appeared during his first vision. So Ultom wasn't the only reason they were interested in him.

It was a small comfort since it meant he possibly had two things the Undead Empire needed. It was an advantage he might be able to use, compared to the other outside factions where his access to Ultom was his only redeeming factor. It didn't solve the main issue, though, that there were huge risks associated with bartering with these kinds of factions.

Still, Zac felt it was worth meeting up with Catheya, and not just because it would be nice to see her after over five years. Risks were unavoidable on the path of cultivation, and he knew trouble would come looking for him even if he hid away here on Earth. Better to take charge of his own fate, and the Undead Empire seemed one of the best options to ally with.

Especially considering they probably had brought some nice gifts to bribe him with.

Opening his remaining Draugr Hidden Nodes was one of his goals before breaking through, and Catheya's handlers were by far his best options to accomplish that. He just needed to devise a plan that would allow him to navigate these muddy waters before setting out.

"Is everything alright?" Calrin asked curiously.

"It's good," Zac nodded before taking out a blank Communication Crystal.

He imprinted a short answer that he was back after dealing with some things and needed a couple of months to recover before meeting with Catheya. Zac didn't offer any details or pinpoint any specific location, though. He would have to discuss the matters with the others to see if they had any ideas.

Perhaps they could meet near one of the main factions of the Kaldran Strait? Or in the Million Gates Territory, perhaps?

"Send this back with the method," Zac said after placing the communication crystal into the same box and locking it with his Cosmic Energy.

Calrin nodded, and the box was gone a few seconds later. It looked like the people on the other side were extremely eager for them to complete the trade the instant it appeared. With that, Zac was done with his objectives at the Thayer Consortia. But just as he was about to leave, Zac had another idea and stopped in his tracks.

"Is there something else?" Calrin asked curiously.

"See if you can find any information about these sigils," Zac said as he took out a slightly bloodied parchment. "These ones are slightly modified from the original design not to give anything away, so just look for something similar. Be discrete, for your eyes only, and don't let it trace back to us."

It was one of the more detailed drawings he had lifted from the bodies of the Kan'Tanu invaders, depicting the slightly warped versions of the Left Imperial Palace and the nine subsidiary courts. Most things indicated the seals originated from the Million Gates Territory, but Zac figured it wouldn't hurt casting a wider net. After all, he got nothing when Ogras and Iz picked up signals to their respective pieces in Zecia's patch of the Endless Storm.

Perala had already warned him that the final piece was in the System's hands and would be used as a carrot during the war. Of course, the fact that the Perala Janodrok and the Vigil weren't hostile didn't mean she was implicitly telling the truth. But even if what the Void Priestess said was correct, there was still one piece out there that he needed to get his hands on.

"Oh, don't worry, we already are," Calrin nodded.

"What?" Zac said, completely blanking out.

"These are the runes your followers found in the ruins on the other planet, no?" Calrin said with confusion. "We have been making discrete inquiries about them for quite some time. Many of them seem to differ from what Miss Thompson provided before, though."

"Ah?" Zac said, barely able to keep his voice stable. "You're saying these match the Ensolus Ruins?"

“Some of them, yes,” Calrin nodded. “We have not found anything that can shed some light on the origins of the Ensolus ruins, though.”

“Alright,” Zac said, his heart beating like a drum. “Then pause the search for now and seal any knowledge of these things.”

“Oh?” Calrin, confusion evident on his face from the quick turns, but he understood the severity. “Of course, I will deal with it personally.”

Zac nodded in thanks, and he was out of the doors a second later, making a beeline for the closest Teleportation Array. A few minutes later, he appeared in a private Teleportation Chamber prepared in the depths of Fort Atwood on Ensolus. When he appeared, he gasped in surprise as a familiar ripple made his mind blank.

It really was here, the third piece for his quest.

Zac took a deep breath to stabilize his agitated mind as he looked in the direction of the Ensolus Ruins, barely able to believe his sudden windfall. It felt like he suddenly could see a straight path toward Hegemony, the final roadblocks removed without him lifting so much as a finger. The only thing he needed now was time.

Ogras joked about treasures falling from the sky around him, but it almost seemed true this time. How was this possible? Fate? Or had the System intentionally put those ruins on this planet?

But why hadn't he noticed anything the first time he appeared on Ensolus? He had even been a lot closer to the Ensolus Ruins back when visiting the mines with Ilvere. Was there something special about the Void Star that had been needed to trigger the quest, or perhaps the connection? Was it because the Void Star held the connection to the Lost Plane at the time?

That weird spatial star was actually linked to the Million Gates Territory and the Endless Storm where the Left Imperial Palace probably resided, while Ensolus was shielded-off by the System for another 100 years. Or perhaps it was the proximity to the Lost Plane through the Mystic Realm.

The ripple was calling him, telling him to rush over and claim his prize. But Zac eventually shook his head and teleported back to Earth. The moment he returned, he sent a message to Vilari, asking her to stop any expeditions into the ruin and seal it off for now. He wasn't worried anyone would steal his opportunity, but he feared those disintegration pulses would get people killed.

Besides, it was possible there were more pieces over there than just his own, considering the ruins were huge. He didn't know what the criteria for people like Ogras to get the quest were, but it was perhaps possible to stumble onto a remnant through dumb luck. If possible, Zac wanted to reserve those opportunities for his most trusted people rather than random explorers from his army or the two native races.

As for himself, he wasn't in any hurry. He still had a lot of room to improve on his own, and he wanted to use the third burst of clarity to finally create a perfect blueprint when his foundations were as stable as they could be. In other words, just before heading to the Perennial Vastness. Using it right now would only help him decipher the remaining chapters of the Book of Duality, which would be a huge waste.

Of course, he would head over later to properly seal off whatever temple that held his piece, just to make sure nothing unexpected happened to it. For now, he had other pressing matters to deal with. Zac took a calming breath to clear his head before returning to his compound, where he set course for the shipyard.

Zac didn't even have time to greet Rahm at the reception before he heard the deep thuds of metallic legs approach from the back rooms.

"Brat, you got it?" Karunthel asked with excitement as he entered the reception.

"I got it," Zac smiled as he handed over the Beast Pouch. "A spatial affinity Worldeater, like you ordered."

"Not bad, not bad. It will be nice not to be in charge of the crappiest shipyard in the whole Multiverse," Karunthel grinned as he looked Zac up and down. "Seems you had a few gains of yourself, even if you look a bit worse for the wear. Getting ready to evolve?"

"I'm ahead of schedule, but there are a few more steps I need to complete," Zac said after some thought. "How long until everything is dealt with?"

"It's a quest reward, so the shipyard will be replaced quickly. Ten days at most," Karunthel said. "The ship would have been ready along with the shipyard, but that only holds true for the Early-level hull right now. The upgrades would take two months, depending on which model and what modifications you want. Have you decided what to do for that one?"

"I have," Zac nodded. "I want the Yphelion model."

"What, the scout ship?" Karunthel blurted, looking visibly disappointed. "I thought better of you, kid. You sure you don't want me to make you the destroyer instead? I can guarantee your name will spread far and wide after your first engagement."

"That's exactly what I want to avoid," Zac said with a roll of his eyes. "The situation has gotten a bit complicated."

It wasn't an impulse decision to go with the scout vessel, even if it wasn't what he had originally planned. Initially, the idea was to get the all-rounder ship and modify it a bit to suit the chaotic region of the Million Gates Territory. Compared to most vessels in Zecia, it would have been able to shine no matter if you talked speed or defenses.

But things had changed when he heard a bunch of powerful factions was coming over. Those people would probably have high-quality vessels, even if the System restrained their grade. The advantage provided by the Creators wouldn't be as big. Not only that, but Zac felt the risk of accidentally running into Monarchs was suddenly a lot higher with various factions scouring the Million Gates Territory for clues to Ultom.

For now, it was just his people and the outsiders who knew the truth, but even the native factions were bound to catch on sooner or later. And no matter how impressive the work of the Iliax was, it was simply impossible for a Middle D-grade Cosmic Vessel to deal with even an Early Stage Monarch.

And while most Monarchs couldn't match up to Cosmic Vessels in terms of long-haul speed or their ability to pass through dimensional layers, they could teleport vast distances in quick bursts thanks to movement skills.

Zac had discussed the situation in the Million Gates Territory with both Pretty and Leyara at length, and he had ultimately concluded that the scouting ship was the best option for him in the short run. The Yphelion's defensive and offensive capabilities weren't particularly impressive, but the ship came with various other useful features.

Most important was its speed – the Yphelion was far quicker than the other two models. Furthermore, being a scouting ship, it could initiate dimensional jumps more frequently and with shorter delays. That could be the difference between life and death when a Monarch was bearing down on you.

Its scanners were also top-of-the-line, which would help spot and avoid enemy vessels long before the Yphelion was spotted. And finally, while its defenses wouldn't last long in large-scale space battles, they should hold up well enough against random encounters against Kan'Tanu scouts.

The Yphelion was even a decent option if you looked at it long-term. In the future, the ship would save Zac a lot of time when he needed to travel long distances. His goals would eventually take him out of Zecia, no matter if it was to find Kenzie or to continue his cultivation. In the open world, he didn't have access to the whole teleportation network as he did here, and he would probably have to spend years traveling through space.

The scouting vessel was almost three times as fast as the generalist vessel, which could shave off years when he needed to visit hard-to-reach-places. Routes that would take the massive carriers decades would only take a few months in the Yphelion. Of course, going at maximum speed was also pretty expensive, but Zac could easily stomach the cost by now.

"Alright then," Karunthel sighed. "I guess the Yphelion models are better suited for those chaotic regions you want to visit. And we could always add proper weaponry if you meet the requirements for further upgrades down the road."

"What kind of requirements is that?" Zac asked curiously.

With him having delivered the [Ferric Worldeater], the [Items for Karunthel]-questline was finally dealt with. However, that only upgraded the Shipyard to Early D-grade from what he understood, which was a far cry from the limits of that kind of facility.

"Who knows," the spider golem shrugged. "It's up to the Heavens. Come back when the upgrades are finished, and I'll see if you've met the requirements to get the second quest."

"Alright," Zac nodded. "By the way, can you build multiple Cosmic Vessels simultaneously?"

"Of course," Karunthel nodded. "The mass-produced models are much easier to construct. We can build ten or so at a time, and they take between one and three weeks to build. Why, do you want more ships?"

"Well, war is coming, so I've found some potential customers," Zac smiled.

“Finally, some real work,” Karunthel grinned. “But you should know, your Yphelion will take up all our capacity until it’s built.”

“Alright,” Zac slowly nodded. “I’m thinking we’ll build a round of showcase vessels for our prospective clients first while we finalize the plans for the Yphelion.”

“Sounds good,” Karunthel nodded. “Now, shoo, I want to begin upgrading this place. Come back in ten days.”

“Alright, have fun,” Zac smiled as he left for his compound.

He didn’t even reach the forest before a huge gleaming barrier sprung up around the whole shipyard, and a moment later, it was gone. It had been transported to a barren mountainous island at the edge of his archipelago that Abby had suggested before he left for the Void Gate. By now, the island had already been fitted with a teleporter with restricted access and powerful arrays to keep both beasts and explorers away.

With that, the most pressing issues had been dealt with. Abby and Adran had both sent him a bunch of messages with various issues of the Atwood Empire, ranging from proposals to expand the academy and found subsidiaries to small problems that had cropped up during the integration of the Mavai Demons and the Raun Spectrals.

But nothing required his immediate attention, so he returned to his cave to focus on his recovery. And with the third piece of the seal waiting for him on Ensolus, he would have to change his plans. He already had an idea the moment he felt the pulse, and it made more sense the more he thought about it.

He only wondered what the others would think upon hearing his decision.