

The Fall 953

Chapter 953: Uprising

Zac was planning on heading toward another conference room, but he stopped when he saw a familiar face below. It was Ibtep, looking out at a garden courtyard from a large window.

"You're still here?" Zac asked as he walked over. "Rhubat didn't call you?"

"No, I have no commitments apart from my farms nowadays. Did things go well?" Ibtep asked as they handed Zac a red larva that almost looked like a Jelly.

"I think so," Zac said, wryly smiling at the little grub struggling in his hand. "Is this one of your new breeds?"

"It is," Ibtep seriously nodded. "I've found tremendous joy in breeding new and exciting species on my farms. Unfortunately, my brethren have a narrow palate, and few of my latest inventions have had much success. So many interesting species and flavors have gone underappreciated, so I had an idea. If the Zhix refuse to expand their horizons, why not enter another market?"

"So, humans?" Zac grimaced.

"Exactly," Ibtep eagerly nodded. "There are so many of you. This is a new breed, designed with you humans in mind. I would love your input."

Zac looked down at the larva with some resignation before he bit down. However, his eyes immediately opened wide as an explosion of a familiar flavor entered his mouth, prompting him to eat the rest of the grub in one bite.

"Strawberries?"

"Exactly," Ibtep nodded eagerly. "It took some time, but I think I got quite close to the real thing. I would have kept going, but it turns out those berries are quite poisonous for us Zhix. I had to spend a week on the latrines while I taste-tested them."

"Well, the taste is there," Zac smiled. "You might need to... Repackage these things, though. Humans aren't used to eating larvae."

"What about these new races you've scrounged up? Do they enjoy tasty treats?" Ibtep said.

"Well, the ghosts definitely don't," Zac said. "The demons probably will, though."

"What about the corporeal unliving? Do they eat? Do they poop?" Ibtep asked eagerly.

"Only after reaching late E-grade," Zac said. "Undead enjoy scents, though. So if you can breed some fragrant critters, I'm sure they would like it."

"Interesting," Ibtep said with gleaming eyes.

Zac looked at the Zhix, remembering how he had been a fount of inexhaustible curiosity during their first meeting and the following days. Suddenly a thought struck him, and he made an impromptu decision.

"Rhubat is leaving Earth in a week or two. Most likely for a few years," Zac said.

"Oh?" Ibtep exclaimed. "Where to?"

"The depths of this sector, a place called the Million Gates Territory. If you want, you can join him. He'll be traveling with most of the elites of Port Atwood."

"A reconnaissance mission?" Ibtep asked.

"Among other things," Zac nodded. "They will also explore hidden realms in search of ways to gain strength before the war arrives. I thought your talents might be useful in such a mission."

"I am just a worm farmer nowadays," Ibtep hesitated, but Zac could see the Zhix was interested.

"Well, think it over and discuss it with Rhubat," Zac smiled. "I have to go. Thank you for the treat."

"Good luck," Ibtep bowed.

Zac nodded before turning toward his second appointment, but he did contact Ogras through his communicator on the way.

"Rhubat is joining you on your mission," Zac spoke into his communicator. "Maybe Ibtep as well."

"So you decided to clue those people in," Ogras commented on the other side. "But why the insect-peddler?"

"I don't know. Call it a hunch?" Zac said. "I felt that it's not necessarily the strongest who will get the inheritances, but those with affinity to it. Ibtep has a rare mindset and a class based on discovery. I didn't tell Ibtep about the heritage, though. I just felt Ibtep can be an asset to you, even if they don't end up getting a seal."

"Alright, I trust your instincts, and we have more than enough room aboard the vessel," Ogras said. "By the way, did your quest update from sharing the details with the big guy?"

"No," Zac grunted with annoyance. "I can't figure out what's going on with this thing."

"Well, we'll see how it goes," Ogras said. "By the way, the Sino-Indian alliance left in a huff with some others soon after you left the stage."

"I saw. We'll see how it goes," Zac sighed as he walked into a meeting room closer to the hall where the ambassadors were getting debriefed on the transition.

He made another call with his communicator, and Henry Marshall entered the room a moment later, along with an Atwood Hall employee who brought a tea set and some water.

"Your presence is something else these days," Henry nodded as he sat down. "Have you entered D-grade already?"

"Not yet," Zac said. "This time, I want to shore up my foundations a bit more. But I'll break through before the war starts."

"It's hard to believe your foundations can get any sturdier," Henry said with a shake of his head. "It's almost like you're a different species than the rest of us by this point."

"In a way, we're all a different species compared to before the integration," Zac sighed as he put some rare herbs into the tea kettle. The leaves immediately dissolved, and a fragrant aroma spread through the room. "How are you?"

"I'm getting along," Henry smiled. "The family is doing quite well, thanks to you."

"It's mostly your own work," Zac said as he poured Henry a cup.

This little ceremony had been common while he lived with Thea. Henry had always served tea when Zac visited, and Zac had reciprocated in turn when Henry visited Port Atwood. Henry had stuck to the teas of Old Earth, while Zac usually served interesting Spiritual Leaves he'd found through Calrin.

In a way, it had reflected their mindsets, where Henry still had a foot in the old world while Zac wholeheartedly embraced the new.

The old man nodded in thanks, and a small smile spread across Henry's face as he took a sip. "So, how was it?"

"Perfect," Zac nodded as he poured a cup for himself. "Thank you for agreeing to this."

"Just like in New Washington," Henry said. "I wonder if this is to be my lot, to set up your sales pitches."

Zac laughed, remembering the humble beginnings of Port Atwood. Back then, they had been forced to set up a stall in a bid to get a few people to move to his island. But it was only after Henry Marshall confirmed his identity that they got a few people to join. Today, Henry had played a similar role, though this time, it was at the behest of Zac.

"And as I set myself up as an antagonist to this endeavor of yours, I'll get approached by like-minded people," Henry continued.

"Perhaps," Zac nodded. "What do you think I should do with these people who pull in a different direction?"

"Does it matter what I think?" Henry said with a smile. "It took a while, but us old bones have started to come around to this new reality of ours. The one with the biggest fist makes the rules, and the rest have to figure out how to maximize their benefits within that playing field. If possible, we'd like to set up some ventures on both Elysium and your other planet. They will not clash with your consortium."

"Of course," Zac nodded. "The broad strokes are set in stone, but I am always open to suggestions."

Henry nodded as he placed down the cup. "Well, if you want my advice, it would be not to half-measure this change. I don't know if you are right in choosing this direction, or if your strength and infamy have nurtured a hubris worthy of the Roman Emperors. What I do know is that there will be discontent, both with the Undead and how you unilaterally have decided the future of Earth.

"I have seen it. Some of us have managed to discard the trappings of old, while others are slipping back into routine thanks to years of safety. They whisper of democracy, of overthrowing tyrants. One whisper will birth three more, and opinion will eventually become fact. Many love to be the underdog, the oppressed. That way, they can rail with righteous indignation at the system holding them back."

"So what do you think I should do?" Zac asked.

“Strangle those whispers in their cradle.”

The two talked for a while longer, with Zac sharing some of his experiences in the outer world while Henry provided some suggestions based on his experience. The old Marshall Patriarch wasn't as knowledgeable as himself or Ogras about cultivation, but he did have many insights into human nature thanks to his pre-integration life.

Eventually, Henry left to take charge of family matters and create a plan for their expansion into Ensolus and Elysium. Of course, this would be done in secret. The official reason for their talk, which Henry would also leak, was that the Marshall Clan had tried to change Zac's mind in private. Zac wanted to be done with this matter by this point, but the constant barrage of messages in his communicator told him he couldn't just up and leave.

Instead, Zac spent most of the day meeting with one group after another, mostly leaders of various subsidiary factions. The Underworld Council had no strong feelings about the Undead. They were the ones who had been least impacted by the undead incursion, so they didn't have any objections more than the inherent oddity of the situation.

In fact, they were interested in hiring a large number of Revenants to work in the Underworld. Even today, quite a few sectors were largely unexplored, and many were filled with Miasma by this point. Having undead explorers and laborers who could extract the rich materials down there was a good opportunity to increase profits, which was something everyone wanted with war looming on the horizon.

The Ishiate Tinkerers didn't care much, either. They were more interested in exchanging insights with the Einherjar in hopes of weaponizing Miasma for their gadgets. For example, Zac heard one mention the possibility of creating cannons that could shoot out condensed Miasma, instantly turning the enemy ranks into mindless zombies. Zac knew it was possible, considering that exact thing had attacked him in the heart of the Dead Zone.

The shamans of the naturalist Ishiate were far less comfortable with the undead factions, but Zac didn't care. They hadn't accomplished much during or after the Integration, and their top cultivator, Starlight, had left Earth behind long ago. Thankfully, it looked like they would become more useful as time passed.

They had a generally high affinity with the Dao of Life and Nature, and more and more talented healers were appearing in their ranks of Shamans. As long as he provided access to some of the Blessed Lands and some manuals, he could probably gain a competent medical corps in time for the invasion.

Simultaneously, Zac held a private meeting between his puppet and the Raun Spectrals. They were relieved to hear that a deal had been struck with the Undead Empire. A few inquired about the possibility of joining the Undead Empire down the road, which Zac was open to. Ultimately, Zac doubted there would be many who showcased enough potential to get recruited, but the possibility might make the Raun military work harder.

Many more wanted to discuss all manner of topics with Zac, but he didn't have time to spend whole days in meetings. He didn't even know any of the details of the Integration, and he had no time to micromanage everything. Instead, Zac retreated to his Cultivation Cave to continue his cultivation, though he had no intentions of using the Temporal Chamber immediately.

Zac had already decided to use it after getting the first set of treasures from the Undead Empire. He also wanted to finish the first layer of the [Void Vajra Sublimation] before sealing himself for three years. Zac had already made several improvements to his methodology over the past months, from adjusting the composition of the paste to the complementary arrays.

He wanted to go through the same experiments for the next layer before entering the Chamber. Because according to Catheya, you couldn't enter and leave as you pleased. You would be sealed away for three full years when you entered, so Zac needed to prepare everything.

Most importantly, he needed to let the Chamber absorb Divine Energy from a Nexus Vein for a few months, or he'd have to use Divine Crystals to power everything constantly. Reyna Umbri'Zi had already filled it with both Miasma and Cosmic Energy, so he only needed to place the box right in one of the Life-Attuned veins to gather the missing element.

It didn't take Zac long to put the matters of the outside aside as he entered an empty state where only his path and the Dao existed. Unfortunately, he only got to complete one session of the [Nine Reincarnations Manual] before his communicator buzzed. Zac sighed as he looked at the communication crystal. He had already told the others not to bother him with minor details, so something big must've happened.

"Three factions are revolting," Ogras said on the other side the moment Zac accepted the connection. "What do you want to do?"

Zac wasn't the least surprised. The Atwood Empire had not made any big moves on Pangea in years. He had been gone for almost a decade while the strongest elites had been busy dealing with Ensolus. Now, Zac had openly taken on the role of the ruler of Earth. Some people were bound to be angry, and some were dumb enough to do something about it.

"Who are they?"

"A faction within the Sino-Indian Alliance led by some Guru Anaad Phakiwar. Apparently, he's someone who used to be a big shot before you left him in the dust? The other two are the councils of two major cities situated near the Dead Zone," Ogras said. "There's also a few who put forward ideas like a world council that should decide certain matters through majority votes."

"As we expected, then," Zac sighed. "Only humans, at least. Do you need my help?"

"It's just a bunch of weaklings living in the past. We'll deal with it," Ogras laughed. "It's better if you don't appear. It will damage your prestige if people see you running around personally putting out fires."

"Alright, thank you," Zac sighed before putting away the communicator.

Some things were inevitable, just like Henry said, and it was not just about him controlling Earth. The Undead Empire had caused so much damage to Earth, all but destroying some of the most populous countries on Earth. That was not something you could just forget in a couple of years. Hell, if Zac himself hadn't gotten to know Catheya, he might have felt the same way, even if he had a Draugr half.

In a perfect world, Zac could have allowed time to heal the wounds and met their anger with compassion. Unfortunately, Earth wasn't ready for a galactic war. Too few had the skills to survive in an

all-out clash against an experienced cultivator army, even if Zac equipped them with superior gear. So he couldn't have people casting doubt on his plan, slowing down the transition of the population.

These early voices of discontent would have to become the sacrifices that kept the others in line.

Zac resumed his cultivation, completing another rotation of [Void Vajra Sublimation]. As far as Zac could tell, he was one-third through the first layer of the method by this point. Quite a few golden flakes were dancing in his cells even before he started the method, with more being added every session.

It even felt like his cultivation speed kept increasing as his body grew increasingly accustomed to Life. Calling it an exponential speed increase would be an overstatement, but he didn't think it would take much more than another month to complete the first layer. Continuously reinforcing his Dao Heart also helped. The quicker he entered the right state, and the deeper he delved into the depths of the Void, the greater the effect of the [Void Vajra Sublimation].

By the time Zac had finished, another report had been sent over. Everything was already over. Ogras had led a few Demons and Valkyries to the settlements, and not a single agitator had managed to escape. The rioters hadn't realized how to usurp a town properly. They hadn't bothered killing the appointed mayors and snatching the Nexus Nodes, allowing Ogras to pop up right in their midst.

So just like that, the original second-place-holder of the Dao Ladder had died, quashed like a bug by Ogras.