

Chapter 1035

Groundwork

Dawn walked into the office of the diamond-rank trainer, August. It was a simple room, although the dark wood was an extravagance in a city located on a sun. August was reading a report from a holographic projector when Dawn arrived, and he stood up from behind his desk. She casually waved him back down.

"Welcome back, Your Highness," he said before sitting back behind the desk. She took one of the seats opposite.

"It's been a year," she said without preamble. "How are they coming along?"

"You're telling me that you haven't been watching closely?"

"I've been making preparations at Interstice. We're not too far from the new great astral being making his presence known."

"His? It's another elevated mortal?"

"Yes."

"And it went so well last time with the Builder."

Dawn smiled but didn't let herself be dragged off topic.

"How goes the training?" she asked again.

"It's been interesting. Normally, I'm given the best the Imperium has to offer, to draw out every measure of potential they have. The recruits who make it into this program are always exceptional, but rarely surprising. Wexler and Remore have been easy because they fit that mould perfectly. I'd recruit them to the Imperium, if I thought you'd let me. With the others, drawing out their potential is proving more complicated, but that isn't a bad thing."

"How so?"

"It's forced me to examine how the program operates. To adjust our goals and methodologies. I have been focused for centuries on training the very best. Those who are comprehensively impressive in every metric, even before I get my hands on them. Those who are outstanding in some areas while having shortfalls in others do not normally make it here."

"But we do train them. The Imperial forces aren't just nine people you've taught personally."

He gave her a flat stare.

"Yes, the Imperium as a whole trains more than just the most exceptional, plucked out of trillions. But our most elite training programs, as overseen by me, do not."

“So, you finally realise there are more than those nine people?” Dawn teased.

“I’m not sure I like what your time away from the Imperium has done to you, Princess. My point, Your Highness, is that instructing your guests has shown me that I may have overlooked people who belong in our most elite training programs. Whose accomplishments are only possible because of the imperfections that led me to reject them. We’ve been kicking them down to lower-tier training programs, and I believe that, in some instances, that is a mistake. I’ve already started expanding our recruitment criteria for the elite level programs to be more diverse.”

“You’re not concerned about diluting our top-level talent?”

“There will be problems in the short term, of course, but I’ve realised that we’ve become narrow-minded. In weeding out every recruit with any flaw or weaknesses, we’ve missed out on bring some astonishing talents to their full potential, and that is the Imperium’s loss. If nothing else, the attempts to recruit them have demonstrated that we’ve been overlooking something.”

“Recruitment?”

“The Ordis Academia has been persistent in trying to lure away Standish and Callahan, and I’m not entirely sure we should keep stopping them. By all accounts, their accomplishments relative to the backwater they were raised in are exceptional. Imagine if they had Imperial educations. And I know that Anson Cazus has been sniffing around Estella Warnock. Warnock will never be a quality combatant, which is the focus of our training here, but espionage training? I’d like to keep Callahan and Standish, but supplementing their training could be of benefit. As for Warnock, if Cazus sees potential I do not, that may be a better pathway for her. All of this, of course, is up to you. You brought them in and it’s your decision.”

“It’s their decision, August.”

“This is the Imperium and you are its immortal princess.”

“And these people defy kings, gods, great astral beings. I brought them here so they’re better equipped to do just that. They choose their own way, August. It’s what defines them.”

“I cannot teach them how to fight gods. I couldn’t teach the best of the Imperium to do that. You can take the greatest talents and give them the greatest training, but you can’t give them the will to face the creator of universes, or death itself.”

“I know. That’s why these are the people I’ve brought you. They may not have the greatest talent, but they do have the will. And you, yourself, have said that you’ve learned

the virtues of the imperfect. You said Remore and Wexler meet your standards, but what of the others? Who stands out?”

“Humphrey Geller and Neil Davone have surprised me. While each have some oddities in their power sets, they’re both quite archetypal in their roles.”

“And that’s a problem?”

“The very best carve their own path. Remore and Wexler have less conventional power sets that let them draw out their unique strengths to the full. Geller and Davone are right down the line, walking well-trodden paths. Those roads are well-trodden for a reason, but to be truly exceptional requires people who are the exception. I initially believed that the commonality of their power sets would limit their ability to express their individual talents, but the limits proved to be in my way of thinking.”

“Oh?”

“Again, it comes down to overlooking those whose potential is more uneven. In isolation, my initial assessment of Geller and Davone was accurate. It’s only when you place them alongside the people we’ve been passing over that their true value is demonstrated.”

“How so?”

“Take Geller, as an example. We train our people to be versatile and adaptable to any group. Geller has taken the opposite path, going all-in on his team, and his team specifically. He’s a brawler, which means hitting faster and harder than the next person, but for half as long. Geller has built his combat style around leveraging the aptitudes of his team members to surpass his limitations. He hits even harder, even faster, and he just doesn’t stop. Instead of being reliable in critical moments, he’s an unstoppable force, never letting up the pressure. By relying on his team, he becomes the rock they rely on in turn.”

“And Davone?”

“Similar to Humphrey, although less flashy. Davone is a classic protective healer, the kind that goes overlooked because their efficiency, timing and battlefield awareness can easily go unnoticed. Davone isn’t some wild talent, but his reliability and consistency are critical in a team whose members have the strengths of their weaknesses. He makes the unreliable reliable, and the inconsistent consistent. Between him and Geller, they lay a solid foundation for a team very different to the kind we train here. They take what shouldn’t work and make it thrive.”

“Are you suggesting we change how we train our most elite forces in response to a ragtag group from some nothing planet?”

“Hardly anything that drastic, Princess. Much of what has been a revelation to me is well known to the instructors working in the lower-tier programs. The problem is me. I’ve been chasing perfection so long that I forgot that it’s the imperfect who produce the real surprises. I’m simply going to start incorporating methods and recruits that have previously been kept out of our highest-tier programs. The bulk of our elites will be as they have always been, but a few unconventional groups given our highest level of training could become valuable assets. Unconventional solutions to unconventional problems.”

“A benefit to the Imperium.”

“Indeed. Such groups must be made up of those who are still exceptional, however, albeit in quite specific ways. To be honest, the bulk of the people you brought to me do not belong here.”

“All I ask is that you do what you can. Tell me about them.”

“They’re interesting. Hard workers, but mostly unremarkable. It’s clear they come from a world where reaching diamond-rank is an exceptional rarity. They’ve laid none of the groundwork because they don’t know how. Team Biscuit are clearly an exception to this, which I assume is your doing?”

“Not just mine, but yes.”

“I’ll get the gold-rankers to diamond, but expect them to rapidly stagnate thereafter. I’m not saying they can’t get stronger, but it will be slow going. Training people like that is beyond the scope of what we can offer here.”

“And the three who were already diamond?”

“Rimaros and Volaire have already drawn out the bulk of their potential. We’ve done what we can with their more obvious deficits, but the truth is that they will not grow stronger any time soon. To be frank, Princess, they would offer more value in your direct service than looking for strength when there’s no more to be found.”

“I will speak with them. What of the third diamond-ranker?”

“Allayeth has been something of a pleasant surprise. Somewhere along the line, she’s convinced herself that she wasn’t remarkable. All of your recruits need time with our therapist healers, but she needs it more than any of them, except perhaps Callahan. Once she stops becoming her own barrier, I believe that Allayeth will flourish. To what degree, I could not tell you, but there is definitely value in keeping her here in this program for now.”

“How long are we talking before the golds rank-up?”

“You should know that’s a question with no good answer, Princess. We each have our own pathway, and while we can be hustled along, we ultimately move at our own pace. Team Biscuit will be the first, obviously, but we’ll get them all there in the end.”

Dawn was having a quiet and casual morning tea with the Pallimustus diamond-rankers. Quiet and casual, to the annoyance of the Imperial princess, meant only six butlers on hand to meet their every need. She had been questioning her guests on how and why they had come to be here. She had encountered all three during her time on Pallimustus, when she was warning them of the Builder's invasion, but her interactions with them had been mostly brief.

Only Soramir Rimaros had spent any real time with Dawn, and his story was known to her. He was the only one to have left Pallimustus on his own steam, giving him a cosmic perspective many on his world lacked. He'd recognised what Dawn's involvement with his planet and her focus on Jason had portended. He'd been preparing to do what he could ever since.

Where Soramir was one of the most powerful and respected of Pallimustus' diamond-rankers, Allayeth was just the opposite.

"In the eyes of most," Allayeth explained, "I wasn't much more than a powerful gold-ranker. I kept many of my mortal ties and didn't participate in the oh-so-secret diamond-rank collective."

Soramir hid a laugh behind his teacup.

"It's not like they were beating down my door, either," she continued. "I'd positioned myself as guardian of Yaresh, a city-state most people hadn't even heard of. It was hardly the Storm Kingdom or the Mirror Kingdom."

She gestured at Soramir and Victor, the men who had established those nations.

"Why did you both put 'kingdom' in the name, by the way?" she asked. "Did you think people wouldn't know?"

It was Dawn's turn to smother a laugh at the awkward expressions of the two dynastic founders.

"The point is," Allayeth continued, "that I wasn't surprised that no one told me about the anti-god insurrection they all planned."

"That is not how I would categorise it," Victor said.

"You're right," Allayeth said. "You're hardly standing up to the gods when your first act is capitulating to one of them."

Victor opened his mouth to defend himself, but he stopped and nodded.

"We had the best of intentions," he said. "The gods had been going off the rails for a long time, but it was the revelation about Disguise taking over Purity's role for centuries that finally moved us to act. The gods had to have known, yet they hid it from their own

followers. We decided to do something, but there were limits. We can't fight gods directly, only impede the activities of their followers. And some gods offered unique challenges due to their areas of influence."

"Knowledge being at the top of that list," Soramir said.

"Precisely," Victor confirmed. "As a monarch, I had responsibilities. If I extended beyond my means to protect my kingdom, I would have failed them as a king. That was made very clear when we'd barely started discussions and one of Knowledge's diamond-rankers approached us. Every plan we had, she knew the moment it was conceived. Any step we took, she would know how to counter. When she wanted to retaliate, she would know exactly how to hurt us."

"I understand that responsibility," Soramir said. "It's why I stepped away from the Storm Kingdom. My people did not deserve and could not handle the repercussions of diamond-rank conflict."

"Knowledge could shut down our plans as fast as we could make them," Victor continued. "But she made us an offer. She would keep our plans hidden from the other gods, so long as we held off until her own preparations were done. We had doubts, of course. We didn't know what she was scheming, at least at first. She told us enough to be certain that her plans were targeted outside of Pallimustus, so we went along. Once we realised she was invading another world, we discussed the ramifications of that. In the end, we held the line. Confronting our own gods was already daunting; we didn't have the resources or ability to try and save another world entirely."

"Yet, here you are," Allayeth pointed out. Victor looked at her for a long moment, then gave a sombre nod.

"I've had many children over the centuries," he said. "They are each special in their own way. As much as I've seen, they always find ways to surprise me. The prerogative of the young, I suppose. My first instinct was to be angry at Asano for not bringing my son home to me. It didn't take me long to realise that Valdis would have chosen to stay on Earth. To stand against the god that I would not. When you came to my door, Soramir, I took the chance to seize a little of my son's boldness. I left my throne and title as Mirror King to another of my sons, Lucian. It now falls to him to keep the kingdom clear of the battles between gods and diamond-rankers. And of my actions."

"You can't believe it's that simple," Allayeth said.

"Of course not, but it was as much as I could do. Now, I'm not even sure what I accomplished, if anything. I've been in this strange place while my son is fighting on a planet I'm apparently not even allowed to visit."

"That ends soon," Dawn said. "I've been making preparations of my own, but I could use some aid. I won't draw on the resources of the Cult of World-Phoenix."

"Why not?" Soramir asked. "You're a hierophant of the cult. They'd do anything for you."

"Yes, they would, but that wouldn't be appropriate."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm laying the groundwork for the Cult of the System. Are you willing to help me?"