

The Fall 686

Chapter 686: Lies and Propositions

"Turn me in?" Zac smiled, though he inwardly didn't feel as confident.

He had already confirmed with Triv that not being attached wasn't a crime, but that was just the official ruleset. Zac wouldn't be surprised if some hardliners within the Empire wanted to eradicate everyone who didn't pledge allegiance to their God Emperor the Primo.

Zac tried to gauge whether Catheya was serious or just probing him in search of information, but he didn't get anything from her smiling facade. Varo, her staid attendant, didn't provide any guidance either as his face was as wooden as when they met in the Base Town. Only the Titan displayed open hostility, but Zac felt it was more of a character trait than a testament to her true feelings.

It looked like he would have to channel his inner Ogras for a bit, and if that failed he could always book it with his escape talisman.

"Are you sure that's in your best interest?" Zac shrugged with a lazy expression. "Are you really willing to become the sinner of your clan? In fact, I think you'll become my most ardent protector."

"Ardent protector? The sinner of my clan?" Catheya said, her glistening smile widening. "How bombastic. Perhaps I should just drag you back to the clan to let the elders decide your fate? That way I won't be responsible for the fall-out."

"Don't you think it's odd I dared come to this remote place alone, even with my complicated background?" Zac sighed. "I knew there was a risk using your token, so I made some preparations of my own. If something happens to me or Vilari here, a few very damaging information missives will find their way to various intelligence houses and clans."

"Missives?" Catheya repeated with a raised brow.

"Missives detailing an illicit affair between an Aetherlord and a Draugr Autarch from the Heartlands. Giving up on the commandments for love and pursuit of their boundless path," Zac laughed. "I don't know if Mistress Be'Zi's actions can be considered illegal, but I am sure the facts can be used against Clan Sharva'Zi by competing factions."

"And you would just be willing to throw my ancestor under the bus?" Catheya snorted as the brows of the Titan furrowed. "Are you not afraid you'd become an exile?"

"She casts such a long shadow, I'm sure she wouldn't mind me using her name to protect myself," Zac shrugged.

The situation had been tense ever since Catheya entered the balcony, but it was like the temperature dropped over twenty degrees as the group said steeped in silence. What he was doing was a calculated gamble based on what little he knew of the Undead Empire. They all followed Heaven's Path as far as Zac could tell, and someone becoming an unorthodox cultivator was probably not as simple as just changing path.

He was betting that Be'Zi had somehow managed to cut her connection to the Primo and the Empire, allowing her to take a path of her own.

"Alright, alright. No need to get so tense over a little joke. After all, aren't we all friends?" Catheya said with a helpless sigh, like she was trying to entertain an unappreciative audience. "We are connected, that's why I gave your... junior brother, the token."

"In fact, I think I understand things a bit better now," Catheya added as she pointedly looked at the markings on Vilari's face.

Zac inwardly breathed out in relief, feeling he had passed the first hurdle. However, he was still primed for an ambush, ready to conjure a massive Annihilation Sphere at moment's notice. The energy had been expended upon his first Reincarnation, but he had already accumulated a decent stockpile of energy. He was confident that he would be able to blast these people to kingdom come if needed.

"Well, I guess I don't understand the humor of Imperials," Zac shrugged. "You came looking for my Junior Brother. Why?"

"Well, most of it was curiosity. I heard some interesting things before I left the Zecia Sector," Catheya coughed, which caused the Titan to snicker. "I also came here to give him a proposition if his strength matched the requirements. But I feel you might be an even better fit."

"A proposition?" Zac frowned, but he quickly understood what was going on. "The Twilight Ascent?"

"Just so. I am looking for a few skilled members to join me in exploring the Twilight Ocean," Catheya said. "I think you'd fit the bill perfectly."

Zac was a bit thrown off by how quickly Catheya went from threatening him to extending an olive branch, but he soon found his bearings again. Exploring the Twilight Ocean was already something he had set his sights on, but he hadn't planned on teaming up with others. Especially not people who might be a threat to him.

"Why would I want to do that?" Zac asked skeptically.

"Well, first of all, I can give you a spot through my clan, allowing you to skip that time-consuming tournament to win a spot. I think that would be preferable to you as well, since the bigshots are actually scanning those participants for all kinds of things. I guess you want to stay incognito since you technically aren't on either our side or the side of the living, no?" Catheya smiled.

"Not being part of the Empire doesn't mean I'm not on the side of the unliving. And what interest do you have in the Twilight Ascent? I don't believe that the disciple of a C-Grade Monarch is so hard up for cash that she needs to go risk her life for some Twilight Fruits," Zac asked.

"Well, those fruits are something with constant demand and no steady supply, making them something useful to have. But I am more interested in something else. The real treasures can be found in the depths of the Twilight Ocean. There are all kinds of valuables there. Some of them are so rare they'd even result in a bidding war between Hegemons," Catheya explained.

Zac's interest was immediately piqued. The rewards for the Fate-Plucking Ladder were pretty good, but Zac wasn't sure if spending years desperately trying to get a good position was worth the time investment. But someone like Catheya probably knew the real scoop that couldn't be found in Nala's crystal, the hidden benefits that made even wealthy scions such as her interested in taking the plunge.

"I am aiming for one particular natural treasure; Life-Death Pearls. They are treasures that can't be taken outside, but they can allow you to save years of meditation into Daos related to Life and Death, making them especially valuable to us undead," Catheya explained.

"So it's a Dao treasure?" Zac asked.

"Well not quite," Catheya said. "It's more like a Dao Impartment. You have greater control over the inspiration you'd gain."

Zac was barely able to keep his face impassive when he heard about their effect, and he was lucky his heart didn't beat in his current form. Life-Death Pearls, weren't they essentially specially tailored Dao Treasures for him? With his progress having come to a stand-still since Earth ran out of Origin Dao, these were exactly the kind of items he needed.

However, nothing ever came for free, and it was suspicious that Catheya was looking for helpers to farm these pearls. Why share if you could keep them for yourself? There was definitely something going on.

"Since we're fated I can let you in on a secret only known to the peak factions," Catheya added with a mysterious smile, clearly well aware that she had him on the hook. "The Twilight Ascent's internal quest for a Limited Title is random, but it is always related to one of four categories; Dao, Slaughter, Treasure, Exploration. This time it will be related to Dao, which makes the pearls doubly valuable."

"Why would you need my assistance? You already have helpers," Zac asked, forcibly restraining himself from jumping onboard blindly. "What's the catch?"

"Well, for one there are dangerous beasts in the depths of the Twilight Descent. Secondly, there are the other trial takers to worry about, and you need some allies to make sure you don't get overrun," Catheya shrugged. "But more importantly, there are some unique restrictions in place in the Twilight Ocean, and I need some capable helpers to deal with it."

"Oh?"

"Twilight Energy is not natural, it's a fusion of life and death. Absorbing it is like drinking tainted water," Catheya explained.

"Why not just block it out and live on Miasma Crystals?" Zac asked skeptically.

"It is pervasive, and for some reason invasive to boot. Keeping it away for any stretch of time is nigh-impossible, it keeps finding ways back as though it was alive. It also grows stronger the further you travel," Catheya sighed. "Thankfully, my master has provided me with something to help weaken the effect. But that treasure is too difficult to activate alone, so I need to assemble a small group of elites. Each person will run the shielding array for a few hours before we switch."

"Why not switch between the three of you?" Zac asked as he glanced at Catheya's two companions.

"We need multiple different Daos to cycle through the array. Too few, and the environment will adapt," Varo spoke up to explain.

"That's pretty weird," Zac muttered.

"The world is full of weird unexplainable things," Catheya shrugged in response. "My master estimates that it would take us three months to reach the location of the pearls, provided nothing goes wrong. After that, you'd be free to look for opportunities of your own."

"What's in it for me?" Zac asked with a raised brow. "What's the split? And why shouldn't I just go alone now that I know about the pearls and the quest?"

The Titan glared at Zac like she wanted to rip him apart, but Catheya only smiled as she patted her follower's arm.

"You're free to walk away," Catheya smiled. "But there are usually less than 100 pearls per trial. Without any special methods of locating them, you could swim back and forth for decades without any results. Besides, even if you reached the depths but you would probably be pretty weakened by the environment. What if you met a group like mine, where we have a handful of members who are not weakened by the restrictions?"

Zac ignored the thinly veiled threat and instead tried to sort out the information. It was a shame that Catheya didn't arrive an hour later, after he'd been able to learn more about the trial. But provided she was telling the truth, going in a small elite group might be the best way to get his hands on the better items inside.

Of course, he could always go at it himself and pray that his high Luck would pull through for him again.

"Going with us, you have a good chance at getting your hands on a good number of fruits. Our side will take the first ten fruits, after which we will split the remainder equally," Catheya continued when she saw Zac hesitate. "A handful of these fruits will give you a leg-up on the rest of the trial, no matter what your plans are."

"You can go alone, but with your current strength, you wouldn't make it past the middle reaches of the ocean," the hulking revenant added with a raised brow. "The best treasures would be out of reach for you."

"How do you figure?" Zac asked.

"I can tell that you are somewhere between Middle and High E-grade, with extremely deep accumulations. But you are also definitely young, even younger than me. I doubt you have any Dao Branches yet? What if you meet a level 150 elite from one of the three Empires, one who's wielding a Middle-Stage Dao Branch? Can you deal with that alone?" Catheya asked.

Zac wanted to say yes, but he inwardly knew the truth. It was impossible, at least unless he managed to hit them with an Annihilation Sphere. An Early-Stage Dao Branch was more powerful and provided more attributes than all three of his Daos combined. A Middle-Stage would absolutely steamroll him even if he had an attribute superiority.

Not to mention that someone sitting on such Dao insights in the E-grade definitely had a slew of other advantages.

"That's why people like us need to team up if we want to enter the inner reaches. There is safety in numbers," Catheya said.

Zac was full of hesitation, but he eventually made a decision. He'd go along with Catheya for now. If things seemed suspicious he'd make a run for it, no matter if it was in ten minutes or after they had entered the trial. But first, there were some benefits to eke out.

"Well, I can join your group, but you'll have to provide me with three things in addition to the deal you proposed," Zac slowly said.

"Don't overextend yourself," the Titan Revenant growled. "It's not like you're irreplaceable."

"She's welcome to say no, but something is telling me that I'm not as replaceable as she says. Otherwise, she wouldn't be looking for some random stranger like me or my Junior Brother to assist her," Zac grinned

Catheya neither confirmed nor denied Zac's guess, but he felt he was onto something. The Twilight Ascent was a System-sanctioned trial, which meant that the realm was most likely slightly adjusted to create a better testing ground. From his quick scan of the crystal, Zac had already confirmed that the trial was grade-restricted, but he guessed that elites had some sort of advantage.

Perhaps Attribute Efficiency helped reduce the restrictive properties Catheya mentioned, allowing them to fight more efficiently in the depths? Or perhaps she was looking for outsiders since the elites in the Twilight Harbor might hold hidden alliances of their own.

"Remember, you are still here as a guest of Eldritch Archivals, and you would need to prolong your stay through them," Varo added, clearly to put some pressure on him. "Without mistress's blessing, you would be forced to leave the Twilight Harbor before the event even started."

"That leads me to my first requirement. Seeing as you want to employ me, you will have to provide me with basic amenities along with taking care of the costs to prolong my stay," Zac said.

"That is no problem," Catheya agreed without hesitation.

"Secondly, I want to choose three of your E-Grade skills from the VIP-Section of the Eldritch Archivals. Free of Charge," Zac said.

Zac had already learned of the true nature of the Eldritch Archivals after covertly probing Nala. It was actually one of the top five public Dao Repositories in the Twilight Harbor, among the undead forces that is. It was no doubt one of Clan Sharva'Zi's main businesses in the harbor, considering it was their token Catheya had provided him with.

"Audacious! The VIP-Section only holds high-quality skills and greater! They're almost priceless," the Titan roared.

"They're still ultimately just E-Grade skills. They can't be considered priceless," Zac snorted.

"One. I can give you three skills in total, but only one can be from the inner sanctums. You can also pick two of the best skills of the normal high-end section," Catheya slowly said. "Not even I have a free reign of the skills in the sanctum. All of them are single-use inheritance crystals to guarantee originality. I can't just hand them out left and right, I need to pay with family contribution points."

Zac was inwardly elated to hear he could actually get his hands on one of the top-tier skills of what was either a B-grade force or at least a peak C-grade Clan. He wasn't surprised to hear the skills were single-

use inheritance crystals though. After all, who would want to pay an arm and a leg for a skill if the Skill Repository kept selling them as quickly as they could replicate them?

Inheritance Crystals were something he had learned about from Calrin not long ago after he started preparing for his skill fusion. The most common skill crystals were the small ones that someone, or the System, had imprinted with a copy of the skill fractal. It usually worked 1 to 3 times, after which it broke apart.

More than a few cultivators created these crystals as a side-income, though copied skills almost invariably lost some of their quality compared to when they were provided by the System itself or if they were self-created.

Second most common were the crystals Zac had in his Dao Repository. These much larger skill crystals could be used continuously, as long as the crystals were allowed to slowly recuperate and slowly absorb energy after every use. Both these crystals had one thing in common though; with enough time and effort, you could create an endless number of these skill crystals.

It was different for Inheritance Crystals though. To create an inheritance crystal you needed to physically take your Skill Fractal and infuse it into a crystal while splitting off a part of your soul, the part containing all your insights and comprehensions of the skill. In other words, you would lose the skill forever, and you would even ruin the skill slot in your body.

These crystals provided various benefits compared to normal skill crystals. First of all, you were pretty much guaranteed originality. It was like you inherited the skill from a predecessor, and no one else would be able to buy it. These crystals weren't transcribed as well, so there was no loss in quality like with the other two types of crystals.

Furthermore, the skill came with a lot of insights from the get-go. If your comprehension was good, you might even be able to push it to Middle Proficiency instantly.

The downside was obviously the huge cost of creating them. They would essentially cripple a cultivator, and apparently, it wasn't possible to create them on your deathbed when your soul was weakened and your memories of the skill were blurry. It required you to do it yourself when you were at your peak.

There was one more method to acquire them though, and this was the most common method of gathering them. There was an extremely small chance of an inheritance crystal forming inside the body of a corpse. So massive factions would continuously gain a few inheritance crystals as the previous generations departed, but the demand always far outstripped the supply.

For Zac to get his hands on such a rare commodity was an unexpected gain, but he understood he couldn't push it much further judging by the look on Catheya's face. Still, there was one more thing that he desperately needed, something he wasn't confident that his Draugr heritage was enough to provide.

"Third, there should be some top-tier auctions taking place before the Twilight Ascent. I want access."

"There is one next week," Catheya smiled. "I was planning on going, so how about we make an outing out of it. So, do we have an agreement?"

"Happy to work together."

