

The Fall 687

Chapter 687: Pursuit of Eternity

Exquisite chimes danced in the air and echoed with the hints of the grand Dao as Va Tapek walked into the vast hall that doubled as an observation deck. He was met with a refreshing gust medicinal aroma after taking just one step inside. Va briefly scanned the hall, seeing there were four Perennial Braziers burning, each of them releasing smoke of a different color.

Va Tapek took a deep breath, and felt his cells opening, greedily swallowing the dense medicinal and spiritual energy that suffused the air. Ylavian Bloodroot, Gelasan, dried bones of Abyssal Dominators. And those were just a few of the dozens of valuable materials that had been turned into incense for an empty hall.

Of course, materials like these wouldn't be enough to improve the cultivation of an advanced Monarch such as himself, but most E-Grade warriors would explode after just taking a whiff of this mist. Even if they survived, they would probably become lunatics, their minds broken by the extremely dense Dao markings hidden in the scent.

"I'm jealous. I knew that becoming an Earl was a lucrative venture, but I didn't expect it to be at this level," Va snorted as he looked at the closest brazier. "Burning a mountain of Nexus Coins every second even when you're just here as a spectral projection. Don't you have some disciples or descendants to waste all these treasures on?"

"Well, I have to maintain appearances," a masculine laugh echoed through the hall as the form of a cultivator congealed on top of a mat close to the enormous floor-to-ceiling window on the opposite side of the hall. "Besides, it is not like the Sharva'Zi Clan has been mistreating you these years. Come, sit."

Va Tapek only rolled his eyes as he teleported over to the other side of the hall, his movement causing a series of abstruse runes to appear among the medicinal clouds. He looked over to his benefactor, or rather the projection of him. Whether his real body still existed, not even Va Tapek knew.

The projection looked a lot like how Va Tapek remembered his old friend though. Chiseled features that spoke of indomitability and conviction. His robes hung loose and exposed a densely muscled torso covered in scars, and he sat in an unrestrained manner as usual. He still radiated that same haughty yet slightly lonely aura of a peak wandering cultivator who had emerged at the top after innumerable bloody encounters.

But there were some differences as well.

Most notably, his skin had taken on a slight greenish tint, like gold mixed with black. A second look proved that it was actually two sets of extremely minute runes that covered his skin, each of them smaller than a dot. One of the patterns held the secrets of Death, and the other seemed to be speaking to the heart of Life.

Va Tapek's aquamarine eyes turned to the star that took up most of the vision of the enormous windows in front of them; the Twilight Ocean. They were slowly becoming one.

"If you wanted to discard your Human ancestry, why not just come over to our side? I'm sure we'd be able to find a Blessed Land for you to awaken without giving up on your past," Va Tapek said as he sat down.

"Bah, what's so good about being undead?" the man snorted. "Besides, if I did that, how would I be able to complete my plan? Speaking of, how did things go?"

"It took me some time, but I found it. The Zecia sector has changed a bit since you hid this thing," Va Tapek said as he took out a box from his spatial ring.

"Great!" the man said, his eyes lighting up. "I was afraid it would have managed to break out after all these years. You didn't get spotted, did you?"

"Shouldn't have," Va Tapek said with a shake of his head. "I was required to check in with the local Province, but I pretended to have an epiphany to not get entangled. I left a clone there in seclusion while my main body searched for the item. By the way, things are getting a bit heated over there."

"I heard. Who would have thought that someone would conjure the Stele of Conflict in a frontier sector?" the man laughed. "It's fine. Some bloodshed will cut the chaff and help purify the heritages. Did you arrange someone to assist me in marking the leyline?"

"Hm," Va Tapek just said as he took out a bottle of liquor. "It is done."

"Oh? How certain are you? Where did you find the helper?" the man asked with interest.

"It's my disciple. She already has two passable followers, and she is currently in the process of hiring a few more," Va Tapek said as an indulgent smile spread across his face.

"Your disciple? Isn't she an Imperial? Will she really complete the task?" the man asked with a frown as the huge anomaly outside shuddered.

"She doesn't know the purpose of why I sent her. She thinks she is fulfilling a task for the undead factions. You just need to provide the path she has to follow," Va Tapek explained. "I'd appreciate it if you gave her one of the less precipitous paths though."

"Of course. But even then, there will be dangers, and not just from the natives," the man said with a pointed look. "You know my situation, I can't intervene as I wish. Just creating these paths and divulging the treasures is pushing it."

Know your situation? Va Tapek thought with some exasperation. How is that possible? I've never heard of anyone doing what you've done, what you're about to do.

"It's fine. Little Catheya has been a bit too carefree lately. She needs to take some risks if she wants to reach the next step," Va Tapek said with a sigh. "Besides, you're the one who's truly in Danger. Your plan is crazy, even for you. Both the local clans and the empires will try to stop you. Others will try to seize the opportunity for themselves."

"That's what makes things so exciting," the man laughed before he gave Va Tapek an inscrutable look. "What about you? Having last-minute doubts?"

“Always,” Va Tapek snorted as he got back on his feet. “But it’s worth it. Where else will an outsider such as myself be able to witness someone defending their Dao while building the first step to eternity?”

He looked at the celestial anomaly in the distance once more and he couldn’t help but smile with excitement. These kinds of chaotic events were rare. Those who survived would definitely have gained something.

“Besides, the frontier is growing a bit boring. Perhaps the reemergence of the Eveningtide Asura will shake things up a bit.”

A boisterous laugh echoed through the hall as Va Tapek left.

“Can we trust him?” Qirai asked with a frown as they entered the private areas of the Eldritch Archivals. “There’s something off about him.”

“What do you think, Varo?” Catheya smiled as she turned to her assistant.

“He’s dangerous... Very dangerous,” Varo said after some thought. “But as long as our interests align, it should be fine. If we want to kill him... All-out and without hesitation.”

“That guy? Dangerous?” Qirai snorted. “He is a pureblood, but his aura wasn’t anything special. One smash and he’s done for.”

“Hopefully it won’t come to that. The Twilight Ocean is big enough for everyone to drink their fill,” Catheya laughed, but she inwardly felt that Varo’s estimate was more incisive.

The group soon entered her private courtyard, and Varo activated a series of protective measures. Her branch might be the ones in control of the interests in Twilight Harbor, but there were definitely spies in the mix. No one would have expected that a place in a frontier sector would be so lucrative, rivaling even some of the core businesses back home.

Greedy eyes were definitely eyeing their wealth, and Catheya couldn’t let anything happen. Her performance in the Tower of Eternity should elevate her status from a second-seed to first seed talent within the clan, perhaps even as soon as she returned.

But she was still lacking the accomplishments to cement her status as a talent to nurture. She believed that her performance in the Twilight Ascent could be the ticket to gain the top treatment among the Draugr youth.

And this mysterious Draugr might even be the key to becoming a Heaven’s Chosen, someone wholeheartedly nurtured by the Empire. She couldn’t explain why, but she trusted her instincts.

“It’s odd,” Catheya muttered.

“He felt like Zac Piker, yet not,” Varo said, understanding his mistress’ thoughts all too well.

“Exactly,” Catheya agreed.

“Was it a human in a disguise?” Qirai asked curiously. “I couldn’t tell.”

“Possibly,” Catheya nodded thoughtfully. “I couldn’t sense anything off with his bloodline, and mimicking a Draugr is no easy feat. However, there were some points of suspicion. Also, his smell is off.

Zac Piker was a pureblood human who carried the scent of Draug, while Arcaz is a Draugr with a lingering stench of humanity.”

“You and your smells,” Qirai muttered. “Perhaps it was that Deviant Asura who was a Draugr disguising as a human? That little attendant of his was very pretty, in a damaged kind of way. Perhaps that's why he asked for young females?”

“My nose is seldom wrong,” Catheya said. “And Zac Piker was definitely not undead. His skills, Dao, and energy teemed with life. He'd kill himself holding those kinds of energy inside his body. Well, we know where he lives now. I'll ask master to scan him to make sure.”

“The important thing is whether he can help us complete master's task. Arcaz has definitely cultivated his soul, and he seems to have the multipliers of either a peak second seed or even a first-seed cultivator. You've seen the list of requirements master gave me. He's the fourth candidate fulfilling them all after three months of searching, and the most promising one at that.”

“In regards to his demands...” Varo probed.

“Fulfill them,” Catheya said with a lazy wave. “It will cost a large chunk of my contribution points, but our gains will far surpass the cost as long as this mission is successful.”

“Even if he turns out to be a Dreamer?” Qirai asked hesitantly.

“It does not matter. He might be Zac Piker, a human with a connection to my Ancestor. He might be Arcaz, a pureblood Draugr with an attendant marked by the same primal type of destruction that Zac Piker released in the Base Town,” Catheya smiled. “In either case, it's a promising investment. If the Matriarch ever returns, I think this connection might be enough to transform our fates.”

“I'll arrange everything,” Varo nodded and started sending a few messages with a communication crystal.

“What do you want to do about the other candidates?” Qirai asked.

“Two more should do it if Arcaz is as useful as I feel he is, but it's best to get three,” Catheya mused. “What about the letters I sent out?”

“Ravan has accepted. A few have expressed interest but most haven't put forth any clear commitments. They seem to be holding out for greater benefits. Troker has declined,” Varo said.

“What, why?” Catheya asked with a frown.

Troker was her first choice for a group member until this Arcaz appeared. He was a powerful mentalist, and they had worked together before when she visited this place last time. He had both powerful scouting capabilities and his spiritual Domain Skill could lessen the effect of the suppression of the Twilight Energy.

“Someone from the Eternal Clan has hired him as a guide,” Varo said. “They seem to have agreed to take him to the Heartlands afterward. We can't compete with their offer with our current resources.”

“Ah, those bloodsuckers are here?” Catheya exclaimed with some shock. “I thought most of them were busy warring against the Buddhist Sangha all the way over by the Cosmic River?”

The eternal clan had few members, just a few percent of the Draugr population, but they wholeheartedly nurtured each and every member. The average strength among their youths was at the second tier, and the degree of supreme talents that appeared in their ranks were far greater than most Draugr clans.

There was not much to be done about it. Their ancestors required less than half the cultivation resources compared to the Draugr ancestors for some reason, which meant that they had massive reserves to spend on their young. The reason for this advantage was a secret those bloodsuckers guarded with their lives, much to the annoyance of the other Divine Races.

“Supposedly, one of the branches returned to the Heartlands to attend some family event and learned about the opening of the Twilight Ocean. A few youths decided to come here for a quick adventure before returning,” Varo said.

“Like hell they are,” Qirai snorted with anger. “Those crafty bastards would never do anything just for the fun of it.”

“There are more reports,” Varo added. “There are rumors of Heaven’s Chosen among from the Radiant temple having arrived. I have not found any clues about movement from the Havarok Empire, but if two of them are moving...”

Catheya nodded with a sigh. If the Eternal Clan was coming, then they were planning something. The Eternal Clan and the real peak factions among the Draugr had never cared about this remote sector, which was what allowed a mid-tier family like the Sharva’Zi Clan to quietly reap the rewards. Now one bigshot after another was coming for some frontier trial?

What had her master gotten them mixed up in?

The droplet drifted through the hidden pockets of space. It was completely unassuming, and not even the most intrepid scanning array would spot anything special about it. Yet it moved with mind-bending speed, surpassing most C-grade Cosmic Vessels as it made its way toward its destination.

Inside, a small world was hidden.

“We’ll arrive in one month, which gives us ample time to prepare,” the steward said as he refilled the goblet for the young girl gazing at the cosmos flitting by outside.

“What a desolate place. It feels like the Heavens have forgotten this wretched corner of space. Is there really someone who will reach Autarchy here?” Uona asked. “Is it even possible?”

“One shouldn’t completely discard these small frontier sectors. Their average power and heritage are quite wretched, but with enough numbers and time, some terrifying beings will be born here. For example, the Bloodmoon Autarch.”

“Lord Bloodmoon had the help of our family though,” Uona countered.

“By the time he joined our family as an Elder he had already set his foundation and confirmed his Dao. He would likely reach the same height without us, it might just have taken a few hundred thousand years longer,” the old man smiled. “Besides, one family or another of the Eternal Clan was bound to pick him up with his talents. We were just lucky to form a connection first.”

“Well, there will always be aberrations,” Uona muttered.

“It is precisely such an aberration that has appeared,” the old man said. “He is known as the Twilight Lord now, but he was once known as the Eveningtide Asura.”

“It’s that guy?” Uona exclaimed, her eyes lighting up. “I thought he was dead. I have read the reports, I can’t believe Lord Eveningtide survived all that. For one of the Dreamers, he’s pretty amazing. Killing a Havarok Prince and even destroying one of their Immemorial Realms? Crazy.”

“He must have been pushed to the brink, but that led him to a fortuitous encounter. He found that the Mystic Realm we are heading toward was actually two opposing Daorealms that had fused together and survived. He has somehow managed to merge with the resulting anomaly, and has slowly gathered momentum to form the steps to eternity,” the man said.

“That’s possible?” Uona said with surprise.

“Everything’s possible, child,” the old man smiled.

“Do we really need to make a move against that guy and steal his opportunity though? Seems a bit low-class,” Uona said with some reluctance.

“You know how rare the opportunities to form those steps are,” the old man sighed. “Even the peak clans need to accumulate for eons to make an attempt. So, any time an opportunity like this appears, we can’t be picky. Gaining a second Autarch of our own bloodline, even if he ends up a One-Step Autarch, will elevate our branch to a whole new level within the clan.”

“Well, all that’s is Grampa Nether’s problem. I just need to go inside that trial and kill some people, right?”

“Yes, but don’t get careless. Everyone in the know is trying to keep the information under wraps, but the truth always leaks out. These kinds of events always turn into a bloody affair. The natives from the frontier sectors shouldn’t be a threat, but the Empires of the living will definitely get involved.”