

## The Fall 712

### Chapter 712: Truths and Conspiracies

It worked. The energy from [Force of the Void] had no problems undoing the bindings from Leandra's obfuscation array, and the Duplicity Core instantly returned to plain view of Zac's inner sight. He wasted no time and instantly activated the core in case the pollen could hamper the process.

Zac felt the familiar wave of weakness, followed by an exuberant vigor as his cells were with energy. It was just as he had expected; the weird pollen surged through his veins, and he almost felt like he had eaten a Berserking Pill or an aphrodisiac. His Cosmic Energy raged through his body, and he was suddenly ready to take on the world.

But before the world, there were some immediate issues to remedy. The energies in the room churned as Zac's aura exploded outward, neither constricted by arrays, lilacs, or the Mystic Realm itself. Zac heard a groan from Yod's direction, but he was more concerned at dealing with the weird array sucking the death out of Catheya. His old companion appeared in his hand as he stood up, and Zac suddenly felt whole again, in a way he'd never felt while wielding [Rakan's Roar].

"Impossible!" Yod screamed when he saw Zac somehow ignore the effect of both the pollen and arrays, but Zac disregarded the traitor's screams as he swung at the ceiling, sending out a series of silvery fractal leaves.

A barrier sprung up to protect the draining sphere, but it was shredded in an instant thanks to the enormous power in his peak mastery fragment. The pull of Miasma immediately stopped, though that didn't mean Catheya was completely out of the woods.

As for the Draugr, she looked up at Zac with mute incomprehension as he walked over and stuffed a soldier pill into her mouth and a Miasma Crystal into her hand before gently lifting her up to place her back against a rock. Yod didn't get quite as gentle a treatment as Zac simply grabbed one of his legs dragged him over.

The two unliving were still completely immobilized by the pollen, giving Zac a moment to sort things out. How to deal with Catheya was a real conundrum, but his attention was first turned to the traitor of the group.

"You... What's going on?" Yod stammered. "You're a Dreamer? No, that's impossible."

Catheya was still just looking at Zac's face as her own kept changing expressions, like her mind had short-circuited from trying to reconcile all the snippets of information she had on his two identities. Yod might not know who stood in front of him, but Catheya surely did. After all, [Million Faces] had deactivated the moment he swapped race.

"Don't sweat the details. I just happen to be a Draugr with some special abilities. Why are you doing this?" Zac asked with a frown. "Couldn't you have waited to attack Catheya until after we got the pearls? Why involve me?"

"What the heck?" Catheya blurted from the side, finally waking up from her shocked state.

"Why I am doing this?!" Yod growled, rage overcoming his fear and confusion. "Do you even know what you're doing? What the goal of your little side-mission is? You're trying to destroy Twilight Harbor! I'd take you out even if I have to die with you. Ten Thousand Nexus Coins compared to trillions of lives? Go screw yourselves!"

"A bit bombastic, aren't we?" Zac snorted, though he could sense some hesitation coming from Catheya.

"You outsiders!" Yod spat. "You come to our homes and bleed our resources dry! And that's not enough! You even want to detonate the Twilight Harbor so that some bigshots can harvest the resources in its depths! I guess you got tired of slowly siphoning our wealth, huh?"

"What? Detonate the whole place?" Zac exclaimed. "What about the other participants?"

"What about them? What is the life of some frontier ants for the vaunted B-grade Empires?" Yod snorted.

"He's lying," Catheya said from the side. "My master wouldn't sacrifice me even if the plan is true."

"Where did you hear this?" Zac asked as he turned back to Yod. "Who is this order you mentioned?"

"I wouldn't tell you even if I could. Go ahead, Kill me. There are more like me who will give everything to save our home," Yod said before he closed his eyes.

"Well, whatever," Zac snorted as [Verun's Bite] ripped through the air.

A muffled thud echoed out through the cave a moment later as Yod's head was cut clean off and fell into the field of flowers. Zac looted any items of interest on his body before he stowed it away. He wouldn't be able to turn the body to make another follower, but he didn't want to leave any clues behind.

Eventually, he turned back to Catheya who silently looked on with a complicated gaze.

"It's you, after all," Catheya eventually sighed.

"It's me," Zac shrugged.

There was no point in denying it. Even if his disguise skilled had worked across transformations, there was no way she wouldn't make the connection when he suddenly turned into someone living. His best disguise was the simple fact that you couldn't be both alive and dead, and he had already shown that to be false.

"The question is how we'll go forward from here," Zac continued as he tried to gain any clues as to what Catheya was thinking.

Unfortunately, she didn't divulge much. Her face was a calm mask now, though he could still sense some confusion and curiosity. There weren't any hints of repulsion or hate, like his transformation was heresy to the Draugr race. Then again, she would probably keep any such thoughts deep in her heart in a precarious situation like this.

"What do you want?" Catheya eventually asked.

"Let me think for a bit," Zac muttered as he sat down in front of her.

There was certainly the issue of her master's brand and his contract to take into consideration, but the simple fact was that Zac was unwilling to let Catheya die when he so easily could save her. She had her own goals and ambitions, but she had been nothing but helpful to him since the first time they met.

She helped him in the Base Town, and she never seemed to act against him during the months they had worked together. Overall, he felt she was a good person, and Zac couldn't just stand by while she died. But at the same time, it had left him with a mess on his hands.

Catheya wasn't biased against the living, but she was ultimately a citizen of the Undead Empire. Now that she had this information, how would she act? Forming a Contract of Binding like with the Valkyries was out of the question since she had a higher level than him, and a simple contract like the employment contract wasn't strong enough to guarantee much of anything in the long run.

"You're worried I will spread this unique ability of yours to my people back home. That this ability will implicate you and your close ones," she slowly said. "You don't need to worry."

"Well, that's a relief," Zac said with a roll of his eyes. "Care to explain why?"

"Why would I?" Catheya said. "I have absolutely nothing to gain from betraying you. But more importantly, I'm not some ingrate who places wealth above my comrades. Besides, what are you even worried about? If the Empire found out about your situation you'd be invited with open arms and heavily nurtured."

"Or I would get dissected because some old monster got curious," Zac snorted.

"There's no way the princes would allow that," Catheya snorted. "Do you think the Empire hasn't tried? Undead who can transform and absorb Cosmic Energy when there's no miasma around? Who can eat the vast number of treasures only Dreamers can digest? If it was possible to accomplish something like this with any certainty, we would have figured it out billions of years ago. I bet you're a freak of nature that can't be replicated, like so many other Heaven's Chosen through the ages."

"Still," Zac muttered, though her points made some sense.

"Could you move me a bit further from these infernal flowers while we discuss this further?" she asked.

"Not just yet," Zac smiled.

"And can I ask why not?" Catheya sighed. "I truly have no interest in divulging your secrets, whatever they are. Why would I? You are clearly connected to my ancestor, and I don't think it's a simple connection if what you said about her husband is true. If anything, I might just bring trouble down on my own head if I somehow ruin the plans of my ancestor. We are on the same side here."

"Not betraying your benefactor's secrets is just a matter of course," Zac countered. "There are also the issues of guarantees and remuneration."

"A real benefactor wouldn't keep their beneficiary captured in a poison mist to extract them of valuables though," Catheya said with a raised brow.

"Well, the Heavens are ruthless, and all that," Zac shrugged. "Life is hard and I need to fight for all the benefits I can get."

“Yeah, your life looked really hard when you outspent Hegemons left and right,” Catheya snorted before her brows scrunched up. “Wait! Where did your money come from?! I discounted you being a Progenitor because of your wealth, but now you’re really one? What’s going on?!”

“That’s what’s important now?” Zac asked, but Catheya was obviously in full calculation mode.

“Alive and Dead... Annihilation... Aetherlord husband.” Catheya muttered.

Zac listened on with confusion, even he a bit curious what kind of crackpot theory she was cooking up. Unfortunately for her, she was doomed to miss the mark, considering she was lacking a few key pieces of information.

“Ancestor walked the path of pure Death, and the aura your follower emitted... Master said it had a hint of Oblivion. She must have made a breakthrough, which allowed her to live until now. Her husband is an Aetherlord, a rare race blessed by unusual attunement to life,” Catheya said, her eyes boring into Zac’s. “You are a mix of life and death... Are you... Ancestor Be’Zi’s son? Are we related?”

“You can call me Young Grand Ancestor,” Zac nodded, while also memorizing the key pieces of information she had unwittingly divulged.

Catheya snorted before her brows scrunched up. “No wait, master said you don’t even have a hint of the Sharva’Zi bloodline. And I don’t think you lied when you said you only met in a vision back in the tower. Don’t tell me you have even more big shots helping you out, giving you money? What are you, some sort of old monster-magnet?”

Her face was a tapestry of fluctuating expressions as she tried to go over the various pieces of information she had on him. Zac inwardly groaned since she was getting a bit close to the truth with the latest guess. Of course, the fact that it was a Technocrat powerhouse, and his mother to boot, was probably not something she’d ever get right. Thankfully, Catheya soon calmed down again.

“I guess I won’t be able to figure it out unless you choose to tell me,” she eventually sighed before she solemnly looked into his eyes. “You need to make a decision here.”

Zac looked into Catheya’s eyes for a few seconds before he sighed and created a normal System-enforced mutual contract. It was straightforward enough, simply saying that they couldn’t divulge each other’s hidden aces to any parties. Catheya immediately agreed to with a small smile, and Zac carried her out of the field of Vigorbloom Lilacs a moment later.

Before leaving the area he quickly harvested the patch of flowers. Yod had probably extracted most of their medicinal value to set the trap, but there might still be some pollen left. It would be a waste to leave behind. He took the array markers and the living cultivator’s body as well before carrying Catheya away.

“There’s still the matter of payment,” Zac said after setting Catheya down in a cave some distance away from where they met Yod.

“Well, what do you want?” Catheya asked. “There’s not much I have that I can give you. You’re way wealthier than I am.”

“I want information,” Zac slowly said.

"What kind?" Catheya countered.

"I want you to teach me all you know about raising undead, upgrading and modifying skills, and bloodline evolutions," Zac said.

"Why don't I just tell you the secrets of the Heavens themselves while I'm at it?" Catheya said with exasperation.

"You know, Yod ran into one living cultivator, I bet there are more around," Zac slowly said as he took out a few Vigorbloom Lilacs. "Perhaps they would be more amenable to helping out if the immobilized Draugr they found presented them with a bouquet."

"Fine, fine," Catheya said with a glare. "I'll teach you what I can, but I have restrictions I can't break. Draugr Bloodline Methods are completely off-limits, but I can teach you a bit about skill evolutions and my necromancy knowledge. Gods, you're so weird. You're extremely powerful and disgustingly wealthy, but you're barely above a newborn in knowledge."

"Well, we all have our weaknesses," Zac smiled.

Hah, right," Catheya snorted before her eyes widened, and her volume increased as it looked like she had just received her biggest shock yet. "Wait! The amulet you bought, it's for you! You're a mortal! A Draugr mortal?! That's impossible! Absolutely impossible!"

"No wonder you were ready to enrage a Monarch, it's for your cultivation. With your accumulations, breaking a node must be like dancing with death," Catheya muttered. "I can't wrap my head around this."

"Then don't. Focus on building a curriculum for me instead," Zac said with exasperation.

"However, only after we leave this place. You haven't really saved me yet," Catheya said. "I am weakened by the environment, restricted by those cursed flowers."

"Alright, fair enough," Zac agreed.

"So you actually are a Draugr since you want manuals? You're not just pretending?" Catheya asked as she looked him up and down curiously. "Or is the current you the fake? No, that's not right either. I've seen you fight in both forms."

"Zac, Arcaz. I'm both, alright?" Zac grunted. "How it works is my business."

"So what do I call you?" she asked curiously.

"Up to you," Zac said after some thought, afraid to give up even more information by saying a specific name.

"So mister Deviant Asura then," Catheya said as a smile spread across her face. "You know, I think I get it now. You've channeled all your libido to one of your personas. That's why you're such a blockhead in your Draugr form and a deviant in the other. It's a relief, I was starting to worry that I had really overestimated my charms."

“What deviant,” Zac groaned with annoyance and embarrassment. He thought Catheya had left Zecia before that moniker was coined, but it looked like he wasn’t so lucky. “That title is just something some jerk came up with based on some misunderstandings and exaggerations, probably a friend of someone I killed in the Base Town. Just call me Zac in this form and Arcaz in the other, okay?”

“Fine. There were a lot of those little misunderstandings from what I heard though,” Catheya said with a pointed look. “And I do believe I remember you appearing from the Tower of Eternity in enough jewelry to make an imperial concubine jealous.”

“I knew a bunch of people would be waiting outside because of the quest, and I got those items from a powerful cultivator in the Battle of Fates I mentioned. What was I supposed to do? Get myself killed because looking proper is more important?” Zac muttered.

Catheya snickered in response, but she thankfully dropped the subject. It looked like she had regained her humor now that her life wasn’t in immediate danger any longer.

Zac knew he was going out on a limb here, but he didn’t know what else to do. He couldn’t go around killing and silencing everyone, even friends, who found out about his Specialty Core. Being in a constant state of fear and paranoia was no way to live. Being cautious was important, but he couldn’t let his secrets define him. It was that kind of secrecy on his part that ultimately led to the death of Thea, though his mother was obviously more in the wrong.

Part of him still wanted to bring Catheya back to Earth to ensure that she couldn’t spread the news, but he knew that it would be nigh-impossible to enforce that. It wasn’t like Zac could stuff her in a coffin like Ogras did with Emma, and make it all the way to the teleporters before getting stopped. Catheya’s master had definitely placed a marker on her for safety.

This was a gamble of sorts, the same one he took with Ogras four years ago. If things worked out, you could say he had another companion he could trust his back to, and one with access to the Undead Empire at that. If things went south, he would at least get some benefits from the disaster before fleeing.

He would probably have to adjust his plans for the trial though. Escaping a few months early in human form seemed to be the safest bet going forward.

“You know, this makes me half your master,” Catheya suddenly said with a wide smile.

Zac was about to counter her point, but he got distracted as a screen suddenly appeared in front of him.

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