

The Fall 716

Chapter 716: Relegation

There was no telling if there were some hidden downsides to his unique ability, but so far the only one seemed to be how hard it was to upgrade his Bloodline. He still held on to the [Cardinal Kernel] because of the events on the Memorysteel Mountain. He wanted to upgrade his bloodline to E-grade, but the moment probably needed to be right.

First of all, some random patch of seabed or cultivation cave wouldn't do. Just the awakening had eaten half the treasures in the mountain, there was no telling what the second awakening would require. He didn't want to waste the kernel by activating the process, only to find there wasn't enough fuel to power the whole evolution. Secondly, he needed to find a safe place, since he had been knocked clean out the last time.

What if some cultivators cropped up because of the chaos and decided to get some easy contribution points?

"I can't, and don't want to, go into detail on this ability," Zac eventually said to Catheya. "This mental trick is part of the agreement, so keep it to yourself, alright?"

If possible, he would have preferred using his Annihilation Sphere to take those people out rather than using [Force of the Void]. That way, Cahteya's memories would be erased as well. Unfortunately, he had no way to use the skill as an area attack that could target all six cultivators. He might have been able to take out the leader, but then the others would have escaped or retaliated.

Or perhaps the leader would have managed to avoid the strike like he almost avoided [Arcadia's Judgement] at which point Zac would be screwed since he would have lost the element of surprise.

"I know, I'm not an ingrate," Catheya snorted before she looked at him accusingly. "You know, it's a bit depressing to travel with you. At first, I thought we were roughly at the same level, but now I'm finding that you weren't even exerting yourself before. How are people like me even supposed to get a shot when there are monsters like you walking around?"

"There is ultimately balance in the universe," Zac snorted. "Things are not as simple as they look."

"I know," Catheya nodded. "Heavy is the crown. I think it's the same with my ancestor. She should have the qualifications to become a real tycoon back home by now, but she's still maintaining her distance as her clan is falling apart. Who knows what kind of troubles she has encountered on her road to power."

"Falling apart?" Zac asked with a frown. "Is your clan in trouble?"

"Not trouble like extinction, but trouble nonetheless," Catheya sighed. "We are facing relegation."

"What? Relegation?" Zac asked as he looked at Catheya in confusion.

"I once told you that conflict within the Empire is disallowed, but that doesn't mean there isn't competition. Strength is ultimately the most important thing. Our clan has been in a steady decline for a long time, and we're risking being downgraded from a Middle-tier clan to an Entry-level clan," Catheya said. "We will lose large parts of our domains, which means even fewer cultivation resources. It'll probably exacerbate the decline even further."

"And that is why you wanted me to send a message to Be'Zi," Zac surmised.

"Exactly. I wanted her to tell her that Re'Zar Sharva'Zi is approaching his end. His chances at forming another step are bleak according to my father. He will leave on his final journey in fifty generations or so, and there is currently no one to take his place," Catheya said. "We have managed to keep the news sealed for now, but it's just a matter of time."

"Who's Re'Zar?" Zac asked.

"Ancestor's lineal great-grandson," Catheya said. "And our only Autarch."

"What's these steps you talked about?" Zac asked. "Is it related to the B-grade?"

"Yes," Catheya nodded. "Gaining Autarchy is to form a ladder to Heaven, and the more steps you form the greater the foundation you build for this ladder. Each step adds not only power, but a large amount of longevity. Our ancestor is a One-Step Autarch, the lowest level. He's already used too many longevity medicines, and a breakthrough is his only chance now."

Zac slowly nodded in understanding. It looked like having an Autarch, even if one at the lowest rung, was enough to be considered a Middle-tier clan in the Heartlands. That probably meant a low-tier clan had Divine Monarchs and powerful accumulations, and forces beneath that weren't even considered proper clans.

Zac also felt that probably meant that a peak-stage Clan in the Undead Empire might not even have A-grade cultivators going by the grading of Clan Sharva'Zi, or at least not too many of them.

"Ancestor Be'Zi was an above-average Two-step Autarch when she left," Catheya added. "For her to still be alive... She has to have reached the later stages of Autarchy, or perhaps even higher. If she returns, we'd not only avoid relegation, we'd instantly be promoted."

No wonder Catheya was so eager to find her ancestor. It was really a matter of heaven or hell for her clan whether she returned. A clan falling from grace always led to a feeding frenzy, and Zac doubted that the commandments could completely protect against something like that. It was essentially heavenly law.

"So steps are a bit like Cosmic Cores? A bottleneck?" Zac asked.

"I can feel that I'm not allowed to discuss it," Catheya said. "Autarchs are the main power of any empire since those above rarely make a move. Knowledge is controlled."

"Well, keep your secrets then," Zac smiled.

"Like I have a choice," Catheya said with a roll of her eyes. "But I can tell you that everyone who reaches that stage has once been Heaven's Chosen or something even greater, yet less than one percent ever go beyond three steps. You could say that cultivators at that height live in defiance of the Heavens, even when walking Heaven's Path. Every step is met with resistance."

"Well, I guess that's still far off from us," Zac shrugged as he thought things over.

Catheya's request was pretty simple; convey a short update of the situation of Clan Sharva'Zi. But Zac wasn't sure if he could. He might be sent back to the underground cave and Be'Zi if he found the second

Splinter of Oblivion, but that might very well have been a one-off thing that the System arranged for him.

"I might be able to relay your message. The question is, what can you provide in return?" Zac said after a while.

"I'll hold nothing back when teaching you all the insights and corpse-raising methods my master has imparted," Catheya said. "You can even keep the information crystals."

"That's part of the previous deal," Zac snorted. "Do you have any other information from your clan that can be useful for me?"

"To be clear, I can only teach you things my master has imparted me with. I can't divulge any of Clan Sharva'Zi's methods, same as with any descendant you meet," Catheya said.

"Your master is not part of the clan?" Zac asked with interest.

"Only partly," Catheya said with a shake of her head. "Master Va Tapek an old friend of the third Supreme Elder of Clan Sharva'Zi. He joined us as an exterior elder, but he's not very restrained. I've gained most of my methods from him rather than the clan, and he never restricted me from teaching others."

It really looked like Clan Sharva'Zi was in decline. Catheya's master wasn't even a Divine Monarch from what Zac had heard, yet the clan couldn't demand much of anything from the sounds of it. Also, there there was still one question that puzzled Zac quite a bit.

"Why you?" Zac asked with confusion. "Why would a high-tier Monarch take you under his wing and take you all over the frontier? They don't usually do that, right?"

"You should have already seen it; we are both Ice Warriors," Catheya explained before she deflated a bit. "Also... I happen to be the descendant of the third Supreme Elder. His youngest daughter, in fact."

"So, your Master is kind of doing his buddy a favor by taking on?" Zac guessed, getting a glare in return.

"I might not be some dual-race indestructible weirdo, but I have my strong points as well. My Ice affinities are among the top three in my generation in the clan. I have at least five Hidden Nodes, and I natively opened one of them," Catheya said with a haughty demeanor. "And a powerful father is a talent as well, proves I have strong genes."

"Natively what?" Zac asked, ignoring the latter part. "You mentioned that word before as well."

"How do you know so little when you obviously have so powerful backing?" Catheya muttered with exasperation. "It means I opened one of my hidden nodes upon birth. I could use some of its effects while in F-grade, while it was completely unlocked the moment I evolved."

"Something like that's possible?" Zac exclaimed. "Which one did you open?"

Zac hoped to gain some insight into the hidden nodes of the Draugr, in case there were still some lurking in his body. His three hidden nodes were all connected to his Void Emperor-bloodline and seemed to form a closed system, but that didn't mean there weren't more of them to open.

"I guess it's fair you know some after what you've displayed to save me," Catheya said after some hesitation. "It's a special hidden node related to my nose."

"Your nose?" Zac repeated with a blank look.

"It's very sharp," Catheya added.

"A very sharp nose," Zac sagely nodded. "Impressive."

"It's a natural scouting ability that can help me with everything from finding treasures to spotting hidden enemies. It allowed me to sense your Draugr heritage all back in the Base Town! Well, whatever. A brute like you wouldn't understand a good thing if it hit you in the face," she huffed.

"I can try sending a message, but your master's scattered methods aren't enough considering they are part of our earlier agreement. I want a top-grade treasure as well," Zac said. "One equivalent to the things the top 1,000 combatants could get from the Fate Plucking-trial."

"If I had anything like that, I would have already used it on myself," Catheya said with exasperation.

"There are still almost three years to go in this place, right?" Zac smiled. "Between killing off people and exploring the depths, you should get your hands on one. If you hand one over to me before the trial ends, then I'll try to send a message when I return."

"Why must I find it myself?" Catheya frowned. "Do you think you can just pick those things up from the ground? Only a handful are excavated every Ascent, and seldom by people like me. My master can get one in short order after we leave though."

"No deal," Zac said with a shake of his head. "This is non-negotiable. Lucky for you this is a double trial. Your odds are a lot better than normal."

Things had already progressed to this point. There was no way he'd stay along a second longer than needed in the Twilight Harbor. Between Catheya discovering his true form and Alea wanting to eat the Twilight Fruits, he had pretty much given up on the Fate-Plucking Ladder unless something changed.

It was better to leave the trial a few months early and slink away before anything could happen. After that, he'd have around ninety years to sound out whether Catheya betrayed his secrets and what the Undead Empire's response would be.

"... I'll try, but you have to understand that you're asking the impossible from me," Catheya entreated. "Please, this is a matter of life and death for my clan. Isn't there anything else I can do for you? On the outside or in here?"

Hearing the last part gave Zac another idea and he quickly made a decision.

"There is one other thing," he slowly said. "I am looking for two particular spots in this Trial, and they should be around the middle reaches. Find the exact location of those two places, and I'll try to convey the message."

"That's it?" Catheya asked skeptically. "Just the location of the two spots?"

"That's it," Zac said. "Deal?"

"Absolutely," Catheya quickly nodded. "Do you have a description?"

Zac immediately described the two locations of the two remnants as best as he could remember them from the vision back in the Mystic Realm, along with the hints he had gathered so far. He figured he could have Catheya find those two places while he checked out the Chasm and got rid of the brand this Va Tapek had left in his body.

"Never heard of those two places, and they're not in the private missives of my clan. But I should definitely be able to find them within the year," Catheya nodded. "What's special about them?"

"Don't enter those places," Zac said. "Only trouble waits in there."

"No wonder you're looking for them then," Catheya laughed. "Trouble seems to follow you wherever you go. Do you know that your home sector is currently in isolation because of you? We barely got out."

"What? What did I do?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Because of the thing you summoned in the Tower of Eternity," Catheya said. "Apparently, that stele is some weird artifact older than the System itself. Wherever it appears, conflict will appear. The higher-ups are afraid that just its apparition will cause spread chaos across the frontier after you summoned it, so Zecia has been quarantined. No ships in or out. Of course, it's impossible to keep completely sealed, especially when the Heavens thrive on conflict."

"No wonder," Zac sighed, remembering how that huge ogre at the Big Axe Coliseum had mentioned that war was coming.

Was it all his fault? He quickly shook his head. It couldn't be, he was just a small fry who could barely impact the fate of a single planet. If anything, it was on the System. It was the System that conjured that apparition, not he. And since the System wanted a conflict in Zecia, it would accomplish it one way or another.

That alone was barely a comfort as he thought of the chaos and loss of life that a Sector-wide war would bring. Unfortunately, he was still just a nobody. He wouldn't be able to impact the situation as he was right now. He could only push himself to get stronger, and once he reached the top, he'd be able to prevent things like this from going out of control.

The two sat in silence and continued to recuperate and cultivate for a few more hours, but eventually, it was time to go. They had completed their task as best as they could, and Catheya still hadn't sensed any of her followers coming down to look for her. She was anxious to get back to the surface, and Zac was eager to go get the Life-Death Fruits.

They simply picked the tunnel at the top of the chute they had rested in and followed whatever path had the least ambient life-attunement energies. Their efforts paid off over the next hours as they kept ascending until the energy was barely marked by the Living Pulse.

"We should be coming in on the surface by now," Catheya said.

"Alright. Give me a second," Zac said, making Catheya look over with confusion.

Zac jogged over to a secluded section out of Catheya's sight and erected an illusion array around him before he closed his eyes as he let waves of Cosmic Energy spread through his body. He kept this going

for over a minute until he finally activated his Duplicity Core. A wave of Miasma spread through his body, and he was back in his Arcaz personality a few seconds later. It was the best he could do to obfuscate the exact details of his transformation for the moment.

“So weird. Is the Twilight Energy even affecting you at all?” Catheya said with a shake of her head when Zac returned, and he only smiled in response as he passed her by on the way to the exit.

They were almost at the crest, and both of them readied themselves for battle just in case. The waters above them were mostly neutral in flavor, but it was still a stretch that passed right above the Living Pulse, and there would definitely be numerous cultivators passing. Two Draugr would definitely stick out if discovered, and they were pretty lucky they hadn't run into a single group since taking out the Havarok squad.

Truthfully, his actions beneath the surface might have worked in their favor in unexpected ways. The upheavals he caused might have been felt all the way to the surface, and who'd dare venture into some tunnels that could come crashing down on you at moment's notice? The last stretch was too narrow to pass through, but they were so far from the Living Pulse by this point that Zac simply cut it apart, creating a tunnel to leave through.

“Two signals!” Catheya exclaimed with glee the moment they emerged from the underground. “It should be Varo and Qirai!”