

The Fall 740

Chapter 740: Dark Horse

“What the hell!” Qirai screamed, her eyes almost bulging out of her head. “Am I seeing things?! Has this cursed ocean finally driven me insane?”

“If it did, then it dragged us all down,” Catheya sighed as she looked at the screen in front of her.

[Monthly Contribution Ladder]

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Her face was calm, but a storm raged in her heart. Just what had that lunatic done this time? Was it too much to ask for him to stay out of the limelight? No, he had to throw a wrench in the whole trial, getting his name known far and wide. She thought he had learned his lesson after causing all that havoc back in Hollowtongue mountain after they parted, considering he had been quiet for some time.

It turned out he was just amassing momentum for whatever madness he had accomplished. Catheya felt a headache coming on as she tried to figure out what to do from here on out. She might have been able to hide Zac Piker's identity before as no one of importance would care for a random trial-taker, but how could she possibly do that now?

Forget her master, even the officials of the Empire might start asking questions about him, especially when this trial was so out of the norm.

It was almost mindboggling the kind of shockwaves Zac Piker managed to create with his limited power. He had plunged the whole Zecia sector into chaos while still in the F-grade, and her master had actually estimated that he was somehow related to the odd spatial ripples that were the hot gossip back before they left. He didn't have any proof, but the timing was too coincidental with the appearance of the Steele of Conflict.

Now he had appeared here, and the trial that had been held for tens of millions of years without much issue had somehow become the preamble of a cataclysmic struggle between three empires from the looks of it. He had once more become the eye of the storm of fate, and Catheya had a creeping suspicion he wasn't done causing trouble.

After all, there was definitely something odd about the location she had found for him. She hadn't managed to get past the restrictions to enter the heart of the volcano, but her nose told her all she needed to know; that place was cursed. Yet that man wanted to go there, proving he was up to no good. The question was what she should do.

Stay clear or ride the storm to the end?

“Some people know his identity,” Varo said from the side. “His connection to clan Sharva'Zi is known by a few after the events at the Auction. What should we do?”

Catheya glanced at her follower, his sleeve hanging empty after the amputation, before she looked the window for a whole minute. Finally, she made her decision.

"We'll keep the course. Arcaz Black will be coming our way as soon as he's done with whatever he's up to, and I want to have both locations confirmed so that we can send him on his merry way as quickly as possible," Catheya sighed.

"That guy might be powerful, but he is trouble," Qirai reminded.

"The fate of our clan is a weak candle in the wind. If something isn't done it will be snuffed out before long. The Supreme Elder is barely staving off the madness, and I'm sure there are a few neighbors more than willing to push him into an early grave," Catheya said. "Arcaz Black is like a beacon of providence, his mere existence can change the wheels of fate. How can we give up on it at this stage? Who knows, whatever he's doing might even be at the behest of my ancestor."

"Elusive maneuvers?" Varo ventured.

"Exactly," Catheya nodded as she took out a mask that fused with her face.

It felt like maggots burrowed into her flesh, and soon enough her pristine features had been replaced by a much more squarish face. The mask was gone, and anyone who looked into her eyes would no longer see the abyssal orbs, but rather two icy-pale eyes that emitted a freezing cold.

She wasn't the only one who changed as large scars started to appear across Qirai's body. Her teeth fell out the next moment as her jaw grew, replaced with sharp fangs. A long rat tail sprung out next, and her right arm grew almost thirty percent compared to the original. Anyone looking at her right now couldn't possibly think of her as anything but a Corpselord guardian.

As for Varo, he was the last one to worry about. He had not one but three ways to change his appearance, and together they formed a disguise that would fool everyone but the absolute peak scouts.

"I hate this form," Qirai muttered as she scratched her snout.

"You look very powerful," Catheya laughed.

"I'll give that guy a good talking to when he comes back," Qirai grunted as she started getting used to moving around with a tail.

"Will Mr. Black come back and risk getting discovered?" Varo asked from the side. "Waiting out the trial and staying hidden seems more appropriate."

"My intuition tells me he'll come," Catheya slowly said. "I think the two spots he's had us look for are the true reason he entered the Twilight Ocean in the first place. Besides, does that guy seem like someone who would be content with hiding in a cave for another two and a half years?"

Qirai simply snorted in response as Varo slowly nodded in agreement.

"What do you want us to do?" Varo asked.

"We'll head toward that temporary settlement we heard about before," Catheya nodded. "We need to expand our charters since I have no idea where to look from here on out. Besides, we might learn what's actually going on over there. I'm sure that whatever that unlucky star did ruffled some feathers."

"I wonder what those two hotshots are thinking right now," Qirai snorted as she startled dismantling the array flags of their hideout. "I bet that princeling and crazy bloodsucker are grinding their teeth right now."

"He really knows how to keep life interesting," Catheya laughed.

Uona threw away the emptied husk of the cultivator she had caught before, a surge of pain and humiliation burning in her heart.

Why wouldn't they regrow?

No matter how much Blood Essence she gathered, her limbs refused to regenerate no matter how many times she activated her bloodline ability. Even wounds left by Hegemons would slowly regrow, but something was wrong this time around. That ball of destruction the Draugr unleashed, was it truly Oblivion? Something like that shouldn't be possible to wield by an E-grade warrior.

Did Arcaz Black carry one of those seeds? She had heard about warriors getting infected by those fragments that carried the ancient curse, but this wasn't how it should work. Those warriors never were in control of the seeds, the seeds were in control of them. Even the powerful could only seal them away, never taking advantage of the energies within.

Was Arcaz Black somehow unique in that sense? Or was it something else?

That ant! Uona grit her teeth as she paced back and forth, her gait only made possible by turning a Blood Servant into a temporary limb. Everything had gone awry because of that encounter. Not only had he stolen her spot, his name sitting on top of her head to remind her of the humiliation. Now, the situation might even affect her family's plans.

Their nascent branch was finally starting to rise, with two Autarchs holding down the fort at home and at the Eternal Court. With a third one, they could send one to the frontlines, becoming a core contributor to the war against those bald bastards. The amount of resources that would bring to their family would be enough to stabilize their foundation as a High-grade branch, and they would be able to slowly work toward the peak from there.

And now she looked like this. The other Chosen already looked down on her because of her lacking heritage, even though almost half of them had worse foundations than she did. What if she came back looking like this? The walls of her submersible cracked as they were blanketed by Uona's fury, but she slowly calmed down as she started considering her next step.

Part of her wanted to leave and have Grandpa Nether heal her wounds, but she couldn't face him like this. She had accomplished most of her tasks, but the most important parts were still left undone. The Blood Effigy would need at least another year to grow. Now with Arcaz Black entering the fray... This was not over. A Pureblood Draugr like that couldn't be completely unknown.

"Where is the closest settlement?" Uona asked as she turned toward her guide.

"Mistress, settlements often spring up around exits, though it is a bit early for that now. However, there should be one settlement a month's travel from our current location called Glory's Rest. It is a mountain that has been turned into a town over millions of years, its features remaining intact between trials," the blood servant answered with a bow.

Uona nodded in understanding as she slowly tapped her nail against the table. However, she frowned when she saw the blood servant take a hesitant step forward.

"What is it?"

"Mistress, I might know something of importance," the blood servant slowly said as it looked at her wound.

"Oh?" Uona said, not really caring about what a thrall might consider important.

But she still indicated for the blood servant to speak up. He had helped her immensely over the past month, and without his knowledge, she might not even have surpassed Ykrodas on the ladder. It wasn't that the princeling was stronger, but he had brought a whole army to help, the coward.

She even did feel a bit bad about refining this Troker into a blood servant. But the regret only lasted for a fleeting second. How else would she be able to bring him to the depths of the Mystic Realm without him succumbing to the atmosphere? She'd take the thrall back to the clan after this was over, and that alone would more than make up for making him an eternal servant to her clan.

"That terrifying energy in Mistress' wound. I know of a place in the Twilight Ocean where a similar aura can be sensed," Troker hesitated.

"Is there now?" Uona said, a smile spreading across her face.

"Who?! Who the hell is Arcaz Black?!" Ykrodas roared with fury as he smashed a wine glass. "Where did this man come from?!"

He couldn't believe what he was seeing. He had memorized every single name on the ladder, and this man had not once appeared before.

"He is not mentioned in our or the local missives. He's not even in the whole tournament registry," Orbot said after scanning his memories. "Either a hidden elite or an outsider with a ticket. Judging by the name, I'd guess undead."

"Ask around. He's not necessarily unknown even if he's not in any missives," Ykrodas frowned. "His points don't make any sense either. What do you make of it?"

"According to my estimates, he's not a threat to your majesty," Orbot slowly said. "I think this man has one Middle Branch at best. Perhaps even lower."

"That's it? He can't possibly have gained so many points through slaughter," Ykrodas frowned.

"My best guess is he's encountered some opportunity. Young Master gained 50,000 Points from ingesting that constitution-augmenting treasure before, and our enemies have harvested quite a few points by destroying nodes. I think this fellow managed to stumble upon some sort of opportunity that unlocked a large section of the tapestry," the advisor mused.

"Makes sense," Ykrodas nodded. "He wasn't even on the ladder before."

"Your majesty is absolutely right. If anything, this is an opportunity for us," Orbot added. "That Eternal Clan lass is difficult to deal with, but she seems to have encountered some difficulty considering her

points have barely grown since the last tally. As for this Arcaz Black, we just need to kill him. With the bounty on his head, your Majesty can reach the top in one go."

"Easier said than done," Ykrodas sighed. "That person could be hiding anywhere, probably inside the chasm itself. Why would he pop his head out at this juncture? He has a good chance at maintaining his lead all through the trial, and will get the third spot at worst."

"I doubt the Ruthless Heavens would let someone just hide out and claim the rewards," Orbot said as he slowly tapped the table. "But I do have an idea to move events in our favor."

"What have you cooked up this time?" Ykrodas smiled, his densely inscribed face turning into a fearsome mask.

"We, unfortunately, don't have the means to find him as things stand. But I happened to hear that a certain Core Disciple of the Radiant Temple is touring a region a week's travel away. Someone who is a member of the Constellation Hall," Orbot said with a pointed look.

"A numerologist?" Ykrodas exclaimed, his eyes lighting up. "That would work. But catching those wily bastards is easier said than done."

"That is absolutely true," Orbot nodded. "Your Majesty would have to make a move personally on this one I think."

"That's fine by me. I didn't know Constellation Hall was mixed up in this mess. No wonder we've had so much trouble completing our tasks."

"We're alone in this struggle," Orbot nodded with a sigh. "Both the temple and the unliving want the ascension to proceed. The temple even seems to have an agreement with the target. Perhaps he's planning on joining them for sanctuary after this is over with, taking the mantle of another Grand Deacon."

"They wouldn't dare," Ykrodas said with a shake of his head. "It would disrupt the balance."

"An agent then, a rogue Autarch causing chaos among the temple's enemies, while staying clear of their domains," Orbot said. "Might be even more useful than a proper member."

Ykrodas grunted in agreement. That man had caused so much trouble while still a Monarch, and he didn't seem to have any compunctions about slaughtering the weak. Just how much Havarok blood would flow through the sector if that lunatic had his way?

"Completing the task is ultimately more important than my ranking," Ykrodas said. "How is the progress of the seals?"

"Should be just about finished," Orbot nodded.

"Let's take a look," Ykrodas said, and the two ventured down into the catacombs beneath the settlement.

Down below a massive hall stretched out, with almost five hundred warriors sitting in orderly lines. Surrounding them were fifty array masters, all of them continuously forming sigils as they chanted in

unison. The ground was covered with runes, and new ones joined them every second as they crawled toward the warriors.

The runes then climbed up on the warriors' bodies, joining thousands just like it. Ykrodas knew from experience that the process was extremely painful, but the warriors didn't as much as move a muscle as they were being engraved. Ykrodas truthfully didn't know if these people could feel pain any longer. Feel anything, for that matter.

"Sacrificial beacons. Not living, not dead," Orbot said as he looked down at the native deathsworn with a complex gaze.

"This is their conviction. Steele warriors willing to become swords aimed at those who threaten their homeland," Ykrodas aid, his eyes looking across the hall. "We'd be lucky to have such warriors in our ranks. Have the others send them out the moment the process is finished. Let's go find that numerologist."

Alvod looked at the rippling tapestry that stretched across the horizon, a frown marring his face. Why was joy so often marred with sorrow? Had he pushed the boundaries too far, to the point that the Ruthless Heavens finally sent a warning? He knew that meddling with a trial was to mess with the core commandments of the System, and there were bound to be repercussions if he overplayed his hand.

However, his brows slowly relaxed as the tapestry calmed down, the pressure of the Heavens slowly lessening. Left behind was a more complete tapestry, like a stubborn imperfection that had finally been smoothed out. But something had obviously changed, and not for the better.

His eyes turned to one of the three whirlpools far beneath his position, and he could feel how the flow had become far too disorderly to properly make use of. If things stayed like this it would become far more inconvenient to harvest that power when the Heavens truly came crashing down. He sent a mental command to his sentinel, but his brows rose in shock when he couldn't get a response.

It wasn't hard to put two and two together. What had Thram done to draw the ire of the System? She should be safe from any restraints, considering she was a native Alvod had raised and nurtured for 30,000 years. She also knew better than to mess with the funneling array, especially this close to the fruition of the plans.

Someone must have managed to figure out a way to mess with his array, even when it was placed in the depths of the Twilight Chasm. Anger once more burned in his chest as he pictured the face of the Havarok Emperor. It had to be them. No one else should want to destroy that particular array.

His eyes turned to the chalice, and he grit his teeth as he extracted nine drops, before quickly infusing them into nine flags. The flags flew out in an instant, each taking a specific position in front of the tapestry. Alvod's aura exploded as his world projection emerged, a world of endless tides that crashed against the flags.

As the tide rose and fell, a few small engravings, each looking like something left behind by the birth of the universe itself, were added to the nine flags. It was the Primal Dao being slowly transformed into the core of the array.

Nine drops and a lot of effort would delay him for half a year. Fury smoldered in Alvod's chest, but he didn't let it affect his concentration as he slowly recreated the flags that had been lost. With each crashing of the tides, he felt how his enemies gained another day to complete their schemes. As the tides receded, his eyes turned to the chalice, now looking far more unfilled compared to earlier.

But this was ultimately just another bump in his path. He had survived far worse. Tram should wake up soon enough, and he would get the whole story then. Alvod's scowl eventually started to ease up as the confident smile once more spread across his face.

If anyone knew how to bide their time before exacting overwhelming revenge, it was him.