

The Fall 755

Chapter 755: Parting the Clouds

"The last thing you said?" Zac muttered as he scratched his chin. "Uh... Don't cause trouble?"

"And what did you do?" Catheya said with a dangerous smile.

"Well, that wasn't my fault. Uona-" Zac tried to explain, but he didn't get any further before he got cut off.

"So you did attack her!" Catheya exploded. "No wonder that crazy harlot put a bounty on my head! We haven't been able to sleep a wink for months because of you! Looking over our shoulders every waking moment, afraid that the bloodthirsty she-devil or the Havarok prince would entrap us in their hunt for you. Battle after battle the moment our disguises were exposed!"

"To be fair, she was the one that attacked me first. What was I supposed to do? Let her attack me?" Zac muttered before he froze. "Wait, the Havarok Empire is looking for me as well?"

"What do you think? You surpassed them both on the ladder, and it didn't take much investigation to find out that you had been part of the missions to mess with the Living Pulse. With your contribution points, I think they are seeing you as their number one obstacle to achieving whatever goal they have in here," Catheya sighed as she slumped down in the chair. "I swear... I have never heard of anyone with such a penchant for creating chaos such as you. At least it looks like the Havarok stopped looking for you two months ago, which gave us some the opportunity to find this place."

"It can't have been all bad," Zac said as he took out a chair of his own, shrugging off a layer of frost that had formed on his robes. "I can't believe you've managed to form a Dao Branch this quickly."

"What Dao Branch? This layered domain?" Catheya snorted as she glared at Zac. "It's just a third Dao Fragment I was forced to form just to stay alive. My whole cultivation path has been thrown off-kilter because of your unrivaled ability to create enmities. Now I have to figure out what to do with a second Ice Dao."

"Well..." Zac coughed, feeling a bit bad for Catheya.

Initially, he had even been a bit jealous. He had been forced to go to insane lengths and swallow that mysterious Dao light to form a branch, and she had accomplished the same in the middle reaches of the ocean? But it turned out it wasn't actually an Ice Dao Branch as he thought, but rather two Peak Dao Fragments both of the ice variety.

Still, forming a Peak Dao Fragment from nothing in just over a year was almost as shocking as forming a Dao Branch. Besides, the aura she had exuded for a moment was simply too great, making Zac believe there was more to it. Did Catheya perhaps have a Hidden Node that worked similarly to his [Spiritual Void]?

Forming another Dao Fragment was a good thing on the surface, but it could also spell trouble. He knew that Catheya's original plan was to form a Dao Branch by fusing her two Daos. Now, she was suddenly saddled with a third Fragment, this one in the same vein as one of her other two Daos.

It wasn't too uncommon to cultivate two Daos of the same type, but the goal was usually to fuse the two similar Fragments into one Branch. However, she couldn't do that now, since that would leave a sole Death-attuned Dao Fragment. Upgrading that Dao as is would mean flirting with the boundless path, which was highly frowned upon in the Undead Empire.

She would ultimately have to still fuse Death and Ice and then complement it with another Ice-based Dao Branch. Problem was, that such a path would put tremendous requirements on her affinity to ice. Even elites had a hard time forming and progressing a single mixed-meaning Dao Branch, but Catheya suddenly had to gain the equivalent insight of one and a half pure Ice Branch.

It was not just a matter of doubling the time it took her to cultivate. She would require both a lot of additional lucky encounters, life-and-death battles, and time to meditate on a way to piece it all together.

Simply giving up on one of the Dao Fragments wasn't an option either. The System neatly arranged one's insights into packages and named them Seeds, Fragments, Branches, and so on, but it was ultimately just understanding of the universe. It was all one, all connected.

That's why you couldn't just collect 100 Dao Fragments to boost your Luck and other attributes. It would end up with your path being all messed up. You'd have problems even progressing in the D-grade with Dao Fragments weighing you down, and becoming a Monarch was simply impossible. How would you form an inner world on such a shaky foundation like a Dao Fragment?

Of course, if Catheya succeeded on her new path, she would be stronger for it. Two Dao Branches was not just twice as strong as one. There was also the added benefit of Dao Braiding apart from the attribute boost. But the risk of getting stuck in a bottleneck was much greater than going with a more conservative Single-Branch Path.

That's why most people except the real elites only aimed for one Dao Branch. People who dared to aim for three branches like Zac himself was exceedingly rare, even in the top factions.

"Your talents were wasted on only going for one Dao Branch anyway," Zac said. "A budding Heaven's Chosen like yourself should have at least two, right? Just look, your new Fragment has progressed by a terrifying amount in one short year."

Catheya only snorted in response, but she did seem a bit mollified. "Well, I was considering adding another facet to my cultivation after meeting you. I just wish I would've had more time to plan and meditate on the decision further, rather than being forced into it."

"If it's any consolation, pretty much all my insights come from almost getting myself killed, and it has worked out pretty well so far," Zac said before his brows furrowed in confusion. "Wait, what does your Dao have to do with me?"

Catheya just smiled as she conjured two ice shards. The first one slowly turned into a beautiful flower which gave Zac a sense of immense cold, reminiscent of the terrifying bolt Va Tapek had unleashed in the Twilight Harbor.

The other shard turned into an icicle, and Zac almost felt his soul getting pierced by looking at its sharp edge. Zac wasn't sure exactly what insights had gone into that Dao, but he felt it much more aligned

with his own Dao of Conflict compared to the other shard. It looked like Catheya had opted to go all-in on an offensive Dao while her other one was more all-purpose from what he'd seen so far.

"Sometimes, brute force is simply the best solution, which you are walking testament to," Catheya said as she gave him a long look that made Zac's hair stand on end. "Besides..."

"What?" Zac hesitated, his heartbeat speeding up from the intense stare.

"Nothing, never mind," Catheya muttered.

"Well, offense is the best defense," Zac said with a weak smile. "And don't worry, I'll be more careful going forward."

"Please, don't jinx us any further," Catheya groaned while Qirai almost looked like she had been physically wounded by Zac's assurance.

"On another subject..." Zac said hesitantly.

"Yes?" Catheya slowly said as her eyes slowly thinned.

"Here, I have prepared a small token of apology," Zac said, quickly changing course from asking about the remnants.

From the sounds and looks of it, the trio had barely managed to stay alive thanks to his exploits, and it was just too heartless to immediately ask about his own matters. Instead, he took out three boxes and threw them over to Catheya and her two followers. Inside Catheya's box was the second dumpling, while the other two contained what he suspected to be top-quality Dao Treasures.

"What's this?" Catheya asked, her scowl suddenly replaced by an impish smile.

Zac immediately realized he might have been duped, but he didn't really care. It was ultimately true that he had caused Catheya a lot of trouble, and this was a was simply making amends.

"I don't know what it's called. I found it in the heart of the Twilight Chasm. It'll provide you with a powerful epiphany, allowing you to improve death-attuned skills in all kinds of ways. I used one to upgrade a skill, it worked extremely well," Zac said. "I think you could use it when crafting as well. It might allow you to create a uniquely powerful follower, or perhaps form a supreme-grade skill to go with your new Dao."

"Supreme-grade? That great?" Catheya exclaimed as she looked down at the box with shock. "Thank you, it looks like you do have some conscience after all."

The other two nodded in thanks before they stowed away their boxes, and Zac could sense that the tense atmosphere had relaxed by quite a bit.

"So you really went all the way to the chasm," Catheya sighed. "I guessed as much, but I wasn't sure. I wanted to check it out as well, but some other time perhaps. By the way, were you involved in that enormous snake making the rounds in the chasm?"

Zac smiled a bit helplessly with a shrug. He wasn't sure why the big snake had targeted groups of cultivators at the surface, but he guessed it had taken out any threats to its master's plan. However, Zac wondered if it would still have done the same even if he hadn't ruined its plans at the bottom.

"Should've known," Catheya snorted, whereas Qirai gave him a thumbs up.

"Don't listen to the young miss. Cultivators are meant to live large! Otherwise, what's the point?" the Titan Revenant laughed. "And we were only in true mortal danger a few times while looking for those places."

"You still looked after getting a bounty on your heads?" Zac said, his heart beating an extra time with his excitement. "Did you find them?"

"Why else would we be hunted day or night?" Catheya glared. "I promised we'd find them, so we did. It was actually not too far from the ravine we ran into Uona, that crazy witch. Luckily, she was busy decimating a small army and didn't realize who we were, so she only sent a few blood thralls after us."

"Near the ravine, you said?" Zac frowned as he got a sense of foreboding.

He had blasted Uona with a full-powered Annihilation Sphere, and now she just happened to be seen close to the resting place of the second splinter? He wanted to believe in coincidences, but he didn't need his Danger Sense to realize his plan might have hit a snag.

"Well, that's not good," he muttered.

"That's the understatement of the year," Catheya exhaled. "Do you know who the Noz'Valadir are? Varo had heard of them before. They have two Autarchs, both of them more powerful than our Patriarch. And both of them have a good chunk of lifespan left as well. I fear they might retaliate against clan Sharva'Zi unless you can get our ancestor to return."

Zac's eyes widened a bit, only now realizing his actions might have implications outside the Mystic Realm as well. There was an unspoken rule in the Multiverse that the grudges and actions inside Mystic Realms stayed between the members of the junior generation, but there was a limit to everything.

There were no guarantees they would let bygones be bygones if he directly impacted their bottom line with his actions. And after interrogating that Havarok warrior, he understood what was going on. It was a competition for the opportunity that the Eveningtide Asura was trying to create. If his actions cost the Eternal Clan an Autarch, just how far were they willing to go for revenge?

Would the Undead Empire step in to protect Clan Sharva'Zi? Or at least the more powerful Draugr clans?

"You know, I tried entering the ravine before we were discovered," Catheya said after the silence had stretched on for a while. "I couldn't pass the natural formations, but I smelled something familiar. The same thing I smelled from Zac Piker when he caused havoc at the base town. The same thing as the tear-streaks on your follower's face."

"Oblivion," Zac grunted. "The path of your ancestor. Uona has reason to believe I'll appear there if she's figured out the same thing as you."

"And you're still going?" Catheya asked hesitantly.

"Have to," Zac grimaced. "That weird town people keep mentioning, is it close to the ravine by chance?"

Zac's last hope was that Uona had simply passed by the area of the splinter while hunting cultivators around the ancient city.

"Not really," Catheya said, dashing his hopes. "A month's travel away, maybe?"

"Well, shit," Zac muttered.

"You really haven't had enough?" Catheya said with a raised brow. "I don't exactly know what is hidden in those two places, but my intuition tells me it's nothing good."

"I would prefer to stay hidden for the rest of the trial, but I can't stop now," Zac shrugged. "I have things that I have to accomplish."

"Well, one of the locations is not that far away," Catheya eventually sighed as she threw him an intelligence crystal. "Tell me. Whatever you have planned. Will it be as... impressive... as what you've done thus far?"

"Well, this one might get a bit chaotic," Zac admitted with a crooked smile.

"Give us a moment," Catheya groaned as she glanced at her two followers who promptly nodded and left the chambers.

"How bad are we talking? Are you able to say?" she asked when the two were alone.

Zac hesitated a few seconds before he decided to tell the truth. "I want to say that nothing will happen, but my hands are tied. The result... is unpredictable. Might be as hectic as the Tower of Eternity. With Uona creeping about, it might get even worse."

"Is it my ancestor making you do this?" Catheya asked with a frown. "Or is it my master?"

"Neither," Zac shrugged before he braced himself. "I have completed what your master asked of me. Did you know that he is working with the Twilight Lord, who just so happens to be the Eveningtide Asura?"

"What?!" Catheya exclaimed, looking genuinely surprised. "The Eveningtide Asura from the Zecia sector? I thought the Asura had been killed?"

Zac didn't immediately answer, but rather sat frozen for a few seconds before he breathed out in relief. He had thought long and hard just what he could and couldn't say to Catheya. He had seen the brand disappearing, and the text had said that 'karma was severed'. However, did he dare bet his life on it?

Ultimately, he had settled on sharing everything he had managed to piece together, but keeping all information about the egg and the valley for himself, just in case. And it didn't look like he had triggered any hidden curse by divulging his findings.

"Apparently not," Zac eventually shrugged before sharing all the information he had gathered so far.

Catheya only asked a few clarifying questions, and she sat in silence for almost a minute after he was done.

"I finally get it," Catheya said with sorrow in her voice. "So the Eveningtide Asura is trying to break through to Autarchy, turning this place into a sacrificial vessel. I can't believe master is helping the Eveningtide Asura, after all my clan has done for him. And no wonder so many elites have gathered. This will be a real bloodbath."

"Why do so many factions care whether Alvod tries to break through?" Zac asked.

"A single Autarch emerging can shift the power dynamics in these outer sectors, but it's not really about that. It's about resources, and why no Autarchs ever emerge in the frontier sectors," Catheya said.

"Just why is that?" Zac asked curiously.

"These sectors are too lowly, and the true face of the Heavens are shrouded, like the sun being hidden by thick clouds. It's not possible to ponder on the Grand Dao here. In fact, it's so bad that Autarchs try to avoid these lower Sectors altogether. Just existing in them is a constant drain on their foundation. Without access to the Heavens, they're like starving beasts sacrificing muscle mass to survive a bit longer," Catheya sighed.

"With the Heavens shrouded, you simply cannot seize and defend your Dao. Doing so requires a special environment, and this is not just an issue of the frontier either. Clan Sharva'Zi doesn't have direct access to such an environment. The whole clan has to contribute to the Empire for ages to gain a single chance at Autarchy. Even then, the odds of success are extremely slim."

"But Alvod has found a way to break this convention," Zac concluded. "To part the clouds, so to speak."

"Apparently," Catheya nodded. "Normally, I would have said it was a fool's dream, but considering the weight the multiple factions put on this matter, I think that it will actually work. A unique opportunity for Divine Monarchs, situated out here in the lawless frontier... Autarchy without spending a hundred thousand years' worth of accumulations. No wonder the sharks are circling the waters."

"Where does that leave us?" Zac asked with exhaustion. "Are we all screwed? Is there anything we can do?"

"Leave early," Catheya thoughtfully said. "The Boundless Heavens might provide some sort of lifeline if all hell breaks loose, but I wouldn't bet my life on it. Perhaps it will deign us a worthy sacrifice in return for the ascension of another Autarch."

"That sounds like the system, alright," Zac muttered. "This ancient town, do you think it's related to everything else going on?"

"What, you're planning on wreaking havoc over there as well?" Catheya countered with a raised brow.

"Not if I can help it, but sometimes you don't get a choice," Zac said. "What's your take?"

"It's a bit suspicious," Catheya said. "A mysterious town appearing like this when so much is going on? If I had to guess, it might be related to Aia Ouro."