

The Fall 756

Chapter 756: City of Ancients

"Aia Ouro? The Eidolon?" Zac said with confusion. "They're the ones who have conjured the city? Are you sure?"

"They call it the City of Ancients, apparently. It appeared much closer to the Death Pulse than the Living pulse, so I've actually traveled around that area quite a bit over the last year. And I encountered an inordinate amount of spectral cultivators flitting back and forth," Catheya said. "Besides, I heard rumors of the Eidolon's vessel being spotted here as well, over a month before the city rose through the ground. Why would such an elite stay in the middle reaches, if it was not related to that place?"

"What would a bunch of ghosts have to gain from doing this?" Zac asked.

"I have no earthly idea, but whatever they are doing should be aimed at helping their elders seize the opportunity for themselves. Of course, I have no idea how things like that work. I wouldn't be surprised if Aia Ouro themselves didn't know exactly the purpose of their actions," Catheya said. "Perhaps there is something at the heart of the City of Ancients that can help wrest control of this realm? That's the idea I've been able to come up with so far, but the truth is probably only known to some Divine Monarch outside."

"A bunch of paranoid old goats," Zac muttered.

"It's those kinds of people who survive for long enough to become Divine Monarchs," Catheya winked as she took out a decanter and two glasses of wine, pouring a cup for Zac. "Now, what will you do after this, provided we survive?"

"What do you mean?" Zac asked as he took a swig.

"You know the kind of chaos you've caused, and you seem to have no intention of stopping. I will be questioned the moment I leave this place, and you should know that the contract we've entered will not hold," she said with a helpless shrug. "Not to mention master and my clan, it's also likely that the Umbri'Zi Family will want to look into the matter. Who knows, with your display, you might attract attention from even higher places."

"Like the Abyssal Shores?" Zac asked curiously.

The Umbri'Zi Family was the Draugr Clan ruling over the Undead Kingdom in the area. Technically, most of the Undead Provinces in this part of the frontier were subordinates of the Umbri'Zi, including the Kavriel Clan that governed over the Zecia Sector. However, the provinces were ultimately pretty autonomous, simply sending some resources in steady intervals.

Zac didn't have a lot of information about the Umbri'Zi, since their presence wasn't all that palpable in the Twilight Harbor. Catheya had explained their disregard as a matter of pride. The Umbri'Zi was on the precipice of becoming a High B-grade Clan, with both an extremely powerful matriarch and a handful of lower Autarchs to lord over their domain.

Their domain wasn't just the Undead Kingdom, but they apparently controlled vast territories in the Undead Heartlands as well. It would be a bit of an embarrassment for a vaunted clan like that to set up shop shoulder to shoulder with a bunch of the living factions in a frontier settlement.

Rather than that, they had others do business for them, like half-blood Draugr forces with some weak link to their bloodline. Furthermore, forces like Sharva'Zi had to pay a tax to the Umbri'Zi rather than the Twilight Lord. So, Zac felt that it was possible for the Umbri'Zi to look into him after these events.

Hopefully, they shouldn't be antagonistic toward him, considering he had worked against the Twilight Lord's interests rather than the Undead Empire's on this occasion.

However, while the Umbri'Zi was well-known, the Abyssal Shores was still a blank. Uona had mentioned it like it was the holy lands for Draugr, yet he hadn't heard a word about it from any other source.

"Well it's—" Catheya said before she stopped herself and looked at Zac suspiciously. "Wait, why are you asking? Why do you know that name?"

"Uona thought I was from that place," Zac said before he hesitantly decided to tell the truth. "And I might have rolled with it and used that as my background story from then on out."

A groan echoed through the room as Catheya slumped forward with her head in her hands, in a shockingly accurate homage to the statue depicting the Crown of Despair.

"Why must you torment me like this?" Catheya said "You impersonated a person from the shore? Who? Who knows this?"

"Well, there's you," Zac said, getting an exasperated grunt in return. "And Uona. And the Havarok Empire, probably."

"Anyone else?" Catheya asked icily.

"Oh, and the Eveningtide Asura, probably. Well, I told his snake guardian, and it probably passed it along?"

"Why not just shout it in front of the gates to the City of Ancients where a few hundred thousand warriors can hear you?" Catheya said while glaring at him.

"You think that would help?" Zac asked, but he quickly stopped messing around upon seeing that she was on the verge of another eruption. "Alright, alright. I'm sorry. I simply didn't have a lot of options, and I didn't want to implicate your family with my actions any further. I figured that the Abyssal Shores would be powerful enough they could survive taking the blame for my actions."

Catheya's demeanor softened a little, and she eventually shrugged. "Well, that's true. It's not like you're at the stage where you can rock the Abyssal Shores. They don't care about some squabbles on the frontier. They're only interested in the advancement of Draugr."

"So just what is it? Can you tell me?" Zac asked with burning curiosity. Who wouldn't know about the peak institute of their heritage?

“Well, it is a matter of the Draugr rather than the Empire,” Catheya thoughtfully said. “It shouldn’t break any commandment if I discuss it considering you’re Draugr. The Abyssal Shores is indeed the seat of our power. But more importantly, it is the origin of our kin.”

“What?” Zac exclaimed with surprise. He had expected the former, but the latter was a surprise.

“There is a mysterious lake of infinite depth and infinite darkness. Not even Autarchs can enter it and come out alive. There are even rumors that one of the non-Draugr princes once entered the Abyssal Lake, only to barely escape with their life intact,” Catheya said.

Zac’s whistled in surprise. A place not even Autarchs could tread... Just kind of dangers did it contain? As for the princes, Zac was pretty she was referring to one of the Empire's elusive A-grade cultivators.

“The Draugr are the sole exception. Eons ago, our ancestors emerged from the depths, walking onto the Abyssal Shores. They had no memories of the past, of where they came from. Were they born in the ocean, or did they come from some realm hidden in the depths? We still don't know. They only knew they were the Draugr,” Catheya said as she glanced at Zac. “This was long before the System, mind you.”

“Then what happened?” Zac asked.

“Our ancestors lived at the Abyssal Shores until the integration took place, our most powerful ancestors easily rebuffing any attempts to unroot us. But the lake actually closed itself during those dark ages, and it no longer sustained us. By that time, our ancestors had already allied with the other undying races, and they joined in the exodus. Eventually, the Undead Empire was founded, and we moved the lake to its core at a shocking cost,” the Draugr scion continued with some wistfulness. “Two A-grade ancestors sacrificed their lives to accomplish the task.

“Today, the lake is once more our Heartland. The Abyssal Shores is the name of our centralized faction. A few of our clans have permanent residence there, while some elites of our race get to train there temporarily. It’s in the heart of the empire, so the cultivation environment is naturally unsurpassed. Furthermore, the lake itself presents us Draugr with unique and unrivaled opportunities ever so often.”

Zac slowly nodded with a thoughtful look in his eyes. Traveling there to cultivate for a while sounded like a huge opportunity, but he doubted that was possible for him. He was neither a true Draugr nor a member of the Empire.

“Well?” Catheya asked with a glare.

“Well, what?” Zac repeated with confusion.

“Your plan?” Catheya exclaimed with exasperation. “Focus up.”

“Ah, right,” Zac smiled. “Worried for me?”

“Worried about the chaos you infuse into your surroundings,” Catheya snorted before she became serious. “Your name is probably known far and wide outside, and my involvement with you is common knowledge by now. I cannot lie to the Imperial Ambassadors.”

The two stared into each other’s eyes for a few seconds, before Zac eventually sighed with some exhaustion. “Well, I’d appreciate it if you kept my situation secret. If it’s impossible... Well, that’s too bad, I guess. You think the Empire would want to kill me or Recruit me?”

"Definitely recruit you," Catheya slowly said. "A Heaven's Chosen marked by fate, who could walk among the living as either a spy or ambassador? I wouldn't be surprised if some old monster claimed you as a direct disciple."

Zac smiled at that, but he didn't feel as confident himself. The warnings of Yrial echoed in his head, and there were no guarantees that he wouldn't end up dissected rather than nurtured. The good news was that he doubted he was interesting enough for an ancient Autarch to make a move. And even if some Monarch came looking for him back in Zecia, so what?

He already had a handful of Monarchs gunning for him over there, and he was doing just fine. No one even knew his real identity, and if things really got out of hand, he could always seal Earth after the Assimilation, making sure no clues got out. If worse came to worst, his core personnel would go into hiding across the sector, while he became a wandering cultivator.

With his teleportation network, he'd be night impossible to catch, and anyone would have to think twice before targeting Earth, lest they wanted to bring another Eveningtide Asura event down on their heads. Of course, for that kind of deterrent to be effective, he would need to prove his effectiveness at pushing through the ranks. He would need to be a lot more powerful than now by the time the integration took place.

"Well, I will try to be gone by the time my identity becomes an issue. I can always sound out the situation in the future after things have calmed down. I'm planning on heading out to the two spots locations as soon as possible, and leave the moment I have what I need. The that City of Ancients and the fate of the Twilight Harbor, I want no part of it," Zac eventually said.

"We'll leave early as well," Catheya nodded.

"Could you give me a few days headstart before you leave the realm?" Zac asked.

"That's fine," Catheya shrugged. "We have already picked up most of the treasures my master had divined for us. There are a few locations left, but I doubt they haven't already been stolen by others by now. We'll move toward the second spot and help you with reconnaissance. Then we'll exit three days after you've left the Ocean."

"No wonder your auras are so much stronger," Zac said with a raised brow. "Were the Life-Death Pearls even the best item your master had the Twilight Lord provide?"

"Well, some of the items on the list weren't as plentiful as the pearls," Catheya shrugged before she looked at him with a small smile as she leaned forward. "And you are ultimately an outsider. Of course, if you chose to join our family... Anything I have would be yours."

"I'm pretty happy with my current situation," Zac rejected without hesitation, prompting Catheya to humph and lean back into her chair. "More importantly, I have collected some things that I have trouble identifying. Perhaps you can help?"

"Why ask me?" Catheya said with a studiously lazy tone. "You said it yourself, I'm just a second-seed talent from a force not worth joining. What insights could I possibly provide the vaunted Arcas Black, the unfettered snake-charmer and unmatched troublemaker?"

“Alright alright,” Zac snorted. “How about this, for every twenty treasures you help me identify, I’ll give you one? Please?”

“Every twenty treasures?” Catheya exclaimed. “What’s going on? Just how many items have you snatched up? Did you rob the Twilight Lord’s treasury or something?”

“Something like that,” Zac coughed, prompting Catheya’s eyes to widen even further.

One by one Zac started taking out the small mountains of items he had accumulated since they split up last time. The more common items he had found in the middle reaches were all in his information package, but that was about it. He had collected a huge number of herbs and materials in the reef forest, especially from all those spatial items, and there was also the items from the chasm itself.

Unfortunately, he had absorbed most of the treasures he had encountered during his Bloodline Evolution, but there were still over a dozen items from the floating mountains. Furthermore, he had collected a large number of treasures hiding in the expansive cave networks in the wall of the chasm, each one more energy-rich than the other.

Initially, Catheya had exclaimed over Zac’s good luck as he started taking out one box after another, but her demeanor eventually turned from excitement to shock, and then to blank incomprehension as the piles of natural treasures grew. Still, she performed her task almost as expertly as Calrin and his cousins.

It took almost two hours, but the results were eventually tallied up. Catheya had only managed to identify roughly 30% of the items that Zac had taken out, but it wasn’t surprising considering most of the things he had picked up didn’t grow anywhere outside of the Twilight Ocean. However, while Catheya couldn’t name the majority of materials, she still displayed an impressive ability to categorize what was left.

Soon, a large pile of Attribute Fruits had accumulated to his side, and Zac’s eyes gleamed when he looked at the five herbs that would be able to raise his Luck. He seriously imprinted the aura they emitted, so that he would remember the feeling in case he ever ran into something similar in the wild.

The other attributes were just a matter of time for him to fill up thanks to his massive wealth, but Luck-boosting fruits were shockingly rare, and not something that reached auctions very often. Even now, he still hadn’t gained a single point in Luck from fruits during the E-grade.

Apart from that, there majority of the items were not really useful for him in the short run, perhaps except the 30-odd Dao Fruits that he’d save for when he had found some more insight into his Daos. The vast majority of items were mainly useable for crafting. For example, Catheya had identified a black block of metal as [Shadesteel].

Its main use was to be smelted into runes on weapons, which would strengthen its energy conductivity and the weapon’s abilities. There were over a hundred items that would provide these kinds of effects, from leaves that would form a dye that could help clothes hide one’s aura better, to berries that would strengthen the water-based nature in pills.

Finally, there were a total of five treasures that each one was at the level of a uniquely supreme E-grade treasure, which was shocking considering that not a single such item was found in most trials.

Unsurprisingly, four of them had been found on the floating mountains, with the last one in the lower parts of the cave system.

Two were affinity-boosting treasures, one boosting life and the other death, and Catheya looked at the death-attuned one like a starving wolf.

"Just take it," Zac smiled.

"What?" Catheya said, her eyes wide with confusion. "You don't want it? Even if it might help you become a cultivator?"

"My situation is a bit special," Zac shrugged. "That thing won't be of much use to me."

He wasn't lying. He sincerely doubted a treasure like that would amount to anything more than some food for his Hidden Nodes. Certainly, many of his followers back home delved into the Dao of Death, but the problem with this trial was that it was somewhat similar to the Tower of Eternity. Some treasures would become useless the moment they were taken outside since they depended on this unique environment.

So anything that could be eaten before leaving should be eaten, and it was better to give Catheya such a treasure than banking on that it would survive until he could hand it to someone back home.

"Has my charm finally started to wear you down?" Catheya asked with a wide smile.

"Something like that," Zac snorted.

"Alright, thank you. I won't forget this," Catheya said. "How about this? I'll take this and nothing else. Otherwise, I might form a heart demon."

"Suit yourself," Zac said as he stowed away the other treasures.

"Alright, that's it for business, right?" Catheya smiled. "Travelling all alone with that bounty on your head for months can't have been easy. How about you stay a day and recharge your batteries? I have become quite the expert at preparing the various specimen of this ocean, and who knows when you'll get a chance to drink wine from the Heartlands next time?"

"Alright, I'm in," Zac laughed. "I guess one day off couldn't hurt."