

The Fall 789

Chapter 789: Doubts and Schemes

The darkness might only have lasted for an instant, or it might have gone on for a year, but a glimmer of light finally broke the gloom as Catheya woke up to the sound of shattering ice. All around her a sealed dome of ice broke apart as shimmering runes dissipated, exposing her and her two followers to the familiar surroundings of her master's Cosmic Vessel.

"Good morning," a familiar voice said, and Catheya felt her heart once more freeze over as she turned her eyes toward the source of the sound.

"Master," Catheya hesitantly said as she struggled to get her mind to focus up. She needed all her mental faculties if she wanted to weather this calamity. "What happened?"

"Two weeks have passed since I was forced to seal you. I had to use Myriad Ice since you were so far away from me," Va Tapek smiled as he slowly walked into the hall. "I had to thaw you three slowly as to avoid any damage."

"And the Twilight Harbor?" Catheya hesitated as she looked around.

"Gone. It couldn't withstand Alvod Jondir's ascension," Va Tapek sighed.

So the Eveningtide Asura had actually succeeded. She was shocked, remembering the chaotic scene just before she fell unconscious. Even an Autarch had tried to stop him, yet he somehow pulled through? Just what kind of foundations did he have to succeed in the face of such adversity.

However, the more pressing issue was that one of Alvod Jondir's allies stood right in front of her. She knew that she was just an ant compared to her master, but fury still thawed the chill that had still lingered in her body. "The Sharva'Zi clan has been your home for eons, so why--"

"Now, don't go saying such hurtful things, girl," a snort cut her off, but Catheya's eyes widened as a flood of relief filled her. Her dad was here, which meant she was safe.

Wait, her dad was here?

"Father?" Catheya hesitantly said as she looked around, just in time to see her father's lean silhouette appear next to Va Tapek from a swirl of poison.

"Do Mr. Tapek seem like someone who would betray the clan for a Dreamer? I've taught you to think deeper," Ruz Sharva'Zi sighed as he waved his hand, prompting Catheya to float over. "Now, let me look at you."

Catheya had a million questions threatening to burst out of her head, but she forcibly stilled herself as she let her father scan her cultivation. Meanwhile, her two followers quickly made their exit after bowing in the direction of her father.

"You've set the foundations for a second branch? And your affinities have increased. Not bad. It seems you've worked hard these past years," Ruz eventually said, a rare smile spreading across his face. "Did you have fun in the Twilight Ocean?"

"What fun?" Catheya huffed, slowly adapting to the unexpected turn of events. "Things grew way out of control. I'm lucky to be standing here."

"We had confidence in you. These kinds of experiences are required to reach greater heights. You can't always hide in Mr. Tapek's shadow and expect any great results," Ruz shrugged.

"I know, dad," Catheya sighed. "Now, can you please tell me what's going on? I saw the harbor before I was sealed. Our whole world should be destroyed, our commercial lines ruined."

"Do you really think we didn't have an idea of what was about to happen in the Twilight Harbor?" Ruz snorted. "The bloodsuckers heard whispers about it in the Eternal Halls, but we were oblivious?"

"Then why?" Catheya said with a frown. "Our foundation, millions of years of effort."

"Obviously, we got something much greater in return," Ruz shrugged. "Think, child. Where were the Draugr during this mess?"

"That's-" Catheya muttered with hesitation.

This was something she had wondered about over the past year. Why hadn't the Umbri'Zi thrown their hat in the ring? Why was an opportunity in Draugr Territory left for the Eidolon and Eternal Clan? They ultimately failed from the sounds of it, but it was not their opportunity to seize from the beginning.

"Mr. Tapek brought news of Alvod Jondir's plan to me over five millennia ago, long before you were even born. Since then, the elders have planned for this event. First of all, we didn't lose much. We have been stealthily siphoning everything of value from Twilight Harbor for decades. We only lost some low-grade material that is entirely replaceable," Ruz said.

"Master?" Catheya asked with confusion. "How- How do you know the Eveningtide Asura?"

"We met in the Havarok Empire," Va Tapek smiled. "We became allies of necessity for a short while. Truthfully, I thought him dead for a long time, until he sent word to me a few thousand years ago. He needed my help."

Catheya's eyebrows scrunched up slightly, which made Va Tapek laugh. "Child, you'll make me sad if you look at me with such consternation. You are correct. I am the one who told your clan about my old allies' plans. I was also the one who helped spread the news to Hive Ouro, the Noz'Valadir, and even the Havarok Empire. But that was exactly what Alvod Jondir asked of me."

"What?" Catheya blurted.

"Alvod knew he was missing two things. Daoguards to ward off the meddling of the Twilight Harbor Council while he was at a critical point of his preparations, and the ability to perfect his path without a breakthrough. Leaking the news would solve both those issues. The Divine Monarchs of the Undead Empire needed to let Alvod collapse the Twilight Ocean before they could seize the opportunity, so they became highly motivated guardians for him to complete a few critical steps," Va Tapek explained.

"As for the second part, he managed to find his answer when pressured from every direction, finally perfecting his Dao and empowering it to the point it could withstand Heaven's wrath. Of course, he barely managed to squeak by with an unconventional method like this, becoming a One-Step Autarch.

But his accomplishment will be remembered for tens of millions of years,” the Revenant mage continued.

“But that means we sold out our people? Won’t the Empire sanction us?” Catheya asked with worry.

“How is it a breach to tell our brethren of an opportunity of Autarchy?” Ruz shrugged with a calm face. “The opportunity was real, though we failed to mention how tightly bound the Daos of Life and Death were interlinked at the heart of the Twilight Ocean. That made it far more difficult for Nizu Noz’Valadir and Tua Ouro to connect to the Heavenly Dao than they had expected. But if things played out differently, they might have succeeded.

“Unfortunately for them, providence wasn’t on their side that day, with Nizu falling and Tuo being crippled. But the fact that promising Divine Monarchs belonging to hostile camps got themselves in trouble, how is that our fault? And if some threatened middle-grade families deem fit to send us a few gifts to celebrate how things panned out, we’d obviously be amenable to that.”

“Most importantly, this benefited the Umbri’Zi family,” Va Tapek added.

“But they weren’t even here?” Catheya said with confusion.

“Exactly. They were somewhere else. At the Tarramak Vault, in fact,” Ruz smiled.

“What!” Catheya almost screamed. “Don’t tell me they seized it?!”

“Alas, no,” Ruz said. “Holding that place is too costly, not worth the effort. But destabilizing it, especially after it was prematurely forced open...”

“The Havarok Empire has been locked out of over twelve sectors,” Catheya said, the situation finally dawning on her.

“The Sixth Protector of the Havarok Empire forcing his way here in his full form was enough to destabilize the gate. The moment he fled back in defeat, the Umbri’Zi managed to destabilize their pathways even further. War is already raging across the stars,” her father nodded. “By the time the Havarok Dynasty manages to reconnect to the frontier, we will already have purified half of them. Their backers can’t fault the Undead Empire on this method, and one of the conquered sectors... is ours.”

“We’ll be able to form a province!” Catheya’s eyes gleamed.

Losing a profitable business in the Twilight Harbor was a big hit, but what was that compared to the revenue of a whole Sector? Certainly, they would have to pay a tax to the Umbri’Zi Family, but they both had the bloodline of Zi. The Sharva’Zi had always been extremely well treated in their dealings in the frontier thanks to that link.

“But why didn’t you tell me anything?” Catheya eventually huffed. “Am I really your daughter?”

“We couldn’t risk our plans leaking. With the Eidolon involved, we couldn’t let juniors hold any critical information,” Va Tapek smiled. “What if you were captured inside the mystic realm, and they dragged the truth out of your mind? This plan was extremely risky, with a high chance for failure.”

“Old men and your secrets,” Catheya glared.

"Well, it all worked out fine, didn't it?" Ruz shrugged. "Truthfully, things played out more beautifully than we could ever have dreamed. Who would have thought that the Sixth Protector would arrive with such fervor? We really have your little friend to thank. But he's also made the situation a bit complicated."

"My friend?" Catheya asked with confusion. "What's wrong?"

"He killed the scions of both the Eidolon and the Eternal Clan before he ripped the very fabric of the Mystic Realm asunder. He even crippled the Realm Spirit during his rampage from what we've gathered. He essentially removed all the roadblocks for Alvod's Ascent, forcing the Sixth Protector to come in person instead of conjuring an avatar or possessing a descendant," Va Tapek explained.

"But he also dragged us and the Umbri'Zi into the mix. You were mostly sent in there to provide you with experience, yet one of your party members, another Draugr, became the focal point of the trial. He even killed two Scions of the empire, opening us up for a broader line of questioning," Ruz sighed. "Our plan would only truly work if we had plausible deniability."

"That crazy witch Uona attacked him first. She was running rampant here in the frontier, doing whatever she wanted. She almost killed me as well, and put a bounty on me!" Catheya frowned. "Arcaz didn't even want to go to the City of Ancients, but Uona forced his hand. She only has herself to blame."

"Still, someone from the Empire will need to speak to us, to you in particular, about what transpired inside. We need to find a strategy to protect our family from being sanctioned," Ruz continued, clearly not caring about the details of the events inside. "Our situation is precarious enough as it is."

Catheya understood his reasoning. For her father, who was in the right or wrong among the junior generation didn't matter. What mattered were the political implications and how they could affect the clan. "You're not suggesting we're supposed to cook up some lie and push the blame on Arcaz, right?"

"Well, we still haven't learned who the Empire will send. Our response highly depends on what camp the ambassador belongs to," Ruz sighed. "The Umbri'Zi is sending a delegate as well. We'll hopefully be able to figure out a path with their help."

"I am already here," a peeling laugh echoed out through the vessel, and only then did Catheya realize another Draugr right next to them, like she had always been there.

"Mistress Umbri'Zi," Ruz exclaimed with shock, and both he and Va hurriedly bowed.

Catheya quickly curtsied as well, her heart rapidly beating as she understood the implications of how her father acted. The Umbri'Zi was a far more powerful clan than Sharva'Zi, but there was no need for such deference between Monarchs. That could only mean one thing; the Umbri'Zi had sent the avatar of one of their Autarchs to look into the situation.

Her heart tightened as she gazed upon the woman. This had all ballooned far beyond what she had expected. She had felt somewhat certain that her plan would work, but that was before she knew of the truth behind the curtains. But she should have known that Arcaz Black would somehow become the unwitting lynchpin in a massive political plot.

Because why wouldn't he?

"No need for formalities. We're of the same branch," the woman said as her eyes turned to Catheya. "How marvelous. You are almost a spitting image of little Be'Zi, but you have a warmth that she always lacked. I was under the impression she had succumbed some time ago, yet I read a conflicting report on my way here? Is that stubborn little girl still alive?"

Catheya's eyes widened even further since she finally realized who this was. This was not one of the outer elders or lesser Autarchs of the Umbri'Zi. This was the Matriarch herself, Reyna Umbri'Zi, someone who was at least a fifth-step Autarch. An ancient being who had lived for at least 20 million years, partly thanks to her mastery over the Dao of Time. A wave of her hand and the Sharva'Zi would be annihilated.

"Don't over-think things, child. The fact that I am here is a good thing," Reyna said. "The Ambassador will arrive in three days. Before then, I have been sent to get to the bottom of a few things."

"You've been sent...?" Catheya muttered with incredulity while the brows of her father furrowed in consternation.

Who could send a fifth-step Autarch on an errand, except those two factions?

"That is beside the point," Reyna said. "Now, answer my question."

"Ancestor Be'Zi Sharva'Zi is alive, according to Arcaz Black," Catheya hurriedly said, not daring to lie in front of this ancestor. She was an arch-duke of the empire and someone who could decide the fate of not only Arcaz but also her clan. "Arcaz Black has been in contact with her. She... sent a message that she was unable to return at the moment."

"So she's alive," Reyna sighed as a scene appeared in front of them, a scene Catheya hadn't seen before.

However, she knew the place; the City of Ancients. Catheya looked on with wide eyes, and it felt like she was seeing her travel companion for the first time. Terrifying markings covered his face, and chaotic swirls of unbridled power coursed around him. He didn't seem like a warrior, but a force of nature, a calamity that couldn't be quelled.

His silver gaze looked down upon a bedraggled Uona like an Emperor meting out judgment, and a moment later heavenly lightning slammed down on the vampire, extinguishing her body and soul. Was this how Arcaz had ended the two powerhouses? How was something like this possible?

"Be'Zi is alive, and her apparent disciple happened to unleash hollow Chaos. It looks like she refused to give up on that unclimbable peak. Well, she was always a stubborn one, and it seems to be working for her," Reyna continued before she waved her sleeve, prompting the scene to disappear.

Catheya breathed out in relief, realizing that Reyna didn't care that their ancestor had seemingly broken the commandments of the empire to pursue the Path of Oblivion. Was it because of a familiar sentiment, or was it possible that the Path of Oblivion didn't clash with the Heart of the Empire?

"He is an odd one," Reyna muttered before she turned to Va Tapek. "I gather you scanned him. Is it true he lacks the mark?"

"He is truly unattached," Va Tapek confirmed with a small bow. "I had never heard of a member of the divine race not attached, which was why I sent back a report."

"It was that report that resulted in me having to visit this Heaven-forgotten corner of the multiverse," Reyna smiled before she turned to Catheya. "Child, tell me what you know of this young man. It is more important than you know."

"I..." Catheya hesitated for a few seconds, her eyes flickering between her father and the ancient matriarch of the Umbri'Zi family.

"You care for him," Reyna slowly said with a small smile, and a small box appeared in her hand. "Don't worry, I mean him no harm. In fact, here."

"This is?" Catheya asked with confusion as she took the box, only opening it when she saw the nod from the old Autarch. "Perennial Vastness!"

"That old thing still hasn't given up, still biding his time in that mysterious realm," Reyna said with a smile. "I was curious, so I had a talk with the newly ascended Autarch. A remarkable young man. It is a shame he declined our offer to be awakened, he would have made an impressive Outer Elder. In either case, Alvod Jondir left this behind for Arcaz Black, with the message that while the mission was a failure, the end result was acceptable. This is his reward."

Catheya's eyes were wide as she looked down at the token in her hands. This thing was beyond precious and something even scions of the Empire would want. For a Mortal like Arcaz, it might be his best path of forming a proper core.

"Of course, you can use it yourself if you so desire," Reyna snickered as she looked at Catheya teasingly. "I don't care either way."

"No, I will deliver it to him," Catheya hurriedly said. "More importantly, I bring a message from Arcaz Black to the empire."

"To the empire?" Reyna said with a raised brow. "Big words from a child. Then again, he clearly has wild ambitions. Tell me, what did he want you to convey?"

Catheya took a deep breath before she explained Arcaz's unique situation. She tried to paint him and his weird abilities in as positive a light as she could, of how he could benefit the Undead Empire. Of course, she failed to mention what a lightning-rod he was, and the chaos his human identity had already caused back in the Zecia sector.

"No matter what his actions might look like, he bears no ill will against the Undead Empire. However, he is worried that he would become an experiment to some Monarch if his situation became known, which is why he has refrained from coming home until now," Catheya ultimately said.

"A being of both life and death? So he's an Edgewalker? How interesting," Reyna eventually said, looking a bit surprised for the first time since appearing out of nowhere. "It's not very often one of these aberrations show up, and I think it's only the second time the undead half is Draugr. I think I understand now why he reached out to me."

The response was absolutely not what Catheya had expected, and she struggled to understand what was going on. Edgewalker? Catheya had never heard of the concept, and neither had her master by the looks of it. In fact, he looked extremely surprised at the information, which was no surprise considering he had scanned Arcaz before.

But all that was pushed away when she heard Reyna's last statement. She had already considered this when hearing that the Umbri'Zi Matriarch had been sent here by someone.

Could it possibly be one of the two Abyssal Lords who was behind this?