

## The Fall 827

### Chapter 827: Heart of the Empire

Zac mutely looked on with amazement as deep cracks spread across the Izh'Rak Reaver's bones. It was definitely the work of the Undead Empire's commandments, a punishment for divulging the secrets to an outsider. Zac knew just how sturdy the exoskeleton of reavers was, and Kaldor was at the peak of Monarchy. Even then, the restriction that bound all imperials managed to cause such damage for uttering a few sentences. Just how overbearing was the Primo?

Or was it related to the Heart of the Empire?

Zac had always wondered what the Undead Empire had to fall back on in order to survive to this day. After all, they were making enemies left and right with their eternal crusade, even against peak factions like the Buddhist Sangha. Certainly, the Undead Empire was a terrifying existence, and Zac suspected they had at least a dozen Supremacies from what he'd gathered.

Still, was that really enough to fight in every direction, contending against multiple factions at once? At first, Zac had believed it was related to the Primo and the mysterious Founders. If the Primo was a powerhouse at the peak of the A-grade, or perhaps even something beyond that, it might be enough to prevent the empire from being completely overrun.

However, since finding out about the existence of Eternal Heritages from Qi'Sar, Zac had floated the possibility of the empire controlling some ancient relic that kept them, or at least the Heartlands, safe. From the sounds of it, it might be the case. What all this had to do with Pure Death wasn't clear, but Zac guessed the reaver was getting there.

The white concoction Kaldor's smeared across his body had come alive, and it burrowed into the cracks. Just a few seconds later it had solidified, seemingly repairing the damage altogether. Zac looked on with mixed emotions, inwardly vowing to never make this troublesome species an enemy for real.

Even if he managed to crack those disgustingly sturdy bones, they actually had concoctions that could mend the damage in an instant?

"Spare shavings," Kaldor explained when he saw Zac's look. "A pain to make, literally, but I've had a lot of free time in this place. Anyway, the ancestors found the heart and managed to gain limited control over it. It was the emanations of the heart that birthed the Heartlands, and it is still upholding it to this day."

Zac's eyes widened in surprise, partly because of what Kaldor said, but mostly because of what could be discerned between the lines. Limited control? The Primo and the Undead Princes were unable to take full control of this Eternal Heritage, even after billions of years? It almost sounded like they were using it in an unintended manner, just siphoning some of its leftover energy to terraform the surroundings.

The possibility almost beggared comprehension. Just becoming a Monarch was akin to becoming a god, where you carried a literal world in your body. You could live for a million years, surpassing Earth's civilization tens of times over, and you controlled vast powers.

Above that were Autarchs, and then the mysterious Supremacies who were so exalted that Zac still had no idea what kind of existences they were. The only information he'd manage to gather was that they

could change the laws of the heavens all across the empires they controlled, remolding the Dao in their image.

But even these kinds of beings were unable to properly control an Eternal Heritage erected in a bygone era? Just who created it and what kind of stage had they reached? Just what were the limits of cultivation? Perhaps he'd be able to find the answers someday, but for now, Zac took a steadying breath and refocused on his question.

"What does the Heart of the Empire have to do with my question?" Zac prompted.

"Some things will just harm you if you know. Suffice to say, the path of Pure Death is inextricably linked to the heart. If the general ban wasn't imposed, the source of our power would be weakened, diluted. Only a scant few can be allowed to walk the path of purity, and it is not only a matter of talent – there's also temperament and providence. If the wrong person reaches the peak... The consequences could be disastrous," Kaldor sighed as a few more cracks appeared across his body.

Zac slowly nodded. Hearing the explanation, the first thing he came to think of was Be'Zi. Was this why she had severed her Karma with the Empire? She wanted to delve into Pure Death and Oblivion, but she wasn't qualified? Or did she have the qualifications, but broke some rules when wanting to transition Pure Death into Oblivion?

And why would the Dao, the fundamental truths of the universe, be linked to an old ruin? How were they connected? There was something odd going on at the peak. From the various pieces of intelligence Zac had gathered, there seemed to be some sort of limitations to the Dao as you approached the Terminus.

It was almost like the truths became a finite resource, where each peak could only house so many cultivators. Zac was about to ask some clarifying questions, but the reaver immediately shut him down before Zac had the chance.

"Brat, just join the Empire if you want to know more. With your bloodline, you'd get a hero's welcome. Ow, ow, my bones," Kaldor complained. "If you can control these cursed remnants, you should be able to find a backer within your kin who can let you undergo the examination. Our races are always eager to find members on the outside."

"Why's that?" Zac asked with interest.

"So many fell during the Dark Ages. Others were lost as we searched for safe harbor," Kaldor grunted. "All our heritages are incomplete, except for the bloodsuckers who joined later. Finding someone like you might mean your race can reclaim something they had lost, though the odds are minuscule. You can use that as a bargaining chip."

Zac nodded pensively as he thought back to his vision of Eoz, the founding Draugr. He had no idea what the names of the various branches of Draugr were, except for the other two mentioned in his vision and Zi, the ancestor of Catheya's Clan. What if Eoz was a lost heritage? With his ancestor being the third to break out of the Abyssal Lake, Zac figured the bloodline had to be quite strong.

That alone might be even more valuable than his identity as an Edgewalker. If not for the Undead Empire as a whole, then at least for the Abyssal Shores. With this knowledge, he felt far better prepared

for potentially joining the Undead Empire in the future, though he would have to digest what he had found out first.

"So, the splinter?" Zac eventually said.

"Take it," Kaldor grunted as he pointed toward an empty spot in the courtyard.

The next moment, the ground rumbled as an opening appeared, from which a pedestal rose. On top of it rested a glass casing covered in intricate engravings. Four pitch-black runes slowly rotated around the box as well. These illusory runes were somewhat similar to the ones Be'Zi had erected in his soul, though they weren't nearly as refined.

If Zac had to guess, it was Kaldor himself who had added the outer array to add a second layer of protection to the cage. Even then, it wasn't perfect. Zac could vaguely sense the remnant that was floating in the middle of the cage, and the two splinters in his mind stirred a bit. However, the caged splinter was in some sort of sealed state, with only some weak tendrils of Oblivion leaking out from its casing.

"Good riddance," Kaldor muttered as he looked at the Splinter of Oblivion. "That energy is quite interesting, but it is ultimately no good. Be careful with this thing."

"I know," Zac sighed as he mentally started to prepare himself.

He didn't know what to expect when absorbing the third set, but he couldn't imagine it would be a comfortable experience. Thankfully, he had evolved his Soul Since last, which would hopefully allow him to make the trek to the bamboo forest after this without causing a scene.

"I'm not just talking about its mental influence," Kaldor said, dragging Zac out of his thoughts. "Do you know why there's only one set of these things in the Orom World, even when this big bastard has been alive for almost 40 million years? Surely, it would encounter more of them as it swallowed millions and millions of poor souls. After all, there are not just one or two of them out there."

Zac nodded in agreement, remembering the vision of when that godlike existence destroyed the Heart of Oblivion and Spark of Creation. Going by the apocalyptic scene, there were at least a few thousand remnants scattered across the Multiverse. It really was a bit odd that Orom only had one set, considering this was the second time he stumbled into a pair in a couple of years.

"The Orom discards the other ones it finds?" Zac ventured after some thought.

"Exactly. Spits them right out before running away," Kaldor laughed.

"One is an eternal curse, two is a calamity," Zac muttered.

"What's that?" Kaldor asked before he shrugged. "No, I'm talking about something else. These things alter fate."

"Alter fate?" Zac repeated with confusion.

"The creature that was split into these shards was a unique existence born during the rebirth of the era. It was only the equivalent of peak Autarch, but its control over the Dao was greater than most

Supremacies. The only reason it didn't reach that stage was because of an obsession that held it back, forever trapping it at the threshold."

"What does that have to do about fate-altering?" Zac frowned.

"Its obsession was too powerful, and it alters reality even in its pseudo-dead state. These remnants want to be reforged into one. My guess is, the more of these things you collect, the more you'll find yourself on a collision course with more remnants. Whether you like it or not."

"The remnants are somehow altering events? Altering my decisions?" Zac asked.

"No idea how it actually works," Kaldor said as he scratched the spots on his skull he had just repaired. "It can be considered an opportunity. Who knows, this phenomenon might be what brought you to me and Pavina, eh? But it might also be a calamity, where you're dragged to a place of no return. More importantly, are you willing to be a puppet, to be manipulated based on some ancient bastard? Or do you want to be in control of your fate and your path?"

Zac wordlessly gazed at the shimmering splinter as he went over the reaver's words. It was true, he had repeatedly felt like a puppet when it came to these remnants, of how he felt the System was essentially forcing him down a path.

Hearing this, he might have been unfair toward the System. Perhaps, it was the remnants themselves who kept pulling him toward their brethren, with the System simply cheering them on. But it didn't really matter. As Kaldor said, it was ultimately an issue of his fate not being in his own hands. It didn't matter so much who was manipulating him – what mattered was that he needed to break free.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Who knows," Kaldor said. "I only heard about these things in passing before I got trapped in this place. But I figure there should be some solutions. The ancient will hidden inside these things is hard to deal with, but the power of the crystals themselves is not that impressive. Perhaps you can extract what you need and discard the rest when you get strong enough?"

Zac slowly nodded in agreement as he walked toward the sealed crystal hovering in its cage. The closer he got, the more the remnants in his mental prison stirred, but they seemed a bit confused, unclear what was going on. The same thing was happening to the sealed splinter, where its black luster flickered ominously, but it didn't lash out at all.

"You have just over three months," Kaldor said just as Zac was about to pick up the cage.

"What?" Zac said with confusion, stopping in his tracks.

"As I said, you had three years to take this thing. Soon after, it had to be returned to be resealed," Kaldor grinned. "Since you came three months early, you have just over three months to play around with this thing before it goes back to the repository in Liberty Point."

"What happens if I don't return it?"

"Someone like me will be sent to retrieve it. Someone who's not bound by the rules of a duel," Kaldor said pointedly.

“And if I consume it?” Zac hesitated.

“Same deal, but your corpse will be retrieved instead,” Kaldor laughed. “So you better be sure about what you’re doing.”

Cold sweat ran down Zac’s back as he looked at the splinter in front of him, and he inwardly cursed Kaldor for being so vague. If he really waited until the last day, wouldn’t he be screwed? It would take him weeks to reach Three Virtues’ bamboo forest and get the shard, more than enough time to be tracked down by an Emerald Badge.

After fighting Kaldor, who had restrained his Daos to the level of Peak Dao Fragments, Zac was even less confident in making it out of a battle like this alive. Certainly, Kaldor was most likely one of the most powerful Emerald Badges around, but even the weaker ones had unique strength like Kaldor’s killing intent.

“Thank you for the warning,” Zac said. “So how do I take away this thing? Can I put it in a Spatial Ring?”

“Sure,” Kaldor nodded. “But it will taint the pocket space. It shouldn’t be a problem for a year or two, but the ring would eventually destabilize and blow you up.”

Zac breathed in relief, but his heart still beat like a drum as he placed his hand against the glass casing, trying to imprint the seals to memory. The runes on the class box were distinct from both Kaldor’s Addition and Be’Zi’s gift, more in line with the seals the System had added to the prison in his mind. Perhaps their design would be one of the clues to figuring out a way of this mess in the future.

A wave of unfettered desire slammed against the cage in his mind, but it quickly calmed down as Zac put the cage into his Cosmos Sack. He infused his senses into the bag, and he immediately understood what Kaldor meant earlier. Kaldor’s protective runes didn’t make it into the bag, and a black haze had started to spread from the glass box in the subspace, causing some ominous ripples in the fabric of reality.

Thankfully, Zac didn’t have any important item in this native bag, and he didn’t care if it would break down. As long as it could withstand the influence until he’d fetched the shard as well, he was content.

Having gotten what he’d come for, Zac saw no reason to linger in the reaver’s mansion. He wasn’t sure what to think of Kaldor. The old monarch had been extremely shameless and forced his hand, but he had also provided great assistance. Perhaps, it was only thanks to this Izh’Rak Reaver he was safe and sound after setting off his Annihilation Sphere years ago.

Still, no matter how many benefits Kaldor had provided, it ultimately felt like Kaldor had his own plans, where he once more had become an unwitting pawn in some greater scheme. The sooner he could get away from this place, the better.

“So, where are you off to now, brat?” Kaldor asked curiously as Zac got ready to leave.

“I’ll visit Pavina and thank her for helping me survive today’s battle,” Zac answered after some consideration.

“That little traitor,” Kaldor snorted, though he clearly wasn’t upset. “And then?”

Kaldor’s expression was lazy, but Zac understood there were hidden implications within the question.

"After that?" Zac hesitated. "I'll stay in the area for now."

"Hm," Kaldor nodded. "If you ever get out of here, are you planning on joining the Undead Empire?"

"I'm not against it, but I haven't made any decisions," Zac said. "From what I've gathered, the situation seems a bit messy."

"All powerful factions are messy," Kaldor laughed. "That's how things are when great benefits are at stake. Not even the baldies of the Buddhist Sangha are any different. Where there is cultivation and the pursuit of Eternity, there will be intrigue and backstabbing. But you should know; you will always be incomplete until you return to your origin."

"My origin?" Zac frowned. "The Abyssal Lake?"

"Exactly," Kaldor said. "Without returning to your origin, you will never unlock your true potential. But when you do, you will be able to look down on the world. Such is the benefit of a divine race. Goals that are just flights of fancy for base creatures like Revenants or Humans will be well within your reach."

Zac furrowed his brows, not commenting on the proclamation.

"Off you go then, brat," Kaldor added. "Remember, you have three months before that thing has to be returned. Not even I can help you after that."

"Thank you," Zac eventually said as he left for Pavina's mansion. "For everything."

"I wonder, what will you choose?" Kaldor muttered as he sensed the young Edgewalker disappear among the trees before his gaze turned in another direction. "And why did you have me go to these lengths?"