

The Fall 899

Chapter 899: Edict

On Kalstor Vala, the whispers of war had finally reached the general populace, and thousands of rumors circulated in the markets, the taverns, and the households. However, the unrest didn't reach the sprawling manor in the center of the capital, whose forests stretched for hundreds of miles.

It was like a secluded haven shielded from the sorrows of the outer worlds, and the marvelous glades and pristine lakes were known across the planet for their beauty. But those living at Kastor Vala couldn't have imagined the rumor was a sham, that there was a festering blight hiding in the heart of the forest.

"Where the hell is he?!"

The evil star paced back and forth, demanding answers just as she had so many times before.

"Mis- Mistress, we assure you we have sent out the messages as you have instructed," Porto Vala said as he dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief.

Porto Couldn't believe how one's fortunes could turn so quickly. Living close to the Kaldran Straits was fraught with danger, but this was just cheating. It had started out so well. Just a few centuries after he had taken up the role as a ward of his family's mercantile planet, the Undead Empire had halted its warfare for the first time in eons.

But that reprieve had only lasted a few short years before they started attacking with redoubled efforts. Porto soon learned the reason – it was not about killing humans and assimilating their planets. Not exclusively, anyway. A true war was coming to Zecia, and the Undead Empire was honing their warriors against the coalition's armies.

With powerful invaders coming over, the Undead Empire saw an opportunity to seize high-potential bodies from both sides, so they no longer cared about their numbers as they reformed their war machine with blood and ice. Anyone who fell at this point wouldn't be any use in the real struggle, anyway.

Luckily, Kastor Vala was some distance from the frontlines where the undead and living were fighting for the fates of their planets. His job was only to rebuff the occasional raid or scouting party with the help of the planet's arrays and the garrisoned soldiers. But who could have expected this evil star and her supremely powerful guardian would show up out of the blue and forcibly move into his mansion?

The whole coalition had collectively breathed out in relief when the mysterious Draugr scion had finally left the Zecia sector for the rotten pastures of the Empire Heartlands. Her presence, or rather that of her master's, had been like a butcher's axe that hung over the Kaldran Strait for years until the danger thankfully passed without incident.

But only a scant few years later, Catheya Sharva'Zi was back, and she had brought an even more terrifying master this time. What was it with this lass and her interest in this remote little sector? Couldn't she just leave well enough alone and let them lead their lives in peace? And who was this bastard who kept eluding them? If not for him, these unwelcome guests would have long been gone.

"If you did what you were supposed to do, then we would have had an answer by now, wouldn't we?" the young scion glared, her abyssal eyes boring into Porto's.

"I am starting to think your connection to that man is not as close as you led us to believe," a voice echoed through the hall like the death knolls of a funeral procession, and Porto's hair immediately stood on end. "Were you perhaps just a passing acquaintance who saw an opportunity to enrich yourself?"

The next moment, cascading waves of death filled the hall, and Porto desperately took out a number of Divine Crystals to avoid being crushed under the tide of undeath. Even then, he didn't dare so much as look up when the two spoke, but he also didn't dare to just leave in the presence of a powerful Monarch.

"You can believe whatever you want," Catheya snorted. "You can try approaching him yourself and see how that goes."

"We spent quite a bit on you, child. Yet we have nothing to show for it," the second Draugr commented, not sparing Porto so much as a glance.

"He came back more than half a year ago, but going by the report, he might be wounded," Catheya ventured. "He might also have chosen to discard this line of communication since so much time has passed. Perhaps we should move to the second location?"

Porto's eyes widened in a mix of hope and horror. The abyssal eyes of these terrifying Draugr had haunted him for over two years, and every night he had dreamt of their departure. But not like this. They had sworn that they wouldn't harm him if he successfully contacted whatever bastard they were trying to find, but they never made any guarantees if he failed.

Would they really leave him with his little life if he didn't deliver? That young lass might have done so, but that old wretch who accompanied her reeked of blood.

"A-Ah, mistress, I will try again. Don't you worry," Porto urgently said as he once more dabbed his face. "I'm sure we will get an answer momentarily. Surely."

"You have three months," the Monarch said as she stared at him with those nightmare-inducing eyes. "Get us an answer within three months... If you fail, then I will personally awaken you and this planet. Now, leave us."

Catheya shook her head at the receding back of the corpulent merchant before she turned her gaze back to her guide. Or her warden, depending on how you looked at it. What she said was true; the Umbri'Zi Clan and the Abyssal Lake had provided her with opportunities that most Draugr could only dream of.

But it was contingent on her delivering on her end. If she failed, it wasn't just a problem for her but for the whole Sharva'Zi Clan. She still remembered the nervous eyes of her father when he sent her off with Enis Umbri'Zi, a Monarch whose bloody feats during the Havarok War had reached even the Abyssal Lake. She was a terrifying butcher, but Catheya couldn't just sit back and let Enis do as she pleased.

"Three months?" Catheya asked with a frown. "The deadline set by the Abyssal Lake was five years. Only two years have passed since we returned."

"Things have changed," Enis said. "An edict arrived at the Kavriel Clan yesterday; I just got it."

“An Edict?” Catheya said with a sinking heart. Not many had the authority to send out something like that, and it getting one sent to the frontier was nigh-unprecedented. “Is it the Abyssal Council?”

“No, child,” Enis said as she looked deeply into Catheya’s eyes. “It comes from the Heart.”

“The Founders?!” Catheya blurted.

As far as she knew, the Founders hadn’t left the Heart for tens of millions of years as they tirelessly worked on their undertaking. During the endless years of the Undead Empire, they had only appeared during a few critical junctures, like when the Buddhist Sangha was out for blood or during the crusades of the Ancient Imperial Clans.

“The seal is growing stronger. The backup squads you requested will not be able to make it through.” Enis said.

“Is that it?” Catheya said with confusion.

“No, that was just an update from the Kavriel Clan,” Enis said. “The edict is simple; Zachary Atwood must choose death and join our side. No matter what. This is no longer just a matter of the Abyssal Shores. It is a matter of the Empire.”

Catheya took a shuddering breath as she tried to compute what had just happened. For the Eternal 108 to turn their gazes toward Zecia was incomprehensible. Just what kind of storm had that troublemaker kicked up this time?

“It isn’t right,” Emberstorm muttered as they flew toward the enormous citadel in the distance.

“Working with these cretins.”

From beneath, the screams and clamors of the endless series of bloody cages assaulted them, and even Til’Siri was a bit unnerved by the misery. Many thought beasts cruel, but she had never seen these kinds of macabre conditions among any others than the cultivators. This was not natural selection; it was elevation through misery.

But orders were orders.

“We’re not working with them,” Til’Siri sighed. “We’re just using them to get to the Left Imperial Palace.”

“That isn’t much better. Since when did the Starbeast Alliance need to barter with the Unorthodoxy? Just because we’re both standing outside the cultivator alliances doesn’t mean we’re the same,” Emberstorm spat. “The fell karma of this world is nauseating. We should just annihilate this little faction and seize the Star Gate for ourselves. The Black Heart Sect wouldn’t dare raise an issue over a frontier sector.”

“You don’t know that,” Til’Siri countered with annoyance.

Even after reaching Atavism, these ancient and oversized insects were simply too bloodthirsty. Thank the Heavens a Qilin Beast Emperor was in charge of this mission rather than one of those lunatics. Of

course, while she and Emberstorm were just sent there to observe and assist at this stage, they had probably gotten the same orders from their elders.

If an opportunity presented itself, seize a spot by any means necessary. In other words, they were competitors, and there was no need to keep up any pretenses when dealing with this fool.

"Didn't you hear? The Black Heart Patriarch fought with Lord Realmsbane not long ago, and the Lord was forced to back down. They clearly have a vested interest in this matter. Otherwise, the patriarch would never have appeared."

"So what?" Emberstorm shrugged. "Even if Lord Realmsbane was pushed back, it didn't count. The Lord only fought to prove a point, and they battled inside the Black Heart Dimension. If one of the Ancestors make a move, the whole cult would be turned to ash."

"That's enough," Lonzor said. "Black Heart Sect is not as simple as you think. Neither of the two went all-out in that fight. If the Black Heart Patriarch completely unseals the curse in his chest, few in the Multiverse would get out of the conflict in one piece. And there are even rumors their founder is still alive in stasis. Besides, many things are at play here."

"Other factions?" Til'Siri frowned.

"Not yet; we should be among the first," Lonzor said with a shake of his head. "It's about fate. According to the Bone Sage, two rivers of fate have converged because of an anomaly. Even the System has gotten involved. Using force could backfire as the rivers drown us. We need to play by the rules."

"So, what should we do?" Til'Siri asked.

"The first step is setting up our presence here," Lonzor said. "As you said, the Black Heart Sect is not able to contend for the Ultom Courts. They simply have too many enemies and too few allies to protect something like that. The Cultivator Clans would band together and launch a crusade under the guise of justice to seize the Left Imperial Palace for themselves. So the cult chose a different path. That of a ferryman."

"What?" Emberstorm said with confusion.

"Because of the cosmic hiccup, there is still much we don't know, but we do know that this event is targeted at the younger generation. The Black Heart Sect still don't know the details, but they quickly figured out this sector was integral to competing for the opportunity. Since they couldn't take the thing themselves, they have opted to demand resources in return for passage through the Star Gate and a spot in the upcoming events," the Qilin explained.

"You want us to become mercenaries in some frontier war?" Til'Siri said with a frown, disgusted at the mere thought of fighting shoulder to shoulder with these maniacs.

"The sanctioned war is a part of the puzzle. We just don't know how yet," Lonzor nodded. "So our tasks are as follows; we need to establish our presence here while searching for clues of the Left Imperial Palace. If we encounter an Inheritor Candidate, we need to either recruit them or kill them. If we find other outsiders sniffing around, we kill them immediately. Finally, we need to quicken the formation of the Star Gate.

“Our greatest advantage is that we’re ahead of the competition. The earlier this war begin, the better we will be positioned compared to those who come behind us.”

“Well, I don’t know anything about stargates,” Emberstorm muttered before his amber eyes lit up. “But I can help you kill the Inheritor Candidates. They should just be some frontier natives, right?”

“About that,” Til’Siri hesitated. “If we really encounter a candidate... If we manage to seize their opportunity...”

“Well, you are welcome to try,” Lonzo said with a small smile. “The Bone Sage said only those beneath a century of age will be able to contend, but you might surprise us all.”

“What?!” Til’Siri exclaimed while Emberstorm looked like he was about to explode. “I’m over six hundred years old!”

“This opportunity already has an intended recipient, it’s neither for your branches or mine to claim,” Lonzor sighed with a complex expression. “Our job is to pave their path.”

“Who?” Emberstorm raged. “I know I’m only on the twentieth spot of the Starbeast Stele, but what bastard has been given this chance without any discussion? That little brat Laka? No, she should be 180 years old.”

“It’s not anyone on the Starbeast Stele,” Lonzor said. “A primordial has been unsealed.”

———

Finding a proper backer was essentially the same plan Zac had when trying to deal with the Great Redeemer. Unfortunately, the problem remained the same – how to retain control, or at least autonomy, in a relationship with a vast power imbalance. Just like Yrial once said, when valuable treasures were at stake, there was no such thing as orthodox or righteous factions.

A crackling sound drew Zac out from his thoughts, and he frowned when he saw that space had once more started to collapse. Was it because the mysterious aura of the temple had grown sparse? It looked like it hadn’t actually closed the breach but only momentarily pushed it away. Luckily, Zac had already got everything he needed from this place, so there was no point in sticking around.

Zac still hesitated a second before he flashed over to the cracked altar. He could feel how space was fast collapsing, but he couldn’t just leave such a valuable treasure behind. Zac put his hand on the stone, but his brows soon furrowed. He was trying to put it into a Spatial Ring, but nothing happened.

Since the altar refused to enter his spatial treasure, Zac could only rely on brute force. His muscles strained as he gripped the edges of the altar, but his eyes almost bulged out from their sockets when he couldn’t move even the smallest piece so much as an inch. He didn’t know if the seemingly ordinary stone actually had the weight of a mountain or if some unseen force was preventing him from moving it, but it quickly became apparent it simply wouldn’t budge.

Zac was filled with a sense of frustration as he looked down at the broken altar. The treasure was so close, yet it was impossibly out of reach. Would he really have to leave such an amazing item for meditation behind? Even after all his gains, Zac still felt like he had lost out on a fortune, and his eyes

roved though the hall for a consolation prize until they focused on the tattered scroll hanging on the wall.

Better than nothing.

He flashed over with [Earthstrider] and snatched with one practiced motion, and he was relieved to see it could actually enter his Spatial Ring. Even now, Zac had no idea if it actually had any effect, but he figured he might as well take it. Who knew? It might be able to provide one final burst of glory that helped him out sometime in the future.

But the moment Zac snatched the scroll, he immediately regretted it as a new set of cracks appeared on the altar. Simultaneously, the odd undulations drastically increased in power, making Zac wonder if the scroll had actually helped keep the collapse at bay. The breach that had been held at bay for so long seemed to be coming back with redoubled ferocity, and Zac's Danger Sense screamed at him to leave before it was too late.

With a flash, he appeared at the doorway of the temple, just in time before space itself collapsed like a punctured ball. The altar was swallowed by a chasm that seemed impossibly deep, and Zac felt his footing get precarious as the whole temple started to buckle. Zac glanced at the ring on his hand with some regret as he ran for his life.

Why didn't he ever learn?