

The Fall 947

Chapter 947: Cat and Mouse

Spotting the three Monarchs was not only a confirmation that Zac was right to be occasionally paranoid. It was also proof of just how powerful the sensors of the Yphelion were. There wasn't any way for him to actually see the Monarchs, but he could pinpoint their location with a hundred-meter precision across half the solar system. And even if they hid their presence, the Yphelion could somewhat estimate their strength by how the Cosmic Energy around them reacted to their presence.

Zac hoped this would be enough to deal with those sneaky elders. Even if the undead Monarchs managed to break through the protections of the repeaters and trace the signal, they still had to reach the Space Debris. By that point, Zac would be long gone, having jumped to a different dimension. From there, he could make his way to any number of planets at the edge of the Empire of Light.

Even the Monarchs would have to be careful about following him there. If the Empire of Light were a bunch of weaklings, they'd have been swallowed by the Kavriel Province long ago. They might not have as powerful Monarchs as the ones sent from the Undead Empire, but the Empire of Light possessed some of the most powerful arrays and fortifications in the sector.

They had reinforced their borders for millions of years, spending mindboggling resources on defensive arrays and other fortifications. And they all were designed to kill or weaken the Undead. Not only that, but most of the top factions of Zecia had pitched in to construct this iron curtain so they wouldn't have to deal with the Undead Empire.

"You came as a puppet out of nostalgia?" Catheya said with a roll of her eyes. "I'm sure it has nothing with your paranoia."

"Well, it might have been a factor. You can never be too safe," Zac laughed, but he chose not to expose that he knew about the Monarchs just yet. "How did things go on your end? You never provided a clear answer in the messages."

"No small talk as usual?" Catheya giggled, and Zac couldn't help but sneak a peek at the impressive cleavage she was showcasing today. "I had hoped that some time spent apart would have made your insensitive heart grow fonder."

"I'm working on my manners," Zac smiled. "But people are already gunning for me left and right; I need to know if I need to add the Undead Empire to the list."

"I guess that makes sense," Catheya nodded before her face turned serious. "Before anything, there's something I need to know, and don't you dare lie."

Zac was slightly surprised by the sudden shift in tone. He guessed Catheya's handlers had left her with some strict instructions. Perhaps she was even fed her lines from the Monarchs hiding in the bushes. The longer the meeting dragged on, the higher the risk was of something going wrong, so if they wanted to jump straight into business, he was amenable to that.

"Alright, what is it?" Zac asked.

"Did you really think I look pretty?" Catheya, her serious face breaking into a radiant smile.

"What? That's what you wanted to know?" Zac said with exasperation.

"Of course. You said I looked nice. It hasn't been easy dragging compliments out of you, so I just wanted to make sure," Catheya grinned, and she even fluttered her eyelashes a bit.

Zac inwardly groaned. How could she act like this with three ancient monsters listening in? Was she trying to get in trouble? Besides, the situation was a bit embarrassing for him as well. It almost felt like having a girlfriend brazenly flirt with him in front of her grandparents. But what could he do but accommodate her? He didn't want to talk to the ancestors just yet.

"You really do," Zac eventually said. "It feels like you've become more in tune with the Dao. You must have worked hard on your cultivation over the past years."

Zac hoped that was enough to get Catheya back on track, but she didn't look too enthused about his answer. "Still a block of wood. Would it kill you to throw out some niceties unrelated to cultivation?"

"That's..." Zac hesitated, suddenly feeling a bit regretful over his perfunctory answer.

Even if you disregarded the matter of the Monarchs, Zac knew this wasn't his forte. He hadn't been the best communicator even before the Integration, and the events since had only made it harder for him to open up. There was even a small voice in the back of his head warning him from allowing himself to be attracted to others. No matter if you looked at Alea, Thea, or Hannah, his romantic interests hadn't fared so well since the Integration.

It made him think of Iz's warning to Ogras, of how his powerful fate would drown the demon if he didn't manage to elevate himself. No matter how you looked at it, the same could be said about the women around him. The cultists had targeted Hannah because of her relationship with him. Thea had been killed because of his mother's ideals.

Alea was a bit different, but it was still undeniable she had been put in the position where her soul was shattered because of him. Her fate had been swept up by his, and she had been thrust into his conflicts until she eventually paid the price. Even before then, she had almost been killed because of him on multiple occasions.

But at the same time, pretending to be oblivious was both rude and cowardly. Catheya deserved better than that, even if she was partly teasing him right now.

"I-" Zac said, but he really didn't know what should come after that.

"Relax," Catheya laughed. "I can hear the gears turning from here. Don't worry; I know you've been forced to fully focus on the Dao just to survive. I still think you'll improve after you join a proper faction and don't have to fear every shadow. You can give me a proper answer by then."

"Alright," Zac agreed, thankful to have been given an out. "So what have you been up to since the Twilight Ascent? I was worried there for a bit, even if you had your master with you. I didn't expect things to get so crazy."

"Apart from the year I've spent waiting for you here in Zecia, I've been staying at the Abyssal Lake," Catheya smiled. "As I've said, that place is really something. You'll only be able to unlock the true

potential of your heritage if you go there. You can't imagine what it's like standing on the shores of the Abyssal lake. It's like coming... home."

"Maybe one day," Zac nodded.

Zac wasn't surprised Catheya's elevation was related to the Abyssal Lake. After all, it was the holy land of the Draugr, and there had to be all kinds of opportunities waiting there. But at the same time, Zac guessed it wasn't the whole story. Because if everyone who visited the shores came out as powerful as Catheya, then the Draugr would already have become the leading race of the Undead Empire.

"You don't seem too interested," Catheya said with a pout. "I'm telling you, that place is amazing."

"I believe you," Zac laughed. "More importantly. I've been curious for a while. How did you know about the Orom?"

"Whatever. One day you'll realize I was right, and you were just obstinate. I can be magnanimous if need be," Catheya smiled. "Alvod Jondir's ascent made things a bit chaotic, as you can imagine. Such an important trade hub blew up, and even Divine Monarchs of the Undead Empire were killed and crippled. The Umbri'Zi Matriarch soon showed up to take charge of the situation."

"The top elder?" Zac exclaimed with some shock. "I thought those figures spent all their time in sealed Cultivation Chambers."

"Wouldn't the ancestors go mad if they had to live like prisoners?" Catheya countered. "Either case, your name soon came up. An unknown E-grade Draugr causing so much trouble it beggared comprehension. It was all recorded, you know. What you did inside the City of Ancients?"

"Uh," Zac coughed, suddenly doubly happy he had chosen not to come in person.

"What was it you said to that lunatic as you ruined her plans? 'Since when has Draugr feared a bunch of bloodsuckers?'," Catheya grinned. "I have to admit; you were quite dashing there. It's a shame the conclusion was lost because of some sort of interference."

"That was not my-" Zac said.

"Relax," Catheya laughed. "Those people only had themselves to blame. Who asked them to fish for opportunities in Draugr territories? In either case, between your performance and my introduction, Reyna Umbri'Zi was quite interested in you. But we couldn't find you. Not even your corpse – that thing you prepared was pretty good, but it wasn't enough to fool a motivated Autarch."

"Lady Umbri'Zi figured something was wrong after a lot of bodies had simply disappeared in the aftermath of the Twilight Ascent, and she found out about that Voidcatcher with the help of her skills," Catheya sighed. "Even then, she only managed to track it down because of some powerful energy fluctuations that could be felt far and wide. We ultimately learned about your fate from an Izh'Rak Reaver called Kaldor."

"You met Kaldor?" Zac exclaimed. "Is he okay?"

"I only read the reports, but he is fine. Reyna Umbri'Zi sensed there were imperials trapped within that fish's body, and she had it spit them all out. Along with some monks, apparently, due to an agreement," Catheya said.

Zac sighed in relief upon hearing that both Kaldor and Pavina were fine. Both had taught him a lot during his stay in the Orom World, especially Pavina. But while he had helped Hera escape with the help of the seed, Pavina had been left behind. She had stopped him when he had tried to give her a hint about his imminent escape, but the matter had still weighed on his heart over the past year.

However, there was one thing that Zac had some difficulty understanding. Kaldor and the Umbri'Zi ancestor had actually saved Three Virtues and his fellow monks? "Since when were you guys so friendly with the Sangha?"

It didn't take a genius to figure out it was Three Virtues and his subordinates who had been released. But why? The Sangha and the Undead Empire as a whole might not be mortal enemies, but they definitely weren't allies either.

"Well, for one, the leader among the Monks actually had a pretty lofty position with the Sea of Tranquility, one of the Four Oceans of the Sangha," Catheya said with some fear in her eyes. "The Oceans are incredibly powerful but even more reclusive than the Mountains and Temples. They have never joined in on the crusade against the Undead Empire, apart from some of their acolytes joining to temper themselves. The elders didn't want to poke the hornet's nest. Attacking them might have summoned some terrifying Deva."

"The Sangha is that powerful?" Zac exclaimed. "They've caused you such a headache even without the top branches of the faction joining in?"

"Well, they're not considered a true peak faction without reason," Catheya shrugged. "But much of their strength comes from their consecrated grounds and seclusion. They wouldn't be able to exhibit the same level of power when emerging from their Holy Lands."

It was hard to imagine that shifty monk Three Virtues as some bigshot, but Zac guessed it made sense. Three Virtues and Lord 84th were only splinters of the Lotus Emperor. And if a single fragment was a powerful Cultivator who could become a Divine Monarch any time, then the Lotus Emperor was most likely a late Autarch.

His shocking action of splitting his soul into 100,000 splinters and having them enter the cycle of reincarnation might be a bid to grasp the insight needed to become a Supremacy. To kill someone like that could create a huge problem for the Undead Empire.

"But that's actually not all," Catheya added as she looked at Zac oddly.

"What? Something related to me?" Zac asked.

"Well, yes and no," Catheya slowly said. "It turned out Commander Kaldor hadn't been swallowed by the Orom on accident, and neither had that monk. They both had missions to investigate the Orom's actions. And according to the monk, Karma had been sown. Harming him would have a negative effect on their goals."

"Goals? The Orom's actions? What's going on?" Zac said with confusion. "Is it related to how it swallowed a bunch of cultivators left and right?"

"That was just a means to an end," Catheya said. "You should know those kinds of creatures normally don't appear in the Frontiers. The Cosmic Energy is too sparse to sustain Autarchs, especially such large beings."

"I know; that's why it had to keep feeding," Zac nodded.

"But do you know why it stayed here, barely surviving at the edges of the universe?" Catheya said.

"I figured it was too weak or cowardly to contend for a domain in the central regions," Zac shrugged.

"Actually, the Orom was part of a powerful faction, the Starbeast Alliance. That big spacefish would be one of its weaker members," Catheya said. "It was traveling across the frontier on a mission. Had been for millions of years."

"A mission for what?" Zac asked curiously.

"That was what the Izh'Rak Reavers wanted to know after finding out about the Orom. Anything that would prompt a Primordial Beast to spend millions of years had to be pretty impressive, right? Something that would make powerful factions like the Starbeast Alliance mad with desire," Catheya said as she looked at him with a pointed gaze. "Can you think of something like that here on the frontier?"

"Don't tell me," Zac muttered.

"The thing you unearthed," Catheya nodded in confirmation. "The Starbeast Alliance knew about that place somehow and has been searching for it for so long. Unfortunately for them, they encountered a wandering calamity like you, and their plans were exposed. Now, the Reavers are here for the prize, but we Draugr have also staked a claim. Partly because of you, partly because this is Draugr territory."

"So that's how it was," Zac slowly said as a wry smile appeared on his face back on the Yphelion.

The Orom really was a bit unlucky. It had searched for Ultom for millions of years, only to have its plans exposed because of Iz Tayn's grudge against him. The huge commotion Catheya mentioned was undoubtedly the flames of Iz's terrifying Dao Guardian, which had led to the Orom being exposed even with its comprehension of the Dao of Space.

The Orom's involvement in all this could also explain why the Reavers were here in Zecia. To think that that brute Kaldor was actually a covert agent looking for clues. No wonder he stayed on, even if he could confirm his Dao anytime he wanted.

"I still can't believe the Orom was looking for the Eternal Heritage," Zac muttered. "Did you guys kill it?"

"No," Catheya said. "Reyna Umbri'Zi wanted to, but she was only here in the frontier with a clone. It wasn't powerful enough, allowing the Primordial Beast to use some sort of forbidden skill and break free of her hold. But it shouldn't be able to recover in the short run."

"The others inside..?" Zac asked, but he sighed when Catheya only shook her head.

He had already known this was the likely outcome for most of those trapped by that Primordial Beast, but it was still sad to have it confirmed. Many faces flashed past his eyes, people he had met during his years trapped in the Orom. The Multiverse could be a cruel place. That some of the people, including those closest to him, survived and managed to get out was at least a small comfort.

“You know...” Catheya slowly said, dragging Zac out of his thoughts. “I know you wanted to discuss this with me, but there are real representatives waiting on the ship that took me here. People with actual influence. If you want, I can call them-“

“No need,” Zac cut her off before turning the puppet’s head in a certain direction. “In fact, if I see one of them make a move, I’ll consider that as the end of this meeting. That includes the two elders hiding in the bushes.”

“The what?” Catheya blurted, genuine confusion written all over her face.

But a powerful snort echoed through the room a moment later, and a mighty pressure descended before it quickly disappeared. Zac didn’t care – his real body was far away, after all. He was more interested to see that the two actually backed off and had teleported back into their Cosmic Vessel.

“Keep a close watch on that ship. Make sure it’s not up to something,” Zac said to the administrators on the Yphelion before refocusing on Catheya.

“That’s-“ Catheya stuttered with a mix of resentment and helplessness on her face. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know. It’s just that this is such an important matter, and I am only a junior. I am not qualified. But they are back on the vessel now, and we’ll make reparations for this transgression.”

“It’s okay,” Zac nodded.

He really wasn’t too upset over the two Monarchs hiding. If anything, it allowed him to showcase he wasn’t some fool they could just take advantage of, while also giving him an edge in the upcoming negotiations.

Besides, the Undead Empire would have to be crazy if they didn’t at least try something. Truthfully, he would have done the same if he were in their shoes. This wasn’t some random trade. It was an Eternal Heritage. If someone with the key to the inheritance had just strolled up to him, then Zac would probably have kidnapped him as well if it was a matter of life and death for Earth.

Just like Ogras said, cultivation had always been a war for resources. It was simply a part of the struggles of reaching for the peak. Zac held no delusions they would stop after this one attempt either. It was unavoidable when being the weaker party, but he would be able to extract more benefits after every attempt, provided he managed to thwart them.

This was the dance of cat and mouse Zac would have to endure until he could lay down the law with his axe.