

The Fall 948

Chapter 948: Asset or Liability

“We can talk about the heritage and reparations later. Let’s go back to where we left off,” Zac said. “So, what’s the verdict? Discounting the thing brewing here in Zecia, does the Abyssal Shores consider me an asset or a liability?”

There were many things Zac needed to cover with Catheya, but the first thing he needed to do was to sound out his value as an individual to the Undead Empire. Even if he knew he’d never measure up to something like Ultom, he’d be safer the more valuable his identity as an Edgwalker was. It might make the Monarchs of the Empire think twice before trying to sacrifice him and instead lean toward plans that didn’t include him dying.

“Asset or liability? Well, you tell me, Mr. Arcaz Umbri’Zi,” Catheya winked.

“What?” Zac said.

“As I said, the Umbri’Zi Matriarch was intrigued by you, and she chose to cover for your actions. They said you were a hidden scion of their clan, and you accidentally went a bit overboard in the Mystic Realm when completing some tasks. Officially, you’re currently in secluded cultivation to reflect on your actions. Congratulations, you’ve gone from a frontier hick to one of the most eligible Draugr bachelors in this generation,” Catheya smiled.

“Well, it’s not like the title is real,” Zac snorted.

“No, it’s real,” Catheya said with a shake of her head. “I’m quite jealous. You’ll be sent straight to the Abyssal Shores when you return for further training. And here.”

Next, Catheya placed three items on the table. They all looked extremely impressive, but one drew Zac’s attention more than the others. After all, he had seen that thing before – it was actually a Perennial Vastness Token.

“This is a small greeting gift from the Abyssal Shores and Clan Umbri’Zi; things prepared before the situation became... complicated,” Catheya said with a pointed look. “I know you recognize that token. Lady Reyna took it from the Twilight Lord’s own hands. That’s the benefit of being part of a top-tier faction.”

“From Alvod? What happened with that guy?” Zac asked curiously.

“He succeeded with his ascent, and now he’s a Grand Deacon of the Radiant Temple,” Catheya shrugged.

“You guys didn’t kill him?” Zac asked with surprise.

“Why should we? He has a deep grudge against the Havarok Empire, and he has no scruples. If anything, the Empire would be more inclined to send him longevity treasures so that he can keep causing trouble,” Catheya laughed.

“Alright,” Zac smiled as he took the Perennial Vastness Token and looked at the intricate seal on its surface.

Who could have thought he would end up getting the token that Alvod promised him all those years ago? The problem was he already had one.

“Are you sure you’re okay with giving this thing away?” Zac smiled. “I can tell you’re getting ready to break through as well.”

“Who do you take me for?” Catheya said with an arrogant expression. “If you can get one, then why can’t I?”

Zac looked on with surprise as a second token appeared in her hand, this one identical to the one Zac held on to. “You got one as well? Since when were they so common?”

“Finder’s fee,” Catheya smiled. “Introducing you came with some benefits. And while these things aren’t common, they’re not unique wonders of the Multiverse. If the Twilight Harbor can get one, then surely the Abyssal Shores can pick up a few. I was thinking we could go together. I still don’t know exactly how things work in there, but having someone to watch your back can’t hurt.”

“Sounds good,” Zac smiled as he pocketed the token. “I still need a few years to shore up my foundations, though.”

It looked like he had some good news for Ogras when he returned. Vilari and Joanna were two other candidates, but he knew it was too early for them. Vilari wanted to push her soul further before Breaking through, while Joanna sought to gain insights into her Path on the battlefield. That left Ogras, who was almost ready to enter Hegemony just like himself.

“That’s fine,” Catheya nodded. “I want to improve my foundations a bit before ascending as well. We can figure things out as the date gets closer.”

“Sure. What are the other things?” Zac asked as he looked at the two other items; an engraved box that almost seemed to shift in and out of reality and an opaque vial that exuded a pervasive darkness.

“The first one is called the [Essence of the Abyss],” Catheya said with longing in her eyes as she looked at the vial. “Just like its name indicates, it contains the essence of the Abyssal Lake. It can’t completely replace the real thing, but it will partly awaken your Draugr Heritage. Opening at least one Hidden Node is a foregone conclusion.”

Zac’s brows furrowed a bit aboard the Yphelion as he looked at the vial. “How long can it be saved? Is it usable in the D-grade?”

“What?” Catheya said with confusion. “Why would you save it? You know, most Draugr would kill for this thing. Only a limited number of people can receive a true awakening every year, and creating this elixir removes a few of those slots. It doesn’t have any drawbacks; it’s a free elevation.”

“My Draugr side is pretty powerful as is,” Zac sighed. “Too strong, and there might be trouble when forming my core.”

Zac obviously wouldn’t mind getting a free power-up, especially with more Hidden Nodes on the line. However, he already had his plate full catching up to his Draugr side with the [Void Vajra Sublimation]. The past month had resulted in more progress than he’d expected, but it wasn’t like he would reach a state of Life-Death equilibrium with years to spare.

If he suddenly awakened his Eoz Bloodline with this treasure, there was simply no way to push his Human side to the same level before the war started. There was still a chance that it wouldn't matter for forming his Cultivator's Core, that his Daos being in balance would be enough. But the deeper his understanding of Duality became, the more he believed Three Virtues had been right in this regard.

Having an imbalance between the two elements would lead to an imperfect outcome, at the least. It might make the Core Formation impossible for someone with a massive foundation like Zac. As a mortal, you had to thread a needle as you forcibly constructed a core powerful enough to carry his cultivation. If he also had to constantly keep watch to prevent the Death-attuned side from overwhelming the Life-attuned side, the difficulty would skyrocket.

"I- I'm not sure," Catheya eventually said. "You can still awaken your Bloodline as a Hegemon, but I don't think you'd be able to open your Hidden Nodes. Hidden Nodes are like small gateways into another dimension. When you attach a Cultivator's Core to your Pathways, the surge of energy will wipe the slate, destroying or burying these entrances. Opening Hidden Nodes is difficult on its own, but doing it as a Hegemon is too, too difficult."

Zac slowly nodded thoughtfully, not sure what to do. It would really be too much of a waste not to open the Hidden Nodes while he had the chance. Perhaps if he could find some equally good body-refining treasures with Life Attunement? Maybe he could even have the Undead Empire source some treasures for him.

That actually didn't seem like a bad idea. Many of the Empire's enemies used Life-Attuned treasures to deal with the Miasma of the Undead, and they should have seized mountains of the stuff over the years. Those items were essentially to them. At the same time, they couldn't just sell them through some back channels since that might come back and haunt them later.

"Well, I don't have a solution in this regard. But the third gift might be useful if you can find one on your own," Catheya added, making Zac curiously look up from the vial.

"What's that?" Zac asked.

"I can't open it, but it's a Self-contained Temporal Chamber with three years sealed inside," Catheya smiled.

"A Temporal Chamber?" Zac hesitated. "That sounds a bit-"

Dangerous. That was the word Zac left out. Temporal Chambers were something that Zac had wanted to get his hands on for a while now. He had heard of how Va Tapek had made Catheya cultivate in a Temporal Chamber for a year, allowing her to gain her levels in time for the Twilight Ascent quickly.

The downside for her had been the inability to Cultivate the Dao for that duration, but that didn't matter to Zac. He couldn't improve his Daos through meditation in either case and rather needed to deal with his Constitution and Soul. For him, a Temporal Chamber sounded like the perfect solution to his current time crunch.

Unfortunately, reality didn't always match up to expectations. After discussing the matter with Calrin, he soon found that things weren't so simple. There were a few solutions where you could lessen the

impacts of time, where two years would pass on the outside while you only aged one. You essentially blocked out some of the Dao of Time to accomplish this effect.

These methods were unsurprisingly popular among aging ancestors, who sealed themselves to protect their descendants for a longer time. Or to wait for their descendants to gather resources or source some critical treasure for their breakthrough. But to cheat time in the other direction was even harder.

You had to harness the Dao of Time to speed up the passage of time in a certain area or subspace. The slightest imbalance could create Temporal Rifts, something just as deadly as Spatial Rifts but even harder to defend against. Constructing something like that was incredibly difficult and not something Zac could buy on the open market.

And even if Zac managed to get one, would he dare use it? A single fault or imperfection, and he risked getting ripped apart at a moment's notice. Just starting such an array could kick up a temporal storm, as could shutting it off. Even the natural energy flows of Earth could suddenly create a small but deadly imbalance.

The only reason Catheya could have enjoyed such an opportunity was by having a Peak C-grade Master. Calrin guessed that Va Tapek had sped up time in a section of his Inner World, a subspace where the laws of the universe were more malleable. That way, Va Tapek could personally control the Time Chamber and suppress any errant energy flows for the entire duration. And it wasn't like Zac had a peak Monarch in his back pocket to help him with this.

Ultimately, these kinds of cultivation tools weren't something you'd see on the Frontier, and you'd most likely require an Array Master or Temporal Cultivator to run it. That was why Zac was slightly cautious, even if the sender was the Undead Empire. A portable unmanned Temporal Chamber sounded too dangerous, and no one in Port Atwood would be able to tell whether it was starting to fail.

"I know what you're thinking, but you don't need to worry," Catheya smiled. "This is not some rinky-dink array you'd find in the Frontier. Reyna Umbri'Zi personally crafted this domain at no small cost. You might not know this, but she is a Late Autarch and a Temporal Cultivator. This thing is even more stable than a planet."

Zac's brows rose in surprise. He hadn't expected that the Umbri'Zi ancestor was a Temporal Cultivator. He had to admit, if someone like that had created the Temporal Chamber, it was definitely safe to use. Provided it wasn't some sort of trap, that is.

"What's the temporal ratio?" Zac asked.

"There is none," Catheya said. "As I said, the item contains three years. After you enter, the timer will start. When you leave three years later, no time will have passed."

"What?!" Zac exclaimed, and he gave the box a second look. This was way beyond what he'd expected.

It was just like the Spatial Chamber technique Vai had explained to him, and the one Leyara's Templar squad had utilized to set up hidden camps. Creating something like that in the main dimension was incredibly difficult. But something told Zac it would be even harder to accomplish with a Temporal Chamber.

Zac looked at the box with desire in his eyes. Time in a box, an incredibly valuable for someone short on time but with thousands of years left on his lifespan. "Can the ancestor make more of these things?"

"She probably could, but it's dangerous to use these kinds of items too much," Catheya said.

"Because of the Dao?" Zac asked.

"Not only that," Catheya said with a shake of her head. "Unless you're a Temporal Cultivator, then stepping outside of time will gradually detach you from your timeline. In the early stages of overconsumption, it will feel like your surroundings will randomly speed up or speed down. It can cause quite a headache during critical situations. If you ignore the signs and keep stealing time, your body will eventually be unable to withstand it. You would become unable to reenter the timeline without being ripped apart by temporal storms.

"The ancestor estimated three years was the limit for you. Any more might affect your breakthrough to the D-grade, forcing you to take a few years to harmonize with the river of time. This is especially true considering time is apparently dilated inside the Perennial Vastness. So the sooner you use this thing, the better."

Zac nodded in understanding. He should have guessed nothing came for free on the road of cultivation. It seemed like Temporal Chambers were like the Cosmic Water he had used during the first month of the Integration. A little bit was fine, but overindulging could create immense problems. Even pills were this way with the Pill Toxins and immunity.

Still, suddenly gaining three full years was huge. It almost doubled the amount of time he had to train and prepare. As long as he could speed up his body tempering a bit, it might just be enough to cultivate the third layer of the [Void Vajra Sublimation]. That way, it should be fine using the [Essence of the Abyss].

It would also give him even more time to study the rules of Duality, a subject that was becoming increasingly abstruse, even with the help of the lake water. The only problem was the Moss Crystal and the five-year deadline. He didn't know if there was some hidden timer within the crystal, which would erupt when the time was up. If it were, he'd have to figure out a solution before heading to the Perennial Vastness.

But as Zac saw it, that was a negligible downside in the face of these potential benefits.

"These items are all amazing. Convey my thanks to the Umbri'Zi representative," Zac said.

"These things are just a small gift from the elders," Catheya smiled. "When you go to the Abyssal Shores, your cultivation requirements will all be taken care of."

Zac slowly nodded but couldn't help but feel suspicious over this treatment. No matter what Catheya said, a Perennial Vastness token had to be pretty rare, even in the Undead Empire. For them to not only give him one meant a Heaven's Chosen would miss out. They even gave one to Catheya in a not-so-discrete effort to send someone with him.

The [Essence of the Abyss] and the top-quality Time Chamber were even more valuable. Zac doubted that even the descendants of the Umbri'Zi could freely enjoy such things. On the surface, it sounded like

a meat pie had fallen from the sky, an opportunity to further his cultivation. It was obvious these items came with strings attached.

"So what's going on, and don't tell me it's your bargaining skills," Zac said, drawing an annoyed humph from Catheya. "Do they value an Edgewalker that highly?"

"Well, no," Catheya said, and she actually looked a bit conflicted. "That's... Well, the Umbri'Zi and the Abyssal Shores were interested because of something else."

"What then?" Zac asked with a frown. "I'm sure the Empire isn't lacking elites, judging by what a pain in the ass Uona was to take down."

"Do you remember what I told you about the history of the Undead Empire?" Catheya asked. "About the dark ages?"

"Of course," Zac nodded.

"The Draugr lost a lot as well during those years. So many succumbed to the environment. Altogether, over a third of our heritage is gone," Catheya sighed. "Did you know? It has been over two hundred million years since we encountered unattached Draugr from the outside. When they were welcomed back into the fold, one of the Draugr branches gained a previously lost Hidden Node."

"Don't tell me," Zac said with surprise.

"The thing that interests the Abyssal Shores is ultimately not your ability to become human. It is the fact that you might carry something we lost all those years ago. You might be able to strengthen our race as a whole," Catheya said as she looked at him seriously. "Do you know which of the Draugr branches you're part of?"

Zac didn't immediately answer and instead countered with a question of his own. "Which branches does the Draugr currently have? Which ones are complete and which are missing?"

"I have been instructed not to divulge that," Catheya said with a wry smile.

"Figures," Zac snorted as he slowly tapped the table.

He had been going back and forth about whether he should hide his Bloodline or hope to use it as a bargaining chip. Now, it turned out his perceived value as an Edgewalker was considered useless, while everything hinged on which ancestor he had.

Suppose his heritage was one of those that were partly or completely missing, then great. His value should suddenly skyrocket in the eyes of the Abyssal Shores. But if the Eoz branch was alive and well back in the Abyssal Lakes, he was suddenly just another junior. He might not only become expendable here but even lose the support of the Umbri'Zi.

Ultimately, Zac chose to trust his guts and roll the dice. Right now, he didn't have any true value in the eyes of the Abyssal Shores. In their eyes, he was only a gamble, a small chance to regain a Hidden Node or two. As far as they were concerned, he was far more likely to be one of the weaker or complete bloodlines.

But if it turned out Eoz branch was missing, or at least incomplete, he'd suddenly shoot up in value. After all, Zac was pretty sure Eoz was one of the strongest branches of the Draugr.

"My Bloodline is that of Eoz. In my vision, I was the third to emerge from the Abyssal Lake," Zac eventually said.

"The Vanguard," Catheya exclaimed as her eyes widened in shock, but she barely had time to finish her words before a tremendous pressure descended on the room.

"Child, is what you said true?"