

The Fall 950

Chapter 950: The Road Forward

Catheyia stood just outside the temporary building, looking on as the automaton walked into the woods toward the closest settlement. She was filled with a mix of disappointment and relief that Arcaz hadn't appeared in person. It would have been nice seeing him again, but these shifty elders were up to no good, no matter what they said to her.

That by itself was a huge headache. They didn't trust her and only divulged any details at the last moment. Even now, she didn't know whether the promises and agreements she had put forth were real. Thankfully, Arcaz seemed to understand that much, and he didn't seem to hold it against her.

A moment later, she sensed a shift in the air, and she turned around to see five people suddenly standing behind her.

"Good job," Enis nodded.

"I was just repeating the words said to me," Catheyia sighed.

"You made some alterations," Tavza said as she expressionlessly looked at Catheyia.

"It's because you don't understand how things work here," Catheyia said with a roll of her eyes. "He's not a junior from the Heartlands. He's a progenitor who grew up on a world without cultivators. He lacks the whole cultural heritage of established factions. It would just backfire if you tried to pressure him with seniority or status."

"Now that I can believe," Laz Tem'Zul snorted as he glanced toward the automaton. "No reverence at all."

"I still don't understand that point," Kator White Sky, the Izh'Rak Reaver scion, said. "Wasn't he connected to your ancestor, the one who refused to leave the Boundless Path? Yet he's a clueless progenitor? Which is it?"

Catheyia warily looked up at the hulking Reaver, and she couldn't help but remember his terrifying power. He was eighty years old and approaching Late Hegemony, but the local Peak Hegemons had to put their lives on the line just to spar with him. And since this war-crazed skeleton couldn't go a single day without fighting, the wounds of the local elites had racked up to the point that Monarchs had been forced to become his sparring partners.

Even now, it felt like this lunatic was barely reining in his battle lust.

"That's--" Catheyia hesitated.

"Be'Zi Sharva'Zi has already been given special dispensation from the Heart, as has Catheyia," Enis Umbri'Zi said. "More to the point, we have already confirmed their connection comes through the Dao of Oblivion and happenstance. It is doubtful they have ever met in person. Be'Zi and her companion should currently be located deep within the Eternal Storm."

"That by itself is a problem. We do not have a proper understanding of his connections, and therefore not his motivations. I read the reports. Someone else has been hiding in his shadows since the

beginning. Before he even visited Twilight Harbor. His very existence is proof of this,” Tavza An’Azol said. “A pureblood Draugr Edgewalker does not just appear out of thin air. Especially not if he’s carrying the bloodline of the Vanguard.”

“So why did you stop the plan? We had already locked in on their position,” Kator snorted. “You were even the ones to put it forward.”

“What?!” Catheya said with shock, but she was soundly ignored.

She looked at Enis, but the Umbri’Zi Monarch only shook her head slightly, telling her not to push the matter.

“The information put forth changed the stakes,” Tavza calmly said. “Besides, the make of that vessel was out of our expectations. That’s not something you’d expect to find on the Frontier. There was a high likelihood its arrays would have noticed Sepravo had he moved any closer.”

Catheya’s eye widened in surprise. Sepravo A’Tem was here? She had never seen the Revenant Monarch aboard their vessel. Come to think of it, she hadn’t seen him since they appeared in Zecia. Even back then, it was like Catheya had noticed him but soon forgotten about his existence.

Now, Catheya realized it was most likely part of the Monarch’s skillset, making it clear what kind of profession Sepravo had. An assassin, and an incredibly skilled one at that, considering he had been allowed to take the name of a Bloodline Clan. Catheya shuddered, realizing just how close to disaster her friend had been.

“So, you feeling threatened, girl?” Kator snickered as he looked down at Tavza. “Your prince isn’t exactly young, and now the Vanguard is back? I hear those guys were almost as sturdy as us Reavers. I wonder how the branches of Mez and Azol feel about that.”

“If the lost bloodline of Eoz can rejoin our ranks, we will all be better for it. Why would An’Azol hamper that?”

“You say that, but why don’t I see any sincerity on your face?” Kator laughed.

“We are not like the Eternal Clan, constantly fighting among themselves while striking out at anything around them,” Tavza calmly said. “Besides, he is just one junior. Raising a whole branch requires both time and resources.”

“Resources you could withhold if they start to grow too much,” Kator laughed.

“Enough, Kator,” Toss White Sky grunted before glancing at Enis. “That ship is another point of suspicion. Has he already joined up with another faction for the upcoming trial?”

“Not necessarily,” Enis countered. “No matter what the truth of his origins are, it has been confirmed he is a genuine progenitor, even if he was somehow placed on a world just before it got integrated. And he is a stand-out progenitor at that. He might have been given the vessel as a reward from the System.”

“The matter of his hidden backers can be put aside for now,” Laz said. “What’s important is the intelligence he provided. As far as I can tell, it seems genuine.”

“He held back,” Tavza said, glancing at Catheya. “You could have pushed him further.”

"I did what was asked of me. If you think it insufficient, you're welcome to try taking over the future negotiations," Catheya snorted. "I'd like to see how many secrets you can get out of that guy."

"Enough," Enis said before looking at Laz and Toss. "What do you wish to do?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Toss shrugged. "We're sending the kids into the Eternal Storm while we deal with the demands your greedy little adoptee put forth. Do the locals have any nearby seeds?"

"There should be a few hidden worlds," Enis nodded.

"Good, then there's no point staying here," Toss said, and the next moment he and Kator were gone.

Catheya glanced in the direction of the puppet once more, and a sense of helplessness filled her heart. What should she do? Then it struck her, and she turned to Tavza before her guardian whisked her away.

"I wish to enter the Million Gates Territory as well," Catheya said with determination. "I wish to contend for one of the lower courts."

"Why should I take you?" Tavza countered, seemingly not surprised at all. "You seem to be harboring many ideas of your own. That's not a trait you look for in a party member. Besides, your role is to be our liaison with that man. That will not be possible from within the Eternal Storm."

"That may be, but this way, I can be your liaison with Arcaz inside the trial. And I can guarantee you will find no more capable followers in Zecia after I've formed my core," Catheya said. "Besides, I am sure Arcaz would not begrudge me a chance to join this opportunity."

"You seem to like that man," Tavza commented as she looked at Catheya. "But I wonder if that will be enough. Remember, Arcaz Umbri'Zi, or rather Zachary Atwood, has to choose death. That is even more important if he truly is a descendant of Eoz."

"I know that," Catheya huffed, but she inwardly wasn't convinced.

She didn't have any logical reason to refute the words of Reyna or the others, and her research of the topic in the Abyssal Shores had confirmed their words. There hadn't been any Life-Death Edgewalkers who had successfully entered Hegemony. Yet, when she remembered that man, how he'd looked when he first transformed in front of her to save her life, she couldn't shake off her lingering doubt.

Her father had once said nothing was impossible in the Multiverse. If it seemed like it, it was only because the solution hadn't been figured out yet. So why couldn't that be true for him? If not him, who could possibly break the old conventions? So what if it was related to a broken peak?

"Well, if that fails, we will have to make the choice for him," Tavza shrugged, which dragged Catheya out of her thoughts. "I will think on your proposal."

"What are you-" Catheya frowned, but the An'Azol descendant and her guardian were already gone.

"Child, that was a mistake," Enis sighed after the two appeared in their quarters aboard the Eclipse a moment later.

"I know a lot of powerful warriors will enter this inheritance, but I will have become a Hegemon by the time the inheritance starts," Catheya said.

"That may be, but for you, surviving until the gates open might be even harder than the inheritance itself," Enis said with a shake of her head. "Those two are allies, yet they are also competitors. Each will want to bring as many of their own into the Left Imperial Palace. Should you manage to seize one of the seals, you will become a ticket they might both consider better used on their own people. Don't delude yourself that your identity as Arcaz Umbri'Zi's companion will keep you safe from those two."

"Since when were you worried for my safety?" Catheya smiled.

"I am trying to salvage this mess at least somewhat. Our branch can't walk away completely empty-handed," Enis sighed. "It's a shame that brat didn't allow you to join him on his planet."

"That's for the best," Catheya snorted. "From the sounds of it, those people would have used my presence there to do something backhanded."

"Don't forget yourself," Enis said. "No matter what you think of their actions, they are ultimately acting for the betterment of the Empire. You cannot let your priorities get mixed up."

"What do you think, uncle?" Tavza asked as she sat down by the screen transmitting the outside of the Cosmic Vessel.

"The council gave you free rein to take charge of this matter. If us old things involve ourselves too much, it might affect the outcome negatively," Laz smiled. "Judging from what we've learned today, this might be even more true than we previously thought."

"I doubt taking some suggestions from my elders at this juncture would impact my chances at becoming a candidate," Tavza said with a shake of her head as the planet grew smaller in the distance.

"Well, things have gotten complicated," Laz sighed. "Who would have thought he'd be a descendant of Eoz?"

"It's still not confirmed. He was conveniently absent to confirm anything, and I don't trust that girl," Tavza said. "She was investigated, but that was in the Abyssal Shores. She might have hatched this plan while waiting for us to arrive."

"She is conflicted at the least, but I do not believe she planned this," Laz said as he sat down opposite her. "The Vanguard returning. That little Reaver brat wasn't lying. This will create significant waves. The other Divine Races might feel threatened, and the current balance in the Shores will be upended. Perhaps him not returning--"

"We can't," Tavza sighed. "I would have preferred simply killing him and taking his seal. I just feel he carries too many secrets to be allowed back home. That feeling has only increased after getting a first-hand look at his personality. He's shifty, greedy, and only accountable to himself. But now, we are forced to act as his shield."

"Oh?" Laz said with surprise.

"The Patriarch spoke to me before I left," Tavza said after a pause.

"What?!" Laz exclaimed. "Prince Aewo has left the depths?!"

"No," Tavza said. "Ancestor just sent a whisp of his consciousness to me as a precaution. He said he had felt the lake stirring not long ago and had had a premonition. That this Zachary Atwood might be part of the lost branch. And if he was, then he had to be returned to the shores at any cost."

"Is it that important?" Laz said with a frown. "Truthfully, I feel that perfecting another one of the established bloodlines would have a greater impact on our Race's strength in the short run. As you said, it would be a huge undertaking to resurrect the bloodline of Eoz. First of all, he'd need to become an Autarch at the least before he can properly pass on the whole branch."

"I thought so too," Tavza nodded. "But apparently, there's more to it. The princes have found something, something in the depths of the lake. They've failed to access it all this time, but Zachary Atwood might be the key."

"A bloodline lock?" Laz said with interest.

"Azol, Mez, and Eoz. Three upper Bloodlines leading the nine others," Tavza said. "All three would have to be present to access that place. For millions of years, the princes have been working on a workaround. They have made no progress, even when consulting the Primo."

"So what is it?" Laz asked.

"Ancestor never told me, except that it's related to our very foundation and origin. It's far more important than a few missing links of the lower bloodlines," Tavza explained.

"So the brat is the key to this thing?" Laz grimaced.

Tavza nodded. "Do not tell the others. I only told you now to impress you on the importance of his return to the Abyssal Shores, where he can be protected until he fulfills his role. Until then, he might be targeted by Kator's camp and assassins who sneak into this Sector. The Hiveminds and the Sanguine Palace aren't above something like that."

"Of course," Laz agreed as he took out a Mindseal Talisman and added an extra layer of protection to the memories. "There is one problem, though."

"What?" Tavza asked.

"How do we protect someone who refuses to even meet with us?"

The scenes stopped playing, and the wall turned dark in the meeting room of the Yphelion.

"What do you think?" Zac asked.

While Ogras had been next to him during the meeting, he hadn't been able to see or hear what was happening on the other side. But now that the meeting was over, Zac replayed the whole thing.

"What do I think? I think your spring is about to come. The moment they get their hands on you, they'll strap you to a bed and bring in a steady stream of young flowers." Ogras glared at Zac. "Just how bright is your star of providence? Where is the justice in the world? How am I supposed to live with you showing me something like this?"

“Not that,” Zac laughed. “Besides, you’re probably overthinking things. They’d probably just need some cell samples or something. I want to hear what you think about the agreement.”

“Well, I doubt the gifts are problematic,” Ogras said. “I don’t think their excitement over your heritage was fake, though it’s a shame we have no way to confirm things from our side. But I doubt they would send you off with something problematic and risk missing out. If the original gifts were tampered with, they would most likely have swapped them out under the pretense your bloodline deserving a better gift.”

“I think so, too,” Zac nodded. “What about the heritage?”

“They knew even less than we expected,” Ogras said with some bemusement. “I didn’t expect them to not even have figured out about the Million Gates Territory already. We might have sold that intelligence cheaply, but it doesn’t matter. We got most of the things we needed out of this meeting. And the ongoing agreement between you and the Empire will prove incredibly lucrative.”

There had been a few things that Zac had wanted to accomplish with this first set of negotiations, and the treasures he’d asked for were just a smaller part of it. The real goal had been to open up a path for Earth and the Atwood Empire while keeping the demands reasonable. Too much, and they might figure out various loopholes.

Therefore, the demands were carefully chosen and part of a plan Zac had mulled over since learning of Ensolus. First of all, he had managed to get an agreement that the Undead Empire would accept their presence and expansion across the Kaldran Strait. Not only that, but they would covertly assist in the Atwood Empire’s development and protection after Earth and Ensolus emerged from the shroud.

The Atwood Empire would essentially become an allied faction, which meant they would be safe from the biggest faction in that region of space. Truthfully, Catheya even seemed a bit excited at the prospect, which surprised Zac. But it didn’t take long for him and Ogras to figure out what was happening.

It was not long ago that Twilight Harbor had collapsed, and the Umbri’Zi had lost one of the most useful trade hubs where they could purchase the resources of the Frontier without breaking any commandments. Twilight Harbor had also been a significant revenue stream for Clan Sharva’Zi, with their Dao Repository and other shops. Now, with the Kavriel Province’s tacit approval and even protection, Zac was primed to set up something similar in Zecia.

An unaffiliated Grey Zone, where both living and undead could come to trade resources.

Each side had treasures the other required, and every transaction would mean money entering Zac’s pockets. Zac had already made a fortune through his lucky encounters, but that was nothing in the face of the revenue streams a popular trade hub could generate. Better yet, no one could compete with him on this matter, thanks to the support of the Undead Empire.

For the first time in a while, Zac felt the future looked bright for Earth. The assimilation had always been like a cloud looming over him, especially since his faction became part-undead. But now, the clouds had parted, and the road to endless riches had been paved.

He just needed to survive the schemes of the Undead Empire and the dangers of Ultom to get there.

