

The Fall 1010

[Chapter 1010 - A Favor Owed](#)

Zac calmly looked at the smiling vampire, but his Dao was already coursing through his [Thousand Lights Avatar]. He'd unleash [Void Zone] at the slightest energy fluctuations and kill as many as he could before they had the chance to react to having their energy and Dao nullified.

"Relax," Ysaya said with a helpless shake of her head. "Why does it feel like I just had a brush with the eternal slumber? We're not here to take what you've found, even if we're curious about it. We're here because of them."

Ysaya pointed at the followers standing to the side, and Zac glanced over with a raised brow.

"Them?"

It was only one word, but it conveyed his skepticism. Since when could some Revenants or Corpselords move two Eternal Clan members? Especially when the two vampires were the more powerful party. There were a few Revenant and Corpselord factions with great power and influence in the Undead Empire, but not even the scions of those clans and sects would be able to dictate the actions of Ysaya and Solomis.

"Mistress An'Azol sends her regards, master Umbri'Zi," the sole living cultivator said with a bow.

"Tavza sent you?" Zac said, his eyes immediately thinning.

"The Mistress regrets the misunderstanding that transpired on the outside and had us come here to clarify some points," a Revenant explained as he handed over a box. "She also asked us to assist you in any way we could. Upon seeing the global task and making some inquiries, we realized it was most likely you who had triggered it. Thus, we approached the young masters of the Noz'Serasta to render assistance."

"Assistance in exchange for a favor owed," Solomis said.

No wonder. A favor from one of the two leading clans of the Draugr race was incredibly useful. Their family would richly reward these two after coming home with such a boon. Even better, it didn't cost Zac a dime.

"Well, convey my thanks to Tavza if you get the chance," Zac nodded at the Revenant.

"I've always heard the Azol princess is beyond haughty, not even sparing her fellow Draugr a glance," Ysaya smiled as she leaned closer. "Yet she's showing you such deference. Makes one wonder what's so special about you."

"Nothing really, we're just good friends," Zac said.

"Uh, huh," Ysaya said, clearly not buying it.

"I heard of an Umbri'Zi scion a few years ago," Solomis interjected. "An Arcaz Umbri'Zi."

"That's me," Zac sighed, not bothering to hide it.

He wore his standard Arcaz face and was already called Master Umbri'Zi. There was not much point hiding it—it seemed more pertinent to prepare for the fallout.

"As I thought," Solomis nodded, and Zac was surprised to see his cold visage warm up a bit.

"What's that? What's going on?" Ysaya said curiously.

"Noz'Valadir," Solomis reminded.

"Ah! That was you?!" Ysaya exclaimed, her four pupils fusing to one as she stopped and looked straight at Zac.

A tense silence stretched out, and the other undead warriors either moved away or reluctantly prepared for battle.

"Good job!"

"Ah?" Zac blurted.

"Why look so surprised?" Ysaya grinned. "Not like she was part of our branch. Those upstarts have acted all high and mighty lately because of some good luck. They even pressured our clan for a few of our ancestral ponds. Who knows what would have happened if they got a third Autarch in such short order? Their disastrous excursion to the frontier knocked them down a notch, though. And there's suddenly a slot to visit the Eternal Halls ripe for the taking."

"Uh, well. Glad I could be of service," Zac coughed.

"You're cultivating Pure Death," Solomis commented as his sanguine eyes looked Zac over. "No wonder you're already running around after breaking the commandments in such an overt way."

"Yeah, well," Zac shrugged, not wanting to stay on that subject for too long. "You didn't bring Catheya?"

"That Draugr girl? She wanted to come, but the Grand Firmament Coalition got in the way," Ysaya explained. "She'd only draw attention if she entered the Calamity, so she's acting as a decoy in Vastness City instead. Thanks to her, only nine entered the Calamity instead of the planned thirteen."

"Those people again?" Zac frowned. "And they've entered the Calamity?"

"Good, we didn't come in vain."

Zac gave Ysaya a questioning look.

"The favor was good, but there's no reason to return so soon. We've already paid the entrance fee, right? More importantly. This is a rare opportunity to collect some high-quality blood and bodies. But the moment you step through the teleporter, the bait is gone," Ysaya said, the bloodthirsty look in her eyes returning.

"Only question is, can you still fight after dealing with those people you had dangling from your chains?"

"Just lead the way," Zac snorted.

An hour later, an exhausted Zac stood in front of the teleportation pillar, still in his undead form. He and the Noz'Serasta scions had come to an agreement where they'd targeted the Grand Firmament Coalition

in an ambush. After a furious battle, two of theirs had fallen while one of their lieutenants had almost been crippled. Whether he'd be able to recover or not wasn't sure, but they'd failed to prevent him from fleeing back to his mansion.

The vampires had siphoned off some blood of another four, which was the same as stealing a part of their foundations. In exchange, two of their undead followers had racked up some nasty wounds, but they'd recover in a month or two. The clash wasn't that deadly, but that was the norm. There was no point in fighting to the death for the weaker party, and they'd fled the moment they realized they were outmatched.

Besides, the Grand Firmament Coalition leader, Nerven Serku, wasn't even there. He had arrived in the Calamity but opted to take a strike team and head further into the Calamity in hopes of finding the core. Those who remained were just a backup squad responsible for gathering intelligence and ambushing solo travelers.

The two vampires had wanted to target some more people after witnessing Zac's might, such as the loose coalition of solo adventurers. After some deliberation, Zac passed on joining. Ultimately, he didn't want to kill random people to advance his goal. If the aim had only been some light robbery and snatching Mana, then fine, but the vampires wanted blood and bodies. Even if he hadn't personally killed anyone in such a scenario, he would still have tipped the battle in their favor.

The spatial gate opened as he touched the alabaster pillar, and he stepped through after glancing up at the sky. They were waiting for him up there. There was no way he could have missed that familiar sensation. A set of Remnants, just like he'd expected.

He'd known it since upgrading his soul. Cracking open his cage had created a brief resonance, confirming their existence and rough location. They were somewhere in the upper layers of the Calamity. He'd considered going to fetch them instead of returning but quickly rejected the idea. Ultimately, he couldn't rely on the Remnants to get him out of every jam.

Returning to Vastness City without their aid could be seen as a test. Besides, he had just broken through with body and soul. His soul, especially, was in a fragile state—it wasn't the time to mess with those things. He could always fetch the remnants before forming his core, adding a fourth set to his tally. From there, he only needed one more for 'Atavism,' whatever that meant.

The moment Zac had fully stepped through the spatial gate, he felt a mysterious swirl gather around him. He suddenly felt more attuned to the world. Or perhaps it was more apt to say the world was more in tune with him. The change no doubt came from a sudden influx of Mana from completing the quest, and he curiously opened his screen.

[Mana: 14,703]

He'd gained 4,900 Mana since emerging from Sinner's Lament. In reality, he'd earned another 1,000 from five kills inside a Red Zone—the base 100 per kill plus an automatic 100 bounty, whether you discovered a blueprint weakness or not. That had all gone into paying for his 4-day stay inside the Calamity, though. That environment was just too expensive. He would have to find a quest to cover the cost the next time he visited. Another 100 Mana had gone into running the Simulation Array back in his mansion.

"So that undead newcomer got it," one of the onlookers muttered upon seeing the air swirl around Zac.

Zac glanced at the gathered crowd, but it was clear no one had any plans to target him. The mission was over, and the rules of Vastness City were in place. There wasn't much point in attacking now, especially not since it was common knowledge he'd won all those duels, with most not even being able to land a single blow. Zac walked away, moving through a series of random streets and alleys until he was mostly certain no one was following.

No one except a presence in the shadows.

"'We'll keep our heads down and just get our cores.' That was you, you know. Some sales pitch," a voice dripping with sarcasm appeared in his ear, prompting a wry smile to spread across Zac's face.

"Yeah, well," Zac laughed as a hooded Ogras stepped out from the shadows. "Things happen. And it's not like you believed me anyway."

"I guess that's true," Ogras sighed. "You got the thing?"

"I got it," Zac nodded.

"Was it because of that book of yours or your aggravatingly high Luck?"

"The latter," Zac said, a smile playing on his lips. "The treasure kind of appeared right on top of my head after I broke through."

"Of course it did," the demon groaned.

"Is Catheya alright? I hear she had another run-in with the Grand Firmament Coalition," Zac asked.

"She's fine. I opted to stay close to her just in case rather than join the fun. That place seemed like a bad fit for me in either case," Ogras sighed. "Those people backed down after she retreated into that tavern. It's one thing to harass an individual. But targeting that establishment is to anger every single undead in the Perennial Vastness."

"She's still there?" Zac asked.

"Should be. What's your next move?"

"Plan B," Zac said after some thought. "In one day or so."

"Want company?"

"Sure," Zac readily agreed. "I'm probably skipping the mission release, though."

"That's fine; I want to research that book in either case. I think it's my best bet to reach the higher echelons in time. I might pick up some quick missions in a few Green Zones while studying the patterns," Ogras said.

"You understand them?" Zac said with surprise.

"Well, not really. But I have a decently capable helper."

The demon was obviously referring to K'Rav, the goblin warlock, and Zac felt Ogras was probably on the right track. His strength was in the middle of the pack among the guests, which meant the most lucrative Red Zones were incredibly dangerous unless he found one perfectly suited to his path and skillset. He could still join Zac on missions, but the more taxing the task, the bigger the Contribution skew would get. At some point, he'd be taking greater risks for lesser rewards.

Using Ventus's strategy to supplement his Mana seemed like the best plan. After all, Ventus wasn't all that powerful, yet he'd reached the ninth echelon. Certainly, he'd been in the Perennial Vastness for over two decades, but a big part of that had been spent studying the patterns to set up his strategy.

The only other alternative for Ogras was to rely heavily on his [Shadewar Flag] to force his way through Red Zones. However, that thing was a lot like his Remnants. It contained grade-breaking power, but it wasn't Ogras's. Furthermore, Zac could tell there were some costs to using it, even if Ogras had never explained exactly what they were. Using it a bit was fine, but it couldn't be fully relied on.

"I'll head to Catheya before going back to rest," Zac said. "I'm heading straight to that place in 22 hours."

"See you there," Ogras said, and he was gone the next moment.

Zac headed straight to the tavern after getting an update, and a Revenant inside nodded toward one of the private rooms as he walked inside. Zac nodded in thanks and opened the door.

"Imagine my surprise. I had barely recovered from your mad crusade against the mounds when my vacation gets interrupted. Of all places, a supreme treasure has appeared in the Calamity, no doubt turning that chaotic place into a veritable powder keg. And who do I know that was planning on heading to that very place."

"Well, that would be me," Zac smiled as he closed the door behind him and sat down in front of Catheya.

"So I rush out of the East Qi Springs, with barely enough time to dress myself—"

"Now that's a scene."

Catheya only rolled her eyes in response. "I come here, only to run into those firmament bastards. Like glue, those people. So I essentially find myself under house arrest, acting as bait until you're done wreaking havoc."

"I'm sorry you got implicated," Zac said as he took out a purple Death-attuned flower he'd found on his way to the Storm Chamber. "A souvenir from the Calamity Mountain that fell from the sky."

"Well, I'll forgive you this time," Catheya said as she accepted the flower with a small smile. "But, just bring me along next time if you plan on doing something exciting."

"I only planned on evolving my soul before returning. Trouble just keeps finding me," Zac said helplessly.

"Well, I'm glad you're fine," Catheya said as she enclosed the flower in a case of clear ice.

"How are you feeling?" Zac asked. "You're looking better than when I last saw you, at least."

"Well, that's a pretty low bar," Catheya laughed. "I've never been so tired in my life. It's terrifying trying to keep up with you. I slept a day straight before heading to the East Qi Springs."

"I can't believe you spent Mana on a spa," Zac said with a shake of his head.

"It's not just a spa," Catheya said with a roll of her eyes. "It's a comprehensive treatment with acupuncture, medications concocted based on your Daos, healing and recuperating arrays. One day in there was like resting for two weeks outside. Without it, I'd carry exhaustion and sequelae for the next mission. It just so happens to be a very nice Spa as well. Why... don't you join me for a day trip next month?"

"Actually, that sounds pretty nice."

"Really?" Catheya said, looking up from the flower with delight.

"Sure," Zac nodded. "My next destination shouldn't be too dangerous. But knowing my luck, some lost continent or ancient beast will probably fall out of the sky."

"Now that's the truth," Catheya smiled as she took out a bottle of wine.

"I could probably use a break afterward," Zac nodded. "By the way, I met two followers of Tavza."

"Yeah, they spoke with me as well," Catheya sighed. "It looks like I was led by the nose back then."

"Well, it doesn't mean Tavza can be trusted. It just means there was another culprit this time," Zac shrugged. "Maybe your escape will help keep them on their toes."

Zac spent another hour catching up with Catheya while letting the tavern's gathering arrays recover his depleted Miasma. Catheya had gained some insights during her stay in Sinner's Lament, and she needed to seclude herself for a few weeks to ascertain whether it was something she should integrate into her core. Thus, she would also miss the mission release in the next few days. That meant the next outing would only be him and Ogras.

A few people were loitering the streets when Zac exited, but he paid them no mind as he returned to his storefront. Giving it some thought, Zac infused his will into the shop. A fist-sized crystal appeared right next to the entrance. Anyone who infused their will into it would see a set of materials for sale. They were all things he'd picked inside the Calamity. Some of the materials seemed useful for his core formation, but others were not useful to him.

Raw materials generally had very little value to his people back home. Even if the things he found were good, he had no people to extract their true value. Meanwhile, some guests here had incredibly deep pockets, and it was better to trade for Nexus Coins or crystals than bring them back to Zecia. The rates for materials were even higher here than in Twilight Harbor, though there was almost only demand for rare treasures found inside the Perennial Vastness or items that could help guests hunt for treasures.

Zac appeared in his mountaintop mansion, and coruscating waves of Buddha's love greeted him. It wasn't too bad. The pressure wasn't as intrusive between his evolved soul and reaching the second echelon. The Core Array was still trying to brute-force his blueprint by any means necessary, but Zac smiled upon seeing it hadn't produced any real results after almost a week of running.

It had generated some scenarios where the core would turn a bit turbid or weakened, but that was to be expected. Nothing was impervious to all Daos and elements. Seeing as the array at least produced some interesting data, Zac let it keep running as he began meditating.

A day later, Zac was almost in a perfect state. Eating the [Soulhaze Lily] saved him a month of recovery while strengthening his soul by around five percent. Only a few lingering cracks from channeling so much Remnant energies remained, though Zac noted his body healed that kind of damage significantly faster thanks to his Body Tempering breakthrough. It was a shame he hadn't managed to retain more than 15% of the lily's energy, but Zac wasn't too broken up about it.

The lily had still provided a lot of benefits, and there were no guarantees he would have been able to harness that much more of its efficacy if he brought it back. Besides, the Perennial Vastness was full of good things like the lily.

'Where to?' Null asked as Zac walked over to the teleporter.

"The Quarry," Zac said, and a gate opened up.

It was time to find out what kind of opportunity Lord Engo believed waited for him there.