

The Fall 1019

[Chapter 1019 - Ahead of Schedule](#)

All sound and light were muted in the depths of the pond. It was almost like time stood still, frozen by the intense cold from the depths. Catheya continuously dragged energy into her body from the frigid waters as she circulated [Frigid Doctrine of Zi]. Her ichor coursed through her veins, harmonizing and assimilating the pond's energies while the essence of the energies was dragged into the seed in her lower abdomen.

She had finally managed to reach the 100-meter ledge. Catheya still couldn't see the bottom of the Belsim pond, but she guessed she'd reached the halfway point. She'd be ready to start her core formation when she could reach that spot and stay there without being overwhelmed by the death and cold.

Of course, that final stretch was no joke. Catheya shuddered as another glacial tendril from below caressed her leg, leaving her calf frozen solid. But she wouldn't give in. She could tell there was something special about the depths. Perhaps an array or a natural formation? Either case, the depths felt like a bonfire of Dao when she circulated her manual. Not even the shallows of the Abyssal Lake emitted such intense power, though the Tears of Belsim didn't nurture her bloodline.

"You have an entry request."

'He's here?' Catheya asked as she slowly opened her eyes.

"An Ogras Azh'Rezak requests an audience," Winter answered.

A surge of annoyance flared in Catheya's chest, but she still started ascending the pond. Zac was already three days late to their date, and now his shadow came knocking instead? She knew they were all busy, but it still hurt.

She'd heard of how women back home ignored their partners as punishment for their transgressions. But how was that a punishment to Zac? He'd get engrossed by one of his projects in no time and soon forget he was being ignored. Infuriating. Besides, his drive and dedication were attributes she loved, so the situation was doubly frustrating.

A wave of frigid air greeted Catheya as she emerged from the pond, but the iceswept winds almost felt sweltering after spending the past five days in the depths. She channeled her Miasma to dry her clothes and hair as she accepted the request through her guide.

"What is it?" Catheya grunted as the demon stepped through the gate.

"What's with the long face?" the demon grinned before shuddering. "This place is the worst."

"Well, it wasn't made for you," Catheya said. "Where is he?"

"I found some clues to an item he needed for that hammer of his the other day," Ogras explained.

That cursed hammer. This wasn't the first date it had ruined over the past year.

"You or your goblin?" Catheya said with a roll of her eyes.

"What's the difference? We're both benefitting, aren't we?" Ogras snorted. "Or do you want to change our agreement?"

"Nevermind, I'm just a bit annoyed," Catheya sighed. "So you found some clues."

"The numbers indicated a Green Zone, so we feared it'd start a global quest if we waited. We've been narrowing it down for the past week," Ogras explained as he took out a bottle that seemed to contain liquid fire. He took a deep swig, and Catheya could see how the demon's life force almost seemed to have ignited. "That's better."

"So?"

"He needs your help. Can we go before my little spear turns into an icicle?"

"He clearly preferred your help," Catheya said, unable to fully keep out the resentment of his voice. "Why bother coming to me and ruin your good time?"

"Is that what you want me to convey?" Ogras countered with a raised brow.

"...No," Catheya sighed. "Where to?"

"Well... It's the Heavenly Cauldrons."

Catheya blanched before looking at the demon suspiciously. "Are you trying to get me killed?"

"If a Green Zone can kill you, you're probably not ready for Hegemony."

"You know what I mean," Catheya glowered. "That place is my nemesis."

"That's why he needs your help. Opposites and all that," Ogras grinned.

"Fine," Catheya sighed as she mentally prepared herself for an absolutely dreadful day.

"What a devoted wife," the demon grinned as the teleportation array activated. "Entering the gates of hell for her beloved. Makes my heart swell."

Catheya would normally have started shooting icicles after the demon at this point, but she was busy placing talismans on her body to deal with the heat that radiated out of the gate. The two stepped through, and Catheya had to forcibly resist jumping back in. Waves of Fire and Life assaulted her and tried to burrow into her body. They stood atop scorched steppes covered with angrily shining moss.

Within that moss, small beetles scuttled about, making Catheya's skin crawl.

"Yeah, not great," Ogras commented as he followed Catheya's gaze. "They're only by the teleporter, though. I think they like the spatial energy."

"Where to?" Catheya said, already feeling her skin heat up.

The talismans lit up one after another and started releasing the stockpiled Miasma, and a ring on her finger began releasing an icy mist. Unfortunately, her preparations could only do so much when faced with a fully attuned environment. She was only one person, and it was impossible to push away the pervasive Dao around her completely. It was like trying to hide a stench with perfume. It just resulted in a different type of stinky scent.

"This way, young miss," the insufferable demon said with a bow. How did he manage to make a bow sarcastic?

The two didn't exchange many words as they set out across the steppes, passing a series of golden rivers and pools of magma. Thankfully, Zac was inside a large volcano she could see far in the distance. It wouldn't take more than an hour or two to get there.

"Any news from your goblin friend?" Catheya eventually asked.

"He says a surge is forming," Ogras grinned. "Right now, the energy levels across most realms are decreasing slightly, but that's because it's accumulating."

"When?" Catheya asked.

"Two years, maybe. It'll depend on the realms. Some might only need a final push to produce a material."

"Will you two be able to figure it out in time?" Catheya asked curiously.

This was their shot. Zac was just too much of a machine, and they couldn't keep up unless he visited realms suited for their strength. Neither did either feel comfortable relying too heavily on him for Mana. So the two had decided to team up, using [Perennial Transformations] as a foundation. They had already managed to trigger and finish two local quests, though they'd only gained 1,000 Mana each this way.

However, it was relatively risk-free and only took them a couple of days. The problem was it was quite difficult to meet the requirements of that Numerologist Zac knew. His scheme was essentially to abuse hidden rules of the Perennial Vastness and create artificial fate through proximity and timing. Arrive early or too late, and you wouldn't trigger a personal quest. Either no quest would trigger or a global one if the treasure was valuable enough.

It was quite ingenious but also very difficult to perfect. Luckily, Ogras had that mysterious spectral goblin for help. In return, she provided manpower through the Undead Empire. She was also more powerful than the demon, so they had agreed to split the bounties 50-50. Still, it was shocking how much the man had grown since they met in the Tower of Eternity. She wouldn't have had a leg to stand on if she hadn't been sent to the Abyssal Shores.

Especially when you considered that flag... Catheya shuddered at the memory. She knew a thing or two about souls and reanimation, and that thing wasn't natural.

The two kept a steady pace, though Catheya felt her focus start to waver at the constant onslaught of hostile Dao and energy. Thankfully, they'd reached the volcano, and Catheya gritted her teeth upon seeing a familiar figure step out from a hidden tunnel.

"You!" Catheya growled as she stomped over. "Two days late, and then you drag me to this purgatory? What did I do to deserve this?"

"I'm sorry. Look, I'm suffering with you!" Zac said as he quickly transformed into his Draugr form. Immediately, his face collapsed into a pained visage, and he hunched over while grasping his chest. "Ow ow, the heat!"

A smile crept up Catheya's face, but she pushed it down and roused her annoyance as she poked him in his side. "Jerk, like I don't know your body tempering method translates into resistance to this exact environment."

"I'm sorry, really," Zac smiled. "You look very pretty today."

"I'm a sweaty mess," Catheya huffed, partly mollified. "Well, what do you need me to freeze here? The sooner we can leave, the better."

"Come," Zac said, grasping her hand as he led her inside.

"How did your cultivation session go?"

"Not bad," Catheya said as she released a content sigh. For some reason, the heat was lower inside the volcano than outside. "I think my seed will be finished in four years."

"That's great," Zac smiled. "Guess we're both ahead of schedule."

"This is the fourth, right?" Catheya asked.

"Well, we'll see," Zac smiled.

The two continued further into the mountain, and the tunnel grew darker as the heat grew more sparse. Catheya soon realized it wasn't the mountain. Zac had installed cooling arrays in the tunnel, and she felt some sweetness in her chest. He'd probably known she would be hot and miserable by the time she arrived and made some preparations. Twenty minutes later, there was finally a change in the path. A weak golden light lit up the tunnel in the distance, and Catheya inwardly braced herself. They were about to reach the molten core.

Then, there was nothing: no life, no fire, no heat. But neither was there any death or cold. There was just nothing, like she had stepped out of Heaven's purview. It was both disconcerting and liberating, and it almost felt like she couldn't tell where she ended and the air began.

Catheya looked at Zac with confusion, but he only smiled as he led her toward the light. They turned around a bend and found themselves in a room filled with a soft glow. A thick rug covered the ground, a low table where a bottle of chilled wine stood waiting, and lots of pillows. There were no lights or candles, but then none were needed.

The cave simply ended at the opposite side, exposing the room to a breathtaking vista. It was a vast sea of fire releasing innumerable bubbles of life-giving light. The lights slowly rose toward the sky but collapsed just before they reached the volcano's mouth. It created a beautiful and ever-changing ambiance that filled the area.

"What— How?" Catheya whispered as she looked around with confusion. There were no holy beacons, no arrays. She couldn't sense any energy fluctuations at all. Or rather, she could, but they disappeared right outside the cave. It was like she was standing inside a raging fire, yet the flames somehow missed her. Was it a separate dimension? But there should still be hints of Dao if so.

"I've been thinking about what you said that day. How you felt like an outsider," Zac explained. "So I built this. A way to enjoy the view without relying on flooding the environment with Miasma."

Catheya wordlessly looked at him, her vision swimming.

Zac awkwardly scratched his chin, like he so often did. "I know it's just a small room and not really what you meant. I just thought you'd like—"

His words grew indistinct and were then stopped as she pressed her lips against his. She soon felt those strong arms enclose her and was filled with contentment.

"I love it," Catheya whispered. "I can't believe you sealed the Heavens for me."

Til'Siri's hearts rattled as she stood at attention by the teleportation array. She felt like she was part of history, about to catch a glimpse of the birth of the Era.

"Be careful what you say," Til'Siri once more reminded her irascible companion. "The Primordial was born in a more brutal era."

"I know, I know," Emberstorm shrugged. "Though if you ask me, it's a waste of time. This old thing is as ancient as the Era itself. I bet she won't even get accepted by Ultom, no matter how loved by the Heavens she is."

"Even if it turns out she can't enter, she'll still be the leader of our operations here," Til'Siri countered, hiding the smile that tugged at her lips. "Besides, the ancestors wouldn't have awoken one of the four remaining Primordials if they weren't confident she'd be able to participate."

"Whatever," Emberstorm muttered. "Bunch of dusty things that don't understand this Era, if you ask me. They were strong, alright, but they were just supersized barbarians without skills or technique."

"Well, no one asked," Til'Siri spat. "Now be quiet, or you'll get us both killed."

An hour passed until the array finally lit up. Til'Siri smoothed her dress, prompting a derisive snort from the insectoid.

Then, she stepped through, and Til'Siri could barely prevent her ardent expression from collapsing. The Primordial was short and round to the point she was almost a circle. However, she was all muscle and asymmetrical bones, giving off an intensely deadly aura. Her face was flat and unexpressive, completely lacking the graceful features commonly associated with a perfect Atavism. Simply put, she was ugly, incredibly so, with the exception of her eyes. They glowed with purple splendor, and Til'Siri felt like she was looking at the Dao itself.

"We greet the esteemed Primordial!" Til'Siri said with a deep bow, and she inwardly sneered upon seeing that Emberstorm didn't follow suit.

It looked like her goading had worked.

"So you're the one they dug out of that deep abyss? The one who's supposed to lead us without having merit or qualifications?" Emberstorm said. "If you want to lead me, you'll have to endure my attack."

The stout creature wordlessly looked at Emberstorm for a second before slowly reaching out her hand. Emberstorm snorted as flames lit up across his body, and a deafening drone made the air crackle. But a

frown appeared on his face as the hand kept getting closer. Til'Siri shook her head, feeling her senses were being messed with. It didn't seem the Primordial's hand was growing, but rather that the universe shrunk to accommodate her will.

Emberstorm tried to create some distance, but the hand was intractable. A storm of scorching flames erupted on Emberstorm's body, but they were snuffed like a weak candle as the hand closed around him. The Primordial hadn't even given him a chance to launch an attack before attacking herself.

"Wait—" Emberstorm screamed, his anger finally turning into fear. But it was too late.

The arm pulled back, and the Primordial put her whole hand into her oversized mouth. Til'Siri shook as she stood rooted in place, sweat pouring down her back as she found the horrifying creature locking eyes with hers as she slowly started to chew. A few ghastly crunches were followed by a gulp. Like that, one of the rising stars of the Starbeast Swarm had been turned into a snack.

"He dared challenge the natural order without understanding his or my strength," the creature said. "That is unacceptable."

Til'Siri could only nod, afraid she'd be targeted next.

"This System has made you all weak and irresolute," the Primordial continued. "It gives a veneer of order when the only truth is power. I will not kill you today. But you will replace the schemes in your heart with strength if you wish to follow me."

"Y-yes," Til'Siri shuddered, knowing her plot had been seen through.

Til'Siri knew there was no scheming against this ancestor. Looking into her eyes put Til'Siri under even greater pressure than meeting her ancestor. Til'Siri should have known better after learning of her origins. About a unique creature who had reached the limits of the broken Heaven of that primordial Era. Someone who had slaughtered Supremacies and bathed in their blood.

Someone with the strength and determination to give up her spot at the peak and seal her reincarnation in the river of time, all for a chance to push beyond the limits of the Dao when the Heavens had recovered.

"What about the matter?"

"The local faction is called the Kan'Tanu. They do not have the means to stabilize the Space Gate forcibly, and they are still organizing their armies," Til'Siri hurriedly said, feeling she'd been given a new lease on life. "On your command, I've petitioned the elders to help. Array Masters will arrive in two months with the required materials. Their preliminary report is that it will take another two months at most to finish the process."

"Good. Today's universe is too wretched, and the Heavens are spread too thin. I will have to rekindle my memories with blood instead of Dao. Constantly relying on my bloodline is too tiring."

"What does Mistress want to do until then?"

"We continue into the Million Gates," the Primordial said. "The cosmos is pointing me toward the first key."

Til'Siri nodded, trying to quell her jealousy. Born from the Dao in the chaotic cauldron of a nascent Era, blessed by the cosmos in a way you'd never see today. Having the Heavens whisper its secrets into your ear, pointing you down the correct path.

How were others to compete with a lifeform like this?