

## The Fall 949

### Chapter 949: The Vanguard

At first, it had seemed as though the voice appeared out of thin air. But mid-sentence, it focused into a singular point as another Draugr appeared in the room's doorway. His aura was restrained, but Zac felt like he was looking into a churning maw when gazing in his direction. According to the readouts from the Yphelion, he was one of the two who had stayed in the woods earlier.

That was actually a surprise to Zac. If Zac had guessed, he would have said this Draugr was a Peak Monarch, not a Middle C-grade cultivator like the Yphelion indicated. Even among Monarchs, this had to be an uncommonly powerful warrior. Furthermore, it was something different about him.

The Monarch reminded Zac a bit of the [Essence of the Abyss]. It was like his very presence was swallowing all light around him. Catheya had gained a hint of this sort of aura, but it was just a shadow of what this man exhibited. In other words, he probably had awakened his Bloodline multiple times or stayed for prolonged durations in the Abyssal Lake.

"Chil- no, young man, is what you said true?" the Monarch said. "Does the bloodline of Eoz flow through your veins?"

"Lord Tem'Zul!" Catheya exclaimed as she stood up.

Zac frowned at Catheya's words. It seemed like she had greeted the Monarch out of respect, but her words also acted as a clue for him. Tem'Zul? So yet another branch had arrived in Zecia, one Zac had never heard of before. Zac had expected the Monarch to be yet another Azol, but this muddled the waters even further.

Unfortunately, Zac didn't have the information needed to deduce anything from this man's name, so he felt it best to distance himself for now.

"I thought I made myself clear," Zac slowly said while instructing the puppet to stand up and up to leave.

"Wait, wait," the Catheya urgently said. "The news you sprung on us is just too big. This is Lord Laz Tem'Zul, the Dao Guardian of Tavza An'Azol and a permanent resident of the Abyssal Shores. He can answer any quest-

"I don't care," Zac interjected as he put the Perennial Vastness Token and [Essence of the Abyss] into the large pockets of the puppet's robe.

"This is my mistake. I had not expected to hear that name today," the Draugr warrior sighed as he placed a black crystal and a Spatial Ring on the table. "Here, take these things as my apology. Please carry on."

A moment later, he was gone, but Zac made no move to sit down.

"Don't be like that," Catheya said with a helpless shake of her head. "The elders just got excited. I think you have figured out that the name Eoz holds significant meaning to us. Please, let's sit down and discuss this?"

"Fine, for you. But this is the last time," Zac said as he picked up the ring and the crystal. "If they keep butting in during our conversation, I will just leave, even if I have to sacrifice this puppet and the treasures."

"Of course," Catheya nodded. "Now, is what you said really true? Is your Bloodline Eoz?"

"What're these things?" Zac asked, ignoring the questions.

Catheya didn't immediately answer, but she soon nodded. "The Crystal is a database of Draugr genealogy. It has information about all Draugr Branches, including your own. The information can help you better understand your lineage and how to make the most out of it."

"So something that you probably would have given me anyway?" Zac scoffed.

"No," Catheya said. "That's a primer from the Abyssal Shores. It's not something we'd normally hand out. We just planned on comparing your aura to the database in the crystal. But if you're an Eoz, it's moot. Instead, you can read about your branch's history and your future brothers and sisters. As for the ring, it has various rare treasures useful when forming a core and shoring up one's foundation afterward. Now, can you tell me what's going on?"

"I'm pretty sure my bloodline is Eoz," Zac confirmed. "That's what I saw in my vision when I opened a node called [Adamance of Eoz]. You're free to believe me or not."

"What vision are you talking about?" Catheya said with confusion.

"Didn't you see one when you opened your nodes?" Zac asked. "I remember the depths of the Abyssal Lake, the sense of belonging. And then..."

"Then what?" Catheya asked curiously.

"Is Eoz a missing bloodline?" Zac asked instead of answering.

"It's all in the crystal," Catheya said with exasperation.

"I can't read it with this puppet, so humor me," Zac said.

"Alright, fine," Catheya sighed. "Rather than lost or missing, it's more apt to say they sacrificed themselves to give the Draugr a chance at survival."

"During the Dark Ages?" Zac asked.

"Exactly," Catheya nodded. "As the System was born, the universe was drained of energy, and the Abyssal Lake sealed itself somehow. Our environment was rapidly deteriorating, and we knew we had to move. But where could we go? Until that point, the Draugr had been content staying by the lake, and we knew very little about the rest of the universe."

"So we set out without any clear goal or destination in sight. We could only tell that some dimensions weren't as affected as others, and some unique environments could resist the System's drain."

"Special environments?" Zac asked.

“Things like certain Ancient and Immemorial Realms. There are special places in the main dimensions as well, unique regions that can be deadly even to Supremacies,” Catheya said.

“Sounds pretty dangerous,” Zac commented.

“It was, but what could the ancestors do but forge ahead? And among the Draugr, none were as resilient as the descendants of Eoz. Your Miasma lasted longer, and you could resist all kinds of dangerous environments that would severely weaken or even kill the others. Thus, your branch took on the roles of advance scouts during the dark ages. They became the Vanguard, those who forged ahead into those dangerous zones and realms in search of safe harbor.”

Zac wasn’t surprised when he heard Catheya’s description. The first part sounded just like the effect of [Adamance of Eoz], and it seemed the other parts of the Bloodline further improved survivability. Truthfully, Zac would have preferred a bloodline that was a bit more rounded or one improving his speed to make up for his lacking focus in Dexterity and mobility.

But ultimately, survival always came first, so it was by no means bad news to hear he apparently had the Draugr Tank Bloodline.

“You can understand how dangerous such an undertaking was,” Catheya continued. “None sacrificed more than the children of Eoz during our great migration, even though your branch was the ones best suited for survival. One by one, the Vanguard found temporary harbors that allowed us to survive a bit longer.

“But you should know, Death-attuned worlds were barely a thing back then. The Dao wasn’t as accessible back then, so most places we found were things like ancient battlefields or other anomalies. Eventually, those places ran out of Miasma, and we were forced to keep moving.

“The leaders all knew this, so the Vanguard never stopped searching. They kept going, traveling the Multiverse, searching for a more permanent solution. Unfortunately, they never found it. By the time we joined up with the Founders and discovered the Empire Heartlands, the branch of Eoz had already fallen,” Catheya sighed.

“It is the only branch that’s completely missing right now. Honestly, I still can’t believe this. How can you possibly carry the Bloodline of Eoz? Are there more of you?”

“I can’t comment on the first question,” Zac said. “But you shouldn’t expect anyone else to pop up.”

He obviously wouldn’t tell them about the Corpselord Clan that had somehow stumbled onto a perfectly sealed corpse of the Eoz Bloodline. As long as he was unique, he was valuable. Looking back at it now, that poor Draugr Mahl’s brother found had most likely been a descendant of one of those scouts who had set out from the rest of the Draugr.

“That’s a shame,” Catheya sighed, but she didn’t look very disappointed. “So, then what happened? In your vision?”

Zac digested the news of his ancestors before continuing. “As I said, I was deep underwater in the Abyss. No past, no future. Then, I felt the pull from above, and I started to swim toward the surface as new thoughts and impressions filled my mind. It wasn’t easy, like the Abyssal Lake didn’t want to let me go,

but I pushed on. By the time I crawled onto the shores, two were already standing there – Mez and Azol.”

“Ancestral Descent? Just how pure is your Bloodline?” Catheya muttered with disbelief.

“So it sounds like my bloodline is a pretty good one,” Zac smiled.

“I was kind of joking before when I said you’d become a top bachelor in the Heartlands. Now, it is probably true,” Catheya said with a helpless shake of her head. “You’re a living Bloodline Patriarch, sole inheritor of a whole Bloodline. And by the sound of it, your Bloodline is incredibly pure. Rekindling a bloodline can be incredibly difficult, but it should be possible with your power and your Bloodline’s purity.”

“Alright, just remember that for our upcoming talk,” Zac smiled. “Now, what do you want to know about the Eternal Heritage, and what are you guys willing to pay?”

“You’re essentially a core member of the Undead Empire already,” Catheya said with a pout. “Why the need for secrecy and trade-offs? Why not just work together on making sure we get our hands on the Left Imperial Palace? The competition will be incredibly fierce. We’ve already received word that at least one Imperial Clan is on their way.”

“Imperial Clan?” Zac asked curiously.

Zac could tell Catheya wasn’t talking about some random Empire when she said Imperial Clan. It made him think of Leyara and her mention of Nine Imperial Bloodlines. He’d tried to dig into what she meant by that, but she never really answered him. But with the Left Imperial Palace being in the center of all this, it wasn’t hard to figure out what Empire it all related to.

“Remnants from the Limitless Empire,” Catheya said, confirming Zac’s hunch. “The most powerful factions of the Limitless Empire collapsed almost immediately when their undertaking was finished. The System’s awakening killed off too many patriarchs and great generals. But out of the ashes, seven phoenixes rose.

“A few clans acted more decisively than others, turning on the Empire the moment they saw which way the wind blew. They attacked their masters and pillaged the treasures of the Limitless Empire. Not much later, the great beings of the Multiverse realized what Emperor Limitless had done and descended on the Limitless Empire with fury. But by that point, these seven clans were long gone, having stolen the riches and hidden in various corners of the Multiverse.

“They only emerged much later, when the energy had returned to the Multiverse. And they were more powerful than ever. Using their stolen foundation, they are all incredibly powerful factions to this day. Except for one clan that was exterminated for some reason.”

“Seven clans, with six remaining?” Zac hummed, thinking back to Leyara’s words. “Not nine of them?”

“Not that I know,” Catheya said with a shake of her head.

“These seven factions, were they top-tier powers within the Limitless Empire?” Zac asked.

“No,” Catheya said. “If they were, they would have been present for the System’s awakening and absorbed with the rest of the leaders. These seven clans were either middling factions or upstarts. But

make no mistake, that was then. Today, they're all genuine A-grade factions with unfathomable foundations."

Were they perhaps different? It sounded like it. Zac didn't feel these people were the ones Leyara was talking about. Perhaps the Nine Imperial Bloodlines referred to lineages of those close to Emperor Limitless, lineages that were gone or diluted by this point in time.

"Working together is fine, but there are some small things I want from the Undead Empire first," Zac eventually said.

"I expected as much," Catheya smiled.

"First of all, I don't like the idea of compulsions. I can join the Undead Empire down the road, but I don't wish to be restrained like that," Zac said.

"That's impossible. Those are fundament-" Catheya said, but she froze before looking at Zac in shock. "I guess I was wrong. They agreed. You are technically already a councilor of the Abyssal Shores, provided your Bloodline is that of Eoz. Of course, that's just an empty title without the actual power of the position until you become at least a late Autarch. Until then, you can stay on as Arcaz Umbri'Zi but enjoy certain special privileges."

"That way, you would have an official position in the Undead Empire without technically joining it. In return, you'd only have access to the Draugr domains. If you wished to travel through the other regions, you would have to get permission first. Provided your official allegiance remains to your own faction, you would also be unable to access certain System-maintained features," Catheya continued, looking more and more confused by the words transmitted to her. "I can't believe they're making this kind of accommodation."

"So, what's the catch?" Zac asked.

"Apart from providing us with information, you have to assist our side inside the inheritance when possible," Catheya said. "Also, if you find a trove, our representatives get the first pick. Finally, there is a certain item inside the palace you need to help bring out, if possible, whether you manage to join up with our representatives or not."

"What item?" Zac asked with genuine confusion.

The conditions were mostly fine. Giving the Undead Empire the first pick was the only one that might smart a bit, but there was a real chance a situation like that might not even occur. As for forming an alliance and information sharing, that was already something Zac wanted in either case.

The most interesting thing was the third condition, the unnamed specific item that the Undead Empire wanted. Between the second and the third conditions, it almost seemed like this was their real mission.

Perhaps they already knew that swallowing the whole Eternal Heritage was too difficult. The competition would be incredibly fierce with people like Iz Tayn and these imperials showing up, and that was just the start. The Undead Empire was already an embattled force and trying to monopolize a second Eternal Heritage might be more than some ancient factions could accept.

If that were the case, it was better to lower your expectations a bit and instead take something that could benefit the Undead Empire, but might not necessarily create too many problems on the outside. The question was what kind of item this was and how the Undead Empire knew about it.

“They can’t tell you right now,” Catheya said, but she quickly continued when Zac grunted with annoyance. “They don’t know. This is a command from the Heartlands. They haven’t given us the specifics either. Perhaps they’re afraid of the details leaking.”

Zac thoughtfully went over the information. Honestly, Zac was a bit surprised that they just agreed to his main condition without pushing back at all. It really seemed a bit suspicious. Then again, what were some accommodations for a junior in the face of an Eternal Heritage?

The problem was assurances. They could promise things left or right, but it was ultimately up to them to follow through in the future. It wasn’t like there was a complaints department he could turn to if they simply threw him to the wayside after this was all said and done. And did these representatives even have the status to promise these things?

“It’s easy to promise things, but what guarantees can you provide?”

“Before the inheritance, you will have an official writ signed by the Primo himself, witnessed and consecrated by the System. Breaking that would turn the System against us, essentially making it a pledge to the Heavens,” Catheya said. “I don’t know about these things, but apparently, you will be able to tell its authenticity upon seeing it.”

Zac glanced over at Ogras, who was sitting right next to him on the Yphelion, but he shook his head after Zac repeated what Catheya said. He had no idea if something like that was real or not. But Zac’s guts told him it was possible.

Even C-grade Cultivators could somewhat use the System for their benefits, from having it issue quests to stopping it from teleporting people away. It didn’t seem like such a stretch for someone like the Primo to have the System witness an agreement for him. If it was real, then Zac was mostly satisfied.

Such a writ was like a poison pill – they could still break the agreement or kill him, but there was no reason to do so unless the benefits outweighed the costs. And killing him after the inheritance would serve no purpose and only rob them of his Bloodline.

“That’s fine, but what if your people fail to get a slot?” Zac said. “I can’t be responsible for that.”

“As long as you do your best in helping us, the offer stands. We can only blame our inadequacy for not gaining access,” Catheya nodded.

“That’s fair,” Zac nodded. “My second condition is that-”

“There is a second condition?” Catheya scoffed. “Be careful not to get overstuffed.”

“I still think there’s room for more,” Zac laughed.

“Alright,” Catheya sighed, but a wide smile had spread across her face. “What is it?”