

## The Fall 967

### [Chapter 967 - Forced Decision](#)

Sweat ran down Jaol's face, but he froze his nerves to keep his hands steady through the pain. The slightest mistake would cause the makeshift Disruptor to blow up in his face. So he put his troubles aside as he engraved the detection array his vision overlay indicated. Even then, it wasn't easy. The further he was forced to progress under the Cursed Heavens, the worse his components worked. It wasn't long until he'd have to make a decision.

Either head back home or replace the rest of his components for flesh. Both paths felt insurmountable. He still didn't know why the bounty on his head was so grotesque. He only had a small part in the destruction of Little Bean, and that was under duress. Yet the government was willing to pay one hundred times its value for his capture.

Why?

It had to be that chimeral lunatic. That bastard who had set his fate off-kilter. It was rather him they wanted, and Jaol had become a clue. However, there was no point in explaining that to the higher-ups. The AI Lawkeepers didn't make mistakes, they said. And since they said he was a terrorist, he obviously was one.

That left a biological respec, but where would he find a Grafter in these parts? There were more outcasts like him, but his status was just too low to get in contact with anyone who had the skills required for such a surgery. Besides, those who had fled to these parts all had troublesome backgrounds. He'd probably end up an experiment even if he somehow managed to scrounge up the Credits or Nexus Coins for the surgery.

Thirty seconds later, Jaol was done, and it wasn't a moment too soon. He could hear his pursuers close in through the bugs he'd planted. They still seemed to know his location, though only the general direction. Less than ten seconds. Jaol groaned as he got to his feet, and he hid the Disruptor behind some of the refuse lining the walls of this god-forsaken excuse of a space station. Simultaneously, he linked it up with his other devices, finishing the chain.

A second later he was gone, running toward the Primarch Harbor. The Thearch Harbor was controlled by his old crew and the Pirate alliance; there was no way he'd be able to get close enough to sneak aboard a vessel without being spotted. Eden Harbor would be better, but Jaol doubted he'd make it past the controlled sections of the city. Captain Redvine had too many contacts in this place.

Luckily, the streets were mostly empty these days, with the faraway sun being blocked by the broken world for the next few days. As such, the arrays covering New Eden had been turned off. There was no way the Mayor would open his pockets to fuel the arrays when the star did not. Here in the slum, that included the arrays meant to keep order.

The endless corridors turned to a blur as Jaol ran for his life. An explosion behind him confirmed his trap had been sprung, but an enraged roar indicated it hadn't been enough. He could only urge his legs on and pray that the wound that had almost bisected him didn't rip open any further inside the makeshift tourniquet.

Raucous laughs and hollering taunts echoed through the streets from the temporary residences to his sides. Jaol didn't know whether they were laughing at his or his pursuers' misfortune. More importantly, were any of them willing to fish in muddy waters? Someone being pursued often meant there was money to be made, and the bigger fist made the rules in the slums of New Eden.

As expected, a few people appeared ahead, but activating [Flaming Geas] made them scurry out of the way. Few Class-3 cultivators made the slums their home, so the outburst of a peak Class-2 was enough to scare away random opportunists. As for the underworld leaders, they hopefully wouldn't insert themselves into this mess. Sometimes, it was better to stay out of trouble. You never knew what kind of deadly attention your actions could attract.

For example, how could Jaol have expected that a supposedly simple mission would end with him being hunted by Redvine, a terrifying Late Class-3 Captain who had terrorized the surrounding regions for over ten thousand years? It was not like Jaol had even wanted that thing, nor had he planned for the rest of the crew to turn to dust.

But he'd be reasonably safe if he could travel a few quadrants. People like Redvine hadn't lasted so long by taking overdue risks. They stuck to their lane, seldom sailing into regions controlled by other Monarchs than their benefactors.

A sharp pull made Jaol fall over, and he groaned in agony as he slammed into the ground. His vision was going haywire from the synaptic overload, but he could vaguely see an energy leash locked around his ankle. And on the other end was Kalso, his face a furious mask of scorched skin.

"Bastard," Kalso swore as he stabbed his arm with a syringe full of healing serum. "You're lucky the captain wants you alive. You better pray you have something she needs, or I'll ask her to hand you back to me. I'll see how you do with one of those grenades shoved up your ass."

"I've told you I didn't steal any treasure," Jaol said as he scrambled to his feet. "You searched me over and over."

"There are all kinds of treasures," Kalso said. "Including ones in your head. We heard an interesting rumor lately. Of impressive bounties."

Jaol shuddered as he'd heard the very same rumor. Some newcomers to these quadrants paid huge premiums for the capture and delivery of individuals who had encountered a specific opportunity. Newcomers who had rejected the Law of Balance, the kind of people who had given Technocrats such a bad reputation across the Cosmos. There was no way you'd have a good ending if handed over to the Kan'Tanu.

And the Redvine Pirates had figured it out.

It was over. Even if he had ten lives, he wouldn't be able to defeat Kalso, and he'd brought twenty helpers that had already caught up. Even if Jaol had been forced to partly embark on the martial path because of circumstance, he was ultimately a navigator. How was he supposed to defeat a Hegemon? Neither did he have the money to bribe them; Jaol was almost broke.

There was only one thing he had left to barter with, which was clearly valuable beyond the knowledge it imparted. Anything was better than the Unorthodox Path, so he could only take a shot in the dark.

"I AM A PLAINSWALKER OF ULTOM, HELP ME, AND I'LL JOIN YOUR CREW!" Jaol screamed at the top of his lungs, his voice echoing through the streets.

"What in the nine hells are you talking about? Ultom? Never heard of them, can't be anyone too impressive," Kalso laughed. "Should have figured someone like you were a spy. Too bad, this is Redvine's domain. Scream all you want; no one is coming to help you."

"I wouldn't know about that," a snicker came from the distance.

Next, three hooded beings appeared as though out of nowhere, placing themselves between Jaol and Kalso.

"This will impact our plans," the smaller hooded one commented, her voice so soothing Jaol almost forgot his situation.

"We're just starting a bit early; it should be fine. No need to be too discerning on the way out. We can't just look the other way when a spare part appears in our lap, can we?" the owner of the original voice said before turning toward Jaol. "How about it, Plainswalker? Ready to join a new crew?"

"Yes, yes!" Jaol eagerly nodded, though the comment about spare parts was decidedly unsettling.

Whatever. Join today, and run away tomorrow. He'd done it many times before over the past decade.

"I'm a skilled navigator, and I can-"

Jaol was interrupted by a lazy wave from the hooded man.

"Do you know who I am?" Kalso growled as a bloody aura started to spread through the whole neighborhood, to the point the nearby houses were completely drowned.

"Redvines, right?" the leader laughed as a ripple burst out from the lithe woman who'd spoken before.

Jaol looked on with incomprehension as the whole crew behind Kalso simply collapsed, their spirituality completely erased. They didn't even have a chance to pass on to the afterlife, either. A dozen wraiths were dragged out of their bodies before they flooded into the leader's sleeve. Jaol shuddered at the scene. These people were even scarier than the Redvine Pirates.

"You! Shadewar Armada!" Kalso said with a sharp breath before his body shattered.

A pained wail reached them not much later as the Hegemon reappeared a few hundred meters away, dragged down by four wraiths even more powerful than the ones that appeared before. His escape measure failed, Kalso desperately tried to fight them off, but his struggles met an abrupt end as the largest of the hooded ones threw out a spear that pierced his head.

"Wha-" Jaol said, but a series of enormous explosions interrupted his line of thought. From the direction of Thearch Harbor.

"So, navigator, time to prove your worth," the necromancer laughed. "We'll be robbing some people today, and you'll be leading the way."

Jaol blankly looked at the four lunatics who dared rob a Space Station owned by a Monarch before a wave of déjà vu hit him. Wasn't this just like that time aboard the Little Bean? Jaol inwardly cried, wondering if another decade of suffering had arrived.

-----

It was now or never.

Tavza was terrifyingly efficient. She wouldn't spend more than a few hours inside the Mystic Realm unless something unexpected cropped up, and it had already been 100 minutes. The moment she could confirm nothing was calling to her, Tavza would move on, no matter how valuable the realm appeared. No sense of adventure, that one. All eyes on the mission. This wasn't what cultivation should be like.

How was it even possible to make exploring a mysterious place like the Million Gates Territory boring?

More importantly, it was that utilitarian mindset that was pushing Catheya toward her inevitable doom. She couldn't be certain, but she'd felt a growing sense of wrongness over the past year. She'd always been the outsider in this group, but it was starting to feel like she was prey. And the reason was painfully obvious.

She'd become a sealbearer while only Tavza and two of her followers had gained similar access. It was a far cry from Tavza's envisioned army that would steamroll all resistance inside Ultom. She hadn't even managed to secure entry for her core squad of six followers, the elites who were meant to pave the path for her inside the inheritance.

Meanwhile, a ticket was just sitting there. On an outsider who hadn't even reached Hegemony, at that. That had been a tenuous, but manageable, situation at the beginning. Her value as liaison to Arcaz Black still held some sway. But it all changed yesterday when they seized the Kan'Tanu vessel. They'd found a captured sealbearer in the brig, and Tavza had finally managed to confirm her theory.

Killing a sealbearer would transfer the seal, though without that marvelous burst of inspiration that came with it. No longer was she a risky venture; one slash across her throat, and Tavza's next-in-line was guaranteed to become a Threadwinder.

Catheya had no faith in the commandments at a time like this. Nothing was absolute. Catheya wasn't even sure the commandments would protect her, considering Tavza had been given a mission of utmost importance to the Empire. What did it matter if the vaunted An'Azol killed a few juniors if it improved the Empire's chances of accomplishing their goals inside the Left Imperial Palace?

Neither was her relation to Arcaz much use here in the Million Gates Territory. Anything could happen in this lawless place. How would Arcaz know whether she was sacrificed or died looking for opportunities? At best, she'd become a warning to take precautions against betrayal, but what good was that to her when she'd passed on to the great beyond?

She didn't have a Danger Sense powerful enough to warn when fate was moving against her, but she did have a nose for trouble. If not for the fact that a batch of Kan'Tanu elites had entered the small realm ahead of Tavza, Catheya might already have found herself at the sharp end of her sword. So she needed to be gone before it was time's up.

As long as she managed to activate the token, all would be fine. She would be whisked away to the Perennial Vastness, where Tavza couldn't reach her. She could tell Arcaz about her situation, and he would put pressure on Tavza's elders. Having Arcaz and his sealbearers as enemies should outweigh the benefits of having another minor sealbearer on their side. At least she hoped that was how it'd play out.

Going this route would further damage her standing within the Empire, but it was better than being a sacrificial lamb. Besides, she still had the Umbri'Zi. It was thanks to Enis's surreptitious warning that Catheya managed to hide away the token before Tavza arrived back then. When they confiscated her Spatial Tools under the guise of their mission being Top Secret. Saying that her items might be bugged or marked, and that nothing could go wrong.

But who would have thought the Heavenblighted token didn't work inside the Million Gates Territory?

Twice she'd tried activating it now, but it had just hummed a bit before dying down. The most likely reason was that space was too unstable here in the Million Gates Territory. Such was life on the Frontier; nothing worked as it should. It was nothing short of a miracle that someone like Zachary Atwood had appeared in a place like this.

The solution was both simple and difficult. She needed to leave the Million Gates Territory, or at least reach its edges where space was more stable. Luckily, they weren't that far by this point, thanks to the agreement with Arcaz. Besides, Tavza's brutal pace had cost them two vessels and most of their personnel, and she had to return and resupply in either case.

Crossing just the final stretch alone would still be difficult, but Catheya had no choice. She lay unmoving in the infirmary's healing vat, her eyes never leaving the information array that tracked the surrounding spatial phenomena. Ten minutes later, it happened. It was time.

Catheya rose from the tank, the physician-turned-warden immobilized by a gust of utter cold before they had a chance to react. The frozen Draugr soon took Catheya's place, getting a nice bath. She would probably thaw out in an hour, and the tank would prevent any lasting damage. Catheya quickly donned the physician's clothes before leaving the infirmary.

Unfortunately, she'd lost her mask, but a small layer of ice adjusted her features enough to pass a cursory glance. Especially when her hair mostly hid her features as she looked down at a random report she'd lifted from a table.

She slightly nodded at the guard outside, relaxing upon seeing him barely sparing her a glance. He was in the middle of his cultivation cycle, a dereliction of duty you'd only see when Tavza wasn't aboard. Catheya didn't immediately head for the Kan'Tanu vessel docked to their own. First, she entered a series of rooms and compartments, embedding Miasma Crystals while freezing certain sections solid.

It only took ten minutes, yet it felt like an eternity. Every small shudder to the vessel made her think of the gates to the hangar opening, but she still completed the preparations she'd planned over the past year. A single spot missing, and her plan would fail. Catheya considered visiting Tavza's compartments as well to hopefully find her Spatial Ring. Ultimately, she decided against it.

It was too big a risk, and Catheya didn't even know if her things were there. Instead, she walked over to the upper deck, her steps excruciatingly slow so as not to draw any unwarranted attention. Luckily, only

two wholly unimpressive Hegemons stood guard. Thank the Heavens for the theory that bringing too powerful followers would weaken any chances of finding seals.

"Doctor Ynsa? Wait, no, what's go-" the guard said, but he didn't get any further before a wave of frigid cold swept forward, locking the two early Hegemons in place.

With their energy reserves, they would manage to free themselves in less than a minute. A minute was all Catheya needed as she flashed through the temporary corridor that connected the two vessels. Utmost cold followed in her wake, and the whole pathway shattered before the guards could thaw.

Time was of the essence, and she became a streak of ice that zig-zagged through the corridors until she reached the bridge. The two guards standing outside were frozen before they could react, and Catheya crashed through the door a moment later. Inside were three badly startled researchers who seemed to be reviewing various readouts.

"Hurry! Activate the propulsion. They're getting away!" Catheya screamed as she entered like a hurricane.

"Wha? Who-" a shocked Revenant blurted and was promptly awarded a slap.

"NOW!" Catheya roared, and the three veritably threw themselves at the controls.

Just a second later, the familiar hum of a Cosmic Engine roaring to life was followed by the shudder of the anchors breaking off. In just a second, the ship had moved hundreds of meters and was already outside reach for the skeleton crew that remained on the Empire ship. That didn't mean she was safe just yet.

"South-southwest, the spatial window!" Catheya urged and saw the one she slapped dutifully input the coordinates.

However, Catheya frowned at the other two, who shared a glance as their fingers moved toward an unfamiliar console. The next moment, they were frozen solid as well, leaving a lone researcher looking at Catheya with horror in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, my friend, but it looks like we are going on a journey together," Catheya smiled.

A sudden shockwave threw the man to the ground, but Catheya grinned as she tapped a few buttons, prompting a screen to appear. The Imperial Venator was slowly spinning as it moved away from the Spatial Gate, shrapnel from its broken engine forming a shimmering trail.

That's what you get for shutting me out from all the meetings and training sessions, Catheya inwardly scoffed.

It had given her ample time to wander about and figure out the faultlines of the ships. The ship was doomed the moment the crew activated the engines to move in pursuit. Her preparations had created a few energy blockages, and the release valves were frozen. Had they just waited another ten minutes, they would have been fine. Now they'd need at least a week for repairs.

By then, Catheya would be long gone.