

## The Fall 977

### [Chapter 977 - Reunions and Departures](#)

A spiritual nudge dragged Zac out of his thoughts, and he looked up to see Vilari walk over.

"It's nice to see you again," Zac said, and he felt an odd yet comforting sensation as a consciousness wrapped itself around him in a spiritual embrace.

"Likewise," Vilari smiled, stopping in front of him. "I've missed home."

"Things have changed a lot since you left," Zac said. "The undead population has quintupled. Pika and her husband are working in the Atwood Academy, overseeing the undead students."

"It's really happening," Vilari hummed, looking up at Zac. "Thank you."

"Of course," Zac said. "You had the right idea from the beginning."

Vilari nodded before looking Zac up and down. "Your current aura is shocking."

"It's just a bit unstable after a couple of breakthroughs," Zac explained before looking into Vilari's eyes. "I had planned on bragging about my Soul Improvements when you returned. But it looks like you've made even greater improvements somehow."

"I've encountered a few opportunities of my own," Vilari said.

"I heard you found both pieces?"

"I was lucky," Vilari said, her smile widening. "It allowed me to finally resolve the matter of my Bloodline. My cultivation speed will drastically increase going forward."

"That's amazing," Zac whistled.

Vilari's Bloodline was one of the most powerful he'd seen, but the previous owner of her body likely came from the central regions of the Multiverse. Like his own Bloodline, it had proven incredibly hard to rekindle no matter which method they'd procured over the years. That, in turn, led to Vilari being unable to awaken and utilize her soul-based Bloodline.

No wonder her soul felt so powerful. If he could just get another Moss Crystal from Mossy, Vilari would be ready to evolve into Hegemony sooner. Zac almost shuddered at the thought of an elite Mentalist with an incredibly refined soul and a Soul-related Bloodline in a place like Zecia. She'd be a one-woman army.

"Let's catch up more later," Zac said. "For now, let's deal with the Technocrat."

"Of course, this way."

Zac stepped into a guarded building, and a wry smile spread across his face as he saw the familiar figure toiling over a workbench. It didn't look like a blueprint or a schematic for some machine but rather a genealogical study. Jaol looked up when Zac entered, their eyes locking.

"Long time no see," Zac said, not finding any better words after meeting the person whose fate he'd so utterly derailed.

"Wh-"Jaol said before freezing, his mechanical eyes slowly widening in alarm and rage. "YOU! BASTARD!"

Zac didn't have a chance to say anything else before the navigator flung himself at him, seemingly trying to claw his eyes out. Of course, it was fool's hope, and Vivi had bound him before he even got close.

"I heard you've had a bit of a rough go at it the past years," Zac sighed. "I'm sorry about that."

"A bit of a rough go?!" Jaol screamed while desperately trying to break free from Vivi's vines. "You blew up my place of work, which was also my home! You then framed me and pushed some of the blame on me, even though I was a hostage. I've been hounded and hunted for over a decade! The moment I go back, I'll get executed!"

"That framing bit was to get you off the ship," Zac said as he sat down. "If I didn't, you'd be dead now."

"I would have flown right back into the explosion if I knew I'd end up in your hands after all these years of suffering."

"Don't say that. We worked quite well together the last time," Zac said. "Either case, things have reached this point. You have to admit, the odds of us running into each other again are essentially zero. Fate's at play here. So let's talk about your future in Zecia and the Left Imperial Palace."

Zac stepped out of the compound an hour later, a hooded Jaol by his side. A contract had been signed, and he'd gained another follower for his journey into Ultom. Jaol was surprisingly agreeable upon hearing that more than ten people of his faction would go. Then again, it made sense. Jaol wasn't even a Hegemon and had a non-combat profession at that.

Even if he wanted the opportunities inside, he neither had the means to get the other pieces of the seal nor the confidence to enter that place alone. He was probably planning on using Zac and his people as meat shields while looking for treasure or more bursts of insight. For now, Zac could live with that kind of attitude. He did ultimately owe Jaol one.

Perhaps even more important than getting a second Plainswalker of Ultom, Zac gained a navigator who knew more about the Endless Storm than anyone in Zecia – something that might prove vital for his distant goal of reaching the Six Profundity Empire. The most promising method was finding a gateway, possibly the same as the one Leandra used, that would take him to that section of the Multiverse. Going blindly would be incredibly dangerous and akin to finding a needle in a haystack.

Of course, Zac would wait a bit before informing Jaol they would be setting out on that kind of adventure in the future.

Jaol wasn't surprised by Zac's ability to use Creation when he explained his offer. In contrast, Jaol was quite pleased, though he didn't want to be reformed just yet. It turned out the navigator already was working on a Transcender path on his own, researching various eyes and bloodlines to incorporate into his body.

Since Zac couldn't create something he couldn't understand or imagine, Jaol first wanted to gather some samples for Zac to analyze. That was fine by Zac, though it meant that Jaol would have to wait until he returned from Perennial Vastness to get his new body parts. That was a good safety measure since Jaol was now bound by the System's contract.

Zac wasn't worried about Jaol causing any troubles with the Neural Network either. Because of Kenzie, he'd already invested heavily in blocking out any Technocrat Signals. It was more than enough to deal with a low-grade navigator from a weak corporation like the Little Bean's owners. More to the point, Jaol had a terrifying bounty on his head because of him.

It was no doubt the result of him flashing Leandra's command token. The exact details of his and Jeeves' birth were a bit blurry, but it seemed like many powerful Technocrat factions had betrayed the Kayar-Elu after the System had already weakened them. Now, they were looking for Jeeves, hoping to use it to create the Machine God.

Of course, Jaol didn't know all that. He'd just thought some bigshot had sent Zac onboard Little Bean, and the Technocrats wanted to find this person. In a sense, it was half-correct, except Leandra had nothing to do with his heist of the Shard of Creation.

After learning it was part of a mission of the Tower of Eternity rather than some conspiracy, Jaol's anger had somewhat mollified. The Technocrat's inborn disdain for the System had allowed Zac to place all the blame on it, hopefully making their cooperation easier going forward.

Zac shuttled Jaol back to Earth while the rest of the elites of Ogras' mission resumed their roles in the Atwood Empire. There was still a year left before the war officially started, according to the Void Priestess. But there were no guarantees. The main thing that held the Kan'Tanu back was that the Space Gate wasn't stable enough to shuttle through Monarchs.

But the moment they could send a real Vanguard, they'd likely start trying to conquer planets to create beachheads. By that point, the System might just go ahead and erect the War Platforms across the two sectors.

With all the elites returned and the situation clearer, Zac spent the next two weeks in a series of meetings to make final decisions. Some meetings were with the core members of his faction, while others were large war councils joined by both the experts he'd hired and visiting consultants of the Allbright Empire.

The consensus was unanimous; the amount of resources spent on low-grade warriors was far beyond what any D-grade force in Zecia could stomach. Unfortunately, there were limits to how far Nexus Coins could take a faction. Money didn't breed elites, and killing random beasts on his planets or their moons wasn't enough of a challenge to temper an army.

True warriors could only be forged on the battlefield. Zac could only pray his preparations would keep the initial losses at a minimum.

Ogras didn't participate in the meetings, instead opting to enter the heritage of the Umbra, riding on the success of becoming the first official name on the Sixth Layer of the Gates of Rebirth. The demon emerged five days later, some nasty wounds filled with the Dao of Shadows covering his body. However, by the happy look on his face, he had accomplished what he set out for.

Zac also spent some time every morning teaching Emily. He mainly focused on helping her find a direction and stabilize the fundamentals of her technique. That way, she could continue progressing after he left for the Perennial Vastness.

After a few days, Joanna also joined. Zac was relieved to see that some time to stabilize her heart had borne fruit. The franticness was gone, replaced by a steady calm. Her aura made Zac think of a veteran army—steadfast and precise like a well-oiled machine. It was very different from Zac's chaotic path for the Dao of Conflict, and most likely better suited to lead armies. Hopefully, that temperance would be the key to cinching a seal of her own.

Two more weeks passed like this until the day Zac had waited for arrived. A report from Vikram confirmed a communication crystal and a Spatial Ring had been sent over from the Undead Empire, and Zac soon had the delivery on his table. Zac called over Ogras before sinking his consciousness into the crystal.

He'd hoped for a confirmation from Catheya that it was time to go. Instead, he heard the voice of Laz Tem'Zul. And the more he heard, the deeper his brows furrowed. The shadows congealed a few minutes later, and a grinning Ogras appeared in front of him.

"It's finally time?"

Zac only shook his head with exhaustion.

"What is it?" Ogras asked. "What happened?"

"Listen to this," Zac muttered as he activated the Communication Crystal again.

"Young master Umbri'Zi, we hope this message finds you well. With the date of your ascension coming close, we wanted to send a short message of well wishes and a few items that may prove useful inside the Perennial Vastness," Laz began.

What followed was a long-detailed list of the ways their agreements and preparations had progressed, proving the Undead Empire had gone above and beyond keeping their end of the bargain. It almost sounded like the Draugr Monarch was gearing up to complain about something, but the topic changed in another direction.

"As you head into the Perennial Vastness, I hope you will remember that there are as many truths as there are viewpoints. Nothing is white and black or necessarily what it seems, and you'll see more if keeping an open mind. The Undead Empire is sincere in their desire for cooperation and welcomes you with the highest honors to the Abyssal Shores in the future."

A few more cryptic lines about misunderstandings and friendship followed, along with the customary invitation to meet in person to discuss further.

"Well, that's not great," Ogras grunted.

"What do you think?"

"Something must have gone wrong," the demon said.

"But why would they frame it like I shouldn't believe any rumors that come my way? What should I keep an open mind over?" Zac muttered.

"Still haven't heard from Catheya?" Ogras asked.

"You think it's about her as well, huh?" Zac frowned. "You don't think she's...?"

"Unlikely," Ogras said after some thought. "I feel it's more likely she'll be the source of whatever new information they don't want you to listen to. This reek of internal politics."

"You'd think they'd put such things aside when it comes to a matter as important as the pillar," Zac muttered.

"It's during these kinds of times, in particular, they can't give up on the internal struggle. Something like a Pillar of the System will completely upend the power dynamic of whatever faction ends up with the prize. If the clans don't position themselves properly ahead of time, they might find their achievements and struggle resulted in their doom."

"So, what should I do?" Zac frowned. "This is outside my wheelhouse."

"Depends on what your goal is," Ogras said.

"Well, first of all, I want to ensure Catheya's safety. And unless necessary, I don't want to rock the boat with our agreements," Zac said. "The Undead Empire is the guarantor for the long-term plans of the Atwood Empire. Without their support, we might not have even managed to sell our Cosmic Vessels."

It wasn't an exaggeration. Calrin had almost been thrown into the brig because of some scheming from certain Mercantile Clans. At first, Zac had planned to use Alvod Jondir's name to slap away any such conspiracies. The Allbright Empire was an external subsidiary force of the Radiant Temple, so Zac figured they'd know a bit about the situation and back down.

At the same time, Alvod would likely stay in seclusion for centuries, perhaps millennia. He had barely managed to break through while simultaneously fighting multiple factions, including an actual Autarch. It was a miracle he managed to survive, let alone break through. By the time he emerged, the matter would be long forgotten, and it wasn't like a subsidiary force like the Radiant Temple would dare inquire with him even if they remembered.

But it turned out his gambit was unnecessary. The Undead Empire had already made some moves on his behalf. Casses Allbright, the third Prince of the Empire, had been sent into the Million Gates Territory to investigate a huge and sudden presence of undead cultivators. It was there he'd met, or rather had been captured by, the Imperial Monarchs.

But rather than a forceful conversion, it had turned into the first diplomatic meeting between the Zecian forces and the Undead Empire. And Casses had flown right back from that meeting to quickly accept a most generous agreement with the Thayer Consortia.

In fact, Zac could have increased his earnings tenfold if not for the production limit. After getting a chance to prove their wares, the Creator series had become quite popular on their own merit, and each war fortress wanted at least a few hundred. The ship's unique technology was an incredibly useful tool that could turn the tide of war. What were some C-grade Nexus Coins in the face of that?

The factions on the Frontier obviously couldn't compare to the real behemoths of the Multiverse Heartlands, but they were still established dynasties with millions of years of history, powerful backing, and trillions of citizens. Even the innumerable F-grade cultivators could help fill the war coffers by killing

beasts, getting money from the System, and selling anything worth Nexus Coins at the System-run stores.

"If you want to retain the status quo, send an equally vague letter back," Ogras said. "Something along that you're happy with how things progressed through Catheya's hard efforts. That you're looking forward to seeing her in the Perennial Vastness or something."

Zac agreed, and the two spent the next hour crafting an ambiguous message to send back to the Undead Empire. As for the items in the spatial ring, they were some top-quality core formation treasures. Zac wasn't sure if he'd dare use them after how they tampered with the [Essence of the Abyss], but he could perhaps sell them to some cultivator in the Perennial Vastness.

"So what do you want to do?" Ogras asked after things were dealt with. "If you ask me, I think the Draugr lass has already entered. That's why they were forced to send that message rather than just catch her."

"I think so, too," Zac said. "Which means she might already have been inside for weeks, with the time dilation. Are you ready to go?"

"Been ready for a while now," Ogras grinned.

"Alright, give me one hour," Zac said before sending out a series of messages through his communication device.

The core of his faction already knew he was leaving to form his core, so a flood of well-wishes entered his Communication Crystal over the next hour. Joanna, Vilari, and Emily visited as well.

"Good luck," Emily said. "Come back sooner, this time, alright?"

"I'll try," Zac smiled before turning to Joanna and Vilari. "In case the war starts without me..."

"We'll hold the fort," Joanna nodded. "Don't worry about Earth and its people. You have done more than enough already. It's time for us to prove ourselves worthy of your nurturing."

"Alright," Zac nodded. "But remember, survival comes first. I don't need some small-scale victories if it means mountains of dead."

Finally, he turned to Ogras, both of them holding their tokens. "You ready?"

"Time for the Deviant Asura to create another scene," the demon grinned. "May the Heavens have mercy on the Perennial Vastness."