

The Fall 979

[Chapter 979 - A Dangerous Game](#)

The message stopped playing, leaving a pregnant pause in the room.

"What a fine mess," Laz Tem'Zul eventually sighed, his eyes turning to Tavza.

He wasn't the only one. Everyone's eyes were on her, expressions ranging from annoyance to bemusement. Furthermore, she'd bet her cultivation that Kator would be grinning ear to ear if the Reavers had expressions to gauge. Tavza took the looks in stride, knowing this day was coming since that little troublemaker had absconded.

"I admit, I did not expect Catheya Sharva'Zi to do something like this," Tavza said. "Being the commanding officer on the excursion, I take responsibility for this situation. However, I cannot help but wonder what would bring the child of Zi to do something like this. She had to know this would damage our undertaking."

Laz nodded in agreement. "It's ultimately the fault of that willful lass we are in this situation. She knew the stakes yet chose to throw a wrench into the machinery."

"She is willful but loyal to the Empire," Enis Umbri'Zi frowned. "Without her, we would not be as well positioned as we are, no matter if it's for the upcoming war or the struggle for the Eternal Heritage. More importantly, she's not so bored she would run for her life, hijacking a vessel. The surveillance arrays can only give one side of the full picture. She clearly feared for her life."

"Why would I kill her for a seal? The net benefit would be zero," Tavza rejected. "If anything, it would be a guaranteed loss. Someone chosen naturally will most likely be more useful inside than someone who had to steal a ticket. And that's not even including the damage to our cooperation agreement. I was rather thinking of putting her under house arrest for the way she pushed beyond her capabilities, almost getting herself killed in search of personal strength."

"Three years you've kept us from communicating with that brat, and this is the fallout," Toss grunted. "We brought his teacher just to pull him over to our side, yet you wasted our window of opportunity with your nonsense."

"He wouldn't appear in person for his close friend; what makes you think he'd show up for Pavina Sorgo?" Laz scoffed.

"Either case, we are sending a petition to the Heart. Your handling of this matter has been crude at best," Toss said. "The Izh'Rak Reavers will be taking charge of this matter. Tavza is powerful, but she doesn't have leadership experience like Kator. She's been locked away in her castle all her life, never having been forced to come into contact with the ugliness of the world."

"Leading a bunch of brutes in head-on battles against the Primal Council might not be more useful than my knowledge of ancient arrays. And I have the Abyss on my side," Tavza calmly said. "And he is falling behind."

"I may have one fewer sealbearer, but that was before you lost one," Kator laughed. "Also, war is our specialty. There's no way we won't find more seals than you over the coming years. Besides, my taking charge will alleviate some of the tension with that ally of ours."

"Leadership is up to the Eternal 108 to decide," Laz calmly said.

It looked like Toss was about to continue arguing, but a gentle knock on the door drew everyone's attention.

"Come," Toss said, and the door opened.

"I am sorry to interrupt," Tassar said, repeatedly bowing at the trio of Monarchs. "I have the report the Lords asked for."

"Anything?" Tavza asked, keeping her face impassive.

"Ah, that's..." Tassar hesitated.

"Just say your piece," Laz Tem'Zul sighed. "Let the truth speak on its own."

The Kavriel Patriarch nodded, clearly not relishing being forced into the middle of the internal strife that had been escalating over the past years.

"We found traces of [Kazh Strangleroot] in the vat Miss Sharva'Zi used to recover her wound. Actually, we were lucky the vat was slightly damaged. The compound had already been replaced by untampered medicine, but a small amount of the liquid had leaked inside a gathering tray below."

"Strangleroot?" Tavza said. "Someone placed a hallucinogen inside the tank? Why?"

"Well," Tassar coughed. "It wouldn't be a hallucinogen at the levels we measured. But if exposed continuously, it would elicit feelings of paranoia, of being watched. Since we found the Strangleroot, we knew what to look for. We also found weak traces of it in a duct leading to Miss Sharva'Zi's room."

"Someone was dosing that girl?" Tavza frowned.

"You've been had, child," Laz sighed, turning an even look at the Reavers.

"What? Do the vaunted delegates of the Abyssal Shores have something to say?" Kator laughed.

"You?" Tavza frowned. "Guess you're not just an empty set of bones."

"I don't like what you're insinuating," Kator shrugged. "How is it my fault you have no control over the personnel or your vessel? But this just proves what Brigadier Toss said. You don't know the cruelties of war, thinking this is an outing with your servants."

"Your stunt may have cost us a potentially useful helper mission," Tavza said. "Neither of us managed to become a Flamebearer, but he is one. If he won't help us—"

"Where did you get that?" Kator asked, scratching his skull. "Didn't you hear the guy say how much he enjoyed the cooperation? Might be a bit wary of you guys, though. But that sounds like a Draugr problem rather than an Imperial problem."

"This may push him into choosing his dreamer form in the upcoming trial," Tavza said with a scowl.

"What does that have to do with the mission?" Kator countered. "We can just work with him in his dreamer form, no? He still needs our help for his undead subordinates and backing inside that place. Again, not a problem."

"These actions go beyond the scope of the mission. This is harming the foundations of the Abyssal Shores," Laz frowned, killing intent leaking out of his body to the point the whole castle shuddered.

However, an opposing aura of boundless bloodthirst rose to match it from Toss, causing tears in space to crop up. Tavza sighed as four runes appeared around her, preventing the ruthless auras from reaching her. Kator simply withstood it with his bones, clearly relishing the conflict.

"Please, lords," Tassar Kavriel entreated. "There are hundreds of thousands of dutiful workers of the Empire caught in your auras."

Laz snorted, but his aura vanished a moment later.

"If the Abyssal Shores have a complaint and the proof to back it up, they are welcome to bring it up through the normal channels," Toss said when the shakings had abated. "Just like how I will put forth that Kator being made the mission leader."

"This isn't over," Laz said. "If this costs the Abyssal Shores the Bloodline of Eoz, there will be consequences."

"You can rail against the injustice, but I would be careful pushing too hard," Toss shrugged. "After all, it's not only the Izh'Rak Reavers who are content maintaining the equilibrium."

"Let's go," Laz said, walking out of the meeting with Tavza and Enis in tow.

"I know Catheya has caused some problems this time, but she's not a fool. I'm sure she'll be able to figure out something was amiss with her situation after getting the medicine out of her system and thinking things over."

"The Strangleroot wouldn't create new enemies in her mind," Laz pointedly said. "It would only amplify those that were already there."

"Still," Enis said. "The Umbri'Zi is fully committed to helping out in this endeavor, including bringing Arcaz back to the Heartlands."

"If there's even an Arcaz left by the time he emerges," Tavza sighed.

"That's..." Enis said before sighing and shaking her head. "Let me know if you need my assistance."

Enis returned to her quarters while Tavza and Laz walked back in oppressive silence to their wing of the castle. A few minutes later, they reached a sealed chamber, where Laz released a series of Runeseeker Eyes to look for hidden arrays or spies. He nodded at Tavza, who smiled slightly.

"Did you get it?" Tavza asked as she sat down.

"Thankfully, Lord Tem'Zul's outburst allowed me to condense the conversation without being noticed," Sepravo A'Tem nodded as he appeared out of nowhere and handed her a crystal. "I could not get the

final exchange, though. Toss would have sensed me dragging the conversation from the past without the interference."

"That's fine," Tavza nodded. "What you got is enough for our purpose. Can you bring the two of them out?"

"Of course, miss," Sepravo said before a Revenant and a Dour-looking Human appeared in the room.

"Greetings, mistress," both said with a bow.

"Your mission is to find Arcaz Umbri'Zi or Catheya Sharva'Zi inside the Perennial Vastness. Give them this recording. Keep a respectful distance, but try not to interfere with their business. Keep watch of agents of the other Divine Races; I fear they might be planning something similar."

"We will accomplish the mission without fail," the Revenant said.

"Good," Tavza said before turning to Sepravo. "I'm sorry, but we will have to activate the tokens inside your Inner World to hide the ripples. The wound will heal slowly in this environment."

"It's a small matter," Sepravo said. "I will prepare a hole in my aperture to minimize the loss."

"Go, then," Tavza said. "We don't know how things work inside. The closer they enter together, the greater their odds of running into each other."

"Then I shall take my leave," Sepravo bowed before disappearing.

"You're playing a dangerous game," Laz commented after the Revenant Monarch had left. "If you fail, the consequences are huge. Appearing incompetent will be the least of your worries."

"I was left with no options. The status quo couldn't go on. If not for those spies, I would have been forced to do something on my own and hope to frame Kator," Tavza said. "Only by breaking down the current structures can we begin to rebuild. As for looking incompetent, who cares? What does my reputation matter in the face of furthering our goals?"

"If Acraz Umbri'Zi sees he's being plotted against by the other factions of the Undead Empire, he'll be faced with two choices. Either move toward the Abyssal Shores or try to elude the empire altogether. Kator was right about one thing. Arcaz still needs us for his undead followers and to act as a guarantor. He has clearly not severed his emotions to the point he can sacrifice his home world and hide away."

"Why not nip the problem in the bud when you noticed it?" Laz asked.

Tavza knew Laz was aware of the situation and didn't need her to explain it. He was rather trying to gauge her understanding before reporting back to the Shores. It was true. This was a huge gamble, one that the elders back home most likely would have vetoed if they had the chance. But everything she'd learned and seen of this wretched region, everything she'd gathered about Arcaz Umbri'Zi, told her this was the only path.

He was Chaos incarnate.

Perhaps it was by design, perhaps he was a pawn of the Heavens. It didn't matter. Staying the course and relying on the experience and lessons gained over eons would fail in both unexpected and extravagant ways. Fate twisted around that man in terrifying ways, leaving utter bedlam in his wake.

She had to push their relationship closer, or the storm would ruin her plans. For years, they'd prodded and tried everything with this outsider, but he was more slippery than an Abyssal Eel. In a way, it had been illuminating. She'd thought any cultivator living on the Frontier would jump at the opportunity to become part of an empire like theirs. How wrong she'd been.

"Arcaz does not trust us in the slightest. Three years and we haven't even managed to get a blood sample from him to confirm his bloodline. If not for the details he's shared with us and Prince Mez's divination, I would have thought he was lying. He is just too paranoid. So even if I dealt with the spies, he might as well consider it a ploy to build trust. If the news even reached him.

"This way, we can at least make ourselves look marginally better by dragging the Reavers through the mud. It may be the first step toward building a real rapport."

"But what if he chooses his human side?"

"Kator has a point. We don't need a Draugr for the inheritance. But Arcaz knows there is a time after that, and the agreement is with Acraz Umbri'Zi, not Zachary Atwood," Tavza said, though she felt some exhaustion over the matter. "Ultimately, it's out of our hands. We can only put our faith in the divination of Prince Mez. The heavens indicate we will get what we look for."

"But what about Kator?" Laz asked. "We will be hard-pressed to contend for leadership as things stand."

"The situation is fluid," Tavza said. "Today, the winds are blowing east. Who's to say which direction it'll blow tomorrow? A lot can happen in four years."

Zac's heart beat with anticipation as Null somehow moved him into the hole. Incredible energies teeming with meaning celebrated his arrival. For the first time in years, he lamented he wasn't a Cultivator who could take advantage of this environment. Zac soon remembered the truth, though, which quickly settled his heart. He couldn't make use of the dense Dao in this realm, but neither could the cultivators.

The world was in a Temporal Chamber, and anyone who dared ponder on the Dao in this environment would find it twisted and out of tune with the Heavens. Still, it was most likely an incredibly useful building block for cultivators to speed up the formation of their cores. Most sects and Clans had similar gathering arrays, as did the Atwood Academy nowadays. The places in the Orom World he visited were the same.

Even then, those places couldn't compare. This whole world was filled with the Dao, and it wasn't limited to one specific element either. It was almost like a corner of the Heavens had been stuffed into a Mystic Realm. Was this how the environment was in the more flourishing regions of the Multiverse? No wonder his mother wanted to take Kenzie to the Six Profundity Empire.

One's body would most likely gradually acclimatize to this kind of cultivation environment, but cultivation and meditation would yield far greater results. The environment was even better than in his

cultivation cave, and this was when just floating around in the air. If he added gathering arrays on top of this...

Zac was dragged out of his daydreams by a weak mental nudge. Zac could have easily extinguished it with his soul, but he let the tendril into his aperture. Simultaneously, a small band appeared on his left wrist, seemingly made of glass that absorbed light rather than reflected it. He wouldn't have known it was there if not for the mental connection that had just formed.

"Null, is that you?" Zac asked.

"It's me," the guiding spirit confirmed, and Zac wasn't sure if he heard the voice in his mind or reality. "I'll usually be taking this form during your stay."

"So you'll be watching my every move?" Zac asked.

"Kind of," Null said. "But you know, even if I didn't, the boss would. He's everywhere at once, so there are no keeping secrets in this place. You either have to live with that fact or leave."

"I know, I know," Zac nodded. "Where is this? I can't see anything."

"The space before was sort of a gateway. Starting now, you've entered the real Perennial Vastness, and time moves at ten times the outside speed. This is the energy nimbus surrounding the whole domain. If you want, you can hire a vessel to fly around in it in the future. There are some interesting places hiding inside, but finding them is a matter of fate and chance.

Zac tried sensing anything in the surroundings, but there was just an ocean of energy, no matter how far his consciousness spread. "So what's next?"

"I'm taking you to get your starting kit," Null said. "Then, we'll find a place for you to settle down."

"What about my friends?"

"Space is relative in this place. As soon as you pick a spot, you'll be able to find the others. You will understand soon," Null answered as another gate appeared before them.

The next moment, Zac found himself floating in the center of a huge circular square. It was made from a singular piece of smooth rock and lined with seventeen pillars. Not two pillars looked alike, yet they all emitted unfathomable power. Zac's eyes first turned to a pillar made from twisted steel, looking almost like a thin hurricane covered in runes.

Chaos.

Another was made from innumerable weapons, most of which Zac didn't even recognize. Just looking at it filled Zac with such pressure he was forced to look away lest his soul be lacerated. Others were also easy to understand; the pillar of the Elements or Nature was easy to spot. Others were more mysterious, though Zac had a decent idea of what most represented.

"What's this?" Zac still asked as he looked around.

"This is the most commonly accepted model of the Heavens. Seventeen Peaks of the Grand Dao. The Nine Seals and Eight Thrones," Null said.

"Nine by eight. One destiny," Zac muttered but immediately regretted it.

Two simple sentences and the whole world started heaving.