

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1063 - Bonded - Read

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Zac's heart furiously beat as he looked into the smiling Realm Spirit's eyes. So Sendor knew. Had he known all this time? Had he investigated him, or had his breakthrough exposed something? Did he have information about Kenzie? His mind was thrown into chaos by the name he had only heard from his mother's lips.

"How?" Zac eventually said.

"How I knew?" Sendor grinned. "Well, I didn't. Until now, that is."

Zac glared at the unreliable Supremacy. There was no way his guess was a shot in the dark.

"Fine, it made sense, so I made some discrete inquiries. Adding that with my unique relationship with the System, I managed to piece together the clues."

"Made sense how?" Zac pressed.

"So, do we have a deal?" Sendor countered.

Zac took a steadying breath before slowly nodding. He knew he was on the hook the moment he heard the name of his mother's clan. Besides, with Sendor having deduced as much already, his secrets weren't as valuable anymore.

"As long you don't tell me some commonly known scraps before saying that you can't share anymore for one reason or another."

"I'm sure you'll be satisfied," Sendor laughed. "You first, then."

"Why?" Zac said with exasperation.

"Seniority."

"Fine," Zac sighed. "I honestly don't really know what's going on—this wasn't part of the plan. But we are one. I control both, and both are me."

"I knew it," Sendor said with excitement, his eyes suddenly emitting that immense pressure again.

Zac held his breath and held onto his Dao until the feeling passed. He really couldn't wait to get out of this place.

"There was something odd in your chest before. Now it's gone. It's what made this possible?"

Zac didn't immediately answer. He'd agreed to explain his situation, but there was nothing said that he had to go out of his way to share his secrets. Like the fact the node was called a [Quantum Gate], which had then been converted to the links. So Zac simply nodded in response, confirming the Hidden Node was part of the reason.

"I knew it. Hey, try extracting Miasma from your human form again."

Zac was annoyed at being treated as an experimental subject, but he followed the instructions. Figuring out the details of his constitution was part of why he wanted this trade in either case. Once more, chilling waves of death spread through his pathways before being expunged by his body's natural defenses.

"Your path is interesting but quite unfortunate when you consider these changes," Sendor snickered. "Well, it's not too bad. You should be able to freely use the Miasma in your human form by the time you form an Earthly Dao of Death. It still won't feel very nice, and you'll get that ugly pallid complexion if you overdo it, but you won't get sick. Let's keep going."

Sendor had him complete a few more experiments, including some Zac hadn't thought of. He could freely draw any energy from either body, but he ultimately only had one pool. If human Zac used up all the Miasma, then Draugr Zac would be in a bad state. Still, he had essentially doubled his energy reserves; he only needed to get a bit stronger before he could make use of that fact.

He could also extract energy from "both" cores to one body. It doubled his output, but it put his pathways under immense strain. It wasn't very useful for now, but Zac could already picture some possibilities. For example, what if he created a War Regalia based on his Inexorable Core for his human side?

He would essentially be able to run a second set of equipment for free, provided his Draugr side didn't require energy at the same time.

"Next up," Sendor said. "This one might hurt."

"Wait, wha—"

Zac wanted to have Sendor clarify, but he suddenly found himself pushed through a vortex. His words turned into a horrified scream as the gate closed behind him, and he pictured the link between his bodies being forcibly cut. However, no pain arrived, and Zac curiously looked around.

His human form found himself standing atop a tower, looking out across an impossibly vast city. He saw hundreds of palaces the size of capitals, and he almost keeled over from the terrifying auras that were suddenly released from every direction. It was blinding, and Zac knew he wouldn't have survived if not for the protective barrier around the tower.

"I guess it's quite resistant."

Only then did Zac come to, realizing he'd heard the words from his Draugr body. The link was still there, and his vision was split between the city and Mount Illumination. After the shock abated, Zac made a few interesting discoveries. For one, it was much easier to control his bodies when they were separated, with no overlapping sensations to cause confusion.

Secondly, the energy draw from his new Specialty Cores had slowed to a trickle. Zac had expected the cost to maintain the connection would increase the further apart his bodies were, but the opposite seemed to be true.

"What's going on? Where am I?" Zac asked.

"In one of the more flourishing cities of my domain," Sendor said. "It's on the opposite side of my body."

"How far apart are my bodies right now?"

"Further than the span of an established empire," Sendor smiled.

Zac's eyes widened in shock. When someone like Sendor talked about empires, it was definitely the monolithic forces of the Multiverse Heartlands. The Zecia sector could barely be considered a small province in such a place. To think he could freely use his bodies at such a distance without any downsides. If anything, he felt better than ever.

Also, just how big was Sendor's realm? Can a pocket dimension really be called that when it is this big?

"Now, let's try this," Sendor said, and Zac's human form found himself dragged off the tower and into another vortex.

At first, Zac didn't mind, but he yelped with shock upon losing half his impressions. It was like he'd been blinded in one eye, but the loss was far more comprehensive. The link to his Draugr body had been cut. Zac felt his body rapidly grow weaker, like he'd been branded with something like the Orom's Prison Seal.

Were his energy circuits not working properly now that he couldn't sense his half? Zac could picture his core being ripped in two and leaking all his accumulated strength. Zac only calmed down after a minute when he'd confirmed nothing else changed after the downgrade of his power. He looked around and saw he was floating inside a bubble bobbing on a sea that teemed with Temporal Energy.

Being separated from his other half just as he was getting used to it was extremely jarring, resulting in it taking a few tries before he managed to enter his Void Self State.

Only then could Zac vaguely feel the connection to his other body, though only to the point he could tell it was still there. He had no way to interact with it, and the shared consciousness was no more. And that was just the beginning. For one, Zac felt like his soul had been cut in half, where only his Evolutionary Core remained.

The same was true for his Cosmic Core, which no longer could provide him with Miasma. And the source of the weakness quickly became apparent when Zac opened his Status Screen.

Name Zachary Atwood

Level 155

Class [D-Arcane] Evolutionary Precursor

Race [D] Human - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment [Zecia] Atwood Empire – Baron of Conquest

Titles [...] Runic Progenitor, Grand Achievement, Arcane Ascension, Pathbound Core, Peakmender

Limited Titles Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th, Equanimity, Big Axe Gladiator, The Final Twilight - 1st, Gates of Rebirth

Dao Branch of the War Axe - Middle, Branch of the Kalpataru - Middle, Branch of the Pale Seal - Middle

Core [D] Evolutionary Core

Strength 38,026 [Increase: 169%. Efficiency: 409%]

Dexterity 20,468 [Increase: 141%. Efficiency: 285%]

Endurance 25,044 [Increase: 155%. Efficiency: 409%]

Vitality 33,586 [Increase: 168%. Efficiency: 428%]

Intelligence 6,503 [Increase: 125%. Efficiency: 285%]

Wisdom 9,777 [Increase: 127%. Efficiency: 300%]

Luck 881 [Increase: 154%. Efficiency: 349%]

Free Points 500

Nexus Coins [D] 7 645 946

His attributes had been cut by 20%, where most of it came out of his Strength and Endurance. In terms of combat effectiveness, he'd say he'd lost closer to a third. A quick calculation confirmed what had changed. He had retained the full benefit of his titles, base attributes from levels, nodes, and even free points. And while one of his Soul Spirals was suddenly missing from his mind, Zac still got the attribute boost from all three Daos.

However, he'd lost all the benefits of having two classes. All the attributes he'd gotten from his Undying Bulwark, Fetters of Desolation, and Inexorable Apostle classes were gone. Everything else was the same, including the list of Hidden Nodes in his bloodline screen. Zac looked across the boundless sea, trying to figure out why this place was different.

Was it the Temporal Energy? Zac couldn't be sure, but he wouldn't be surprised if this ocean had a completely different spacetime compared to the part of the Perennial Vastness which contained the Cosmic Gallery. Was that

enough to make the connection unstable? Was it the only one, or were there other types of domains that would cause this issue?

At least there wasn't a backlash, and his weakened state wasn't too taxing. His attribute superiority mostly came from his titles, which were still in full effect. His situation was like any elite's right now, though his power and experiences had allowed him to rack up far more titles than normal people. Zac could still take on almost any Heaven's Chosen at his level, though he definitely wouldn't be able to handle freaks of nature like Iz Tayn in this state.

A few more minutes passed where nothing happened. Depending on what speed time moved in here, it might be a while before Sendor extracted him, which let him ponder the ramifications of the recent discoveries. Essentially, he could split his situation into three scenarios, each with its own circumstances.

He was technically in his 'ultimate' form when the bodies were next to each other. Fighting side by side, using two sets of skills and techniques, would turn him into a two-person army, far eclipsing his previous peak condition. However, the Specialty Cores consumed a lot of energy in close proximity for some reason, making his energy control sluggish. It was also difficult to sort out the mirrored impressions, which was a huge disadvantage in a pitched battle.

When separated, he had almost returned to his previous state. The cores didn't steal his energy, and he felt more in tune with the individual bodies. However, he wouldn't be able to swap classes, nor would he be able to fight as a team.

Now, he was suddenly left with half a soul, core, and reduced attributes. It was the worst scenario, one with no upsides but significant risks. For example, what if only one of his bodies were sent into Ultom, and he had his connection cut? There were only three years left until the trial, and the biggest boost to his raw power would come from leveraging his Middle-quality Cosmic Core to rapidly gain levels during the war.

Right now, the downside "only" meant a loss of 20% of his total Attribute points. But by the time he reached level 200, that number would be even higher. He also wouldn't be able to implement his idea of using Death-attuned equipment in his human form.

Ten more minutes passed and Zac started to grow bored, but a mysterious ripple suddenly spread through his protective bubble. Then, a voice followed by a burst of impressions threw his mind into disarray. Meanwhile, his body filled with power like he'd eaten a berserking treasure. The connection had been restored in full, along with all its benefits.

As for the voice, it was Sendor, who'd asked, 'What about now?'

Zac sorted through the memories and immediately understood what had just happened. His Draugr form had lost the connection the moment Zac entered the temporal sea, just like his human form. Sendor immediately started another round of experiments, and the findings were transferred over to "him" the second the connection was restored.

There were a few takeaways. First, the other body operated like normal when the connection was blocked. In other words, it wasn't like his consciousness was linked to either body. It was in both, and his Draugr side had felt like the "true" Zac while the connection was blocked. Secondly, his Draugr half was even worse off since his undead body had also lost the benefits of the Void Vajra Constitution.

That disadvantage would likely even out after the Eoz bloodline was fully awakened, but it was worth noting that bloodline benefits didn't carry over. It wasn't just the attributes either; his Draugr form had returned to its previous state where Life was poison. Just as Zac had gone over the burst of memories, he heard Sendor speak.

"Interesting, let's try this."

The connection was suddenly cut again, and he was stuck atop the ocean for another ten minutes before being dragged back to Mount Illumination.

"What cut the connection the second time?" Zac asked.

"My Dao," Sendor said. "I surrounded each body with it. It looks like isolating either will be enough to create interference."

"Can I do anything to prevent my connection from being cut?" Zac asked.

"Little brat, you're a million years early if you want to break through a Heavenly Territory," Sendor guffawed.

"Still, the stronger the connection, the better my chances at survival," Zac ventured.

"True enough. Right now, I'd say a middle Autarch or equivalent domains can interfere with your connection," Sendor said.

So Iz's golem guardian could separate his bodies with its Dao, but not the Eveningtide Asura. Of course, that was contingent on an Autarch bothering to create an isolated bubble of Dao around his body. It also meant nothing in Zecia should be able to cut the connection. Not even the Million Gates Territory reached those energy levels, and he had already traveled a distance hundreds of times greater than Zecia inside the Perennial Vastness.

"Your best bet to strengthen the bond is likely to improve two components that enable your split state; the Void and your clan's inheritance," the Realm Spirit continued.

What Sendor said made sense. Pushing his Bloodline to D-grade might alleviate some of his drawbacks. Doing so before Ultom should be possible, considering his Void Emperor Bloodline should already be at the precipice of a breakthrough. He just needed to find some impetus to push through that final barrier and then use the [Stone of Celestial Void] to trigger the process.

As for improving "his clan's inheritance," Zac had no solutions. However, Sendor might provide a path forward.

"Is that everything?" Zac asked, eager to learn more about the Kayar-Elu.

"One last test. Slap yourself with this thing," Sendor said as he handed Zac a piece of leather that emitted an incredibly foul aura.

"What?"

"Just do it," Sendor urged, looking like he was observing a fun spectacle.

Zac was full of misgivings, but he walked over to himself. It was odd seeing himself looking back into his eyes with helplessness as he swung the piece of leather. A loud clap echoed, and Zac felt his Specialty Cores heat up as they extracted a huge amount of energy. Thankfully, they soon calmed down, and both Zacs turned to Sendor.

"Happy?"

"Very. Now give me that thing," Sendor said before sending another ripple through his bodies.

"What's going on?"

"That piece of hide belonged to quite a nasty one who caused problems in my body long ago. The amount of sin she committed..." Sendor said, looking part disgusted and part impressed. "Her very body had become permeated by foul Karma. But look at you..."

"What?"

"Slapping someone with that thing should create a Karmic Grudge, almost like a curse. Just grabbing onto it would leave a mark. But in your case? Nothing. There's still not a shred of Karma connecting your two bodies. Your human body remained untainted even after holding onto that thing. Your old connections are there, but it might be impossible for you to form new Karmic Links. Quite useful. Not even your toad friend's ability is quite this impressive."

No Karmic Links at all? Zac had to agree; such an ability was extremely useful. Karmic Links had caused him quite a few headaches over the years, from The Great Redeemer to the Buddhist Sangha. It was a constant threat where he felt the risk of being exposed or tracked down.

"So my condition is impossible to expose?"

"I wouldn't go that far," Sendor said. "For one, I can vaguely sense a resonance from your cores when you extract large amounts of energy, though that might be fixed when your bloodline catches up. More importantly, there are a lot of scary people out there. I can think of a few who should be able to figure something out if they put their mind to it." The debut release of this chapter happened at November 1st.

Zac nodded. As far as he was concerned, that meant his secret was safe. The kind of people Sendor would consider scary didn't exactly grow on trees. Being split into two had essentially removed the most glaring danger to himself—his unique ability to change between two different races and classes.

Now, anyone would just see a powerful human or a powerful Draugr. His value as a research subject was essentially gone, provided no one realized there was a connection between his two bodies. Of course, that would only work as long as the truth of his breakthrough didn't spread.

"About my situation," Zac hesitated.

"Don't worry about that," Sendor grinned. "I'm going to keep this juicy nugget for myself. You never know if it might become important in the future. "

Zac inwardly groaned, but what could he do? At least it was a landlocked Realm Spirit who worked for the System that found out. That was way better than some other Supremacy.

"You thought I had become two people for a moment there. Is that a real possibility?" Zac asked.

"Looking for a cover?" Sendor said. "It's possible, but it's generally from deviations. Something happens with your path, and two opposing concepts split you in two. Others intentionally split their soul, discarding a part of themselves. With your contradictory path, it's a very plausible excuse. You couldn't reconcile Life and Death, your human and undead sides, leading to a deviation."

It looked like Zac had a road forward. The fact he was two beings would be hidden from everyone, even the people in Port Atwood. The official story for those who knew of his old ability would be that he was split in two. Perhaps he should even send his Draugr self to the Kavriel Province and let the Monarchs scan him. It was risky, but it might lead to avoiding some hidden dangers.

One thing was for sure, though. While the situation seemed stable enough, Zac definitely needed to unearth the secrets hidden within his body before forming his Inner World. Preferably, Zac would have answers before the first bottleneck of the D-grade, but he knew the chances of that happening were slim. It had been seven and a half years since he entered the Perennial Vastness, which meant nine months had passed on the outside.

War was right around the corner, and then came Ultom. Unless he could figure out what else hid in his Specialty Cores with the final piece of his Left Imperial Seal, he'd have to save that until later. He'd settle for upgrading his bloodline and hopefully remove some of the downsides to his situation.

Of course, one more reward was waiting right in front of him, one that might provide the answers he needed.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1064 - Origins - Read

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"How did you know about the Kayar-Elu?" Zac asked, finally expressing the question that had been burning in the back of his mind for the past hour.

"It just made sense," the Realm Spirit shrugged. "When you've lived as long as me, you start to see some patterns in the river of time."

"Made sense, how?" Zac pressed.

"What do you know about the Technocrats?"

"The usual stuff. Dao of Technology, Technomancers, Transcenders, Machine God Faction," Zac said impatiently.

"Sure," Sendor said. "And do you know why the System hates them?"

"Because the Dao of Technology isn't within the purview of the Seventeen Peaks? Because they're functionally Unorthodox Cultivators?"

"Bah," Sendor scoffed. "The Dao is the Dao. Why can't it be applied the way those people want to? They're not breaking the four laws. Usually not, anyway. But who doesn't cheat now and then? It's not like this is the first Era these ideas have appeared. Much of their accomplishments are built on their predecessors. Such is the nature of technological advancement, no?"

Zac nodded hesitantly.

"The reason's simple. War!" Sendor laughed. "The faction you know as the Technocrats today was originally founded by an empire called the Selvari. They weren't anything special, just a slightly powerful force in that ancient epoch when the Dao still was rough and tumble. But they stumbled upon something. Or rather, it stumbled onto them."

"An Eternal Heritage," Zac surmised.

It seemed odd that the technological foundation of the Technocrats would come from something as ancient and mysterious as an Eternal Heritage. He had a hard time picturing something like Ultom containing a bunch of schematics. But having an Eternal Heritage as backing would explain how they could stay strong with the whole Multiverse standing against them.

"Just so," Sendor said. "Well, sort off. The Selvari controlled the better part of a galaxy when it happened. This was before dimensional travel was commonplace, mind you. One day, a huge energy field appeared, consuming almost a fifth of the galaxy. It was a disastrous loss for the Selvari, but they forgot about all that when they found the Technocrat Codex.

"Most Eternal Heritages were created through untold sacrifice and an Era's worth of accumulation. The Technocrat Codex was a bit different. I don't know how, but someone threw a bunch of ideas into the future, avoiding the Dao's collapse."

"Ideas?" Zac asked.

"The people from the Primordial Era probably didn't have the strength to transport matter through such a vast stretch of time, bypassing the Cataclysm. Instead, they sent ideas. Theories, inventions, schools of thought. They suddenly popped up in the minds of the Selvari across the galaxy. The impartment also expanded the minds of these lucky few, letting them stand far above the rest. Using the gift, they became the leaders of the Selvari and founded the Technocracy.

"The Technocrats became a ruling caste far above the rest, especially after it became clear even their descendants enjoyed the cerebral enhancement from the Technocrat Codex. However, while the Technocrats quickly usurped the old structures and took full control, they also elevated the Selvari to new heights.

"Soon, they built wondrous machines that allowed them to visit other galaxies. Other dimensions. They saw themselves as the masters of the universe, delving into its secrets with wild abandon. But then, a small empire rose in a neighboring galaxy. An empire which would come to change everything."

"The Limitless Empire? Two such powerful factions appeared in the same dimension?" Zac asked. "What are the odds?"

"Greater than you might think," Sendor smiled. "Mystic Realms are not born equal, and neither are dimensions. The Selvari and the Limitless Empire were founded in one of the most flourishing dimensions closest to the Heavens. The Dao was clear, and the road toward the peak was wide. Of course, there's another reason. The original inhabitants of the Limitless Empire were Selvari."

"What?" Zac said with confusion.

"Far from all Selvari were satisfied with the changes brought from the Technocrat Codex. The Technocrat Inheritance was simply too alien compared to the natural path of cultivation. Many renounced the Technocracy, especially those belonging to orthodox sects and clans. They fled their homeland and migrated to remote galaxies in a bid to return to traditional cultivation.

Zac's mind was abuzz with the new information. The origin of the System and its hatred of the Dao of Technology suddenly felt much clearer. Not only was the Technocracy an enemy of the Limitless Empire, but the citizens of the Limitless Empire were also formerly under the thumb of the Selvari.

"I think you can understand why the conflict arose," Sendor continued. "The Selvari originally considered the region that later became the Limitless Empire an unofficial colony filled with technologically inferior citizens. The first true war of the Limitless Empire was not only one of expansion but one of liberation."

"And I'm guessing the empire won?"

"The Technocrats found themselves outmatched even before the System's appearance," Sendor nodded. "Emperor Laondio was like a radiant beacon, a savior to free the citizens from the tyranny of technology. He and his powerful subordinates were like a testament to the Heavenly Path, proving the Technocrat Codex was nothing but false truths."

It wasn't hard for Zac putting two and two together after knowing that.

"What does this have to do with the Kayar-Elu?" Zac asked.

"The Kayar-Elu was one of the founding Clans of the Technocracy, direct inheritors of the Technocrat Codex."

"So I'm not human?" Zac asked. "I'm Selvari?"

"Honestly, I don't know what you are," Sendor laughed. "You should be human, but so were the Selvari. In fact, they are the origin of your race and the reason your kin are all over the place."nôvel binz was the first platform to present this chapter.

"It was humans who founded the Technocrats?" Zac exclaimed.

"Well, the Selvari were originally humans. However, their empire had grown diverse after eons of expansion through their galaxy."

"So how did Humans become one of the most populous species of the Multiverse if the Selvari were the System's enemy?" Zac asked curiously.

"For one, there were just as many humans in the Limitless Empire, so targeting your race specifically would make no sense. The war was over ideology. And resources, of course. Be it the Limitless Empire or the Selvari, both needed vast amounts of resources. Saying that The Limitless Empire targeted the Selvari solely for freedom would be a revision of history. They especially needed a specific ability of the Selvari, which incidentally is the reason you can find humans in every corner of the Multiverse.

"The Selvari knew they wouldn't last for long. The Limitless Empire's War Machine was terrifying in a way you can't imagine, and their forces grew daily. But the Selvari had something the Limitless Empire didn't—the ability to travel through dimensions en masse.

"Back then, the realities weren't as interlaced as today. Forcing your way through the dimensional barriers and the chasm between was something only the greatest of Emperor Laondio's generals could accomplish. But the Selvari built enormous Arks and sent trillions of their citizenry, mostly humans, into every corner of the Multiverse. It was a lifeline and a counterattack; forming millions of safe enclaves through all realities. Growing in secret to one day strike back at their hated enemy.

"The System made all that irrelevant, though," Sendor snickered. "The Dark Ages arrived, and most societies collapsed. A million years is an unbelievably long time without Cosmic Energy. Almost all the colonies were erased by the river of time, and the few surviving descendants had forgotten their origin and mission long before the System awoke. Later they were integrated, having no recollection of their old enemy.

Zac saw the holes in his understanding of the universe rapidly fill in. The origin of the Limitless Empire and the purpose of the System. He even had an answer to why the System had rearranged the Multiverse into such a confusing mesh of dimensions. Zac could almost picture it. The Limitless Emperor's main adversary had suddenly sent their people to innumerable dimensions just as he was about to win the war.

So he built the System, a War Machine that would span all realities by fusing with the Heavens, possibly integrating the Selvari's dimensional understanding. That way, he'd be able to hunt down the scattered Selvari while exploring the other dimensions for opportunities.

"Oh, don't go spreading these things," Sendor added. "It can be a touchy subject."

"Of course," Zac said. "You still haven't answered my questions, though. About the Kayar-Elu."

"I was providing context," Sendor snorted. "You youngsters are always so impatient."

"I'm not immortal like you," Zac sighed.

"I guess that's true," Sendor nodded. "Around four thousand years ago, my connection with the System received such a powerful shock that it was almost severed. It had entered an almost manic state as it forced its way into the Eternal Storm. The Heavens only returned to normalcy after two months, but I could tell the System had entered a weakened state. Later, I heard that one of the ancient Technocracy clans had fallen, smote by endless Tribulation Lightning.

"I am guessing the event involved your birth."

"What? four thousand?" Zac said. "That can't be right. I'm only 52, including time distortions."

"You were likely placed inside a seal. To hide you from the Heavens, the System, and even the Technocracy Alliance. " Sendor said, thoughtfully looking at Zac. "Possibly also to shield you from the Dao. Too much of that before you started cultivating, and it might have damaged your bloodline."

Hearing he might be thousands of years old was a bit of a shock, but Zac had always suspected he was older than he seemed. Leandra had apparently been at death's door after her family's fall, and recovering for millennia was nothing for people at that level. At least he was still considered a youngster by the System since it had given him the quest for Ultom.

"You said it made sense I was related to those people," Zac said. "Why?"

"I'm closing in on some dangerous topics. Suffice it to say, just like the Limitless Empire had a complicated relationship with the Technocracy, so did the Void Emperor. Few things are black and white, especially at the peak," Sendor said, looking at Zac with a complex gaze. "I wonder what is chance and what is predestination. I wonder if he..."

"Nevermind," the Realm Spirit said with a shake of his head.

The Realm Spirit had stopped short of giving clear answers about Karz, but Zac could infer a few more details to add to the growing web of his origin. It sounded like the Void Emperor had some connection to either the Kayar-Elu or the Technocracy as a whole. Had Karz betrayed Laondio to ally with the Technocrats? No, that didn't seem right. If that were the case, would his mother really say he carried the Original Sin?

Was it the opposite? Had Karz infiltrated the Technocracy, befriending them before taking them out on the emperor's orders?

"As far as I know, the Kayar-Elu received two main inheritances from the Technocrat Codex," Sendor continued. "One was related to shielding and aura manipulation. They were a major player in setting up Sanctuary, the Holy Land in the depths of the Eternal Storm. I'm no expert in those matters, but I felt your protective array held some similarities to their heritage, and the same is true for your newfound resistance to Karmic Links.

"And you've just experienced their second inheritance," the Realm Spirit smiled. "They hold the secret of twinned existence, something beyond cloning or puppets. Two bodies, each as strong as the other. Of course, one of those bodies was supposed to be mechanical, not whatever they accomplished with your weird Void Duality.

"I can't imagine the work that went into transforming a peak Technocrat invention into something that would work within the purview of Heaven's Path. It's like forcing a previous Era's cultivation System into this one. And that's not even taking into account merging the technique with your bloodline."

Zac slowly nodded, remembering how he'd seen Leandra seamlessly shift between a gargantuan metallic body and her normal human form. He'd already drawn the parallels to his situation. However, that didn't account for Jeeves' existence—a living AI that seemed to be integrated into the Heavenly Path.

That technology seemed even more groundbreaking than his duality, especially considering what he'd just learned about the Selvari. Did that mean the Kayar-Elu actually had three heritages, with Jeeves being a hidden technology of theirs? Or did the AI come from somewhere else, like another ancient Technocrat clan? The latter would explain why Firmament's Edge knew to look for Leandra and the Digital Nexus.

"Here, read the rest yourself," Sendor said, throwing over an Information Crystal.

Zac infused his will into the crystal and was greeted by a wealth of information. Dozens of books worth, including everything from the ancient era before the System to current events. It even detailed methods to enter the Digital World without implanting yourself with Technocrat machinery. However, a brief scan left Zac frowning, and he looked up at the Realm Spirit.

"This is just general information," Zac said.

"General information that's very hard to get in integrated space," Sendor countered. "Information I believe you will need soon. And it's not all general information. The locations where the System struck the Kayar-Elu and some of their hidden domains. Some of their connections within Integrated Space. Spatial Gates deep inside the Eternal Storm. These things are worth a fortune among the established factions."

It was true. While there were no deeper explanations for his Duplicity Core, there were some very pertinent pieces of information in the crystal. It actually mentioned the Six Profundity Empire and even listed three factions suspected to be founded by the Kayar-Elu—the Pravosti Clan, the Heavenly Palace, and the Huarki Consortia. There was a good chance Leandra hid in one of those three factions.

Of course, these factions might have opted to erase any traces of their origin after the Kayar-Elu's collapse. Luckily, Sendor had listed another fourteen factions across six empires, giving him a direction to keep looking in case he came up emptyhanded in the Six Profundity Empire.

The suspected locations of some of their hidden realms might be the key to fusing his body. He needed to figure out what other secrets hid inside his core, and visiting Kayar-Elu's hidden labs was a promising solution. However, the marked places were all inside the Eternal Storm, far beyond his reach.

"Still," Zac said. "Nothing here will let me fuse my bodies or take control over the cores. Nothing that can help me in the short run. Compared to what I—"

"This is all I know; it's not like I'm some Technocrat information merchant. And don't you try squeezing more benefits out of me," Sendor snorted. "This is more than fair."

"Fine. Nothing on their recent movements?" Zac ventured.

Zac didn't know if it was good or bad news, but the information crystal lacked information about Leandra and Kenzie.

"Honestly, I thought them eradicated until you appeared on my doorstep. That's the consensus among the few who actually know who the Kayar-Elu are," Sendor said. "Those who survived must have concealed themselves quite well. If you don't know, then I have no idea how to help you."

"That's fair," Zac said, stowing away the crystal. "Just one more thing, then."

"I'm telling you, I'm not giving you any more resources," Sendor said with exasperation. "With your disgusting Luck and the System's attention, just go find them yourself. Things given for free are rarely appreciated."

"No, not that," Zac said, though he wouldn't have said no to some more benefits. "Can you send my bodies back separately? One three hours before the other."

"You want to test the limits of your mysterious connection," Sendor, his eyes lighting up with interest. "That's fine."

"Can I say goodbye to Null first?" Zac asked.

"Null begun the process of rebirth while you were unconscious," Sendor rejected. "Her existence is based on your path. It will take her centuries to form a true soul with such heavy baggage."

Zac was disappointed, but what could you do? He took in the surroundings of the mountaintop one final time. Its destruction had actually made it easier to leave, in a sense. It was like his presence had been erased from the region, his Karma with Mount Illumination severed.

"What about the brands?" Zac asked.

"I've already placed them on both your bodies," Sendor said, rolling his eyes when Zac's eyes thinned with suspicion. "Here, see?"

Zac first didn't understand what Sendor meant, but he soon felt a mysterious ripple within the chests of both his bodies. Zac's heart was gripped with fear as it felt like Sendor had hidden a whole universe within a bead no larger than a grain of rice. The next moment, the marks were gone, letting Zac breathe out in relief.

"They'll activate on your will but not on their own," Sendor said. "So don't let yourself get knocked out before you can infuse a wisp into your chest."

"Thank you," Zac said. "I'm ready, then."

"Then off you go," Sendor said as a cocoon of runes grew around Zac's human form.

"Please have my other body catch up if something odd happens," Zac added, suddenly realizing the experiment might be a bit dangerous.

"No problem," Sendor said before throwing over a token. "Come visit if you ever find yourself in my neighborhood. The Cosmic Gallery only holds some low-grade baubles, but I have other regions that would astound you."

"And I just need to share some of my secrets to access them?" Zac said with a roll of his eyes.

"Such is the Law of Balance," Sendor laughed. "I have lots of treasures, so make sure to think of ways to entertain me. Now go. Have fun in the Left Imperial Palace. Some of the answers you're looking for might be found there."

A small gate appeared beneath Zac's feet, and he lost the connection as he began the return journey through the Void. His mind slowly grew quiet, matching the empty surroundings. Seven years had passed, but he was finally going home. He had been full of expectations for his visit to the Perennial Vastness, yet the experience had exceeded anything he could have imagined.

Most importantly, he had accomplished his goal of reaching Hegemony, even if things had taken a sudden turn. It had thrown many of his old plans out the window but also provided him with some new options.

With the biggest roadblock out of the way, it was time to plan for the future.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1065 - Contingencies - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1065 - Contingencies

"It's time," a voice echoed through the peak. "You've arrived."

"Thank you for your help," Arcaz said as he stood up.

Sendor had left soon after the first body was sent away, but he was clearly still keeping watch. A second cocoon enclosed his body, and he was soon shuttling through the Void. Three hours' worth of memories were exchanged as the connection was restored. The merge kept his mind occupied for almost two minutes, which was an important lesson on its own.

Arcaz began his return journey while Zac checked on his compound. It looked exactly as he'd left it, which produced an unsettling sense of disconnect rather than comfort. He'd spent over seven years inside the Perennial Vastness, yet only a few months had passed on the outside. It almost made his experience seem like a dream.

Not only that, but he finally felt the ramifications of spending such a long time in Temporal Dilation. First, three years inside an absolute Temporal Chamber while time outside stood still, then another seven inside the Perennial Vastness. Cheating the river of time came at a price, where Zac's body was assaulted by Temporal Energy that seemingly appeared out of nowhere.

It felt like his surroundings were in flux, with leaves swaying so quickly they turned to a blur for a fraction of a second, only for them to freeze the next. Channeling his Daos helped a bit, but Zac knew it would be a while before the feeling gave in completely. At least it didn't affect his spirit or his Dao, which meant he was better off than most cultivators.

The temporal invasion left cultivators in an annoying state of imbalance where the Dao was not quite as distorted as when Temporally Dilated, but fluctuating in a way that made cultivation and meditation dangerous. Zac didn't feel any of that, and he soon found a way to enjoy himself and combat the backlash.

A powerful current of Cosmic Energy coursed through his body, and Zac's feet lifted from the ground. Then, he was floating a few meters into the air, unfettered by gravity's constraints. Well, mostly unfettered. Flying was akin to

turning yourself into a Cosmic Energy magnet, generating a repulsing force to the ambient energy.

In reality, it was slightly more complicated, where you used your Dao to connect with the environment and weaken your earthly shackles. But it was fundamentally impossible without a core and the ability to channel those levels of energy.

It was similar to the method most low-grade vessels used to fly and only really worked in environments with enough ambient energy. Of course, Hegemons had enough raw firepower to switch from being magnets to rockets, expelling large quantities of energy to fly even in energy-starved regions.

Zac was curious about the situation back home, but he didn't make his return known yet. There would have been messages waiting for him if the situation was dire and required his immediate attention. Instead, Zac waited, observing his other body close in on his location. There was no sense of distance conveyed through his link, and he couldn't sense it actually getting closer.

The experience got boring after a while, and Zac began swinging his axe to get used to his influx of attributes. The transition wouldn't be difficult. His Strength had taken a massive leap forward, but so had his Dexterity. Balance was maintained, letting him quickly adapt to the change and enter his Evolutionary Stance.

The roars of [Verun's Bite] sang in the courtyard, where Zac was a blur moving back and forth. One moment, he stood on the ground. The other, he floated ten meters in the air. The technique would need to be expanded now that he could fly, but it was still in working order. Arcaz appeared next to him three hours later, and the energy drain resumed.

Having thought things over, Zac strongly suspected the drain resulted from forcibly disentangling Karma between his bodies rather than maintaining the link. It was easy to avoid Karmic entanglement with people on the other side of the Multiverse, but another matter entirely when you stood next to each other. It also explained why the cores extracted such a huge amount of energy when Sendor had him use that cursed piece of hide.

Sendor had thought him immune to Karma, but Zac knew that was only part of the picture. It was more correct to say that the Specialty Cores provided shielding, but doing so cost energy. Judging by the drain from slapping himself with a tainted object, he still needed to be careful when dealing with

people above his grade. What if some old Arhat forcibly tried to link up their fate? Would his cores be drained until his Draugr body died from energy starvation?

Still, retaining some secrets when faced with the inquisitive Realm Spiritit filled Zac with a small sense of victory. However, the feeling quickly passed and was replaced with a torrent of confusing emotions as he sensed familiar ripples from within his bedroom. He flashed over and found the source in a hidden compartment.

Within was a Spatial Ring holding a solitary object; the Technocrat insignia.

Zac hadn't dared to bring such an item into the Perennial Vastness, so he left it back on Earth. Now that he'd returned, it immediately started acting out—it definitely wasn't a coincidence. Zac would probably have ignored the call if his breakthrough had gone according to plan. Now, Zac slowly reached toward the ring, even if he were filled with reluctance.

He'd thought his connection to his mother severed when she left with Kenzie, but there was no way he could ignore his Technocrat origin with his body being installed with hidden features. His Draugr body hid inside one of his isolated cultivation chambers before Zac took out the insignia.

Zac infused a wisp of energy, and the familiar form of his mother appeared in front of him. Seeing her stoked the flames simmering in the depths of his heart, where the most recent setback only added more fuel to the fire. Leandra, in turn, looked neither like the vengeful maniac in his Heart Tribulation nor like the doting mother she'd presented herself as in her previous recording.

This time, she appeared just as when they met in person; cold, callous, and infuriatingly calm when faced with Zac's wrath.

"You survived," Leandra said, her cadence like that of someone commenting on a new haircut. "I wasn't sure whether you'd find a path through the synchronization with your ill-fated choice of secondary body. Our inheritance has served you well."

"Not like I asked for any of this," Zac said, unable and unwilling to hide the anger and disgust from his voice.

"Railing against reality will change nothing," Leandra said. "For better or worse, our gift is a central part of your identity."

"What do you want?" Zac growled. "Why did you make contact now? What about severing fate?"

"I believe I made the right choice back then, especially after seeing your progress. Severing Karma and letting you walk your own path let you reach a point I didn't expect you would. Some things can only be nurtured in the wild," Leandra said, ignoring Zac's eyes veritably spitting fire at the remark. "And now, an opportunity to repay your family has arrived."

"Repay you? Repay you?!" Zac almost screamed. "Why would I ever help you? I hope your plans fail and the Kayar-Elu are finally removed from the universe."

"Then, what of your sister?" Leandra countered. "She is not yet strong enough to survive on her own. Without my protection, she'll eventually be discovered and killed. Besides, taking on this particular task is in your best interest."

Zac didn't answer, but his expression spoke volumes.

"You are suspicious. That is fine," Leandra nodded, her gaze shifting toward the chamber where his Draugr body hid.

Zac grimaced; she knew.

"You should be filled with questions, confusion. What else is hidden in your body? What were our goals, and how does it pertain to you? I'm sure you can appreciate that Class-3 isn't the end of the road we prepared for you. You can choose to maintain your ignorance and pray you will somehow survive the next transition. Or you can take charge of your fate."

Zac held onto a belly full of anger, but he knew she'd pinpointed his weakness. He really was afraid of his Specialty Core holding more secrets that would mess with his path.

"Only by taking control over your body will you be able to avoid disaster. Only that way do you have a chance to become something more than a tool," Leandra said. "You may despise the Kayar-Elu, but you're still nothing but a failed experiment in your current state."

Zac took a calming breath as he stared at the projection. A normal patent would readily provide the information he needed to avoid getting himself killed, but he knew he wouldn't be so lucky. Leandra was a full-fledged zealot hoping to overturn the Heavens to avenge her family. As she said before, she wasn't contacting him to help; she was using his situation as bait for him to further her goals.

"What do you want?" Zac squeezed out.

"It's simple. Our family prepared for our grand undertaking for eons, which included setting up several contingencies. I need you to activate one of them for me."

"Contingencies?" Zac frowned.

If Leandra was telling the truth about wanting to keep him at a distance and avoid Karma, then the contingency wasn't for him. That meant it was for the other half of their experiment.

"What have you done to Kenzie?"

"Your sister is doing fine for now, but lacking the unique features of your bloodline has proven problematic," Leandra said. "Unless you help activate a safeguard we created, the Digital Nexus will eventually be discovered by the Cursed Heavens. Your sister will attract a second calamity like the one that brought our demise. Your time is limited."

Zac's heart shuddered at the thought of Kenzie being forced to deal with a tribulation powerful enough to eradicate a clan like the Kayar-Elu. However, he quickly calmed down and looked at the projection suspiciously. That 'contingency' might be what brought Kenzie's demise rather than what saved her. It might even allow Leandra to take over Kenzie's body.

"You're lying."

"I find the truth a powerful enough motivator in this situation," Leandra calmly said. "And even if you have doubts of the veracity of my claims, are you willing to bet Kenzie's life on it?"

"If it's so important to you and your schemes, why don't you activate it yourself?"

"It cannot be accessed remotely, and I cannot tread where it's hidden," Leandra said.

"Let me guess. It's back where you lunatics got blasted by the System?"

"No," Leandra said. "It's inside Sanctuary, the Holy land of the Technocracy. In a sense, it's Sanctuary itself."

"What!"

"What place is better to hide a secret repository of our family from the Heavens?" Leandra said. "What thing is better suited to hide the miracle inside your sister's body than Sanctuary's protective shroud?"

"If it's there, then it's probably been discovered by your enemies already," Zac said.

"Impossible."

There was utmost certainty in Leandra's words, which made Zac recall a piece of Sendor's earlier explanation. The Kayar-Elu was one of the factions that participated in building the Technocrat's Holy Land. They must have installed some backdoors and secret features during that time. It might really be safe if that were the case.

Zac felt defeated as he looked into his mother's eyes. She had planned everything to a tee, preparing both carrot and stick to force him into action.

"Why me?" Zac sighed. "Why couldn't you just leave me alone?"

"My options are limited. Only a clan member can enter that place without triggering certain safeguards," Leandra said. "I've been marked, so I cannot go, and bringing the Digital Nexus there is not safe. That leaves you, who are fully free from anything marked by the Dao of Technology. You have the bloodline to enter, and your unique body will make you invisible to the eyes of my pursuers."

Zac knew what she was getting at. If upgrading his Duplicity Core had made him resistant to Karma, he likely enjoyed similar protections against various other methods, just like what the Concealment Array provided. It was possible he was uniquely suited to avoid the gaze of the Living AIs and ancient Technocrats inside Sanctuary.

"This is an opportunity for you," Leandra continued. "The safeguard is placed inside a hidden laboratory managed by my father, the leader of our family. There, you can find the answers to the questions burning in your heart. You can also confirm the truth of my claim before activating the safeguard."

"A simple task with a straightforward reward. As such, balance is maintained. The details have been added to the token."

"Wait!" Zac before Leandra's projection dissipated. "How long do I have?"

"We still have time before your sister is exposed, but that's contingent on nothing changing," Leandra said. "The sooner you finish your task, we can all return to our destinies."

Zac gritted his teeth as Leandra was about to disappear. "You say our Karma is severed, but that's not up to you. Sooner or later, I'll track you down. You'll pay for what you did back then."

Leandra only smiled at the threat.

"If you can accomplish such a thing, I will be content. That would mean the Zero Affinity Container would already be well on the way toward the Terminus. You would become an element of uncertainty that would break the status quo. That's all I can hope for, considering our recent setbacks."

"I won't go along with your twisted plans," Zac growled.

"Some things cannot be avoided whether we like it or not. The course was set long before either of us was born."

The projection disappeared, leaving Zac alone in his room. Only after a few minutes did he infuse a wisp of his will into the token to receive a brief information packet, if you could call it that. According to the insignia, there were two steps to the plan. First, he needed to pick up a key inside a hidden laboratory and activate some sort of protocol.

Both these things were required to access the hidden domain inside Sanctuary. The external lab was not among the hidden strongholds Sendor listed, but it was somewhat close to one of the Spatial Tunnels he knew of. And that was lucky as well, considering Leandra hadn't bothered providing him a route to Sanctuary. The missive said that the Eternal Storm was everchanging and that the roads she knew were likely compromised.

Sender's Information Crystal had suddenly shot up in value, saving him the headache of infiltrating some Technocrat force to get his hands on a route. Still, that didn't mean the task was easy should he decide to follow Leandra's instructions. The first step of the plan needed to be finished within three centuries, at which point he had another two to reach Sanctuary and activate the safeguard. Five Centuries was an incredibly long time considering his age, but it didn't feel that way after comparing notes.

He wouldn't make it in time, even if he set out today. How the hell did his mother expect him to accomplish such a mission?

Zac put away the token as he tried to quell the storm raging in his heart, where anger, worry, and helplessness fought for dominion. There was no point in heading for the Sanctuary right now, even if he could technically send one of his bodies while the other stayed in Zecia. The Yphelion simply wasn't equipped for that kind of journey, no matter if you looked at its max speed or defensive capabilities.

The Yphelion was meant to be his ace while traversing the Million Gates Territory, though he ended up not going before Hegemony. However, no matter how dangerous the chaotic region at Zecia's edge was, it paled compared to the unintegrated regions he'd have to cross to reach the hidden base, let alone Sanctuary.

He'd either have to upgrade his ship by multiple stages or get a better one before setting off. Worse, according to the information packet, the safeguard only needed to be activated and not be taken to wherever Kenzie and Leandra were. As such, the path to the Six Profundity Empire wasn't marked.

The feasibility of the mission was one thing. The task itself was also an issue. He had already considered heading into the Eternal Storm to investigate his Specialty Cores. This mission would let him accomplish that goal, and he would even be able to visit a few of the other hidden strongholds on Sender's map on the way. However, he'd have to be crazy if he took Leandra at her words.

It was not just possible, but likely there were some key aspects she wasn't sharing about the mission. It could very well be a trap. Zac thoughtfully looked down at the emblem, a plan slowly forming in his mind. Could he do it?

Could he achieve his goals, save Kenzie, and foil Leandra's schemes, all in one go?

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1066 - News from the Front - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1066 - News from the Front

Zac sighed as he sat down to face himself. He'd check in with the creators for a shipyard-upgrading quest later, but he had too much on his plate to worry about that matter right now. He'd have to survive the war and Ultom before worrying about heading into the Endless Storm. Perhaps he could trade the Primo's item inside the Hollow Court for a vastly superior ship. Perhaps Ultom would provide him with another solution. Worrying about it now wouldn't do him much good.

The real question was, what should he do going forward? Too much had happened too quickly, and he hadn't had the chance to sort everything out.

"I guess you'll be Arcaz for now," Zac said, and his Draugr self wryly smiled as he transformed into the usual appearance of his alias.

There was no point in telling even his closest confidants the truth of his shared existence. What they didn't know couldn't hurt them. The official story would be that he was really split apart during his breakthrough. Both were him since they came from the same soul, but they were their own people who would gradually diverge in the future.

It had been a relief to rid himself of the constant worry of his duality being exposed and becoming a test subject of some desperate Monarch. Unfortunately, it looked like one secret had been replaced with another. Some would likely think he was lying, but if Sendor couldn't figure things out, how could some Monarchs in the frontier? That uncertainty might actually provide some protection. Would the Undead Empire dare target him, unsure if his Draugr self even had Ultom's seal?

Zac stood up and started swinging his axe, but he frowned as he felt the moves sluggish and crude. Part of the reason was that he no longer had his [Thousand Lights Avatar] to channel his Daos through his bodies. That problem was easily solved, but it wasn't the main issue. The real interference came from the shared consciousness.

He'd already guessed as much, but it became increasingly apparent when trying to use his Evolutionary Stance while Arcaz looked on. He tried repeatedly, but Zac failed to enter that ethereal state when both bodies were

next to each other. They were hearing the same things, seeing the same things, though from slightly different vantages.

The difficulty of keeping the impressions separate created a delay which made it impossible to become one with your weapon and Dao. Only when Arcaz closed his eyes and entered a Void State to block out the surroundings did Zac manage to use his technique to its fullest. Both bodies simultaneously activating skills was easier, but Zac believed he was better off keeping his personas split up for the time being.

He could send one body to the battlefields while the other worked on upgrading skills or cultivation, or perhaps send both to different battlefields on different worlds. That would at least let him rack up wartime merit at twice the speed while improving his cover.

However, his top priority was reaching a point where he could freely control his bodies, whether they were on different worlds or fighting side by side. It was the key to pushing his strength to the next level before Ultom, and it might even help him with one of his long-term goals; fusing his stances into one system utilizing all three Daos.

In fact, reaching that step didn't necessarily require him first putting his bodies together. He had access to all Daos in both bodies and could freely use all three energies his Cosmic Core produced. Of course, he'd have to learn how to walk before he could run. How would he fuse his techniques when he couldn't even use them simultaneously?

Zac believed he would eventually grow more accustomed to his new form of existence, but there should be some ways to speed up the process. He didn't want to waste his free points on Intelligence, but there were undoubtedly some training methods for cultivators using beasts, puppets, or clones. They all required splitting one's attention, sometimes into thousands of avatars. He just needed to figure out how to do so with two.

How hard could it be?

Zac shook his head and sat back down, where he began dividing his items between bodies. Each side would have to keep some opposing materials on hand for Soul Cultivation, but it'd otherwise be easy enough to split the assets. The last item he took out was Alea's necklace, which he'd stowed away in a reinforced spatial ring to protect her from the Tribulation Lightning.

He'd already noticed his Spirit Tools were linked to both bodies, but Zac still handed [Love's Bond] over to his Draugr side. A surge of spiritual energy poured out of the necklace the moment she was out of the ring, and Alea's avatar appeared between his two forms with a huge smile on her face.

"You did it! I knew- Wait, what's going on?" Alea said as she curiously looked back and forth. "There's two of you now? Why do I feel connected to both?"

Zac wryly smiled and explained the situation through their mental connection. Alea was one of the few he could let in on his secret. He doubted he could keep it from her even if he wanted to.

"That's great!" Alea laughed as she hugged Arcaz from behind. "I was getting annoyed by having to share you with that mutt, and then you even got a copycat plant. Now I get one of you all by myself."

"I'm still going to fuse back together eventually," Arcaz commented as he equipped the necklace, bemused she was more annoyed with Verun and Vivi rather than Catheya. "How are things on your end?"

"I can break through any time as long as you provide the materials," Alea smiled.

"And you really don't need any arrays or other preparations? The [Divine Investiture Array]'s enough?"

"It'll help me through one final time. Oops, I have to go now," Alea said before she turned into a streak of energy that returned to the necklace.

Zac looked at the necklace for a few seconds before sending a message through Communication Crystal. It only took a few seconds to get a response, and its content made him frown. He flashed away, leaving his Draugr body to prepare for Alea's breakthrough. It wasn't the only thing that needed to be dealt with now that he was finally a Hegemon.

He also needed to expand and refine his pathways. The System only provided the initial expansion, and he would have to fix the rest himself. He'd begin with his Draugr form while his human side went and got to the bottom of things. Vilari's message couldn't wait.

Port Atwood was mostly the same, though Zac didn't check things thoroughly as he made a beeline for the enormous administrative building. He flew the

first stretch but soon switched to [Earthstrider] upon realizing the Peak Quality E-grade skill was still faster than his rough application of flight.

Vilari was already waiting for him in the lobby along with Joanna and Ilvere, and Zac breathed in relief upon seeing that all of them were fine. Joanna sported some new scars, but her aura had grown significantly stronger since they sparred last.

"Congratulations on your successful breakthrough," Vilari smiled. "I hope everything went well?"

"Well, things took a weird turn, but I'm fine," Zac grinned. "I'll tell you about it later. What's this about the war starting early?"

"There was a sector-wide announcement around three months ago," Vilari said. "We were fighting our first battle within three hours."

"So it really happened," Zac sighed, incredibly relieved he didn't waste an extra decade mastering [Essence Union] for his core. "How are things?"

"For the Atwood Empire? Mostly fine," Joanna said. "We're still in the war's early phase, and things are kept on a smaller scale. Our losses in the first couple of battles were on the higher side, but that's to be expected when so many of our warriors were untested recruits. Those veterans and wandering cultivators you managed to scrounge together were a huge asset, but with those nasty Heart Curses in the mix..."

Ilvere spat in disgust when Joanna mentioned the curses, and Zac understood the sentiment. Even he had found the things difficult to deal with back in the Void Star, and he was immune to their influence. They had to be a huge threat to normal cultivators.

"Luckily, our enemies thus far have been quite weak. Most seem to be captured warslaves, ill-organized and equipped," Ilvere said. "Our resources have allowed us to compensate for our shortcomings in experience."

"So things are fine," Zac breathed in relief.

"The Atwood Empire is winning, but Zecia is not," Vilari sighed. "Many established factions have suffered significant losses in these few months. The Kan'Tanu have already formed multiple beachheads in our sector. A few factions have collapsed already, their members turned into more warslaves."

"So fast?" Zac exclaimed. "How's that possible?"

"Follow us," Vilari said, leading Zac to a congress hall that had been transformed into a command center.

There were over fifty people inside fast at work, sending messages or analyzing the data appearing on a mix of large screens and arrays. There was also a huge star chart projected in the center of the room, which Zac assumed showed the current state of the war.

"This thing was delivered when the war officially started. It currently shows a three-dimensional map of Zecia," Joanna explained. "We're the blue dot, and the red spots are lost territory."

The map was an almost incomprehensible cloud of white. Zac could only recognize a few pieces, mostly the large empires. For example, it wasn't difficult to find the band of lights representing the Undead Empire since they emitted a weak hint of Death. However, one thing was quite clear and very troubling.

"There are red dots all over the place," Zac frowned. "How's this possible in just three months?"

The scene made him think of the Void Gate and the Kan'Tanu scheme to infiltrate the Zecia Sector through the Void Star. They'd pop out from Mystic Realms all over, wreaking havoc on regions that were supposed to be safe. But hadn't they ruined that scheme when they blew up the Stellar Ladder?

It hadn't been his main objective back then. He had simply wanted to destroy the connection to the Lost Plane before Gemmy, Billy's pet Realm Spirit, died and took them all with her. Blowing up the Kan'Tanu's backdoor entrance to the sector was just a welcome bonus. But looking at the map, it felt like his actions weren't as permanent as he'd thought. Had the Kan'Tanu managed to restore the ladder?

"The inter-sector war has innumerable war fronts," Vilari sighed. "We have thirteen arrays across our two planets, eight of them on Earth. Each will activate independently, though we cannot figure out any pattern. At that time, our command center receives an order of minimum deployment."

"We can't send less than the minimum, but we can send more," Joanna added. "We've done that so far to make sure we won't get overrun, but it's not a sustainable method. It increases our total loss rather than reduces it."

"We can also activate the arrays on our own," Ilvere said. "We haven't done that so far."

"Have any enemies ever stepped onto our soil?" Zac asked, having a pretty good idea of how there was so much lost territory.

It looked like the System was the cause of the chaos rather than some Kan'Tanu scheme.

"No," Joanna said, looking a bit disgusted. "It's part of the rules of this 'game.' Each array is considered a battlefield, so we have thirteen. The first battles all took place on neutral territories. Probably dead worlds the System has sourced from somewhere. We get extra merit and advance if we win a decisive victory."

"Into the Kan'Tanu Sector," Zac surmised.

"Exactly," Ilvere added. "At first, it's at remote unimportant worlds. But if we keep winning, we'll get sent to more powerful planets where the resistance is fiercer. Of course, each succeeding victory also snowballs our battle merit, and we get the chance to loot more flourishing worlds."

"So when you said whole forces have collapsed already, it means they suffered a series of disastrous losses until their main worlds were conquered?"

"Exactly," Ilvere said, looking at the shimmering lights with a frown. "We can only see our side of the map, but our intelligence channels indicated there's a lot more red in our sector than theirs. The Kan'Tanu are fewer in number, but their warriors are all incredibly fierce. No matter if it's attacking or defending, they fight to the end."

"Not like they have a choice with those disgusting things inside their bodies," Joanna spat.

"Can we reclaim those planets?" Zac asked.

"We can," Vilari nodded. "You can spend merit to shift a certain array's battlefield. It's very cheap if you've got the advantage but very expensive if your enemies are bearing down on you. Sometimes, you'll shift to a local battlefield where the goal is to rebuff the invaders. Those give bonus merit and are quite lucrative. Of course, the opposition is quite stiff."

"What if we just fly over?" Zac asked.

"It's possible, and it apparently gives huge bonuses. But it is very dangerous," Joanna said.

"Dangerous, how?"

"For one, it splits our forces. Any soldier we put on a fleet of Cosmic Vessels is one we can't send through the teleporters. It could lock up our resources for years, considering the level of our vessels and the distances involved," Joanna said. "It might be different now that you're back, though. You could teleport a strike squad to a nearby planet and fly over."

"It's still fraught with danger," Ilvere interjected. "These dots are updated with at least a few weeks' delay—the invaders will have dug in by the time you'd arrive. And while the arrays send us toward forces of matching strength, anyone could be waiting on the other side in this kind of mission. For example, we can teleport to a few worlds in the Kan'Tanu Sector at a very favorable price. What if we run into a Monarch? We'd be sending our warriors to their deaths."

Zac slowly nodded. You could likely control the risk by picking the right worlds to target. For example, a Low D-grade world would have been ruled by a Middle Hegemon at most, so the attackers were unlikely to be stronger than that. Monarchs were strategic resources, and the Kan'Tanu wouldn't send one to guard some random planet.

"There's more. I hear an enormous army is making its way through the Million Gates Territory, which will only increase the pressure. The chaotic region acts as a natural defense, but it will only delay the inevitable. The peak factions are already asking for reinforcements, even talking about forced drafts to shore up the physical battlefield. We'll be at an even greater disadvantage then."

"The war's barely started, and things are already so grim," Zac grimaced.

"It's bad, but not quite as bad as it looks," Ilvere said. "They have the advantage of unity and being more accustomed to bloodshed. Meanwhile, Zecia has quite a few declining factions who's maintained their status by bluster and hollow strength. These factions snapped like dried wood when the Kan'Tanu descended on us, but the rate of losses is already slowing down."

"Zecia has a huge advantage in terms of population," Joanna added. "The Kan'Tanu's cultivation method has an extremely lethality rate. Some estimates put their population at less than a third of ours, even if their sector is reported to be larger. And while Zecia has suffered huge defeats early on, we've also been tempered by the bloodshed."

"So time is the key," Zac muttered. "The Kan'Tanu wants a quick victory while we need to slow things down. We can use the war to transform our population into a superior army if we endure long enough."

"That seems to be the case," Ilvere nodded. "But it's easier said than done. Those Heart Curses are as troublesome as the Undead Empire. Zecia's growing stronger, but the Kan'Tanu are constantly adding new warslaves to their ranks, replacing their losses. And even if the plan is a success, it will have been paid for with rivers of blood."

"There have already been reports of factions surrendering," Vilari sighed. "Whole factions defecting and implanting themselves with Heart Curses to avoid battle. Luckily, the System heavily punishes those traitors, making it a relatively rare occurrence for now."

"Punished how?" Zac asked.

"I hear they stop getting wartime merit, though I'm unsure if it's a permanent punishment. They also have to keep stepping onto battlefronts, where they are given more dangerous enemies. Some Clan in the Dravorak Dynasty defected and was matched against an elite regiment of the Dravorak Imperial Army the next week. There are recordings of them being cut down to the last man, butchered like pigs."

"Intentionally spread to quell those kinds of thoughts, I guess?" Zac asked, getting an affirmative nod.

"There's more," Vilari added, surreptitiously looking around. "Should we adjourn to a meeting room?"

"I'll check the latest reports," Ilvere muttered and lumbered off.

"Is it about the inheritance?" Zac asked after he, Vilari, and Joanna were alone. "Have you figured out how the System will award the final pieces?"

"In a way," Vilari said as she shared a screen.

[Call of the Soultaker (Campaign, Inheritance (1/?)): Rise two ranks through War Merit. (0/2)]

"A multi-step quest," Zac muttered. "With seal pieces hopefully waiting at the end."

There was no other way to read the quest, considering Vilari was a Soultaker of the Anima Court. Zac had no idea how hard it was to rack up enough merit to rise two ranks, but it couldn't be too hard for a talent like Vilari. The real problem was that the quest didn't say how many steps it had, making it difficult to estimate how quickly these tasks needed to be finished.

"That's the assumption," Vilari nodded. "Every sealbearer has been awarded a quest, though our tasks are individualized."

"I haven't gotten one," Zac frowned.

"You should get it as soon as you register," Vilari said, and there was a flicker of anticipation in her eyes.

She wasn't alone. Joanna looked at him with expectation.

"Register? For the war?" Zac asked.

"Exactly. Before that, you can't even enter the battlefields or check out the Merit Exchange. You won't believe the things the System has put up for sale," Joanna said with a wide smile. "I can't wait to see what rating and designation you'll end up with."

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1067 - Rules of Engagement - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1067 - Rules of Engagement

"Rating and designation?" Zac asked. "What's going on?"

"There are several facilities near every Battlefield Array," Vilari explained. "One of them is a recruitment center. You must first register to access the Teleportation Array, War Merit Exchange, and various other features. At that time, you'll get an evaluation and a designation. For example, I'm a Fourth-Degree Captain, the lowest Captain rank."

"I'm a Strike Leader," Joanna added.

"What's the significance of the designations?"

"All designations come with varying levels of authority, and some provide access to additional features. My designation is equivalent to the authority of an Early Hegemon, which is enough to let us ignore any outside orders on most Early D-grade battlefields," Vilari said.

"So there's really a problem with outsiders?" Zac sighed.

This was something they'd feared since the beginning and one of the reasons he'd wanted to break through to Hegemony before the war. Factions without any elites were generally placed under the command of greater forces during sanctioned wars, and it looked like this inter-section war wasn't any different.

"There have been some problems, but we've been safe for now," Vilari said. "As Ilvere said, the war is only in the early stages. Our battlefields only have up to three factions working together, and all are roughly the same strength. However, we assume the battles will expand in scope in the future, perhaps through merging battlefields. The chain of command will become a bigger issue at that point."

"Your quest said to upgrade your rank with merit," Zac commented, seeing one route to avoid that headache.

"They can automatically be upgraded from accruing enough merit. I am close to reaching my first promotion," Vilari confirmed. "However, only War Merit gained through your designation counts. In other words, I can gain ranks from leading armies, but not through assassinating enemy leaders or crafting wartime resources."

"Breaking through is another solution," Joanna added. "Might makes right, and your ranking will get upgraded when stepping through minor thresholds. Thanks to your disciple, we also have a Third-Degree Captain, which lets us act unhindered on one of our two Middle D-grade battlegrounds."

"My disciple? Emily?" Zac asked with surprise. "Did she manage to hire a talented veteran?"

"No," Joanna laughed. "She broke through one month into the war, becoming our first native Hegemon."

"No wonder I didn't get any title this time around," Zac whistled. "I can't believe she broke through so quickly."

"Since then, four more have followed in her wake," Vilari said. "All of them are sealbearers. Of course, I expect that number will soon rise drastically. The Merit Exchange is almost completely geared toward gaining strength, and it's quite generous."

Zac turned to Joanna. "What about you? What's a Strike Leader?"

"It's great," Joanna smiled. "It lets me lead a small autonomous strike squad on the battlefield, and we get increased bounties for all leaders we take out."

"That sounds perfect," Zac said.

If possible, he'd definitely want such a role. Not having to bother with all the nitty-gritty or tactics, where he only needed to swing his axe and take out the leaders of the invading army.

"But it sounds like the System created a mess through our ranks, rearranging our personnel like that?"

"It was a bit chaotic at the start, but things quickly clicked into place," Vilari said. "The System has a very discerning eye. We've discovered quite a few talents hidden among our ranks."

"I guess that makes sense," Zac said. "This is what the System was designed for."

"Most roles are quite simple, too. Foot soldier, support, defender. Things like that," Joanna added. "You can also ignore your designation and stay in whatever position your faction awarded you. That's generally a bad idea since working according to your designation will reward more merit. We listened to the System's recommendations and rearranged things accordingly where possible."

"What about the evaluation you mentioned?" Zac asked.

"We think it's there for the designations, but it might have other uses. Like those who get higher evaluations might get more opportunities down the road," Vilari said. "There's no telling what other things the System might throw our way as things progress. It might also be related to the quests."

"So you registered, got a good evaluation, and became a Captain, which might have resulted in a quest for another piece of your seal," Zac summarized. "And you need to either break through or accrue merit through your designation to progress it."

"That's the gist of it," Vilari smiled.

"How long do you think until you can break through?"

"I could technically begin the process within three months, but my Soul isn't quite at the level I'd like," the Revenant said. "And unless my stepping into Hegemony is required, I'd prefer to find the second piece of my seal before evolving. I used the first to form a Bloodline Cultivation Method, and I wish to use the second to fuse my heritage with the Crown of Despair to create a path uniquely suited for me."

"That's fine," Zac said, remembering his plan to get his hands on another Moss Crystal for Vilari. "Follow your instincts. I'll do what I can to help."

"Vilari should be able to speed up her Merit now that you're back," Joanna said. "She's been forced to be on standby in case someone dangerous appears on the battlefields. Now, she can properly lead a few offenses."

"Yeah, I should be able to deal with anything that crops up. What about you? Have you found any clues to the Indomitable Court?"

A smile spread across Joanna's face as a similar quest screen appeared before her.

[Indomitable Spirit (Campaign (1/?))]: Personally execute hostile leaders worth 25,000 Merit. (18,321/25,000)]

It was similar, but there were some notable differences to Vilari's quest. For one, Joanna's only said it was a campaign quest, while Vilari's was tagged as both Campaign and Inheritance. However, the name was promising. Not only

that, but Joanna was well on her way to finishing the first step. It really looked like she'd grabbed onto the opportunity.

No wonder she was covered in a new set of scars.

"Between our two planets, another two have been awarded similar quests so far," Joanna said as the screen disappeared. "I'm hoping it'll be my way into the inheritance, even if it's as a second-string participant."

"Don't be so sure about that," Zac said. "I don't know if he told you this, but Ogras had to complete a difficult quest to get his seal. And he was the first sealbearer apart from myself in our group. Actually, there's more."

Zac shared how Kruta had gained an epiphany even when taking a seal from the body of another. Before that, the assumption was the seals would only provide an epiphany once. Recalling the event was extremely odd. He hadn't noticed before, but the information seal was already active. Thanks to his first round of negotiations with Sendor, he could remember all his encounters on top of his cultivation.

However, he couldn't remember where he and Kruta fought Valsa. He could vaguely recall they had entered some sort of dangerous cultivation zone, where Valsa ambushed them. But the details eluded him. The same was true for all his memories. Apart from remembering the Calamity and Mount Illumination, all his other adventures had grown blurry, like they had happened eons ago.

It was discomfoting having his experiences altered like this, but Zac knew that would happen going in. Besides, just remembering those two places let him intuit many things about his experience. The reason he could recall his home base and the Red Zone was no doubt related to the remnants and the Peak of Chaos, and Zac smiled at the thought of holding onto yet another of Sendor's secrets.

"Really? I actually get insights this way?" Joanna exclaimed, flush with excitement.

"Our working theory is that it's based on affinity. Anyone can get a seal, but only those with affinity to the courts would receive their insights," Zac said. "And I'd venture affinity won't be a problem considering you got the quest."

Joanna nodded eagerly, and it almost felt like her momentum was burning. It probably wouldn't be long before she also stepped into Hegemony.

"By the way, who are the other people?" Zac asked.

"They're—" Vilari began, but a blaring alarm cut off the Mentalist.

"Now?" Joanna swore, and Zac could feel the command center come abuzz through his Soul Sense.

The three ran back into the common room, where Ilvere was already barking orders.

"It's an early invasion!" Joanna exclaimed as a bloody aura leaked from her body. "Someone is making a move on one of our war fronts."

"What's going on? How can I help?" Zac said.

"You've just returned; you don't need to worry about this," Vilari said. "We can handle it. Why not focus on getting accustomed to your evolution?"

"You've fought for months while I was off-world. This is the least I can do," Zac said. "Besides, what better place to get used to my breakthrough than on a battlefield?"

Vilari and Joanna shared a look.

"Do you wish to lead the army?" Vilari hesitated.

"No, I'll just join as a fighter," Zac said, almost laughing upon seeing the relief in their eyes. "You know I'm no good at that micromanagement stuff. Unless the System forces me into some other role, I'll be the vanguard."

"Then follow me," Joanna said. "The battlefront is on Ensolus, so we need to teleport there first."

"Be careful," Vilari added, clearly opting to stay behind to manage things.

"We'll catch up properly after we've dealt with this mess," Zac said.

'Remember to listen to your subordinates before storming the enemy lines,' Vilari urged through a mental message. 'Fighting on these battlefields differs

from the inheritances, and the Kan'Tanu have some dangerous methods. Even you can fall if not careful.'

Zac nodded in understanding before he and Joanna rushed out of the command center.

"Do our warriors always go to the same warfront, or do we switch it up?" Zac asked as they ran toward the Nexus Hub.

"Usually the same unless one front needs reinforcements or finds themselves needing specific talents," Joanna said. "We do have some reserve units who can help shore up our ranks. The command center will no doubt some this time around. We are spread a bit thin, though. We've managed to recruit a lot of new recruits lately, but they're not ready to join the battlefield yet. "

"So, what's an early invasion?" Zac asked.

"We mentioned that we have the option to activate our Battlefront Arrays early," Joanna said. "Some Kan'Tanu regiment must have done just that. The eighth army fought just three days ago, and it shouldn't have activated this early otherwise. As far as we can tell, each battlefront is only called upon once every two weeks at most, though there are always smaller skirmishes in between.

Joanna's face was somber as they rushed toward the battlefront. Zac also had a bad feeling. He'd just returned, and some details were still hazy, but it wasn't difficult to understand the implications of an early attack. No one could fight continuously. The casualties would be staggering if a faction pushed its soldiers too far, and a war at this scale could last centuries unless one side managed to overwhelm the other.

Normally, both sides would use the downtime to regroup and recover. An attack just three days after the first meant the Kan'Tanu must have received reinforcements and planned to take out their enemies in one go while they were at their weakest. Furthermore, the fact they dared attack an overgeared army like his must mean they'd brought a whole lot of firepower.

A few more jumps took them to a huge war camp on the Mavai Steppes, its scale making it even larger than Port Atwood. It wasn't just the soldiers of the eighth army but also their families and a huge support system. Of course, the inner sections would only be accessible to the enlisted.

It was only the third time Zac visited the life-attuned continent, having been busy with his cultivation over the past years. Still, Zac could sense that the environment had improved slightly since he was here last time. Releasing the twinned Realm Spirits into the planet's center had done wonders.

The chimeral energy on the Ensolus Continent was kept stable enough not to descend into a situation like the Calamity, and the energy on the two single-attuned continents had improved in quality. It couldn't compensate for the loss of Origin Dao, but the environment would slowly improve as the Realm Spirits grew up.

The camp was already full of bustle, with a constant stream of warriors pouring toward what looked like an Incursion Pillar in the distance. Many of the soldiers were Mavai, with this being their continent, but Zac saw there were soldiers of all living races represented. Of course, most of his armies were mixed, but they couldn't have Raun Spectrals and Revenants stationed on a Life-attuned continent.

A small party was already waiting for him as they stepped off a private Teleportation Array, including the Mavai Warchief and two of his adult children.

"Welcome, Emperor Atwood!" Ra'Klid greeted with a small bow, which was mirrored by the others. "We just got word of your return. Congratulations on your breakthrough."

"Thank you," Zac smiled. Zac didn't know if he'd ever get used to being called Emperor, but he didn't bother trying to correct people any longer. "How's the situation?"

"Fighting has already begun, but we are not yet sure of the extent of the attack," Ra'Klid said, pointing at the pillar. "We're entering with full force just in case, and the Lord's reinforcements will soon arrive."

"How's the reaction to our integrated armies been?" Zac asked as they hurried toward the pillar.

"Not great," Joanna grimaced. "The Undead Empire has been a huge asset for Zecia, having a massive army and winning almost every battle they've joined. It has drastically improved their reputation, but three months isn't enough to erase eons of bad blood. And that hatred has spilled over on us."

We've had to rearrange two battlefronts to avoid infighting with the other participants."

"People actually cause us problems while we have the invaders to deal with?" Zac frowned. "Who are these people?"

"Just some backwater D-grade factions," Joanna said. "Most of them are essentially dead weight."

"Worse than dead weight," Ra'Klid added. "Nothing is more dangerous to a tribe than an incompetent Warchief. Second is incompetent allies."

"Can't we just get rid of them?" Zac asked.

"Attacking them counts as a betrayal. Even ignoring their orders can cause issues if we don't have high-enough officers among our ranks. That's partly why we're pushing ourselves to break through and rack up merit."

"This battlefront isn't too bad. Our allies aren't the strongest, but they're taking the matter seriously and are fighting hard," Ra'Klid said. "As for the others..."

Zac grimaced. It wasn't hard to figure out the rest, thinking back to the desperate situation displayed on the War Map. Zecia had a lot of useless factions, but even useless factions could nurture a couple of Hegemons if their foundations were strong enough. And the Atwood Empire was the perfect meat shield—strong, well-equipped, and lacking seniors that could suppress their allies and take charge.

"Hopefully, Emperor Atwood's return will help with this matter. As the ruler of the faction, your status will impact all battlefronts," the demon added, looking at a large structure placed just outside the inner walls of the military compound.

It was no doubt the Recruitment Station, yet the scene in front of it made Zac's brows rise. A swarm of agitated demons currently blocked its entrance, all of them old, maimed, or both. A few even had completely white hair, while the gold in their skin had long faded. Their auras weren't anything to call home about, but Zac could feel their steely determination as they glared at a couple of clerks standing by the entrance.

"What's going on?" Zac asked.

"Volunteers," Ra'Klid sighed. "Old veterans whose bodies didn't properly adapt to the integration. Warriors who have been deemed too wounded to participate effectively on the battlefield. Many have tried to join for months, and they rushed here when the warning blared."

"Why not let them register if we're already spread thin?" Zac asked.

"Teleportation is only free up to the minimum personnel listed by the System," Joanna explained. "The rules are similar to the Incursions, with one important difference. We also lose Faction Merit when sending warriors beyond a certain point, which is our most critical resource. If we let anyone join, we won't be able to spend merit on fortifications or other upgrades the Atwood Empire desperately needs. We need warriors, but they need a minimum strength to warrant sending them to the battlefronts."

"Some of these old goats are trying to join for selfish reasons," Ra'Klid added. "They're not the ones who have to pay for mobilization, and they don't care if they'll become weak links in our ranks. Their eyes are on the Merit Exchange, thinking it's the key to return to their former glory. For example, a pill to restore an E-grade cultivator's limb only costs 2,500 merit. There are also Dao Fruits and other good stuff."

"We chose to restrict the recruitment centers when people began causing problems, like trying to sneak onto the battlefields in search of merit. One lunatic even tried setting fire to the barracks to create a diversion. Now, there's a pre-screening process."

"The seniors who came here today just want to help," Ra'Klid's daughter quickly added, clearly not agreeing with her father's opinion on the crowd ahead. "Every time the tribes enter the pillar, many will be forever left behind on some distant world. Even more will come back inside Spatial Rings. The seniors are willing to take the most dangerous roles, all to protect the future generations."

"The young have yet to experience the darkness in the hearts of men," Ra'Klid smiled, ignoring his daughter's blithering stare. "If they had such desire to serve, where were they when we called for army reserves in the past years? Why didn't they apply for non-combat roles to help our efforts through the proper channels? They can earn merit that way too. They're hoping to stay at the backlines and reap the far more generous wartime rewards when we conquer a world."

"That's—" Wrok'Sa said, but Ra'Klid waved at her to stop as he turned back to Zac.

"Either case, we can't let them onto the battlefield, especially not now," Ra'Klid said. "Do you want me to disperse them?"

"I think it's good if you solve this," Joanna said to Zac. "Times are tough, and people need a beacon of hope. Or at least a beacon of power."

"Hope and power," Zac said, slowly nodding. "I'll deal with it."

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1068 - Rank and Designation - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1068 - Rank and Designation

Zac didn't know which of the two demons was right. Both, most likely. Some of these volunteers might be wartime opportunists. But it wouldn't be odd for many of these old warriors to stir after witnessing the brutality of the struggle.

He remembered the problems they'd had with their recruitment drives in the beginning. Many didn't even believe them when they said a war was coming. And even if it did, so what? The integration had been dealt with without many of them ever lifting a finger. Why would this be any different?

Now, war was here, and people were forced to face reality. Months had passed since the battles started, which was ample time for the situation to be spread back to the civilians. These old fighters might really have chosen to sacrifice themselves for their tribes now that the Kan'Tanu and their Heart Curses were at their gates.

"Then we'll go ahead," Ra'Klid said, not without some reluctance. The demon was clearly curious about what rank and designation Zac would be getting. "I need to see what we're dealing with."

"I'll catch up soon," Zac nodded as he turned toward the recruitment center.

Zac's arrival initially came unnoticed. The crowd was busy shouting at the workers barring the entrance behind an array. A few glanced over when Zac came close, but they didn't recognize him. Joanna helplessly shrugged at the scene, indicating for him to speak up. Zac chose an even more direct solution; he rose into the air and floated above the crowd.

"Emperor Atwood!" a human clerk exclaimed upon seeing Zac fly toward them, prompting the grizzled old warriors to look up with shock.

Zac saw the mixed emotions in their eyes; hope, suspicion, curiosity. He knew what kind of impression his demon citizens had of him. The events in the Tower of Eternity, or when he quelled the Raun uprising, had long since spread throughout the Mavai population, intentionally so by Ra'Klid and his council. Adding his reclusive nature, Zac had almost taken on mythical status.

He could tell that some of the old warriors had almost expected him to have three heads and six arms, and they looked a bit disappointed upon realizing he just looked like a normal human, even if it was a flying one. Zac hesitated a moment before releasing some of the restraints on his aura, letting roiling waves of Killing Intent, Divine Energy, and the Daos of his Evolutionary Path spread through the crowd and beyond.

The barrier surrounding the recruitment center groaned, and the line of reinforcements froze momentarily on its way to the inner regions and the Battlefront Array. The Mavai veterans took the brunt of his aura, but they were only briefly shocked before a fervent gleam appeared in their eyes. Zac obviously restrained his power to a level where it wouldn't hurt these people, and he knew the allure of his path to these old Mavai Demons.

If he'd been Mavai himself, he would have been considered a forefather already. Of course, it looked like his reputation had taken a hit as there were not a few unfriendly looks trained at him. Zac had an inkling why and ignored it. He'd turn these people around through action.

"I'm gratified to witness the Mavai's bravery and the steel in your veins," Zac said, his Dao-empowered voice echoing through the square as he stopped before the entrance. "I know you are worried for your sons and daughters, but rest assured. The Mavai Tribes are part of the Atwood Empire, and you have our full support. We will crush this assault, as we will any faction who tries to harm our people."

"Warc- Ah, mister Emperor," a wizened Mavai warrior missing an arm said. "Are you joining the war?"

"I am sorry to have kept you all waiting these past months," Zac said. "I had just broken through to Hegemony when I learned of this early attack. I'm stepping onto the frontlines as soon as I've registered. Our forces are more than capable of handling this assault, and there is no need to send

noncombatants to their deaths. If you still wish to serve, please talk with our recruiters. There are many ways to help keep our soldiers safe."

No order was issued, but the protective barrier deactivated, letting Zac inside. There were a dozen clerks and warriors who looked ready for a siege, but Zac only nodded in their direction before continuing to one of the fifty glimmering crystals floating at the back of the hall. Zac placed his hand on the crystal, and a familiar pulse spread through his body.

[Use Alias?]

"No," Zac said after some thought, not feeling the need to hide his identity any longer. If anything, it could help his faction if he gained some renown and appeared on leaderboards.

Perhaps the System already had him on file because the evaluation was far quicker than when it scanned his Cosmic Core. A set of screens popped up almost immediately.

[Evaluation: Early D-grade. S-grade Attributes. B-grade Dao. S-grade Achievements. S-grade potential. Rank: Baron of Conquest]

[Comprehensive evaluation: S-grade. Marked for unique scenario, special designation awarded.]

[Designation: Fated Flamebearer]

[Flamebearer of Zecia (Campaign, Inheritance (1/?)): Lead your faction to conquer 9 Early D-grade worlds in the Zurbor Sector. Kill or capture one Sealbearer. Reward: Court Cycle Token. (0/10)]

[Calculating Pre-enlistment Merit. Merit cap Reached.]

There wasn't anything surprising in the evaluation. It was a bit annoying not being awarded S-grade across the board, not even getting an A-grade rating for his Dao. But he had to admit that three Middle-stage Dao Branches wasn't that impressive for an Early Hegemon. For example, Iz had three Late-Stage Dao Branches while still in the E-grade, and there were likely Early Hegemons who had formed Earthly Daos.

Of course, the difference between him and them was that he'd just entered Hegemony while they'd likely spent centuries there, possibly millennia. At

least the comprehensive Evaluation was put at S-grade, though the text after left Zac with mixed emotions.

Being marked by the System for 'special training' had controlled most of his actions during the event in the Research Base at the threat of having Skills and levels removed if he didn't comply. And he still remembered the stifling feeling of being congratulated for being awarded a unique scenario when left alone on Demon Island. Now, he found himself marked yet again.

He loathed the feeling of having the System trying to rein him in and control him, but the situation was thankfully quite different this time around.

Terminology aside, his new quest looked just like the one Vilari had, with no stick to go with the carrot. Of course, there was one interesting difference. Vilari's quest had no reward listed, while he would receive a 'Court Cycle Token' from completing the very first step.

There was no description of what the thing did, but it had to be related to the Left Imperial Palace, and likely his other inheritance quest that had him complete cycles of sealbearers. Getting the token was easier said than done, though. Conquering nine worlds was one thing; he could force a few quick victories with money before retreating if need be.

But where would he find a hostile Sealbearer? It wasn't like they announced their presence. He had long since figured out the method Valsa used to expose him, but those tracking arrays could only scan the surrounding hundred meters. He'd keep it on him while fighting, but it was still akin to looking for a needle in a haystack.

The added merit was tacked onto the bottom of his Status Screen, and the pre-enlistment War Merit cap was apparently 125,000. The reward was no doubt the result of his activities inside the Void Star. He didn't have much to go by, but Zac suspected it was significantly more than any of his followers had earned so far.

Joanna's quest had said she'd gained roughly 18,000 merit from taking out enemy leaders, and that was with a rank that provided bonuses for doing just that. Zac estimated Joanna had around 30,000 total when adding her other merit sources. Truthfully, Zac felt the reward on the lower end, considering the effect his contribution had on the whole sector.

He'd been one of the main reasons the Kan'Tanu infiltration plan had failed, and he'd killed multiple hostile Hegemons. The only reason Zac could come

up with was that the System didn't want to award too much merit before the actual war. It wanted him and others to temper themselves on the battlefield. The bonus should at least set him up with some nice things that'd let him quickly advance through the initial stages of Hegemony.

Opening his status screen led to another startling discovery; his Draugr self hadn't received any merit. Both bodies had gained the inheritance quest, but only his human Status Screen had a line with merit. Zac had wondered whether his bodies would be counted as two individuals or one. The result wasn't definitive, but Zac leaned toward him being counted as two for the war but one for the Left Imperial Palace.

That was actually the optimal scenario as far as Zac was concerned. It would be difficult maintaining his cover if his Arcmaz persona didn't appear on any leaderboards. Of course, he'd have to visit another Recruitment Center with his Draugr body later to confirm his findings. Now, Zac had more pressing matters to deal with.

He turned toward the exit after he was done, but he was surprised to find Joanna quickly trying to hide the disappointment on her face as she stowed a Communication Crystal.

"What's wrong?" Zac asked.

His mission was tricky, but Zac was overall happy with the results.

"When Emily broke through and was promoted, the Command Center got a notification saying our army ranking had been upgraded. I just confirmed that we didn't gain a rank this time. I guess we all kind of thought..." Joanna said, her voice trailing off.

"Oh," Zac said. "Sorry, I've received a specialized role."

"Is it related to..." Joanna asked, getting an affirmative nod in return.

"Let's go," Zac said.

However, Zac didn't even reach the exit before a commotion erupted outside.

"The Merit Board!" dozens of demons shouted as one blue screen after another popped up among the crowd.

The demons that had seemed indignant suddenly looked at Zac with reverence, and he could guess what they were thinking. People had thought he'd been in seclusion while his armies bled, but the accrued merit told another story. The Atwood Emperor must have fought tirelessly in the shadows, perhaps on the front lines in the Million Gates Territory.

Of course, their previous assumption had been much closer to the truth. He really had been in seclusion since the war started. Zac glanced at Joanna, who shared a screen identical to the others.

1st – 125,000. Zachary Atwood.

2nd – 41,327. Rhubat.

3rd – 37,173. Emily Larkin.

4th – 27,911. Joanna Thompson.

5th – 24,474. Vilari Blackwood.

6th – 24,238. Ra'Klid Erosa.

7th – 23,471. Janos Azh'Rodum.

8th – 21,788. Ilvere Azh'Rodum.

9th – 21,629. Aouvi Sealmyre.

10th – 20,138. Carl Elrod

[...]

100th – 15,362. Torat.

Zac quickly skimmed the list of names and realized it was a local ladder of the Atwood Empire with only a few dozen names he didn't recognize. The entries themselves didn't provide any big surprises. The top ten were mostly made up of people chosen for the upcoming trial, excepting Ilvere and one of the two Raun leaders at the 9th spot. The other one was at the 12th.

He hadn't expected Rhubat to hold the second place, and with such a margin over people like Vilari and Joanna. Zac guessed it made sense, considering he was the leader of the warlike Zhix, but he had to be one of the sealbearers

who had evolved. Zac also hadn't expected to see Thomas Marshall at the 14th spot, nor Verana Tir'Emarel, the Tal-Eladar Beastmaster, at the 15th.

"Amazing," Joanna said.

"It's not bad," Zac nodded.

"Not bad," Joanna repeated with a wry shake of her head. "Rhubat, Emily, and I had the most accrued merit when registering, yet none of us crossed 10,000. I had 8,000."

It had taken three months for Joanna to earn another 19,000, meaning that roughly 5,000 merit a month was the target for a Peak E-grade elite, which tracked with the barrier of entry to the top 100. Meanwhile, Emily's and Rhubats tallies indicated Hegemons could earn just under double that. If a powerhouse like Zac could earn double what an elite like Emily did, he'd earned around half a year's merit in one go.

Zac was very curious about what kind of rewards you could exchange for such a chunk of merit, but the still-progressing stream of soldiers was a stark reminder that this wasn't the time to investigate the ins and outs of the War System. Joanna joined him as he flashed out of the building, soon arriving atop the Battlefield Array. Altogether, they stayed less than two minutes on the Mavai continent.

The transportation was instant. One moment Zac was embraced by the vibrant aura of the Mavai Continent. The next, he almost felt suffocated from lacking truths and energy, while a loud rumble made it difficult to even think. This warfront had to be located on a Middle E-grade at most, judging by the energy density. Then again, Zac guessed that the huge fortress around him would further drain the region.

The environment was almost unbearable after having spent years in the sublime realms of the Perennial Vastness, but he pushed down the discomfort as he inspected the screen that had appeared before him.

[Eighth Battlefront of the Atwood Empire. Assigned Leader: Ra'Klid Erosa.]

[De-facto leader of Atwood Empire detected, designation qualified for leadership. Assign yourself leader?]

"No," Zac said without hesitation.

[General assignment: Defend the fortress. Merit awarded after siege is over, depending on individual contribution.]

[Fated Flamebearer: Break the siege. Destroyed battlements 1.5x merit. Killed or captured enemies above 1st Grade Sergeant, 1,5x merit. Conquer enemy base 1-2x merit depending on performance. NOTE: This world is insufficient to advance campaign quest.]

Zac scanned through the temporary assignments and breathed in relief upon seeing the nature of those provided by his designation. The bounties were clearly urging him to go on the offensive rather than hunker down inside some command tent. Even better, the System still didn't force him into anything like the quest chain he'd completed inside the Mystic Realm. It more resembled Joanna's tasks.

After closing the screens with a thought, Zac took in the scene. It quickly became apparent that the rumbles didn't come from thunder but from enormous explosions that shook a wall far in the distance. Between the teleportation platform and the frontline, there was another line of defense, together forming a diamond-shaped fortress the size of a city.

They had appeared right at its center, and Zac noted their pillar was one of two, with the other only a few hundred meters away. From it came a stream of minotaurs, the smallest of them three meters tall. They weren't quite the height of the Zhix's Anointed but were decidedly bulkier. However, while their expressions were fierce, their auras and equipment left some to be desired.

Of course, it wasn't fair to compare the beastkin with the overgeared armies of the Atwood Empire, but they seemed a bit shoddy even for an established Zecian D-grade force. They reminded Zac of when he fought Clan Azh'Rezak. As Ra'Klid guessed, these minotaurs likely came from a newly formed force or one with limited resources.

Both minotaurs and his own soldiers streamed toward a large square beneath the platforms, where they were arranged into larger units before immediately being sent to the frontlines. The attack came from two directions, with the battle to the north being much fiercer. A large section of the wall was actually missing, and there were well over a hundred unmoving bodies around the breach.

A shimmering barrier covered the broken patch, but Zac wasn't sure how dependable it was, considering his soldiers were constantly passing through it

to meet the attackers head-on. He could vaguely spot a river of Kan'Tanu attackers stream toward the breach under cover of an enormous tangle that pulsated with cursed power. Meanwhile, the Array Towers atop the wall unleashed unfettered destruction on something hidden behind the fortifications.

"What should we do?" Zac asked, filled with urgency upon taking in the scene.

They'd known about the war for years, and the briefing had given him a decent understanding of the recent developments. However, the stakes hadn't felt quite real, especially with the System almost making a game of it. It was all too real now. The soldiers in the distance were only specks from their vantage, but each was a warrior under his command who could join the unmoving corpses on the ground at any moment.

Yet they staunchly streamed toward the breach, which felt increasingly like a bloody grindstone where every minute was bought with rivers of blood.

"I can't believe they broke through so quickly. They've always had problems dealing with our arrays," Joanna swore, her shocked expression not making Zac feel any better. "It looks like we have the situation under control, but something's wrong. Look."

Zac followed where Joanna pointed and saw an army tens of thousands strong having gathered behind the wall at the other frontline. Meanwhile, hundreds of array masters were fast at work, setting up doorways that rippled with spatial energy.

"They're striking out," Zac said, recognizing the arrays.

They were War Arrays that would create short-distance gates leading to the other side of the fortifications. If timed correctly, they would allow his army to strike the enemy front lines much quicker while avoiding the killing fields between the wall and the invaders. In return, it cost a small fortune to power those things, not to mention the cost of the doorways themselves, so few D-grade factions would use them.

The Atwood Empire was essentially leveraging their massive wealth to minimize casualties, but Zac knew that the vanguard of those arrays would take heavy losses to form a beachhead. He remembered doing the same thing back in the Mystic Realm when the Church of Everlasting Dao tried to disconnect their platform from the Memorysteel Mountain.

But instead of a few hundred cultists, these warriors would have to face a sea of Kan'Tanu and their war machines.

"The Kan'Tanu must have forced our hand. We would have stayed within the walls normally, using our Array Towers to weaken the attack before striking out," Joanna said. "Must be related to that big hole. Ra'Klid wants to destroy whatever created it before we're left with a second entrance."

Zac looked back and forth, gritting his teeth with frustration. It felt like whichever side he chose, the other would suffer heavy casualties. He even regretted not bringing his other body, even if he knew he wasn't ready to fight a pitched battle under those conditions. Ultimately, he could only follow his gut and do his best.

"I'll deal with the breach," Zac said, not waiting for Joanna to answer before shooting forward like a rocket. There were Kan'Tanu to kill.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1069 - Death - Read

Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1069 - Death

The surroundings were reduced to a blur as Zac made a beeline toward the frontline. Zac's instincts urged him to emerge through the breach and unleash a massacre, but he remembered Vilari's warning. Rushing headlong into the heat of it might lead him right into a trap, one that might implicate his soldiers too. Besides, there were likely better ways to use his strength than to cull the Kan'Tanu's vanguard.

He could already spot Ra'Klid atop the wall, directing the efforts to shore up the broken section, so Zac changed direction and flew atop the wall walk. Multiple auras exploded when Zac appeared out of nowhere, two of them in the D-grade, but the demons relaxed upon seeing who it was.

"What happened?" Zac asked as he landed next to the Mavai Warchief.

"They struck like lightning," Ra'Klid spat. "It's because of those things."

Zac followed the demon general's gaze and was shocked to see how small the battlefield was. The Kan'Tanu fortress was actually visible in the distance; it wouldn't even take him less than ten minutes to reach it if he ran. Between was simply an empty field, which was currently crawling with enemy combatants. Zac felt like he was looking out at a sea of agitated ants creeping

toward their wall, where only some patches were covered by the bloody tangles.

A bloody melee had already erupted below, but Zac could tell that the Kan'Tanu Vanguard didn't have many powerful warriors. The Atwood Army and minotaurs were already pushing them back, and new warriors joined every second. Zac was relieved to see his men fight as a unit, keeping losses at a minimum. Casualties were far higher on the Kan'Tanu's side, though they didn't seem to mind in the slightest.

The source of the constant rumble was the hundreds of pyramids that floated just above the ground, launching one attack after another on their protective barrier. The pyramids were mobile array towers that released dark-red beams that exploded when they hit the barrier. Zac frowned upon realizing the assault was almost one-sided, but it wasn't because the Atwood Army didn't have array towers of their own.

They had bigger fish to fry. Literally.

Nine enormous spheres were rolling forward at a steady pace, each over 200 meters tall and covered in black runes. Three of them had been destroyed by a barrage of attacks, reducing them to building-sized rubble on their way to the wall. The other six were still intact, their runes forming a sturdy barrier as they advanced.

Zac guessed a tenth was the source of the huge crater nearby. His first thought them some sort of Array Wallbreakers, but his eyes widened upon realizing the spheres writhed and wiggled. The things were alive. Unfettered attacks rained down on the creatures from the remaining Array Towers, but the effect was limited. The blast had clearly damaged the defensive arrangements, and taking out the first three had drained the intact Array Towers.

"What the hell are those things?" Zac swore.

"Living bombs, by the looks of it," Ra'Klid grimaced.

"How did they manage to close in on us?" Zac frowned. "They should have been spotted the second they emerged from the other fort."

"That's the thing; they didn't. Four of them just appeared out of nowhere, which was the source of the alarm. The next moment, their army emerged from a sudden sandstorm halfway across the no man's land."

"These creatures are incredibly tough," a shaman next to Ra'Klid sighed. "Our guardians immediately targeted them, but you can see the effect. We only managed to destroy three before the last one reached the wall."

"The thing somehow tapped into the energy powering our arrays just as I arrived," Ra'Klid continued. "You can see the result yourself. Now there's six of them here and another four on the other front. And now their armies are protecting their advance. We can't let them get any closer even if we have to fight outside the walls."

Zac nodded. The outermost wall was clearly the strongest, while the inner one seemed designed to withstand just enough punishment for the army to evacuate. Losing the outer wall meant losing the battle. The generals had to choose between fighting outside the walls or retreating and had picked the latter.

"Now that you're here, we can divide and conquer," Ra'Klid said. "With your permission, I drafted a loose plan. Using our elites, we will launch a raid at the three on the left. I was hoping you could blend with the army below and strike at the nearest one while we draw their attention. They don't know of your existence, so we should use it to our advantage."

"I'll see what I can—" Zac said, but his mind ground to a halt as he honed in on a particular warrior below.

It was a young human fighting alongside Mavai, Zhix, and other humans as they struggled to push back the flood of Kan'Tanu warslaves pouring toward the breach. He was only in the early stages of the E-grade but showcased commendable skill. But skill alone wasn't enough to survive on a battlefield like this. A sudden surge from the Kan'Tanu had cut him off from his squad, and he found himself isolated and surrounded.

The scene was not unique. If anything, it was commonplace. The Atwood Army tried to keep order, but it was impossible with Heart Curses erupting everywhere. The squadmates tried to rescue their companions, but they didn't have the strength to force an opening. Neither was there anything special about the boy. He was just a common footsoldier doing what he could to stay alive until rescue arrived. Yet he was different.

Because Zac recognized that sword.

He had just returned from Ensolus, having dealt with the natives and stabilized the world, when he passed by the Thayer Consortia. Back then, he'd seen a group of teenagers who had yet begun cultivating swing around some swords. Zac had felt something in the youth's glare and gifted him a Spirit Tool Sword he'd picked up during his travels—the very same sword the young man now desperately swung to stave off his attackers.

It was just a short encounter, one that Zac had almost forgotten after almost fifteen years of cultivation. Of course, for this young man, just under five had passed. The teenager had made his way through the F-grade, successfully breaking through. Only to be thrown onto the battlefield. And now his journey was about to end.

Zac was already moving before he knew it, Ra'Klid's warning shouts growing distant as he descended on the frontlines like a bloodthirsty specter. A sanguine beam shot right at him when he lept down from the wall, but an offhanded swing cut the Array Tower's attack in two. All the while, Zac's eyes never left the young man.

He fought with the same determination Zac saw back then, striking down one of the Kan'Tanu. He even managed to destroy the Heart Curse, but doing so opened him up to a deadly strike from another enemy. A stab of a spear radiating a weak Dao of piercing punched a hole through the Atwood soldier's already damaged armor and continued into his chest.

Zac burned with fury as he crashed into the ground like a meteor, eviscerating dozens of Kan'Tanu before they could react. A storm of fractal leaves ripped apart the second wave of invaders, along with dozens of Heart Curses, before Zac knelt next to the boy.

"It's... you," the young man coughed, his voice barely a whisper as his blood joined that of the others in the ground. "Thank... you... for the..."

"Focus on recovery," Zac said as he flooded the wound with his Branch of the Kalpataru while feeding him a top-quality Healing Pill.

It was too late.

The pill went to work, but the soldier's heart had been pierced, and an infusion of hostile Dao had destroyed most of his lungs. He didn't have the Vitality or a

constitution strong enough to tide him over until the pill could mend the damage. He exhaled one final time, his hand still gripping the shortsword as the inexorable end of all living arrived. True Death trumped Zac's Dao of Life, and the young man's soul entered the cycle of reincarnation.

Zac might have been able to save the boy if the problem was being implanted by a Heart Curse. He could probably overwhelm these low-grade curses with Void Energy or his Dao Branches, but he couldn't deal with a destroyed heart. At least not while his Creation Energy was completely drained after his breakthrough. What little he'd extracted since then was barely enough to reform a finger, but a heart was asking too much.

It was just one death among hundreds, and the war continued all around him. But it was like Zac had been separated from the world around him as he looked down at the fallen warrior, where his erratic aura ensured neither enemies nor allies dared come close. A small whisper in the back of his mind tried to rationalize the scene. This was the reality of war; hundreds had already suffered the same fate since the early attack began.

Furthermore, this boy wasn't someone close to him—Zac didn't even know his name. Yet something about his death filled Zac with such a suffocating feeling that it almost drove him mad. He'd wrung himself dry working on his breakthrough, making the impossible possible by forming an unprecedented core. He'd stepped into Hegemony in defiance of his fate and conventional wisdom.

But what did it really change? It didn't stop the suffering around him. People, his citizens, were still dying.

A raging storm built in his chest, and his aura formed a deadly domain that made his surroundings impassable for most E-grade cultivators. However, his aura slowly condensed as Zac forcibly restored his mental state. Entering Hegemony might not be enough to save everyone, but it had undeniably made him stronger.

There wasn't anything he could do about the war, but he could swing his axe until there were no enemies left. He could make himself into a bull's eye, where every attack coming his way would be one fewer levied at his people.

"Stop! They have whole squads of assassins targeting leaders!" Ra'Klid shouted, having finally caught up along with six bodyguards.

"I'm going in," Zac calmly said, his momentum surging.

The demon's face collapsed at the response. "They have Heart Curse traps too, where you're doomed even if you survive! You need to be care—"

Ra'Klid swore upon seeing their leader carve a bloody path right toward the closest Living Bomb. The warslaves might as well have been made from straw when faced with the Emperor's axe. It wasn't just the warriors, either. A storm of fractal leaves destroyed one of the thorn shields, and Ra'Klid grimaced when the gory scene below was exposed.

"That maniac!" Ra'Klid swore. "Hurry, protect the Emp—!"

The demon didn't have time to finish his words before two Array Towers were split apart, their explosions creating a ripple of unfettered destruction that consumed over a hundred Kan'Tanu.

"Find him!" Ra'Klid shouted as he rushed forward.

The group set out again, but they only managed to move fifty meters before a line of pure destruction split Ra'Klid's vision in two. He almost felt like his soul would be sucked out of his body from the calls of two churning clouds that stretched toward the sky. One contained salvation and the origin of the Mavai, a golden portal leading to paradise. The other was a cold pit of despair far more wretched than the aura of the Raun.

The huge siege creature didn't even have time to fall apart before an eruption of vines ripped apart a squad of assassins along with one hundred warslaves even further away. It looked like Emperor Atwood was heading toward the next sphere, not bothering to hide his goal. It almost felt like he was intentionally announcing his advance, daring the Kan'Tanu to stop him.

Ra'Klid almost wanted the invaders to take him up on the offer, if only out of morbid curiosity. Was it even possible to stop that man?

"Uh— how do we protect someone like that?" the blade master next to Ra'Klid said, scratching his head in a mix of bemusement and awe.

"That's... Nevermind," Ra'Klid sighed. "Back to the original plan. Call the attack on the remaining Spheres. We can't let the Emperor do all the work."

Zac was a bloody reaper as he roved through the battlefield, leaving whole fields void of any life in his wake as he closed in on the second bomb. Even then, he felt suffocated as he unleashed the area attack of [Nature's Edge] again. He knew his outburst wasn't really changing anything in the grand scheme of things. This was just one battle. There were similar scenes on twelve other worlds, even if not as gruesome as this one. Still, it beat doing nothing, and it helped Zac process the turmoil within.

Unfortunately, tuning things out while dealing with the threat proved difficult, and not just because of the emotional toll. This was the first time he fought since breaking through, and the experience left him stifled more than anything. His Cosmic Core was ready for war, but his body was not, leaving him with an ocean of energy but nowhere to use it.

His partially-upgraded pathways could channel more than ten times the energy compared to before, but to what end? His skills were still E-grade. Zac realized he could push a bit more energy into the skills, making them sturdier and harder to whittle down. But they were ultimately not designed to utilize a Cosmic Core.

It felt like he'd installed a jet engine in an old rickety car. Even puttering at the lowest gear pushed his Skill Fractals to the limit. It was no wonder most D-grade cultivators stayed in seclusion for months after breaking through, fixing their pathways, and upgrading at least one skill.

Another step with [Earthstrider] put him closer to the next bomb, but he found his path barred by a group of six Hegemons. Meanwhile, a bloody dome made out of thousands of pulsating tendrils sprung up around him, quickly forming an impassable cage. Zac could tell that it would take some effort to break out of this thing, even for a Hegemon, and there were already dozens of bloody thorns moving toward him in an attempt to infect his core. Yet Zac only scoffed, glancing in the direction of his army.

It should be far enough.

Not having any skills to leverage his Cosmic Core was a pain in the ass, but Zac differed from most frontier Hegemons in one critical aspect apart from his strength; he was also filthy rich, at least by Zecia standards. A golden talisman appeared in his hand, and a torrent of energy followed.

A burning sun rose above Zac's head, filled with Divine Energy and Zac's Dao. The approaching thorns were all incinerated long before they could

reach Zac. The Kan'Tanu Hegemons knew it meant trouble and unleashed a series of powerful attacks while another round of thorns dug into the creation in an attempt at mutual destruction.

The onslaught instantly destabilized the Offensive Talisman, but the sun was never meant to stay for long. It exploded, releasing a wave of golden flames that consumed everything with Zac at the epicenter. The cage didn't even last a second before it was consumed. The flames continued outward, creating an inferno that consumed everything within a mile's radius. Some managed to get out of the way, but even more were swallowed by the conflagration.

Zac had used a Peak-quality Early D-grade Talisman bought from Asta back in the Perennial Vastness. Its destructive might matched that of a Peak-quality Early D-grade finisher, further bolstered by Zac's Dao. The E-grade cultivators that made up the bulk of the army had no way to individually resist these levels of power, and it had arrived too suddenly to form a united front. Nine mobile pyramids were hit, and while none collapsed, only two managed to continue their barrage.

That single attack was expensive enough to bankrupt more than a dozen Wandering Cultivators in the D-grade, but Zac had a whole stack of them in his Spatial Ring. Of course, that one blast had cost him a third of his Divine Energy and put a strain on his pathways.

Zac was the first to be consumed by the sun but barely felt it. A world of golden flames surrounded him, but a swing of his axe created a wind tunnel. He emerged from the inferno unscathed, his body now covered in a plate armor made from bone. The armor was covered in dense golden runes, generating a stable, protective domain that kept the fire at bay as Zac closed in on the Hegemons.

Two had died from the talisman, but the other four had banded together to withstand its assault. Still, these people were even weaker than the Kan'Tanu Hegemons who had been sent into the Void Star. Just withstanding the talisman was testing their limits. Zac descended on the quartet like a fox in the henhouse, [Verun's Bite] roaring with triumphant glee as they fell one after another in quick succession.

The flames abated soon after, exposing Zac standing alone in a field of blackened corpses. Even the closest bomb had been hit by the talisman, and its aura fluctuated precariously after many of its arrays had been singed off. There was only finality and hunger for more as Zac moved to finish the job.

The day was young, and he was far from satisfied.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1070 - As the Emperor Commands - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1070 - As the Emperor Commands

Spirit Tool War Regalia were extremely expensive, high-quality ones even surpassing the price of Cosmic Vessels. It was also an issue of supply and demand. You wouldn't necessarily be able to get your hands on one even if you had the money to spare, even in the Multiverse Heartlands. Artisans who could create something like that didn't exactly grow on trees, and it could take years to make one.

Not even Zac had managed to get his hands on any, and not for lack of trying. There had been a few for sale in Vastness City, but none suited Zac's Daos. Few living practiced the Dao of Death, and the fusion of Life and Conflict was quite uncommon too. The Undead Empire had promised to provide him with something for his Draugr half, but they'd held back on delivery before he broke through.

As such, Zac still lacked any real War Regalia. However, getting your hands on regular D-grade equipment that could mimic their effect wasn't too difficult, especially not in the Perennial Vastness. The [Ossuary Bulwark] was a good early D-grade armor set comprising six linked pieces. It was a beastcraft too, making it a suitable partner to [Verun's Bite], providing a protective domain and a very sturdy protective exterior.

It obviously wasn't at the level of Izh'Rak Reaver Warbones, but then few things were. At least it let him ignore the flames, and these E-grade Kan'Tanu warslaves without Dao Branches or high attribute pools could attack him until they ran out of energy without leaving a mark on Zac's body.

The downside of the armor, except for costing thousands of D-grade Nexus Coins inside the isolated economy of the Perennial Vastness, was the lack of spirituality. In other words, Zac had to manually control the arrays powering the thing. It also lacked the natural ability to absorb energy from the surroundings like a Tool Spirit, making the cost of running it noticeably steeper.

Keeping its arrays active reserved a good deal of Zac's energy capacity. Common Hegemons with unimpressive or imperfect cores would find it difficult

to keep the thing running, even with their pathways fully upgraded. In Zac's case, the cost didn't really matter, considering he had few avenues to use it anyway.

Zac initially hadn't planned on taking out his [Ossuary Bulwark] during his first engagements. He didn't think himself so powerful that he was unkillable in these small-scale engagements. Vilari was absolutely right with her warning; this early battlefield could pose a threat to him if he grew careless. Things had been smooth sailing so far, but the [Celestial Sun Talisman] had ensured that every single Kan'Tanu knew of his presence. They were already adapting, forming a defensive perimeter in the distance between himself and the third living bomb.

The real reason he'd wanted to avoid using his armor was that these things had very limited self-repair capabilities. High-quality D-grade Equipment was too complex for the holistic repair arrays you saw on most E-grade equipment. Or rather, those arrays were so expensive that it didn't make sense to add them to anything but Spirit Tools in the D-grade. Buying a couple of spare sets was cheaper than engraving repair arrays.

The [Ossuary Bulwark] would naturally recover from minor damage, partly thanks to its inherent nature as a beastcraft. Anything more would require the attention of a D-grade Blacksmith skilled in beastcrafting, something the Atwood Empire lacked. One day, Zac might be able to deal with these kinds of issues himself, but the unlocked sections of [Cosmic Forge] didn't cover equipment repair.

Not a single Kan'Tanu stepped onto the burned fields around him, but Zac knew it wasn't just out of fear of him. Rather, he could sense the familiar ripples of an imminent self-destruct from the scorched living bomb. Zac still wasn't sure if these things were actually sapient or just flesh controlled by the arrays, but he supposed it didn't matter.

Zac didn't back down from the increasingly erratic energy fluctuations ahead. Instead, he shot forward, a set of golden runes appearing across his face as an enormous fractal leaf teeming with Life and Conflict formed in front of his axe. The air around Zac groaned from his mere presence, and Zac felt a surge of golden fury course through his body.

His berserking skill was one of his last to reach Peak Mastery, mostly because it had proven difficult to evolve while in secluded cultivation. It needed the fury

and purpose to unleash a crusade to improve, something that was impossible to emulate while sitting in his cultivation cave back home.

He had eventually accomplished it a few years into the Perennial Vastness, and the effect was quite useful now that he'd entered Hegemony. Even at peak mastery, the skill only provided a 35% attribute increase. However, Zac felt the skill fast at work as he approached the self-destructing bomb—the skill actually provided cooldown recovery at Peak Mastery, apart from further lessening the backlash to the point it was almost negligible for Zac.

True to its name, [Arcadian Crusade] allowed you to keep fighting longer and harder, provided your energy stores could keep up. Normally, Zac would require around three minutes before he could use [Rapturous Divide] again, but the golden energy from the berserking skill was already pouring into the divided skill fractal.

It would be a minute at most before he could use it again. Unfortunately, [Arcadian Crusade] could only cut down on the cooldown of [Judgment of Arcadia] by a few hours, which meant it was still a once-per-fight type of skill. For now, he'd keep at hand.

One minute was not long, but the sphere before him wouldn't give him the time to recharge [Rapturous Divide]. That was why he'd gone back to using [Nature's Edge]. The gleaming leaf reached one hundred meters in no time, yet it kept growing with extreme speed as Zac poured more and more energy into the skill. Soon, it dwarfed even the enormous sphere, and a piercing scream echoed through the battlefield as it descended in a murderous vertical arc.

A shimmering barrier appeared around the bomb, but over a dozen beams ripped through the sky and pierced into the shielding just before Zac's attack landed. They had come from the wall in the distance, where the Atwood Empire's siege engineers tried to pave a path for Zac.

It worked.

Between the already damaged patterns across the sphere's surface and its rapidly destabilizing energy, the Array Towers managed to shatter the barrier. Zac's attack continued unimpeded, digging deep into rocklike flesh. The result wasn't quite at the level of his previous use of [Rapturous Divide], even if his attributes had been empowered by [Arcadian Crusade].

Still, it carved a fifty-meter-deep gash, which was all he needed. Zac stepped forward with [Earstrider], arriving inside the enormous body. Wild torrents of unstable energy tried to rip Zac apart, but [Ossuary Bulwark] kept the chaos at bay as Zac flooded [Nature's Edge] with energy. An eruption of hundreds of leaves shot out from his body, digging into flesh around him.

Normally, the activation of the skill would end there, and Zac would have to wait a few seconds before he could activate the leafstorm again. This time, it was different. The leaves never stopped forming when empowered by [Arcadian Crusade]. Hundreds of blades grew to thousands, turning Zac into a walking calamity.

Each individual blade only held a fraction of Zac's strength, but they were still equivalent to a Late Stage E-grade cultivator's attack. Together with the empowerment of two Dao Branches, they rapidly carved out a gory chasm within the sphere. Soon, a five-meter pitch-black orb was exposed, and Zac bisected it with a direct strike.

An incredible surge of Kill Energy confirmed the creature had died, yet Zac inwardly grimaced when the energy poured into what felt like a bottomless chasm. In the E-grade, Kill Energy directly entered the nodes, either to force them open or fill them with energy after they'd been unlocked. It was similar in Hegemony, except it all went into the Cosmic Core.

The flood of energy poured into the surface pathways he'd arduously crafted just a month ago, and it almost felt like the section 'came alive.' Zac had no better way to describe the feeling. Every corner of the core was filled with vast amounts of energy, but it almost felt mechanical rather than spiritual.

Progressing through Hegemony was to unlock the true potential of your core until it was perfected and could be transformed into an Inner World. However, it felt like the core's insides were already the size of a planet. These miscreations were somewhere in the middle of Early D-grade, yet all that Kill Energy only filled up a corner of a single surface pathway.

He still wasn't quite able to make a perfect estimate of how close he was to his next level, but he guessed he'd have to kill hundreds of these things. The amount of energy he'd have to accumulate to reach the limits of Middle D-grade was staggering. Time was limited and every kill counted, even if Zac knew he was better off targeting Middle- and Late Hegemons or Beast Kings for their exponentially larger reward.

But there were none of those on this battlefield by the looks of it. He hadn't lost his mind, even if fiery anger still smoldered in his chest. But no matter where he looked, he couldn't spot any real elite. And since Zac had already lost out on a huge amount of Kill Energy by using a talisman, he opted to deal with the bomb rather than simply moving out of the way.

With the energy secured, Zac flashed away just before its broken body exploded, further ravaging the region. As he moved toward the third siege weapon, a golden haze spread around his body, attaching to every surface, even forming floating pockets of life in the air.

It wasn't another talisman's work, but his Peak Mastery [Primal Edict]. Since what little Creation Energy he had couldn't be used to save that child, it would instead be used to reap the lives of his enemies. Zac had pushed his Supreme Pathbound E-grade skills to their peak years ago while collecting materials for his Omnitool, knowing it would be a while before he managed to upgrade these incredibly complex fractals.

The energy across the battlefield stirred as innumerable deadly roots sprung up wherever Zac passed. [Primal Edict] contained the essence of his Evolutionary Path, and it fed on the aura of struggle that permeated the whole region. It became fodder for the cycle of destruction and rebirth, letting the roots grow at an accelerated pace as they joined Zac in his advance toward the defensive line.

The whole sky lit up as thousands of Kan'Tanu fearfully unleashed whatever skills they possessed, sacrificing coordination in favor of speed and widespread destruction. The scene reminded Zac of his exit from the Tower of Eternity, though there were some critical differences. For one, he was in perfect condition. Secondly, he had gone from a crude strongman relying on a superior attribute pool to a true powerhouse.

Not to mention the fact he had a grade advantage against his attackers. Zac moved like the wind, forming the vanguard of a tsunami of bloodthirsty vines. The battlefield looked like a war of man against nature, and man initially seemed to be winning. Innumerable attacks ripped into the advancing tangle, destroying roots and vines by the thousands.

Only Zac was unscathed, dodging or ripping apart any skill that came close. He didn't need to activate [Empyrean Aegis], and neither did he need to rely on his [Ossuary Bulwark] to survive this particular gauntlet. Soon, he'd pushed through the first barrage, and the roots around him had turned into a chimera

mesh containing hundreds of different Daos. They had died and been reborn, incorporating the truths that felled them.

They crashed into the protective barrier, which almost broke from the first strike. A storm of bloody thorns and attack tried to push back [Primal Edict], but a gleaming axe hidden within the chaos crashed into the barrier with devastating force. A breach had been formed, and vines flooded the opening like a pack of bloodthirsty beasts. Meanwhile, a grand forest sprung from the ground, half of it right in the middle of the Kan'Tanu's ranks.

The warslaves knew the trees spelled danger when they saw it, but they didn't even have time to channel new skills before vines spewed out from the trees. The display resembled the end of every fallen Kan'Tanu, but these vines were far more potent and deadly than any common Heart Curse. Fearful screams echoed through the region, and Zac was filled with a steady stream of Kill Energy as his deadly tangle autonomously spread through the battlefield like a bloodthirsty infestation.

Many were cut as the Kan'Tanu fought back, and others were infected by the Heart Curses of the fallen. In seconds, the defensive line had collapsed. A few voices cut through the mayhem, trying to restore order through the ranks, but Zac appeared without a sound through the nearest tree. In no time, another four Hegemons had died, and a hidden assassin squad had been ripped asunder before they could even reach Zac as he teleported back and forth.

However, the number of warriors on the battlefield was just too many, and Zac was right in the middle. The dominion of [Primal Edict] was gradually pushed back by over a thousand invaders fighting together. Still, it was enough. One skill had reaped hundreds of lives and created chaos in the Kan'Tanu ranks. It should have lessened the pressure on the breach far in the distance, and it had let Zac close in on the third bomb. He even saw that his people had managed to destroy a fourth sphere while he ran amok, with a regiment of elites making their way toward a fifth.

Maybe his antics had worked too well. Over a dozen Hegemons had appeared between him and his target, and six huge runes had appeared in the sky. The patterns seemed to fuse with the living bomb, prompting Zac's Danger Sense to give a weak warning—nothing that would make him back down. [Rapturous Divide] was finally off its cooldown, and Zac rushed forward while an enormous fractal leaf grew in front of his axe.

The slaughter lasted another twenty minutes before things finally calmed down. Zac panted as the final sphere collapsed, his pathways throbbing from overuse. Activating multiple talismans with half-finished pathways had taken its toll, yet Zac felt he had more to give. But looking around, there was nothing left to target. The Kan'Tanu had all fallen or retreated by now, and the ground was littered with corpses and dried-out Heart Curses.

Instead of enemies, he saw Ra'Klid rush over with a squad of powerful tribesmen radiating a bloody aura. The Warchief and his men had left for the other frontline while Zac singlehandedly dealt with things here. A third volley of spheres had eventually arrived, but the tides had already turned by that point. Zac only needed to deal with two, while his soldiers and array towers dealt with the other three.

Ra'Klid and the others had clearly seen a pitched battle on the other side, with all of them covered in wounds and grime. However, their bedraggled state couldn't douse the flames in their eyes as they looked at Zac with veneration.

"How's the situation?" Zac said as he took out a canteen of water, the skull-like helmet opening up and shrinking into the breastplate.

"They called for retreat after their third summon failed to change the situation," Ra'Klid said, having the same look in his eyes as his men. "I don't know what to say. I've never seen anything like your offense. One man singlehandedly overwhelming an army—you'll become a legend after today."

"As long as our people are safe," Zac sighed. "What happens now?"

"The quest will automatically finish as soon as things have calmed down. We'd rest, repair our defenses, and collect our fallen," Ra'Klid said before sharing a look with his bodyguards. "There is one more option, though. We can strike back."

Zac frowned at the idea, and not because he was feeling tired. His other half back on Earth was already fast at work absorbing energy from a Cosmic Crystal to restore his energy reserves, and he only sported some surface wounds. However, the thought of dragging an exhausted and wounded army into another engagement made him hesitate.

"Emperor, a Warchief cannot put all the tribes' burdens on his shoulders," a shaman next to Ra'Klid said, clearly understanding the thoughts in Zac's mind. "Wars will come, and people will die. Such is life."

"Striking our enemies while they're at their weakest will keep casualties at a minimum," Ra'Klid added. "If we seize their teleporters, we'll have conquered this planet. It will take at least two weeks before the Ruthless Heavens opens a new path leading here. If we wait, who knows what the Kan'Tanu will come up with next?"

Zac looked to the dark sky and slowly exhaled. He'd just enlisted, yet he already felt spiritually exhausted. It was one thing to walk the path of War and Conflict while traveling alone and another entirely when so many fates depended on your choices. But the demons were right. His gaze slowly turned to the fortress in the distance. The enemy fortress stood waiting in the distance, and a trickle of escaping Kan'Tanu poured through its gates.

"Oh, they're here," Ra'Klid muttered, and Zac turned over to see four D-grade Minotaurs hurrying over. "What do you wish to do?"

"Do we have the tools to break through their barriers?"

"We can crack them open like an egg," Ra'Klid said, a ruthless smile spreading across his face.

"Then we attack," Zac growled. "Mobilize our men immediately. Don't let the Kan'Tanu recover."

"As the Emperor Commands," the demon bowed, and a screen appeared before every able-bodied soldier. "It is good to have you back."