

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1071 - Burden of Rule - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1071 - Burden of Rule

Zac shook his head before tuning out the ruins around his human half, his Abyssal Orbs refocusing on the notes around him. Progress was slow, even if there weren't any particular issues stumping his progress. He'd entered a Void State with his human body to focus on recovery, but it was hard to shut out the scenes of the last couple of hours. He'd just returned, yet he'd already been forced to see thousands of subordinates fall. And these numbers were on the lower end when considering the scope of the attack.

At least they had conquered the world through their counter-offensive, giving the Eighth Army a much-needed rest. When the Atwood Army's siege machines began their assault, the Kan'Tanu had soon opted for a retreat rather than bringing in another round of reinforcements. The invaders left only a regiment of sacrificial warriors to buy some time.

He could have sneaked through the barrier and forced it open using [Ancestral Woods] along with Void Energy, saving them half an hour of unrelenting bombardment. He could even have sent the roots of [Primal Edict] into the fortress, but it was much too early to display such an earthshattering ability. Besides, whittling down the defenses had provided Zac and his warriors some much-needed rest in case of a counter-attack.

Thankfully, things progressed smoothly, apart from the fact the fortress had been boobytrapped with Heart Curses. It wasn't the first time the Atwood Army had encountered such tactics, though, and the losses were minimal. Securing the Kan'Tanu base had let them take control over the teleporters. They could have continued through the array and into the next world, but they had opted to seal the passage instead.

The victory felt hollow after witnessing the cost it came at, but Zac knew he couldn't keep wallowing in misery over the reality they found themselves in. It was better to channel his energy into something useful. The faster he could finish the transition into true Hegemony, the more people he'd be able to protect. He had begun reinforcing his pathways when his human half left, but he'd stopped soon after arriving at the warfront.

Part of the reason was out of fear his work would distract him, though he had confirmed modifying his pathways on one side didn't affect the energy

circulation on the other. The biggest reason was that the death of that poor young man had triggered his Branch of the Pale Seal.

That helplessness he'd experienced as he saw the boy's life slip through his fingers mirrored the inexorable dominion Death held over all. This control over fate was a core aspect of his Dao, and it had felt like he were on its receiving end for once. His Daos had been sealed for almost a decade inside the Perennial Vastness, and the experience was enough to set the rekindled momentum from his breakthrough ablaze.

It felt macabre to turn the boy's untimely demise into nourishment for his Dao, but the day had only driven home the need for strength. Getting ready for the Left Imperial Palace didn't even feel like his main priority any longer. He needed to get stronger for his people's sake. Zac believed he had enough high-quality Dao Treasures to force a breakthrough, but the epiphany wasn't enough to crystallize the insights he wanted to package into it.

It had provided a sense of direction, though, and Zac suspected he'd find more answers as long as he kept returning to the battlefield. For now, there wasn't anything left to absorb, so he returned to work on his pathways. One section after another was crushed before far more complex runes rose from the ashes. It felt like he was carving the fractals into his body with a rusty nail, but Zac didn't have the luxury of naturally reforming the pathways with a Cultivation Manual.

For a moment, he'd thought his Draugr half might become a cultivator now that the bodies were split, but the inheritance of the Void Emperor was just as dominant on both sides. It was a bit of a letdown, but Zac also knew that his connection to the Void was the only reason his desperate gambit to split bodies worked in the first place.

A whole hour passed as Zac meticulously redrew the pathways, starting from his [Inexorable Core] and moving toward the [Deathmark]'s skill fractal behind his left bicep. Seven years inside the Perennial Vastness had been more than enough time to create a few preliminary schematics to evolve many of his skills, and he'd chosen his corrosive Domain Skill to be the first for his Inexorable Apostle class.

For one, it wasn't that complex a Skill Fractal compared to the likes of [Pillar of Desolation] or [Arbiter of the Abyss]. Secondly, he was already quite happy with the skill and saw no reason to make any changes apart from balancing the Daos of Conflict and Death a bit better. Mostly, he just needed to upgrade

it to the point where it could accommodate the energy levels a Cosmic Core could provide.

Finally, Zac felt it was the most useful one for the time being. Upgrading his most powerful finishers before the Left Imperial Palace was imperative, but he needed the ability to unleash large-scale destruction right now. He could imagine the effect of unleashing [Deathmark] in the middle of the Kan'Tanu's ranks, where the Dao-empowered corrosion alone would be enough to take out E-grade cultivators. The skill would probably be even more effective than [Primal Edict] after it evolved.

A straightforward upgrade sounded easy on the surface, but it was a step that stumped frontier Hegemons for decades, sometimes forever. Many of the Wandering Cultivators he'd encountered in the Void Star only had a few D-grade skills, some only one.

It wasn't just a matter of widening and reinforcing the channels of the skill. You needed to elevate the truths that went into fractals, preferably adjusting them to suit your own Daos. Only that way would you be able to control and transform the vast amounts of energy the Cosmic Core released. Upgrading High-quality skills and above was impossible without a Dao Branch, and you needed the theoretical foundations to translate your comprehension into fractals.

Luckily, this wasn't something that would confound Zac any longer. His theoretical foundations would be considered impressive even in the Heartlands, at least when it came to his three Daos. To boot, his Dao Branches were already Middle Stage, more than enough to create an Early Proficiency D-grade Skill. For him, it was just a matter of making some final alterations to make his envisioned Skill Fractal fit with the pathways of his class.

Zac had planned to finish the section of his pathway in one go before upgrading the skill, but he was interrupted mid-way as he felt someone stepping into his Soul Sense. It was Triv, who shuddered and looked around with confusion. The Ghost Butler had actually noticed the spiritual domain, an ability that was quite rare even inside the Perennial Vastness. Zac guessed it was a benefit of being a spectral cultivator or cultivating the Eidolon Techniques.

Triv had initially encountered some problems when trying to swap to Aia Ouro's methods, but he'd managed to make the transition after a year, partly

thanks to Vilari and Zac. Vilari had helped decipher a few sections related to the Soul, which was a significant portion of the method, while Zac had used the natural understanding awarded by the Lake Water to clear out some of the roadblocks.

When Zac left for the Perennial Vastness, the butler looked mostly the same. Now, Zac could sense some ethereal ripples from his body, which seemed to have turned even more intangible. It looked like things were going quite well.

"Come in," Zac said.

"Young master!" Triv exclaimed. "Welcome back, and congratulations! Young master has just broken through, yet your aura is so dense."

"Thank you," Zac smiled.

"I heard young master had joined the war effort, but I sensed that someone was drawing energy from the manor's gathering array, so I figured you had returned. Young master, I have urgent—"

"There's no hurry," Zac waved, feeling too exhausted to deal with another issue. If it were something war-related, he would have been contacted through the communication crystals rather than the old butler coming over. "How are things? I can tell your aura has improved."

Triv reluctantly dropped the subject. "I'm ashamed; I am lagging behind. I will endeavor to enter Hegemony so that I can better assist young masters day to day."

"Don't overdo it," Zac said. "And let me know if you need something for your breakthrough."

"No need to worry about this old ghost. Young master has already provided a path toward the next step," Triv said with a bow. "I trust the situation with the Eighth Army was swiftly handled now that the young master led the armies."

"We won and seized the planet," Zac said, but he felt no joy. "But we still lost a lot of people."

"Few battles are this hectic," Triv offered. "And if it is any consolation, many of your warriors will find new life on Elysium."

"What?" Zac said, his brows furrowing. "We're taking the bodies?"

"Not at all!" Triv hurriedly assured. "Every soldier of the Atwood Army signs an insurance policy so that a stipend can be paid out to their families or friends in the event of death. There's an option in that policy where the soldiers can donate their bodies to the cause, so to speak. In return, the stipend will be doubled, and it will be paid out no matter whether the body can be used for an awakening or not. The leaders initially considered increasing the base salary too, but they felt that would pressure people desperate for improvements to sign on."

Zac slowly nodded, not entirely sure how he felt about the matter.

"For what it's worth, I think it's a marvelous idea," Triv said. "Young master's faction is unique in that it incorporates life and death. I think this system could be the first step to connecting the sides. The families of the fallen heroes will see their loved ones live on in another form. And the revenants will have an understanding of their origin, something only the naturally born enjoy in the empire.

"I hear that there have already been quite a few requests from the bereaved to meet the newly born Revenants, though it will be a while before the first of the fallen can awaken. Should both sides be willing, we might even see a new form of family units crossing the bridge of life and death. I think this idea could even be expanded to the whole population."

Zac had to admit that it wasn't a bad idea after overcoming his initial reluctance. So long as there was no compulsion, it sounded like a natural outcome for his empire. He doubted things would work as smoothly as Triv made it sound, but people were adaptable. What sounded macabre right now could be completely natural in a few generations.

"I trust Vilari and the others have thought everything through," Zac said when he sensed the worry from the ghost. "Could you catch me up on what else has happened since I left? I barely got the chance to land before the early attack arrived."

While Zac had Triv fill in the gaps, his human body opened his eyes and called over an attendant. Shortly after, Ra'Klid arrived.

"Is there something?"

"The boy who died," Zac said.

"His body has been secured and will be sent back to the homelands," Ra'Klid said, some nervousness evident in his eyes. "May I ask..."

"A short encounter years ago," Zac sighed, understanding what the Mavai Warchief was thinking. "I saw him practicing and gifted him that sword on an impulse. I didn't expect to see him like that the next time met."

Ra'Klid undoubtedly feared he'd inadvertently sent one of Zac's close ones to the frontlines and to push back the initial onslaught at that. Even if he technically did nothing wrong with his orders, something like that could have repercussions depending on the mood of the Emperor. Of course, Zac wouldn't fault Ra'Klid for something like this, but things could change when it came to matters of life and death.

It wasn't odd to worry, especially when few knew much about his personality beyond the rumors.

"Do you know if he chose to donate his body?"

"I looked into his situation before. He did sign up for that program, but with his heart destroyed..." Ra'Klid said with a shake of his head.

Zac understood what the demon meant. Revenants may not have a beating heart before fully awakening their bodies, but it is still a critical component of a body. With it missing, the body wouldn't be able to gain spirituality. A talented Lich could replace the heart without turning the body into a Corpselord, but that was beyond the capabilities of Port Atwood Liches.

"Make special arrangements for the boy. Set his body and his belongings aside. Vilari will deal with it," Zac said.

"Of course," Ra'Klid agreed.

"Thank you," Zac said and closed his eyes, but he opened them upon realizing the demon hadn't left. "Is there something else?"

"While we're on this topic," Ra'Klid coughed. "With our inborn nature, awakening as undead is apparently impossible. It's not that the Mavai lack the willingness to serve, though some certainly prefer the traditional rites over..."

transformation. But it means the bereaved among the tribes receive a smaller reward compared to the humans."

"It's not just a problem for the Mavai," Ra'Klid quickly continued upon seeing a frown appear on Zac's face. "The Raun and lord's Revenant armies face a similar issue, what with their bodies already being dead. "

"I understand where you're coming from, but contribution lies at the core of the Atwood Empire. Some can contribute more than others; that's just a fact of life," Zac said. "What would you have me do in a situation like this?"

"I agree with you," Ra'Klid hurriedly nodded. "Contribution is the key. The empire provides remuneration for gaining another citizen who can contribute after growing up. After all, both planets are sorely lacking people after the integration. So why not reward all additions to the population, not just those through raising the undead?"

"You want the same contribution to be paid out upon giving birth?" Zac said.

"Both provide a citizen," Ra'Klid.

"You know I'm not really hands-on with these matters," Zac slowly said. "I will discuss it with the others."

"That's all I ask," Ra'Klid said with a bow. "Then I won't disturb you any longer."

Zac looked at the departing demon for a while before closing his eyes again. Ra'Klid's proposal might be logically sound, but the two concepts still felt different to him. And since the demon had come to him for this matter, Zac suspected his council had already shut it down. Still, he would talk it over with the others later to hear their opinion. For now, Zac had to see what the butler wanted before he exploded from anxiety.

"So, was there something requiring my attention?"

"Ah, yes! There is an urgent message from the Kavriel Province," the butler said and handed over two boxes.

As expected, the matter was related to the Undead Empire. It was quite the coincidence for them to contact him just as he returned, displaying his human form on the battlefield. Zac wryly smiled as he inspected the contents. One

came from Kator, who officially represented the Undead Empire by the looks of things. The other came from Tavza, who had seemingly felt compelled to send a separate message.

There were no gifts of congratulation inside the boxes, only Communication Crystals and Teleportation Tokens. He guessed the Undead Empire was quite frazzled, especially the Draugr faction. They must have realized their scheme with the [Essence of the Abyss] had failed and that he'd sacrificed his Draugr side to force his way into Hegemony.

The messages were quite similar. They congratulated him on his breakthrough and wished to meet at his earliest convenience to discuss the war efforts and their upcoming mission. However, there was an interesting addition to Tavza's message.

'The foundation of your bloodline was set in the E-grade. With your ascent into Hegemony, it is time to harvest. Abyssal Shore has granted a unique exception and is setting up the first Abyssal Pond in the Frontier. Submerging yourself should unlock the true potential of the bloodline of Eoz. If you need anything else to hasten your acclimatization to your newfound rank, do not hesitate to contact me.'

Zac smiled, sensing the anxiety almost seeping out of the words. It was quite the tantalizing bait they'd thrown out to confirm they hadn't just let one of the lost bloodlines slip through their fingers.

If his breakthrough had gone according to plan, there was no way he'd dare step foot in the Kavriel Province. But now? Zac thought it over briefly before his gaze shifted to the Teleportation Token.

"I guess it's about time I visited Kavista."

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"What? Young master is really visiting the capital?"

"As soon as I've dealt with a few things," Zac nodded.

"What about young master's condition?"

"Things have changed," Zac said, sharing his prepared excuse.

"Life and Death... Difficult indeed," Triv sighed before perking up. "Perhaps this is for the best? Now young master can visit the Heartlands without worries. Will young master require my—"

"I'm sorry, another time," Zac said, noting that Triv didn't look very disappointed. "I only have so many tokens."

Going to Kavista came with significant risks, even if his identities had been separated. He didn't want to risk Triv's safety just to make his stay slightly more convenient. As for himself, he had some plans to increase his odds of success. If that failed, he had the escape bracelet, though it currently was on his human body. It had long since recovered, and both features were available in case he needed to get out.

While there were risks, Zac felt the benefits were worth it. It wasn't just the Abyssal Pond that attracted him. He finished his breakthrough three months early, and Zac had hoped to use that time to upgrade some of his skills and perhaps gain a couple of levels before the war began. Now, he was thrown into the meatgrinder the second he returned, and every delay meant more deaths.

Zac would be lying if there wasn't a selfish aspect too. While the System was the source of all this suffering, it also provided enormous benefits to those who excelled. The Merit Exchange was just one part of it. There might be titles and unique opportunities waiting for those pushing to the top of their ladders.

The elites from the outside, such as Tavza and Kator, were no doubt already fighting furiously to rack up the merit needed to empower themselves and to better their chances inside the Left Imperial Palace. He needed to catch up, and quickly. Visiting the Kavriel Province was a chance to speed up his transition.

Apart from the Abyssal Pond, they would have top-quality cultivation chambers and skill upgrade arrays. He had already made some arrangements, but his preparations were much better for his human side. Those arrays had been easy enough to buy inside the Perennial Vastness, but his Array Master acquaintance Asta lacked the skills to make death-attuned versions.

Cathey had sourced some from the Undead Alliance, but it wasn't like the undead guests had brought many D-grade cultivation arrays. What was the point—they couldn't use them, and who'd they sell them to?

Of course, Zac wouldn't immediately rush over after being called upon. Zac inscribed a message and sealed it inside Kator's box.

"Please send this back."

"Of course," the ghost agreed. "Is there anything else young master requires?"

"Not right now," Zac said. "I just need to digest everything that has happened while I was gone."

"If young master wants my opinion, I think your citizens are finally coming to realize how lucky they are," Triv said. "News of defeats, slaughter, and suffering reach our world daily. Other factions have used civilians as fodder to protect themselves, leading to disastrous losses. Meanwhile, our people haven't suffered at all under the young master's rule."

"I heard recruitment has sped up lately," Zac commented.

"I'm not too updated on those matters, but I would assume they are related. There will always be heroes who step up to protect their homeland when it's threatened," Triv said. "Of course, I'd venture the Merit Exchange has also changed some minds. I hope young master doesn't mind, but I have been helping the Raun Spectrals."

"You enlisted?" Zac said with surprise, getting a nod in return.

"Only for a non-combat role," Triv explained. "The undead battlefield on the Raun Continent is lacking in experience, even more so than the others."

Zac grimaced, knowing Triv was referring to. The oldest of his undead warriors were only a decade old. His other races weren't much better off in cultivation, but they had some experience to draw upon, especially the Zhix. Meanwhile, the Raun spectrals weren't much better. They had been a tight-knit community without war after they shed their mortal coils. All their focus was on survival. They'd been forced to adapt just like Earth did, but even the Humans had ample experience in killing before the integration.

"I have been relaying what little I learned from following Adriel and helping them set up defensive arrays," the ghost continued.

"How are they doing?"

"Surprisingly good, actually," Triv said. "It turns out spectral cultivators are immune to the Heart Curses, the common curses at least. Those nasty things have become a threat to the Kan'Tanu rather than their enemy when fighting the spectrals. Revenants aren't immune, but the curses don't work quite right when they feed on Miasma. The Undead Empire has already figured out a counter and has graciously provided us with the solution. Of course, the invaders may devise a counter as the war progresses."

"Still, that's not bad," Zac whistled.

It didn't matter much to him personally, already being immune to the Heart Curses. He'd already confirmed his Hidden Nodes existed in both his bodies, and cutting the connection wouldn't impact that. Zac didn't know why things worked that way, but he guessed they were more categorized as a node than a bloodline benefit, letting both bodies enjoy them under any condition.

"Then I shall take my leave," the butler said.

"Actually, there's one thing," Zac said. "My Tool Spirit will break through soon."

"The coffin?" Triv said, looking at the necklace expectantly.

"The coffin," Zac nodded.

"How marvelous."

"It will be met with a tribulation," Zac continued. "Is there any way to hide it?"

"Hiding the Heavens," Triv said. "It is possible to seal off a region to not impact your surroundings, but I am afraid I'm not up to such a task. I think young master would be better off moving to one of your private islands or Elysium."

"Do you know any suitable spots with pure Dao of Death?" Zac asked.

"Certainly," Triv said. "There is a small island with extremely dense energy. It's currently empty but has long since been equipped with a set of arrays and a

Teleportation Array. Young master's followers figured you might need it for growing crops or some other activity requiring pure energy."

"Can you prepare anything that might be missing in the environment for a Tool Spirit's breakthrough?" Zac asked. "I'll deal with the preparations for the breakthroughs itself."

"I will arrange things right away. It should take no more than a day unless lord has any special requirements," the butler agreed. "Young master's guardian golems are still at the shipyard for upgrades, though."

"A general setup is fine," Zac said.

The ghost left to prepare things while Zac spent another two hours finishing his work on the section of his pathway leading to [Deathmark]. Ultimately, he chose not to immediately evolve his skill. Instead, he checked the time. After confirming he had a few hours, he stepped onto the teleporter, soon arriving on another sealed-off island.

It wasn't the site for the breakthrough but rather his shipyard. There were a few things he needed to figure out before facing the scrutiny of multiple Monarchs. The first stop was to see if he qualified for the next quest in the chain and what requirements the quest had.

"Welcome, Lord Atwood," Rahm said as Zac entered the office, completely unfazed at Zac visiting in his Draugr form for the first time.

He'd actually never mentioned his unique situation to the Creators, but there was no way they didn't know. Karunthel, especially, seemed to know of everything that happened on Earth, and they'd stayed inside his compound for over a decade before he upgraded the shipyard. They would have to be blind to not realize.

"Hello, it's been a while," Zac nodded. "How are things?"

"All operations are normal," Rahm said. "Our order book is filled for the next twelve years."

"That good?" Zac said with surprise, remembering business was good but not great before.

"I guess people even in these backwater parts know good stuff when they see it," a booming laugh echoed through the room as Karunthel entered. "Your mercantile venture is forwarding new orders at a rate we cannot match, even after increasing prices."

"Nice to see you," Zac nodded.

"Same, kiddo. So what happened? Got split in two?" Karunthel laughed.

"How'd you know?"

"It gets boring overseeing the production of these simple models, so I stay updated with the local events. Especially so now that so many interesting things are happening in your Sector," Karunthel said. "Besides, Rahm and I had a bet going on how you'd deal with Hegemony. I guess none of us won, even if I was closer. That guy had no faith, thinking you'd fail."

"I believed you'd choose one race and discard the other but keep its nature as a subsidiary path," Rahm elaborated when Zac looked over with a raised brow. "It was the scenario with the most likely outcome based on available data."

"I knew you'd do something unexpected," Karunthel grinned. "I just picked the wrong one."

"I'm happy my struggles can provide some amusement to pass the time," Zac wryly said.

"Well, I'm sure you'll figure things out. So, what brings you here?" the foreman grinned. "Ships? Upgrades? Those golems?"

"A little bit of everything," Zac smiled. "Have I qualified for a shipyard upgrade quest yet?"

"You have," Karunthel said. "I'll see if I can get you an easy one. Things are finally getting interesting, and the Iliex can't miss out on all the excitement."

Zac waited for Karunthel to interface with the Shop System, and a screen soon appeared before him.

Mercantile Empire (Unique, Limited.): Sell 2,000 D-grade Cosmic Vessels. Have your products destroy 4,000 vessels. Turn the Atwood Empire into a

Middle D-grade force. Reward: Upgrade Iliex Shipyard to Middle D-grade. 1 Custom-designed Vessel upgrade. (1392/2000) (133/4,000) (0/1).

Zac scanned the task, nodding in satisfaction. As far as he was concerned, this one was much easier to deal with than the previous one, to the point it almost felt too easy. Sure, the upgrade was only for a minor stage rather than improving a full grade, and it would have been almost impossible without the ongoing war.

However, it was essentially a quest that would finish itself. The first part could be completed in roughly a year if he had the shipyard focus on only building the simplest models rather than the drone hangars or command ships. And Atwood Empire was a Middle D-grade force in all but name considering its strength and resources. The lacking component was likely the lack of either a Middle D-grade region or a Middle Stage Hegemon. The former was hard to deal with on short notice, but the latter should be resolved even before Ultom. In fact, Zac's goal was to only spend eighteen months in Early D-grade, forcing his way to the limit of the stage through carnage and burning money.

This was only possible thanks to the 15 years he'd spent working on his blueprint and collecting resources, erecting a foundation that would let him sprint through the first stage of Hegemony. Most mortals wouldn't be able to gain levels at all after breaking through. They'd first have to spend centuries, millennia even, refining their crude cores into something that could be taken further.

Zac had bypassed all that with his almost perfect creation, putting him at an advantage over even most cultivators. The only downside was the vast amounts of energy his Cosmic Core required for every level, but that was the smallest of all the problems a Hegemon faced when progressing through the ranks.

The second task was the trickiest requirement for the shipyard quest, which had barely progressed over the past years. Luckily, it said nothing about who had to destroy the vessels. He only needed to keep selling his wares to the Allbright Empire, and progress would quickly ramp up when the Kan'Tanu reached the frontlines with their physical army.

"Is that really it? That's all I need to get a Middle D-grade shipyard?" Zac asked to make sure.

"That's it," the spidergolem confirmed, though Zac saw the golem looked quite surprised too. "I guess I underestimated my pull with the System?"

"I would assume it's due to the Kan'Tanu invaders," Rahm interjected.

"How so?"

"I think that's it. The System is bound by the Law of Balance when managing this war, but the opposing force is an unorthodox cult with immense fell Karma," Karunthel grunted. "You should know how that affects things."

Zac's eyes lit up upon realizing what was going on. Just like his massive providence helped him in all kinds of ways, so did fell Karma hamper the path of cultivators. It was for this reason most High-grade cultivators avoided killing mortals or low-grade cultivators en masse. In this case, the System appeared to indirectly help the Kan'Tanu's enemies by providing easier tasks.

"Can I use the upgrade on any vessel?" Zac asked.

"Only vessels created by this shipyard," Rahm calmly rejected.

"Including the Yphelion?"

Rahm didn't answer, instead turning to the foreman, who froze for a few seconds.

"Even the Yphelion," Karunthel confirmed. "However, its grade exceeds the shipyard's because of our previous deal, so you would have to provide certain key materials and money if you want it to reach Late D-grade. Otherwise, it'll just get a bit stronger while staying in Middle-D grade."

"That's not a problem," Zac agreed.

"You should understand this is a huge opportunity," Karunthel added. "I've heard of similar-level tasks that took millennia to finish and others so difficult they remained unresolved until the license was revoked. Try to complete this one without delay. We might be able to ride this wave of providence even further."

Karunthel was absolutely right, and Zac got increasingly excited the more he thought about it. If the next mission was as easy as the first, it might even be possible to upgrade the shipyard a second time within a decade. A Late D-

grade Iliex Shipyard wasn't just an insanely lucrative moneymaker; it was a strategic resource that could impact the whole war.

The kind of ships such a shipyard could produce would be close to the absolute limit of what you saw in a frontier sector like Zecia. There were undoubtedly a few C-grade Cosmic Vessels among the ancient forces like the Dravorak Dynasty, but even most Monarchs would have a Peak D-grade vessel at most. If Zac could flood the market with ships at that level, he would drastically strengthen Zecia as a whole.

Not only that, but it was the key to another troubling matter; the task Leandra had levied on him. If he could upgrade the Yphelion to Peak D-grade, and then possibly use [Cosmic Forge] to make some improvements of his own, he might actually be able to set into the Endless Storm in search of answers to his Specialty Cores a lot earlier than he'd previously thought.

He definitely needed to make this mission a priority.

"I'll see what I can do to speed up the progress," Zac assured. "How's the situation with the Golems?"

"Those soulless things," Karunthel sighed. "Well, puppets aren't our specialty, but it won't take more than a week before we finish the upgrades."

"Perfect, thank you," Zac said. "I'd love to stay a bit longer, but the situation outside..."

"Go, deal with your matters," Karunthel waved. "But be careful out there. I don't know if you've heard, but those people you're fighting... They're an off-shoot of a very scary faction. Don't think of them as some weaklings from the frontier. Stronger people will soon appear on the battlefields."

"Thank you," Zac nodded. "I'll be careful."

Zac had already learned of the Black Heart Cult from Iz and the Undead Empire but still appreciated the warning. With the Left Imperial Palace at stake, there were likely true disciples from the main branch looking for seals. These people would soon appear on the battlefronts if they hadn't already, and their underlings would be far more skilled than the warslaves they'd fought so far.

Zac sent out a message before stepping onto the Teleportation Array. A minute later, Zac was greeted by a refreshing gust of death as he appeared inside a private chamber on Elysium. The floor was spotless thanks to the cleaning arrays, but he knew this particular teleporter hadn't seen any use in years. Even then, it activated just seconds later.

Vilari smiled upon seeing Zac, but her brows soon furrowed with confusion. "What's going on? Triv said you were back, but reports from the eighth army... I figured it was a clone, but your soul is complete."

"I—" Zac said, but the words caught in his throat upon seeing the worry and confusion in Vilari's eyes.

He couldn't.

It had already killed him hiding or lying about so many aspects of his life with Catheya, even if both agreed that was for the best. The subterfuge reminded him of Thea, where his secrets had played a major role in her death. Keeping his twinned existence hidden from outsiders was required to protect himself, especially so after learning it was a known inheritance of the Kayar-Elu. But did he really need to keep the truth from everyone?

Vilari wasn't saddled with the compulsions of the Undead Empire, and the thought of lying to someone who could be considered his daughter didn't sit right with him.

"Let's talk," Zac sighed, and the two sealed off the room.

A few minutes later, Vilari looked at Zac with marvel.

"To think such a thing was possible," Vilari said. "I understand why you want to keep it secret. If nothing else, it'll give you an incredible advantage inside the inheritance. If you can sneak your human body inside while using this one to work with the Undead Empire..."

"I could get away with all kinds of benefits while none being the wiser," Zac smiled.

"Thank you for trusting me," Vilari said, and a binding contract soon appeared in front of Zac.

"There's no need—"

"It's for both of us. I don't wish to be the reason something happens to you," Vilari interjected. "An added protection in case I'm captured or something similar. Now that you're a Hegemon, it'll be difficult to break these against my will."

"Fine," Zac agreed, accepting the contract before reactivating the teleporter. "Let's go. We'll stay undercover for now."

Zac donned his cloak while Vilari shrouded the two with a spiritual domain as they emerged near Elysium's sole battlefield, though there was one in the Underworld too. Between Port Atwood's strength and Pangea's population, the rest could be found on the life-attuned sections of Earth.

They were functionally invisible in their current state, and the few who could notice Vilari's domain would quickly avert their gaze upon realizing who they were spying on. A word from the Mentalist was enough to empty the recruitment center, not that it was crowded like on the Mavai Continent. Zac entered and placed his hand on the crystal, and the familiar process began anew.

[Use Alias?]

"Arcaz Umbri'Zi," Zac said, a wide smile appearing on his face.

A row of screens popped up the next second, all identical to his first enlistment. His designation was the same, but no second quest had been added to his Status Screen. He opened the local ladder with a thought, confirming there was no need to hide his identity anymore. If anything, he wanted as many people as possible to see him now.

1st – 125,585. Zachary Atwood.

2nd – 125,000 Arcaz Umbri'Zi.

It worked.

His cover story had suddenly gotten incredibly difficult to refute. After all, was there a stronger alibi than one from the System itself?

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Chapter 1073 - Exchange

Zac looked at his second tally with a smile. Getting 125,000 merit hadn't felt too impressive when he saw it the first time, but he was far more appreciative after joining his first campaign. He'd repelled half an army almost on his own and then conquered the world, yet it only rewarded him 600 merit, including the bonuses he got from his designation.

Certainly, that was a decent amount for one hour of work, considering Emily and Rhubat only earned around 10,000 a month. But it wasn't like he could get this amount every hour as long as he kept fighting. He could feel it'd take a day to stabilize his overused pathways and recover his energy. And even if he were ready, where would he go? If he forced early assaults on the other warfronts, casualties would quickly balloon.

The real problem was the battlefield and its low grade. The static rewards for large-scale tasks such as conquering the enemy fortress were very low, and his merit was drastically penalized since he out-leveled the warfront. Zac guessed it was fair; the System wanted people to push themselves and break through their limits at the edge of life and death. It would be a problem if people like him were allowed to farm low-grade battlefields for infinite merit without taking any real risks.

He would have to take real risks and enter higher-grade battlefields to earn more merit, but that was easier said than done. He first wanted to finish his upgrades since you could run into elites and higher-stage Hegemons on those warfronts. But there was also a problem with his faction. Their lack of Hegemons could partly be made up for with his elites' equipment and individual strength. But their wartime supplies were lacking.

The Atwood Army had limited stockpiles of good siege machines and Array Towers since they could only produce High E-grade weaponry, with the occasional product reaching the threshold of Peak E-grade. With every faction across Zecia screaming for these strategic resources, they were only left with scraps, if anything, when trying to purchase items from the outside. As such, the number of high-grade engagements they could enter was limited.

But there was a possible solution to the problem.

"What now?" Vilari asked.

"Let's check out the Merit Exchange," Zac said, and the Mentalist led him to a nearby structure.

Triv had already covered the general rules of the Merit Exchange. Simply put, there were three of them; General Exchange, Limited Exchange, and Faction Exchange. The listed products were individualized based on your grade, designation, and evaluation. Defenders would see more treasures leaning toward survivability, while commanders had access to War Arrays, communication methods, and protections against assassination.

The exchange was guarded by three Revenants and a Raun spectral, who quickly bowed upon seeing who was approaching. The two entered, and Zac found the Merit Exchange looked almost identical to the Recruitment Center. Dozens of floating crystals were lined up, though someone had added small booths with obfuscation arrays for privacy.

There were only a few Revenants inside, and Zac curiously looked on as one after another emerged from respective booths. The two entered one of the free exchange booths, and the surroundings blurred. Zac put his hand on the waiting crystal, and a screen resembling his Town Shop appeared.

For a moment, Zac felt himself back in the Orom World, looking at the vast number of items that could be exchanged. There were all kinds of wares, from raw materials to pills, weaponry, and ancillary items like talismans or arrays. The items were mostly in Peak E-grade or Pseudo D-grade, with only a few being Early D-grade—in other words, things that would be used by an Early Hegemon on the frontier.

Some wares, especially the E-grade items, were marked as grade-exclusive. That meant they'd be removed when he broke through to Middle D-grade and hopefully replaced with better stuff. Then again, high-grade items were much rarer, to the point Late Hegemons almost had nothing to buy in the general store, with all their resources being limited.

As expected, nothing piqued Zac's interest in the General Exchange. You could even get better stuff in his empire's Contribution Store, not to mention his private stockpiles. The only benefit was that you could buy as many as you wanted of every item, and the prices were very fair. Zac only skimmed through the contents to get a general sense of what the System offered before swapping to the Limited Exchange.

Things quickly got more interesting. For one, there were no E-grade items, with all wares being Pseudo D-grade or higher. Just the opening screen showcased all kinds of useful items. There were unsurprisingly Core-Strengthening Pills from High to Peak-quality, including attuned ones that could more efficiently nurture his core. You could also buy powerful-looking arrays to improve your cultivation speed, defensive treasures, and various Natural Treasures.

There was also a generous assortment of skills, manuals, and techniques. The System had even put up unique potions or treasures that could award special constitutions, though those were both extremely expensive and few in number. Not even Zac could afford them, with the cheapest being listed at 750,000 merit for a simple attuned constitution. The top one was so expensive it filled Zac with helplessness.

[Celestial Aperture Constellation: 12,500,000. Grade limited. (1)]

Certainly, the item was amazing, essentially reforging your body to form a secondary circuit through your body. It increased cultivation speeds, affinities, and provided significant attribute boosts. It even added natural abilities like a bloodline would. But over ten million as an Early D-grade cultivator... That was decades of hard work, even for Zac—literally thousands of heated engagements like the one he'd just experienced.

There were a few dozen more items like it, each reminding Zac of the things he'd seen at the last levels of the Tower of Eternity. They were clearly the long-term prizes for the sector's top talents, ensuring they kept pushing themselves. However, Zac doubted most of these things would ever be cashed out.

Accumulating the necessary merit was easier said than done. The cheaper items could provide strength or survivability right now, which could mean the difference between life and death on the battlefield. If you didn't spend anything, you risked being overtaken or killed by those who used the merit exchange to snowball their strength.

For Zac, getting any of the top-tier grade restricted items was impossible, considering he wasn't planning on sticking around in Early Hegemony for long. Besides, Zac believed he had better opportunities waiting for him in the Left Imperial Palace, so he instead focused on the mid-range wares.

In contrast to the best stuff, these things were surprisingly affordable. The General Exchange had given him a decent idea of how the System valued merit in terms of Nexus Coins, and some mid-tier items, such as Attribute Fruits or skills, were listed at a fraction of their real value.

"It even has absolute temporal chambers?" Zac exclaimed as he read through the list. "So cheap!"

The things seemed identical to the treasure the Umbri'Zi Matriarch gave him, and Zac could finally piece two and two together. "Emily and Rhubat bought one of these?"

A cultivator could technically force a breakthrough and form a core without a nucleus, but it was extremely foolhardy. For one, it drastically increased the difficulty, putting the process closer to that of a mortal. And even should you succeed, the result would likely be much worse than if you just took your time. In other words, it wasted time rather than save it.

The theory was the same as with his own breakthrough. The sturdier the nucleus you formed, the better the core you could build around it. If you rushed things, you were liable to create imperfections that would lead to a lower-quality core. Saving a couple of years in the E-grade only to waste centuries in Hegemony wasn't a worthwhile trade.

That issue could be solved with a Temporal Chamber. Emily could easily have jumped into the temporal pocket to finish her nucleus before breaking through. Of course, the best Temporal Chambers in her price range would only provide a year, far less than what most cultivators spent on their nucleus. For example, Catheya had already worked on her nucleus before entering the Perennial Vastness. Even inside, she opted to spend the better part of a decade to improve it further.

But it was good enough. You didn't need to aim for perfection for every little thing. He'd rushed his breakthrough in the F-grade, and things worked out fine anyway. Between a year or two on the outside and another within, his follower's nuclei would likely be good enough not to create any issues, at least in the early stages of Hegemony.

"Most of the sealbearers who had accumulated merit in the Million Gates Territory bought one right away. I also have a chamber ready to use as soon as I've figured out the details of the core I wish to form," Vilari confirmed. "They are one of the hottest commodities, and the Temporal Chambers were

even cheaper before. Everyone wants to buy time to break through or upgrade their skills."

"Good," Zac nodded. "Wait, the prices aren't static?"

"The popular wares rise in price as the supply dwindles," Vilari said with some helplessness. "The System doesn't want us to ease our way into things. The moment we relax, we'll find ourselves further away from the items we need. Even worse, we believe the Limited Exchange is shared with the Kan'Tanu. The projections from the peak factions indicate items are disappearing faster than they should."

"So any treasure we're too slow to get falls into the hands of our enemies," Zac sighed. "Ruthless Heavens indeed."

It wasn't hard to figure out what the System was thinking. As usual, it provided both carrot and stick. Those who pushed themselves the hardest would gain access to great benefits, some of them at the level of what he'd received from his various quests. And competing with your enemy for strategic resources meant neither side could relax.

"You've looked at the list of items more than me. Have you found anything you think might suit me?"

His 125,000 merit per body was far from enough to buy the multi-million merit items at the top, but he could sweep up a couple of mid-tier items per class before they increased in price.

"You ultimately know your situation best," Vilari smiled. "Skills or Skill Upgrade Arrays should provide a direct powerup, as would the Attribute Fruits."

"I'm not sure those arrays will work on an Arcane Class," Zac muttered.

Arcane classes provided more power and were better in tune with your Daos, but the drawback was how specialized they were. His pathways had become far more particular since breaking through. A semi-suitable skill might lose 30% of its strength with an Epic Class, but it would lose more than half on an Arcane. Or, just as likely, it wouldn't work at all.

Zac could feel that his connection with [Abyssal Phase] had worsened by quite a bit since it wasn't really aligned with his path. He could still activate it, but there was palpable resistance. He could still get around the issue by using

Void Energy, but he would have to make some alterations when upgrading or fusing it.

The Attribute Fruits were a good option, though the Peak Quality ones cost 25,000 a piece. Even then, it was a bargain, considering it was just two or three months of work for your average Early Hegemon. Zac guessed those would soon increase in price with how rare such high-grade attribute fruits were on the frontier.

There was another interesting option that attracted Zac's attention.

[Early D-grade Tool Embryo Array: 150,000. Grade Limited (1,000)]

Focusing on the line provided additional information.

[Gives a twenty percent chance to awaken a piece of equipment with a Tool Spirit. An awakening is guaranteed to add at least one skill. A failed awakening will destroy the equipment.]

It was a huge gamble, but the payout was massive. Twenty percent wasn't great, but it wasn't a long shot like winning the lottery. And Zac believed it was possible he could nudge those odds in his favor with his Luck and [Lucky Beads]. He might even be able to assist the process with [Cosmic Forge]'s [Cosmic Infusion].

The item was quite rare, limited to just 1,000 copies. It might seem like a lot, but it was simply nothing compared to the incredible population of Zecia. Hegemons were quite rare even on C-grade continents, but there were millions and millions of them across the whole sector. Add to that the Kan'Tanu fighting for the same treasures.

These Tool Embryos would all be gone within a year.

The same was true with more than half of the items in the Limited Store because of their heavily rebated price. Those who didn't get what they wanted would snatch something of similar value before it was too late. Getting the limited resources would be a race where most only managed to get one or two before all the low-hanging fruit was bought out.

Zac guessed that only the top 5% of Hegemons would be able to get something before it was too late. Between the quality and surprisingly

generous prices, Zac doubted the System would dole out treasure-providing quests for the war. It was all handled through the Merit Store instead.

Even then, Zac didn't buy anything. He had a huge lead on the competition thanks to his early contribution, and he wanted to first figure out what he could get his hands on or accomplish without spending merit. Why buy something for merit that he might be able to extract from the Undead Empire?

"Do you wish to see the Faction Store?" Vilari asked when Zac stepped away from the crystal, getting an affirmative nod.

The Mentalist led Zac into a side room that only had one crystal. Zac placed his hand against it, and a new list of options appeared. The cheapest section was full of war tools, from array towers to siege weaponry. Even Cosmic Vessels were available, but Zac quickly realized they were worse than the ones he produced in-house.

Zac wasn't too interested in the details of all the individual battlements. His generals had no doubt already analyzed which ones were suitable for his faction. He was more interested in their price range, and seeing the numbers almost made him recoil. The Merit Exchange was definitely a last-ditch solution.

So much for using the Merit Exchange to speed up the campaigns now that he was back. His faction would lose merit with every victory by paying these kinds of usurious fees. Zac was annoyed, but he continued to the section listing wartime features rather than items. Many of them he'd heard mentioned already, such as resetting battlefronts.

The reason the eighth army couldn't back down in the previous battle was precisely because of this feature. They had recently finished a forty-day campaign that had led them into Kan'Tanu territory. Since they didn't have the confidence to hold onto a hostile world, they opted to reset the battlefield and restart from scratch.

Doing so after a successful operation only cost a symbolic fee, and it let the eighth army start another campaign to rack up merit. But they had been unlucky, being reassigned to meet a similarly successful army who'd already won a series of battles. The next battle would occur on the Mavai Continent if the fortress was sacrificed. Essentially, the Atwood Empire had almost been forced to pay the price for someone else's failures.

There were also options to close or open new battlefronts, the former costing one hundred times as much as the latter. You could also merge battlefronts, though that option was greyed out for some reason. Zac guessed it was still deactivated in this introductory stage of the war. The price tag of adding extra personnel beyond the free limit was also listed. For example, one thousand Late E-grade cultivators only cost 50 Faction Merit.

However, adding a single Middle Hegemon to a Peak E-grade Battlefield would cost a whopping 2,500 Faction Merit. It was even more expensive than the luxury battlements in the earlier sections. Zac shook his head, thanking his lucky stars that the System went by grades rather than attributes or strength. Still, he realized he had cost the Atwood Empire 100 Faction Merit to enter the Eighth Battlefront late to the game.

Zac continued through the list, and his heart beat with desire as the costs exploded.

[Upgrade world to Middle D-grade Mass: 250,000-1,000,000.]

[Upgrade world to Middle D-grade Energy: 2,000,000 – 10,000,000.]

[Relocate conquered Early D-grade world: 50,000-500,000.]

[Relocate conquered Middle D-grade world: 500,000-5,000,000]

There were roughly thirty options that touched upon the very foundations of your faction, and each was incredibly tempting. Apart from the straight upgrades of worlds, there were things such as Limited Trials, Holy Lands, Mystic Realms, and Planetary Arrays. Zac focused on one of the most expensive options, to upgrade a world's base energy, and a new screen appeared.

[Earth: 4,350,000]

[Ensolus: 6,575,000]

"So expensive," Zac grimaced, seeing the [31,384/37,479] at the top of the screen.

In other words, the Atwood Empire had earned just over 37,000 Faction Merit in three months, of which 6,000 had been spent already. Meanwhile, his worlds were surprisingly expensive to upgrade, even with their small sizes, no

doubt because of their Life-Death attunement. Zac guessed Earth was a bit cheaper because of its size and because its energy density was already superior to Ensolus.

"We've tried to keep our expenditures at a minimum, but it's difficult when we could spend some Merit to lower casualties," Vilari commented when she felt Zac's mental state fluctuate.

Zac shook his head, filled with a mix of desire and helplessness. Many of these options could completely elevate your faction, especially upgrading a world's energy density. Upgrading Earth's energy would take over three decades at their current accumulation rate, provided they didn't spend a single Faction Merit point during those years.

It felt stingy, but Zac knew it was actually extremely generous. Upgrading a planet's energy density was almost unheard of on the frontier, to begin with. A few decades of war for such an opportunity was nothing to established factions. You could compare it to Clan Azh'Rezak, who had sold themselves as mercenaries for over 20,000 years with almost nothing to show for it.

Of course, sending some squads to fight the Tal-Eladar couldn't be compared to the life-or-death struggle against the Kan'Tanu. Just like the peak treasures in the Limited Exchange, Zac believed few of these opportunities would get exchanged. It wasn't even a matter of your own performance. It didn't matter if the Atwood Empire won every battle if the Kan'Tanu won the war.

Still, Zac wasn't deterred. If you didn't dare aim for the top rewards, then there was no way you'd get them. The shipyard quest wasn't the only opportunity for himself and his budding empire. The Intersector War was a perfect fusion of risk and reward; those who could thread the needle would come out the other end reborn.

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"What's the greatest source of Faction Merit?" Zac asked.

"Conquering worlds deep in the Kan'Tanu Territory," Vilari said without hesitation. "The neutral battlefronts span three to five worlds. One is in the middle, while the others likely are dead planets in either sector. You generally start in the middle world, and conquering the neutral battlefront is a successful campaign. Stopping at that point has no real downside, but the merit accrued is very limited."

"And continuing beyond that point is where the real merit is."

"Exactly," Vilari nodded. "If you step through the Battlefront Array at the final world, you'll find yourself on an inhabited planet in the Kan'Tanu Sector. It's no longer a manicured battlefield but rather a world-spanning war. We've entered fifteen such battlefronts and succeeded in seven conquests. For the others, the victory condition given was generally deemed too expensive or time-consuming. Three times we were forced to run for our lives. More than half of our merit comes from those seven victories, even if five campaigns were on Peak E-grade worlds."

"The retreats were all on D-grade worlds?"

"One was actually on an E-grade world," Vilari said with a shake of her head. "It was a training world swarming with new recruits, and there were hundreds of Hegemons overseeing things. The difference in strength between the worlds is significant. Some had enormous populations and powerful leaders. Others were almost free for the taking. We didn't dare continue from our first victory since the risks were too great. We simply harvested what resources we could for a week before resetting the battlefronts."

"How are they? The civilizations under the Kan'Tanu?" Zac asked.

"It's not abject misery all around, but conditions are deplorable compared to here," Vilari said. "It seems every citizen is tested for cultivation talent when young unless the planet is extremely remote. Those with high affinities are implanted with Heart Curses and begin their cruel training. Those with unimpressive affinity become skilled workers or the warslaves we've generally run into, depending on how unlucky or connected they are."

"What about mortals?"

"Generally indentured workers to their regional lord. They have no rights and work whatever task they're assigned until they die. It can be anything from manning the fields and tending beasts, to low-skilled work on production

worlds. Not that many are implanted with heart curses. I don't think Mortals can motivate the cost of creating them. We have brought a few hundred of them back to better understand our enemy. You can talk to them if you wish."

"Perhaps another time," Zac muttered as he considered his options.

While it didn't sound like the Kan'Tanu civilians led a great life, it wasn't actually that different from the feeder worlds in the Zecia sector. He guessed not even an unorthodox cultivator would bother being cruel for cruelty's sake unless they'd succumbed to their Heart Demons, and the Kan'Tanu needed everything from cultivation resources to normal food just like everyone else.

"Are the citizens loyal?"

"I wouldn't say that the general population holds any great love for the Kan'Tanu, though they don't know any other life," Vilari said. "You're thinking of relocating planets?"

"It's way cheaper than upgrading," Zac said. "Wouldn't hurt to get a couple of extra worlds. We might even pick up a Middle D-grade world down the road."

Between the expenditures involved in upgrading Earth and the benefit of suddenly gaining a whole new planet, it might be better to aim at relocating a couple of promising worlds. With its Earth's small size, it would eventually require some subsidiary worlds that could provide the base resources that you wouldn't want to grow on such valuable land like Earth.

More importantly, it would provide a big population infusion, which was exactly something the Atwood Empire needed. It wasn't just to replace the warriors who fell on the battlefronts. Earth and Ensolus had lost a large chunk of their citizens to the Integration, and not even Earth could have been considered highly populated by Multiverse standards before.

For example, the capital of Salosar Seven covered a third of its planet. Certainly, some manors were the size of countries because high-grade cultivators needed more space for their gathering arrays and clans. However, there were still well over 30 billion people living on that planet permanently, which didn't count all the temporary residents. Meanwhile, Earth still hadn't recovered to the point there were one billion between the Underworld, Elysium, and Pangea.

"Relocating worlds is a double-edged sword," Vilari warned. "The top empires have arranged for a few E-grade factions to purchase worlds already as an experiment. It turns out new battlefronts open up as a result. With a Middle D-grade world with a high population, we might double our number of Battlefront Arrays. We'd either have to spread our forces further or somehow train the new population in record speed."

"A population where all the talents have already been turned into Heart Curse cultivators," Zac grimaced.

"Maybe if the war takes decades," Vilari said. "Raising a new batch of E-grade soldiers would take five years, three if we spend generously. Of course, we'd first have to wait a few years for the children to grow up, during which we'd have to cover their battlefronts. But the planet would catch up within a decade, and we'd suddenly have three worlds gathering merit."

Zac grimaced at Vilari's idea even though he knew it had merit. It just felt morbid, raising generations of soldiers like they were cattle. The picture of the young swordsman flashed before his eyes, and he felt his heart tremble. Then again, was it better to leave the worlds in the Kan'Tanu Sector?

"Let's put that matter aside for now. Maybe there are other ways to speed up our merit."

"Higher-grade worlds award drastically higher merit, especially if you kill their World Leaders," Vilari offered. "Now that you're back, we might be able to take down a few of those. There's also your fleet of Cosmic Vessels. They can let you earn a fortune, which is why we are drowning in new orders even after increasing our prices twice."

Zac had already realized their value after seeing the map in the command center. Most Cosmic Vessels in the Zecia Sector could not be stored in a spatial ring because their central arrays couldn't enter a subspace. Meanwhile, the Creator vessels could be turned into large cubes before being stowed. They took some time to unpack, but it also meant you could bring the ships anywhere.

For example, to planets neighboring conquered worlds. Others didn't have his unlimited access, but the Porter Guild and teleportation tokens still existed. His commercial Cosmic Vessels were only Early D-grade and unsuitable for long-range missions, but they were quick enough to move between planets in

a local cluster. It would only take a few days to a month to strike at a neighboring planet, reaping a good chunk of merit.

"Our buyers right now don't care what model they get," Vilari said, confirming Zac's thoughts. " They're mostly after the portability after realizing the opportunity that presents. Whether it's reclaiming words on Zecia or striking at neighboring worlds in a Tan'Kanu cluster, there are massive profits to be had. It's probably the best way to transform Nexus Coins into merit."

Zac slowly nodded before looking at the time again. They still had over two hours.

"Call Emily and Joanna to meet us in my compound," Zac said. "I want to go over a few things."

Sharing his secret with Vilari had been a spur-of-the-moment thing, but he felt he could also tell those two. As for others, he would have to think it over first.

"Emily is currently in the Kan'Tanu sector," Vilari said. "We've sent word that you've returned, but I'm afraid calling her back—"

"Should I send over my other body?" Zac asked.

"It's incredibly expensive sending cultivators to active battlefronts in the Kan'Tanu Sector, especially high-grade ones. Those conquests are like trials. It's cheaper to give up on the battlefront and start fresh than sending reinforcement," Vilari said. "Also, Emily would get angry. She'd think you didn't trust her to do her job. You need trust in the abilities of the people you've nurtured."

The thought of Emily fighting on a distant planet filled Zac with anxiety, but he knew Vilari was right. Emily wasn't the unruly child he picked up decades ago. She was now one of the top commanders under his rule, and he had to believe in her ability to get things done. If nothing else, she had the wits and resources to retreat if things took a bad turn.

"Just Joanna then," Zac said. "I can catch up with Emily later. Right now, I need to go over a few things because I am heading to Kavista in two hours."

As he said that, his human body opened his eyes and moved toward the Battlefront Array leading back to Ensolus. Time was limited, and he had to ensure everything was in order.

"The Kavriel province?" Vilari said with shock, but her mouth soon curved upward. "In two hours? I see you already have a plan."

"Half of one, anyway," Zac laughed. "I just need you two to help me perfect it."

"Damnit, what's going on?!" Reoluv Dravorak swore, and his bloodshot eyes opened inside the Healing Ward.

His whole body hurt and his pathways were so strained that it felt like they could collapse at any time. But he'd done it. Three successful conquests in two days, all to gather the necessary merit for his quest. It was supposed to only be two campaigns, but a nagging feeling had urged him on, forcing him to continue. He had even kept his personnel and resources to a minimum, ensuring he'd gain the maximum merit.

Yet he received no notification of his quest being complete when the ladder updated, and he urgently opened it to see what was going on.

[Stars of Zecia: Early D-grade]

1st – Kelvinios

2nd – Sacred Insight

3rd – Kerokas, Kavriel Province

4th – Ynar Solefair

5th – Zachary Atwood, Atwood Empire

6th – Arcaz Umbri'Zi, Atwood Empire

7th – Helian Ailo, Allbright Empire

8th – Fateblight, Hanor Clan

9th – Sossor

10th – Ardos Havarok, Dravorak Dynasty

[...]

100th – Uroso Kavriel, Undead Empire

Reoluv's mind ground to a halt as he saw the familiar name that had appeared out of nowhere and claimed the fifth spot. That guy was really an unlucky jinx. Reoluv was supposed to have taken the first step toward domination by leaving his mark on the Tower of Eternity. Yet, a short moment of carelessness had messed up his climb, only for his accomplishment to immediately be overshadowed by Zachary Atwood.

He did pass the seventh floor on his second attempt, but who cared about that when the Deviant Asura conquered the eighth the year before? Yet Reoluv hadn't let that cast a shadow on his heart. He'd worked tirelessly for decades while the Deviant Asura disappeared from the limelight. He'd even been given the opportunity to train in the Havarok Dynasty, further setting himself apart from the other Zecia chosen.

When senior Ykrodas told him great opportunities were waiting back in Zecia, Reoluv had first believed it a thoughtful way to send him back home. But it was all real, to the point even the Havarok Dynasty had been ordered to enter the fray by some mysterious faraway faction. Reoluv still didn't understand the details, but he knew the Havarok Dynasty had been enlisted because of their connection to his Dravorak Clan.

That connection acted as a ticket into their sealed sector, allowing them to squeeze some people through the barrier while the rest had to pass some sort of trial. Reoluv had initially feared his role would be nothing but a porter as he failed to get one of those seals Ykrodas talked about, even after searching the Million Gates Territory for over a year. Then came the quest.

Reoluv knew this was a life-altering opportunity for him, so he'd thrown himself into the gauntlet against the Kan'Tanu elites. Just remembering the blood-drenched aura of the madman he met on the last conquest was enough to leave his back slick with sweat. Reincarnators, they called themselves. Murderous experts who'd survived two baptisms of slaughter to be reborn. He knew he'd have fallen today if not for the one thousand elite guards laying down their lives to provide him an opening. He hadn't managed to kill his enemy, but at least wound him enough to back down.

Now, it felt like their valiant sacrifice was for nothing. The daily update had added two new names sector ladder, but neither of them was his. Instead, he found himself in the eleventh spot, just one step shy of his goal.

The quest that Senior Ykrodradas believed was his ticket to the real opportunity needed him to reach the tenth, and he had hoped that the past three months would have let him climb the final step of the ladder. If only he had returned upon reading the reports of conflicts in the Million Gates Territory rather than wait for Ykrodas and his elder brother to take him there.

Reoluv's choice to strengthen himself as much as possible before the war began had completely backfired, leaving him with too little pre-war merit to make much of a difference.

"Don't beat yourself up," an ancient voice echoed through the chamber. "You should recognize those names."

Reoluv took a steadying breath before nodding. "I should have guessed the Deviant Asura would create a splash when he finally reemerged. I'm less clear how the Umbri'Zi scion managed to shoot to the top in one go or why he's listed as a member of the 'Atwood Empire.'"

"Perhaps he's the same as the alias Fateblight, using a random small faction to access Faction Merit. More likely, he's after those marvelous Cosmic Vessels," Hastos Dravorak said. "Either case, it is inevitable that more and more people will join the conflict. I spoke with Refus Havarok. It appears someone manages to gain the acceptance of the Zecia Seal daily."

"That's why I pushed myself half to death these past months," Reoluv sighed. "I know my limits; I won't be able to stay in the top ten with more and more outsiders joining the war. Their strength and resources will make it impossible to keep pace. Sooner or later, Mistress Tayn will return and likely bring terrifying allies. I just needed to finish the quest before the competition heats up."

"...I will see what I can do," the voice said after a brief pause.

"I can't ask ancestor to attack those scions!" Reoluv said with alarm. "I'd rather give up on the trial than bring harm on the Dynasty."

"Who said I'd attack them? I'm old, but I'm not suicidal," Hastos laughed. "Asking the young masters of the main branch to rest for a few days shouldn't be too much to ask, and I think I can call in a few favors to stall some of the people on your heels. After all, most of these outsiders are ultimately relying on natives to rack up their merit. You will still have to push yourself a bit longer."

Reoluv steeled his heart, knowing what he had to do. With so much at stake, it was obviously not a matter of just calling in a few favors. His ancestor would have to pay a huge prize to help him squeeze into the top ten. He needed to risk it all, ensuring his master's sacrifice wasn't for naught.

"What in the Abyss," Laz Tem'Zul exclaimed, the shock and exaltation in his voice dragging Tavza out of her blank slate.

"What is it?" Tavza asked, though her idle curiosity was far from expelling the gloom in her heart.

She still found it hard to accept how spectacularly she'd failed her ancestor's task, failed her whole race. Bringing a lost bloodline back into the fold to claim his birthright sounded so simple. What Draugr would say no to coming home, to reconnect with the origin of their very being? Yet she'd spent the past years floundering about, utterly incapable of making Zachary Atwood take even one step toward his rightful destiny.

Enis still held onto a desperate hope that her ward had accomplished her task inside the Perennial Vastness. That Zachary Atwood had somehow defied all expectations and retained his impossible duality even in Hegemony. Tavza couldn't bring herself to believe in that false hope. She just needed to look inward at the monstrous power of the upper bloodlines to know the truth.

There was no fusing Life with their heritage.

"He's on the global ladder!" Laz said.

"We knew that would happen," Tavza said. "Kerokas should have roughly 135,000 merit right now, which placed him at the third spot. 125,000 should put Zachary Atwood in the top 5, or at least the top 10."

"No, he's on the ladder," Laz said with a shaky voice. "Arcaz Umbri'zi. Right next to Zachary Atwood."L1tLagoon witnessed the first publication of this chapter on Nøv€l--B1n.

"What?!" Tavza blurted. "How is that possible?"

"I—" Laz said, but his words caught in his throat as their heads suddenly turned in the same direction, toward one of the four long-distance hubs of the capital.

Valsa took a shuddering breath; the confusion swept away. She suddenly felt whole, even if she hadn't known something was missing. Laz Tem'Zul didn't seem to sense the same thing, but he was still visibly moved upon sensing the aura. From the depths of despair, salvation had emerged.

The Bloodline of Eoz had finally come home.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1075 - Coming Home - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1075 - Coming Home

Chapter 1075 - Coming Home

A welcoming wave of Death filled every pore of Zac's body, and he took a deep breath of contentment. Only now did Zac realize he had actually never really felt the Dao of Death in this calm and natural state. Twilight Harbor and its trial Realm, Earth, and Ensolus all had Life mixed in with death. Even the Death-attuned world disks in Twilight Harbor or the Deatly region in the Orom World had felt like pockets of sanctuary assaulted from every direction.

That wasn't the case here. It was as though the laws of the universe had been inverted, where Death was the natural order. There wasn't a hint of conflict or instability in the air. The Miasma was tranquil as it permeated everything. Zac felt like he'd come home, but his companion didn't seem to share the sentiment.

"Heugh—"

Zac wryly smiled as he took out a couple of Divine Talismans and put them on the little Sky Gnome who had appeared on the teleporter next to him. They formed a protective bubble, rebuffing the surrounding death, and Zac placed a Divine Crystal in Calrin's hand to bolster the effect. Normally, the Sky Gnome could care for himself, but the shock had paralyzed him.

"Wha—Liar! Where have you taken me?" Calrin wheezed when he finally came to.

"Welcome to Kavista," Zac said as he moved the merchant away from the teleporter.

Calrin looked like he was about to have an aneurysm, and Zac couldn't blame him. Zac had to admit it was a bit of a low blow bringing the merchant to the Kavriel Province, but he was the best suited for the job. First, he enjoyed some special protections through the Mercantile System, though his status had become a bit muddled since Zac became the majority shareholder of the Thayer Consortia.

Also, the Sky Gnome had, by far, the best understanding of the Atwood Empire's coffers and Zecia's market. Calrin knew what Port Atwood needed and what everything should cost. The only alternative was Vikram, but Zac wasn't sure he'd be able to withstand the environment. He also wasn't nearly as shameless.

So he'd visited Calrin on his way back from the Eighth Battlefield, saying that a huge opportunity had presented itself. Only at the last second had he swapped out his living body with his Draugr one, and the two had been teleported away before Calrin had the chance to realize he'd been misled.

"I never lied. I did take you to a C-grade continent to see if you could secure some resources and sell some of our stockpiles," Zac coughed, quietly adding when he sensed four people closing in. "Hold that thought."

Zac turned to the Revenant guards, all of them Hegemons, who appeared unsure how to act. One of the arrivals was a Dreamer, someone who absolutely shouldn't appear in Kavista, of all places. Normally, they'd just kill or capture him, but his companion was an esteemed Pureblood Draugr radiating an aura far surpassing theirs.

Ultimately, they opted to bow and wait for further instructions.

"I am Arcaz Umbri'Zi," Zac said. "I am here to see Tavza An'Azol and Kator White Sky. I am expected."

"U-Umbri'Zi?" the leader stuttered before bowing again, this time even deeper.

"Lunacy... This is lunacy," Calrin cried to the side.

"Don't be like that," Zac said. "See this as the opportunity it is. The Kavriel Province is slowly moving away from its isolationist policy with this war, yet they still lack real connections with the upper factions. Meanwhile, I hear that the Mercantile System has mostly been sealed off like everything else, cutting the Kavriel Province off from the empire heartlands.

"Our goal has always been to turn the Atwood Empire into a major trading hub and the link between the Living and Dead of Zecia. This is our chance to take the first step in that direction while getting our hands on things we desperately need. Just imagine the profits if our consortia can pull this off. Even the earnings from my Cosmic Vessels will pale in comparison."

"That's... Huh," Calrin said, his saucer-wide eyes gaining a calculative and greedy gleam. "Maybe—"

The Sky Gnome got no chance to finish his thoughts before a series of immense auras descended, drowning the whole region. Zac snorted upon noting the Teleportation Array had dimmed down. He moved closer to Calrin, who was suddenly wrapped in dozens of protective spheres. The two stepped out of the small chamber, finding themselves in a secluded square surrounded by towering black walls.

Zac had hoped to get a glimpse of what the capital of a C-grade continent looked like, but the sprawling city that no doubt surrounded him was completely cut off by the fortifications. They reached over one hundred meters in the air, and huge turquoise sigils hung above. The sigils only held the seal of the Kavriel Clan, but just glancing at glowing runes filled Zac with alarm. They looked ornamental, but the things clearly contained deadly force.

Above the walls was only an open sky. The Kavriel Province was covered in the same aquamarine sky that Earth almost had ended up with, though it was much deeper. No vessels were flying about, which made sense considering this likely was a highly restricted area. There were, however, a few floating constructs in the sky, and they messed with Zac's perspective.

Zac could tell at least of them was a planet-sized War Fortress similar to the ones built in the Allbright Empire. Yet it was only the size of a small dot while still inside the atmosphere. The sky had to be hundreds of times higher here than back on Earth for something like that to be possible. Then again, what else could you expect from a proper continent whose size was so great Zac could barely compute it?

There was no more time to inspect the surroundings before a familiar figure stepped out of the air, prompting the guards to fall to their knees inside the teleportation room.

"Son of E—ahem, young man, welcome home," Laz Tem'Zul said, his face rife with emotion. He almost looked at Zac like he were a long-lost son. "We have eagerly anticipated your return."

Zac bowed at the Draugr guardian he met during his negotiations with Catheya. The puppet he used back then had conveyed the immense power of the Monarch, but it was nothing compared to feeling it in person. His aura was refined to perfection yet perfectly contained. Not only that, but Zac could feel a sense of belonging in Laz's abyssal eyes, something he hadn't felt even when looking into Catheya's.

It was as though Zac had been transported back to his bloodline visions where Eoz swam in the depths of the Abyssal Lake. Laz Tem'Zul might not be of the three upper branches, but his bloodline was undoubtedly incredibly pure. More than that, it had undoubtedly been awakened to a very high degree using the Abyssal Lake.

"Greetings, senior," Zac said. "It feels good stepping onto actual death-attuned soil, but my friend here has some problems adjusting. I'd appreciate it if you could assist with this matter."

Laz glanced at Calrin with passing interest, and a protective sphere appeared around the merchant. Zac could tell it protected him from the Monarch's inherent domain and Kavista's environment in general.

"Thank you, great lord," Calrin sighed.

"For now, let's—" Lez began, but the Monarch shook his head when two people stepped out of thin air.

The most attention-grabbing was the towering Izh'Rak Reaver in the front, whose aura felt like a storm of blood and death compared to the sheathed blade that was Laz Tem'Zul. Zac could tell the Monarch had to be one of the upcoming elites of the White Sky Phalanx and possibly one of the three strongest beings currently in the Zecia sector. It was Brigadier Toss, the Dao Guardian to the Reaver next to him.

When they left for the Perennial Vastness, there had only been four Izh'Rak Reavers in the Zecia Sector, though the Undead Empire was trying various methods to increase that number. Yet there was no mistaking the reaver next to Brigadier Toss for anyone but Kator White Sky, the Warchild of the White Sky Phalanx.

Izh'Rak Reavers were one of the most warlike species in the multiverse, evidenced by their whole society being organized through a military hierarchy. And it was clear this chosen hadn't grown up inside some protective environment. The whole square dimmed as immense pressure weighed down on Zac's shoulder. However, Zac noted it wasn't a skill or a Dao, at least not in the conventional sense.

It was Killing Intent, refined and transformed into something resembling a mix of an Illusion and Restrictive Array. It was just like the techniques Commander Kaldor had used during their duel in the Orom World, though not quite as refined. Of course, while Kator didn't have the skill of the Divine Monarch, he wasn't restricted by anything. Zac could feel how the madness of war tried to drag him into a delirious state, and it was lucky that Calrin was shielded from the onslaught.

The crushing pressure wasn't passively released by the reaver; this was intentional. A test, and a challenge. Showing who's boss right out the gate.

Zac wasn't sure why the reaver had adopted such a strong stance, but he knew it wasn't just the combative nature of the reavers that made Kator act out. Catheya hadn't been able to share much about the chosen, but Zac had managed to piece together a few things. He carried himself forthright and openly, but a ruthless warrior and commander hid behind that facade.

It was worth remembering that Kator was different from Tavza. She had been born into her role, carrying the bloodline of Azol. And while Kator was a direct descendant of one of the top generals of the White Sky Phalanx, he still had fought with the elites of multiple generations for his current role. Nepotism was considered a weakness; only individual power and contribution mattered in their society. And it was generally those with both brains and brawn who managed to fight their way to the top.

Unfortunately for Kator, he had picked the wrong method to push Zac down a peg. His Void Self kept him ensconced in a world of nothingness, distanced from the madness around him. And while the pressure was enough to force the guards behind him to a prone position as they gasped for air, it wasn't enough to make Zac bend. If anything, it had triggered the bloodlines in his body, where the Adamance and Conviction of Eoz not only resisted but rebuffed the pressure.

"Is that it?" Zac asked, his voice cutting through the madness as he released restraints on his brutal nature.

The ground shook as a torrent of murderous intent roiled out of his body like dense waves of bloody mist. It was nowhere near as controlled or refined as Kator's, but it was boundless and unstoppable, like a storm rolling down a mountain slope. The crude display was fueled by decades of slaughter and living on the edge of life and death. The true edge, where you lacked any support system as you repeatedly put your life on the line. Where you never knew if you'd see tomorrow's sunrise.

It was clear that Kator had ample experience in war and killing, but his Killing Intent lacked that vicious ruthlessness that Zac's experiences had forced upon him. As such, the murderous waves of Zac's domain ripped into the Intent Array, slowly consuming it.

"Not bad!" Kator laughed, seemingly exhilarated rather than embarrassed by the display. "I was starting to wonder if your kin lacked any true warriors. You might be worth dueling, after all."

Zac was about to answer, but a sigh echoed through the square as Zac found his Killing Intent dispersed.

"Is this the best use of our time?"

The calm voice was followed by two more figures appearing on the square. The first of the two was another Draugr who also had the aura of a tempered warrior. She felt vaguely familiar, even if they'd never met. She reminded him of Catheya, even if their appearances were completely different. Zac had a decent idea who this was; Enis Umbri'Zi, the Monarch who had originally been tasked with bringing him into the fold before the Left Imperial Palace derailed everything.

"Mistress Umbri'Zi," Zac said with another bow. "I'm sorry for that embarrassing display."

"You had us worried for a while," Enis commented with a neutral voice, though Zac noted her mouth curving slightly upward in satisfaction. "Little Catheya has told me so much about you it almost feels like we know each other. I pray she's helpful during your time off-world."

"Yes, she's been a huge asset. It was thanks to her I—" Zac began, but his voice trailed off as he glanced at the other newcomer. "Pavina?"

The half-orc Revenant's aura was completely different now that the Orom's Prison seal no longer bound her, but she looked the same. Zac had long since learned how the Umbri'Zi Matriarch had freed the captive undead, but he still hadn't expected to see his old mentor here on the frontier.

Of course, seeing how she had placed herself behind Toss, Zac had a decent idea of what was going on.

"Long time no see, kid," the Revenant Monarch smiled. "You're looking good. Your strength has increased by leaps and bounds since we last met."

"Pavina joined our mission because of her fate with you," the leading reaver rumbled, his voice feeling like bones grinding against steel. "I apologize for Kator's display. But judging by your aura, I suspect you fully understand the fundamental law of the universe. That strength is the greatest truth. That it is order and providence."

"Of course," Zac said, keeping his thoughts to himself.

"It is good that you are here; we have some matters to discuss," Toss continued.

"That's why I came over," Zac nodded.

The air twisted as the reaver pointed at Zac, but Laz was even faster. The Draugr appeared next to Zac, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"The meeting room is quite far. Let me escort you," Laz said, and the surroundings distorted before Zac had a chance to respond.

The next moment, Zac found himself standing inside an opulent room. However, it didn't look like a place where you'd hold a meeting, even if it could certainly house over a hundred people. Instead, it was a sprawling living room overlooking a private garden filled with D-grade flowers. In front of him was a simple table with two chairs, one of which was occupied by a young Draugr woman.

Tavza An'Azol.

Zac wasn't too surprised he'd been taken to Tavza before the meeting, and he curiously looked at the leader of the Draugr delegation. As expected, she was a stunning beauty, her features elevated by extreme affinity to the Dao.

However, she perfectly matched Catheya's descriptions; rather than cold, her face felt distant and unfeeling as she inspected Zac. If there had been challenge in Kator's demeanor, there was simply nothing to be gleaned from Tavza.

Even then, Zac felt more connected to the woman before him than he did Laz'Tem Zul. He could feel the echo of Azol, the originator of her branch, in her aura. The sense of familiarity momentarily dragged Zac back to the time when the children of the Abyssal Lake first stepped onto those ancient shores. Realities converged, and the line between Zac and Eoz blurred. He was looking into Tavza's eyes, but at the same time looking up at that primordial sky, with Mez and Azol standing by his side. Imparting his mark on the great tapestry.

The feeling passed as quickly as it came, but it left Zac off-balance. Actually, it looked like he wasn't the only one, as Tavza's face had shifted subtly as she blinked a few times. The situation led to an awkward silence, but the Dao Guardian quickly came to the rescue.

"My apologies; I thought it proper the two of you met while the others convened," Laz Tem'Zul smiled. "You handled yourself well. The Reavers wouldn't have accepted you if you backed down."

"My companion?" Zac asked, shaking his head to clear the lingering impression.

"I've instructed a follower to prepare a room and an isolation array where he can rest while we sort out some things," the Monarch said.

Zac nodded in thanks before turning back to Tavza. The woman's unerring stare left Zac unsettled, and he soon found himself forced to break the silence.

"Well?"

"How is Catheya Sharva'Zi?" Tavza asked.

"She... She's good. Won't be returning for a while, though," Zac said, surprised that was her first question.

Tavza nodded, giving no indication of what she thought of the news.

"I thought it unlikely you'd accept our invitation, especially so quickly," Tavza said. "It seems quite out of character for you."

"Well, things change," Zac said. "Is the Abyssal Pond real? Or was it bait?"

"Both," Tavza said. "A pond has been conjured and connected. However, we didn't expect to activate it so soon. It will take a week for it to fully awaken. I suggest you should finish your transition before submerging yourself. We will provide the materials to expedite the process."

"Thank you," Zac slowly said, looking on with confusion as Tavza turned her gaze to the private garden.

He didn't know what to make of Tavza's demeanor. He'd spent the last couple of hours perfecting his excuses while Vilari and Joanna helped formulate a plan. He had teleported the moment the global ladder finished its daily reset, partly to use it as cover and partly to set things in motion before the delegates from the Undead Empire could adapt to the revelations.

He'd expected to immediately be hounded for answers, but Tavza barely seemed to care. He honestly preferred Kator's overbearing greeting to this inscrutable reception. There was some good news, at least. The Abyssal Pond was real, and he hadn't been cut down or thrown into a cell. Of course, Zac knew that didn't matter much, with multiple Monarchs tracking his every move.

Whether he walked out of this in one piece would depend on the next hour.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1076 - Suspicions and Excuses - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1076 - Suspicions and Excuses

Tavza kept her face impassive, but masking the waves in her heart wasn't easy. She knew this meeting was an opportunity Laz Tem'Zul presented, a way to tie a first string of fate between herself and this walking calamity. She had spent years trying to nudge him closer to their camp by hook or crook, even letting the Zi girl get targeted by the Reavers to shake things up and sow the first seeds of partnership.

Now was the time to harvest, yet her mind wasn't on the present. She was trying to hold onto that blurry sky, whose primordial Dao was just out of reach.

The same was true from the lingering touch of the progenitor, crossing the vast river of time. If she could just get another chance, another glimpse... She might find some of the answers she sought.

She still couldn't understand what just happened. The scene had been brief and obfuscated, but she could tell it was just as the earliest annals described. There had been a few occasions where extraordinarily talented Draugr had triggered that Ancestral Descent, eternalizing their accomplishments by adding them to the Stargazing Tablets.

However, while her bloodline was the strongest of the past 100 generations, she was not one of those chosen. Yet looking into Arcaz's eyes had given her a glimpse of her origin, like a scene observed through a dirty window. That on its own was shocking enough, but it had actually purified her bloodline by a bit. Tavza wasn't certain, but she believed she could succeed in a partial awakening.

Tavza had never heard of anything like this, and the answer could only be found within the man before her. She had already considered him an avatar of Chaos, inadvertently creating unpredictable waves in the River of Fate. But to think the effect was this direct, this brazen. What secrets did Arcaz Umbri'Zi hide for him to trigger her bloodline in a way not even the two ancestors had?

The incredible opportunity had completely thrown her off-balance, and she glanced at Laz for him to take charge while she tried to sort out her thoughts.

"Not preparing the Abyssal Pond in time is a miscalculation on our part. We were happy to hear of your successful return and sent out our invitation before arranging things properly," Laz said.

"You learned I had returned from the Perennial Vastness as a human and were afraid your scheme with the [Essence of the Abyss] had failed," Arcaz said with a meaningful smile.

The accusation dragged Tavza back to the present, and she quickly sent a message through her mental link.

'The essence was tampered with?'

'That's—'

"It was my order to tamper with the essence," Tavza said, knowing the truth from her guardian's tone.

She didn't know whether she should be angry or not. The Abyssal Council scheming behind her back had made her mission far harder, if not impossible. No wonder all her attempts at meeting in person had been ignored, all her attempts at communication been met with distrust. Then again, Tavza sincerely doubted she would have managed to convince this man to pick death, especially after meeting him in person.

An unbendable stubbornness was engraved into his bones—ironically, a possible side-effect of his bloodline. Kator's probe had been met by a powerful rejection, allowing the reaver to make all sorts of deductions. Even now, faced with Monarchs in what he possibly considered hostile territory, Arcaz looked unwilling to back down even one step. Tavza briefly wondered if she would have been able to do the same.

"Of course, we would," she continued. "You know the value your bloodline holds to our race—you've used that fact to extort us for years. Too much is at stake to let the cards fall where they may. Thankfully, the bloodline of Eoz is alive and well."

'There's no need for you to take the blame for this,' Laz's voice echoed in her mind.

'I ultimately bear responsibility for this mission, including our failures. And it's better he trains his ire toward me than the Abyssal Shores if we want him to join us when we return.'

"Being straightforward about it doesn't make it better," Arcaz snorted.

"We will provide a satisfying compensation for this... misstep," Laz said. "I hope you can believe us when we say there was no malice behind our actions, even if we had a self-serving interest. We were certain it was one or the other, and your future prospects as the Bloodline Ancestor of Eoz would be immeasurably broader."

"Now that you've become a true Draugr, our goal has been met. I'd venture our goals are more aligned than you might think going forward," Tavza said.

"And if not, you'll make sure to guide me down the correct path?" Zac asked, his voice rife with sarcasm.

"If that's what's required."

"Tavza is direct, but she only has your best interests at heart," Laz coughed before Arcaz could speak again. "In a way, you can even be considered siblings. The three upper branches were always the closest. I'm sure they're looking forward to your return. On that note, I was hoping you could shed some light on the situation. You are one, right? A true Draugr?"

"I think this matter should be discussed with the others, no?" Arcaz smiled.

Rebellious to the end. Tavza didn't care since she already had the answer. If Arcaz Umbri'Zi wasn't Draugr, at least where it mattered, then no one was. Laz glanced in her direction to gauge her reaction. It was exhausting, but the Heart had decreed that the young generation would lead this expedition. It seemed foolish, but Princess Ur'Mez had already warned that fate was the most important part of her mission, but it was currently in an incredibly fragile state.

Bending to outside interference or letting others direct your path could weaken your fate with the Fifth Pillar. The change compared to her life back home was refreshing, but that liberty currently felt suffocating. How should she deal with this troublemaker? How was she supposed to tie a malignant star like this to her chariot?

'His bloodline is real—he must be protected. Have Sepravo follow him at all times.'

"Of course, we've kept the others waiting," Laz said. "We simply hoped to meet you before the others to confirm the veracity of your bloodline and give a warning now that we've confirmed it's real."

"A warning against what?"

"Any large empire has dangerous undercurrents, and the Undead Empire is no different. The upcoming trial has priority, but you must be careful, even among your allies. The appearance of Eoz's bloodline has already spread in certain circles, and not everyone is happy with the changes that might usher in. Not even Draugr."

"And the only ones I can trust are the two of you?" Arcaz commented.

"We are just reminding you to never let your guard down, even if your circumstances clearly have changed," Tavza said. "In fact, some things might be better left unsaid. I have received four messages from Kator already. Let's go."

"Just one question," Arcaz said. "If you had to pick between the mission and saving the bloodline of Eoz, which would you choose?"

Tavza looked at Arcaz a moment. "That is an impossible choice, and I will work hard to avoid being put in that position. Ultimately, you are responsible for your fate, and you cannot rely on anyone else to save you. Just as I don't expect you to save me or my subordinates at the expense of the bigger picture."

"Fair enough."

Zac relaxed, having crossed the first hurdle. He had been worried that his Draugr persona wouldn't be seen as the real deal, which would drastically have lessened his value to the Abyssal Shores. Luckily, Tavza had clearly felt the same resonance as him, confirming his heritage.

Even then, she had said that she couldn't protect him if he got between the Undead Empire and the mission in the Left Imperial Palace, but that was to be expected. At least it meant he should be somewhat safe inside Kavista. After all, this was Draugr territory, with the other factions only having a handful of representatives present.

Laz'Tem Zul transported the three the next moment, and the four from before were already waiting when they arrived.

"I'm sorry," Laz smiled as they appeared. "I got excited and forgot myself."

"I'm sure," Toss scoffed. "So? Is he real?"

"He's Draugr," Tavza calmly confirmed. "There is no doubt about it."

"We're all busy, so let's not waste any time," Toss said. "One moment, we get reports you chose life, even after we were assured that was impossible. You being a Dreamer or undead doesn't matter for the mission—that's more of an

issue for the Abyssal Shores. However, the situation raises an important question. Before we can untangle the recent events, I need some assurances.

"You might look right and act right, but there's something off about you," the reaver continued. "We still have no idea where you came from, and your means are far beyond what you'd see from some frontier cultivator who got lucky. Meanwhile, you adamantly refuse to join the Empire. Makes me wonder if you can't rather than won't, due to previous obligations. How can we know you're not working for someone else?"

So it came, after all, before they'd even touched upon his dual bodies. Zac had to admit they had good reason to be suspicious. NøvEl--ß1n hosted the premiere release of this chapter.

"Well, the part about me avoiding your trap is easy enough to answer," Zac said. "I became acquainted with Iz Tayn of the Tayn Family a while back. She used one of her family's special methods to scan the gifts you provided. She found a brand that would somehow tamper with any life in my body and helped me remove it."

There was no point hiding his link to Iz from the Undead Empire. He was almost certain they already knew about it, considering Iz hadn't exactly been circumspect in her visit to Zecia. Adding that to their appearance by the Orom, and it would be impossible not to make the connection.

"So you're really part of the Tayn Clan," Toss commented, and Zac could feel the displeasure even if he had no expression to read.

"I didn't say that," Zac said. "We met inside the Tower of Eternity. I kind of pissed her off before running away, so she hunted me down to the frontier. Luckily, it helped me escape the Orom, and we've worked things out since then."

"So they were really there for you," Pavina laughed. "Their rampage helped many of us to let go of the grievances we had held onto."

"How absurd," Enis sighed. "A small grudge between juniors led the Tayn to the fifth pillar by accident, while the Starbeast Alliance had to toil for eons."

"You really are a troublemaker," Kator guffawed, and even Tavza's inexpressive mask had a hint of helplessness as she wordlessly looked at

Zac. "I've read the reports. Why do things go out of control wherever you appear? Should we be worried?"

"Just coincidences," Zac muttered, unable to bring much gusto to his voice. His track record wasn't exactly stellar.

"Never mind that. Will the Tayn Clan become a hindrance?" Tavza asked.

"The opposite, really," Zac said. "She has her own goals, so she won't help me. But she won't make trouble for me or my friends either. Better to have a neutral party enter the Left Imperial Palace than a hostile one, right? She's only interested in the main inheritance while we're supposed to be looking for something else."

Zac didn't mention he knew about the Hollow Court, at least not yet. You never knew when that knowledge could come in handy.

"We can't do much about the Tayns," Laz'Tem Zul agreed. "Trying to bar them from the inheritance will create more trouble than it's worth, and targeting their princess would lead to a calamity for the Empire—it's better just to stay out of their way."

Zac inwardly sighed, unable to fully suppress the pang of jealousy in his heart. Iz was really living life on easy mode, with her family being so terrifying that even the Undead Empire didn't dare target her. Meanwhile, he was forced to plan ten steps ahead every time he left Earth. To that point, he still wasn't out of the woods as Toss wordlessly looked at him, clearly not satisfied with his answers thus far.

"I know what you're looking for, but I don't have any answers to give you. I don't know how I came to be," Zac said. "I'm sure you've investigated my background already. I'm a native of Earth."

"A human," Toss commented.

"Well, truth be told, I actually died once during the integration," Zac said. "At least I thought I did. A few seconds later, I woke up in my Draugr form. It took months before I even heard of Draugr. I've been searching for answers to my situation since. My best guess is that I'm like many other natives of Earth—a descendant of that bloodline research base that had everyone in a tizzy."

"The heretic base, which just so happened to blow up after you entered its depths," Kator commented. "Destroying any chances of verifying your claims."

"Yeah, well. It would blow up whether I got involved or not because of that spatial treasure," Zac shrugged. "You could always look for similar bases if you want more answers. I'd be curious to see what you'd find as well. As for my means, that's just what happens when you survive against all odds, and your advantages begin to snowball."

He conjured a screen, and a few sharp intakes echoed across the room as they read its contents.

[Grand Achievement: Gain 50 Titles while in E-Grade. Reward: Effect of Attributes +6%.]

"Fifty?" Pavina muttered in disbelief while Enis and Laz looked at him with burning eyes.

Zac smiled as he closed the screen. This was the best he could come up with. Pleading ignorance wouldn't satisfy these reavers, so he'd prepared a plausible excuse that was impossible to verify. Triv had already mentioned sending back word of the unusual amounts of varied bloodlines on Earth, and he was using that fact to cover up his own circumstances.

"You should worry about our real enemies rather than some imaginary hand in the shadows. Catheya and I were targeted by the First Heaven inside the Perennial Vastness," Zac added, eager to change the subject. "They even sent a Supremacy into the Immemorial Realm to take me out."

"What?"

"What happened?"

Zac ignored the suspicious looks and recounted the situation mostly truthfully, only leaving Kruta out of the equation.

"How could you possibly remember all this?" Laz'Tem Zul asked, and he was not the only one doubting Zac's words.

"I made a deal with the Realm Spirit Sendor," Zac said. "I retain all memories of people and events inside the Perennial Vastness but nothing about the realm itself. I also had Lord Sendor arrange a special opportunity for Catheya,

so she'll only return one year before the inheritance trial. I figured you wouldn't take me at my word, so I brought you some things."

Zac presented a series of reports, information crystals, and Cultivation Manuals taken from Valsa's spatial ring and the various safe houses. He even presented one of his seal-finding treasures, though he kept the rest back on Earth. Zac felt a series of domineering souls scan the contents on the table, and the room was silent for over ten seconds.

"As expected, the harmony between the coalitions is cracking now that another pillar is up for grabs," Kator said, his thoughts mirroring Kruta's. "That's pretty good. I've always wanted to lead a crusade against those haughty bastards, but they're too troublesome when sticking together. "

"It's no surprise the imperials are getting mixed up in this—it would be weird if they didn't. Even the undying Realm Spirit of the Perennial Vastness is trying to influence events from the shadows," Toss grunted, turning to Zac. "I'll accept your explanation for now. But I will keep a watch on you. I will strike you down if you give me a reason to think you're working against the Empire's interests. I don't care how valuable your bloodline is to the Abyssal Shores."

"And I'll work hard to become a thorn in the side for you and the whole White Sky Phalanx if I find you people scheming against me," Zac countered.

"You against the whole Phalanx?" Kator laughed, but there was an unmistakable sharpness to his tone. "Such huge appetite from a barely ascended Hegemon. Then again, you need the backbone of a reaver if you want to accomplish anything great in this world. I heard you fought my uncle to a standstill inside that big fish. Impressive, even if you cheated."

"I cheated?" Zac swore, the memory of that duel igniting a wave of anger. "That shameless guy cheated long before I bent the rules a bit."

"Is that so?" Kator said. "Well, makes me even more interested in fighting you. I want to see if you have what it takes to threaten my home."

"What's the point?" Zac snorted. "As you said, I just ascended. Besides, we both have better things to do."

"What better way to get to know each other than through a simple spar?" Kator said. "I'll restrict my level to yours."

"See, your uncle said the same thing until he started losing," Zac shrugged. "Not interested."

"Ah, I remember a prize was on the line for that duel. Then how about I put up something good I found the other day?" Kator said. "If you win, I will provide you with a sealholder."

"What, you'll lend me one of your men?" Zac said. "Why would I want that?"

"Oh, not one of mine," Kator snickered. "It's a Dreamer I brought back from my latest campaign. A Zecia native, at that. Maybe even someone you know."

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1077 - Duel - Read

Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1077 - Duel

"You've captured a Zecia sealbearer?" Zac asked with a frown.

Zac knew the reaver was just taunting him, but he was still worried. On paper, it should be almost impossible for him to know whoever Kator had captured, but things weren't that simple. For one, the circles were much smaller when looking at the elites at the top. Even if he didn't personally know them, there was a decent chance he knew of them.

Secondly, he'd already seen how one acquaintance after another got their hands on seals, possibly piggybacking on his connection to Ultom or the Left Imperial Palace.

"I didn't, the cultists did," Kator said while scratching the bone plating on his chest. "The Kan'Tanu takes a lot of prisoners, and we often get missions to liberate them. A world I conquered had a prison full of captured elites waiting to be implanted with Heart Curses, and the sealbearer hid among them. I sent the others back home for a small fee but kept the real prize for myself. Who knew it would come in handy so soon?"

"Who is it?"

"Does that mean you accept?"

Zac didn't immediately say yes. "What if I lose?"

"Then you rein in your attitude and follow orders properly inside the Left Imperial Palace."

The fact that Kator was so eager to spar with him, to the point he was even offering up a sealbearer, was suspicious. What the reaver asked in return was essentially something Zac would have to do in either case, considering his contractual obligations. It felt like a trap, but he didn't know what it could be.

Did he want to use the opportunity to strike at him? Zac doubted it. Even if the reaver wanted to kill him, a spar in the middle of Kavista wasn't the place. Multiple Draugr Monarchs were observing, and there was simply no way Kator could take him out before they intervened. And Kator was definitely smart enough to realize that.

Or did Kator want to leave a shadow in his heart, utterly crushing him to the point Zac began to doubt his path? Unfortunately for him, Zac's heart wasn't so fragile he couldn't take a loss by someone almost twice his age. Yet Zac hesitated, unsure whether the gamble was worth it. But could he just leave someone here in Kator's grasp?

"Even spars can lead to injury," a calm voice interjected, and Zac looked over at Tavza. "The Abyssal Pond is opening in one week. He cannot be wounded for that opportunity."

"Then let's wait a month," Kator said. "I want to spar with him when he's in his best state anyhow."

"Fine, I agree," Zac grunted. "But you keep the sealbearer alive and in good condition until then."

"Of course. I'll ensure the Isolation Array keeps running for a month," Kator grinned. "After that..."

"No need to play those games," Zac snorted. "I said I'll fight you, so I will. Now, can you tell me who it is?"

"Enough bickering," Toss said. "We'll keep the Dreamer alive. This is good; you should exchange pointers anyhow. Both of you have entered the Integration Stage, and fighting opponents with similar accomplishments in technique will help you push toward the next level. As for the sealbearer's identity, it's a Dreamer called Boje Zethaya. You should know him. For now, let's get back on track."

So it was that guy. Boje was the Zethaya Clan Alchemist he'd almost killed while visiting the Tower of Eternity decades ago. To think he'd also gotten his

hands on a seal. Zac knew he'd have to win the duel in a month and free the man, to give him a thrashing, if nothing else. After all, it was after Ibtep visited Boje's subordinates that his reputation took a drastic nosedive, and his nickname was born.

Of course, Boje was also incredibly valuable beyond his status as a sealbearer. It wasn't a secret that Boje had become a disciple of their Matriarch over a decade ago. Even Zac, or rather Joanna in his name, had sent a letter of congratulations when the news became public. Saving Boje could help the Atwood Empire get their hands on Zethaya's best wares, the stuff that the alchemists currently only provided the top factions as part of their wartime contribution.

"Agreed, let's move on," Laz Tem'Zul said. "The information you brought on the Seven Heavens will be useful. Knowing that the Tobrial Dynasty of the Seventh Heaven is in charge of the events will let us prepare some counters. However, be careful when striking deals with entities such as Sendor the Unbounded. You never know how it'll affect the course of events. The Realm Spirit might have just been bored, but it likely had ulterior motives for assisting you."

"I wasn't really in a position to refuse, so I figured I might as well extract some benefits," Zac shrugged.

"Greedy, just like in the Orom World. Be careful not to overstuff yourself," Pavina smiled before her brows furrowed. "Since no one else is asking, I will. One moment we thought you'd sacrificed your Draugr half, then two names appear on the Zecia Ladder. What's going on? Are you okay?"

The time had come for the main course. Zac put the matter of Boje aside and gathered his thoughts by ensconcing himself in the Void within. The next couple of minutes would decide whether his gambit was successful or not, and there couldn't be any mistakes.

"I guess I overestimated myself, thinking I would be the first to succeed where all others had failed," Zac began, trying to look like someone embarrassed but trying to hide it. "Simply put, things went wrong during the Core Formation almost immediately, and I was forced to split my soul.

"You should already know from the Twilight Ocean I've absorbed the two forms of Remnants. They were a big reason I chose to cultivate Pure Life and Death rather than stepping onto the Heavenly Path. Ultimately, it didn't work

out. I was forced to use Creation to form a second body and then Oblivion to sever the two."

"You're saying your state is the result of a controlled deviation?" Tavza asked.

"I'm not sure if you can call it that," Zac said. "It isn't my path that's broken or imperfect, but the Dao. The result is mostly the same, though."

Zac spent the next half-hour going over his situation and answering questions, mixing truths and falsehoods to paint the picture he wanted to show to the outside world.

"Forming a new body with Creation and transplanting the Essence of Draug," Toss muttered, turning to the other Monarchs. "Is something like this possible?"

"That's—" Laz hesitated while Enis looked similarly troubled.

"I stand by my earlier statement," Tavza said. "He is Eoz."

"We will have to run some tests to make sure nothing is wrong with you," Toss said, getting approving nods from the other Monarchs. "If what you say is true, it's a miracle just being alive. Odds are you have lingering problems, problems that should be remedied sooner rather than later. You still are in a formative state after your breakthrough. Waiting too long will leave you with a cracked foundation."

"Of course," Zac agreed, having expected them to put forth such a demand.

They obviously wanted to use the examination to dig for his secrets, but so what? Even Sendor had been forced to provide benefits to get to the bottom of things, so how could a couple of Monarchs trapped on the frontier figure out the truth? Between conventional wisdom and the simple fact that even the System considered him two people, his lie was almost foolproof.

"This is good and all, but you still haven't shed light on the most critical issue," Kator said. "You're saying this body was created inside the Perennial Vastness. Are you, the Draugr you, even a sealbearer any longer?"

"That's where things get tricky," Zac said as he shared all three of his quests related to Ultom and the Left Imperial Palace to prove he still had access to the inheritance.

"Flamebearer..." Tavza sighed, and Zac could feel a palpable desire from Kator on the other side of the table.

"The thing is, both I and my alter ego received this quest," Zac said. "I actually don't know who's the real sealbearer. Maybe whoever gets the final piece? Maybe we can choose which of us should enter? I guess I'll know more when I start progressing the quest."

"Maybe we should just cut you open and see if there's a seal inside," Kator commented.

"You could try," Zac said, not fazed in the slightest by the undisguised threat. "If you think one of your subordinates would be a better Flamebearer candidate than me. Of course, if I don't send back the right message at regular intervals, my other half will know you've broken your side of the agreement."

"Then we'll see how things will play out inside the Left Imperial Palace, especially after Zac joins up with the Tayns or some other faction. No point for him to hold onto death when you've severed the link, right? And I guess you'll just have to pray that the Court Cycle Token isn't necessary for your mission."

"No one is killing anyone," Laz Tem'Zul said. "The Empire honors its agreements."

"Kator's crude jokes aside, you should understand we have no reason to target you," Pavina said, giving the young reaver an annoyed look. "You might not know this, but seals taken from others generally don't award a quest. Meanwhile, you have three, more than we've seen on anyone else. And considering how you were the first to get a seal, we have all the reason to believe you'll be a key player in the upcoming mission."

"How do you know that?" Zac said with surprise.

"The whole Multiverse knew," Toss scoffed. "You picking up the first seal was like throwing a mountain into a calm lake. Everyone tuned into these matters felt the ripples on the River of Fate. And while you have extraordinary protections against investigative measures, they're not foolproof. Our Divine Strategists and the Abyssal Eye of the Mez Family all found clues to your identity."

Zac kept his face impassive, but he was alarmed. This was the first time he had heard of such a thing. It was one thing to be one among many sealbearers, slipping back into obscurity after the inheritance while the Undead Empire took the heat of any potential fallout. But it was another thing altogether if the ancient factions knew it was he who kicked off everything.

"Your identity should be mostly safe," Tavza said. "The divinations only returned diffuse hints of Chaos, Death, and the Buddhist Sangha. We could connect those impressions with you because of the information compiled from Twilight Harbor and your encounter with the Voidcatcher. Only the Sangha has a similar understanding. The Starbeast Alliance shouldn't be aware of your real identity."

That was a relief, though only a small one.

"While on the subject, can you explain your connection to the monks?" Enis asked. "I find it highly troubling that you're so entangled with them. Of all the factions in the Multiverse, they're one of the most troublesome to get mixed up with. Even the Absolute Seal came out on the losing end when she invaded the Sea of Tranquility. And I hear she's been plagued by misfortune since, barely holding onto her title."

Zac was still reeling over his identity as the first sealbearer being exposed, but he gathered his thoughts and shared what he knew. This time, he saw no reason to hide any details. One of the reasons he'd joined up with the Undead Empire was to gain some protection against the Sangha. So Zac shared everything from Mount Everlasting Peace until what happened with the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation].

"That little bastard," Pavina swore. "I'll deal with him if I ever see him again."

"You've done well, but you should have told us about this part earlier. We have some methods to weaken their hold on you," Toss added. "Few are as versed in dealing with the Sangha as us."

"The trap in the Body Tempering Manual. You realized the danger from one of the seals you picked up inside the Void Star?" Tavza interjected, and Zac nodded after giving it some thought.

"Fate..." Tavza sighed, putting two and two together.

The Draugr Scion was right on the money. If not for the situation with the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation], he might not have thought to ask Iz to investigate the [Essence of the Abyss]. Even if suspicious, he would probably have succumbed to the drive to get stronger and drank it before Iz showed up. Certainly, his odd bloodline and the Technocrat Core may have protected him from the trap, but he'd have to be a fool to underestimate the means and methods of any ancient faction.

"It sounds like a classic move by those baldies," Pavina sighed. "They likely knew you'd come to us after observing you inside the Orom. This way, you'd either become an unfeeling arhat or develop a distrust for us. Those people are something else, causing trouble from the other side of the Multiverse."

Zac wryly smiled. He sometimes wondered the same thing, whether Three Virtues really meant to harm him or not.

"The content of your quest, is that's why you've brought a Dreamer merchant to the empire?" Tavza asked, getting the discussion back on track.

"Exactly," Zac said. "You guys have helped me a lot over the years, but I need to be shameless and ask for more assistance. My faction is ultimately young and lacking foundations. We don't have the resources to fight this kind of large-scale war."

"That's not what our reports indicate," Toss snorted.

Even Pavina, who had only spoken in his favor during the meeting, raised a brow at the shameless display.

"You're simply filthy rich for your grade, even before you started selling those Cosmic Vessels," the reaver continued. "You shouldn't have any problem completing the Campaign Quest by throwing some money around. You might even be able to finish a solo campaign on an Early D-grade world, judging by your aura."

"This is only the first quest in the line," Zac countered. "None of us know how many hoops the System will throw at me before giving me the final piece. The quicker I can finish this one, the better, right? Especially considering I only need some siege—"

"We'll assist you, but we need to be careful," Laz Tem'Zul interjected. "There is a reason us old things are standing on the sidelines. The war is connected

to the inheritance and the System observing our every move. We're afraid helping too much would count as cheating, negatively affecting you in the trial, or making subsequent quests far more difficult. Tavza and Kator only have slightly better resources allocated compared to our other battlefronts for the same reason."

"You've given us a lot to unpack," Toss said. "Someone will take you to get checked while we discuss. Frankly, we need answers from the Liches before we can formulate a plan."

"I'm sure you're curious about life here in the Empire," Laz Tem'Zul added. "Why not familiarize yourself with your new home and stabilize your state before dealing with these matters?"

"There'll be time for sightseeing later," Zac said while putting the next part of his plan in motion back on Earth. "Right now, I need to focus on getting stronger. And let me be clear, I may have been split in half, but I am still the same person. My home is the Atwood Empire. I do not wish to change anything in my previous agreements just because I'm now more of a normal Draugr."

"Then we'll have someone lead you to a suitable Cultivation Chamber afterward," Laz sighed, opting not to press the issue.

"Thank you," Zac nodded. "I look forward to working with you all."

He walked toward the exit, and the door opened on its own, revealing a beautiful young Draugr woman. Her eyes practically sparkled as she looked up at Zac, and she curtsied in a way that showcased an astounding amount of cleavage.

"Lord Umbri'Zi, I am Kasina Kavriel. I've been tasked with guiding you and fulfilling any of your other requirements during your stay," she said, her inflection leaving no doubt about how far she was willing to take her hospitality. "If you please."

"Then I'll rely on you," Zac coughed as they left the meeting room.

He tried to keep up some polite conversation with the girl as she led him toward the ward, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Just like the Monarchs no doubt was analyzing everything he'd said, so was he going over the meeting.

As far as he could tell, everything had gone according to plan, except for Kator making the situation murkier than it needed to be.

The Monarchs had stopped short of promising anything tangible, but things were moving in the direction. Passing the check-up was the final step before he could begin harvest, and he'd prepared a few tricks to stack the deck in his favor. His human body had already appeared on Pangea, stepping into another War Camp without hiding his tracks.

Zac wasn't planning on conquering a second world in one day. This would be a short visit where he killed multiple birds with one stone.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1078 - Upgrades - Read

Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1078 - Upgrades

Zac sighed as the gates closed, his exhalation creating swirls in the medicinal mists around him. The ambient energy of the Cultivation Chamber, which actually was inside the trunk of an enormous tree, was even greater than the caves he'd used in the Orom World's Blackink Mountain. But while the energy density had almost been lethal back then, it was a welcome luxury to his D-grade body. The initial posting of this chapter occurred via N0v3l.B11n.

The quantities were amazing, and there was a quality to match. Zac had felt there was something different about the energy since arriving in Kavista. It felt more complete than almost any place he'd visited before, likely one of the benefits of C-grade continents. Something like that wouldn't create miracles, but it should make progress through the ranks smoother, and those born in these environments would have greater chances of being blessed with high affinities.

That gift that had been amplified inside the sacred tree through a comprehensive set of arrays, and the dense mists of Medicinal smoke improved the environment even further. It felt like healing rain falling on the parched desert that was his soul, and even his other body benefitted from it as he sat in his cave back on Earth.

Zac's body was already greedily absorbing what the cultivation chamber generously provided, and he even felt some of it entering his Cosmic Core to help push him toward the next level. All his Hidden Nodes were blissfully quiet, indicating there should be no poisons or other dangers hidden inside the medicinal fumes.

The environment left nothing to be desired, but Zac was even more appreciative of the silence. Only the soft, calming crackle of three burning braziers and accompanying incense was a welcome change after six hours of tests and constant questions from both the Kavriel Clan's Healers and experts brought from the Undead Empire.

They had worked hard to ensure he was okay, searching high and low for any damage. Unsurprisingly, they hadn't found much. He had endured all kinds of punishment inside the Perennial Vastness, but the marks from those experiences were mostly on his other body. Of course, the most troubling wounds left by Chaos and Tribulation Lightning had been transplanted along with his Draugr foundation.

But four months had passed since forming the Glimpse of Chaos, and his rapid natural recovery had already dealt with the fallout. The Tribulation Lightning was more recent, and the unfettered assault had caused far more damage than the Chaos Motes. Most of the medicine currently entering his pores was a custom mix meant to deal with the small cracks left by the Heavenly Wrath. The compound was even a custom mix based on his constitution, a luxury only those with private Alchemists and Doctors could enjoy.

Of course, looking for damage to his foundations was not the true purpose of the check-up. Their check-up was mostly an excuse to excavate his secrets, and the experience had allowed him to confirm a few things. His Specialty Cores had the same feature as his old Concealment Array, which led to people not finding anything out of the norm.

They didn't seem to realize he had a Specialty Core at all, instead seeing a Cosmic Core based on his Inexorable Path. Sendor had been able to see the truth, though it had looked like two separate cores to him. So his Kayar-Elu Core did most of the heavy lifting, but the doctors had peppered him with such a number of questions that he'd barely managed to keep his facts straight.

Emerging from the Healing Ward had felt like leaving the courthouse after having been cross-examined for days, narrowly avoiding a death sentence. Even then, it was an even greater relief to finally get rid of the Kavriel girl. She had only gotten more aggressive as time passed until she finally shed all pretenses. Having to physically ward off half-naked beauties wasn't part of the scenarios he, Vilari, and Joanna had drawn up before visiting.

Though, come to think of it, it was something Catheya often warned him off.

Zac hadn't been called back to the meeting room after everything was said and done, which Zac felt was a positive sign. Maybe his performance back on Earth might have helped sell his claims. Forcibly activating [Arcadia's Judgment] just five hours after the battle with the Eighth Army had damaged his human pathways, but it was the most effective way to show that the Zac back on Earth was real rather than a weak clone. Seeing how quickly they'd gotten word of his return the first time, they'd likely managed to enlist quite a few spies among the natives of Earth.

As planned, his outing to Pangea had been short but eye-catching. He'd sacrificed a bit more Faction Merit to step onto the 11th battlefield controlled by Rhuger, who currently held the 19th placement on the local ladder. It was one of the most integrated armies, with representatives from all races. Zac figured that was the easiest way to ensure word reached Kavista one way or another.

While there, he'd adopted the same crude but effective tactics as during his first battle. He shot out from the fortifications like a meteor, crashing into the much-smaller Kan'Tanu Army. Less than two minutes later, he'd returned to the wall walk, having taken out the leader of the enemy army and at least fifty bodyguards in one fell swoop.

Now that everything was dealt with, Zac sat down on the central array. A mysterious sensation filled him, like he'd been connected with the tree itself. Its roots were his roots, continuously drawing pure Miasma from the depths of the world. Its branches were his branches, transmitting the voice of the cosmos to his ear, showering him in the Dao.

Zac spent the next hour resting his mind and absorbing the rejuvenating mist while his human body repaired the cracked pathways around [Arcadia's Judgment]. After that, Zac went to work, both bodies working in tandem as they made their way through one section of his body after another. Zac was tireless thanks to enjoying the benefits of two high-quality environments, and his speed only increased as he formed an instinctual understanding of how his Classes were codified into fractals and runes.

He did nothing but upgrade pathways over the next two days, and the combination of his comprehension and supremely durable body let him reforge more than half his pathways—something that'd take normal Mortals with Rare classes months, sometimes years, if their constitutions were on the weaker side.

No one disturbed his Draugr body during this time, but messages were constantly delivered to his Cultivation Cave back on Earth. Emily had succeeded in her conquest and would return the next day for the monthly War Council. Zac looked forward to seeing her again, along with many of his old friends who had supported the empire in his absence. It also meant he needed to get a move on. He wanted answers from the Undead Empire before convening.

He still had some time, though, and leaving now felt like a waste. Zac had spent the past days gaining a much-better understanding of his Classes, and there was no telling he'd have a moment of tranquility like this next time. He wanted to capitalize on his mental state being this good, which meant it was high time to upgrade [Deathmark].

He didn't immediately walk over to the high-quality Skill Upgrade array installed next to where he was sitting. Instead, he cleared his thoughts and ate a Natural Treasure that helped elevate his mental state. It was in the same vein as the bulbous treasure he'd used to create [Pillar of Desolation], though nowhere near the same quality.

Zac didn't need the treasure for inspiration. He already knew the general direction he wanted to take and how such a fractal should look. However, this was the first D-grade skill he'd create, and he wanted it to be perfectly in tune with his Inexorable Path. Inexorability was control over fate, the relentless advance that overcame any resistance. Resisting inexorability was not a victory—it was a stay of execution.

In that vein, the corrosive domain was very much in line with his path, putting his opponents under constant pressure until they could no longer resist. The problem was the wraiths, the half representing the Dao of Conflict. Their ability to constantly reform after being destroyed was in the right direction, but Zac had long felt they missed something.

Too many of his stronger opponents had been able to simply shrug off their advance like they were nothing but annoying flies. They were like common soldiers trying to take down an Eonic Seed. Zac had ample first-hand experience of the fate awaiting the poor soldiers tasked with such a mission. For those men, he was essentially the grim reaper.

Similarly, his wraiths failed to leave a single mark on Zac's most troublesome enemies. Certainly, they'd managed to kill several powerful adversaries over the years, but that was because Zac had forced an opening with his technique

and other skills. That wasn't a testament to [Deathmark]'s power—any skill would have been able to finish the job at that point.

The problem was the reset.

Every time a wraith was destroyed, the skill was pushed back to square one. Only if they managed to land a hit would they leave the lasting mark that gave the skill its name. This didn't mesh with Zac's vision of his path, one that constantly advanced and suffocated the enemy with intractable power. He had to increase the Dao of Conflict to balance the skill, but he didn't want to just make the wraiths stronger.

Rather, he wanted to emulate the winds of war, where the pressure mounted until something gave way. Doing so would impose a time limit on the ability, but Zac was fine with that. A few minutes of downtime between uses, like [Rapturous Divide], was acceptable if it improved the usefulness on more powerful enemies while retaining its large-scale impact on weaker enemies.

The synthetic epiphany helped Zac iron out a few small details he'd intentionally left open until he finished the surrounding pathways over the next few hours. When everything was finished, he stepped onto the platform holding the Skill Upgrade Array.

The setup looked very different from the [Fractal Framework Array] he'd used in the E-grade. A large bowl holding inky-black water was placed atop the platform. It was almost as wide as a manhole cover, and its waters rippled mysteriously despite no wind. Just looking at the small waves filled Zac with impressions of the Daos of Death and Conflict.

Zac wasn't sure how it was powered, but it was clear the Kavriel Clan had infused the platform with Daos similar to his own. Neither Dao held quite the concepts that made up his Branches of the Pale Seal and War Axe, but it was very impressive for a borrowed environment. There were two interlocked magical circles, one surrounding the bowl and the other where Zac sat down.

A small burst of information entered Zac's mind as he infused some Mental Energy into the array beneath him, and he immediately understood how the array worked. While it looked quite different from his arrays, it was functionally the same. Zac began the process by infusing his Daos into the array, and the ripples in the waters subtly changed as Zac branded it with his path.

The process took an hour and cost a surprising amount of Mental Energy. A purely martial cultivator would already have been mentally exhausted, but the expenditure was negligible for Zac. When done, the array began drawing large amounts of Miasma, forming a natural circuit that passed through the two circles before returning it to his body.

The upside of this setup quickly became apparent. It was almost like the inky water had become a part of him, and the Skill Fractal for [Deathmark] barely rippled when it entered the bowl. The waters kept the fractal stable as it entered its malleable state, and Zac could tell the fixed array would give him twice as much time as the portable arrays he used in the Twilight Ocean.

That didn't mean he would waste any time, and he immediately began his work on the patterns. The waters rippled and churned as Zac refined one section after another, sending back incredibly detailed feedback. Every movement on the water's surface resulted from the Skill Fractal within, and the connection with his Dao let him perfectly understand what they meant with greater precision than the warning signals you commonly saw.

Still, the waters were generally quite calm as the hours passed, only predictably crashing against the bowl's edge when Zac performed the necessary realignments to balance Conflict and Death. Sixteen hours later, a shimmering rune pulsating with his Inexorable Path rose from the waters and entered his body. Zac observed the intricate fractal as he fused it with his pathways, almost feeling robbed of his accomplishment.

Zac knew he shouldn't complain that the upgrade had progressed without a hitch, but such an easy process almost made him feel like he'd taken a shortcut or aimed too low. No, things had simply followed the script for once. Between the environment, his Daos, and his theoretical foundations, there really shouldn't be any issues when upgrading his basic skills.

This might be a step that eluded many Wandering Cultivators on the frontier, but Zac was ultimately more similar to heartland elites already. Still, he had carried the nagging feeling that some crisis would strike at a critical juncture, just like when he upgraded his core. He laughed quietly as he shook his head, briefly wondering if all his struggles and setbacks had made him addicted to suffering.

Curiosity soon won over his suspicions, and he excitedly opened the Skill Panel.

[D] Deathmark - Proficiency: Early. Join your foes in an Inexorable dance of Death. Upgradeable.

The flavor text, like the Skill Fractal itself, was mostly the same. The few adjustments he'd made hadn't changed the fundamental nature of the skill. The simplest change was to leverage his Cosmic Core to increase the skill's reach by almost ten times. Since he'd chosen to make it a time-limited skill, he wanted it to consume a huge region before he activated it again in another section of the enemy lines.

It was that first burst of corrosion that would have the greatest effect in either case. After that point, the enemy would adapt and stay clear of the zone of death. He'd already seen a similar response after he activated the [Setting Sun Talisman] in the middle of the Kan'Tanu army. So Zac didn't consider the limited usage much of a downside.

However, bolstering Conflict and making adjustments had undoubtedly reduced the strength of the corrosive domain somewhat. Zac believed that was a worthy trade-off. The domain itself wouldn't be as lethal, but it should still be deadly to E-grade cultivators when powered by his Daos. And the reimagined wraiths should be better at dealing with the stronger enemies caught in his domain.

Zac felt a bit drained, even with everything going according to plan, but not to the point he had to rest. He needed to enquire about the situation outside, so his human body resumed upgrading pathways while his Draugr self stood up and left the Cultivation Chamber back in Kavista.

The exit led to a luxurious living room built atop a branch, where Zac found a graceful silhouette waiting. Thankfully, it was Tavza rather than Kasina Kavriel having returned for another round. A slight frown appeared on his face when he saw a projection of his newly formed Skill Fractal float atop the table before her, but his brows smoothed out as he walked over.

Going in, he'd already figured his every move would be monitored even if his plan worked.

"I didn't expect you to be so free to spy on me forming a skill," Zac commented. "I bet Kator is already out there racking up merit."

"Constantly staying on the battlefronts is an inefficient use of time," Tavza calmly said as Zac sat down. "Ninety percent of a battlefront's merit can be

seized in a very short timeframe. The battle you joined on your return is a good example of that. The rest of my time is better spent focusing on more important matters than micromanaging my army. My generals will inform me when a window of opportunity appears."

Zac hadn't expected Tavza to provide such a detailed answer to his jab, but her words weren't without merit. It would be one thing if he had been able to teleport to one lucrative battlefield after another, but doing so would slowly drain the Atwood Empire of its Faction Merit. So he would either have to accelerate his own campaigns through burning money and sacrificing manpower, or he'd have to accept there would be downtimes where his presence didn't add much.

If anything, his roving the battlefield could lead to the enemy turtling up and increasing their defensive measures. During those periods, he might be better off hunting Beast Kings or focusing on his cultivation.

"Your control is lacking, but you more than make up for it with an uncanny instinct when it comes to the Heavenly Patterns. Your theoretical foundations are exceptionally stable for someone with your background. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought you hid a fourth Dao Branch from the Peak of the Grand Tapestry," Tavza commented. "This, together with your apparent inability to explain your origin, has filled certain people with misgivings."

"Are those misgivings enough to attempt snatching my seal or trap me here?" Zac asked.

"No. It would appear that targeting you is much more likely to harm our plans than assist them. But then, you knew that already, which is why you dared accept our invitation."

A smile spread across Zac's face. The harvest was in, and it was time to inspect the crop.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1079 - Returning to the Fold - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1079 - Returning to the Fold

Zac nodded at Tavza to continue, the promise of treasure making his heart beat faster. Not even upgrading his skill could compare to the prospect of getting access to the Undead Empire's stockpiles. Perhaps if he'd gotten

another title out of it, but the System wouldn't award bonuses from something so basic in the D-grade.

"I've been instructed to ask you about the incongruity between the talent you showcased when forming your skill and what we found during the inspection before we go into detail," Tavza said. "If we don't get to the bottom of things, we must first reconvene."

Zac snorted, knowing the Monarchs were likely spying on the conversation. He couldn't blame them for their demand. He was the same, grabbing for benefits every opening he saw. And them confirming he really was a Draugr Mortal had created massive waves, where the Draugr doctors had looked at him like he was an alien. Zac thought it over for a few seconds before nodding.

He'd have to give up a smaller secret to protect a bigger one.

"I guess I can tell you. It's unrelated to the Peak of the Grand Tapestry," Zac said.

The Peak of the Grand Tapestry, or the Artisanal Peak as many called it, was the peak that held most of the Daos craftsmen used. Smiths, Alchemists, Formation Masters, and inscribers generally walked this path, though most used Mixed-meaning Daos. For example, a blacksmith would likely fuse the Daos of Fire and Smithing to focus on fire-attuned tools.

You could obviously do without it, just as Zac could swing his weapons without his Branch of the War Axe. Of course, that would make things a lot harder for him. He was lucky, in a sense, that [Cosmic Forge] was a technique invented before the Heavens reformed. Otherwise, he would have been unlikely to be able to reach the upper layers of the method unless he got an Artisanal Dao.

The Peak of the Grand Tapestry was not solely something for craftsmen, though. It governed the concepts of patterns, which could have various applications. Most notably, it was the secondary Dao of the Apostate of Order and part of his addition to the System. Order brought rules and predictability, setting up the various laws governing everything from System-enforced contracts to the Unifying Era's cultivation system.

Meanwhile, the Grand Tapestry played an important role in turning the Apostate's codified vision into something that could be used even by low-

grade cultivators. As such, it would be an incredibly helpful tool when creating skills, as its shadow could be found in every Skill Fractal. There were even cultivators who solely focused on inventing or improving skills for Dao Repositories, using the Peak of the Grand Tapestry as a basis. Of course, that had nothing to do with his current accomplishments.

"It's related to the upcoming mission."

"The inspiration awarded by the seals is marvelous, but they're not enough to gain such a comprehensive understanding as what you've displayed."

"Well, not the seals, no," Zac said. "But that's not the only thing I've found related to the inheritance. You should know that the Left Imperial Palace is just a shell surrounding the real prize."

"Ultom Courts," Tavza nodded. "The sole heritage of the Lost Era."

"Well, I got my hands on something else from that place," Zac said, taking out a small vial.

Tavza frowned as she picked up the glass container. She took out the stopper, and Zac saw her impassive expression crack as a gust of madness escaped from the lid.

"What's this?" Tavza gasped as she closed the vial.

"Iz Tayn called it Dead Dao," Zac shrugged. "It's nasty, but the waters hold a weakened version of the truths from that place. I found a whole lake of this stuff inside the Void Star and used it to shore up my foundations."

The lake water was mostly gone, and the small samples he had left weren't enough to provide any insights. He'd still kept them around in case they became useful down the road. For example, he'd considered whether he could use them as an ingredient in a compass for the Left Imperial Palace. Something that could harmonize with the aura of Ultom and lead him to similar treasures.

"This is quite literally drinking from a tainted well."

"Well, as luck would have it, the Bloodline of Eoz is surprisingly effective at dealing with that stuff as long as I don't overindulge. Others couldn't make use of the insights locked within."

"Do you have more of this?"

"All gone," Zac smiled as he took back the vial. "Ran out a year before I headed to the Perennial Vastness. "

Tavza looked at the vial for a few seconds before slowly nodding. "I would urge caution, but that ship has sailed. Besides, I doubt you would have listened to me."

"So, the agreements?" Zac said, eager to change the subject before they began prodding into his lacking affinities again.

"The Abyssal Shores would have preferred you returning to the Empire's embrace now that you've separated from your human half, but the nature of your quest makes that impossible for now," Tavza sighed. "So we accept your proposal. Completing your quest takes precedence, and we'll continue to support your cultivation."

"When you say your—"

"That of Arcaz Umbri'Zi," Tavza elaborated. "If things are as you said, we believe it's in our best interest to push your accomplishments and strength beyond that of Zachary Atwood. Since we can't confirm how your change has affected the mission, it's best to make one of the two bodies a better candidate in the System's eyes."

"I guess Zac will have to start looking out for daggers in the dark," Zac muttered.

"I can't comment on that. I only speak for myself and what's said in the open," Tavza said. "I believe that targeting Zac the human is an unnecessary risk. However, I suggest you tell your other half not to push things too far. We want Arcaz, not Zac, to enter the Left Imperial Palace."

"I'll try, but I can't guarantee anything," Zac said.

"We're aware of that," Tavza said. "Perhaps it's a moot point, and both of you are sent inside. That would obviously be the optimal scenario."

"I guess," Zac shrugged, though he was inwardly grimacing.

He had tried to avoid broaching that possibility, but these people weren't fools. If possible, he wanted his other body to enter unnoticed while this one became his alibi.

"We will also establish a mercantile link with the Sky Gnome you brought, connecting you with an Early D-grade Smithy on the outskirts of Kavista. Their products are of mediocre quality, and they won't provide any discounts. In fact, they think they've been punished by the reassignment as they were exclusively working for our imperial armies before.

"This much shouldn't be considered intervening with your fate. As for your personal benefits, you will be given the equivalent of what the Abyssal Shores would provide any promising Early D-grade cultivator," Tavza said. "However, we will not forcibly raise your strength by pouring you full of resources. We fear it will damage your connection to the Left Imperial Palace."

Zac's face scrunched up more and more as Tavza continued. A backwater Early D-grade smithy? That's it? That was like being thrown some trash they'd found in some dusty corner of a warehouse. Unfortunately, it was hard to poke holes in their excuse.

It really looked like the System wanted to limit outside interference for this trial, with the outsiders only being able to bring a few Dao Guardians and followers. With the Undead Empire's agreement being based around the trial rather than the Atwood Empire, they were well within their right to withhold resources out of fear it'd harm their mission.

"I should tell you, Kator or I did not receive much better terms than this, and we don't enjoy the freedom you do. The second Pillar's ascent was a harsh lesson for those who tried to meddle with a trial targeted at the younger generation," Tavza added, clearly understanding his misgivings.

"I guess it makes sense," Zac sighed.

It was less than he hoped for, but much better than nothing. He had mountains of cash but nowhere to spend it, and even an average D-grade smithy in Kavista should be quite good by frontier standards.

"Does the resources include—"

"You pick yourself," Tavza said as she handed him a sigil made from obsidian. "We have added a suitable amount of Imperial Credits to this identity token."

You can exchange them for items at the Kavriel Clan's private repository. You can earn more contribution the conventional ways, should you find items you want outside your budget."

"And this is not a sneaky way to trick me into becoming a citizen?" Zac smiled, remembering how he used this exact method on the Mavai and Raun.

Of course, he still accepted the token. Getting his hands on the promised batch of resources was half the reason he came here. Zac looked at the An'Azol scion expectantly, hoping there was more good news. However, she calmly looked back at Zac, leading to another drawn-out staring contest. This time greed won.

"So is there anything—"

"Can I ask why you so staunchly resist?" Tavza interjected.

"What, you think I should just roll over and accept whatever you say?" Zac frowned.

"I am referring to our standing invitation for you to join the Undead Empire. Especially now that you're apparently a pure Draugr," Tavza elaborated. "You are essentially a Bloodline Ancestor of the Draugr Race. The Abyssal Shores would sweep away all your troubles to restore the Eoz branch. You would have access to high-limitless resources and Dao Partners if you so desired. You could use your authority to take control of the whole Kavriel Province, providing a safe harbor for your home world."

"Getting access to all that wealth and power is a double-edged sword from what I've seen," Zac shrugged. "I'm not convinced it wouldn't harm rather than help me attain my goals, judging by the various Heaven's Chosen I've run into over the years."

"You think the younger generations spoiled, untested," Tavza nodded. "That is a fair assumption. We only have an incomplete account of your experiences, but those feats alone are quite shocking. You have experienced more great events than many Monarchs, and the Killing Intent you unleashed tells a tale of repeatedly putting your life on the line.

"Compared to such a background, most so-called chosen indeed cannot measure up. They've chosen the safe route, raising themselves as far as their talent and connections can take them. Instead of tribulations and

opportunities, they progress using their family's resources and taking controlled risks. These individuals are predominant in most factions and cannot possibly measure up to you."

Zac nodded, but a hair-raising feeling suddenly gripped Zac's heart, prompting him to take out a spare axe.

"However, you shouldn't underestimate the ancient factions throughout the Multiverse."

The whole room disappeared the next moment, replaced by utter darkness. Zac felt like he'd been dropped into the depths of the Abyssal Lake, but the experience differed completely from his Bloodline Visions. There was no sense of welcoming, of coming home. There was only hostility and a pervasive sense of finality, to the point Zac felt the Death-attuned energy coursing through his body become subverted.

Zac tried to push back using his Daos and Killing Intent, but it was like throwing a rock down a bottomless chasm. His rational mind told him that there was no way Tavza would try to harm him at this juncture, but a budding panic built from having all his senses sealed. He almost instinctively activated [Void Zone] as a safeguard but quickly calmed down before exposing his secret.

A few seconds later, the domain dispersed, and Zac found himself back in the chair.

"The true core of any established faction is forged through blood and tribulation. They make up the protective umbrella the vast majority rely on," Tavza continued like she hadn't just attacked Zac. "Those who take the safe route are ultimately servitors providing for our paths, trading longevity and safety for a lifetime of service. They run our businesses, collect resources, and man our armies. Meanwhile, those chosen for nurturing lead a life solely focused on reaching the Terminus."

"The two families of Azol have nurtured forty-eight Supremacies since the Dark Ages and the Empire's founding. There have only been three limited periods where our branch lacked a Supremacy at its helm. That's not possible just by wantonly showering the younger generations in wealth and hoping for the best."

Zac would be lying if he said he wasn't impressed. Just under fifty Supremacies might not sound like a lot compared to the endless years the System had been running. However, Catheya had once mentioned that there had only been around 150 Abyssal Princes since the System's birth, with a few more suspected Supremacies who never made their status public. In other words, the two families of the Azol branch were responsible for roughly a third of all Draugr Supremacies.

"I get it; I'll be careful not to underestimate anyone," Zac sighed.

Tavza was obviously not just displaying her power to push him down a peg or showcase her family's eminence. It was a warning not to underestimate anyone just because he'd come out ahead so far. The people Tavza talked about weren't the Heaven's Chosen who made up the top of every generation. It was the Eonic Seeds who had shown the potential to become the future leaders of their faction.

"That domain, was it your bloodline?"

"While Eoz acted as the Vanguard, Azol provided Sanctuary. The Abyssal Lake is wherever I am, which is why I was chosen over any talent from the Ur'Mez Clan. Part of my job is to provide safe harbor during our mission, as the Left Imperial Palace is unlikely to hold any Miasma," Tavza calmly explained. "I simply marked you as a hostile outsider to the lake."

Zac shuddered upon thinking back to that utter darkness. He could only imagine how the real thing would be if an outsider tried to dive into the lake's depths. No wonder even Supremacies had to tread carefully when visiting the Abyssal Lake.

"Well, I won't say never when it comes to joining the Empire. But I still think things are fine the way they are for now," Zac said. "It's not just about resources; it's about freedom. What you offer comes with strings attached. Every gift would be another chain anchoring me to the Abyssal Shores. It might not seem like a big deal to you, but I was born here in the wilderness. The thought of getting caught up in the annoying schemes and plots of you people is exhausting."

Tavza looked at Zac for a few more seconds before nodding. "I won't waste our time pressing the matter any further. Perhaps the Abyssal Pond will show you that being bound to the Abyssal Lake is not the punishment you think. It's a gift."

"How are the preparations?"

"As promised, the pond will awaken in five days. You will not be the only one entering, though you will be given an advantage. A few locals have received quests that might lead to seals, and we have decided to give them a chance at elevating their unremarkable bloodlines."

"What advantage?" Zac said, pinpointing the critical aspect. "I thought you just dipped into the water and reaped the benefits?"

"This is just an ancillary pond. The amount of benefits is limited. Simply put, the Abyssal Pond can stay activated for three days at most, and you will be able to enter a day before the others. What you can accomplish in that time is up to you. I suggest you work hard until then, finishing up your pathways so that nothing holds you back. You can only attempt an awakening so often. This is your sole opportunity before our mission begins," Tavza said as she stood up.

"Ultimately, this is only a way to patch up a missing part of your heritage. If you want to fully delve into the gift your ancestor left you, you have to return to the origin. Even we have only unearthed some of the marvels of the Abyssal Lake after all these years. With your bloodline, you might be able to find something uniquely suited to you."

Zac's eyes followed Tavza as she left the room, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

He didn't know about all the other parts, but he agreed with what Tavza said about preparing for the Abyssal Pond. He couldn't risk his pathways becoming a bottleneck, preventing him from taking full advantage of the opportunity. There was just one thing he had to do before secluding himself again. He left the room shortly after Tavza and inwardly groaned when two new Kavriel attendants waited outside, each a beauty even among the fine-chiseled Draugr.

Thankfully, they seemed to have learned their lesson from Kasina, and they only made some discrete offers of visiting incensaries or scenic spots before leading him to the Kavriel Clan's repository. Zac kept his face impassive as he fought the desire in his heart while scanning the almost endless list of items. He'd thought his Contribution Stores were well stocked, but that felt like a joke now.

This was what real foundations looked like, and this fortune was only the local stock of a frontier province. It was nothing compared to what waited in the Abyssal Shores. The best schemes were those where your target knew they were being manipulated but could do nothing but jump into the trap. Zac did what he could to rein in his greed as he scanned the list for what he needed.

Soon, four boxes had been delivered to Zac.

"I need these sent back to my homeworld," Zac said. "It's about time I send another message anyway. Can you take me to the closest teleporter?"

"That's—" The two Kavriel daughters hesitated as they looked at each other, but they clearly received instructions as their smiles soon returned. "Of course, this way."

Zac was taken to a teleporter but made no attempt to escape back home. Instead, he placed the boxes onto the array one by one, along with an Information Crystal containing a short message and his pretend codeword. He also had one of the two girls deliver a message to Calrin before returning to his Cultivation Chamber, which had been cleaned and had its incense replaced in his absence.

Having dealt with everything he needed, Zac returned to the cultivation tree inside the Kavriel Clan's private forest. Five days should be more than enough to finish up his pathways and prepare himself for the pond.

Back on Earth, Zac grunted as he got on his feet and walked out of his cave in the depths of the mountain. He looked down at the necklace around his neck, gently smiling as he ran his thumb across its surface.

"It's time."

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1080 - Metamorphosis - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1080 - Metamorphosis

Zac had made great progress on his Evolutionary Precursor pathways, even if his private cultivation grounds weren't at the level of what his other body enjoyed over in Kavista. Thankfully, the biggest factors in redrawing pathways were mental persistence, a strong constitution, and pain tolerance, something he had in spades.

The monthly meeting was right around the corner, and there were a lot of things Zac wanted to have sorted out before. He emerged from the cave in the depths of Demon Island, but the Teleportation Array actually didn't show his compound as a possible destination. Zac had guessed that might happen, so he instead used a backup teleporter in a hidden corner of his private forest. The initial posting of this chapter occurred via N0v3l.B11n.

Soon, he was back in his compound, where a chaotic scene awaited him.

"Young master! Be careful; the house just collapsed," Triv said, fussing back and forth in front of the ruins that were once his teleportation hub.

"Nothing to worry about," Zac smiled as he began clearing the rubble.

It only took a minute to find three of the boxes. The last one was embedded deep in the ground, having pushed through the teleportation platform and the building's foundations due to its immense weight. He stowed them away in a spare Spatial Ring before turning to the ghost.

"I'm heading to the island," Zac said. "Make sure no one interrupts me."

"Ah, of course. The puppets who have finished their upgrades have already been sent over to clear out the waters," Triv said. "This matter was an oversight of mine. I will upgrade all facilities to match your grade posthaste."

Zac nodded before flashing away, soon appearing on a small flat island in the middle of nowhere where waves crashing against rock greeted his arrival. The island almost looked like the obsidian finger of an enormous entity jutting out of the ocean. A dense haze of aquamarine mist covered the whole island, a result of the surrounding waters being a sea of death.

He could vaguely sense a few powerful auras deep in the waters. Some were his puppets forming a defensive perimeter, while others were undead aquatic Beast Kings. Zac could see a few carcasses floating on the waters, yet the beasts were clearly unwilling to move too far away from the island.

It wasn't hard to understand why—the place teemed with the Dao of Death, possibly only surpassed by his Cultivation Cave and a few select regions on Elysium—a perfect place for Alea to take her next step.

Zac felt nauseated just staying in this place, and his Void Varja Constitution furiously rebuffed the Death trying to creep into his body. Of course, his

human body could withstand much harsher environments than this with its multiple layers of defense. And it was a small price to pay to help Alea break through.

The island wasn't very large, so it only took him a few minutes to reach Triv's arrangements in the middle of the island, where the energy was at its densest.

'I thought you'd leave me with your undead body,' Alea's voice echoed in his mind as Zac transformed [Love's Bond] into its coffin form.

"It's off-world dealing with some matters. I didn't want to keep you waiting," Zac explained as piles of Death- and Conflict-attuned materials appeared around the central gathering array.

Finally, he took out the four inscribed boxes and placed them in front of the coffin, along with a different box from his own stockpiles. "Will these work?"

Exquisite auras spread through the region when he opened their lids one by one. Two of them barely had any aura of Death or Conflict, rather emanating powerful Spiritual Fluctuations. They were rare Natural Treasures that could raise the spiritual strength of a Tool Spirit, though they could also be used on contracted beasts to slowly improve their souls.

The third box contained three crystals that emitted an intensely powerful Dao of Death, and Zac's hand withered from just opening its lid. They weren't something that had been born in the depths of a Miasma Crystal mine, but rather something that had been sent over from the Abyssal Shores. They were actual treasures harvested from the Abyssal Shores called [Blackwater Gems]. The crystals were normally used by Draugr to refine their bloodlines and likely sent to the Kavriel Clan to serve as a motivational tool for their young.

The fourth box held the broken fragment of a shield, and it was this item that had caused his teleportation house to collapse. It had once been a part of a Peak D-grade defensive Spirit Tool, but breaking had damaged its spirituality. A talented blacksmith had managed to salvage this piece, turning it into a top-tier material that could technically be considered Early D-grade.

It was essentially the equivalent of the refined bones Kruta had given him as thanks for the Indomitable seal. It was actually for this reason Zac had picked up the item in the Kavriel Clan rather than any other spiritual Metals of similar quality.

The more he worked on his pathways, the better he understood just how interlinked his two new classes were. An outsider was unlikely to spot any connection between the two sets of pathways, but Zac could see the echoes of his unique Cosmic Core everywhere. One side was almost the inversion of the other, having far more in common than one might think.

That realization had filled him with hope, and it seemed like the key to fusing his bodies back to one in the future. It also made him put even more weight on the aspect of balance between his two sides, which included his Spirit Tools. Their upgrades had been quite random thus far, eating whatever Zac stumbled onto. That had been fine for now, but Zac knew he needed a plan if he wanted to bring them with him to the peak.

Alea was better off, while Verun had very unimpressive origins. But even Alea had been crafted with a mishmash of items he had poured out of his Spatial Ring, mostly things he wouldn't give a second look today. He needed to treat their evolutions as an opportunity to fix these imperfections. It was also an opportunity to tune the weapons with his path and with each other, which should raise their potential and make future upgrades easier.

The fifth box was an item Zac had picked up inside the Perennial Vastness, looking like the figurine of a metal heart. And while it didn't move, it released powerful waves of Conflict like a heartbeat. Zac had already gathered most of what he needed for Alea and Verun's breakthroughs, but he had wanted to add at least a few more precious items. Luckily, he'd found more than he needed in the Kavriel Repository, saving him from having to buy anything from the Limited Merit Exchange.

Just like the [Warstone] became the Nucleus of his Cosmic Core, so would the metal heart become the core of [Love's Bond]. The other half would be the [Blackwater Gems], balancing Death and Conflict.

"These are perfect," Alea said as her projection emerged from the coffin. "I have more than what I need now."

"Then I'll leave you to it. I'll make sure nothing interrupts you. Don't go crazy this time," Zac grinned, but he felt his smile strained.

"Don't worry. I'm ready. You'll be surprised," Alea gently smiled as she touched his cheek. "I will follow you to the end."

"Don't waste your energy on me," Zac urged. "Focus on your breakthrough."

Zac retreated to a safe distance, and it didn't take long before the process started. He soon felt fate gathering while the sky darkened above. Yet nothing happened for the next hour, at least nothing Zac could see. Alea was unmoving in the middle of the treasure trove while the sky occasionally rumbled with forbidding power.

Yet Zac knew that Alea was doing something inside, using the final vestiges of the [Divine Investiture Array] to facilitate her entry into the D-grade. Finally, the next step began as dense runes suddenly appeared all over the coffin. They weren't the System's gold but the familiar grey and black matching his Inexorable Daos.

The coffin lid swung wide open, and it was like the Spirit Tool had become a black hole as everything around her was sucked in at once. The rumble above immediately ramped up to a crashing fury, and crackling thunder spread far and wide. Zac looked up at the churning sky, and a small seed of fear flickered in the depths of his heart.

Thankfully, the Heavens weren't here for him today, even if he wouldn't have minded taking a blast or two if it could lessen Alea's pressure. She had looked calm and confident, but they both knew her breakthrough wouldn't be a walk in the park.

Having made some discrete inquiries with the people in Perennial Vastness, Zac already knew the reason for [Love's Bond]'s powerful tribulation during her last breakthrough. The culprit was Alea herself rather than the Daos or materials that went into it. A living being's soul becoming a Tool Spirit could be seen as cheating death, a shortcut to gaining immortality.

After all, Tool Spirits didn't grow old as they technically weren't alive. Certainly, most Tool Spirits grew insane over the endless years, but even beasts were considered short-lived compared to them. Lova had said that even false immortality came at a steep price, and these tribulations were one aspect of that.

It was yet another reason to quickly figure out how to bring Alea back to life, but Zac still hadn't found any solutions to that problem. The only method he kept hearing about was the conventional one, where the Tool Spirit gained such a powerful spirituality it became indistinguishable from a cultivator. A bit like Brazla, only not crazy.

That wasn't a real solution. In such a scenario, Alea would still be an unorthodox Tool Spirit, subject to Heaven's ire. He had to keep looking. For now, Zac could only help her through the ranks, strengthening her soul as much as possible along the way.

The coffin rose into the air as three golden runes appeared around it, and Zac recognized some pattern from the [Divine Investiture Array]. They were complex beyond compare, but seeing them gave Zac some assurance against the force gathering above. The first bolt soon descended, a two-meter-wide purple pillar of unfettered fury.

Zac breathed in relief, sensing that the punishment was far less intense than his own. Hopefully, that meant that terrifying red lightning wouldn't make an appearance this time around. Dense shrouds of darkness poured out of the coffin, forming a protective cocoon like last time. The first lightning bolt struck, and Zac found his vision replaced by a blinding light.

Zac rapidly blinked and found [Love's Bond] still floating in the air, albeit scorched and slightly crooked. A sphere of crackling lightning surrounded the coffin, having replaced the protective domain. Zac frowned at the scene, sensing that the Tribulation Lightning had dug deep into the materials, and he felt pain being transmitted to him. However, Zac could also sense the lightning being consumed, turned into the catalyst for Alea's breakthrough.

She really had picked up some of his bad habits.

It wasn't solely her own accomplishment, though. One of the three golden runes was gone, and Zac guessed the System had transformed some of the tribulation lightning into useful energy. A clap of thunder shook the whole island, and the obsidian ground was showered in purple as the second bolt formed.

A second cocoon formed around the coffin, this one even denser than the previous one. Zac could even sense the energy signatures from some of the materials that had been swallowed, though none matched the five supreme items. Perhaps Alea saved those for the final bolt?

The protective shell was accompanied by her chains this time. They rose toward the sky, forming a complex seal Zac didn't recognize. One of the golden runes superimposed on the chains just as the second bolt struck, and a shockwave forced Zac a step back. The tribulation passed, yet Zac's worry

only grew deeper. The beautiful coffin had been significantly disfigured, looking like something partially melted in a fire.

The scene was definitely not what he'd expected after the previous breakthrough. She had passed that one with flying colors, only getting slightly toasted by the experience. Zac only found solace in the fact Alea's spirit was still in decent shape despite the torrential amounts of lightning raging within her. But the real danger had yet arrived.

Tremendous pressure from above shook the whole island as the final bolt gathered. Streaks of red had appeared, after all, gathering in the heart of the purple. The final punishment would be on a different level altogether, yet Alea didn't form a third barrier. Zac looked on with horror and anticipation as the twisted coffin lid shattered, becoming dense clouds of abyssal Death. From within, a familiar yet foreign figure emerged.

Alea's projection looked like a dark goddess of war, decked in exquisite armor as she turned her deathly eyes to the sky. Her beautiful horns felt like black spears, sharpened to the point they could puncture the sky.

Zac could tell her appearance was different from Brazla's. The Tool Spirit of his Dao Repository often wore armor, but it was all a hollow display of grandeur. Meanwhile, there was an incredible force contained within Alea's form—a hero's aura further augmented by the top-tier treasures that had gone into her breakthrough.

Her aura was completely different from the one she had while alive. There were still hints of the poisonous path she'd tread, but it had been rolled into the superseding concept of Death, just like his Seed of Rot had eventually become the Branch of the Pale Seal. And in the heart of it all was a seed of utter darkness—Oblivion painted in the hue of the Abyss.

Zac wouldn't have been too surprised if that was all there was to it. His companion wasn't just exuding an aura of Death, but also one of intractable ruthlessness you could only nurture from the Peak of Conflict. Sure, the plan had always been to infuse more Conflict-based materials for her breakthrough, but he hadn't expected Alea to gain such an aura on her own.

Normally, the Tool Spirit's nature followed the material that made up the Spirit Tool, just like how Verun's appearance had changed a few times over the years. So changing the spirit's alignment was possible, but you had to be careful not to overdo it. You couldn't just force-feed the Tool Spirit with the

Daos you wanted it to have. You needed to slowly move it in the direction you wanted while using materials that wouldn't clash with the current make-up of the equipment.

However, Alea hadn't yet fused the materials for her breakthrough. They had only been transformed into an intangible state ready for absorption, which meant Alea had nurtured this aura of war on her own. Had she managed to cultivate a Dao of Conflict without telling him? Was such a thing even possible in her current state?

The Heavens wouldn't wait for Zac to digest the situation. A huge swirl had already formed in the sky, its center an angry ball of red. It looked like an eye wrought from the cosmos, glaring down at Alea's defiant form. The bolt was already descending, yet Alea wasn't done.

The molten remains of the coffin shattered, turning into a cloud of darkness so dense it felt like a black hole. Most of it gathered in Alea's hand, taking a form closely resembling [Black Death]. The rest created a series of chains, each seemingly filled with enough power to seal the Heavens themselves.

Alea pointed her axe at the incoming pillar of destruction while the chains formed a defensive net, perfectly mirroring Zac's understanding of his Inexorable Stance. It was almost like looking at his mirror, and Zac's heart clenched at the scene. She must have been observing all those years he'd explored his path, toiling away in secret to walk in step. Giving up her path to follow his.

The memories he'd been shown when Alea transformed into [Love's Bond] came crashing back, and the words she'd said just before starting her breakthrough took on a new meaning. The truth he had shut his eyes to for so long couldn't be ignored any longer. While he looked for ways to turn Alea back into her original form, she sought ways to become a true Tool Spirit uniquely suited for him.

If he found a way to turn her back, would she even take it?