

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1081 - Renegotiating Terms - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1081 - Renegotiating Terms

A finger of pure lightning pushed out of the dark clouds, intent to squash the bug intent on defying the natural order. Meanwhile, Alea radiated an aura of conviction, the swirling energies around her so familiar they might as well have been Zac's own. She was like a celestial general, and the world answered her call.

Alea had been drawing large amounts of energy from the Gathering Arrays since the process started, but it was nothing compared to the torrential current that rushed out of the ground to bolster her domain. The Heavens descended while the Earth rose to meet it. Zac found himself pushed over a hundred meters back as a pillar of purple light purified the whole region of Death.

The third bolt's momentum felt unstoppable, pushing through the layers of Death like they were made out of paper. Alea didn't back down. The chains stabbed into the pillar as it closed in, each siphoning some of its force before disintegrating. However, the accumulated lightning was simply too much. It continued down, barely weakened.

Then, everything stopped as Zac felt the familiar seal on reality in a small pocket around the demoness.

"Wh—" Zac exhaled with shock, in disbelief that Alea dared to activate [Fate's Predestination] on the Tribulation Lightning.

Zac felt a tearing pain through his link, but her face was a stony mask of determination. The axe containing her body's core and the new materials' essence turned into a blur, the sole source of movement in a frozen reality. It ripped into the Tribulation Lightning just before it broke free.

A large scar had been carved into the purple pillar, and the angry red in its center was gone. However, the bulk of the tribulation remained, submerging Alea in a sea of lightning. The last thing Zac saw before she was swallowed whole was [Black Death] melting while Alea curled into a fetal position. Then, the connection was gone, leaving Zac caught between despair and hope.

Zac felt his nails dig into his palms while deliberating whether he should force his way inside or trust Alea's capabilities. The Heavens didn't make things

easy for him. It was like a purple sun had been born, a sun made from lightning and fury. Its boundless energy overwhelmed Zac's attempts to see or sense what was happening inside.

He ultimately chose to stay put, even though each second felt like an eternity. Thankfully, the lightning sphere eventually began shrinking. Part of it dispersed as the clouds above parted, but some of the lightning was clearly consumed by something within. Eventually, the situation inside was exposed, and Zac breathed out in relief.

Alea was gone, and there was no sign of the coffin reforming. Instead, there was a two-meter-tall crystal covered in the same runes that he had briefly spotted across the coffin's surface before. Alea had taken a similar form the last time she broke through, meaning she had begun the next step of the process. Lingered arcs of lightning sizzled across the cocoon as it descended, and it released unstable fluctuations surpassing those of the E-grade.

Zac didn't care so much about the strength of the aura as the fact there were spiritual fluctuations at all. It meant Alea was alive, even if Zac temporarily couldn't sense her presence in his mind. Anything else was secondary. Zac took a moment to calm down while waiting for Alea to settle and the tribulation clouds to fully disperse.

There was no Toll of Hegemony accompanying [Love's Bond]'s evolution. The only proof Alea was no longer in the E-grade was the aura she exuded. Then again, she wasn't quite in the D-grade either. Not yet, anyway. Alea's breakthrough would eventually create a similar effect, but the order of things was a bit different with Spirit Tools.

Alea had absorbed the necessary materials, and the Tribulation Lightning acted the part of a furnace. Right now, Alea should be fast at work integrating the new materials into her body. Normally, a blacksmith would manage this process, but the [Divine Investiture Array] made that unnecessary. A skilled craftsman could still speed up the upgrade, but Zac wasn't comfortable handing Alea to some Kavista artisan.

Of course, evolutions normally didn't take things as far as Alea had, completely disintegrating their old form to rebuild everything from the ground up. Zac had experienced the same thing when evolving his [Void Vajra Sublimation], and he knew just how dangerous it was. The slightest hesitation

or weakness and your soul would scatter before it could drag your body back together.

Zac waited another hour for the lingering lightning to disperse and Alea's fluctuating aura to stabilize before walking over. He placed his hand on the smooth surface, trying to reconnect with his companion. Eventually, he found a weak consciousness brush against his.

"Are you okay?" Zac quickly asked. "That appearance—"

'I told you, it's a surprise. Two years,' Alea whispered before Zac felt her consciousness retreat into the crystal's depths.

Zac sighed and picked up the cocoon, carefully carrying it to the teleportation array. He wasn't about to leave Alea here, even with the puppets standing guard. There wasn't much point either, considering the ambient energy was greatly weakened. Instead, he transported the crystal to his Cultivation Cave, where he placed Alea in the heart of the Death-attuned side.

He'd hoped to ask her about her transformation and the fact she'd hidden so much from him, but it would have to wait. Two years was longer than he'd expected, likely a consequence of her taking things so far. Then again, it wasn't a big deal. He already had a solution that wouldn't leave him unarmed until the final stretch of the war; the Temporal Chambers in the Merit Exchange. However, putting only Alea inside one of those chambers wasn't cost-effective.

As long as he provided enough resources, he could also fit [Verun's Bite]. Letting them evolve next to each other might come with some unexpected benefits, such as harmonizing better with their new affinities. Verun would be enlightened to the Evolutionary Path by contrasting it to the Inexorable nature of [Love's Bond], and vice versa. Such a plan would need someone to feed them and push them out of the temporal field when they were about to finish their breakthrough.

In a perfect world, Zac would have done it himself. He wouldn't have minded a few years to work on his skills and shore up his foundations. However, he could still feel the lingering mark of cheating the River of Time so much over the past decades. Right now, it was manageable, but entering another temporal space again so soon would come with severe repercussions. Instead, he'd let one of his followers use the opportunity in return for managing his weapons.

Getting the chamber and a volunteer was easy, but [Verun's Bite] still lacked a few key materials. There hadn't been anything suitable inside the Kavriel repository. Even if the Undead Empire had life-attuned treasures, they definitely wouldn't give any to Zac with the current circumstances. Even the Spiritual Treasures had contained at least some hints of Death, making them unsuitable for the primal axe.

Zac knew he could always get the stuff he needed from the Merit Exchange along with the Temporal Chamber, but he'd already calculated the items he wanted would cost him 70,350 Merit. If possible, Zac wanted to avoid spending what little merit he had, letting him use it on things he couldn't get any other way. And as luck would have it, he had a good idea of how to get the other things he needed.

The Allbright Empire and other peak factions had initially only treated him cordially because of his connection with the Undead Empire and the potential he represented. However, that had all changed after the war broke out. The whole sector was screaming for his Cosmic Vessels, making him a key player in the war. In other words, it was time to renegotiate the old contracts, reaping some benefits along the way.

"How are things?" Zac asked as he stepped into Calrin's offices on the top floor of the Thayer Consortia.

The little Sky Gnome was still trapped in Kavista with his Draugr body, but the chairman's position couldn't be left empty at such a critical time.

"I'm trying to keep things under control, but Calrin's expertise and personal connections are a large part of what keeps operations running smoothly," Vikram sighed.

Zac inwardly laughed as he sat down on a sofa. His human liaison and Calrin constantly bickered like an old couple when working together, but they clearly missed each other. Calrin had similarly fussed about Vikram during their short exchanges in the Kavriel province.

"I'm sure you're doing fine," Zac smiled. "Don't worry. He'll be back in a week or two."

"We should manage until then," Vikram nodded. "How may I help you?"

"I need a better understanding of the ship sales," Zac said. "Or rather, the orders and where they come from."

"Most major coalitions have standing orders where they'll take anything they can get their hands on," Vikram said. "These orders offer sixty to seventy percent more than our original pricing. We also have hundreds of individual orders from various factions, some of them for over five times the price."

Zac had expected as much and nodded for Vikram to continue.

"We have already switched our sales to consist almost solely of the Sunstreak, with a few Starflash and Farsight. Production of all other models have essentially halted," Vikram explained.

The Starflash was the mid-range destroyer Ogras had, while the Farsight was the speedy scouting vessel. Both were good options if your goal was to send a small squad of elites to a neighboring planet and conquer two for the price of one. But as expected, the Sunstreak was the most popular version, simply because it was both the cheapest and quickest to manufacture.

It was a smaller raider vessel that could house roughly 800 men. It didn't have the sustainable flight speeds of the other two ships, but it had a burst function that would provide a momentary eruption of velocity. It also had a few powerful weapons that could hit hard and fast before running away—perfect for striking a Town Protection Array when launching a blitz attack.

"What's the situation with our agreement with the Allbright Empire?" Zac asked.

"They have benefitted greatly by signing such a large deal right out the gate," Vikram said.

Zac wryly smiled. The Allbright Empire had essentially signed that agreement under coercion rather than from actual need, allowing Zac to secure a steady stream of money over the past years. Now, that agreement had turned into a goldmine for them. That was about to change.

"It's still running out in two months?" Zac asked to confirm.

"Yes," Vikram said. "They have contacted us repeatedly since the war began to negotiate a new contract, but we felt it better to wait for your instructions before making any decisions. After all, this is not only a matter of revenue."

Vikram was right. If Zac only wanted to maximize profits, he'd just sell a bunch of Sunstreaks to whoever paid the highest. However, he already had more money than he could spend, while the ships could bring other benefits such as connections and rare materials. Selling the ships for a lower price to the established factions was preferable if it meant getting Zac could get his hands on strategic resources.

There were also the matters of putting the ships where they best could help Zecia and his quest to upgrade his shipyard.

"Perfect," Zac said. "Send a message to the Allbright Empire. Tell them a representative is visiting in an hour."

Not much later, a familiar face stepped into the office. It was Zakarith Azh'Rodum, and seeing the little demoness filled Zac with nostalgia. She was one of the first demons he spoke with. They'd met just after the chaotic events surrounding the [Fruit of Ascension] and Clan Azh'Rezak's subsequent withdrawal. He'd temporarily kidnapped Zakarith and her father to get some answers.

Since then, she'd risen through the ranks, and she was today one of the top officials in charge of procurement and equipment for the Atwood Army. It turned out her doe-eyed look and diminutive frame hid a skilled and unyielding negotiator, and Vikram believed she was the best person to send on this mission.

"Emperor Atwood," Zakarith exclaimed when she spotted Zac. "I didn't expect to see you here."

Zac nodded in satisfaction upon sensing her stable aura and demeanor. He'd been worried she'd lose her composure if sent out alone, but she had matured over the past years just like everyone else.

"Good to see you," Zac said, jumping into the matter without preamble. "I have a mission for you, if you're up to it."

"Whatever I can do to help," Zakarith said.

An hour later, the demoness stepped onto the teleporter, beginning her journey toward the Red Sector. Zac would have liked to come along but knew it was too risky after seeing the names on the ladder. The Allbright Empire

held three positions in the top 100 on the Early D-grade ladder, with Pretty Peak appearing in the 73rd spot.

Three names wasn't anything special for such a powerful faction, but the problem was that one of the three was Ventus Kalavan appearing on the 29th. In other words, the Radiant Temple group Ventus mentioned was staying with the Allbright Empire, adding an unpredictable variable that made him leery of visiting in person.

He even suspected Helian Ailo, the current 7th rank holder on the global ladder, belonged to the Radiant Temple. After all, if there were such a powerful local, Zac should have heard of him already. A similar situation could be seen with the Dravorak Dynasty housing individuals from the Havarok Empire, including the all-too-familiar name of Ykrodas Havarok.

Zac smiled, wondering what expression the princeling had after seeing the name Arcaz Umbri'Zi appearing on the ladder. Their encounter should have left quite the impression on Ykrodas, with Zac being filled with the power of Chaos as he executed Uona Noz'Valadir right in front of him and his men.

He had no idea how the Havarok Dynasty had caught onto the scent of the Left Imperial Palace, but he was almost certain that was why they'd showed up. The presence of these people complicated things, and Zac would be like a pig presenting himself for the slaughter if he joined Zakarith on her journey to the Red Zone. The Havarok, especially, had ample reasons to hate him based on his surname alone. The war between the Umbri'Zi Clan and the Havarok Empire still raged as far as Zac knew.

Just sending Zakarith was risky, but she hadn't even blinked when he explained the dangers. She had said that the soldiers put their lives on the line every day, so how could she back down from something like this?

Zac spent another hour with Vikram until a notification told him it was time to go. A few minutes later, he stepped into a large office in a secured wing of the government building. The office was actually his own, but he had barely spent any time there. It was perpetually empty, yet a figure was standing by the windows this time.

"You're back!" Emily exclaimed, turning into a blur that crashed into his chest.

"I've missed you," Zac said with a smile as he embraced his disciple. "I hear you've become a pillar for Earth while I was gone. I'm so proud of you."

A slight blush appeared on Emily's face as she dug deeper into his chest.

"And yet you blew my score out of the water the second you returned. Twice," she murmured before looking up at Zac. "What's going on? Is that why you wanted to see me privately before the meeting?"

"Let's sit," Zac sighed, and he spent the next minutes going over the situation.

"So half of you is over in the Undead Empire scamming those rich kids?" Emily giggled.

"Something like that," Zac laughed. "I have to be a bit shameless to get my hands on materials. It's rough out there. Even my little disciple beat me to Hegemony."

"How could something like a Cosmic Core hold me back?" Emily grinned. "Besides, my path is much more straightforward than yours."

"Is there anything you need?" Zac asked.

"I'm fine," Emily said. "I have everything I need between your Contribution Exchange and the Merit Store. I don't want to keep relying on your help to progress. True strength needs to be earned; I've learned that the hard way."

"You've really grown up. I feel like a parent sending off their kid to college," Zac said with a shake of his head. "But don't try to carry everything on your shoulders. Everyone needs help now and then."

"I know," Emily grinned. "I could say the same to you."

The two spent the next hour catching up. Zac shared some of the stories he could still remember from the Perennial Vastness, while Emily detailed her war exploits.

"So you've taken down two D-grade worlds now," Zac said. "That's great."

"Honestly, I could have doubled that number, but the harder we push, the more people will die," Emily said. "It seems impossible to strike the right balance. Each victory is paid for in blood, but it leaves the survivors stronger. The Dao comes alive in our camps after every time we've finished a campaign. People are evolving their Seeds and Fragments left and right, while others use merit or conquered resources to progress."

Zac agreed. You both wanted to push to strengthen your force and hold back to keep your subordinates safe. It turned out that Rhubat's lead wasn't due to personal strength but rather a difference in mentality between Zhix and Humans. None had fought harder than Rhubat's Second Battalion, and none had seen as heavy losses. Rhubat was pushing the Zhix hard, hoping it'd let them better adapt to their new reality. As for those who died, it was simply weakness leaving the hives.

He still wasn't sure how he should go about completing his Campaign Mission or how he should act in the long term. He wanted to conquer as many planets as possible to maximize Personal- and Faction Merit, but was that something he could ask of his army? He'd have to be blind not to realize that his population couldn't keep up with his pace, but he also didn't want to adopt Tavza's approach, where he spent most of his time back on Earth.

Luckily, it looked like Emily had an idea.

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"I had an idea I wanted to run by you before the meeting," Emily said as the silence grew heavy. "I've been talking to my subordinates, and more than a few wish we'd transition from our slow-paced and defensive tactics to more aggressive ones. They feel this war is their chance to rise and are willing to put their lives on the line for the sake of Earth or their cultivation."

"What do you propose, then?" Zac asked.

"I want to separate our operations into defensive and offensive battalions. Those who wish to push into Kan'Tanu territory and accrue merit can sign up for the elite offensive squads. Of course, we'd only take the strongest ones. The others will remain in the regular armies, mostly focusing on defense. The System won't allow you to stall for more than two weeks, but the defensive can progress through the worlds as slowly as they're allowed, keeping casualties at a minimum."

"What you propose is a complete reorganization of the army," Zac commented.

"Our soldiers have all fought multiple engagements now. Our methods and equipment are mostly the same across battalions, and our cooperation has

matured. If we're careful, we should be able to rearrange our army without creating too much confusion. The safety will be higher in the defensive battalions, especially if we can upgrade our arrays and siege weapons. We can lower our standards a bit and accept some of the volunteers early to fill up our ranks."

Zac felt the proposal was promising, but many questions remained unanswered. "Would we even be able to gather enough people to man those kinds of elite squads?"

"You'd be surprised," Emily said. "If you manage to get your hands on the supplies we need, we'll be able to open up at least two new battlefronts and convert two of our old ones into offensive armies."

"That many?" Zac said with shock.

"Well, at least a third of them would be Zhix," Emily said with a wry smile. "But people are finally waking up to the realities of our world. Wealth, status, longevity, freedom; you need strength if you want any of them. And with every battle, our warriors' Dao Hearts grow stronger. Death no longer scares them, but living like a coward and giving up their path does."

Zac sighed, suddenly remembering his talk with Catheya years ago, just before he entered the City of Ancients. He had hesitated about letting his subordinates start an Incursion, but Catheya had convinced him to agree. Cultivation was an individual journey where you searched for the truth of the cosmos, the meaning of life, and their purpose in this vast universe. No matter what drove people to ascend through the ranks, it wasn't Zac's place to say they couldn't go after their dreams.

At least not until their pursuit clashed with Zac's, at which point one would walk away stronger while the other would become fertilizer for another's path.

Zac nodded, his heart steady, even though his decision likely meant over a million additional deaths over the coming years. "I'll support your proposal. I want to see a proposal for the reorganization as soon as possible."

By then, the meeting was just around the corner, and they made their way to the hall. Outside, many familiar faces were already waiting, ranging from the demons who first joined his factions to the inhabitants of the research base. There were also some Zac didn't recognize, including an Ishiate tinkerer, rugged veterans who must have joined through the recruitment station in the

Red Sector, and a slew of humans who likely represented the latest generation of elites.

People stood clumped together, discussing various matters with low voices, but the lobby quieted down when Zac approached. A few seemingly wanted to approach him but held themselves back as Zac entered the hall. The meeting hall had clearly taken a lot of inspiration from the House Chamber of the old United States, where the Speaker's chair had been replaced by something more resembling a throne.

Behind his seat was an enormous insignia of the Atwood Empire, expertly crafted with high-grade materials. It even exuded a powerful aura, filling the room with a warlike atmosphere. It was slightly ostentatious, but Zac didn't mind. It matched the times they lived in, and the setup was nothing compared to some of the throne rooms out there.

Half the seats were already occupied, and Zac estimated around two hundred representatives would be present. All the races under his rule were represented, even the werewolf tribe, and Zac spotted a few figures he hadn't seen since the Integration. For example, there was Willow, the ishiate shaman he'd met during the New World Government's auction. The Marshall clan also had two representatives present, Henry and Mark, a general who had advised Thea during her campaign against the undead empire.

The room rapidly filled after Zac's arrival, and Zac began the meeting without any preamble.

"It's good to see so many familiar faces," Zac smiled as he looked around the room from his seat. "I know everyone is anxious to return to their duties, so I will make things as brief as possible.

"First thing's first, the elephant in the room; the two new additions to the contribution ladder. Some here knew the truth, while others might have had some suspicions. Now that things have reached this point, there's no point in keeping things under wraps. Until recently, Arcaz and I were the same person, and my ability to swap between forms was my hidden ace."

Most of the founding members of his faction took the news in stride, having known about it for decades. Others had suspected as much, considering a trail of clues led to that conclusion. Only a few were shocked by the revelation, especially the natives of Ensolus. They hadn't been there for Earth's Integration, when Zac and "Mr. Black" took out one incursion after another,

but never at the same time. So they hadn't seen anything wrong with both names appearing on the ladder.

"However, my cover story has become the truth," Zac continued. "I encountered a problem when breaking through to Hegemony. My Cosmic Core couldn't hold both Life and Death. I always knew that might happen, so I prepared a few backup plans. I ended up splitting my body and soul in two. The result was two versions of me being born. Neither is the real me; both are. I guess you could consider us twins or brothers.

"Nothing will change from this, except that the Atwood Empire now has two rulers. For convenience's sake, my Draugr twin has chosen to adopt his cover name as his real one, and he's now in the Kavriel Province negotiating a deal for resources. We've already gotten word the negotiations were a success, and we now have direct access to a smithy specialized in siege weaponry. He'll return in a week or two."

"Ah, Emperor Atwood, is he... Are we—" Carva, one of the Raun spectrals, spoke up, breaking the silence gripping the room.

"No." Zac said decisively. "Even if he's Draugr, he still shares all my memories. He's a native of this planet and has no plan to give up on it for the Undead Empire. We will continue down the path we've set down—a neutral force at the crossroads between Life and Death. Any questions on this?"

As expected, no one spoke up for half a minute. Zac was sure many were curious about the details, but who'd dare to dig into his secrets? Neither would anyone go against his decisions. Zac rarely got involved in managing his empire, but he was still its unilateral ruler. The room's design might have given the meeting a veneer of democracy, but the Atwood Empire ultimately wasn't one.

"Access to more weaponry is huge," Illvere eventually said. "Our stockpiles have been holding us back for long, and the recent attack proved our products aren't infallible. I just worry whether we'll be able to use them effectively. We don't have many undead Siege Engineers."

"The items are only usable with Miasma, so we'll have to accelerate our training," Zac said. "However, the idea is not to rely solely on this source. Hours ago, I sent Zakarith Azh'Rhodum to the Allbright Empire to renegotiate our agreements regarding my Cosmic Vessels. Part of my request is for the

Allbright Dynasty to provide a similar connection. We'll hopefully have an answer soon."

The news was clearly welcome, and Zac felt the atmosphere shift in the room where many eyes had gained a calculative gleam. Better equipment meant fewer losses and more merit. Especially so when the resources were provided to the armies free of charge to a certain degree.

The Atwood Army had already set up a contribution-style model for the battalions. Most of the resources harvested after a victory would enter Zac's coffers to fuel the war efforts and pay pensions to the families of the fallen, but 20% would stay within the battalion. Some would become individual bonuses, while the rest would enter the battalion's private funds to purchase whatever they needed.

Zac saw that the atmosphere was just right, so he struck while the iron was hot.

"On that note, I have some other news. Emily."

Emily nodded and began explaining her vision for the Atwood Army's reorganization. It was clear she had already run the idea by some of the other battalion leaders, who joined the discussion that quickly sprouted.

"What you say makes sense. Elites aren't born in the training fields," Ra'Klid agreed. "However, this strategy carries the risk of hollowing out the strength of the regular armies. Without elites to shore up the ranks, any surprise might lead to a quick defeat and disastrous losses."

"Part of that problem will be resolved through upgrading our defensive equipment," Emily said. "With stronger fortifications, our common armies can hold on longer until backup arrives. Secondly, we will ensure each standard army has a core of elites. We will rotate these guardians if too few talents wish to take on these assignments on a permanent basis."

"The same is true for the leaders," Joanna added. "Each of us will have to hold down the fort for some periods. We can use that time to consolidate any gains or inspirations we've had."

"Forcing such a comprehensive overhaul in a short duration is bound to create disorder," Henry Marshall offered, and the general to his side nodded in agreement.

"Disorder means death on the battlefield," Mark said. "A shake-up of this magnitude would be implemented over years in the olden days. We'd plan and analyze for years, arrange war games and training to perfect our cooperation and refine the strategy."

"I am aware this kind of reorganization will create chaos within the ranks," Zac said. "However, it still needs to be done in the quickest timeframe possible. This first year is critical, whether it's for the faction as a whole or for our elites hoping to seize opportunities in the Limited Exchange. The Kan'Tanu is pushing hard, and we need to hone ourselves into a force having what it takes to reach the other side of this struggle."

"We have reason to believe the war will have multiple stages," Vilari added. "It's a reasonable assumption that the better we perform in the first stretch, the better we'll be treated as the war heats up."

Zac nodded in agreement. The reason for the war was the same as why Earth was integrated; to raise more warriors. Those who performed would be rewarded, while those who played it safe were discarded for lacking potential and drive.

"I want to see at least one elite army within ten days and for the whole army to be reorganized within the month. Start planning your campaigns accordingly."

A few grimaced at the tight schedule, but no one offered rebuttals. However, one camp that had sat silently until now finally stirred.

"Warchief, when you say that you want one army ready in advance, does that mean you're taking over a battalion?" Rhubat asked.

"No. I am opening a new battlefield. I haven't decided whether Arcaz or I will lead it yet, but it will become our first spear stabbing into the depths of the Zurbor Sector. It will aim to conquer one neutral world a day, and at most, five for the outer worlds in the other sector," Zac said as an aura of blood and conquest leaked from his body.

"I'm aware opening new battlefields will increase casualties and stretch our remaining battalions. But this is war, and the kid gloves must come off. To counter the price of our offense, I want to accelerate recruitment by at least 50%. No faction or region will be allowed to sit on the sidelines while the rest of us bleed. Those who shirk their duty will be conscripted. Deserters will be punished."

"Good!" Rhubat rumbled, slapping their massive hand onto the table as a bloodthirsty aura to match Zac's radiated from its hulking body. "This is the way! These unclean ones are the instigators of this conflict, and backing down or hiding will not solve anything. There is no war without sacrifice, no important cause without a price. Yet we must fight. The Zhix Hives stands behind this proposal. We shall embark on our second crusade!"

A storm of dense killing intent immediately exploded from the Zhix sitting around Rhubat, and Zac's brows rose slightly as he felt fate shift around the insectoids. Be it the Anointed or the normal-sized citizens, they seemed incredibly excited about Rhubat's declaration. In their first crusade, they had fought for millennia to rid themselves of the Dominators, but their victory had left them without purpose.

Not everyone shared the Zhix's enthusiasm, but quite a few welcomed the change. The Emperor had made his will clear, so the discussion soon shifted to implementation. Zac didn't participate much, instead opting to listen in to get a deeper understanding of the Atwood Army's operations and the general state of things.

Normally, the meetings only lasted an hour before people rushed back to their respective battlefronts, but people only emerged after four hours this time. A few lingered, wanting to catch up with Zac or propose various ideas. They saw the meeting as a rare opportunity, considering Zac was almost always either in seclusion or off-world.

Zac was anxious to get back to his cultivation, but he knew he couldn't just dump all responsibilities on his subordinates. Besides, his Draugr body was still fast at work, redrawing pathways and preparing to upgrade the next skill.

One of those approaching Zac was Little Bolt, one of the first mercenaries who enlisted with the help of Emily. The Recruitment Station he helped run had expanded a lot since Zac left, and the number of applicants was increasing every day. There were over a hundred people over there, responsible for investigating and testing. Little Bolt himself had later moved on to a leadership role and liaison between Wandering Cultivators and the Atwood Empire back on Earth.

"You want to become an official citizen?" Zac said thoughtfully.

"Many of us do," Little Bolt said. "It's not just about the safety and wealth the Atwood Empire provides while the rest of Zecia is burning. You'd have to be

blind not to see the potential of Lord's faction. Our futures would be far brighter staying on permanently rather than as temporary mercenaries."

"We understand nothing comes for free, but we are hoping a route to citizenship could be implemented," the unfamiliar woman next to him added. "To give us something to work toward."

Practically, nothing was stopping Zac from setting something up. As a Baron of a D-grade force, he had multiple ways to deal with that matter. For one, he could simply award ten people citizenship every year without any prerequisites, and he could hire a few external elders using the System's contracts. He could also give out Decree quests or appoint someone else to do so.

However, awarding citizenship came with certain risks. For one, most Wandering Cultivators no longer wore the prison bracers that prevented them from teleporting off-world. Anyone cleared for duty had the bracer taken off since they'd have exploded the moment they stepped onto the battlefronts otherwise.

There had been a few deserters already, people who teleported home instead of to Ensolus when they used the Nexus Hub. Of course, it was a very rare thing, and not just because the fee was more than the accumulated wealth of most of these people. Little Bolt wasn't exaggerating; the conditions in the Atwood Empire were far better than most places, especially the dangerous Red Zone.

That wasn't a big problem since his undead forces weren't a big secret anymore, but it could become one if the deserters were citizens. They'd be able to go back and forth from Earth, and quite a few forces would be eager to enlist someone with that kind of access. They wouldn't be able to bring anyone with them to Earth, but they could become spies or wreak havoc in other ways.

Then again, it might be fine with proper safeguards on resources and checkpoints at the Nexus Hubs.

"You should know I'm not much of a hands-on leader," Zac said. "I will discuss the matter with the others. It's not impossible to tie citizenship to wartime merit, though it remains to be seen what levels are suitable."

"Of course," Little Bolt quickly nodded. "I know I'm not the most objective speaker in these matters, but I believe the people we've recruited over the past year are reliable. Many dreamt of a place to call home long before the war, but such opportunities aren't easily come by within the ancient empires—every inch is already claimed by one clan or another. If we get the opportunity, we and our descendants will work hard for the Atwood Empire."

Zac nodded, and the two left with a bow. They were soon replaced by the Raun Spectrals, who discretely revisited the topic of the Undead Empire and Arcaz Umbri'Zi. Eventually, everyone had gotten their chance to speak, at which point Zac moved to a smaller meeting room.

There were a few people he needed to speak with in private, and the first was Rhubat.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1083 - Weariness - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1083 - Weariness

It had been years since Zac met Rhubat in person. Decades, if Zac included his time in the Temporal Chambers. Zac had been busy with his cultivation, while Rhubat had immediately rushed back to the hives after returning with Ogras. They'd been so eager to discuss their recent findings with the other Anointed that Zac only managed to exchange brief messages before he set off to the Perennial Vastness. A meeting was long overdue.

"Warmaster, you asked for me?" Rhubat said.

"I did," Zac said as he sat down. "It looks like the Zhix welcomed my shake-up."

"I'm sorry to have used you for my purposes," Rhubat said with a small bow. "The Dominators had a greater impact on our society than we realized. Ten years of peace among all hives is unprecedented, and many have felt lost without something to train our spears at. I once hoped Zhix would never have to enter another crusade, yet it became our path to salvation."

"It's fine," Zac said. "If anything, I'm hoping your mentality will influence the rest of my people. Unfortunately, that's difficult when the Zhix warriors are almost solely concentrated to the second and seventh battalions."

"That's why you wanted to see me," Rhubat slowly said. "You wish to split up our forces."

"It's part of it," Zac said. "The Zhix are performing beyond reproach, but I'll be blunt. Your people forming an autonomous enclave within my empire is a problem waiting to happen. We won't always be around, and I fear leaving things unsettled will lead to a conflict that neither side wants. What if the third crusade is the one against the Atwood Empire?"

War was a time when heroes rose to prominence, and Zac's instincts told him to nip this problem in the bud. Rhubat was like a shining sun to the hives. The Anointed before him might become the unwilling figurehead of an uprising if the Hives decided they shouldn't have to take orders from Port Atwood any longer.

That was doubly true considering what he'd brought back from the Perennial Vastness.

"I understand," Rhubat sighed. "Yet another reminder we're holding onto a life from a bygone era."

"I know the Zhix have a troublesome past with the Dominators, but you should also understand I'm not some tyrant interested in forcing my beliefs onto your race or interfering with your lives. I'm not asking the Zhix to relinquish their connection to their hives. I just want them to recognize they're part of a bigger picture, and I hope you'll use this reorganization to better integrate your people. The hives will follow as long as the Anointed and respected warriors lead the way."

Rhubat peered into Zac's eyes for a few seconds. "I thought I'd get closer to you after breaking through, but I feel there's a towering mountain before me. Strength is truth, and I will work harder on integrating our kin. However, the Zhix are no one's slaves. We follow you, but as you say, we will not always be around. Whoever picks up your mantle must prove their capability and sincerity to the hives."

Zac thought it over for a few seconds before nodding in agreement. "I agree. Sincerity is a two-way street. On that note, I have something for you. It might help you deal with some of your kin's issues."

The five insectoid species he'd approached inside the Perennial Vastness had outright refused to shed any light on their cultivation system. And it was clear

insectoids generally shared the Zhix's xenophobia, to the point they shunned the Primal Council and any other group of beastkin. However, it wasn't difficult to gather some general information on insectoid societies and various species of insect beasts.

Two of the insectoids had also decided to target him after his inquiries, which left Zac with a few communal cultivation manuals and unique resources. The insectoids hadn't even cared about sealing their techniques since they were custom-made for their species. Still, they should be useful as a reference for the Zhix. It was clear that cultivation was very possible even for societies such as the Zhix. There were a few terrifying forces out there, and the A-grade insectoid empires were some of the most feared factions in the Multiverse.

For one, their members were fiercely loyal, with the whole population willing to fight to the death for the hive. Secondly, at least half of all insectoid species had unique Kings or Queens at the top, or a ruling caste like the Anointed. The solitary leaders, especially, were powerful even among Supremacies, bolstered by unprecedented amounts of faith energy.

This was what Zac feared the Zhix would adopt, considering such a cultivation system was bound to cause trouble for Earth. How could the object of the Zhix's faith be subordinate to the Atwood Empire?

"Faith," Rhubat muttered after scanning the information for a few minutes. "I see now."

"It seems to be the most common path," Zac said. "With the communal nature of insectoid species, the standard path of cultivation doesn't really work. Only those born with an individualistic mindset, like Ibtep, follow the conventional route. The rest cultivate through faith."

"And the stronger the source of faith, the stronger the population," Rhubat concluded, but there was a frown on their face. "I see why you're worried, Warchief, but you need not be. This is the path of the Dominators. I cannot accept the Zhix consecrating me or any other leader as a god. I would only replace the chains of old with new ones."

"The Dao of Faith is one of the Seventeen Dao Peaks, and it's not limited to the consecration of a leader. It's just that this method has proven most effective for many similar species," Zac offered. "You can have faith in things, concepts, or even your ancestors. Of course, these routes have different

challenges that need to be overcome. And not all insectoids rely on faith; there's more on that topic in the missives."

Rhubat took a breath before standing up, bowing deeply at Zac. "Warchief, thank you for this. I cannot speak for the future, but the Zhix will not betray your trust while I am around. You have given me much to think about."

"Just one more thing," Zac said. "Do you or Ibtep need any assistance with your Campaign mission?"

"Mine will be finished soon enough. I simply need to kill five more D-grade battalion commanders in singular battle," Rhubat said before their face turned odd. "As for Ibtep... They might need some assistance."

The Anointed left a few minutes later, at which point Zac's face matched Rhubat's. He'd already heard Ibtep was the second Zhix to reach Hegemony, but Zac hadn't known the class they'd picked was called Grub Knight. It was a weird half-martial pet class that differed from Verana's Beast Tamer archetype.

Instead of having multiple pets fighting for you, Ibtep formed temporary connections with their grubs, connections which were only active when he rode them. In return, mount and knight would strengthen each other, forming a stronger whole. The problem was that Ibtep's interest leaned toward raising tasty treats or worms that could be used as workers. Until now, he hadn't raised a single beast bred for war.

That on its own wasn't a problem, but Ibtep's quest needed their mounts to accrue a combined 15,000 merit, a difficult task for worms whose only strong feature was their taste. Rhubat had encouraged Ibtep to raise deadlier critters, but the result wasn't great.

Ibtep tried their best, even enlisting the Tal-Eladar's help, but the years of selective breeding the Zhix had done so far were useless. Ibtep had intentionally bred out any aggression and other features that were a hindrance for workers but useful for fighters. With time and resources limited, Rhubat feared Ibtep wouldn't figure out a solution to their mission in time.

Zac could hopefully expedite things by providing resources and acquiring powerful worms off-world. At the same time, Zac wasn't sure it was the right move. The inheritance was based on fate, and Ibtep had never been a fighter. Pushing him down the martial path might not be the correct solution to dealing

with this matter. He'd have to have a talk with the worm rancher to figure out a plan when he had time.

He spent another hour catching up with the core members of his faction, handing out unique treasures he'd picked up along the way while exploring the Perennial Vastness. It quickly became apparent that Vilari was right. There were only a few local Hegemons for now, but more than ten people were approaching the point where they could attempt their breakthrough.

However, one person hadn't seen as much improvement as the others. Zac inwardly sighed as he saw Sap Trang step into the room, his eyes darting around like a child called into the principal's office. If Zac had felt the winds of fate pushing the Zhix forward, it was almost the opposite with the old fisherman in front of him.

Zac couldn't feel a hint of fate on Sap and felt the odds of the man reaching Peak E-grade slim even if provided the necessary resources. Sap also hadn't been present at the meeting, even if he was qualified, no matter if you considered his status as a founding member of the empire or an Admiral of the Atwood Navy.

"I'm sorry," Sap eventually said as he sat down. "I abused my status—"

"It's fine," Zac said. "You could say you were my first human follower, and you were instrumental in the formation of the Atwood Empire. I won't pressure you if you don't wish to register for the war. Besides, your job has never been more important, and no one is better suited."

"It's mostly Little Bau," Sap said with a crooked smile.

"Still," Zac said. "The number of Aquatic Beast Kings far surpasses those on land, and we must maintain order while so many of our warriors are off-world."

Most worlds had vast swathes claimed by Beasts, turning into Danger Zones for cultivators. Earth wasn't any different. One of the reasons was that it was too costly and dangerous to clear them out. Cleansing the oceans was almost impossible, whether you considered its size or the fact that the beasts outnumbered humans by hundreds to one.

Keeping wild regions was also intentional. It gave the factions somewhere to temper their warriors without waging wars against their neighbors. The best resources also only grew in the wild, often with beast guardians creating a

sympiotic relationship with the treasures. So you settled by creating a perimeter, and the Beast Kings were usually smart enough to honor the borders in times of peace.

But if they stepped out of line, people like Sap Trang and his Kraken needed to be there to push them back before they invaded cities or underwater resources. If not for the hard work of the Atwood Navy, the archipelago would have already become an unlivable Danger Zone considering how energy-dense the region was.

"Well, I'll do my best as long as possible."

"What's going on?" Zac asked with a frown as he sensed the hidden meaning in Sap's words. "Are you okay?"

"It's hard to explain," Sap Trang sighed. "I might be a child in the eyes of the powerful beings out there, but I'm old. My joints don't ache like they used to, but there is a weariness I didn't feel during those first months of the Integration. Perhaps it's because I relaxed after finding my grandson safe and sound. Perhaps it's because I received the gift of Cosmic Energy too late in life. Either case, the feeling only grew stronger after I avoided the Incursion. Now, I can tell I've reached the end."

"You're not—"

"I'm not ready to enter the cycle of reincarnation just yet," Sap Trang smiled. "But I fear I won't be able to keep up with Little Bau much longer, and I don't want to become an anchor holding him back. I'm thinking about passing on the link to my great-grandson in the future. Liem's only eight, but his affinity with water is far greater than mine or his father's. And Bau already sees him as family."

"I understand," Zac sighed. "Let me know if there's anything you need."

The old fisherman left soon after to resume his vigil. Meeting Sap dampened Zac's mood, and he didn't stay much longer. The news of the army shake-up had already spread by the time he emerged from the government building, and Zac heard quite a few pedestrians discuss the matter as he walked to the closest teleporter.

Emily's analysis was already proving accurate; the response was quite positive. He even heard a few cultivators mentioning they would apply for a

transfer, though their auras clearly indicated there was no way they'd get accepted. Of course, this was the capital, which was mostly populated by the strong. The sentiment was likely different on the mainland.

Zac soon returned to his cave, where he spent the next day in seclusion, working tirelessly to prepare for the Abyssal Pond and the war. The only times he moved from his prayer mat was to occasionally check in on Alea, even though her situation seemed to have completely stabilized. The large crystal still looked like it wanted to swallow all light as it siphoned off the Death in the cave.

Finally, Zac got the message he'd been waiting for; Zakarith had finished the first round of negotiations. She had accomplished her job splendidly and sent back a list of preliminary terms for Zac's approval. The exact details would take longer to iron out, but the abridged terms indicated things would go the way he'd hoped.

The Albright Empire was clearly worried about him turning to the highest bidder now that the old agreement was reaching term. It wasn't just about the portability either. It was their most valuable feature, but they also added a lot of value on the frontlines. The Creators' advanced weapon systems had proven surprisingly effective, considering they had already destroyed hundreds of enemy vessels before the real war even started.

As such, the Albright Empire was desperate to expand its fleet before the Kan'Tanu's main army reached its defensive perimeter. They had been more than willing to accept Zac's terms, though that was partly because he'd held back quite a bit. Apart from increasing the purchase price by 60%, the agreement mostly mirrored the benefits he'd gotten from the Undead Empire.

The first was exclusive access to three ventures; a smithy, a Formation Guild specializing in wartime arrays, and an alchemist clan. These three covered all the needs of his armies. If he later managed to free Boje, he could use that connection to get special items for his elite battalions. However, he truthfully wasn't confident he'd win in his duel with Kator. He'd heard some shocking rumors from his attendants in Kavista, and they hadn't decided on what kind of handicap he'd get.

Since he couldn't rely on connecting with the Zethaya Clan, Zac had opted to add an alchemist to his demands. He could probably have pushed for even more, but the thought of extorting the faction standing at the forefront of this conflict left a bad taste in Zac's mouth. There was also some truth to what

Toss and the others said about fate. Even if you ignored the Left Imperial Palace, there were direct implications for his faction.

What if he went too far with his spending, and the System upgraded its rating of his forces? It might mean his E-grade battlefronts suddenly found themselves pitted against armies of Hegemons. There was no way good equipment was enough to make up for a difference in grade when it came to common soldiers, and the losses would be catastrophic.

Besides, he needed the Allbright Empire just like they needed him, even if they didn't know it. Selling ships to the Allbright Dynasty was the best way to ensure his ships saw combat, letting him progress his shipyard quest quicker.

Still, Zac had used the situation to get a few benefits for himself. He reviewed the attached list of rare materials and sent a response, and he didn't need to wait more than an hour before two Valkyries dropped off a couple of boxes in his compound. A hungry roar echoed in Zac's mind when he picked them up, confirming his choice was correct. Verun absolutely wanted the items sealed inside.

Not all of them contained treasures, though. One held a rare formation similar to a Core Formation Array but aimed at beastcrafted Spirit Tools. Better yet, its patterns indicated it came from the System itself, perhaps from a quest reward like how Zac got the [Divine Investiture Array]. The original owner had probably opted to sell or trade the thing to the Allbright Dynasty rather than using it themselves.

Zac hadn't expected the Allbright Clan to have such a good thing, or that they had voluntarily offered it as a greeting gift before the negotiations even started. It saved Zac a trip to the Big Axe Coliseum, which had similar facilities and skilled blacksmiths.

"Are you ready, buddy?" Zac smiled as his old companion appeared in his hand, and an exhilarated howl answered when he dragged his finger across the mottled surface of its edge.

Zac was full of excitement as he walked toward the teleporter. In less than a day, he would get to see the evolved form of his two companions.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1084 - Widening the Path - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1084 - Widening the Path

Similar preparations like those for Alea were quickly arranged, and Zac stepped onto another private island at the archipelago's edge. It was one of the few pure Life-attuned hotspots that had yet been turned into spiritual farms, reserved for his private use. Zac installed the [Primordial Awakening Array] inside the valley at the island's heart before taking out the mounds of treasure he'd prepared.

The refined bones he'd gotten from Kruta were one of the core items, and they even held the Dao of Conflict already to match his path. Joining them were the two Life-attuned treasures he'd gotten from the Allbright Empire, of which one would elevate Verun's spirit while the other was an extremely durable stone.

The last box wasn't a material for the upgrade itself, but rather for a step that came before. It was a peak-quality [Primal Series Harmonization Array] and looked like a small stone altar. It wasn't another special array from the System but a very common array sold by multiple local Formation Clans. Zac already had a few before entering the Perennial Vastness, but this one was of better quality.

The Primal Series was one of the more common types of rewarded equipment, at least in the Zecia sector. And while Verun could barely be compared to the common goods you'd see all over, it still carried some of the same issues. This array was designed to alleviate some of the problems before evolving it.

Verun's main source of nourishment had always been blood from the beasts he'd slain over the years. Each infusion left a small mark on the Tool Spirit, refining its bestial spirituality further. This diet allowed for quick and cheap growth through the first grades, which was perfect for the average frontier cultivator. After all, you only needed to hunt random beasts or buy blood at a discount, and your weapon would slowly grow stronger.

However, the potential of this path was very limited. Zac understood the concept very well, thanks to his study of [Cosmic Forge]. Too many clashing bloodlines had entered his axe, taking up space while providing little of use. The [Primal Series Harmonization Array] was essentially a press, condensing

all the energies the weapon had absorbed over the years. The good ones even managed to fuse some of them, like turning coal into diamonds.

And the more space was left, the more room there was to grow.

Zac deftly set up everything in no time. Peak Quality Beast Crystals had already been slotted into the array to power the process, and Zac placed his companion onto its surface after taking a calming breath. He had gone over the next step for years to ensure nothing went wrong.

After all, there was no way he'd be satisfied with the improvement from this array alone. It was one thing if the System had crafted it—those products came with a quality guarantee—but this was an array crafted by one of the resident Formation Masters of the Allbright Empire. More importantly, the array only condensed and fused the essences. It didn't improve them or remove the unsuitable pieces.

Luckily, Zac had just the thing to vastly improve the result; [Cosmic Extraction]. Zac couldn't do what the array did, but he could complement the process by removing the most troublesome bits during the fusion. He'd already perfected the method on spare axes while practicing crafting.

The altar hummed to life, and the inscribed runes released a bloody glimmer. After ten minutes, the runes on [Verun's Bite]'s handle also lit up, and it looked like the veinlike golden streaks across the weapon pulsed from a heartbeat. Zac felt Verun's pain as the array set its spirituality ablaze, but the Tool Spirit didn't resist at all.

It took an hour for the altar to fully agitate and untangle the bloodlines inside the weapon, and the axe was veritably vibrating atop the array by that point. Zac knew that was his cue, so he engraved a small seal with his Omnitool at a certain spot of the axehead. Hiding in that location was a blob of energy that completely clashed with the weapon's nature—it reeked of death and decay, a remnant from one of the bloodlines Zac let it absorb before deciding it should become a true Life-attuned weapon.

It couldn't be called a whole essence like those he infused with [Cosmic Infusion]. It was barely a fragment of one, a small snippet of discord. It was lucky since he couldn't use the standard extraction method while the [Primal Series Harmonization Array] was running. Instead, he'd created a small peephole with the seal, letting him drag out the piece like pulling out a splinter.

An unstable vacuum was left in its wake, and a streak of blood actually shot out of the axe. But the situation didn't get a chance to worsen before a tremendous pulse pushed down on the bloodlines. Zac erased the seal and moved on after confirming the extraction was successful, this time targeting a piece clearly coming from the adolescent dragon in the Tower of Eternity.

The dragon's blood was responsible for a significant portion of Verun's nature, and its extremely high-end bloodline was an important reason [Verun's Bite]'s potential had skyrocketed upon entering E-grade. However, that didn't mean every aspect of the dragon's bloodline was suitable going forward. The bloodline purity and bestial ferocity that could be considered part of the Peak of Conflict were perfect, but there were also snippets holding the Dao of Fire. Those pieces had become a disturbance to the fusion of Conflict and Life, and similar whispers of unsuitable Daos could be seen everywhere.

The situation wasn't all that bad, though. The precious treasures he'd fed Verun over the years had flushed out much of the clashing attunements, and [Cosmic Forge] allowed him to remove even more. Besides, this was just the beginning. Zac would definitely retune [Verun's Bite] properly when his accomplishments in [Essence Fusion] were deep enough. This was just a way to ensure his axe could keep up until then.

Zac spent the next twenty minutes removing as many unsuitable essences and bloodlines as he could while the altar condensed the remainders. The forceful extraction led to the accumulated bloodlines inside the weapon decreasing, evidenced by the pools of acrid blood covering Zac and the surroundings. Of course, Zac wouldn't let Verun face its tribulation with an incomplete bloodline. He had prepared suitable replacements.

The first of which was his own blood.

Zac dragged his thumb against Verun's edge, and drops of golden blood were sucked into the weapon. He had focused the vitality of his Void Vajra Constitution into four droplets and infused them with his Daos, creating an incredibly nourishing replacement for his weapon. His bloodlines and Constitutions were still considered E-grade, but they were at the very limit of the grade. The infusion left him woozy, but it was nothing some rest and a pile of Beast King meat couldn't fix.

Next, a coffin emanating temporal ripples appeared next to him, and Zac calmly turned to the person inside. Uona Noz'Valadir had acted high and mighty when alive, treating him and the other trial takers as playthings. Today,

she had been reduced to nothing but a material for Verun's growth. The blood still flowing through her body had always attracted the Tool Spirit, and it would get to eat its fill today.

Actually, Uona's fate wasn't unique among Eternal Clan members. The haughty vampires looked down on all other species, considering them as food for their Blood Path. However, it turned out that their blood was considered an extremely valuable resource, especially their so-called Heart Blood, which contained the essence of their path. It was useful in various ways, from alchemy and smithing to nourishing beasts.

It was the true reason many joined the Buddhist Sangha in their crusade against the Eternal Clan. Vampires with pure bloodlines and high talent, such as Uona, were extremely valuable, and that wasn't even considering the startling changes her corpse had seen over the years. A series of unlikely coincidences had created something unique, which was exactly how many treasures were born.

Uona had been marked by Chaos and struck by Heavenly Lightning, all while carrying a powerful source of high-quality blood. Zac was responsible for the first two and guessed the blood came from the Eternal Clan Monarch who Alvod Jondir killed. Today, half of Uona's body was completely withered, emitting an air of Death and even Oblivion.

The other half possessed a vibrancy that no undead being should have, making her look more alive than when she actually lived. Even her skin had gained a golden hue. Uona had essentially undergone a similar transformation as the Chaos Motes in his body, where Chaos had fused with her Eternal Clan heritage and then split into Life and Death.

Zac had already fed Verun a few drops of the life-attuned half, and it had elicited such a strong reaction he'd decided to seal the corpse inside a temporal coffin until today. Unfortunately, Alea had no interest in the other half, though it would likely see use in other ways. Its energy was simply too attuned to him not to take advantage.

Verun howled with glee, hunger overcoming pain as it greedily drank the refined blood, absorbing everything in no time. The quality of his and Uona's blood far surpassed the random bloodlines Verun had absorbed over the years, and the lesser essences were forced to give way to the newcomers. Zac had never felt more in tune with the weapon than now, and he could feel the excitement mirrored in Verun.

The runes atop the altar died down after another ten minutes when they failed to condense the bloodlines further. Zac moved [Verun's Bite] to the [Primordial Awakening Array], and the upgrade process began soon after. The differences to Alea's turbulent ascension quickly became apparent.

The piles of materials didn't get sucked into [Verun's Bite] at once. Instead, Zac fed the array one item after another, based on which item Verun desired the most. The bones entered first, followed by the other top-tier materials from the Allbright Empire and Perennial Vastness. With every material that entered the array, a new set of golden runes appeared on the axe.

The axe was completely covered when just twenty percent of the materials had been absorbed, but Zac sensed Verun wasn't satiated. So he kept pushing items into the array, looking on with interest as new layers of golden runes gradually formed a cocoon around the axe. Eventually, Zac felt fullness from his mental link just as he was about to take out some of his spare materials.

The upgrade array cracked as the shimmering ball released a powerful pulse, and Zac backed away while [Verun's Bite] rose into the air. He could tell that his part in the process was over. No ominous clouds were forming above his head, but Zac could still feel fate gathering around his weapon. Then, a flash of gold appeared out of nowhere, striking [Verun's Bite].

The golden bolt shared almost no similarities with the Tribulation Lightning of the Old Heavens, except that they were made of lightning. Zac couldn't sense any anger or aura of extermination. There was only indifference, like a god looking down at the world. The System wasn't out to harm, but it also wouldn't care if [Verun's Bite] failed its test.

This was the first time Zac saw a trial of the Heavenly Path since breaking through to E-grade. [Verun's Bite] differed from [Love's Bond] in that it was an Orthodox Spirit Tool in every sense of the word. The weapon was provided by the System, and they'd followed the conventional evolution path. The only difference between [Verun's Bite] and normal primal series axes was the shocking number of opportunities it had encountered thanks to being bound to Zac.

It wasn't even on the Boundless Path like Zac. His Daos were kept separate so he could walk the path of Pure Life, but Verun was the sum of the materials that had gone into its creation. It was a Life-Conflict dual-affinity Spirit Tool, similar to a Mixed-meaning Dao.

Tribulations within the Heavenly Path were generally considered easier, but that didn't mean the System would just hand out things for free. You needed to prove yourself worthy, just like how Zac had endured two Tribulations when entering E-grade. Similarly, the bolt contained incredible force, and a storm was kicked up inside the valley. Zac could sense complex fluctuations inside the lightning, which triggered both his Soul and Dao Heart.

The trial of Hegemony was essentially all three tribulations of the E-grade baked into one and cranked to eleven. Every aspect needed to be up to par, and the demands on Tool Spirits weren't any different. The weapon had to be nurtured with good enough materials to withstand the energies of a Cosmic Core. Its spirituality also had to be strong enough not to break when faced with the Daos of their wielders or enemies.

Finally, their Heart had to be strong enough if they wanted to follow their companion on their journey toward the peak. The former aspects mostly depended on treasures and opportunities, while the latter was nurtured through the bond between wielder and tool.

A defiant roar reverberated through the valley, drowning out all other sounds. The runes across the axe's surface burned with unfettered power, and one after another sank into the axe. Not a wisp of the golden lightning was released into the wild. Having passed the first bolt, it became perfected energy. The second bolt arrived without warning, its intensity more than double the previous one. Thousands of runes appeared around the axe upon collision and were dragged into [Verun's Bite].

Zac felt Verun's struggle, and his mind was full of defiant roars. He could feel the two bolts locked within the axe, turning its own body into a furnace. The pain didn't subside, but the energy eventually stabilized. Zac could sense fate gathering for one final salvo. This time, Verun emerged in person, standing guard over its corporeal form while roaring at the sky. Its mane almost appeared to be on fire as it danced in the wind, the fur releasing intense red- and golden lights.

The final bolt emerged from the void, and Zac smiled upon seeing Verun swallowing it whole before retreating into its axe. The process had felt calm and controlled from beginning to end. Compared to Alea's breakthrough, it had been. Still, the overbearing display at the end could only fool a bystander. Zac could feel just how much pain Verun was in as it struggled to refine the tribulation.

Ultimately, Verun more than possessed the qualifications to take the next step, whether you looked at quality, spirituality, or Dao Heart. The remaining golden runes across the axe didn't sink into the axe but released a stronger radiance. Soon, the light congealed into a huge pallasite made from steel and gold. Just like Alea, Verun had passed the tribulation and was now incorporating the new materials.

In contrast to Alea's breakthrough, Zac still felt his connection to Verun. The Tool Spirit was exhausted but in high spirits. Zac still retracted his presence, letting his companion focus on breaking through.

There was no need to wait for Verun to stabilize, so he moved the pallasite to his Cultivation Cave. Zac spent the next day cultivating, making sure no surprises popped up with either of his Tool Spirits. Thankfully, everything was in order, and both were steadily absorbing the ambient energies to fuel the fusion. Zac nodded and left his cave but didn't take the teleporter. Instead, he passed a series of barriers, emerging in the complex tunnel system of his mountain.

It only took a few minutes to reach the secluded valley hidden between the mountains. A confusing mix of Life and Death danced around him, partly due to his Cultivation Chamber right below. He'd once considered developing this region into a premium cultivation space, but the chaotic atmosphere had made that almost impossible.

Of course, a few mansions were hanging from the slopes of the four mountains around him, though they all faced outward. This region had been turned into yet another private domain of his, though it hadn't seen much use.

Zac walked through the valley until he reached the withered Tree of Ascension. It had long since lost all its leaves, and it was difficult to tell whether it was still alive.

"It might still make it. There's a stubborn seed of spirituality that refuses to let go."

Zac looked over, nodding at Vilari as she appeared from the mists.

"Perhaps. It's been through a lot—being poisoned, ripped apart to provide materials, and now this environment. It's really unlucky," Zac said with a shake of his head. "Are you ready?"

"I've memorized your notes and the missives," Vilari nodded. "There shouldn't be any issues."

"Good," Zac said and took out a small box. "I'll be relying on you then."

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1085 - Death's Duality - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1085 - Death's Duality

The box in Zac's hands held a golden array flag rippling with Temporal Energy. Just holding it exacerbated his disconnect with the River of Time, and he quickly backed away after placing it some distance away. A powerful suction soon dragged vast amounts of ambient energy toward the Array Flag, and a shimmering sphere five meters wide soon became visible.

It was a Temporal Chamber he'd just bought from the closest Limited Exchange, this one a two-year version costing 35,000 Merit. Since it hadn't been filled with energy like the one Zac got from Reyna, it would need to absorb the ambient energy for half a day before it could be used. Even then, one would have to bring a lot of crystals to ensure you didn't run out of energy and waste your time inside the temporal bubble.

"Are you staying?" Vilari asked after a few minutes had passed.

"I'll be back before it's finished charging," Zac said. "I won't be much company after you enter, but I'll be by your side."

"It will be a comfort just having you here," Vilari smiled.

It hadn't taken much deliberation before Zac picked Vilari to look after his Spirit Tools. He could trust her with his life, and her powerful soul would let her better sense the situation within the two cocoons. Furthermore, she was not yet ready to enter Hegemony, which was actually a good thing. Zac couldn't ask someone busy with their core formation to ensure the cocoons had enough energy. Breaking through was difficult enough without having to focus on side tasks.

Vilari could still benefit a lot from the Time Chamber, considering her focus on Soul Cultivation. Not even her extraordinary bloodline could let her keep the same pace as conventional cultivators. However, two extra years should translate into significant progress with her Soul Cultivation. That way, she'd be

able to quickly break through as soon as she found the next piece of the Anima Court Seal.

Zac left the valley, spending the next ten hours making preparations. Eventually, Zac returned to Vilari, using Vivi to carry the two cocoons. He gingerly put them down before taking out yet another box and handing it to Vilari.

"Here."

Vilari curiously opened its lid, and an eruption of immense Mental Energy poured out while the whole valley was lit up with emerald splendor. Vilari's eyes widened in surprise before she looked up at Zac.

"A Moss Crystal? I thought the moon refused to give up more of these?"

"I flew over and made an offer Mossy couldn't refuse," Zac grinned.

Actually, the trade went surprisingly well. Mossy had initially been angry by the 'betrayal' upon realizing Zac had fully absorbed his Moss Crystals without being impacted by the hidden soul sliver within. But Zac had pointed out there shouldn't have been a trap inside anyway. From there, it turned into a straightforward transaction of benefits.

"Be careful, though. I wouldn't be surprised if there's another seed of sentience hidden in this thing," Zac reminded. "And seeing how smart Mossy is getting, it might be trickier to deal with than what I encountered."

"We're lucky Emerald Eye remains in E-grade," Vilari commented. "Such a large soul might be able to reach Earth if it reached the limits of Hegemony."

Zac nodded in agreement. He knew he was making a deal with the devil by providing Mossy with treasures, but he needed the Moss Crystals if he wanted his soul to keep up with his other cultivation. There was also the matter of rebuilding his Thousand Lights Avatar, which required vast amounts of Mental Energy. He had actually gotten another one for himself during his quick trip to the moss-covered moon, though it seemed Mossy wouldn't be able to form any more in the short run.

The two talked a few more minutes before Vilari walked into the bubble, the two cocoons floating behind her. The dense haze of energy filling the Temporal Chamber turned their forms into a blur, and Zac's heart thumped as

he felt the Temporal Energies rise over the next minutes. Still, Zac tried to look encouraging rather than worried, remembering Vilari would look at the same expression for two years.

Eventually, a powerful pulse was followed by a rapid-fire series of events. The dense haze inside the Temporal Chamber instantly disappeared as Verun's Pallasite soared toward one side of the valley. The crystal was covered in cracks and releasing extremely powerful fluctuations, and all the Life-attuned energy in the valley was dragged toward it like a comet's tail.

Zac didn't even have time to blink before the obsidian crystal flew in the opposite direction. It was only a fraction of a second later, but Zac guessed that close to a year had passed between Verun and Alea finishing their fusions and being sent out by Vilari. The Mentalist also emerged, but Zac refocused on his Spirit Tools after confirming she was fine.

The Pallasite was the first to shatter, and an earth-shattering roar was followed by a pulse of utter ferocity. Zac felt it cover the whole valley range and continue surrounding the mountain range. His communication crystal was already vibrating, which was no surprise. There was no way this phenomenon couldn't be sensed from Azh'Rodum. Judging by the intensity, they might even feel it back in Port Atwood.

He ignored the messages, looking at the sky with a smile. The toll was not as large as his own, but it did stretch almost 40 kilometers in each direction. As far as Spirit Tools went, that should be considered passing with flying colors. In the heart of it all, Verun floated, its length more than two hundred meters.

The Tool Spirit had undergone yet another transformation inside the Pallasite. In the beginning, Verun had been brown, followed by black with red streaks after absorbing the dragon's blood. Later, it also gained golden patterns after increasing its affinity to Life. Today, Verun's fur was a light steely grey. The red-and-gold patterns remained and had grown even denser than before. Its mane, especially, was filled with thick golden bristles with roots of sanguine red.

Otherwise, it looked similar to before, a primordial hyena with an oversized maw. Each tooth was now the size of a building, yet sharp enough to make space groan in protest. One interesting addition was that Verun actually had a rune on its forehead, a complex pattern of steel and gold. It resembled some of the evolutionary blueprints he'd created while searching for answers, but it

held more meaning than that. Zac couldn't be certain, but it seemed to generate some sort of domain.

A second apparition followed on the heels of Verun's appearance, this one even more familiar. It was Alea, looking almost exactly like she did when resisting her tribulation. Her aura was significantly more condensed, though, even with her size almost a match to Verun's.

A second toll spread far and wide, but it didn't clash with the other one. They superimposed as they covered almost the same area, and the storms inside the valley calmed down rather than grew agitated. Zac savored the atmosphere, his smile growing wider as he saw his two companions showing off. The two Tool Spirits looked back at him, and he could feel their spiritual links grow stronger.

It felt like pure water finally returning to dried-out riverbeds, and he was whole once more.

The apparitions only stayed for a while longer before they shrunk into two lights, one gold and one black. The lights shot toward him, and Zac soon held a necklace in one hand and an axe in the other. Zac could tell both Verun and Alea were in good form, and he turned his head down at the axe.

[Verun's Bite] hadn't changed as much as the apparition. It still had a wooden handle, though its weathered brown color had shifted toward a golden-red hue. The axehead was still made from bone, and the teeth for counterbalance remained. As expected, the golden patterns had grown more exquisite, and Zac felt like he was looking at small divine rivers running toward the gleaming edge.

Surprisingly, the five sanguine runes on the handle were all gone, replaced by two golden runes, one of which was the original one that let Verun fight by his side. Going from five to two runes gave Zac pause, and he briefly wondered if his pre-evolution adjustments had damaged its core. However, he understood he was worrying for nothing after wordlessly communicating with Verun.

The old abilities, if you could call them that, had simply been integrated to become standard features of the Spirit Tool. Instead, the weapon had gained a true skill, something closer to the earth-shattering abilities [Love's Bond] had possessed since he first got it.

This, unfortunately, wasn't the time or place to try it out. Zac turned to the necklace, a sense of premonition filling him upon seeing that the miniature coffin was replaced by a round pendant. Its motif was a mix of Alea and her flowing hair and an axe. He gingerly put it on, ignoring the cold Death radiating from its black metal. Zac was about to try to question Alea about her choices, but he sighed and shook his head when he felt her consciousness brush against his.

'I'm glad you're okay.'

'I didn't expect the Heavens to get quite that angry, but it worked out nicely," Alea giggled. 'Come on, activate me.'

Zac wryly smiled and infused some energy into the pendant, which turned into a wave of darkness that ran down his right arm. Zac's mind was filled with the roar of thousands of chains rattling, like a convoy of bound dead ambling forward in the underworld. The impression only lasted a moment before Zac felt solid metal and a comfortable weight in his hand.

[Black Death] had retained most of its appearance, just like [Verun's Bite], except for a few small details. It had been utterly black before but was now a charcoal grey with pitch-black markings to mirror verun's gold. A singular rune was also at the top of the handle, clearly a skill like those on [Verun's Bite].

'Can't call me [Black Death] anymore. How about [Alea's Kiss]?' Alea suggested.

'No way,' Zac rejected without hesitation.

'No, I guess that's no good. It would make me seem like a frivolous woman if I went around kissing everything that came your way. [Death's Duality]?'

'Fine,' Zac absentmindedly agreed, but his attention was mostly on the other changes to [Love's Bond].

Upon seeing the necklace's new appearance, he'd already suspected Alea would surprise him. And as it indicated, the Coffin form of [Love's Bond] was gone entirely. Like that, both of the Spirit Tool's original configurations were gone.

Replacing the coffin was a plate armor made from the same material as the axe. The same pitch-black markings holding the Death and even a hint of

Oblivion formed a mysterious pattern moving toward runes of distilled truth. The only part that was different was a black engraving of Alea that covered his heart. It looked just like her, but it was clearly not just decorative. Zac could tell it was a skill like the rune on the handle.

The armor only covered part of his body. A sturdy breastplate protected his heart and lungs, and the armor continued down his right arm. Zac's midsection, left shoulder, and neck were left fully exposed, but not even a blade of grass could get through the covered sections. Thankfully, Zac didn't even notice the armor, and he felt no resistance or restriction when twisting his torso or swinging his arm around. The plates were perfectly adapted to his physique, and there had to be some magic at play since Zac couldn't even hear a creak when moving around.

The coffin was gone, but Alea had saved the chains. They now emerged from six vortices on his backplate, three running down his shoulders along his spine. A seventh chain emerged just below his elbow, forming an additional layer of protection for his right arm before attaching to the bottom of [Death's Duality].

Zac held one of the chains, a small frown marring his face. The new form was powerful and full of potential, yet it left Zac with a sour feeling. Carrying the coffin on his back had been a reminder and a promise. And with the coffin gone, it felt like he'd broken the oath he'd sworn at this exact location years ago.

'I never liked having you carry around that coffin,' Alea muttered as the chains wound around him in an embrace. 'It made you sad, and it served no purpose anyway. My old body was gone by the time I became [Love's Bond], so it became nothing but a container of guilt. I like this form much better. This way, no one will be closer to your heart than me.'

'Why didn't you tell me?' Zac sighed. 'I could—'

"You could have what?" Alea snorted as her projection emerged from the engraving on his breastplate.

"Talked me out of it? Tried to prepare a body in secret when I don't want one? No, you're too stubborn, so I took matters into my own hands. If you want to help me, help me finish my transition. That way, I won't have to suffer such painful tribulations while following you."

"...Fine," Zac sighed. "But if you ever change your mind, just tell me."

"I know, and I love you for that," Alea winked before turning to Vilari. "Thank you for your help in there. Those Spiritual Fluctuations were actually very useful for us."

"You're welcome," Vilari smiled.

"You know, you're not bad," Alea thoughtfully said. "Good looks, good talent, good temperament. You'd make a virtuous wife. How about snatching this guy up before it's too late?"

Vilari's eyes widened in shock, her trademark calm cracking. "I—"

"She's just messing around," Zac sighed.

"Am I?" Alea said with a raised brow. "Catheya's not bad, but she's all caught up in the politics. How can she manage your house like that?"

"I don't need you to act matchmaker," Zac said with a roll of his eyes. "Believe it or not, I'm doing quite well on my own. Since you have so much energy, explain your new form. Are you able to stay like this longer now?"

"I guess, but there's not much point," Alea hummed as she floated around. "It's still a drain on my spirit, and I don't have any combat ability like Verun. Besides, this is not really my true form any longer. It's like if you turned into a cloud of dust. It might work, but it's not natural. As for my new form, isn't it self-explanatory? You could barely consider me a War Regalia right now, even if I'm still missing most of the features. But try it out—infuse some energy into me."

Zac followed Alea's instructions, and the black patterns immediately released a dark gas that trickled down over his body like a slow-moving waterfall. The smoke was decently corrosive, but more importantly, it seemed to have a defensive effect. He curiously picked up a nearby stone with telekinesis and hurled it toward himself.

With the stone's speed, it would punch right through a Middle E-grade cultivator, yet Zac didn't feel a thing when it met the dark shroud. The mist temporarily hardened at the collision spot, turning into an impassable wall. The stone shattered, and the mist returned to its original form, only slightly weakened.

Zac whistled as he looked down at the shroud. The feature was surprisingly durable, and it barely cost him any Miasma. Its shifting nature even acted as a form of distraction. Veteran warriors could use the slightest movement or shift in weight to predict their opponent's next move. The haze around his right arm, in particular, would make those predictions much harder.

The feature wasn't without its problems, though. The shroud was densest over his armored parts and the sections right below. However, his legs were only partially covered, while his head and left arm remained fully exposed. Compared to the [Ossuary Bulkwork], the barrier wasn't as comprehensive or reliable.

"Each upgrade should cover a bit more and hopefully add new features. By the time I reach Late D-grade, I'll be wrapped all around you," Alea said with a mischievous grin.

"And at peak?" Zac curiously asked.

"I'm not sure," Alea said. "I guess we'll find out together. Well, that's it for me."

"Your soul's wounded?" Zac frowned. "Do you need to enter seclusion?"

"Stopping that bolt did a number on me," Alea wryly smiled. "But no, I'm mostly fine. Though I wouldn't say no if you fed me some tasty spiritual materials."

"Actually, I have something right now," Zac said, taking out a small vial.

It was the [Wreathstar Nectar] Iz gave him. He had initially planned on using the remaining drops after entering Hegemony, but he'd realized he didn't need them. Zac didn't know if it was his month of unconsciousness, the effect of the Perennial Vastness, or something related to his Technocrat Origin. Either way, he felt his body and foundations as stable as bedrock upon waking up. It was even part of the reason he could make such rapid progress on his pathways.

Zac released one drop on [Black Death] and another on [Verun's Bite]. The mysterious liquid entered the weapons without issue, and even Zac could feel the mysterious energies wash over Alea and Verun. Alea returned to her necklace form, but when Zac tried to stow [Verun's Bite], it actually resisted. Instead, it turned into a simple bone ring on his right thumb.

"You wanted to hang around like Alea?" Zac asked and laughed upon hearing an affirmative roar in his mind. "That's fine."

Zac then turned to Vilari. "Thank you for your help. How did things go on your end?"

"I'm the one who should thank you," Vilari smiled, having already overcome the embarrassment from before. "I saved decades of work on my soul, and two years of seclusion gave me the time to explore some ideas I've had for skills and my blueprint. I'll be ready to evolve as soon as I get the next piece."

"Good," Zac said. "I'll talk to you later."

Zac returned to his Cultivation Cave after sending Alea to Kavista. The environment there was much better for stabilizing her foundation, and he wanted to bring her to the Abyssal Pond. Who knew? It might provide her with an opportunity as well. Having dealt with all short-term matters, Zac shut out the outside world.

The next time he emerged from seclusion, it would finally be time to stare into the Abyss.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1086 - Origins - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1086 - Origins

A gentle chime indicated it was about time, and Zac slowly opened his eyes. The medicinal haze around him was incredibly dense, having found nothing to fix since yesterday and left accumulating inside the sacred tree.

He was ready.

The work on his Pathways finished two days ago. The general circuit was fully upgraded already, both as Human and Draugr. Most cultivators wouldn't believe their ears upon hearing a Mortal finishing everything in under a week. Then again, Zac wasn't a Mortal in the conventional sense.

The only parts that didn't quite match his Classes were a few small sections surrounding some of his skills and empty skill slots. He hadn't figured out all the details yet on how he wanted to move forward with his skills, so he had left those snippets in an open-ended state to easier adapt later on. Those small sections wouldn't affect his fighting ability, at least not while the skills remained E-grade.

Zac had accrued dozens of skills between his classes, and not all were as straightforward to deal with as [Deathmark]. First, there were his ancillary skills, such as [Cosmic Gaze] and [Spiritual Anchor]. Both were useful, but neither was tuned to his path. After matching his pathways to his classes, they barely worked anymore. He had similar issues with some of his active skills, such as [Innate Ward], [Undying Mark], and [Abyssal Phase].

Then, there were the ones he no longer used. For example, there were [Conformation of Supremacy] and [Gorehew]. Over the years, he'd picked up many of these skills to shore up his weaknesses, but it was high time he did something about it.

Having outdated and unsuitable skills wasn't a huge problem in the lower grades since the energy levels or Daos involved weren't enough to cause a disturbance. But the problem would become increasingly noticeable as time passed.

A chain was only as strong as its weakest link, and these unsuitable Skill Fractals were currently weaknesses in his pathways. They were like cholesterol clogging up his spiritual arteries, lowering his already unimpressive energy transmission. It slowed down activation times and weakened persistent skills such as [Primal Edict] since the fractal didn't get as much energy as it should.

The Skill Fractals even created disharmony within your body, like a few instruments playing out of tune in an orchestra. For cultivators, it was like having a fly buzzing in their ears while trying to meditate on their Daos. That wasn't really a problem for Zac, who didn't meditate, but that didn't mean he could ignore the skills.

The whole point of a Class was that it attuned your body to your path—the System handing out Skills was just an added bonus. The real magic was the pathways themselves and how they transformed normal energy into something uniquely suited to activating your skills. Before the System, cultivators had to manually refine their energy before launching spells, which was obviously way harder.

Unrelated skills were based on concepts that had nothing to do with your path, yet they were connected to your pathways. In other words, they distorted the signal, which became increasingly noticeable as you progressed through the grades. The added detail to fractals at each grade was a consequence of

higher-grade skills requiring more specific energy, and having an Arcane Class magnified that.

That was why cultivators generally avoided filling their skill slots with random abilities even after reaching a bottleneck—some even closed their empty skill slots permanently to improve their energy flow. Zac had always followed this way of doing things, though he only found out why later.

Right now, the downside wasn't too bad. The power he'd gained from entering Hegemony more than made up for the reduced efficiency, and the disharmony they created wasn't to the point they'd make skills randomly fail. Still, it was a problem that needed to be solved, and the sooner, the better. Some skills would be upgraded and altered to suit his path, while others would be replaced or discarded entirely.

Luckily, not all his skills were this troublesome to deal with. For example, he still didn't know how to evolve [Pillar of Desolation], but the skill was perfectly attuned to him. The only downside of letting it stay in E-grade was that his ultimate skill wouldn't be strong enough to deal with troublesome enemies. With other skills, he had already come up with a solution, and he'd taken the opportunity to upgrade a few more while waiting for the Abyssal Pond to be readied.

[D] Evolutionary Edge - Proficiency: Early. The struggle of the wild hones the sharpest edge. Upgradeable.

[D] Indomitable - Proficiency: Early. The will of the underworld is intractable, undeterred by the screams of the bound. Upgradeable.

The Soul Defense skill on his Undead side barely required any adjustment. He'd simply made some alterations that would let him bolster its effect with both Daos of his Inexorable Path. Before, it only gained durability from his Branch of the Pale Seal. Now, it would also push back with the help of the Branch of the War Axe, which would strengthen the defenses further while having the chance of eliciting a backlash on spiritual attacks.

[Nature's Edge] had seen a larger overhaul, even more so than [Deathmark]. Over the past years, Zac had thought long and hard about what role his old staple skill should have. [Chop] had added lethality, reach, and durability during a time when his equipment was low-quality, and he dealt with enemies a few at a time. Today, he barely used [Nature's Edge] to empower his weapon, mostly because of the huge strides he'd made with his technique.

There was no point in forming a fractal blade when infighting any longer. If anything, a meter-long blade placed in front of your weapon made infighting more cumbersome. Not only that, but [Verun's Bite] was already so sharp and durable it was better to let the axe itself strike the enemies than to use an intangible blade. That was doubly true now that Verun had become a D-grade Spirit Tool.

Meanwhile, releasing fractal blades at ranged targets was only somewhat effective. It was easier for Zac to just flash into melee range and unleash [Nature's Edge]'s area blast instead. As a result, his staple skill had been reduced to an omnidirectional burst attack he used to deal with weaker targets, while occasionally becoming the activation vehicle for [Rapturous Divide].

Zac had cross-referenced his old skills, multiple skill crystals, and books on patterns to find a solution. He wanted the skill to regain its usefulness as a repeatable attack he could use to empower his combat style. Hopefully, the alterations had let him accomplish just that.

There were a few more skills that Zac was ready to fix right away, but there was no way he'd split his attention when entering the Abyssal Pond. He even let his human side enter a Void State as his Draugr half exited the Cultivation Chamber. A graceful woman already waited outside, and Zac was surprised to see she was a Late-stage Hegemon.

"Young master, I'm Selesa Kavriel. I'm here to lead you to the Abyssal Pond," Selesa said with a graceful curtsy. "If you please."

"Thank you," Zac said, and the two made their way to the closest teleporter.

Zac had expected the Abyssal Pond to be nearby, but Selesa led him through a relay of almost a dozen arrays before they reached their destination. Judging by the closed-off chambers and the mounting pressure, Zac guessed they were moving underground. Far underground, toward the source of the immense energies that fueled Kavista and the Kavriel Clan's ancestral home. Even he found it slightly difficult to bear the pressure, and he realized why they hadn't sent someone from the younger generation to guide him this time.

The depth of C-grade continents was innumerable times greater than planets, but that didn't necessarily mean they held sprawling underworlds like the one on Earth. Certainly, there were undoubtedly subterranean biotopes the size of whole worlds and cave systems you could spend decades traversing.

However, the deeper regions of continents were rarely visited because of how dangerous it was in the depths.

For one, the pressure would mount until even Monarchs found it difficult to endure. But long before that, there were incredibly dangerous energy pulses that could rip cultivators to shreds. These currents moved too fast to dodge, and they contained such vast amounts of energy that it was impossible to set up man-made protections. They were the source of the rich environment above, but also what kept cultivators from searching the rich depths.

Certainly, there would always be people willing to take the risk when there were benefits involved. There was a type of daring explorer who made a living striking at the deeper regions, hoping to find pockets where the pulses never passed for one reason or another. Those spots had a chance of hidden Holy Lands and could hold Natural Treasures that had been growing in secret for millennia.

Zac once asked why people simply didn't dig into the continents from below since that's where the treasures hid, only to find out it was impossible. True continents weren't like the world disks of the Twilight Ocean, where you could see both the surface and underside. In reality, C-grade continents and above didn't actually have an underbelly, which was something Zac still had a hard time wrapping his head around.

"This way, my lord," Selesa said when they'd finished their jumps.

The previous rooms had been without exits, but this one held a singular door guarded by two peak Hegemons. They slightly bowed at Zac and opened the door as he approached. Behind was a short corridor leading into a surprisingly luxurious lounge area. Zac felt like he'd arrived at a five-star spa, a feeling that was only reinforced as he walked up to a large window close by. There was a shimmering lake just below, along with an actual beach.

Had the Kavriel Clan built a resort in the depths of the continent?

"Is this it?" Zac hesitated, looking at the shimmering waters with suspicion.

The lake was clearly special, but it resembled a watered-down version of Be'Zi's cultivation ground more than the Abyssal Lake of his vision. The waters were a radiant Aquamarine rather than the oppressive black that swallowed all light. Besides, the lake was immense, to the point Zac couldn't see its end. There was simply no way this was the Abyssal Pond.

"No," Selesa smiled. "This is the Deepmist Lake, a private cultivation ground of the Kavriel Clan. The Abyssal Pond is further down, but I do not have the qualifications to go there. I've been told Mistress An'Azol will lead the rest of the way."

"Even further down?" Zac muttered. "Aren't you worried the pond will get dragged into a—"

Zac's words got caught in his throat, his eyes widening with realization. Energy pulses, beasts, and unbearable pressure were not the only dangers of delving into the depths of the continents. The further you went, the greater the pressure, until not even space could endure. After reaching a certain point, the underground would make the spatial turbulence inside the Research Base seem mild.

Most of the fractures were just that—spatial rifts that were only good for ripping you apart. However, a few led to Mystic Realms attracted by the immense gravitational forces of the C-grade Continent. Those pathways were highly sought-after resources that factions like the Kavriel Clan could spend a fortune stabilizing and moving to a safer location.

Supposedly, a few tears could even lead to the mysterious lower planes, though those were supposed to be incredibly rare and very unstable.

Was that how Tavza and Laz Tem'Zul had connected this remote corner of the Multiverse with the Abyssal Lake? If so, what exactly was the Abyssal Lake? Could the Abyss be a lower plane in the depths of reality, while the shores were simply a gateway to the prime realities? Almost like how a crack had led the Ra'Lashar Goblins to the 'Lost Plane,' which was actually the inner dimension of an Eternal Heritage?

Selesa didn't answer his question, but her smile indicated he was on the right track. The attendant led him to the shores, where they waited silently for a few minutes until the waters rippled.

"You're here," Tavza said as she emerged from the waters. "Your energy is flowing naturally. Are you ready?"

"As ready as I can be," Zac nodded.

"Follow me, then."

Tavza turned back into the waters, and Zac followed. The Deepmist Lake was cool to the touch and filled with immense accumulations of Death. Zac wasn't even sure it was made from water. It seemed more like the liquified energy of the Twilight Ocean, though this one wasn't sullied by Life.

Zac had no trouble piercing through the waters with his power of flight, but his speed was clearly not up to Tavza's standard. She waved her hand, and Zac was pulled over before a pitch-black creature surrounded them. Zac couldn't exactly tell what it looked like from within, but it seemed to be either an eel or an aquatic dragon. Either case, it was incredibly fast, transporting them dozens of times faster than Zac's peak swimming speed.

"Most who live by the Abyssal Lake have similar abilities," Tavza explained when Zac looked at her curiously. "It wouldn't be inaccurate to call us an aquatic race, and high affinity to Ice and Water is quite common among our kin."

"I guess," Zac said as he looked around. "I didn't expect the pond to be down here. Can you explain what's going on?"

"I overheard your exchange," Tavza said. "It's as you believe. The Abyssal Lake is more than a special region. It's most likely a unique plane."

"Most likely?" Zac said, looking at Tavza with confusion. "You don't know?"

"Reality sometimes resists the clear-cut definitions we create to rationalize our understanding of the cosmos," Tavza said. "The Abyssal Lake shares some characteristics with the lower planes but also differs in a few critical aspects."

"For example, we can temporarily connect with the Abyssal Lake by seizing and retuning a spatial bridge. This indicates the true lake is located somewhere down there. However, neither Draugr nor anyone else has ever found it when scouring the planes. The only way to get there is the Abyssal Lakes, or these pathways opened by using a beacon connected to the lake."

"The Abyssal Lake seems to lack any connection to the Earthly Peak, and neither does our race show any particular talent for this Dao. It's also impossible to form contracts of summoning or exchange with the creatures living in the lake, like how summoners and warlocks connect with other planes. So your guess is as good as mine."

Zac thoughtfully nodded as he looked at the increasingly dark depths of the lake. He should have expected the lake wasn't as simple as a physical object. But to think it was hidden so well that not even the Supremacies had figured out where it was.

"You're happy?" Tavza suddenly said with a raised brow.

"Ah?" Zac said, only then realizing he had a smile on his face. "Well, it's kind of interesting, isn't it? The Multiverse is so old, and there are beings who have been around for billions of years. You'd expect every nook and cranny to have been explored by now, yet the cosmos is still filled with mysteries we can't make heads or tails of. Who knows how many more places like the Abyssal Lake there are?"

"It's true," Tavza said. "Most of our reality remains uncharted, and word of new discoveries in the Eternal Storm reach our ears every year. There are even things within integrated space that have baffled people for eons. Take the Omnilord's Trial, for example."

"The what?"

"Throughout recorded history, since before the System even, there have been sightings of an ancient castle appearing out of nowhere. Sometimes it's in the middle of the Multiverse Heartlands. Sometimes it's in the depths of the Eternal Storm. There are even records of it appearing in the Lower Planes.

"It appears for exactly 37 days before disappearing. During that time, its gates are open for anyone below the C-grade. However, not even Supremacies can force their way inside. Once, a Throne tried and was rebuffed."

"So it's an Eternal Heritage," Zac surmised.

"No," Tavza said with a shake of her head. "It's Dao is odd, but it should be something of this Era. The problem is, no one knows who this Omnilord is. We only know what the plaque outside tells us. The Omnilord has left 'The Key to the Future' for his fated inheritor, and it's waiting in the heart of the castle."

"What's the key to the future?"

"Who knows?" Tavza shrugged. "And that's my point; there is usually a reason why mysteries remain a mystery to this day. Out of the billions of geniuses who have entered the Omnilord's trial, not one was ever seen again."

"What a party pooper," Zac muttered, but his spirits soon lifted as he saw a barrier ahead.

Tavza's creature flew through the barrier, and Zac felt a powerful spatial ripple pass through his body before his senses were overwhelmed. Death, darkness, stillness. Home.

"We're here," Tavza said as they stepped out of a spatial portal, her words entirely superfluous.

Zac could feel it with every fiber of his being, and his eyes instinctively honed in on the source of the feeling; the gateway to the Abyss.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1087 - Abyssal Pond - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1087 - Abyssal Pond

The call of the Abyss overwhelmed all thoughts and impressions for a moment, and Zac's eyes were glued to the distant black spot in the ground. It took him a couple of seconds to recover, at which point he finally took in the rest of the scene.

The subterranean cave the portal at the bottom of the Deepmist Lake led them to was just under a mile across, yet the pond in the distance was no more than a few dozen meters wide. The rest was occupied by a massive array surrounding the abyssal waters. The pond resembled a small pupil in a gargantuan eye, and looking into it filled Zac with a sense of belonging.

The pitch-black water was absolutely still, making it look more like an opaque pane of glass than liquid. However, the fluctuations of Death it released rose and fell, resembling waves reaching land. The pond was hundreds of meters away and contained by barriers to not lose its efficacy, yet Zac's body was screaming at him to enter. If the energy leak filled him with such desire, what about the real thing?

The Abyssal Energy's attraction to his bloodline was almost unbearable, but it was not the only thing that drew Zac in. The truths themselves were incredibly fascinating. He'd always sensed the Abyssal Energy in his bloodline visions, but only seeing the Abyssal Pond in person let him understand its Dao better. Zac was certain the aura of the Abyss was an expression of Pure Death, yet it was quite different from his own.

It felt endless, like Death had become the heavens and absorbed all other Dao. With every fluctuation, Zac felt like he'd sensed a new Dao hidden beneath the surface, only to find it yet another expression of Death. His own Dao suddenly felt small and fragile, like something that could only grow in a sterile environment. Zac shook his head and stabilized his heart. There was no point in comparing himself and his Dao Branches to a mysterious region that not even Supremacies could unravel.

He turned to the surrounding array, but a brief inspection left him with vertigo rather than answers. The array's complexity was far beyond what he could possibly hope to decipher with his innate comprehension or [Primal Polyglot]. It must have been erected by the Draugr Monarchs and was possibly the first C-grade Array he'd ever seen in person.

The array formed a star-shaped pattern around the pond, and 108 densely engraved stone pillars were placed inside. Curiously, the pillars were hollow, and Zac saw they contained streams of Aquamarine water. Judging by the energy fluctuations, the lake above was continuously feeding the array vast amounts of water and energy.

No wonder the lake hadn't seemed very impressive for its location or status as a hidden resource. Zac almost felt a bit bad for the Kavriel Clan. Tavza had essentially turned one of their major cultivation grounds into a battery for the Abyssal Pond. Judging by the energy involved, it would likely be a long time before this place fully recovered. At least they'd get to enjoy some of the benefits.

Outside the array, there were already a few hundred people waiting. All of them were Draugr, with most of them being of the young generation by the looks of it. There were even two Peak E-grade cultivators who could only stay in this environment through the protection of their elders.

"So many?" Zac commented. "Going to get cramped in that little pond."

"Only five will actually enter," Tavza explained as she led him over. "The rest will only meditate in the array eyes. It's not a replacement for the real thing, but it's still a valuable opportunity for someone on the frontier. These are all talented seeds from across the continent. For some, this might be the first step in a series of encounters that will remold their fate."

Zac nodded. Getting the ball rolling was often the most difficult step when you wanted to rise beyond the norm. You needed a catalyst that gave you the

strength to keep pushing, just like Zac's early windfall of Titles had let him eventually steamroll the incursions.

At the front of the group stood five Draugr Monarchs, three of which seemed to be members of the Kavriel Clan. The other two were, unsurprisingly, Enis and Laz.

"What do young master think of our youngsters?" one of the Kavriel Monarchs said with a smile, giving Zac the impression of a kindly grandpa.

Of course, he was anything but. The old man was Tassar Kavriel, a High Monarch and one of Zecia's true overlords.

"It's not without reason the Kavriel Clan has stood strong in Zecia for so long. You have so many talents," Zac said politely.

Zac was just playing nice, but his compliment was by no means an exaggeration. Every single cultivator around him had incredibly solid auras, and they'd easily become one of the central figures if placed in the Atwood Army.

Just as Zac looked at them, so did the elites of the Kavriel Province look back at him curiously. Some were curious, while others looked at him with gratitude. His presence was an important reason this place had been set up. Of course, a few looked at him with jealousy and challenge in their eyes. Clearly, they felt they deserved better treatment based on their talents and contributions but were forced to sit by the sidelines while some stranger hogged the whole thing for himself.

Still, no one spoke up—who'd dare cause a scene with Tavza and the Monarchs present?

"They're decent enough," Tassar smiled. "Of course, they can't compare to Lord Umbri'Zi. This old man was shocked upon learning of some of your deeds. You're a true paragon of your generation. I hope you can look after these children in the future."

"Uh, sure," Zac slowly nodded before turning to Laz Tem'Zul.

"What do you think?" Laz said. "You can feel it, no?"

"It's amazing," Zac nodded. "My cells are screaming for me to jump into the pond."

"I can imagine," Laz smiled. "Your bloodline is right at the threshold of awakening after consuming the [Essence of the Abyss]. Don't worry, everything is in order, and the connection will fully stabilize in two hours."

"So, what am I supposed to do?" Zac said, looking at Tavza with a raised brow. "The [Abyssal Revolutions] method you gave me only lets me control my Bloodline Nodes. It doesn't do anything for awakenings or bloodline refinement."

Zac had gotten the general Bloodline Method even before entering the Perennial Vastness, but its limited use meant he never bothered to practice it. [Bloodline Resonance] had already let him connect with his Draugr Nodes just fine, and his Heart Cultivation had improved his control even further. Besides, he was extra skeptical about practicing any technique provided by Tavza after his experience with [Essence of the Abyss].

"You don't need any method at this stage," Tavza said. "You are coming home, just connect with your origin and accept as much of the Abyss as possible. After you've awakened, we can provide the method to solidify your bloodline and push it toward the next awakening."

"As much as possible? Can an awakening be good or bad?"

"The first step is the awakening, but it's just the beginning. Those with great talent and fate can skip some steps."

"Generally, our bloodlines can be awakened up to five times," Laz clarified. "We call the stages Return, Strand, Shallows, Midnight, and Depths. Each stage has the conventional Early to Peak stages. Most will awaken to Early Return, but skipping one or two of the minor thresholds is possible. It's very rare, though."

"I see," Zac nodded. "What do you mean by 'generally five awakenings'? Are there more?"

"There is a sixth and final stage called True Abyss," Tavza said. "It's only been reached by our Abyssal Princes on a few occasions. Four times, to be exact, where each one was a member of the upper bloodlines. Those awakenings ushered in an age of prosperity for our kin."

"Is the current—"

"No," Tavza said with a shake of her head. "The last True Abyssal Prince emerged sixteen generations ago."

Zac nodded in understanding. Six stages, where one was considered a longshot even for Supremacies, might seem worse than the nine layers of the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation]. However, more levels didn't necessarily translate into higher potential. Zac had seen some extremely unimpressive methods with over fifty layers, where the nigh-impossible final layer barely provided the benefits of a minor breakthrough of a good method.

"Unfortunately, many of our bloodlines are incomplete or impure. Reaching the upper layers was already difficult in the olden days, and it's only gotten harder," Laz sighed. "Most elites sent to the Abyssal Shores find themselves stuck in the Return Stage. Undergoing a second awakening will give you a decent chance at permanent residence. Entering the Shallows in one's lifetime will make you a core member of our race."

Zac asked a few more practical questions, but it was quite straightforward. It seemed like he only needed to submerge himself and dive until the pressure and energy became too much. Spatial fluctuations meant the opportunity was over, and he needed to get out unless he wanted to get dragged into the lower plane. It turned out the pond itself was separated from the real lake, and he should under no circumstance enter the real thing. The depths of this pond didn't lead to the shore but rather some random uncharted spot of the Abyss.

"I think I got it," Zac said. "Jump inside, harmonize, and swallow as much energy as possible. Sounds easy enough."

"Be careful not to overdo it," Laz said, urging caution for the third time over the past few minutes. "If you take on too much, you will no longer harmonize with the Abyssal Lake. You will become the lake. Every day, the Abyssal Lake claims some of its sons and daughters this way. Never forget your sense of self. You are of the Abyss, but you are not the Abyss."

The next two hours felt like an eternity, and the call of the Abyssal Pond only grew more alluring over time. Even then, Zac could tell with certainty when the connection was complete. He shot to his feet, his eyes already on the array's center. The pond looked the same, but it suddenly felt bottomless, far eclipsing the Twilight Chasm or the feeling he got when peering into a Draugr's eyes.

"Go ahead," Laz smiled when Zac looked over for confirmation. "Remember, the Abyss is endless, but we are not. You need to be alive to enjoy the benefits it provides."

Zac nodded in thanks before setting out. He followed the pre-arranged path through the complex array, studiously avoiding the immense energies that raged on both sides of the path. Even he would find it difficult to survive inside the sea of Miasma that kept the pond stable.

It only took a few breaths to pass the barriers and reach the pond, at which point the beckoning call was almost unbearable. The ichor in his veins felt like fire as it coursed through his body while his cells greedily swallowed the mysterious energy wafting from the still waters. It effortlessly melded with his cells, like it had always been part of him.

It took all of Zac's self-control not to jump straight in then and there. Instead, he first dipped his finger, confirming nothing was wrong. In fact, it felt wonderful. His presence naturally spread through the waters, and the Abyss welcomed his arrival. He felt boundless power waiting below, like a corner of the Heavens hid from the universe that could only be unearthed by the children of Draug.

Zac took a shuddering breath as he removed his necklace, carefully submerging a corner into the waters.

'It's fine. Great, even,' a content hum echoed in his mind. 'And I can fly away if it becomes too much, so don't worry about me.'

Zac smiled and transformed the Spirit Tool into its armor form. Normal treasures would easily get corroded by the Abyssal Lake, so he'd already replaced his Spatial Ring with one made from proper materials. However, he couldn't do the same with [Love's Bond], and there was no way she'd survive the environment in the depths.

Luckily, it looked like the surface was fine, and Zac laughed when he saw Alea's six chains emerge from the breastplate and dip into the waters. The scene made him picture Alea dipping her feet in a hot spring, enjoying the warmth. Seeing everything was fine, Zac finally gave in to his craving.

He flew to the center of the pool and submerged himself, his descent only creating the smallest ripple. Soon, the Aquamarine light of the ambient Miasma was gone, replaced by utter darkness. Yet it wasn't the hostile gloom

of Tavza's domain nor the restrictive darkness Eoz had broken through in his visions. It was warm, welcoming. It was home. Zac almost groaned in pleasure as he felt the Abyss spread through his body, but a discordant change ruined the experience.

The annoyance only lasted a moment before Zac resumed his descent. The wave of weakness that suddenly spread through his body wasn't a trap, but rather him losing his connection with his other body. He'd already suspected that might happen after learning how mysterious the Abyssal Lake really was. Zac even felt it might be for the best. This way, there would be no outside distractions. Besides, if his connection couldn't be maintained, then it was highly unlikely the Monarchs outside would be able to spy on his actions.

Deeper and deeper he went, into the heart of darkness. Boundless warmth poured into his body, gently burrowing into his cells to bestow the gift of the dark waters. And something from the depths of his being stirred, rising to meet the call of the Abyss. Tavza had told him to harmonize with the lake, but was there even any need? There was no sense of separation, only communion, as it became unclear where his body ended and the Abyss began.

Zac let his consciousness spread into the darkness like a root network moving through the soil in search of sustenance. The further he expanded, the greater the amount of Abyssal Energy poured into his body, and the faster he would move toward a higher state of existence. Of course, Zac remembered Laz's warning and never let that final wall of separation between the self and the Abyss get infringed upon.

However, his strong Dao Heart and experience with the [Void Vajra Sublimation] quickly proved to be a huge asset. He was like a small island in an endless sea. The crashing waves of the Abyss tried to drag him under, but he resisted the pull as his claim on the surroundings expanded. He'd only been inside the waters for a few moments, but Zac could already sense an intangible shackle within his body.

The moment it shattered, the true power of his Draugr heritage would be his.

It quickly became clear that some parts of the Abyss felt more intimate than others. Perhaps Eoz had been born from one aspect of the Abyss, while the other branches had their own regions. Or perhaps it was simply that some regions of the Abyssal Lake were a better match to his Branch of the Pale Seal and his Inexorable Path, just like the maze in the Gates of Reincarnation.

Either case, Zac followed the sense of belonging as he swam toward the energy-rich depths. The pressure was enough to crush an E-grade cultivator, but it was nothing to him. Even if his Eoz Bloodline had yet to fully awaken, it provided a natural resistance to the detriments of the Abyssal Lake. He could tell that his Human body would already have been forced to turn back, but he hadn't even begun to utilize his Hidden Nodes to endure.

The surroundings grew increasingly compatible, and vast amounts of seemingly tailor-made Abyssal Energy entered his body. The feeling was intoxicating, but Zac eventually stopped his descent. It wasn't just that he was approaching the limits of what his body and Dao Heart could withstand. He could sense an intangible film not that far below his current location.

It was no doubt the gate to the true Abyssal Lake, the place Laz warned him off. If he crossed that line, there was no coming back. He'd suddenly find himself in some unknown corner of the Abyssal Lake without telling where the exit was. Draugr or not, that wasn't something an Early D-grade cultivator could survive, considering even Eoz had been forced to struggle a bit to escape the depths.

Still, this was good enough. He'd managed to get further than Laz had expected, reaching the very edge of the Abyssal Pond. The Abyssal Energies were more than five times denser than at the surface, and the truths they held felt more complete. It should only be a matter of time before he absorbed enough to awaken.

However, a troubled frown appeared on Zac's face as the hours passed. It was as though the vortices in his cells were completely insatiable. No matter how much of the Abyss he swallowed, he didn't seem able to gather enough momentum to break the chain sealing his bloodline. It almost felt like he was leaking, where a good chunk of what he accepted into his body was stolen before it could integrate with his bloodline of Eoz. Of course, his body hadn't sprung an actual leak, though Zac would have preferred such a simple problem.

A leak could be plugged, but what was Zac supposed to do when the culprit was his Void Emperor Bloodline?

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1088 - Selfishness and Hope - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1088 - Selfishness and Hope

Zac guessed he shouldn't have been surprised that the truths of the Abyssal Lake could become nourishment for his original bloodline, even if his cells rarely competed for the energy entering his body. The Abyssal Lake held a unique approach to the Dao of Death that seemed to go beyond his understanding of Dao. Zac wouldn't even be surprised if the Void of Death could be found in the lake's depth, where its Dao of Death reached the extremity.

So what should he do? Let alone awakening multiple stages like Tavza mentioned; Zac wasn't sure he'd even be able to break the first shackle as things stood. And going by the absorption rate, Zac suspected that his Void Emperor Bloodline wouldn't be satiated even after drinking its fill for the whole three days.

After all, he'd absorbed half a mountain when awakening the Void Emperor bloodline to the F-grade. The amount of energy required at his current level was no doubt monstrous. Besides, did he even dare push for a breakthrough for his Void Emperor Bloodline in here? There was no way the people above wouldn't realize there was something wrong if he unleashed the true vortices of his bloodline.

No, it was too early, and the timing wasn't right. Zac dispelled the worry and impatience before the feelings became a crack in his heart that the Abyss could exploit. Instead, he focused on increasing his rate of absorption. It would increase the risk of taking on more than his body and mind could handle, but it might let him keep more for himself.

New spiritual tendrils full of hunger spread through the waters, some of them inching ever closer to the pond's edge. As the roots crept closer to the barrier, the quantity and quality exponentially improved. Even the insatiable vortices in his cells found it difficult to keep up, and a primal force started to build within his body.

It worked. Just a few more hours and the accumulation would be enough to break the shackle holding him back. However, the influx of pure Abyssal Energy didn't come without a price. The call of the Abyss was deafening, threatening to overwhelm his spiritual and psychological defenses. He tried to hold onto his Void Self, but he could tell the pure energies right by the spatial film were more than he could sustainably handle.

Zac was unsure what to do. If he backed down, his cells would quickly siphon off what he'd managed to accumulate. But there would be repercussions from

staying on, and not only the risk of being absorbed by the Abyssal Lake. The truths entering his body were too lofty, too complete. He'd encountered this situation a few times before, like in the hidden valley of the Twilight Chasm.

However, how could that setup compare to the truths hidden in the Abyss? If not for his Void Heart, his path would already have broken.

Zac chose to retreat and find another solution, but something other than Abyssal Energy was suddenly transmitted through the spiritual tendrils closest to the edge. It felt more like a spiritual thread that tried to connect with him from the other side of the film. The tendril gave Zac the same odd sensation as when he first met with Tavza, where the line between him and his bloodline blurred. Zac felt like he was looking down at a mirror, but the one looking back at him was Eoz.

It was as though his adoptive ancestor had left his essence in the Abyss, but it was unable to cross the threshold and enter the Abyssal Pond. It frustrated Zac, like he was receiving an incredibly important message but couldn't make out the words. The connection might even be the key to his current predicament. What were the diluted truths of the Abyssal Pond in the face of Eoz?

Zac still held himself back, his desire for power and answers fighting with the rational voice urging caution. He could just let it go. He'd only entered the Abyssal Pond three hours ago and hadn't exhausted all his options yet. The energies by the film were dense enough for him to awaken. He just needed to strike the right balance to not get overwhelmed.

The whisper might be a trap of the Abyssal Lake, an attempt to recover one of its lost children just as they were about to back away. And even if the call was real, that there really was a piece of Eoz left in the Abyssal Lake, was there any need to take the risk right now? It wasn't too late to search for the message when visiting the Abyssal Shores.

Despite the risks and rational objections, more roots inched closer to the intangible divider between pond and lake. If there was one thing that Zac knew with utmost certainty, it was that there was no such thing as certainty. When had things ever gone according to plan for him? What guarantee was there that he'd ever get to visit the Abyssal Shores? Depending on how things panned out inside the Left Imperial Palace, he might even become a fugitive of the Undead Empire.

Zac knew he was about to do something most would consider monumentally stupid, but that was cultivation. Those who reached the top had all made similar choices during their ascent. Only those taking risks others wouldn't were qualified to aim for the peak. Besides, Laz only warned him against swimming into the Abyssal Lake. He never said anything about sending in a single tendril.

A probing string of Zac's spirit inched through the divide, and time shattered like a mirror.

"Go on," Eoz smiled as he added the finishing touches to the guiding pattern. "Follow what the elders taught you. Claim your birthright, but do not ask for more. The Abyss is already kind enough to return some of what we left behind. Remember that we came from darkness, but our eyes are illuminated by the stars."

Fear and uncertainty were written on the young boy's face, but his lips thinned with determination as he nodded in understanding. He added the closing dot of the final rune himself on his forehead before turning toward the lake. The boy bowed, but only silence answered. Eoz looked at the unmoving waters with sorrow, the crashing waves now only a distant memory.

"Grandpa, why do Elosis and the others have to awaken their bloodline so early?" a young woman whispered as she watched her brother disappear into the lake. "It's so dangerous. Why can't they wait like I did?"

"The stars are shifting," Eoz murmured, as much to himself as to his distant descendant.

Even he could feel it by now, the boundless darkness Mez had warned of for so long. It would consume the stars, leaving desolation in its wake. They'd sought answers in the depths, a path for their kin. But even the Abyss would have to retreat when faced with that Heavenrending calamity.

It was not yet time. Fate was still gathering in the depths, and that thing was not ready to emerge. You only had one chance when striking at the Terminus, so you had to pick the right moment. Eoz could sense that he would have long since returned to the darkness by the time the stars aligned, but he didn't much care.

The will buried in the inky waters ultimately wasn't his. He was more concerned about the children surviving the calamity. His gaze turned to the boy who had stopped a few meters down, already struggling to take in the gift of the Abyss under the guidance of the runes—a pity. The price of their choice became more apparent every generation.

Suddenly, Eoz's eyes widened as realities converged. It was back, that feeling. The calm waters rippled before him, but it was clear the others couldn't hear the whisper of providence. It was hidden even from the stars as it stretched from beyond the Abyss.

"Grandpa, what's wrong?!" the young woman exclaimed when Eoz stood up.

"Your brother's fine," Eoz said, but his eyes weren't on his little descendant.

Or perhaps they were.

"I guess I'll be a bit selfish this time," Eoz muttered before shifting.

Purpose roared and stars flickered as Eoz walked toward the center of the lake, each step adding to his momentum. By the time he reached his destination, only ruins were left in his wake, a scar on the Heavens themselves. The laws pushed back against his desire, but he wouldn't relent. Not today. Cracks appeared on his hand as he pushed it down on the rippling waters, ignoring the churning clouds gathering above.

"Hope."

A small tremor in his territory shattered the tranquility, prompting Aewo An'Azol to open his eyes. He stepped through space, appearing atop the Starfall Spire. The lake stretched in front of him, endless and bottomless. How many times had he looked down upon the gentle waves by now? He could barely remember the way his heart had stirred in the earlier years. The memories had almost been fully consumed by helplessness and stagnation.

For so long, he'd been determined to leave a mark behind, to raise the prestige of their race and widen the future of the next generations. However, he knew his contribution could be considered middling at best. At least his kin hadn't declined under his watch, but he'd resigned himself to never surpass the role of a guardian bound to pass on the torch rather than ignite a bonfire.

Yet, in the blink of an eye, a series of events had turned everything on its head.

The stars had grown unpredictable, and not even his pupil could predict how the wind would blow. Aewo could almost feel the sense of mystery and wonder that filled his heart in his younger days. The stars were shifting, with every day holding the possibility of change. It was that very feeling that had awoken him. However, no matter how he looked, he couldn't find the source of the change.

Was he fooling himself? Had he become so desperate in his autumn days that he made up patterns in the stars? Was it perhaps time for him to seal himself? The Shores couldn't be led by someone with an unstable territory in these critical times.

His gaze shifted from the endless black to the sprawling city on its shores. Both, yet neither, were home. Not even a faction such as the Abyssal Shores was immune to the test of time. The outer city had undergone multiple cycles of growth and decay during his life, and it was barely recognizable to him any longer. Those ancient memories felt like figments of his imagination upon observing the foreign streets filled with unfamiliar faces.

Not even the structures by the shore were quite as he remembered them from his younger days. More importantly, the proud sons and daughters who'd held court in those mansions, leading their race toward glory and defeat, were gone. They had been reduced to names in dusty tomes, if even that. A few only lived on in his memory, soon to be fully erased. Others were still remembered and missed, but it was only a matter of time.

Asira Cer'Zal had been a shining beacon, the first Abyssal Lord from the Lower Bloodlines for five generations. She had raised the whole race's prestige while reigniting the clans' drive. Today, her ancestral mansion showed the mark of time. Thousands of generations had tried to recreate Asira's miracle, yet they only had three Autarchs to their name.

Aewo peered through the layers of restrictions to gaze upon the consecrated statue in Cer'Zal's inner sanctum. Asira had already sealed herself when he built his ladder to Heaven, but he still remembered the immortal will she released when she left on her final journey. It was only six million years later he was shown her obelisk in the depths, having joined the others around the seal.

He turned to the distant palace where his kin lived, but the familiar bloodline fluctuations failed to extricate him from his sense of disconnect. He couldn't even remember the last time he visited the graves of his three daughters. Through the endless eons, even the bond of fatherhood faded. Thousands of generations had come and gone since he laid Ilisia to rest, with his attendants changing between every seclusion.

What was he holding on to?

A ripple thankfully dragged him out of his thoughts, and he turned to the person who had appeared atop the peak. His dour mood was washed away upon seeing her arrival, and not only because she was an anchor in this unfamiliar era. Ysil only left her observatory at critical times, which meant...

"Teacher," Ysil Ur'Mez greeted before turning toward the lake.

"You too?"

"Time diverted, ancient will," Ysil muttered as one star after another descended from the sky, each one dwarfing the city below.

The Abyssal Shores began to decay as it was drowned in Abyssal Fate, but Aewo shielded and restored the Celestial Plateau with a wave of his sleeve.

"Can you bring it forth?"

"I need teacher's help."

Aewo nodded, and a shroud of darkness spread from the tower, forming a seal the size of the Abyssal Lake. The Abyssal Lake rippled when the brand touched its surface, and a slow swirl emerged in the lake's center. Endless starlight fell on the whirlpool, and both looked on with rapt attention as a breach was forced in the River of Time.

Ysil gasped as infinite power spread through the Abyssal Shores, and even the stars paled when faced with its splendor.

"It's him," Aewo said with a ragged breath, a storm of emotions filling his heart. "Even now..."

"Hope," Ur'Mez whispered before turning toward him. "Teacher, what do you think?"

"How can we look the other way when the Vanguard has made his will clear?" Aewo sighed.

"It'll be difficult reaching the boy. Even if we help, the effect won't be very good. And we don't even know if he can bear it. It might ruin our undertaking."

"Trust the ancestor," Aewo said. "If it fails, we will simply have to find another path. And if not us, then our descendants."

"You're right."

The world-spanning seal shuddered before a duplicate made from abyssal water rose from the lake, making it look like a tidal wave was about to consume the whole plateau. Meanwhile, the suns turned into billions of streams, forming a band of Fate around the two seals. Innumerable Draugr had already emerged from the waters and buildings, fearfully looking at the display. No one dared to so much as breathe out of fear of disrupting whatever was happening.

For a brief moment, an impossibly large hand appeared between the seals, stabilized by the band of starlight. It was gone the next, and both Aewo's and Ysil's arrays soon sank into the rippling waters to begin their journey. Soon, it was as though nothing had happened, yet millions of gazes were trained at the shores. Aewo could understand why.

Even if only he and Ysil had seen the hand, it was impossible for them to completely mask its aura. For a moment, the mark of a True Abyssal Lord had leaked onto the shores. No, something beyond that. Something that might have been lost forever, never to return. The aura of one of the Three Guardian Ancestors.

"This..." Ysil gasped as she looked at the children below.

Aewo didn't need the bloodline of Mez to understand what she meant. Those who lived at the shores were all blessed with great fate, but he'd never seen a storm like the one sweeping through the districts. Even those who had exhausted their potential suddenly burned with purpose as they fervently looked toward the lake. Lord Eoz forcing his way to this timeline had overturned the natural order, and there was no telling what would come of it.

A smile appeared on Aewo's face as he stepped through space and returned to his chambers. Perhaps he had some more to give.

"What do you think?" Laz asked as they looked at the distant pond.

"Awakening should be a foregone conclusion," Tavza said. "I'm more worried about what kind of storm he'll call forth."

"He's a troublemaker, but this is the Abyssal Lake," Laz said. "He's just a drop in an endless ocean; what waves can he—"

Laz didn't get any further as a deep rumble rocked the cave.

"Activate the bedrock stabilizers!" Tassar Kavriel shouted. "How can there be an earthquake? What the hell are our scouts doing?!"

"It's not a tremor or tide," Tavza sighed as she suddenly felt a familiar presence—that of her ancestor. "Chaos has arrived."

Meanwhile, the still surface of the lake rippled as it rose. Fate was unraveling, time was twisting, and the Abyss was coming alive. A sense of loss filled Tavza's heart as the cave filled with Abyssal Energy. She'd somewhat looked forward to seeing Arcaz Umbri'Zi in action, but now she almost wished she hadn't. As the crashing waves of the Abyss rushed closer, she couldn't help but look back at her life.

What was she doing?

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1089 - Crossed Fates - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1089 - Crossed Fates

Zac gasped as he found himself back in his body, his mind a confused mess. Witnessing the monstrous power contained within Eoz's body was almost enough to destroy his mind. The Draugr Progenitor's hand, especially, beggared comprehension. It was like a corner of the Heavens taken physical form, holding the limits of Dao. Its splendor had pushed everything aside, subverting reality and bending it to his will.

The scene itself wasn't the only thing that left him reeling. It had felt too real. Was it really a Bloodline Vision?

For a moment, it almost felt like he'd been connected with Eoz the same way he was with his human half, though the other side was so powerful it had

overwhelmed Zac's sense of self. Still, it hadn't felt like he'd been shown a vision of Eoz by the shores. He had lived it, and the powerful eruption of Temporal chaos just before his mind was overwhelmed strongly indicated this idea was more than a wild theory.

But was something like this even possible? Could he really connect with Eoz when separated by billions of years? Or was it just his mind making sense of the impartment?

Eoz had been aware his race was about to face an extinction event, though only Zac knew the System's birth was the cause. A million years was normally not a very long time for a Supremacy, but it was essentially a death sentence when you removed all energy and Dao. Doubly so for the Undead, who relied on Miasma to survive. Zecia couldn't even sustain a thousand Monarchs, or a single Autarch for that matter. Zac could only imagine how much energy a Supremacy used daily to power their territories.

It wouldn't be weird if Eoz had opted to leave behind something in the Abyssal Lake, intended for whatever descendant that would one day return. This inheritance was then triggered when he finally touched the true Abyssal Lake with his mental thread, and the powerful intent left behind had been enough to distort Zac's mind.

It was the most rational explanation, but Zac wasn't convinced. His guts told him he'd become part of a temporal paradox made possible by Eoz's unfathomable power.

He'd taken advantage of his identity as a descendant of the lost branch of Eoz for years, but actually being connected to the founding progenitor left Zac reeling. What if he disapproved of Zac's way of going about things? Would he reach into the future once more and slap him to death?

There was no time to untangle this mess. He'd already realized the film between lake and pond had been breached, and torrential amounts of pristine Abyssal Energy surged from the depths. It was far beyond what he could possibly endure, so Zac decisively chose to cut his losses and run for his life.

It was too late.

The Abyss exerted an inescapable pull, and Zac found himself dragged toward the divider. Zac panicked, feeling the bottomless chasm waiting below. If he let himself get pulled down, it was game over. The only solace was that

the rapidly accumulating Abyssal Energies would erase his mind long before he was crushed.

Zac didn't care if the Monarchs above somehow spied on him. He still activated [Void Zone] to give himself a fighting chance against the grip of the Abyss. However, how could an E-grade Bloodline Talent match up to the Abyssal Lake? The nullification zone didn't even get the chance to deploy before it was destroyed. Yet Zac lost a third of his accumulated Void Energy in that fraction of a second.

Not even his hidden ace could get him out of this mess, and Zac despaired upon finding his skills unusable because of the immense energies storming his body. Yet Zac didn't give up, and he furiously swam against the current, his Hidden Nodes burning with purpose to give him power. In his desperation, it almost felt like [Adamance of Eoz] held an inexhaustible font of strength.

His bloodline burned as he fought back, and Zac was elated to find that his desperation seemed to increase his resistance against the surrounding Abyssal Energy. Sadly, it was only a small comfort considering he was still being flooded by unbearable amounts of Abyssal Energy. His cells and [Void Heart] were already overrun, and he found it increasingly difficult to hold onto his self while inching away from the divider.

The tug of war only lasted a few seconds before Zac sensed another terrifying surge below. It wasn't that the Abyssal Lake had come charging with redoubled efforts—not only, anyway. He could sense that the incoming blob of Abyssal Energy was of unbelievable purity, but there was something else mixed within. Three presences, two of which were familiar to him.

Eoz and Azol.

The third presence held the echoes of fate and the stars, which undoubtedly meant the third upper bloodline was represented too. Zac didn't get to inspect the incoming thing more closely before something burrowed into his body, pushing all the Abyssal Energy away. Zac shuddered in relief, knowing just how close he'd been to getting overwhelmed.

Zac soon felt the presence of Eoz burning in his chest, spreading through every part of his body. He couldn't see a thing in the inky-black waters, but he could feel lines of power being drawn on his skin. They were very similar to the patterns he drew on himself when practicing [Void Vajra Sublimation], but their appearance made Zac think of the young boy he'd seen in the vision.

He could tell the pattern covering his body was far more complex than the young boy's, and its effect was immediate. The pull from the Abyss was gone, and it almost felt like the surging currents had split to form a sealed pocket. A pocket that was continuously dragging Abyssal Energy perfectly in tune with his body.

It didn't take long to figure out the source was the mysterious patterns. It had adopted a far more direct approach than Zac's from before. He'd slowly searched for the optimal section of the Abyssal Pond to better harmonize, but the pattern directly drew over what he needed and pushed away anything else. The energy density had already increased manifold after he breached the film, but now it was at least only energy perfect for the bloodline of Eoz.

That didn't mean he was safe.

The overwhelming amounts of Abyssal Energy being dragged into his body by the runes had become a tribulation no less deadly than the one that had almost done him in during his ascent to Hegemony. The vortices in his cells were soon overrun, drenched in a darkness deeper than black. Every part of him was broken down and reformed. Not even his soul was spared when the Abyss flooded his deathly Soul Spiral with monstrous amounts of energy and truth.

The pain was so bad Zac's mind tried to shut down as a protective measure, but he staunchly held on. Because his instincts told him this was an opportunity he just needed to survive to receive a gift from Eoz. He wasn't exactly sure why the actual inheritance had taken a while to appear after the Bloodline Vision, but the current situation was clearly related.

He didn't believe Eoz was out to hurt him. The impartment might have been miscalibrated after being sent through time or left dormant in the Abyssal Lake for so long. But with every second he endured, he felt himself moving closer to a mysterious rebirth. The vortices in his cells gradually became solid, looking like miniature copies of the Abyssal Pond.

They still retained the voracious pull of his Void Emperor bloodline, but they also emitted the bottomless darkness of the Abyssal Lake. It was like two pictures were overlapping, moving closer and closer to perfection. Then, just like when the Abyssal Pond fully awakened, the ponds in his cells suddenly gave off a far more tangible aura.

The intangible chain snapped, and the whole pond shook as his body exerted a tremendous pull that almost overwhelmed the runes on his body. An oppressive darkness within his body was rapidly growing, exuding the suffocating intractability of death. However, Zac didn't get the chance to celebrate his breakthrough or register the changes happening to his body because it had triggered something else.

Flowers of truth sprouted in the fertile soil of his awakened bloodline. For a moment, Zac found it difficult to make sense of the fragmented storm of impressions squeezing into his mind. He saw a large number of scenes shrouded in darkness, from enormous castles to broken weapons of war that shocked Zac to his very core. He saw the mysterious obelisk from the previous bloodline vision and felt a harrowing call from within.

Zac even saw a few fragmented scenes from above the surface. Two godlike Draugr standing atop a spire almost as tall as the Tower of Eternity, one wielding Fate and the other the Underworld. Around them was an almost endless city weighed down by eons of stagnation. Other fragments weren't scenes or memories at all. They were insights into the Abyss, pieces of a puzzle leading to something extraordinary. It all gelled into a singular whole when his body had drunk its fill, and it all surged into his Soul Aperture.

It was suddenly like the truth of the Abyss had been laid bare, filling Zac with boundless comprehension and understanding. Zac vaguely realized that Eoz had given him a similar opportunity as Yrial, a Dao impartment. However, Eoz's gift wasn't forceful. It wasn't trying to lead Zac down someone else's path, but freely let him look at the whole tapestry of Abyss without being overwhelmed. It had let him enter a mysterious state of absolute clarity and stability.

Zac was overwhelmed by the generosity. Yrial had already explained the price of these kinds of impartments, and this was a complete, perfected Dao. Something like this could have harmed the Eoz's foundations, especially if he forced it through the River of Time. Zac definitely wouldn't let such a gift go to waste, and he searched for the parts of the tapestry that rang true with his path.

Even a small corner of Eoz's Grand Dao could illuminate his own path, saving him decades of hard work. Zac even felt that the more of the tapestry he comprehended, the better his body harmonized with his bloodline. His physical body felt incredibly distant when faced with the immensity of Eoz's

Dao, but he could vaguely sense that his body had begun a second round of absorption. It was now rapidly advancing toward the next stage.

Time lost all meaning, but a spatial shake eventually startled him awake. Zac was filled with a sense of loss when the Grand Dao dispersed and became one with the Abyssal Lake. Just as Zac was about to lose the connection, a powerful voice echoed in his mind.

'Child, I don't know how you came to be or how our fates crossed. Some of the mysteries of the Abyss elude us to this day.

I can tell my branch is not represented among the stars in your era, but that's the natural order. Impermanence is law for all subjugated by the Terminus Seals.

Your Heaven is foreign to me, and much of what I know is no longer relevant. But sensing my kin from within the Abyssal Lake was a precious gift in troubling times, so I tried to return the favor.

There is no need to look to the past for direction. Perhaps it's for the best if our names are forgotten. We never wanted our identities to become shackles for our descendants or for the lake to become their prison. We rose from the depths in search of something more. Our origin can give context, but it cannot lead the way.

Remember, the essence of my bloodline is purpose. I originally thought my calling could be found beyond the stars at the limits of power, but I only ever found true purpose in our descendants. The answers that had eluded me until then suddenly became clear. Power for power's sake is hollow. Only when fighting for something greater than yourself can you excavate the true power hidden within your personal Abyss.'

It was Eoz, and each word of his was infused with endless meaning, somehow surpassing the tapestry Zac had been observing for the past days. When Eoz was finished, his presence was gone, and the clarity was gone with him. Zac's memory of the tapestry immediately grew blurry, but he was surprised to find Eoz's parting words condense into a sealed impartment much like his [Cosmic Forge].

Unfortunately, it seemed completely inert, not providing Zac with any clues to its contents. Zac shook his head, knowing he couldn't be greedy. He was still in a muddled state, and the huge amounts of energy around him made it

difficult to sense the situation within his body. But Zac knew he'd made off like a bandit. Even if the seed turned out to be nothing, he'd gained far more than he could possibly have expected.

But you had to be alive to enjoy the results of your harvest. Zac's danger sense indicated in no uncertain terms that he didn't have much time. The spatial fluctuations grew more chaotic by the second, and he was lucky if he had one minute before the inky waters were dragged back into the Abyss. He wouldn't be surprised if his meddling with the barrier made the pond's closing far more unpredictable.

Zac burned with urgency as he began swimming toward the surface, only now realizing he could actually see. The oppressive darkness was still there, but his Draugr vision had somehow shifted, providing him a unique advantage in these inky waters. His sight was still nowhere near as clear as in his Bloodline Visions, but it let him maneuver much easier. Perhaps it got better with every stage you awakened.

The Abyssal Lake was unwilling to let him go now that Eoz's protection was gone. Zac felt a sense of déjà vu as he forced his way upward. The experience was just like his first bloodline vision when Eoz emerged from the depths. Determination and conviction burned in Zac's chest, filling him with limitless power and intractability.

Those carrying Eoz's bloodline couldn't be bound or stopped. Like Zac, Eoz was always forging ahead, breaking through any resistance. The ichor in Zac's veins burned, allowing him to drastically increase his speed. Zac could tell the pull on him was even greater than before the impartment, but it only felt like a small inconvenience right now.

The chaos around him only grew worse, and Zac said a silent prayer for the other Draugr inside the waters. He tried scanning the surroundings in case he could help someone out, but he couldn't see a single one. Perhaps his actions had made the others leery of stepping inside.

Zac's all-out effort soon let him shoot out of the waters like a rocket, where a confusing storm of impressions greeted him. It wasn't just the link to his human body being restored. Even more so, it was his own experience. He'd sensed he'd undergone a dramatic transformation inside the water, but he only started to realize the extent now.

He first put aside the memories from his human half to focus on the most pressing matters. The situation inside his body wasn't the only one that had drastically changed. A chaotic scene greeted his return, with the whole cave on the brink of collapse. The huge array around the pond had been flooded, and the mark of the Abyss had replaced everything else. Even now, he found himself standing to his knees in Abyssal Water.

The black waters were quickly receding at least, and Zac felt the connection with the Abyssal Lake break a moment later. The Abyssal Pond was still there, but it had become rootless. Zac guessed it would retain its efficacy for a few days, though the Abyssal Energy wouldn't be replenished. Zac didn't care about that. He was more worried about something else, and he wildly looked around.

Zac only breathed out in relief upon seeing his axe embedded in the ceiling, with six chains dangling toward the pond. Alea would definitely have been in the splash zone if the Abyssal Pond erupted, but it looked like she'd retreated in time.

'Are you okay?' Zac asked as he flew up and extracted [Love's Bond]. 'I'm sorry, I didn't expect things to go out of control.'

Zac shuddered at the thought of Alea being suddenly submerged by the Abyssal Waters. He knew all too well how dangerous that was. Even worse, she could have been dragged into the depths, and Zac knew there was no way he'd been able to find her if that happened.

'Well, I did. Isn't that always the case with you? I knew you were up to no good the second I felt the ripples on the surface,' Alea laughed. 'I'm fine, but I'll have to focus on digesting all these energies and impressions for a while. The pond spat out quite a bit of it.'

Alea then cut the connection and returned to her necklace form. Zac could tell she hadn't entered a slumber as she did between their talks in the E-grade. It was more like she'd secluded herself to focus on her cultivation. Zac could still call on her, but that would be like someone barging into his Cultivation Cave while he was in the middle of a cultivation session.

Besides, Alea wasn't the only one in urgent need of digesting their insights. Zac didn't bother with the group of Draugr approaching as he flew down to one of the dry spots, where he threw out an isolation array. He'd been given a small window of opportunity, and fate was urging him on.

Everything was in place for him to take the next step. It was time to form his first Late-stage Dao Branch.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1090 - Awakening - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1090 - Awakening

Zac's previous breakthrough took place shortly before entering the Perennial Vastness. He'd found the answers to Death after walking through the maze of Life inside the hidden level of the Gates of Reincarnation. At that time, he'd based the insights on balance, which helped him harmonize his Life- and Death-attuned branches.

Of course, the breakthrough direction wasn't because of the Limited Trial. It was the natural conclusion to years of studying balance and duality for his blueprint. Since then, he'd spent the better part of a decade fighting and exploring inside the Perennial Vastness. And while normal cultivators couldn't connect with the Dao inside a temporal chamber, that had never been Zac's method of communing with the Heavens.

He'd slowly accumulated, shoring up his understanding of his Daos through battle, where his technique paved the path and his experiences provided context. He'd only missed a spark to turn his years of struggle into truth, and he got it right after returning to Earth. His short encounter with the ill-fated swordsman had shaken his mind awake.

His death had given Zac a deeper understanding of inexorability, and by extension, his Branches of the War Axe and Pale Seal. Zac thought he'd have to continue his search for answers on the battlefield for a while longer, but Eoz had provided what he needed and more.

The aspect of Death Zac was about to incorporate slightly deviated from the original script, but such was cultivation. There was no need to close himself off to the universe just because he'd gained Arcane classes and formulated a path. He was still young, still learning, and you had to adapt upon realizing his understanding was flawed or at least incomplete. That was the only way you'd reach the peak.

Zac's eyes had been opened to a new facet of inexorability upon feeling Eoz's will and conviction while submerged in the pure Abyssal Energy. One that didn't just resonate with his path, but one that helped him better fuse it with his

Draugr bloodline. Adamance, Conviction, and Immutability—weren't these all expressions of his Inexorable Path?

Fearlessly advancing, rendering any resistance moot. Take in the Heavens and make them your own, and let your enemies' Fate become nourishment for yours. Death could be either finality or progress, and he was the judge of who would be sent to the Abyss and who'd continue their journey.

Zac only needed a single Dao Treasure to trigger the breakthrough. His Soul Aperture was still overflowing with energy from the pond, to the point the breakthrough would help alleviate the pressure on his Soul Spiral. A river of truth and comprehension poured into his mind, and Zac froze the spiral as he ushered the energy into the Dao Apparition in its center.

It didn't take long before Zac felt a soft pop in his mind like he'd pierced an invisible membrane blocking his connection to the Heavens. A surge of power followed in its wake, and Zac smiled upon realizing how smoothly the waves of Death coursed through his body. The past week had only let him make some preliminary arrangements for restoring his [Thousand Lights Avatar], yet his Dao moved almost as unhindered as when he'd had a fully-formed spiritual body.

It was a long time since he'd been as comfortable as he currently felt, and Zac couldn't help but stretch and move around inside his isolation array. The feeling reminded him of his breakthroughs inside the Orom World, where the Tribulation Lightning had cleansed his body of the immense amounts of toxins he'd accumulated with the [Celestial Clay].

It was at that point he realized something surprising. [Million Faces] had been deactivated by the storm of Abyssal Energy, yet his hair remained the same steely grey he used to hide his human ancestry. His face had reverted from his Arcaz persona, but it didn't quite look like Zachary Atwood either. His basic features were still there, but he'd taken on some of Eoz's appearance upon his bloodline awakening. Altogether, he looked quite a bit better, though he still lacked that touch of Dao that imparted an otherworldly beauty.

Having his appearance improved was nice, but it didn't matter much. There were still far more interesting things brewing inside his body, not to mention his bloodline. But just as Zac was about to open his status screen and inspect his gains, a slight cough made him look over. The whole Draugr retinue was waiting for him outside, and the Monarchs could obviously see through his low-grade isolation array.

Zac felt a pang of worry upon seeing their scrunched-up expressions and the scattered lines on everyone's exposed skin. The runes were clearly the same thing he'd been covered in, but some only had one or two sigils that weren't even connected. It was like they'd been hit by nomological spill-over.

Tavza's pattern was far more exquisite than the others, covering most of her face like a tribal tattoo. However, even if Zac couldn't make heads or tails of the pattern, he could tell it wasn't quite complete.

Zac glanced at the mayhem around him. The Abyssal Water had fully retreated by now, but water from the Deepmist Lake was pouring down from cracks in the ceiling. The cave would probably collapse soon enough unless it was reinforced. Zac took a stabilizing breath before stepping outside, knowing he'd have to be a bit shameless once more.

"Sorry, I felt inspiration coming on," Zac said. "I didn't expect the trial to wrap up in such a destructive way. Thank the Heavens everyone got out in one piece."

He'd hoped to diffuse the palpable tension, but he inwardly groaned when he saw his words had the opposite effect. The young elites suddenly looked like they wanted to eat him alive, while the Monarchs had complex expressions on their faces. Only then did Zac notice a critical detail from the fusion of his two sets of memories.

He had been fully occupied with the impartment while in the Lake, and he'd opted to immediately break through upon exiting. Now that Zac could go through his human body's experiences, he realized that not even a day had passed since he entered the Abyssal Pond. It wasn't that the others had escaped in time, but that they didn't even get the chance to enter before the connection broke—or rather, when he broke it.

Of course, he wasn't about to admit that.

"I guess forcing a connection on the Frontier was harder than we thought," Zac coughed, but it was clear no one bought his excuse.

"Son of Chaos," Tavza muttered while Laz helplessly shook his head.

The next second, a screen appeared in front of him. Zac mutely watched the recording, seeing how the Abyssal Pond exploded, destroying most of the Array Pillars in one go. It was almost like the Abyss had opened its maw,

trying to consume everything. Worse, Zac could clearly feel the mark of Eoz within the raging tsunami. There was no way the Monarchs hadn't realized the source of the commotion.

Just when it looked like the Draugr group would be swallowed, two magic circles suddenly appeared above the pond. They stabilized the surging waters, resulting in a small lake that covered most of the broken array. The ambient energy seemed shocking even at its shores, eclipsing what Zac encountered in the shallows of the pond. The problem was that more than ninety percent of it was tuned to the Branch of Eoz, making it unsuitable for these Zi Branch members.

They must have waited for the pond to return to normal, only to see it lose the connection two days early.

"Hey, you can't blame that one on me," Zac said, staunchly sticking to his guns. "I've never seen those magic circles before."

That was only a half-truth. Zac might never have seen those particular arrays before, but he recognized the aura they exuded. They came from Azol and Mez, just like the auras he'd sensed in the depths.

Just like the things still waiting in his body, currently surrounding [Gorehew] and [Abyssal Phase]

The line of deathly starlight surrounding [Gorehew] had an ethereal aura of Fate and Death, marking it as the work of Ur'Mez. The other was almost indistinguishable from the Abyssal Lake, similar to Tavza's bloodline ability. Zac had noticed the odd arrays and the pure Abyssal Energy they kept sealed the moment he emerged from the pond, but he didn't dare act hastily.

After all, these were things likely left by Supremacies. He didn't want to narrowly survive the Abyssal Pond only to blow himself up an hour later.

"I get the feeling you often find yourself in this position," Tavza sighed, glancing at Laz.

"Don't worry. I can tell your awakening was a rousing success. So what if it caused some waves?" Laz smiled, not caring in the slightest about the state of the cave or the Kavriel youngsters. "Master Kavriel, let's talk."

"Let's go," Tavza said, glancing at the young warriors. "The rest of you, stay here. It's not what we hoped for, but the lingering energy in the pond is still quite beneficial for the unawakened. Focus on the patterns. They'll help you find the way."

"I feel bad," Zac muttered as Tavza led him out of the Deepmist Lake.

"I thought it had nothing to do with you?" Tavza said with a raised brow.

Zac could only laugh in response. They both knew the truth.

"You don't need to worry," Tavza continued. "Those half-blood children severely overestimated the benefits they could draw from the Abyssal Pond. There's a reason we only invite the elites of our race to the Abyssal Lake. Being marked by the Ancestral Runes will let them purify their mottled bloodlines more than the original arrangement. It might even provide unexpected long-term benefits."

"Why didn't you mention these things?" Zac asked as he looked down at his hands. "Like you said, they helped quite a bit."

The patterns on his body were still visible, but they were slowly fading. Zac wasn't too worried, though. He'd already memorized every detail of it and could easily redraw them like he did when practicing the [Void Vajra Sublimation].

"I didn't mention it because there was no point. Only someone who's reached the True Abyss Realm can extrapolate a whole circuit. Our most talented warriors can occasionally figure out small sections, but most never have the chance," Tavza said, her pitch-black eyes speaking volumes as she looked at him. "The circuit on your body should be the first complete set of Ancestral Runes since Ter'Ael Zan'Azol was alive."

"Oh," Zac weakly muttered, studiously looking away.

The two traveled in silence as they made their way toward the teleporter, each occupied with their own thoughts. Zac's mind was still a mess. There was so much to untangle, and he began by checking out his Status Screen.

Name Zachary Atwood

Level 155

Class [D-Arcane] Inexorable Apostle

Race [D] Draugr - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment [Zecia] Atwood Empire – Baron of Conquest

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

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

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

Core [D] Inexorable Core

Strength 68129 [Increase: 204%. Efficiency: 429%]

Dexterity 25902 [Increase: 156%. Efficiency: 285%]

Endurance 56490 [Increase: 185%. Efficiency: 450%]

Vitality 39287 [Increase: 178%. Efficiency: 428%]

Intelligence 7262 [Increase: 135%. Efficiency: 285%]

Wisdom 14237 [Increase: 137%. Efficiency: 300%]

Luck 982 [Increase: 164%. Efficiency: 349%]

Free Points 0

Nexus Coins [D] 7 645 946

Zac looked at the numbers with awe. He'd already made a huge leap in power upon reaching Hegemony, and now his attributes had increased another 25% in one swoop. It was significantly more than he'd expected, especially after confirming he hadn't gained any new titles. Zac began by focusing on the line listing his Daos, and the details of his upgraded Dao Branch came into view.

[Branch of the Pale Seal (Late): All attributes +50, Strength +1750, Endurance +9000, Vitality +2750, Wisdom +1150. Effectiveness of Endurance +25%]

There weren't any real surprises to the evolved branch. The only thing of note was that his Strength and Wisdom had slightly more than doubled at the cost of Endurance and Vitality. The +50 to Intelligence had also been removed, leaving him a bit stronger but also dumber. Just like how he liked it.

Altogether, the branch provided 15,000 Raw Attributes, a significant amount in the Early D-grade. Still, Zac only stayed on the Dao Screen for a second as he was much more eager to see the more exciting change.

Bloodline [E - Corrupted] Void Emperor, [D] Children of Draug - Eoz

Talent Force of the Void - 19%, Void Zone

Bloodline Nodes [E]Void Heart, [E] Spiritual Void, [E] Purity of the Void

Nodes [D] Adamance of Eoz, [D] Conviction of Eoz, [D] Immutability of Eoz, [D] Alpha Link, [D] Omega Link

Constitution [Death] Branch of Eoz (Early Shallows): Base Attributes +250, Strength +1250, Endurance +2,250, Luck +25, All Attributes +10%, Strength +5%, Endurance +10%. Effect of Strength +5%, Effect of Endurance +10%.

Zac looked blankly at the screen for a few seconds, repeatedly reading the long string of boosts to ensure he didn't see things wrong. He'd already been able to tell he should have passed the Return stage entirely, but he was shocked to find he'd also skipped the Shore. Early Shallows was the first step of the third awakening, and enough to make you a core member of the Draugr race, according to Laz.

The benefits didn't disappoint either. Zac thought forming a Late Branch would be the biggest attribute boost, but it paled compared to his Draugr bloodline boost. Having an Early Shallows Bloodline provided more flat attributes than a Middle Dao Branch. It even provided 25 Luck and 10% to all attributes, making it one of his largest individual sources of Luck.

Not to mention, this wasn't even the real benefit of awakening your bloodline. Each stage you unlocked would normally increase your Dao Affinities, with the major threshold providing a significant boost. The reason any Draugr reaching Shallows became a core member wasn't because of a few extra Attribute Points. It was because their inborn advantage gave them a decent chance of reaching Monarchy and possibly beyond.

All from staying in some lake water for a day—a poignant reminder that not all races were born equal in the Multiverse.

It was only a few seconds later that Zac realized the huge attribute bomb wasn't the only thing new on his Bloodline Screen. His awakened bloodline wasn't visible on the main Status Screen, but it had been added next to this Void Emperor Bloodline here. It was an interesting tidbit, but the big news was that all three of his Draugr Hidden Nodes had been upgraded to D-grade in one swoop. Even his Force of the Void had recovered to 19%.

Zac was slightly surprised he hadn't gained a single level after being drowned in such immense amounts of energy, but he soon found the reason why. The pathways in his Cosmic Core had suddenly become quite lopsided. The paths holding Death and Void of Death had been greatly filled in, and those made for Conflict had seen a noticeable improvement.

However, the parts with Life hadn't gained an inch, which wasn't surprising considering the energy source. No wonder he'd felt so lopsided when upgrading his Dao. Zac felt he could have evolved his Branch of the Pale Seal once more if he wanted, but he'd held himself back.

For one, he needed to digest and stabilize his foundations before breaking through again. Secondly, he'd felt a sense of imbalance between his two halves. It wasn't just his Daos and core, either. It was like every aspect of Death suddenly eclipsed his attainments into Life. Zac could tell it would become a problem if he exacerbated this disparity, especially his core, which depended on balance.

His human body was already cramming Life Attuned Core-awakening Pills into his mouth to remedy the situation. Zac estimated he'd be able to gain at least 6 or 7 levels by the time he'd returned to equilibrium. Not even the top-tier pills he'd prepared would be able to take him that far, but he could accumulate the rest on the battlefield.

Soon, Tavza had escorted him through the gauntlet of relays and returned to his Cultivation Tree. She didn't say anything, but Zac knew what Tavza was waiting for. He only hesitated a moment before he chose to come clean.

"I felt him," Zac said. "I felt Eoz in the Abyss. It was almost like he reached through the River of Time to help me. I think your ancestor helped out somehow. Do you think—"

"I don't have the answers you're looking for," Tavza sighed. "The Abyss sometimes shows us things when we delve too far, but what you said might have happened. I sensed the mark of Eoz within the pond, far beyond what you'd expect in this era. This all is far beyond what I expected.

"However, I do know this. Not even our Supremacies can freely stretch through the Abyss like we saw today. You should fully understand our relationship with the Abyss by now, and the incredible dangers that lurk in its depths. Be it Lord Eoz himself or our guardians; they've all paid a heavy price to assist you today. I hope you won't do anything to betray that trust."