

## **Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1091 - Sincerity and Reciprocity - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1091 - Sincerity and Reciprocity**

Zac knew Tavza wasn't lying when saying that today's assistance hadn't come without a price. Zac still wasn't sure if Eoz really had reached through the river of time to impart his knowledge, similar to the Technocrat Codex. But Zac had felt the fury of the Heavens in the vision and how the universe itself was trying to resist Eoz's actions.

The two Supremacies of the Draugr race must have sensed Eoz's actions and realized the connection would have difficulty reaching Zac on its own. Maybe it was because moving something through time was difficult enough. Maybe it was because the lake had been moved, and Zac was located at the frontier. Either case, the Abyss was a place not even Progenitors like Eoz could walk unhindered.

Zac wasn't sure how to feel about the situation. Two generations of Draugr Supremacies had assisted him, and the benefits he'd reaped were simply obscene. Bloodline, Dao, and possibly Skill. There was also the mysterious seed in his Soul Aperture which might bring even more benefits down the road.

Sure, the assistance from the current generation of Abyssal Princes might have been provided with certain considerations. They knew he'd never felt any real belonging to his kin and might have used this opportunity to pull him closer. Of course, there was no proof beyond the fact that Supremacies rarely made a move unless absolutely necessary.

It wasn't laziness but that their very existence was a constant struggle against the Heavens. The higher you climbed, the greater the suppression you'd face. It wasn't just a matter of Tribulations. Monarchs had to absorb vast amounts of energy just to maintain their inner world. On the frontier, that translated into a constant need for treasures.

Meanwhile, Autarchs wouldn't willingly stay in these god-forsaken regions, as the sparse Energy and Dao were directly harmful. Zac had heard that the Autarchs of smaller factions, like the Radiant Temple, generally stayed in special dimensions or Ancient Realms to lessen the burden on themselves and their factions.

Zac could only imagine the cost of a Supremacy going all out. The current-day Abyssal Lords clearly had great hopes for him, to the point Zac suspected it wasn't as simple as just restoring a lost branch. Perhaps the three ancestors had left behind certain treasures or techniques that required all three upper bloodlines to work.

In contrast, Zac felt true sincerity from Eoz. The Draugr Progenitor had even indicated he didn't want Zac to carry the burden of his ancestry, that Zac didn't owe anything to his Bloodline. Eoz also seemed to have a different attitude to Abyssal Lake than the Draugr of the current era. He'd left its embrace to search for something more, only to find his descendants were born incomplete without returning to the origin.

So what should he do?

Zac's body might have become immune to Karmic Entanglement after breaking through, but he wasn't an ingrate. Just turning his back on Eoz would leave a blemish on his Dao Heart, even if the impartment was freely given. He'd been given so much by now that Zac didn't know if he wanted to extricate himself from the debt even if he could.

It wouldn't hurt to treat the Abyssal Shores with greater sincerity, and help out if he could.

"I'm aware the gift I've received today is significant," Zac said. "I'll try to reciprocate, but I'm ultimately just a D-grade cultivator. We both know that people like us are just pawns at best, and I refuse to become a cog in someone else's struggle."

"If you know that much, you should understand that it's rarely up to us whether we participate," Tavza countered. "The actions today have surely been noticed, and it won't be long before my ancestor's sacrifice is connected to you. I suggest you return to your home world sooner rather than later. The stakes have increased, leaving everything in flux."

"Will you even let me?"

"We might be able to contain the rumors for a few days, but no longer. Tassar Kavriel should be loyal to the shores, but some of the younger might have their own ideas. With fate gathering here in Zecia, they might see this as an opportunity to rise."

So that was why Tavza wanted the young to stay and practice by the Abyssal Pond. It was essentially a way for her to enforce an information lockdown. The lush environment of Kavista suddenly felt oppressive, with dangers hiding in every corner. He'd thought he'd managed to navigate a solution with the Undead Empire, but it was clear the events had broader implications than he'd realized.

"I've applied for your return already, but I alone cannot give the go-ahead. Hopefully, Kator won't have any objections," Tavza continued as she took out a Spatial Ring. "The promised method and some cultivation resources. However, you won't be able to make much headway on your Bloodline with these things.

"I can tell you've entered the Shallows, and it's almost impossible to progress outside the lake at that stage. Using our Bloodline Methods simply isn't time effective outside the lake itself."

Zac nodded as he accepted the ring. Such was the Law of Balance. Pure-blooded Draugr living in the Abyssal Shores were guaranteed at least one bloodline awakening through access to the lake, and real talents managed to awaken multiple times. However, without that resource, it was incredibly difficult to progress.

Death-attuned materials could barely help, and even treasures from the Abyss like the [Darkwater Gemstones] weren't a replacement for the real thing. That was why [Essence of the Abyss] was such a valuable treasure. Few other things could mimic direct contact with the Abyssal Lake.

"Thank you," Zac said. "You've been a huge help during my stay."

"Please remember that the next time you're about to wreak havoc," Tavza said, showcasing a rare smile. "I wouldn't mind a heads-up."

The Azol successor left the next moment, leaving Zac alone with his thoughts. He glanced at the ring and found it contained one hundred [Darkwater Gemstones] and a few plants from the Abyssal Lake. There was also a set of Information Crystals, but Zac only briefly scanned the methods before putting the matter aside.

Something was brewing in his body that couldn't be put off any longer. The Skill Fractals had already started to twist and untangle under the influence of the foreign energies. The good news was that it didn't seem to be a bad thing.

The skills were actually evolving on their own, following the concepts they were being showered in.

However, he couldn't just sit by when his skills were being reforged, even if the result would be good. He needed to provide input, aligning them with his path and ensuring they would mesh well with his combat style.

Zac retreated into his cultivation chamber, where a new type of incense was already burning. Zac could feel it had a similar effect as the drops he got from Iz, though not nearly at the same level. Zac let the medicinal smoke nourish his body while focusing on the mutating skills. And the longer Zac observed, the more he realized things weren't quite as they seemed.

The mysterious bands wrapped around his Skill Fractals looked like they had been formed by Mez and Azol, but Zac realized there was a shadow of Eoz within. It was transforming their truths somehow, harmonizing them with his body and Daos. It was almost like Eoz had sensed the two present-day Supremacies and repurposed some of their energy. There was a lesson in there.

Zac soon understood what he needed to do, and his Inexorable Dao Mold emerged from within the Soul Spiral. It had long reached a soft limit based on his Daos and soul strength and had barely progressed over the past year. Being showered in Abyssal Energy seemed to have strengthened it even further. Zac infused Mental Energy and Dao into the mold, ensuring his newly upgraded Branch of the Pale Seal didn't overwhelm his Branch of the War Axe.

Thankfully, Zac had ample experience with one of his Daos being stronger than the others, though it was usually his Dao of Conflict that evolved first.

A complex braid of truth soon emerged from the mold. Zac didn't directly send it toward the Skill Fractals but channeled his Dao through his Pathways. The braid subtly changed under the influence of his Class Pathways before passing through each band of foreign energy. Each circuit swallowed a good chunk of his Mental Energy, but Zac readily provided more from his mold.

It didn't take long before he saw results. Until now, the mutation of his skills had been passive due to the incredibly high-tier truths surrounding them. But the formations hummed to life now that they were powered with his Dao, and the process drastically sped up.

The two skills were being reborn with speed and precision far eclipsing what Zac could accomplish on his own, even when using the assisting arrays. It was a joint effort. Zac set the course, Azol and Mez provided the unique energies of their branches, while Eoz became a bridge that made outside influences part of Zac's path. In fact, Zac found both Ur'Mez's and An'Azol's comprehension complementary to his own as marks of their branches appeared on the fractals.

Mez's talents were related to divination and fate, just like how his Inexorable Path held his desire to control his destiny. This aspect was being added to [Gorehew], and Zac couldn't wait to see the result. Similarly, the unfathomable depths of the Abyss were infused into [Abyssal Phase], moving it toward something that could be mistaken for a bloodline talent. His movement skill's name and flavor text had almost felt like a mockery since learning of the true Abyss, but it would soon live up to the real thing.

The process was extremely smooth. It was as though the arrays were sentient, understanding his will perfectly. It only took six hours for his skills to be reformed and another 30 minutes to redraw the connection between pathways and Skill Fractals. For better or worse, the foreign energies were completely gone when Zac was finished, leaving only the dormant seed behind. The new Skill Fractals were pitch-black, almost resembling scars on his pathways.

However, he could feel their complex patterns and exquisite balance, knowing his two bought skills had gone from something he'd picked up in a Frontier Repository to proper Peak-quality D-grade skills. Zac eagerly opened his Skill Screen to check out the result.

[D] Fatehew - Proficiency: Early. The butcher's blade of the inky depths, sealing providence and reaping lives. Upgradeable.

[D] Abyssal Drive - Proficiency: Early. Become the Abyss. Bring them into your embrace. Upgradeable.

So [Gorehew] had become [Fatehew]. Zac didn't recognize half the patterns on the skill fractal, but the flavor text and the parts he did understand indicated it would have roughly the same role as before. Interestingly, the flavor text of [Abyssal Phase] hadn't changed when upgraded, even if more than 60% of its fractals had been replaced.

Looking at the two skills filled him with far greater confidence for the upcoming battles. He'd already upgraded his mental defenses and [Deathmark]. By adding a movement skill and a general offensive skill, he had a basic kit of everything he needed. The only thing he wouldn't mind adding to his repertoire was a powerful finisher, but his stacks of talismans could temporarily take on that role.

Better yet, the reformation of [Gorehew] and [Abyssal Phase] had given him something beyond the skills themselves. Just as he'd expected, a lesson was hidden within the opportunity. Zac had already touched on the matter when upgrading his Dao Branch, but seeing the upgraded Skill Fractals drove home the point.

His view on cultivation had become too narrow.

He'd spent decades building his path, shoring up his theoretical foundations, understanding of the Dao, and inventing a suitable blueprint. The hard work had been rewarded with two matching Arcane Classes and foundations as stable as bedrock. But he had narrowed his scope too much, afraid to paint even an inch outside his self-imposed lines.

This hyper-focused approach had made him forget an important aspect. The Dao wasn't static packages of truth that had to be categorized one way or another. You needed to be the conductor, not a vessel for the Dao. If he just walked straight ahead in the direction his Daos were currently pointing, ignoring everything around him, was it even cultivation?

Take the Seals and the Thrones, for example. The Peaks was whatever they said it was, and massive wars had been waged over the direction of Dao.

Zac was obviously not there yet, but there was no reason for him to completely shield himself from any outside influence. The key was making the influence your own, something subordinate to your path. For example, his understanding of fate was nothing when faced with the Ur'Mez Clan, but he had benefitted greatly from incorporating some of their heritage into [Fatehew].

The same was true for how his Dao had incorporated some aspects of his Bloodline. It didn't mean the scope of his Branch of the Pale Seal had grown more scattered. It had meant he'd made the truths of the Abyss a supportive aspect of the Pale Seal. Theoretically, he could push this theory to the very

limits, where all Daos under the Heavens became an aspect of Death. Zac even suspected that was how the Abyss operated.

Of course, Zac's revelation didn't mean his previous method was a mistake. He wouldn't have managed to enter Hegemony if he hadn't taken full control over his path and its interlocking parts. You could even say his shift in perspective was part of the natural cycle. A cultivator would undergo periods of integration where they accepted new concepts and impressions. Then, they would condense these things into something uniquely suited to them while discarding what was useless.

An endless cycle of expansion and reduction, each moving your path closer to perfection.

Focusing on his skills had been a welcome distraction, but now that it was dealt with, there was not much else to do but wait. He hadn't heard back from Tavza during the whole skill reformation process, and Zac started to worry after another hour had passed. What if they really didn't let him go because of what happened in the Abyssal Pond?

Zac felt it unlikely, but it was impossible to tell what conflicting interests clashed in the shadows with a faction like the Undead Empire. Then, he finally felt a presence in his lobby, and he quickly walked outside.

"We feared something had gone wrong upon hearing you left the pond after a day. I guess I was worried for nothing."

"I have too much on my plate to swim around for days on end," Zac said with a smile upon seeing who had arrived.

"You know, it's not easy to get to see you," Pavina said with a shake of her head. "Still the same, so consumed with cultivation. Don't forget to slow down now and then."

"I wouldn't mind a vacation, but who will tell the System?" Zac grunted. "What brings you—"

Zac didn't get any further before he was filled with a sense of deadly crisis. His body moved on instinct, [Death's Duality] already swinging toward Pavina before he'd digested what was happening. The silver edge rebuffed a small sword, but it was already moving toward his throat with redoubled speed.



The overbearing pressure brought Zac back to the duels in the Orom World, and he could feel Pavina's attacks were influenced by far deeper truths this time. It was as though every strike of hers was imbued with Death incarnate, and anything they targeted was doomed to be consumed. It was completely different from the surface technique she used years ago.

Zac hadn't fought in his Draugr form for months, but his Inexorable Stance came as naturally as breathing. Not only that, but his awakened Bloodline had turned him into a perfect vessel for his path, where Death and even Conflict felt like the natural state of his body.

The lobby echoed with the clattering of chains as they formed a web of mayhem. They moved with far greater speed and agility than before, to the point Zac couldn't control them at their max pace without losing control. Soon, Pavina was surrounded by chains while Zac fought to lock her down from the front.

The contained battlefield hadn't become a hindrance to Zac's technique. On the contrary, the ceilings and walls let the chains change their trajectory faster and in unpredictable ways while restricting Pavina's options. However, the Monarch was like a fickle wind, impossible to contain.

She avoided his attempts at containment with ease, seemingly everywhere in the room at once. Her blade went for his eyes one moment, only to be striking at his spine the next. There was real lethal intent between every strike, and the pressure only mounted as the seconds passed. Zac didn't mind—he even welcomed the challenge. It was only possible to find your limits when fighting powerful opponents.

And there was so much power waiting to be unearthed.

## **Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1092 - The Power of a World - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1092 - The Power of a World**

The feeling of pushing beyond one's previous limits was addictive. Accounting for his increased attributes was one thing, but he could tell just how much his body had improved from his bloodline awakening. His energy stores hadn't increased much like from his previous improvements since he had a Cosmic Core for that now, but the other benefits of a Draugr constitution had seen marked improvements.



Durability and energy flow had drastically improved. It even felt like his body had added a hidden multiplier on his Attribute Pool. His arms swung harder than they should have, and his feet moved quicker than should be possible. Even his mind seemed to have become sturdier. Zac could really understand why the Abyssal Shores valued those who'd entered the Shallows so much.

Their bodies had become almost perfect for cultivation, especially if you included the significant improvements to affinities.

All other worries disappeared as Zac readily followed Pavina toward the end of the road. The lobby was soon unable to bear the pressure and shattered, but the two didn't pause for a second. The battle continued midair, where his chains formed a spherical domain of utter destruction.

Zac's intractable army of Death forged ahead, but Pavina met Zac's advance with furious destruction. Her Death was one of force and violence rather than Zac's suffocating grip. She kept adding new techniques to her style she'd never used before, but Zac smoothly adapted. He had added decades of experience to his Techniques since they last met, fighting in every conceivable environment.

The fundamental concept behind his Inexorable Stance was containment, where he'd dismantle the enemy's attacks and limit their options. The chains would almost become puppet strings, leading his opponent toward their inevitable doom. However, if the enemy managed to break his pattern and disrupt the rhythm, he'd be back at square one.

Thankfully, visiting environments based on all seventeen peaks had shown the path forward. The more he experienced, the more adaptable he'd become. By the time Zac could smoothly counter whatever his opponent threw his way, no matter their path or what Daos they practiced, his technique would be perfected. Zac understood he wouldn't reach that point by Late-stage Integration or even the Peak. It would take millennia, perhaps even longer, to reach that point.

Fighting Pavina was at least a step in the right direction and an opportunity on its own. How many got the chance to test their understanding against the blade of a Monarch?

A second spike-like sword appeared in Pavina's off-hand when Zac got close to finding an opening, and her fighting style became even more aggressive. Zac still didn't lose his composure. Pavina could resist, but it was like fighting

against the ocean's waves. Even if she resisted or pushed them back, they would always return. Erosion was Death, and Death was inexorable.

The whirling chains slowly shrank their domain while Zac's swings grew more sublime. Pavina fought like she had three heads and six arms, and each clash left shockwaves instilled with enough force and Dao to leave scars on the ancient trees around them. Soon, they reached an impasse where neither could retreat or advance.

"Not bad," Pavina laughed. "But this alone isn't enough to deal with Kator. Let's kick it up a notch."

Suddenly, Zac felt as though he'd been thrown into a gravity well. Pavina looked the same, and she hadn't unlocked more of her Daos or attributes. Yet, Zac suddenly felt like he was looking up at a towering god. There was an intangible pressure where Zac's very essence was suppressed by a higher state of existence, something that a sturdy body and high Strength could shake off.

It wasn't just him being affected, either. Reluctant groans and creaks echoed through the forest as the stout trunks bent like they were enduring immense pressure. Zac was left reeling by the sudden suppression and barely managed to block her next strike. He managed to move his axe just in time, but it felt like he'd been struck by a collapsing star.

Zac's bones groaned from the collision before he crashed into the ground, but he shot back into the sky with an explosion. Zac finally realized what she'd done, and excitement gleamed in his eyes.

Pavina had added the power of her Inner World to her technique. It was undoubtedly just a sliver, yet the difference in pressure was more tangible than when Zac fought an opponent with a Dao Branch the first time. It was no wonder that Monarchy was considered one of the great watersheds within cultivation, where it was almost impossible for D-grade Cultivators to put up a fight.

The leap of strength between E-grade and Hegemony wasn't nearly as pronounced, and you had to get your hands on things like War Regalia and D-grade skills if you wanted to bully people with your levels. That wasn't the case at C-grade, where every strike and every skill was imbued with the power of a world. How could a lower-grade cultivator compete against that?

Their sparring session had been mostly even until now, where both used their own means to fight for an advantage. On occasion, Zac would be in the lead, only to have it wrenched back by Pavina in unexpected ways. Now, that was out the window, where Zac felt he was about to be swallowed by an avalanche.

But something within his body roared with defiance, and boundless force pushed back. It wasn't his Void Emperor bloodline or its Hidden Nodes. [Void Heart] was still in a comatose state after overindulging on Abyssal Energy, and [Purity of the Void] couldn't help with this kind of problem.

The Ichor and Miasma in his body had almost ground to a halt, but it suddenly roared back to life as [Adamance of Eoz] spread a shroud of darkness through his body. The effect was immediate and overwhelming. It barely felt like it was Miasma coursing through his Pathways any longer. It more resembled Abyssal Energy, and it completely ignored the outside pressure.

Pavina's Inner World tried to hamper its progress, but it was useless. Zac's personal Abyss welcomed and consumed any force exerted upon him, like a stone dropped into a bottomless lake. He'd only been able to fight at 70% after Pavina's C-grade abilities were unleashed, not counting his turbid energy flow, which would have made Skill Activation nigh-impossible. Now, he was back at 95%.

Neither used any skills, but Zac could tell the strengthening effect of his Miasma had at least doubled. Zac wasn't even sure he'd need defensive skills against most E-grade cultivators beyond this point. Between his body's comprehensive upgrades from the bloodline awakening and [Adamance of Eoz], his skin would become impregnable armor as long as he channeled his energy.

Clashing with pure technique didn't give him a chance to observe the changes to his evolved [Immutability of Eoz], but Zac was disappointed to find that [Conviction of Eoz] hadn't seen much improvement. The effect was still there, allowing him to push beyond his body's natural limits. Actually, he could take it even further with his upgraded constitution, but that was more a benefit of his awakened Bloodline than the node itself. Zac could extract a bit more potential for the same amount of strain, but the improvement was only by a few percent—nowhere near the significant change to [Adamance of Eoz].

Was it related to purpose? Simply sparring with Pavina wasn't enough to bring out most of the node. It might also be a matter of scaling. His F-grade

boosting skills had started to lose efficiency by the time he reached Middle E-grade, as they could not multiply such a massive attribute pool. Perhaps the upgrade to [Conviction of Eoz] simply let him continue to use its effect into the D-grade while only slightly improving its effect.

Zac guessed he shouldn't complain either way. After reaching Early Shallows, Zac could boost his combat power by over 20% without any downside. That was like having a Berserking Treasure permanently active, and it could be pushed even further when he had his back against the wall. And while the cost of Vigor was greater, his body's stores seemed to have more than tripled. He'd have to eat a small mountain of food after a fight to replenish, but he should be able to use his Hidden Nodes much longer without worrying about starvation.

His Bloodline let him resist the pressure of Pavina's Inner World, but it wasn't enough to seize an advantage. And even if he did, Pavina would increase her strength some more. Zac felt this was a good stopping point. He hadn't quite reached his limits, but he didn't want to show all his cards to Kator, who would undoubtedly get his hands on a recording of this sparring session. However, Zac suddenly had an idea.

"Mind if I try something?"

"Go ahead," Pavina grinned. "Show me what you got."

Zac nodded, and streams of Miasma entered his newly formed skill. However, the response, or lack thereof, almost made him lose focus. [Fatehew] didn't activate, seemingly only half-filled even if it didn't accept any more Death-attuned Energy. Zac was confused for a few seconds before realizing what was missing.

A stream of dense Mental Energy emerged from his Soul Aperture, filling the missing sections of the fractal. Swirls of Darkness immediately surrounded [Death's Duality] and his chains, looking like small streams of pure Abyssal Waters. It suddenly felt like the whole forest had grown dimmer, the sounds of their ongoing exchange muted.

Pavina's eyes widened slightly in surprise, but Zac wouldn't give her the time to analyze the skill. He unleashed a forceful swing aimed at her neck, giving her no choice but to parry with one of her swords. She clearly used more strength than before, and her weapon wasn't even pushed back when

[Death's Duality] slammed into it with enough force to make the nearby trees quiver.

The Monarch planned on transitioning the parry into a ruthless jab. However, she was forced to give up on that as an intangible blade passed right through her sword, continuing unimpeded toward her neck.

A soft sheen covered her neck at the last moment, and Zac felt himself lose some Mental Energy. [Fatehew] wasn't a continuous skill, but only one of the swirls surrounding the axe had been lost. Zac summoned a new one easily enough, but its appearance made him frown. Going by his impression of the skill, it should have grown a bit darker, yet it looked exactly the same.

The two exchanged a few more attacks before coming to a stop. It was like the surrounding trees released a collective sigh of relief as their shaking crowns calmed down.

"A very interesting skill," Pavina nodded. "A Weapon Imbuement Skill requiring mental defenses to block a physical attack. And it even targets your Dao Heart."

The most noticeable change of [Fatehow] was how it no longer produced a large jagged blade. The old skill had suffered from the same downsides as [Nature's Edge]—there wasn't much point in forming a three-meter blade in front of his axe. It would be in the way during a melee like when he fought Pavina just now, and he had skills like [Deathmark] for large-scale destruction.

The solution he'd picked for [Nature's Edge] was to transform it into a skill that directly imbued the weapon itself rather than form a blade. His melee strikes would gain additional effects that would synergize with his technique. He already had [Blighted Cut] on his undead side for a similar purpose, though its effect wasn't quite up to par.

Zac's original plan had been to adjust [Blighted Cut] to better suit his combat style, but something about Mez's Bloodline had made him feel [Gorehew] could take on that role even better. He didn't quite know what to do with his old skill after the sudden change of plans, but he figured he could turn it into a chain-exclusive skill that focused more on restriction than the corrosive effect.

"I'm sure it's nothing compared to the great things you've created over the years," Zac smiled, remembering Pavina's fondness for some blatant flattery. "How was the effect?"

As expected, a gratified smile spread across Pavina's face as they landed on the ground.

"It's nothing much," Pavina said with fake modesty. "I could tell something was different about the Weapon Imbuement the moment you activated it, but the effect only became clear after our weapons collided. It suddenly felt like I had no hope of victory, and that feeling was only magnified when the spiritual blade passed through my weapon."

"The pressure on my Dao Heart won't make much difference in a sparring session, but it should be very useful in real life-and-death situations. Even veterans will have some doubts and fears, and this skill can amplify those thoughts. The more pressure you apply, the stronger the influence will become.

"As for the soul aspect, I doubt it's enough to cause grievous wounds. But it's still very suited to you. After all, I've still not met any other infighter foolish enough to cultivate their soul."

Zac grinned, not minding the backhanded compliment. Pavina had always been conflicted over his focus on his soul. He had his reasons persist on this path, but he had long felt his powerful soul was underutilized. As luck would have it, upgrading [Gorehew] had finally given him the opportunity to make use of his powerful soul and vast Mental Energy reserves.

As Pavina said, the intangible blade made from Mental Energy wouldn't be able to kill a Hegemon. At best, it'd deal surface wounds that would slowly accumulate into something incapacitating during a prolonged battle. However, the soul blade would exhaust some of his enemy's Mental Energy. At least, it should have.

"Did the blade siphon some of your Mental Energy?" Zac asked.

"Well, no," Pavina smiled. "But that's because my Inner World's pull is greater than yours. I doubt too many Hegemons can take those hits without sacrificing a chunk."

Zac nodded in relief. He'd been worried his skill was faulty for a minute. [Fatehew] was supposed to grow slightly stronger each time he successfully destroyed some of his opponent's Mental Energy—an inheritance from the skill's predecessor. In return, the skill would cost more and more to activate.

That was a trade-off Zac was more than willing to take. Even if he spent more than twice what he exhausted, he'd still come out way ahead against everyone except Mentalists. An exhausted mind would make mistakes, and mistakes lead to Death.

"It's amazing how much you've improved since we met last time," Pavina said as she stowed away her weapons. "You need to get used to fighting in the air, though. High-grade battlefields are generally divided into layers, with D-grade cultivators battling above. That way, you can prevent your soldiers from being caught in the crossfire. And if you manage to push back the enemy Hegemons, you can unleash devastation on their backlines."

"I'm working on updating my technique. Flying takes some time getting used to, though," Zac smiled.

"It's fine. You just broke through," Pavina shrugged. "Besides, most of the Kan'Tanu are pretty trashy from what I've heard, and most Heart Curses should only be a mild inconvenience to you now that you've awakened. You'll be able to figure things out on the battlefields."

"I'm guessing you didn't just come over to ambush me?" Zac said, seeing the opportunity to broach the most pressing matter.

"I was sent here to test you out and take you to the teleporter," Pavina smiled.

"I can leave?" Zac asked to confirm.

"Of course. We need you to start working on that quest of yours. Who knows how many hoops the System will have you jump through to optimize your chances inside the inheritance."

Zac inwardly breathed out in relief, and the two immediately set course for the Nexus Hub he first arrived in. Pavina didn't teleport him over, allowing the two to catch up. He was surprised to find that Commander Kaldor had actually entered the Orom willingly to investigate its suspicious actions.

To think the huge fish had used its captives to fuel some Fate-based array searching for the Left Imperial Palace. The thought almost made Zac laugh, seeing how he and Iz ruined eons of work. It didn't particularly help him in any way, but it still felt good to hear the Voidcatcher's scheme had been ruined. Zac couldn't even imagine how many people on the frontier had died because of its search for the Left Imperial Palace.



"So what do you think?" Zac said. "About my duel in four weeks?"

"Uh, work hard on your cultivation, alright?"

Zac grimaced upon seeing Pavina's weak smile and darting eyes. That bad, huh?

## **Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1093 - Bred for War - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1093 - Bred for War**

"Kator is incredibly powerful," Pavina sighed upon seeing Zac's look. "I wouldn't last ten seconds if we were the same grade. A few lucky Reavers are born with special bones that provide unique and incredible abilities. They call them Miracle Bones because that's what they enable. Only one out of a hundred thousand purebloods gets one. Getting two is a blessing from the Heavens. Kator has four that I know of."

Zac grunted noncommittally, taking the news in stride. It wasn't that he underestimated those Miracle Bones—he wouldn't be surprised if they were even stronger than Hidden Nodes or Specialty cores. Four of them might double Kator's combat strength or more. This was simply how things worked. Anyone who could dominate a whole generation, especially of a powerful faction like the Izh'Rak Reavers, was bound to have something to fall back on.

It could be inborn advantages, advantages gained through unique opportunities, or more likely both.

"Do you know the rules?" Zac asked. "Not much point if we use skills and our full strength. He's right at the threshold of entering Late Hegemony."

"We have training arrays similar to the dueling platforms back in the Orom World. Kator's effective attributes will be reduced to roughly your level, and his Daos will see similar restrictions. You'll duel as we did now, using only your inborn advantages and technique to decide a victor."

"Really?" Zac said with a raised brow. "That seems surprisingly generous coming from that guy."

"He's pretty arrogant and wants to succeed where Commander Kaldor failed," Pavina laughed. "But if you fight like you did today, my money's on my little boss. He's also been debriefed on your battle with the Commander, so he'll be

ready for that weird trick you used. You might want to think of other roads to victory."

The weird trick she mentioned was no doubt [Void Zone], which he'd been forced to briefly use when Kaldor began cheating. He'd said it was a Draugr bloodline talent, but Kaldor was no fool. Even if Zac belonged to one of the lost branches, you'd have to be blind to mistake his Void abilities for something linked to the Abyss.

The two soon appeared at the inner square, where a familiar figure awaited him. Calrin's aura was stable, but he looked haggard, like he'd endured seven taxing years since they last met. However, his visage lit up upon seeing Zac, though the cherubic little face soon scrunched up in a scowl.

"How did things go?" Zac smiled as they walked over.

"You wretch!" Calrin wheezed with a low volume. "How could you just leave me here for a week? Throwing me to the wolves."

"You sometimes have to take risks for profits," Zac coughed. "Is everything in order with the manufacturer?"

"It should have been," Calrin said with annoyance. "Our contract with Brightglave Munitions was finalized two days ago, but they won't release the wares."

"What's going on?" Zac said, turning to Pavina.

"No idea," Pavina frowned. "Ah, here they come."

One by one, the representatives from the two camps appeared out of thin air. Zac wasn't surprised everyone was seeing him off, but he got a bad feeling upon seeing the slight frown on Tavza's face.

"Running back home so soon? You're not reneging on our deal, are you?" Kator laughed.

"Aren't those my words?" Zac countered. "I hear our wares are being held in limbo?"

"So they are," Kator nodded before turning to a gate in the distance, and Zac's eyes thinned upon seeing two Revenants step through. "You have been

running wild on the Empire's dime for a while now, and we don't have anything to show for it beyond non-binding promises and second-grade information. It's about time we implemented some oversight to our investment."

"You want me to bring spies with me back home?" Zac said with a displeased frown, though he was inwardly relieved.

He was already acting under the assumption that the Undead Empire was observing his every move, so having two shadows following him around wouldn't change much. It would have been much trickier to deal with excuses to keep him in Kavista.

"Rebellious as ever," Kator snickered. "I simply want to ensure that the resources we provide are used efficiently and for their intended purpose. Remember, our support is contingent on you progressing your quest as Arcaz Umbri'Zi."

'There are indeed clauses in our contract that can halt delivery of products,' Calrin's voice echoed in Zac's mind. 'I tried to get rid of it, but they didn't budge on that one. An imperial command can divert all resources meant for us to their own war machine.'

"I want you to have finished the conquest part of your quest within two months," Kator continued. "As for the sealbearer, we'll provide one if fate fails you."

"And if I can't conquer nine worlds within the timeframe?"

"Then you're simply too incompetent, and sending War Machines to you is a waste of resources," Kator shrugged.

Zac snorted, but he wasn't worried. Nine Worlds in two months was roughly one successful conquest a week. It was a tough schedule, but he had multiple ways to lessen the burden, from his Cosmic Vessels to his other body working in tandem.

"The liaisons are not just there to keep an eye on things," Laz interjected upon seeing the atmosphere grow tense. "We handpicked Serzo and Petrus because of their experience and expertise. Your faction is young and lacking in some aspects. You could benefit from some outside feedback."

"Serzo is a follower I brought. He's a veteran who accumulated great merit in our war with the Havarok Empire," Enis Umbri'Zi elaborated. "He was tasked with getting newly awakened worlds up and running, and he should have insights that can benefit your budding society."

Zac nodded in thanks, knowing Enis was telling him this to make clear his allegiance.

"Petrus was raised in the White Sky Phalanx, giving him ample insights into how to run a well-oiled war machine," Toss said. "Efficiency is critical when you can't steamroll your enemy. A few adjustments here and there can lower expenditures and casualties by a surprising degree. Stretched across the duration of the war, it might be the difference between victory and defeat."

"You're right. Thank you all for your help until now. I'll keep working hard on my end," Zac said with a bow.

"Be careful. Fate is stirring," Tavza said.

"I will. The same goes for you," Zac nodded before glancing at the two Early D-grade Revenants. "Let's go."

"Remember, your life is most important," Laz fussed. "Don't overextend yourself in search of quick progress. These Kan'Tanu have some troublesome elites, and there are outsiders searching for seals on their side as well."

Zac, Calrin, and his two new 'advisors' soon stepped out from a Teleportation Array by the Nexus Hub of Port Atwood. The Sky Gnome didn't even say goodbye before sprinting toward the safety of his office, his stubby legs showcasing amazing speed. Zac smiled as he heard Calrin grumble under his breath until he exited the range of his Soul Sense.

He turned to the two liaisons, who curiously looked around. "Welcome to the Atwood Empire. I'll do my best to accommodate your needs during your stay. However, if I find you're snooping around where you shouldn't or harm my citizens, there'll be consequences."

"Master Umbri'Zi, you don't need to worry," Serzo smiled. "While we are here to ensure the resources provided are used properly, we've no interest in causing trouble. I hope you can see us as assets. As the lords said, we both have some experience that could prove useful."

"I'm not foolish enough to jump into the matters between you young masters," Petrus added. "I'm here to do my job and keep my head down. I've already familiarized myself with the first batch of equipment that'll be sent over momentarily. If you want further advice, I will do my best to provide it. If not, I'll stay out of the way."

Zac nodded and led the two out after setting them up with guest tokens. They didn't have any bombs, but they would let Zac's people track their movements. In return, they worked as credentials, providing access to teleporters and various regions depending on their grade.

"Let's go; we're expected," Zac said after sending a couple of messages through his communicator.

"Where to?" Serzo asked.

"We've been setting up an elite army to quickly rack up merit and conquests," Zac explained. "I'm hoping it'll be up and running within a few days. Any input you can provide to make that happen is appreciated."

He'd been impatient since returning from his first visit to the battlefronts, be it from reading the daily reports or seeing his position on the Ranking board being overtaken. His two spots had already been pushed down a peg by Helian Ailo. The fact that the global ladders didn't list people's actual merit meant it was impossible to tell whether he was about to lose another position. It constantly felt like he had people breathing down his neck.

The three made their way toward the government building, their appearance barely making any waves among Port Atwood's pedestrians.

"It's quite novel," Serzo said as he glanced at a Revenant and Ishiate walking side by side. "I hear your planet became this way after the realignment failed midway?"

"That's part of it," Zac nodded. "I'm guessing it was also a gift by the System because of my condition."

"I would have expected greater resistance to our kin," Petrus commented. "I've participated in two Incursions myself. We're always sent to the thick of it, leading to massive casualties among the natives."

"There's been some problems, but we're working on it," Zac said, glancing at the two advisors. "You should probably refrain from advertising that you're from the Empire, though. People might not be as accepting of imperial undead as my own people."

They soon reached their destination, where Zac's other body and a few of his generals waited. The two Revenants surreptitiously inspected Zac's human form, but Zac knew these two wouldn't find anything amiss. The group moved to a private meeting room by the Command Center, immediately getting into it.

"These two gentlemen are Petrus and Serzo, the representatives I mentioned in the message," Draugr Zac said.

Human Zac slowly nodded. "Welcome. I'm sure Arcaz has told you all you need to know. Let's get started. I've mostly been in seclusion, so Ilvere will catch you all up to speed."

"Ahem," Ilvere said. "We're slightly ahead of schedule but need two more days before everything is arranged. We're still vetting members and adapting our setup based on the new Blazing Comet equipment."

"What's that?" Petrus asked. "What about the Brightglaive Munitions?"

"I negotiated another deal while Arcaz met with you guys," human Zac explained. "Blazing Comet is a weapon series provided by the Allbright Empire. It's roughly equivalent to your Moonglaive series."

"Lord Atwood's social circle is indeed wide," Serzo smiled.

"Well, it was mostly a matter of having a decent production line of Cosmic Vessels," Zac shrugged. "Now we have two sources of equipment, one for each half of the Empire. This way, we won't be as restricted when configuring our armies."

"The matter of your integrated armies is one of the things we were instructed to broach," Petrus said. "We recommend separating your armies into Life and Death. It's simply more practical."

"We understand that you wish to integrate your people, but you should be aware it comes with certain practical challenges," Serzo added. "When the Undead Empire enters a neutral battleground, there's a thirty percent chance

it'll be Death-attuned. It's an accommodation by the System to slightly level the playing field.

"With an integrated army, I assume these odds will get lowered, and your undead warriors will generally find themselves at a disadvantage."

"It's not just about the battleground itself," Petrus said. "You all fought the Kavriel Province during your integration, so you should understand our fundamental strategy. We have the means to convert any battleground to suit our needs. The terraforming will act as a weapon while allowing our soldiers to fight at full strength. But such a strategy doesn't work if half your army is made up of Dreamers."

"You're right; the need for different environments is a thorny issue," Ilvere nodded. "However, our undead population is far smaller than our living one. We simply can't field proper undead armies as things currently stand. Instead, we have developed methods to create mobile and contained pockets of Miasma on any battlefield."

"It's also a matter of the Empire's path," Draugr Zac added. "We're ultimately a Life-Death faction, and I think blindly copying the Undead Empire's methods will harm us in the long run. I'd rather work toward a method uniquely designed for us that'll turn what you call a disadvantage into a weapon our enemies will have difficulties adapting to."

"True, strategies using both Miasma and Cosmic Energy have unique advantages," Petrus nodded. "War Arrays can be strong against one but weak against the other. The White Sky Phalanx has experimented with adding Dreamer units before. We ultimately found it more convenient and efficient to focus on what we're good at, but you have more to gain from developing this path."

"We've had preliminary success with some strategies, but if we can't make it work in larger engagements, we'll revisit the topic," Draugr Zac said before turning to Ilvere. "So, who's coming with me?"

With the demands from the Undead Empire, it had become clear that his Draugr half had to take charge of the first battalion. Besides, his Draugr half was simply stronger after the recent gains. It wouldn't hurt having that extra assurance on the frontlines while they were still figuring things out. Meanwhile, his Human side could keep working on his cultivation.



"We've decided to use the Second Battlefront for the new unit and split its current soldiers among the other twelve," Ilvere said. "Rhubat will stay, but step down and become your second-in-command."

Ultimately, they'd decided against opening a fourteenth Battlefront. It would add undue pressure during the restructuring. Zac would instead wait until the second elite battalion was set up in a few weeks before taking that step. This solution also solved the issue he'd broached with Rhubat, spreading the Zhix squads among the other battlefronts in hopes it'd help with their integration.

"We've also transferred Carva, Janos, Mondrik Ashtos, and Ciru Volor. Joanna Thompson and Carl Elrod will lead independent bounty-hunting units. Mark Marshall and Jarmon will oversee the Navy. The other commanders will stay on their current assignment, integrating the next wave of recruits."

Zac nodded. It turned out that the challenge wasn't getting enough people to sign up but that almost every elite and commander wanted to join the new elite squad. He couldn't put all his Sealbearers and core personnel in the same squad, leaving the other fronts exposed, so Ilvere had picked a few from each race. The others would get a chance later through rotations or by joining human Zac's army.

The meeting continued for another few hours, and Zac was happy that the newcomers didn't cause any trouble. Both provided valuable insights, especially with Petrus, who better understood Brightglaive Munitions' equipment. There was a difference between making plans based on spec sheets and practical knowledge.

The promised equipment had arrived by the time the meeting adjourned, and Zac joined the elite army for a series of war games to get used to the new arrays while sorting out the kinks in their cooperation. Zac only oversaw the training with his Draugr body. His human half had already returned to his Cultivation Cave to absorb Life-attuned energy and ponder on his Evolutionary Path.

The benefit of having harmonized his two classes and Daos was already becoming apparent. It allowed him to retool some of the ideas and concepts he'd encountered in the Abyssal Pond for his other side. It couldn't fully replace the need for inspiration into the concept of Evolution or Life, but it helped shore up his foundations and figure out a direction of study.

Three days passed, and everything was finally in place. The battalion was still rough around the edges, but it was ready to be fielded. Zac unhesitantly called for departure, and it only took an hour before the whole army stood in front of the second battlefront array.

Rhubat and Carva were off dealing with the reset and reactivation of the Battlefront Array, leaving Zac standing atop a stage with his other commanders behind him. Zac felt a pang of guilt as he looked out across the sea of faces looking up at him, but he quelled the feeling.

These people had all volunteered, and their bloody auras left no room for interpretation. They walked the martial path just like himself, all with blood and grime under their nails. They were the best fighters his Empire could field, and they were just as eager as he. Zac slowly floated into the air, his growing killing intent enough to silence whispers in the huge crowd.

"I'm sure you've heard the rumors already. I am Zachary Atwood, or Arcaz Umbri'Zi, depending on how you look at it," Zac said, his voice carrying far and wide. "I won't waste your time with empty speeches or talks about righteousness or glory. This is war. Right and wrong don't matter. The invaders want what's ours, and it's kill or be killed.

"I am not satisfied with passively defending. I will strike back with everything I got and turn their aggression into fodder for my path. Since you volunteered to join, I assume you feel the same way. Our goal is simple; we'll strike fast, and we'll strike hard—one conquest per week, where we take everything they have before we disappear.

"During my travels off-world, I encountered an ancient storm where Life and Death coexisted. The two elements working had formed something far deadlier than either could on their own. The locals simply called the region 'the Calamity'.

"That's the kind of power and ferocity we need to survive these desperate times. We need to become a force of nature, unpredictable and unstoppable," Zac said, his Killing Intent spreading further and further out. "We'll secure Life through Death and destruction, seize our future with our own hands. And should we fall, it'll only be after we've made these Kan'Tanu invaders pay a price they'll never forget."

The huge pillar behind him lit up to punctuate his words, radiating a sinister light. It didn't feel like a gateway leading to glory, but rather a portal to hell. Yet

none of the soldiers wavered, and while none uttered a word, Zac could feel their auras surging. Soon, hundreds of thousands of streaks of Killing Intent rose to join Zac's own, forming a huge storm of violence. Zac nodded in satisfaction at the scene.

"Welcome to the Calamity Company."

## **Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1094 - Entering the Fray - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1094 - Entering the Fray**

Acrid smoke and an overcast sky greeted Zac as he stepped out from the battlefield teleporter, surrounded by his generals and commanders. The view was unfamiliar, but the blue prompt appearing before him was not.

[Second Battlefield of the Atwood Empire. No assigned leader.]

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

Rhubat had wrapped up their previous campaign two days ago before resetting it, allowing Zac to enter without spending any more Faction Merit.

"Yes," Zac said.

[Leadership assumed. Due to individual Evaluation and Contribution, awarded role as Battlefield Commander.]

[General assignment: Conquer neutral battlefield. Merit awarded after successful conquest, depending on individual contribution. NOTE: Capturing resource points does not increase contribution.]

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

Zac skimmed the prompts, seeing they were mostly the same as the two previous times he'd stepped onto the battlefield. The most important distinction was that he'd been designated leader, and not just for the Calamity

Company. Being assigned commander let Zac breathe out in relief. It meant he could enact the optimal strategy for the upcoming campaign.

Petrus and Serzo had provided a lot of practical information over the past three days, one of which was how the System arranged the war and leadership role. The Kavriel Province had an almost uncountable number of battlefronts, and they'd already figured out all the ins and outs of the System's rules. For example, only battlefields with standout leaders had Battlefront Commanders.

The previous battlefronts in the Atwood Empire didn't have any. The assigned leaders were just captains who wouldn't have the authority to order the other factions around. Meanwhile, a Battlefront Commander had authority over anyone stepping onto the battlefield, be it your faction or the others. It was definitely a role you wanted for yourself and dreaded an outsider would get, but Zac hadn't been certain whether he could get it because of his unique designation.

Being a Battlefront Commander didn't mean you had to stay in the commander's tent. Zac opened a special war interface, arranging official positions for Rhubat and the others. He left some slots open in case any of his temporary allies showed promise.

There were still only his own people stepping onto the alien world, but the nearby platforms indicated this campaign would consist of three parties. It usually wouldn't take more than a couple of minutes before the System found some people to matchmake you with. There was no telling who'd step through those teleporters, but the fact that he'd already been awarded Battlefield Commander rank indicated they wouldn't be too strong.

Zac ultimately didn't care what kind of people showed up; the Calamity Company was never meant to depend on any allies. His people had the strength and resources to deal with the enemy alone. If they got some assistance, then great. Zac didn't mind sharing some of the spoils as long as the outsiders pulled their weight. And if troublemakers or people shirking their duty appeared... His newfound role had various ways to deal with that.

Rhubat, Carva, and Janos smoothly took over the administrative duties while Zac turned to inspect the battlefield. The world they'd been sent to was Early D-grade, though the energy wasn't nearly as dense as back on Earth. It even felt hollow, like the planet was leaking spirituality. It wasn't hard to guess why.

This time, they'd appeared in the middle of an endless wartorn city, with the Battlefront Arrays placed on a huge square.

Everything around them was in ruins. Whole city blocks had been leveled by supersized towers falling on them, and scars hundreds of meters deep leaked chaotic energies. Only a few structures remained standing, their burned-out husks reaching hundreds of meters into the air like jagged teeth. Zac even spotted two mountain-like castles in the distance, though they seemed to have been hit the hardest.

Whatever happened on this planet didn't take place long ago. Buildings around them were still burning, which was the source of the thick haze that irritated Zac's eyes. Zac could even sense resentment and Death from every direction, even if he couldn't see any bodies or signs of life. Neither could Zac tell where the enemy camp was located. The scouting units led by Carva were already pouring into the various pathways, using various means to conceal their presence.

Simple battlements were blocking some of the nearby streets, but it was a far cry from the sturdy walls he'd seen on the two previous battlefields. Of course, Zac's engineers carried whole fortresses in their spatial rings, which they could set up in short order. He wasn't worried about safety but rather the confusing environment. And he wasn't the only one.

"Urban warfare," Mark Marshall grunted as he approached Zac. "It's a bit better now that people can fly and zip about like superheroes, but it's still a pain in the ass."

Zac nodded at his commander. He hadn't had much contact with Mark, but he was a former fighter pilot and high-ranking general of the old world. He was fifty-five by the time the integration arrived, but he didn't look much older than Zac after reaching Peak E-grade. He was one of the most important talents of the Marshall Clan in the post-Thea age, though his skillset wasn't purely martial.

He was among the first to enter Zac's Navy, and he'd been training with Cosmic Vessels for years already. He wasn't at the level of some of the pilots they'd recruited from the Million Gates Territory, but he made for a perfect admiral when considering his allegiances and military experience.

"This should be a conquered planet that's been repurposed into a neutral battleground," Petrus said as he walked over.

The Revenant had been attached to the Calamity Company, while Serzo had chosen to tour Elysium. Spy or not, he had over two hundred years of experience as a member of one of the Multiverse's greatest armies.

"The Kan'Tanu likely destroyed whatever faction the planet belonged to and harvested the people and resources before leaving. We already know that large-scale human sacrifices are needed to breed their curses."

"How do you know it's not just a random battlefield the System has conjured or moved over?" Mark asked curiously.

The Revenant looked around for a moment before taking out something that looked like a telescope. He didn't point it toward the sky but rather in a certain direction of dense smoke. Zac was curious about what the thing did, but his brows scrunched together upon sensing a familiar aura—the aura of the Kan'Tanu Heart Curses.

"This aura is just a few kilometers away," Petrus explained as he realigned the telescope. "There's another spot there. The source should be Cursed Grounds, semi-sentient spots of the Kan'Tanu corruption. They aren't as dangerous as the real curses, but they can last for weeks outside any hosts, longer if they get something to feed on."

The Revenant shook his head and stowed away the gadget. "If Death-attuned worlds are the Empire's home ground, then this can be considered the cultists'."

"I bet it's cheaper for the System to parcel such a world into a few dozen battlefronts than transporting worlds from other dimensions," Zac muttered as he looked around.

Both the Atwood Army and the Undead Empire had thoroughly explored these neutral battlegrounds, and none were proper planets. They were by no means small, but you'd eventually reach a spatial barrier if you traveled far enough. You also couldn't enter space from these things since the void waited outside.

"These battlefronts are quite rare, but they should become more common as the war progress," Petrus said. "I think the System only repurposes these fallen worlds when deemed unsalvageable."

"Is it possible we can find locals among the ruins?"

"It's possible," Petrus nodded. "They are not considered allies, though. We have awakened quite a few survivors without any issues."

Zac understood what Petrus meant. You normally couldn't just kill fellow Zecians on the battlefield. At the least, it would come with penalties to your merit. You could also become branded a wartime traitor by the System, which put a huge bounty on your head. However, it looked like the citizen of fallen worlds didn't enjoy those protections.

"What do you two suggest?" Zac asked.

"Shock and awe," Mark said. "The less time we give the enemy to entrench themselves, the better. This environment heavily favors the Kan'Tanu. If we wait too long, the ruins will be covered in Heart Curse booby traps."

"The Human is right," Petrus said. "Fighting in this environment puts more focus on individual strength and squad cooperation than raw numbers, which is advantageous to your elite army. However, it's also more complicated than normal battles where you can advance in one big group. It's good practice for cleaning out real capitals, but your army needs more basic experience before taking on these complicated tasks. I suggest you storm their location and use your new toys to create a standard battlefield."

"How about I zip over and deal with the enemy leaders while the soldiers catch up?" Zac ventured.

"Lord Kator has tried that before to save time," Petrus said with a shake of his head. "An impregnable barrier will appear if you try to attack the enemy base too early."

"He's right, Warmaster," Rhubat rumbled. "I once tried the same thing. The Heavens call for outright war and prevent any shortcuts."

"I guess it wouldn't be much of a war if you could send powerful assassins to take out generals the moment you arrived," Zac shrugged. "How long is the grace period?"

"One moment," Petrus said as he took out another item.

This one was more familiar to Zac. It was a long-range scanner, a simpler variant of what was installed in all Cosmic Vessels.



"This battlefield is quite large," Petrus muttered as he fiddled with the item. "The higher the grade and the larger the area, the longer the grace period. I'd guess six hours for this one."

"Then we'll do as you suggest," Zac nodded. "I want to move as soon as our scouts find the enemy. I'll go check out the others."

The first of the two teleporters was already gathering power, which meant their first ally was about to emerge. Zac walked over, accompanied by Joanna. Zac felt like his silent prayers for useful allies were answered a moment later as a stream of Corpse Lords emerged.

They were all over four meters tall, crafted by heavily relying on some sort of bear-like beastkin by the looks of it. Zac guessed some Lich Clan or Coalition had gotten their hands on a large enough batch to create a cohesive Corpse Lord Clan. It was far better than putting bodies together at random. For one, it saved a lot of time, but it also helped the Corpse Lords reproduce independently. The more similar the genealogical makeup of two Corpse Lords, the better the odds of conceiving. If they were too different, it was simply impossible.

The leader in the front, a towering beast over six meters tall and at the peak of Early D-grade, looked relieved upon seeing Zac. However, his head turned in confusion as he took in the diverse army gathering across the square.

"Uh, my lord," the Corpse Lord bowed. "I am Hor Husko of the Husko Clan, a subsidiary of the Santomar Crypts."

Zac didn't recognize the names at all. He guessed it was some random faction in the Kavriel Province. After all, the province was far more than just the two C-grade continents they controlled. In fact, the Kavriel Province was the largest faction in the sector, only trumped in size and population by two semi-cohesive alliances.

"I'm Arcaz Umbri'Zi," Zac said and flashed a token he'd been given during his stay in Kavista. "It's good to have you here. I'm taking charge of this battlefield. I hope you don't mind."

"Lord Umbri'Zi?!" Hor blurted before bowing again, this time far deeper. "Of course, my lord. Anything you require. Just treat our army as your own."

The Corpselord's expression was calm and respectful, but Zac's far more powerful soul let him sense the unstable fluctuations in Hor's mind. Zac couldn't decipher what emotions the fluctuations represented like Vilari, but it wasn't difficult to guess what was running through his head. He was excited since meeting someone as connected as Zac was a huge opportunity. However, he was probably worried for his men, considering their huge gap in status.

"Ready yourselves," Zac said. "We plan on forcing our way through this battlefield as quickly as possible. Our goal is to finish this conquest within a week. But don't worry. I'm not looking to use you or the other allies as sacrificial pawns. We have the resources to deal with this alone if need be."

"Don't worry, my lord. The Husko Clan will not let you down. We don't have much, but we're strong and sturdy," Hor said. "If it's alright with the lord, I'll immediately coordinate our forces."

Zac waved over Rhubat as he added Hor as an official commander. "Make an inventory and find a slot for our friends here."

"Of course, Warmaster," Rhubat nodded as the Anointed and Corpselord shared a measuring look.

Hor was confused why a pureblood Draugr was working with various races of Dreamers, but he knew better than to question the situation. Zac nodded at the Corpselord before turning to the third and final teleporter.

Things didn't go as smoothly this time around. A wholly unimpressive human faction appeared, clearly shocked to run into such a wide array of undead. Their leader was an aged Hegemon whose strength was already in decline, and the old man seemed more concerned about not getting killed or turned than coordinating the war effort. He was more than happy to stay behind to "guard the base." Zac left them to their own devices and had a few people stay behind to ensure they didn't cause any trouble.

Forty minutes later, they got word back from the scouts. They had spotted movement in the distance. Twenty minutes later, they had a good enough idea of what direction the Kan'Tanu base was located to make a decision.

"We're setting out," Zac simply said, and four streams of warriors poured through all major pathways leading west.

The largest stream was shrouded in smoke even denser than from the burning wreckage. It was produced by heavily armored combat liches carrying large braziers hanging from chains in one hand and scepters in the other. They looked like unholy Paladins and made up every twentieth row in the stream.

They were the battlefield support providing protection and Miasma, and every undead squad would have at least one of these clerics. The braziers were a form of Miasma generators, whose small size would normally make them less effective than normal Unholy Beacons. However, between the Liches' empowerment and the high-quality incense burning within, they actually released far more Miasma into the surroundings than the standard beacons he'd encountered during the Incursion.

Within the train of deathly smoke, Zac felt the diverse auras of the soldiers harmonize into ten thousand units. Similar scenes occurred across the other divisions, with innumerable War Arrays activated simultaneously. For a moment, Zac almost saw four deadly spears pointed in the direction of the Kan'Tanu camp, and he got goosebumps from the power they exuded.

Their whole army hadn't even passed through the teleporter yet, but six hundred thousand warriors would be more than enough unless their enemy proved unusually powerful. If you looked at individual skills, these people were the best of the best. The same could be said of their equipment, and Zac doubted there'd be more than 50 Early D-grade armies that were outfitted so extravagantly.

Hundreds of army engineers ran ahead to remove any rubble or other roadblocks, while the rest stayed by the lumbering line of huge contraptions by the tail-end of his army. It was the War Machines being pushed forward, gliding just over the ground by using the same form of arrays as E-grade Flying Treasures.

These restricted battlegrounds didn't have the type of environment that supported that form of flight, but the siege equipment came installed with backup systems that enabled flight at the cost of more energy. It would have been more convenient to carry the things in Spatial Rings, but the D-grade War Machines had similar issues as Cosmic Vessels.

It wasn't as bad as standard vessels that couldn't be put inside a Spatial Treasure, except for a few models. However, the stowable equipment they'd gotten their hands on required Array Masters to dismantle certain sections

and then put them back together during deployment. A veteran Array Master would only need thirty minutes, but only a handful of Zac's people were at this level.

It had taken roughly two hours to activate the line-up rolling behind him during their exercises, which was way too slowly when they didn't know what to expect. It was much more convenient to spend some extra money and roll the things along. Doing so exposed the expensive equipment to ambushes, but they had multiple measures in place. They even had half a million Corpselords to help, and their hulking frames formed a natural wall around the equipment.

The environment was tricky, but the Calamity Company intractably moved forward. The chaotic scars covering the city were suppressed, and bridges were placed over them. Even the patches of Cursed Ground were dealt with through furious bursts of violent purification.

After an hour, Zac finally got the call he'd been waiting for. Carva had located the enemy base and sent back a rough path. He couldn't wait any longer, and he turned to Joanna who eagerly looked back. It was time to launch some special operations.

"Let's go."

## **Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1095 - Tools of the Trade - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1095 - Tools of the Trade**

"Display intent," Janos muttered just as Zac was about to call out his order.

"The Kan'Tanu are not fools," Rhubat said. "The unholy ones will sense our approach soon enough. An army this size cannot go unnoticed, even in this chaotic environment. Our lines stretch for miles. Warmaster's plan to push them back early might make them expend more resources on defenses, but it should reduce the surprises."

Zac agreed. He wasn't worried about any walls or defensive barriers the Kan'Tanu could erect in a couple of hours. He was more worried about the Kan'Tanu setting up kill zones with Heart Curses, and it seemed preferable to drive the enemy back to their base before they could booby-trap the whole city. The order was given, and twenty thousand of their fastest warriors split off from the seemingly endless line of warriors.

They separated into groups of six to ten before spreading out, forming an impassable net in front of the army. Only the occasional scout would be able to pass through their perimeter unnoticed, and the squads moved close enough to easily reinforce each other in case of larger fights. If the Kan'Tanu wanted to sneak around and hit their base or siege machines from behind, they'd have to take a huge detour.

Zac joined Joanna's special unit, which solely consisted of Valkyries. They rushed through the crumbling city with speed far exceeding what the main army could sustain, their eyes peeled for points of interest and enemies.

Moving through a region of Cosmic Energy as Draugr did nothing to slow Zac down. Having awakened his bloodline to Early Shallows had drastically improved his resistance to the ambient energy, and the effect was further bolstered by his upgraded [Adamance of Eoz]. His Void Emperor Bloodline and Void Vajra Constitution had already made him extremely resilient, and this pushed it a step further.

Even the chaotic and unstable energies seeping from the planetary wounds were rebuffed before penetrating his skin. As things stood, Zac believed he could even temporarily withstand the Remnant's pulses of Creation and Oblivion without nullifying them with the opposing Dao.

Their group saw nothing but desolation for ten minutes until Zac spotted a weak hint of life hiding far up in a ruin with his Draugr vision. It wasn't one of their own, which meant it was either a civilian or Kan'Tanu scout. Considering the utter lack of survivors until now, Zac leaned toward the latter.

His guess was quickly proven right. The scout had somehow realized he'd been exposed even though a thick wall of smoke separated their groups. He turned tail by jumping toward a neighboring building, heading toward the Kan'Tanu camp. The movement caused some ripples, but his aura almost disappeared the next moment. Of course, that was not enough to elude the eyes of Zac or his followers.

"Enemy," a Valkyrie alerted, and Joanna and three more spear maidens turned into blurs as they activated their Movement Skills.

Zac was even faster. A shroud of utter darkness swallowed the world as time seemingly ground to a halt. Even the Dexterity-focused Valkyries appeared like mortals when Zac passed them by, turning into a streak of darkness

shooting straight for the fleeing scout. Zac felt like he'd come home as he whizzed between crumbling buildings toward his target.

The change of perception was one of his favorite aspects of the new-and-improved [Abyssal Drive]. Before, the movement skill had reduced the world into a monochrome of life and death. Now, the skill better lived up to its name, as it almost felt like he'd summoned the Abyssal Lake.

The change wasn't just cosmetic, either. One of the biggest weaknesses of the old skill, beyond the long activation time, was its inability to pass through turbulent energy. That downside had almost gotten him killed in the Twilight Chasm, and it wasn't the only time he'd been forced to deactivate the skill before he was ripped to shreds. As Zac continued to progress, the environments he operated inside would only grow more dangerous.

This shortcoming was one of the main issues he'd wanted to fix while workshopping upgrades, and the Abyssal Pond had provided the perfect opportunity. The movement skill combined the resilience of Eoz with Azol's connection to the Abyss. The Abyss followed him wherever he went in his current state, turning hostile environments into his home field.

Some experimentation had confirmed that the movement skill didn't actually suppress the surrounding energies. It was more like he had one foot in reality and one foot inside his personal Abyss, reducing the effect of chaotic energies and even attacks. It was slightly reminiscent of the [Stone of Hope] he'd used to alleviate the damage when opening nodes in the E-grade.

Such a useful addition was probably enough to elevate his movement skill to Peak quality, but it wasn't the limit of what it brought to the table. There was one aspect that Zac liked even better.

The scout was quite agile, but he was ultimately only a Late E-grade cultivator. Zac rapidly closed in until he finally sensed the scout was within reach. The scout froze momentarily, enough to miss his step and crash into a wall. That delay was all that Zac needed. He appeared by the scout the next moment, grabbing him by the neck.

A weak pang of danger made Zac cut the man in two, destroying the Heart Curse just as it was about to explode. Zac had hoped to interrogate the man to see if any elites were among their ranks, but he guessed the curse had realized its host was doomed. Joanna and the others caught up a second later, looking at the gory display with a mix of awe and disappointment.

It was a shame with the scout, but the skill's efficacy still left Zac satisfied. Anyone entering the range of [Abyssal Drive] could be dragged into the Abyss, though the effect was nowhere near the level of Tavza's domain. It only lasted a moment, and only much weaker cultivators would have their senses completely sealed for the duration. The elites he'd tried it on could still function to varying degrees.

Vilari wasn't impacted at all, but most would have their perception and reaction reduced. It didn't sound like much, but it could mean the difference between life and death when every advantage counted. It wasn't just useful for attacking, either. His pursuer would momentarily have their vision obscured when he was forced to run for his life.

"His equipment is old, and he's wearing self-bought parts. He shouldn't be from one of the Kan'Tanu's regular armies but rather a local militia. I guess that's fair, considering they got such a suitable environment," Joanna commented before looking at Zac with a raised brow. "You promised."

"I know, I know," Zac said with an embarrassed smile. "Just got caught up in it. I won't meddle unless necessary."

One of the requests put forth by his commanders was that he keep his head down during the neutral battlefields. Part of it was not to clue the enemy in on a powerful ranker leading the enemy faction, which might lead to reinforcements or outsiders waiting beyond the neutral zones.

Most importantly, his people needed practical experience to improve their teamwork. A few days of practice was nowhere near enough to perfect the Calamity Company's operations. The best solution was to practice on these contained battlefields where he could step in if necessary.

Taking out the scout didn't slow their group down, and they weren't the only ones that had found prey. The unstable energies acted like a natural dampener, but Zac could still sense contained eruptions of Dao and Energy to both his sides. Their group spotted a small Kan'Tanu squad a moment later, and they were dealt with almost as quickly as the scout, even if he stayed back this time.

Joanna descended on them like a crashing meteor using an offensive movement skill. Three of the warslaves were dead before they realized what'd hit them, each having a hole punctured through head and stomach. The others tried to flee, but the Valkyries had been through this dance before. The



soldiers only managed to get a dozen steps before being struck down one way or another.

The Kan'Tanu seemed to have realized their enemies were running down their base, but that didn't mean their soldiers were called back. Showcasing their signature ruthlessness, the Kan'Tanu sent out more people in larger suicide squads. Their job was not to stop the advance but to sacrifice themselves to slow down the Calamity Company while taking out a few soldiers in bursts of mutual destruction.

It didn't change anything. The advance squads fused into larger groups to deal with the human traps, and the small flashes of energy were replaced by loud eruptions of outright battle. Half an hour passed this way, and Zac estimated they'd already killed well over 100,000 Kan'Tanu defenders. The thought almost left Zac breathless.

One hundred thousand casualties weren't much compared to some historic wars back home, but this was just a minor clash on a preliminary battlefield. When you considered these numbers in the scope of the whole sector, the daily loss of life was almost incomprehensible. Thankfully, they had only lost a few hundred soldiers, most of them to Heart Curses and Cursed Ground rather than the sacrificial warslaves themselves.

The environment grew increasingly rough, and soon they found hints of the Kan'Tanu taint on almost every building. It almost looked like a sinister sibling to Mossy had taken hold over the city district, with black pulsating tendrils covering walls and ceilings. Most of them were inert, but every so often, a spike would detach from the walls to strike at a nearby target. No wonder Petrus had called this a Kan'Tanu home-field advantage.

Suddenly, a spiritual fluctuation was followed by Carva rising from the ground.

"My Lord, it's just up ahead," she said.

"Good job," Zac said as they moved to a greater vantage.

They were still a dozen miles from their destination, but a noticeable lack of smoke gave him a clear view of the enemy's Battlefront Arrays. The Kan'Tanu's starting location looked similar to theirs, a huge square over a mile wide. However, in their case, they had completely transformed the region already. The surrounding buildings had been leveled to make way for a large,

sturdy wall, but Zac noted they only had cleared out the surrounding kilometer.

That was the killing field, and beyond was a solid band of intensely tainted buildings. A dense layer of throbbing sin had suffocated all flames, creating a natural disaster zone separating them and their target. Zac had never seen such a huge swathe of cursed energy before, and the scene left him hesitant.

"What do you think?"

"It's odd," Joanna muttered. "Their soldier doesn't seem well trained or well equipped, but they have far more of these tendrils than we usually encounter. There's no way this is just something that had been left on the battlefield. The barrier is still actively growing."

"That stuff has to be grown somewhere," Tamira commented. "Maybe these guys are from a curse production world, so they have a lot of this stuff lying around?"

"Either that, or they're hiding their strength," Joanna nodded.

Zac's gaze swept across the region, but he couldn't find any hints of danger or fate gathering. It might be a trap, but Zac had never felt as confident in his instincts. After all, he'd made some improvements in this regard over the past few days. He even had a new title to show for it.

[Destined: Reach 1,000 Luck while in D-grade Reward: Effect of Luck +7%.]

The above-expected results in the Abyssal Pond had given him 99 luck, putting him right at the threshold of breaking one thousand. The surprise boon had prompted him to spend 50,000 of his starting Merit on a D-grade Luck Attribute fruit, pushing him past the 1,000-mark threshold.

The fruit cost twice as much as the normal ones, but it was still a huge bargain. Normally, Luck-attributed fruits could run you up hundreds of times more. Even then, Zac had noted that they didn't sell as well as he'd expected. Then again, most would choose tangible powerups rather than something as elusive as Luck when your life was on the line every day. And only Zac had the massive multipliers that drastically increased the effect of each Luck Fruit.

Hopefully, it'd make his campaigns more fortuitous, letting them avoid the deadlier targets for the time being. He'd also moved the [Lucky Beads] to his

Draugr form, which left him with an extreme sensitivity to danger. Zac believed he'd be able to sense it if there was any hidden elite with a strong fate among the Kan'Tanu in the distance.

Seeing the Kan'Tanu furiously work on shoring up their defenses filled Zac with impatience, but there was no point in attacking just yet. The grace period would last another three hours, and they'd just be wasting their energy on nothing. At least their fast sortie had accomplished its goal. The Kan'Tanu didn't dare send out more troops from their protective bubble, turning them into sitting ducks as the advance squads formed a perimeter around the square.

Zac almost felt bad for the cultists, knowing the Battlefront Teleporters were sealed during the grace period. They could send more people through, but none could leave. Then again, it was for the best. They'd have to fight these Kan'Tanu sooner or later. The bigger bite they could take out of the enemy lines on each neutral battlefield, the fewer defenders would remain when they reached the real world.

The bulk of the army caught up an hour later. Multiple city blocks were quickly leveled, letting the army gather. The scene was similar to the sea of faces Zac faced before, but the atmosphere was different. It was somber, subdued, like the calm before the storm.

Zac sighed before turning to Ciru Volor and nodding. The stone turtle scurried away, and three hundred War Machines were slowly rolled to the front lines, forming a mile-wide line parallel to the distant square.

The machines, if you could call them that, looked like ten-meter-tall glass spheres covered in a mesh of white metal, each holding a miniature star. Zac could sense the oppressive heat from within, even with the powerful isolation of the white runes. They came from the Blazing Comet Constellations and were one of the models that couldn't be stored at all.

Zac was ready to intercept an attack from a distance, even if he doubted the Kan'Tanu's machines could reach that far. If anything, they wanted the Kan'Tanu to emerge from their turtle shell and target the dangerous-looking contraptions. Of course, the Kan'Tanu knew better than that. Almost two hours passed in oppressive silence, at which point he finally got a nod from Rhubat. It was time.

"Launch."

The runes atop the hundreds of spheres lit up in nigh-perfect sync, and even Zac felt his heart palpitate upon seeing the tide of Stellar Flames that rolled forward. The scene slightly resembled the talisman he'd used during his first battle, but how could a single talisman compare to the combined might of one hundred D-grade War Machines? The fury unleashed was blinding and all-consuming, filling Zac's whole field of vision.

The whole realm shook from the onslaught, and burning scars in space formed a trail behind the advancing apocalypse. The buildings caught in the conflagration simply disintegrated as the wave advanced, leaving a burning glass-like surface in its wake. Leveling ruins barely weakened the opening salvo, and it continued right into the band of condensed Cursed Ground. A piercing screech echoed through the district as a massive tangle erupted to meet the incoming wave.

Almost a third of Zac's soldiers paled by the spiritual shockwave. Thankfully, it wasn't strong enough to cause any real harm at this distance, but it proved that the suspicious moat wasn't ordinary. If they'd tried to enter and cleanse that wall the normal way, they'd definitely have taken a hit. It was an important reminder that quantity could make up for quality. Even Zac would find himself in deep trouble if hit by the wall of fire he'd unleashed, and most of his elites would have had a hard time surviving inside that massive tangle.

Stellar wrath clashed with millions of profane tendrils, and the stars emerged victorious. Some elements were better than others at dealing with Heart Curses and Cursed Grounds, and both Lightning and Flames had proven effective at dealing with the sinister energy.

A deafening sound resembling the wail of millions of anguished souls was released from the towering wall of smoldering tangles, but deep, rhythmic thumps from large drums the Corpselords had brought dispelled some of the effects. It even made Zac's heartbeat speed up, and he felt himself itching for battle.

"Advance!" Rhubat roared, their voice amplified by the ground to sound like the call of a Mountain God.

The roar of war soon drowned out the roaring flames. A sea of warriors stepped onto the still-smoldering pane of glass, their rising Killing Intent holding the promise of a storm—a storm of violence about to come down on the Kan'Tanu.

## **Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1096 - Wealth Advantage - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1096 - Wealth Advantage**

Zac gazed down at the backs of the advancing soldiers, their silhouettes illuminated by the still-smoldering flames ahead. In an odd way, the endless lines of cultivators stretching across the horizon made him calmer rather than more anxious. The suffering and death of war were turned into something abstract when individuals became cogs in such a vast machine.

The stars inside the spherical War Machines had greatly dimmed after unleashing their power, and the contraptions were rolled back to give way for other tools. One model looked like a statue of a masked goddess holding a large glaive in her hand. It radiated powerful waves of death, and a thousand-meter-long turquoise half-moon appeared in front of the statue like a ghastly rainbow that seemed to be constantly collapsing into itself in a cyclic swirl of monstrous energies.

The hundreds of gargantuan glaives acted like a protective cover for the advancing army below and quickly showed their value. Tens of thousands of pitch-black spears, each over twenty meters across, pierced through the smoke curtain and continued toward the advancing soldiers of the Calamity Company. The whole horizon was blotted out in no time, and even Zac felt some pressure upon feeling the innumerable spears flying in his direction.

It was a purely physical attack and a cheaper alternative to using proper War Machines. Most likely, these things had all been manually hurled by the stronger Warslaves to thin out the approaching army. The spears lit up with simple runes to add weight and piercing ability, but they were somehow dragged to the deathly rainbows like moths to the flame. And like the moths, they were incinerated upon touch.

The enormous glaives contained an intractable pull similar to Zac's skillset, dragging everything into the cyclic swirl of destruction. Left was only an ashy snowfall falling toward the ground, joining the soot and smoke of the battlefield.

The Volor stone turtle gave the call, and a third set of War Machines appeared out of nowhere. The contraptions looked like traditional cannons, though their barrels were wider and shorter than what you'd expect. It was roughly as tall

as a man but only five meters long, and the payload took up almost half the barrel.

The cannons looked barbaric and crude, but they worked. Thousands of thunderous explosions erupted as the runes across the barrels flashed with burning light. Cannonballs the size of wrecking balls soared through the air above their army, each shuddering with barely contained energy. The bombs continued into the haze, and it felt like the world held its breath in anticipation.

Then, a deafening explosion overwhelmed all other sounds, its intensity so great Zac felt he'd been punched in the ears. The ground heaved, and a massive shockwave swept the dense smoke and lingering flames away. The Kan'Tanu fortress was once more exposed, and it already looked like its hastily erected defenses were teetering on the brink of collapse.

Its protective cover of cursed thorns had already been shorn off by the unrelenting flames of the Calamity Company's opening salvo, and the concussive explosion following in its wake had reached the very foundations of the array-reinforced walls. The array still worked, but the deep fissures across its foundations indicated that most of the embedded Array Flags must have been damaged.

Zac nodded in appreciation in the direction of Ciru, who returned a slightly manic grin. The [Godslayer Cannons] were actually homemade wares of the Atwood Empire, a joint effort between the Ishiate and clan Volor, and the former's mad penchant for destruction had stirred the berserker hearts hiding in the depths of the usually taciturn gemlings. The cannons didn't quite live up to their name as Late to Peak E-grade War Machines, but their destructive capabilities were nothing to scoff at when you had the money to craft high-quality bombs.

Ciru gave the call, and half of the deathly statues raised their weapons in an act of undisguised aggression. Their summoned glaives shot forward as they rose into the air, the whistling air sounding like the wails of lost souls. The conjured blades seemingly moved slowly because of their size, but they approached the Kan'Tanu compound with shocking speed.

The cultists desperately fired more spears and a blinding number of skills to prevent another strike at their barrier, but it was all sucked into the voracious swirl within the glaives. Most were eventually overwhelmed and destabilized, but a few endured. They looked like ghastly spires reaching for the sky at their

final approach, before they fell onto the barrier with the force of a falling meteor.

The shield released a blinding light as the Kan'Tanu Array Masters saw no recourse but to activate some fallback measure. It proved futile.

The shield crumbled when the eleventh glaive struck, and piercing screams echoed across the battlefield as tens of thousands of Kan'Tanu warslaves died from the fallout. The Kan'Tanu didn't even have time to react before a fourth set of machines lit up behind Zac. They were thirty meters tall and looked more like traditional Array Towers. They had been transported in a lying position but had already been erected some time ago.

Zac only had ten of these beasts, but each created a huge shimmering array far above the Kan'Tanu's base. It almost looked like they were portals from another world, and hundreds of burning meteors were soon unleashed on the ground. The scene reminded Zac of the special event he encountered with Vai on the Ramsi Wall, where a huge vortex had spat out stones filled with truth.

The magmatic boulders kept coming, and the Kan'Tanu base soon turned into armageddon with their main barrier down. A storm of counter-attacks flew up from the ground, but the arrays were simply too far into the air. Only other War Machines or Hegemons could deal with them, and it didn't look like these Kan'Tanu had any to spare.

The meteor shower could last over an hour as long as Zac supplied the towers with enough Cosmic Crystals, and they put immense pressure on the soldiers below. The Kan'Tanu couldn't escape and they couldn't stay, so they chose the only option remaining. They advanced.

A swarm of desperate soldiers poured through the broken battlement, madly rushing toward the Calamity Company's frontlines. A second round fired from the [Godslayer Cannons] caused untold destruction, but there were millions of warslaves. The distance was huge, but the cultists were all E-grade and desperate. Soon, the unstable swarm of Kan'Tanu slammed into the Calamity Company's far more ordered frontlines, making the cannons useless.

"That's my cue," Joanna said before she set off with a squad of thirty headhunters.

The air rippled around them, and Zac noted they had seemingly become almost invisible to the warriors as they crossed the chaotic battlefield. The



Valkyries used a War Array that hid their presence. Their method probably wouldn't work against an alert scout in normal circumstances, but the battlefield had become a perfect cover.

Smoke, flames, radiant skills, and chaotic energies rendered the valkyries practically invisible, letting them move toward the Kan'Tanu backlines in search of leaders. The warslaves had lost any semblance of order in their desperation to get out of meteor showers and cannon fire, and they couldn't let the Kan'Tanu leaders get their men in line: the more unorganized the enemy, the fewer casualties on their side.

Zac gave it some thought before he flashed forward, leaving his dias and following in Joanna's wake. He had already donned his cowl and bracer to hide his presence, allowing Zac to move through the Kan'Tanu soldiers like a specter. Occasionally, he'd swing his axe, and a body would crumble. Zac was gone before the body hit the ground, letting his actions go largely unnoticed.

The battlefield seemed completely out of control, but it had a unique tempo. Zac could feel the chaotic mix of energies and Daos congeal into something unifying as he progressed. An aspect of Conflict, born from the flames of war. It was nowhere near the pristine tapestry of Grand Dao he'd witnessed inside the Abyssal Pond, but rather something coarse, rugged, and unstable.

Then again, perhaps that was the nature of Conflict. It was embodied by the sooty soldiers desperately unleashing everything in their arsenal for a chance at survival. Or at least to cause as much death as possible before they met their demise, a final act of defiance. It was completely different from the tidiness of a duel or the war games they'd practiced.

Zac soon caught up with Joanna's group, who had found a group of commanders hiding behind a piece of rubble. The cultists had been trying to set up a command array but were forced to jump out of harm's way when the Valkyries descended like a pack of hungry wolves. Joanna's ferocity was shocking, and she seemingly didn't care that the group had two Hegemons.

Then again, she didn't need to. She was nowhere near Zac's level when he was at her stage, but these Hegemons were nothing special. Joanna managed to hold down both on her own while the Valkyries tore through the weaker cultists. However, a golden streak pierced through the clouds just as they were about to collapse on the two desperate captains.

It was like a golden laser that had somehow found a narrow gap through the confusing battlefield, and it pierced one of the Hegemons' heads before he had a chance to react. The other cultist was shocked by the sudden turnaround, but the Valkyries seemed to have anticipated it. Three spears destroyed the fallen D-grade cultivator's torso before his Heart Curse could erupt, while Joanna finished off the survivor with a storm of jabs.

"That jerk is stealing merit," Joanna said with exasperation when Zac walked over.

Zac smiled as he glanced in the direction of a distant skyscraper. Zac couldn't even spot the attacker at this distance, but it wasn't difficult to tell the arrow came from Carl Elrod. He was already famous for using his bow like a sniper rifle to pick out elites hidden among the crowd. The archer was the fourth native to become a Hegemon, and his Sealbearer-quest and designation were similar to Joanna's.

The more Zac learned about Carl, the more impressed he became. They hadn't exchanged more than a few dozen words, and he seemed to always be off somewhere when Zac appeared. Still, he'd performed his due diligence after Carl became a sealbearer. Surprisingly, the archer was actually among the earliest humans to join Port Atwood, but it wasn't from one of the standard recruitment drives.

He'd operated independently close to one of the first Incursions Zac closed, using sneak attacks and ambushes to take out invaders and free enslaved humans. After the incursion was closed, Carl chose to join his army, where he'd performed valiantly in every engagement they'd encountered. His ascent had been slow and steady, going from a decent talent who couldn't quite make Earth's ladder into a top powerhouse of his empire.

Becoming a Sealbearer was like adding rocket fuel to the unassuming archer's path, and he'd quickly advanced into Hegemony. With the energy of a Cosmic Core to power his skills and bow, his range and lethality had become simply terrifying. He was like a humanoid War Machine, one who could freely move about while avoiding detection.

"We have to move," Joanna said, and they blended into the chaotic battle before they could be swarmed.

Zac followed the Valkyries for the next thirty minutes like an intern shadowing their instructor. His hands itched for action, but the war was over almost as

soon as it began. It only took fifteen minutes for the Calamity Company to completely overwhelm the uncoordinated assault of the fleeing Kan'Tanu. Morale was already low, and order completely crumbled with all the leaders being hunted down by Joanna and other elites.

Many tried to flee into the ruins, but the engineers hadn't been idle either. Massive energy walls cut off most escape paths, and soldiers were already waiting in the gaps. Zac stood atop the crumbling wall, shaking his head at the scene. The situation was lopsided from the start and had now turned into a downright slaughter.

The warriors of the Atwood Empire kept order, slowly shrinking the circle. The battle was all but over, but every single warslave carried a bomb in their chest. A single stab was all that was needed for a promising elite of his faction to get infected. The curse was a death sentence for the living, and having a cure didn't mean it was safe for his undead soldiers. The cursed tangles could still cause a whole lot of damage even if the host could resist its possession.

Zac saw no reason to observe the grisly clean-up, so he turned away and walked toward the three Battlefront Arrays. Ten minutes later, Zac received a notification the campaign was over. The slaughter was still going on outside, but Zac guessed the situation had reached a point where the System didn't deem it an active battlefield anymore.

As expected, Zac only received a pittance for his temporary mission, not even fifty merit. The Atwood Empire fared slightly better, but even they only got 107 Faction Merit for the decisive victory. As expected, not even the D-grade Neutral Battlefronts were worth much.

Zac sensed powerful auras approaching and looked over to see Rhubat and Joanna walk over. Both radiated a bloody aura, but they only had some surface wounds a common healing pill would deal with.

"Good job. How's the situation?"

"No surprises, except for a few managing to flee into the ruins," Rhubat said. "We have sent hunting squads to deal with them."

It was ruthless, not even sparing the deserters, but they couldn't have Kan'Tanu running around in this place. It was almost a day until they could advance, and having desperate cultists hiding in the shadows was an unnecessary variable.

The thought of being forced to wait so long until they could advance filled Zac with impatience, and he began fiddling with the new features that had been unlocked after being declared the victor.

"So expensive," Zac swore as he looked at the prompt provided by the conquered Battlefront Array, prompting the Anointed to look down in confusion.

"There's little point in unsealing the teleporter early," Rhubat agreed after Zac shared the screen. "At least not for a standard engagement like this."

"We could use the downtime anyway," Joanna added. "We need to go over the result and make adjustments. Besides, we must have spent thousands of D-grade Nexus Coins in this blitz. This place looks run-down, but there should be some resources hiding somewhere. I've never heard of a battlefront being completely barren. We might be able to recoup some of our expenses."

Zac nodded in agreement. Their War Machines might have allowed them to overwhelm the enemy, but using hundreds of D-grade Siege Arrays cost a fortune. Not even the Calamity Company wasn't meant to act this exorbitantly. Most Early D-grade armies only had a few as a hidden reserve, but few actually used them in a normal engagement. Many, like the Kan'Tanu divisions they'd fought, had none.

But what could they do? They needed to get used to the equipment, even if it burned money.

"Carva, can you come over?" Zac said into a communication crystal, and the spectral appeared within a minute.

"I'm here, my lord."

"If the Kan'Tanu missed something when they sacked this city, it's most likely hiding underground," Zac said as he took out an [Automatic Map] and marked a few spots. "Beyond the castles, check these locations. I felt something different over there. Coordinate with the hunting groups in case you run into the stragglers."

"If there are underground vaults, we'll find them," Carva assured before leading tens of thousands of spectrals into the ruins.

"I guess I'll join in," Joanna said. "I think we got all the Hegemons, but you never know."

Zac considered going out himself, seeing if his massive pile of Luck could lead him to some treasure. However, a deep thump threw those plans out the window, and Zac's eyes widened in realization. He turned to the Anointed next to him, whose energy antennae had clearly picked up something was happening within Zac's body.

"Could you make sure no one disturbs me for the next couple of hours?"

"Of course, Warmaster."

"Thank you," Zac said, flashing over to a secluded corner of the former Kan'Tanu fortress.

He threw out a block that quickly expanded into a small square house. It was a tent of sorts, or rather a mobile Cultivation Chamber. This particular model was quite expensive, coming installed with both isolation and defensive capabilities. Zac didn't particularly expect a surprise attack, but he didn't wish to be interrupted. Zac entered and nodded in satisfaction when a thick stone dome enclosed the building. Finally, Rhubat sat down atop the newly-formed mound like a stalwart guardian.

Zac retracted his Soul Sense and turned his vision inward. The source of the disturbance was unsurprisingly [Void Heart]. The Hidden Node had been unresponsive since his dip in the Abyssal Pond, but it had finally woken up. Each beat grew deeper than the last, and Zac's eyes glimmered as he felt a shadow of the Abyss spread through the body. Most things entering the Void were returned as normal energy, but there were also special circumstances like the Heavenly Lightning.

He couldn't wait to see what would come from swallowing the purest waters of the Abyss.

## **Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1097 - Unequal Exchange - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1097 - Unequal Exchange**

Zac didn't have to wait long before the Hidden Node in his chest began dumping vast amounts of energy into his body. [Void Heart] had returned

something that was both familiar and foreign. The aura of the Abyss was somehow still there, yet it wasn't holding the Dao of Death. It had all been stripped away, turned into amorphous energy that was neither attuned nor unattuned.

One moment, Zac was looking at something very similar to the universal Kill Energy that the system used. The next, he felt like he was looking at inverted Abyssal Energy holding Void of Death instead of Dao of Death. It refused to be categorized, but Zac could tell it was incredibly dense. Just the first thump released enough energy to overload your average Peak E-grade cultivator, yet Zac could sense vast quantities were still stored within [Void Heart]. It would take half an hour for the Hidden Node to release it all.

Interestingly, Zac found that the Hidden Node released equal amounts of energy to both his bodies in an impressive quantum feat Zac couldn't begin to comprehend. Manually taking control of [Void Heart] with his Heart Cultivation let him shift the distribution until one body got nine parts to the other's one. Being unable to completely plug the Hidden Node in either wasn't a problem right now, but it was worth remembering when around the prying eyes of the Undead Monarchs.

Despite the energy's impressive density, Zac was slightly disappointed after seeing it. He'd hoped a special source like the Abyssal Lake would produce something equally unique. There was no point in crying over spilled milk, though. And if he didn't do something soon, the energy would start leaking from his bodies.

The refined energy should improve his cultivation more than the Life-attuned D-grade Core Nurturing Pills he'd used over the past days, and it came without pill toxicity or risk of forming a resistance. Zac corralled into his Specialty Cores from both bodies, the infusion resulting in an uncanny split-vision. The refined Abyssal Energy entered the Specialty Core's quantum aperture in two states, just like how the pathways in his Cosmic Core simultaneously existed as Dao and Void of Dao.

The energy smoothly reinforced the pathways, and Zac was happy to see the refined energy even work on the parts of Life and Void of Life despite its clear Abyssal aura. It really was like Kill Energy in that regard. The effect was quite pronounced, too. He'd already reached level 156 by relying on the pills, but that was because he was somewhat close to the threshold from the beginning. The refined Abyssal Energy could potentially take him all the way

to level 157, a cultivation speed that could only be called monstrous in the D-grade.

However, Zac urgently stopped the infusion upon seeing that his Draugr heritage finally stirred. The swirls in his cells came alive, and it felt like an intangible darkness spread through his body. He was becoming a humanoid lake of darkwater, though Zac quickly realized something was wrong. The deepening darkness didn't lead to the Abyss.

Instead, Zac could sense the hints of the ancient aura of his Void Emperor Bloodline in the depths of the pond-like swirls in his cells.

Zac still wasn't sure how his situation worked. Truthfully, he hadn't expected a second Bloodline to appear on his Status Screen after his dip in the Abyssal Pond. Having multiple Bloodlines really shouldn't be a thing. You either inherited a bloodline or formed one through special encounters or reaching a high enough grade. If you had multiple Bloodlines competing within your body, they'd either fuse into something new, or one would push out the others.

Therefore, Zac had always assumed it'd look like his human side after awakening his Draugr heritage; he'd get a Branch of Eoz "Constitution" while his Void Emperor inheritance remained predominant. The fact that his Children of Draug-bloodline didn't appear by his Race on his main Status Screen didn't help, either.

He was entering uncharted territory, and there was only one way to figure out how things worked. Strictly speaking, if the option were between feeding his insatiable Void Emperor Bloodline or progressing his Cosmic Core, he'd pick his core. The energy demands for upgrading his mysterious Bloodline weren't of this world, and his E-grade [Void Heart] didn't have the capacity to even move the needle.

Zac still diverted as much of the refined energy as he could into his Draugr form, feeding it into everything from bones to surface skin to gauge the reaction. The value of the information he could glean from the situation easily surpassed that of gaining a level, especially considering that the golden swirls in his human form were completely uninterested in the energy.

Innumerable streaks were absorbed, and the feedback was one he'd seen many times before. The energy dragged into the vortices was sent to the inaccessible Void where he'd never see it again. Yet Zac persisted. He hoped



for a similar situation as the one in the Abyssal Pond, where he could progress his Eoz bloodline as long as he first stuffed his primary one.

After five minutes, the response he'd prayed for finally arrived, though not in the way he'd expected. The vortices continued to swallow everything Zac imparted, but it was no longer a one-way street. Ancient force appeared out of nowhere, reeking of Death and power. It definitely wasn't Abyssal Energy, yet it naturally blended with the Abyssal darkness in his cells.

His Children of Draug-bloodline was progressing, and not by a small amount.

Zac's real hearts were beating in pace with [Void Heart] as he excitedly watched the deathly vortices expand and grow darker. He knew how difficult it was to improve one's Draugr bloodline outside the Abyssal Lake, so this was a rare opportunity. It seemed unlikely, but he might actually break through again just days after reaching Early Shallows.

The prospect of breaking through wasn't the source of his excitement, though. The twice-refined energy that was seamlessly fusing with every part of his body didn't even have a hint of the Abyss remaining. It instead exuded the primordial aura he could sense upon activating skills with Void Energy, though marked by an unmistakable hint of Death. It felt like the refined energy had been exchanged for the Vigor of a long-dead powerful beast, yet it improved his Eoz bloodline.

Did that mean other energies refined by [Void Heart] and his cells could do the same?

The implications were staggering. The universe was full of treasures Cultivators disregarded because of their unstable energies, which were perfect fuel for his Void Emperor Node. For example, he'd bought Beast Cores for a pittance and used them to speed up his leveling. That method had somewhat taken a backseat as the energy demands per level increased, but what if he could use the same method to advance his Bloodline?

If his assumption was right, it meant he'd found a unique way to progress without locking himself to the Abyssal Shores, which seemed to be a dream of his adopted ancestor. Like Karz in his visions, he'd be turning trash into treasure.

His Hidden Node released energy for another twenty minutes, and his body didn't let a single sliver of it go. The Void continued to return that ancient force

for a while longer. There wasn't much for Zac to do at that point, so he tried to better understand the process within his body. However, he absolutely couldn't find the source of the energy or the process of how it was converted.

The depths of his cells felt like an endless expanse. His Mental Energy threads were lost inside long before they could find anything. Zac shifted his attention, trying to better understand the process itself. He'd missed what happened to his body during his day in the Abyssal Pond because of the epiphany and was only left with the result.

Zac didn't glean anything special except for his cells slightly expanding without taking up more physical space. He did, however, sense something else—a mysterious resonance was slowly forming now that his body was in an agitated state. Zac didn't know why, but the intangible sensation made him think of something like a Skill Fractal, but it was blurry and indistinct.

The hidden font of Vigor eventually ran dry, and the feeling of progress instantly stopped. As expected, the energy wasn't enough to let him break through again. Each stage of Shallows required significant refinement of your body, and Zac suspected his unique constitution had increased the energy requirements involved.

As for the intangible sensation, Zac believed it was more than just a representation of the mysterious power fusing with his body. Was it perhaps a Bloodline Talent? Each awakening was supposed to have a high chance of unlocking a Bloodline Talent, especially if you had a pure Bloodline. Zac's Bloodline was supposedly as pure as they came, yet he hadn't seen a hint of any Eoz Bloodline Talent.

He'd figured it was linked to his inability to find any more Eoz Hidden Nodes beyond the first three, that his other Bloodline had blocked them somehow. But perhaps there was yet a chance to awaken a talent at least. In other good news, Zac could also confirm that his Bloodline hadn't reached its limits after its third awakening, though that wasn't much of a surprise considering his connection to Eoz himself.

What stymied the elites by the Abyssal Shores wasn't access to the lake or Abyssal Energy. If you lived in the Draugr Holy Land, you could go for a dip whenever you wanted. The problem was that everyone had ceilings on how much their bodies could take in. The cap could be slowly raised by practicing Bloodline Methods, but inborn talent was the biggest indicator of how far you could go.

Zac had found nothing holding him back in this regard, and he even felt a slight hunger from his body after the feast. Zac was happy to oblige, and a Death-Attuned Beast Core appeared in his hand. A raging storm of untamable energy poured into his body, and the previously wan [Void Heart] perked up with newfound enthusiasm.

The node spat out a few bursts of refined energy a couple of minutes later, and Zac almost screamed with excitement upon seeing the familiar process start anew. The refined core only produced a few strings of meager Vigor, but it proved his idea feasible. Zac burned with anticipation as he took out another item, this one a Death-attuned Natural Treasure holding far more exquisite truths than the Beast Core.

Two hours of experimentation gave Zac a much better grasp of his options. For one, the source material had to hold the Dao of Death to benefit his Bloodline, even if [Void Heart] seemingly removed it. The closer its energy signature was to Abyssal Energy, the better it would work. Furthermore, its grade had to reach a certain stage.

E-grade materials were useless, and even Early D-grade Beast Cores barely made a difference. He'd probably have to chow down on cores for centuries just to improve his Bloodline a minor stage. Of course, not even the Natural Treasures he'd absorbed came close to the Abyssal Water.

Zac, unfortunately, failed to recreate the effect in his human body. Only his Draugr side could improve his Draugr Bloodline, even if its benefits were fully transferred over. Neither could his Void Vajra Constitution take advantage of Life-attuned items similarly. He did find that his efficacy improved slightly if feeding [Void Heart] Life-attuned Beast Cores just before practicing the fourth layer of the [Void Vajra Sublimation], but the effect was very limited for the costs involved.

It was a disappointment, but Zac knew that his Void Vajra Constitution lagged behind by quite a bit. His Minor Sublimation could, at best, be compared to Middle or Late Strand, a whole awakening below his Draugr half. Perhaps he could add this type of feature to the Fifth Layer of his Body Tempering Manual, using the phenomenon on his Draugr half as a template.

However, that was a matter for the future. Zac barely managed to rework the fourth layer inside the Perennial Vastness, using a large amount of Mana to force a series of epiphanies. However, he hadn't even begun his work on the fifth. The original version was simply too esoteric, and Zac suspected he'd

need an Earthly Dao of Life before even properly understanding it, let alone rewriting it.

Zac stopped taking out treasures after getting a basic understanding. There was a time and place for anything. If anything, his Draugr Bloodline was already too overpowering. Right now, Zac needed to use every tool available to catch up on his Life-attuned side, so [Void Heart] was better used to supplement Life. That didn't mean his Draugr half had nothing to spend time on. There were still 16 hours until they could open a portal to the next battleground, and Zac planned on using that time to upgrade a skill.

Dealing with something as fragile as Skill Fractals in the middle of a battlefield was foolhardy at best, but over two hours had passed since they routed the Kan'Tanu. His headhunters would have dealt with the deserters by this point, and he was surrounded by over a million soldiers. So he felt confident as he took out a large bowl—the very same one he'd used in Kavista. It might have been part of the Sacred Tree's cave, but Zac hadn't felt too bad lifting it on the way out.

The accompanying platform thumped onto the ground, and a Skill Fractal soon sank into the bowl's shimmering waters. There were multiple skills that could be upgraded for a quick boost to his combat strength, but there was one skill that took precedence—[Armament Mastery]. D-grade was the final level of the guiding skill and key to improving his odds against Kator in a month.

He wanted to upgrade his two mastery skills as soon as possible and use the battlefield to integrate their teachings before the duel. The Mastery Skill Fractals were among the simpler ones between his two Classes, and the upgrade smoothly proceeded. The only issue came from his Arcane Pathways, which wasn't too happy about the unattuned skills.

It was only a small issue since all mastery skills were quite flexible, but he was probably better off removing the fractals after reaching Peak D-grade and incorporating all their teachings. Technically, he could have infused the skill with the Branches of Pale Seal and War Axe to push them closer to his Inexorable path, but Zac had opted to keep the skills unattuned.

He didn't want to use the Mastery Skills as a shortcut, but rather to take their basic teachings and integrate the pertinent parts with his Technique. His goal wasn't just to master the Integration Stage but to push his Technique far beyond that level. To accomplish that, he needed to be in control of the direction his stances should take.

With everything dealt with, Zac stowed his mobile camp and cut a path through the dome. Rhubat was still sitting atop it in silent meditation, and clumps of Zhix warriors were resting in the area. They all stirred when Zac emerged but soon calmed down upon realizing it wasn't an enemy.

"Anything?"

"Everything is in order," Rhubat said after jumping down from the earthen dome.

"Alright, let's gather the captains."

A small war council was held where they went over the battle. They all agreed the result was very good for their first battle. They'd taken out an army of millions, yet they'd only suffered 20,000 casualties, of which a fifth were deaths. Even Petrus had difficulties pinpointing glaring mistakes, partly because they had crushed the enemy with money.

If there was one thing to complain about, it was the efficiency of their expenditures. With the amount of money they'd spent, one could argue that they should have been able to bury the enemies in the rubble before the battle turned into a melee.

Only four thousand deaths to the Kan'Tanu's millions didn't sound like much, but the whole Calamity Company would be dead and buried in a year if they sustained such losses in every offense. The whole reason he'd rerouted almost all of his Cosmic Vessel Earnings into the War Arrays was to avoid that exact scenario.

The battlefield cleanup finished during their meeting, and a soldier delivered the tally. Zac read the report, feeling a bit helpless upon seeing that the battlefield liches had only managed to scrounge together 13,000 Kan'Tanu bodies that could become Revenants. It was roughly half a percent conversion rate. And considering the source, definitely not enough to replace the talented elites they'd lost.

So much for increasing their manpower as the war progressed.

**Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1098 - Kerkos VI - Read  
Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1098 - Kerkos VI**

It took a moment for Zac to come to grips with the numbers. The War Machines hadn't left a single body intact, but the biggest culprit, by far, was the Heart Curses. The only way you could get an intact body from the Kan'Tanu was if you destroyed the Heart Curse before or simultaneously as the opponent, while neither damaging the heart nor head. Such a feat was easier said than done when only a fraction of his soldiers walked the popular body-preserving paths of the Undead Empire.

Certainly, they got a huge influx of body parts for raising Corpselords, but the lack of torsos and heads was also a problem. They couldn't exactly raise undead tangles of legs and arms in a morbid replication of the Void Beast called the Collector. Besides, his faction's foundation in Corpse-stitching was still quite shallow. Sewing together leftover parts of these unremarkable Kan'Tanu Warslaves was barely worth the effort.

Whatever they raised this way was extremely unlikely to become a Cultivator, and even reaching E-grade was an almost insurmountable task. Still, Elysium needed normal non-combat citizens, and they would at least be able to raise some decent Corpselords and Revenants.

The vast majority of the Kan'Tanu would be buried, though it wasn't exactly an act of benevolence. It was because of a suggestion from Serzo. He'd provided a specific array that would slowly remove the resentment from the corpses and urged Zac to create massive burial grounds at specific spots on Elysium. Corpses were natural generators of Death, and the burial grounds would slowly refine the Dao of Death that covered the continent.

Serzo had always done the same on newly realigned worlds. At the very least, it created pockets of elevated energy. And if his people kept racking up bodies at this pace, they could birth new Nexus Veins or possibly even create Holy Lands for cultivation. The Kan'Tanu would literally become fertilizer for Elysium's cultivation. It was macabre, but Zac felt it among the nicer things he'd done with the corpses of his enemies since stepping onto this path.

The scouts and treasure hunters returned an hour before the teleporter activated.

"Anything?" Zac asked when Joanna and Carva came walking over.

"Not much," Joanna sighed. "We did discover a few hidden vaults of the previous inhabitants, but nothing too impressive. Our returns barely reach 200 D-grade Nexus Coins and another 50 for the harvested gear. It's almost

impossible to unload low-quality equipment nowadays, though. The whole sector's flooded with the stuff."

Zac grunted in understanding. 250 D-grade Nexus Coins was nothing to him, and it didn't even cover the opening salvo of his assault. However, it would be quite the haul for normal Early D-grade forces for a few days' work. If an army only used Late and Peak E-grade siege weaponry, they could likely finish a battle of this type for less than 100 D-grade Nexus Coins.

Certainly, such a battle could take weeks, depending on the enemy's resilience, and the loss in manpower would be far greater than what the Calamity Company suffered. Still, weaker D-grade forces could steadily extract wealth from the neutral battlefronts and make much more money than relying on their traditional channels. And there was always the small chance of stumbling onto a real treasure trove.

For example, Zac had heard that the Azh'Rezak Clan had been doing quite well for themselves since the war began. Ogras' old family didn't have a very impressive heritage and were dirt-poor, but their strength wasn't hollow. The clan had eked out a living selling themselves as mercenaries since their founding, and their elders and regular armies were battle-hardened veterans, one and all.

He still kept constant watch on the small faction in case a bout of bad luck placed them against a dangerous enemy. If things went awry, he'd quickly zip over and at least save Ogras' grandfather.

Minutes passed, and the last warriors emerged from seclusion, some with excited expressions. Zac could tell there hadn't been that many breakthroughs this time, but it was no wonder considering how they utterly steamrolled the enemy. Zac eventually walked over to the Battlefront Array with the others.

"Everything is ready, Warmaster."

"I recommend bringing both the outsiders," Petrus said. "The Dreamers are fearful of death, but that's a strength on its own. Their soldiers had already built four walls around our base before they were called over."

"Better than dismissing them and being stuck with some nuisance," Zac agreed. "So, what are our options?"



"Left for an easy conquest, center for potential merit," Petrus said. "As we suspected, the Central Array leads toward a world with sacrificial farms. The farms are considered strategic resources, and destroying them provides significant Faction Merit in addition to damaging an important facility. But those worlds are always heavily guarded. The other two lead to random worlds at the edge of their sector."

Zac hesitated a moment before shaking his head. "There'll be time to strike at such targets later. Besides, picking that direction on the first victory gives them too much time to prepare."

"Indeed," Petrus said. "There'll be time to harvest merit later. For now, focus on working out all kinks."

After winning a Neutral Battlefront, Zac could activate any of the three Kan'Tanu Battlefront Arrays. You could even split your army and activate multiple Battlefronts if you were confident in yourself and your allies, though that meant fighting at a numerical disadvantage. Whichever you picked would lead you toward the faction that emerged through the teleporter.

The targeted faction would remain, but the other two groups of cultists would likely be swapped out for other worlds. This way, you could pick the Kan'Tanu world you wanted to conquer.

There was, however, a chance that the System would throw a wrench in your plans, teleporting you toward another world than the one you picked. It was a safeguard against people always playing it safe, and it seemed to trigger more often the more you stalled and avoided dangers.

The Kan'Tanu could also reset their battlefront using Faction Merit to avoid further battles. When faced with a powerful army like the Calamity Company, they would definitely do so if they had any merit remaining. Some would wait until the last minute in hopes their enemy would be sent somewhere else, while others immediately forfeited to save on Faction Merit.

In those cases, you'd also be sent somewhere else at random. If lucky, you could skip neutral battlefronts. The only safeguard for defenders was that foreign armies never could show up on your world out of nowhere. You had to lose at least one battle before facing an actual invasion.

That didn't mean you'd always be matched against a weakling when appearing on a random Kan'Tanu world. It wasn't that uncommon a strategy

to intentionally back down so that you could deal with your enemy on your home turf. Ultimately, only the most powerful factions had the strength and resources to conquer a whole world with a size-restricted army. Most gave up after reaping some harvest on the neutral fronts or performed a quick raid in the Kan'Tanu sector before returning home.

The various options and strategies available created a dynamic scenario where the System kept you on your toes. Zac could only play the odds and avoid some dangers, such as picking another battlefield array than the one leading toward the curse farms.

Zac looked back at the square of people, including the two outsider factions who filled up the flanks. The soldiers looked more motivated this time than before their first engagement, especially the outsider forces. Even if the Corpselords had lost more combatants than the Calamity Company, their casualties were likely lower than normal.

And with such monstrous momentum, it was almost a given that the campaign would end with a decisive victory even in the hostile sector. And even if they only got a small chunk of the awarded merit, it was likely more than they'd make in a month or two by resetting neutral battlefronts over and over.

It was worth remembering that Faction Merit meant different things for different factions. For the Atwood Empire, it was a way to improve its long-term potential. For weaker forces, it was a crucial lifeline that would let them prevent having their planet overrun at least once.

"Let's go," Zac said, and the array lit up. "Same strategy as last time."

The next three conquests went the same way as the first, even with Zac scaling back on their use of D-grade War Machines after every engagement. By the third fight, their casualties decreased at half the expenditure. Still, Zac was bleeding money at a shocking rate. A normal D-grade faction would go bankrupt within the week, though his shipyard was still generating revenue more than three times the expenditures.

Thank the Heavens for the renegotiated contract. Without the bump in price, he'd be losing money by the time he'd set up the second elite army if you included the cost of the other twelve battlefronts.

As promised, Zac mostly stayed his hand, only slightly putting his thumb on the scale while moving through the battlefields. Seeing deaths all around him

hurt, but he could only harden his heart. He channeled his complex emotions into purpose, and he was almost ready to explode by the time they found themselves in front of the final array that'd finally lead them to a proper Kan'Tanu world.

"The training wheels are off now that we're stepping onto their soil," Joanna reminded. "The System will only offer protection for an hour, and anything can wait on the other side. It will be booby-trapped if nothing else."

"I understand," Zac said as he cracked his neck. "I'll make my move if it looks bad. It's about time I earned my keep."

"We should be able to handle it, so try to hide until we've found the World Lord. With how we've bulldozed through the neutral zones, there's a high chance our target has forfeited. The only way they stay on is if they don't have enough Faction Merit to avoid us."

Zac nodded. This was the upside of possibly being sent to a random world. You didn't know what you were dealing with, but neither did your enemy. The Kan'Tanu wouldn't have any idea their enemy came with an almost incomprehensible number of arrays and siege machines. And since the World Lord always had a decent bounty on his head, you didn't want to give him any reason to run off-world before you could scramble space and seal the planet.

The Teleporter activated, but Zac didn't take the lead this time. Instead, a mixed group of Bearkin Corpse Lords, advance guards, and engineers made up the vanguard. Zac only snuck inside after ten minutes, hidden among a squad of Revenants and using every tool in his repertoire to hide his strength. As usual, he was greeted by a prompt upon stepping onto the new world.

[General assignment: Conquer Kerkos VI. Merit awarded after successful conquest, depending on individual contribution. NOTE: Capturing capitals, resource points, strategic resources and structures increases awarded Faction Merit. Killing or capturing World Lord increases awarded Faction Merit.]

[Fated Flamebearer: Kill or capture World Lord, 2,5x merit. Conquer World Capital, 2,5x merit. Kill or capture Outer Court Sealbearers, 25,000 merit (repeatable). Kill or capture Left Imperial Palace Flamebearer, 250,000 merit (repeatable).]

Both general and designation quests looked quite different this time. The general assignment was far more generous, awarding Faction Merit for all kinds of things. But the thoughts of Faction Merit were quickly thrown out the window upon seeing his Flamebearer quest. Kill Outer Court Sealbearers? Left Imperial Palace Flamebearers? And they were repeatable?

Zac quickly calmed down. For a moment, he'd almost thought he'd fill out his seal early, but there was simply no way there were multiple sealbearers on this world. It was most likely a special bounty he'd get on every Kan'Tanu world as part of his identity as Zecia's Flamebearer. Nothing else was a surprise, so he closed the prompt to inspect where they'd ended up.

The skies were a shimmering orange and pink, like a summer sunset on old Earth. Large birds leisurely glided about far up in the sky, and Zac even spotted floating islands in the distance. You generally didn't see such things on D-grade worlds, but Zac could tell the planet had a decently strong affinity to metal. Was the whole world perhaps a large magnet, holding the islands aloft?

The scene was beautiful, and it was hard to reconcile the skyline with a world controlled by an unorthodox cult using human sacrifice and Heart Curses. Of course, the gauntlet waiting for them outside the protective bubble was a poignant reminder this wasn't some vacation. A towering wall was rising with speed visible to the naked eye, but Zac could still see the sea of cultists waiting for them.

A killing field of Cursed Ground acted like a moat, pushing right up against the golden barrier. Beyond was an enormous sea of Kan'Tanu soldiers at least five times the size of his combined army. They didn't come empty-handed, either. There Zac spotted three types of War Machines surrounding their location, one model radiating energy that clearly was in the D-grade. They were even erecting a huge metal cage to seal the whole battlefield.

As Joanna expected, these people weren't the same as they'd fought until now. The Kan'Tanu sector was mostly Human, but there were distinct differences between regions. These defenders had a grey, almost steely, skin hue, and many had purple irises. They were also better equipped than the world they'd targeted, though Zac noted they didn't wear the special liveries of the seven Kan'Tanu Chapters.

The Kan'Tanu Sector was ruled by one sect, but it was separated into units for logistics. Each chapter was a branch of the cult and the equivalent of a Zecian

top-tier Empire. The whole sector was cleanly split between these even chapters, but most planets had no real connection to their overlords beyond providing bodies and resources.

Zac guessed this was a world with decent mineral deposits thanks to its affinity, which generated some wealth and warranted slightly stronger defensive measures than normal worlds. However, the Ambient Energy was noticeably lower than in both his worlds. The planet couldn't be too valuable, mostly holding large quantities of low-grade metals.

Judging by the line-up, these invaders must have opted for a decisive attack while they had their enemy gathered in one place. Their retreat was possibly even intentional to set up this kind of siege. However, the appearance of undead and other unfamiliar races had clearly caused a stir. Zac could see hesitant and fearful looks among the frontline soldiers.

The minutes passed, and the hastily-erected fort rapidly filled with veteran soldiers. Meanwhile, new warriors were constantly joining the already massive Kan'Tanu ranks from two directions, likely the closest teleportation arrays. More War Arrays were erected, and Zac frowned upon seeing their opposition grow fiercer.

Neither side called for an attack. There was no way the Kan'Tanu could break through the System's protections, and Zac had no reason to call for an early strike. They had essentially entered an arms race, a fight the Calamity Company would win any day of the week. Meanwhile, if they started shooting at the Kan'Tanu from within the golden barrier, the System would see it as the Atwood Empire forfeiting the protections.

Zac silently observed the enemy ranks from a slightly obscured spot next to a [Godslayer Cannon], trying to gauge the winds of fate to pinpoint elites and potential dangers. When ten minutes remained on the grace period, he suddenly spotted something by one of the larger constructs behind the Kan'Tanu's rearguard—a newcomer.

He didn't look special, and it was impossible to gauge his strength at this distance. Neither did he have any particular swirl of fate around him which would denote a powerful elite. However, it almost looked like he was glowing to Zac's vision, a metallic sheen that Zac instinctively knew wasn't something the warrior was doing himself.

Could it be?

'How do you normally find the enemy World Lord?' Zac asked through a Command Array.

'They're generally the strongest person. You can also ask any random civilian on the street. Most commoners don't have any Heart Curses, so they spill everything the moment they're faced with a whole army,' Joanna answered. 'We've always had a name and description by the time we reached the World Capital.'

Zac inquired with a few more, and even Rhubat, who had killed two World Lords, said the same thing. Neither had any special means to track down the leaders, but Zac was certain. That glowing man, it was him—the World Lord of Kerkos VI. He must have joined the ambush upon learning that the enemy weren't the ones they'd been expecting. If things went well, they'd stay and reap some merit. If the enemy proved to tough a nut to crack, he'd sneak back to the World Capital or perhaps even off-world.

But how could Zac let him go now that he'd served himself up on a silver platter? Four days he'd held himself back. Four days, he'd watched some of his Empire's most promising warriors fall so that the army could find its way.

No longer.

## **Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1099 - One-man Calamity - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1099 - One-man Calamity**

"Are you certain, Warmaster?" Rhubat asked.

"I trust my instincts."

"Do you require assistance?"

"No," Zac smiled. "Just don't shoot me with your cannons after opening the path."

"The death of a World Lord triggers a global prompt," Joanna reminded. "It always weakens their resolve. Triggering it within a minute might break the army entirely. Many will run to the hills or hide deep in the forests while we sack the planet, rather than throwing their life away for a fallen leader."

"I'll try to get it done quickly," Zac agreed.

"Then let's get the show started," Joanna said while Rhubat sent out a series of commands.

There were still a few minutes remaining on the grace period, but they didn't want to give the World Lord a chance to return home after assessing the situation. As one, the spherical War Machines atop their podiums unleashed a pulse of fire that rippled toward the surrounding army. The [Godslayer Cannons] erupted soon after, their deadly payload entering using the inferno as a cover.

The soldiers of Kerkos VI weren't slow on the uptake. Their defensive barrier was already active, and there was almost no delay when they returned fire. Twelve high-intensity beams tore through the curtain of flames with speed far surpassing their cannons, hitting the Calamity Company's defensive barrier from every direction. The barrier buckled, and Zac's eyes widened upon seeing that it almost collapsed.

Thankfully, the combined effort of thousands of Array Masters and a secondary array let them endure the attack. The lasers lingered for a few seconds before winking out, but their blinding power had undoubtedly seared itself on more than a few retinas. It wasn't easy to condense so much energy into a beam no wider than a head, but it was much more effective at dealing with powerful enemies and protective arrays.

The source was the tall D-grade Array Towers in the distance, and Zac could tell they were of even higher quality than his own War Machines. The World Lord must have leveraged the accumulated riches of his attuned planet to procure these things as a hidden ace. No wonder they'd chosen this kind of strategy—most factions would have had their barriers shredded by that kind of attack.

As expected, a conventional salvo similar to the Calamity Company's cannons followed in the wake of the lasers, their attacks reaching the barrier in front of Zac just as the Ishiate-made bombs crashed into the metallic cage in the distance. Utter mayhem followed, and it looked like thousands of suns had ignited around them. Zac felt the heat and pressure from within the rippling barrier, and his soldiers atop his wall-walk were forced to hunker down behind the crenelation.



The Kan'Tanu were throwing everything but the kitchen sink at them, desperate to force their way through the harried barrier. Metallic spikes hundreds of meters long shot toward them, and some Cursed Tangles had even managed to survive the flaming inferno. It glommed onto the wall, siphoning the energy that kept it running. Warriors and purifiers were already on the move, creating an apocalyptic scene beneath the wall with skills and state-provided talismans.

Meanwhile, the engineers were fighting fire with fire, and a second bomb had already been pushed into the red-hot barrels of the [Godslayer Cannons]. The battle had only progressed for a few seconds, yet the unleashed firepower was far beyond what they'd seen on the Neutral Battlefronts. The three-mile-wide no man's land had turned into something more volatile and unpredictable than the Calamity, and Zac began doubting his plan of forcing his way through.

No, wasn't it for this exact kind of scenario he'd upgraded [Abyssal Drive]?

Zac waited, observing the heated exchange with rapt attention. Thankfully, the terrifying beams couldn't fire again in short order, much like his stellar flamethrowers. And while those towers trumped the Calamity Company's peak offensive strength, Zac's other War Machines were clearly much stronger than the Kan'Tanu's. The [Godslayer Cannons]'s bombs were slamming into the steel cage repeatedly, the explosions holding all kinds of Daos.

The Ishiate had invented over twenty different explosives for their favorite weapon of mass destruction, and they were trying to figure out which worked best against the incredibly stable barrier of the Kan'Tanu. The more attacks it endured, the more it seemed like a proper Town Defense array that drew upon the strength of the world itself.

"Prototype 4!" Ciru roared in the distance, and the engineers swarmed over the steaming cannons to make adjustments.

Hundreds of stoneturtles even ensconced the War Machines in something that looked like blobs of mercury. Judging by the billowing clouds of steam they released, it was a way to expel the accumulated heat and energies within. It only took a few seconds to make the necessary adjustments, and fifty cannons fired simultaneously.

Zac sensed the energy within, realizing it was similar to the [Void Bombs] he'd occasionally relied on during the integration. Zac knew how expensive spatial

materials were, which meant his lead engineer was determined to open up a path for him. Zac readied himself as Miasma entered his movement skill.

Then, the bombs struck the barrier. Their explosions contributed nothing to the cacophony of the battlefield, but their visual display overwhelmed everything else. Fifty cracks in space formed a vertical line on the Kan'Tanu's grey barrier. The scene only lasted a moment before space buckled, and a spatial tear hundreds of meters across dragged a huge chunk of the Kan'Tanu's wall and thousands of their men into the Void.

The cultist desperately fired back, suppressing the dimensional wound with raw firepower. The whole region heaved, yet Zac knew this was his chance. Finally, the chaotic energies and blinding lights subsided to the point he could vaguely see the opposing side.

The spatial tear had been forcibly crushed, but that section of the wall was gone entirely. Kan'Tanu Array Masters rushed to plug the gap with a new barrier but met resistance when trying to form across the unstable patch of space. It was covered in cracks and fissures from the get-go, a remnant of the spatial scar.

The Array Masters were already mending the damage, but a small breach was all Zac needed. The world turned dark, and hundreds of thousands of attacks froze in place like he'd stepped out of time. Zac pierced through the incinerated Cursed Ground, narrowly avoiding surviving tangles, errant attacks, and regions holding deadly energy accumulations.

The dimensional film was incredibly fragile after the previous chaos, and Zac could tell it was teetering on the brink of collapse again. But the darkness of the Abyss temporarily provided Zac passage through the aftershocks. Not safe passage, certainly, but stable enough that his upgraded movement skill wasn't forcibly deactivated. Zac shot through one of the barrier gaps like a streak of darkness, moving with such speed that the few on the frontlines who noticed him had no chance to intercept.

Suddenly, he was flying right above the heads of the bulk of the cultist army, and he saw how the endless numbers of E-grade cultivators realize what was happening. It felt like a million eyes were suddenly on him, and the warriors lit up within the Abyss as they began rotating Cosmic Energy. Zac activated the blinding feature of his skill for a moment, ignoring the significant drain of impacting so many cultivators.

He found a group of warriors that looked like a subsidiary command unit and deactivated [Abyssal Drive] right in the thick of it. A gleaming edge shimmering with death tore through the captains, the force of Zac's swing and Daos so overwhelming they generated devastating wind blades that killed even more. Zac barely had time to emerge from the puff of darkness before another wave of gloom exploded from his body.

The cultists weren't fools, and the backlines were already spreading out after witnessing the Calamity Company's firepower. This way, they'd avoid whole clumps of warriors being taken out before they could do anything. Unfortunately for them, scale was the main goal when Zac upgraded his corrosive Domain Skill.

The ominous clouds covered a mile in every direction with terrifying speed, like an ancient plague descended on the unorthodox sinners. It swallowed a huge swathe of the Kan'Tanu army before they even had a chance to figure out where their target disappeared to. A storm of Kill Energy flooded his body when the weaker warriors were almost instantly killed by the corrosion.

Even if E-grade cultivators barely provided any Kill Energy, the sheer quantity of deaths let Zac steadily reinforce his Cosmic Core with freakish speed. If he could keep up this rate of carnage, he'd probably reach the limits of Early D-grade within a few months. Something like this was only possible for overwhelmingly powerful Hegemons, though. Even Middle Hegemons would normally be risking their lives when placing themselves in the middle of millions of enemies, and those who could rarely be bothered.

Risking your life for months on end to save a couple of decades of meditation wasn't worth it for most Hegemons, and there was the issue of fell Karma and resentment to consider. Wanton slaughter of people in the lower grades was like overindulging on leveling pills. But instead of Pill Toxins, you were left with Heart Demons and resentment hiding within your body, which was even harder to eliminate.

Large-scale massacres of significantly weaker cultivators also turned the System against you, like with the Great Redeemer. Thankfully, the war greatly reduced the effect of these downsides. After all, the System couldn't punish you for participating in a conflict it arranged. It was fine for now, but Zac would have to be careful about targeting E-grade cultivators by the time he reached Middle Hegemony.

The continuous influx of Kill Energy was a welcome bonus, but Zac didn't forget his main goal. His body melded with the shroud around him as he reactivated his movement skill. Zac still couldn't activate other skills while running [Abyssal Drive], but most active skills wouldn't deactivate after he entered his spectral state. [Deathmark] was no different, and it even provided cover as Zac resumed his mad dash toward his target.

Order had completely crumbled within his deadly domain. Zac saw hundreds of Kan'Tanu dying from friendly fire when their companions desperately released their skills to force back the corrosive mist. But it was like the haze was attracted to its targets, especially those who fought back the hardest. The veterans caught within the attack fared better, grouping up to create safe pockets void of corrosion.

Unfortunately for them, that meant they became the unwitting targets for the true terror of [Deathmark].

They emerged from the shadows without making a sound, and even some of the veterans didn't notice anything amiss before it was too late. The commotion of the still-ongoing exchange of firepower behind him was deafening, so Zac sensed rather than heard a thousand soft rustles from his surroundings. The next second, a new surge of Kill Energy entered Zac's body. And it only kept going.

The Specters looked very similar to before; part-skeleton, part-ghost, wielding brutal axes wrought from the dense shrouds from which they came. The only noticeable difference was that they each contained more than ten times the energy, making them stronger and sturdier than their E-grade counterparts. Their auras were also far more attuned to the mist, making them even harder to notice.

Most spectral warriors had killed their targets with their attack, with a few being rebuffed after leaving a corrosive mark. With their first targets down, they emotionlessly continued toward their next victim, showing surprising battle instinct. When possible, they retreated into the corrosive mist to deliver surprise strikes. Only when faced with groups of warriors did they fiercely fight back, completely uncaring about their safety. If anything, they welcomed outcomes of mutual destruction.

Less than 100 of his temporary subordinates were destroyed by the E-grade cultists before they could accomplish their goal. Zac was eager to see their performance after reforming, but he had already reached the edge of the

corrosive haze. Zac felt the connection with his skill cut off as he shot out from the churning cloud with the speed of a bullet, at which point he'd crossed most of the army.

That didn't mean the skill dissipated. Zac had infused a good chunk of his Miasma into the cloud, and it would keep running until its energy was expended. The nightmare for those caught within had only begun, especially considering that every soldier who managed to escape meant more wraiths and corrosion for those who remained.

The World Lord had realized he'd been exposed, unsurprising considering Zac was making a beeline toward him. Thankfully, the display of [Deathmark] wasn't enough to make him back away. Instead, one hundred exquisitely equipped warriors had appeared out of nowhere, forming an empowering War Array as they prepared for battle.

Their auras harmonized, and the World Lord pointed a deep-purple sword toward Zac. At this point, Zac realized his target was a Middle Hegemon, and not one at the beginning of the stage. Zac should have expected as much, considering Kerkos VI was an Attuned Early D-grade world. Yet Zac wasn't worried—he welcomed the challenge.

Powerful Middle Hegemons had been his limit before evolving, with Late-stage Hegemons or Beast Kings being simply too powerful. After all, anyone who'd reached that far into Hegemony had very solid foundations compared to the Early stage D-grade cultivators who'd barely squeezed into the grade.

A powerful magnetic storm formed a barrier between himself and Zac and the World Lord, its size even eclipsing Zac's [Deathmark]. The domain swallowed thousands of Kan'Tanu reservists, but the World Lord didn't seem to care. Space filled with an endless number of miniature metallic shards, each releasing sharp pulses into their surroundings.

The effect formed a domain that not even [Abyssal Drive] could nullify, and Zac felt painful pricks all across his body as he pushed inside. Even his speed was drastically reduced, and the dense Dao of Metal surrounding him made it seem as though he was digging through a solid sheet of steel. It felt like the whole planet was trying to seal his movements with an incredible magnetic pull. Zac had hoped to force his way through the domain, but the delay made him return to his normal form.

A scream of danger greeted his return to the corporeal. Zac felt like he was staring down the barrel of a gun. By this point, he knew to trust his gut and activated multiple skills at once. His stature doubled as a dark chain wound around his exposed left arm in a mimicry of the upgraded [Love's Bond]. Meanwhile, Alea's backplate was covered by the judge's mantle from [Arbiter of the Abyss].

Four small skeletons also appeared behind his back, along with the protective rune beneath his feet. Zac followed his instincts and had [Profane Exponent]'s new mage skeleton empower its companion with redirecting powers, prompting a dark swirl above Zac's head.

Only then did Zac feel somewhat safe as he forged ahead. He didn't have to wait long to encounter the source of his unease. A streak of sinister red shot right at him, but not from the direction of his target. It rather came from the side, and it contained a familiar monstrous force as it tore right toward him.

Zac had witnessed the strength of the D-grade Array Towers firsthand and knew he wasn't sturdy enough to take such a condensed attack head-on. But there was no reason to. Repulsion and redirection worked together from his two defensive skills, and the beam reluctantly had its trajectory altered. Zac had wanted to turn it right toward the World Lord, but he only managed to nudge it in the general direction of another Array Tower.

A streak of searing red passed right in front of him, but Zac didn't even have the chance to breathe out in relief when a huge sword pushed through the storm.

Zac was just an ant when faced with the blade, but he saw no reason to back down from a physical attack, even if the magnetic field empowered it. Dark swirls appeared on [Death's Duality] as Zac defied the gravitational pull and flew into the sky, the muscles in his arm bunching up as he unleashed a barbarous swing at the incoming blade.

The collision of blades was like a nuclear warhead going off, releasing erratic torrents of opposing Daos. Zac was punched back on the ground, his landing creating a huge crater even in the incredibly dense metallic soil. Bones creaked, but Zac knew he'd come out the victor of that exchange. Zac hadn't been able to absorb the rebound, but he remained mostly unscathed.

In contrast, huge cracks covered the sword, while the metallic domain had destabilized. The magnetic pull on him had drastically lessened, and he

spotted his target only a few hundred meters away. The source of the attack was a six-armed metallic giant conjured by the World Lord and his elite guard, but one of its arms had shattered after the exchange. It still released a fierce aura, and the weapons in its remaining hands were ready for war.

But so was Zac.

## **Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1100 - A Pink Sky - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1100 - A Pink Sky**

Their eyes met, and Zac's murderous intent was reflected in the World Lord's. Zac rushed out of the crater, making no attempt to hide his goals as death rose from the ground. He had activated [Fields of Despair] to improve his sight and levy its debuff on his targets. Zac doubted an E-grade skill could retain its full efficacy on Middle Hegemons wielding Dao Branches, but he'd already confirmed it could remove the full 10%, up to 2,500, on Early Hegemons.

Death fought with Metal as the magnetic domain recovered, and Metal came out ahead. It wasn't enough to forcibly deactivate his skill, and the protective rune of [Profane Exponents], along with his Eoz Nodes, let him shrug off much of the remaining suppression. Still, it reminded him he needed to upgrade [Fields of Despair] sooner rather than later. Its use had lessened slightly since he gained his Soul Sense, but it was still a fundamental skill that allowed him to nudge any battle in his favor.

The ground shook, but not from Zac's approach. Instead, thousands of projectiles shot out from the ground, all aimed at Zac. Some were rune-covered stalactites of steel-infused stone; others were fully-formed weapons part-energy and part-metal. The most numerous were the raw metal shards dragged from the ground, most no larger than bullets, that shot toward him with incredible speed.

It was like the maw of a subterranean beast had broken through the ground to gobble him up. Two more huge swords were also descending from above, sealing the route in the air. The metallic giant also stabbed an unbelievably large pike right toward him, and its sharp edge filled most of Zac's vision in no time. The situation only grew more hectic when a sanguine laser pierced his domain from the side. The beam actually moved like a supersized blade, searing the air in an arc toward him while cutting off his escape.



The trap had been sprung, and Zac was under fire from every direction. But there wasn't even a ripple in Zac's heart as he forged ahead. The core tenet of the Inexorable Stance was a relentless advance, where everything put in your way was nothing but a feeble attempt to delay the inevitable.

The Miasma in his body churned while the chains of [Love's Bond] formed an impenetrable web around him. The varied attacks coming from the ground were clearly conjured by the elite guard, and the chains were more than enough to deal with them. Zac almost felt as though the chains had a mind of their own as they destroyed or rebuffed anything within twenty meters.

In a sense, they did.

The advantage of [Love's Bond]'s evolution went beyond a new form and increased durability. The materials making up the Spirit Tool were finally in tune with his technique. More importantly, Alea had joined him on his Inexorable Path. Zac barely had to divert any attention for the six chains to form the complex patterns that let them rebuff hundreds of projectiles. Only the small shards managed to pass through the curtain, but they couldn't even break through the repulsion domain of [Arbiter of the Abyss].

The chains didn't possess the raw strength to rebuff the enormous blades descending from above, but they didn't need to. Five orbs of utter darkness appeared behind Zac, forcing the Pygmy Skeletons to move to the ground. The wails of the underworld pierced joined the clamor, the source of the anguished screams a dense haze dripping from [Death's Duality].

It almost looked like you could glimpse a dark purgatory through the swirling mist, but looking at the scene too long would leave lacerations on your soul. Zac swung his axe, and the mist thickened into the skull of [Desperation's End]. The skill had changed quite a bit while Zac improved the skill to peak proficiency, much like how the wooden hand of [Arcadia's Judgment] grew more impressive.

By now, the skull was twice the size of Early Proficiency and covered in dense scars like it'd seen a thousand wars. They formed a complex pattern reminiscent of the primordial runes on the Stele of Conflict. The only exception was a deep crack right in the skull's glabella. It looked like something left by a sword having pierced its forehead, exposing an oppressive darkness within. The scar resembled a devilish third eye, staring right at the incoming spear.

The skull moved with blinding speed, and three of the meter-wide spheres teleported to its side to take up the role of stalwart guardians. Each skill upgrade had added another restrictive orb, and reaching Peak Mastery had done away with the framework wings entirely. Zac believed they had been necessary to refine and control the orbs in the lower stages, but his strength and Dao were enough to skip the training wheels by the time he mastered the skill.

Runes radiating Death and Conflict appeared on the orbs, and the Magnetic Domain was utterly incapable of withstanding their pressure. Any projectiles around the skull froze in place, and the skill's latent cutting force shredded the ones conjured by E-grade cultivators.

The last two orbs moved from their position behind Zac's back, but they didn't join the rest of the skill. Instead, they flickered and appeared by the descending swords. Not even the enormous blades could break free from [Desperation's End]'s seal, but Zac could sense that the orbs could only contain the attacks for a short moment. That was more than enough.

The scarred skull had destroyed everything it passed by, forming a safe passage void of even the Magnetic Domain. It let him increase his pace, avoiding the incoming laser. There was no need to expend energy to divert it again. The beam was already destabilizing, and the Array Tower would have to stop the attack pretty soon. If not, it would explode, likely taking a large number of Kan'Tanu with it.

That left only the spear, but it wasn't long for the world. The scarred skull opened its maw and released its deadly contents. The blade shot forward, leaving spatial fractures in its wake. The wails from the underworld reached a crescendo, and Zac saw through [Fields of Despair] that even some of the elite guards lost their composure and recoiled.

Spear and edge met, but there was no struggle for supremacy. The spear was cut clean through despite its imbuelement of an Early Dao Branch and a War Array. It only found success in the sense that it had exhausted a good chunk of the energy within [Desolation's End]. After all, it was only an E-grade skill contending with a proper D-grade skill.

If it was before, the edge would have reached a point of destabilization after ripping apart the sky-scraper-sized spear. However, the combination of his upgraded [Adamance of Eoz] and Cosmic Core had made his skill roughly twice as durable. Of course, the fact that his Daos decidedly trumped the

World Lord's played a large role. The attack still had enough in the tank to forge ahead, and it actually grew in size.

A sound resembling a screech played in reverse indicated the orbs holding back the descending swords had reached their limits. The skill's exhaustion was enough to let the blades break through, and they crashed down toward Zac. However, Zac had already closed half the distance between himself and his target by that point, arriving within the range of the supersized swords.

The blades dug into the ground, creating an enormous chasm at Zac's previous location. Zac was only hit by the resulting shockwave. It felt like he'd been punched in the back of his head, but Zac used the force to increase his speed and keep up with his still-advancing attack.

The elite guard tried to stop the final approach of [Desperation's End], but the black orbs paved a path. Ten guards were shredded, but the World Lord broke apart the edge with a swing of his sword. Half of it shattered, letting the leader avoid damage, while the other half slammed into the metal giant. It wasn't enough to destroy the skill, but the attack pushed it back and interrupted a follow-up strike.

The War Array was temporarily destabilized after having a dozen of its controllers killed, and there was nothing between Zac and his target. The steel giant was still looming above, but its size had become a weakness at melee range. It was time to finish things. However, Zac only had time to take a few steps before the ground exploded.

Zac initially thought it was just more of the metallic projectiles, but his eyes widened when a curtain of writhing red filled his vision. It was a Heart Curse trap that moved like lightning to contain him. Zac was certain it hadn't been planted after he'd activated [Fields of Despair], which meant the World Lord had already made some preparations in the short window Zac was dealing with the first laser and falling sword.

In contrast to most Heart Curses, this one was a bright red, and color wasn't the only thing it had in common with blood. The tangles were more liquid than solid, and a dispersive swing of Zac's axe had no effect. The shockwave only created a thin gash in the wall, but it was like the bisected tangle had a mind of its own. It actively fused back together, somehow absorbing the force.

Bloody tendrils pierced toward him, but Zac didn't jump back or try to go around. The collapsing laser beam had almost caught up, and it had

expanded to the width of a mighty redwood tree as the Array Tower failed to contain the energy. Stopping to avoid the bloody curse meant stepping into the beam, and Zac wasn't certain he'd be able to block even this unfocused laser.

Of course, there was no reason to stop.

Zac kept running, unleashing a herculean punch at the bloody wall with his left hand. A hole was forced into the sanguine Heart Curse, and Zac rushed right through. Much of the cursed liquid splattered across his body, but he didn't care. What should have been a calamity didn't even slow him down, with [Void Heart], [Immutability of Eoz], and [Purity of the Void] fighting to be first in line to rip apart cursed intent the moment it entered his body.

The bloody mesh was followed by a more standard tangle of heart curses unleashed by the whole guard, though it was imbued with the Dao of Metal. It looked like a maelstrom leading to hell, full of sinewy spikes and sharp edges that radiated murder. But Zac was like an enraged bull, and his axe carved a path. Another set of cursed tendrils managed to find their way into his body, but they fared no better than the ones before.

The two sets of superimposed curses would have been a death sentence for most. Even Draugr, such as the Kavriel Descendants, would have had trouble dealing with the situation. The weaker ones would have died, but even the elites would be severely weakened by the deadly parasites rampaging through their body.

Zac suspected the Kan'Tanu had arranged everything with the Heart Curses in mind. The giant, the storm of attacks, and the laser from behind. They were all designed to waste the tricks up Zac's sleeve and expose him to the curses. After that, they'd only need to finish the job while their target was attacked from within.

Unfortunately for the World Lord, he wasn't dealing with a normal Draugr. His gambit had zero effect, and it let Zac get even closer without so much as a flesh wound. If the ruler of Kerkos VI wanted to use his Array Towers again, he'd also be targeting himself. More importantly, the Kan'Tanu group was about to enter [Arbiter of the Abyss]'s sphere of influence.

It was just in time, as Zac could finally see the familiar hesitation creep into the World Lord's eyes—the growing realization that he'd kicked an iron plate this time. Zac only needed him to hesitate a bit longer, so he let his aura

fluctuate erratically while trying to look like he was enduring soul-rending agony.

He even strained his body to make pitch-black tendrils cover his pallid face. It was just his ichor moving through his veins while pushing [Conviction of Eoz], but it was easy to mistake the scene for the Heart Curse trying to wrest control over his body in the heat of the moment.

The World Lord gritted his teeth and channeled his vast stores of Cosmic Energy. Meanwhile, the auras of the guards exploded with brutality as their sizes doubled. They had entered a berserking state, with chaotic auras and thick black veins pulsating across their engorged bodies. It was almost like they were trying to show him what the real deal looked like.

The guards had gained a temporary boost close to a small realm. The six Early Hegemons approached middle Hegemony, and the Peak E-grade guards suddenly felt like powerful Half-step cultivators. Altogether, it seemed like their strength had increased by around 50%. It was significantly more than his [Arcadian Crusade], and Zac sincerely doubted this was a peak-quality method. The repercussions would undoubtedly be dire for using their Heart Curses like this.

Zac was ready to enter a fierce melee, and the swirls of intractable darkness from [Fatehew] had already appeared on his axe. But Zac suddenly swore in realization and urgently upped his pace. It had looked like the World Lord was preparing for a life-and-death brawl just now. However, while his deathsworn took a step forward, he took a step back. Zac's feigned weakness had been met with feigned determination.

A storm of attacks blocked his vision, and blood rained as the agitated Heart Curses broke through the cultists' bodies to join the assault. Zac felt some anxiety upon sensing the World Lord's escape just as he was about to enter the reach of his taunting ability, but he quickly calmed down. The sudden shift was not enough to change anything.

He'd mostly relied on brute force on his crusade through the Kan'Tanu army until he reached his target. His movements subtly shifted while the swirling chains resumed their complex dance. He had fully entered his Inexorable Stance. Incoming attacks were snuffed out like flickering candles in the wind, and the rattling links went from defense to offense as they pounced on the cultist blockade.

The black chains were everywhere at once, targeting vitals and sealing movements. The Kan'Tanu had lost much of their rationality from triggering their Heart Curses, but an almost bestial instinct allowed them to dodge and counter with great responsiveness. To an outsider, it might have looked like they countered Zac's technique, but it was the opposite.

Their instinctual movements made his technique even more effective, and it felt like his chains had become puppet strings attached to the cultists as he manipulated them to open a path. The squad leaders desperately tried to use their bodies and curses to block the way, but they suddenly froze and let Zac flash through. The reality became apparent a moment later as four of the Kan'Tanu Hegemons collapsed into chunks of flesh and viscera, having been cut apart by lightning-quick swings while his chains diverted their attention.

D-grade Cultivators who had forcibly raised their grade through pills or sacrifice weren't much different than E-grade cultivators to the current Zac. They didn't have the foundations to leverage their grade and only became slightly stronger elites.

Breaking through the empowered defensive line had been effortless, but it had delayed Zac a moment. Long enough for the World Lord to create more distance. Zac knew his fears had come true upon seeing that the World Lord's body was rapidly turning into streaks of light as he held a runic feather in his hand—an escape treasure.

The leader was incredibly decisive, immediately using a rare lifesaving treasure rather than a movement skill to create more distance. Judging by the intensity of the fluctuations of space and wind, it wouldn't just move him to another part of Kerkos VI. It was like his [Flashfire Flourish], having the ability to pierce at least one dimensional layer.

Zac felt like time moved in slow motion as he urgently tried to close the gap. More and more of the World Lord's body was transformed into an intangible streak, and Zac could feel how a vortex was opening behind him. Zac's target would be dragged inside in a moment, and Zac wasn't like Iz. He didn't have some unfathomable method to piggyback on someone else's treasure. At best, he might be able to enter the vortex with [Abyssal Drive], but who knew where that'd leave him?

A surefire way to counter his escape was to activate [Pillar of Desolation] with Void Energy. The deathly river could seal space, and only the best escape treasures would be able to elude it. The wealth of this random World Lord had

surprised Zac already, but he doubted he had such a good thing on hand. Zac didn't want to expose an ace like that on his very first battle.

Instead, he chose to trust in his other skills.

Zac precisely calculated the distance and threw forward his left arm the moment he was within range. The World Lord was mostly through the vortex by that point, but the sound of the punctured air was followed by a chain shooting into the vortex with such speed that it left small cracks in space. Zac tugged, and a ghastly smile spread across his face as a resonance was followed by a horrified shriek. A disoriented and forcibly materialized Hegemon was yanked out of the dimensional tunnel.

The last thing he ever saw was a pink sky and a black edge.