

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1101 - Clean Sweep - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1101 - Clean Sweep

[World Lord of Kerkos VI killed. Kerkos VI considered neutral for two weeks.]

Zac breathed out in relief upon seeing the prompt, its message further confirmed by the huge surge of Kill Energy entering his body. He was confident in his skills, but there were all kinds of odd techniques and counters out there. The World Lord might have had a cloning method that let him swap out targets at the last second or possess a means of survival even with an axe through his head. Thankfully, it really was his target lying on the ground before him, his body ravaged by forcibly materializing and being dragged back through the one-way vortex.

The World Lord escaping their planet during the invasion would make things harder for the defenders, but the Calamity Company wouldn't benefit nearly as much as if they managed to kill him. The System mostly considered it a tactical retreat rather than a surrender or defeat. For one, there wouldn't be any prompts, and some of the more critical features of the War System wouldn't immediately trigger.

The Kan'Tanu obviously didn't want their leaders to run, but they weren't madmen who required all their men to fight to the death—such treatment was reserved for the lower castes and the warslaves. In contrast, the cultists valued their elites and leaders quite a bit. Depending on how connected this Hegemon was, he might just face some light punishment by his superiors before being reassigned.

He even had a chance of getting his world back, considering most invaders retreated after sacking the world. Only the larger factions dared hold onto planets in the foreign sector, having their own powerhouses to shore up the defenses in case a Kan'Tanu elite was sent to reclaim it.

The pull had shattered the spectral chain of his skill, but [Arbiter of the Abyss] was still running. This wasn't anything new—like [Vanguard of Undeath], it could be maintained indefinitely as long as he had the energy to spare.

However, there was one interesting aspect that differed from when he first got the skill. The chain around his left arm was currently unresponsive to calls, but Zac could feel it slowly filling with energy. He'd be able to trap another elite with a spectral link in thirty seconds or so.

[Arbiter of the Abyss] was the last skill to be upgraded to E-grade. The complexity of [Vanguard of Undeath] and his hesitance of direction had delayed him for years. He'd only taken the step inside the mysterious temple where he got the second piece of his seal. By the time he entered the Perennial Vastness, he had barely used it in an actual fight. But like his other skills, it had been elevated to Peak Mastery long ago.

The first two upgrades hadn't changed anything. It simply made the directional domain stronger while allowing the chain to move significantly faster. The chain itself was key to making the most of the skill, but it had been a bit slow before. He had essentially been forced to use trickery and misdirection to mark his targets and summon the spectral chain that multiplied the taunting effect.

The taunt itself hadn't gotten any stronger at Peak Mastery, but it was already very impressive, like the battle just now had shown. Instead, it had pushed the chain's speed to its peak and could now move far quicker than even Alea's upgraded chains. Most importantly, the upgrade made the spectral chain rechargeable. The spectral chain could still only last for ten seconds after deployment, but it would now charge up another chain after a minute.

It was perfect for a protracted battle where Zac roved through the army in search of leaders. He'd take out one, and the charge would be ready by the time he reached his next target. He could even alternate between targeting the armies and leaders by using [Deathmark] or [Arbiter of the Abyss] while the other was on cooldown.

This time, Zac doubted he'd get the chance, though. He could feel how the air went out of the sprawling Kan'Tanu army after the proclamation spread through the ranks. It was like the whole battlefield had frozen, where most cultists tried to compute how their leader had fallen just a couple of minutes after the fight started. The only ones who didn't seem to care were the death guard behind him.

Their Heart Curses were going out of control, and they had lost the last of their rationality upon seeing their leader fall. They ignored the prompt as they pounced on Zac. He doubted they were even able to read the prompt in their current state, and not just because the writhing tendrils had emerged from many of their eye sockets.

The steel giant had already disappeared after its summoner died, and the berserker, with their feral instincts and ineffective curses, had no chance to

withstand Zac's refined technique. The guard was cut down in seconds, leaving Zac alone in a field of Death. The next group of cultists was miles away. Everyone closer had either been killed by the metallic storm or the lasers. He could see more than a few cultists glance in his direction, but none attempted to rouse a response.

The world becoming neutral was a huge blow to any attempts at turning things around. For one, it was almost impossible to get any more reinforcements even if the World Lord had recalled the warriors from Kerkos VI's other battlefronts. It wasn't that the planet's Teleporters had been blocked, but the features most factions relied on in the System Era required the planet to actually be assigned to someone.

For instance, Zac's administrators had adjusted the Teleportation Arrays in his Empire to work dependent on an individual's rank and role. His soldiers could teleport to war bases they were assigned to, but civilians could not. Without these settings, people could only access arrays in their private list of teleporters. For most people, this was only their hometown and a few neighboring cities.

The world becoming neutral removed that option. Any reinforcements would have to travel the conventional ways or rely on others with teleportation access, just like Zac had used the Marshall Clan to clean out the incursions. But it was easier said than done to ferry a whole army that way.

The same was true for any off-world Kan'Tanu. They couldn't use their sect's credentials to teleport over. Only those with Kerkos VI on their list could come over, though Zac planned on jamming the Nexus Hubs before word spread.

There were various problems facing the locals beyond the matter of the teleporters. Whoever took over the role as leader of the planet's capital would be able to use the defenses already there, but they wouldn't have access to the town shop. Who'd even want to take on such a hopeless role, and who'd be foolish enough to follow them?

The Kan'Tanu were reeling from the prompt, but the Calamity Company had been waiting for this moment. The statues hidden behind the walls were activated, and twenty Miasmic glaives rose toward the sky. The Kan'Tanu's iron cage had been battered well beyond the initial breach while Zac dealt with the leader, and seeing the terrifying glaives was the straw that broke the camel's back.

The army began to unravel like Joanna had guessed, beginning with the vast number of reservists in the back lines. They ran for their lives, leaving the front lines to fend for themselves. The elites and leaders weren't much better off. With every additional deserter, it became harder to maintain control. The frontlines, who saw the miasmic blades fly toward them, were desperate to escape, even if it meant cutting a path through their compatriots.

Zac shook his head at seeing how quickly things fell apart. It really drove home that this planet wasn't some hidden base of Kan'Tanu elites. It was simply slightly richer than the average Early D-grade world at the edge of the Zurbor Sector. The World Lord should have kept his head down and leveraged his resources for steady victories in the Neutral Battlefronts, but getting his hands on the powerful Array Towers had made him greedy.

Speaking of, it would be a shame to leave such good things for the Kan'Tanu.

Three hours later, the situation had stabilized. The battle took longer than necessary since they'd opted to turtle up behind their protective barrier as long as possible. There was no point in sending your soldiers into the meatgrinder when you could pepper the Kan'Tanu with your cannons from a safe vantage. They even had cheaper munitions for this very purpose.

Only when they'd taken out all the frontline arrays and broken the defensive line did the soldiers of the Calamity Company flood out from their fortified position, and even the staunch of heart cultists panicked by that point. Millions of Kan'Tanu had fallen, but even more had run for the hills. Hunting down the escaping wasn't worth the time or effort, and they had instead chosen to stabilize their position.

Their losses were minimal, but it had proven harder than expected to capture the valuable Array Towers. It turned out they had self-destruction switches held by their controllers, and seven of the twelve towers had been blown up before they could be secured. Zac had managed to kill the Array Masters in one, Carl sniped another, while they were simply lucky with the last three. Their controllers had opted to flee without blowing up the towers.

The towers had since been defused, and Zac hoped for good news.

"Moving these towers comes with some risk," Ciru said. "They need to be dismantled, and the wrong method will lead to a critical failure."

As Zac had expected, the D-grade Array Towers weren't actually mobile. They had been set up over a month ago, according to their investigations, and their purpose was solely to trap unwitting enemies. This was the third time the World Lord of Kerkos VI had tried this scheme. He'd mostly sent reservists and dissidents into the Neutral Battlefronts, sacrificing them while lowering the guards of his enemies.

Zac almost felt like the System had taken offense to the shameless tactic and sent the Atwood Empire his way.

"Is there anything we can do to decrease the risk?"

"Well, getting the schematics would help," Ciru said. "We can also figure out some things by studying the rubble of the broken ones."

"I'll see what I can do," Zac said, though he wasn't hopeful.

It was highly unlikely a native had created these towers. Most likely, they'd been bought and shipped over by a local Array Master division. And while everyone technically was part of the same faction in the Zurbor Sector, there was no way the sellers would supply the schematics of their wares. Even unified regions generally had standard economies for most of the population.

Zac returned to the command within the temporary fort. It looked like a simplified version of the large battleroom back in Port Atwood, with screens and arrays displaying all kinds of data. Instead of the large map displaying the war progress across the Zecia sector, there was a holographic depiction of Kerkos VI in the middle.

Just like the map on Earth, it was something provided by the System. This one wasn't free, though. The map was generated by one of the cheaper purchases in the Merit Exchange, the Early D-grade [Elite War Mapper]. It was a one-time purchase of 10,000 Faction Merit and something Zac had chosen to splurge on for his Elite Divisions.

There was also a standard War Mapper for sale for only a tenth of the price, but it lacked the critical feature that had made Zac spring for the upgraded version. This map came with over two-dozen markings, all shining with different intensities. Each was a location that would award Faction Merit, and the intensity indicated the amount.

They would have discovered many of these locations by simply asking any random prisoner, but many of the best resources were often hidden and hoarded by a local faction or the World Lord themselves. But nothing could escape the System's gaze, and Zac expected the mapper to have paid for itself within two months.

The most radiant light was unsurprisingly the planet's capital, situated on the opposite side of the world. It would take over a month to travel there by foot and nine days using flying treasures. Zac obviously wouldn't wait that long, which was why there were twenty enormous metal cubes unfurling into Cosmic Vessels outside.

Zac had set a goal of one week for every campaign during the council, and that number wasn't picked at random. The Neutral Battlefronts would take two to four days, depending on your luck. Adding two days to unfurl their Cosmic Vessels and another two to package them, and you had a week.

You'd also need a day or two to extract all the planet's value and merit, but you weren't always this unlucky with spawning locations. The World Lord of Kerkos VI had picked the battlefront furthest from the capital for his ambushes, which meant most invading forces would be pressed to reach the capital and return within the two-week span of relative safety.

Other times, you'd find the capital within walking distance. After all, the capitals usually held the densest accumulation of citizens, which meant a few of the planet's Battlefront Arrays would be placed nearby. Those times, you could skip the Cosmic Vessels and finish the campaign a few days early. Few worlds were like Earth, where Port Atwood had a much smaller population than many of the cities on Pangea. His archipelago only had one on an island neighboring Port Atwood, which had become Battlefront One.

Skipping the Cosmic Vessels meant fewer resources would be harvested, but they were after merit rather than materials. And that was mostly accrued through the capital and the rare strategic locations such as curse farms. Everything else was just a bonus.

"Have you found any targets for those guys?" Zac asked as he walked over to Joanna.

"There are two promising mining towns within three day's journey," Joanna said. "Both are within the top twenty richest deposits, and there are several

well-off families there. Even with the best stuff smuggled or hidden away, they should be able to extract a few hundred D-grade Nexus Coins from them."

"Alright, give them the coordinates," Zac nodded. "Remind them of our rules about our rules for sacking cities and have some observers join them."

"Of course," Joanna said.

"Found anything else?" Zac asked.

"I think we've figured out how that guy could afford such good toys," Petrus snorted. "That guy you split apart has extracted the cores in half of the mines."

"What?" Zac said with surprise. "He's cutting off his revenue stream for some quick merit?"

Spiritual Mines weren't like those of old Earth. In a sense, mining was closer to farming than the simple extraction of resources. As long as there was a core, more spiritual metals would grow over time, just like how new crystals slowly sprouted in his mines on Demon Island.

Any spiritual mine would have a Nexus Vein beneath, but that wasn't considered the core. It was rather the Natural Treasures that had been born in their depths. The vein provided the energy and unique treasures that elevated the environment to birth better materials. Zac still remembered how the cave surrounding the [Mind's Eye Agate] was crammed full of Supreme-quality Twilight Crystals.

If you removed the Treasures, the mine would degrade into something that only produced low-quality materials—essentially killing the goose that laid the eggs. If you were adventuring like Zac was in the Twilight Chasm, you wouldn't care, but any proper leader would leave the Natural Treasures inside their mines. You'd do anything in your power to nurture them and bolster their effect on the surroundings.

To think that the World Lord had extracted the lifeblood of his world. Zac could have understood it if he was facing destruction, but the planet was seemingly doing fine even before.

"The lord wasn't a local," Petrus explained. "He was sent over at the start of the war, according to our investigations. I guess he had connections with an Array Clan and hatched a scheme to rack up some merit. He likely didn't care

about harming the resources at all. He'd be long gone before it became a problem. And in chaotic times like these, who's keeping track? He could point his fingers at us if it ever became a problem."

"Can't believe he's pawned off our reward," Zac snorted. "Well, there should still be a lot of good stuff remaining."

"What's your next move?" Petrus asked.

"Thirty hours after the ships are up and running. I want everything the World Lord hadn't gotten his hands on yet. Make it a competition. Those who extract the most wealth and merit will get a bonus," Zac said. "I'm joining the group heading to the capital."

"And then?"

"And then we go again. The next campaign starts in six days," Zac said as he turned toward the exit. "Welcome to our new normal."

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1102 - A Chance to Rise - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1102 - A Chance to Rise

The attendants had long since been sent out, leaving only Pavina and Kator within the necropolis. Their unmoving postures were a stark contrast to the chaotic scene playing in front of them. The Abyssal Pond had just exploded, threatening to drown the whole cave. The events moved at an accelerated pace, but not a single detail escaped visual bones.

"No wonder they fought so hard to keep this information contained," Kator muttered as the recording neared its end. "I can't believe he blew up the Abyssal Pond. His reputation as a troublemaker isn't for nothing. Yet he actually had to use one of those lowly treasures to evolve his Dao Branch. I guess he really is a mortal—I was sure he was messing with the measurements somehow."

"He's a weird one all around," Pavina agreed, a thoughtful frown on her face. "Why would his Bloodline awakening create such a stir? He seemed fine when we sparred."

"Who knows?" Kator shrugged, but he suddenly felt a slight vibration in his bones. "Oh, I think we're about to find out."

Kator stopped the recording and turned toward the center of the room. Toss stepped through a slit in space, a starry sky barely visible behind him.

"Commander," Pavina said with a bow.

"Welcome back. Any luck?" Kator asked.

"I managed to reach them," Toss nodded. "Replay that for me."

Kator felt his sinews tighten with annoyance, but he complied after rolling his shoulder to indicate his displeasure at having the order subverted. Toss was in his right to be curious, but the chain of command couldn't be forgotten. Especially considering the extent to which his mission had been micromanaged from the command crypts in the depths of the White Sky Gorge. Rank trumps fate, they said. The irony was palpable, considering his mission.

A deep rumble from within the commander indicated his answer depended on the recorded scene, and Kator chose to drop the matter. It ultimately wasn't a worthwhile battle, and Kator was too curious about the findings to delay the meeting further. He was tired of hearing the same excuses from that decrepit half-blood Draugr, that outside influence had damaged or blocked the connection to the Heartlands.

Since when was it so easy to damage the imperial channels? Not even the Heavenly Seal on the sector had put any restrictions beyond limiting the transportation of people and equipment.

Finally, the captured scenes had played a second time, at which point Kator nodded for his guardian to share his findings.

"Our suspicions were correct. The events in the pond and the communication blockade were related. But the implications are even greater than we thought," Toss said.

Kator's frontalis muscles shuddered with annoyance. This old bastard savored every moment he was in command, like the attention was the marrow broth of a True Dragon. He couldn't be more clear he felt his babysitting task beneath him. If not for his mission, he'd likely have run headlong into the Million Gates

Territory to wreak havoc and become a blazing star of the war. Kator controlled his body to not give any hints of his inner thoughts. He was getting ample practice in that regard lately.

"Almost a week ago, a phenomenon covering the whole Abyssal Lake appeared," Toss continued after the pregnant pause. "The Abyssal Shores immediately sealed itself off to contain the rumors, but how can something like that go unnoticed?"

"A phenomenon?" Pavina exclaimed. "Arcaz managed to make the Lake stir all the way from the Frontier?"

"Perhaps," Toss grunted. "But it's not as simple as that. The phenomenon wasn't something naturally generated by the Lake. Both the Abyssal Lords sacrificed some of their territories to aid the brat's awakening. The Azol guardian, in particular, unleashed immense power."

"What?!" Kator exclaimed. "The Azol can draw longevity from the Lake, so he should be able to live for a few million more years. But aren't our strategists saying his Dao Heart is on the verge of collapse? He's lived too long and has lost his purpose. If he damages an already unstable territory..."

"On the surface, it looks like the shores sacrificed millions of years of protection to save a D-grade cultivator a few years of progress," Toss nodded. "If there wasn't something else at play, who'd make such a gamble? Even if the boy returns, it's a long shot he'll be able to restore the line of Eoz. The other two branches have always teetered on the brink of extinction, but they at least have a few thousand members."

"So there's something else at play," Kator muttered, his gaze shifting to the frozen image of Arcaz Umbri'Zi. "What other secrets are you hiding?"

"He might not be aware of the situation," Pavina offered.

"It's possible only the Abyssal Lords know the true value of this boy," Toss agreed. "They've always been guarding the secrets of the depths with their lives. I doubt even the Primo knows the full story of what's hiding down there. Rather than restoring a branch, the child's blood might be the key to restoring something they've lost."

"So, what instructions do the generals have?" Kator said, his head tilting. "What about our approach?"

Toss didn't immediately answer but first turned to Pavina. The Revenant hesitated before shaking her head. "I guess I should check the status on the battlefronts."

"She likes the kid, but she's a soldier," Kator commented after Pavina had left. "She won't jeopardize her mission over personal sentiments."

"True, but what I'm about to say is too sensitive. It cannot be allowed to reach any ears," Toss said, using the ancestral language of bones and sinew instead of his conventional voice.

"For now, the orders are to maintain the course," Toss said. "But the leaders are worried. This is an unwelcome variable in an already chaotic time. An informal meeting has been called between the Phalanxes, the Hiveminds, and the Eternal Court."

"So my acting might become reality after all?" Kator laughed, but fury burned in his heart.

"It's possible," Kator acceded. "The Karma might need to be harvested early."

Years of observation and data collection had led to a simple conclusion, one that kept being reinforced as time progressed—Zachary Atwood, or Arcaz Umbri'Zi, was the fulcrum of providence for the upcoming trial. Piggybacking on his fate was bound to be one of the most effective methods to achieve something within the Left Imperial Palace.

Another inevitable conclusion was that forming such a bridge of fate the conventional way was doomed to fail. Whether it was analyzing Arcaz's personality and actions or the Karmic between him and Commander Kaldor, the conclusions were the same. While Arcaz remembered favors, it wasn't enough to form strong Karmic bonds.

There were multiple layers of isolation between him and his surroundings, both brought by his paranoia and yet unidentified means. Arcaz was undoubtedly holding onto so many secrets that he'd never be able to form a true bond of brotherhood, at least not with an outsider like him. Arcaz's connection with the Undead Empire was strictly utilitarian, and not even the Draugr could get more than a foot through the door. And what was that kind of shallow fate worth in the grand scheme of things?

That was fine with Kator—he had no interest in bonding with the brat. He didn't actually mind the boy's greedy nature and unfettered ambition. If anything, it was almost like looking in a mirror, except Arcaz wasn't fettered by the chains of command. But that realization only reinforced the futility of camaraderie. The same mountain couldn't contain two tigers.

So Kator hadn't minded overly much when the strategists had devised another method to forcibly form a bridge of fate. If building a bridge of friendship was out of the question, why not animosity? Destiny would draw them together for a clash at the finish line. It forced him to act like a two-bit villain, but it was clearly effective.

Kator almost laughed upon remembering those blaring eyes, and his bones itched for the upcoming match. The duel wasn't something planned by the strategists. Smacking the kid around would be a fun bonus for all his hard work. His motto had always been that if you couldn't find a way to enjoy the orders you've been given, you might as well go off on your own.

Who knew? If Kator knocked the little Draugr ancestor around enough, he might spit out some good luck.

Yet Kator knew the situation wasn't good. The Phalanx had their thoughts and schemes; he was just a tool to further their positions. Heaven's providence wasn't so easily seized. Setting himself up as a foil to that walking calamity was bound to lead to cosmic retribution. But what did the generals care if he was sacrificed so long as the Phalanx accomplished their goal?

Wasn't that why they'd sent over that Revenant woman and why Toss spoke softly like a courtesan when that Draugr was around? They were focusing all the resentment on him, turning him into a sacrificial pawn. There was even a scenario in place where he'd kill the brat to seize his providence. The backlash would drown him in the river of fate, but the faction would benefit from the fallout.

Too bad for them, he was an excellent swimmer, and he was determined to come out ahead.

The Phalanx, the brat, the Heavens themselves—they could all burn so long as he could reach the peak. Ultom's glory would wash away any foul Karma left from this affair. But for now, he needed to play the role of the good soldier. No point in jumping ship before you had somewhere to land.

"The leaders better forge a Writ of Exemption if they want me to dip my hands in this mess," Kator said. "I'm not taking on the combined wrath of the Abyssal Shores and the Primo alone. And I'm still needed inside the trial."

"I have already put forth your demand. But the Emperor might have his hands too full to bother with you," Toss responded, his hunched shoulders ripe with meaning.

"Are they finally really pulling the trigger?" Kator said, his surprise not feigned. "I can't believe it. Did that brat actually trigger a civil war?"

So it turned out the meeting between the three factions wasn't just about the fifth pillar and the rise of the Draugr. It was about the very direction of the Empire.

Most thought the Imperial Commandments and the Eternal Crusade a safeguard to avoid repeating the tragedy of the Dark Ages. However, the upper echelons all knew the truth. The Primo had gathered the undead races and led them to the Heart of the Empire, promising salvation and fertile cultivation grounds. However, the blessed environment from the Eternal Heritage came at a price.

The Primo had clearly known about the heritage before the Dark Ages, but why hadn't he taken it for himself in that ancient era? Because it fed on Death. And without helpers to fight and bleed in every direction, stacking up casualties among their ranks and enemies, the Heart of the Darkness would have fed on the Death of the Primo's own territory.

They called themselves the Divine Races but were essentially forced labor for the Cultivation Paradise of the Eternal 108. In return, the Primo returned some of the Death they accumulated, creating the Empire Heartlands. But the moment a race dared slack off, they'd find their quadrant gradually declining.

Only the Draugr were different, having the Abyssal Lake to drastically lessen the quota. The Lake and Heart had formed a symbiotic relationship, each providing for the other. It was no wonder the two Progenitors of their race decided to sacrifice themselves to forcibly push the primordial gateway through all of reality, causing such widespread damage the Heavens almost went insane.

"Fate is gathering, and the Heavens are rising," Toss said. "The Pillar's ascent is flipping over the carefully arranged board. All the lofty existences are eyeing

the Grand Dao, hoping to use the chaos to claim a piece of the Heavens. Ambitions that have been brewing in the shadows for eons are forced into the light. Not even the factions outside the struggle for the pillar will be able to avoid the winds."

"I thought the reclamation was only a fanciful dream the leaders told themselves to stabilize their Dao Hearts," Kator snickered, his fingers indicating his thoughts on the status quo.

"What do you know?" Toss scoffed. "You better be damn well prepared when you target the Emperor. The Primo has been looking the other way for so long, and we still don't know whether it's a sign of weakness or a trap. We don't even know whether the Prime Eternal is in a weakened state or not."

"But if our guesses are true about the item in the Left Imperial Palace..." Kator commented.

"We'd be forcing his hand," Toss nodded. "Before, that was fine. The Draugr race would either help us or take a neutral stance. But the appearance of this child has muddied the waters. We don't know what they're up to now that the Abyssal Lords are going to such lengths. If the boy dies and the Shores go mad, they might align with the Eternal 108. Azol might even sacrifice his territory to ruin our plans."

"A troublesome variable," Kator nodded, but he was inwardly delighted.

Bring it on, you crazy brat! The more chaos Arcaz stirred up, the more opportunities he'd have to break free and seize the opportunities for himself.

"It's good that you understand," Toss nodded. "For now, act as if nothing has changed. The negotiations back home won't be finalized in a month or two. But prepare yourselves. We'll have to go all out when we make our move."

"I understand."

"This is your chance to rise," Toss commented. "If all goes well, you'll be remembered as the liberator of the Izh'Rak Reavers."

Kator pushed out his chest to feign excitement, but he inwardly sneered. Liberator? More like martyr. He had no interest in being the banner child of the insurrection if it meant he'd be dead. There was only one role he was interested in: Grand Marshal of the Izh'Rak.

Thankfully he had some time. Depending on how the winds blew, it might be for the best to have the fulcrum fall during the war. He didn't even have to make a move himself; a few people even he was wary of were starting to appear on the battlefronts. There were even rumors of Technocrat Transcenders hiding among the Kan'Tanu.

If nothing else, the Seventh Heaven would surely be interested in the information they'd learned in the meeting.

"By the way, Scholar Semmel gained acceptance by the seal just as I was about to leave," Toss added after a moment.

"Oh?" Kator said. "Is she ready?"

"She's been preparing since she got your message," Toss said. "She's quite excited by the experiment and should have everything ready within the day."

"Interesting, interesting," Kator snickered. "I wonder how that brat will react."

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1103 - Finding a Purpose - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1103 - Finding a Purpose

Yselio hummed a nursery rhyme as he read through the reports, occasionally making a calculation with his fingers. Things were progressing as expected, and he was beginning to unravel the patterns behind the deployments. The universe might seem random and fickle, but that was only because you couldn't see the Order hiding within. And so long as you understood the rules, you could nudge them in your favor.

It took a few hours to collate the necessary adjustments, but Yselio believed they should let him move his battlefronts closer to the so-called Allbright Empire. The little frontier faction was a sheep ripe for the plucking now that they were forced to transfer more and more soldiers to the Eternal Storm. Yet, they dared host outsider sealbearers within their domains. Ending their future would broaden his own, increasing his fate with the Left Imperial Palace.

And the price was more than acceptable. He only needed to sacrifice twelve out of the sixty-four worlds he'd taken control of. Two of them had decent strategic value, but what did he care about some merit in the grand scheme of

things? The only headache was the Central Chapter of the Kan'Tanu. Yselio sighed and looked out the window, but the fires obscured his view.

Suddenly, a knock on the door and Ylvin stepped through shortly after. Speak of the devil.

"Welcome back," Yselio said with a smile. "How are things at the capitol?"

"That Sect Master is slippery like an eel," Ylvin snorted before glancing at the fence in the corner of the room. "What's this ugly thing, then?"

Yselio laughed as he looked at the creature trapped within its pen. It was in good vigor even after three days and furiously slammed against the barrier upon sensing the newcomer's aura. The interesting markings had only grown denser after the forced impartment of Desolate Energy. Yselio wouldn't be surprised if this little Early D-grade critter could slaughter most Middle Stage Hegemons by this point.

Frontier Hegemons, anyway.

"I've been perusing the archives of the Broken God Chapter lately," Yselio said. "This desolate region is really quite interesting. There are remnants of the old empire everywhere, and these pitiful savages don't understand what they're sitting on. I picked this little guy up in a dimensional fragment. The remnant seems to have passed through an uncharted plane, and the inhabitants have picked up some rare characteristics."

"Still working on your perfect killer? Do you have that much free time?" Ylvin said with a pointed look. "I'm assuming you've gone off to play only after finishing your assigned tasks?"

"Something like that," the prince laughed, lifting his hands in surrender upon seeing his uncle's brows furrow. "Truly! I'm working hard on our mission."

"Then why are you still barely in the Top 100?" Ylvin spat. "The top position might be difficult, but you're embarrassing the Heavens by this point."

"What does Father and my Imperial Uncles care about some small-scale scuffle on the frontier?" Yselio said with a shake of his head. "I'm keeping my eyes on the real prize."

"So long as you remember," Ylvin relented before glancing at the critter again. "I still remember the aftermath of when you tried to mutate that Siren within your palace. Did any of your staff survive its song?"

"Only the stronger spies and assassins who'd infiltrated my staff," Yselio grinned.

"Hm. By the way, you were right. Those siblings from the Blade Sea were accepted," Yrvin said as he took out a gourd.

"Oh? Where are they now?"

"They're still at the edge of the sector, but they should be here in a week."

"Good, they can take charge of the sixth field army upon their return," Yselio muttered. "Kervin is lacking fate. Maybe he can find it in the Million Gates Territory with the vanguard."

"While we're on the topic of spies?" Yrvin laughed. "Dealing with the children of the other Heavens is fine; they're the ones who snuck in here. But the elders back home will take it as an insult if you make it too obvious."

"Kervin is one of my dear cousins?" Yselio said with feigned surprise, laughing when Yrvin rolled his eyes. "Did you see the report on Zecia's ladders?"

"I did. Two new names, both late registries appearing on the Early D-grade ladder."

"What do you think?"

"Both received exactly 125,000 the moment they registered," Yrvin said. "They must be related to the events in the Stellar Ladder. No other event has given such sizable pre-enlistment rewards. They're likely even the main perpetrators, judging by the fact that the Vigil's Holy Maiden was only awarded 75,000 Merit."

"Zachary Atwood," Yselio hummed. "It was about time he appeared. He's bound to hold the most fate of his sector."

"He's all but guaranteed to be a sealbearer," Yrvin agreed. "If you ask me, one of the most promising targets for finding the next piece of your own."

"If it's fated," Yselio smiled, his finger slowly tapping on the table. "Two newcomers, likely newly ascended. Just months after my poor cousin died and Emperor Vastermal met his unfortunate setback."

"You think they're responsible?" Yrvin said with interest.

"Who knows? Does it matter?" Yselio smiled.

"Do you wish to send word back home?"

"And give the First Heaven an excuse to send cousins here in the open rather than in the dark?" Yselio laughed. "Not a chance. Perhaps if we need a borrowed hand in the future. Until then, obfuscate any details. Let Zachary Atwood drown in a sea of minutia within the reports."

"Alright, it's your call," Yrvin shrugged.

"The question is, just how are those two connected?" Yselio continued. "Zachary Atwood met with Catheya Sharva'Zi inside the Tower of Eternity. Was that their first meeting, or is there something more to it? Did Zachary Atwood know Arcaz Umbri'Zi even before that? And why is a Draugr part of a faction that hasn't even been assimilated? My instincts tell me that unraveling this mystery will move me closer to my goal."

"Do you want me to investigate?" Yrvin asked.

"It's not urgent; let one of the others take care of it," Yselio said. "I'd appreciate it if you kept investigating the thing from before."

"Still the Central Chapter?" Yrvin said with a raised brow. "Just what are you worried about? They seem to be following the agreement to a tee."

"Isn't that suspicious on its own? An unorthodox cult playing by the rules?" Yselio said before his brows furrowed. "No, something is hiding beneath the surface, and it's making me uncomfortable."

Carl glanced out the vessel's window and felt the familiar queasiness upon spotting the planet in the distance. It was less than a day since he last found himself flying in the air, desperately avoiding the furious attacks of the defending cultists while assassinating Array Controllers and leaders.

Their pace was already frantic enough to wear him down to the bones, but the boss wasn't satisfied. The boss's appearance might have changed, but his penchant for destruction remained the same. If anything, it might have gotten stronger. Carl almost laughed at himself upon remembering the relief he'd felt when the scanners said the closest D-grade world was out of range. He should have known better.

Of course the boss would have a sleek personal vessel with more than ten times the speed of their normal ships, large enough to hold an elite strike squad—a squad he'd regrettably been selected for.

Sometimes, Carl struggled to understand how things reached this point. The first time Carl spotted him in the distance, he'd seen the madness in the boss's eyes. Carl still remembered his emotionless visage as he cleaned up the stragglers of the incursion by old Toronto. Just a few months into the integration and he was harvesting lives like they were crops.

Yet he found himself pulled ever closer to the malignant star that was Zachary Atwood. Some joked that it was Lissa who had tricked him into greatness, but Carl knew it was deeper than that. He could almost feel like his road into the future had been tied to the chariot of the Deviant Asura. And try as he might, he wasn't able to extricate himself.

Certainly, being bound to someone like Zachary Atwood had its upsides. He'd be lying if he said he didn't enjoy the pursuit of the Dao and his improved longevity. If not for his still-incomprehensible choice to approach one of the Valkyries all those years ago, he would probably be puttering around in Early E-grade by this point—and he'd seen how those people fared on the battlefronts.

He'd never have encountered the boundless magnificence of the Radiant Court, getting the chance to touch upon the very essence of the cosmos. It had let him cross the threshold of Hegemony in just over a decade, something which trillions of people could only dream of.

But why did strength have to be seized through so much bloodshed? Was slaughter really Heaven's Path and the true expression of the Dao? Carl shook his head as he finished up the engravings on his arrows. Like it or not, it was the reality they found themselves in. Not much later, his door beeped and slid open.

"We're ten minutes out. We're coming down on the capital the moment we arrive," Joanna said.

"What about the Town Protection array?" Carl asked hesitantly. "This thing doesn't seem like a destroyer."

"I'm not sure. The Lord said he would deal with it."

"Who could've guessed," Carl muttered as he got to his feet, grabbing his Spirit Tool Cloak from the chair.

The bright yellow runes across its green fabric shimmered, and Carl felt some of his anxiety give in as his presence was muted by its illusory effect. The weaker his aura, the harder it would be for trouble to find him.

They walked to the large hull where the bulk of their group was already waiting, armed to the teeth and ready. The air was heavy, and not only because of the bloody auras the elite soldiers exuded.

There was always that hint of uncertainty with these uncharted worlds. They hadn't been filtered by the System, so they could hold anything, really. A secret base with thousands of Late Hegemons? Perhaps. A Monarch ancestor visiting his hometown? Why not?

Carl's nerves were taut, but he put on a steadfast expression as he returned the greetings of the soldiers. One way or another, he'd become one of the pillars of the Calamity Company. He needed to project calm and confidence, like it wasn't crazy for a group of five thousand to invade a world that dwarfed Jupiter in size.

The boss stood by the large hatch, giving no indications of his thoughts. In his hand was an unfamiliar crystal, but it seemed to be a remote controller to the ship judging by its design.

"Are you ready?" Arcaz asked without opening his eyes.

"Ready," Carl said.

"We'll follow behind you," Joanna continued, and Carl inwardly groaned upon feeling the bloodthirsty aura awaken next to him. No one had drank from the tainted well of the boss's mind as much as this girl.

Only he and the boss had the power of flight, but no one had prepared parachutes or ships. What was the point? They'd only slow you down and turn you into a target. You might just as well jump down while firing back at whatever tried to take you out. Most had some way to temporarily maneuver in the air anyway.

"I'll break open the barrier," Arzas said, turning his terrifying eyes to Carl. "I'll be relying on you."

"I—Yes," Carl croaked, hurriedly looking away.

"Good. It's time."

There was no warning, no shake from entering the atmosphere. The hatch just opened, and Arzac Umbri'Zi jumped out.

"Huh," Joanna said after a moment of silence. "He said he'd deal with the barrier, but I didn't expect he planned to blow it up himself."

"Then you haven't been paying attention," Carl muttered as he flew out of the ship, his bow drawn and ready.

Far below, a citadel stretched across an expansive mountain range, with the central palace right below them. It was on the smaller side as far as D-grade capitals went, but its population should still be over five million. And yet, there was nothing to shoot.

Carl's augmented vision spotted more than one hundred potential targets scrambling to man their stations or floating into the air. However, almost all of them were within the palace, whose protective array was already activated. A few strong people stayed in the hanging mansions just beneath the peak, but the main array protected them.

Only the common neighborhoods and slums in the valleys were without protection, but the strongest signals from down there were Middle only E-grade. Not enough for him to waste his special arrows and potentially expose himself.

Carl's heart hammered upon seeing the main peak's array towers light up, and he checked and double-checked to ensure that both his cloak and obscuring skill were running. He should only look like a streak of sunlight at most, but Carl still felt incredibly exposed. Not as exposed as the boss, though.

Arcaz had turned into a black streak, moving with speed approaching Carl's arrows. There was no finesse, no subterfuge, to his approach. If anything, he was impossible to miss. He was flying right toward the barrier's center, radiating the aura of a vengeful god. He must seem like a heavenly calamity for those poor mortals looking up at the sky right now.

The defenders unleashed a storm of skills toward the approaching streak, but Carl shook his head. Such a weak response couldn't possibly curtail the Deviant Asura. They should have fired their Array Towers at him instead of waiting for them to fully charge. As expected, a monstrous burst of Miasma and the skills shattered.

Still, Carl wasn't sure how the boss planned on breaking through. Over the past months, he'd seen just how durable Town Protection Arrays were. Even the weaker ones could usually endure a good beating from their Cosmic Vessels and War Machines. The boss was strong, but a single Hegemon shouldn't be enough.

Then, a primordial roar shook the mountain range, and Carl could barely believe his eyes when the boss turned into a black dragon hundreds of meters long. It released a shroud of death and destruction, barreling right for the barrier.

The scene was so shocking it made Carl's mind shut down momentarily. But it was forcibly rebooted when five terrifying beams shot down at the barrier. They came from the vessel, and each targeted a different section of the shield. An earthshattering explosion reverberated through the mountain range as the undead dragon crashed into the shield, and Carl could barely believe his eyes when it popped like a soap bubble.

Was the shield just for show? Or was the boss just that strong?

Carl guessed it didn't matter. He'd go crazy if he kept trying to look at things with common sense. The big guy had already emerged from the dragon's mouth, shooting toward the strongest cultivator. Meanwhile, that corrosive domain of his spread through the courtyards, filling every nook and cranny. A pang of warning reminded Carl of his job. He quickly nocked an arrow as the Branches of Inferno and Apostle's Arrow entered the bow, prompting the patterns he'd just engraved to light up.

[Apollo's End] activated, and an explosion almost rivaling the boss's followed a searing streak of flames. He couldn't take all the credit—most of the force

came from the Array Tower he'd just blown up. It was just about to fire at the Yphelion, but how could Carl let that happen? Instead, flames and unstable energies consumed a whole section of the palace, throwing the planetary defenses in disarray.

A second streak of flames joined the first, forming a second radiant pillar as another Array Tower blew up. Two balls of crackling destruction tore apart the sky where he fired the shot, but Carl had moved far away already. His back was slick with sweat, but he still added the unnecessary flair that made the trajectories linger in the sky. After all, any shot aimed at him wouldn't target his men.

The frontrunners had almost reached the ground already, with people like Joanna using energy to speed up their descent. They looked like a human waterfall forming a trail from the Yphelion to the planet below. Carl shook his head, maintaining his altitude while nocking another arrow. He'd stay up here, thank-you-very-much.

He'd already decided on his path. With an emperor and generals who were all maniacs, the Atwood Empire needed some levelheaded people to keep the ship afloat. Some Yin to all that Yang. For instance, guardians who could stand firmly at the vanguard, protecting the common soldiers and civilians from the Deviant Asura's monstrous fate.

That wasn't him. Neither was he a scary assassin skulking in the dark, taking on tasks that couldn't be made known to the public. That was Ogras' job. Carl would settle for something simple. He'd help clean up the messes and keep things nice and tidy while staying out of the boss's way. Then he'd take his paycheck and go home to his wife and daughter.

He'd be the Atwood Empire's janitor.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1104 - Standing on the Outside - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1104 - Standing on the Outside

The ship shook violently, once more reminding Til'Siri about the inferiority of the humanoid form. The Heavenly Dao might favor the small bipedal races, but this was no way to travel. It felt like the frail tin can housing them could fail at any moment, dragging them into a chaotic spacetime to never be seen again. How could it compare to the Spacebeasts?

Her mother could have crossed this small stretch of the Eternal Storm in a few days, crushing the spatial storms with her body. Yet they had been locked in this steel cage for months, narrowly escaping death a few times over.

All the while, the war outside progressed while young talents rose to prominence in the System's eyes. Til'Siri's guts turned at the thought. They'd spent so much money and effort to accelerate the war, only for this fool to throw it all away. Yet she hid those thoughts in the depths of her heart as she knocked on the door.

It slid open a few moments later, and Til'Siri almost recoiled from the stench.

"Your eminence, you called?" the young roc said as she gingerly stepped into the mess-hall-turned-lair.

"The fulcrum has returned," the Primordial said from her throne of carcasses and assorted spoils amassed during their journey through the Million Gates Territory.

"I—Yes," Til'Siri nodded. "The one who escaped Lord Orom, who we fear alerted the Tayns and the Undead Empire to our goals, recently appeared on the global rankings in the other sector. He's reached Early D-Grade."

"Early Core Formation," the Primordial muttered. "Free fate for the taking. Find them."

"I fear that will prove difficult," Til'Siri hesitated. "It takes some time for reports to reach us here, but it seems he has entered the arranged battlefield of the Intersector war. The System won't make it easy to—"

"This System again," the Primordial spat. "So many rules, so many limitations. How will anyone reach the Terminus when coddled like this?"

Til'Siri didn't dare say anything to this stubborn old creature and her mounting annoyance with the drastically different world she'd woken up to. Any explanations had fallen on deaf ears, and she had been unwilling to play by the System's rules since the get-go. Til'Siri guessed she knew the reason. The Primordial was born from the Dao, a true daughter of the Heavens. Now, the System had appeared, placing itself between this creature and her origin.

Til'Siri would never say it out loud, but she increasingly felt that picking this relic of a bygone age to lead this mission was a mistake. Her strength defied

all convention, but she was too set in her old ways. And with the road to the Ultom Courts being barred by the System's trial, you needed to play by its rules.

What good was strength when the Primordial refused to even register for the war or enter the pre-arranged battlefronts? Becoming a pawn of the false Heaven, she called it. So what? Better than wasting away in these flying coffins. The others were smart enough to just send manpower while staying behind and reaping merit. With the force amassed in this vast armada, they'd seize a foothold in no time. It wasn't too late to teleport over by that point.

Sure, they'd picked up four more seals for the youths sent over by the alliance, but those opportunities were on the battlefield as well.

"Fine. The Heavens will bring us together sooner or later. It's just a matter of time," the Primordial eventually relented. "How long until we arrive?"

"Two more months."

"Good," the Primordial said, throwing out a compass.

"What's this?" Til'Siri said as she looked at it with confusion.

"I sensed that something an old acquaintance left behind is nearby," the creature said. "We need to pick it up on our way. It should help us with our goal."

Red vines and leaves were everywhere, and their thirst for blood was boundless. The demonic World Tree seemed able to ceaselessly produce new ones, and not even setting the thing aflame had curtailed its automated defenses. Yet the Calamity Company slaughtered their way from the outer branches toward the isolated domains within the foliage's depths.

The main branches were shaped like plateaus and almost a mile wide, forming a long city district with a wide central street. In the middle was a turbid river of blood-like sap that released energy into the surroundings. There were multiple rows of buildings to both sides, from which frightened faces occasionally peered. From others, bands of warslaves launched ambushes, taking advantage of the protection from their guardian tree.

Joanna's blood surged as the clashes and explosions around her formed a song of violence. The deepest shudders came from the tree crown's heart, where Zac was undoubtedly already unleashing a storm of violence upon the World Lord.

Splinters flew as a sword pieced the thick wooden wall to her side, and a streak of sinister light shot out from its tip. Joanna felt her perception expand as she split in two, where one avatar stabbed an assassin who had snuck up on her from behind. The other leaned forward, countering the sword strike with a stab of her spear.

Not so much as a splinter flew out as her condensed Dao and precise technique pierced through the mahogany wall. Her force was perfectly contained to the tip of her weapon until it went from wood to flesh. She released the force before retracting her weapon, and multiple infusions of Kill Energy confirmed [Warwhirl] had taken out the assassin and two companions hiding within the building.

Her two aspects fused back into one and [Battlefield Asura] reset, and she continued down the road without missing a step. Her lieutenants paved the path to her side, and not even those eluding detection could escape when the Raun Spectrals passed through walls in search of soldiers blending with civilians. You couldn't leave that kind of danger on their escape route.

The tearing sound was so overwhelming it felt as though the whole world was being ripped apart. In reality, it was just a single branch of the world tree being sacrificed to deal with their ships. Joanna shook her head at the futility. The tools used by the Atwood Empire wouldn't fall to something like this.

As expected, the six Cosmic Vessels smoothly moved out of the way, letting the branch and the city district upon it plummet toward the sea dozens of miles below. Joanna could hear the horrified screams from the Kan'Tanu citizens, but there was no time to feel sorry for those poor souls. She had her own to worry about.

"BRACE!" Joanna roared as she stabbed her spear into the ground.

The next moment, hundreds of the outer branches grazed the one they occupied. Her heart lurched as she felt a surge of momentum as the branch bent over fifty meters instantly, only to shoot right back up after withstanding the collision. The wind swept through the district the next moment, its force just as devastating as a hurricane.

Whole mansions were ripped into the sky, taking its hiding cultists with it. Gravel turned into deadly projectiles, but the shields formed with [Wargod's Favor] absorbed most of their force. Joanna felt like organs were forcibly rearranged, but her feet were steadily planted to the ground. A few bloody streaks appeared on her body, but the rubble was the least of her worries.

It was impossible to get a good look at their situation, but she knew hundreds of her men had been thrown off. She had no way to get them back at this moment, and she could only put her faith in their training. The soldiers sent to deal with the capitals were the best of the bunch, and everyone had various means of survival.

The citybranch calmed down, and Joanna exhaled in relief upon seeing soldiers appear one after another, often using movement skills or lunging attacks. The few who lacked such means used one of the [Roc Step Talismans] they'd been provided, creating small wings on their feet that let them step through the air and return. As for the others, it wasn't over yet. The ocean below wasn't safe, but falling into it was by no means a death sentence for a Late E-grade cultivator.

"Send a rescue team to the trunk," Joanna said.

"We still haven't secured the docks," Tamira answered.

"Deal with the leaders, then seal it," Joanna said, glancing toward the tree crown.

A dark mist had already covered an area the size of a small town, but it couldn't isolate the sounds of fighting within. They actually sounded further away, which likely meant Zac and Rhubat had broken through the outer perimeter and were now fighting the World Lords. She desperately wanted to join him, to stand by his side and sweep his enemies aside.

But she couldn't.

It was like the whole empire was like a beast come alive when its emperor returned. The Calamity Company had earned more Faction Merit in two weeks than any of their battlefronts earned in a month and a half. They were like an unstoppable juggernaut that gained more momentum with every victory.

However, being faced with Zac's monstrous power had turned into another tribulation for her Dao Heart. She'd always known he'd been desperately fighting and steadily progressing all this time, but the forces of the Atwood Empire hadn't really seen him in action since the integration. At most, there had been a few short bursts of dominance, like when he quashed the Raun plot.

Now, his presence increased on every battlefield, and it sometimes felt like there were no limits to the power contained within his body. She knew there was no point comparing herself to others, especially aberrations like her lord. She was on the right track as long as she was stronger than yesterday's self.

But it wasn't easy. It felt like she was standing on the outside, looking at the chosen ones within. Like she wasn't deemed worthy, disdained by the Heavens.

"It shouldn't be long before the prompt," Joanna sighed and put away the communicator.

She pushed any errant thoughts aside, holding onto Zac's words. There was always a chance so long as she held onto an indomitable heart. And the real opportunity was right around the corner. The Teleportation Hub was right ahead, and Joanna could feel the ripples of space from within. Every second, groups of Kan'Tanu flew out from the large structure atop oversized leaves, heading toward one of the dozen battlefronts spread across the island-sized tree.

She was just 100 merit short of finishing her quest, and someone with a bounty on their head was bound to guard that place. She sent out a few commands, and the wide line of soldiers began to gather as they closed in on the building. As expected, a regiment of over ten thousand elites was stationed outside, ready to defend their source of reinforcements with their lives.

A woman over three meters tall stood at the front, a large red halberd in her hand. She radiated a dense aura of Hegemony, and there were already three red rivers and a swirl of leaves floating around her. It almost looked like she was an avatar of the demonic tree, but Joanna could feel the familiar aura of the curse from her.

A perfect target to hone her skills.

"I'll deal with that one."

After today, she'd find out if it was possible to seize fate.

"I've just received an answer from Lord Kaldor," Petrus said. "He accepts your proposal. Your duel has been postponed one day so that you can help conquer the satellite world."

"Good," Zac said before turning to Joanna. "We set off the moment the ships are unfurled."

"Of course," Joanna agreed. "I'll arrange everything."

"Thank you," Zac said. "I need to rest for a while. See if you can get a report on the situation with the Acheron Company before we set out."

Joanna nodded, though they both knew it was just for Petrus' benefit. Zac knew exactly the situation with the second Elite Army. They were waiting for the timer to run out before stepping onto their first hostile world, with his human half at the helm.

Petrus left soon after, leaving Zac alone in a tower the previous World Lord had used as a cultivation chamber. It was a shame he managed to teleport off-world before they'd even broken through the final neutral battleground, but you couldn't blame the guy for seeing which way the wind blew. The Kan'Tanu leader must have been quite connected to get recalled instead of fighting to his death like most lords he'd encountered.

Zac looked out at the sprawling city. The situation had already stabilized even if they hadn't unfurled the Cosmic Vessels yet. Having a dozen of those things floating above a capital was a powerful deterrent to ensure no one had any ideas. The streets were empty of locals after they'd declared martial law, but his soldiers were searching every nook and cranny with practiced ease.

Four weeks of non-stop campaigning had given his people ample experience dealing with the fallout of a successful conquest. The elites had become collection agents, targeting the affluent neighborhoods with pinpoint precision. Each squad was allowed to keep some of their harvests before turning the rest over to the quartermasters. There would undoubtedly have been all-out

brawls if not for strict orders and fear of being kicked off collection duty or the Calamity Company entirely.

Zac had chosen the most pragmatic approach. As leader, he had access to all kinds of features on the battlefronts, including tallies of individual and squad merit. Using the available data, squads were assigned better looting locales the more they'd contributed to the campaign. It was another element of competition that spurred his soldiers to fight harder and push themselves even further.

On one of the largest squares, a recruitment center was being set up, and his collection agents and peacekeepers were already spreading the word. When martial law was lifted, the natives of the capital could apply for citizenship. The bulk of the army would leave for the next campaign soon enough, but some would stay behind to collect the loot for another week.

Over the past month, they had found a surprising number of talents without any Heart Curses in the world capitals. The prospects all had one thing in common; they were connected one way or another, allowing them to get civilian assignments rather than becoming warslaves. However, with their planet conquered and their backing killed, they feared what would happen when the foreign soldiers left and their old masters returned. The Kan'Tanu wasn't especially known for their leniency toward failure.

The Atwood Empire had already provided refuge to over a million who'd chosen to take a bet on a new life. There had been so many willing applicants, especially on the more mismanaged planets, that they could set up strict requirements on practical skills or affinity. They could have taken ten times more if they wanted, but they had to be pragmatic and only take on those who could be used in the war efforts.

Zac turned back from the window, knowing his people could deal with the cleanup without him keeping watch. Instead, he sat down and went over the next couple of days. Almost four weeks had passed since the Calamity Company was formed, and this was their fourth successful campaign.

Most opposition had been crushed without breaking a sweat. Only the third one had put up some resistance. A Middle D-grade Remoulded had controlled the planet, and the general level of fortifications and soldiers was significantly higher. They still hadn't encountered any of the Kan'Tanu's true elites, though—the Reincarnators who had undergone two baptisms.

The Remoulded had put up quite the fight, but he couldn't overcome Zac's overwhelm. Ultimately, he'd opted for mutual destruction by detonating his Heart Curse. Too bad for him that even the evolved curses failed to get a footing within Zac's body. He'd looked at Zac with a mix of confusion and outrage just as the light left his eyes.

It was also that conquest that had thrown Zac's plans for a loop. Zac shook his head as he opened his status screen.

[Flamebearer of Zecia (Campaign, Inheritance (1/?)): Lead your faction to conquer 9 Early D-grade worlds in the Zurbor Sector. Kill or capture one Sealbearer. Reward: Court Cycle Token. (8/9) (1/1)]

Who could have expected that the Remoulded kept a sealbearer captive?

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1105 - Keeping up Appearances - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1105 - Keeping up Appearances

No one among the Kan'Tanu seemed to have realized there was a sealbearer locked away on the planet, even if everyone with the rank of captain and above had standing orders to keep a lookout for the sigils in case they appeared on fallen elites. The World Lord was aware, though, and had kept her in a separate dungeon. As far as Zac could tell after going through his Spatial Rings, the Remoulded had kept her hidden in hopes of negotiating a private deal with some outsider faction.

Zac only learned that fact later, after she'd been freed and loudly announced her status out of fear of being left behind on the Kan'Tanu world. The Sealbearer was originally from the Zurbor Sector, though not part of the Kan'Tanu sect. There were still some unattached cultivators around, though mostly in remote and unimpressive regions, just like how most F-grade worlds weren't even considered part of the factions they were placed within.

Stormstar, as the sealbearer called herself, didn't come from one of these remote regions. Zurbor bordered the Eternal Storm just like Zecia, and the situation inside was not much different from the Million Gates Territory. If anything, it was more populated and chaotic since so many had chosen to flee the Kan'Tanu and their Heart Curses since the sect arrived in the sector six million years ago.

The former pirate's seal was the Hollow Court, and Zac still hadn't decided what to do with her. Killing her to extract her seal was too ruthless, especially since she wasn't part of the Kan'Tanu sect. But she wasn't some saint, either. She'd taken advantage of the chaos brought by the intersector war to take her crew out of the Eternal Storm. She was an Early Hegemon, and her strength had let her ravage multiple E-grade worlds before being caught. For now, she was locked in a dungeon back on Earth, her Cosmic Energy and movements sealed.

Having the trickiest part of the quest finished early was a relief, but it put him in a difficult spot. While this was only the fourth successful campaign, it was the eighth D-grade world the Calamity Company had conquered. Three came from conquering neighboring planets, while one came from advancing a second layer during their second campaign.

They'd chosen to advance one more layer after learning of a demonic tree that was considered a strategic resource. Zac normally wouldn't have taken such a risk, but they'd gathered some intelligence indicating it wasn't that heavily guarded. The planet's population was so small they only had one battlefront, and they mostly relied on the huge tree for protection. With the large amount of additional merit such a conquest could bring home, Zac had chosen to pull the trigger.

And now, the Calamity Company wasn't the only one out there fighting. He was originally due to head to Kavista in six hours, but the Acheron Company would take out a ninth world in twelve. If he had followed that plan, he would've likely completed his quest off-world, and there was no way Kator would let him return to Port Atwood without first turning in the quest.

Zac was already cautious about returning to Kavista after the events in the Abyssal Pond, and producing the Court Cycle Token right in front of those people was a recipe for disaster. He had already confirmed that the quest progress was shared between his bodies, but he didn't want to give any clear answer to how it worked to Kator. The less certain they were, the harder it would be to scheme against him.

At the same time, not going likely meant losing access to the Brightglaive Munitions and their main source of Death-attuned Cultivation Materials his undead soldiers relied on. After all, the resources he'd looted in the Twilight Harbor weren't endless, and years had passed already. The War Machines, especially, were a huge factor in the elite armies' lightning-quick campaigns,

and they all used expendable capsules to fire. Capsules you had to purchase from the foundry.

The latter wasn't a plot of the Undead Empire to keep him reliant on them. It was easier to build a D-grade War Machine that used a separate payload to fire, be it miasmic glaives or falling comets. Putting everything inside the Array Tower would make it more complex and often add longer charging times. Separating the functions also meant the foundry would get a repeat customer so long as their products were used, and many establishments made their real money through their after-service. His situation was the same with the Blazing Comet equipment they used, except for the suns.

Luckily, he'd been given an out upon arriving on this world. There was a second D-grade planet just eight hours' travel away. Zac had already indicated that the Acheron Company's campaign was about to wrap up. So if they wanted to steer all the fate toward Arcaz, why not let him conquer a neighboring world before fate could be shared? The Undead Monarchs were obviously eager to see the next part of his Flamebearer quest, and no one was willing to take unnecessary risks with something as fickle as fate. Even Kator had given in, giving him an extra day.

This way, Zac could turn in the quest on Earth and leave the token on his other body for safekeeping.

Zac's communication crystal eventually buzzed. He glanced out the window and saw a fleet of sleek Cosmic Vessels closing in with extreme speed. Meanwhile, elite squads had already gathered outside the walls, ready to be beamed up. Zac grunted as he got to his feet and jumped out the window. One more world to conquer.

Sixteen hours later, Zac stepped out from the battlefield array, worn but in otherwise good shape. The satellite world was weaker than the one they targeted, and Zac returned on a shuttle just two hours after the battle began. Petrus accompanied him while most other elites were still wrapping things up on the Kan'Tanu planets.

He'd arrived at the war camp formerly belonging to the Second Battalion. It had long since been redecorated, including newly made banners displaying a unique weapon for the Calamity Company. A stream of messages welcomed his arrival, and he briefly scanned them as he made his way toward the Merit Exchange. The wartime quests needed to be handed in at the exchanges, and Petrus was there as a witness.

A large crowd of soldiers was gathered outside, but they opened a path upon seeing their arrival. They were all warriors of the Calamity Company, grizzled and covered in barely healed wounds. A few had returned just before Zac to get a day or two off, while others had been sent back during earlier battles to heal. They generally kept 20% of the Company on standby in case they needed reinforcements and to let people rest or break through.

The soldiers, both living and undead, enthusiastically greeted Zac as he passed by. Most of his fights had been highly visible, and he'd taken on an almost legendary status among his soldiers after a few of his exploits. Apparently, there was even a lot of debate among his people about which of the two emperors was the strongest. Camps had been formed, especially between the Calamity- and Acheron Companies.

Of course, only Zac knew the answer.

His undead side was still stronger than his human one, even after he'd spent three weeks in seclusion with his human body to catch up. Most of that time had been spent absorbing Life-attuned energy to alleviate the imbalance. He'd already gained three levels by funneling everything into his Cosmic Core's Life-attuned circuits, most of it from digesting Core-nourishing pills and using [Void Heart]. There was still a surplus of Death in his Cosmic Core and soul, but he needed to stop since the second elite army had been assembled.

Zac only had time to finally deal with [Surging Vitality] before setting off. He'd originally planned on doing so while still in the Perennial Vastness, but he'd opted to wait until Hegemony. It was difficult to say whether he upgraded the skill or created a new one—he'd essentially scrapped the whole thing, with the new Skill Fractal only keeping a few core aspects. The new skill was called [Surging Rebirth] and was far stronger than its predecessor.

The skill retained the ability to use Kill Energy for a powerful surge of recovery. It still used a whole lot of energy, but his branches of Life and Conflict could now boost the effect. More importantly, the skill could be activated while fighting without impacting his combat ability. Essentially, it would sacrifice his progress with levels for increased survivability on the battlefield.

He'd chosen this direction because of his [Undying Seal], the yet-upgraded healing skill of his Draugr form. Those seals had proven useful more than once in pitched battles, and the effect of [Surging Rebirth] should definitely be

even better, considering it was more tuned to his Daos and a Peak-quality skill.

The new recovery skill even had a more normal healing feature now. It wasn't very impressive, but it was very energy-efficient and ran on either Cosmic or Divine Energy. It was the ability he'd use after a battle, letting him recover while using the accumulated Kill Energy on his Cosmic Core instead.

"Let's do this in the Faction Merit room," Zac said with a low voice, and the two headed into the room to the side.

Inside, Petrus began setting up a series of recording arrays and what looked like a treasure that could analyze energy auras.

"Just following orders," Petrus said with a helpless shrug upon seeing Zac look at him with a raised brow.

"Well, get my good side," Zac muttered. "Ready?"

Petrus nodded, and Zac placed his hand on the Exchange Crystal to infuse his will. There were no spatial ripples, but an oddly-shaped box covered in familiar runes appeared by his hand. The box was made from lacquered wood and shaped like a crystal, having a total of ten sides.

Each side had a singular rune, one for each of the lower courts, while the seal for the Left Imperial Palace was situated above the clasp. Zac briefly showcased the box for the recorder before opening it and found a small nine-sided token within. In contrast to the box, this one was made of an unknown lilac metal and was completely blank.

"No energy fluctuations and no impartments," Zac narrated as he turned the token over, not bothering to hide the disappointment. "It resists Mental Energy and Miasma. It seems to have no apparent use at this junction."

"May I?" Petrus asked, and Zac handed it over.

"How odd," Petrus said after a while. "The box appears more valuable than its content."

"Its use might not be apparent until later," Zac shrugged and stowed the token.

"This thing," Petrus hesitated.

"Will be with me for safekeeping," Zac expressionlessly said. "Don't want to mess with fate by sending it somewhere it doesn't belong."

Petrus slowly nodded, not pushing the matter further. Zac was inwardly relieved since there was no way he was handing it over. If the overseer had taken a hard stance, Zac would have been forced to take some unfortunate steps. With that part of the way, Zac continued to the next step.

"I have already received a second quest."

[Flamebearer of Zecia (Campaign, Inheritance (2/?)): Accumulate 500,000 Merit through Fated Flamebearer Campaign Missions within your faction. Conquer one Middle D-grade end node. Reward: Lesser Enlightenment. (0/500,000)(0/1)]

"The reward is similar to other sealbearers this time around," Zac commented.

He'd made rapid progress on his quest, but his followers had three months headstart. More than half his Sealbearers had already finished their first quest, and while their second tasks were different, the reward was the same. They all stood to gain an additional burst of epiphanies, though Zac doubted it meant they'd get a piece of the seal.

Considering it said "Lesser Enlightenment," it seemed more likely that the System had extracted some of Ultom's truths and awarded diluted versions. Zac guessed it'd be somewhere between his lake water and the real deal.

A few non-seal bearers had also finished their tasks, but their reward for the second one was quite different—access to a personalized trial. Zac couldn't be certain, but he believed there was a small chance of obtaining the first piece of an outer court seal in those trials. There was no way it could be a guarantee unless millions of outer court seals were in circulation. At least, Zac hoped that was the case since the alternative would be extremely high mortality rates. Joanna was already firing at all cylinders, desperately working to gain access and seize the opportunity that awaited her.

500,000 individual Merit was a lot, but Zac felt it wasn't that big a deal even if his previously accrued merit wasn't counted. He'd started out with 125,000 in both bodies, which wasn't even enough to put him at the top of the local list. In

other words, the strongest Early D-grade cultivators had generated over 40,000 Merit a month since the war started.

It was more than the 26,000 Merit Zac had earned as Arcaz Umbri'Zi over the past month, but Zac knew that tally wasn't his limit. He could have gotten even more if he'd removed all the leaders himself, but Joanna and his other elites needed those fights for their quests and the experience. Both he and his soldiers were getting stronger, and they would gradually target tougher enemies who were worth more merit.

So long as the merit from both his bodies counted, he should be able to finish the task within half a year. It was a very tough deadline, but there was always the chance of running into more sealbearers. Capturing the pirate captain had added another 25,000 to his tally, almost doubling his monthly income. A single Flamebearer would cover half the quest, though Zac highly doubted he'd stumble onto one.

The second side mission wasn't too bad either. Campaigns couldn't be continued continuously. They would eventually end after a couple of battles in the Kan'Tanu sector. In Zecia, it usually meant reaching the main world of a multi-world faction. In cases of smaller factions like Zac's, his enemy would be sent somewhere stronger at random after taking down Earth.

With the Kan'Tanu, it normally meant reaching the main world of whatever branch of the organization you found yourself with. Taking out a weaker Middle D-grade world was by no means impossible, but Zac didn't feel the Calamity Company was ready. Even a weaker Middle D-grade faction was bound to have dozens of Hegemons, even multiple Middle D-grade Hegemons if unlucky. It simply was too much compared to the Calamity Company's 4 Hegemons.

Add to that stronger barriers and the higher average strength of their soldiers, and Zac would have to take significant losses to brute force a victory. However, the Calamity Company was in a period of rapid growth, and the number of Hegemons among his ranks would only increase. Quite a few people were right at the threshold, only needing that final push to begin forming their cores.

"What do you think?" Petrus said as he turned off the

"Well, I won't have to change anything up to progress the quest,"

"Your faction isn't ready to conquer a Middle D-grade planet," Petrus said, echoing Zac's thoughts. "I recommend petitioning for a group of Outer Elders to share the weight."

"There's no rush," Zac said. "We're a young faction. Who knows how strong we'll be in a year?"

"I guess that's true," Petrus nodded. "Are you heading to Kavista right now?"

"I still have some time, so I'll consolidate before going," Zac rejected. "Maybe I can squeeze out some last-minute insights."

"Of course," Petrus said as he left. He stopped at the doorway, looking back with a rare smile. "Good luck with your duel. If you win, you'll become a legend in the White Sky Phalanx."

"I'll do my best," Zac waved.

Zac left the exchange shortly after, teleporting to his cultivation cave. He spent the next hour stabilizing his mind before taking out a box. Simultaneously, on a distant planet in a different sector, Zac took out an identical one. Pavina's warning had lingered in the back of his mind since returning, and he had wracked his brains on how to gain an edge on the overbearing Izh'Rak Reaver.

It wasn't like the duel with Kator was a battle to the death, and encountering someone who could push you to your limits and beyond was a rare opportunity. The clash might even let him refine his techniques, and the longer they fought, the greater the chance was that Zac would discover something.

But the lower stakes didn't mean he was ready to lose. He wanted to win, both for himself and for Boje. The last-minute shopping spree at the Limited Exchange would hopefully create the opportunity he needed.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1106 - Purgatory - Read

Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1106 - Purgatory

Zac had scoured the endless list of treasures in the Limited Exchange every time he returned from a campaign. There were thousands of items that could improve his strength, but he needed something that could improve his odds of victory within the restrictions of the duel. That cut down his options drastically.

For example, the Attribute Fruits would give him a cost-effective boost, but Kator's attributes would match his. So while he'd need to buy the fruits sooner or later, they currently served no purpose. The same was true for the [Early D-grade Tool Embryo Array] he'd spotted before. The battle wouldn't depend on equipment quality, and he wouldn't even use his [Ossuary Bulwark] when fighting the reaver.

He also didn't want to waste his merit on something he could accomplish on his own before entering the Left Imperial Palace. For example, there were soul-strengthening treasures that would speed up the reformation of his [Thousand Lights Avatars], but he already had a Moss Crystal for that. And seeing how expensive soul-strengthening treasures were, the cost return wasn't too good.

Ultimately, Zac had landed on the item within the boxes before him, and he'd even sprung for two of them. It was called [Wargod's Sagacity] and was a form of epiphany treasure targeted at combat. It didn't improve Daos, but using it was supposedly akin to fighting a thousand battles in an enlightened state, which was exactly what Zac needed right now. Better yet, the more life-and-death experience you had, the more effective the treasure would be. And few people Zac's age trumped his experience in that regard.

Upgrading his two mastery skills had been easy, but incorporating their teachings was another matter. There was no end to the variations hidden within the D-grade trajectories, and he'd only reached initial success after a month of effort. The realization was initially exciting since it meant there was still a lot of room for improvement to his techniques that didn't rely on upgrading his Daos. However, time was a resource he desperately lacked.

The E-grade skills had taken him a couple of months to push to Peak Mastery and incorporate into his technique, but Zac felt the D-grade versions would take at least ten times that long. As things stood, he'd have to spend a couple of years on [Axe Mastery] and [Armament Mastery] before the fundamental teachings could be considered fully infused into his two stances.

A few years was nothing for a Hegemon who counted their lifespan in millennia, but he had the trial right around the corner. The goal was still to enter Middle Hegemony in a year or so, at which point he should be focusing on the Middle D-grade teachings of the Mastery Skills already. He'd have to rely on some outside assistance if he wanted his techniques to reach their limits before entering the Left Imperial Palace.

Zac also hoped that [Wargod's Sagacity] would let him find other ways to refine his techniques. He'd worked hard for decades, methodically building and rebuilding his stances from the ground up. But his stances were ultimately created by an E-grade cultivator with a limited understanding of the Dao and combat. Small weaknesses were bound to be hidden within what felt perfect to him.

It was also a while since he'd had a real spark of inspiration regarding his techniques. The last time was inside the Gates of Reincarnation, but that experience was built on the foundations of his arduous work. His techniques had never benefitted from the rare enlightened state that birthed his [Void Vajra Sublimation] or [Pillar of Desolation]. Zac wasn't sure if these treasures were enough to bring such benefits, but they cost 65,000 merit, and he'd gotten two. Even if they didn't revolutionize his technique, they should save him years of effort.

He moved to the death-attuned half of his cave while his human half sealed himself in a cultivation chamber at the heart of the recently conquered Kan'Tanu world. There was still a bloody atmosphere in the capital after the fierce battle, and it was as though the whole region had temporarily become attuned to the Dao of Conflict—perfect for pondering on his techniques.

When everything was in place, both bodies opened their boxes, exposing the treasure within. Zac wasn't sure whether [Wargod's Sagacity] was a Natural Treasure or something manufactured. It wasn't a physical object but a shimmering rune held in place by a small array within the box. A Natural Treasure seemed more likely since it didn't look like a fractal based on the Apostate of Order. It was more closely related to the preceding primordial patterns he'd seen on the Stele of Conflict.

Opening the box was enough to make the surroundings stir, and Zac's hearts hammered like he was desperately fighting in the middle of a battlefield. The mysterious rune couldn't stay exposed for too long, so Zac grabbed them with Mental Energy and pushed them against his foreheads.

The effect was instantaneous.

Zac felt as though he'd eaten multiple Berserking Treasures as the fires of war coursed through his veins. However, while normal treasures had occasionally sent him into a state of grandiose delusions or bloodthirsty hunger, [Wargod's Sagacity] brought unprecedented clarity. The uncountable battles he'd fought

through the years played through his mind, and new clues and lessons were extracted from the memories.

The runes soon reached his Soul Aperture, stopping right between the two Soul Spirals. They were like radiant suns, showering his mind with the secrets of battle. Another one who got a front-row seat was the Apparition for his Branch of the War Axe. It was like treasures and miniature Zac formed a feedback loop, and the avatar began swinging his shifting axe.

Zac couldn't sit still either, and axes appeared in his hands as he began his destructive dance. The Miasmatic mists swirled in the Death-attuned half of his Cultivation cave as Zac activated [Armament Mastery]. The trajectories and impartments merged with the endless stream of memories before being woven into the Inexorable Stance.

Chains, feet, and axe moved perfectly in sync with the almost dizzying number of lines that showcased the thousands of options a warrior had at every moment. Tempo, angle, strength, and speed. Slash, grab, kick, or reposition— everything could be adjusted to birth endless permutations. Adding the truths of the Cosmos into your swings would let you resonate with the Heavens and borrow some of its power.

But fusing theoretical knowledge and the Dao into a technique wasn't as simple as infusing a skill with the Dao. It required a far deeper understanding of how your Dao affected the universe and yourself. The Dao wasn't something as tangible as the Attuned Mental Energy or even the Avatars floating in his mind. The Avatars were just his comprehension expressed in a way that made sense to his brain, thought made real.

The Daos were the truths that made up the fabric of reality. You could see hints of it in everything, even the mundane. Even the "unattuned" theories of the Mastery Skills were based on a wide array of Daos—under the Heavens, there wasn't really anything that could be seen as truly unattuned. Except for himself, perhaps.

Integration meant stripping the mottled truths of basic existence and replacing them with your own Daos. You became an expression of your path, focused and free from distracting Daos that restricted your movements. When every action fully resonated with your Daos, you would have reached the peak of the Integration Stage. Of course, a Dao Branch wasn't profound enough to fully carry a comprehensive technique.

His Draugr form smoothly entered a Void State, turning him into a dry sponge soaking up the truths laid bare before him. His human side faced some resistance, but he pushed down the discomfort and let Death spread through his body. Meanwhile, the rattling of chains echoed through the sealed chamber in the Kan'Tanu world. It wasn't Alea, but rather [Chainbox Two], a spare armament he'd picked up years ago.

It wasn't often that Zac released Death in his human form, considering it didn't bring anything to the table for his class or the Evolutionary Stance. But there wasn't anything physically stopping him, especially now that his awakened Draugr Bloodline had drastically improved his resistance to any opposing Daos.

Still, there was a slight discrepancy between his two bodies for the first couple of minutes, like two instruments lightly out of tune. But their movements converged until their movements communicated the same thoughts and concepts. Surrounding his human form was a second set of trajectories generated with [Axe Mastery], doubling the number of lessons he incorporated into his Inexorable Stance.

Zac fought through his experiences, bloody struggles against everything from hordes of beasts to powerful adversaries who pushed him beyond his limits. Every swing was slightly more refined than the one before it, and the mountains of information he'd tried to digest over the past month no longer felt so overwhelming. But a frown appeared on his faces as the endless battles replayed in his mind.

Each fight had been an important lesson that made him stronger, but having thousands of them superimpose into a broader picture gave him an upsetting sense of premonition. Something was missing.

The more he filled in the blanks using experience and the light of [Wargod's Sagacity], the more he felt his techniques weren't at the standard they could be. It wasn't like they had huge defects for their grade, but that they were akin to something like a Middle- to High Quality Technique rather than something at the limits of what was possible. Zac briefly hesitated before rattling chains were replaced by creaking vines in the Kan'Tanu chamber.

After reaching perfect sync, Zac's bodies diverged, with human Zac moving from Death to Life. Meanwhile, Draugr Zac mirrored the journey, fighting his way from the deathly forest in his cave toward the threshold of Life and Death. It was an intentionally slow and measured transition to let him feel the shift it

brought. After a few minutes, he'd fully entered the Evolutionary Stance with his human body.

Using both stances to their fullest simultaneously was normally very difficult, even when his bodies were separated, but the still-glowing runes let him accomplish it without a hitch. His bodies were moving independently, each following its own concepts and Daos. But as time passed and his understanding broadened, Zac felt his swings sync up again.

Their movements weren't identical this time, but it was more like they were partners locked in an intense battle between Life and Death. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say they had formed a symbiotic connection where their actions depended on the other.

When one advanced, the other stepped back. When one moved left, the other moved right. One's actions complementing the other, forming one half of the whole. They pushed and elevated one another, and Zac felt how the speed at which he incorporated the lessons of his mastery skills more than doubled.

However, no matter how hard he tried, Zac couldn't perfectly line up his two stances. There was an unbridgeable gap between his techniques, and he was once more filled with that uncomfortable feeling of deficiency. This time, it wasn't only the Inexorable Stance that created the feeling; it was both of them. And he could tell that it wasn't a problem that could be fixed by fully integrating his two mastery skills.

It wasn't hard to understand what was missing. A technique only using two Daos of his trinity path could never be considered whole.

Zac had been aware of this issue for years, but he figured it was something he could fix further down the road, when the two sides of his path became one. However, Zac vaguely sensed that wasn't an option, or at least not an optimal one. He hadn't even come close to hitting the ceiling of his current stances, but he felt they risked becoming flawed the longer he waited. He didn't want to rebuild from the ground up, like when he was forced to spend years reworking his stances in the Orom World.

Fixing the issue was easier said than done—no one knew better than him just how difficult it was to fuse Life and Death into a working whole. Chaos was the gatekeeper that barred progression on this broken peak, a paradox that required the Grand Dao before comprehending its subsidiary components. However, Zac had already found a workaround.

He believed the solution hid within the light of [Wargod's Sagacity]. Vague connections formed between his technique and other parts of his cultivation system, but the radiance was already fading. The impression grew blurry and distant, but Zac barely grasped a few clues just as the flickering runes in his Soul Aperture winked out.

The answer was within the Void.

Zac didn't move for a while, slowly digesting the experience as his mind returned to normal. He could tell that he'd mostly incorporated the insights of the mastery skills. He'd need a month or two to fully consolidate everything on the battlefield, but it wouldn't take up much of his time. It was hard to tell with techniques, but Zac believed his stances had become roughly fifteen percent stronger and more flexible.

Such a boost would be a huge help in the upcoming duel, yet it didn't feel like the biggest gain of the day. The insight at the end was the real prize, even if it had yet to become concrete. Sometimes, you needed a spark of inspiration to broaden your vision and begin the process of growth. It turned an abstract dream or aspiration into a goal that could be pursued.

Zac took a steadying breath as he slowly opened his eyes. It felt like he'd been in an enlightened state for months, but a mental check indicated he'd only been swinging his axe for five hours. That meant there was still some time before he needed to leave for Kavista. He let his Draugr half continue digesting the inspiration while his human side emerged from the former World Lord's cultivation chambers.

He found Vilari waiting outside, having taken up a position as Dao Guardian.

"How's the situation?" Zac asked.

"Still stable," Vilari said. "One of the Kan'Tanu armies returned from their battlefield, but they're on the other side of the planet. They dispersed upon returning, so we didn't bother with them. We're not heading that far for resources anyhow."

Zac nodded. Usually, the armies of conquered planets hid within the neutral battlefronts as long as possible. Who'd want to return only to be slaughtered? The neutral ground at least provided a chance of survival since the conquerors couldn't enter the other battlefronts. The conquerors could settle

in, continue to the next world, or return home. In other words, two out of three options would let the hiding armies return home after a few weeks.

"Are you okay? Your soul seems agitated," Vilari asked with worry after seeing Zac's distracted state.

"It's nothing," Zac smiled. "I just ate a treasure of enlightenment."

"Are you confident?"

Vilari was one of his closest confidantes, so she already knew everything about the situation with the Undead Empire and the upcoming duel.

"I made some progress, but I don't know if it's enough," Zac sighed. "I've only managed to gather rumors rather than hard intelligence. But there's a reason Kator's holding the top spot on the Middle D-grade ladder. He's a tough opponent."

"Be careful," Vilari said. "Winning or losing ultimately doesn't matter. It's just a small stop on your path. The real danger is the hidden threats of the Undead Empire. Commandments or not, there are bound to be conflicting goals and deep undercurrents."

"I know. I'll be careful," Zac smiled. "I need to head back for a bit. Can you deal with everything here?"

"Of course. Do we need to delay the next campaign?"

"No," Zac rejected. "I'll only be a couple of hours. I probably won't fight in the neutral battlefronts, though. I need to put all my attention on my other body."

"Focus on your matters, and don't worry about us," Vilari said. "We've worked hard so that you don't have to carry the whole burden alone."

Zac said his goodbyes before flashing away, using [Earthstrider] to head to the Battlefront Array. It had taken his army an hour to cross the distance, but it only took Zac ten minutes before he appeared back on Earth. Soon after, he stood before his Draugr half, who handed over the box with the Court Cycle Token without opening his eyes.

Zac took it and left the cave, teleporting to a desolate island. In contrast to many of the islands in his archipelago, this one had extremely sparse energy.

It was right on a fault line between two Nexus Veins, which meant all the energy was directed to neighboring islands. Yet, the island wasn't empty. A huge, forbidding structure took up most of its surface.

The Imperial Prison.

His unannounced visit caused a small stir, and hurried steps echoed on the stone floor before Zac spotted a familiar face. It was Julia Lombard, the former member of the New World Government and current Minister of Justice of the Atwood Empire.

"Emperor Atwood, we didn't expect to see you today," Julia said with a small bow.

"You're here?" Zac said with surprise.

"It's an important facility of the Ministry of Justice. I work from here one to two days a week," Julia explained. "Either case, welcome to Purgatory."

"Purgatory?" Zac said with a raised brow.

"That's what the prisoners call it," Julia said. "We just keep digging deeper as the need for more and stronger cells is endless. They say we're halfway to hell by now."

"Hopefully, we'll be able to close down some of those floors one day," Zac sighed. "How's the situation?"

"It's stable. The prisoners are too drained to do much of anything," Julia said. "Are you here for an inspection?"

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head. "I'm here to see the special prisoner. Stormstar."

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1107 - Chosen - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1107 - Chosen

Suddenly, there was a break in the monotony, and Stormstar opened her eyes upon hearing a clank in the distance. Did they think a short stint of solitude would make her dance to their tune? These filthy-rich strangers were really newly integrated rubes. She was born from the stars, accustomed to the vast

silence. Let alone sitting around for a couple of days. She could do a year standing on her head if need be.

Of course, she would have preferred a better environment than a prison made from Sinkstone. The ceilings, the walls—everything acted like a natural sponge, stealing any energy before it reached her. Well, almost all energy. The Sinkstones and Prison Arrays might work on these inexperienced natives, but how could the settlers of the Ragged Expanse not have some tricks up their sleeves?

Every day came with the threat of running into anything from Kan'Tanu slavers to competing vessels, and you better be ready for a desperate attempt at escape before they brought you to their bases. Her former crew could testify to that. The memory filled her heart with annoyance. It had taken her four decades to assemble her crew after assassinating her old captain and commandeering her ship. All that hard work down the drain.

Not that it mattered now. She had been chosen for greatness, becoming a Skybreaker of Ultom and shedding her old life. Who cared about being locked in a dungeon? If anything, they were welcome to leave her down here. The mortal food they provided to replace Cosmic Energy was decent enough, and they seemed to be far from any of the crazy cultists that had hounded her nightmares since she was old enough to have them. She would be more than happy to wait out the timer and let the inheritance whisk her away.

But how could these people leave her to her own devices? They probably had no idea what the inheritance was, but a week should have been enough to make some inquiries. That prospect was cause for constant worry. Considering the gear these people were sporting, they probably had some good channels. Good enough for their inquiries to reach the mighty figures hiding in the shadows.

Stormstar didn't know whether she wanted to be discovered or not. It would be nice to grab onto a nice juicy thigh and enjoy the benefits being a lackey brought, but she knew she wasn't even dirt in the eyes of those lords. Who knew, there might even be ways for them to snatch her opportunity, then where would she be? No, better stick to what she knew; stake it out on her own, and fish in the muddy waters.

So she needed to make her move before these people tried to copy the idea of her previous captor.

Stormstar kept her face impassive, but she was ready to strike the moment the door opened. It had taken over a month of effort, but she had finally managed to accumulate enough energy for, well, something. The Kan'Tanu lord was too worried about his scheme being exposed that he couldn't properly contain her in their real dungeons, and these guys seemed to think sealing a Hegemon's Cosmic Core was enough. Had they forgotten they'd all stored energy through their bodies until reaching the D-grade? Only fools wouldn't have backup reservoirs hidden somewhere in their bodies.

The steps drew closer, and she slowly placed her wrist against the small spike she'd managed to form. Shattering the bracelet would probably cost her a hand, but the [Stormfiend Codex] would let her regrow it in a year or so. The reinforced door opened, and a stranger walked inside.

The stranger was a man of great contrasts. He had one of the most impressive physiques she'd ever seen, with well-defined muscles that gave off a refreshing aura. He should be a Body Cultivator just like herself. Too bad his appearance was average at best. Even worse was the tell-tale lack of spirituality in his eyes and features. Even if he exuded a decently strong aura, his future was bound to be limited.

What a waste. Even with a slightly Dao-touched face, he'd be able to make a name for himself as a kept consort of the Pirate Empress or on one of the pleasure ships of the Seven Secrets Carnival.

Stormstar tried to look confused and scared, but she inwardly sneered when this newcomer failed to close the door behind him—big mistake.

"Stormstar, I presume?" the man said as he took out a chair and sat down. Strike two.

"Who're you? The custodian?"

"I guess you could say I'm the big boss," he said. "You can call me Zac."

"Big boss?" Stormstar laughed. "Don't let that scary black-eyed zombie hear that."

The man only smiled at the taunt. "I hear you've been chosen for an opportunity."

"That's true, that's true," Stormstar eagerly nodded. "A sage came to me in my dreams and said we have great fate. He imparted me with an ancient seal, explaining it was the key to a great opportunity. I'm sure you've heard of the powerful outsiders by now. They're here for the opportunity my senior is guarding."

"Someone visited your dreams?" the man said with a raised brow.

"I know it sounds corny, but it's true," Stormstar lied. "He said he'd return soon again. I can request an additional slot in exchange for freedom and some resources. Hell, I'll even ask to bring your friend over there if it gets me out of this place."

"Who are you—" the man said and turned around.

Strike three.

Stormstar exploded into action, lunging for her target while unleashing everything she'd stockpiled. There was no thought of conserving energy. This bastard had multiple Spatial Rings on his hands; there were bound to be crystals and pills to replenish her stockpiles.

A gory explosion shook the cell when she ripped off her sealed hand. It didn't even slow her down. She had become the storm, and the winds that had been sealed in her blood flooded her remaining hand. It all gathered into a lethal blade aimed at her target's neck.

The world shifted, and Stormstar almost felt like her soul had been knocked out of her body when her face crashed into the ground with enough force to crack her jaw and knock out a few teeth. She couldn't understand what had just happened. One moment, he'd been turned away. The next, her head was in his hand, crashing toward the ground.

However, the pain was nothing when faced with the horror of the aura suddenly filled the room. She'd thought the Remoulded was scary, but it was simply a joke in the face of the roaring killing intent released from the stranger's body. It felt like she was staring up at an actual Primordial Fiendgod, the mythological creature that was the source of inspiration for her Body Tempering Manual.

The whole prison seemed to quake when faced with the brutality of his aura. How could this level of oppression come from a commoner like this? Stormstar doubted that even the feared Reincarnators could reach this level.

She couldn't move; she couldn't breathe. She'd named herself after the mysterious wind-attuned star where she'd chanced upon the Seal of the Hollow Court. Now, he was the storm while she was the candle at the precipice of being snuffed out.

"Decent try. I was wondering if you'd dare make a move."

"Mercy! I submit," she croaked, looking as pitiful as possible as she peered up from the ground. "I'll do anything! Please, spare me!"

There wasn't even a trickle of blood. It was a relief now that things had come to this, but it still filled her with irreconciliation.

The pressure subsided, but Stormstar didn't dare move so much as a finger. First and foremost, she was a survivor. She was only 90 years old, but she knew when to advance and when to back down. It was the whole reason she'd managed to become a captain at such young age.

"Enough nonsense with the sages and dreams. You should recognize this rune, right?" the man said, and Stormstar's heart sank even further upon seeing the box in his hand.

It was there, the mysterious rune that had given her a new lease of life. However, it was only one of many; hers wasn't even in the prime position. It proved she might not be as fated as she'd thought, or that the opportunity was as simple as she initially believed.

Stormstar inwardly grumbled. Why did this plain-looking bastard have to pretend to be the sheep? She had bet the ship that he was a rube, only to find out he knew even more than her.

The box opened, displaying a blank piece of metal within. It didn't look like much, not nearly as attention-grabbing as the brutal axe that appeared in the man's hand. The killing intent leaking from its gleaming edge made Stormstar's hair stand on end. She couldn't imagine the number of lives it had reaped to gain such a brutal aura. At least she'd have some company in the afterlife.

No! She was chosen, picked by the ancient inheritance that had driven everyone crazy. She wasn't fated to die in some cage. She wracked her brain to remember that feeling from before, to display some knowledge and showcase her value. But she was coming up woefully short. What in the stars was she supposed to do with a blank piece of metal?

"Use your connection to the Hollow Court to activate this thing. If you fail, we'll have a different sort of conversation."

The oppressive atmosphere of the Imperial Prison lingered in Zac's heart as he teleported back to Port Atwood. It was his first visit, and seeing just how many high-risk prisoners they'd accumulated over the years was sobering. Especially so considering how cheap life was in the Multiverse, where many who would be imprisoned before were simply killed on the spot or executed later.

The fall of civilization during the Integration had led to a drastic loss of order, where scum like Roger saw their chance to live out their twisted ambitions. The situation had gradually improved since, but the war had set them back by a depressing degree. The main cities were all quite safe, but the same couldn't be said for smaller and remote settlements. Those strong enough to become peacekeeping guards in this era had been sent to the frontlines, exposing the home front to society's dark underbelly.

There were even problems within his army. Infighting and killing for resources were all-too-common, and some soldiers had acted like beasts on the conquered worlds.

Unfortunately, his meeting with Stormstar hadn't given him anything to improve his mood. They'd known from the beginning that she had an emergency stockpile, and he'd wanted to see what she would do with it. Unfortunately, she chose to ambush him the second he showed a small opening, dispelling any thoughts of recruiting her to his faction.

His experiment didn't fare any better. Zac sighed as he gazed down at the Court Cycle Token in his hand, properly inspecting it again. No matter how he looked at the quest reward, it was the same as before. Zac would have mistaken it for something crafted with mortal materials if not for the fact the small token weighed as much as a boulder and was utterly impossible to bend or scratch.

He'd hoped the token would react upon encountering a sealbearer, but there hadn't been any response. The pirate had been so desperate to follow his request she'd actually tried to force it into her forehead when all else failed, creating a crack in her skull before Zac could stop her. Yet nothing she'd done had elicited any response. Zac still had no idea what the token's purpose was. They'd already confirmed with the arrays that Stormstar really was a sealbearer, so that wasn't the issue either.

Zac had eventually been forced to give up. Of course, he hadn't killed her and only told her to come up with the solution before the next time he visited—a small payback for trying to lob off his head. In reality, he wasn't sure what to do about the pirate-turned-raider.

Stormstar had spouted nonsense since he entered the cell and pounced when she saw an opening—not exactly someone you could trust your back to inside the trial. Perhaps it was better to move the incomplete seal to one of his own. Ogras still lacked one piece to complete his, but perhaps it was better for sealbearers to follow the quest chain. If nothing else, it came with additional bursts of enlightenment. He also needed a second Skybreaker if he planned to form two cycles before the inheritance began.

Then again, Stormstar had been chosen by the seal, meaning she had some sort of affinity with the outer court. Zac strongly suspected that the natural sealbearers would have an advantage over those who stole the opportunities from the hands of others. There was also the option of selling her to the Undead Empire. A sealbearer of the Hollow Court was an extremely valuable asset to the mission, and he'd be able to trade a whole lot of resources for her seal.

In either case, Zac wasn't in a hurry to decide. More than a dozen layers of protection were hidden across the island. There was even a huge array installed underwater, which could seal off the whole region. Even a Late Hegemon would have a hard time breaking in or out of Purgatory before reinforcements arrived. Stormstar wasn't going anywhere, even if her gambit had worked.

Zac was more concerned about the Court Cycle Token and felt it too early to throw it into some corner of his Spatial Ring until the trial started. It was possible the captive wasn't considered part of his cycle, which could have prevented the token from doing something. And as luck would have it, he had a backup guinea pig to test this theory on.

It was time to visit Jaol, his resident Technocrat navigator.

Jaol had stayed on Earth since he and Zac came to an agreement where he'd help replace Jaol's bionic body parts with ones of flesh. He was even part of the army, though he had not officially registered for the war. With multiple technocrat components installed throughout his body, Zac and the officials aware of Jaol's situation hesitated to integrate him into a battalion.

It was no secret what the System thought of the Technocrats, or rather the Selvari Empire. Zac wouldn't be surprised if the System arranged deadlier opponents if it found Technocrats hiding within an army. Besides, it wasn't like the navigator would be much use on the battlefield.

Jaol had been attached to the Atwood Army Research Department, located in a newly built annex of his academy. The Research Department had already surpassed the academy in size and continuously expanded along the island's eastern shores. Most of his talented academics and craftsmen had been transferred over, ranging from the old scholars of the Technocrat Research Base to the Ishiate Tinkerers.

The department also consumed more money and resources than even his elite armies. It was a necessary expenditure. The Research Department worked on hundreds of projects to strengthen his armies and decrease his dependence on outside resources. The sooner his Empire could produce D-grade equipment, pills, and War Machines in-house, the better.

Jaol fit much better in that environment and was currently helping with projects for the Atwood Navy. Most of his knowledge of navigation and spaceflight couldn't be directly translated into something suitable for a faction reliant on orthodox cultivation, but some things could. He'd already created a few gadgets that were installed on the Atwood Empire's Creator Vessels, adding handy features.

He'd also made a few improvements to the adapters that let old earth technology and Arrays communicate, continuing the work Kenzie had begun. It was only a limited research direction, set up for convenience's sake. For example, letting citizens use common old-world home appliances and having Gathering Arrays convert excess energy into electricity.

It wasn't like the Multiverse lacked the type of commodities that Old Earth possessed. They generally ran on ambient Cosmic Energy, which meant limitless clean energy. However, a young faction like the Atwood Empire

lacked the infrastructure, be it factories or inscribers, to produce all these daily necessities. It was easier to repurpose the old manufacturing during a transitionary period, and it wouldn't attract the System's ire so long as the technology lacked any form of spirituality.

Zac found the navigator in a restricted workshop in front of multiple large monitors that presented rows of data with dizzying speed.

"Did you bring the—" Jaol mumbled as the door slid open, but the words caught in his throat upon realizing it wasn't some assistant that had returned. "What are you doing here?"

"Just passing by," Zac said, throwing over the metal token. "Hey, have you seen something like this before? Is it something of your kin?"

"Hmm, it resembles an alloy, but it's not. If anything, it feels ancient," Jaol muttered as his bionic eyes whirled. "Wait, wha—!"

A streak of light had been dragged out of Jaol's body and entered the token. The shocked navigator threw away the token as though it was scalding, but Zac was ready to catch it. Finally, there was a change. A small rune of the Farsee Court had appeared on one of the sides, seemingly engraved. Better yet, it released a weak aura. It was just a whisper, but Zac would be able to recognize it anywhere.

The aura of Ultom.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1108 - Restoration - Read

Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1108 - Restoration

As Zac expected, he needed to have his sealbearers infuse the token to officially form a cycle. It also confirmed that you needed to have a real link to the sealbearer since the process was automatic for Jaol and impossible for Stormstar. In other words, Zac couldn't go around slapping random sealbearers with the token to fill up on cycles.

The situation also gave some possible answers to his other Ultom-related quest, One By Nine.

[One by Nine (Unique, Inheritance): Form a full cycle of Sealbearers. Reward: Entry to the Left Imperial Palace (9/9) COMPLETE. [1148 days] [NOTE: Multiple cycles can be formed.]

The quest had been listed as complete for a while, yet it was impossible to turn in. Perhaps that would change when he filled in the whole token, at which point it would become a key. Who knew? There might even be follow-up quests waiting for him.

Confirming if that were true was easier said than done. His progress might say 9/9, but he currently lacked access to three of the outer courts. Ogras would be gone for a while, and there was no telling when or if Kruta would arrive. Finally, there was the issue of the Daedalian Court, where Zac still wasn't sure who counted as part of his cycle. It should be either Ventus or Catheya, neither of whom was close at hand.

Most interesting was the weak aura of Ultom the token exuded. It wasn't close to the levels of the epiphany and even far inferior to the lake water. However, it didn't dissipate or weaken. The rune of the Farsee Court released a steady stream of crystallized comprehension. He might be able to use the token as a cultivation-assisting treasure, similar to Yrial's Statue or the [Mind's Eye Agate] he lost a while back.

It wasn't enough to do much of anything right now, but what if he filled up the cycle? Or even multiple cycles?

"How do you feel?" Zac asked as he carefully stowed the token.

"How do I feel?" Jaol swore, his face a mask of fear and suspicion. "Bastard, what did you do? What was that thing?"

"What's with that look? I just officially added you to my group for the upcoming inheritance. How could that hurt you?" Zac said with a roll of his eyes.

"Then why did you pretend like it was a technocrat disk?" Jaol countered.

"Did anything change for you?" Zac asked, studiously ignoring Jaol's question. "Any prompts, new quests? Any energy entering your body?"

Truth be told, Zac had no idea what the token would do. Even now, he just had working theories that could easily be proven incorrect. His biggest fear was that the token would extract the seals altogether. That was why he'd started with Stormstar and continued to Jaol. Better their seals disappear than someone like Vilari. Ultimately, Jaol wasn't one of his people but more like a reluctant ally.

The Technocrat was contributing to his faction right now, but Jaol would undoubtedly sell Zac down the river if it meant getting back in the good graces of the Living Als. Besides, while his fate had been thrown off-kilter after the events in Little Bean, it was undeniable that Jaol had come out ahead. Zac had already given him a fortune to get his new life started, and he was almost certain Jaol's Karmic connection to him was the only reason he could become a sealbearer in the first place.

"Whatever," Jaol muttered as he deflated under Zac's even stare. "No, nothing. I didn't feel anything from that mysterious light, and my quest still says I need two more pieces to finish my seal."

"Alright," Zac nodded after confirming the situation by having Jaol share the quest. "I guess that's it then. Let me know if anything changes."

"I will, but don't blame me if your subordinates don't forward my messages," Jaol asked, his eyes darting toward a metal door to the other side of the room. "Uh, is that the only reason you came here?"

"I had some time, so I figured I'd check in," Zac shrugged as he nodded at the screen. "What's that?"

"This? I'm still working on modules that can better interpret the data your vessels provide," Jaol said. "The scanners of your Class—ehm—D-grade Vessels are surprisingly good, but most information is too complex. Your navigators can't make sense of it, so the ships limit what they share. Furthermore, your vessels are all military make, so they prioritize battle-related readings."

Zac was aware of the problem. Karunthel had warned him when the shipyard was upgraded. Some features ran in a simplified mode because they lacked specialists like Jaol to take charge. Like with everything else, they were working around the clock to catch up, but they needed some stop-gap measures until then.

"The things I'm working on are designed to sift through the discarded data and lessen the workload for your crews."

"Lessen the workload in what way?"

"Right now, I'm working on something that'd quickly let you determine the source of distant energy signatures. Right now, your ships only provide some

low-priority general information unless the source is something like a Cosmic Vessel or array. But you use the Destroyers for resource extraction as much as their original purpose. This module will help your crew determine whether whatever your scanners pick up comes from Natural Treasures, large quantities of low-quality materials, or something else. At a later stage, it'll be able to tell exactly what treasure it is and how much."

"Without any AI or technology, right?" Zac asked while looking at the data with interest.

The setup made Zac think of the tablets the 'Datamancers' used back in the Mystic Realm, and he worried Jaol would try to sneak Selvari tech into his ships for one reason or another. Then again, Zac could vaguely tell something was different about the text on the screen. It almost felt like he was looking at an array, where his Ultom-awarded insight picked up on some patterns.

"Of course," Jaol said. "I'm only using a screen since I'm more used to reading data this way. It's a headache doing all this work without the assistance of the Digital World or a specialized AI, though. You're all living like barbarians."

"You people wouldn't be cowering in a remote corner of the Multiverse if the Technocrat way was so superior. There are arrays and spirits out there just as complex and powerful as your AIs. It's just that your foundations are shallow in this regard," Zac countered. "But this is an interesting project. Let me know if you need anything to speed up the process."

The Creator ships were top-of-the-line, but as Jaol said, they were specialist vessels. Adding extra features was a godsend since Zac doubted his upgrade quest would broaden his ship catalog that much. Until now, the Creators had only sold warships, likely by design from the quest that awarded the shipyard.

The modules would help him chart his stellar neighborhood, but they sounded especially useful for the war effort. The [Elite War Mapper] only showed where merit could be found, but it wasn't always easy to tell which markings would lead to riches and which ones represented hidden experts or strategic resources of no value to the Atwood Empire. And the more efficiently they could extract any value from the enemy planets, the quicker they could move on to the next campaign.

"I could use a couple of helpers. It doesn't need to be skilled labor like the so-called Datamancers you sent over," Jaol said. "The prototype is working, but we need to build a database for the array to compare energy signatures. The

more data we've collected, the more precise the array's estimates will become."

A smile tugged at Zac's lips at the thought of how technology and magic were ultimately the same. For so long, he'd thought there was something about the Dao of Technology that clashed with the Heavens, but it was just an ancient grudge that scarcely anyone remembered the reason for any longer. The Supremacies of the Technocrat alliance must feel incredibly frustrated about the situation.

"I'll arrange something with our treasury. We have quite a bit of stuff lying around. You could try building something portable. Something the quartermasters of our armies could use while going through our loot."

"That's a good idea," Jaol eagerly nodded, his eyes darting to the door.

"Alright, what's on your mind?" Zac smiled. "What's behind the door?"

"Ah, well," Jaol coughed. "Do you remember our last discussion?"

"I haven't forgotten," Zac said. "Do you have everything ready?"

"I do," Jaol said, eagerly walking to the door.

It slid open, leading into a large warehouse lined with dozens of vats and special containers. It looked like a mad scientist's laboratory, and Zac looked at Jaol with a raised brow.

"You've been busy."

"I, ah, might have exaggerated your involvement in a clandestine project to get help with my search after I didn't hear from you for a while," Jaol said, studiously looking away.

"Fine, but no more," Zac snorted as he stepped inside. "You need this much?"

"No, but you never know what turns out to be useful. I've collected all kinds of promising samples, and the war veritably flooded the markets. I've drawn out a series of branching schematics, depending on how well you think you can replicate these things."

"You do realize I have my hands full? It's all hands on deck, and I can't spend my days analyzing all these bloodlines. You need to—" Zac said as he looked

across the room full of samples, but he froze upon seeing a body floating in the inner corner. He flashed over, his eyes wide with shock. "Where did you get this?"

"What's the matter?" Jaol asked after teaching up. "An old acquaintance?"

"Something like that," Zac sighed. "An old enemy."

It was actually Uvek Cartava, the leader of one of the four factions of the Research Base. The Cartava clan had targeted his faction in a desperate attempt to escape the base, nearly resulting in disaster. Luckily, Zac had returned in time, foiling their attempt. Uvek was almost killed, but his followers had managed to fake the old man's death at the last moment, narrowly escaping with a small group of civilians.

The survivors of the Cartava clan had escaped toward another fragment of the Research Base when things came crashing down, and that was the last he saw of them. He'd assumed they all died since they failed to show up on Memorysteel Mountain, either killed by Void Beasts, the Lunar Clan, or the realm's collapse. So it definitely wasn't a face he'd expected to see today.

"I'm not surprised," Jaol nodded. "I found this guy floating outside one of the local planets with over a hundred clansmen around him. He's from the Technocrat Research Base, right?"

"What's going on?"

"Well, my search for strong bloodlines quickly led me to the survivors of the Subspace Station I heard was connected to this planet. When I learned that many research subjects tried to escape their prison by jumping through spatial anomalies, I tuned my scanning modules to look for corpses floating around space. Their weak signals are normally something your vessels will disregard unless the bodies are Hegemons or above. Only those people might have stuff worth looting.

"When I made it look for E-grade bodies, quite a few popped up nearby. Mostly people who tried to escape at the last moment or were spat out when the realm exploded. I only found two bodies from before your world's integration into the System."

Zac was surprised to learn that people had been thrown out in his cosmic backyard. Everyone had waited for the Great Redeemer to descend, and his

failure to do so was taken as proof that the path between Earth and Mystic Realm was completely cut. Perhaps these people had been spat out before things reached that point, or perhaps the battle between the titans had forced Voridis A'Heliophos to flee, costing him his chance to find Earth before the Assimilation.

"Do you know if they were alive when they appeared in the main dimension? Could there be survivors?" Zac asked.

"Possible, but unlikely," Jaol said. "The spatial tears or the Void destroyed most bodies. Only the strongest would survive moving through dimensions. Even then, they'd have to appear on a planet or close enough to reach the atmosphere before dying of asphyxiation."

Zac shook his head as he turned away from Uvek's body. The Cartava Clan was truly pitiful. They'd been captured by the Tsarun Clan because of their eyes, and one suffering had replaced another. Yet they'd held on for a chance at freedom. Yet now they were gone, and Uvek had once more become a research specimen.

It made him wonder if it was related to the Taboo Power held within their eyes. Leviala tampered with the river of time twice. Could the cosmic backlash be powerful enough to curse her whole clan?

"Do you want me to—" Jaol hesitated.

"It doesn't matter," Zac said with a shake of his head. "But I won't be able to recreate the Temporal Bloodline in his eyes—I've already tried that for our Revenants. And like I said, I can't spend too much time studying all these bloodlines."

"Of course. I've thought of an alternative method that might be easier for you," Jaol said as he walked over to a table. "The problem is recreating the bloodlines themselves, right? What if, instead of creating new body parts from scratch, you create my genealogical makeup inside an existing organ? I'm a normal human, apart from my implants, so it should be much easier. I've already extracted the essence of my blood."

"So, an organ transplant without any rejection," Zac thoughtfully muttered. "Maybe. It would require very delicate control, and Creation Energy is notoriously hard to keep in line."

"Any more delicate than recreating a foreign bloodline?"

He had to admit; it was an interesting prospect, and not just for his deal with Jaol. If his idea worked, it might let Zac manufacture Corpselords without any downsides of rejection between body parts. Sure, using Creation Energy and Longevity absolutely wasn't worth it for common Corpselords or even elites. But what about the Heaven's Chosen he encountered?

Zac could imagine the kind of powerful followers he'd be able to raise if he fused the strongest aspects of his strongest enemies into one body. He even had a lot of candidates in his Corpse Sack, considering how often he was forced to target the heads of his enemies to take them out in one go.

The concept might even have uses beyond creating bodies and body parts. It could be combined with the techniques of [Cosmic Forge] to create perfect materials for his Spirit Tools. Verun, especially, could benefit from adding a Cosmic Cycle or two, but Zac needed to get everything just right to not damage its growth potential.

Zac shelved the idea as he collected the data and samples Jaol had collected. He had way too much on his hands right now to add his crafting technique to the list. His weapons had already reached a state where they wouldn't hold him back in the war or the Left Imperial Palace, which was good enough for now.

"I'll give it a try. Give me two months to look over the materials," Zac said.

"No problem, take your time," Jaol quickly nodded. "A few months here or there won't make any difference."

"I'll talk to you later," Zac said as he left the research center.

Zac glanced in the direction of his compound but shook his head and teleported to Pangea, where he briefly met with Rhuger. A second sigil was added to the token, and the aura it released grew stronger. Oddly enough, Rhuger didn't seem to notice it, and neither did Janos or the others he visited one after the other.

An hour later, Zac ran out of sealbearers on Earth. He found himself standing by the shores within his compound, looking out at the boundless sea. A storm rumbled in the distance, its dark clouds slowly creeping closer. The scene

perfectly mirrored Zac's thoughts. As the duel drew closer, his sense of apprehension became stronger.

It wasn't his Danger Sense warning him of a plot like in the Perennial Vastness, but rather an uncertainty from the depths of his heart. It wasn't just the quest that had made him ask for an extension, but that nagging feeling. It wasn't a fear of Kator but rather a worry over his mental state. Eight years of running rampant in the Perennial Vastness seemed to have created a flaw in his mentality, and he felt his very identity under threat.

When the Incursion struck, he was a nobody, a lost boy in the woods struggling to survive. He'd always held onto that feeling of helplessness, even when his identity began to shift. Conquering the Azh'Rezak Clan, becoming the strongest on Earth. Having his name spread far and wide across the sector and beyond. Mortal or not, he'd become a true Heaven's Chosen and only advanced from there.

It had become harder and harder to convince himself that he had to be careful, that the waters of the Multiverse were deeper than he could imagine, and Zac realized he'd been nurturing the arrogance of an elite. He'd heard the warnings, seen the signs. Kator was an absolute monster. Yet, in Zac's heart of hearts, there had been a sense of superiority and conviction he'd pull ahead. Kator was ultimately only 90 years old, which wasn't that different from himself. When restricted to the same level, how could he possibly lose?

Now, he had started worrying about what would happen if he came up short. Would it damage his path, his convictions? The impervious mentality that had let him forge ahead despite all odds? Was his Dao Heart perhaps not as stable as he'd come to believe?

Zac shook his head and turned away from the advancing clouds. Investigating the token had been a welcome distraction, but he couldn't stall any longer. Only by facing the doubts in his heart could he quash them before they turned into Heart Demons corroding his Dao.

He had done what he could, and it was time to test his axe against Kator's mace.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1109 - Duel - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1109 - Duel

The soothing caress of Death was the same when Zac stepped onto Kavista's soil. The war seemed so distant within the tranquil courtyard. His appearance was expected this time, and Zac didn't even have time to address the guards before his surroundings twisted. When his vision stabilized, Zac found himself standing in the familiar meeting room, surrounded by the usual suspects.

"Hello again," Zac nodded calmly, but he felt slightly nervous upon being stared down by the Monarchs this time. It felt as though there was a vague threat lingering in the air. Perhaps the feeling was triggered by paranoia after Tavza's warning last time. Perhaps it was triggered by the unease that had plagued him the past days.

Of course, there was a chance his high Luck let him pick up on a real plot against his life. But if that were the case, it was much weaker than when he'd been targeted by Valsa of the First Heaven. Hopefully, that meant no one had committed to targeting him in the next couple of days.

"I was wondering whether you'd dare show up," Kator laughed.

"I said I'd be here, so I'm here," Zac shrugged. "Let's make this quick, though. I need to get back on the battlefield."

"Haste makes waste, young friend," Laz said. "We've read the reports. You haven't stopped for a moment since returning. It's not a sustainable pace in a conflict of this scale."

"Even if you can keep going, it's a good idea to let your men rest occasionally," Pavina added. "Tired soldiers make mistakes, and mistakes lead to deaths."

"I'll be careful," Zac nodded.

"You're speaking like he has a choice," Kator said. "His subordinates are just trash covered in treasures, and the Kan'Tanu will reach the Allbright Empire in a couple of months. I bet the System will set up large-scale battlefields at that point. They won't have a chance later if they don't push themselves now."

Zac tried to ignore Kator's comment about his men, but a flame of anger ignited upon remembering how valiantly they'd fought under him over the past month.

"What? You thought you'd formed an iron-veined army in this short duration?" Kator scoffed upon seeing Zac's glare. "Your so-called Calamity Company would get ripped apart by any neophyte squad from back home. Haven't you realized? Your enemies are all trash as well. The System is going easy on newly integrated worlds. You're just smashing some border settlements with your wealth."

He wanted to refute the reaver, but Zac knew there was some truth to his words. Even after consecutive victories, they hadn't encountered any really powerful or connected worlds. They hadn't encountered any official soldiers from the seven chapters and only one Remoulded. Their opponents seemed to be getting stronger, but they still had an easier time than the D-grade worlds under the powerful empires.

There was no point in getting bogged down in a shouting match with Kator about it, though, so he focused on what he said about the frontlines instead. As expected, the war would enter the next stage soon enough. Zac turned to the Draugr for answers.

"Will the Million Gates Territory's defensive line be able to hold?"

"That's..." Laz said. "It'll be a tough battle."

Zac's heart sank upon seeing his expression. He didn't look confident at all.

"Is it because of the outsiders?"

"They have moved up the conflict, but they only have a supportive role like ourselves. Most of us will relocate soon. We'll be acting as deterrence for the outsiders on the other side," Laz said. "The problem is the Kan'Tanu themselves."

"You won't help us fight against them?" Zac frowned, understanding the implication within Laz's explanation. So long as the Monarchs on the other side didn't make a move, neither would they.

"This is not our fight. We're only here for the inheritance, and there's a tacit agreement between the external factions. We won't interfere with the war, at least not in the open," Toss said upon seeing Zac's displeasure. "If anything, you don't want us to make a move. It'll escalate the conflict, and you locals will suffer."

"Of course, the empire isn't just looking the other way. The Kavriel Province has helped reinforced the defensive lines for years, and we've transferred a third of our forces to the alliance," Laz said.

"Kid, if you want my advice, ignore that battle and focus on the battlefronts," Toss said. "The System won't arrange things neatly for you youngsters if you head over there to help. The established factions will go all out, using hidden cards and their Dao Reserves. What good is your Early D-grade cultivation if one of the Kan'Tanu Monarchs turns your Cosmic Vessel into ash?"

"So what should we do?"

"The harder you fight on the graded battlefronts, the fewer soldiers the Kan'Tanu will be able to send to the frontlines," Pavina said. "Their approach has taken so long because they have created a safe path through the Million Gates Territory. Their first goal will be to create a beachhead outside the Eternal Storm and set up large-scale teleporters to transport soldiers."

"They've stabilized the Million Gates Territory?" Zac exclaimed. "Is that even possible?"

"It's possible, especially with the Starbeast Alliance helping out," Laz said.

"They've got special techniques to traverse the Endless Storm?"

"Techniques? If you can call having a big body a technique," Kator scoffed. "Their ancestors are the size of continents in their true forms. Even Starbeast Monarchs can crush most spatial turbulence with their bodies alone. How hard could it be to force their way through the calm edges of the Eternal Storm?"

Zac felt helpless over the situation. The Kan'Tanu was enough of a headache, and these outsiders only made it worse. They didn't want to dirty their hands, but they sure seemed more than willing to fan the flames. They didn't care if trillions of people died on the frontier so long as it created a situation where they could fish for more seals.

"It's only a temporary solution," Tavza added, and Laz nodded in agreement.

"The Eternal Storm has its name for a reason. Untamed dimensions pushing against integrated space will constantly give rise to new turbulence. The invaders will have to maintain the road if they want to keep using it for passage and create backups in case it fails. Of course, our side wants to

destroy their route to our sector. There's already a hidden war being waged within the Eternal Storm, with thousands of elite units participating."

The struggle within the storm before was news to Zac, but he wasn't surprised. His shipyard quest advanced daily thanks to more enemy vessels being struck down. Ten days ago, progress had moved from 228 to 241 in the span of four hours. A large-scale battle must have erupted somewhere within the Million Gates Territory.

Zac still wasn't convinced about their motives. There was no reason for the outside influences controlling the Allbright Empire, the Havarok Dynasty, or the other top-tier Zecia factions, to slow down the war. His people had already found clues indicating the outsiders wanted to maintain a balance where neither side gained or lost too much. At least until the time of the trial.

Then again, the status quo favored Zecia, so Zac guessed he shouldn't complain.

"For now, I have no intention to send my people to the physical frontlines. The Atwood Empire is already providing high-quality Cosmic Vessels; it's more than enough for an Early D-grade Force. But like Kator says, it might not be up to me," Zac said before turning to the reaver. "Are you ready? Or are you going to keep annoying me in hopes it'll make me slip up later?"

"What do I need to ready myself for?" Kator snickered. "And don't you worry, it'll be over quickly. You'll be back home before you know it."

"Boys," Pavina said with a helpless shake of her head.

"Remember, it's just a friendly spar, not a battle with your futures on the line," Toss grunted. "There are a few more topics to cover. We saw the recording of the token. Are there any findings since?"

Zac thought it over briefly before sharing what he'd discovered since parting with Petrus and what he believed it signified. He didn't share the aura the token had begun to release, though. That was a secret cultivation resource best kept close to the vest.

"Your theory seems plausible, but let's hope it has more uses than unlocking the gates to the Left Imperial Palace," Tavza said.

"Where's the token now?" Kator asked. "Let's test it on me."

"If you were me, would you bring it here?" Zac said with a roll of his eyes. "I'll just go ahead and hold onto it until the mission starts."

"How about a trade? A peak D-grade Wild Mystic Realm and 1,000 C-grade Nexus Coins for the token," Kator said. "It's a great deal if what you say is true. What's the use of a key to the main court when our mission will take us elsewhere? Meanwhile, a powerful unpopulated realm and a capital infusion would be a huge boost for your little kingdom."

Zac almost blurted an agreement upon hearing the offer. A Peak D-grade Mystic Realm should be right at the threshold of becoming an Ancient Realm. It could become a hidden Holy Land like the ones most established factions used, or a road to survival in case they lost the war. Zac could move his people into the realm and destroy the exit, letting his people hide within the Void until the storm passed. Meanwhile, the token would only slightly assist his cultivation in the short run, and possibly help him out inside the trial.

Yet, Zac's instincts told him he would regret it if he agreed.

"That's okay; we're doing fine as we are."

"Well, I'm here if you change your mind," the reaver snickered. "But don't think I'll buy that thing after the mission ends and the elite forces leave this wretched corner of space. You might regret not taking the deal when those cultists come knocking on your door."

"I'll take my chances," Zac said, inwardly sneering.

He doubted the reaver would be so blasé over the token if he knew it released a continuous stream of inspiration.

"What is your plan for the captive sealbearer?" Toss asked.

"No plan yet."

"We'd be willing to trade her for resources if you can't find a use for her seal."

"Perhaps in the future," Zac rejected. "I want to keep her around for a while. Maybe I can turn her around to get her brand on the token."

"It's not a pressing matter," the reaver said, dropping the subject.

The meeting went on for another thirty minutes, even if there wasn't much else to discuss. Kator's scathing remarks aside, the Calamity Company had performed beyond their expectations, and his next quest only needed him to keep fighting. He received some suggestions based on the reports sent back from Serzo and Petrus, there were no complaints or demands. Unfortunately, that didn't mean Zac's request for access to more resources was granted, either to buy or be provided for free.

The Monarchs used their usual excuse that meddling excessively with the younger generation could have unintended consequences. However, they indicated they would trade any captured sealbearer he encountered, even if he managed to engrave them on his token first. Zac wasn't so sure about that kind of trade. The token was a litmus test of sorts. If a sealbearer managed to leave a rune behind, they genuinely wanted to follow him. How could he send someone like that to the Undead Empire to be killed or awakened?

The atmosphere grew more oppressive as the minutes passed, but Laz seemed unwilling to let the meeting end. The topics he broached became more tangential and theoretical, much to the displeasure of the reavers.

"Any other matters can be dealt with as they arrive," Toss eventually said. "There's no point in wasting time dredging these old topics again."

"Let's get this over with, then," Laz sighed, and the surroundings shifted.

The Monarchs had transported them to a huge arena over a mile wide to accommodate the powers of Hegemons. Of course, a fight using only techniques was unlikely to require that much space. After all, Zac could tell from the brutal aura radiating from Kaldor that he wasn't a cultivator whose technique relied on dodging and harassment. Just like himself, he was a head-on fighter.

Zac couldn't even estimate how many spectators could fit in the galleries. Today, they were empty, with no one coming to join them. It gave the coliseum a desolate aura, but Zac preferred this over his fight being turned into sport for some Kavriel scions. A ripple spread through the area, and Zac could feel Tavza's and Kator's attributes being suppressed. He couldn't sense any change in the Monarchs and guessed they were too strong to be affected.

"Three clean hits at vitals means victory. After each hit, you create distance," Toss said. "You're both in the integration stage, so control your force at the

point of impact. There's no point in taking any risks, even if both of you have large stores of Endurance and Vitality."

"Don't mind him," Kator laughed as his aura grew increasingly oppressive. "Hit as hard as you can. If a brat like you can break through my Warbones, I might as well die."

Zac ignored the taunt, focusing on the upcoming battle. A shroud of darkness spread across his chest as Alea entered her true form. The abyssal chains emerged from the gateways on his back, and an otherworldly rattle filled the quiet arena. The familiar grip of [Death's Duality] appeared in his hand, and Zac felt all extraneous emotions washing away as he turned toward his opponent.

Kator followed suit, throwing off the loose robe he usually wore to expose the glistening skeleton plating beneath. Commander Kaldor never used his Warbones back in the Orom World. There was no need, considering his bones were the equivalent to Peak C-grade metals, even in their passive state. So it was the first time Zac saw the transformation of an Izh'Rak Reaver. The bones grew thicker, darker, and their edges sharpened. Every plate was becoming a weapon on its own.

White markings spread across Kator's body, and he began his transformation. Meanwhile, a flanged mace grew out of his right hand, its head the size of two fists and lined with sharpened bones reminiscent of [Verun's Bite]. The palm of his left hand expanded, forming a serrated round shield. It was only the width of Kator's forearm, and it looked as much a weapon as a defensive tool.

The self-made tools weren't fused with Kator's body like the soldier ants of his Ayn Hive. They detached after emerging from within Kator's body, though Zac noted a string of sinew still connected the shield to Kator's palm. By the appearance, Zac suspected it could be used as a throwing shield.

The transformation only took a few seconds, but it was enough to completely reform his appearance. Zac obviously wouldn't mistake him for anything but an Izh'Rak Reaver, but it now looked like Kator was wearing full-body armor. It was covered in dense white runes, and Zac noted they formed a full pathway with two focal points. One was a pristine black bone the shape of a seven-pointed star embedded above his heart. It covered most of his chest, like Alea's image on s own body, and it seemed to release a mysterious force through Kator's body.

One of the Miracle Bones? Perhaps it was the same with the ridge of horn-like spike that had appeared right atop Kator's head. Zac first felt it a weakness to have such critical bones exposed like that, but he realized they seemed even sturdier than the rest of Kator's plating. It was doubtful they were good targets in a real battle—if he had the strength to shatter those things, he might as well lob their heads off instead.

The skeletal race was normally lanky and had at least a meter on the average human. However, the transformation reduced Kator's height by more than a head. He was also bulkier, coming closer to Zac's physique. It wasn't just his bones that had transformed, but also the incredibly dense muscles hiding beneath.

The onlookers had already moved away, hiding their presence to avoid distraction. It was like only Zac and Kator remained in the world.

There was no signal, no further words about code of conduct. What needed to be said had been said. Anything else would be communicated with their weapons.

Zac released the pent-up aggression that had been building in his chest, shooting forward with such force a deep explosion reverberated through the empty arena. A boisterous laugh greeted his approach as Kator slammed his shield with his mace, the collision sounding like a clap of furious thunder. Zac's aura and Killing Intent roiled forward like a tidal wave, but an overbearing force with equal ruthlessness pushed it back.

Lightning-quick chains made up the vanguard, surrounding Kator in a web of Death while [Death's duality] drew a ruthless arc aimed at Kator's neck. The strike looked simple on the outside, but it contained the Inexorability of Death. The opening strike had innumerable opponents who thought they could block or dodge, only to find all their options sealed and their path cut short.

But Kator was like an immovable mountain, meeting offense with overwhelming aggression. Instead of blocking the strike with his shield, he instead used its serrated edge to hook one of Zac's chains, forcibly altering its trajectory to disrupt Zac's trap. Meanwhile, the mace descended toward Zac's head with similar brutality, moving with beguiling speed.

Zac began his swing first, but he could tell the mace would reach its target before his axe. He had no choice but to redirect his strike and intercept, even using [Conviction of Eoz] to reposition in time. A tearing screech filled Zac's

ears when weapons collided, but Zac barely noticed it over the hidden battle between their Daos.

They said that you could only truly know someone after brawling with them. Zac wasn't sure that was true, but the opening exchange let him know one thing for certain. Kator's technique was not inferior to his. He'd already expected as much. Kator was an eonic seed in the Integration Stage. What Zac hadn't expected was the number of Daos that had gone into the reaver's path.

Just how many concepts did this maniac wield?

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1110 - Overbearing - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1110 - Overbearing

Zac was confused by the mottled mixture of truths he sensed within Kator's attack. They had been fused so tightly into a singular force that Zac couldn't even make out their components, but the situation didn't allow for a deeper analysis. He felt a prickling pain in his right arm, and he realized he'd have to push [Conviction of Eoz] into a self-harming state if he wanted to fully block the strike.

Kator's attack was not only faster than his but heavier too? Zac's instincts told him it was too early to unleash his upgraded node and transitioned into a deflecting blow instead of competing in power. His free arm redirected the chains to target Kator's limbs, playing the fetters like an instrument. The chains could move independently, but manipulating them with his hand made their turns sharper and more unpredictable.

The six chains had already formed a domain around his target, striking from every angle. They were fast, strong, and naturally moved in adherence with his Inexorable Stance, where Dao elevated them beyond their normal state. Kator didn't back down. He forged ahead, somehow unleashing haymaker after haymaker without exposing any openings. Zac gave as good as he got, and ominous shrieks joined the rattle of chains as [Death's Duality] tore at the impervious reaver.

Soon, two battles raged in the vast coliseum. One was in the physical realm, where axe clashed against mace while shield and chains worked to shift the duel in their favor. The opening exchange proved that both approached conflict the same way—where offense was the best defense and retreat was

surrender. It was forceful, overbearing, and suffocating, leaving the opponent in despair.

The second war was hidden from the naked eye but just as intense. It was a clash of the spirit where Dao was pitted against Dao as two opposing paths collided. Zac had become a representation of the inexorability of Death and cultivation's end. He was judge and executioner, shaping fate through the swings of his axe.

Yet Kator refused to be contained, denied Zac the authority of adjudication. He broke through real and metaphorical chains, subverting Zac's truth to impose his own. Even the Remoulded World Lord had been forced into a passive state by the armament's relentless pressure, letting Zac direct the fight like a puppet master while advancing for a final strike. Yet the reaver wasn't ruffled at all, countering many of Zac's techniques without missing a step.

Against most enemies, Zac could target their eyes or throat, forcing them to avoid or respond. Something like this was simply impossible with an Izh'Rak Reaver who didn't have organs or even a brain. Of course, Izh'Rak Reavers were difficult to deal with, but they weren't invulnerable. For one, using one's Warbones was apparently extremely taxing, more than most War Regalia. It also drained their Vigor, which was an important reason all reavers were Body Refiners.

Secondly, their consciousness was spread through their skeletons, which meant any damage to their bones could damage their souls. Even a strong enough hit to their extremities could shock their mind and briefly scatter their thoughts. And while their consciousness was spread through their skeleton, much was still gathered in their head. Destroying it wouldn't outright kill them, but they'd be half-dead and easy to finish off.

His chains didn't have that kind of raw power even after their upgrade. Kator ultimately was an elite at the precipice of Late Hegemony, and his Warbones were extremely strong even when his Attributes were restricted. Zac could probably slap the chains against Kator's skeletal plating all day without it changing much of anything.

That didn't mean the chains were useless. Targeting obvious weaknesses was only one of the strategies the Inexorable Stance could deploy—it wasn't even central to the way Zac used his armament. It was simply a method to

speed up his fights against weaker or unskilled opponents, but he'd never planned on fully relying on those tactics when facing real elites.

Cultivators who had glaring weak spots didn't get far on the road of cultivation, and the further Zac progressed, the more fallbacks his enemies would have. Some could even survive having their head split open. Others were like Kator, using thick hide or War Regalia to block everything but the strongest strikes.

The Inexorable Stance was a technique of restriction and suffocation, and the fundamental way to use his chains was to literally bind his target. And as a fallback, he could position his chains so that some movements would capture the opponent's limbs or weapons, forcing them to approach another way.

If Alea had still been E-grade, it would have been impossible. Now, the links had enough power to restrict even Kator for short windows. They'd eventually snap, but Alea had already assured him it didn't matter. There were miles of chains hidden within the subspace of [Love's Bond], and Alea could always produce more by feeding her materials or recovering the broken links.

Chains snaked toward limbs and torso like nimble Boa constrictors, aiming to seal Kator in a tomb of death and metal. Yet it felt as though Zac was punching the air. Kator was slippery like an eel, weaving through the seemingly impassable web to continue his furious attacks. Zac found himself narrowly avoiding a crushing blow to his chest when Kator's arm should have been restrained.

The reaver's style lacked the flexibility of armament, but his technique had its own method of controlling the battlefield. It wasn't that the White Sky Phalanx scion used brute force or speed to open a path—it would be a fatal mistake to interpret Kator's deceptively wild swings as the signs of a barbaric fighter. Exquisite control hid within the wide movements, and Zac wasn't even close to exploiting those gaps.

His attacks were too fast, too forceful, and Zac had no choice but to continuously reposition while looking for an opening. One moment they were exchanging strikes on the ground, the next in the air. The constant shifts had a mysterious cadence that disturbed Zac's rhythm and broke his containment. Chains that should have caught a leg only found air; others seemingly veered right into Kator's shield when they aimed for his arm.

And there was a constant sense of discrepancy between reality and Zac's ingrained muscle memory. The feeling was similar to trying to run in your

nightmares, where you moved in slow motion or were locked in place. Zac felt like he'd entered an invisible quagmire formed by Kator's technique. And the more he struggled, the more the swamp pulled him in.

Zac relied on his wealth of experience to wrest back the initiative, yet the sense of suffocation only grew. No clear winner had emerged after a minute of battle and hundreds of exchanges, but the reaver held an undeniable advantage. He flipped the script every time Zac created a small chance, almost turning opportunity into calamity. If not for his fine-tuned instincts and heavily augmented Danger Sense, Zac would have taken a hit already.

The reaver's mace was everywhere, each swing containing a force that couldn't be shrugged off. Forget seizing the momentum; Zac rather felt himself slowly being herded toward a cliff. And try as he might, he couldn't find a road to salvation. Unless something changed, Kator would take the first point within the next five minutes.

The difference couldn't be explained by the level of their techniques. Kator had stronger Daos, but he was only at Middle Integration, just like himself. He couldn't infuse much more of his comprehension into his technique than Zac, and the array nullified most of the other advantages of stronger Daos.

Neither was it attributes—Zac had to admit he had been given an advantage there. The combat array had reduced Kator's Attribute Pool to Zac's level but didn't fully account for Zac's higher Attribute Efficiency. His effective Strength, in particular, was above Kator's, yet he failed to leverage it into anything substantial.

One of the issues was inherent advantages. While Zac enjoyed higher raw power, Kator had other advantages the rules of the duel didn't prohibit. Few could compete with Zac regarding the number of Hidden Nodes, and he had two bloodlines and an external constitution that boosted the fundamental quality of his body.

However, all these unique strengths meant very little under the current restrictions. Zac had no Cultivation Manual, his Specialty Core added nothing to his combat ability, and his Bloodline Talents didn't empower his technique. Out of eight Hidden Nodes, only [Conviction of Eoz] and [Adamance of Eoz] helped.

The former let Zac push his body beyond the bounds of his attributes, while the latter let him fight at full strength. Kator's aura was growing stronger by the

second, and it had already reached a level of oppression where it formed an attack or restrictive domain. It exerted a tangible pressure on Zac's body, like when Pavina unleashed the weight of her Inner World.

Zac's aura or Killing Intent could not do anything to the effect—it felt more like an attack on his Dao Heart. There was no way Kator was cheating with four Monarchs observing, which meant the effect was caused by the reaver's own Bloodline, Hidden Nodes, or Miracle Bones. And that was likely just the tip of the iceberg.

For Kator to emerge at the top of the generation within a warlike race like the Izh'Rak Reavers had to mean his hidden advantages were geared toward combat. It might be seen as unfair within the scope of the match, but it was impossible to create a completely fair duel. No matter what you restricted or allowed, one party would come out slightly ahead.

Zac could essentially ignore the oppressive domain thanks to his Eoz Bloodline, but he was still filled with misgivings as he held on. Zac's instincts told him that Kator was still holding onto even stronger methods, waiting for a moment of weakness to strike. Meanwhile, he hadn't even figured out what Daos Kator cultivated.

Only a fool would openly show their hand, but Zac had never encountered a situation like this before. A couple of clashes would always leak some clues. For example, there was no way Kator didn't understand his Inexorable Stance was based on the Daos of Death and Conflict by this point. Yet Kator was like a black hole, where an event horizon obscured the inner workings of his technique.

How was Zac supposed to anticipate Kator's moves when he couldn't tell which Daos they were based on? Fundamental mastery and Dao were the base components of technique, but experience was needed to make the most of it. A decade of struggle inside the Perennial Vastness had vastly improved Zac's adaptability, but the accumulated experience proved largely unusable.

Rather, it became a weapon pointed back at him when instincts and memories clashed. The discrepancy constantly caught him off guard and made it nigh impossible to take charge of the battle. Every second was spent at the precipice of disaster, where one small miscalculation would spell disaster.

Zac still hadn't released all his power, even if it was only a matter of time before his defenses were broken through. They were still sounding each other

out, but it felt like he was exposed in the open while Kator hid in the dark. He needed to pry open the black box of Kator's technique if he wanted to find the route to victory.

Dealing with the unknown was a skill on its own, and Zac had found multiple ways to accomplish the goal. Zac knew he'd have to pay the price for knowledge with a powerful enemy like Kator, no matter the approach, but he still shifted his goal from landing a hit to forcing him to expose more aspects of his technique.

The battle grew increasingly frantic as Zac fought seemingly at random. His swings followed no rhyme or reason except for his desire to introduce disruptions to the battle and let chaos take hold. Doing so took him in and out of his Inexorable Stance, but it also pushed Kator off-balance. And whenever he regained his balance, Zac would extract a nugget of truth from behind the curtain.

The manic approach left Zac covered in shallow cuts after just thirty seconds, but he had managed to avoid anything beyond grazing strikes. Kator wasn't interested in bending the rules to claim victory after some surface wounds. He understood what Zac was doing and clearly wanted to crush him fair and square. Zac knew he couldn't skirt death forever, but he was close to an answer.

The feeling of walking a tightrope turned into acute impending doom as Zac used his smaller frame to squeeze beneath Kator's mace in the wake of his herculean swing. Zac was seemingly risking it all to strike at the reaver's chest, but the lethal shield was already moving toward his temple. A chain pulled him aside, but strands of severed silver hair dancing in the air showed how close he'd just been. But he'd managed to confirm his hunch from the way the shield moved to intercept.

It was hidden behind layers of misdirects and supporting Daos, but Kator was a Temporal Cultivator.

The Dao of Time was even rarer than the Dao of Space, and there weren't many cultivators he'd fought walking this path. Zac's obfuscated memories from the Perennial Vastness left him with some experience dealing with the Dao, but it was mostly how to force his way through temporal anomalies rather than fighting Temporal Cultivators.

The most memorable experience dealing with the Dao of Time was the betrayal of Leviala Cartava back in the Research Base. However, she wasn't actually a Temporal Cultivator. Her mysterious eyes let her forcibly swim against the river of time at a tremendous cost, but she didn't seem to have grasped the Dao for herself.

Kator obviously wouldn't use his Dao in a way that broke the taboo of altering the past—Zac doubted he was even able to. He'd instead infused his comprehension of Time into his technique, reminiscent of how Void's Disciple had fought using his comprehension of space. However, Adcarkas was only an E-grade talent moving toward Integration. Kator's application was light-years ahead.

It wasn't that Kator was faster or stronger than him or even that he was using a limit-increasing method similar to [Conviction of Eoz]. His attacks messed with temporal flow and perception so subtly that it took Zac three minutes to figure it out. What looked like a hasty jab was a full-powered swing, and his openings felt like traps because they were. There were two parallel timelines running, one real and another that Kator showed him.

Even after realizing the truth, Zac had difficulty figuring out which opportunities were real and which had already passed.

The situation was well outside Zac's expectations, but his heart beat with excitement. The misgivings that had plagued him for days were giving way to the addictive sense of discovery. Every response was a clue, every movement a revelation. Getting a hold of the Dao of Time was like finding a loose thread in a piece of fabric. He'd eventually unravel the whole thing as long as he kept pulling.

Exposing Kator's secret was the first step to his counter-attack. It didn't weaken Kator's technique, but it let Zac more naturally adapt to the disjointed time flow of the reaver's attacks. He was still on the losing end, but it wasn't quite as desperate as before. [Death's Duality] struck high and low, and the chains moved as though they had a mind of their own.

The rhythms were constantly broken and reborn over the next minute, as though Zac had forced his opponent into an endless cycle of reincarnation. Every exchange was a Death, leaving his path slightly wider as he continued deciphering the mystery of Kator's Daos.

"Since you're so curious, have a taste!" Kator suddenly roared as primordial runes appeared on the ridge atop his head.

Zac knew there was trouble when an opalescent shimmer spread across the Reaver's Warbones, and he was immediately proven right as the shield swiped at him with redoubled speed. Zac urgently leaned away, but the temporal quagmire he'd been struggling against the whole fight had come at him with redoubled force. In a split second, Zac entered thousands of timelines, all leading to suffering.

A roar from the depths of his heart broke him free from the mysterious state, and he ignored the false future and followed his instincts. Chains stormed forward to form a sacrificial wall, narrowly saving Zac from having his throat slit. But the brutal mace was already rising to meet him. Zac furiously fought back, but knowing about the Dao of Time was useless when it flooded the surroundings.

It was like Kator had become an avatar of the Peak of Continuum, meting out judgment at the mortals who tried to steal its secrets. It was as though his role as judge over death had been usurped. Zac knew he had to disengage and regroup but found no way out of the swamp. He helplessly found himself being submerged. The only path out was to shut down the Dao, but could he really use [Void Zone] like this?

A kick landed square in his chest before he could decide. [Love's Bond]'s protective haze couldn't absorb the force. Zac felt like his heart had been crushed, and he was launched into the air like a ragdoll. His mind was a mess, and he failed to gain control over his flight until he was caught by the protective barrier at the arena's edge. Zac barely managed to land on his feet, his whole body shivering as it worked to dispel the furious mix of Dao that had been shoved into his chest.

Kator remained floating at the arena's center, looking down at him like a god of war.

"That's one, Draugr."