

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1111 - Behind the Curtains

- Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1111 - Behind the Curtains

Three minutes in, Zac was already down one point. It wasn't what he'd hoped for, and certainly not a good sign. Landing a clean hit was easier said than done when two opponents were of roughly equal strength, and neither could use treasures or skills to quickly force an opening. He'd heard that sparring sessions between high-grade cultivators could last months when neither could find a weakness to exploit.

Zac had no plans of stalling or tiring Kator out, but he'd hoped to deduce the reaver's Daos before his luck ran out. He hadn't expected Kator to freely provide the answer in such a straightforward way.

As expected, Kator had mixed truths and falsehoods, creating an impossible scenario for his opponents. It had felt as though there were dozens of Daos hidden within his technique, but only three distinct Daos were rampaging through Zac's body. However, Zac was shocked to find that Kator actually cultivated truths from six different peaks.

His Dao of Time wasn't pure but a mixed-meaning creation borrowing from the Dao of Death. Death only held a supporting role, perhaps connecting the reaver's constitution with the Peak of Continuum. The Dao was the source of Zac's feeling like he'd been trapped in a swamp. It held the truths of temporal decay, dragging one toward the nether realm.

The crushing pressure that targeted Zac's Dao Heart wasn't solely created by a Hidden Node. Kator also cultivated an emotional Dao from the Peak of Impetus. It was mixed with the Peak of Conflict, creating a branch that gave Zac the impression of an unstoppable general. It rampaged through his body like it was bent on destroying him. If not for Zac's near-immunity to foreign Daos, it would have caused a lot of damage.

The combination wasn't as unusual as Kator's other Daos. The Daos of the seven emotions and six desires could greatly empower a cultivator if their mental state matched their Dao. The more Kator's emotions urged him on, the stronger he would become. Zac even suspected his [Conviction of Eoz] was based on this peak. Yet there was a reason many cultivators severed their seven sensations to attain the Dao.

Impetus was a double-edged sword. When your emotions were in sync with your Dao, it held unmatched power. But the moment your heart failed you, so would your Dao. If fear took hold in the heart of a warrior cultivating Daos like Fortitude or Valor, it could break their path altogether.

The third Dao was the reason why Zac had such a hard time figuring out Kator's Secrets. The last two peaks that made up Kator's sextet of concepts were the Earthly Peak and the Peak of Taiji. The Earthly Daos could manipulate other Daos. Beyond that, Zac didn't fully understand how the Mixed-meaning Dao fit into Kator's cultivation system or technique.

The half belonging to Taiji was based on gravity, but Zac hadn't sensed that kind of weight in his strikes. The same was true for the Dao of Death. As a pureblood Draugr who had incorporated the very same Dao into his technique, he should have been able to notice it before the Dao of Time. Not even the Earthly Peak would be able to obscure his vision.

Had Kator only infused parts of his Daos into his technique like himself? Or was the reaver still hiding some of his power? Zac hoped it was the former but knew he couldn't rely on blind hope.

Kator was just as powerful as Pavina had said, yet there was no fear or hesitation as Zac walked back toward the middle of the ring. If anything, his heart beat with excitement. It wasn't often you ran into opponents like this, be it in talent or uniqueness of path. And after this big bastard had annoyed him for over a month, Zac desperately wanted to land a solid hit square on his face.

"Is this it? Was I expecting too much?" Kator scoffed. "Where's the ability you used on my uncle? You said it was a Draugr Bloodline ability back then, so go ahead."

"We'll see," Zac said, not minding some banter while his Hidden Nodes cleaned up the invading Dao.

Zac wasn't the only one benefiting from the brief impasse. The runes across Kator's horn-like bones still shone, but the shimmer across his plating was just a shadow of before. The ridge extending down his neck seemed to be a tuning fork of sorts. It let Kator perfectly harmonize with his Daos, strengthening him and deepening his Integration. It was like he'd momentarily entered Late Integration, which upended the fragile balance Zac had maintained.

Kator's aura was already back to normal, seeming slightly sluggish and out of harmony. He was dealing with a small backlash by the looks of it. But could that really be the limit of a top-tier advantage like a Miracle Bone? And if so, why were the runes still shining?

"I didn't expect your path to be so complex after getting to know you," Zac continued while observing the Miracle Bone. "It caught me by surprise, but I'm up to speed now."

"Are you calling me an idiot?" Kator laughed. "What does that make you if I can use you as a punching bag?"

Zac only smiled as he shot forward. The last of the invading Dao had been swallowed by [Void Heart], yet Kator was still dealing with the ridge's after-effects. Zac had already paid with a direct hit for its activation. It would be foolish to let the reaver recover before resuming the battle. He still lacked some answers, but he was more confident this time.

Kator didn't mind Zac's unannounced attack, boisterously laughing as he threw his shield at him. Zac narrowly dodged without losing speed while two chains wound themselves around the string of sinew connecting the shield with the reaver's palm. Both sides tugged, but Kator's positioning was better, being able to use his full weight behind the pull.

The chains suddenly detached from the string to target Kator's arm. Meanwhile, Zac had caught up, unleashing a ruthless slash aimed at the reaver's extended arm. The withering Dao tried to drag his perception under, but Zac was ready for it now.

There was no easy way to get around the temporal uncertainty, where a minute discrepancy could mean the difference between landing a strike and walking into a trap. However, Zac was in the Middle Integration realm himself, and he roughly knew its limits.

He needed to create a situation where it didn't matter if his timing was slightly off. It meant forcing a larger opening, but Zac already felt the battle lean in his favor. Something was indeed wrong with Kator's state. He narrowly moved his hand out of the way, but a leg was caught by a chain.

The air screamed as the mace fell with the force of a mountain, but Zac didn't leave the melee range. He moved under the shield arm, using the remaining momentum of his first attack to swing up at Kator's ribs. The reaver had

anticipated his move and was already moving out of reach, but Zac stuck to him like glue.

Zac was a storm of intractable violence, his unceasing strikes generating a constant rumble resembling the sounds of an army marching to battle. Kator continuously created false timelines, but they shattered under the inexorable advance of Death. N0v3l Realm was the platform where this chapter was initially revealed on N0v3l.B1n.

Kator was barely able to hold on, his counters seemingly more aimed to create wiggle-room than take him down. The situation was completely opposite from before, but Zac soon realized something was wrong. He'd gained control over the tempo, but his path to victory gradually grew narrower.

Infighting at this level was like a bloody form of chess, where both sides saw hundreds of steps ahead. Judging by the flow, his advantage should be snowballing, yet Zac didn't feel much closer to landing a solid hit. Kator's stance had shifted into a fully defensive one, trying to drag out the fight as long as possible by relying on the Dao of Time.

The reaver wasn't faking his disadvantage—he wouldn't have adopted such a passive approach if he didn't have to. But it confirmed his weakened state only really was temporary. Zac knew he was fighting against the clock, and he immediately made his decision. The power of the Abyss poured into muscles and bones as he extracted even more power from [Conviction of Eoz].

Zac's prickling pain spread through his limbs as his strength and speed soared another 5%. It wasn't the limit of the node, but if he went too far, he'd destroy himself before Kator got the chance. And five percent was enough to drastically shift the balance. Darkness roiled across his body, making him seem like a ghost from hell.

A herculean swing pushed away Kator's shield, exposing his chest. The mace descended toward him, but Zac slammed it away with the reinforced plating on his right arm. He'd planned on using the rebound to shift his block into his strike, but he felt a heavy pressure on his arm, ruining his trajectory and making him fail a lethal blow.

As expected, Kator hadn't displayed the full extent of his stance. He no longer held back on using the Dao of Gravity, making it even harder to break through his defenses. Zac wasn't deterred. Every time he forced out a new method, it only meant he was one step closer to victory. Every failure fueled Zac's next

strike, his desire for victory urging him on. [Conviction of Eoz] responded in kind, and the damage to his body lessened while its effect remained the same.

Eoz had said that he found his greatest strength when protecting his descendants. Zac had felt that effect on the battlefields over the past month but also realized it wasn't the only way to use his inheritance. It wasn't a desire to protect his kin that let Eoz escape the shackles of the Abyssal Lake when he first woke up. It was simply desire.

The end of the road drew closer as the Inexorable Stance finished its cycle. Two chains bound Kator's left arm, and he'd just forced away his mace. His axe was already descending toward his chest when his skeleton suddenly shone with opalescent light again. His restrictions failed, and Kator's shield tore toward Zac's head with speed imbued by time and gravity.

Zac growled with annoyance, but he had no choice but to disengage. As expected, a single burst wasn't the limit of the Miracle Bones. It was like the tides, rising and falling, this time returning at the worst possible time. Was it bad luck, or was it calculated? Zac sensed it was the latter. So long as Kator could stall and play defensive for a minute, he'd be able to turn things around again.

It even seemed like Kator had accumulated force by restraining himself, and he was like a released spring now that he was no longer in a weakened state. He'd gone from turtling up to displaying aggression surpassing any earlier point in the fight. Yet Kator didn't manage to eke out a clear advantage.

Last time, the surge had come too suddenly, but Zac knew what he was dealing with now. Kator had held back, enduring until the situation shifted in his favor. Two could play that game. Death was a patient hunter, and Zac's body would last almost an hour at the pace he was using his Hidden Nodes—more than enough time to force Kator into a weakened state multiple times.

But Kator wasn't planning to play along.

"Not bad. I guess you have some grit. But can you keep going? What's next, son of Eoz?" Kator laughed.

Zac urgently tried to shut down whatever the reaver had in store, but he was already at a slight disadvantage. And there was no way to stop Kator's next move. Creaking sounds of bone breaking echoed from Kator's back, and Zac

swore in surprise upon seeing his broken spine rise into the air. It had separated into three pieces, forming a gruesome halo above Kator's head.

The whole arena shuddered as the Heavens were supplanted. The air was no longer just filled with simple Miasma; it had become an expression of Kator's Dao. The transformation wasn't a surface change like [Fields of Despair]. The halo had generated a true Dao Domain at the level of Early Integration.

Domains and techniques were almost impossible to cultivate simultaneously, at least at their level. One required you to externalize Dao, the other as something internal. It posed the same difficulty as Catheya pursuing Dao Domains and Earthly and Heavenly Harmonization, but it went even further. Those two concepts were at least of the same type, while domains and techniques were completely different approaches to how you viewed the Dao.

But it looked like Kator had broken that fundamental rule with the help of another Miracle Bone. The domain wouldn't be able to exhibit its full power in a battle of technique, but Zac still found himself under assault by the world. Turbid temporal flow tried to restrict his movements, and the weight of Kator's Dao put his already strained body under further pressure.

Zac's Hidden Nodes fought back, but the domain was an external pressure that limited their effect. Meanwhile, Kator was like a dragon returning to the sea. His hits grew even more ferocious, and Zac was drowning in wild attacks. He had no choice but to push his [Conviction of Eoz] harder to hold on, but he knew he couldn't stay this way for long.

The chains attacked the halo with suicidal fervor, lashing at them from every direction. The bones were repeatedly knocked away, but Zac was dismayed to find it didn't have much of an effect on the domain. The Miracle Bones seemed to work so long as they were within twenty meters of Kator.

Alea could drag them further than that, but that was easier said than done. The reaver had completely seized the momentum, and he had no problem targeting any chain that tried to drag a bone away. Even if he succeeded, Zac would be occupying half his chains, and they were the only thing preventing him from being completely overwhelmed.

New cuts joined the previous ones as Zac was pushed toward his demise. The situation was impossible. His body was breaking down to withstand the offensive, but its only effect was prolonging his suffering. This was his limit.

Was he really going to lose like this?

Zac inwardly roared with unwillingness, but he only had one thing left to fall back on. His eyes shone with madness as he made his choice. Screw it! A Divine Monarch had felt his Bloodline Talent first-hand, and everyone seemed to know about it already. He might as well take the opportunity to gauge their response to his showcasing some of its abilities. What good was his Void Emperor Bloodline if he never dared use it?

Time was erased and gravity overthrown as the Void replaced the Dao. Kator's advantage was fully canceled when faced with [Void Zone], and Zac pounced with fury. Kator had egged him on, wanting him to show the ability, but he was clearly flustered upon having his Daos nullified. Not even the Miasma within his body was spared.

Unfortunately, unleashing his Nullification Zone also meant Zac lost some of his edge. The Void didn't just cover his immediate surroundings but also his own body. The Branches of Pale Seal and War Axe had coursed through his body until now, carried by his awakened bloodline to let him extract everything from his technique. The effect was gone when another truth pushed the others away.

But what if they were one, working together instead of pulling in different directions?

Zac hadn't forgotten the clues he'd grasped in the throes of the epiphany brought from [Wargod's Sagacity]. The answer was in the Void, but Zac he didn't have the luxury to go looking in this fight. Now, those ideas came crashing back, and it was like a haze covering his eyes had been forcibly shattered.

Heart, Dao, and Void became one, and the triumvirate truth opened a path. [Void Zone] began shrinking, initially to Kator's delight. He switched to his aggressive stance but was suddenly forced to throw himself onto the ground. A soundless axe slashed right where his head had once been, leaving not so much as a ripple behind.

Kator growled as he attacked with redoubled fury, a palpable Killing Intent leaking from his body. His anger didn't change the situation. It was suddenly like Zac was the one controlling time, with the reaver's powerful swings striking empty air. Zac didn't immediately aim for another hit. [Void Zone] was still shrinking, extending only two hands from his body.

The Void within his body was growing increasingly profound, but the bloodline of Eoz wouldn't be denied any longer. Adamance strong enough to reject the Heavens fought back against the nothingness. Neither side was giving in, turning Zac's body into a battlefield. Yet Zac encouraged the struggle, condensing his Nullification Zone even further. Finally, he reached sublimation, and two became one. Zac finally saw the road clearly and knew it was time.

His strike was simple yet sublime, severing Time and falsehoods as it moved toward Kator's chest. It was one with the Heavens yet separate, a paradox manifest within Zac's axe. Kator discarded technique and burgeoning momentum in a desperate attempt to avoid, but the edge still drew closer.

Zac barely remembered why he fought or the goal to seize points. The beauty of the swing consumed all else. Zac's whole being was infused into the gleaming edge, and space tore as it advanced. The scar was clean like a surgical cut, resembling the curtains of reality itself. The Void of Space didn't wait on the other side.

It was something else entirely, and it wanted to communicate.

The beckoning call from within soon commanded more attention than the winning strike. Zac realized something was wrong, but it was too late. The curtain parted, and Zac was consumed.

There was an infinity of nothingness. True nothingness beyond the Dao or Void. A blank existence beyond Zac's realm of comprehension. It transcended even the fundamental laws of existence. There could be no Life, no Death, no Conflict. To enter was to reject the self, forever embracing true emptiness.

The infinity didn't deter nor beckon—it wasn't the source of the call. It held no promises or threats. Yet it filled Zac with a primal dread that he'd never felt before, his soul crying with despair as he faced the transience of being. Seeing it exposed you to erosion of all thought, but Zac strenuously turned away. There could be nothing in the infinity, yet the beckon remained.

Zac lifted his gaze, finding himself staring at an inverted mountain hanging down from a swirling cloud of darkness. Was it made from ancient stone, or was it ice? Densely packed light? Three thousand competing answers

appeared in Zac's mind. All were correct, yet none were. Zac didn't know why he knew it to be true, nor why he felt a vague connection.

The mountain was silent, enduring. And massive—its size beggared comprehension. The Zecia sector wouldn't be more than a pebble on its slopes. The mountain released no aura, but the sheer weight of its existence threatened to shatter Zac's mind. He could see the whole thing from his vantage, yet he could only take in a corner of a corner. Even that was asking too much of a mortal mind.

A single mountain, upholding seventeen peaks and all creation.

Zac felt a pull, and the mountain was swallowed by the darkness. The last thing he felt was eight ancient wills, their conviction piercing the infinity.

[Beware the Terminus.]

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1112 - Potential - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1112 - Potential

A small ripple can change the world.

Blessed Fate opened his eyes, and his heart moved for the first time in eons. Few things could make the Lord stir in his slumber. Blessed Fate pinched his fingers and turned his gaze to the vast beyond, soon finding the answer. Or half of one. Someone had been touched by the Cosmos, becoming a candidate for investiture.

It was rare, but the occasion shouldn't be enough to cause a reaction from the Lord. Thousands of chosen would emerge every minor cycle. But how many could reach the end, severing mortal Karma and moving the Kalpa forward? Candidacy was just that; potential.

What was different this time? Blessed Fate felt the Heart of all Creation, searching for answers within. But a shroud of darkness obscured filled the firmament.

"I can't deduce it?" Blessed Fate muttered.

Let alone individual, even the contested precept was hidden from his eyes. His gaze turned toward Akaniṣṭha, but the Supreme Seal was unmoved. That didn't mean there was no threat to the Sangha.

Blessed Fate looked at the rippling waters in thought. Normally, he would ignore such an event, even if their own Seal was targeted. If the Supreme Seal could lose their position, it wasn't fated to begin with. The Kalpa would turn in accordance with the laws, and what would be would be.

Besides, most candidates already had links to the Sangha. Whoever had touched upon the Terminus through fate or fortitude would eventually cross paths with one of their Dao Seekers. There was no lack of ordained accumulating merit across the myriad worlds.

But the Lord's warning could not be ignored, and the timing was suspect. Was it one of the ancient existences hiding in the corners of reality? The change in destiny brought forth by the Fifth Pillar was bound to make a few anxious enough to make their move. And the feeling he got was eerily similar to the methods of the people who should be sealed in the past.

The Terminus Council.

Blessed Fate put his hands together, and a world grew around him. Future and past unfurled as the chants of ten million monks filled the air. The temple had stood forever in silent obeisance of the Heavenly Trajectories, and it would forever remain. The depth increased until fate could bear the existence of those he sought.

An Arhat stepped out of the dream, his third eye open and his body annealed by the Dharma. For the monks in the temple, Blessed Fate was but a lifeless diety, but the Dharmic defender could sense his presence. He solemnly walked over, the world already filling him with purpose.

"Your Eminence," the Arhat bowed.

"You are True Destiny. There has been a change in the river of fate that cannot be pierced by conventional means," Blessed Fate said as six identical Dharmic Defenders were born. "Take your brothers and investigate the anomaly."

"What should we do upon finding it?"

Blessed Fate thought for a moment. "The stability of the Dharma is paramount to all beings of the Cosmos. The anomaly presents a threat to the natural order. If their Dao is confirmed and their role is set, then this poor monk can

only bear the Mara to uphold the path to salvation. Let them rejoin the Cycle of Reincarnation."

"As Your Eminence commands," the Arhat nodded. "If their heart can still accept Buddha's Love?"

"Bring them to the Fourth Mountain."

The Arhat nodded, and the group wordlessly left the temple through a golden portal, leaving the Ocean for the mundane world. Blessed Fate closed his eyes, and the world was no more. The waters were back, but the world had not regained its calm. A seed of fear caused ripples across billions of miles before Blessed Fate sealed his self with a sutra.

"Laondio..." Blessed Fate muttered. "After all these years, I still cannot erase you."

Light replaced darkness as the vision shattered, but the mountain refused to give way. Zac's mind was still processing its immensity, unable to take in anything else. A sharp stab of pain briefly pierced the haze, and Zac distractedly noticed something white had slammed into his left arm. Bones cracked and ichor spattered as Zac was thrown away.

Zac crashed into the ground, yet it took a few seconds for his mind to catch up to the present. He'd heard the System's voice at the end, yet again warning him of the Terminus. The next moment, he'd been back in his body, his axe still moving toward Kator's chest. The vision must have occurred outside of time, and he wasn't sure if Kator had noticed anything.

What was real? What was fake? No one had come to call off the duel, so Zac suspected no one had sensed what he'd seen. They would have investigated if they did, no matter if they detected the infinite blankness, the mountain, or the ancient wills.

The spatial cut was missing upon his return, and Zac doubted he'd actually entered through the curtains. At least not physically. But real or not, the vision had a very tangible effect on him. The feeling of convergence was gone, scattered by the vision. Zac desperately wanted to recapture that moment of clarity where he'd seamlessly fused the Void into his strike, but his mind was

still jumbled after being forced to witness something so far beyond his realm and comprehension.

The vision had only lasted for a few seconds, but it felt like he'd lived an eternity. And the encounter wasn't truly behind him—the mountain had barged into his mind, taking up a corner of his psyche. The mountain pierced through a curtain of the unknown, pointing down at his soul like a sword of Damocles. It didn't seem to be actually there, but the phenomenon far surpassed a memory. The situation more resembled the impairments that were locked in his mind.

The profoundly terrifying mountain was far more overbearing, though, exerting immense pressure even in this ethereal state. Just focusing on it made Zac's mind reel, and shifting his focus did not let him ignore its existence. He could tell his soul would have been damaged, possibly crushed, if not for his choice to cultivate the [Nine Reincarnations Manual]. The mountain was overbearing in a way Kator couldn't hope to match, but Zac's instincts told him he'd somehow stumbled onto a huge opportunity.

Of course, the benefits of this kind of encounter couldn't be unearthed in a day or two. In the short run, the vision had utterly derailed his duel.

Zac had been at the cusp of success. Everything had converged in that final strike—his Daos, the Void, and decades of experience. Now the feeling was gone, and he couldn't remember some of the details. He'd also been about to equalize the points only to be derailed by the vision. Kator had pounced the second Zac's strike fizzled out, leaving him with a cracked humerus.

It left him just one point from a clean sweep, wounded and unsure where to go from here. Worse, he realized he only had 10% of his Void Energy left. He vaguely remembered that his way of using [Void Zone] had cost far more than normal, but it was nowhere near this point. Zac believed that forming the illusory scar had utterly drained him, leaving him with almost nothing for the rest of the fight.

Zac pushed away the defeat and confusion, slowly getting back on his feet. He was exhausted, but he still had some left in his tank. And while his bone was damaged, it wasn't that big of a deal. It would still move as he willed it through channeling energy, and he didn't need its full strength to manipulate his chains. The situation wasn't good, but Zac knew he needed to keep going. Both for his path and because his memory of that perfect strike would grow more blurry as time passed. This might be his only chance at recapturing it.

Kator didn't seem as boisterous as before when Zac approached. He didn't speak, and Zac felt his posture had lost some of its domineering air. There was hesitation, confusion, as the reaver gazed in his direction. That alone let Zac regain some of his lost confidence, and he took a steadying breath as he prepared himself to give it his all to the end.

With every step, he replayed the earlier exchanges, trying to understand without being swept away. This time, he needed to hold onto his rationality. Epiphanies could save years of arduous grinding, but they left holes in one's comprehension that needed to be filled in. Besides, Zac didn't want to get sucked into that realm again. Instead, he calmly analyzed the similarities and differences between plan and execution.

The idea born during his use of [Wargod's Sagacity] was to use the Void of Life for his Inexorable Stance, just like his Inexorable Core. It wasn't the first time he'd considered it, but he'd always put it aside since he had absolutely no idea how to accomplish something like that. Zac was still unclear of Void's real nature. He'd simply poured the refined Void Energy from the Void Engine into his core during its formation, but he couldn't exactly do the same thing with a technique.

But the condensed experience let him glimpse a solution based on the [Void Vajra Sublimation]. He could somewhat emulate the truths within, even if he still didn't fully understand them. Combine that with what he'd learned from his blueprints, Core Formation, and Bloodline, and he had a chance of infusing a shadow of the Void into his stances.

The sudden inspiration just now had introduced a new road to explore. Harmonization to the Void through [Void Zone]. If he became the Void, he would naturally move according to its truths. Zac knew that his swing wasn't technically part of his Inexorable Stance.

If anything, it had given a sneak peek of a level far beyond his current level. That attack had contained the full Void of his imperial bloodline, but he only needed the Void of Life at this stage. Still, Zac was anxious to find his way back to that state. As long as he could replicate it, he would be able to move toward true integration.

Kator made no move to attack as Zac came within 50 meters, but his gaze was full of unspoken questions.

"You—"

"It was my carelessness," Zac calmly said. "Let's continue."

There was nothing else to say. Kator had questions, but why should he answer? Zac shot forward while [Void Zone] ensconced him in nothingness. He had limited time left, and Zac wanted to make the most of it.

The hunger for the truth had become overwhelming, to the point the duel became subordinate to his search for the Void. And Kator was the perfect opponent. Where else could he find someone so utterly matched to his stances, forcing him to push beyond his limits?

The reaver was full of misgivings, but he grunted as he swung his shield to throw away three chains before they could latch on. The coliseum became the battleground where Death's inexorable grip fought against the suffocating swamp of temporal decay. The sound of weapons clashing echoed through the stands. Yet both were careful, prodding, trying to understand what had just happened.

The Nullification Zone was initially reluctant to be condensed again, but the pressure helped Zac fully contain it in his body. Where the Abyss waited. Zac was adamant while the two forces were exhausted, yet they refused to merge into one. The Abyss furiously fought back, and it felt like the Void was oil poured into water. A rapidly dwindling source of oil.

Zac wasn't deterred. He kept channeling the Void, observing its battle while Zac fought his own. Every swing, every movement, every breath was made with the Void in mind. He tried recalling the pieces he'd gleaned of the Void of Life over the years, trying to connect them with the unity of before. It didn't spark any further inspiration. But something else did.

The mountain in the back of Zac's mind slowly came alive as it came in contact with [Void Zone]. It was as though it could understand Zac's intent and released a mysterious resonance with his Void Energy. Zac was initially afraid it would do something crazy, but he soon realized it was a good thing. It suddenly felt like the Void in his body had become like the mountain, paradoxically made from everything and nothing at once.

And one of the myriad manifestations was the Void of Life.

Zac tried to grasp hold of the truths when they appeared, but they were fickle and elusive. They appeared without rhyme or reason, a flicker of existence before being consumed by the Abyss or transforming into something else.

Eventually, Zac caught onto something and integrated it into his swing. At least Zac thought he did, even if the attack seemed like a normal strike based on the Inexorable Stance. The Void was too obscure, hiding in the shadows of the Dao.

There was nothing special about the attack, but Kator was slightly late in reacting—a noticeable step away from his previous pin-point precision. Zac was flush with success, but he failed to replicate the effect. Meanwhile, the mountain was calming down. Zac refused to let go and pushed more Void Energy into his Soul Aperture. The fading vision stirred again, releasing even stronger pulses.

The Void of Life became even more visible, and the fight rapidly shifted in Zac's favor. Kator sensed the change and launched a furious counterattack. It was as though he wanted to prove himself against this unknown phenomenon. Yet his situation only grew increasingly desperate. At first, Zac only managed to capture the essence of a wisp every couple of seconds. Soon, it was double that, and each time created an opportunity.

The chains were neither quicker nor slower as they moved to restrict Kator's movements, and Zac's swings didn't gain any noticeable power-up. The only change seemed to be that they were becoming harder to predict. A lightning-quick slash narrowly missed Kator's chest, but Zac was already gone before finishing the movement, another hit targeting the reaver's right side. Kator had anticipated him coming from the left, forcing the reaver to block with his mace at an awkward angle, pushing him off-balance.

What was it about the Void that made Kator suddenly misread his moves on such a fundamental level?

Then it struck him. The Integration Stage was the integration of Dao into your movements. It elevated techniques beyond the mundane, but it also restricted them. The whole reason he'd worked so hard to unravel Kator's Daos was to better understand the underpinning rules of his technique and predict his movements.

But how could a normal cultivator predict the alien truths of the Void? The uncertainty it introduced went far beyond the Earthen Peak Kator used to transform his Daos. The attacks Zac managed to infuse with some of the Void simply didn't follow Heaven's Path, turning truths into lies and creating opportunities that shouldn't exist—Kator's extremely high reflexes and affinities had become a weapon used against him.

It had to be said that Kator was a genius. The reaver's instincts must be going haywire, but he was adapting. Unfortunately for him, their starting points were too different. Zac had observed the Void for decades, and he wouldn't give Kator a chance to catch up.

A huge bang echoed through the coliseum as [Death's Duality] crashed into the reaver's chest. Zac looked like a scrawny adolescent in front of Kator's hulking frame, but his smaller body contained the power to destroy mountains. He'd sealed some of his Strength at the last moment, but it still sounded like a bomb had gone off when Kator was launched across the arena. His flight only stopped after being caught by the arena's protective array, mirroring Zac's flight before.

Kator slumped to the ground, and Zac looked down at the axe in his hand with marvel. His insights were borrowed, and it couldn't be considered true integration, but it proved his plan was feasible. And powerful. If he could figure out to use this ability for real, it would become the perfect counter against all these Heaven's Chosen who were one with the Dao.

A pang of visceral danger made Zac look up, and he felt a predatory gaze from Kator in the distance. The reaver wasn't even moving, but Zac's senses screamed at him to get away.

"Good... Good!" Kator roared as red runes appeared all across his Warbones. "How long has it been?!"

Kator's murderous intent soared, and it looked like he'd set half the arena ablaze as a primordial force was awakened within. His power and momentum were growing with every step he took, and it was only further augmented by the halo above his head. The space in the arena was twisting under his pressure like it couldn't withstand what was hiding within that skeletal frame.

"I guess you leave me no choice," Zac sighed as he calmly looked at the approaching juggernaut.

"What, you still have some—"

"I forfeit."

**Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1113 - Void Mountain -
Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1113 - Void Mountain**

Zac felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders when he threw in the towel. He'd been worried stepping down would affect his mental state, but there wasn't even a ripple in his heart. If anything, it had solidified, and Zac even sensed he might have been worse off if he won. Coming up short was frustrating, but it let him nip the growing arrogance in the bud.

It was an important lesson and an opportunity to refocus on what mattered. Why should he care about wins and losses, or whether he was unbeatable at his level? Why should he make that part of his identity, his ambitions? It was just empty accolades in the face of his goals and pursuit of the Dao. He should welcome a thousand losses like this if it meant he could refine his path.

Zac also knew his loss was deserved. He wouldn't have seized even one point on Kator if not for his lucky mid-battle epiphany. And truthfully, he only got his sole point because Kator wanted to counter the Void through technique. Kator's current state was absolutely terrifying, and Zac knew his newfound ability wasn't enough to deal with it. The usefulness of the Void didn't come from unmatched power. It came from the fact that it was alien and unpredictable. But Zac had repeatedly proven that tricks were useless in the face of overwhelming power.

He couldn't continue fighting even if he wanted to. Kator might not have known it, but he would have managed to turn the situation around even if he didn't activate his final Miracle Bone. He was almost completely out of Void Energy, making it impossible to maintain his [Void Zone] much longer. His body wasn't in any better shape. He'd been forced to extract a huge amount of power from [Conviction of Eoz] since Kator conjured his Domain, and Zac was nearing a threshold where the damage wouldn't mend in a day or two.

Even the illusory mountain in his mind felt faded, and Zac was afraid it'd break if he kept going. It would be a huge loss if he wasted his opportunity on something like a duel.

The only thing that called for a continued battle was Boje Zethaya's plight. But as much as he wished, Zac ultimately couldn't save everyone. He'd see if he could trade Boje for Starstorm or a future sealbearer. They'd likely accept the offer if they knew they were targeting the Hollow Court.

Zac's tranquility wasn't mirrored in his opponent. If anything, his aura grew, and Zac frowned upon feeling the pressure mount.

"Forfeit?" Kator sneered as mysterious light poured down his flanged mace. "You think you can just hit and run?"

The reaver's Daos formed a gravity well beneath the head, filled with Death and Time. It almost looked like a gateway to a lower plane had been forced open, and Zac suspected it wasn't far from the truth. He sensed a familiar pressure behind Kator's bearing, the pressure of a world. That was obviously impossible for a Middle Hegemon. Had Kator used the Earthly Peak to connect with a hidden dimension, borrowing its strength to empower himself?

Zac couldn't take one of those hits head-on, yet he wasn't worried even when the reaver shot forward like a runaway train.

As expected, three figures stepped out of thin air between him and Kator. Enis and Laz had appeared by Zac's side in case the reavers wanted to try something. Luckily, it didn't prove necessary, as Kator was suddenly gone. Toss had effortlessly flung his ward into a spatial crack, probably depositing him back in his quarters.

Monarchs were simply at another level—even someone like Kator was helpless in front of them.

"You made the right choice," Enis said as she looked at Zac with an approving gaze. "Don't feel discouraged about your loss. Even I can't see the limits of your future."

"I apologize about Kator. Unlocking the ultimate strength of his body comes with some mental side effects," Toss said as he walked over.

"That's okay," Zac smiled, nodding at Tavza and Pavina as they appeared on Toss's tail. "I've been there before."

"Mh," Toss slowly nodded.

No one said anything for a few seconds. Zac didn't feel anyone scanning his body, but it still felt like all five were trying to see through his secrets. There was a palpable tension in the air, where the slightest movement contained the possibility of a drastic shift. Zac would be lying if he said he wasn't nervous, and he was ready to use [Flashfire Flourish] at a moment's notice.

His escape treasure wasn't strong enough to elude a Monarch without a Chaos Mote fueling it, but Zac was certain the Draugr would cover his escape

if it came to that. The Abyssal Lords had paid a large price to assist his awakening. Laz and Eniz wouldn't let that sacrifice go to waste because of his Void Emperor Bloodline. Thankfully, it didn't come to that. Toss shook his head, and it was like the tension dissipated from the arena.

"I was skeptical after hearing my cousin's description," Toss rumbled. "Your ability to seal the Dao has incredible potential, especially if you manage to fuse it into your technique. Work hard; the Abyssal Shores are blessed to see the Bloodline of Eoz return."

Zac nodded in thanks, but he could hear the unspoken implication in Toss's words. He was clearly suspicious about the origin of Zac's ability. And while there was no change in expression on the three Draugr, Zac knew they probably were the most confused. Eoz's Bloodline might have been lost since the Dark Ages, but there was no way they didn't have records of things like Bloodline Talents or Hidden Nodes.

But as luck would have it, [Void Zone] was actually very in tune with Eoz's Bloodline if you looked at it at a surface level. Their inner workings were based on completely different concepts, as his difficulty in mixing the Void and the Abyss showed. Still, the talent was almost like a mix of [Adamance of Eoz] and [Immutability of Eoz]. Zac could argue it was a hidden variation or mutation of the long-lost branch.

"I'm still some ways off. I should thank your young master," Zac said with a bow. "I wouldn't have been able to grab onto the solution if he hadn't shown my understanding of technique was too narrow."

The words came from his heart. Zac felt he owed his opponent a debt of gratitude for opening his eyes, even if the guy was pretty damn annoying. Kator's technique was simply better than his. Perhaps not in grade or complexity, but definitely in the way he'd adapted it to his unique circumstances.

Every aspect of the reaver was infused into his technique, from his complex combination of Daos to the unique advantages of his body and race. Everything created a holistic system where weaknesses were covered and strengths were amplified. Zac was far inferior in that regard, even if his Stances were very well attuned to his Daos. He'd essentially fused his Daos and personality with the Mastery Skills and called it a day. He wouldn't have thought to use his Bloodline Talent the way he did if not for Kator showcasing how he dealt with the cyclic nature of his Miracle Bone.

Zac knew Kator was almost twice his age, but the stark discrepancy was still humbling. He'd somewhat felt unmatched at his level, whereas Iz Tayn was the exception that proved the rule. But the Multiverse was vast and ancient, and every moment allowed another earth-shattering genius to appear.

Kator might not be at Iz's level, but his accomplishments were far beyond Zac's in multiple areas. Zac wasn't even convinced he'd have won in a scenario where they were the same level and age.

"You have reached very far on your own, but having insightful mentors and talented peers can let you go further than when traveling alone," the reaver said. "Feel free to come back any time. Even if Kator is busy with the war, other talented fighters in Kavista can help you refine your technique."

"Thank you," Zac said. "I have to go over the duel while the impressions are fresh."

"Go ahead," Laz said before a swirl of darkness surrounded him, perfectly isolating all sound and energy.

Zac didn't sit down to meditate. He ignored the complaints of his wrung-out body as he began to reenact the battle without the Dao or Energy. The only difference was that [Death's Duality] had been replaced by a roasted hind leg of a Middle Beast King while his free hand shoved pills and tonics down his gullet between bites.

His moves were slow and measured, like when he practiced [Void Vajra Sublimation]. However, he wasn't trying to comprehend the fusion of Death and Void, or even the essence of his attacks. He was simply trying to get closer to the Void of Life by copying his own movements.

There was no way around it, he needed to start from the ground up. His foundations weren't just shaky regarding the Void—they were practically nonexistent.

His first brush with the Void was one of chance. He was essentially like Leviala, born with an ability he didn't fully comprehend. Even then, the Void has gradually infiltrated every aspect of his cultivation, from Body Tempering to Cosmic Core. Now, it had come knocking at the door of his techniques. Lord Engo had warned him that his comprehension was borrowed from Ultom.

That needed to change, and quickly.

And finally, Zac saw a path forward; through the illusory mountain. Zac still didn't know why he'd been dragged into the vision mid-battle or why the System felt the need to reiterate its warning of the Terminus while it dragged him back. But he knew what the mountain represented. It was the Void taken form, the hidden bedrock of the Multiverse.

Zac doubted the mountain was an actual place. It was pure truth, or lack thereof, beyond the limits of his comprehension. The mountain was simply his mind trying to translate its existence into something it could take in, similar to his Dao Avatars. Besides, why would the First People have gone extinct if the mountain was real? Zac would have to be crazy if he believed himself capable of reaching a place Void-cultivating Supremacies could not.

No matter the truth of the matter, the mountain was real in the sense that it existed in his mind. It still felt weakened and hollow, but it had stabilized now that Zac no longer triggered it with [Void Zone]. Judging by how it slowly siphoned unattuned Mental Energy and his remaining Void Energy, it would recover with time. He might even nurture it by feeding it refined Void Energy or treasures in the future.

The Void Mountain might become the key to deciphering the true nature of the Void in a way that his Bloodline couldn't. The Void Energy released from the depths of his cells was too profound. Studying it was like trying to grasp the Dao of Chaos from the get-go. In contrast, the mountain somehow destabilized his Void Energy and separated it into all kinds of expressions.

It let him observe the Void from different angles, including those pertinent to his path. That was his best shot at understanding their nature in the same way he'd grasped his Daos.

As for the ancient wills he sensed just before the vision shattered, Zac wasn't sure what they represented. Zac didn't even know if the Void Mountain or one of the hidden wills had beckoned him. The expressions of unbreakable resolve and utmost power were missing from the miniature mountain in his mind, and he hadn't gotten a good sense of their nature before the vision ended.

He'd only felt their existence within the darkness, but Zac knew they weren't simple. Were they perhaps the eight pillars of the System? Each was founded on an Eternal Heritage worthy of emitting that kind of eternal determination. If so, he'd probably been pulled into the vision by Ultom itself. But shouldn't he have recognized the signal if that were the case?

Did he even want to know the truth? Zac sighed with helplessness as he finally sat down to let his body rest. What was supposed to be a simple duel had led him down a rabbit hole that equally reeked of danger and possibility. The Multiverse was too deep and mysterious. Whenever he got closer to an answer, more things popped up to upend his worldview.

The Heavens and the Void. The Terminus and those who wanted to guard or destroy it. The hidden fight for the direction of the Era, schemes billions of years in the making. The more Zac got embroiled in these matters, the harder it would be to extricate himself. He couldn't let himself get distracted at this juncture. He wasn't strong enough for his opinions to matter, nor was he a historian or a scholar. He was a fighter, and he had people depending on him.

Zac put the matter aside. He was better off focusing on the path forward. Using the mountain to infuse wisps of Void of Life into the Inexorable Stance was only a stopgap, a shallow mimicry. The real long-term solution was the one he stumbled onto before the vision. Mind-bending epiphany aside, Zac understood that state wasn't anything new. It was just like when he fused his Daos into his Thousand Lights Avatar, letting soul and Dao harmonize with his technique. Except, he'd used [Void Zone] and his Bloodline to accomplish something similar.

Did that mean reforming his spiritual avatar was a waste of time and energy? His awakened Bloodline was already an amazing conductor, and his Void Vajra Constitution would eventually catch up. No! Zac suddenly had a new idea, one that refused to let go the second it took hold. Wasn't his broken avatar an opportunity for him to rebuild something better? Something better suited than the original Eidolon technique.

His Children of Draug-bloodline could easily carry his Branch of the War Axe, but it was ultimately a body of Death marked by the Abyss. Similarly, his other body was purely Life-attuned, even if it was cultivated by borrowing concepts of the Void. And he had his Void Emperor Bloodline and the mountain to cover the Void. That left the third, and possibly most important, pillar of his techniques—Conflict.

What if, instead of a Thousand Lights Avatar, he formed an Axe Avatar? Or an Avatar of Conflict?

Instead of fusing Void and the Abyss as he'd tried during the duel, he'd create a spiritual state where everything perfectly came together. That would turn his body into the ultimate vessel for his stances while fully utilizing bloodlines and

constitutions to empower his technique. That would be a true integration, like how Kator used his Miracle Bones and Hidden Nodes.

The idea had immense promise, and Zac was certain something amazing would come out of it. Zac urgently wanted to reform his spiritual body to confirm, but he suspected he'd need the help of Ultom to reforge [Thousand Lights Avatar] into something that could stand toe-to-toe with the overwhelming power of his bloodlines.

Zac spent the next three hours making preliminary deductions and reshuffling his training priorities while mending the microscopic wounds left by [Conviction of Eoz]. Ultimately, Zac knew he had to go. Every extra second he spent in Kavista came with the risk of things turning south.

He emerged from the swirl and found that only Laz Tem'Zul remained.

"Everything sorted out?" the Monarch smiled.

"For now," Zac said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'm glad to see you could turn the situation into something positive. Only those with indomitable hearts have the qualifications to strive for the peak."

Zac nodded in thanks. "I'll keep working on it. It's about time I returned. Could I trouble you to send me back to the teleporter?"

"In a moment," Laz said.

Zac still frowned in displeasure, even if he wasn't surprised. He'd somewhat expected there was some hurdle remaining before he could leave.

"Don't worry; it's nothing big. We are just as eager for you to continue your work on the missions. Kator wished to exchange a few words before you left."

"So he wants to gloat now that he's calmed down?" Zac sighed. "Well, let's get it over with."

Laz gave him a helpless smile before transporting them to a large dojo. Kator was already sitting on a mat, surrounded by the haze of two high-quality incense sticks.

"You're finally out!"

"Had to give you time to calm down," Zac commented.

"Sorry, sorry," Kator laughed. "You surprised me, and I wasn't ready to have the fun end."

"It's fine. Was there anything you wanted to—"

"Still, I feel bad," Kator interjected. "It's not like me to lose control like that. Besides, I can't call it a victory after I had to go all out. If my buddies back home heard I acted all high and mighty after being pushed so far by a newly hatched Hegemon, I'd never hear the end of it."

"You called me here for a rematch?" Zac frowned.

"Afraid not. Neither of us has the time. This little diversion has already cost me thousands of merit and the chance of finding more sealbearers," Kator said as he lazily scratched his head. "Did you forget about the poor guy I've been keeping around? Why don't you just take him as a form of apology?"

Kator turned toward a nearby door. "Buddy, come on in!"

Zac was shocked and quickly turned toward the doors as they creaked open. Was Kator for real? And indeed, a familiar figure soon stepped into the room. Zac was initially relieved, but his heart sank upon realizing the wrongness of it all.

"You— what have you done?!" Zac wheezed, his eyes wide with anger.

His Draugr vision wouldn't lie. Boje Zethaya was indeed unharmed, but there wasn't a speck of Life in his body.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1114 - Living Dead - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1114 - Living Dead

For a second, Zac had thought Kator wanted to extend an olive branch after their initial friction. It turned out the gesture was just another way to mess with him. The tranquility he'd seized was almost blown away, but Zac pushed down the anger as he wordlessly stared at Kator.

"Don't give me that look. Want another beatdown?" Kator laughed.

"There is no way he'd be up and walking if he was just turned," Zac squeezed through grit teeth. "You promised you wouldn't touch him until our duel. Is your word only worth this much?"

"I promised he'd be alive and well. I never promised I'd keep him a Dreamer," Kator said, scratching a small scar on the chest where Zac struck him before.

"Killing Boje and awakening a Revenant can't possibly be considered alive and well!"

"Oh, but I didn't awaken him," Kator said before turning to the Alchemist, who had hesitantly stopped at the doorway. "Buddy, introduce yourself."

The man looked back and forth between Zac and Kator for a moment, fear and helplessness evident on his face. Eventually, he released a helpless sigh. "... I'm Boje Zethaya,"

Zac's eyes thinned. There was something about his face and voice that was so familiar, and not in the eerie way he'd seen with his enemies-turned-followers. The newcomer didn't seem to be lying. Revenant was really Boje Zethaya unless they had managed to steal his memories before raising a Revenant spy.

"You—" Zac slowly said, realization finally parting the clouds of anger that had built in his mind.

He'd heard it was technically possible to turn cultivators into Revenants while retaining their memories, but it was exceedingly difficult and expensive. Only the most talented Liches could accomplish such a feat, and it required exceedingly rare materials. Zac even doubted there was anyone in Zecia who had the skills necessary. Even then, there was a decent risk either soul or body would succumb from the transition, to the point that even living Death Cultivators were leery about taking that step.

Why would Kator do something like this? Was it really just to mess with him?

"You don't think I understand how your greedy little mind works?" Kator snickered upon seeing the confusion on Zac's face. "You wanted a chit for the Zethaya Pill House, which you could use to further the cultivation of Zachary Atwood and the Dreamers of your faction. Something we explicitly said might work against our goals."

Zac didn't bother denying it. After all, it was true that Boje's access to the top-tier Pill House was an important reason he'd shown up today. And even if it wasn't the only reason, so what? Should he try to explain himself like a defendant on trial? That would only make him look like a hypocrite.

"Besides, you really thought I'd just let a Sealbearer go?" the reaver continued. "You'd send him back, but do you think those weak Alchemists would dare hang onto him? The brat would be sold off to one of the outsider factions before he could bring down a calamity on their heads. Then we'd be left with nothing while our enemies grow stronger."

"This kills two birds with one stone. Young Boje here is now one of us, commandments and all. There's no way for him to become part of someone else's cycle. Realignment should be the optimal choice, superior to awakening or digging the seal out of his chest. After all, the seal chose this guy for one reason or another. This way, we keep the original, but in a more suitable form."

"Three stones, maybe," Kator added after some thought. "Seeing your constipated face is quite a delicious bonus."

Zac inwardly fumed but knew he had no leg to stand on. Kator had obviously twisted the meaning of his promise, but that didn't much matter at this point. He could have raised a stink if he'd won, but he couldn't complain about Boje's fate.

"Enough," Toss said as he stepped through a crack in space. "Our mission takes precedence over everything else. This is already a good outcome for the child."

"Kator managed to bring a highly skilled Lich for this very purpose," Laz added. "Native sealbearers are expected to be more useful inside the trial zone, so we've spared no expense to ensure there are as few lingering drawbacks as possible on our new members."

"I know today didn't go as you hoped, but don't let it sow seeds of doubt in your heart," Pavina said.

"Thank you," Zac said. "Don't worry about me. My cultivation path has been nothing but hiccups and roadblocks since day one. This is just another Tuesday."

"If there's nothing else, we'll take our leave," Laz Tem'Zul said, ushering Zac and Boje from the dojo.

An unexpected scene waited on the other side. It was a huge training square where thousands of warriors fought. Only a few were Draugr, with Revenants and Corpse Lords having a roughly equal distribution. A bloody air covered the arena, except for a solitary spot of darkness where he found Tavza waiting. She briefly glanced at Boje before leveling an even stare at Zac.

"You knew about this?" Zac asked.

"Some battles have to be ceded for the greater picture."

Zac snorted with displeasure, but he followed when Tavza turned around and walked toward a gate on the opposite side of the room. It was like an invisible hand pushed the combatants aside, creating a path for their small group. No one said anything for a minute until Tavza finally spoke again.

"For a moment, I thought you'd subvert all expectations again."

"Wasn't enough this time," Zac shrugged. "I'd probably be dead if it were a real battle, with escape the only other option. And there might be hundreds of people like him in the trial."

"Hundreds? Unlikely. The deeper your foundations, the harder it is to push for Late Hegemony within a century. Besides, there's a reason there's only Kator and I at this level from the Empire," Tavza said. "All factions are fearful of diluting their fate by being greedy. While our estimates indicate there'll be hundreds of sealbearers, the vast majority will be Early or Middle D-grade. There shouldn't be more than twenty people at Kator's level."

Zac nodded, but her phrasing made Zac look over with curiosity. "Between you and Kator, who'd win in a spar?"

"In a spar? Kator," Tavza said with equanimity. "Those practicing technique will always benefit in situations limiting one's other powers. In a life-and-death battle? Impossible to say."

Zac was slightly surprised that Tavza felt confident standing toe-to-toe with Kator in a death match. A young princess of the Azol bloodline obviously wouldn't be weak, but Tavza's role in the mission seemed more like support. She had her Domain-like Bloodline that could provide Miasma and a deep

understanding of Arrays and ancient history. Meanwhile, Kator was a pure combatant.

The conversation stalled again, and Zac eventually turned to Boje, who had nervously followed a few paces behind.

"How are you feeling?"

"I am fine, thank you," the Alchemist quickly said. "I... May I ask for young master's name?"

"You don't know?" Zac said with confusion.

"Boje Zethaya entered Middle D-grade just before Kator found him," Tavza commented. "He wouldn't know."

No wonder Boje had looked like a question mark since the beginning. Zac's Draugr appearance was only vaguely familiar to his original features after awakening, and it was almost impossible to draw the connection unless you knew they were the same person. However, he'd figured Boje would've figured it out through the two aliases on the ladder.

Turned out Boje didn't even have access to it. Less surprising was that Kator hadn't bothered filling the poor Alchemist in on the situation.

"You're already Middle D-grade?" Zac said with surprise. "Your cultivation is even faster than Reoluv Dravorak's?"

"My, ah, previous status came with some advantages," Boje said wryly. "The Zethaya Clan is one of the wealthiest factions in the sector, and war was coming. The Matriarch chose to pour vast amounts of resources into our people. That way, we'd be better prepared while reducing our attraction as a target for ransacking. Then... I—"

Boje's already pallid face grew even paler as he lost his words.

"The Kan'Tanu forcibly raised his cultivation with taboo methods after he was captured," Laz said.

"Then—" Zac hesitated as he glanced at Boje's chest.

"No, they don't implant sealbearers with Heart Curses," Tavza said upon seeing Zac looking at Boje's stomach. "We believe they are selling

sealbearers to outside factions and don't want to spoil the goods. After all, those things feed on fate, in a sense."

"His cultivation was already resource-heavy, and the ritual damaged his foundations even further," Laz said before turning to Boje. "Don't consume more treasures or gain any levels over the next three years. Focus on purification and learning what we imparted."

"I—I understand," Boje stuttered, clearly unnerved by the gaze of the Draugr Monarch.

Zac was about to explain the situation, but they had reached the teleportation square—or rather, one looking mostly like it, except for a few minor differences. Zac guessed there were dozens of them in the sprawling mansion of the Kavriel Clan.

Boje was surprised to hear they were leaving the Kavriel Clan's ancestral manor, but he welcomed the news. It almost looked like he didn't care where they were going, so long as it was away from all the scary overlords of the Undead Empire.

Zac exchanged a few words with Laz before activating the teleporter, indicating Boje to get inside. Just as they were about to leave, Zac heard Tavza's emotionless voice in his mind.

'Don't return to Kavista before the mission. The situation has gone out of control.'

The teleporter swallowed him and Boje before Zac had the chance to react to Tavza's message, and they soon appeared by his Nexus Hub. Boje curiously looked around, his brows slowly scrunching together as he sensed the environment outside.

"What's this?" Boje muttered. "I sense something sinister... No, wait... is that—"

"It's the Dao of Life," Zac sighed. "You'll get used to the change in perspective. Trust me, I know."

"You—"

"I know you have questions. I'll explain everything, but let's relocate before anything else," Zac said with a shake of his head.

The two teleported once more, appearing in Zac's Compound. All the while, Boje only got increasingly confused as he observed the surroundings. Finally, they settled in his Death-attuned compound, where Triv served refreshments before retreating.

"We're not on Kavista anymore, are we?"

"No. Not in the Kavriel Province at all, in fact," Zac explained. "I guess I should introduce myself. I'm Arcaz Umbri'Zi, but you know me better as one of my aliases—Zac Piker."

"Ah, of course, I—WHAT!" Boje blurted a storm of emotions fluctuating across his face. It took him over a minute to recollect himself, at which point he looked at Zac with a complicated expression. "They got you too? No wonder we haven't heard from you lately."

"No," Zac said with a wry smile. "Well, not in the same sense. My situation is more complicated. I was already Half-Draugr when we met the first time. I had something similar to a deviation when entering hegemony and was split in two. The half you're more familiar with should currently be leading another campaign for the Atwood Empire."

"So that's where we are," Boje said, his eyes widening in comprehension. "I recall reading a missive mentioning your world had pockets of Death after the Undead Incursion. To think it was to this extent."

"The System turned it into a Dual-attuned world after we passed the integration," Zac said. "Now, we're the only life-death faction in Zecia."

Zac spent the next ten minutes broadly explaining the situation and catching Boje up to speed.

"I understand," Boje said, blankly looking up at the blue sky and the warm suns above. He said nothing more, seemingly lost in his thoughts.

"Are you okay?" Zac eventually asked after the silence had dragged on for a minute.

The Alchemist was dragged out of his stupor and looked over.

"The past couple of months have been..." Boje said, slowly shaking his head. "It's ironic."

"What?"

"I met the Matriarch a few years ago. She told me I wasn't suited for the path of Death and should focus on Life instead. I wonder what she would think if she saw me now."

There was a smile on Boje's face, but even Zac could see the mania hiding beneath the surface. He said nothing, letting Boje continue.

"I followed her suggestion. After our meeting, I shifted my direction toward healing while continuing my studies of Alchemy. I normally stayed far from the fighting, healing our soldiers from within our battlements. But the quest required me to follow the army into the Kan'Tanu Sector, and I got greedy."

Zac could guess the rest. They met a strong opponent, and Boje's army was killed or captured. "Did you get the seal during the war?"

"No, shortly before," Boje said. "The Zethaya have some clandestine... ventures... inside the Million Gates Territory. That chaotic space has a lot of resources you can't find elsewhere. I was sent there after we started hearing the rumors of war and opportunities."

"Should you be spilling the beans on those kinds of secrets?" Zac said with a raised brow.

"It doesn't matter now," Boje sighed. "Those channels are all liquidated. Besides, I'm not even part of my family anymore."

"Those orders..."

"It's not just that," Boje said, looking up at Zac. "I can't return anymore. That skeleton jerk was right in one thing. My family can't withstand holding onto someone related to the Left Imperial Palace. I kept my situation hidden out of fear of becoming a bargaining chip. Now, my situation is even worse. Besides... I can't face my family like this..."

Zac understood what he meant. Boje was caught in a nightmarish situation where he currently didn't quite belong to either side. The Zethaya Clan might not even believe he was who he said he was. His first thought was also that

Boje was a spy. Hearing the motivations and seeing Tavza and Laz's reactions wasn't enough to fully dispel the thought. Realignment was simply too rare, to the point that it never happened on the frontier.

"Well, I shouldn't complain," Boje eventually said. "So many people have died in this war, including people I've known my whole life. My situation is much better than that, especially now that I'm out of the eyes of that Izh'Rak Reaver.

"I'd like to send a message back home, with your permission. Just explain the situation to my parents. I won't mention the matter of the Left Imperial Palace, of course. I'll say something like they recognized my potential was too good to awaken conventionally and chose realignment instead."

"Sure," Zac nodded. "How's your situation in that regard? Can you still practice alchemy?"

"Well, I have some relearning to do. Thankfully, I don't cultivate the Dao of Life like some healers," Boje said. "I'm cultivating the Daos of Fire, Herbalism, and Alchemy. The Empire also provided resources and manuals to allow me to continue my cultivation with Miasma instead of Cosmic Energy."

"Let me know if you need anything else," Zac said. "My Atwood Empire can't compare to the Zethaya in terms of riches, but you might be surprised by the stuff we have in our stores. Much of it comes from outside Zecia."

The two talked for another hour, catching up and planning for the future. Zac had to admit, Kator had set everything up quite nicely for the Alchemist. Apart from Cultivation Manuals and Alchemy techniques, Boje had even been provided with a large batch of practice resources and information missives related to his path of study. The Undead Empire unsurprisingly had ample experience taking Alchemic Recipes from the outside and reworking them to suit their races.

It was almost impossible for an Undead to create pills that could be used for the living. After all, the foundation of their pills would be made with Miasma rather than Cosmic Energy, which would leave an indelible core of Death within. For the undead, that energy would simply bolster the effect of the pills. For the living, taking the pill would be akin to inviting Death. A few might be fine, but any more, and they'd face the same situation as the cultivators who had stayed within the Dead Zone too long.

Boje was quite eager to start working on the proprietary Zethaya recipes. In his words, he wouldn't be breaking any of his old family rules if he reworked them into undead pills. They could technically be considered entirely new pills.

Zac could still sense the panic beneath the excitement, but there wasn't much Zac could do about it. The trauma he'd been through wouldn't magically heal after a short conversation with an old acquaintance. Hopefully, staying in the Atwood Empire would let him process what he'd been through. Seeing the undead and living working together might make it easier to deal with his situation.

"Excuse me, young master. You have guests," a voice said from outside, and Zac mentally opened the gates to let Triv inside.

Accompanying him was Joanna and a couple of Revenants who would take Boje to get settled. Soon only Zac and Joanna remained, and he shared the events of his visit.

"That reaver was so strong that not even you could defeat him?" Joanna frowned. "I knew the trial would be deadly, but this..."

"We still have some time to catch up."

"What's next?"

"More of the same," Zac said. "These are going to be a bloody few years."

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1115 - Providence of a Sovereign - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1115 - Providence of a Sovereign

The heavenly pressure was finally giving in, but it was too late. Golden lightning crackled across Ogras's unmoving body while a spiritual pressure made the whole square groan. The cracks grew deeper until his head snapped and fell to the ground. The tribulation didn't care and continued its assault for another minute before dissipating.

Ogras slowly rose from the shadows of his shattered self, exhaling as his dummy dissipated with the wind.

"Out with the old," Ogras grinned.

A manageable amount of lightning crackled through his body, tempering his flesh and soul. It would probably linger a while longer, so Ogras looked around. The comforting shade had returned, replacing the overbearing presence of the Ruthless Heavens. His shadowy servants were also gone, becoming the first casualties in his fight against fate.

Most importantly, his flag, while scorched, remained in one piece. It was still crackling with lightning more ferocious than himself, which elicited a snicker. He almost wanted to activate the thing to hear the little bastard's screams. No, there was no point in tempting fate like that. The Ruthless Heaven was undoubtedly still close by.

Seeing that the situation was stable, Ogras turned his sight inward. There it waited, a shimmering orb of untold possibility. The next moment, it was gone, but Ogras didn't panic. A wide smile spread across his face as he saw his Shadowmirage Core reappear. It worked. He'd been worried his plan was a fool's hope, especially when his core lacked its current properties during the formation.

He'd carried that hesitance for years, wondering if he was deluding himself. Could something created during his bouts of amnesia really be trusted? But he'd decided to bet on himself, or rather his other self. If Zac dared to aim for such a paradoxical core while being a mortal, how could he back down from creating a core that was both fake and real?

But even if it was real, could he trust its source?

He'd long been worried it was K'Rav that whispered in his ears during the blank periods he'd endured since visiting that glacier. But he'd realized the truth by this point. The illusory treasure had created a schism in the depths of his mind, and the creatures trapped within his body had eventually figured out how to use it to communicate. Or perhaps merge, since his own psyche seemed to be one of the voices.

He'd been able to suppress the bouts when he only had Asshole in his body, but he was outnumbered by this point. He could only delay it for a couple of days now. It was enough to find a safe spot, but Ogras worried about its implications for the future. Would he become the illusion and the fused spirits become real if he kept going down this path?

It was even weirder that the spirits seemed to be helping him. He'd been sure their almost incomprehensible scribbles were a trap. Ogras certainly would

have done everything in his power to escape if he ever found himself in the same situation as the three creatures sealed by the [Spiritlock Physique]. And if that failed, make both sides go out in a blaze of glory.

Rasata's notes weren't any help either—there were no mentions of communication with your Spiritlock Avatars. However, the suggestions didn't clash with the original ideas born from Ultom's insight. If anything, they brought out the true value of the mysterious light. Adding the Dreamgeist, especially, drastically improved the proposals. But the biggest contributor was still himself.

Ogras almost hated his shadowy half for the inspired ideas he jotted down in those short moments. Why couldn't he just get them in his normal state? Did that guy steal all his comprehension? Ogras shrugged. Whatever. He might not have a full handle on the situation, but he understood enough to make some decisions. If you assumed everyone was scheming against you, you'd be ready for anything. Their goal might be to possess his body, but he was making plans on his own. Until then, he'd accept their gifts, turning them into one of his secret sources of strength.

And the result was definitely good. The Heavenly Lightning had been the catalyst needed to kickstart his creation. A core at the threshold of reality was undeniably the best fit with his unique constitution. Any enemy who thought they'd pierced his core and crippled his cultivation would be in for a rude surprise when they realized it had no effect.

There was a shift in his surroundings, and Ogras's spear appeared in his hand as he swirled around. He soon relaxed, realizing it was just a shimmering crystal that had already appeared without warning. Ogras's eyes gleamed with anticipation as he walked over. It was time to see if his hard work was enough to reach the destination.

Core Formation Successful

Design: 11% unique.

Imperfections: Flawless (3-9).

Evaluation: High Quality, B-grade Energy Capacity, A-grade Potential, A-grade level of Innovation.

Ogras had expected to see a list of classes and was surprised he got a report card instead. Only 11% uniqueness even after he created the thing from scratch, using the truths of Ultom as the foundation? Ogras shrugged after some thought, not bothered by the low number. He knew that the fusion of Shadows and Illusions wasn't anything unique. You could randomly throw a rock into a gaggle of assassins and hit someone with a similar path.

But so what? Unique didn't mean strong, and common didn't mean weak. Furthermore, the Cosmic Core was only one part of your path. And it couldn't be too bad if the Ruthless Heaven felt it warranted an A-grade level of innovation. But he did briefly wonder what was needed for A-grade. 5%? 10%? Either case, Zac must have gotten S-grade with his weird creation.

He was much more interested in the other aspects. His core looked incredible, but seeing that he'd reached High Quality in one go was a huge relief. Ogras was just one step short of the Peak, paving the path for Monarchy. He'd definitely made the right decision staying an additional two years, even if he felt mostly ready to advance for a while. Without the added Mana and planning, he probably would only have reached Middle Quality.

The energy capacity wasn't stellar, but Ogras had already been aware of that when creating his blueprint. But his path wasn't one of endurance. What was the point of a large pool when you either finished the job in one strike or ran for your life? The extremely rapid energy transmission it was capable of was far more useful. If anything, B-grade was better than expected.

Ogras snickered upon thinking of the elders back home. The main branch had celebrated for six straight months when the Fourth Elder broke through, inviting the whole capital to a feast. Such a commotion over a lump of garbage that left the old goat stuck at level 153. What would those scheming halfwits think if they saw him now? With a swing of his spear, the whole council would be punched full of holes.

He shook his head, dispelling his fantasy of a glorious return. One day, he would slap all those deceitful faces before taking his grandpa away, but his fate with Azh'Rezak and the Horde had already been severed. He couldn't forget that his circumstances had changed. What was an earth-shattering accomplishment back home wasn't worth mentioning in the circles he ran lately. Whatever core the black-eyed lass created two months ago was bound to be equally impressive.

She'd been making improvements until the end, just like he. Ogras might have one more seal piece under his belt and enjoyed the benefits of buddying up with a walking treasure magnet for longer, but Catheya was a little princess. Her dad was a Late-Stage Monarch and her Master was even stronger—their starting position wasn't the same.

Today, Ogras felt he'd closed the gap to all the heaven-kissed brats who thought themselves better because they won the cosmic birthright lottery. His anticipation grew as he waited for the real prize. Then, it was there.

[Option 1]

Name: [D-Epic] Rehiphem's Vengeance.

Fixed Attributes: Dexterity +300 / 450 / 600, Wisdom: +150 / 225 / 300.

Free Attributes: +100 / 150 / 200.

Forgotten, hidden. Returned with a vengeance.

[Option 2]

Name: [D-Epic] Nightmare's Requiem

Fixed Attributes: Dexterity +150 / 225 / 300, Intelligence +100 / 150 / 200, Wisdom +250 / 375 / 500.

Free Attributes: +50 / 75 / 100.

A beguiling song, a beautiful dream. All a lie.

[Option 3]

Name: [D-Arcane] Shadewar Sovereign

Fixed Attributes: Dexterity +250 / 375 / 500, Intelligence +100 / 150 / 200, Wisdom +250 / 375 / 500.

Free Attributes: +50 / 75 / 100.

Ruler of none, master of all.

Ogras's hands shook as he reached the final line, a storm sweeping away everything else. Who cared about the old tale of Rehiphem, the advisor of the ancient Gods? Who cared about nightmares? He'd done it. He'd actually done it. Ogras's eyes couldn't help but mist over as his mind drifted back to his journey over the years.

It had all started that day. He'd held his hand against a Nexus Node very much like right now, trying to take control over the small island kingdom after taking out all the competition. Back then, he'd been shut out, deemed unworthy, and he'd been swept up in Zac's path just minutes later.

Today, it felt like the gates to the Heavens themselves had opened wide to let him in as a testament to his struggle. He was not just a hanger-on anymore. He was lowly born but had seized the providence of a sovereign.

A movement shattered his beautiful dream, but a confident smile appeared on the demon's face as he calmed his raging emotions.

"Ai, it's finally over," a wretched voice emerged from the scorched pit. "The Ruthless Heavens, indeed. I can't believe some lunatic created that thing. Makes our experiments seem tame in comparison."

"You would have gotten there eventually if you didn't destroy yourself first," Ogras commented, his voice slightly hoarse. "Did it work?"

"Yes," K'Rav grunted as he appeared.

Golden lightning crackled across the goblin's spiritual body, and his aura was erratic. But the goblin had passed his tribulation just as Ogras had.

"Hurt like one of the Four Fell Brews of Potioneer He'Zar, but the path has been created."

"So now we just need to fill you up before subverting darkness and light."

"When are things ever so simple?" K'Rav snickered. "Fooling the Heavens isn't so easy, and I doubt this new-fangled overlord is a fool. You want to turn the fell Karma of the [Shadewar Flag] into an illusion, but the souls will resist becoming subordinate Tool Spirits. It's against nature."

"That's why I have you, isn't it?" Ogras lazily said. "Work hard on motivating the recruits. The better they align with our plan, the easier it should be."

"You want me to reason with a bunch of mindless vengeful spirits?" K'Rav scoffed.

"Whatever," Ogras shrugged. "If things go south, I'll just throw you into a spatial tear and wash my hands of the whole situation."

"Little bastard, some things are not so easily erased," K'Rav snickered. "You've got the mark of the Ra'Lashar all over you. Our fates are inextricably linked."

Ogras didn't bother arguing. He and the goblin had their plans and fallbacks. Only time could tell who would walk away in the end. For now, their purposes were aligned, at least at a surface level.

He turned back to the Nexus Node, having already made his choice. What was there even to think about? If the Heavens gave you a treasure, you wouldn't look for baubles on the ground. Streaks of power entered his body, setting the foundation for his pathways.

"What an innovative way of cultivation. Classes, ranks. All neat and tidy, controlled by an eternal overlord," K'Rav sighed, studying the Nexus Node with interest before observing the changes within Ogras's body. "I'm not sure I like it, though. It all feels very restrictive."

"Yeah, well. You, if anyone, should know that unfettered freedom has a price," Ogras countered. "And it creates opportunities. Without the Ruthless Heavens, I would never have left my home world. I would either have wasted my life at the threshold of cultivation or gotten killed by one of my cousins."

"Yeah, I guess a little ingrate like you came out ahead," K'Rav shrugged. "So we done here?"

"We're done here," Ogras agreed as he stowed the [Shadewar Flag] in his sleeve. "The war has already started. We can't let the others have all the fun."

"War," K'Rav grinned. "It's been a while."

It was as though Ogras's proclamation had triggered a hidden array as the familiar bubble sprung up around him. He was filled with anticipation for his return as he streaked through the endless cosmos. Was this finally his chance to make that monster look at him with shock and some jealousy?

Suddenly, Ogras felt a powerful pull, and he groaned with pain when his pod was forcibly dragged into a pitch-black hole. His eyes were wide with panic, but there was no time to think. A gleaming dagger was piercing right at his forehead, and his body moved on instinct. Fake became real, and shadows became true as Ogras avoided the ambush while unleashing an attack on his own.

Ogras didn't care who this shadow was or how they'd ended up in this dark basement—protecting his little life took priority. But the enemy's dagger almost felt alive, continuing toward his forehead with unerring precision. Ogras was aghast to find that no matter how many times he subverted his position or how many layers of feints he used, the dagger only drew closer.

How was this possible?! The shrouded assassin was clearly only at Late E-grade. Ogras decisively shifted his main body into one of the shadows he'd already sent in every direction, escaping through a crack in the wall. Why should he risk his life fighting that guy? There were far too many suspicious points about the situation for him to stick around.

Shadows passed through the cracks in the ground, moving thousands of meters in no time. But an isolating force exhausted his shadows, making it harder and harder to move. Finally, Ogras had no choice but to go up, but his heart lurched upon realizing he was somehow back in that same room. The shadowy assassin only looked at him, his aura still at the Late E-grade. Even then, Ogras was filled with a fatal danger.

"Not too bad, I gue—Alright, enough."

Ogras found his true form dragged out of the shadows after a second failed escape, and his whole body was suddenly locked in place by a monstrous killing intent. He knew that any tricks or movements meant utter death. This was not something an E-grade cultivator could emit. Or a Monarch, for that matter. Ogras knew there was trouble when his return journey was interrupted, but he'd hoped it was a cosmic hiccup rather than the machinations of an old monster.

Where was Zac's Luck when you needed it? Or was this what his life was like?

"Little eel, try to escape again, and I'll sever your shadows."

"I'm sorry senior," Ogras said with an ingratiating smile. "I was just shocked by the sudden changes. I did not realize such an esteemed figure had called upon me. What can this lowly one do for sir?"

"Glib," the assassin scoffed. "As I said. Not bad, but you're lacking in skill and experience. More importantly, you lack ruthlessness. Against your enemy but especially against yourself. Fearing for your life is natural, but it's poison to your momentum. Only by becoming death can you deliver death."

"Of course, of course," Ogras eagerly nodded while trying to understand what in the nine hells was going on.

"I'm not sure what dogshit luck you have, but the Lord of the Perennial Vastness sent you to me for training," the shadow continued. "Seeing as he didn't make things difficult for me after I failed to kill him all those years ago, I guess I owe him one."

Ogras was initially confused, but he quickly understood what was going on. Even if his core was good, it wasn't good enough for an ancient existence like the Lord of the Perennial Vastness to make any special arrangements. He'd been curious and expectant after hearing Zac share his experience in... Where was it? Why couldn't he remember? Ogras shook his head, realizing his memories had already been sealed. But he knew one thing.

It was him, again.

Ogras sighed, knowing his Karmic Debt had only grown larger. He didn't know what Zac had done to send him here, but he knew it was an unimaginable opportunity if he managed to grab onto it. Someone with the guts to target the Perennial Vastness had to be unimaginably strong. Or unimaginably stupid, but those people rarely lived for too long.

"Senior, I am in your care," Ogras quickly said.

"Promise or not, you're too weak," the shadow offhandedly said.

"Ah?"

"I expected that undying thing to send over some unique little monster, but you don't have the qualifications to withstand my teachings. Your mind would break, and your body would tear if you tried to forcibly learn my abilities," the shadow said. "But I'll give you a chance to shore up your lacking foundation. It

might not be enough to let you contend with the strongest of your generation, but it'll be a step in the right direction.

"However, it'll be dangerous. Say the word, and I'll send you on back home instead, and I'll consider my debt paid."

A flash of fear gripped Ogras's heart. If this scary guy said it would be dangerous, then it meant he wanted to send him through the gates of hell. What good was the promise of power if you were dead? No, he couldn't always back down on this one.

Being meticulous and careful was virtuous, but being too afraid to bet on your future was not. If he backed down today, there would be a similar situation tomorrow. At most, he'd just die. It was bound to happen sooner or later when following that walking calamity.

"I'm willing."

"Good. Long ago, I founded a little group of brothers called the Red Hand Society. I don't really bother with the organization anymore, but they'll come in handy this time. I left them a unique realm that's used to train their more promising candidates nowadays. I'll give you an identity as a Faceless Shadow and send you inside. I'll pluck you out after a year. You should be strong enough to learn a few of my moves if you're still alive by that point."

"Oh, I went ahead and sealed that thing in your sleeve. It's pretty interesting, but I feel it would get in the way of your training."

The sudden shifts and turns only let Ogras nod in agreement before he found himself pulled into another vortex. Just as the gate to the nondescript cellar was about to close, Ogras heard the parting words of the mysterious assassin.

"Of course, if you're strong enough to not just survive but to conquer, then there's no better place to find an army for your flag."

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1116 - Born from Dirt - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1116 - Born from Dirt

"Why did I enlist those years ago?" Ton lamented for the fifth time today.

Fandar smiled helplessly as he glanced at his pilot. "We come from dirt. We'd be here one way or another. Better inside one of these nice little skippers than among the conscripts on the war plateaus or frontier planets."

Ton rolled her eyes. "Maybe I could have married up. I hear traders and skilled craftsmen can avoid the draft to some degree."

"Why in the stars would a wealthy merchant go for you?" Fandar guffawed, dodging the wrench thrown his way. "And where would you even meet one in Green Streak? The closest we saw to a titan of industry was Big Bucket in the scrap yard."

"Never seen a man that fat. I wonder if he ate all the spare parts he couldn't sell," Ton giggled before her face became downcast again. "This is going to be bad, isn't it?"

The question made the others in the cockpit look over, their hollow eyes proof of weeks of sleepless nights. They were hoping for something, anything, that could relieve the tension that had been building aboard the Perky Princess. Fandar wanted to give it to them, but he wasn't in any better state himself. If not for his Cosmic Core, he would have keeled over already.

Fandar hesitated before nodding slightly.

"It's going to be bad. But I'll do everything in my power to see us through to the other side. After all, every one of you owes me money."

Small chuckles echoed through the cockpit. "We'll do our best too."

"Like you said, it could be worse," Enok offered. "We're stationed close to the Everfast Star. Among the Starlords, Lord Everfast is among the stronger."

"That's right," Ton nodded. "I hear he's a grand-uncle of the current Emperor of the Dravorak Empire, or something like that. He definitely has some good stuff prepared in case they hit this side hard. The sixteenth star grouping will face the real pressure."

"If you ask me, the sixteenth is a trap. Why else would it be manned by rogue and wandering Monarchs? The weakness is too glaring," Enok countered. "I bet one of the heavyweights is waiting there to take out a couple of Monarchs after they overextend."

"I hear the Lords have had many problems calling over the hidden masters," Mina said. "Maybe they simply don't have enough strong Monarchs to create a strong line."

"There's no point speculating," Fandar interjected. "The plans of the Lords are beyond us. We only need to use this little beauty to take out anything at our level and sweep away Lord Everfast's obstructions. In that regard, we're in a pretty good situation. Remember, the Kan'Tanu have passed through the whole Million Gates Territory to get here. Their flagships are probably fine, but the swarm of smaller vessels should be facing all kinds of problems already."

"There's no way those lunatics are willing to stop and repair the ships of their grunts," Enok agreed.

Of course, there was the thing none said out loud. The danger didn't come from the D-grade Cosmic Vessels they were ordered to take out. It came from whatever the Kan'Tanu had prepared to break through the defensive line. Whatever could destroy the powerful Spatial Seals that had turned the exit of the Million Gates Territory into a thin corridor could take out their little vessel as an afterthought.

Hours passed of their vigil. They couldn't sleep on duty, so they passed the time alternating between meditation and idle conversation. The topics had been rehashed endless times over the past decades, but the familiarity was a comfort.

Suddenly, the silence of the endless expanse broke as a storm of messages flooded Fandar's mind.

Enok was only a breath slower, his face pallid as he saw the readings of their scanners. "Spatial activity! Terrifying numbers!"

"They're here," Fandar growled.

"Shouldn't they be days away, dealing with our traps? Where's the early warning? What the hell are our scouts doing?!" Ton swore.

The crew was shocked, but their training had already kicked in. A series of procedures readied the ship for combat. It was like a beast come out of hibernation, and its ferocity was matched by the elite soldiers on board. The whole defensive line was coming alive, and space itself groaned from the gathering force.

"All hands on deck!" Fandar said, his voice spreading through every inch of the vessel.

At the same time, flickers of light spread across the horizon—small motes of sanguine radiance growing into cracks to another dimension. On the other side, an endless armada was waiting. A direct shift had been blocked by the powerful jammers of their War Fortresses, but the Kan'Tanu was rapidly forcing a path.

"Fire!" Fandar roared. "Take them out while they break through!"

A ruthless sheen appeared in Mina's eyes, and her usual circumspect aura was replaced by a murderous air. Ominous hums and vibrations spread through the Perky Princess, promising death and destruction. The Atwood Ships were really worthy of their renown. It barely took any time for a thick pillar of opalescent light to shoot forward, crashing into the nose of a ship just as it peeked through the gate. The origin of this chapter's debut can be traced to N0v3l--B1n.

A powerful barrier blocked the beam, but the gateway fluctuated erratically from the powerful energy of the sustained beam. Suddenly, the gate collapsed, cleanly cutting the Kan'Tanu Vessel in two.

Similar scenes were taking place all across the horizon, but Fandar felt a sense of defeat upon seeing more and more ships emerge unscathed. Ultimately, it was a long shot dealing with their enemies like this, especially when they suddenly appeared out of nowhere. There was no escaping the bloody battle that would come.

Suddenly, two radiant half-moons were unleashed by the Everfast Star, each innumerable times stronger than their own energy attack. They left a trail of spatial chaos in their wake, and the Kan'Tanu vessels unlucky enough to be in their way were reduced to ash. The attacks disappeared, having pierced through the dimensional curtain to target the real threats beyond.

Fandar's heart hammered, but he kept giving out orders while analyzing the mountains of reports and data transmitted between the Everfast Star and the armada. A shockwave blasted a hole in space, creating a gateway the size of a planet. Fandar spotted three gargantuan vessels on the other side, one of them left with a noticeable scar.

However, his vision was blocked by two hulking entities before he could discern if the Kan'Tanu mothership was really damaged.

"What the hell is that?!"

Two impossibly large forms stepped out of the gateway, their size making the D-grade vessels surrounding them look like flies. They weren't constructs but humanoids, decked in nothing but a fur loincloth and sinister-looking stone helmets. Their roars shook space, and Fandar swore upon seeing something in their hands.

"Incoming!" Fandar urged as the giants hurled their payload.

The things had looked like small pebbles in their hands, but they were actually large stars wrought from black metal. They were over a hundred meters across, their spikes emitting chilling force. The things had to weigh as much as a mountain, yet they tore through space with incredible speed. Ton cursed her heart out as she pushed their ship to dodge. A projectile whizzed past them with almost blinding speed.

One of its spikes dragged against their shield, but the fully charged barrier narrowly held against the grazing attack. Fandar breathed in relief, but he knew things would just get worse from here on out.

"Titans!" Ton whispered with horror. "The Kan'Tanu have Titans?!"

"That's impossible," Mina whispered. "I read at the Academy that the true Titans were exterminated eons ago. They went against the new order, and the System rallied the masters of the Multiverse against them. A mighty being approaching the levels of the Apostates purged their whole race from the river of destiny. Besides, these things aren't nearly big enough. They seem to be humanoid beasts."

"Not big enough?" Ton swore, her face slick with sweat after narrowly avoiding death. "Those bastards are almost as big as the Everfast Star."

Fandar only grunted, more occupied with reading the reports than explaining the difference. The two giants were massive, but they were only specks of dust when compared to the true Titans. Only the mythical Starbeast in the Multiverse Heartlands could compare with those things.

Besides, that was not the only thing off with the things.

"Something is wrong," Enok muttered, his warning echoing Fandar's thoughts. "Their readings... They're Corpses?!"

"Almost. They're containers. Containers for madness," Fandar spat. "Change targets. Suppressive fire!"

Thousands of attacks tore toward the giants while the subsidiary towers of the Everfast Star suppressed the still-emerging Kan'Tanu fleet. Unfortunately, the dark-grey skin of the oversized creatures was stronger than any spiritual metal. Only the attacks of the Everfast Star managed to pierce their hides, but Fandar almost wished they hadn't when a wriggling mess within was exposed. It was countless insectoids, each the size of a small Cosmic Vessel.

Their carapaces were covered in the familiar tendrils of the Kan'Tanu Heart Curses, pulsating with sinister power. Being exposed to the environment of outer space made the abominations stir, and they swarmed out of the wounds. A few creatures waking up triggered a chain reaction, and gory explosions erupted all over the giant's bodies as a whole swarm emerged.

Soon, Fandar had no time to worry about giants and whether they had any more spikes to throw out. The parasites formed a devastatingly durable vanguard that shot toward the defensive line with speed only space-born creatures could display. The Kan'Tanu vessels followed in their wake, madly firing. They were writhing tsunami drawing closer by the second. Their armada was firing at will, and thousands of insects were turned into gory pulps of writhing curses, but the giants were seemingly bottomless repositories of parasites.

Soon, the Kan'Tanu were everywhere, and the whole Everfast Armada was caught in a chaotic melee. Silent explosions lit up the darkness as vessels on both sides met fiery ends. The Perky Princess shuddered from the shockwaves, but nothing had managed to break through yet.

Fandar gave the occasional order but trusted his crew to handle themselves. His mind entered the ship, spreading into the dozens of drones it could control. They emerged from the four hatches on the ship's belly, forming a defensive perimeter around them. One of the four-winged insects was streaking right toward them with suicidal fervor, though focused attack of their energy cannon and the smaller drones turned its head into a gory mess.

A bloody tongue of sin pierced the broken skull and lashed at their ship with incredible force. The gargantuan Heart Curse had emerged, clearly not

sharing the fleeting lifespan of its smaller brethren. The thorn stretched for over a mile, and the readings indicated its force was well within Middle D-grade—more than what Fandar dared to take on with their shield.

"Dodge!" Fandar growled, but Ton was already pushing the ship's engines beyond their safe limits to veer out of the way.

Fandar felt his insides shift, but they narrowly avoided the sanguine spear. Yet the curse actually followed in pursuit, somehow dragging the huge corpse along. A Kan'Tanu Cosmic Vessel moved to intercept, forming a deadly pincer. The whole ship shook from the onslaught, but the shielding held long enough for the drones to catch up. Flickering light drowned the enemy until one of the drones found the weakness.

Mina had been waiting for an opportunity, and a dense pillar of destruction bore right through the ship. A huge explosion illuminated the surroundings, and their scanners were momentarily overloaded as the Perky Princess pierced through. The trailing Heart Curse was pushed away by the shockwave, and it gave up its pursuit. However, it was still alive, roving back and forth, seemingly searching for slower targets.

Two enemies down, but new enemies had already replaced the ones they fought. They were everywhere, and one desperate struggle replaced the other. The insects were thankfully not too dangerous. They were fast, but they couldn't withstand the weaponry of the Everfast Armada. However, they completely disregarded their safety as they targeted any ship that came close, and new ones replaced the ones that were killed. In just twenty minutes, the whole field was littered with the things.

"Why isn't the Lord doing anything?!" Ton spat through grit teeth, though they all knew the answer.

For one, the battlefield had become extremely chaotic, making it difficult to target the enemies with conventional means. More importantly, the three motherships had yet to emerge from the huge gateway, still hiding behind the two giants. The Starlord was undoubtedly wary of showing his hand before knowing who hid within those three leviathans and what other means the Kan'Tanu had prepared. He hoped their ships could break through the predicament and force the enemy out of hiding.

However, the onslaught was too intense. One Alliance vessel after another crumbled under the assault, forcing the Lord Everfast to make his move.

Hundreds of jade swords poured out of the War Fortress, and thousands more emerged from hidden pockets throughout the battlefield. The vast sword array lit up, shrouding thousands of miles in an emerald haze. All through the battlefield, ships and creatures were cut apart. Not even the carcasses were spared, with thousands minced and pushed away.

Fandar could tell the invisible blades released by the swords were gathering to an attack of utmost power and destruction. Everything that came close was shredded as the attack tore toward the giants. But just as they were about to be consumed by the blade domain, a snicker echoed through the battlefield.

The hoarse voice felt like the laugh of an evil god, peering at them from the depths of hell. Meanwhile, the head of a huge bird covered in parasites appeared before the giants, blocking the incoming attack. Fandar was overwhelmed by despair upon seeing the attack fail. How could they fight against this? Why should he let his crew suffer? Why not just—

A searing heat made Fandar yelp with pain, and the sizzling sound of burning flesh and the acrid smell of the Clarity Seals woke him up. Fandar took a shuddering breath, and his crew was no better off. Their eyes were bloodshot, and their hands were shaking from having almost lost their minds just now. The fact that a simple laugh had created such havoc could only mean one thing.

A Kan'Tanu Monarch had made their move.

Fandar had heard the rumors of the terrifying lords of the Kan'Tanu. Almost all were former Reincarnators, having reached the top by slaughtering their brothers and sisters. Their inner worlds were completely filled with monstrous Heart Curses whose power was beyond one's comprehension. When you fought against one Kan'Tanu Monarch, you fought against two.

"I've been waiting for you, wretched thing," a booming voice emerged from the depths of the star. "Why hide behind these fell constructs?"

The voice was like a bell dispersing the lingering effect of the laugh. The emerald haze had seemingly come alive, forming a protective curtain around the surviving vessels.

"Why so impatient? The stage has barely been set, and you wish to skip to the main course?" the hoarse voice from before answered from the other side of the enormous gateway.

"Last time, you left your arm behind. There are no spatial gates for you to flee into this time," the commanding voice from within the War Fortress said.

"Fate is everchanging. Let's see if I can take something from you this time."

This time, the crew didn't lose their mental faculties from the sinister voice, but Fandar still felt a sense of defeat. It wasn't that he believed in the words of the hidden enemy more than the Everfast Monarch. But Fandar knew that their fate was out of their hands now that the top combatants had stepped onto the field.

If the Everfast Monarch won, they'd soon exterminate the enemies. If he lost, then none of them would be spared when the Kan'Tanu Monarch was no longer restrained. Their only hope in that situation was escape, praying that the enemy wouldn't lock space quickly enough.

"Why would I give you the opportunity?" Everfast said before his booming voice shook the cosmos. "MERGE!"

The crew groaned from pain and disorientation as a powerful spatial pulse passed right through the Atwood Ship.

"Brace yourselves!" Fandar grunted, shaking his head to clear his vision. "Something is changing!"

Yet, there was nothing that they could do but ride out the storm of whatever their Starlord had planned. Space bent, causing unbelievable pain across Fandar's body. Then, it thankfully went away as reality snapped into place. Or realities. Fandar's eyes were wide with shock from the sudden surge of information entering his mind.

Who were all these people?

Less than 300 vessels had remained after the furious struggle against the cursed insects, yet there were suddenly 800 nodes in the network. They had appeared out of nowhere, already unleashing hell on the other side. Fandar gasped upon realizing what had just happened. It was a dimensional convergence.

It was unbelievable that the Starlord had managed to hide such a powerful force in a neighboring dimension without anyone noticing, but there was ample proof all around them. Fandar realized the Sword Array had paved the

way, creating safe pockets to merge into. However, many swords had failed, which led to dozens of vessels superimposing on debris or insect carapaces.

The shielding of the newcomers had mostly kept them safe, but a few weren't so lucky. Their shields hadn't managed to rebuff the materia, leading to a forced fusion of two dimensions. One ship had completely merged with an insect carapace. There was no way the crew had survived the spatial chaos generated by such an accident.

Thankfully, the losses were nothing compared to the devastation on the Kan'Tanu's side. A whole asteroid belt had suddenly superimposed on their positions. It had to be planned, and there was clearly something special about those boulders. Otherwise, how could over a hundred vessels fail to rebuff the spatial convergence?

A band of earthshaking explosions spread through their armada, the shockwaves creating a second round of destruction as the remaining asteroids exploded. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers were deposited into space, most of them unmoving. Even the leviathan motherships had been dragged out of hiding, and two had suffered damage.

Shockingly, the ships and asteroid belt weren't even the true ace up the Dravorak Imperial's sleeve. In the center of the second fleet was a huge construct already humming with deadly force.

"A second mouse," the hoarse voice snickered, seemingly completely unfazed that they had just lost half their fleet. "I SEE YOU!"

Thousands of insect carapaces exploded, and the crew swore upon seeing a hundred-meter-wide blood-eye appear just a few miles away from their position. It exuded a deep hum that left Fandar with a splitting headache, and his fear mounted as the eye focused on their ship.

"What the what in the nine hells is that?!" Fandar croaked. "Ton, get us out of—hey!"

Blood poured out of Tyla's seven orifices, her whole body twitching terrifyingly. Mina was already dead, and Enko lay unmoving on the ground. Pain and despair filled Fandar's heart as his childhood friend took her last breath.

"I'm sorry."

Fandar desperately held on, containing his crumbling soul and Cosmic Core with sheer will as he set the course for the Perky Princess's final journey. The engine was rapidly overloading, and deadly currents tore through the ship's hallways. He prayed it was enough.

He was born from dirt, but he would become the sand that blinded the enemy.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1117 - Drafted - Read

Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1117 - Drafted

Zac stepped into the meeting room with Vilari and Emily in tow. His alter ego and the leaders of the Calamity Company were already seated, along with Ilvere and the Undead Empire's liaisons. His Draugr persona sat with his eyes closed in meditation, shutting out the surroundings.

It was a small trick Zac had adopted over the past months after having grown tired of talking with himself in these meetings. He let the mounting pressures and his already ironclad reputation as a cultivation maniac work in his favor.

"Welcome back," Joanna said, frowning upon seeing Zac's expression. "What's wrong? Did something happen at the battlefield?"

"No," Zac said with a helpless shake of his head. "No surprises this time. I just spent all my money again. Hate the feeling."

"Don't let the cycle of consumption drive you off the cliff," Ilvere guffawed. "My grandma met her end that way. Found a good hunting spot, but the riches it brought only increased her expenses. She had to take greater and greater risks as the easiest targets were gone. One day, she simply didn't return."

"Maybe she was tired of providing for her money-burning descendants and ran away," Emily said with a wink.

"Aye, that might be the case. She could be off living the good life somewhere right now," Ilvere laughed, but his face soon grew somber. "Then again, none of us are having a good time lately."

"No changes in the prompt, right?" Zac ventured as he sat down.

"Nothing," Ilvere grunted, glancing up at the large map floating in the middle of the large conference table. It was a smaller replica of the one in the middle of

the command center, showcasing the current situation in Zecia. "Conquests don't seem to prolong the deadline. At least not the ones we're doing."

Zac sighed as he looked up at the map. By now, the Red Zone of the Allbright Empire was red in reality, with thousands of worlds conquered or contested. Worse, the defeats indicated on the galactic map were weeks old, and the situation hadn't improved since. If anything, the defensive line had been pushed back even further after the Kan'Tanu erected a beachhead.

"Any big changes?"

"Much of the information is restricted, but rumors are that another War Fortress fell two days ago," Ilvere sighed. "Everyone is sending reinforcements and supplies, but the Kan'Tanu is doing the same. I hear new Kan'Tanu vessels are appearing all over the place."

"They have portable vessels?" Emily exclaimed. "Have they stolen our technology?"

"They don't," Petrus rejected. "But that doesn't mean they can't teleport Cosmic Vessels over. They just need to send them over in pieces and assemble them at location. Then, their Array Masters only need to put the finishing touches on the Spatial Arrays."

"That's right," Ilvere nodded. "I talked with our contact in the Allbright Army. The Kan'Tanu have set up factories on hundreds of worlds. Our side is trying to take them out, but we have trouble just holding onto the land we have."

"We're really losing?" Emily frowned.

"The first clash proved that the enemy has deeper foundations and more dangerous means," Serzo said. "Monarchs are incredibly difficult to kill, yet Zecia lost more than a dozen in the first day of battle, one of them our own. Sure, we've killed a couple ourselves, but we've undeniably come out on the losing end. However, that doesn't mean the war is over. The defeat has stirred some reclusive Monarchs into action, and the frontlines actually have more C-grade cultivators than before now."

"So what are they doing?" the young shaman glowered. "Are those old things waiting for millions of us low-grade cultivators to sacrifice ourselves before they strike back?"

"In a sense, yes," Petrus calmly said, lifting his hand when Emily was about to continue. "This is the reality of war. Victory or defeat will ultimately be decided by those at the top, but that doesn't mean the battles between the lower-grade cultivators are without purpose."

"We are chess pieces," Zac said.

"Exactly," Serzo nodded. "The Monarchs don't want to die any more than the rest of us, but that's not what's holding them back. War is a game of chess. If the queen rushes into the enemy lines, they'll be taken out without a doubt. If too many fall, the balance will break, and the Kan'Tanu will flood the sector unhindered."

"That's where you come in," Petrus continued. "The System is aiding both sides by allowing teleportation to the frontlines through the Battlefront Arrays. Each world we recapture will weaken the Kan'Tanu's hold on our sector, especially if we manage to take out their Curse Farms or factories. Of course, the more important a location we're targeting, the higher the risk of being targeted by peak D-grade elites. It's even possible to run into a true Monarch if unlucky."

"Which is exactly what our side's Monarchs are hoping for," Zac sighed.

The Monarchs weren't hoping for their subordinates to die but to force the Kan'Tanu's hands as the armies targeted the strategic positions of the beachhead. It gave the Monarchs hiding in the shadows an opportunity to strike, dealing a huge blow to the cultists. Sacrificing a whole army to take out a single Monarch was a worthwhile trade from a strategic standpoint.

"And you shouldn't underestimate yourselves," Serzo said. "Monarchs aren't infallible, especially not here on the Frontiers. It's not impossible for D-grade armies to kill them, and they aren't immune to the concentrated attacks of a fleet of Cosmic Vessels. The common Early Monarchs, anyway."

"Still, that's a rough deal," Emily said. "Our equipment won't save us from the attack of an angry Monarch. I hear casualty rates in some engagements exceeded 90% in some cases. Even if we manage to drag one down with the help of our allies, it'll be after taking disastrous losses."

"Like it or not, we have to go," Joanna calmly said. "When life gives you lemons..."

"System's lemonade, bitter indeed," Carl muttered, and Zac could only agree.

The System was clearly in favor of the development on the front. It had given everyone the option to join, and Zac had opted out. The situation was even more chaotic in the first weeks of the clash, and blood had flowed like rivers. If Zac needed any further proof of how crazy the situation had become, he just needed to check his Quest Screen.

One of his shipyard quest's subgoals was for the sold Creator Vessels to destroy enough enemy vessels. It wasn't even halfway finished before, but it had finished four days after the Kan'Tanu reached the Red Zone. Calrin was being overwhelmed by requests for more vessels and spare parts, but there wasn't much they could do. The Creator's quotas were set by the System.

Zac definitely wouldn't send his people to that place if he had the choice. As he'd said to Kator, his little faction had already contributed more than their fair share. Besides, his elites were steadily growing stronger and accumulating merit by taking out one Kan'Tanu world after another through the Battlefront Arrays.

Unfortunately, the System had run out of patience, and the Atwood Empire's participation was no longer voluntary. They had been given a quota; six battlefronts needed to be fused into two, where each would be sent to the frontlines. Zac had tried to stall as long as possible until the situation stabilized, but the System had added a deadline. He needed to make the adjustments within two weeks, or the System would make them for him.

All D-grade factions across Zecia were in the same situation, though their quotas and grace periods differed depending on the System's evaluation. The Atwood Empire were among the last to be forcibly merged, all thanks to their stellar performance and non-stop campaigns. The first factions were forcibly merged and sent to the frontlines over a month ago, just hours after the initial clash.

"Well, at least the returns are good," Joanna offered. "Those who survive are rolling in it. Pretty much everything has strategic value and bonus merit."

"A faction like ours would be attached to a Middle- or Late D-grade army," Ilvere nodded. "It's dangerous, but the potential gains are indeed far greater. One day of fighting can surpass the reward of a week's campaign."

"That's right," Emily said, shooting Zac a mischievous grin. "Just look at Zac and Arcaz. They've already been pushed down to the 9th and 10th positions."

Zac answered with a roll of his eyes, once more feeling the pain of his empty pockets. But she was right. Over the past month, his monthly gains surpassed 40,000 for both his identities, a huge improvement compared to when the two companies were first set up. However, it actually wasn't enough to maintain his position, let alone climb any higher on the ladder.

"Fate is gathering," Vilari added, her tranquil voice like a calm lake that spread through the room. "The frontline is the true stage for the seals."

A few in the meeting weren't sealbearers, but everyone had already been appraised of the situation. They would have found out sooner or later, even if Zac hadn't told them. As Vilari said, one sealbearer after another popped up on the front. The situation had already reached the point where rumors spread among the elites of Zecia like wildfire.

Few knew the truth about Ultom or the Left Imperial Palace, but it was common knowledge that some combatants were carrying mysterious seals. Finding one on the battlefield meant getting your hands on an unimaginable opportunity. Some were initially skeptical, but that all changed when all the established factions put out monstrous bounties on the seals. Even information of sightings was worth a fortune, and it had attracted numerous elites who would normally have stayed far away from the frontlines.

The Atwood Empire remained unmoved, even if it had become clear that stumbling onto Starstorm had been a lucky break. After four months of constant fighting since the duel, Zac had only encountered two more. The first was a Soultaker of Ultom. It would have been nice to get a second member of the Anima Court, but the sealbearer had been personally discovered and killed by Vilari. She had offered to give up the seal, but Zac wouldn't snatch Vilari's opportunity like that.

This way, she'd gained her second seal early, and she was ready to break through at any time. Zac was extremely worried because of her heavy foundation and mysterious bloodline, but there was nothing he could do to help except provide some rare materials he'd found in the Perennial Vastness.

The second seal was a piece of the Farsee Court. The sealbearer was a Kan'Tanu this time, and he was currently sealed on the bottom floor of Purgatory with Starstorm. Zac wasn't sure what to do with that one. He

already had Ibtep and Jaol for his cycles, and he frankly felt it a waste to give them a second piece of the seal.

Jaol wasn't trustworthy enough, and Zac worried it might harm rather than help Ibtep. The Grub Knight might be a Hegemon, but he wasn't a pure combat class. He didn't have the strength to become even a minor player inside the Left Imperial Palace, so reinforcing his connection with Ultom could very well result in the Zhix never returning.

"You have to make a choice."

It was Petrus who had spoken, steadily looking at Zac. The choice was simple; should he enter the fray in earnest, or should he sacrifice six of the weaker armies to protect his elites and his core strength? Many had done just that, judging by the reports.

But that wasn't Zac's path, and it wasn't the culture he wanted to foster in his empire. Strength was a gift but also a responsibility.

"I've already discussed this with Arcaz. The System has made its will known, and we have to listen. We're joining the battle in earnest," Zac said.

His Draugr half opened his eyes and spoke up for the first time in the meeting. "Calamity and Acheron can't continue as they are. Our string of victories has been too eye-catching in either case. We barely avoided that headhunting squad the last time, thanks to Vilari's early warning. The System is also sending us to increasingly dangerous places. It's only a matter of time before disaster strikes, so we might as well take our chances."

"It's true," Petrus nodded. "Someone has managed to grab onto the patterns, and your faction is like a shining beacon. If I were the Kan'tanu, I'd station a Half-step Monarch in the region we were active in. A good way to snatch a whole faction of sealbearers."

Zac nodded in agreement. "Give out the order. The Fourth and Sixth will merge with the Calamity Company in ten days. The Eighth and Twelfth will join the Acheron Company."

"If there's resistance?" Ilvere asked.

The situation on the battlefield was public knowledge, so the soldiers of the other battalions knew what getting picked meant. They were mostly manned

by normal warriors, many of which weren't even Late E-grade. Each battalion had a core of elites, though many had intentionally avoided the two elite companies until now. They definitely wouldn't be happy about being sent to the Red Zone.

Even victories would come with heavy casualties among these common troops; the superior equipment of the Atwood Army couldn't change that. Zac was helpless to do anything, but months of warfare had numbed him to the cost of war. You could only keep trudging on, praying that the light at the end of the tunnel was hard-won peace rather than death.

"This is not an open forum. They're soldiers; they don't get to pick where they're sent," Zac said. "Quash any resistance. Deal with deserters the usual way. No transfers will be approved beyond the scheduled cycling."

"We'll deal with everything, " Ilvere agreed.

"Are we finishing another campaign before setting off?" Joanna asked.

"No," Zac said. "I'm giving both companies the full grace period to recover and consolidate. We could all use the break."

"Good," Petrus nodded. "I'm certain the break will pave the way for thousands of breakthroughs. It's not easy to connect with the Dao when you're always on the move and fearing for your life."

"That's what I'm betting on," Zac said. "I hear many have scrounged up enough merit for Temporal Chambers. I hope we'll see some more Hegemons that can help shore up our lines."

"Don't get your hopes up too much," Ilvere said. "I know those seals have let a few smoothly pass through, but Hegemony is a massive watershed. I know the Atwood Empire has far surpassed the Azh'Rezak Clan already, but it wasn't like the clan was solely made up of wastrels. Even then, the clan only had six Hegemons, most barely worth the name."

"I know," Zac said.

Admittedly, Zac didn't have huge expectations for the second generation of Hegemons. The first batch were all his closest confidants, elites who had relied on the insights of Ultom to create unique, top-quality Cosmic Cores. The next batch would likely be the exact opposite.

Those who entered the E-grade first on Earth weren't the elites who had dominated the various ladders. It was those with shallow foundations who had chosen Common E-grade classes. In contrast, many of the talents from the first year were still stuck in F-grade even a decade later. They had picked powerful classes and dominated the early months but hadn't accumulated the Dao and achievements necessary to get a matching E-grade Class.

Similarly, those who would form their Cosmic Cores were likely those who followed one of the Atwood Empire's basic Heritages. Elite soldiers who were strong, but not too strong. They'd use simple Cosmic Cores, barely making any alterations. It was far easier than creating something suited for your path, but these cultivators were unlikely to even reach the peak of Early D-Grade.

Not only that, but most would fail. They didn't enter seclusion equipped with the sublime understanding awarded by the seals. Most barely understood how the Cosmic Cores functioned and simply followed their Heritage like it was a cookbook. But that was how things worked in established factions. If anything, the Atwood Empire was extremely unconventional in how many unique paths their leaders had. It was something you almost only saw on newly integrated worlds.

The meeting ended two hours later, but Joanna stopped Zac just as he was about to leave for the teleporter. Zac saw the determination in her eyes and knew she'd made her decision.

"You're going?" Zac asked to confirm.

"I wanted to say goodbye," Joanna said. "And thank you for everything."

"Don't talk like you're not coming back," Zac frowned.

"Still."

"I'm the one who should thank you," Zac said, feeling extremely helpless. "You read the reports from the Undead Empire and the Alliance. The trials are all different, but the lethality rates—"

"That's all the more reason for me to go," Joanna said. "If it were easy, the reward wouldn't be worth it."

"If it's just a seal, we'll find more," Zac couldn't help but say. "Especially when we head to the frontlines."

"No, it's not about the seal," Joanna said. "Not really, anyway. I feel I need to do this, for myself, for my path. I have to prove to myself that I have the qualifications to strive for the Dao. That I'm more than the scared girl you picked up in Greenworth all those years ago."

"You've already proven that a thousand times over."

Joanna just looked at him with fierce determination.

"Alright, go," Zac sighed, pushing down his anxiety to smile at his captain. "Show them the mettle of the Atwood Valkyries. I'll be waiting for you to lead us to the front lines."

"I'll be back."

Zac wordlessly looked at Joanna's departing back as she headed for her home at the academy. They'd have the answer in ten days. If successful, Joanna would return at that point, stronger than ever. If not, she wouldn't return at all.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1118 - Thirteen Days - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1118 - Thirteen Days

"Sometimes you have to step into the belly of the beast if only to see if you can fight your way back out. Fate given can never compare to fate seized."

Zac glanced over to see Vilari had appeared by his side. "You're right, but it doesn't make me any less nervous."

"It shouldn't," Vilari said. "Your feelings are proof the sorrows of the world haven't suffocated your mortal heart. It's a gift."

"Teachings from your master?"

"Something like that," Vilari smiled. "I'm secluding myself too."

"Is there anything I can do? Do you want to use my cave?"

"There is no need," Vilari said. "I plan to activate the Temporal Chamber on Remembrance Plaza if that's okay with you."

Zac grimaced but nodded in agreement after some thought. "Just try not to disturb the visitors."

The plaza was located in New Washington but was something added after Zac took over. It was a huge square commemorating those who'd fallen during the integration. There were thousands of pillars covered with the names of those who died without a grave, and anyone could add the names of their loved ones.

Since the war, it had also been expanded to add huge mausoleums and a section dedicated to the soldiers of the Atwood Army. There were usually thousands of citizens visiting the square, putting flowers and candles by the pillars or steles. It had already become one of the most popular spots for pilgrimage among Earth's citizens. After all, who hadn't lost someone close during the integration?

Its special status and the constant stream of visitors had already left its mark on the square. It exuded a supernatural solemnity rife with something similar to Faith Power. It was like the mourning pilgrims had left a part of their suffering behind in the pillars before leaving. It was undoubtedly a very suitable spot for someone like Vilari to cultivate.

"Of course. They won't notice I'm there," Vilari assured.

"Then, good luck. I'm looking forward to seeing what you'll be able to accomplish as a Hegemon."

The Mentalist left soon after while Zac made his way toward the teleporter. His followers were forging ahead, and he needed to do the same. Thirteen days was nothing for a Hegemon, whose seclusions were often counted in decades. But it was a rare break after having pushed himself for months.

Zac's original plan had been to send one of his bodies to war while the other stayed behind and cultivated, working on the various aspects of his path. Reality had proven that was just a naive fantasy. He wouldn't have had any free time even if he had four bodies rather than two. His only windows of cultivation were the cooldown before the Battlefront Array opened up, and those were often occupied by meetings or enemy holdouts.

Swirling mists of densely packed energy greeted Zac as he entered his cultivation cave. His undead half was already waiting inside, surrounded by miasmic trees and teeming Death. The death-attuned forest of his Cultivation

Cave had seen a noticeable upgrade after Zac swapped out the withered trees forcibly converted inside the Dead Zone to native death-attuned trees from Kavista.

Each added to Triv's natural formation, and they even helped purify the energy. As a bonus, they were easier on the eyes with their vibrant indigo trunks and white spotted leaves.

Zac had already planned out his schedule, so he walked directly to the life-attuned half of his cave. A prayer mat was placed in its center with the Statue of Yrial standing behind. There was much that needed to be done, and his soul was first on the docket.

Both bodies took out their respective Array Disks, and the first cycle of reincarnation began. The two spirals in his Soul Aperture hummed to life as dense streams of Mental Energy and Dao were dragged out of his cores. The Mental Energy was further bolstered by his Moss Gem and Dao Branches. Triv had also helped install Soul Nurturing Arrays to infuse his body with even more fuel for the process.

The arrays could transform some of the planet's inherent spirituality into something useful for one's Soul Cultivation, but they mostly relied on Soul Crystals. He'd planted some Natural Treasures to improve the surroundings, but he hadn't gotten his hands on any real top-tier materials for that purpose yet. Zac was even using his Cosmic Core to provide the Array Disks of the [Nine Reincarnations Manual] with huge amounts of attuned energy.

It wasn't just Zac wanting to speed up the process. He had crossed the first watershed for his Soul Cultivation, attaining Minor Sublimation. The demands on energy and environment drastically increased. Zac knew that his efficiency wasn't even half what it would be if he weren't limited by circumstance. And that was considered pretty good—the [Void Vajra Sublimation] was even worse off.

That was simply how things were on the frontier. Just reaching Hegemony was a fight against fate, considering the lacking resources and hollow Dao. Anything above was a struggle where you had to replace quality with quantity.

Zac sat unmoving in his cave, but the disks in his hands gained an increasingly oppressive aura. He was essentially holding two bombs in his hands, but the top-quality craftsmanship and materials let the Array Disk

refine the raw energies into something greater. The process took two hours, at which point the crashing rivers came crashing back.

His Evolutionary Soul Core had generated a stream of immense Life, but it didn't all return to where it came from. Instead, Zac steered half into the golden shroud surrounding his Inexorable Core. Similarly, the Death-attuned Spiral surrounding his Evolutionary Core gained an infusion of Death, its gentle rotation turning into a forceful spin. Lastly, a small amount was dragged to the top, where the Void Mountain waited.

It wasn't like a thief siphoning some of the benefits, but rather an emperor demanding its due. However, the Void Mountain only fed on Void and Mental Energy. It filtered out some Mental Energy before rebuffing the Dao, letting it fall back into his Soul Aperture like a Dao-instilled rain.

His two cores were assailed by a sudden jump in pressure from the spinning shrouds, not only from their own spirals but from force radiated from the opposing side. The pressure let a sliver of external Mental Energy be added to the sun-like core in the middle. Even his Dao Molds benefitted, their channels being reinforced and expanded. The improvement wasn't big, but the session had just begun.

A second round of extraction began the moment the situation stabilized, with even more energy being added from outside sources. The hours passed as one cycle after another was completed, and the spirals released increasingly powerful radiance. The pressure was rapidly building, far beyond what the method originally called for—an unavoidable side effect of his choice to form two Soul Cores instead of one.

Thankfully, Zac's Soul Aperture was already incredibly resilient. The powerful Tribulation Lightning had swept through every inch of his body during his breakthrough. It almost killed him, but surviving meant the calamity had become an opportunity. The lightning had greatly reinforced his soul, just like his Cosmic Core.

His split existence came with benefits he only noticed after his soul had come under threat during one of the campaigns. His Technocrat Hidden Nodes had turned his Soul Aperture into a quantum space, which made it harder to target. A Soul-damaging curse had stopped with confusion the moment it entered the space, letting his Daos and [Immutability of Eoz] rip the curse apart before it could do anything.

The quantum space also made the aperture more durable. It was likely a natural consequence of the Technocrat Gates. They needed to create a sturdy barrier to isolate the quantum space with the normal dimensions bound by the Dao, just like his Specialty Core did. This also resulted in his aperture withstanding more abuse when practicing his [Nine Reincarnations Manual].

Even then, Zac only dared infuse his Dao into the first three cycles. Any more, and he'd damage his soul. The attuned dust looked like real galaxies by that stage, with millions of brightly shining stars holding large deposits of Life or Death. The train was running itself at that point, allowing Zac to focus on other matters.

At the fifth cycle, Zac made a small change. Motes of utter darkness were forced out of hiding and dragged into one of the Array Disks. Similarly, vibrant light of opalescent splendor appeared from the cells of his human body and entered the other. It was the refined energy from his Remnants, adding Creation and Oblivion to the process.

During the previous reincarnations, Zac had only turned to the Remnants when making the final breakthrough. A big reason for that was the limitations of the Array Disks—they couldn't withstand it without being damaged or twisted. However, the disks crafted for the fourth layer were different.

The materials were all D-grade and extremely precious, allowing them to take on small amounts of Creation- and Oblivion Energy without any major side effects. Zac only dared to use the energy for the second half of the method to avoid overdoing it, but it brought significant benefits to his soul. Not only that, but Zac had found the addition had another use.

Zac stabilized his thoughts before taking out a small metal token inscribed with seven intricate runes. It released a weak light containing the fundamental laws of the universe. The faint glimmer generated by seven seals was still not a match to the insights stored within the Lake Water of the Lost Plane, but it elevated Zac's mental state by almost 20%. More importantly, it opened Zac's mind to possibilities and ideas he was unlikely to reach on his own.

He turned his sights to a nearby easel. His hands were already full with the disk and token, but a brush rose through telekinesis, adding a few strokes to the intricate patchwork on the canvas. There was a similar easel by his undead side, but he only had the mental agility to work on one at a time. Even then, he only made a few additions before stopping, thoughtfully looking at the design for over twenty minutes without finding the answers he sought.

The blueprint resembled a mighty tree, with a large trunk taking up the painting's center. It was almost the only blank patch on the paper, with hundreds of patterned strings stretching out from its sides, forming a confusing web of branch-like fractals. It wasn't a schematic for his looming Cosmic Core upgrade—that thing was already finished inside the Perennial Vastness as part of the original schematics. It was a prototype for the broken energy highways on his shoulders.

Eventually, the refined energy from the Array Disk came crashing back, bringing with it the hints of Creation and Oblivion meshed with his own Daos. The energy entered his Soul Spirals, letting them go from drained to supercharged. Zac felt like he'd eaten stimulants and decisively added a few more strokes to the blueprint. The sixth cycle began after a minute, and his Mental Energy was siphoned off for another round of refinement. His inspiration went with it, and he found himself unable to progress any further.

The hours passed as Zac refined the fractal one burst at a time, relying on the ideas he'd had during the previous campaign, the [Court Cycle Token], and temporary brushes with Creation and Oblivion. Yet each cycle added less than the one before, and his progress slowed to a crawl by the eighth cycle.

Zac eventually shook his head and placed down the brush. He could tell that he wasn't getting any closer. His latest changes were just small improvements to efficiency without adding anything new. He was close to a solution, but an uncrossable barrier kept him from perfection.

Part of it was his lacking understanding of Creation and Oblivion. Much of his Daos of Life and Death was represented in the Remnant's refined energy, but an important distinction separated Life from Creation and Death from Oblivion. He could somewhat intuit the difference, but Zac wasn't confident fully grasping it when his Daos were at their current level.

Another reason he couldn't finish the blueprints was lacking inspiration. The token's weak light of comprehension indicated that an important piece was missing. However, Zac sensed it would take many sessions of trial and error or a stroke of inspiration to find it. For now, there wasn't much else to do. The Soul Strengthening Method was about to wrap up, and the energies involved required his full attention.

The nine-refined energy came roaring back, and even Zac's improved aperture shook from the immense force that had been gathered. It looked like the spiritual space had been cleanly delineated in two by the blinding light

released by the soul spirals. One side was drowned in gold slightly flickering with the opalescent grandeur of Creation. It was like the corner of a vast, life-giving sun had squeezed into his mind.

The other side was gripped in utmost darkness, where the gloom of Death felt like a frozen tundra resisting the golden sun. Within its depths were spots of terrifying nothingness that could only be sensed but not seen.

The only exceptions were two islands of unyielding opposition—the Soul Cores ensconced in their opposing Daos. They were under intense duress and filled to the brim with refined energy.

The pressure let more and more energy and truth merge with the Cores, and their resistance tempered the spirals in turn. However, it wasn't enough. Zac had taken the risk to form two Soul Cores, and it would be a waste to not take advantage. The cores were almost out of his control, but Zac held onto his tenuous grasp, using it to drive the cores toward one another.

The scene was just like when he first created them back in the Perennial Vastness. Life and Death were the basis of the [Nine Reincarnations Manual], but Conflict was the catalyst for rebirth. The whole cultivation cave shook from an invisible force as Soul Cores collided, and two waves of violent Dao fought in the cave's center.

The cave had become a representation of his aperture, where the physical world followed the spirit. Zac's visions swam from the impact, but he roused his cores for a second clash. Erratic streaks of Life and Death burst from his head like sparks released when a hammer struck the anvil. The process repeated once, twice, three times. The shockwaves overlapped, creating a mysterious resonance that spread through his body and beyond. It was as though the Daos of Life and Death had been dragged down from the Heavens and displayed in their most primal form.

Zac couldn't contain the huge amounts of energy the collisions discharged, and his aperture couldn't withstand the upheavals. With every clash, large amounts of refined energy seeped out of his body, but they also forced the cores to condense and incorporate some more. The same was true for the spirals, whose innumerable miniature stars had grown slightly stronger. More collisions would have further improved the effect, but Zac knew his Soul Cores couldn't take it.

Hairline cracks already covered their surface. Any more, and the damage would go from growing pains to crippling wounds. Still, Zac was happy with the result. The crude clash wasn't even a step in the original method but something Zac had added because of his special situation. Yet it had added a whopping 30% to his gains from every cultivation session. By the time his Soul Cores could endure a full nine collisions, the efficiency should be double that of the original method.

Not only that, but he finished the whole cycle in half the time the method called for, thanks to channeling both Array Disks simultaneously. It shortened the time his cores were tempered every session, but the gains far outweighed the downsides.

His Soul Aperture gradually calmed down since enough energy had been expelled. The empty expanse of spiritual space temporarily took the form of two energy oceans, reminiscent of how it looked after his first reincarnation. Of course, the amount of energy and Dao locked within the seas was far beyond back then. Still, it wasn't a natural state, but it would solve itself soon enough.

Some would naturally seep out of his body or return to his Cosmic Core, while some were dragged toward the top of his mind. Where the Void Mountain waited. The hidden construct had grown increasingly agitated by the surging waves of energy over the past hours, especially considering it couldn't absorb most of it. Dao and Void didn't mix, leaving the illusory mountain in a wanting state.

But no rules were absolute, and the seas stirred as another gate opened in Zac's mind. It was time to make another trade.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1119 - Stagnation and Dissolution - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1119 - Stagnation and Dissolution

The Void Mountain felt far more tangible than when Zac first got it, though that was partly a temporary effect of practicing the [Nine Reincarnations Manual]. However, Zac had spared no expense in collecting Void Treasures to facilitate its recovery. He'd spent tens of thousands of D-grade Nexus Coins over the past months, but Zac knew the mountain was worth every penny.

Void Energy was already seeping out of Zac's cells, rushing toward the mountain like Dao Seekers approaching Kunlun. The mountain reciprocated, turning the surrounding Void into a myriad expressions of the Void. Zac spotted hints of the Voids of Life, Death, and Conflict among them, but they were fickle and soon replaced by another absence of truth.

Their appearances were too short to grasp anything tangible, even when using the [Court Cycle Token]. Luckily, Zac had already found the solution after months of trial and error. A fount of condensed Dao burst forth from [Spiritual Void] in the center of his Soul Aperture. His mind had just calmed down after the earth-shattering clashes, but the lingering energy was swept up in the tsunami released by his Hidden Node.

It formed a pillar of Life and Death, seemingly rising toward the Heavens. In reality, it flooded the Void Mountain's hidden space, and the mountain accepted it all. The Mountain rebuffed any attuned Mental Energy or Dao. But any Dao stored in the [Spiritual Void] was an exception. The mountain would even accept the leftovers from the [Nine Reincarnations Manual] so long as it was mixed with at least 50% Void-refined Dao.

The mountain's influence on the ambient Void Energy soon shifted. Until now, no aspect of the Void was more dominant than any other, but noticeable pockets of Life and Death gradually appeared. They also lasted longer before being forced into another form, giving Zac a longer window of discovery.

His E-grade Hidden Node only managed to turn a few percent of the Void Energy into a matching element with the help of the accumulated energy, but that was enough for Zac. The frontlines and the upcoming campaigns were pushed aside, replaced by the hidden truths of the Voids of his path.

Unfortunately, the mountain was immeasurable and insatiable, and [Spiritual Void] couldn't keep up for long. The Mountain could release pulses a while longer before it would fade, but Zac immediately retracted his Void Energy. The longer he used this cultivation method, the longer the mountain would have to recover. Even this short stint meant he'd have to feed it for a week before trying again.

The remaining energy in his Soul Aperture was immediately dragged into [Spiritual Void] to replenish its lost stock. Zac let the Hidden Node do its thing while he digested the results of his latest session. It had taken months, but Zac was finally starting to grasp hold of something tangible.

First of all, he'd confirmed that while the Void was the absence of Dao, it was also truth on its own. However, it seemed as though it couldn't exist independently. The Void relied on the Dao like a shadow needing a source. If the Dao shifted as the Era progressed and Supremacies vied for their corners of the Heavens, so would the Void change its meaning.

But how did that fit with the First People? What happened to the Void when the Dao shattered? Zac felt there was a missing piece of the puzzle. One possibility he'd considered was that the connection he'd felt was a result of his Bloodline rather than a fundamental truth. The Void Emperor was a bridge between the two, which made the impossible possible.

The truth was elusive, but the connection had helped him with his research. It let him observe the Void of Life and Death through his Daos, comprehending by observing contrasts. He'd already reached a basic understanding, and the Void had gone from a mysterious enigma to something that could be chipped away piece by piece.

Zac had named the Void of Life Stagnation and the Void of Death Dissolution.

The Void Of Death didn't represent immortality. At least, that was not what Zac saw when he observed the flickering motes in his mind. For him, it felt more like the terrifying blankness beyond the Void Mountain.

Death was the ultimate end of all journeys, but it was also a major driving force for all beings in creation. Fear of death, desire for longevity. Purpose, struggle—they all faded when the fundamental truth of Death was removed. It was a form of existential apathy. Without Death creating stakes, nothing mattered.

It was ominous, but Zac believed it would naturally fit with his Evolutionary Stance. The technique represented the unquenchable spirit of Life and the unending struggle to shatter the chains of fate. Dissolution was the other side of the coin. It gave Evolution context in a way that another Dao could not.

In practice, Zac believed infusing the Void of Death into the Evolutionary Stance would make his attacks harder to counter. Just like how Kator's Technique messed with Zac's sense of time flow, so would Dissolution make his opponents less attentive. Adding the unpredictable nature of the Void and his attacks would be much harder to counter.

Of course, Zac was far from reaching the point of replicating the phenomenon predictably and without relying on the Void Mountain. He hadn't made any significant breakthrough, but he loved the feeling of making gradual progress. In every session, he managed to extract a few grains of understanding. They were not worth mentioning on their own, but they would eventually accumulate into a mountain.

He'd asked Vilari, and the sensation was similar to how meditating on the Dao felt for high-affinity cultivators. He'd always suspected his odd constitution came with inverted affinities, and the Void Mountain had all but confirmed that fact.

There were some important differences between comprehending the Void and the Dao. Zac was certain he had already reached a level of comprehension that could match a Dao Seed, but he didn't have anything tangible to show for it. There were no prompts from the System, no Dao Apparitions or Fractals, nothing.

Zac couldn't generate or move the truths of the Void with his Soul. As such, it was impossible to infuse his skills with something like Void Seeds of Stagnation and Dissolution. He still had to rely on his Bloodline and the mountain to conjure the Voids of Life and Death, but he couldn't control the Void Energy after the mountain separated it.

Yet Zac was certain his work would eventually bear fruit. He knew he hadn't discovered the true purpose of the Void Mountain or what secrets it held. Zac sometimes felt like he was collecting the cobwebs and dust from an ancient treasure chest, ignoring the true prize within. But the more he interacted with it, the closer he was to getting some real answers.

If nothing else, Zac could already see some benefits through his cultivation of the [Void Vajra Sublimation]. The better he understood the Void of Life, the more Life he could steal from the Cosmos to further his constitution. A couple of months of practice had already increased his cultivation speed by 20%—a much-needed boost. There were no Abyssal Ponds for his human side, and the large gap between his constitutions couldn't be bridged in a month or two.

Zac's Draugr half left the cave to deal with the various matters that had cropped up. Zac also stood up, but he didn't leave his cave. He crossed the vibrant forest and stepped into the side chamber that was the source of the Life-attuned energy. It was the original cave he'd discovered after snatching

the [Fruit of Ascension]. He'd jumped into the pool of Nexus Water to escape the sea of poison that Ogras tricked him into releasing.

The cave looked vastly different today. In fact, it was barely recognizable from just a couple of months ago. For one, its size had grown more than five times to accommodate its new occupants. Every inch was covered with dense vines, forming a lush cocoon that had suffocated all other life despite the transcendent environment. All other life except the gargantuan bulb in the cave's center.

Zac's Worldring was still more than large enough to accommodate the adolescent Worldrender Vine, but the synthetic environment of the Spatial Tool couldn't match up to the environment of his cave. There was something missing, no matter how many treasures he threw inside. The energy and Dao were rootless, making them hollow compared to the real thing.

Even the Inner Worlds of Monarchs faced the same problem, though their Daos nurtured their worlds in a way that Worldrings couldn't match. But they were still incomplete, and staying inside such a world for too long was harmful to one's cultivation. Only the Inner Worlds of Autarchs held the true Dao thanks to connecting a ladder to the Heavens.

The difference didn't matter for Vivi, who had reached her limits. It was different for Haro, who was in a stage of explosive growth, where his demands on quantity and quality were constantly increasing. Zac would have left Haro in here permanently if the battlefronts hadn't been so beneficial to his growth. It was almost like the bloody atmosphere was fertilizer, allowing Haro to strengthen its connection to the Dao of Conflict.

"How are you guys?" Zac smiled as he walked inside.

Haro couldn't answer, and Zac doubted he'd bother even if he could. Haro could barely be considered aware by this point, but he already displayed the signature arrogance and aggression of a Heavenrender Vine.

Vivi was happier to see him, and he felt the connection to his companion restore as she sent a few Vines over to greet him. Zac threw out a couple of recently killed Beast Kings, but she only took some blood for herself before giving Haro the carcasses. The beasts were quickly dragged into the bulb, and Zac heard crunching sounds for a few seconds before things calmed down.

Zac felt a pang of sorrow as he observed Vivi's lacking appetite. Vivi's vines didn't look as wan and withered as when he got her, and most of her brown leaves had turned golden. It was no surprise. Heda had been a prisoner of the Orom World like everyone else, and she barely had enough resources to avoid relegation. She simply didn't have the resources to provide an old experiment like Vivi with top-quality nourishment.

However, Vivi's lifeforce was still only growing weaker. All the treasures in the world couldn't subvert the river of time and the limits of fate—at least not any Zac had found. They had made Vivi a bit stronger, though. She was now a strong Peak E-Grade Spirit Plant, rather than Late E-grade like when he got her, and she could enter something similar to Half-Step Hegemony for short bursts. However, months of fighting with the evolved forms of [Verun's Bite] and [Love's Bond] clearly showcased the undeniable gap between Vivi and his other companions.

She couldn't keep up.

Dealing with normal soldiers was no problem, but Vivi couldn't threaten or contain most Middle Hegemons, making it hard to fully utilize his Evolutionary Stance. Zac often used [Primal Edict] to complement her pressure, but it wasn't the same. Those vines were hard to control by their very nature. They represented the wild cycle of death and rebirth, and they didn't have the same connection as he had with Vivi or Alea.

And since Vivi couldn't break through, Haro needed to wake up sooner rather than later. That way, she wouldn't need to drain herself to keep up with his constant fighting.

The timeline hadn't seemed like a problem when Zac first got the Heavenrender Seed. Haro would be grown up in time for the Assimilation, at which point Zac had expected to be a middle Hegemon at best. After all, he'd known just how difficult progress through Hegemony was for Mortals. Then came Ultom, paving a path to power while bringing terrifying enemies to his doorstep.

Luckily, Zac hadn't held back on providing for Haro. His aura already surpassed Vivi's, even if he was only a big bulb with some feeding tubes.

Haro's shocking progress left Zac with mixed emotions. It was yet another reminder that the Multiverse wasn't fair or equal. Passing the F-grade wasn't a given for Humans, and becoming a Hegemon made you a talent even in the

Multiverse Heartlands. The vast majority simply didn't have the fundamental qualifications to take that step. Even those with talent had to work hard and risk their lives to break through.

Meanwhile, Haro wasn't even slowing down as he tackled that threshold. No, it couldn't even be considered a bottleneck for Haro—Hegemony for a Heavenrender Vine was nothing more than entering puberty. There would be no tribulation, no lightning, and Haro wouldn't encounter any roadblocks on his way to Monarchy. His only bottlenecks were his natural absorption speed and the depths of Zac's pockets.

A powerful presence pushed against Zac's mind as he walked over to the building-sized bulb. It almost felt like he was being stared down by a monstrous beast reeking of blood and destruction. The hazy consciousness wasn't completely hostile, but it was still full of warning. Zac almost wanted to slap some sense into the huge bulb. He'd spent a fortune on Haro's growth, yet it barely tolerated his existence.

The problem would only grow larger from here on out. Not even a Plant Master like Heda could subdue a grown Heavenrender Vine, let alone Zac. And Haro was not a normal Heavenrender Vine, thanks to its extravagant diet. He needed to form a binding connection before it was too late. It was essentially taking advantage of the naivety of a child, but it was his only chance.

Today was a chance to kill two birds with one stone. If everything went according to plan, both he and Haro would benefit tremendously. It all depended on whether his purchase lived up to its description.

Zac took out the box that had set him back to a measly 2,328 merit after having accumulated over 200,000. It had cost him everything he'd earned over four months of campaigning, along with most of his remaining starting bonus. Zac opened the lid, finding three items inside.

One was a vial filled with a viscous golden liquid. Not even the dense isolating inscriptions could block out the immense amount of lifeforce sealed within. Zac could feel a palpable desire as Haro sensed its contents, and dozens of feeding vines slithered toward him.

"Now you're suddenly friendly?" Zac snorted while casually slapping the vines away, but his eyes never left the vial.

The liquid within shimmered like it was mixed with miniature diamonds. Opalescent runes flickered around the vial, forming a halo of truth. Even the glimmers within the sealed container seemed to hold the primordial truths of Life. However, Zac could tell the runes weren't just random expressions of Dao caused by the liquid's intense energies. There were patterns within the chaos, combining into a natural formation of incredible complexity.

Zac turned to the item next to the vial, which was a single leaf lying on a bed of shimmering sand. It looked more like a delicate sculpture than something naturally formed, and it actually made Zac think of Iz Tayn. Like her features, the leaf was completely elevated from the mundane, proof of its intense affinity.

But while Iz was a personification of the myriad Daos of Fire, the leaf embodied the essence of Life. Its mere appearance set the Divine Energy in the cave astir, like subjects greeting its king. However, it was clear the grand appearance wasn't the leaf's original state. Like the vial, it was ingrained with microscopic dots of life.

They were likely the source of the patterns covering its surface. Who knew? The leaf might have been completely ordinary before it encountered the opportunity that made it uniquely linked to the golden liquid.

The last item in the box didn't exude any spirituality. It was a normal Information Crystal, and Zac closed the lid after taking it out, much to Haro's dismay. Zac scanned its contents for twenty minutes before taking out a wooden block and one of his artisanal axes.

Lines appeared at a rapid pace, and a fractal resembling the leaf had soon been etched into the block. Zac looked at it thoughtfully for a few minutes before making some minor alterations. It shouldn't pose any problems.

"Alright, alright," Zac smiled as he extricated himself from the web of Haro's feelers.

Almost everything was in place. Zac was only missing some fuel for his plan to work, and two new boxes thumped onto the ground. Neither had the signature array of the System's wares. They were normal treasure chests Zac had bought in the Perennial Vastness. Inside were piles of Dao Treasures reeking of both Life and Conflict.

Cultivation was to take measured steps on a neverending road. But sometimes, you had to take a leap.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1120 - Symbiosis - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1120 - Symbiosis

Zac knew he was taking a big risk but felt the cosmos urging him forward. Fate was gathering as a rising tide. Some would be swallowed by the churning waters, but others would ride the wave to greater heights. Zac believed he was among the latter, but you couldn't stand on the shores if you wanted to find out.

He opened the inlaid box and took out the vial again, and Haro communicated a palpable hunger. Vivi wasn't as enthused, even shielding the large flower bud in vines as Zac walked toward her child. She was older and better understood the ingrained relationship between risk and opportunity. Zac looked up at the large flower on the ceiling that could be considered Vivi's head.

"I have to do this, for both our sakes. Haro can't grow to his full potential without facing the wind."

Vivi didn't answer, but her vines eventually retreated. Zac nodded and jumped onto the bulb, seeing the death chamber within. Haro's main body was a large flower with petals and vines layered into an inescapable web that seemed to form a natural restriction. Its center was filled with huge thorns that looked like teeth, and a twist of its vines would rotate them like a grinder. Only scraps remained of the beast kings that had been dragged inside, with the rest absorbed by the plant.

"I don't know if you can understand me. This will hurt, but you need to hold on. Don't resist, or it'll worsen the result for both of us."

Zac opened the stopper, and an immense burst of energy almost threw him off Haro's back. The cave was filled with a pillar of Life, and Zac felt his cells being nourished by its aura. It was minute, but even some of his lost Longevity was restored. It didn't make much of a difference for Zac, but it proved just how much energy the liquid contained for its emanations to have such an effect.

Haro almost went mad with hunger, and hundreds of feeding vines emerged from the bud. Zac didn't keep the Heavenrender Vine waiting any longer and poured the vial right into its heart. Vines shot toward the falling drops, but Haro failed to seize anything as the liquid dispersed into a shimmering haze.

It looked like it was Haro being consumed rather than the other way around as the shroud grew, soon covering the whole plant. Shimmering runes danced within the mist, forming an ever-changing pattern. They sank into Haro's flesh one after another, bringing with them immense amounts of energy.

The whole mountain shook, and shocking amounts of Divine Energy were forcibly dragged from the depths. Zac had already jumped down from Haro's back and sat down right in front of it, taking out the second half of the entwined treasure. The leaf had already come alive on its own, generating mysterious ripples that covered the cave.

Zac knew every second it spent outside his body was energy lost, so he grabbed it in an attempt put it into his mouth. However, the leaf turned into a streak of gold that entered his hand, quickly appearing in his torso just above his Cosmic Core. The leaf shuddered, and Zac felt thousands of runes appear throughout his body, his situation mirroring Haro's.

Painful waves of boundless Life dug into flesh and bone, but Zac's face didn't so much as ripple. The pain wasn't even at the level of his Body Tempering Method and not enough to distract him. Instead, he focused on the leaf itself. Zac channeled his mental energy into his Evolutionary Dao Mold and sent the braid into the leaf.

His Daos were the missing piece of the puzzle, the key that made the formation whole. The shimmering runes across the leaf shifted, and it was a leaf no longer. Instead, it was a gate to the boundless universe. Zac didn't hesitate as he sent a wisp of his soul inside. His vision split, with a verdant scene occupying most of his mind.

Life was everywhere. It was everything in the realm beyond the gate.

Zac had become a will-o'-the-wisp gently floating on the branch of a cosmic tree. Just the branch seemed boundless, transcending physical space to become law. As for the tree itself, it might cover all reality where life existed. Its roots dug deep into the lower planes, and its canopy reached for the stars. Zac had been somewhat prepared after reading the instruction, but he was still shocked at the immensity of the scene.

Of course, Zac knew it wasn't a real tree. It was more accurate to say it was a manifestation of the Dao of Life's tapestry. The leaf's formation had let him temporarily touch upon it with his mind, providing a direct connection that only top-quality Dao Treasures could match. He looked around, realizing that each leaf was a life, and the boundless tree held so many it almost broke Zac's mind.

None looked the same. They had all grown from different soils of fate and circumstance, becoming the infinite expressions of Life. Most were weak and unimpressive, but even they had something that made them unique. A few radiated such incredible power Zac didn't dare observe for long. Unfortunately, none of the leaves was the one Zac sought.

Physical proximity seemed to have little bearing on the vision or arrangement of the leaves. Out of the thousands in his immediate surroundings, Zac couldn't recognize the aura of a single one. Zac spread his consciousness further, but he still didn't find Haro after reaching as far as his spirit could go. Zac had expected as much and infused even more of his Dao into treasure.

The runes through his body lit up even further, and a sharp stab of pain in his real body preceded an invisible pulse being released within the mysterious realm. Still nothing. Zac wasn't deterred and urged the wisp to move to a new section. Another pulse, yet only the gentle rustle of Life answered his call. There was finally a response by the fourth attempt, but Zac frowned upon seeing a large leaf float over. Or rather, a creature masquerading as a leaf.

It wasn't Haro, but something reeking of rot and decay. Zac could have retreated, but a burst of ferocious sharpness shredded the thing—a burst of cleansing Conflict in the sea of verdure. Zac continued on his way, feeding the treasure leaf with more and more Mental Energy. A few more weird parasitical creatures appeared, but none could withstand a single burst of the Branch of Kalpataru.

Distances were hard to grasp inside the Tree of Life. Zac felt like he'd undertaken an epic journey, but it also felt like he'd only stayed in a small corner of a single branch. He started to worry if he'd been unlucky and placed too far away. The treasure said there was a chance of that happening, but it was supposed to be low.

Finally, there was an answer to his call, a ripple matching his own. He'd found it. Zac eagerly followed the signal, rushing through the endless canopy with redoubled vigor. Soon, Zac spotted a thorned golden leaf on a distant branch.

Haro. Zac hadn't expected finding him would be so difficult, but it didn't matter now that he was here.

The treasure he'd bought from the Limited Exchange was a unique bonded treasure called [Bond of the Divine]. The liquid and leaf didn't have a shared origin, but they had encountered something that linked them together. It wasn't a normal link either, but one that connected the two items through the Tapestry of Life.

The diamondlike glimmer had generated a natural formation based on the connection, turning the items into something that could be used as a companion contract. It could be used on any living creature, not only plants like Haro. Pet contracting methods weren't especially rare—the Orom World had three suitable skills and dozens more of varying elements. Of course, this wasn't a normal companion contract—if it were, it wouldn't have cost more than 80% of the items in the Limited Exchange.

Even now, Haro was angry, struggling against cryptic patterns that danced across its body like parasitic insects. Meanwhile, cracks occasionally appeared, releasing bursts of golden light before the wound closed. Zac could sense Haro's pain, fear, and boundless anger as he instinctively fought against the transformation imposed on its body.

Zac wasn't surprised. He'd felt just how much energy that golden liquid held. Even a top-tier plant with one foot into Hegemony would have trouble digesting all that, and the natural formation was also drawing immense amounts of Divine Energy from the ground. What Haro thought was a delectable treat was an agonizing round of tempering. But Zac had been in similar situations more than a few times, and he estimated that Haro would be able to overcome the danger.

Haro's leaf suddenly froze as Zac floated closer. He had detected Zac's approach and grown wary. Zac didn't make any attempt at hiding. Instead, he flew over and tried to link up with Haro through the treasure. He was blocked by the opalescent runes covering the leaf, but that wasn't a problem after Zac infused his Daos into the patterns.

Like before, the formation shifted, and Zac felt the two halves of the formation join up as they were transformed by his Evolutionary Daos. They were far beyond Haro's grasp on Life and Conflict, and Zac could feel his hunger and desire. The adolescent plant should instinctively understand that the Daos

could help him digest the vast amounts of energy inside his body, let him soar to the sky in one leap.

And they were there for the taking.

Zac acted the fisherman but swore when he felt an angry push against his mind. The little fish hadn't taken the bait. Haro was stubborn like a bull and agitated, striking at anything that came close. Zac tried to calm him down, to communicate what he should do. However, Haro refused, adamant about dealing with the array and energy on his own.

"Picky eater?" Zac snorted as he opened the boxes before him. "We'll see how long you stick to your principles."The origin of this chapter's debut can be traced to N0v3l--B1n.

Two collections of Dao Fruits waited within, and Zac ate one of each type. A surge of truth stormed into his mind, entering the two Dao Apparitions. The influx shattered the chains that had held his Dao Branches back for so long. The Divine Tree grew taller, its energetic aura deepening as new aspects of Life were tacked on. The miniature axman danced his dance of destruction, his swings growing fiercer and more unpredictable.

It didn't take long for the stream of truths entering his Dao Mold to grow deeper and more complex, and Zac sped up the process further by eating another set of Dao Fruits. Truth was transferred from aperture to leaf and from leaf to Haro, showering the Tree of Life with Zac's path.

Zac inwardly snickered when he felt the desperate desire through the link, but he didn't say or do anything. This step would have to be taken by Haro himself. The young vine resisted for a minute, but he was young, and his will wasn't tempered. Haro soon succumbed to the desire for power and stopped resisting Zac's presence and the array.

Instantly, everything clicked into place, and Zac felt boundless force enter his body as the Tree of Life disappeared. In return, Zac felt a heavy drain on his mind. It was a give and take, forming a cycle of discovery and refinement. Zac shut out his surroundings, fully focusing on his Daos and the transformation of his body. His cells rapidly absorbed more life, saving him months of work on his [Void Vajra Sublimation].

Zac didn't know how much time passed or how many cycles of exchange had taken place between himself and Haro. Eventually, the feeling of growth

diminished, leaving only a link as stable as the Dao itself. Zac opened his eyes, and a mental check left him stumped. Eight days had passed just like that?

The experience had filled up his consciousness, leaving both bodies stuck in a meditative trance. Thank God he'd been ready for something like that to happen, so his Draugr half had retreated to his compound just before starting the process. Zac looked over at Haro, surprised to see that he had shrunk in size by half.

However, his aura was incredibly condensed and felt far more lethal than before. Haro undoubtedly had benefitted immensely over the past eight days. Zac was curious to investigate exactly how much, but Haro had entered a deep slumber to digest the energy and insights. The cave was completely drained of Divine Energy, so he sent Haro and Vivi into his Worldring with some treasures.

Zac's communication crystals were full of unanswered messages, but he first opened his Status Screen.

Name Zachary Atwood

Level 164

Class [D-Arcane] Evolutionary Precursor

Race [D] Human - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment [Zecia] Atwood Empire – Baron of Conquest

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

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

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

Core [D] Evolutionary Core

Strength 102816 [Increase: 204%. Efficiency: 429%]

Dexterity 47432 [Increase: 156%. Efficiency: 285%]

Endurance 66137 [Increase: 185%. Efficiency: 450%]

Vitality 57732 [Increase: 178%. Efficiency: 428%]

Intelligence 9576 [Increase: 135%. Efficiency: 285%]

Wisdom 17519 [Increase: 137%. Efficiency: 300%]

Luck 1003 [Increase: 164%. Efficiency: 374%]

Free Points 0

Nexus Coins [D] 8 412 249

Another step closer to the next stage of Hegemony. The gains were extremely impressive, but that was always the case when improving his Daos. And this time, he hadn't just evolved one but two.

[Branch of the War Axe (Late): All attributes +50, Strength +9500, Dexterity +5000, Wisdom +150. Effectiveness of Strength +25%]

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

Zac smiled helplessly upon seeing that he'd lost his last piece of Intelligence from his Daos. The Branch of the War Axe was also growing more condensed. The small boost to Endurance was gone, and the imparted Wisdom had decreased by two-thirds. For a while, he'd broadened his path, but Zac felt like he was returning to the path of the brute.

The latest boost had increased his attribute pool by another fifteen percent, and where his Strength had finally passed 100,000. Unfortunately, it hadn't awarded him any more specialist titles. Perhaps if he reached 250,000 before Monarchy? Zac was doubtful, and it ultimately didn't matter much. The real benefit came from having three Late Dao Branches to empower his skills and Technique.

Most would consider evolving two branches foolish and greedy. Even if you succeeded against all odds, it'd likely leave you with shaky foundations. Zac didn't feel that way at all. If anything, the breakthroughs were long overdue.

Zac had already been right at the threshold when first stepping onto the battlefield, thanks to a decade of accumulation inside the Perennial Vastness. His battle with Kator and months of experience had been more than enough to clear up any lingering confusion. Even studying the Voids of his path had given him a better understanding of his Daos. After all, they were linked, and by understanding one, you would understand the other.

The only reason he'd held off breaking through until now was the new insights he gained during his dip in the Abyssal Pond. After seeing how grand and comprehensive the Dao of Death could be, Zac slowed down and reevaluated his understanding of Dao. Mez had made Fate part of Death without turning it into a Mixed-meaning Dao, and the Abyss almost seemed to hold all the Daos under the Heavens.

Zac wouldn't have minded holding out even longer while searching for answers, but time waited for no man. There was no telling what he'd encounter on the frontlines, and he couldn't hold back such a critical boost to his power. Perfection was an illusion in D-grade, anyway, and he'd fill in the blanks as he progressed.

There was nothing else of note on his Status Screen, so he opened his Skill Screen next. By the end, the new addition waited for him.

[D] Adaptive Symbiosis - Proficiency: Early. Bond through Life, rise through struggle. Upgradeable.

Zac smiled and turned his gaze inward. It felt like a small sun had been born atop the Specialty Core, radiating warmth throughout his body. Its shape made Zac think of a seed rather than a leaf, and the pathways connecting it with his Cosmic Core looked like roots absorbing nutrients. It wasn't far from the truth. The skill was constantly running, siphoning a small amount of Divine and Cosmic Energy.

The cost was nothing compared to the benefits. As its name indicated, [Adaptive Symbiosis] was more than just a Companion-binding skill. The initial exchange where Zac's body gained more Life and Haro gained Dao wasn't the end of the shared benefits. The bond would provide the pet with constant nourishment. And since it came directly from Zac's Cosmic Core, it would further harmonize Haro's Daos with his own.

The skill could also be activated. Zac infused some energy, and his companion shuddered within the Worldring. Haro didn't wake up, but his aura

grew by a noticeable margin. Zac looked on with interest, but his attention was soon diverted by the vast amount of Vigor pouring into his body. His muscles sang, and Zac felt he could fight for ten days and nights without stopping.

Zac nodded in satisfaction and deactivated [Adaptive Symbiosis] before Haro woke up. The skill had provided Haro with part of Zac's attributes. Judging by Haro's aura, its attribute pool had risen by roughly 10%. It wasn't much, but Zac suspected Haro's grade limited the effect.

The encounter had improved Haro's cultivation significantly, but he hadn't entered D-grade quite yet. He was right at the threshold, but his foundations were noticeably sturdier than before. Haro would hopefully have become a Plant King by the time he woke up. By that point, he should benefit even more from the skill.

Zac didn't gain any attributes but didn't come out wanting from the trade. Cultivators were far inferior to beasts regarding lifeforce and Vigor, but plants towered above them both. In return, Spiritual Plants were rooted in place, and their consciousness was usually locked in an eternal slumber. Atavism was also all but impossible for most species.

Most importantly, their cultivation speed was incredibly slow. That was exactly why Haro couldn't resist copying some of Zac's Daos and what made the [Bond of the Divine] so precious. Few things could impart Daos to plants, who slowly communed with the Heavens as the seasons came and went. Who knew how long it would take the vine to reach that level of comprehension on his own? Centuries, most likely, and that was only thanks to all the treasures he'd been fed.

In other words, both came out ahead. Being able to tap into just a part of a Heavenrender Vine's Vigor solved the troubling issue with his Eoz Bloodline. His fight with Kator lasted less than 20 minutes, yet he'd been completely drained by the time it was over. And he couldn't exactly take out a huge slab of meat and scarf it down mid-battle. With [Adaptive Symbiosis], he could convert energy into Vigor.

Zac spent another day stabilizing his state and getting familiar with his Daos. There were still a few days before they had to go to the front, but Zac grunted and got to his feet. Joanna's trial was about to end, and he wanted to be there to welcome her back. There was also Vilari and the fact that none of the waiting messages were from her.

He wasn't too worried about Vilari. She was an absolute genius, and her path was solidified by two seals of the Anima Court. She knew what she was doing.

The one that was cause for concern was Joanna. Zac knew that more than a few promising elites across Zecia had entered the trial and never returned. Some of them were stronger than Joanna. No, he couldn't think like that. No one pushed themselves harder than Joanna, and she was perfect for the Indomitable Court.

There was no way the System would let such an amazing soldier fall early.