

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1131 - Faith and Thorns - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1131 - Faith and Thorns

The desolate tundra was painted in myriad hues as the Dao-wrought northern lights grew into huge dimensional fissures that spread across the horizon. However, it wasn't the Void that waited on the other side. It was a melange of chaotic truths and unstable energies. It reminded Zac of the Void Star, both when the Spatial Nexus blew up and when they escaped Gemmy's world.

Even today, Zac didn't fully understand what those realms of chaotic spacetime represented, but it seemed to be the result of two realms pushing against each other. The immense energies involved opened up a temporary space filled with energy and Dao from both realities. Entering such a space was incredibly dangerous, and whether you found your way back before the spatial bubble burst depended on luck and strength.

The scene above was both beautiful and harrowing, but it seemed as though it had nothing to do with their battle. Space still held within the planet's protective atmosphere, though Zac could vaguely feel an uncomfortable pressure. It came and went like a storm that couldn't be seen with the naked eye, but it was more noticeable wherever large amounts of energy had been unleashed. The sensation filled Zac with trepidation, like they were fighting on top of a thin layer of ice.

If you took a wrong step or exerted too much power, you might accidentally break through and be plunged into the icy depths below. Dossin's subordinates had released thousands of deep-blue crystals that hovered above their ranks. They released subtle ripples that seemed to help stabilize space, but their effect was limited. It was no wonder. How could a couple of low-grade arrays nullify the force exerted by a moving Mystic Realm?

Attacking was fraught with danger, but to avoid fighting wasn't an option. Over a hundred monstrous goliaths were bearing down on their position, each a walking calamity with enough strength to indiscriminately slaughter their E-grade soldiers. In fact, they wouldn't even need to breach their lines to devastate their ranks.

Thousands of tendrils grew from their towering bodies, forming an impassable wall of sin. The terrible aura within the thorns and flesh was similar to the common Heart Curses they usually fought, but it was deeper, more refined. It

didn't escape anyone's notice, and it drastically increased the pressure they found themselves under.

Taking the brunt of a war slave's Heart Curse was still lethal for most. However, E-grade cultivators could survive being grazed or lightly wounded by tendrils or most forms of cursed ground. Of course, it depended on them not being implanted with too much corruption and that they sought treatment in time.

These tendrils were different. Whatever methods the Chapter of Hallowed Fleshed used to create these monsters made the cursed energy they carried far more potent. Zac almost felt a hunger from the sea of fleshy vines that slithered toward them with incredible speed. It would be extremely bad if their lines were breached.

A storm of long-distance attacks pelted the giants as soon as they came in range. It did little to exhaust their boundless energy. Only the Hegemons managed to damage their hardened flesh, but only a handful collapsed from the initial barrage. The rest trudged on, and even grievous wounds closed with a speed that rivaled the recovery of Plant Kings. Worse, much of the energy from those who fell was siphoned off by their brethren.

Millions of E-grade warriors couldn't accomplish much individually, but they would be able to exhaust the giants if given time. Unfortunately, there were too few targets, and one of the headaches of large-scale battles reared its ugly head. Dossin's orders were precise and exhaustive to maximize the damage they caused, but there were simply too many people targeting the same spot.

Space became too congested, and many attacks actually helped the giants by clashing with other skills in an unintended friendly fire. Such a scene rarely occurred when the Acheron Company fought alone, but this army had been cobbled together half an hour ago. Getting the timing right was impossible.

Most E-grade soldiers were ordered to target the incoming goretide instead. It was constantly growing denser, and a constant rain of attacks was barely enough to maintain a status quo. The situation wasn't looking good. They were barely keeping the goliaths at bay, but more were already stepping onto the battlefield. The pressure increased, and their soldier's energy wasn't endless. It was just a matter of time before their defensive line was breached unless something changed.

Zac was worried, but he didn't set out alone to lessen the pressure on his men. He could guess why General Dossin adopted such a conservative approach. Part of it was that the approaching goliaths were just empty meat shields meant to exhaust their elites and War Machines. These fleshy monstrosities were all very powerful, but there were still the cultists themselves to worry about.

There was something else too. Dossin had to adapt their response to the constantly shifting spatial pressure. Activating so many War Arrays at once had pushed the dimensional integrity to the limits. They had no choice but to slowly advance while attacking just enough to deal with the threat. Only when they'd exited the danger zone could they deal a decisive blow to Kan'Tanu's vanguard.

Zac inwardly sighed, thinking back to the powerful weaponry installed on the alliance's flying treasure. Dossin had likely planned to unleash a powerful barrage at the enemy and escape the spatial decay before landing. They might even have been able to dodge the first goretide with the earth traversal. Unfortunately, the bell's appearance ruined those plans, and they found themselves in a passive position.

Now, they would have to endure another culling before seizing the opportunity to turn things around. Until then, Zac couldn't do anything that might ruin her plans. He could only grit his teeth and endure as the pressure mounted, and the fleshy tide was soon within 100 meters in some sections.

They were carving a path to life in a sea of death, and the smell of blood and putrefaction was suffocating. The thorns were already within throwing distance of the Acheron company at the flank, while others had been forced to activate a wall of defenses. The shields held for now but shuddered precariously under the goretide's relentless pressure.

"Stop!" an enraged roar shook the army while hundreds of the hovering crystals simultaneously lit up.

Six swords wrapped in engraved bandages appeared above Dossin, each teeming with incredible force. But instead of targeting the looming goretide or the giants beyond, she slashed into her own ranks, killing thousands in the blink of an eye. Zac had kept a low profile until now, but he swore and unleashed a barrage of fractal blades that cleared out a huge swathe of tendrils. They needed the breathing room to deal with the sudden betrayal.

However, it wasn't Dossin that Zac worried about, but rather the hot-tempered youth who had confronted Dossin before. He floated at the front of his army, a sea of tendrils banging against a shield before him. His warriors were furiously unleashing everything in their arsenal to push them back, but it was clear they'd be among the first to suffer the Heart Curses of the Hallowed Flesh.

The young leader was facing tremendous pressure and was clearly no longer in the mood to listen to Dossin's commands. He was holding a withered branch burning with umber flames that made Zac's eyes tear up. Dossin's attack was bearing down on him with lightning-quick speed, and Zac was shocked at the force and brutality it contained. Even he would be hard-pressed to block that sudden attack, and the young man had not expected to be targeted with such decisiveness.

"You—" he screamed as a powerful barrier sprung up around him, but his words died with him as Dossin's attack pierced straight through.

The attack cleanly dismembered the general before six runes formed a seal around his corpse. Her subordinates were already following up to reinforce her shield, but it was too late. The branch was an extraordinary item, and that fool of a commander had already unsealed it. The world was drowned in red, and Zac had to squint to barely determine what happened.

The cage was incapable of containing the force, so Dossin shattered one rune to direct the onslaught forward. A monstrous wave of flames swept through the goretide, consuming sixteen goliaths at once. A single attack of the mysterious treasure punched a hole in the Kan'Tanu's vanguard, but no one was celebrating the achievement.

That burning branch was no larger than a shortsword but held dozens of times as much energy as his Early D-grade War Arrays. Even after its outburst, its flames had only weakened by half, but there would be no opportunity for the exotic treasure to showcase its might again. Space imploded, swallowing both treasure and its wielder's corpse. Dossin had cut straight through her own subordinates for a chance to stop a larger tragedy, but her sacrifice was instantly undone as hundreds of crystals were reduced to dust.

The collapse was like a flash in the pan, covering no more than a few meters and disappearing in the wink of an eye. But a ripple spread through the young man's ranks just as space mended. The soldiers had no chance to react, and Zac looked on with dismay as half a million men shattered like they were made of stone.

All were equal before the ripple, and Hegemons fared no better than the weakest support staff. Most victims came from the culprit's own faction, but the neighboring armies were also impacted. Worse, Zac could feel how the whole region had destabilized. The burning branch had broken through the treacherous layer of ice, and cracks were now spreading in every direction, undoing Dossin's plan in one go.

"Nothing more dangerous than a pig-like ally!" Petrus swore, his eyes blazing with hatred.

Zac wholeheartedly agreed and even regretted not killing all the troublemakers before setting out. Risking a rift between the army's factions was better than leaving such a troublemaker to their own devices.

At the same time, it wasn't hard to understand the man's thoughts. It was easy to brand him a traitor, but the situation was more likely the consequence of an arrogant man under a whole lot of stress. The bell had reaped the lives of a tenth of their men, but the death toll wasn't evenly distributed. Part of it might have been bad luck and a difference in mental tempering, but Zac believed some races were more susceptible than others.

Acheron Company only lost three or four percent, with not one of them a spectral cultivator. A golemoid race was even better off, where less than a percent had ripped out their cores. In contrast, the annihilated army had lost at least 15% of their men, including a few Half-Step cultivators. Then, they had the bad luck of facing more goliaths than most, yet Dossin staunchly denied any requests to launch another salvo with War Machines.

The young lord had already been dissatisfied with the Dravorak General's leadership and chose to unseal a powerful treasure rather than see his men be sacrificed to accomplish the plan of an outsider. That critical misstep cost him everything, and his actions had turned the whole army's path of retreat into a minefield.

They had advanced more than a mile since unleashing their first barrage of the War Machines, following up with just enough attacks to not tip the scales. New fault lines spread through already weakened space, and Zac could vaguely sense energy and Dao bleeding into their reality through invisible microfractures. It wouldn't be difficult for the Kan'Tanu to shatter the region altogether.

Zac growled as he shot forth. "Go!"

More than a hundred Hegemons tore into the goretide, each cleaving a path through the thorns on their way to the lumbering goliaths. Dossin had asked the strongest combatants not to expose their positions but had no choice but to activate their hidden reserves early. By hook or crook, they needed to move the battlefield before the Kan'Tanu could take advantage of their mistake. The E-grade soldiers were forced into a sprint, desperately cutting their way through the impassable wall of brambles.

The members of the joint army were all handpicked by the alliance, and you'd see displays of valor and skill no matter where you looked. But the tendrils were endless and unrelenting, fearing neither death nor damage. Screams of pain and cries of despair echoed through the battlefield as the goretide reaped its first round of victims.

The Acheron Company performed better than most, but soldiers still fell one after another. Zac gritted his teeth with fury as he heard infected soldiers plead for death before they lost their rationality. In a normal battlefield, they might have chosen self-detonation to open a path for their brothers-in-arms, but even that final act of defiance had been taken from them. Now, they could only die with regret and anger.

Zac did what he could to lessen their pressure by unleashing as much destruction as possible with [Skystriker], but his goal was the goliaths. The quicker he destroyed the tide's source, the more of his men would survive. The sea of thorns was not able to deal with the alliance's strongest combatants. They either tore straight through the curtain or flew above, reaching their targets in seconds.

An ethereal sigh echoed through the battlefield to Zac's left as Vilari unleashed a skill. Zac could vaguely sense a spiritual wave passing through three of the constructs, but it had absolutely no effect. The goliaths lacked souls, which meant they were most likely remotely controlled puppets. It was still possible they had a controller within who was protected from mental attacks, and there was one easy way to find out.

Zac flashed forward, his axe lighting up as it drew an upward arc. A roar of war and dominance echoed through the battlefield as a large blade cut a goliath apart. Its innards were only more madness, and Zac frowned when a wall of stench hit him. It had undoubtedly taken thousands of human sacrifices to create these undying things.

He couldn't find any core, and the two halves were already trying to merge back together. Zac grunted in annoyance as his arm turned to a blur. A storm of violence descended on the construct, quickly reducing it into dozens of parcels. Their previous approach had been crude, but it really looked like they had no other options. Only shredding these giants seemed to keep them down for good.

A sudden, earth-shattering explosion leveled everything within three hundred meters of the fallen giant. Zac had expected something like that to happen and was already moving toward his next target. This time, he activated [Apex Jungle], and a sphere of vibrant trees created an island of life in a sea of corruption. Two constructs were trapped within, and another was blocked from advancing further.

"Be careful, they explode," Zac said as a squad of soldiers entered his domain.

It was an elite vanguard of Mavai Demons led by Ra'Klid. Zac had already learned how to prevent his autonomous skills from attacking his men, but it required less mental effort with the Life-attuned demons. They almost seamlessly blended into his forest, joining vines and streaks of axelicht in combating the enemy.

More and more warriors caught up by following Zac's trail of destruction, and actual fortifications were added to the forest's edge. Zac's skill was becoming a true beachhead where his men could rest and regroup. But it was ultimately a trap where they'd bury these oversized monstrosities.

The third giant had already forced its way into the forest, but Zac ignored it as he methodically dismantled the closest one. Ra'Klid was already following on his heels, leading his men to shred, burn, and purify every piece Zac cut off. Others were working together to erect a series of barriers. When the giant eventually fell, it only managed to topple and destroy a single line of trees.

More giants converged on his location, but that was for the best. Thanks to Zac's Late Dao Branches, they barely needed to use any energy to deal with the giants. Of course, Zac doubted the Kan'Tanu would let him dismantle their flesh puppets unopposed for long. It was for that reason Zac instantly acted when he sensed something amiss.

'Watch out!' Vilari's warning echoed in Zac's mind as he cut into another giant.

Zac had already activated [Empyrean Aegis] and was moving away, but the golden barrier proved useless in the face of the rune that shot out from the goliath's body. Zac's danger sense had gone from a muted whisper to a blaring siren, and he desperately dodged with everything he had.

The early warning and quick reaction were barely enough. The rune passed right by him, though his shoulder was lightly grazed. Zac felt [Immutability of Eoz] heat up, but unbearable pain quickly overwhelmed the sensation. It was like a mesh of barbed wire had snuck into his pathways, and someone was trying to control him with the strings.

Meanwhile, a smaller form emerged from within the damaged goliaths. It resembled an evil god, with six arms and a swarm of tentacles instead of legs. At first, its aura was indistinguishable from the giant, but it shifted in nature as it rapidly rose. Zac's pathways were still in disarray, but he forcibly channeled energy into [Rapturous Divide] to create a line of annihilation through the avatar.

The six-armed creature shattered, but Zac sighed in disappointment. He'd hoped to turn his near-death experience into a decisive victory, but his opponent was too slippery. The avatar had turned into innumerable floating fingers that spread through this jungle. The rune before was already a strong indicator, and the energy emitted from the swarm of fingers confirmed Zac's fears.

"Retreat!"

The soldiers urgently followed his order, but the fingers moved too fast. Agonized screams immediately echoed through the forest. The fingers had only tapped whoever they reached, but the victims were already convulsing on the ground. Some managed to rebuff their advance, but there were still thousands more that deftly avoided Zac's attacks in search of targets.

They were dealing with a Hexmaster, and a strong one at that.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1132 - Tripartite Truth - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1132 - Tripartite Truth

Dozens of strings of Mental Energy entered Zac's skill fractals as he forcibly ordered his domain to destroy as many floating fingers as possible. They were like living things, dodging and weaving among a storm of vines and blocking

trees. Most were destroyed, but many still reached the soldiers fighting within [Apex Jungle].

The sudden and indefensible attack had taken Zac by surprise. Nothing remotely similar had happened to all the goliaths they'd destroyed until now, and neither his Danger Sense nor [Inborn Predator] had given him much warning. Only those with powerful treasures or skills that hid your presence and Killing Intent could accomplish something like that.

There were still many secrets surrounding the Seven Chapters of the Kan'Tanu, and they knew even less about the mysterious leader who had yet to appear. However, Zac was certain these methods weren't something the Chapter of Hallowed Flesh possessed. Most likely, this hidden attacker came from the Chapter of Tripartite Truth.

Despite being the chapter with the fewest core members, Tripartite Truth was possibly the most feared among Zecia's elite. After all, just like Vilari, they all possessed means that few on the frontiers could effectively block. Their ranks included Hexmasters, Array Masters, Mentalists, and a few neighboring classes. However, it would be a mistake to consider them mages.

The way they fought was a lot more like assassins. They occasionally appeared to wreak havoc on the battlefield with strange and unpredictable methods, but their focus was almost exclusively on taking out enemy leaders. This Hexmaster had embedded himself within a goliath, waiting for a leader to come close.

It was simply bad luck he'd encountered Zac. He had a Hidden Node custom-made to deal with these kinds of threats, yet Zac had to forcibly stop his body from twitching and his Cosmic Energy from going out of control. Most Hegemons present would have died or been grievously wounded by the ambush.

New severed fingers appeared among the trees, most of them targeting Zac. It looked like the Hexmaster was trying to take down Zac from the shadows, but Zac wasn't convinced. First of all, the fingers weren't fast enough to pose any real threat to Zac. If nothing else, they were physical skills, and [Empyrean Aegis] was still running.

More importantly, the first rule of an assassin was to never fight an enemy head-on, especially not if it was a one-on-one situation. If the attempt failed,

you needed to flee without hesitation. Everything after the initial strike was a diversion.

Zac hadn't moved an inch after the initial exchange. He silently sensed the surroundings while directing his forest, searching for something that didn't belong. Finally, a clue. He stepped into a tree, appearing in a different section of his forest. Zac targeted empty air, unleashing a whirlwind of attacks that blanketed the whole region in violence.

It didn't take long before one of his Dao-infused blades shattered, exposing his target. The six-armed creature had somehow hidden within one of its severed fingers, and his whole body spilled out when it was destroyed. Zac was about to step forward and finish the job before the Hexmaster disappeared again, but a scream of danger ruined those plans.

He forcibly changed his trajectory, narrowly avoiding a translucent hand twice his size. It grabbed right where he stood, and Zac's mind spun from the sound of hundreds of knuckles crunching. The grab was both physical and spiritual, leveling dozens of trees while extinguishing the souls of the soldiers unfortunate enough to be within a hundred meters of the attack.

Zac was right next to the epicenter, and [Empyrean Aegis] didn't fail him this time. It blocked the physical aspect at the cost of half a pillar. He endured a bout of vertigo and unleashed a lightning-quick swing, but the Hexmaster's grotesque avatar dodged as he rushed for the forest edge. Zac pursued and was immediately met with another grab.

The source wasn't the Hexmaster himself but the three goliaths trapped inside his forest. They had frozen in place, and it looked like an invisible hand had remolded their flesh into enormous chalices.

A severed, pale hand with thin, unusually long fingers floated above each chalice. The hands were without blemish and could have been mistaken for marble sculptures if not for the bloody stumps. They were constantly forming seals that should be impossible if you had bones, and Zac could tell they were rapidly absorbing the cursed energies stored within the former giants.

Zac never took his eyes off the Hexmaster. That guy was too dangerous to be left alive, so the chalices could only wait. Zac unleashed a barrage of attacks while manually controlling the final lines of defense. The Hexmaster proved agile like a monkey despite his large frame, and he wasn't lacking in physical strength. A tree that moved to block the cultists' path was ripped apart with his

bare hands, while others withered and were reduced to ash with simple gestures.

The jungle was slowing him down but failed to prevent his escape entirely. They were already approaching the forest's edge despite Zac furiously channeling Dao and Energy into [Apex Jungle] and [Primal Edict] to stop his prey. He launched one fractal blade after another, some aimed at the Hexmaster while others cut off his path.

Suddenly, a third pale hand appeared. Instead of targeting Zac, it opened a small path out of the forest, providing a glimpse of the situation outside. As expected, the Hexmaster wasn't the only Kan'Tanu to step onto the battlefield, and clashes between Hegemons raged all around them. The goliaths were strong but slow, unable to effectively counter the all-out offensive by the alliance's elite Hegemons.

The appearance of cultivators to coordinate with the goliaths drastically increased the pressure their army faced. The cultists held up their Hegemons and protected the giants, leaving them free to spawn more cursed tendrils. It was no wonder so many soldiers stayed at his forest's perimeters despite the Hexmaster's deadly skills.

Emily was furiously battling two Hegemons just a few hundred meters from [Apex Jungle]. Her axe array looked like the apocalypse, where some axes burned while others released lightning. The Kan'Tanu were like iron towers, forcibly resisting the unrelenting assault while trying to break the swirling array.

The Hexmaster was about to escape, so Zac knew he had no choice. He took out a mottled talisman from his Spatial Ring and flooded it with Cosmic Energy. He also used his other hand, temporarily relinquishing his hold of [Verun's Bite] to take out a pitch-black javelin. A line of scripts lit up across its haft just as he launched the weapon with all the force he could muster.

The throwing weapon shot forth like a cannon, aimed straight at the Hexmaster's back. The assassin realized the javelin was far deadlier than Zac's normal attacks and swiftly flashed to the side. The javelin punched through the air just a second too late and left the forest's perimeter with unstoppable momentum. A tunnel of incredibly turbulent air was left in its wake, rendering most movement skills unusable.

The cultist was unscathed, which was within Zac's expectations. The important thing was that the javelin throw prevented the Hexmaster's escape long enough for Zac's talisman to activate. A towering deity wrought from stone and steel appeared at the forest's edge, forming a final line of defense.

It pushed its arm forward in an unadorned manner. Nevertheless, grandeur hid within simplicity, and the movement held a conviction to move mountains and seas. The Hexmaster tried to flash past the strike using a movement skill, but the push was like an inviolable law of rejection. It formed an impassable shockwave that pushed the cultist right back into the jungle. Where Zac was waiting.

A ruthless strike descended with both power and precision. It dug into the avatar's head as he flew past, but Zac's vision twisted in a mysterious subversion of reality. The head was made anew, and [Verun's Bite] finished its trajectory without causing more damage. In return, two of the Hexmaster's six arms withered and fell to the ground.

The Hexmaster had used an unknown method to turn a deadly strike into a grievous wound. Zac knew such skills came at a cost, and losing two arms was likely the least of the Hexmaster's problems. However, Zac didn't get the chance to capitalize on the opportunity before a third arm exploded, creating a pulse of darkness that crashed into the golden barrier enclosing Zac.

[Empyrean Aegis] failed to fully block the strike, but the remaining force wasn't enough to harm him. The problem was that the strike wasn't solely physical. The darkness entered his body and transformed into a swarm of small pebbles inside his Soul Aperture. They were parasites drawn to the immense Mental Energies of his Soul Cores, only held back by swirling nebulae.

An intractable force slammed into Zac right after the exchange. The source was his own talisman rather than the Hexmaster sacrificing another arm. They were both pushed toward the forest's center until the wave stopped, forming a huge blockade resembling a City Defense Array. The Hexmaster had used his spiritual attack to slip away, but Zac was certain he hadn't managed to escape his domain.

The barrier wouldn't last forever, so Zac forcibly channeled [Apex Jungle] to regrow the destroyed section of his forest. He strained his senses to pinpoint his target's location, but his eyes were still on the battle outside. Or rather on the pitch-black javelin as it pierced into Emily's axe array, unerringly moving toward the strongest of the two Hegemons.

The spear was filled with his Dao and launched with over 400,000 effective Strength. It contained the force to shatter mountains. Nothing would remain if the javelin connected, even if the Hegemon belonged to the Chapter of Hallowed Flesh. The cultist unhesitatingly chose to dodge upon discovering the incoming calamity, but Emily's tempest had obscured Zac's ambush until it was too late.

The body cultivator lost an arm and half his torso when the javelin flashed past, and Emily pounced on the opportunity. The whole array subtly shifted, and the fiery inferno gained a sense of decay. Two tomahawks flashed, leaving a swirl of red leaves in their wake. Two heads flew into the air, and the leaves ignited, consuming the corpses in a conflagration before the Heart Curses could emerge. N0v3lTr0ve served as the original host for this chapter's release on N0v3l--B1n.

The last Zac saw of the battle outside was Emily emerging from the inferno unscathed, her face a calm mask as she inspected the surroundings for threats. Zac nodded in appreciation, gratified that the rambunctious kid had turned into a steady warrior who did not hesitate to punish mistakes.

Emily was done while Zac still had his own foe to deal with. He'd prevented the Hexmaster from escaping and destroyed half his arms, but they couldn't pay this game of cat and mouse forever. If nothing else, a cornered rat was bound to lash out, and there were still a lot of soldiers inside his forest.

Zac knew the assassin had more cards up his sleeve. The six-armed avatar was most likely a skill rather than his real body, and the flesh chalices still stood tall despite the best efforts of his two domain skills and hundreds of his men. The hands had stopped moving yet exuded tremendous waves of energy that formed a mysterious resonance. It hindered Zac's attempts to pinpoint the assassin's location, though that was likely a side-effect than the arrangement's true purpose.

[Immutability of Eoz] was growing increasingly agitated despite having already cleared out the initial curse. There was something else brewing like the whole forest had been hexed. He had no choice.

'Can you help me with this guy?'

There was no telling how long it would take to deal with this slippery eel. It wasn't a problem that could be solved with superior strength, and every second the Hexmaster wasted would leave the alliance in a worse position.

He needed someone to break the stalemate and let him rejoin the battle outside, and Vilari was best suited to counter the Hexmaster.

A brief scene appeared in his mind's eye. Vilari was facing three Hegemons from the Chapter of Hallowed Flesh, singlehandedly preventing them from reaching the Acheron Company. None were Middle Hegemons, but all were far above the norm and demonstrably resistant to her methods.

Even Vilari was having trouble gaining an advantage, yet she didn't hesitate to offer her assistance. 'I'll come as soon as I can.'

'No, don't worry about me. I'll figure something out.'

Despite his reluctance, Zac still took out a blue feather and filled it with enormous amounts of Divine and Mental Energy. The reluctance wasn't because of the cost or rarity of the item. Months of campaigning, taking out World Lords and looting their treasuries, had let Zac accumulate an incredible stockpile of D-grade methods. Each was once a lifesaving treasure, unable to showcase its might before its owner was felled.

The problem was the huge energy expenditure of repeatedly activating D-grade treasures. Their incredible power came at a cost, and that cost was inefficiency. Each talisman used far more energy than equivalent skills, so using one was a last-ditch measure for most. Even Zac was feeling the burden, and he needed to save something in the tank for the war outside.

Zac felt like the world inverted, where the physical became spiritual and part of his Soul Aperture. The Hexmaster had perfectly concealed his breath and aura, but his soul lit up like a beacon in Zac's perception. He was already halfway out of the forest, but his escape was cut short with Zac moving to block his path.

The hidden Hexmaster was immediately drowned in a storm of axelights and Zac's furious assault. The Hexmaster was ready for his appearance, and innumerable fingers formed a protective cocoon that blocked out most attacks. The Middle D-grade defensive skill was incredibly tough, blocking blocked the peppering of axelights. Thankfully, Zac still had [Evolutionary Edge].

Each attack held the essence of his path and unbelievable sharpness, allowing it to pierce right through the macabre shield. The beleaguered avatar within had other layers of defense, but grisly wounds rapidly appeared across his body. The cultist's repeated attempts to get away were quashed thanks to

the lingering effect of the blue feather. It gave Zac an additional sense to predict his opponent's actions, allowing him to preemptively ruin those plans with his Evolutionary Stance.

He'd become a pack of wolves methodically ripping their prey apart, leaving no path of survival. Of course, Zac would have preferred to take his opponent out in one go, but he couldn't find an opening to land a decisive strike. Even if he did, it might be subverted again, so he approached the Hexmaster like he did the giants—cutting them apart piece by piece until there was no chance to get back up.

Unfortunately, every moment in battle came with the risk of unforeseen variables. A scream of danger warned of impending doom as large cracks appeared across the hands floating atop the chalices. The feather's spiritual domain shattered the next second, but Zac saw three knives emerge through the vision provided by [Apex Jungle].

The knives were covered in dried blood that released such a sinister aura Zac's hair stood on end. They were tools of torture rather than tools of war, and years of practicing the evil trade had left a patina of deep-rooted resentment on their edge.

The weapons didn't move fast, but any attempt to bar their path failed. Worse, their deadly payload could be delivered even at a distance, and Zac's Soul Aperture and pathways were already under assault by thousands of invisible cuts. It was a spiritual attack of incredible potency that only grew worse as the knives drew closer.

Even then, escape was never on Zac's mind. Any skill would lose most of its potency so long as its controller died. Zac chose to go all out, and a large amount of Cosmic Energy surged from his core toward [Arcadian Crusade]. However, what was supposed to be a power-up left him with a damaged Skill Fractal and a crack in his pathways.

The soul-rending pain made Zac keel over, which led to another discovery. The cascade of spiritual attacks relented when Zac froze up and stopped channeling Dao and energy. Now, the assault had already resumed as Zac continued to channel energy into his skills. It was obviously not the Hexmaster acting gentlemanly.

The knives had a similar effect to [Empyrean Aegis], where his use of Cosmic and Mental Energy caused a powerful backlash. It was still bearable for low-

energy and ongoing skills, but his berserking method worked by overloading his body with energy. Activating it was like asking for trouble.

Zac's woes only mounted when his predatorial nose for danger warned of another threat bearing down at him from above. He endured the agony of activating [Skystriker], instantly taking him twenty meters away.

It looked like the sky had split in two when a line of demonic red dug into Zac's domain. It carried monstrous force, carving a huge hole in his jungle. It passed right by where Zac stood moments before, and Zac's eyes widened with fear when small dimensional fractures appeared.

No deadly ripple formed from the fracture, but Zac knew he was in trouble. The newcomer was already bearing down on his position through the hole in the jungle. It was a blade master wielding a large saber, the air around him crackling with barely contained power—another Middle Hegemon, one possibly stronger than the Hexmaster himself.

His brutal aura carried a trace of familiarity with Zac's own. The man possessed a Branch of conflict and had made significant inroads with some form of body tempering.

The sudden appearance wasn't bad luck. The strike had almost perfect timing, and the Hexmaster hadn't used the brief respite to escape. Instead, he'd taken control of the three knives, prompting their speed and aura to more than double.

Death approached from every direction, and space was falling apart. This was a true calamity, and Zac knew he could no longer fight hobbled by his self-imposed restrictions to protect his secrets. The floodgates opened, and the spiritual attacks were suffocated by the touch of the Void.

The Void Emperor had stepped onto the stage.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1133 - Takedown - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1133 - Takedown

Zac's roar shook the forest as he lunged at the Hexmaster using only the physical strength in his body. It looked like he was trying to deal with the familiar threat before worrying about the newcomer, but reality quickly proved

that theory wrong. A huge axe emitting an archaic air had already appeared above the swordmaster without warning, immediately going in for the kill.

Its utter lack of Cosmic Energy made it easy to mistake the axe for an apparition, but the force it contained was very real. The saber master quickly caught on, but there were no real defenses against the instant and untraceable peril that Zac's Void Energy represented. The E-grade skill still packed plenty of power, but it required strict conditions to ever reach a Middle Hegemon.

Void Energy's instant activation completely side-stepped these limitations. The axe was right upon its target the moment it appeared, and the huge sigil in the sky delayed his response. A resounding crash shook the forest as the oversized axe hit its mark. The already strained [Apex Jungle] could hold on no longer, and the remaining trees dissipated into golden smoke.

The tumultuous scene far overshadowed Zac's own actions, especially since he had completely stopped circulating Cosmic Energy. His turbid aura, bereft of any signs of skill activations, gave the illusion that the huge attack came from somewhere else, and Zac planned to make the most of that fact.

Zac reached the Hexmaster's fingerstorm the moment [Arcadia's Judgment] struck. The impervious wall had endured dozens of strikes from [Apex Jungle] and even more from [Primal Edict]. Throwing yourself against it with your own body was tantamount to suicide, or so the Hexmaster thought. [Verun's Bite] lit up with radiant luster without so much as a flicker of Cosmic Energy, carving a huge hole in the churning wall of flesh.

A surprised but fierce face stared back at Zac as he squeezed inside, but the cultist's response died in its cradle when the cocoon was cut off from the Heavens. Zac had activated [Void Zone] the instant he confirmed the three-armed Hexmaster was within range. The swirling fingers didn't dissipate as Zac had hoped. Instead, they lost their luster and slowed down to a crawl.

The energy inside the Hexmaster was momentarily interrupted before resuming at a reduced pace. It might have been enough to disrupt the three daggers, though Zac could no longer observe the situation outside after his jungle collapsed. Of course, he knew the chances of [Void Zone] dealing with the knives weren't great.

His E-grade Bloodline Ability simply lacked the punch to shut down the incredible amounts of energy coursing through a Middle Hegemon's

pathways. Its use was downgraded from nullification to suppression against foes at this level. That was more than enough. It had never been a lack of firepower that prevented Zac from dealing with his enemy. It was the Hexmaster's varied means of survival and uncanny instincts that had foiled him at every turn.

Now, they were once more face to face, and [Verun's Bite] was already descending. It dug into flesh, cleanly severing two of the remaining arms before continuing into the Hexmaster's chest. It differed from Zac's normal approach that went straight for the head, but the cultist had the uncanny ability to sacrifice arms for power and survival.

Rampant Dao wreaked havoc within the oversized humanoid. Zac even added a flood of his Branch of the Pale Seal to create a war within the cultist's body. At that moment, the ground heaved, almost throwing Zac off his feet. It was the second half of [Arcadia's Judgment] going off in conjunction with his melee attack. It was the finale of his lightning-quick blitz aimed at taking out two troublesome opponents at once.

So where was the Kill Energy?

Zac lamented that [Arcadian Crusade] had failed to activate because of the knives' interference, but there was nothing to do. His gambit had failed to kill either elite, and he could only deal with the cards he'd been dealt. The Hexmaster was closest, so he would start with him. The man had already sacrificed his final arm to survive Zac's attack, but the technique accomplished little more than field repairs because of lacking offerings and being operated within [Void Zone].

A second swing followed up on the first, but the Hexmaster let loose a desperate wail as his belly exploded. Zac was mentally prepared to fight off the high-quality Heart Curse of an elite reincarnator, only to find the demonic Hexmaster to shoot out like a cannon. It wasn't because of a Heart Curse. The lunatic had sacrificed most of his organs to escape Zac's grasp.

The gory explosion was subdued like it took place underwater, and it left a trail of tainted blood. It burrowed into Zac's skin as he pursued, but he barely noticed it. The blood was a mix of corrupted energy and a living curse, and the combination triggered no less than three of his Hidden Nodes.

Zac's target may have escaped, but he was an arrow at the end of its flight. It was a miracle the Hexmaster was even alive, especially considering that Zac's

Daos were still destroying what little remained within his body. It was unlikely he could even channel his energy in such a state, but Zac didn't want to give his opponent more time to develop new schemes. He'd been surprised enough by this fight.

However, an erratic aura behind gave him pause. A region over one hundred meters across was utterly demolished, with a large scar digging deep into the ground and innumerable jagged stalagmites reaching for the sky. There was even a spot of nothingness at its center, confirming Zac's hunch his attack had damaged space. And in the middle of it all, an unkempt figure unsteadily got to his feet.

Normally, he would have risked opening a spatial fracture within his body when launching such a powerful skill where space was already exhausted beyond its breaking point. Today, his Void Energy had proven its use in another way. Skills activated with Void Energy appeared instantly in a way Zac still couldn't explain, but it didn't involve any energy within his body.

It was a shame that even a spatial collapse failed to do in the saber master. Zac had to admit, whatever method the Chapter of Hallowed Flesh used to temper their bodies was very impressive. Of course, the warrior wasn't like the ancient protector from Zac's Dao Vision all those years ago. He couldn't just shatter spatial tears with his body, especially not after taking a hit from [Arcadia's Judgment] head-on.

The newcomer's state was better than the Hexmaster's, but that wasn't saying much. He was missing both saber and right arm, and it looked like a beast had taken a large bite out of his torso. The wound teemed with spatial energy and ancient Dao, confirming it was the result of the spatial fracture. Should he swap targets? The Hexmaster might actually die even if left alone, but this guy would not.

'I got it!'

Emily looked like a comet crashing into the beleaguered Saber Master, who barely managed to block two fiery tomahawks aimed at his head. Zac gave a brief warning about the spatial decay before continuing his pursuit. The body-tempering reincarnator was undeniably stronger than Emily, but he'd be lucky to exert even a third of his power in his current state. Emily should be able to stall him while Zac wrapped things up with the other target.

Zac had briefly stopped when the Saber Master reemerged, but that time was more than recovered thanks to a crackling tomahawk entering his body. Emily had already upgraded her buffing skill, where the Lightning-aspected version improved one's speed. Part of it was a simple buff to one's Dexterity, while the other half was slightly harder to explain.

Warm arcs of harmless lightning cycled through Zac's limbs, invigorating his cells and filling them with vigor. It triggered his body in a way that provided a comprehensive boost to his speed. The effect felt similar to the benefits of awakening one's constitution, like how his Draugr heritage had made his skin more durable and provided resistance to all sorts of ailments.

Emily's buff obviously wasn't permanent like a constitution. It lasted a minute, which was more than enough for Zac's needs. No forest remained, but [Primal Edict] was still running just fine. Boundless vines intercepted and bogged down the Hexmaster as he escaped toward the Kan'Tanu's lines, and groups of E-grade soldiers added insult to injury.

It only took two seconds for Zac to close in on his target, at which point a tremendous surge of Kill Energy almost made Zac give up on his chase. His first guess was that the terrible wounds had done the Hexmaster in, but Zac realized he was still hanging on. The only other possible source of such a huge influx was the Saber Master. He must have drastically underestimated Emily's capabilities and made a deadly mistake.

Zac was extremely curious about how Emily had taken out her opponent at such record speed, but there were more pressing matters. A familiar aura was already brewing within the Hexmaster's chest. He was planning to go out with a bang, and there was no telling what terrifying methods a true member of Tripartite Truth used.

There were more than just himself to worry about. Half the soldiers who had entered his domain had died, most of them to the cursed fingers. However, there were still many soldiers nearby who had no way to counter a large-scale curse fueled by life force. Zac moved like the wind, reactivating [Void Zone] when he reached his target. It temporarily quelled the rising force within the cultist's chest, and Zac quickly followed up with two rapid slashes.

One shattered the Cosmic Core, and the other tore into the emerging Heart Curse. Zac was about to lob off the avatar's head for good measure, but a scream of danger made him activate [Skystriker] with Void Energy. A powerful

pull from within the Kan'Tanu's chest almost managed to hold him in place—the Hexmaster's parting gift.

Zac felt like he was being sucked into a black hole, but the combination of [Void Zone], the lightning axe, and his movement skill's piercing momentum allowed him to break the hold. It was just in time, as the three bloody daggers collided right at Zac's previous location. The daggers shattered, releasing a shockwave of resentment that ground everything within a hundred meters to dust.

Zac barely got out of the way in time. The Hexmaster's broken body wasn't so lucky. It was utterly destroyed, reduced to a bloody pulp filled with sinister energy. Resentment and remnant curses mixed, resulting in a hurricane roaring with the anguish of a thousand souls. Zac felt like his head had been split in two, and his vision turned dark as he lost control of his flight.

Blood poured down his nose as Zac crawled back to his feet, but his splitting headache quickly dissipated. His wretched state wasn't because of the wail but the pebbles left in his soul. They had exploded when the daggers were detonated, attacking his soul from within. Luckily, it only had the strength to give Zac's soul a painful shock, a small price to pay to take out such an annoying enemy.

No! Where was the confirmation?!

Zac furiously looked around, realizing he'd been had once more. However, a second surge of Kill Energy let him breathe out in relief. Zac flew to a patch free of vines nearby and was surprised to find Ra'Klid standing with axe in hand over an unfamiliar corpse. The face was different, but the dissipating aura confirmed it was his enemy. The Hexmaster had somehow sacrificed his body and Heart Curse to escape with a clone, but it had left him teetering at the brink of death.

Ra'Klid had been at the right place at the right time, finishing the job once and for all.

"Can't believe I failed to kill him after all that work," Zac muttered as he landed next to Ra'Klid. "Good job."

"Just wrapping things up for you, my Lord," the demon grinned. "Damn, I wish I wasn't level capped."

Zac was about to ask about Ra'Klid's men, but Emily's sudden appearance derailed his thoughts.

"Are you okay? What happened?"

"Oh, nothing much," Emily grinned. "I remembered I had a little Technocrat toy left from my days in the Wild West. Good thing about those trinkets is that they don't emit Cosmic Energy. So I dropped it by that guy's feet just before he punched me. He really did me a solid flinging me away since the whole region shattered the next second."

"You," Zac said with a wry smile. "Be careful about using those—"

Zac's voice caught in his throat because a radiant light suddenly emerged from the Hexmaster's mangled chest. It wasn't a remnant Heart Curse or trap, yet Zac's heart lurched as he threw a glass sphere into the ground. It shattered, prompting the region to be shrouded in a dense haze that could isolate most energies. The Hexmaster might not have booby-trapped his body, but what he left behind represented a far greater danger in the middle of a high-grade battlefield.

After all, who could resist the call of an unclaimed Outer Court Seal?

The nearby vines writhed with excitement, and it looked like they barely contained an innate desire to consume the seal. The impartment of Ultom was undoubtedly the greatest fertilizer, but Zac knew the truths within weren't meant for him. One wrong move and they'd all be reduced to ash. Zac and Emily warily backed away out of fear of triggering the Starfall Court's seal.

The seal would disintegrate most people upon contact, but that didn't mean it was willing to remain hidden among vines and smoke. A beam of utmost truth illuminated the whole area, making it impossible to miss. Zac looked at the scene with mixed emotions, having seen it many times before.

The display was nowhere near the scope of the terrifying pillar of corruption he accidentally conjured back in the Void Star. However, it easily surpassed what they experienced when encountering seals on the graded battlefronts. It wasn't that this seal was of higher quality but that it had sensed more acceptable candidates in the surroundings.

They'd long since figured out a thing or two about seizing seals from the bodies of others. Or rather, the Undead Empire had performed a series of

experiments and shared some of the findings. First of all, becoming ownerless didn't mean that just anyone could pick them up. The only one guaranteed success seemed to be the sealbearer's killer, provided they were under 100 years of age. Others risked the same treatment as the scout who'd tried to snatch Zac's first seal.

The first rule was a small loophole, where people like Zac could let his chosen land the finishing blow on a known sealbearer. Meanwhile, it wasn't exactly clear how the seal chose among the rest. Some would feel an inexplicable attraction, but that didn't mean they were guaranteed to avoid getting dusted.

To make things more confusing, Tavza had reported a few of her subordinates seizing seals without feeling its call. It was truly a matter of fate, and fate's machinations weren't easily exposed. People like Ventus might have some means of estimating success or failure, but Zac hadn't found a method to open a safe line of communication with the Numerologist.

Lastly, and most pertinent to their current situation, seals wanted to be captured. They would release increasingly powerful fluctuations in an attempt to attract candidates from further and further away. And the more people it approved of nearby, the stronger the display. Zac knew that his obscurity sphere couldn't completely hide its call, and other methods had proven similarly fruitless.

In a perfect world, Zac would have sealed it away while going over his options, but that was the biggest taboo. Trapping a seal in an array or treasure would immediately trigger a deadly pulse.

"This..." a hoarse voice whispered, and Zac saw Ra'Klid look at the floating lines with a burning gaze.

Zac gave it a thought before nodding. "Take it."

The Mavai Chieftain landing the killing blow meant he could safely take it, and the unusual circumstances strongly indicated Ra'Klid had a natural affinity with the Starfall Court. If not for fate's meddling, how else would a Peak E-grade cultivator land a killing blow on a Middle D-grade Reincarnator from the Chapter of Tripartite Truth?

Besides, who better exemplified the title 'Reignender of Ultom' than Ra'Klid, a man who killed his own father to end his reign?

The demon understood they couldn't leave such a treasure unattended for long, and he quickly moved back toward the corpse. However, Ra'Klid froze when Zac suddenly appeared before him, grabbing something that had shot out from the haze.

"So you really couldn't hold yourself back," Zac sighed as he discarded the throwing dagger aimed at Ra'Klid's throat.

"You knew?"

"I had my suspicions from the beginning, but I only learned the truth recently," Zac said with a shake of his head. "It's a shame. Regardless of your motives, you've been a great asset since we arrived."

"If you're so grateful, why not cede this opportunity to me?"

With those words, Tussar emerged from the mists.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1134 - Sacrificial Determination - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1134 - Sacrificial Determination

"It's you?" Emily blurted, confusion and disbelief written all over her face.

Zac understood what was going through her mind. Her surprise wasn't over the betrayal. Emily had experienced much over the years, and there was no way she'd accept an outsider's words at face value. Especially when the old veteran had gone so far out of his way to provide assistance, even risking his life by joining a dangerous special military operation. Few who reached Late Hegemony were so selfless and generous.

Tussar's actions could have been explained with Zac's unique status and connections. He had an ongoing cooperation with the Allbright Dynasty, and Monarchs were personally drawing writs of order for his use. Tussar could have seen Zac as his ticket to the Allbright Empire's inner circles, where he might find the chance to repair his damaged core and even take the next step on his path.

That may well have been his backup plan, but Zac knew it wasn't his foremost goal. Tussar had always been after the seals. If this one hadn't appeared out of the blue, he might even have targeted one of his people. It was this goal

that was the cause of Emily's confusion. After all, Tussar was old—very old, at least 20,000 years by Zac's estimate.

It wasn't just Tussar's appearance. Even his aura was showing signs of age-related decline. It was a premature aging brought on by Tussar's semi-crippled state. A Hegemon's lifespan was connected to their Cosmic Core. When the core was damaged, so was their longevity. It was clear as day that Tussar was well beyond the limitations of the seals and upcoming trial.

"You want this thing?" Emily said, a smile tugging at her lips. "Go ahead. I'd like to see you claim it."

"Hoping to make a fool of myself, child? You might get your wish, but I've made my preparations," Tussar said before turning to Zac. "How about it, young man?"

"You think you can target my people and live to tell the tale?" Zac said, glancing at Ra'Klid. "Ignore him."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Tussar said when the demon stepped toward the seal. "If you steal my opportunity, then every single person on this battlefield will know about it. Same thing should I die."

"You've come prepared," Zac said with a flat voice. Indeed, this was why he hadn't attacked right away. Tussar knew his strength, so there was no way he'd dare approach them without some safeguards. "It doesn't matter, though. Sooner or later, everyone will know the situation whether we like it or not."

"That's true," Tussar said, glancing at the floating seal. "But I'd say we have a while. Of course, we could avoid this headache if you took a step back."

"This is a waste of time," Emily interjected. "You idiot, haven't you read the bounties your own empire put out? Only those below 100 years of age can take this. You're causing trouble for nothing!"

Zac inwardly sighed as a ruthless smile spread across Tussar's face.

"Nothing is absolute, little girl."

"Sacrificial Rebirth," Zac muttered, not hiding his disgust.

"You know even that?" Tussar said, his eyes wide with suspicion. "Don't tell me—"

"Senior Silver warned me about you. You've already been marked as a potential spy because of the mysterious disappearances around you. However, I only realized the truth moments ago."

It was only when Zac used the mysterious feather he'd been appraised of the full picture. Tussar had actually disguised himself as one of his men and hid inside [Apex Jungle]. That was suspicious on its own, but it was nothing compared to the horrifying thing he'd sensed within Tussar's body. Thousands of souls, trapped inside a sinister array engraved on his Cosmic Core's surface.

Zac was no expert on heretical rituals, but everyone had boned up on the subject since the Kan'Tanu invaded. With this knowledge and his sturdy foundations on patterns, it wasn't hard to put the pieces together and intuit what Tussar was up to.

"Sacrificing your cultivation, countless treasures, and thousands of our allies to build a seed of rebirth?"

Tussar had turned his core into a womb feeding on sacrifices and his own life force. His core wasn't actually as badly damaged as his appearance indicated, but the sacrifice had consumed so much the old veteran was nothing more than a living husk. There was already burning life hiding within the array, and Zac had felt a strong sense of evil coming from it.

Zac didn't know the exact mechanics but understood Tussar's plan. He'd shed his old self and be reborn, using his newborn body and reformed soul to access the opportunity.

"What a waste."

Since when was the System so easily fooled? Would Ultom not see through such a crude method? If it were possible, Zac wouldn't have been dealing with Tavza and Kator. He'd be stuck with some old monsters reborn through far more exquisite methods than what some Allbright captain could concoct.

Tussar must have lost his mind after his injury, deluding himself that this was his chance to make a comeback. Zac didn't let him touch the seal because he

would trigger a pulse of rejection that would expose the situation to anyone in the know.

"True, my metamorphosis will leave me almost crippled," Tussar nodded. "But so what? What does a broken soul and crippled core count for in the face of this opportunity? I'd give up far more for this chance, so don't try to stop me!"

Zac only shook his head.

"You may disdain me, but what does a heaven-blessed child like you understand of the commoner's plight?! You think you've struggled, but can it compare to millennia of service and sacrifice?! I can't even remember how many desperate situations I've endured, just to claim what you nobles deem low-quality dregs!"

Tussar's eyes were bloodshot, and his aura flickered precariously. Zac was no Mentalist, but he could feel the veteran's soul crumbling before his very eyes. He'd triggered the process.

"Out of millions of brothers, only I reached these heights. The rest were chewed and spat out by the imperial war machine!" Tussar roared as bleeding cracks covered his body. "How can you understand my—"

"Determination."

The last word came from within Tussar's chest before a naked figure burst forth. He was drenched in blood and his own viscera, and his skin was covered in twisted runes filled with heterogenic spirituality. Zac was shocked at the sudden turn. He'd been waiting for an opportunity to knock out the old veteran during his transformation. Who would have thought the rebirth would be so fast and seamless?

There was nothing to be done. Zac followed his gut and moved to intercept. The incoming homunculus opened his mouth, and a storm of virulent blood burst forth. It was dregs left from the ritual yet seemed more potent than the Hexmaster's blood.

A piercing scream of mortal danger almost made Zac's mind blank out, but years of slaughter made his body move by instinct. Instead of dodging the noxious liquid, Zac lunged straight into it. He didn't even bother to intercept Tussar. Instead, he moved to the cracked husk he left behind.

Most would see it as a nonsensical course of action, but it was that unexpected choice that saved him from hundreds of streaks of light that pierced through the haze. They came from every direction, forming a twenty-meter kill zone around Zac's previous location.

A flash of warmth was followed by an agonizing burn. Zac had been a hair too slow, and his left foot had been severed. It was proof of the lights' terrifying power and how close he'd come to dying. He would have been carved into a dozen pieces if the kill zone had been just one meter wider.

Emily fell over with a pained groan. She had been outside the kill zone, but one of the lights had passed right through her left shoulder, creating a hole three centimeters across. Ra'Klid was the only one avoiding direct damage, no doubt due to his close proximity to the seal. The fishermen hiding in the shadows had consciously avoided that region when targeting the snipe and the clam.

The most pitiful one was Tussar. Zac was the main target, but the old veteran's grab for the seal hadn't gone unpunished. Two dozen streaks of finality ended his ambition and made his sacrifice null and void. Tussar's face still had a look of fierce determination when his head fell onto the ground, and there was only a brief flicker of horrified realization before the head split in two and the light in his eyes faded.

The overbearing attack had almost wiped them out without warning, and Zac knew this was just the beginning. The ambush had swept away the haze, exposing six figures flying toward their group. All had the same golden figure floating behind them, an emperor wielding a thin sword overflowing with the Daos of Light and Space.

Why was it them? What the hell was going on?

One was a lieutenant of a three-eyed race in their allied army, and another a Half-Step Hegemon from the army neighboring the Acheron Company. Only now, both radiated the aura of Late Hegemony that easily surpassed General Dossin's. The other four were unfamiliar, but they all wore familiar livery belonging to the soldiers of the different factions in their group. Equipment only E-grade cultivators would wear, a stark contrast to reality. All four were Middle Hegemons stronger than the reincarnators they had just fought.

The six hadn't stopped to see if their first attack landed. They were already mid-action when Zac spotted them, where the floating avatars pointed their

swords toward him. Zac's mind wailed with danger as hundreds of glimmering lights emerged from the weapons.

Meanwhile, one of the Late Hegemons had opened a scroll in his hand. There was only one rune painted on the ancient parchment. It wasn't a fractal but a single word written in the script of the Limitless Empire.

Solitude.

The world instantly grew utterly silent, like Zac had been rendered deaf. Something had shifted with the space around them as well. It was like they'd been separated from the universe. Even space had perfectly solidified after showing signs of collapse just before.

It was them. The sigil, the powerful cultivators whose hardened eyes indicated they were ready to throw their lives away to accomplish their goal. It was the same as his battle against Valsa Planur in the Perennial Vastness. These were deathsworn soldiers from one of the Seven Heavens.

Knowing the identity of his attackers didn't help. He was still trapped like a beast, and Emily and Ra'Klid were trapped with him. If anything, their identity meant any chance of negotiation or intimidation had gone out the window. He'd seen how these deathsworn worked. They would lay down their lives without blinking if they had been given an order. And judging by their actions, their order was to kill, not capture.

It was almost like time had stopped as Zac gazed upon the incoming attacks. An overwhelming feeling of impending doom had forced his mind into overdrive in its search for a path to victory. He quickly concluded there was none. He had wasted a lot of Cosmic Energy on the previous battle, and half his skills were on cooldown.

Zac still had plenty of treasures in his Spatial Rings, but so what? Wouldn't an elite unit from one of the Imperial Clans have similar methods prepared? Just look at the barrier they'd used to trap him. If anything, he would only fasten his demise if he wanted to prepare talismans and treasures. This wasn't like the Perennial Vastness, where everyone was at the same level. The two leaders likely had Late D-grade treasures beyond the scroll.

Not that any of this mattered—these deathsworn were too powerful on their own. Zac wasn't confident in surviving the incoming attack, let alone a protracted battle. He couldn't even protect himself, and he had two more

people to worry about. Ra'Klid, especially, would die just from the fallout of a battle at this level. There was only one way to get out of this alive.

They needed to get out of here.

They were trapped using a method beyond Zac's understanding, and there was no time to plan properly. Zac knew without a shadow of a doubt they'd die if he took a measured approach. Madness shone in Zac's eyes as his aura exploded. He would have to risk it all.

Every floodgate in Zac's body was opened. A storm of Dao poured out of [Spiritual Void] while the Void once more harkened his call. The inverted mountain in his mind shuddered as it suddenly found Void Energy storming its slopes.

Zac knew this wasn't the right way to use the Void Mountain. There was even a decent chance he was damaging it, shortening the time he had to ponder on the Voids of Life and Death. He was trading long-term gains for a short-term term potential, but so what? You needed to be alive to enjoy your benefits.

The Branch of the Pale Seal approached the mountain, prompting a shift in the Void Mountain's aura. As a result, pockets of his bloodline's Void Energy turned into Void of Death.

Months had passed since his fight with Kator, where he first saw the potential of this route. Since then, he'd made some inroads into the nature of the Void by studying the isolated Voids of his path. Zac was still miles away from naturally integrating the Void of Death into his Evolutionary Stance, but briefly elevating the technique when the Void Mountain provided fuel was easily done.

The golden hurricanes within his cells roared as Zac pushed his Void Vajra Constitution to its limits. Boundless Life coursed through his body and was further kindled by the Branch of the Kalpataru. Even motes of deep-rooted Creation Energy were roused. He was a bonfire burning with the primordial essence that pushed the era forward and sparked the birth of civilization.

[Void Zone] had already been condensed to only cover his body, and it blanketed the raging waves of life like a suffocating curtain of darkness. It birthed a ferocious struggle the Branch of the War Axe fanned on, where two domains fought for dominion over Zac's body. However, the Void transformed

when Zac infused it with the Void of Death provided by the inverted mountain in his soul.

The final key was added, and Zac moved in accordance with the triumvirate truth. Ra'Klid yelped as he and Emily were thrown away by Vivi's vines while Zac advanced. One step, one swing. The actions were simple and unadorned, yet subverted all expectations. The step took Zac right through the inescapable web of attacks, five of which simply dissipated despite holding incredible power.

The second attack had targeted Emily and Ra'Klid. If they hadn't moved out of the way, they wouldn't have looked much different from Tussar. Their new locations were safer, but one streak would have killed Ra'Klid if left alone; two others would have boxed in and killed Emily. Now, it was like they'd never existed.

The action may have seemed effortless, but there was a price for his protection. Not even the addition of Void to the Evolutionary Stance could turn the tables against these six hardened killers. It could only delay the inevitable. A deep gash had appeared on his chest, destroying armor and exposing bone. Zac could tell one of his lungs had been punctured, but he kept going.

Just a little more.

The deathsworn were clearly confused about how Zac had moved in a way that defied the fundamental laws of the Heavens. However, they didn't ask any questions or retreat. They just adjusted their array and attacked again. The speed and power confirmed Zac's hunch the avatars were powered by something more than their users. There was simply no way to unleash such destruction, at least not for the Middle Hegemons.

The temporary harmony within Zac's body was already falling apart due to pain and stress, but another infusion of Void of Death restored order. Zac's heart hammered with anxiety, but he didn't let it affect his actions. The next step decided life and death. Another step shifted his position, and the world briefly turned white.

Zac swung his axe despite his temporary blindness, ignoring the searing heat from his right as he moved once more. He appeared right beside Ra'Klid, who was sitting atop the Hexmaster with a blank look on his face. Zac's right ear was missing after a sharp cut narrowly missed his head. A layer of skin had been shaved off, and a deep wound dug into his shoulder.

If Zac's understanding of the Void had been even slightly off, the wound would instead have split his head in two. However, the risk had paid off. A weak groan escaped from the closest deathsworn as he slumped onto the ground, his head falling off his shoulders.

The death of a controller caused a brief backlash to all avatars, and Zac knew this was do or die. He seized a blob of energy gathered under the cover of his technique, and it poured into the freshly drawn fractal on his right shoulder blade. The fractal lit up and became a black hole that greedily absorbed the energy and Dao used to power his technique.

The sense of harmony was gone in an instant. The gold in his cells faded, and [Void Zone] became food. Even the Void Mountain receded further into his Soul Aperture like it was hiding from a predator. Zac went from being a perfect vessel of his path, burgeoning with power and promise, to a hollow husk echoing with weakness. The profound loss felt worse than death, and Zac almost lost control over the unstable energy.

Thankfully, the immense force concentrated on his right shoulder helped anchor his mind, though the pain it brought was enough to go mad. Zac said a silent prayer as he activated the fractal.

The never-tested, defective fractal, holding enough energy to blow a hole in the sky.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1135 - Facing Destiny - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1135 - Facing Destiny

Zac's left shoulder blade promptly exploded, unleashing a storm of opalescent Creation unsuccessfully caged by his Evolutionary Path. One moment, the deluge resembled a leafy branch. The next, a sharp-edged wing wrought from unfettered possibility. The sudden eruption almost blew his arm off, and he felt like a jet engine had been fastened to his back. Unwilling to give in, Zac gritted his teeth and swung his axe through willpower alone.

The counterforce provided direction to the rampaging energy, allowing Zac to direct some of it into his right arm. Zac could feel bone, muscle, and even his Spiritual Avatar morphing under the tidal wave. Thankfully, the familiar nature of the energy kept the mutations at a minimum. Having completed the journey, the torrent of finely woven force poured into [Verun's Bite].

The Tool Spirit yowled with pain as the energy entered the wooden haft, but it willingly accepted the dangerous payload. This was only possible thanks to Verun officially stepping into the path of Life and discarding conflicting elements. Even then, [Verun's Bite] couldn't endure for extended periods, and Zac was not much better off.

Luckily, a moment was all he needed.

A shimmering energy blade appeared, barely reaching beyond Verun's true edge. It was incredibly crude, a mockery of his old skill [Chop]. The blade flickered like a dying flame, utterly incapable of maintaining a solid form. Yet, as his old skill said, there was greatness in simplicity.

The blade was small and chaotic, but Zac could see a glimpse of his lofty aspirations within. Creation was joined by three forms of fuel; Divine, Cosmic, and Void Energy, where Creation was the outsider who broke the deadlock and breathed new possibilities into his path. The Daos of Life and Conflict joined the Void of Death to keep order and give direction.

Zac understood this balance was tenable at best, and the fuel was rapidly leaking out his back. He didn't try to mold the Origin Blade into something greater. Just keeping it together as he finished his swing pushed his Soul and Heart to their limits. There was only one thought in Zac's mind as he gazed upon the incoming web of inescapable death.

'Open!'

The opalescent edge tore into reality and carved open a wound to expose its secrets. Zac felt like a painter, his axe the brush that overturned convention and redrew fate. Not even the Edict of Solitude could withstand Creation's exuberant will, especially not when the Void directed it from the shadows.

Space was cleanly opened like a surgical scar. The opening was no longer than a foot, but it became a loose thread in the fabric of space. Just a small defect, but that was sometimes enough. The perfect isolation was no more. And through that flaw, madness spilled forth.

Dozens of fractures opened through the cage as the breach turned into a full-blown tempest. The cage of solitude had been turned into a microcosm of the storm in outer space. Vast amounts of foreign energy poured into the cage as the dimensional pressure finally found a place to vent.

The web of light only exacerbated the chaos, and the deathsworn's great momentum was turned against them. The avatars turned into deadly faultlines, spawning spatial tears right on top of their controllers. Two immediately died, one from sudden bisection. The other narrowly escaped the same fate, only to have their torso turned into ash by a burst of foreign Dao.

The final Middle-stage Hegemon barely held on, but both Late Hegemons survived the upheaval through quick wits and ruthlessness. Like Zac, they narrowly avoided certain death by accepting gruesome wounds. Not even losing limbs was enough to create a ripple in their eyes. They were still hellbent on completing the mission, turning into streaks of lights moving toward Zac.

The Edict of Solitude flickered precariously, but Zac sensed its mysterious law was still in effect. His attack hadn't destroyed the barrier separating them from the outside world. It had only changed the situation within. It didn't matter. Zac's gambit was never meant to kill all his enemies or break him out. It would just have been a welcome surprise.

His true goal was to create a path to survival, no matter how narrow.

Vines pulled while Zac grabbed a shellshocked Ra'Klid. He jumped, or rather stumbled, into the spatial fracture directly formed by his attack. It was the largest and most stable, and hopefully, their ticket out of here. He could barely believe his plan had worked.

However, a sudden snap made his heart drop. Another spatial tear had opened up, severing Vivi's vine and cutting Emily off. There was no time. Space was nearing utter collapse, and none would survive if they stayed a moment longer.

Their eyes briefly met, and Emily grinned. She leaped into the smaller tear just as Zac passed through his. A shaky voice echoed in his mind, holding a mix of fear and anticipation.

'See you on the other side.'

Then, there was only chaos.

The connection was severed, and the shock almost exposed Vilari to the clawing grab of her opponent. It wasn't the first time she'd been left without the comforting touch of her father's soul, but it was the first time their connection had been cut off unannounced and so abruptly. It left her empty, exposed, a trembling leaf subject to the winds of fate.

She desperately wanted to follow, to find a clue to what transpired. But her retreat was blocked by the three Hegemons who refused to give in. If anything, they had been emboldened by her shattered momentum, considering her a sheep to the slaughter. Her heart was in turmoil, but she turned despair into fuel for her path.

A desolate smile spread across her face as she looked at the three Kan'Tanu elites. They might be reincarnators from the Chapter of Hallowed Flesh, sporting constitutions capable of isolating their souls. But so long as they could feel, they would never be safe.

"It's a trap!"

Vilari shook her head, but the deprecation was as much directed at herself as her enemies. Struggle as you might, destiny would eventually come calling. She had so desperately wanted to believe in the earnest conviction in her father's eyes that she had ignored the signs. That he would sweep the dark clouds away and make everything right.

Perhaps it was for the best. She'd long known she would eventually have to step out from Zac's shadows and face the winds herself. To drag him into this chapter of unfinished Karma would be selfish.

A distant toll echoed as she undid the seal, and the depths of her heart answered the call. Her bloodline surged, and the [Emancipation Eye] opened. This time, it looked slightly different from normal. The vertical pupil still consumed all thought, but it was joined by a horizontal scar that bled the woes of the world.

Struggle appeared on the face of the three reincarnators, but it was fleeting. One by one, they bowed toward the eye before entering the intersection of her pupils. There was no sorrow or joy, only predestination. Eyes closed and fate was sealed, but Karma would never be severed.

A turbulent wave of impressions flooded Vilari's mind, each a shackle reminding her of the price of her choice. She remained willing, and there was

not a ripple in her heart as their last embers of cognizant self became fuel that nourished her soul. The fading light would soon burn out, reduced to pure Mental Energy bereft of the Seven Sensations.

Vilari opened her eyes, and a flash took her to the edge of the spatial collapse. There was no sign of her father or his attackers. It was like the whole battle had been erased from the river of time. Her first instinct was to unleash a wave of destruction to reopen the path. Vilari shook her head, reining in the magnified rage in her heart.

Sometimes, it was worth risking everything in your fight against fate. However, ignoring facts and giving in to the dark whispers in one's heart was only degeneration. Vilari knew she would have to do better than this.

'Sister, what should we do?'

Vilari took a calming breath before turning to Rhuger. Three moons rotated behind his back, swallowing the lights of the storm above. He was covered in fresh wounds, where one had almost claimed his left eye. Like her, he sensed what happened and fought to break free.

'Is he...?'

'Haven't you learned the way our father operates by now?' Vilari answered with a smile. Even she couldn't tell whether her tranquility was real or feigned. 'The competition for the fortress started over a day ago, so there was never any chance of Dad staying outside for long. He has his destiny to fulfill, and we have ours.'

'I know you lack confidence, but you have no reason to. You were chosen by Ultom, proving you're qualified to stay by Dad's side. You might not be our strongest fighter, but you are the greatest general that's come out of Elysium. It is time for you to spread your wings. The Acheron Company will be relying on you until Father returns.'

'Me? What about—'

'Like you, I have a destiny I must face.'

The heavenly dome shattered as the enormous bell broke through. It almost looked like the spatial fractures had come alive as they stormed the heretical treasure. Yet not a single blemish was added to the broken surface, making

Vilari absentmindedly wonder what kind of experiences had reduced it to such a sad state.

Space repeatedly collapsed and was forcibly reforged through the weight of the bell's aura. Each round of destruction let the treasure squeeze further into the atmosphere, and its intangible pressure had already caused great upheavals on the ground. The vast tangles of cursed thorns stopped their advance, cowering into a defensive curl.

Vilari soon saw the first streak of spiritual light get pulled to the sky and knew her time was already up.

'Tell Dad... I'll see him soon.'

A spiritual mote burst forth from her glabella like an arrow. Vilari activated [Soulshift] just before it collapsed under the bell's aura, letting her appear halfway up the sky in a single bound. She looked down at the sea of warriors, seeing many familiar faces look up at her. Or rather at the bell looming above her like an evil god.

Demons, humans, Zhix, and a hodgepodge of different races. All from different circumstances, many even separated by the great divider that was Death. However, they shared one commonality that rendered their many differences irrelevant. They had a common root, a place they fought to protect. Home. The Atwood Empire, the creation of her father.

She would do her part.

Another bound, and she found herself directly beneath the bell. She could feel the overwhelming waves of ancient thought burrow into her consciousness, trying to corrupt the feelings she held dear. She gingerly touched the ancient stone and sighed sorrowfully as only turbidity answered her call. Vilari knew her path would break if she stayed any longer, so she unhesitantly took the third step.

The dust of relinquished sensations lining the bell's inside stirred, gathering beneath the rotten rope. It formed a simple gate made from pure emotion. Vilari stepped through, and the pressure was no more. Replacing it was an utter darkness, one not limited to her senses. Even her heart and soul were closed off, leaving her in a state of blankness.

Then, a voice appeared, guiding her back to reality.

"Child, I expected you to struggle longer."

It was impossible to make any deductions of the speaker. Its words were crafted with pure emotion, upending Vilari's understanding. There was not a hint of energy or Dao in the words, but Vilari desperately held onto the core of her being. A simple sentence had almost managed to twist her emotions in an even more grotesque manner than the poor soldiers who sacrificed their hearts with a smile.

This entity was corruption manifest, a subversion of the Dao itself. It didn't need to do anything to attack her path. Its mere existence was poison to anyone climbing the Peak of Impetus. Despite the danger, she had to face this head-on.

"What will come will come," Vilari said. She would be lying if she said she wasn't afraid. She was just a child trapped in the web of an evil entity. Truth be told, its power was a small source of comfort. It could have killed her with a thought, so the fact she was still standing meant there was still a fighting chance. "My seals wouldn't have lasted more than a day, and the longer I waited, the more my heart would corrode."

"True. Some threats are best dealt with alone. Some think themselves clever, hiding in the shadows to deal with their problems after reaching a higher stage. Ignorant that their retreat had already sealed their fate," the entity laughed. "But, child, why are you so sure I'm a threat and not an opportunity?"

"Opportunities rarely force themselves on others."

"I would argue they almost always do. Few can choose their direction in life."

"Are you going to pretend you didn't have an ulterior motive in forcing a connection between us? Then let's not waste any more time," Vilari said as she ignited her soul.

She reached into the darkness, guided by the mark she'd left behind. And there it was, the slumbering thought.

"You wish to use the lingering sentiments trapped in the bell to combat me? Feisty," the voice cackled. "But why do you think they're yours to control? That they're even real and not a way for me to supplant your heart? Do you even know the true nature of those who toiled and tolled, fruitlessly praying for substantiation?"

"Know? No, but I have a feeling," Vilari said as a smile spread across her face. "And I know your goal is not possession. Your existence is evil, taboo, and entering my body won't change that. It'll only expose you to the Heavens, and I doubt you can survive its attention in your current state."

Vilari knew the entity could see right through her intentions, but that was just what she wanted. It would confirm she was ready to shed all pretenses if she wasn't given any way out. Vilari wasn't sure about the details but had clearly felt it before entering the entity's domain.

The bell's true spirit had been tricked or forced into slumber, likely meaning the entity needed it alive. What would happen if the spirit woke up, only to find its body so utterly corrupted? The shock alone might drive it mad, severing the entity's control over the bell. Could a snail really survive without its shell?

"Ah, whatever," the entity said after a brief impasse. "I suppose I should be happy the one I've been waiting for isn't a fool. And the fact you dared enter my domain means you're willing to brave dangers."

The darkness receded, and Vilari found herself sitting in a simple cottage face-to-face with her opponent.

"Still playing games?" Vilari said, a hint of steel in her voice.

"I thought you'd relish a familiar face during this stressful situation," Zac said, his eyes dripping with malignant intention. "And I wouldn't call it games. You should understand that our paths, more so than others, require us to act in tune with our hearts. You say I'm evil, but the only evil is denying your true nature. Or replacing the true nature of others with comforting lies."

Vilari's eyes were like bottomless lakes as she silently looked at the twisted misrepresentation of her father. Of all the things it could have chosen, it had chosen the utterly incorruptible truth in her heart. Eventually, the entity seemed to get bored, and his appearance turned into a hunch-backed old lady dressed in unfamiliar ceremonial robes.

"So what do you want?"

"You wanted me to put the cards on the table, so why play coy with me now?" the kindly old lady countered. "As you implied, I've seen better days, and you have access to something I need."

"Is it inside the main inheritance or an outer court? And what can you give in return?"

"Clever girl," the entity smiled. "What I'm searching for should be in the Mercurial Courts. It was those ephemeral dreamers who most benefitted from Pasho's Songs. If you can call that benefit. Child, can you imagine? A whole race denouncing reality and retreating into a dream. They thought they'd found a shortcut to transcendence, stretching a single slumber into eternity. Do you want to know what I saw when I peeked through the curtain?"

"I want the true version of the method you imparted."

"Who's to say what's true?" the old lady said as she looked out the window. "Those who invented the [Embers of Seven Sensations] couldn't even withstand the changing seasons. They could have saved themselves but chose to wait for something that would never happen."

The old lady turned back, her eyes burning with madness as an impossibly wide grin spread across her face. "Meanwhile, I am still here as we approach the Zenith."

Horror threatened to overwhelm Vilari's mind, yet her lips curved upward. But the feeling passed before she reached a point of no return, and she eventually disarmed the trigger.

"Well, suit yourself. You need more strength to accomplish what I need. But I wonder, will you be able to hold onto the sorrows of old when salvation is waiting around the corner?"

"You believe the thing you seek was hidden somewhere else," Vilari exhaled. "Anima Courts?"

"Karma coming full cycle," the old lady nodded. "Now, it's time for us to leave. Our time is short, and there is much you need to experience."

"Deal with my enemies before you go."

"Are you sure? Every offering will help me recover a fraction of my power," the entity said as the world darkened. "Who knows what might happen if the balance is broken? Will your safeguard still work?"

"I'll risk it."

"Then let's go, my little tyrant," the discarnate soul laughed. "Let's see if there's joy or despair waiting at the end of the road."

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1136 - Storm Curtain - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1136 - Storm Curtain

An echoing silence lingered in the chamber as the last motes of Imperial Qi dispersed.

"Interesting. A year of planning, yet the fish slipped through our net," Yselio hummed as he gently stroked his pet's head. "I wonder what caused the interference. That force completely eluded my senses. Zachary Atwood... Not simple, indeed."

"This is my mistake," Werui said, his face pale as he knelt on the ground. The demeanor of a noble and a consecrated knight was swept away in the face of this critical failure. "I underestimated our target. I should have ordered them to back down when we lost one of our three commanders."

"Who could have expected an [Epiclesis Bell] would appear out of nowhere and ruin our plans?" Yselio laughed. "It's a gift, in a sense. Seeing it is like being given a glimpse of history. The Beseechment Pavilion was lost to the river of time shortly after the Anima Court was built. At least, that's what we were led to believe. Too many secrets were buried in those turbulent times."

'And just what was that entity hiding within?' Yselio thought.

Had it been sealed inside by the Pavilion Master, or had it used the bell and its lingering power to avoid Heaven's gaze? Its aura was weak but profoundly deep. Just a wisp remained, but it had almost completely corrupted the lost teachings of Seven Sensations. And it had completely eluded his calculations like it was fully disconnected from the river of fate.

Two mysteries appearing in less than an hour. Who knew what kinds of ripples they would cause? Yselio's eyes glimmered with anticipation. He really made the right choice coming to this desolate corner of space. Where else could he encounter such interesting things? Where else could he hide behind fate's machinations to act however he pleased?

Yselio was eager to discover what benefits unraveling these mysteries could bring, but he kept his desires in check. He'd need to make special

preparations to observe any trajectories involving such a malignant creature. As for the other... was there any point? Fate was gathering.

Yselio turned to the subordinate who had followed him into this realm. One of Ylvin's new in-name disciples, if memory served him well. Perhaps it was fated. His next steps needed to be taken without a chaperone anyhow.

"The fault lies not in you, but you've ultimately been discarded by fate," Yselio sighed. "Keeping you by my side will steer our trajectory off-course."

Werui froze a few seconds before his pallid expression gained a transcendent calmness. "I beg Your Highness to leave a path for this unworthy one's line."

"Their fates have no connection to me or our mission. You will be given a grade-two burial."

Of course, Yselio wouldn't mention the hidden caveat. A grade-two burial might allow glory to be inherited, but the stain of tarnished fate would render it useless. The Tobrial Dynasty wouldn't risk leaving any blemishes on their Imperial Providence in such a critical time. But why worry this man with the matters of the living?

"Many thanks to Your Highness! Glory to Edge of the Seventh Heaven and the Tobrial Dynasty!" Werui said as his soul crumbled.

"Eat up," Yselio gently said.

The Desolate Elsofir purred and slid down from Yselio's lap. Soon, pieces of the martyr's corpse disappeared one after another, as though whisked off to another dimension. With every bite, Karma dissipated until there was none. It was a shame they were so far from home. Would this man's family still remember his name? Gauging Ylvin's reaction would have to do.

"Fate's whimsy," Yselio smiled before his thoughts drifted away.

As expected, the experiment ended in failure. Any Flamebearer carried a seed of possibility. That they one day might possess the qualifications to pick up the torch of the forebearers. Such potential was bound to be difficult to seize in a roundabout way. You'd be fighting against the river of fate all the while. He would have to move personally and with sincerity if he wanted to enter Ultom's Courtyards.

What was more surprising was the way fate fought back. The appearance of the [Epiclesis Bell] was undeniably beyond his expectations and proof he'd misjudged the influence of the cycles. The Outer Courts protected the flame of hope and prevented the pillar from toppling. And by the looks of it, its candidates fulfilled the same role. He would have to make some adjustments to his helpers after returning. As for the Flamebearer, he just had to isolate the candidate to reduce the number of variables. It wouldn't be long before he had this chance.

The Elsofir opened its eyes, and there was a new spark of intelligence in the dark pools. Most of it would soon fade, but it was a shame to waste such a valuable specimen.

"You have one hour to digest your experience. After that, you have work to do. There are a few secrets I need to unearth before that malignant star descends on this place."

The beast nodded and turned into a bracelet on Yselio's arm. The wheels had been set in motion, and there was no point in staying in this room with its faded glory. However, Yselio stopped before leaving, turning to look at the ancient crest hanging on the wall.

"You were all so proud back then. We were barely qualified to run errands or become fodder for your ambition. Even now, my blood marks me as nothing but a lowly messenger in this decrepit fortress. But where are you now? Purple Qi is rising from the east. The Tobrial Dynasty is shining like the North Star while ignorant rats are gnawing at the corpse of your fallen house.

"I wonder if you regretted your choice when you faced the Terminus. Would you have reined in your ambitions if you knew the price?"

Yselio smiled as he left the room. "No, I bet you wouldn't."

Some things were more important than life or the chance at reincarnation. You could only get swept up by your desire like a moth to the flame.

'What did you see at that final moment of clarity? Will this be my chance to peek through the curtain?'

It was like the whole allied army released a collective pent-up breath when the terrifying bell rose into the storm above. They'd feared the Kan'Tanu wouldn't satiate its profane hunger and turn its attention to them. It was a reasonable assumption, considering only a handful had been able to see the figure entering the bell. Even Dossin would have missed it without the War Array augmenting her senses. N0v3lTr0ve served as the original host for this chapter's release on N0v3l--B1n.

"Clear out the remnants and set up the perimeter," Dossin said, her heart weary despite their fortuitous encounter.

She'd have to be a fool not to realize she'd become an unwitting pawn in a much larger game. And it wasn't hard to deduce who stood at the center of the plot. Her gaze slowly shifted to the unique army of living and dead. The Acheron Company and the Atwood Emperor.

No one had said it outright, but her mission spoke louder than words. They were a second-string army at best. The alliance wasn't expecting them to send any elites into the ancient fortress. Their only job was to ensure the Kan'Tanu didn't get free access to a spatially active region. So why had such a monster like Zachary Atwood been sent to her side?

More importantly, who were those traitors? Dossin was born without any peerage. She only seized a chance at a higher life by surviving the Blackwind Camp's harsh training, which had left some gaps in her understanding. However, she knew enough to understand that those six weren't part of Zecia's forces. Outsiders.

The question was whose plot she'd been made complicit to and what steps she should take now. The wrong step would land her in a shallow grave, but the right could be the opportunity she'd been waiting for.

"I need to make a report. Seal the area and set up an Emphyrean-grade Array."

"Emphyrean Grade?" her subordinate said with surprise. "Directly to headquarters?"

"No. Directly to Archduke Everfast."

"We only have materials for one Emphyrean Grade signal," the Array Master hesitated. "Moreover... there is a risk our beacon will interfere with the Archduke's plans."

"I'm aware. I'll take all responsibility. Set it up."

It was time to roll the dice.

Old wounds were immediately joined by new when Zac fell into the storm of turbulent space and ancient destruction. The chaos resembled the aftermath of the destroyed node inside the Void Star, though there were noticeable differences. Beneath the madness, there was a deadly undercurrent that felt focused. Deliberate.

It wasn't aimed at him specifically. It more resembled the tumultuous aura born on large-scale battlefields. Whether the source was a War Array or lingering intent from the Limitless Empire remnant was difficult to say. It was, however, confirmation that his mad idea had merit. That despite what Dossin said, it might be possible to force your way into the ancient fortress.

You just needed to survive the passage.

Zac's ragged state didn't inspire much confidence. His brush with death had done a number on his body, not just his missing foot and bloody gashes. His body was parched like a desert after forcing everything into his ultimate attack, and large sections of his pathways throbbed painfully after being overloaded. Adding the telltale hollowness of using large amounts of Creation Energy, Zac felt like he would be better off on a sickbed than traversing ancient Dao storms.

Thankfully, activating the successor to his [Origin Mark] had only drained the free energy in his body and not all his reserves. He still had almost half his Void Energy left, while his Cosmic Core retained a third. Meanwhile, his undead half was already furiously absorbing Crystals and Voidstones to replenish what was lost. It was a useful ability that boosted his already monstrous energy reserves, though his lack of affinities severely limited his absorption speed.

Ra'Klid wasn't much better off despite not being directly hit by the deathsworn's ambush. At least two Peak Dao Branches had powered their War Array, likely one from each Late D-grade leader. Just being in the vicinity was deadly to a peak E-grade cultivator like the Mavai Chieftain.

Now, he was dragged into this mess. Seizing the fate of the Left Imperial Palace didn't come without a price. The demon had covered his body with radiant golden scales, but the storm tore through Ra'Klid's defensive skill like butter. Zac knew the already wounded demon wouldn't make it, so he roused his bloodline while pulling Ra'Klid closer.

The neighboring storm calmed while Ra'Klid's scales faded until they were barely visible. Completely nullifying the unrelenting barrage was impossible, though. Zac dipped further into his reserves to reactivate [Empyrean Aegis], and the rapid consumption of Void Energy actually lowered as a golden barrier helped deal with the onslaught. Unfortunately, the skill was not well suited to the environment.

Only the central pillar of the defensive skill was within his nullification zone, while the others were exposed to the unrelenting storm. The skill wouldn't last more than twenty seconds, but it gave the two a much-needed breather. Zac searched for Emily but couldn't see her anywhere. The tear she entered was right next to theirs, but space wasn't linear in this confusing realm.

He was extremely worried, but it was undeniably a small blessing in disguise that it was Emily and not one of his other subordinates who'd entered the spatial fracture. Her misadventures in the Million Gates Territory had imparted his disciple with experience and precaution. Zac knew her Spatial Ring contained a veritable arsenal of treasures meant to deal with this exact situation.

While Emily was gone, Zac quickly confirmed they weren't alone in the storm. The two Late-stage Hegemons had followed him into the spatial fracture, only faring marginally better than Ra'Klid. They were grievously wounded, separated, and their defensive skills and treasures were rapidly being exhausted.

A perfect opportunity.

The turbulent environment made it nigh-impossible for Zac to exert any control, but he staunchly inched closer with the help of [Skystriker]. Suddenly, he and the leader were pushed closer, and Zac's arm turned into a blur as Void Energy and Dao entered [Evolutionary Edge]. The Late-Stage Hegemon noticed the strike, but dealing with the storm took up most of his energy.

He tried to activate a skill to counter while repositioning the sword he took out when their War Array failed, but then he entered [Void Zone]. Defensive

barriers faded, exposing the captain's back to the storm's full might. The combination completely disrupted his preparations, and Ra'Klid was poised to strike. He growled as he swung his axe with everything he got. His strength was far below the Late Hegemon's, but it was enough to force his weapon slightly out of the way.

Zac's attack was right on the demon's heels, but an unpredictable gust came to the captain's aid. Zac had been aiming for her head, but the axe bit into her shoulder. Still, a damaged Middle D-grade War Regalia unable to channel energy couldn't block a melee strike empowered by [Evolutionary Edge]. The storm drowned out the axe's roar, but a torrent of blood proved its ferocity.

A flood of rampant Dao poured into her wound, destroying pathways and attacking her core. Zac and Ra'Klid were dragged away before they could follow up, but Zac doubted it mattered. As expected, he didn't have to wait long before an immense influx of Kill Energy. The attack hadn't killed her, but it was the straw that broke the camel's back.

The infusion was the largest source of Kill Energy he'd ever encountered. It wasn't even close. He would have to kill at least twenty powerful Middle Hegemons to enjoy such a bountiful harvest or hundreds of the common Hegemons you normally ran into on the battlefield. It was almost enough to forget his pains as he turned his attention to the next sitting duck.

Unfortunately, the storm dealt with the problem before Zac got the chance. The Hegemon's armor shattered, fully exposing him to the cutting blades. His body briefly turned into a streak of light, but it only lasted a moment before his dismembered body appeared nearby. Out of better options, he'd tried to activate an escape treasure.

Only half a pillar of [Empyrean Aegis] remained by the time the two Hegemons had died, but Zac could already sense the storm's edge. He activated [Skystriker], forcibly cutting through the final stretch. The kaleidoscopic storm twisted as immense spatial forces shattered his defensive skill and overwhelmed his nullification zone.

Zac refused to be ripped apart by the dimensional crossing after coming so far, so he activated a Half-step defensive treasure. It almost instantly failed, but it was just enough to break through and appear in a turbulent sky. Above, a churning thunderstorm roiled and raged, though Zac knew it was a layer of densely packed broken space.

It felt like the unstable barrier could fail at a moment's notice, releasing the apocalyptic energies they'd just escaped. Zac wanted to create some distance to be safe, but the aura below gave him pause. He turned his gaze, finally focusing on the fortress that had triggered the massive mobilization of both sides.

The War Fortress didn't carry much resemblance with the Left Imperial Palace Zac saw in his Vision, but it still left a deep impression. The bulk of the fortress's size was made up of a spherical city, though many of the structures were ancient weapons or arrays. Every single surface was covered in ancient scripts radiating unyielding power.

It looked like the fortress was fighting an invisible enemy as one terrifying attack after another was launched into the sky. Most held enough force to obliterate Zac and the whole Acheron Company, and it was all swallowed by the churning clouds. It was no wonder the whole solar system was on the verge of collapse.

Zac suspected the erratic attacks were the result of damaged wiring rather than someone having gained control of the weapons systems. It was clear that the fortress had seen better days, just like Dossin had said. If anything, her description could be considered an understatement.

There was not a single structure spared of the ravages of war. The fortress's outer rim was supposed to be lined with a mile-high wall, but less than half of it remained. Whole sections were simply gone, while others had become deathtraps filled with deadly energy. More than one turret had failed, blowing up or striking other parts of the fort.

Most blemishes told a tale of bitter struggle, yet they all paled before a huge, jagged scar that had almost managed to cut the whole fortress in two. The wound was ancient yet still teemed with such intense murderous intent that it affected the whole realm.

On top of the Killing Intent, Zac could vaguely feel a helplessness hidden within. The intent was so rife with meaning Zac could almost see the battle before him. It was revenge. Revenge for severing their future and murdering the Dao.

**Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1137 - Killing Intent - Read
Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1137 - Killing Intent**

Zac was almost certain the cultivator who left the immense scar was the equivalent of an early Autarch in the pre-system era. He simply didn't think it possible for a Divine Monarch to leave such an indelible mark. At the same time, the attack couldn't have come from anything higher than an early B-grade cultivator.

The fortress was undeniably much stronger than any weapon system he'd seen in Zecia, but it should still be a C-grade construction. Anything stronger than an Early Autarch wouldn't just have left it in a crippled state. Not even dust would have remained if it had faced the wrath of a Supremacy.

The fortress's sad state wasn't a result of the endless war of expansion the Limitless Empire fought, judging by the sentiment instilled into the attack. It was retribution during the earliest days of the Dark Ages.

The System's birth had instantly wiped out the whole upper echelon of the Limitless Empire. The emperor, his court, and his powerful generals became the fuel that kickstarted their creation. What followed was a million-year epoch where the Dao was shrouded, and almost all energy was stolen.

This period didn't arrive in a day or two. Not even the System could drain the whole Multiverse that quickly. However, it was impossible to miss the signs, and it didn't take long for the ancient forces to pinpoint the culprit. Some, like Sendor and the current imperial clans, figured out ways to seal themselves or hide away, waiting for the Dao to recover.

Others went mad and targeted the perpetrator. Factions who'd cowered in fear of Emperor Limitless and his armies tore through the dimensional barriers and descended on the Limitless Empire. Nothing was spared during that crusade, and the once-glorious empire was almost completely erased from history. This fortress was likely a target of that punitive expedition and had somehow survived through a stroke of chance.

Zac's musings were abruptly swept away as his mind screamed of lethal danger. He didn't need [Inborn Predator] to pinpoint the source. A spire covered in crackling runes and metal prongs was coming alive, and it had locked in on their position. It felt like being stared down by a Primordial Beast, and the intent was so palpable that even the Mavai Chieftain noticed.

"Shit! Incoming—" Ra'Klid screamed as a lance of crackling lighting shot toward them.

The attack was almost as powerful as the pillar of ice Catheya's master once used to save his life, and it moved nearly as fast. Zac tried to move out of the way, only to find small lightning runes sealing his movement. His horror only mounted upon realizing his bloodline was utterly incapable of extinguishing them. Out of better options, Zac turned to the illusory seal hidden in the depths of his body.

It was a huge blow to expend the life-saving grace Sendor left him before the trial started. It was his absolute fallback for situations that not even his bloodline or remnants could remedy. It was so valuable he'd even gone with his untested [Origin Revolution] against the deathsworn.

Certainly, that was partly because Sendor had indicated his unwillingness to kill participants, getting his fate entangled with Ultom and the factions that contended for its ownership. Most likely, the mark was something like an absolute defense, and there was not much point blocking the deathsworn's War Array if he remained trapped in the Edict of Solitude. When Sendor's protection expired, he'd be back at square one.

Just as Zac was about to activate the brand, he felt the familiar aura of Ultom ripple forth. The screaming danger was immediately reduced to a susurrus, and the lightning bolt twisted like a snake. It created a wide berth around Zac's location before disappearing into the spatial storm. Zac exhaled and slowly retracted his Mental Energy.

"Uh," the demon hesitated while rapidly blinking to adjust his eyes. "Never mind. About time we caught a lucky break."

Zac grunted in agreement despite knowing it was more than just luck. His eyes shifted to the Spatial Ring on his left hand, and he took out a small token. The [Court Cycle Token] looked no different than usual, but Zac was almost certain it had saved their lives. Nothing else in the ring could have produced that unmistakable aura.

The fortress actually accepted the token as proper identification. The realization added a layer of safety inside the crumbling realm and clearly hinted its purpose within the real trial. Would each cycle increase his credentials inside the Left Imperial Palace?

Still, Zac knew that staying in the air was to tempt fate. You couldn't rely on proper documentation when the fortress was in such bad shape. But where should they go?

Zac's main concerns were Emily and the Acheron Company. Emily's situation was undoubtedly precarious, but his army also faced great danger. It wasn't just the elite Kan'Tanu army to worry about. He had been schemed against by the Seventh Heaven, and only someone high up in the alliance could have arranged his army to join four infiltrated factions.

His heart gnawed with worry, but there was no way to reach or even contact his people. Returning the way he came was out of the question, and he couldn't spot any of those safe pathways leading out. There was no telling where he'd appear even if he found one. The battle for the fortress spanned a whole solar system, so he might not even end up on the same planet as his army.

Now that it had come to this, he'd have to trust in his people's capabilities and focus on the fortress. Dossin's mission might have been a sham, but the war for the fortress and its treasures was very real. The ancient arrays were not the only things wreaking havoc on the ground. Fierce battles between cultivators were taking place throughout the city.

A quick sweep indicated hundreds of people were already here, an even mix of Alliance forces and Kan'Tanu. There were undoubtedly even more inside the structures themselves. None dared to take to the sky, though, and for good reason. Every second came with the risk of being hit by an ancient War Array, and only the ground seemed to provide a semblance of safety.

There was little order as far as Zac could see. Each side had erected a few temporary camps, but the vast majority were roaming the streets alone or in small groups. Capturing the fortress or even stopping the War Arrays had taken a back seat to the hunt for treasure.

It was easy to see why. The dense Killing Intent seeping from the large wound couldn't hide the fact that the crumbling Mystic Realm was filled with incredible amounts of ambient energy. It even surpassed the general environment in Kavista, whether in density or Dao. The fortress must have been locked in stasis to maintain such an environment after so many years. Or perhaps it had entered a powerful temporal field where millions of years passed on the outside for every year inside.

The ambient energy wasn't the only thing worthy of note. Zac could feel a weak pull of fate from almost every direction. It was the treasure sense awarded by his immense pool of Luck, which was further augmented by his [Lucky Beads]. It wasn't often he felt such a strong calling. Years of

exploration in the Perennial Vastness had only elicited such a feeling a few dozen times.

Meanwhile, the fortress contained so many treasures it all blended into a halo of opportunity. Zac wouldn't be surprised if even normal cultivators could vaguely sense the phenomenon at a subconscious level. Zac made his decision and set out, following the enormous scar toward the fortress's center. It was the most chaotic and fiercely contested part of the fortress, but it was only there he could accomplish his goals.

A lofty tower occupied the inner core, reaching at least a dozen times taller than any other structure. The juxtaposition made Zac think of his visit to the Tower of Eternity. Both had a huge tower surrounded by a circular city. He even felt they were designed based on the same set of principles. Perhaps it was to be expected since they were built by the same faction.

Obviously, this tower was nowhere near the reality-bending height of the real thing. Still, its tip was not far from touching the turbulent clouds, and Zac suspected it might actually reach it soon. Not because the realm was shrinking but because the humongous building wasn't static.

It was slowly spinning and looked like it was rising from the ground. The theory was corroborated by the fact that only the uppermost third was struck by the sword strike. Interestingly, even that section had only been damaged rather than destroyed. The tower was clearly built with sturdier materials and outfitted with stronger defenses. If the fortress had a main control, it was definitely in there.

Zac had no idea why the tower was rising, but it couldn't be good. Both the fortress and its Mystic Realm were barely hanging on. Any big move could disturb the fragile balance, and there was no telling how things would shake out.

He didn't manage to fly more than a second before the dread of being targeted by an array returned. The feeling quickly passed, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief. The token had dispersed the threat much faster now that it was hidden beneath one of his bracers. Still, Zac's nerves were drawn taut as he tore through the sky.

Targeted destruction was only one of the dangers of flight. It was like all the realm's energy and intent were drawn toward the tower, forming a slow-moving cyclone of pure power. The closer they got, the more unstable the air

became. Meanwhile, random waves of destruction tore through the sky, leaving errant bursts that would turn most Hegemons to ash.

Ra'Klid's eyes were wide with terror as Zac navigated the increasingly deadly environment. Landing would be much safer, but Zac suspected something beyond the arrays was preventing the people below from briefly taking to the sky. No one was even jumping over buildings to save time or avoid dangerous regions. His instincts told him that the closer they got to the tower before landing, the better.

Finally, Zac knew his shortcut had been exhausted. He felt a looming threat from the tower itself, and it didn't go away. It wouldn't tolerate his airborne approach any further, so he landed between two structures that blocked vision to the central tower. Zac felt a weak ripple just before landing, and his eyes widened in alarm.

Ra'Klid had already slumped to the ground, but he yelped with shock upon being dragged away by Vivi. It was just in time as three energy bundles appeared from a nearby house. The air was shredded for dozens of meters around them as they released a deadly pulse. Zac knew blindly fleeing might land them in even bigger trouble, so he put himself before Ra'Klid and held out the token.

The three bundles froze briefly before returning to where they came from, soundlessly moving through the wall. Neither Zac nor Ra'Klid dared move for ten seconds, but it looked like they had given up. Zac sighed and flashed to a secluded culvert.

"Thank you, Lord. For everything," Ra'Klid said as he warily looked around.

"Don't mention it," Zac said. "It was me who dragged you into this mess. I expected someone would target us sooner or later, but I didn't expect to run into such a strong squad right out the gate."

"Outsiders?" the demon asked and got an affirmative nod. "What should we do?"

"For now, let's just take a breather and recover," Zac said.

Ra'Klid looked like he'd received an imperial pardon and slumped onto the ground like the air had gone out. Zac wasn't much better off. Urgency and

adrenaline had carried him through the series of near-death experiences, but the state of his body had finally caught up to him.

The stump beneath his leg was the most gruesome. Luckily, dying from blood loss was almost impossible with his Vitality, and he had already sealed the wound with energy. His missing ear and surrounding skin looked grisly, but it was ultimately a cosmetic wound. It wasn't much worse than the lacerations and burns that covered his body. It hurt like hell, but it wouldn't affect his effective strength.

The real dangers were all within. The lesser of the two was the foreign Dao causing trouble. A small amount corresponded to the Deathsworn's War Array, while most came from the chaotic crossing. The problem was halfway solved, thanks to repeatedly flushing his body with Void Energy. His Hidden Nodes and Daos were already dealing with the remains, and his body would be cleansed within an hour or two.

Zac was more worried that [Immutability of Eoz] was still running. It had already dealt with the lingering threats from his battle with the Hexmaster, and Zac couldn't feel anything else wrong with his body. Had the Imperials done something without his notice, like marking him in case their ambush failed? If so, he was likely dealing with a tracking brand.

Unfortunately, Zac couldn't find it, no matter how hard he looked. You really couldn't underestimate people from the Multiverse Heartlands. Even their underlings were so terrifying. Thankfully, [Immutability of Eoz] could sense the problem, meaning the mark would be dealt with sooner or later.

Zac ate a cleansing tonic just in case before turning his vision to his left shoulder. The fallout wasn't as bad as he'd feared. The Skill Fractal was destroyed as he'd expected, but the surrounding pathways only sported some light damage.

The explosion on his shoulder wasn't an accident. He'd known the risks when engraving a defective fractal, so he'd installed a pressure valve that'd go off if the fractal failed to contain the energy. It meant far less energy entering the actual skill, but the small edge wouldn't even have formed without it.

The need for a stronger ace had loomed in the back of Zac's mind for a while. The [Annihilation Sphere] and, to a lesser degree, [Origin Mark] had been his fallbacks since the Tower of Eternity. They let him turn things around

whenever he found himself at the edge of ruin. Unfortunately, they were increasingly coming up short.

The strength of the remnants was still enough to deal with his opponents, but the delivery method was simply too crude. His battle with Valsa had acted as a proof-of-concept for the path forward, but he needed a solution that wouldn't harm his Dao Molds. It would have taken years for his Inexorable Mold to recover if not for Sendor reverting the damage.

Zac had been working on a permanent solution every chance he got, even using the weak wisps of inspiration from his [Court Cycle Token] to speed up the process. Unfortunately, he ran out of time and was forced to settle for what he had. He'd felt that the frontlines were too dangerous without powering up first. And since his attempt to make Haro battle-ready failed, he could only turn to his incomplete blueprints.

The gambit saved his life but also harmed his long-term goals. Engraving a Skill Fractal on your body was like getting a tattoo. You couldn't just engrave, remove, and reform them willy-nilly. The original Pathways of [Cyclic Strike] had already been transformed, or rather scarred, by repeatedly using the remnants. Forcibly redrawing the imperfect pathways had left an even deeper mark.

It would be decades before he could make any significant modifications again, and that was only thanks to his unusually malleable constitution. Most cultivators couldn't even replace Skill Fractals once, which meant each skill represented a permanent choice. You either kept the skill or closed the slot.

Zac shook his head. That was a problem for later. For now, it gave him a faster and deadlier method to use the remnant's refined energy. Next time, the fractal might even survive, and the delivery wouldn't need him to stall so long.

After all, it wasn't designed to use Void Energy.

The idea for [Origin Revolution] was to combine an Evolutionary Dao Braid with Creation, Cosmic, and Divine Energy. Adding Void Energy based on his experimental stance had made it incredibly unstable. Less than 20% of the energy had reached the conjured edge, and Zac failed to contain even that into a stable blade.

Adding Void Energy this time made sense since the spatial cage relied on concepts beyond his understanding. It felt similar to the Orom World, and only

Chaos had worked against that restriction. However, using Void would probably make the skills less effective in most scenarios. It also required him to drain the Void Mountain since he couldn't independently form the Voids of Life or Death.

It would take a few months to reform the broken skill. Zac's shoulder was like a radioactive hotspot after the experiment, and he would have to let it cool down naturally before working on the fractals. Thankfully, the fractal on his right side was fine. Zac glanced at the tower in the distance. He had a nagging suspicion it would be needed soon enough.

Before then, he needed to make some preparations.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1138 - Myriad Paths - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1138 - Myriad Paths

"He's ready to see you," Joanna said as the doors to Zac's temporary cultivation chamber slid open.

Zac emerged from a dense swirl of Miasma, though the observant onlooker would realize there were hints of Divine and Cosmic Energy in the mix. He had to give it to them. The Endemire Sage was quite accommodating, going so far as to set up a small death-attuned section in his War Fortress as soon as the Calamity Company joined his ranks.

It was more out of respect for the Atwood Empire's wares and its allies than for him, but Zac didn't mind. It was only thanks to such bargaining chips he had the chance to even ask for a meeting with the leader of the Forty-Seventh Field Army.

"Wait here," Zac said before turning to the Late Hegemon standing by Joanna's side.

Zac was led to a teleporter, which transported him to a platform beneath a sea of stars. It was possible he'd been sent to outer space, though Zac suspected it was a special chamber in the depths of the planet-sized fortress. The stars were possibly real, but more likely a projection released by the enormous astrolabe floating in the middle of the room.

Beneath it, an elderly figure sat in silent meditation. He was wrinkly and diminutive, with ears too large for his head. The old man lacked the

appearance and aura of a powerful cultivator. The only thing that made him stand out from the crowd was his eyes. They contained profound wisdom and power, making it impossible to mistake him for anything but a Monarch.

The Endemire Sage wore clean but unadorned robes that lacked any spiritual aura, and he sat on the ground instead of a prayer mat or array. The only other item nearby was a wooden pail, whose apparent simplicity only added to the strong contrast with the powerful Spirit Tool floating above his head. Zac glanced at the bucket curiously but failed to see what secrets it held.

Zac had heard some cultivators choose to return to simplicity during their long lives, either as a break from their cultivation or permanently. Some did it to clear their heads and let go of obsessions, thus tempering their hearts. Others sought to understand mortality so that they could transcend it in their pursuit of the Dao.

It was a valid approach, but Zac felt it almost delusional when practiced in the middle of a C-grade War Fortress on the frontlines of an intergalactic war.

"Such a condensed aura. No wonder you've stayed on the ladder since joining our struggle. Now that you're here, you're bound to become the shining beacon of the forty-seventh."

"You're too kind. How can I compare to the seniors who keep us safe," Zac smiled as he walked over.

"Nonsense. Young men such as yourself are the future pillars of our sector. There is no need to contact Mistress Janodrok or Lord Kavriel in the future if you need to see me. You can just call for my little granddaughter. She knows how to contact me unless I'm deep among the gates."

"I apologize. The matter was urgent, and I was afraid any delay would mean unnecessary deaths," Zac said with a small bow as he went straight to business. "As you know, the twenty-second recently started a critical operation. As it happens, half of my forces joined under the Everfast Monarch's banner just moments before."

"So I heard," the Allbright Monarch nodded. "I understand your concerns, but I'm afraid I can't share details about the operation as it's still ongoing. Not even I can access much information after the alliance purchased the War System's regional lock."

"That's not why I'm here," Zac said.

"Oh?"

"I just received a report from Zachary Atwood."

"A report?" the Endemire Sage said with a frown, and it felt like the room temperature had dropped to the biting cold of outer space. "How? You know breaking the seal counts as treason."

"Treason? It's interesting you should say that," Zac said with a neutral expression as he threw over an information crystal. "The how is irrelevant; we both know there are no such things as absolutes. This is the report I received."

Of course, the report was just his shared memories, but he couldn't say that. It was easier to pretend they had some special communication methods. He even had the perfect alibi since the Void Priestess and the Lord of the Kavriel Province had just contacted the Endemire Sage.

"Kan'Tanu outsiders within our ranks? This..." the Monarch said, his eyes burning with intensity like blazing suns. "Is this report true? Have you verified the sender?"

"It's verified, and Lord Endemire should know how hard it is to get word through the blockade. My co-emperor wouldn't waste our time and resources sending false information."

"High-ranked traitors..." Endemire muttered as he looked at Zac in a new light. "No wonder..."

The old Monarch didn't say it outright, but Zac understood what he was thinking. Zac hadn't just contacted his powerful backers to facilitate this meeting. It was a warning meant to restrain the alliance and ensure they didn't sweep the matter with the Seventh Heaven under the rug.

In reality, he would have preferred not to come at all since there was still a small risk the Endemire Sage was part of the plot. However, both the Undead Empire and the Void Gate were isolationist forces and only alliance members in name. They may still have the means to ferret out the traitor, but it would likely take much longer. By then, the Acheron Company might be dead already.

In contrast, the Endemire Sage was very suited to the task. While only an early Monarch, the old man was very well-respected. According to rumors, he was also a sworn brother of some incredibly powerful ancestor of the Allbright Empire.

"Young man, these are serious allegations with wide ramifications," the Monarch said solemnly. "As a small token of apology, please accept a drink from this old man. I believe it will suit your tastes."

Zac curiously looked on as the old man took out a wooden ladle and a small, cracked ceramic cup. It wasn't large enough for a single mouthful, yet pain and reluctance were evident on the Monarch's face as he carefully scooped water from the pail.

"I don't know if it has a true name, but I call it [Myriad Paths Water]. You could consider it similar to a Core Formation Pill, but it leaves no toxins behind. I can tell you're approaching Middle Hegemony. This will help your endeavors. I'll take this opportunity to contact the council."

The Monarch said nothing else. He had already closed his eyes, and the astrolabe started spinning faster. The cup floated into Zac's hand soon after, yet he still failed to discern anything special. From outward appearance, it really was just normal water.

However, the longer Zac looked, the more certain he was the liquid was extraordinary. Even the cracked old cup was hiding some secret. It was just that its spirituality was so perfectly contained that not a wisp could escape.

There were only two things that proved the old man's words. The first was his bloodline, which screamed at him to drink the water. The second was his elevated Luck, which almost created a hallucination where the water released vapor of pure fate.

Zac looked down at the liquid thoughtfully. It didn't trigger any sense of danger, but could he just drink it like that? He knew better than to blindly accept the graciousness of strangers. Then again, this was different than his experience with the [Essence of the Abyss].

The Endemire Sage was sitting right before him. Whether it was to kill him or implant some invisible brand, why bother with the water? If the old man could hide his attack this perfectly, then he wouldn't need to use the water as a

medium. Zac would already have lost the moment he stepped off the teleporter.

But it was, indeed, very beautiful. The more he looked at it, the more Zac felt great secrets hid within the gentle ripples atop the surface. They were so close he could taste it.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm, only now realizing he had swallowed the [Myriad Paths Water] to the last drop. It was like the waves had hypnotized him, and his body acted on instinct. His danger sense was still deathly silent, but his heart beat like a drum as he felt the mortal water transform into a raging tsunami as it ran down his throat.

The Endemire Monarch hadn't reacted, and it almost looked like his soul had left his body. Zac had no time to worry about the old man. The mortal water was now a raging sun, releasing a ripple that spread through his body and entered his Soul Aperture. It didn't trigger Zac's defenses and was gone in no time.

Nothing happened? Zac was ready to combat the water with his bloodline or [Void Heart], but he gasped with marvel as the energy transformed. It was no longer a hyper-condensed ball of undefined energy.

It was him.

The [Myriad Paths Water] lived up to its name, having created three distinct energies that were utterly indistinguishable from his Daos. It wasn't just Miasma. It was the exact composition of Death-attuned energy his Cosmic Core released. Yet it was also fuller, like Zac's own energy was the mimicry.

Zac was now almost certain the Endemire Sage hadn't fooled him, and he couldn't resist the temptation anyway. Turbid pathways rapidly awakened as the [Myriad Paths Water] flooded his Cosmic Core. He'd never made such rapid gains before, not even when eating handfuls of pills just after breaking through.

At the same time, Zac barely felt like he was making improvements. After transforming, the energy was an indistinguishable part of him, and it felt like it was just coming home. The sensation was exhilarating, and Zac's only regret was that he'd only gotten enough for a sip. He was quickly running out of energy, but he wasn't ready to stop yet.

Luckily, he had just the thing to ride the wave a little longer.

Zac was holding onto so much Kill Energy he could barely contain it. The second Late-stage Hegemon hadn't directly been killed by him, but he'd engineered the situation that led to his death. Thus, he'd been given half of the contribution for all those killed by the spatial fractures or the dimensional storm.

The remaining energy of the [Myriad Path Water] acted as a guide and allowed Zac to incorporate the Kill Energy dozens of times faster than normal. His Cosmic Core gave off increasingly powerful pulses of power. It was like a starving beast, accepting everything coming its way. However, no party lasts forever. Zac soon ran out of fuel, and he released a turbid breath.

Zac slowly opened his eyes, waves of shock still coursing through his heart. What an amazing treasure. He'd never encountered such pure and unadulterated energy. It had perfectly adapted to his needs without Zac infusing a drop of Dao. It was like the water already held the true essence of his path and just brought it to the surface.

Come to think of it, Zac had encountered something similar once—the motes of Primal Dao in the Twilight Chasm.

They'd been like an unblemished piece of Heaven dragged down to the mortal plane. The moment it escaped its containment, it transformed into whatever Dao it touched. He'd known it was incredibly precious, but it was only after meeting Yrial again he realized just how rare and valuable Primal Dao was. His mentor said the Primal Dao would have let him become a Divine Monarch or higher, which explained why the Eveningtide Asura had made it part of his ascent.

This water wasn't exactly the same, but it shared similar characteristics. The difference was that one treasure contained truth and the other energy. The Endemire Sage had called it [Myriad Paths Water], but Zac would rather call it Origin Energy. Or perhaps the water was a product made with Origin Dao.

Either case, it was good stuff. One sip allowed Zac to gain four levels in one go, putting him at level 169. It was almost unthinkable for a Hegemon to gain so many levels in twenty minutes, even if one was fueled by Kill Energy. Top-tier pills wouldn't accomplish such a feat, and they'd take far longer to absorb.

And shockingly, the levels weren't the greatest benefits the [Myriad Paths Water] brought. It had rushed into his Cosmic Core like a cleansing wave, its energy more in tune with his path than what his Cosmic Core could produce. And his core adapted.

The System had confirmed his core was Middle Quality with ten to one hundred imperfections when he broke through. Being a mortal, that had remained true to this day. Only Cultivators could steadily refine their cores with their Cultivation Manuals.

In one go, the [Myriad Paths Water] had removed roughly half of the imperfections plaguing his core. Zac wasn't sure if it was enough to elevate his Cosmic Core to High Quality, but it had, at the very least, pushed the core right to the threshold. For a cultivator, that meant saving decades, possibly centuries, on cultivation.

For a mortal, the gain couldn't be measured in time. He'd already scoped out a few treasures with similar effects in the Limited Exchange, but few boasted such pronounced effects. Zac estimated that sip was worth the equivalent of 750,000 merit, and that didn't even take into account that the [Myriad Paths Water] would work on anyone.

The only other way for a mortal was to improve the quality of their core while upgrading it. However, most had their hands full just surviving the breakthrough. Let alone removing imperfections, not adding new ones was considered a pretty good outcome.

It was no wonder the Endemire Sage said the water would be useful. Removing imperfections didn't just help pave the path toward Late Hegemony. It also meant he'd gained a sturdier foundation for his upcoming breakthrough at level 175. He'd made ample preparations already, but he wasn't fully confident. After all, he wouldn't have access to the Perennial Vastness and its arrays when attacking Middle Hegemony.

One sip had already increased his chances by a lot. What if he had a few more...?

"Don't even think about it."

Zac quickly looked away from the wooden bucket like a thief caught in the act. It wasn't the Endemire Sage who had spoken. He was still in meditation, though a deep frown marred his face.

"Master found this bucket after risking his life 50,000 years ago. Even back then, there was only enough water remaining for two dozen elixirs. Between offering some to the Allbright Dynasty and his promising descendants, how much could possibly remain today?"

"I was just looking at the pail. It's remarkable to contain such a spiritual liquid all these years," Zac said as he bowed at the astrolabe.

"Drinking more wouldn't do you any good," the Tool Spirit continued, not bothering with Zac's lies. "Do you think there'd be any left if the old man could repeatedly reap its benefits? You should know, the water can even fix imperfections of Inner Worlds."

"That amazing?"

"Alas, only the first sip brings benefits. The second will leave you bedridden for a century. The third... we'll never know."

"Your master..." Zac hesitated.

"Your report caused huge waves. They are scrambling to deal with the fallout."

Huge waves? Zac frowned. Was there more to the issue than some corrupt general selling him out to the Seventh Heaven?

Eventually, the old man opened his eyes, his expression solemn. "We owe you a debt of gratitude. Your early warning may have prevented a disaster."

"Early warning? My men have already been attacked, and their fate remains unknown," Zac said.

"Rest assured, we have already sent reinforcements to your army. Unfortunately, the ambush on Zachary Atwood was only part of a larger plot. You weren't the only one targeted. We're still investigating the extent of their plot, but we fear it covers the whole battlefield," Endemire said, his eyes burning with anger.

"How's that possible? Whose plot?"

"Technocrats," the old man spat. "Those heretics really picked their timing. They somehow killed and replaced one of our hidden strategic councils. They've been controlling a large part of the operation since it began."

Zac's heart shook at the familiar name but kept his expression steady. "Strategic councils?"

"You could see them as middle management," Endemire sighed. "These highly vetted strategists and generals are the first eyes on the confidential reports from the sealed operation. Smaller matters are dealt with by them directly, while the important decisions are passed up the chain with the pertinent information."

"These heretics have subtly influenced individual events and the overall direction by manipulating thousands of reports and altering orders. Your men being rerouted was just the tip of the iceberg. It'll take weeks to unravel exactly what they've done. By that time, it'll be too late."

Zac could picture the mess the alliance had on its hands. Some Intelligence-based classes essentially turned cultivators into supercomputers, but few could compete with the Technocrats in this department. At any moment, dozens of small, seemingly unrelated, alterations could coalesce into a deadly trap.

The only way to avoid it was to completely redraw their strategy, which risked giving the Kan'Tanu free rein across the battlefield. Zac had a feeling the balance between Kan'Tanu and alliance cultivators inside the fortress wouldn't last much longer.

Ultimately, this mess wasn't one he could fix. He'd already done enough providing intel, and he'd already accomplished his goal here. However, there was one thing he needed to clarify before the next step of his plan.

"The water... Why?"

"It's a gamble," the old man said with a gentle smile. "A cup of Karma, you could say. I believe young master Umbri'Zi is a man who remembers favors and grudges. So I hope you'll look after my granddaughter in the future."

"How? With you by her side, what use am I?"

"Not here," Endemire said with a pointed look. "Left Imperial Palace."

"You..."

"Inda is the most talented descendant I've had, and she was chosen by the Anima Court. As a result, she's been accepted as a disciple of the Radiant Temple."

"Then what's the problem?"

"We're both men of the world," the Endemire Sage sighed. "How can I not know her role in the upcoming trial? What is my face worth in front of these outsiders? Even the Radiant Temple are nothing but hired hands according to little Inda."

"I can't promise anything, but I'll do what I can," Zac said, not bothering to play ignorant.

"That's all I ask. You can return to your men. We will take care of things on our end," the old man said.

"Actually, I need to head back to the Atwood Empire and make some arrangements."

"That's... I understand," the Monarch slowly nodded. "But be careful. The System won't tolerate your absence for long. If one could just return after being forced to the frontlines, our ranks would have been much thinner."

Zac's abyssal eyes looked like frozen black pools when he stepped onto the teleporter. However, hiding beneath the veneer of tranquility hid ruthlessness and determination.

"It shouldn't take more than a day."

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1139: The Dragon's Tail - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1139: The Dragon's Tail

Chapter 1139: The Dragon's Tail

Zac opened his eyes back in the ancient war fortress. He couldn't believe how well his meeting had gone. His goal was to help the Acheron Company, yet ended with him making significant gains. Certainly, Zac understood the Endemire Sage's gift was an investment rather than an act of benevolence.

The pail was already there when Zac entered the room, which meant the impairment was premeditated and unrelated to the military operation.

The old man's word choice was really apt. He'd been served a cup of Karma without proper explanation. The Endemire Sage forcibly tied him and his granddaughter together during an event that heavily revolved around fate. Who knew what kind of ramifications that could have?

Unfortunately for the Endemire Sage, his plan was bound to fail since Zac's body would never form Karmic Bonds after entering Hegemony. He'd still help Inda if they ran into each other during the trial, but Zac sincerely doubted Karma would pull them closer because of the gift.

Zac was more worried about his new enemy and their plot. He would never have guessed that the Tobrial Dynasty would cooperate with a Technocrat faction. The Seven Heavens may have deserted the Limitless Empire, but there should still be bad blood with the Selvari.

Furthermore, these Technocrats weren't simple. Not just anyone could infiltrate an alliance base and replace a group of high-ranking officers without notice. There was no way they belonged to one of the unaffiliated Technocrat organizations in the Million Gates Territory. They should have come from one of Sanctuary's powerful factions. Could it be Firmament's Edge?

Zac hadn't thought of the name in a long time, but he hadn't forgotten about their search for the Digital Nexus. Had he accidentally exposed his connection to the Kayar'Elu during the war, prompting the Technocrats to work with the Seventh Heaven to sound him out? Or was it all just a coincidence? He prayed it was the latter since he had repeatedly used Void Energy during the last battle.

Were Firmament's Edge already here, waiting for him?

He needed to get back to fighting condition sooner rather than later, and the first step was dealing with his foot. Unfortunately, the time constraints didn't give him many options. Accessible treasures required over a month to regrow a limb, and Zac was too stingy to use War Merit on the top-quality treasures in the Limited Exchange.

Relying on his body's natural recovery would be even slower unless he constantly channeled **[Surging Rebirth]**. Zac looked down at the stump with

reluctance, but he knew there was only one option. He'd have to return to that tainted well.

Zac took out a shimmering Longevity Pearl, overruling a strong wave of subconscious rejection as he channeled most of his remaining Creation Energy. His ear and left foot rapidly regrew, though Zac ignored all his scrapes and bruises. Pills and his Void Vajra Constitution were enough to deal with those.

"That energy..."

Zac opened his eyes and saw Ra'Klid looking at him with longing and confusion.

"It's Creation."

"I can't believe you've already transcended the Dao of Life," Ra'Klid muttered as his brows furrowed. "The Mother of Life... Is our path limited?"

"I haven't actually cultivated Creation. It's one of my aces, but it's from an external source," Zac explained after realizing what the demon was worried about. "And I wouldn't call Creation the mother or evolution of Life. It might be the conventional interpretation, and I used to share that belief. Now, I rather feel they're two sides of the same coin. Nothing says that you and the Mavai can't take the Dao of Life to the very end."

The easiest way to understand the Dao was to see it as seventeen pyramids or mountains. At the top, you'd find the unified expression of that peak, such as the Dao of Chaos. This Dao could then be further split into myriad facets, where some were considered higher than others. This interpretation was mostly correct, and it didn't help most cultivators to delve any deeper.

A profound Dao like the Dao of Creation was undeniably far greater in scope and depth than the shallow truths that could become Dao Seeds. However, did Life really need to be subordinate to Creation? If so, how could the Undead Empire rise to the top while actively shunning Oblivion? And how could the Dao of Death inside the Abyssal Lake encompass all creation?

Zac had pondered the Daos of Oblivion and Creation at great length while working on his new aces. His conclusion was that these Daos could only truly exist in a vacuum. Not the vacuum of space but of purpose and direction. They were a lot like the **[Myriad Paths Water]** he'd just consumed. They'd

either disappear or transform into something else the moment they came in contact with the world.

This was likely why the Spark of Creation remained stuck at the threshold until the day it was destroyed. Its desire for Creation ironically made it impossible to ever grasp it. This paradox was why so few cultivators transitioned to Creation or Oblivion, whether it was as pure or mixed-meaning Daos. Who didn't have desires and goals that drove their cultivation? Even an earnest pursuit of the Dao was a form of desire.

In contrast, Life was affected by a will, a purpose. It couldn't exist as a clean slate since it was a vehicle for progress. Similarly, Death was a form of causality. It would never appear without context.

Certainly, there was more at play than comprehension difficulty regarding the Undead Empire. Zac suspected the ban on cultivating Pure Death or Oblivion was related to the commandments. The notion was born when he created **[Adaptive Symbiosis]**, where his bond with Haro was formed through and reinforced by the Dao of Life. The commandments could very well work the same way.

Perhaps those who cultivated Pure Death or Oblivion could ignore the commandments, or possibly even influence those under its bindings. The commandments were the Primo's tool to control his empire, and he wasn't a benevolent ruler based on his eternal war. Such an old monster wouldn't cede his authority without good reason.

"I was worried I'd wasted my opportunity for a moment," Ra'Klid said with a crooked smile. "But you're right. Life is boundless; how could its potential possibly be anything but? There is no reason for the Mavai to abandon their past. It's the key to our future."

Zac nodded in agreement. As expected, Ra'Klid had enough affinity with the Starfall Court to gain inspiration when claiming the seals. By the sounds of it, he chose the same path as Rhubat, using the inspiration to create a cultivation system for their race. In other words, Ra'Klid gaining a seal didn't just mean Zac getting another elite. The whole Mavai Tribe would benefit.

"Reignender of Ultom," Ra'Klid continued. "I finally caught onto the dragon's tail. I can't believe the mysteries contained within that light. No wonder the ancient tribes are offering up such generous bounties. And there's more to this, no?"

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"I'll explain everything when we get out of here," Zac said, "Until then, be careful if you encounter more seals. Only approach if you can feel a connection to it. They'll disintegrate you otherwise, sealholder or not."

"We can't collect them for others?"

"I haven't found any methods, and I doubt there are any," Zac said. "This thing is heavily based on fate. I don't think it's random that you happened to be—"

Zac stopped mid-sentence, suddenly flashing forward and punching. It looked like he hit empty air, but Zac felt his fist connect with something. A small shockwave erupted as a thin figure appeared. It was a humanoid alien, a Half-Step Hegemon judging by her aura. Of course, having just experienced an ambush from the imperial death squad, Zac took no chances.

The assassin crashed into a nearby wall with incredible force, and the wall came out ahead. Zac heard bones crack, but there was not a mark left on the wall. As expected, these structures were made from incredibly durable material. Damaging them would be easier said than done, and digging a path into the tower was out of the question.

The wretched form suddenly shattered, but Zac was already on the move. He'd moved to another patch of empty space, and the target found her throat grabbed and limbs sealed by Vivi's embrace. Her skill had left no trace or ripple of energy, but it had failed to hide from Zac's powerful Soul Sense. He'd seen her creep closer during their conversation and only made his move when she was in range.

"Alliance! Alliance," the alien croaked in a desperate voice.

"Then why are you skulking around us instead of announcing yourself?" Zac countered. The initial instance of this chapter being available happened at N0v3l.Bin.

"This place has no rules," she cried. "We have no way to complete the mission, and these buildings hold ancient treasures! People have gone mad. I just wanted to skirt around you to avoid trouble. Please, I just want to leave in one piece."

Zac grunted in understanding but made no move to release her. She would have attacked the second she saw an opening, even if she were telling the truth. The System frowned upon betrayal during the war, but competition for resources and opportunities was its core tenet. This realm was likely lawless, just like she said.

"I wouldn't hurt any member of the alliance. Answer my questions, and I'll send you on your way. How long have you been in here?"

"Thank you, thank you! I've been stuck here for six hours."

"How many pathways have you encountered?"

"Only one," she cried. "Just twenty minutes after arriving. I should have taken it. Now, who knows if I'll get the chance? Death is around every corner."

Zac slowly nodded, inwardly doubting she was as distraught as she let on. After all, she dared move alone, going so far as to approach strangers this close to the tower. Furthermore, the assassin was wounded, and the wounds came from battle rather than turbulent space. Perhaps she'd successfully ambushed a couple of people already.

They probably looked like easy targets. He and Ra'Klid looked like they'd just fought a grizzly bear and lost, and Ra'Klid's E-grade cultivation was easy to discern. Meanwhile, his cultivation was very difficult to gauge when he contained his aura unless they were significantly stronger. His utter lack of natural affinity made him appear weaker than he was.

He asked a few more questions, and her story corroborated everything from Dossin's briefing. A channel had opened in front of the assassin's unit, and they'd all been ordered inside. Even if stable, the pathway wasn't completely safe. Half had died during the crossing, most of them E-grade cultivators, while the rest were killed inside. The assassin had only survived by relying on stealth.

"Why not head to one of the camps if you're so scared?" Zac asked.

"Never! I can't!" she said with fear. "I'd like to help the war effort, but I want to live even more! They don't let anyone out, and the leaders use us as expendable array breakers to test the doors. I don't think they're even trying to reach the tower. They're just having unaffiliated people break into buildings that look promising."

"Anything else?" Zac asked.

"No, that's all I know," she cried. "Please..."

"OK. Safe travels."

Her eyes lit up but then bulged with shock and despair as her neck snapped. A swing destroyed the Heart Curse bursting from her chest, and silence returned to the street.

"She should be ours. Spy?"

"If not before, then now," Zac said. "She might have been implanted in here. It's an effective way to get helpers in a sealed environment when the stakes are so high."

"I think she was telling the truth despite the curse."

"For the most part," Zac agreed.

"The steppes are burning, yet these fools are digging for steelsoil instead of escaping to the mountains," the demon muttered as he looked at the sky. "What should we do? Try to find a channel and escape?"

Zac fully agreed with the Mavai Chieftain's assessment. It was hard to say what would happen first—the rampaging fortress blowing up or the whole dimension collapsing. Either scenario was exceedingly dangerous, yet Zac had no thoughts of finding a path out.

"I need to give it a try," Zac said, pointing at the storm surrounding the main tower. "There might still be a way to turn things around. And I have to keep looking for opportunities. Things will only grow more dangerous as the war progresses. Our little empire's footing is still far from stable."

"Then join a camp? I spotted one up ahead. With your strength, you can just seize command if they try anything. Could be useful with some helping hands."

"No," Zac said without hesitation. "I think my chances are better if I go at it alone. Besides, I don't trust that our men are really ours after what happened outside."

"I—" Ra'Klid hesitated. "I'm afraid I'll drag you down."

Zac nodded. There was no point in ignoring reality. The demon had potential, especially now that he was a sealbearer. However, Ra'Klid joining the next step was no different than throwing his life away. At the same time, Zac couldn't babysit the demon until they stumbled onto a pathway.

"You'll have to be careful," Zac said, handing Ra'Klid a command token that might help if he ran into a Dravorak unit. "Don't trust anyone. If you can't find an exit, hide inside one of the fortified buildings. That way, you have a better chance of surviving."

Ra'Klid shuddered, but his eyes soon calmed down as a smile spread across his face. "This is the price of power. Don't worry about me, Lord. We both have tribulations we must face and paths we must take. I know what I need to do."

A familiar item appeared in his hand. It was the Temporal Chamber most of his elites had bought. Ra'Klid was already over 60 years old and in the E-grade when the Integration occurred. He'd spent over a decade shoring up his foundations, and getting the seal was the last piece of the puzzle.

"Good idea," Zac said as he handed over a set of Life-attuned treasures useful for Core Formation. "Do you need me to stand guard?"

"No, I feel I need to face this alone. I have relied on you or the tribal elders long enough," Ra'Klid said as a grin spread across his face. "I hope the Lord can help me with something else. If you could help me pick a building with good providence? Lord Azh'Rezak told us at great length about your golden hand during our travels."

Zac laughed and looked around for a bit. "Come with me."

The two didn't walk for long before Zac found a good candidate. The house was in good condition, with its protective engravings active and intact. More importantly, he could feel a weak pull of fate within.

"There should be an opportunity in this building, but it'll depend on you whether you can get it. Don't overdo it. Focus on breaking through first."

Ra'Klid frowned as he inspected the door. "The spy said the restrictions are very powerful. It's almost impossible to open the ones that are this intact and trying will trigger a deadly response."

"Let me try something. Stay back, and be ready to run."

Zac slowly walked closer to the door, the **[Court Cycle Token]** already in his hand. This was a good chance to test his theory. The door opening wouldn't guarantee the token would work inside the tower, but it meant his plan was worth trying. If not, he'd have to figure something else out.

The door soundlessly slid open before Zac even reached it, and Zac exhaled in relief. However, he felt a vague sense of threat as powerful energies coursed through the arrays. Were the defenses realizing something was wrong with the token?

"It won't last long," Zac said.

"Golden hand, indeed," Ra'Klid laughed as he flashed inside. "Safe travels, my lord."

"See you on the outside."

Zac backed away, and the door closed. He waited a minute to confirm the defensive arrays had calmed down before turning toward the tower. It held a fatal attraction, holding far more ripples of fate than the rest of the fortress combined.

Everything was in place, and nothing was holding him back. It was time to see if this tower was as generous as its F-grade brother.

Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1140: Resentment - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1140: Resentment

Chapter 1140: Resentment

Zac's eyes roved back and forth for threats as he crept toward the tower. There were no direct streets leading him in the right direction, but that was fine since Zac preferred using walls and buildings as cover. Powerful bursts of deadly energy and the rumbling sky were a constant reminder of the disaster that could strike without notice.

A piercing scream of danger made Zac's head whip around, putting him face to face with a ghastly sight. An army made from turbulent energy and ancient Killing Intent poured through the streets like a vengeful tsunami, slashing at

doors and anything else that stood out. It looked like the sword scar's intent had mixed with a pool of energy to birth this disaster.

The tidal wave's projections were constantly shifting and distorting, but each temporary figure held enough energy to contend with a Middle Hegemon. Occasionally, enough energy and intent coalesced into constructs, even surpassing the deathsworn captains in aura. Zac didn't even try to fight it, instead relying on his token to escape into the closest building.

The door slid shut, allowing Zac to release a pent-up breath. He hadn't even lasted three minutes after dropping off his companion before mortal danger came knocking. Thank the Heavens for his cheat. Anyone else would have been forced to gamble their lives by fleeing into random paths in hopes the murderous tide would choose another direction. But who knew if something more dangerous waited in the streets they picked.

The interiors differed greatly from what little Zac saw of Ra'Klid's hideout. His had been a spacious room with two consoles and an ornate set of stairs leading to the upper levels. Meanwhile, Zac found himself in a narrow service corridor that was all function over form. He still scanned the vicinity, but it didn't appear to have any traps or weapons. The real danger was outside, and Zac's eyes narrowed upon hearing a scraping sound from the other side of the door.

The Killing Intent outside was growing to the point Zac sensed it despite the wall's powerful isolation. It was so dense it felt as though it would permeate the walls, so Zac hurried further inside. The building was the size of a large factory, yet the space meant for humans was limited to a web of cramped corridors. The only exception was a spacious room right in the middle, which Zac suspected doubled as a break room and bunker.

The whole building was shaking by that point except for the saferoom with its additional layers of protection. Zac opted to wait the storm out, taking the time to make some final preparations. Face shifted into a variation of the disguise he used in Void Gate, that of Gaun Sorom. Of course, his features were altered just in case someone was keeping track.

Zac felt it said something less-than-flattering that he kept returning to orcish disguises, but they were simply the most similar race to humans who could explain his build and aura. Certain golemoid and beastkin races would also do, but they were much too difficult to copy. Actually, even half-blood orcs

were getting rough to mimic since he had yet to evolve **[Million Faces]** into something better suited to his pathways.

Following his face-swap, Zac used an Aura Modulator to appear as a seasoned Middle Hegemon. It didn't take much energy since it wasn't far from the truth. Next, a thick bone carapace covered his body. The sudden ambush had prevented him from equipping **[Ossuary Bulwark]** in time, and he didn't want to be caught unprepared again.

Finally, Zac opened a stopper and poured a silver mixture on himself. It almost looked alive as it spread to cover every inch of his armor, giving it a metallic sheen while partly hiding its life-attuned aura. It was a small trick to temporarily change the appearance of his armor in case someone was keeping track of his equipment.

The shakes had stopped by the time Zac finished his disguise, and he soon found an exit closer to the tower. Zac stowed the token before approaching, taking the opportunity to test the building's reaction. The door didn't automatically slide open, but neither did it attack or summon any energy guardians.

There were no consoles or buttons on the thing, so Zac eventually took out the token again. The door slid open without complaint. A pang of danger made Zac step back, narrowly avoiding a bundle of Killing Intent shaped like a skull lunging at him. Zac furiously swung his axe as he retreated further into the corridor, but there was nothing to kill.

The skull was dispersed into a reddish cloud before reforming into a sword. It held a vast resentment against anything living, and it followed Zac through the building like a vengeful ghost. Eventually, Zac gave up running, letting the sword run him through. Thankfully, the sword lacked the immense energies of the ghastly army. It was just condensed Killing Intent, lacking the ability to cause him physical harm.

The threat was to his heart and, to a lesser degree, his soul. The ancient grudge tried to subvert his will and fill his mind with destructive impulses. If you lost, your goals and rationality would be replaced with the desires left behind by that ancient Autarch. Most likely, you'd become a raving lunatic attacking anything at sight.

Ultimately, it wasn't much of a threat to Zac. He could whittle it down with his own Killing Intent, and **[Purity of the Void]** worked even faster. The intent

dispersed, exposing a sliver of reddish force Zac hadn't sensed before. He couldn't tell whether it was Energy, Killing Intent, or Dao. He could only tell it was very powerful since simply having it in his body made his vision go red.

A hungry thump answered the question; the red sliver was an unfamiliar form of energy hidden within the intent. **[Void Heart]**

gobbled it up after some struggle, yet it took Zac over a minute to calm down from his agitated state. The sliver piqued his interest since he still lacked any method to refine or utilize his immense killing intent. Perhaps it was an alternative route to the Killing Intent Arrays he'd seen the reavers use.

That was a matter for later, though. Zac returned to the exit, relieved to see the ambient intent had decreased to a level where it couldn't take form. Zac still didn't want to be exposed more than necessary, and exploring a building left him much more confident in taking a shortcut.

It also solved the issue of being targeted by the tower, whose constant watch grew increasingly difficult to elude. More than once, Zac felt something lock onto his position, forcing him to take cover. He couldn't discern any weapon systems installed on the rotating tower, but he trusted his danger sense. Too long in the sun would spell death.

The next ten minutes confirmed most buildings were more of the same, lacking any safeguards after the initial check. Perhaps it was different if he tried to meddle with the massive arrays hidden within the walls, but Zac wouldn't do anything so foolhardy.

Oddly enough, he couldn't find a single route leading beneath the surface level, whether it was on the streets or inside the oversized buildings. The enormous scar had cracked open the fortress wide open, exposing that these buildings were only the tip of the iceberg. However, entering the enormous underbelly through the scar was impossible. The intent alone would drive him insane, even if he somehow survived the immense energies.

Then, there was no point going there. Zac was making incredible time despite being delayed twice by other cultivators. One encounter was a complete accident, where Zac emerged from a building to find two cultists right around the corner. A furious blitz provided a modest influx of Kill Energy, though one of the two managed to flee.

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Zac didn't bother hunting him down. Running like that was liable to get you killed when every other block was a death trap. The second encounter was with a cultivator who had lost their mind to the pervasive intent. However, it was just a Peak E-grade cultivator. The fact they were still alive likely meant they'd just entered, only to have their mind immediately overwhelmed.

Then, disaster struck. Zac looked at the token in his hand with horror as he opened the door leading out of the sixth building. Why did its aura suddenly grow weaker? Zac tried to tell himself he was misjudging things because of the energy-dense environment, even if he knew that wasn't the case. He'd used the token for months, and there was no way he'd mistake it. He had lost the equivalent energy of one sealbearer in one go.

Zac's heart clenched in worry and regret. He'd never considered the possibility that using the token would exhaust the sealbearer energy. After all, it had never shown any such inclination during his cultivation sessions. Its truth-imparting aura was constant and ever-flowing.

What if it was permanent? Had he just wasted a seal on taking a shortcut? Perhaps it was just a temporary effect, but Zac couldn't use it lightly until confirming the details. If nothing else, he would have to use the token inside the tower if he wanted the slightest chance of taking control of the thing.

Luckily, Zac was already quite close to his destination. He was only a couple of blocks away from the tower after passing through the building, and he could already feel the winds kicked up by its gentle rotation.

To his left was another impassable region. Rampant energies from a broken Array Tower had consumed dozens of buildings, forming an impassable blockade. It was uncomfortably close to the sword scar, meaning it could turn into another tidal wave at any time.

Zac decisively went in the opposite direction, toward an intersection in the distance. Using it would briefly expose him to the tower, but it was better than daring the sentry array again by jumping over the buildings. Suddenly, Zac spotted something amiss.

It was almost seamlessly integrated with a pile of rubble, but its minute spiritual ripple couldn't escape Zac's senses. One of the pieces of debris was

actually an array disk. Zac inwardly sighed as he destroyed the item with a swing of his axe. It was a sentry array, which meant he'd already been exposed. Following his instincts, Zac decisively turned around.

His approach hadn't been too difficult, but he'd seen the environment everyone else had to deal with. Weak targets like those he'd faced had to be the minority. If the sentry array was part of a trap, then the attacker had to be very confident in their strength. So was Zac, but any battle at this juncture was a waste of energy while risking exposure.

A massive explosion within the mist made Zac swear with alarm. The eruption was like someone poking a hornet's nest, and a brutal wave of energy poured toward him. It fully consumed the building he came from without losing any momentum.

Entering the mist was out of the question, and none of the other buildings were intact. Hiding in them meant waiting for death, so Zac chose the best of many bad options. He rushed into the intersection, knowing he was being corralled like a wild beast.

Zac found himself facing the spinning tower in all its glory, and the encroaching danger from behind was overwhelmed by a profound sense of danger from ahead. One building after another was slowly coming alive around him. Zac knew he was out of time, so he heedlessly flashed into a side street a few hundred meters ahead, where the arrays were still dim.

A dense wall rose behind him, seamlessly closing off his exit. Not that Zac could dare head back in that direction anytime soon. Continuing forward wasn't an option either, as Zac found himself face-to-face with twelve Hegemons armed and ready. He could also tell he was standing atop an array, which would undoubtedly activate in case he made the wrong move.

The lineup was even stronger than he'd expected, yet their appearance relaxed Zac slightly. Half of the warriors wore the liveries of the Dravorak Imperial Guard, while the rest were a mix of elites from different established factions.

Five were Middle Hegemons, two of which had very condensed auras. They weren't at Kator's level, but either should be more than a match to the Saber Master Reincarnator from before. Zac was still confident in victory if it came to blows, but it would be a pyrrhic victory where he'd be forced to go all out.

"Alliance, you dog-eyed bastards," Zac swore as he threw an Allbright nobility token at the Dravorak leader. "Are you trying to get me killed?"

The Dravorak Captain briefly inspected the token before throwing over an item of his own. "Activate this talisman."

Zac glanced at it, confirming it was a simple purification talisman that had become very popular because of an unintended side effect. Its energy signature was very good at agitating Heart Curses. Even the elites from the seven chapters would have a hard time fully suppressing any evidence of their situation.

This particular talisman seemed of higher quality than those circulating on the open market. Zac was quite happy to see it and activated the talisman without complaint. A cleansing wave spread through his body, finding nothing to purify.

"Apologies. Your strength didn't let us take any risks," the Dravorak captain said. "A moment of leniency could undo our undertaking."

"If you're sorry, why not let me spar with you boys for a bit?" Zac muttered as his helmet retreated into his armor, exposing his orcish appearance.

"If time permits," the Dravorak Captain said with a slight smile. "But please, restrain your anger, or you'll attract the ancient intent."

"Fine, let's go then," Zac grunted, brusquely inviting himself into the group.

Since using the token didn't come without a price, Zac figured he might as well see what this group was up to. They had to be one of the groups working toward the main mission, and helping him out was the least they could do after almost getting him killed.

The aura he exuded was only matched by the Dravorak Captain, and the two made some small talk as they made their way through a dizzying number of streets. Each side was investigating each other, but neither gained much. Zac gave a plausible excuse for his identity that couldn't be verified inside the tower, that of late reinforcements from another Field Army.

Their journey took almost an hour, partly because they stopped to take out no less than six groups of Kan'Tanu while picking up four stray Alliance

cultivators. Zac occasionally looked back at the direction he came from, yet there were no signs of Ra'Klid breaking through.

Or anyone else, for that matter. Making a few inquiries helped lessen his worries. It turned out the fortress was installed with arrays that hid breakthroughs. Zac hadn't expected to see it here, but it was common in high-grade settlements. After all, people would go mad if Tolls of Hegemony disrupted their meditation every other day.

Finally, they reached their destination, a mostly hollowed-out building at the very center of the fortress. Just twenty meters beyond was a five-hundred-meter chasm separating the rotating tower from the rest of the fortress. Zac was curious to peer into the depths, but a stormy curtain blocked everything below.

"You can't just fly across the gap and enter the tower?"

"Impossible," the captain said. "The chasm is a separate spatial zone, and you can see how it's constantly swallowing more energy."

"So we're stuck outside?" Zac frowned.

Finding an entrance below was impossible if the chasm was an absolute divide, and **[Apex Jungle]** wouldn't work either.

"No, we believe there are two ways to enter," the captain said. "One, find a teleporter. I refuse to believe none of these buildings is equipped with one. We are constantly on the lookout for the spatial fluctuations of teleportation arrays. We've forced open a few already, but no luck so far."

Zac slowly nodded, feeling that was a good option. It was worth using his token again if it meant getting sent right into the tower. However, he couldn't just mindlessly open one building after another. His token would be reduced to an ornament before he'd explored a single district. "The other?"

"The same way we entered this realm. The chasm is hiding a dimensional storm created by the tower's rotation. It's essentially twisting space into a spiral, creating a protective divider," the captain said before waving his hand.

A simple blade empowered with the Dao of the Sword shot forth, and Zac looked on with interest as it disappeared upon entering the chasm. The

scenery shattered like a mirror the next moment, where a frenzied hurricane of unbridled energy replaced the gentle wind and pockets of mist.

"As you can see, it's not nearly as stable as the barrier to this domain. The tower is damaged, and it hasn't finished setting up its shield. We believe it's possible to turn those weaknesses into temporary paths with enough preparation. The problem is that space inside is—HEY!"

Zac barely heard the captain's words as he burst forth with unstoppable momentum. He was briefly overwhelmed by an immense sense of acute danger from fully exposing his position, but it was quickly drowned and swept away by the hurricane's raging roar. Replacing it was blood and pain, yet there was no regret in Zac's heart as he wildly looked around.

How could he sit idly by after sensing Emily's rescue beacon within the storm?