

## Defiance of the Fall

### - Chapter 1146: Teamwork

"It looks like a captain's quarters," Emily commented as they observed the room. "God, this aura. Is this what you were talking about?"

Zac placed a collapsed piece of wall in the doorway to prevent it from automatically closing before stepping inside. The interiors weren't opulent, but it was at least 100 square meters with multiple rooms. Far more generous than the smaller domiciles Zac passed on his way. However, it looked like a hurricane had passed through the room, leaving it in utter disarray.

It wasn't the result of previous looting. Rather, the inner wall was covered in familiar cracks. A few sections had crumbled entirely, giving a glimpse of the outside. The apartment had only narrowly avoided the sword slash, leaving it flooded with Killing Intent.

"Yeah, it's from the sword scar," Zac confirmed. "I didn't expect to see so much of it here."

There was no clear reason why it hadn't fully dispersed in this particular room. Could the intent have sensed this was the room of a high-ranking officer, and refused to be dragged out by the hurricane? Or was the chasm's pull weakening the further up the tower they went? It left the room significantly more affected, though not to the point condensed streaks would form.

Zac tried prodding **[Void Heart]** to see if it could absorb the intent, but it remained lifeless. Being showered in Life-attuned energy hadn't done anything to repair its damage. Surrounding it with Void Energy or using it to activate **[Surging Rebirth]** didn't help either, leaving Zac helpless. It wasn't like he had any Void Healing Pills or Natural Treasures to repair his bloodline. Hopefully, it'd recover on its own.

He dropped the matter and turned his attention to the room. "Let's see what your helper sniffed out."

The living room had nothing of value, so they continued into an office. It had avoided being directly hit by the attack, yet they only found one treasure within an ancient Spatial Ring. Whatever books, crystals, or reports placed on the stone desk had been destroyed by the intent already.

"What a shame," Emily sighed as she inspected the ring. "It looks like it's about to collapse. If there are restrictions placed on it"

"Would be nice to have someone take a look at it, but it doesn't look like it'll last the journey," Zac muttered as he reached for the ring. "We'll just have to take a gamble."

"Wait! Don't do anything hasty," Emily urged and took out a jelly-like blob.

She pushed the ring inside before squeezing the blob into a cylinder that snugly fit in one of her pouches. Zac looked on with interest, realizing the cylinder released weak Spatial Ripples. The arrangement protected the brittle treasure from shocks while providing it with nurturing energy.

"This way, we can open it when we get back."

Zac had planned to deal with the ring the same way as the Technocrat's since he didn't get any particular feeling from it. He'd quickly scan it and attempt to extract whatever looked the most impressive. But this was much better.

"Good job," Zac smiled. "But wait for me to be present when you crack that thing open. I think it might be flooded with Killing Intent."

Emily nodded, and the two continued their search. There was nothing in the two bedrooms. The two finally reached a sealed door that the gerbil had marked. The door was closed, and its arrays had been fully corroded, rendering the token useless. Setting off a small incendiary created a small crack, but the door still wouldn't budge.

Zac was about to activate **[Apex Jungle]** but stopped and looked at his disciple. "Do you have something that can let us squeeze inside?"

"Of course," Emily grinned as she took out a pouch holding a large number of deep-blue fish scales with a soothing aura. Each had a simple rune engraved on top of it.

Zac followed Emily's instructions and placed it against his forehead. A chill spread through his body as flesh transformed into water. The element was unfamiliar, but Zac didn't face much difficulty controlling his temporary form, thanks to his powerful soul. The only issue was that he was woefully slow, barely moving at the pace of a mortal's sprint.

The scales would be useless in battle, but they were just as useful as **[Abyssal Drive]**

for most forms of exploration.

"Good stuff," Zac commented after dispelling the scale. "What?"

Emily was looking at him with a face caught between laughter and sorrow. "They say never meet your heroes. Aren't you supposed to be Mr. Adventurer? But you don't even have any morphing items?"

"Honestly, I hadn't thought of this issue before. Before, I'd just swap over to my other form and activate my movement skill," Zac said a bit sheepishly.

**[Apex Jungle]** could fill the same role as **[Abyssal Drive]** to some degree, but it ultimately wasn't made to traverse tight spaces. For one, he couldn't use it to travel further than his domain's width. And he could only shrink the trees so much before the skill failed to activate. It also had a minimum size of roughly 100 meters in diameter, making it very conspicuous. Compared to Emily's pouch full of scales, it was woefully inadequate.

Zac had always considered himself a paragon when it came to looting, but he realized he'd gotten lazy. His rapidly accumulating fortune could explain part of it. Fewer things managed to draw his attention, and he could barely be bothered with most spatial rings. That was why he'd almost ruined the ring before.

He'd also been leaning too heavily on his Luck and the unique perception he'd gained by absorbing a lake's worth of insights. The combination let him brute force most opportunities, leaving him woefully ill-equipped beyond the piles of storage items he always carried around.

Compared to him, Emily was like a scout, always prepared. She might not have his extraordinary Luck, but she made up for it with tools and preparation.

"I guess we complement each other," Emily smiled. "You deal with the big picture stuff, and I'll take care of the details."

"Sounds good," Zac laughed as he inspected the cultivation chamber.

The ambient energy was, in a word, terrifying, thanks to still-working gathering arrays and great isolation. The unattuned energy formed a dense mist, and

Zac had to actively seal his pores so as not to get energy poisoning. Emily was similarly affected, though she could use the situation to her benefit by circulating her Cultivation Manual.

The chamber replaced all energy Emily absorbed without effort, and Zac suspected the arrays could provide significant benefits even to Late Hegemons. It made Zac want to cut out the whole room and take it home. Of course, that was both impossible and unnecessary. The ambiance could only be kept at such astounding levels by drawing from the tower's energy stores. Placing it on Earth would leave it drastically weakened.

As expected, there was no teleporter installed in the cultivation chamber, which might be for the best. Zac doubted Emily would agree to leave this early. Especially not when they'd finally found some interesting stuff. Two treasures were placed inside the chamber, and Zac walked over to the first one a prayer mat placed in the Gathering Array's nexus.

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"Natural gathering formations to complement the chamber's?" Zac muttered as he looked at the mat with interest. "Such high quality. My own mat can't compare when it comes to raw energy absorption. It should be an array that transformed after eons of nurturing. It's even on its way to forming a spirit."

"It'll only be able to show its real worth when combined with this particular gathering array," Emily commented, taking out a crystal to copy the arrangement. "Do you want it?"

"Not much use to me," Zac shrugged. "Besides, I think it's best used with unattuned Cosmic Energy."

"Maybe we can recreate this setup at the Academy or something," Emily said as she stowed the mat. "We barely have any premium cultivation grounds. We can't have our citizens spend all their local contribution points on pills and materials. There's no way we can keep up."

Zac wholeheartedly agreed. The Atwood Empire surpassed even Middle D-grade forces in terms of wealth and resources, but they were severely lacking in cultivation infrastructure. There was almost nothing to spend Atwood Empire Contribution Points on except for resources. Sure, there were a

decent number of manuals, but his men had already been provided those upon enlisting.

To wage war was to burn money, and Zac was hemorrhaging resources. Local production couldn't hope to keep up, and the stockpiles brought back from Twilight Harbor were dwindling by the day. His Cosmic Vessel Sales could cover the cost, but sourcing even common cultivation resources was turning into a headache.

Every day, hundreds of feeder worlds fell into the Kan'Tanu's hands. Most planets were recaptured, but that didn't mean much when the cultists employed scorched-earth tactics. Most worlds were ruined, and the rest needed years to recover and resume production. Time they didn't have.

Setting up better cultivation grounds was the first step in lessening the Atwood Empire's over-reliance on cultivation materials. It wasn't anything unique for Earth, either. All factions needed to invest in everything from High-grade cultivation chambers, pill chambers, and comprehension-boosting environments to Mystic Realms, trials, and inheritances.

Selling access to valuable opportunities was the best way to keep one's treasury well-stocked without curbing the growth of your subordinates. If anything, it was much more effective than cramming pills and Natural Treasures down their throats. It was also a good way to ensure your talents didn't run off. The freedom of a wandering cultivator wouldn't be as tempting if it meant losing the blessed grounds that nurtured their Dao and doubled their cultivation speed.

Zac sighed as he turned to the second item in the chamber. He was a long way from setting up blessed lands like the opportunities peppered throughout the Orom World. Of course, he was aware those heritages grew and matured over hundreds of thousands of years. His little empire was already doing very well for itself.

The only item apart from the prayer mat was a grimy-looking glass box. It looked like a small fish tank, and the engravings vaguely visible beneath a layer of dark mud indicated it was an incubator. Not for an animal or egg, though, but for a bladed glove lying in the middle.

"It looks like it's been sealed in some sort of liquid," Emily said. "High-grade blood?"

"Seems to be a concoction, but blood was definitely part of it," Zac said as he infused a sliver of his will into the claw. A fragmented roar of indecipherable impressions filled his mind, and he decisively cut the connection. "The Tool Spirit has crumbled. A Blacksmith and Medium will have to work together to replace it."

Even low-grade Tool Spirits could last incredibly long periods by entering hibernation, but Zac suspected only A-grade Tool Spirits could be considered pseudo-immortal. The thing inside the claw couldn't even be called a spirit any longer. It was more a storm of chaotic spirituality trapped within the weapon. It was even more fragmented than the lingering Killing Intent, unable to even rouse a response to Zac's infusion.

In a place like Zecia, where materials and skilled craftsmen were equally lacking, much of the high-grade equipment was sourced rather than crafted. Adventurers exploring ruins and Mystic Realms often encountered similarly damaged goods, to the point certain Blacksmiths exclusively focused on reforging ancient equipment.

"Those guys are expensive, and they might ruin the glove," Emily said as she looked at the gleaming edges on the sanguine glove. "But it might be worth it. These materials aren't simple, and they've been tempered by the energy-rich environment. It might be possible to restore it to a Late D-grade Spirit Tool."

"Let's keep going. There's something even better on the next floor."

"Oh?" Emily perked up and quickly stowed the whole tank.

Back in the corridor, the two only managed to walk thirty meters before the gerbil squeaked again.

"What is it, Bandit? Another one already?" Emily exclaimed before turning to Zac. "This might take too long."

Zac hesitated, glancing upward. It was calm right now, but that only filled Zac with foreboding. They couldn't spend hours checking every room they passed on the off-chance they held a teleporter.

Besides, his token wouldn't be able to handle it, even if this particular room wasn't sealed. He needed to keep some in reserve in case they ran into the energy sentinels again.

"Let's limit ourselves to two per floor," Zac said. "Unless we find something that sticks out."

"Good," Emily said, and the two turned into streaks of water squeaking through the narrow gap.

The second room's layout was identical to the previous but vastly differed in decoration. There were at least fifty pots in the living room, each covered in engravings. In addition, six glowing spheres were hanging from the ceiling, their light long since faded. Its occupant had turned the whole room into a greenhouse, though not even fossils of the plants remained.

Zac swept the room with his senses, failing to find so much as a shred of life in any of the seeds. They still made a killing by collecting a set of tomes and a World Ring left inside the cultivation chamber. Like the ancient spatial ring, it was in a very bad state, but the room wasn't flooded with Kill Energy. It was actually possible ancient herbs still lived inside, having received ample nourishment from the gathering array. Like the Spatial Ring, it entered Emily's cylinder.

On the next floor, they entered another unguarded chamber, this one a large room designed for body refinement. There were a dozen spherical depressions in the ground covered in engravings. None of the arrays were running, yet the gravity inside was between five and twenty times the normal. They were gravity wells, likely able to support shocking amplification levels without leakage.

There was no way to take the wells with them, but they did find a sealed chest full of refined Gravity Crystals. They were dark brown, covered in engravings, and showcased their attunement in a mind-bending way. Zac almost pulled a muscle taking one out of the box, yet it floated in the air when he tried to put it back.

Like Soul Crystals, Gravity Crystals had no stable supply in Zecia, though they had a small chance to form naturally in spaces with very high gravitational forces. Zac knew they were scarce because Ilvere had a standing order with Calrin. Over the past decade, Calrin had only managed to source a few hundred, none as high quality as the thousands stacked before him.

Zac also snatched a group of dummies standing in a corner before leaving. They had to be made from very durable metals to be used in a gravity-attuned body tempering facility. A few minutes later, they reached the source of fate's



pull, though one didn't need extraordinary Luck or perception to see this room was special.

The gate was twice the height of normal doors, and the hallway had been expanded to a small square. A tablet was hanging to the gate's left, though its markings had become indecipherable. The large, bold runes atop the gate were still more than legible. They emitted intense Faith Energy and streaks of lightning.

The name was equally imposing Tribulation Throne.

"Look! Someone has tried to break inside," Emily whispered, pointing at a scar close to the doorframe.

Zac inched closer, realizing Emily was right. It was a deep scar created by a spatial tear, but someone had tried to expand it with fire. Zac could sense the Dao of Fire within, and they had actually made some progress. Alas, their attempt had run into a wall literally. There was a sheet of an unknown alloy hidden within the stone wall, something Zac hadn't seen in any other rooms. Like the runes, it flickered with lightning, and Zac had a good idea what happened to the driller.

Two foot-shaped scorch marks closer to the wall confirmed his hunch. Zac doubted the previous treasure hunters had been reduced to ashes, though. More likely, they'd realized they couldn't get through and moved on.

Zac scanned the surroundings again, but there were no signs of people lying in wait. Neither could Zac find any booby traps or observation arrays. Still, standing in the open left him feeling exposed. They needed to go for it or move on. Zac leaned toward the former. These gates were the most impressive he'd seen since entering, and it reeked of providence.

"It's worth checking out," Emily whispered, echoing his thoughts. "A tribulation hall might be outfitted with a teleporter. Some would have one foot in the grave after getting tormented by lightning and in urgent need of medical assistance."

Zac rolled his eyes, knowing Emily was just inventing justifications to open the door. However, what she said wasn't without reason. Zac nervously looked at the crackling runes as he presented his token. The doors opened with a deep creak, and Zac was pushed back a few steps by the immense Lightning-attuned energies trapped within.



It far surpassed the cultivation chambers, and just touching it left Zac's skin numb. It was familiar yet undeniably different from the Dao of Lightning Cultivators practiced. Had the Limitless Empire managed to trap Tribulation Lightning? Or did they know how to generate it?

There was only one way to find out.

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"Behind me," Zac said, hefting **[Verun's Bite]** as he stepped into the crackling mist.

Emily kept close, warily scanning the surroundings for Technocrats or different threats. The immense Dao of Lightning that suffused the interiors was almost blindingly bright, and it only took a second to confirm they were alone. The gates behind them closed, sealing them in a large circular chamber fifty meters across.

The room, from floor to ceiling, was made from the same alloy as the sheet Zac spotted before. It seemed to act as both a conductor and isolator, keeping the energy active and contained. It clearly had extraordinary isolating capabilities, too, since the Tribulation Throne was the first room he'd seen completely free from spatial scars.

"It's really a throne," Emily exclaimed. "I thought it was a metaphor."

The 'throne' Emily referred to was the only item inside the chamber. It was placed in the middle and the sole exception to the monochromatic surroundings. While metal, the throne was made from a different material. Instead of the bright blue, it was a mottled brown and black and undoubtedly of higher grade than the rest of the room. It exuded an intense pressure, but not one of lightning.

It held the mark of the mysterious Earthly Peak.

"Earth And the Heavens," Zac muttered as his gaze shifted to the twenty-three metal spikes hanging from the ceiling.

They formed a circular pattern over the throne, with the two central spikes being the largest. The ceiling was roughly ten meters, and the main spikes would only be a meter from the head of those seated on the metal chair. The second ring held four spikes, one in each cardinal direction. Then came eight, and finally nine, each circle formed with smaller spikes than the one before.

"Nine Seals, Eight Pillars, Four Laws, but why are there two equal spikes in the middle?" Zac muttered, glancing at the throne. "The Sangha's Cosmic Chart only holds twenty-two paths. What could be at the same level as the one Destiny? Is it the self, equaling the Heavens, for a total twenty-three layers of existence? Just like..."

"What's that?" Emily said. "Why are you speaking all cryptic-like? You're not an old monster just yet."

"I'm just saying that this setup is not simple," Zac said, his main focus returning to his human side after a brief intermission. "Its design draws from the fundamental truths of the universe. Perhaps that's the only way to simulate true Tribulation Lightning."

Zac was certain that was the case after seeing the arrangement. The previous owners hadn't trapped tribulation clouds to fuel the throne, though there was some sort of treasure within one of the central spikes. Still, the Tribulation Throne was generating its own lightning, which explained why he couldn't feel the primordial wrath of the old heavens.

The Heavens' anger of having its longevity and providence stolen had been replaced by Faith, just like the sign outside. Looking at the spikes felt like gazing upon an indifferent God. The feeling was very similar. It resembled the System's attention.

Perhaps the Tribulation Throne was a side product of the Limitless Empire's work on the System. That massive undertaking had taken millions of years, and it wouldn't be surprising if their findings had spawned thousands of side projects.

"Don't go too close to the throne. Let's check out the other rooms first."

Emily nodded, and they followed the room's edge to the first of three other doorways in the chamber. None of them were guarded by locks, and it smoothly slid open to expose a soothing chamber carrying a similar aura as the throne.

"A meditation chamber?" Emily said as they entered. "There's not a speck of lightning in here."

"Look," Zac said, nodding at the wall next to the door.

A tablet identical to the one outside had been hung there, and this one hadn't been eroded by time. The title said 'Centurion Earthly Devas Pure Lords,' and was followed by ten names and their accompanying times.

"So it was a leaderboard," Emily said. "I guess people were supposed to sit here and ready themselves, using the feats of previous experts as motivation. But what's Earthly Devas and Pure Lords?"

"I don't know about the Devas, but Pure Lords is referring to Late Hegemony," Zac said. "The Limitless Empire called D-grade Golden Core and based their titles on the concepts of discovery, gathering, purification, and dissolution. A Late Hegemon would be a Pure Lord, whose focus is getting their core ready to form an Inner World."

"I guess those sketchy missives you've bought over the years are finally coming in handy. I have to say, Pure Lord is a lot more stylish than Late Hegemon," Emily grinned as she tapped the tablet. "We shouldAh!"

Zac dragged Emily away upon sensing energy entering the tablet, but they breathed out in relief upon seeing it was simply redrawing the leaderboard.

"Was that you, or is it just rotating information?"

"I think it was me. I felt the tablet release a weak pulse when I touched it."

"No wonder," Zac said and looked at the new list.

### **[Centurion Earthly Devas - Awakened Lords]**

- 1. Meso Helo - 3 minutes 32 seconds.**
  - 2. 1st class Corporal Zer Esodor - 2 minutes 42 seconds.**
  - 3. 1st class Corporal Eli Qeron - 2 minutes 28 seconds.**
- 
- 1. Ensign Tur Pesko - 1 minute 49 seconds.**

"So we're Awakened Lords? The best guy at our level lasted just three and a half minutes," Emily said. "That's a full two minutes worse than the 10th spot at Late Hegemony."

"Their bodies are much more durable," Zac said. "And it looks like it's quite the feat, considering how the other fared."

"Anyway, this proves we can use the throne," Emily grinned. "You want to give it a go? See who's better the current generation or the ancient experts?"

Zac was tempted, his eyes darting to the chair. "Let's keep looking for now."

Emily shrugged, and the two continued to the next side chamber.

"Damnit!" Emily said, her face scrunched up like a raisin.

Zac's reaction was the opposite upon seeing the Teleportation Array. It was in pristine condition, gently humming with power that formed a pale blue sheen. Zac walked over and sent his mind into the array. A frown appeared on his face, and he took out the **[Court Cycle Token]** again.

"Wait! You're not sending me back already! At least give a turn on the throne!"

"Don't worry," Zac sighed as he stepped back. "It's sealed. We're not going anywhere."

"It's sealed?" Emily hooted before her face sobered up. "By the tower or the Technocrats?"

"Don't look so disappointed," Zac snorted. "And by the former, I think. The rejection I got was confusing, but it seems the tower has sealed all teleportation arrays, including escape arrays, as a mid-launch safety precaution."

"Mid-launch? We're launching?" Emily said, her brows arching as she felt the ground for vibrations.

"The fortress seems to think so, at least," Zac grimaced. "I guess the spinning is part of a launch sequence?"

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The two spent the next minute analyzing the array, hoping to undo the seal while keeping the array operational. Unfortunately, they were inextricably interlinked. Destroying one would destroy the other.

"That's a shame," Zac sighed. "I'm not sure we'll find another one in this good condition."

"This might be a good thing," Emily offered. "The original owners wouldn't seal even escape arrays without good reason. The fortress must be doing something that has turned all teleportation into a sure-fire deathtrap. And that might mean we're not the only ones stuck here right now."

"That's true," Zac concurred, trying to figure out the next step.

The information had implications beyond the need to find another escape route. What Emily said made sense. If teleportation arrays linked with the many layers of defenses were unsafe for use, then similar methods had to be even deadlier. On the flip side, it hopefully meant the Technocrats were stuck until the fortress finished its launch sequence.

"Looks like we'll really have to go to the top," Zac muttered. "Either to shut off the launch sequence or figure out some other solution."

"Let's deal with this place first," Emily said, eagerly dragging him to the third side-chamber.

The last room was the control center for the Tribulation Throne. Projections showed the main chamber from four directions, and there were two consoles in perfect condition. There were no buttons, only two smooth crystals to place one's hands on. Zac hesitated a moment before walking over to the left one.

A stream of information filled his mind without using the token. The console held the controls and diagnostics of the Tribulation Throne, thankfully designed in a way that even a meathead like Zac could understand. Most systems were in working order, except for two blaring warnings that forcibly took up a corner of his mind like a compulsive thought.

The energy pathways outside the reinforced chamber had been damaged, and the Tribulation Throne could only draw 8% of its required energy during operation. Luckily, the room was equipped with a backup source to prevent a power outage mid-activation, though it only retained enough energy to use the equipment for ten minutes.

More than enough time for both of them to get blasted twice over, judging by the leaderboard.

The second warning was not too surprising, either. The connection with the main systems was severed, forcing the chamber to operate independently. There was no explanation of what that meant, but Zac suspected it was a good thing. Though possibly limiting their options, it was no doubt the only reason they could freely use the chamber and its consoles without further security checks.

"Wow, it's completely unlocked!" Emily exclaimed, echoing Zac's thoughts. "Look!"

Emily had checked out the second console while Zac fiddled with the first. A large map replaced the four screens of the throne. It was their current floor's floorplan, with more than half the rooms named or categorized. Zac's eyes gleamed as Emily shifted the view to the floor above.

One after another, the layout was laid bare until they reached the top.

"Only twelve floors left," Emily said. "Unless there are hidden floors, I guess."

"Can you see the situation inside?" Zac eagerly asked.

"No, it's an offline map," Emily said. "This thing isn't connected to the main network, it says."

"Same as this," Zac said. "Anything about the project or a mission log?"

"No, there's nothing," Emily said. "But take a look at this."

The five uppermost floors appeared side by side, where roughly half the rooms turned blue and the other yellow.

"Military operations and project operations," Emily recited.

"They're kept separate," Zac said, realizing what Emily was getting at.

There were only one or two doors on each floor connecting the divisions. The topmost floor, where the Fortress Main Command Center was located, was fully separated. The inaugural upload of this chapter took place via /n/ov/el/b/in.

"Probably a security measure," Emily nodded. "We might be able to avoid the Technocrats altogether on the way to the control room. If those consoles are

unlocked like this one, we might be able to turn things around without lifting a finger."

"We'd already be running for our lives from energy sentinels if it was so easy to take control over the defenses," Zac said, but he had to say it looked pretty good.

They had a good chance to avoid the main Technocrat party so long as they were careful and kept to their side. As for what they'd do after reaching the top, Zac had no idea. It all depended on what state the control center was left in.

There wasn't any other useful information on Emily's side. Her console seemed like the external connection, while Zac's managed the internal system.

"You think it's working?" Emily said expectantly.

"The automated diagnostics giving the go-ahead," Zac said. "One has to stay here and activate the throne after the other has formed a temporary bond with the chair. There are safeguards and a manual override if you pass out or refuse to give up. So if you see me"

"Alright, that's my cue," Emily interjected as she moved toward the door. "Wish me luck."

"Don't joke. You're not going first," Zac staunchly said. "We don't know if it works like it should just because the systems say so."

"That's my point!" Emily countered with a stubborn glare. "If the thing malfunctions and you can't get out, what am I supposed to do? You have a much better chance to save me. Besides, don't you think I know how you operate? Will there even be any throne left to sit on after you're done with it?"

"The spikes might be incorrectly calibrated for all we know!" Zac almost shouted. "What if it all comes flooding out, hitting you with the equivalent of a C-grade tribulation?!"

"In that case, better me than you," Emily shrugged. "Way more people are relying on you than me, and only you can lead Earth through this mess. So, either I go first, or we don't go at all."



Zac glowered at his disciple and got an equally fierce look right back. He eventually deflated and shook his head in defeat. She was right. "When did you get so stubborn?"

"I learned from the best. Now, watch me tame the Heavens."

"Be careful," Zac reminded. "This device is designed to mimic Boundless Tribulations, not the System's. They'll hit fast and hard, and it'll only get worse from there."

"But the longer I endure, the greater the rewards," Emily said. "Don't worry, I know my limits. I won't get myself killed or crippled over the first opportunity we run into. There's more good stuff waiting for me."

"Fine, then go," Zac said. "Good luck."

Emily winked and headed for the throne. There wasn't much to do. It only took Emily a minute to form the required bond and stabilize her mind. Zac took a calming breath before pressing start with his mind.

A deep rumble made the whole chamber vibrate as the throne activated. Four sharp thuds followed as metal panes fell down to protect the doors from the rising energy levels, which made Zac's alarm bells go off. He'd seen how durable that alloy was. How was he supposed to get Emily out in case something went wrong?

Should he just cancel it?

No, Emily had the right to fight for her opportunities and decide what risks she was willing to take. Besides, just the activation had drained three minutes of energy. There might not be enough juice for two more tries after this, provided each activation was this costly.

Zac didn't blink as he scoured the monitors for any signs of problems. He found none, and the console was communicating everything was operating smoothly as one of the outermost spikes turned blinding white. It looked like it had become a solidified lightning bolt. Then it struck, and the whole chamber was drowned in boundless fury.

Emily sat completely unmoving in the center of it all, but her muscles strained like she was trying to break free from invisible restraints. Her face was locked in a feral growl, with veins bulging on her forehead. She was in agony, yet she

held on. A second spike lit up ten seconds into the baptism, doubling Emily's torment. Every ten seconds, another spike lit up, and it soon looked like Emily was submerged in a pillar of lightning.

Zac's hand was covered in sweat as he gripped the control crystal. The fourth spike had pushed her to the breaking point. The fifth overwhelmed her endurance, making her readings fluctuate wildly. Zac was about to press the emergency halt, but the chamber calmed down without his input. After realizing she couldn't deal with the fifth spike, Emily voluntarily stopped the tribulation.

Every second felt like an eternity as the alloy absorbed the unbound energies. Errant arcs of lightning still filled the chamber when the protective panel rose, but Zac didn't care. He squeezed through the doors the second it was possible and forcibly punched through a lighting cage to drag Emily out.

He kept going, running right into the waiting room on the opposite side. He gently placed Emily on one of the mats, relieved to see the lighting being dragged out of her body by the arrays. She came to a minute later, her eyes wildly looking around.

"H-How long?" she asked with a weak voice, unable to get up from the floor.

Zac hesitated a moment before telling the truth. "Fifty-two seconds."

"Not even a minute?" Emily exclaimed, her eyes turning to the tablets on the wall. "Monsters."

"You're not a body cultivator, and your Soul Cultivation Method is mostly focused on control. Your result is already very good. There's no point in comparing yourself to the best of the best, who all had experience dealing with the real thing," Zac said.

However, Zac had to admit that these old soldiers were the real deal. They had all reached the second circle, which Zac suspected came with a qualitative change to the lightning. As for Meso Helo, he was clearly in a league of his own. Three and a half minutes, did that mean he managed to activate all but the very last spike?

And what about those in Late Hegemony enduring over six minutes? Monsters was an apt description.

Zac shook his head and looked down at Emily. "How's is it? Can you walk?"

"I'll be fine in a minute," Emily said. "My body isn't damaged. It's just like my synapses were overloaded, and my brain needs to reboot."

"That's one way of putting it," Zac smiled. "Were there any benefits to go with the pain?"

"Yeah, this is good stuff," Emily grinned. "Every part of me has been purified. I feel like I've taken a shower after a day of fighting in the trenches. Much of the impurities I've accumulated with pills and treasures over the past year have been dealt with. It's just a shame; my core was about to reach a malleable state, like when I broke through. I could have fixed a few of my mistakes."

Zac whistled appreciatively. The Tribulation Throne was the real deal, providing the same benefits as **[Void Heart]**'s refined Tribulation Lightning. And while Zac wasn't confident in reaching as far as the record holder, he should have no problems dealing with the nine outer tribulations.

He'd already made great strides on his core thanks to the **[Myriad Paths Water]**. Just a few hours had passed, and he'd already found the opportunity to finish the job.

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## Chapter 1148: Lightning and Law

"You ready?" Emily's voice echoed from the control room.

Zac sent a mental tendril into the metallic throne beneath him to double-check. The temporary binding was solid, and there were no signs of it having been drowned in Tribulation Lightning just minutes ago. Everything was ready.

"Do it."

A familiar hum shook the hall as the protective gates slid shut. It was a completely different experience being in the center of it. The first spike lit up, and Zac closed his eyes.

Rampant lightning coursed through his body, not sparing a single inch. It was painful, but Zac felt he was looking at the events as a bystander. A cleansing wave at this level couldn't breach his Void State. Zac was more interested in observing the white Tribulation Lightning to understand how the Limitless Empire replicated Heavenly Lightning's unique benefits.

The first impurities were already being uprooted from their entrenched positions and whittled down. Certainly, the method turned his body into a battlefield, where 800 were sacrificed to kill one thousand. Any Cultivator would take that deal. Injuries were temporary, but impurities could follow you throughout your life.

Zac believed every lightning cultivator had, at least once, tried to accomplish what was now happening inside his body. They'd all come to the same conclusion—it was impossible. Yet the Tribulation Throne proved you could actually emulate the effect, though how it worked differed from the real thing.

The benefits the lucky few reaped during breakthroughs could be considered an unintended side-effect of encountering a cosmic phenomenon of the highest order. Cultivation was to steal providence from the Heavens. Tribulations were the opposite and equal reaction to the Laws of Balance and Impermanence being encroached.

Those, like Zac, who had the strength to benefit from the tribulation, were essentially taking the opportunity to steal a bit more while they had the chance. Doing so was to tempt fate, but the Heavens weren't a true consciousness. It wouldn't notice when some piddling D-grade cultivator stole a bit more.

In the grand scheme of things, no laws were truly broken since the Cosmos would get even sooner or later. Most were forced to spit out what they'd stolen right away, while a few managed to hold onto it for a little longer. And if the running deficit became too big, the cosmos would forcibly clean the slate by ending the Era to reclaim all that had been stolen.

This cosmic phenomenon was impossible to emulate unless you grasped the Heavenly Dao and the Four Laws. The Tribulation Throne obviously took the laws into consideration, judging by the arrangement above, but it used them

for a different approach. As they'd already seen, the main ingredients were the combination of the Earthly Peak and Faith Energy. Faith focused the lightning and imbued it with purpose. It acted like an antibody, directing the lightning's anger on the dregs hidden throughout all cultivators' bodies.

The throne was equally important. Even Zac would have been electrocuted if he'd taken on the onslaught without first forming a temporary contract. The Earthly Peak lived up to its reputation by adding a second nature to the Dao of Lightning. A seed of hope had been implanted in the heart of destruction. The idea was ingenious, but Zac felt there were more interlocking parts required to make the opportunity possible.

Zac's vision pierced the sea of lightning to take in the twenty-three spikes looming above. His instincts told him that comprehending the arrangement would deepen his understanding of the universe. How grand was the Limitless Empire once upon a time, to distill the world's essence into a random body-tempering chamber on a C-grade fortress?New NOVEL chapters are published on novel Fire.net

It filled him with awe and then sorrow. The Tribulation Throne was an astounding feat, but so what? The Limitless Empire still fell, and their great accomplishments had become the toys of those who rifled through their ashes. Zac pushed the matter aside, focusing on making the most of his sole attempt.

The benefits from **[Void Heart]**'s refined lightning were undoubtedly much greater than what he currently enjoyed. Of course, he'd only started. One spike after another activated, and a frown appeared on Zac's face by the time the fifth added its punishment to the tally. Not because the pain was becoming hard to deal with—Zac was still just fine—but because his experience didn't line up with his disciple's.

Emily mentioned she was at the threshold of improving her core when giving up, but Zac couldn't feel a thing. The lightning was still busy accumulating through his body. It hadn't even touched his Cosmic Core or Soul Aperture yet. Zac didn't worry too much. It could be a good thing, proving his constitution was extraordinary.

A grunt of pain escaped Zac's lips upon reaching the eighth stage. His Void State could no longer block out the tearing pain of being submerged in a sea of lightning. However, good came with the bad as the torment came with the change he'd been waiting for. The accumulation of energy inside his body had

reached the point where the Tribulation Lighting was forced into his Quantum Spaces whether they liked it or not.

The value of removing impurities from his Cosmic Core was self-evident, yet Zac looked forward to purifying his Soul Cores just as much. Moss Crystals and Natural Treasures had left his soul with a great amount of impurities. He had no choice; Soul Cultivation was simply too slow unless you had a special constitution like Vilari.

The only way he'd have a sliver of hope of keeping his soul up with the rest of his cultivation was to rely on treasures. This plan depended on regular baptisms from tribulations to keep going, but Zac had already realized his plan wouldn't work much longer. The impurities accumulated faster than he could break through grades, despite **[Purity of the Void]**'s best efforts to remove them before they fused with his body. He'd have to slow down his Soul Cultivation sooner rather than later.

But could he do so?

Maintaining balance aside, Zac was becoming increasingly aware of the looming threat lurking in his Soul Aperture. The four sets of remnants were growing stronger every day as they recovered from his ascent into Hegemony. The cage keeping them captive might as well have been made from sticks and strings.

Getting the fifth set and surviving the Atavism was supposed to stabilize the situation, but he wasn't ready. The Tribulation Throne was an opportunity to rekindle his momentum and continue his dash toward the Fourth Reincarnation. So long as he reached that point, Zac was confident in suppressing the remnants even if they broke out early.

He was still a long way off, but he wasn't lacking opportunities to make rapid progress. The Merit Exchange had items far better than the Moss Crystals, and who knew what kind of amazing treasures the upcoming inheritance held? Readying his Soul Cores for another leap in strength was the first step, but the white arcs of lightning weren't playing ball.

Zac could barely believe his eyes when they made a U-turn instead of targeting his soul. However, they didn't rejoin the sea of lightning inside his human body. Instead, the Tribulation Lighting poured into his Draugr body on the other side of the sector.

Confusion was soon replaced by elation. His Undead side hadn't eaten as many pills and treasures because of the Abyssal Pond, but he still had accumulated a significant number of impurities during the war. Getting a cleansing round for his other half was a welcome bonus, and the Tribulation Lightning should have no choice but to target his cores when both sides reached capacity.

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The first arc was followed by hundreds, forming a pool in Zac's chest. Why wasn't it moving? Zac could tell something was wrong. The ancient Faith Energy became agitated, accumulating power while sending intangible ripples. Was it because it had sensed the body of an undead cultivator, or was it because it had lost the connection to its source?

Zac didn't get the chance to come up with answers or solutions. The growing thunder ball shot out a thick, radiant arc, like a viper striking its prey. At first, it looked like it would hit his Cosmic Core, but the streak passed it by and actually left his body. A painful jolt pushed him to his feet, and an immense pressure threw him off the perched spot he'd occupied for the last hour.

He only managed to resist the sudden pressure halfway down by releasing a storm of lightning-infused Miasma. He floated silently in the air, his abyssal orbs observing the twenty-three waves carved into the monolith and the changes they were going through. Each layer was made from a different type of rock, making the huge statue resemble a rainbow. The first time Zac saw it, he'd judged it a decorative structure bereft of spirituality.

He should have known better. What kind of decoration had the strength to resist the disintegration pulses of the Left Imperial Palace?

Nine waves at the statue's bottom were lighting up one after another, and the Ensolus Ruins were coming alive. Zac's eyes were wide with shock as he looked around as the winds of fate gathered over the long-abandoned city. At the same time, he knew he couldn't get distracted. Ninety seconds were almost up, which meant the tribulation was about to jump a notch in power.

Zac was wrought with hesitation but gritted his teeth and forced his way back to his spot atop the enormous block, inwardly thankful the Ensolus Ruins had already been emptied. Hopefully, the Tribulation Throne wouldn't mess with his other plans.



It hadn't taken more than a minute to figure out the fortress was the perfect place to deal with his bloodline. However, that realization came with some unanswered questions. Exactly how would his breakthrough work now that he had two bodies? Would each side form a set of treasure-eating vortices? His control over his bloodline had improved since practicing Heart Cultivation, but it wasn't perfect.

The Endemire Sage's War Fortress undoubtedly had enough treasures stockpiled to fuel the process, but Zac wasn't tired of his life just yet. At the same time, few environments had the energy and materials his bloodline required. If anything, that was why he'd been stuck with an E-grade Bloodline half a year into the war. Zac's best backup option was these ruins, which still held thousands of sealed buildings.

He didn't feel the pull of treasures like he did back in the War Fortress, but there should be enough to supplement while the tower became the main source. If nothing else, many of the ancient structures were made with high-quality materials, which might be acceptable as fodder.

Any errant thoughts were thrown out the window when nine became ten and white turned pale blue. As he'd expected, the activation of the second circle transformed the lightning. The first nine could be considered separate building blocks stacked on each other. The addition of the blue lightning arranged them into a singular whole before flooding it with more power and deeper truths.

Zac shuddered atop the throne as the lightning across his two bodies transformed. Golden hurricanes and rippling ponds fought back as the invading force dug into the depths of his cells. Bones turned into unwilling conductors, and Zac could no longer see the world beyond the limits of his Soul Sense. His vision had been replaced by a ubiquitous blue where closing his eyes changed nothing.

The pain was still within his tolerance levels, but those limits were being tested as another spike added to his suffering. It only took two second-layer spikes to push the energy density across his bodies to the levels when it all was concentrated in his human half. Even then, the agony was far greater. Comparing the two was like comparing identical attacks where one was fueled by a Dao Fragment and the other a Dao Branch.

The third spike activated, and his thoughts briefly scattered. His Soul Aperture had finally gone from being used as a warp gate to becoming the Tribulation

Throne's target. The enormous swirls of Life and Death crackled and condensed as impurities were expunged. The cost was the heart-wrenching agony of having his soul electrocuted.

The next thirty seconds felt like an hour as every inch of his aperture was flooded. Thankfully, the Void Mountain showcased a surprising foresight by retreating into the mists at the edge of his mind. Meanwhile, the Tribulation Throne provided a much-needed reminder it was a man-made opportunity. Whenever the lightning encountered the subspaces holding his inheritances and the prison, it was like the Faith Energy marked those spots off-limits.

With nothing else to inundate, the lightning finally flooded the intricate pathways of his Cosmic Core. By the time all eight spikes formed a complete cycle, Zac could no longer tell where the lightning ended and he began. Even his Soul Sense had become lightning, officially sealing him from the outside world.

Then came the laws.

Zac screamed, he rolled, he cried. At least, he thought he did. It was impossible to tell over the devastating wave of pure, unadulterated lightning that crashed into him. The light blue had been strangled by the dark depths of the Heavenly Peak as azure destruction shook Zac to his very core. Not even his path or beliefs were spared when they faced such a monstrously refined Dao of Lightning.

It was like the Tribulation Lightning had become the arbiter of the Law of Truth, and it was judging everything heterogenous as unlawful. It was a horrifying rejection that felt like an exile separating Zac from the cosmos. His Dao Heart might have shattered then and there if not for his unique connection to the Void. He was already an outsider, so expulsion from the Heavens didn't hit nearly as hard.

The attack on his heart was deflected, but the twice-evolved lightning was deadly enough that it didn't need any tricks. Zac furiously fought back, knowing he was so close to completing the cycle. Just fifty more seconds, and he would have surpassed the ancients. And he could tell the benefits had taken a huge leap after being subject to a bolt imbued with one of the four laws. His body was being tempered and aligned with the cosmos.

Would he become a perfected being if he passed the whole trial?

Greed and anticipation were quashed and replaced with horror when the nineteenth spike woke from its ancient slumber. The Law of Balance joined the Law of Truth as the azure blue deepened. A piercing scream of mortal danger pierced through the storm, only to be swallowed up by the crackling roar of his soul. The Tribulation Throne was replacing his essence with lightning in a twisted act of equal exchange.

Should he give up?

He could tell he'd already benefitted greatly, and he had to remember this was just a pitstop on their way to the real mission. Emily's words rang in the back of his head. Zac refused to sacrifice his body in search of answers, and he couldn't let personal gain cloud the true purpose that brought him here. Not any longer, at least.

The fortress was a rare chance to make significant contributions that would impact the whole war effort. The sudden appearance of the Technocrats or the revelation of the 'project' hadn't changed that. If anything, it made his original goal more important. Being blinded by lightning had let him see the situation more clearly than before.

Unknowingly, he had been steered off-course by fate's siren call. He'd become the moth to the flame, pushing the war effort aside as he jumped from treasure to treasure like he was possessed. How was he supposed to face his soldiers if the Technocrats got their hands on the beacon while he was busy looting dusty dorms and training rooms?

His rational mind had spoken, but an unwilling and uncompromising flame had ignited in Zac's chest, the same one that had pushed him beyond common sense many times before. It was the flame that urged him to keep going, to seize fate and create a better future than the one you could expect by playing it safe.

Zac could tell something was building within. The nine seals laid the foundation. The eight pillars added power and stability. Now, the four truths were forcibly aligning his body with the Cosmos. It was yet incomplete. He was still incomplete, like an array missing its core. The only way to reap the true reward of the Tribulation Throne was to reach its terminus.

But how?

Each law-empowered tribulation added more torment than half the second-circle spikes. He had already reached Emily's stopping point, where his body couldn't keep up with the punishment. Zac steeled his heart. The lightning had shocked him awake, but there was one more thing he could try before throwing in the towel. He'd be selfish for just another thirty seconds.

His two constitutions roared in defiance, and Life and Death rose to meet the heavenly punishment. The curtailed cyclones and the suppressed ponds no longer silently endured the onslaught. They reached down and connected to that hidden space somewhere in the depths of his body. The sole place the lightning had not yet overwhelmed. The Azure catastrophe froze in hesitation instead of pouring into the new passages. They had sensed the danger in the darkness.

It was too late. Predator became prey as the lightning was dragged into the Void.

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## Chapter 1149: Destiny

Billions of cells, from skin to marrow, replicated **[Void Heart]**'s devouring ability. Golden cyclones sped up while rippling ponds grew darker, dragging all matter to their depths. Each could only swallow a minute amount of lightning, but small streams make great rivers. The unbearable levels of destruction that the nineteenth spike and the Law of Balance levied were brought to balance as the Void accepted what Zac could not.

It actually worked.

It was an idea born from desperation, but not one without merit. Zac's experience in the Abyssal Pond and its aftermath had proven there was a yet unexplained connection between his attuned constitutions and the Void Emperor Bloodline. First, the Void siphoned the energy from his cells during his dip in the pond. Only by connecting with the true Abyssal Lake had he

absorbed enough Abyssal Energy to satiate the Void and advance his Draugr bloodline.

A few days later, **[Void Heart]** finally released the vast amounts of energy it had refined. It left Zac in a similar situation to the one he currently faced, except he was dealing with overwhelming amounts of refined Abyssal Energy instead of simulated Tribulation Lightning.

Left without better options, he'd forcibly pushed the excess Abyssal Energy into his cells to replicate the events in the pond. The Void accepted the offering and even returned a mysterious force that helped nurture his Eoz bloodline, leading to the discovery of how to accelerate the growth of his constitutions.

Zac wasn't necessarily expecting that he'd reap similar benefits by consuming the Tribulation Lightning. His goal was simply to use the Void as a storage facility where he could offload some excess energy, which would allow him to keep going. Then again, the azure lightning certainly had some similarities to **[Void Heart]**'s refined energy. It was man-made and designed to help rather than harm. Perhaps his bloodline could really use it to advance his Void Vajra Constitution and Eoz Bloodline.

The destruction of equal exchange still transformed flesh into lightning, but Zac no longer felt like he was facing death. The intensity was kept in check, and he felt his consciousness stabilize. Feeling his body disappear was terrifying, but Zac knew you sometimes had to break down something to rebuild it better. He'd survived something similar when entering Minor Sublimation, and he'd survive it today.

The Law of Balance finished its work and the Law of Cosmos took over. Zac's newfound confidence almost shattered as a wave of navy-blue lightning swept through his bodies, turning Miasma, Cosmic Energy, and Divine Energy into more lightning. Not even the Mental Energy was spared, and his Soul Cores dimmed like dying suns.

The same happened to his Cosmic Core. The unceasing font of energy Zac had relied on during the war saw its pathways forcibly drained of energy before being filled with crippling lightning. His constitutions had survived his body's transformation, but they suddenly felt hollow and distant. Without Dao, form, or energy, what else remained?

The Law of Truth governed Dao and how it shaped the world, while the Law of Cosmos governed energy. While being targeted by both, Zac felt like he'd been stripped of his hard-earned power and reduced to a pre-cultivation mortal again. It was a terrifying experience that affected his Dao Heart more than the Law of Truth did before.

Zac felt so small and insignificant when faced with the fundamental precepts of the universe, but he knew he had to keep going. Stopping at the 17th spike or at the beginning of the 18th would have been fine. He would be worse for the wear, but the large number of impurities cleansed would more than make up for the torment. However, it was different now that he'd pushed so far into the third circle.

Tribulation Lightning holding punishment of the cardinal laws was called the Four Desolates Tribulation. It wasn't something a Hegemon should come in contact with, at least not with how cultivation currently worked. Zac wasn't even sure if Monarchs had to defend against the laws. It was simply too early to come in contact with such lofty concepts, and each law would damage an aspect of his cultivation if he stopped early.

However, the Tribulation Throne wouldn't include them for 'Awakened Lords' without reason or a plan. Zac guessed that passing all four desolates would return what was taken and more. At least, he hoped that was the case. He'd endured three already, proving they only carried a sliver of the true desolates power. And despite his wretched state, Zac could still feel a steady stream of Tribulation Lightning being dragged into the Void, keeping him above water.

Just one more.

A fourth wave of extermination descended, compressing and darkening the lightning. Zac felt himself rapidly wither in a way that would scare any cultivator witless. It was his life force being targeted, the very thing cultivators fought so desperately to seize. Zac could feel his longevity become lightning and his providence scattered by thunder. It was the work of the Law of Impermanence, the final hurdle of the third round of tribulation.

Impermanence was the inviolable rule his Evolutionary Path railed against and his Inexorable Path emulated. Nothing was Eternal, not even the Cosmos itself. Cultivators could siphon longevity and play tricks to extend their stay, but the Law of Impermanence couldn't be cheated forever.

The only way to break free from the chains of mortality and achieve Eternity was to surpass the Heavens and the laws that bound it. So far, none had succeeded, yet cultivators kept trying Era after Era. This pursuit stood at the center of the conflict between the Thrones and the Seals, and even Zac had been dragged into the struggle by the fifth pillar's ascent.

Seventeen layers of tribulation impressed the Grand Dao onto his body. The cardinal laws expunged the four dimensions of cultivation, leaving only a seed of fraught self in a sea of lightning. Yet Zac held on, trusting himself and the Void to take him to the other shore.

The last embers died. He was nothing, yet everything, when all extraneous had been removed. The agony that threatened to break his mind and spirit faded as his consciousness rose to a higher state of existence. Zac felt like he'd been sent to the first day of the Era, perhaps of all Eras, seeing it in its most primal and pristine state.

He finally understood. Passing the four desolates allowed the trialtaker to briefly fuse with the Cosmos and glimpse its true nature. Only by letting go of the anchors that bound you to the mundane could you peek behind the curtain. It was a concept Zac was more than familiar with, thanks to the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]**. Relinquish all to become one with all.

That teaching was a genuine approach to enlightenment and not limited to the Buddhist Sangha. However, that concept almost became the backdoor, replacing his will with an unthinking Arhat. It left Zac wary of the Tribulation Throne's final stage as his consciousness drifted in the origin of all creation.

Time had lost all meaning. Zac rationally knew he hadn't been in this state for more than a second, but it could just as well have been decades. It was comforting, yet lonely, so Zac welcomed the change to his brief existence of non-existence.

Not one, but two spikes lit up simultaneously, each filling up half his consciousness and the primordial space the Tribulation Throne had conjured. One was so radiantly white Zac felt it transcended the concept of color, exuding faith, strength, and unbending purpose. The other was darker than black, but not the cold, deathly gloom of the Abyss. It was the alluring night sky that drew Eoz's attention the day he emerged from the depths, holding boundless mystery and possibilities.



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It wasn't hard to guess the next step—a choice must be made.

Zac would have snorted if he wasn't a discarnate consciousness locked in an unfathomable tribulation. He finally understood the truth of the twenty-three layers. Nine Seals, Eight Thrones, Four Laws, and the One Destiny. Zac had guessed the twenty-third was the 'self,' representing the will of man and the struggle of cultivation. But he'd looked at it from his own vantage, forgetting to consider who built the Tribulation Throne.

Who but the Limitless Emperor deserved to stand at the very summit, surpassing the Dao and all Laws?

Imperial Fate or Cosmic Destiny. War or self-discovery. Those were the choices presented. Whichever he chose would add the final layer, complete the circuit, and finish the tribulation. Neither was objectively better. The lighting in the two final spikes held such immense profundity that the previous arcs paled in comparison.

Zac couldn't even begin to fathom the concepts hidden within. It was no surprise, considering he still didn't understand what the 'One Destiny' referred to. Zac only knew it was placed above Dao and Law and was represented by Buddha's awakening inside the Sangha's doctrine. The dark lighting didn't promise anything. It was a vast ocean filled with secrets and opportunities. What you'd find depended on fate's winds.

The radiant lightning of the Limitless Empire didn't pale in comparison. Looking at it filled Zac with a sense of purpose. It made him feel part of something greater than himself, something that could withstand the test of time, even the passing of Eras. He'd pick up where the ancestors left off, each generation reaching new heights.

Both held a fatal attraction, yet Zac instinctively recoiled at their gifts. He didn't think the choice was a trick question, even if it seemed odd to disregard the Emperor's path in favor of the Cosmos. Neither did Zac believe it was a trap like the one hidden within the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]**. The lightning wouldn't change his heart or his will. It was more a test of character, fate, and suitability. Google search novel(F)ire.net

And that was precisely the problem. He had already made his choice, one that precluded both paths presented. How many times had he railed at being used as a pawn, becoming an unwilling cog in someone else's schemes? How many times had he cursed fate for pushing him and those around him into dangerous situations? His struggles were all aimed at taking control of his destiny.

Picking either side felt like carving an unsuitable pathway onto his body. Zac was certain either choice would still improve his cultivation, but he was unwilling to betray his path like that. Zac's instincts told him this was one of those situations where compromising would leave a shadow in his heart. It was better to choose neither than betray his path.

He was the Void.

What did it matter if he gave up on the wisdom of the ancestors? He'd forged his own path and would continue to do so until he reached its end. It didn't matter how long it was, so long as it was his.

So what if he rejected destiny? He would create his own fate, seizing what he lacked with his two hands. He had no regrets, even if it meant stepping off the road to enter untamed and unexplored wilderness.

Crashing thunder shook the primordial Cosmos, and the two seas of lightning no longer felt profound and inviting. His declaration was an act of apostasy, angering the Gods and inviting their judgment. The soul-rending agony came crashing back with redoubled force, sweeping away his connection with the cosmos. It was like the trial had turned into a true Tribulation. Zac knew this was his time to cut his losses, only to find the Tribulation Throne ignoring his deactivation command.

He tried to escape or ask Emily for help. However, he couldn't even feel his body, let alone communicate with the outside. Zac despaired, wondering if his death-defying behavior had finally caught up with him. No, he wouldn't go down without a fight! He pushed back against the lightning, unleashing the floodgates to his bloodline to fight back against the Heavens. He'd chosen Void over certainty in the face of all reason. Having it reciprocate wasn't too much to ask, right?

Sometimes, a determined heart can even move mountains.

An immense pressure descended on the cosmic realm, freezing the lightning. Reality shifted, and the Heavens became the earth. The black-and-white seas towering above were now suppressed beneath his feet. And floating above was an inverted mountain vast beyond compare.

It was silent, waiting. Waiting for Zac to follow the voice in his heart and do what needed to be done. To become the Void, take what he needed and discard all else.

Innumerable streaks of unwilling white and black were forcibly dragged from the ground to complement the incomplete system in his body. They buckled and resisted, their wrath enough to incinerate the sky. However, Zac's will carried the weight of the Void Mountain, and the lightning was unable to break free from the hold.

Meanwhile, a third force rained down from above, turning duality into a triumvirate. Together, they'd open the path he sought. Zac felt he was at the precipice of greatness, but an alarming realization struck him like a punch to the face. He had no idea what to do, and the Void Mountain didn't provide any answers.

It was too soon. He was just an Early Hegemon, and this undertaking involved concepts that stumped even Supremacies. It touched upon the Terminus, and a single mistake would collapse the whole system like a house of cards. The trapped streaks of lightning were already exploiting the imperfections to break free. Zac frantically asked the Void for instruction and was met with deafening silence.

However, someone else answered the call.

*'Old friend...'* an ancient sigh echoed through the universe.

It felt like it came from a time before time, stretching to the very end of all existence. It transcended the Dao, yet was one with it. It was unstoppable, unfathomable, and too much for Zac's mind to contain. Even Sendor paled before the unquestionable might embodied within those two words. Had someone actually reached Eternity already?

Time was reversed to redirect the river of fate down another trajectory. The twenty-three forms of lightning stopped their destructive rampage like they'd become docile kittens. Imperfections smoothed out to pave the way for an unbelievably complex pattern. Zac gasped at its intricacy and beauty. He

couldn't even comprehend a corner, but he knew the road he looked for had appeared—the unique road of the Void Emperor.

The pattern sank into his consciousness, and Zac was beset with an immense sense of loss as he was dragged back to his mundane reality. The clarity was gone, and the complex pattern slipped through the cracks in his mind and disappeared. It was like when he encountered the Chaos Pattern and the Void Mountain, leaving him agonizingly curious and desperately wanting more.

Zac could barely tell what was real and what was imaginary as he suddenly was made aware of his immediate surroundings. He was still stuck on the Tribulation Throne in his human form, but he hadn't expected a throne of lightning to have appeared atop the monolith in the Ensolus Ruins. Atop them were his two incorporeal forms, resembling unmoving Gods of Thunder.

All twenty-three waves on the sculpture were glowing, radiating a transcendent force like a celestial beacon. Only a sliver entered his body, but that was enough to trigger a great rebirth. Meanwhile, unprecedented waves shook the Tribulation Throne. It flooded him with the Dao of the Earthly Peak with such force the metal throne twisted and began melting.

Zac accepted it all and even called upon the remnant energies left by the cactus spine and the **[Myriad Paths Water]**. He was like an arid desert, a desolate wasteland without a future. He'd stayed alive through willpower alone, but it was finally time to take back what was his.

Divine flowers burgeoning with untainted lifeforce bloomed in the sea of lightning. Their celestial nectar rushed forth, replacing what was taken and more. Longevity contained the life-giving waters of possibility, allowing Zac to reembark on the path of cultivation. The parched canals of his Cosmic Core filled with pristine waters that traveled through every corner of his bodies to awaken them from their slumber.

Wherever his energy passed, lightning reverted to flesh and bones. It was like the great rivers of his energy reclaimed the desert and transformed the continent into a lush forest. A forest taller and stronger than the one that stood there before. Finally, a gentle rain of truth fell from the skies on the reformed landscape. Life, Death, and Conflict painted Zac's body in the shades of his path.

Never before had Zac felt so connected with himself. He had been realigned with his path and the cosmos, and it seemed every aspect of his cultivation

had seen some form of improvement. However, a dark cloud of premonition covered the skies before Zac had the chance to celebrate.

The process was still ongoing, and Zac was still unable to move. However, a deep rumble joined the apocalyptic chaos of the crumbling Tribulation Throne. It was his stomach incessantly growling, and it was just the tip of the iceberg of the unfathomable hunger that suddenly tore at his insides.

Zac tried to quell it by redirecting some of the immense energies coursing through his body, but it only made his cells more agitated. They were like baby birds screaming for nourishment, and their call only grew louder and more urgent. It had been a while since he last felt this unrelenting and unbearable craving, but it was a sensation he'd never forget.

The unexpected events in the Tribulation Throne had triggered his Bloodline Evolution. He'd chosen the Void and received its aid. Now, it demanded Zac prove his conviction. He could tell there was no stopping this train; he could either jump aboard or get run over. At best, he could suppress it a while longer, but it was just a matter of time.

He had an hour at best.

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## **Chapter 1150: Void Road**

The growing hunger could be endured, but it couldn't be fully denied. The already shocking amounts of lightning that had entered its cells weren't enough. Nothing could ever be enough. Zac's Void, to take what was needed and relinquish all else, was a lie—a retreat born from weakness.

The Void Emperor took what he wanted. He seized the Heavens and devoured the Earth, slaughtering any and all that stood in his way.

Hunger warped his perception, but a loud explosion shook Zac awake. Remnant lightning was being forcibly pulled from the ceiling, prompting a violent response. His Draugr body was trying the same thing, but the mysterious monolith in the center of the Ensolus Ruins actually rebuffed his demands.

It had withstood Ultom's destructive pulses and now endured the call of the Void. Its origin couldn't be simple. Zac only needed to look around to understand there was more than met the eye to the Ensolus Ruins, but that particular mystery would have to wait. There were more pressing matters on his human side.

One spike after another shattered above the Tempest Throne. Despite two consecutive uses, each spike still held immense amounts of energy, and it was all pouring into the chamber. Zac knew he couldn't let things go on, and he forcibly stabilized his mind and suppressed his body.

The frenzied swirls in his cells gradually slowed down, though they were still in an agitated state. The insatiable hunger was still there, too. It was a half-measure that proved just enough to stop the destruction that would drown him in unfiltered Tribulation Lightning.

It was just in time. Alarm bells were going off in Zac's mind as he looked at the crackling storm around him. It looked similar to what he'd used to fuel his rebirth, but its force was far greater. The spikes had adjusted their strength based on his grade during the trial, and those safeguards had failed when the spikes exploded.

Entering the storm meant death without a shadow of a doubt. Absorbing it might work, with the caveat that it would instantly trigger his bloodline evolution. With Emily trapped in the next room, that was a step he could only take as a last-ditch solution. Thankfully, it didn't get to that point.

The twisted Tribulation Throne provided a small sanctuary through its Earthly domain, though only a pile of molten metal would remain in ten minutes. It should be enough, considering the metallic plating covering the chamber was working hard at absorbing the excess energy. He just needed to stay put for a bit longer. Of course, that plan was out the window if more spikes blew up. Seven was already pushing it.

Zac took a calming breath as he felt himself gradually regaining control over his bodies. The transformation had continued despite his bloodline's

interruption, and it was about to wrap up. It would be a while before the lightning dispersed, so Zac took the opportunity to properly scan his body to figure out what the mysterious rebirth had done to him. If nothing else, it would help distract him from the gnawing hunger that constantly fought for supremacy. The part of him that looked at the lightning as fuel rather than death.

The most obvious change was that he'd shrunk. While retaining his height, he'd lost around 30% of his muscle volume. He was still large but not as aggressively beefed up as before. The mass remained equal—what his reforged muscles lacked in size, they more than made up for in barely restrained power. His muscle tissue had been rearranged and concentrated, further optimizing them for battle.

More surprising was that he'd gained a couple of new muscles and tendons humans normally wouldn't have. At least not Earth Humans, anyway, whose fundamental physique Zac still shared. It wasn't anything that noticeably changed his appearance. It seemed as though he'd gained a support system that would let him bring out more explosive force. Zac could not test it out while trapped atop the throne, but he could somewhat intuit he would be able to better utilize his attribute pool as soon as he got used to the changes.

Ultimately, humans weren't particularly suited for cultivation beyond having the basic physiology most cultivation races shared. If anything, they were considered aggressively mediocre, and many factions sought to improve their genealogy by introducing complementary attributes from other races.

Take Earth Humans, for instance. They had become the apex predator of Earth by developing great endurance and energy conservation. But were those features really the most suited for cultivators with their godlike attribute pools and Cosmic Cores providing energy? Zac guessed the transformation followed that logic, though it failed to explain a few other changes. For instance, why did he suddenly have more teeth than before?

The body transformation left Zac conflicted, even if it was a clear upgrade. It was a step away from his origin, the 'Earth Zac.' It was the part that held his mortal heart, acting as a spiritual anchor in a world that grew increasingly grim and confusing.

Then again, if Ogras could deal with becoming a shadow being, then he could deal with some extra teeth and muscles. At least the optimization didn't come with new limbs or gorilla arms, and the added teeth looked normal enough.



Shape wasn't the only thing new in his body. His cells were pure, dense, and incredibly stable, like he'd spent the last decade solidifying his foundations. Zac sensed he could break through in his **[Void Vajra Sublimation]** tomorrow if he had the time, and progress with his Body Tempering Methods would be swift in the short term. The biggest difference, however, was that his constitutions seemed to have formed a stronger connection to his Void Emperor bloodline.

The golden whirlpools had started filling with elusive shadows of Void Energy, and there were hidden currents in the Abyssal ponds. Was it a temporary change because his bloodline was about to break through, or was it related to his choice at the end? Zac's thoughts drifted back to the primordial cosmos and the lakes of lightning, inwardly shuddering at how close to disaster he'd come.

Recalling the experience almost dragged him out of his Void State, so Zac quickly shifted his attention to his Cosmic Core. Like his body, it had been given the expected cleansing, removing impurities and a good chunk of the remaining imperfections. If his Cosmic Core wasn't High-quality before, it certainly was now, which meant one of the major roadblocks to Late Hegemony had been dealt with.

More troubling was that his Cosmic Core had undergone a subtle transformation like his physique. A few pathways had been added, and others rerouted or reformed. The difference was less than 1% compared to its original state. One percent was both little and too much, becoming an unwelcome and worrying surprise now that he was so close to Middle Hegemony.

The small alterations meant his prepared blueprint wouldn't work. He'd encountered similar problems more than once with his Skill Fractals. Even a slight difference would lead to a chain reaction of issues, creating a negative spiral of imperfections and patchwork solutions that left you with something far worse than planned. Zac needed to understand the changes, the theories behind them, and what alterations they necessitated before he could step into Middle Hegemony.

The easier solution would be to revert the changes, though that would also take time. Furthermore, Zac was hesitant to do so since the benefits were undeniable. Somehow, the small alterations improved his energy generation, storage, and transfer by around 10-15%. It even felt like the energy it produced had become slightly purer.

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It was a clear buff, but a reshaped body and altered core weren't enough to fully explain why Zac felt like his body was overflowing with power. He had already formed a hypothesis, and Zac opened his Status Screen to confirm.

**Name** Zachary Atwood

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**Level** 171

**Class** [D-Arcane] Evolutionary Precursor

**Race** [D] Human - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

**Alignment** [Zecia] Atwood Empire – Baron of Conquest

**Titles** [...] Arcane Ascension, Pathbound Core, Peakmender, Destined, Cosmic Introduction

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

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

**Core** [D] Evolutionary Core

**Strength** 125,618 [Increase: 224%. Efficiency: 451%]

**Dexterity** 56,732 [Increase: 166%. Efficiency: 300%]

**Endurance** 72,010 [Increase: 190%. Efficiency: 472%]

**Vitality** 63,369 [Increase: 183%. Efficiency: 450%]

**Intelligence** 11,393 [Increase: 145%. Efficiency: 300%]

**Wisdom** 19,678 [Increase: 147%. Efficiency: 315%]

**Luck** 1,315 [Increase: 174%. Efficiency: 393%]

**Free Points** 200

## **Nexus Coins [D] 19 345 883**

The Tribulation Throne had provided two more levels, though that obviously wasn't the reason why his attributes had jumped forward. His eyes moved from the unchanged line for his bloodline before stopping at his Titles. Hegemony hadn't provided much in the way of Titles thus far. Today, Zac got two. More importantly, one appeared in a manner that made even Zac's heartbeat accelerate.

**[Cosmic Introduction: Achieve Pseudo Low-grade Cosmic Attainment. Reward: All attributes +10%. Effect of Attributes +5%.]**

**[Void Road (Limited): Reject destiny in pursuit of the unknown. Reward: Luck +100. Exclusive. Upgradeable.]**

One normal title and one limited. That alone wasn't anything special. What made Zac's eyes burn and heart thump was that it didn't replace any of his five old ones. It had actually expanded his slots by one, which had only happened twice before despite all he'd been through.

The title itself was nothing to scoff at, either. Despite doing nothing for his combat effectiveness and only providing flat attributes, Void Road was indubitably his strongest title. One hundred flat Luck was a shocking number, and it was the main reason his Luck had increased by a whopping 30% in one go. It provided a monstrous multiplier on one of his strongest points. Certainly, Luck was a double-edged sword where dangers and opportunities came hand in hand, but Zac would take that deal every day.

As if that wasn't enough, the title sported something Zac had never seen before. It had two descriptors; Exclusive and Upgradeable. Did Exclusive mean it was exclusive to him, or that he could only have one path, like the choice he faced at the end? And was there a different approach to evolving it compared to the other titles he'd upgraded? If he figured it out, could he keep tacking on more Luck to the already incredible tally?

Zac stilled his galloping thoughts and shifted his attention to the other title he'd gained. It provided a decent boost, though not one that would make Zac raise his brows. He found description of the feat more interesting than the title itself. 'Pseudo Low-grade Cosmic Attainment' no doubt referred to the changes in his body, further confirming Zac's hypothesis.

It was becoming clear the Tribulation Throne held two benefits. The first came from the outer circles and their seventeen spikes representing the Heavens. They replicated Tribulation Lightning to shed impurities and imperfections.

This part could only be considered a decent opportunity in today's cultivation world unless you were a mortal like Zac. However, it was far more valuable in the era of the Limitless Empire. Zac remembered his bloodline visions and the struggle a young Laondio Evrodok was trying to solve—the large amounts of impurities plaguing all cultivators.

The ancient cultivators didn't have pure Kill Energy to propel them through grades, and even their 'Dragon Veins' contained impure energy. Even those who took the slow path and only absorbed energy from the universe would be plagued by impurities. The System had largely solved that issue. Today, the only impurities most people had to deal with were Connate Impurities, Pill Toxins, remnants from Natural Treasures, and sequalee from wounds.

The diluted Four Desolates Tribulation provided the Tribulation Throne's second benefit. This half was far, far more dangerous than the former, with only Meso Helo having passed it. Zac even suspected those on the higher-grade ladder hadn't reached that step. Their higher timings were rather the result of each tribulation stage needing more time to unload its energy.

Coming in contact with the Four Desolates early was an invaluable experience to prepare for the real thing, but the Tribulation Throne's goal was still to provide immediate benefits. It broke down and rebuilt one's body to better align with the four laws, improving its potential. It was similar to how Catheya's appearance improved after she awakened her bloodline and improved her affinities, though based on even more profound concepts.

Certainly, the term "Pseudo Low-Grade Cosmic Attainment" meant he'd just dipped his feet in the water, if even that. It still felt like he'd taken the first step in dealing with a troubling roadblock far down the road. Iz once mentioned elite cultivators spent most of their time in the lower grades, shoring up their foundations and accumulating.

Could this be part of it? Ensuring one's path was aligned with not only the Daos but the Four Laws early could potentially be instrumental in stepping into Divine Monarchy or Autarchy.

The experience also made Zac think of his first meeting with Catheya. Back then, she'd asked what he thought the difference was between modern and

ancient cultivators. That question led to the discussion of titles, where Catheya defined them as excavated potential. Wasn't this pretty much the same thing?

The Tribulation Throne was an archaic Title Generator for the empire's elites. The method was so dangerous the process could be considered the achievement needed to qualify for a title. In return, its effect would be far more impressive than any of the common titles most people would ever see in today's age.

Melo Heso had also reached that final stage, though he probably picked one of the options immediately and thus finished the last stage two seconds in. Zac, as Emily predicted, had instead caused trouble, dragging the Void and the Ensolus Ruins into the mix. Zac felt his body's alignment could explain the additional Limited Title slot, but it could also be related to the unorthodox way he finished the trial.

It was still almost unbelievable how a series of coincidences had worked together to save his life and bring unexpected benefits. If his body hadn't split during his breakthrough into Hegemony, he would have been forced to give up on the Tribulation Throne early.

Zac only passed the seventeen spikes by spreading the Tribulation Lightning. And if not for his experience in the Abyssal Pond, he wouldn't have known the method to pass the Four Desolates Tribulation. Not to mention that voice. Zac had consciously avoided the topic since even thinking about such a powerful entity risked drawing fate's attention.

Because even when dead, the Limitless Emperor was undeniably the main character of this Era.

The aged voice barely sounded anything like the Laondio from Zac's vision, but who else could it be? Who but the Limitless Emperor could exude such monstrous strength that even beings like Sendor and Eoz paled before them? And who else would say "old friend" when coming in contact with the Void? It could also be Karz, but that made less sense, considering his location.

Zac wasn't sure if the wisp of Laondio's will came from the Ensolus monolith or the large amounts of Faith Energy gathered inside the tower. Either case, it had been attracted by his bloodline and how he used the Void to fight the two choices to create a new answer.

It was ironic. He'd rejected the Imperial Fate to stake out his own path, only to have his life saved by the Emperor himself.

Now, every aspect of him had seen subtle alterations. Was that a natural effect of aligning with the Laws, or was it part of some plot? The exact relationship between Karz and Laondio was still a mystery. They were just E-grade cultivators when Zac saw them in his vision, and it would be millions of years before the Limitless Empire would shake the multiverse.

Had the trajectories of his fate been meddled with, like how the Remnants put him on a collision course with their brethren? The System hadn't warned him of the 'Terminus,' but could it be trusted when the conspirator was its creator? The thought filled Zac with exhaustion. He kept fighting to break the chains of fate, yet new fetters kept replacing the old.

The good news was that the Tribulation Throne was limited in its power. The synthetic Four Desolate Tribulation only held a wisp of the real thing, limiting his rebirth to a Pseudo-stage. He also had his inherent resistance to meddling with his Karma, which was likely to grow stronger over time. The Kayar-Elu would undoubtedly have contingencies against the lingering will of Emperor Limitless if they planned to topple the System.

Still, he'd have to keep his eyes peeled. It was a shame Iz hadn't returned yet. There was no one else he could turn to with matters. Well, there was one. The very notion filled Zac with reluctance and a storm of complicated emotions. He'd talked so big just a few months ago, denouncing and drawing lines. Would he really have to come crawling back now?

Who beyond Leandra held the answers he sought?

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