

Defiance of the Fall

Chapter 1161: Audience

The large chamber resembled a throne room like Yselio's celestial court more than anything you'd expect to see in a Cosmic Vessel. It was wrought from stone, with massive twenty-meter pillars hanging identical banners. Elite soldiers in exquisite gear lined the walls, seemingly blind to the tense atmosphere in the room. Instead of a throne, Zac stood before a large, multilayered dais surrounded by dozens of attendants and officials.

It had only been a few minutes since the enormous warship appeared before Zac. It had sealed space before pulling him into a hatch where a dozen Late Hegemons waited. Zac had been ready to fight for his life, but the familiar sigil emblazoned on their surcoats made Zac stay his hand. They were members of the Dravorak Imperial Guard.

Seeing that it wasn't the Imperials of the Seven Heavens or some other outsider faction was great news, but it didn't mean Zac was out of the woods. The Dravorak's stance was unclear, and they were currently in a remote corner of space. It wasn't unthinkable they'd target him without considering their connection with the Havarok Dynasty.

Yrial's hardships were ample proof you couldn't trust the benevolence of orthodox factions. Forces similar to the Dravorak Empire had hunted Yrial for centuries because of lesser treasures than those in Zac's hand. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to glean anything from the guards on their way over. They almost acted like automatons, ignoring his questions with expressionless faces.

Even now, Zac didn't know what to make of the situation, though it was a relief to find Emily and the others seated to the side. They were in good condition with a feast set up before them. Zac noted with interest that both Galau and Bubbur had changed their clothes to the gear of the Acheron Company. He understood Emily's intentions, which were perfectly in line with his ideas.

In a perfect world, he would have swooped up all of them, but Zac knew it was impossible. The Muscle Brigade already had a place to call home, and just getting Bubbur was a surprise. Besides, they needed to get off the ship before he could worry about recruitment.

Despite their precarious situation, the burly soldiers had clearly not held back on the hospitality. A boozy haze surrounded the former castaways, and some of the men standing around the raised platforms had disgusted looks on their faces when glancing their way. Right now, none of the soldiers were drinking, and their eyes were clear as they observed the stand-off.

It was obvious the officials were split into two camps, where a clear majority looked at him with animosity. Zac didn't care about their hostile gazes, even if most of them had cultivations surpassing his. What mattered was the attitude of the man sitting in the seat of honor.

The central position was occupied by a stalwart middle-aged man with a strong military aura. Prostez Dravorak, or the Everfast Monarch as he was more commonly known. He wore an unadorned uniform, though Zac could tell all his accessories were incredibly valuable Tool Spirits.

A sheathed sword was lying by his side, and Zac could feel the dense, bloody aura even through the isolating scabbard. **[Verun's Bite]** had seen an extraordinary amount of carnage, but Zac could tell it was nothing compared to how many lives the Everfast Monarch's weapon had reaped.

The Field Marshall of the Twenty-Sixth lived up to his name. Unfortunately, his attitude was inscrutable. He was unmoving as a statue with his eyes closed like he'd shut out the world. It almost felt like he was unwilling to get involved with the situation before him.

Technically, he was the ultimate authority on this section of the frontlines, but Zac knew the situation wasn't quite that simple. If nothing else, there was no way the Everfast Monarch was the real owner of the vessel they were aboard. It was one of the few C-grade Vessels in Zecia, and its quality almost seemed to match those of his own.

Certainly, its ancient air meant it might have been a lucky discovery inside some remnant, but it wouldn't be Prostez's turn to get such a ship. He was strong enough to surpass most of Zecia's faction leaders, but at least four Monarchs within the Dravorak Dynasty were stronger than he. New NOVEL chapters are published on novel Fire.net

Zac felt it was more likely the ship belonged to someone else. His gaze shifted to the other person on the central dais, a woman whose features were obscured by a muslin veil. She was demurely sitting a few meters from the Everfast Monarch; her eyes also closed in meditation. Her role, strength, and

status were unclear. Zac only knew she was unlikely to be the Monarch's Dao Companion, as the noblewomen of the Dravorak Dynasty rarely dressed in clothing that made Zac think of the Void Star's nuns.

The Dravorak Dynasty was a faction with a strong martial tradition, one which covered all its citizens. A talented general like the Everfast Monarch would at least be matched with a peak D-grade Marshall with impressive military feats. She'd be wearing the army uniform of the Dravorak Royal Guard or some similar designation, and her position on the dais would be based on her own rank and contributions.

In contrast, this woman felt more like a servant, though no servant would be allowed to sit in such an esteemed position. Not to mention, Zac sensed an intangible pressure from her, despite her not releasing even a speck of aura or energy. Most likely, she was another Monarch, possibly one stronger than the Everfast Monarch himself.

A reasonable explanation was that she was the guardian of the trio of Havarok noblemen sitting on the dais' third layer. All were Hegemons with the tell-tale purple irises common in the Havarok Empire. Zac's eyes were involuntarily drawn to the familiar face on the right. It was Ykrodas Havarok, the princeling he loosely cooperated with inside the Twilight Ocean. He looked back at Zac with a complex expression, and for good reason.

The last time they saw each other, Zac had been channeling the full power of his remnants, and he'd killed Uona by forming a glimpse of Chaos. Such an encounter would leave a shadow on anyone's heart. The events also led to disastrous losses for the Havarok Empire because of the Umbri'Zi Clan's scheme. A scheme Zac had no part in yet ended up taking part of the blame for.

Their leader was likely a peak Middle Hegemon, and he shared many similarities with Ykrodas. However, he gave off a very different air, wearing a mask of haughty indifference Zac had seen on people like Valsa. Of course, he had grounds to be arrogant, boasting a stronger aura than any Zecian Middle D-grade Cultivator or Kan'Tanu Remoulded Zac had encountered. Most likely, only the Reincarnators of the Seven Kan'Tanu Chapters could match up to him.

However, Zac could tell he was a significant step below Middle D-grade Cultivators like Yselio or Kator. He was strong by frontier standards, but not enough to stand out in the Multiverse Heartlands.

Most of the officials on the ground gravitated toward the three youths, which was expected considering the Dravorak Dynasty was in a similar situation as the Kavriel Province. However, their connection was even more tenuous. The Havarok Dynasty couldn't be bothered with their distant branch at all. That was, until they suddenly became useful.

A quarter of the attendants were gathered around the platform on the opposite side of the Everfast Monarch. On top of it sat four valiant soldiers, all solidly in Peak D-grade. Zac hadn't seen them before, but it wasn't hard to recognize them. They were the strongest generals under the Everfast Monarch and his right-hand men.

Their leader's aura even emitted a heavy pressure that reminded Zac of his spar with Pavina. The weight of a world. In other words, he had already taken the first step toward Monarchy by opening a proto-space within his Cosmic Core.

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Opening a proto-space wasn't the only path to the C-grade. One could even say it wasn't the right one, since it apparently limited the Inner World's size and potential. Furthermore, taking that step was irreversible. If this general failed to open an inner world within 1,000 years or so, the proto-space would collapse, destroying the Cosmic Core and taking his life.

Despite the downsides, almost all Monarchs on the frontier used this method instead of the orthodox paths. After all, it split the breakthrough into two steps with a consolidation period between them, which drastically lowered the difficulty. And if you survived opening the proto space, you'd enjoy a millennia of Half-step power.

For all Zac knew, the general might have had zero confidence in breaking through to Monarchy yet chose to open the proto space to gain a burst of power. Unfortunately, this was a far too common occurrence among Zecia's Peak Hegemons. Only a vanishingly small number of Zecian Peak Hegemons would normally consider Monarchy.

The heritages, environment, and opportunities were not good enough on the frontier for more than a very limited number of Monarchs to appear. In contrast, reaching Peak Hegemony was enough to live a life of abundance

and luxury for nearly 100,000 years. Why take the risk, considering failure meant death?

The war had changed everything. Death was suddenly waiting around every corner, and the Limited Exchange provided access to treasures that would never appear in Zecia. A large number of Hegemons chose to take the gamble. If they survived, they could rely on their proto spaces to drastically speed up their merit accumulation. Perhaps they could even cross that hurdle they hadn't dared dream of before.

But the house always wins. The Alliance lost hundreds of Peak Hegemons for every Half-step Monarch they gained. And of those who crossed the threshold, only a handful would succeed in taking the next step before their time was up. It absolutely wasn't worth it, considering hundreds of Peak Hegemons were much more useful than one Half-step Monarch.

Among the four generals, only one seemed hostile toward him. The others were either smiling or neutral. They had probably heard of his accomplishments and were unwilling to hand him over to the Havarok princelings. But could their opinions change anything?

This situation was exactly what Zac had worried about and why he wanted to move the Acheron Company from the Twenty-sixth to the Thirty-seventh Field Army. Zac's gaze returned to the two atop the central square. Curiously enough, the veiled woman sat closer to the friendly camp, though she seemed removed from either clique.

The silence was oppressive. Zac didn't speak up, either. He was waiting to see the attitude of those in the middle. Finally, one of the generals shook his head with a wry smile. He looked quite unassuming and humble, but he had an intelligent gleam in his eyes. Judging by Tussar's descriptions, he should be Warlin, one of the main strategists of the Twenty-sixth.

"We're happy to see you're safe and sound, Lord Atwood," Warlin smiled. "The Marshall was quite worried when the connection broke and we failed to reconnect."

"Must have been the work of the tower," Zac said with a staid expression. "The spatial turbulence is quite strong."

"So it is," the strategist nodded, not bothering to call him out on his lie. "The young heroes here just finished their report."

"Destruction of a valuable relic. Dereliction of duty. Treason," the man next to Ykrodas said.

Zac threw the man a lazy look, somewhat certain of his identity. It should be Ardos Havarok, who once held the eighth spot on the Early D-grade ladder. He was pushed down to the tail of the top ten when Zac registered with his two identities. Since then, he'd kept losing positions and was now in the 23rd spot. Judging by the hatred in his eyes, it almost felt like he blamed Zac for his fall from grace.

"This is one creative bastard, turning white into black," Bubbur muttered, completely indifferent to the murderous looks from the Havarok Camp's officials.

"More like brain damaged," Emily added.

A smile tugged at Zac's lips. The two weren't oblivious to the situation they were in. They had intentionally thrown a rock into the calm lake to show Zac the ripples, and it confirmed Zac's suspicions. The Havarok Dynasty were supposed to be the superiors of the Dravorak Empire and had the numbers on their side. Despite that, these scions were clearly restrained.

Ardos looked ready to unleash a massacre but suddenly stopped and looked away.

"We did the best of a bad situation," Zac smiled. "It's a shame you guys weren't around to help us. Might have ended differently then."

"Indeed. While it's regrettable that the fortress couldn't be brought under the Alliance's control, you all performed valiantly. Even if the **[Centurion Spear]** fails to achieve its goals, it'll be impossible for our enemies to turn the weapon against us," the strategist nodded.

"You're the guy who sells those ships?" another general suddenly interjected. He was human yet bigger than Billy and looked like he'd fit right in with the Muscle Brigade. It was Tusko, the 'Twenty-sixth's Iron Wall.' With Warlin, he was one of the two generals seemingly on his side. "The ones with the dynamic energy weapons."

"That's me," Zac said.

"Those little skippers are amazing. You have any more?" Tusko said, leaning forward with anticipation.

"Unfortunately, no," Zac sighed.

The general sighed with disappointment, and a few hostile officials began muttering about greed and insubordination. However, a blue screen made them choke on their complaints.

"But as you can see, I'm pretty close to upgrading the Shipyard to Middle D-grade. It will increase my production capacity, so I might have another answer for you in a couple of months."

The screen was the **[Mercantile Empire]** quest with some details obfuscated for privacy. However, it was clearly visible that his quest progress was at 1,858/2,000 and 3793/4000. He was right at the finish line, though he also needed to upgrade the Atwood Empire to a Middle D-grade faction.

"Shipyard upgrade?" Tusko roared as he shot to his feet, his eyes veritably burning. "Does that mean you'll sell Middle D-grade Cosmic Vessels? Will they have as high quality? Can they take on Late D-grade destroyers?"

"Yes," Zac succinctly said.

It was one word, but it held great conviction. Tusko drew a sharp breath and tugged at the strategist's sleeve. The hostile officials looked apprehensive, while the Havarok princes frowned with displeasure. More importantly, it was enough for the Everfast Monarch to finally open his eyes.

That was exactly why Zac shared the shipyard quest. Time was too short to get any response to his calls for aid. And even if they answered, what could the other factions do now that he was 'a guest' of the Dravorak Dynasty? That meant his shipyard was his greatest lifeline, and its upcoming upgrade could be the key to pushing a conflicted Everfast Monarch into his camp.

"Troubled times create capable leaders," the Everfast Monarch said, his voice a perfect match to the one from the communicator. "Your contribution to the cause is great."

"I'm embarrassed to hear such praise from the Everfast Monarch," Zac said with a bow, inwardly celebrating the stormy expressions on the Havarok dais.

"There's no need to address me in such a cumbersome manner. Just call me Prostez," the man said. "The others told us you stayed behind to secure the activation. Can you tell us what happened?"

Zac hesitated a moment. He didn't know what these people already knew. He wanted to glance at Emily for some cues, but it was suddenly as though he couldn't see anything but the dais. Prostez or someone else was using an ability to prevent him from corroborating with the others.

"There's not much to say. A powerful outsider broke into the Command Center as we were wrapping up. I had the others go ahead while I tried to hold him back. Things worked out, but I blacked out for a couple of minutes. After that, I barely managed to escape with my life intact."

"What happened with the outsider?" Prostez asked.

"He should be dead."

"You killed an Imperial Prince from the Heartlands!" Ardos Havarok sneered, his face a mix of suspicion and victory. "How dare you stand here after betraying our race!"

"Betrayed my race?" Zac scoffed, though he was inwardly worried.

So they'd already figured out Yselio's real identity. Zac didn't think anyone from the Muscle Brigade had willingly ratted him out, but hiding secrets in front of such a powerful group of cultivators was easier said than done. Zac had already entered his Void State, so he didn't give anything away with a careless word or expression, but that didn't guarantee anything.

"Humans are everywhere," Zac said. "Most of those cultist bastards are humans, too. Are you saying they're our allies?"

"Humans are everywhere because of the hard work and protection from humanity's leaders, like the Seven Imperial Heavens. How dare you conflate them with unorthodox heretics!" Ardos retorted. "Then again, I guess we shouldn't be surprised at your lack of fidelity. After all, can a miscreation like you even be considered human? You're more comfortable among the other unholy things, aren't you, Arcaz Umbri'Zi?"

Zac inwardly groaned when he saw the expressions of the other Havarok scions. Ykrodas still looked conflicted, with a hint of annoyance, but their

leader had no change in expression. He was clearly the one fanning on Ardos from the shadows. Zac had been uncertain of the Havarok's stance since they'd completely ignored him since they appeared in Zecia.

He was painfully aware now.

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Chapter 1162: The Pull of Destiny

Zac's situation, or rather his public explanation for his split, had already spread outside Earth. The more he accomplished, the harder the established factions worked to install spies among his ranks. No matter how hard Julia worked to root out traitors, it was impossible to catch them all.

Besides, even if he hadn't explained the circumstances to the leaders of Port Atwood, there were simply too many breadcrumbs for the Havarok Empire not to connect the dots. The Havaroks would have launched an investigation after seeing Arcaz Umbri'Zi appear on the ladder, especially since his affiliation was listed as the Atwood Empire rather than the Kavriel Province.

The factions that had gained an incursion on Earth had already made a fortune selling information on Zac and the Atwood Empire. Half of them had been routed by him in his Draugr form long before the planet became death-attuned. He and Catheya were also seen together in the Tower of Eternity, where she'd helped him by killing a large number of Tsarun scions.

The Havaroks Empire had even more to go by than the natives since they knew about his actions in the Twilight Ocean. He'd met Ykrodas in his undead form, but there should be multiple records of his human side.

"Arcaz is Arcaz and I am me," Zac said. "And I'd say I'm more human than some outsider who teams up with the Kan'Tanu to harm Zecia. I did what I had to do to protect our sector."

"You dare speak of protecting your sector? Killing one of their heirs will bring a calamity to this whole region. Can you bear that responsibility?" the Havarok scion retorted.

"I never said I killed him. I said he's dead," Zac said with a lazy expression. "A powerful Technocrat showed up shortly after the others left. She was the one who took him out." NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON N(o)VEL(F)ire.net

"You worked together with those Heaven-cursed heretics to kill someone from an Imperial Clan?" Ardos Havarok sneered.

"We didn't work together. The Technocrats just popped up and started fighting with the Imperial. We saw similar battles on the way to the Control Center. Why should I stop them? My goal was to prevent anyone from accessing the controls until the weapon couldn't be stopped," Zac shrugged.

It was difficult to explain how he'd resisted someone like Yselio Tobrial without exposing his secrets. Luckily, the mysterious Technocrat had given him the perfect excuse that would alleviate some of the pressure on him. By choosing his words carefully, he could paint a picture of himself as an innocent bystander in a struggle between the Seventh Heaven and the Sindris Clan, and he wouldn't even be lying.

"If anything, the Imperials were the ones who worked together with the Technocrats until they had a falling out," Zac added.

"The Imperials and Technocrats working together?" the Havarok youth sneered. "You should have devised a better excuse to cover your crimes."

"Oh, is that so?" Zac smiled as he glanced in the strategist's direction. "You should already have some preliminary findings, right?"

"Young master, I fear what he says is true," Warlin, the Chief Strategist, said with a helpless look.

The general clearly didn't relish being dragged into this mess, but Zac wouldn't get anywhere by relying on his word alone. He was obviously not an impartial witness, and the Havaroks had it out for him. Zac was more curious whether there was any connection between the Imperial Clans and the Havaroks. The Havarok Dynasty hadn't joined the struggle for the Left Imperial Palace of their own volition, yet Zac still hadn't uncovered the party behind them.

Things would get thorny if they belonged to the same camp. Hopefully, the annoying princeling was only using the situation to their advantage to get at Zac. Otherwise, an imperial fleet could very well be on its way already.

"You arrived in such a hurry we didn't have the chance to explain the whole situation," Warlin explained. "The Heretics infiltrated our command center with the help of deathsworn soldiers already embedded in our ranks. In return, the Technocrats manipulated our orders to send potential sealbearers into deathtraps."

As expected, Zac wasn't the only target. He wouldn't be surprised if several rankers had disappeared when the ladders updated in a few hours. He'd only survived by the skin of his teeth by taking a huge risk; how could a normal sealbearer survive an ambush arranged by such powerful parties?

"Why did they have a falling out at such a critical moment?" Prostez asked.

"It's possible both sides planned on seizing all the fruits of their cooperation from the beginning," Zac offered, nodding at Ardos. "Like he said, it was an unusual alliance, bound to fail sooner or later."

"Is that it?" the Everfast Monarch asked with a neutral expression.

It was technically within reason the Imperials and Technocrats would betray each other for no other reason than they saw an opportunity to deal a blow to an old enemy. The ancient grudge between the Limitless Empire and the Selvari shaped the world to this day. However, why would those people rush to the top of the tower when all the sealbearers were either at the outer fort or fighting on the outside?

Zac was yet unclear whether Yselio was involved in dragging the fortress to the frontlines as part of his plot. He could just have been waiting for fate to gather before making his move. However, one thing was for certain. Those two would never be willing to jeopardize their main mission over a crumbling C-grade fortress. For them, the Sixth Centurion Lighthouse didn't matter. The only thing they cared about was Ultom and the Left Imperial Palace.

The Everfast Monarch and the others could figure out that much, so Zac knew he had to give them something.

"They were fighting over information on a weapons research project," Zac said.

Truthfully, even such a prize seemed worthless compared to harvesting more seals. Most likely, it was only upon realizing the Sixth Centurion Lighthouse's secret project was related to the Lost Plane that Yselio and the Sindris Clan turned against each other. For all they knew, it might be a back door leading straight into Ultom. If that were the case, its value would greatly exceed any number of seals.

"What kind of weapon?" the Everfast Monarch asked with a somber expression. "Who seized it?"

"I'm not sure what kind of weapon," Zac said, only half-lying. He was still really just guessing at this point. "And I'm not sure either side got it. The Imperial said he was still looking for something when he intercepted us. Our activation of the **[Centurion Spear]** might have interrupted their plans and forced them to hurry to the command center."

"Sounds like you were the last man off the ship," Ardos said with a ruthless smile. "And according to my cousin here, they found a castle picked clean and a Realm Spirit gone berserk when the Twilight Ocean collapsed. *Someone* had absconded with the trove while the rest suffered. History often repeats itself, does it not?"

"Me? You think I got the weapon?" Zac said with a raised brow. "I wish."

"And we should just take your word for it?"

"He's right," one of the generals who had been silent until now said. It was the one who seemed more aligned with the Havarok scions. "A weapon that can move even the hearts of such powerful factions is a critical matter. It can change the course of the whole war. Your word alone is not enough. Better we commit a small taboo by searching your belongings than letting a critical strategic resource slip through our fingers."

Zac frowned in anger while inwardly celebrating his obscene Luck. **[Purity of the Void]**'s upgrade was a huge lucky break, and he'd already moved any sensitive items to his other body. These people could look all they wanted. They wouldn't find a thing.

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"I'm sorry, young friend. We'll have to impose on you," Prostez sighed, nodding at Tusko and the hostile general. "Both of you. Only scan."

Zac suddenly felt a pulse spread through his body while all his backup Spatial Rings flew out of his bags. Someone had scanned him for Spatial Skills like those most Merchants owned. Zac didn't resist. The Void had already retreated to the depths of his body, and even most Autarchs would fail to uncover any of his secrets.

The two generals appeared before him the next moment, going through his rings one by one. One looked increasingly displeased, while the other appeared about ready to defect and join his camp.

"There's nothing," the first general eventually said and flew back to his seat.

"Holy hell," Tusko exclaimed, his eyes as wide as saucers as he turned to Zac. "How?"

"The Cosmic Vessel business is pretty lucrative," Zac smiled.

He'd already transported all resources critical for his breakthroughs and half of the top-tier treasures he'd gathered at the end. What was left was far less impressive, but it was still enough to make most Peak Hegemons go green with envy.

"I bet it is," Tusko muttered as he returned to his seat.

"There is still one suspicious spatial treasure on his hand, and you barely checked it!" Ardros said. "It reeks of energy."

"Young master, it's a World Ring housing a Plant King," the general said. "There are no items inside."

"It might be hiding the weapon inside," Ardros said, turning to Zac. "Take it out and cut it open."

"You want to cut open my companion?" Zac said with a chilly smile as he held up the World Ring. "Why don't you do it yourself, mister twenty-three?"

Ardros' eyes thinned into slits, and he rushed down the dais with a growl, his hands suddenly covered in cracks that spread into the surroundings. Haro had

already stirred from the murderous intent in Zac's heart, and boundless wrath flooded Zac's mind as Haro realized they were under attack.

Zac had no intention of calming Haro down. Instead, he unlocked the spatial seal, and a storm of deadly vines covered in serrated thorns burst forth. Not stooping to the level of others was a virtue, but some would just keep taking and taking until nothing was left.

Ardos fought with far greater ferocity than any of the werewolves he'd encountered inside the Mystic Realm, his hands turning into primal claws infused with the Daos of Nature and Earth. They bit into the slithering vines, but Haro's appendages were more durable than the roots of ancient oak. Still, more and more vines fell onto the ground as Ardos forced his way over. The problem was that Haro was blindly lashing out, guided by blind rage.

As despicable as Adros was, he was ultimately an elite warrior of a B-grade faction. Such a crude fighting style couldn't threaten him.

'Follow me!' Zac urged in his mind, showing the way to the Evolutionary Stance through their shared Dao.

The Heavenrender Vine resisted at first but soon began listening to his calls. The reluctance disappeared when a surprise turnaround drew a line of blood on the princeling's forearm. Zac could feel Haro's desire for power, pleading with Zac to show him the way of unleashing carnage on their enemies.

Zac was happy to oblige, but a pang of danger warned him things were about to take a turn for the worse. A frown had appeared on the Havarok leader's face. One of their elite soldiers had been wounded by a young and inexperienced Early Plant King in front of a large audience. Even if Ardos wasn't using any skills or equipment, it was a huge blow to their prestige.

Rekodes Havarok, the ninth-place holder on the Middle D-grade ladder, was about to enter the fray.

Things had already reached a point of no return, so Zac could only keep going. He stepped into the writhing storm of vines with incredible speed, seemingly fusing with the Heavenrender Vine through perfectly synced movements. A burst of energy surged around Ardos, but his plan was thwarted by a punch that would have thrown the princeling across the room if not for Haro.

Instead, the semi-conscious princeling was dragged back with such force his arm was ripped off. Zac didn't care about the bloody scene as he grasped his neck with enough force to hear bones creak and groan, turning him into a human shield against Rekodes, who had finally stood up with a spear already in his hand.

"You piece of trash, you want to cut open my companion?" Zac growled as he levied **[Verun's Bite]** against Adros' midriff. "How about I cut you and your cousins open instead? If the Havarok Empire has a problem with it, they're welcome to ask the Undead Empire or the Tayn Family for compensation."

A clamor erupted around the dias, calling for Zac's immediate execution, but the commotion was immediately quashed by immense pressure.

"Enough. This matter is over. If you enter a fight, you better be prepared to lose. Your name and background will not protect you on the battlefield," Prostez said with an unmistakable glint of appreciation in his eyes. "That's a fine specimen."

"Thank you," Zac said as he hurled his captive at the Havarok platform like he was a piece of trash.

He didn't like using Iz's name for protection, but his situation wasn't great. And it might have made the Everfast Monarch step in and deal with the matter.

"Such nonsense," the Everfast Monarch sighed. "How could my generals fail to sense the weapon if it were inside the World Ring?"

"The matter of the fortress and its presumed weapon can be put aside, but this man cannot be spared. He's an enemy of the empire," Rekodes interjected.

"Let's not pretend this is about some distant war," Zac snorted, looking at the prince with a mocking smile. "That's right. I'm a sealbearer. You're welcome to test whether my fate or yours is stronger."

A sharp killing intent gleamed in Rekodes' eyes, and the banners in the large hall fluttered from a growing wind.

"As I said, this matter is over."

The words contained unbending determination that pushed down on the room like a thunderstorm.

"Zachary Atwood has contributed greatly to the war effort this time. First, he sent a warning of the Technocrat infiltration, saving the lives of innumerable soldiers. Secondly, he was instrumental in the battle for the fortress. An unthinkable calamity could have struck our frontlines if not for his efforts. Not to mention the vessels his empire is supplying the frontlines. How could the Alliance show its face if we turned our backs on such a hero? Who'd be willing to contribute?"

"Lord Dravorak, this is a matter of the upper dynasty," Rekodes frowned. "Lord Refus tasked you with assisting us in this endeavor. Are you rebelling?"

"Rebelling?" Everfast repeated with an icy voice while his four generals looked at the Havarok youths with undisguised Killing Intent. Not even the general who leaned toward the Havarok's camp was any different.

"It's true. You have your pursuits, and the Dravorak Empire is a subject of the Havarok Dynasty," the Field Marshall nodded, but there was a biting chill in his eyes. "But so what? Is lord Refus here? Even if he were, would he dare break the seal on his power to ignore my orders?"

"You—"

"This is just a game for you little brats. An opportunity," the Everfast Monarch pressed on, his momentum growing increasingly overbearing. "You avoided the battlefield while our men bled, only teleporting over upon hearing potential sealbearers were dropping from the sky.

"Do you think I'd let you touch Zecia's heroes just so that you can reap some benefits without exerting any effort, in blatant violation of your agreement, at that? Audacious! How could I face my ancestors if I sold my honor like that? How could I face my martyred soldiers?! Speak of this again, and I'll break your limbs and throw you onto the frontlines."

"I hope Lord Dravorak won't regret this decision in the future," Rekodes slowly said as he led his men out of the hall.

"This trial... It's hard to say whether it's a blessing or a curse for Zecia," Everfast said with a shake of his head as he watched more than half the officials scurry after the trio. Eventually, he turned back to Zac. "I apologize for

our unseemly behavior. Even with our recent victory, disaster looms just beyond the horizon. We depend on outside assistance, even if their goals are not aligned with ours."

"I understand," Zac said.

It was impossible to say whether Prostez's intervention was because of his namedropping or whether he felt bad. Still, the Monarch had undeniably stuck his neck out for him.

"Is there anything else you can tell us about the weapon or our new enemies?" the Field Marshall asked.

Zac thought for a moment before throwing out a piece of intelligence. "The Imperial called the Technocrats the Sindris Clan. From how he talked, it sounded like he'd defeated them before intercepting us. I'm not sure if that's of any use?"

"Sindris? It's not a name I'm familiar with," Everfast muttered, but Zac noted someone else recognized it.

The veiled woman, who hadn't so much as opened her eyes during the previous commotion, stirred upon hearing the name. Zac could suddenly feel two piercing eyes stare at him, and it felt like they could see through his past and future.

Oddly enough, no one else noticed her reaction. Come to think of it, it was almost as though she didn't exist. Not a single one had glanced in her direction since Zac arrived, from Prostez to the dozens of attendants standing at attention. What was going on? Zac quickly averted his gaze, fearful making eye contact would result in a disaster.

It was too late.

"I will forward this information to the Alliance. There might be recordings of these heretics somewhere," Prostez said, but Zac could barely hear him.

It was like the timeline had split, where Zac had one foot in each reality. In one, the generals continued discussing the Sindris clan as though nothing had changed. In the other, time had stopped except for him and the veiled woman. He found himself unable to move as she stood up and walked over, her steps sounding like the ticks of a clock.

"History repeats itself," she said. "How will you respond to the pull of destiny, young Void Emperor? Will you fight back? Or will you swim with the current? What will your heart tell you when you gaze upon the Terminus?"

"You're from the Vigil," Zac squeezed through a locked jaw, having confirmed her appearance wasn't just a passing resemblance thanks to her aura. "Aren't you people supposed to stay on the sidelines?"

"Oh?" the woman said as she looked at Zac with an inscrutable gaze. "You are right, for the most part. We are flawed, and there is no such thing as a truly neutral observer. Look at our local chapter, participating in a war whose fate has been entwined with the Era's direction. However, I am just here to observe."

"Observe me?"

"In a sense. I'm here to witness the shift," the woman said before her gaze grew distant. "It has begun."

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

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Chapter 1163: The Shift

The rustling fields of Relver Serenity Grass stretched across the horizon in every direction. Only the cubic processing plants equally spaced along the enormous farming platform provided a break in the liminal nightmare. Floating barges were constantly funneling recently harvested crops to be processed or bringing back the refined dust.

Perhaps it would have been better to lose grip of reality. What dignity was there in crawling around in the mud, removing the flower buds that would compete for nourishment and slow the accelerated growth? All while having his energy sapped by the demonic plants and the Feeder Curse in his chest.

The only thing that kept Nolan going was the notion of funneling the indignity and rage into acts of sabotage. To go out in a blaze of glory, wreaking as much havoc as he could. He'd only have one shot before the Heart Curse triggered and ripped him apart. He needed to make it count.

Although, it was getting harder to ignore the whispers of defeat in the back of his head. Four weeks of this hellish existence, and he hadn't seen the shadow of an opportunity. And even if he somehow managed to blow up the whole platform, what did it matter? There were dozens just like it surrounding the Worldfort.

The serenity grass was a necessary resource that helped manage the Heart Demons of these netherblasted cultists, but it was woefully easy to cultivate. It just needed space and sacrifices to grow like weeds.

"Hurry up, you bastards, or we'll pick the next batch of bloodbags from your cohort!" a gruff voice echoed through Nolan's quadrant.

Maybe he should settle for taking out that cruel bastard. It wouldn't change anything, but Nolan felt he could meet his ancestors with a smile as long as Entu joined him in the afterlife. He'd have to endure a bit longer. His semi-awakened bloodline hadn't fully recovered its hidden energy stockpile after that final battle.

Nolan would normally keep his head down and keep working, as the slavedrivers would use any excuse they got to torment the captives. It was the only available pastime of these pathetic little tyrants deemed too incompetent to handle anything but oversee Relver fields and sealed slaves. Just a few more days.

Today, Nolan broke the unspoken rules of the captives as his head rose above the stalks to look at the sky. A radiant light showered the purple fields in a refreshing white splendor. Nolan vaguely sensed that work had practically stopped with thousands of slaves straightening hunched backs. All eyes were on the white streak piercing the cosmos with unfathomable speed.

An immense aura erupted from the Worldfort as a gate the size of a continent formed in its exosphere. It dispersed like a shadow exposed to light as the blinding spear approached. In the blink of an eye, the celestial streak had gone from a distant dot of overwhelming radiance to a line of utmost white that split Nolan's vision in two.

It consumed the Worldfort's central tower and continued out the planet's other end. For a moment, it was as if time had stopped, and Nolan's thoughts ground to a halt as he looked at the impaled world. Then, the world shattered, releasing a tidal wave of glorious light.

The wave looked like a swarm of trillions of fireflies, and they moved even faster than the rubble left from the ruined world. The remainders of the Worldfort were consumed first, and then the moons and defensive satellites that could repel a Monarch's assault. The armada tried to escape, but any attempt to break through the dimensional barrier created tears from which more fireflies emerged.

The wave looked gentle at this distance, but Nolan understood it moved with shocking speed. Nolan's eyes shifted, spotting Entu staring at the sky with horror in his eyes. A smile spread across Nolan's face as he hunched over, and painful lessons allowed him to creep closer unseen without causing so much as a ripple on the serenity grass.

"You—!"

Entu didn't get any further before a bloody hand burst through his chest, covered in pieces of his shredded heart. An unbearable agony assaulted Nolan, and he tasted metal as blood filled his mouth. He pressed on, his other hand forming a large circle. His fingers were filled with the crumbling pieces of his soul, becoming the blade that severed Entu's limbs.

Nolan and the crippled cultist fell over at the same time, one forward and one back. Both sported huge holes in their chests, and neither were long for this world. The only difference was that the last thing Entu would see was dirty soil and darkness while Nolan looked up at the approaching ocean of stars.

It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

"What shift?" Zac asked, realizing too late the veiled woman had disappeared when he followed her gaze.

The feeling of the timeline being split disappeared soon after. Even now, there was no hint on the Everfast Monarch's face that he'd noticed anything. Was the Vigil observer that strong? Could they hold such a special position that the

System didn't hinder their movements, allowing even Autarchs to pass through the seal?

More shocking was that she called him Void Emperor. Until now, only Sendor had figured out that identity, and that was only after performing a thorough scan. This nun had seen through his secret while he actively was trying to hide any traces. Zac suddenly felt even more exposed and was relieved to see her gone, even if his mind was plagued with new questions.

Zac put the matter aside as Warlin suddenly shot to his feet, his expression wide with shock. He wasn't the only one; even the Everfast Monarch's impassive façade had cracked.

"It worked!" the strategist shouted.

"Is it the spear?" Average asked with a shaky voice, his eyes red. "Did it work?"

"It worked, it worked!" Warlin laughed. "We just received a report from our sentries keeping watch on the Kan'Tanu's Warfort. They saw a streak of light passing through the planet. The next moment, an earthshattering explosion destroyed half the solar system. The base, the armada. It's all gone! They don't believe even the residing Monarchs survived!"
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Zac mutely looked at the general. He'd caught a glimpse of the **[Centurion Spear]**, but even he couldn't believe it held such immense power. A Worldfort wasn't some random base. The Kan'Tanu had only erected ten inside Zecia and a few more in the Million Gates Territory, with each directing the war against four to six Alliance Field Armies. Losing one had to be the Kan'Tanu's biggest setback since the war started, and it wasn't even close.

If Zac was shocked, it was nothing compared to the officials gathered in the room. It looked like they'd been struck by lightning. Some turned to Warlin like they couldn't believe what they'd just heard. Others looked at Zac like he was a reincarnation of a War God. Even some officials who had been overtly hostile before suddenly looked at him like he was their first-born son. Even the staunch soldiers standing guard along the walls broke ranks and muted whispers spread through the halls.

"We did it," Average whispered as he slumped back on the chair. "We actually did it."

"Wait, did you say pass through?" Emily interjected. "It's still going?"

"It looks that way," Warlin grinned.

"This is an immense, unprecedented contribution," the Everfast Monarch said. "As I said, the Alliance will not fail its heroes. We will deliver the reward you deserve as soon as possible. The Twenty-Sixth will always remember your service. Any outsider will have to go through us if they wish you harm, even if it's the Havarok Dynasty."

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"Thank you," Zac said with a bow. "I haven't decided on my next step. Right now, I'm more worried about my people scattered through the battlefield."

"Your people are safe," Warlin said. The strategist already had hundreds of communication tokens floating around him. He was undoubtedly sending out new sets of orders because of the news. "In fact, an event took place shortly after you entered the fortress, one we'd hope you could shed light on."

"What's that?"

"An ancient treasure shaped like a bell appeared."

"Again?" Zac exclaimed, feeling like someone had splashed him with freezing water. "How's our losses?"

"Among our people? Almost zero. However, not a single Kan'Tanu survived."

"How's that possible?"

"That's what we'd like to know," Warlin said. "We received a high-priority report from a subordinate called Elena Dossin. She reported a series of suspicious circumstances, from the appearance of an ancient bell and you being betrayed by extremely powerful cultivators. Finally, that bell reappeared just moments after you disappeared. However, an undead captain from your ranks suddenly flew to the sky and entered the bell. We believe her name is Vilari Blackwood."

"What?!"

"The bell flew to the Kan'Tanu's side after a few seconds, and they all ripped their hearts out of their chests. After that, the bell disappeared."

"What about Vilari? Did she return?"

"She did not."

"Is this a weapon of yours, or one that has been borrowed from your allies?" the Everfast Monarch asked. "Don't misunderstand; we have no intentions of taking it from you. However, its power is immense, and we hope to invite you for certain covert missions in the future."

Zac barely heard Prostez's words, his mind abuzz from the news. The ancient bell and its evil aura were still fresh in his mind. To hear that Vilari had entered it was beyond horrifying. Zac quickly opened his quest screen, breathing out in relief when his **[One by Nine]** quest remained listed as complete. Vilari was his only sealbearer of the Anima Court, which hopefully meant she was still alive.

"It's not mine," Zac sighed as he closed the screen. "The only thing I know was that Vilari felt it resembled an inheritance she'd stumbled onto. However, it was like the bell had been corrupted by an evil entity. Can I ask, has there been any news of it since?"

"No," Prostez said. "The spear has made it difficult to communicate in this region. Many matters will remain unclear until the turbulence has calmed down."

Zac took a steadying breath before shifting the topic. "I have another companion inside the fortress base. Has there been any news of it?"

"It's been located, and we're heading there now," Warlin assured.

"I have to leave you now. The others will fill in the gaps," the Everfast Monarch said, giving Zac a last look as his body faded. "Stay or transfer; I will support your decision."

Zac and the others bowed, and Prostez Dravorak was gone the next moment. The generals kept asking questions for another ten minutes, and Zac answered the best he could without exposing any sensitive secrets. On a few occasions, Average was asked to clarify. No one questioned Galau or

Bubbur's affiliation, though that could just be Everfast Monarch and the others looking the other way.

Suddenly, the half-step Monarch opened his eyes and disappeared. From the moment Zac entered until now, he never said a word. First the Everfast Monarch, and now him?

"Is there something wrong?" Zac asked.

"Nothing major," Warlin smiled. "There are some rats skulking about in our vicinity. We'll have to stop here for today."

"Do you require our assistance?"

"Where would the Twenty-sixth put its face if we let you youngsters do all the work?" Tusko laughed.

"Then, with your permission, I'd like to seclude myself," Zac said. "I've pushed myself too hard over the past couple of hours and need rest."

"Of course," Warlin said, glancing at one of the attendants by his side.

"Oh, we might have to call on you in an hour or so," the strategist added as Zac and the others were led away.

"Is there something else?"

"We're already at the coordinates of the fortress base. We're just waiting for our shields to recover enough to force a path through the dimensional turbulence," Warlin explained. "Seeing as you and your companions have the greatest understanding of its intricacies, we might have to lean on you again."

"The base... how's the situation?" Zac asked.

"The boss went there ten minutes ago," Tusko grinned. "What problems could there be?"

So that's where the Everfast Monarch disappeared to. Zac finally relaxed, feeling everything was in hand. The Kan'Tanu should be in disarray after losing their Worldfort. Their Monarchs should have bigger things to worry about than the scraps of a broken fortress.

Their small group was quickly led to a private wing with large common spaces and twenty individual apartments.

"You guys okay?" Zac asked as he looked around.

"We're fine," Average grunted. "Not sure how we'd fare if the spear failed to activate, though. Good job there, boss."

"It was the least I could do."

"I can't believe I used to feel a bit bad for those Havarok jerks after hearing the stories," Emily muttered. "You should have kicked them while they were down back then."

"Well, I had my hands full just staying alive," Zac said with a wry smile.

"I knew you didn't just sit around after disappearing," Average grinned. "To think you've already managed to make a B-grade faction your enemy. Even my crazy grandma would be lost for words. I'm looking forward to hearing the stories."

"We'll catch up over a drink or two later. Right now, I really have to rest for a bit," Zac said, glancing at Average with a small smile tugging at his lips. "Speaking of, your grandmother actually left seclusion while you were trapped. She's also a Monarch now. Unfortunately, she was wounded in an earlier battle, but I'm sure seeing you will lift her spirits."

Average's face turned pale as a sheet, and Zac laughed as the door closed behind him. Kantaja Peak, or the Knuckle Butcher, had created some waves during the war, prompting some unbelievable stories from her past to resurface. The Peaks all had a screw loose, and the partners they chose were even crazier.

Zac spent the next few minutes reviewing everything he'd experienced since stepping onto the frontlines, identifying mistakes and lingering threats. He wasn't too worried about his conflict with the Havarok scions after the Everfast Monarch made his stance known. None of them posed a real threat, and Zac sincerely doubted the Monarch behind them would dare target him.

The Havarok Dynasty's backer would never let a Monarch directly involve himself in a struggle of fate between the younger generation. If he acted on his own and ruined their plans, the whole empire might be eradicated.

The real problem was the Imperial Clans, now that his involvement in Yselio's death had been exposed. He'd hoped any trace of his actions would have disappeared along with the tower, but that didn't pan out. It didn't make a difference whether the Havarok Dynasty followed the Imperial Clans or not. The news would reach their ears sooner or later.

Yselio's gambit cost him his life, but that defeat didn't mean the Seven Heavens would give up. There were still over two years before the inheritance started, which was more than enough time to turn things around. Ancient factions like that wouldn't blink at sacrificing a whole generation if it gave them a small chance at seizing an Eternal Heritage.

Shifting the blame to the Sindris Clan wouldn't protect him against retaliation, and this was a threat that could haunt him after Ultom was dealt with. It wouldn't take any effort on their part to send a punitive squad to Zecia after the sector was unsealed. Zac needed to figure out safeguards for the Atwood Empire beyond the Assimilation.

The second problem was borrowing the Tayn's prestige when he felt the situation was going south. Iz probably wouldn't care, but Zac knew her family wasn't so easygoing. The Tayns wouldn't be feared across the Multiverse for no good reason. He would have to figure out a way to repay the debt before they decided to test Earth's or Zecia's fate.

Powerful gathering arrays had sprung to life while Zac mulled things over, and Zac's parched body greedily swallowed it all. The speed was significantly faster than before, almost reaching the levels of normal cultivators. He had already noticed the difference during the interrogation, but it was far more noticeable inside a cultivation ground.

It was all thanks to the shadowy motes in his cells. He was still unable to cultivate, but his body exerted an inherent pull on the ambient energy. Zac was curious to see whether the pull would continue when his Cosmic Core was satiated or whether the ability was limited to recovering energy.

Human eyes closed to focus on recovery while Abyssal eyes opened in the Ensolus Ruins. While one half fought off Havarok scions and answered questions, the other had focused on consolidating his breakthrough and taking control of his bloodline. He couldn't let any hints of the Void leak before a Middle Monarch.

With his human side taking over the baton, Zac could deal with the pressing matters back home, the first of which was the transformation around him. The Ensolus Ruins were fortunately spared Void's full attention, though Zac sensed that a handful of treasures had disappeared during his breakthrough. Around 15% of the breakthrough had been fueled by Ensolus, leaving most of the temples intact. That number would have been even lower if not for the chaotic events leading up to the breakthrough.

The ambient energy was still improving, already approaching the equivalent of Middle D-grade. It was the work of an incredible Gathering Array. It was even gathering the planet's providence into one spot, meaning anyone cultivating inside the ruins would enjoy a temporary boost to their effective Luck.

The ruins were fast becoming a holy land, but Zac only felt a headache as he flew toward the exit, keeping a wide berth around the new additions. He still didn't have any good solution to how to deal with the situation. The cathedral possibly held something that could help the war effort, but getting through it might require the strength of a Monarch. Teleporting such a powerful being to his budding empire was like inviting a fox into the henhouse.

But could he live with covering it up when so much was at stake? Was it even possible?

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Chapter 1164: Answers

Zac scratched his head with frustration while glaring at the treasure houses locked behind impenetrable barriers. Thankfully, it wasn't like he was completely out of options. The safest was to wait for his toad companion to reach Zecia. Esmeralda would only be somewhere around his level when she arrived, but she was the incarnation of an A-grade thief. If anyone could find a weakness and sneak inside, it was her.

The problem was, he had no idea when she'd arrive. Esmeralda was planning on entering the trial by hitching a ride, so she had no intention of collecting seals. By the sound of it, she planned on arriving at the last moment, meaning the Ensolus Ruins would remain locked away for years. Could he really wait that long? He had one more solution, though, one that could be enacted within a month or two. He'd have to put aside the time to have that drink with Average after he'd returned.

Zac took one last look at the majestic temples before entering the perpetual storm surrounding the Ensolus Ruins. Fierce gales lashed at him as he made his way through, to the point Zac opted to take out **[Love's Bond]** and use the chains to latch onto the ground. The winds had grown significantly stronger since the transformation, a change Zac welcomed.

Before, essentially anyone could pass through and enter the ruins. Now, you at least needed the cultivation of Peak E-grade or ample preparations to safely pass through. By the time the ambient energy stopped increasing, it might rebuff everyone beneath Hegemony. Perhaps they could make the storm even stronger to create a natural barrier protecting their secrets.

Zac emerged from the other side soon after, finding the group of Valkyries waiting for him.

"My lord," Tamira bowed.

Zac nodded with a smile, though he couldn't help but feel a pang in his heart upon seeing the unfamiliar faces behind her. Tamira was one of the twelve original Valkyries remaining. Of the other sixty-eight, half had passed away. Most fell in combat during the integration and the war, while a few fell during off-world training in the interim. The rest had chosen to give up their identity, though it rarely was willingly.

Ultimately, only nine of the original Valkyries were cultivators, and the options for real mortals couldn't be compared to Zac's. Most of the original Valkyries found themselves increasingly unable to keep up with the Valkyries' cultivation despite enjoying the best resources in the Atwood Empire. Ultimately, materials can only take you so far when talent is lacking.

Rather than becoming a weakness during critical missions, they opted to enter the Atwood Army as normal soldiers. This was the ending for most mortals who'd stood out during the integration. Another regrettable example was Ling

Tian, the heroic warrior who'd continuously risked his life fighting the Undead Incursion.

Despite Zac providing him with a steady stream of resources, he was still stuck in the earlier stages of Middle E-grade. Reportedly, Ling Tian spent most of his time in a sickbed after forcing open nodes, just like the Mortal Monarch whose biography Zac got from Thea.

Zac's progress through E-grade had felt arduous, but it was worth remembering mortals generally needed centuries to reach Peak E-grade. Of course, only a vanishingly small portion even got that far. Forcing open nodes during late E-grade, especially, was like playing Russian Roulette. And even should you reach the end, your Daos would be hopelessly behind even the worst of cultivators unless you encountered a series of lucky opportunities.

The Multiverse simply wasn't equal, even if the System had somewhat bridged the gap between mortals and cultivators.

"How's the situation here?" Zac asked.

"Roughly half an hour ago, we felt extremely powerful spatial fluctuations, along with another force. It's hard to explain. It reminds me of the Church of the Everlasting Dao but far grander," Tamira frowned. "We have reports it was noticed all the way in Silverwood Crest. The storm has grown fiercer, too, and it seems to be absorbing energy."

Zac inwardly grimaced. The Silverwoods were halfway across the continent, meaning millions had noticed the transformation.

"It's under control. For now, seal the ruins. Let no one but the most trusted enter," Zac said.

"We'll handle it," Tamira said. "Do you need us to accompany you back to Earth?"

"No, I have a mission for your team," Zac said. "Have someone fetch our strongest camouflage arrays. As soon as security has been tightened, try to hide the new buildings inside the ruins."

Tamira's brows rose. "New buildings? Which district?"

"You won't be able to miss them," Zac said helplessly. "Be careful. Their shields are fully operational. Keep a wide berth and immediately retreat if you notice anything odd. And if the big thing in the middle is too big to obscure, surround it with Mist Arrays or something."

"We'll be careful," Tamira assured, her eyes gleaming with curiosity.

Zac's entered his cultivation cave twenty minutes later with a frown on his face. He'd spent the last minutes talking with his contacts from various forces, sending out feelers about Vilari while thanking them for assisting him with the Endemire Sage and Everfast Monarch. Unfortunately, no one had answers or ideas, and could only promise they'd keep their ears to the ground.

How was he even supposed to look for Vilari? The bell seemed able to come and go as it pleased. Worse, such a powerful treasure would attract the attention of Monarchs from both camps. He'd seen how eager the Everfast Monarch was after learning of its power. After all, even Hegemons were helpless before its influence. Despite his contributions, the Alliance would be more interested in controlling the weapon than saving its passenger.

The only clue he had to go on was his conversation with Vilari before they separated. She'd believed the bell was related to the Crown of Despair inheritance, or rather the Mentalist who set it up. Should he force his way into the trial to speak with Vilari's master? Or was that sending himself to an early grave? Ralz Calzood was still alive, and she might be the reason why Vilari was taken.

Even if only a wisp of her soul was left with Brazla, it belonged to a Peak C-grade Mentalist. Zac knew his odds of survival were almost nil if Ralz wanted to kill him inside her realm.

It might be possible to talk with her without entering her inheritance realm. He'd discuss it with Brazla, but he could only put out one fire at a time. Zac cleared his head as he took out the emblem he kept stored in a sealed part of his Cultivation Cave. Looking at it now, Zac saw some similarities between it and the Sindris token he left in the tower.

The situation aboard the ancient vessel had stabilized, but the Sindris Clan was clearly operating in the area. They could pop up at any moment, and Zac frankly wasn't confident the Everfast Monarch could protect them. Technocrats weren't playing by the System's rules. They may have snuck Autarchs into Zecia, for all he knew.

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It was about time he had another talk with his mother.

Zac infused his will into the token. Nothing happened, except his spirituality being expelled. Zac snorted with annoyance. It almost felt like Leandra had screened his call, but he wouldn't give up just because of that. He kept infusing his will with increasing determination until there finally was a change.

"How disappointing. Only a few months have passed, yet you've already reached a dead end?"

Leandra's projection looked the same as before, her eyes blank and emotionless as she looked at Zac up and down. Zac couldn't glean anything about Kenzie's situation from her appearance, though he could tell Leandra was real rather than an AI.

"That's not it," Zac said.

"Have you called me just to flaunt your evolved bloodline?" Leandra said with a shake of her head. "There is a great cost to connecting across such vast distances, not to mention the dangers of exposure."

"Can you let me talk? Do you think I'd contact you if I didn't have to? If anything, my problem is probably of your making," Zac growled as he produced a replica Sindris sigil he'd carved while taking with his contacts. "These people have popped up in the Zecia sector and seem interested in me. I need answers."

Leandra said nothing for a while as her projection stared at the token. A small furrow had appeared on her face. She was worried, but Zac held no illusions her fears were for his safety. An unwelcome and seemingly unexpected variable had appeared, which threatened her undertaking.

"Have they discovered you?"

"Yes, they got a front-row seat to my breakthrough."

"Careless. The eyes of the world are on your sector right now," Leandra said. "You should have understood your origin isn't simple. One wrong step will

lead to disaster. Remember your mission. Your sister will be struck down by the System if you die or get captured."

"You don't need to remind me," Zac said. "And it's not like I had any option. The situation here is out of control. I did what I had to do to survive. I need you to tell me who these people are and whether they're friends or foes."

"Friend or foe..." Leandra slowly said. "It's impossible to say. I doubt even they know." This chapter is updated by novel Fire.net

"At least you're not making it as cryptic as possible," Zac said with a roll of his eyes.

"Fate's hold..." Leandra muttered as her gaze grew distant. The silence stretched for twenty seconds until she sighed. "Remaining ignorant and free from influence in these times might do more harm than good. It's time you understood your origins."

Zac's heart shuddered. He'd been prepared to threaten Leandra with his assignment if she didn't come clean. Now, that seemed unnecessary. He didn't say or show anything on his face, afraid of doing something that could change her mind. He silently waited while Leandra arranged her thoughts.

"I'm sure you've pieced some things together already. You're my son, but you're also not. You carry the biological inheritance of the Kayar-Elu, but that's less than a third of your genetic makeup. It's mostly a mix of two lineages, one of which is the owners of that token. The Fallen. The Sindris Clan.

"Humanity and The Technocracy share a common origin; an ancient empire called the Selvari. We fought against the Limitless Empire, desperately trying to thwart their mad ambitions. The Kayar-Elu is a prime lineage of the Selvari, as were the Sindris Clan."

'The Fallen? They "were" a prime lineage?'

Leandra kept talking about the Sindris Clan in the past tense despite them being alive and well. Zac had a dozen questions at the tip of his tongue, but he kept his mouth shut as Leandra continued.

"The Selvari fought long and hard, resisting the Limitless Empire for millions of years. Countless sons and daughters laid down their lives to protect our

homelands while our researchers worked themselves to the bone in attempts to build stronger defenses against the onslaught. And yet, we were losing.

"During the height of the war, a grievously wounded man appeared before the Technocracy Council. Despite his state, he emitted a terrifying aura that eclipsed even our forefathers. They had never seen anything like it. Except for one person. The Limitless Emperor. It seemed impossible, but the man actually stood before the council and introduced himself as such.

"The council was ready to lay down their lives to strike down their enemy, even if it meant tearing apart the fabric of reality. However, the Emperor said he came in peace. He claimed he wasn't the one who'd ruled over the Empire for the past eons. A man named Laondio Evrodok had usurped the throne and banished the original Emperor's identity from the rivers of time and fate."

Raging waves coursed through Zac's heart from having multiple answers answered at once. He had to force down his racing thoughts to not miss anything as Leandra pressed on.

"The ancestors wouldn't believe such a fanciful story at face value, but some of his words were quickly proven. His identity was truly taboo, impossible to remember or store. To this day, we don't know his name."

"After much deliberation, the forefathers let the deposed Emperor stay with the Selvari. The Sindris Clan was chosen to guard him. Eventually, he gained the epithet 'Void Emperor,' being the Emperor of nothing. It was also impossible to give him an actual name since it, too, would be erased.

"The Void Emperor joining our ranks was the beginning of the end. At first, everything went well. His power was undeniable, and the intelligence he provided led to significant victories that gave the Selvari the breathing room needed to finalize life-saving projects. The deposed Emperor was also the one who first exposed Laondio's plans for building the System.

"After confirming it was true, the ancestors knew they faced an existential threat that couldn't be avoided or ignored. They had to risk everything for the sake of the universe. They also built great arks to protect the common populace and keep the flame of hope alive in case something went wrong.

"The ancestors were running out of time, but a plan was finally drawn up. The Selvari ancestors, the direct inheritors of the Technocrat Codex, were ready to sacrifice themselves to stop the Emperor's experiment. The Void Emperor led

them to the depths of his old Empire, using secret backdoors he'd left for himself. Everything was proceeding according to plan.

"Then, disaster struck. At a critical juncture, the Void Emperor betrayed us. It led to the demise of most forefathers, including the Matriarch of the Kayar-Elu," Leandra said, her frosty expression veritably oozing with hatred. "The System was born soon after; you should know the rest by now. Our only solace is that the founders didn't go down without a fight. The usurper was grievously wounded. Neither he nor the Void Emperor were seen after that cataclysmic battle over the Era's direction.

"Most likely, they became fuel for the System's awakening, like the rest of the Empire's upper echelon. After all, we can see that the Void Emperor's unique constitution has become an integral part of the System's growth algorithm."

A pent-up breath escaped Zac's lips. The exact details of that ancient past might have been lost, but what Leandra said lined up with Karz's observations during his latest bloodline vision. Reality already bent to Laondio's will when they were Hegemons. He might really have been able to banish an identity when he reached the peak of his power.

And it wasn't like Zac never considered Leandra's explanation of Karz's final end. At first, Zac thought Karz was the Limitless Emperor because of his bloodline. That theory had taken a serious hit when the Void Priestess said his name was Laondio Evrodok. Since then, he'd brainstormed various answers, one being the one Leandra now presented.

The Kayar-Elu didn't want Karz's bloodline to use the Limitless Emperor's authority as a backdoor. They wanted the Void Emperor bloodline because it was the bloodline of the System itself. It simply made sense. Zac remembered the desire the System exhibited any time he offered a Glimpse of Chaos. Wasn't it the same as the endless hunger of Karz's bloodline?

"The Selvari almost collapsed with the System's birth," Leandra continued. "We had just lost our greatest minds and leaders, and the providence of the Heavens was being robbed. The only option left was to hide in the seams of reality, waiting for a day when we could return. The Void Emperor became the greatest sinner, and the Sindris Family got a share of the blame."

Zac was about to ask why, but Leandra raised her hand to let her finish.

"The Sindris Clan was chosen for two reasons. For one, they were one of the three strongest clans of the Selvari, and their homeworld was our strongest fortress. Secondly, they inherited a technology that rendered them almost unkillable. If the Void Emperor suddenly launched an attack, they'd survive long enough to call for help.

"The Sindris Founder was one of only three founders to survive, and his state was much better than the others. One died during the dark ages, and the other burned her soul to help erect Sanctuary."

"Speculation of betrayal soon flourished as we toiled in the darkness. It wasn't just blind scapegoating. The Void Emperor stayed with the Sindris Family for five hundred thousand years before everything went wrong, even marrying one of the Sindris Patriarch's daughters."

"Wait—" Zac said, his eyes widening with realization.

"Yes, your biological father is from the Sindris Clan and a direct descendant of the Void Emperor."

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Chapter 1165: Exchange

Zac felt like distant explosions were going off his mind. Leandra had severely misunderstood him when dropping such a bomb on him. He'd just remembered the archaic aura emitted from the Technocrat who saved his life and wanted to ask whether the Sindris Clan descendants also possessed the Void Emperor bloodline.

"You cannot be surprised your lineage isn't from Earth?" Leandra frowned upon seeing Zac's shocked face.

"Of course not," Zac said after taking a calming breath. "Still—I... I actually have a biological father?"

"Synthetic life is cursed with imperfection," Leandra said. "At least with the current limitations of the Heavens. For our undertaking to work, we couldn't rely on a crafted homunculus with the correct genetic makeup. Instead, we found a Sindris descendant matching our requirements and bolstered his genes with innumerable infusions."

Zac inwardly shuddered at Leandra's unfeeling description of what had to be mass abduction and experimentation on the Sindris Clan's descendants to replicate Karz's DNA. It wasn't just Leandra who had become a cold-blooded zealot after losing her family. It seemed to run in the family.

"And among the Kayar-Elu, I was chosen to carry you," Leandra continued.

Zac wasn't sure what to think about the revelation. Ever since the day Leandra brought Kenzie away, he'd essentially considered himself a test-tube baby born in some clandestine Technocrat laboratory. It had weighed on his mind for a long time, but it had also been liberating. It freed him from any Karmic fetters that would hold him back in his mission to rescue his sister.

To find that Leandra not only was his birth mother but that he even had a biological father left his heart unsettled.

"Then my father—"

"Your father left the Sindris Clan long before he joined our cause, and I can guarantee he's not involved in your current situation. Don't see him as a new backer to rely on. Any outside influence will only chain you down and narrow your path."

"I've seen the way the Kayar-Elu operate." Zac scoffed. "I'd be surprised if he survived, having lost his usefulness."

Leandra said nothing for a few seconds, calmly returning Zac's stare. "If you wish to know the truth, you'll have to find it in our hidden bases."

Zac should have expected Leandra to use the opportunity to hook another sinker into him. This time, it wouldn't work. Even if his father were still out there, what did it matter? Their connection was no different than that of a child and a sperm donor. Robert Atwood was his true father, so Zac felt nothing beyond an idle curiosity about this Sindris defector. Zac was far more concerned about the rest of the Sindris clan.

"Does that mean there's more of them out there? People with my bloodline?" Zac asked.

"No. The Void Emperor never passed on his bloodline, either by design or because of unknown restrictions. The Sindris clan spent an unfathomable amount of time and effort trying to reintroduce the Void Emperor's ability among their descendants by any and all methods. They only managed to create cheap mimics in the end. However, these efforts became a critical part of our endeavor. Your Sindris heritage became the bridge preventing rejection when we fused it with the real Void Emperor bloodline," Leandra said.

"Where did you get the Void Emperor's bloodline if he never left it behind?" Zac asked.

"From the Sindris Clan, of course. No other Selvari family would have access to it."

"What?" Zac said. "Didn't you say he didn't pass it on? What's going on?"

"As I said, the Void Emperor joined the Sindris Clan on the council's orders. The union between the Void Emperor and Naeva Sindris was a political marriage meant to give him a sense of belonging by creating a lineage. Ultimately, it's more accurate to say the Void Emperor assimilated the Sindris Clan than the other way around. His immense power was enough to raise a personal faction within the family, one loyal to him rather than the Technocracy.

"After the Selvari Empire's tragic loss, the Sindris Clan couldn't be trusted. However, they were too powerful to eradicate. The Selvari lost too much in that defeat, and the Dark Age had arrived. Ultimately, the Sindris Clan was exiled, and their banishment remains to this day. They're The Fallen, hiding in the Utmost Expanse at the edge of reality. Most have already forgotten their existence, even among the Selvari.

"Of course, the Kayar-Elu and the other founding families remembered. How could we ever forget? Eons later, the greatest Technomancer since the Founding Matriarch was born in the Kayar-Elu Clan. He created the foundations for what would become the Root Compact Project. A method to heal this broken sky. New NOVEL chapters are published on [N\(o\)veI\(F\)ire.net](http://N(o)veI(F)ire.net)

"That great sage knew the Void Emperor's bloodline was the key to achieving our goals. Our ancestors worked long and hard to find and infiltrate the Sindris Clan, at which point we discovered their similar experiments. At first, we thought we'd hit a wall after seeing how little their extensive efforts had yielded. However, just as we were about to give up, one of our spies happened on an incredible secret.

"The Sindris Founder didn't return empty-handed from the Limitless Empire. He'd somehow stolen a drop of the Void Emperor's Eternal Essence Blood. It was this drop that was the origin of their synthetic bloodline experiments.

"Suffice to say, we eventually succeeded in taking the Essence Blood away, but getting the drop of blood wasn't enough. The Sindris Clan's repeated failures proved just how daunting our goal was. Reintroducing the Void Emperor's bloodline to the world had proven insurmountable; fusing it with our heritage was impossible. Despite millions of years of ceaseless effort, we eventually hit a wall. However, Firmament's Edge approached us about another inconceivable project at that time."

"The Digital Nexus."

"Just so," Leandra nodded. "Firmament's Edge had hit a wall, just like us. They couldn't continue their research, as such a taboo subject would attract the ire of the Heavens. The Kayar-Elu are unmatched at dealing with such problems, so they reluctantly approached us."

"Reluctantly?"

"The Technocracy is unified against outsiders, but there's internal strife like with all other factions," Leandra said. "A different coalition than ours founded Firmament's Edge, so they would obviously be reluctant to expose their most precious technology to us. Similarly, we weren't enthused by the idea of exposing our core heritage to improve another faction's invention.

"However, the more we learned about the Digital Nexus, the more we understood the Root Compact and the Digital Nexus were meant to be together. Each project was imperfect on its own, even if we overcame our bottlenecks. The Digital Nexus could only guide and mold. Even if implanted into an Eonic Seed of unmatched talents, it would only result in a being at the Forefather's level. Perhaps slightly above—still far from awakening a Machine God that could contend with the System.

"Our plan had similar limitations. Our heritage could hide the Void Emperor's bloodline as he grew under the Cursed Heavens. However, the System has continuously expanded its power since its inception. It's stronger and smarter than when we launched our undertaking, and it kept growing while we hit roadblocks. We feared the System would have changed so much by the time we finished the Root Compact that it wouldn't recognize the Void Emperor bloodline.

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"But together, they could break the status quo."

"Only the Void Emperor, with his unlimited potential, could fully take advantage of the Nexus's abilities. Only the Digital Nexus could let the Selvari's champion surpass all predecessors, including the original Void Emperor, by truly perfecting the Dao. Each would be one half of the whole, the Zero Affinity Container facing the Heavens while the Digital Nexus grew in the dark. Furthermore, only the Digital Nexus could integrate the Void Emperor's Essence Blood without killing you.

"It's fair to say we became too greedy, blatantly ignoring laws and heavenly trajectories to achieve our goals. We believed we'd only get one chance at shattering the Heavens, so we chose to take the risk."

Leandra looked at Zac, and a mix of emotions flickered in her usually impassive eyes—hope, anger, disappointment, resentment.

"You wouldn't just shatter the false dome obscuring the Heavens. You would break through the Terminus and usher in an era of prosperity. Now, it's all for nothing. All for nothing..."

"So why aren't you leaving Kenzie alone? Like you said, she can't accomplish what you're hoping for with her limitations. And in case you haven't noticed, the System has already corrupted my bloodline—I can't gain affinities. Your plan will never work," Zac frowned.

"You think we should just stop, give up, after all we've sacrificed?" Leandra said. "Our ancestors toiled generation after generation. Impossible is not an option. Even if I'm doomed to fail, your sister will carry on the torch of hope. One day, our work will pay off."

Zac sighed, knowing it was pointless to press this matter. Truthfully, he could appreciate Leandra's steadfast determination to achieve the dream of her ancestors and give their sacrifice meaning.

"What about the Sindris Clan of today?"

"I assume they came to Zecia in search of the Essence Blood, though I doubt they expected to find it inside a living container. I am surprised they appeared at all. As far as I know, they gave up their investigation over 200 million years ago. I assume they've discovered some clues through my pursuers."

Zac's mind was a mess, but he could tell the projection was weakening. Leandra had decided to finally put the cards on the table, so he needed to get more answers before she disappeared.

"The Void Emperor's exile was fake all along?" Zac asked.

"Who knows?" Leandra said. "It's impossible to say what went through his head. Perhaps he was the real Emperor's agent. Perhaps he used the Selvari to achieve his goals, only to fall to Laondio's schemes. The history surrounding the System's awakening is imperfect and incomplete. Worrying about it will not solve your current predicament."

"So you robbed the heritage of the Sindris Clan and abducted their people to perform your crazy experiment. And now, I have to deal with the fallout?" Zac muttered.

"Don't play the martyr," Leandra countered. "All you've accomplished is only made possible by our 'crazy experiment.' Would Earth be safe if not for our gift? Would you be able to compete for opportunities like the fifth Pillar's Ascent? You were given everything, and the Kayar-Elu paid the price. Dealing with some loose ends is the least you can do."

Zac took a calming breath before answering. "What do the Sindris family want? Kill me? Capture me? Help me?"

"As I said, it's impossible to tell. The Kayar-Elu's infiltration of the Sindris Clan took place over thousands of generations before me. What little I know of their current circumstances comes from your father," Leandra said. "Simply put, they are divided. One faction wishes to return to the fold, and they might see you as the key to achieving that."

"Is Firmament's Edge looking for me?"

"They shouldn't be. You should be presumed dead. No, you were dead. I don't know how you survived that day. How you returned," Leandra said, a hint of apprehension appearing in her eyes as she looked at Zac.

"But since the Sindris Clan recognized me, they might find out sooner or later," Zac surmised.

"Most likely," Leandra nodded. "Your aura is unrecognizable from your original state, but they would still not let you go if they found out."

"I always expected as much," Zac sighed. "What about the other Sindris faction?"

"They remain loyal to their 'Supreme Ancestor' to this day, despite the damage the Void Emperor caused. They're even hostile to the Technocracy, believing we unfairly pushed the blame on them after the mission failed."

"Kind of sounds like you did," Zac muttered. "So, the one who gave me the token might be a loyalist? Would they be friendly, then?"

"Friendly?" Leandra said with a raised brow. "There is only power and benefits in this world. You're still a tool in their eyes. The only thing that differs is their goal. As for what that is, I cannot say. Ultimately, it doesn't matter which faction those you encountered belong to. You shouldn't get mixed up with them. They can't help you with your mission."

"I'll be careful," Zac said, quickly continuing when he saw Leandra's form fading. "Wait! There's one more thing. I think I encountered a wisp of will of the Limitless Emperor, the usurper, inside the fortress. What should I do?"

"Getting mixed up with that entity will not end well," Leandra said as her body disappeared. "Some believe the Limitless Emperor cannot truly die since he's become a fulcrum of the Era, but his influence in the present should be extremely limited. The Dark Age was a calamity, but it's also protecting our age by trapping some dangerous existences in the past."

"So what should I do now?"

"I have provided the necessary context. The path forward is still yours to decide."

The token dimmed and shattered, leaving Zac's eyes wide with alarm. Had their conversation overdrafted the token, or had Leandra intentionally severed their connection? Either case, it looked like this would be the last time he saw his mother until he tracked her down. Or at least until he visited her hidden base inside Sanctuary.

Her explanation at the end left more questions than answers. She hadn't seemed overly worried, but his encounter with Laondio's lingering will felt far more ominous now. Was the Emperor's help just raising another pig to the slaughter? While Karz provided the Daos, would Laondio have Zac provide the Voids?

Was that what the repeated warnings to 'Beware the Terminus' meant? Was it a lingering wisp of Karz's will, trying to protect a descendant from meeting the same end?

The notion made Zac shudder, but the fact that she felt confident staying on the sidelines was good news. Leandra was adamant about completing her clan's undertaking, which he was once a critical part of. He didn't believe she wanted him dead since that would squander a resource that could prove useful in the future.

Zac wanted to stay angry at his mother for what she'd done, for betraying his childhood memories. It was getting increasingly difficult. No matter her intentions, it was undeniable she'd helped him time and time again.

He still didn't know why that Sindris descendant gave him the beacon or token, but knowing her background and their connection was enough for now. He would have to figure out the rest if their paths crossed again.

As for what exactly happened between Karz and Laondio, it still was impossible to say. Leandra's guesses were as good as his, even if his visions gave him unique insight. His Dao Vision showed how Laondio might have usurped Karz's throne, but it was entirely possible Karz was a traitor as well.

Karz's harsh origins had left him cynical, looking at the world in terms of benefits and threats. Laondio's plan to build the System could have interfered with Karz's goal of surpassing the Heavens through his bloodline. It would have made sense to join the Selvari at that point since they were the only ones strong enough to oppose the Limitless Empire.

It was even possible that Karz approached the Selvari Forefathers with the sole intention of consuming them. He'd mentioned that the demands on resources grew along with his strength. The Selvari Founders were among the most powerful beings in existence, so Karz might have considered them and their inventions the perfect fuel to take the next step of his cultivation.

Zac had a harder time understanding the origin of the title 'Void Emperor.' Did his bloodline's name really come from a sarcastic nickname? Zac refused to believe it, even if there weren't any hints of Void Energy in his Bloodline Visions. There was more at play, beyond the fact he was literally a Void Cultivator.

Karz might not cultivate Void Energy, but he was a lot like the true Void Mountain. In every Era, the Dao eventually collapsed to be rebuilt atop the ancient foundations of the Void. Karz was the same. His existence was just like the birth of an Era. He started with nothing but a solid foundation, on which his personal Heaven steadily grew more complete.

That theory could also explain what the 'corruption' meant. Like Karz, Zac started at zero affinities, which was theoretically impossible. However, while Karz grew toward the Heavens, Zac's bloodline dug into the soil toward the Void. Perhaps his Void Affinities were steadily growing as he progressed; he just didn't have any good method to measure it.

An urgent vibration from his spatial ring snapped Zac out of his thoughts. His followers knew he was busy, so they wouldn't call him if it weren't important.

"What's wrong?"

"Y-Young lord! The exchange, it's—" Ilvere's frantic voice came from the other end.

"The exchange?" Zac said, shooting to his feet in anger. "Has someone broken through a battlefront?!"

"No, it's the Merit! It's unbelievable!"

"Oh, the Acheron Company is participating in an important battle. I'm sure it's awarded more than..." Zac said with some annoyance, but Ilvere cut him off.

"What kind of operation awards millions of Faction Merit? Are our people safe?"

"It's still too early to—did you say millions?"

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Chapter 1166: Nouveau Riche

Zac crashed through the Merit Exchange's doors with such momentum the guards believed they were under attack. They exhaled in relief upon seeing it was just Zac rushing toward the side room holding the Faction Exchange. On his way over, Zac had already confirmed his merit had taken a great leap.

[Flamebearer of Zecia (Campaign, Inheritance (2/?)): Accumulate 500,000 Merit through Fated Flamebearer Campaign Missions within your faction. Conquer one Middle D-grade end node. Reward: Lesser Enlightenment. (1,513,389/500,000)(1/1)]

In less than 40 minutes, the quest had jumped by another 750,000 Merit, almost doubling his total progress. The only possibility was that he'd been awarded contribution when the **[Centurion Spear]** hit the Worldfort. But why so much? He'd already confirmed the maximum reward in early D-grade was double that of peak E-grade, meaning 250,000 contribution per instance.

Then what counted as a separate instance? Warlin mentioned the spear had taken out a whole armada and multiple installations along with the Worldfort. Not to mention all the Kan'Tanu hiding inside. If they counted as separate instances, shouldn't the merit have been much higher? Had the tower taken out two more major Kan'Tanu strongholds before running out of steam?

Was it still going?

The door of the Faction Merit room closed behind Zac, who lunged for the floating crystal like a starving beast. Ilvere wouldn't have said 'millions' if the Atwood Empire had only earned the same amount as he. Zac's heart hammered with anticipation as the blue screen popped up. However, even

with his hopes high, Zac couldn't possibly have anticipated the number waiting for him.

[Faction Merit: 62,505,179/62,632,517]

A buzz filled Zac's ears, and he felt faint as he read the line over and over to confirm he wasn't dreaming. He'd expected the mission to count toward Faction Merit since capturing the fortress was part of a collective mission for the frontlines. But what was this number? Around Six million would have made sense if the System awarded Emily, Bubbur, and Galau as much merit as him and counted all that toward the Atwood Empire. This was ten times that already optimistic number.

Wasn't Faction Merit capped like individual merit?

Zac's mouth opened and closed a few times before a deep clap echoed through the room. He'd slapped his cheeks before he spiraled out of control. He'd already planned on passing the exchange on his way back to the Calamity Company to turn in his quest and get the follow-up. The shocking number had thrown that matter to the back of his mind, and the good news just kept coming.

The sixty-two million Faction Merit wasn't the only surprise. Every item in the exchange had seen a significant price reduction after a new feature was added: a faction ladder. The windfall had unsurprisingly catapulted the Atwood Empire to the peak of all Early D-grade factions.

Before, the Atwood Empire probably wasn't even in the top ten thousand. If you counted Faction Merit per citizen or Battlefront, the Atwood Empire would already have been competing for the top position. However, they were ultimately a small faction, even among Early D-grade forces.

There was no lack of organizations that had spent eons growing horizontally after failing to nurture Middle Hegemons. There were also declining factions who'd been pushed down from Middle D-grade yet still had the raw numbers of a higher-grade force. Some had hundreds of billions of members across multiple planets. Even performing at 1% compared to the Atwood Empire would let them accrue Faction Merit faster.

True to form, the System cared for high performers like a loving mother while the ordinary were left to fend for themselves. Their ranking came with a flat markdown of 30% in the Faction Exchange. The second-place holder got

20%, the third 15%, and the rest of the top ten enjoyed 10%. Everyone else had to pay full price. Unfortunately, Zac didn't see the same phenomenon in his individual exchange, even if his gain should have catapulted him to the first position.

Zac had to sit down and calm his racing heart. It wasn't easy. He'd told Ilvere not to worry about the merit before hanging up, but Zac felt feverish as he began analyzing his options from every angle. Like Karz once said, they were limitless.

He'd already calculated his expenses. His breakthrough into Middle Hegemony would cost around 200,000 Merit if he purchased everything he lacked through the Limited Exchange. He could cut that number down even further by getting some of the required materials from the Alliance Treasury.

That left him with around 1,400,000 merit, enough to purchase almost any listing on the Limited Exchange. Sure, it was far from enough for the **[Celestial Aperture Constellation]**, which cost 12,500,000, but that treasure was useless to Zac anyway.

However, 1,500,000 merit was enough to afford three of the top ten treasures. All of them were extraordinary items, with only one in stock, representing an earth-shattering opportunity. Zac doubted even the ancient treasures brought from the fortress could compare.

Zac hadn't even dared think about those items until now. Just scrounging up enough merit for his Middle D-grade breakthrough before he reached level 175 would have been a daunting task. Now, he suddenly had the capital to either get one of these items or get something similar from the Middle D-grade exchange after breaking through.

The situation with the Faction Merit was even more absurd. Upgrading a planet's energy was, by far, the most expensive item in the exchange. Even then, upgrading his two worlds would only cost around eight million after the leaderboard discount. He could even upgrade Earth to Late D-grade with almost half their merit to spare.

Seizing and relocating Peak E-grade planets from the Kan'Tanu's sector could be considered a rounding error. He could even snatch Early D-grade worlds wholesale. By the time the assimilation came around, the Atwood Empire could already have hundreds of worlds under its banner.

You only needed one Late D-grade planet and a handful of middle D-grade planets to create a proper hierarchy. Any talents discovered on the lower-grade worlds would be funneled to academies and cultivation grounds on the upper worlds, while Earth would become the Atwood Empire's holy land.

And if the rewards were this generous for activating the **[Centurion Spear]**, what if he managed to activate the Centurion Beacon and summon the Foreign Gods? It wasn't unthinkable to turn Earth into a C-grade continent if he could have them wreak havoc on the Zurbor sector.

Zac's breath grew ragged as he envisioned a glorious future, but he quickly reined himself in. While they had the money, expanding too quickly would only bring about their own destruction. Neither he nor his subordinates were strong enough to protect such a large domain.

That wasn't just true after Earth's 100-year grace period ended. The more planets he added to his faction, the more battlefronts he'd have to defend. And if he upgraded Earth, the System would regrade it and send stronger enemies their way. His faction wasn't ready. They'd have to draw up a roadmap of sustainable growth, balancing consolidation and expansion.

Still, upgrading Earth was a priority. Middle D-grade planets didn't just come with more energy. Its spirituality would grow stronger, making it easier to communicate with the Dao. More cultivators would be born, and bottlenecks would be crossed with greater ease. It might be the difference between having 50 and 500 new Hegemons by the time he left for Ultom.

However, Zac needed to pass one checkpoint before pulling the trigger; finishing his shipyard quest. That, in turn, required him to become a Middle Hegemon. It was the last checkbox for the Atwood Empire to cross before being considered a Middle D-grade faction. At that point, he could upgrade his shipyard and planets together. With top-quality Middle D-grade Cosmic Vessels defending his Battlefront Arrays, he almost dared the Kan'Tanu to invade his empire.

There would be a hump before the first ships rolled off the production line, but that could be tided over by purchasing battlements inside the Faction Exchange. Even if the items were limited in quantity and of middling quality, they were Middle D-grade War Machines.

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Zac gradually calmed down as he drew up the outlines of a path forward. There were a lot of details and moving parts that needed to be fine-tuned, but he had capable subordinates for that. His time was better spent on cultivation.

Fate had already put him in the crosshairs of one Flamebearer, and there was no telling when the next one would crop up. At that point, Zac wouldn't have a collapsing tower, bloodline breakthroughs, or mysterious Technocrats to save him. He needed to reach a level where he didn't need to rely on gimmicks to survive encounters at that level.

The **[Flamebearer of Zecia]** quest was the first step in that direction, so Zac spent the next ten minutes observing blueprints for skills and his Cosmic Core. The reward for his Flamebearer quest was "Lesser Enlightenment," though there was no explanation of what lesser meant. It might be nothing, but the System could consider the partial seal impartments lesser enlightenment for all he knew.

Zac really hoped that were the case. He still had trouble pulling the gun on his finishers and pathbound skills, feeling there was room for improvement. He couldn't hold off any longer. His opponents were Middle Hegemons or greater, and E-grade skills simply didn't cut it. Zac had been aware of the problem for a while, but his fight with Yselio was the nail in the coffin. They had barely been enough to create a distraction, let alone pose an actual threat.

Originally, Zac planned to use the quest reward for at least one finisher in each class. If there were any inspiration left over, he'd try to set the foundation for transforming **[Thousand Lights Chapter]** into **[Thousand Axes Chapter]**. His experience in the Tribulation Throne had thrown a wrench in those plans. Ensuring he had a working Middle D-grade Core Blueprint took precedence.

Soon, everything was in place, and Zac infused his will into the crystal to turn in the quest. Streaks of light emerged from within and time ground to a halt. Zac found his soul inundated with the utmost clarity of Ultom. It couldn't be described in the same breath as the tainted enlightenment of the Lost Plane's lake water, reaching halfway to the illumination of a true seal.

Thousands of ideas and avenues sprouted like a field of blooming flowers, each emitting an enticing fragrance one could get lost in. With Zac's comprehensive cultivation system, issues and roadblocks were always accumulating in the back of his head, waiting for an epiphany to break the stalemate.

Zac dispersed all distracting thoughts as he focused on his Cosmic Core. It only took a glance for the secrets of the inexplicable alterations to be laid bare before him. Compared to the old pathways, it was like looking at two routes to a destination. Both would take him where he needed to go, but his old pathing now felt like a circuitous route taking rural roads. The changes hadn't turned his core into an expressway, but their road was mostly straight.

Mapping out the necessary alterations for his Middle D-grade blueprint came so easily and effortlessly Zac was almost dragged out of the epiphany. It didn't take the enlightenment of an Eternal Heritage to figure out why—the Tribulation Throne's realignment and the light in his Soul Aperture shared a common origin.

He should have realized that Ultom's light was related to the Four Laws and the One Destiny. They were pinnacle truths despite lacking even a shred of Dao. Most likely, the laws were static, remaining the same across the Eras, which explained why the insights of such an ancient heritage worked without issue in the present.

More than two-thirds of the light remained in Zac's Soul Aperture by the time he'd memorized his new blueprint. Zac kept going, moving to the next item on the docket. His internal gaze moved toward **[Arcadia's Judgment]**, but it suddenly stopped at a skill that had fallen long since into disuse—**[Conformation of Supremacy]**.

There was nothing wrong with the skill. It was among the best skills he'd gotten from outside sources. It was also very flexible, providing different benefits depending on what avatar Zac picked. The skill's issue lay in the simple fact that it filled the same role as **[Evolutionary Edge]**, and he couldn't use both simultaneously.

After he formalized his path and combat style inside the Orom World, it simply didn't make much sense to use **[Conformation of Supremacy]**. The other harmonized with his technique and Daos far better. But what if he didn't need to choose between one or the other?

What type of ability did his Draugr side have that Evolutionary Precursor lacked? A skill like **[Arbiter of the Abyss]**. What if instead of transforming his attacks with aspects of supremacy, he instead transforms himself? Like his Evolutionary Stance, he would become everchanging and unpredictable as he evolved during a battle.

A new road opened up before Zac's eyes, and he eagerly followed it to the end. Everything superfluous was shed while the essence was expanded and aligned with his path. A beautiful web of possibility quickly took form, and Zac had to resist an almost unstoppable desire to immediately turn theory into reality. Instead, he memorized the reborn Skill Fractal before moving on to the original target.

[Arcadia's Judgment] packed quite a punch, but Zac felt it too unwieldy and telegraphed for battles at the D-grade. A skilled enemy would have time to figure out a counter-attack unless he used Void Energy to trigger it. The skill's second stage was also useless when fighting in the air. The upgrade needed to be faster, more ruthless and unpredictable. Like a predator going in for the kill the moment the prey's throat was exposed.

A million ideas were born and discarded as Zac closed in on the solutions he sought, and the last motes of light dissipated just as a third skill fractal was completed. Zac opened his eyes, and a wide smile spread across his face. He would have considered the epiphany a success so long as he fixed his Cosmic Core blueprint. Anything beyond that was a welcome bonus.

The revelation of Ultom's true nature was a godsend. It had essentially confirmed there wasn't anything wrong with his alignment. As far as Ultom was concerned, the changes were pure improvements. His Cosmic Core had moved closer to a state of harmony with the Cosmos, like the difference between a man-made array and a natural formation. The Limitless Emperor could still have his reasons for lending a helping hand, but this step, at least, wouldn't cause problems for his cultivation.

Returning to the Four Laws' embrace through Ultom also answered a question Zac didn't know he had. Walking the path of the Void did not clash with aligning with the Four Laws. While the Void wasn't under the purview of the Heavens, it still followed the fundamental laws of the universe. A Minor Epiphany was insufficient to grasp anything more tangible, but that was enough.

Zac had come away like a bandit, figuring out upgrades for the strongest attacks of his two classes, **[Arcadia's Judgment]** and **[Desperation's End]**. Both fractals had seen enough change to warrant a new name, but it was nothing compared to **[Conformation of Supremacy]**'s transformation.

While not planned, it was long overdue Zac added some skills to his Human class to fill its gaps. The skillset of Inexorable Apostle had already been

expanded with **[Abyssal Drive]** and **[Fatehew]**, two amazing skills that had been formed with the help of Supremacies. Meanwhile, his Human side only had **[Primal Edict]**, which was still stuck in E-grade.

Unless Zac had been deluding himself during his elevated state, **[Conformation of Supremacy]** had turned into something that could boost his whole class, depending on which avatar he chose. The exact details would remain unclear until he performed the upgrade.

Unfortunately, now was not the time. Zac could feel a low vibration rising through the floor on the ancient warship, and a gentle chime echoed through the Cultivation Chamber. It was a wake-up call designed to drag all passengers from meditation because the ship was about to jump. Cultivating while crossing dimensions was normally fine, but it was another matter when subspace was crammed full of chaotic energy left from the **[Centurion Spear]**.

Back in the Merit Exchange, Zac took out pieces of wood and carved replicas of the four new designs. It was a way to confirm his idea and better understand the theories behind the pathing. After finishing, he got to his feet and touched the crystal, prompting the next step of his quest to appear.

[The Flame of Hope (Campaign, Inheritance): Find the breach inside the Eternal Storm. Light the Centurion Beacon. Reward: Seal of the Left Imperial Palace. (0/2)]

Zac looked at the quest with mixed emotions. He'd been hesitant whether he should actually try to awaken the slumbering guardians left by the Limitless Empire, even if the potential gains were insane. They could be the key to saving Zecia, but the road to hell was paved with good intentions. There was a chance he'd be inviting a far greater threat than the Kan'Tanu by messing with that ancient piece of history. The source of this content is NovelFire(.)net

Now, it looked like he didn't have much choice but to activate the beacon. But how was he supposed to find a breach to the Lost Plane inside the Eternal Storm? It seemed orders of magnitude more difficult than finding a needle in a haystack. Thankfully, there was still time, and the answers could be waiting inside the **[Foreign Gods]** tome he looted. He'd only go when he was good and ready and after the Yphelion had been upgraded to late D-grade.

A sudden great heave inside the ancient warship almost threw Zac into the ceiling. The Dravorak Dynasty had set out, meaning they were about to reach

the fortress base. Zac's Draugr half returned to his Cultivation Cave to upgrade his skill after making a single purchase in the Faction Exchange.

It was an added module for 50,000, allowing rankers on the local ladder to hide their exact merit like on the sector-wide one. Zac had always wanted that feature to hide his progress from all the spies, but he couldn't motivate such a high expenditure with their limited resources. Now, it was definitely worth it.

Meanwhile, his human half got to his feet and stepped out from the cultivation chamber. He was worried, unsure what scene would greet them after passing through. The **[Centurion Spear]** had blown up a Worldfort and kept going, proving just how dangerous the energies he unleashed were.

Would there be anything but scorched rubble waiting for them?

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

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Chapter 1167: Cleanup

Zac found Emily and the others sitting with a handful of soldiers in the common area upon emerging. The newcomers wore the surcoats of the Dravorak guard, though they could have been cousins of the burly men of the Muscle Brigade. They were from the same rough stock, bearing barely any resemblance to the Royal Guard he'd seen before.

Their clothes were scuffed, bloodied, and dirty, carrying the mark of intense battle. Their strength was quite varied, ranging from Late E-grade to the peak of Middle Hegemony. All emitted an air of slaughter, one that even outshone the strongest soldiers of his elite squads.

Zac wryly smiled as he walked over. Birds of a feather, indeed. "Hello."

"It's the Deviant—uh, greetings, lord," the Middle Hegemon said, giving an awkward salute. "I'm Tirbas, under the Iron Wall. Sorry about barging in and all."

"That's fine," Zac said as he thumped down, not even a little surprised these rough-looking men were subordinates of the towering general from before. "Still calling me a deviant, though? Shouldn't I have earned a new nickname by now?"

"I think it fits. Only an absolute deviant would manage to blow up a Worldfort in Early D-grade," Emily grinned, eliciting nods of agreement.

"Whatever," Zac sighed. "What are you guys up to?"

"Your disciple and our new friends here have updated us on your activities since we got stuck," Average grinned. "You deserve to be the star of our generation. How about it? Pretty lives up to her name, right? Why not turn our friendship into a blood bond?"

"You're selling out your cousin like that?" Zac laughed, shaking his head. "Never mind my dating life. How's the situation outside?"

"Everything's fine," Tirbas said. "We're just waiting."

"For what? The Everfast Monarch?"

"Nah, the big boss has already moved on, it looks like," another Dravorak soldier grinned. "You beat him to the punch, I guess."

"What?" Zac said with confusion.

"The spear accidentally killed two Kan'Tanu Monarchs before setting off for the Warfort!" Average laughed. "They were apparently hiding within the storm between dimensions when we activated the **[Centurion Spear]**, searching for a way to seize the whole fortress without the whole thing imploding. Only scraps are left of them now."

"The Goldcloaks are already ransacking their crumbling worlds before it's too late."

"The Royal Guard," another soldier explained upon seeing Zac's blank look.

"That's not the only thing," Emily added. "After destroying the Worldfort, the spear seems to have continued into the **[Million Gates Territory]**. Powerful energy fluctuations were recorded further within, so it might have struck something else. We're still waiting for scouts to bring back news."

"It passed right through the Worldfort, so blowing up another base or two is definitely possible," Zac slowly said, hiding the unease he suddenly felt.

He didn't really care what happened inside the Million Gates territory. His worry came from the fact that the numbers suddenly didn't add up. The two Monarchs should have died by the time he escaped the tower, before he first checked the progress of his quest. Which meant he either didn't get merit from either their or Yselio's deaths.

Since he received merit from the Worldfort, the same should have been true for the Monarchs. Did that mean Yselio was alive? He'd never heard of tricking people with fake Kill Energy, but there were all kinds of techniques out there. Or was the problem that Yselio died by a Technocrat's hand, rendering the bounty invalid? Zac sincerely hoped it was the latter.

Otherwise, there was a vengeful Imperial Prince out there, one who knew the secret of his bloodline.

"So we're waiting for them to finish?" Zac said, putting forth a calm front.

"Not really. The death of a Monarch always creates a mess, what with their Inner Worlds spilling into the surroundings. The chaos is even worse with these netherblasted cultists who carry Heart Curses. Those C-grade parasites are extremely resilient. They're still struggling after being ripped apart," Tirbas explained. "Then there's the fortress that's still firing on all cylinders. The two are actually fighting each other, so we're just waiting for the dust to settle before starting the clean-up."

'The fortress base is essentially a life raft now. The Gathering Arrays were part of the tower, and the base's energy stockpiles were depleted long before we arrived. That's why charging the [Centurion Spear] took so long,' Galau explained through a mental message.

"What about the people stuck in the fortress?"

"There are at least 400 life signatures spread through the base," Tirbas said. "No way to tell who's friendly and who needs killing yet, though."

Zac nodded with relief. Ra'Klid wasn't necessarily among the 400 strongest among those who'd reached the fortress base, but he had a unique advantage through his seal. The Mavai Chieftain should be fine unless he'd gotten himself killed before he activated the **[Centurion Spear]**.

"Actually, we should get going," the burly Dravorak soldier said. "You probably should avoid any more touring. Most of the bosses are off dealing with this mess, so some of the brownnosers might get the idea to try something. Some of them are pretty strong."

The Dravorak bowed and walked out in file, leaving just their group behind.

"Touring?" Zac asked with a raised brow.

"Oh, most of us got bored, so we toured the place and ran into those brothers. The soldiers were a lot more talkative now that we're wartime heroes," Average grinned.

"Found out anything useful?"

"Lots of things. For one, this ship is a gift from a mysterious outside force. The Havaroks were the ones handing it over, but the Dravorak were the actual recipients. Those princelings from before are apparently not very happy about it."

"Yeah, I assumed it was something like that. This ship is too advanced to appear in Zecia," Zac nodded.

"No kidding," Average said. "If the Dravorak Dynasty would have been even more overbearing before if they had this thing."

"I guess the outsiders are trying to form Karma with this sector through gifts. Anything else?"

"Well, there's a war base aboard, so we got ourselves registered," Average continued, his smile growing wider. "The ladder will see a big change in a couple of hours. You better watch your back, boss."

"That good, huh?" Zac smiled.

"Don't be shocked, but I got 250,000 Merit as a sign-on bonus. We all did."

Zac couldn't help but glance at Emily, who looked at Average and the Muscle Brigade pityingly. As expected, she didn't think the reward was too impressive. While they got three or four instances of merit, the unregistered only got one. The System had clearly capped their pre-registration contribution, just like Zac's during the events in the Void Star.

By all means, 250,000 was a huge number. It shouldn't be enough to enter top ten, but top fifty was essentially guaranteed. It was also enough to outfit them with useful treasures to keep their momentum going. Between the Peak Family's resources and the things they brought back from the fortress, these warriors would keep soaring higher into the sky.

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He was more curious about Emily's situation, even if this wasn't the time to ask. Truth be told, she hadn't really been a critical part of the operation. However, the operation was worth 62,000,000 Faction Merit, which was harder to accumulate than individual merit. Even if the System only considered her contribution 1%, she might have reached the merit cap, too.

"Our actions have affected the whole frontline," Galau added. "We heard the neighboring Field Armies are already on the move, hoping to capitalize on the chaos."

"It doesn't involve us, though," Emily added. "The Twenty-Sixth is on clean-up duty. There's still a whole lot of stranded cultists spread through the region."

The group spent the next half-hour discussing their next step. Finally, there was a knock on the door, and one of the burly soldiers from before walked inside.

"Our boss is wondering if you can come to the deck?" the guard said to Zac.

"Ok. Give me one moment," Zac said, glancing at the others. "What about you guys?"

"There's a treasure I want to absorb," Emily said as she took out a familiar box. It was the one Zac pulled through the Void when he almost lost control on the way to the Command Center. Looking at it with clear eyes, its cyclic pattern seemed to mesh well with Emily's season-based cultivation system. "You can go without me."

"I'm not going back there after I've finally escaped," Average adamantly said.

The uninterested expressions on the Muscle Brigade spoke volumes, so Zac turned to Galau. "I might need your help."

"Of course," Galau agreed, and they set out.

"How's the situation?" Zac asked as he followed the soldier to a lower floor.

"The outside has calmed down, and everything's dealt with. The hiding cultists didn't stand a chance against all our Peak Hegemons. It's become a gold rush now," the soldier grinned. "Finding a hidden trove will get you a bonus. Shame only Hegemons can participate."

Zac wanted to know about the Havaroks, but he wouldn't put the E-grade soldier in that position.

"What does General Tusko need from me?"

"Oh? Nothing, I think," the soldier said. "We picked up a demon who seems to be with you guys?"

"You found Ra'Klid?" Zac exclaimed, picking up pace.

Soon, they reached the ship's bottom, where a piece of the hull had extended by a few hundred meters to create a detached deck large enough to house thousands of men. Soldiers were constantly shuttling back and forth between the ship and the dormant fortress base floating in the distance. It looked like the platform had become a midway station to report gains and receive orders.

"I'll leave you here," the soldier said. "And, uh, thank you again. For your service."

"You're welcome. We just did what all of you would do if given the chance," Zac smiled before jumping toward the deck.

It was impossible to miss Tusko on account of him being a meter taller than any other human and twice as wide. However, Zac's eyes quickly homed in on the demon fidgeting to the side. Ra'Klid's eyes lit up when he saw Zac walk over.

"You're back," Zac smiled, but a flicker of killing intent appeared in his eyes upon seeing the still-fresh wounds across Ra'Klid's body. "What happened? Who did this?"
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Had the Havaroks gotten to him already?

"Nothing big, just some scuffles over treasure," Ra'Klid grinned before his face grew somber. "I'm sorry, I couldn't find the girl."

"Don't worry, she's with me," Zac said. "I found her inside the tower. I've talked with the Alliance; our people are fine, too."

"Thank the ancestors," Ra'Klid sighed, glancing at the fortress base with mixed emotions. "I can't believe you two survived the tower going ballistic like that."

"It was by the skin of our teeth," Zac grimaced. "How did things go on your end?"

"Well, you picked a good building. I found a Life-attuned treasure that helped me a lot. I entered the Time Chamber and broke through around twenty minutes after you left. At first, I considered staying put until the battle was over, but I accidentally discovered something... About those things..."

"I think I know what you're talking about," Zac nodded. "You could suddenly open doors?"

"Exactly!" Ra'Klid said with excitement. "When I realized I couldn't stay put any longer. So, I spent the next few hours trying my luck while looking for General Larkin. I found a few good things but eventually ran into trouble. A group of cultists rounded a corner just as I emerged from a door. Luckily, the tower went berserk before they could do me in. I took the opportunity to throw off my pursuers and escape into another building. I hid there until these guys broke inside."

"Good job," Zac said, waving at the soldier who had guided them there. "Don't worry about the rest. Head back and rest. Remember what to say and what not to."

The Mavai Demon nodded in understanding and followed the soldier back to their wing.

"Young Asura!" a boisterous voice echoed through the platform, and Zac saw Tusko making his way over.

"General sticky-fingers," Zac greeted, only partly feigning annoyance at having his rings searched before.

"Don't remind me," Tusko said with a sour expression. "Do you think I wanted to rifle through another man's belongings? It was the only way to put the matter to rest."

"I know, I'm just kidding," Zac said. "Where are the other Generals?"

"Busy," Tusko shrugged. "Handil is accompanying the young princes as they search for treasure, Esoro is still hunting down scouts and stragglers, and Warlin is busy sending out orders. So I'm stuck directing the excavation."

"Alright," Zac nodded, glancing at the sea of cultivators flying toward the fortress base. "It looks like a swarm of locusts."

"Treasure-hunting locusts," Tusko agreed, looking at Zac with unmasked envy. "You lucky bastard."

"What's that?"

"The Alliance has given out a decree. Ten percent of all resources sourced from the fortress will be awarded to the Atwood Empire and the Peak Family for your contribution."

Normally, Zac would have lost his mind by such a windfall. Even if the items remaining in the fortress base couldn't compare to the treasures he'd swallowed, their value was still counted in multi-digit C-grade Nexus Coins. However, Zac had already seized so many benefits that he was starting to feel numb.

Zac remembered reading about System-sanctioned wars and their generous rewards before setting off for the Perennial Vastness. Those missives paled compared to the real thing. The struggle for Zecia and the inheritance amplified gains to the point it almost got ridiculous.

Normally, he'd have to be content with the opportunities he seized with his own hands inside the tower. Now, Individual Merit and Faction Merit were tacked on top, their value greatly surpassing the items he consumed for his breakthrough. He'd also get an enormous amount of Alliance Contribution after the dust had settled.

Taking down a Warfort was a huge accomplishment, and the Alliance would definitely go all out with rewards. It wasn't even about him. It was about the Alliance bolstering morale and showing their generosity. Today's news would soon spread to every corner of Zecia, driving home two ideas.

One, things were finally turning for the better. Two, good performances would be richly rewarded. His circumstances made the perfect recruitment ad at a time when most factions resisted sending their men to the frontlines.

"You don't look impressed?" Tusko said, his eyes lighting up as he'd thought of something. "How about this? As an apology for before, I'll help supplement your income."

"What do you have in mind?" Zac asked curiously.

"There's no need for us to sit around here, right? So, let's join in on the fun. Any treasure you find will be yours, but it'll be up to your own ability to find it. I'll tag along, making sure those princelings don't try anything in case you stumble onto each other."

"A treasure hunt?" Zac said, his eyes gleaming.

Getting five percent didn't mean he'd actually get the fortress treasures. The Alliance would tally up the harvest and pay him an equivalent amount, likely in Nexus Coins or normal treasures. It wasn't enough to get Zac excited. However, keeping whatever he found was another matter entirely.

"Are you sure? Or do you need to ask Duke Everfast first?"

"Do I look that useless to you?" Tusko glared. "You think I can't decide on such small matters on my own? Bah! Let's go!"

"If you say so," Zac nodded before turning to Galau. "Buddy, come with me for a bit."

A small smile tugged at Galau's lips as he joined Zac. Tusko seemed confused at their reaction, but he still arranged everything. Soon, the three flew across the empty expanse and passed the fortress's outer wall. Navigating the streets with the towers deactivated or destroyed was effortless, and it didn't take long for Zac to sense a weak pull of fate.

"We might as well start here," Zac said and flew toward a gatehouse just at the platform's edge.

Galau scurried forward to investigate the door Zac indicated.

"The arrays are in a passive energy-conservation state," the merchant muttered as he pushed a silver needle into a small gap. "Five seconds, tops."

"Here?" Tusko said with confusion. "Why not go to the center? The security is stronger, but the trea—"

Tusko's words caught in his throat when a veritable tsunami of Dao rushed out of the door as it slid open. It felt as though someone had crushed a dozen D-grade Dao Treasures. Even Zac's eyes momentarily glazed over, but he gathered his wits before he accidentally advanced his Daos based on the surrounding truths.

He was painfully aware his Dao Branches were lagging, but there wasn't much he could do about it. He upgraded his Branches of War Axe and Kalpataru just a few days ago. His chaotic introduction to the front lines had left him with many new insights, but he was still far from taking the next step.

So he held onto his path and convictions as he stepped into the mysterious shroud, using the **[Lucky Beads]** as guidance. Tusko kept pace, his large shield shining with energy in case of a sudden ambush or automated defenses.

It didn't take long before he found the source of the Dao. Like the small shop where he found the cactus spine, a hidden cupboard was inside the captain's quarters. This one had completely broken down, likely during the final jump into the main dimension, going by the fresh energy around them.

"To think you managed to sense the energy through the thick walls," Tusko said with awe upon seeing Galau extract a treasure box from the array. "Or was it just dumb luck?"

"I don't know about dumb, but I am a pretty lucky guy," Zac grinned as he stowed the box. "Let's see what else we can find."

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Chapter 1168: Fiend Crystals

Zac didn't bother examining the treasure. It'd still be there when he returned, and every second counted. He had a huge advantage between his Luck and Galau's expertise, but at least five thousand Hegemons were scouring the city, with more joining every minute. Zac led them through a couple of blocks, pretending to investigate the sealed doors along the way. Eventually, he stopped before an inconspicuous building.

"This should only be an Array Station," Tusko said, scratching his beard.

Galau made a short work of the door like before. There was no gust of energy greeting them this time. Instead, they found a dusty corridor like those Zac had passed on his way to the tower. Like Tusko said, it was one of the array stations with cramped pathways and the bomb shelter in the middle.

"See?" the general grinned. "Nothing."

"I don't know; I have a good feeling about this place," Zac said as he led the trio inside.

Zac could already sense where the pull of fate came from, but it still took some twists and turns before he found a path to the second floor. Eventually, they stopped before a sheer plate.

"Can you open it?" Zac asked. "Be careful; it might be booby-trapped."

"No problem," Galau nodded. "Step back for a bit."

"Why here?" Tusko said with bafflement.

"Isn't this the point where you're supposed to say something like 'I'll eat my shield if there's a treasure behind that pane?'" Zac smiled.

"You think I'm that stupid?" Tusko guffawed. "You sprinted here like a bloodhound on the scent. I'm not sure what technique you're using, but this isn't random. Damn, I didn't expect a battle maniac like you to be so shifty."

Zac was about to answer, but his eyes steeled when the pane opened with a click, and an ominous sigil formed by a hidden array. Tusko moved his shield

to block, but his actions proved superfluous. The whole hallway came alive, and the glowing rune was ripped apart as its energy was consumed by the circuits in the wall.

"I knew it! You little bastards fooled me." Tusko sighed, eyes glued to the glass canister holding a suspended flower waiting inside. "You evil star! Are you really shameless enough to take advantage of me like this?"

"You're not going back on your promise, are you?" Zac countered as he quickly stowed the treasure.

"Little devil, you don't have to goad me," Tusko huffed. "Go ahead. What do I care? These things wouldn't be mine anyway. I look forward to seeing if your guts are as big as your appetite."

"Be careful what you wish for," Zac laughed as he led the trio out of the house. "Even if I hate to admit it, my nickname isn't completely without cause."

Tusko followed with a magnanimous expression, like an elder humoring unruly descendants. However, new cracks appeared in the general's indifferent facade with every magnificent treasure Zac and Galau dragged out of well-hidden nooks and crannies. The famed Iron Wall of the Twenty-Sixth mechanically followed in Zac's wake, eventually looking like he was trapped in a nightmare, not even bothering to guard his companions.

It wasn't that Tusko wished them harm to stop the wanton looting, but that most traps and safeguards had stopped working when the fortress lost its energy source. Galau used his ample experience to effortlessly disperse or redirect what little energy remained. Only two times did he find himself helpless before an arrangement, where they opted to trigger it out of harm's way.

Both attempts destroyed the treasure within, though Zac didn't even feel the pinch. They were making off like bandits, to the point they probably would have been beaten up by the Dravorak soldiers if not for Tusko's presence. Fame and reputation didn't matter to these warriors who saw Zac and Galau mess with their bonus.

Tusko only awakened from his robotic state when Warlin flew by with a group of administrators in tow.

"Young master, you've already done so much," Warlin said as he stopped before the trio. "There's no need for you to bother yourself with simple clean-up."

"I figured I'd help out," Zac said. "Some of these doors are a bit tricky. It would be a shame if someone else got to them first."

"How commendable," Warlin nodded, though there was a suspicious glint in his eyes as he glanced at Tusko. The Iron Wall's mouth twitched, but he actually kept his mouth shut.

"Are you joining the exploration?" Zac quickly asked before his back-room deal could be exposed and reneged on.

"No," Warlin said with a shake of his head. "Repositories were discovered closer to the center. We're hoping to extract valuable intelligence before the base fully runs out of energy. We fear we might be unable to reactivate the arrays after the lingering Faith Energy has dispersed."

"I won't keep you, then."

"Good luck with your hunt," Warlin said as he flew away with his entourage. "This is a rare opportunity. The Alliance is always in dire need of materials, and we've already found many resources never seen before in Zecia."

"I'll do my best," Zac assured before turning to Tusko. "You heard him. There's no time to waste."

The towering man had already withered under Warlin's scrutinizing gaze, and Zac's words were the nail in the coffin. He looked like he'd taken a punch to the gut, his face pale and flustered.

"I—uh," Tusko stammered. "How about we take a break? You just fought a tough battle."

"Don't worry," Zac smiled. "I feel like a million bucks. Galau?"

"It's nice to stretch my legs after being cramped up in the ship for the last hour," the merchant stoically agreed.

"Ah—W-Well—" Tusko stammered, his huge form shrinking even further as he glanced in Warlin's direction.

"I'm just kidding," Zac laughed.

Tuskar looked like he'd received an imperial pardon upon seeing Zac relent. He'd realized he'd been tricked long ago, but he couldn't have imagined the matter growing this thorny. By now, they'd snatched so many treasures Tusko was in more trouble than he. Zac was only following up on a promise given by an esteemed general of the Twenty-Sixth, while Tusko had let a pile of rare treasures slip through his boss's fingers.

To Tusko's credit, he hadn't stopped them, even when his hands began shaking from the stress. Zac would feel bad if he pushed the matter any further. Besides, there was not much point to keep going. The hidden troves were close to being wiped clean already. He had his Luck to show the way, but there was no lack of discerning eyes among the soldiers. They had their methods to search for fortune, and the defenses grew weaker by the minute.

There were still many unopened buildings without fate's pull, but the chance of running into something good there wasn't very high.

"You know, the corridors beneath the surface are harder to navigate, but they remain mostly untouched," Galau offered. "I bet I can find one of the hidden trapdoors to take us down."

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"Let's go back!" Tusko decisively interjected, looking ready to drag them back to the mothership even if he had to stuff them in a sack.

"One moment. There's still something I want from this place," Zac said, lifting his hands in a calming gesture when Tusko's frantic stare bore into him. "Don't worry; it's not a treasure. I want some of that Killing Intent."

"Ah? That ancient intent?" Tusko said with confusion. "Why? To create a weapon?"

"I have my uses for it," Zac said, unwilling to explain further.

He'd seen firsthand the intent could be weaponized as Tusko suggested. Considering the intent's source, its lethality wasn't that impressive. Zac had poured a fortune's worth into Yselio, and the prince only seemed to grow angrier from it. Sure, Yselio was an Eonic Seed from an A-grade faction, but so was everyone else Zac would need to use that kind of ace on.

Zac felt its value lay in its potential as a Body Refinement Material. If Zac could figure out a method to store the intent, he could accelerate his Body Tempering by a significant degree. The ancient Killing Intent had damaged **[Void Heart]** last time, but that was before he broke through. It shouldn't be a problem now that the node had evolved to D-grade.

"Do you have any ideas?"

"I know a place that has what you need," Galau said before Tusko could answer. "It's a bit dangerous, though."

Zac glanced at Tusko, who shrugged. "It's fine; it can barely be considered a resource." [READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT NOVELFIRE\(.\)NET](#)

Galau led the trio toward the scar, the only section still giving off a dangerous air. While there was no energy for the intent to fuse with, it could still pose a threat to one's Heart and Soul.

"I saw it somewhere around here," Galau muttered as he led them toward a district right by the scar.

Zac could already feel some pressure from the ambient Killing Intent. If not for his Void Heart, his mental state would gradually erode like he'd eaten a Berserking Treasure. His companions had their ways of dealing with the environment. Tusko's eyes were clear, like the Killing Intent wasn't even there.

It was a worthwhile reminder. Despite acting casual, bickering and messing around like a common soldier, Tusko was anything but. He was a seasoned veteran at the very peak of Hegemony and strong enough to stand out among his peers. There were just over a hundred Hegemons with his rank in the whole sector. Zac wouldn't stand a chance if they fought seriously. It was possible that not even a monster like Kator was Tusko's match until the Reaver had broken through to Late D-grade.

Zac was more surprised that Galau appeared just as immune. The more Zac saw of his new follower, the more mysterious he felt. Zac could barely see a shadow of the man he traveled with years ago. Then again, the same could be said about him. Would anyone from his old life recognize him if they met today?

The only one reacting to the increasingly hostile environment was Haro. The Plant King stirred upon sensing the dense Killing Intent outside, and a thin

vine wound itself around Zac's arm. The tip waved back and forth like a snake tasting the air. Zac momentarily hesitated before letting Haro absorb the diluted energy from their surroundings.

Killing Intent was great nourishment for an aggressive plant like Heavenrender Vines, especially now that he'd woken up prematurely and needed to stabilize his foundations. However, Zac worried Haro's nature would grow even more bestial and chaotic if he continued to absorb Killing Intent, whether from the battlefields or this ancient intent.

Zac realized there was a problem during their fight against the Havarok prince. Haro had just gained sapience, and his mental state was very unstable after losing Vivi. Initially, the Plant King ignored Zac's attempts to direct the vines. He had been overwhelmed by rage, acting solely on instinct. Zac could have forcibly seized control through **[Adaptive Symbiosis]**, but that would have created endless problems down the road.

Adult Heavenrender Vines were impossible to tame, and even newborns were a handful. Zac would never reach the smooth control he enjoyed with Vivi if Haro grew hostile and constantly resisted his input. Zac had been able to control her vines like they were his limbs because she willingly synced and harmonized her soul with his.

If Zac had to overrule Haro's much stronger spirit to use his vines in battle, he would have to occupy a significant part of his mind. He'd be fighting Haro in tandem with his real enemy. Haro's pure desire to understand Zac's techniques had set the foundation for true cooperation, but they weren't there yet.

'Take what you need, but be careful,' Zac communicated through the link. 'Remember how the bad guys easily fought you off when you let the anger control your actions? You must remain clearheaded when you face a powerful opponent. Otherwise, you'll become their food.'

Haro's vine froze briefly before coiling tighter around Zac's arm. The vine seemed to understand what Zac meant, and its absorption slowed down. By that point, Galau had stopped before a large, derelict warehouse.

The mottled floor was covered in cracks, its structural integrity weak after eons of exposure to the Killing Intent. The damage was so comprehensive they could peek through the scars into the floors below. The underground

levels seemed to hold even denser Killing Intent, yet Galau simply jumped inside.

"Hey!" Tusko exclaimed and followed behind with his shield. "We haven't cleared these floors! There might still be cultists hiding."

"Their mental states are pretty weak," Galau said.

"That's right, but that doesn't mean this environment will kill them," Tusko said as he scanned the warehouse basement. "At least not immediately. Before that, they'll become frothing beasts."

Zac also jumped down, his axe out and ready. Thankfully, nothing but a reddish haze was waiting for them, and Haro kept his wits about him. Galau led them through a hidden corridor connecting a series of enormous storage rooms until they found one that wasn't just filled with dust and haze.

"This is it," Galau said, pointing at a pile of crystals radiating an ominous red.

"Interesting," Tusko hummed. "They resemble something I read about in an ancient Body Tempering Manual. Fiend Crystals. However, those things should have disappeared along with the ancient races that appeared in the beginning of time."

"Fiend Crystals?" Zac asked with interest.

"They were supposed to hold the primal power of ancient beasts. The first warriors absorbed it to strengthen their bodies. You know, I bet Body Tempering came before the pursuit of the Dao. Who has time to gaze at the stars when a monster is trying to eat you?" Tusko said before shaking his head. "These things are different. Almost seems like something the heretics would use."

"I think they were Gravity Crystals before. Perhaps they were the only ones durable enough to contain the Killing Intent. All this was other attuned materials before," Galau said, pointing at the thick layer of dust on the ground before turning to Zac. "These things have absorbed Killing Intent for eons. Don't let their appearance fool you. They are chock-full of it and very volatile."

Even if they weren't real Fiend Crystals, they held a fatal attraction to both Zac and Haro. The mound of crystals didn't emit much energy to go with the sinister appearance, but that was because they retained some of their original

attunement. Immense forces of gravity had sucked the Killing Intent into its depths and condensed it further.

One crystal with a relatively weak light floated over to Zac, who grabbed it and infused some of his will.

"Don't!" Galau shrieked and jumped out of the way.

Tusko lunged for the crystal with alarm, but he was too far away. The crystal shattered as the ball of Killing Intent went berserk after sensing Zac's soul. It slammed into his mind, dragging some of the ambient intent. Zac had already sensed the danger yet did nothing to stop it. He took a deep breath as he let the killing intent flood his Soul Aperture.

The Killing Intent raged against the newly reforged Soul Cores, yet the nebulous clouds guarding them became quagmires, slowing the intent's advance. The attacking force didn't even get the chance to reach the cores before a deep, primordial thud shook Zac's spiritual world like a drum calling for war. Intractable force pulled the intent out of his soul, each thud preventing its escape.

It just took five bites for **[Void Heart]** to consume it all, even when the amount of Killing Intent was close to a third of what he'd been subjected to when breaking into the tower. What was a deadly encounter just hours ago had been reduced to an evening snack.

"Don't worry, I'm fine," Zac said upon seeing his companions' worried expressions.

"Crazy brat," Tusko muttered. "Are you really okay?"

Zac nodded. "I didn't expect the intent to be so active despite being sealed."

"Good thing you stood some distance from the rest," Galau exhaled. "Otherwise, you would have triggered all of them in a chain reaction. Not recommended."

Zac shuddered as he looked at the large pile. The faux Fiend Crystal he took was on the weaker end, with some seemingly having stored significantly more Killing Intent. Even then, Zac was confident in surviving a dozen now that his bloodline had entered D-grade. However, there were thousands in the pile—holding more than enough to drive him insane a few times over.

"I'll have to figure out a way to stabilize them," Zac said, turning to the general. "These Fiend Crystals are just what I need. You don't mind me taking them, right?"

"Go ahead," Tusko said with a grand wave before looking at Zac suspiciously. "Wait! Give me a few. Can't let you scam me again."

"There are at least a dozen similar repositories spread along the scar," Galau offered. "Probably more."

"Even so."

"Take it," Zac said. "But could you do me a favor in return?"

"You want these things for your cut, right?" Tusko said as a tenth of the converted crystals were suddenly encased by a shimmering barrier. They floated over to Tusko, who stored the pile without any issue. "I'll ask, but I can't promise anything. Everything passes through the Alliance. If their researchers figure out a use for these crystals, they might become a strategic resource."

Zac carefully stowed the rest of the crystals in a spare Spatial Ring. The job took five minutes, at which point he found Galau and Tusko staring at Zac with strange expressions.

"What?"

"Have you forgotten what time it is?" Tusko grinned. "The ladder's updated, may the Heavens help you."

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Chapter 1169: Bringer of Change

"Welcome back," Qul'Uster said, looking up from the terminal as Nutzu entered his office. "You've seen better days."

"Wouldn't mind a vacation," Nutzu grunted while slumping into a chair. "Here's the reports you wanted. It should be all there."

"What an unexpected harvest," Qul'Uster said with satisfaction.

"Why would you even want those old pieces of junk?" Nutzu muttered, still annoyed about losing so many of her men to that devious bastard's plot.

"Junk?" Qul'Uster said with a shake of his head.

"Yeah, junk," Nutzu said. "It should be a Class-4 flotilla using outmoded technology. And that's provided the things remain functional. Damn, I almost got killed over garbage."

"These things aren't garbage. True, they lack the advancements we've developed over the Era, but bear in mind the environment in which they were constructed," Qul'Uster said. "It was during a time when the Selvari were still united, fighting a losing war. With the Limitless Empire breathing down their necks, would there be the squabbles our spies have reported among their descendants?"

"You think they might hold core technologies of multiple families?" Nutzu said skeptically. "If true, we could use that as a reference for our research. But would they have put anything interesting in such a minor fleet?"

"It's worth a try. Class is not always the best indicator of value. The flotilla was targeting a project connected to the False Heavens. There is no information about it in our records, but my instincts tell me the ships won't be of simple stock," Qul'Uster said. "Recovering even an incomplete heritage will more than make up for the setbacks on our end."

"Setbacks? What happened?" Nutzu said with exasperation.

"Our Blank Slates were discovered sooner than expected, and the natives responded with great determination. We only ended up accomplishing 43% of our subset goals."

"Well, I'm pretty sure I killed that princeling if that's any consolation," Nutzu grinned. "I tried to install a Root Device before he died, but he somehow shifted out of our spacetime."

"Oh?" Qul'Uster said with surprise before nodding thoughtfully. "These new Imperials also rely on Faith Energy. He was likely summoned for the rites of succession. Is this why you refused a debrief through long-distance communicators? Or is it about the key?"

"Both. Neither," Nutzu said, scratching her head with frustration.

"It was only a limited cooperation bound to end sooner rather than later. I'll deal with it. You shouldn't face any punishment," Qul'Uster said. "Did you find it?"

"Only the coordinates. I ran out of time before I could get the key," Nutzu said.

"That's a shame," Qul'Uster sighed. "It took a lot of effort unearthing these threads, but we might be able to discover another Lighthouse. The False Heavens seem to be aiding us, dredging items from the dimensional depths."

"Wait, I wasn't finished," Nutzu said.

"There's no way to go back and retrieve it now," Qul'Uster said with a shake of his head, and Nutzu could already tell he was moving on to the next subject. "We will have to make some simulation—"

"Do you want me to simulate a punch so you can settle down?"

Qul'Uster raised his hands in defeat before indicating for her to continue.

"The reason I disconnected wasn't because of that shifty bastard. I'd like to see those old goats try to censure me for taking out an Imperial," Nutzu laughed before her face grew somber. "I found it. The missing remnant."

"What? Already?!" Qul'Uster said, his eyes wide as he shot to his feet. "Where is it?"

"Not it. He."

"He? What?"

"The remnant is a human male."

"You're saying they actually did it? The Kayar-Elu managed to bring back the Supreme Ancestor?"

"No," Nutzu said. "More like raise a true descendant."

"Impossible," Qul'Uster rejected. "You're aware of the founder's parting words. There can only be one per Era. Hundreds of experiments have proven him right."

"Well, he's here, and I watched him awaken the Void Emperor's bloodline to Class-3. Consumed enough resources to raise a Class-4 Dominator," Nutzu said. "Besides, if the elders didn't think there was any hope of success, would they have led the spies to the Essence Blood?"

"It's impossible to know what went through their minds when they made such a dangerous gamble. They said passing the torch to the other inheritor clans was the only chance we had at success, but I see it as an attack on their resources."

"Have the Kayar-Elu and the other haughty bastards go broke trying to extract the bloodline?" Nutzu laughed. "Not a bad plan. Whether they succeeded or not, we would have achieved our goals."

"To think there's a living descendant walking the lands. History repeats itself. We're approaching the zenith," Qul'Uster said, his eyes like radiant torches. "Tell me everything you saw."

"We only saw each other for a second or two," Nutzu said, sharing her experience and the readings from her drones' scans.

"The Void is brought to the surface? I don't understand," Qul'Uster muttered. "How would the Kayar-Elu invert the bloodline? And why? Was that the only way to pass the restriction?"

"It might not be them," Nutzu said. "Remember how it all went down? The Cursed Heavens barged into the Heartlands to wipe out their clan? Four thousand years later, this guy suddenly pops up, just in time to see the pillar's ascent. He could be a plant."

"It's suspect," Qul'Uster agreed. "The Cursed Heavens supposedly annihilated everything related to the project, yet here he is. Do you know his identity?"

"No, but I think he's a local. There's no way he's not famous already, seeing how he almost managed to keep pace with that princeling while still in Early Class-3."

"Local? There's no need to investigate, then," Qul'Uster smiled and opened a file on his terminal. "Is this him?"[READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT NOVELFIR\(e\).NET](#)

"Zachary Atwood..." Nutzu muttered. "That's the remnant, alright. He's famous?"

"He's... Very high profile," Qul'Uster said with a shake of his head. "Just minutes ago, he jumped to the top of the sector rankings."

"Makes sense, considering what he did with the fortress. Those parasite cultivators must be losing their minds right now," Nutzu snorted. "Oh, by the way. He probably has the key."

"Untouched by fate's river, creating his own path," Qul'Uster sighed.

"So what should we do?" Nutzu asked. "I gave him a communicator, but it's already destroyed. He also killed a few of my men in there."

"For now, don't do anything," Qul'Uster said. "I need to speak with my mother."

"Are you going to tell Serpasir?"

"What do you think?" Qul'Uster scoffed, and his usually calm demeanor frosted over. "Those people have been rapidly gaining momentum since the Kayar-Elu's destruction. They think they can use the Technocracy Council's sudden vacancy to move back home. They've gone mad with desire; The interim leader said there have been hints of them researching ways to shed the Oath."

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Report sightings.

"Blind idiots," Nutzu swore, her heart churning with anger. "It's because they never visit the Edge any longer. Someone should drag them out there and have them face the beyond. Our end. That'll help them remember why we chose exile."

"Ultimately, too much time has passed," Qul'Uster sighed. "It wasn't supposed to be like this. We may be deluding ourselves."

"Whatever. I'd rather take it to the end and find nothing waiting for us than give up halfway," Nutzu said. "If he's a descendant, we must bring him to the fold. He's our best chance. He might be even more suited than the original."

"What a mess this has become," Qul'Uster groaned before his eyes snapped open with realization. "Wait, if he's really from back then—"

"Maybe you should call him Eldest Cousin?" Nutzu laughed before her eyes grew somber. "What if Maseri finds out?"—

Qul'Uster groaned and pinched his brows. "Who knows what that madman will do if he discovers his son might be alive? I hear he almost blew up Sanctuary after being dumped by the Kayar-Elu Princess. Let's pray they're still keeping that unkillable lunatic isolated."

A simple slash descended toward the rampaging Beast King's neck. It didn't look strong enough to cut through wood, let alone the reinforced scales of the crocodilian monstrosity. Yet, the greatest truths hid within the mundane, as they represented the true nature of the universe. The sword finished its arc, and the bus-sized head fell off. Even in its death, the Beast King hadn't noticed anything amiss.

Thea sighed as she looked across the battlefield. Killing one beast was barely a blip on the radar before the endless tide that came out of nowhere. Yet, she couldn't sit back and ignore the suffering around her like most of the haughty monks. They spoke of natural course and not stepping into the sea of suffering. They simply didn't want to sully their providence with the Karma of the local factions they hopped between.

Useless locusts.

Well, not all of them. A golden palm crashed into the ground, turning a thousand beasts into ashes. The palm was followed by a ringed staff the size of a skyscraper. It swept through the chaotic lines, forcing order on the wilds. Amanthi was like a god of war as he advanced, delivering salvation through rebirth.

Her mentor singlehandedly stabilized a large swathe of the battlefield before the locals were overrun. There was still a chance to turn things around. The beasts were larger, faster, and stronger, but man never claimed dominion over the cosmos through raw force. Battlements were being erected, weapons assembled. They just needed to hold out a little longer.

A single word made those thoughts shrivel up and die.

'RUN!'

Hearing the horror in her fearless companion's voice made Thea activate her ultimate escape skill without hesitation. Two rounds of adjustments had left it slightly weaker, but it no longer cost her levels to activate. She didn't have much choice—between the dangers on the Goldblade continent and the war, she would have been pushed back to level one just to stay alive.

It was still a unique top-tier Skill, which even borrowed from the Sangha's understanding of the river of fate. However, Thea's swore upon finding herself stuck in place. A hand the size of a planet had replaced all surroundings, destroying any fate she had with the outside world.

"You're the key, aren't you?" a guttural laugh shook Thea to the core. "I can feel your fate entangled with the fulcrum."

Thea ignored the voice as she tried to break free from the mysterious method. Everything she did proved futile, and the hand kept shrinking. Yet she fought on, adamant to struggle until the last breath.

"Benefactor, it is not too late to turn back," an emotionless voice invaded the separated world, rewriting the past and opening a path to the future.

Thousands of pure-white lotus flowers bloomed in the darkness. The gentle rustle of their petals formed a monastic cadence that could enlighten or lead you astray, depending on your heart's convictions. Suddenly, he was there, standing among the flowers with a string of beads in his hand.

Sacred Insight, the leader of the Sangha and the first-place holder of the ladder after he finally overcame the mysterious Kelvinios two weeks ago.

"I knew it," the attacker scoffed, and Thea's eyes widened when she saw the source step out of the darkness. "Turn over a rock, and one will find you bastards hiding in its shadows."

It was that stubby monster that had become a living nightmare on the frontlines. Wherever she appeared, carnage followed. The number of soldiers who had died at her hands was already in the millions, most of them ending up in her stomach. Dozens of Late Hegemons had been ripped apart, and even a few Peak Hegemons had failed to escape her grasp.

The most shocking fact was a little-known secret Everlasting Peace shared. A wandering Monarch had tried to assassinate the so-called Primordial, likely in search of the secret of why she was so monstrously strong for a Middle Hegemon. The clash had resulted in the Monarch's complete and utter death, to the point the cultivators of the Zecia sector had forgotten of their existence. Only the Sangha could see the erasure from history and discover what had happened.

The method sounded like that uncanny power hiding within Zac, where Thea had felt her memories being erased after he killed the Dominator. Oblivion. However, this was on another scale entirely.

"One of the worst things about waking up to this false sky was finding out that you disgusting parasites were still around to soil the river of fate," the ugly creature spat before her mouth curved up in a wicked grin. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. It was that exalted existence who dashed your schemes in that ancient past, wasn't it? Is it revenge? Or do you think you can reclaim what you lost by seizing the court?"

"Amitabha," the monk calmly said. "Buddha's love is Eternal and can never be lost."

Thea didn't make a sound. She was more than happy to let these two first-place holders duke it out. Well, not that happy. While the Sangha's leader was unfathomable, he was ultimately just an Early Hegemon like her. Could he even hold back this creature long enough for her to escape?

It might seem callous, but Thea knew Sacred Insight hadn't saved her out of goodwill. He was cold and calculative, not even bothering to maintain the smiling guise of his brothers. He was also the reason her presence was kept a secret, creating circumstances that prevented her from getting her name on the ladder while blocking her attempts to send a message back to Earth.

Perhaps she'd get her chance if the Primordial could knock him out for a few weeks.

"Slippery tongues as always," the Primordial laughed. "Your talk makes me want to return to the seas and take a dip. I still remember the sweet taste of sanctimony."

"The Sangha will never turn away an esteemed guest. Every meeting is an opportunity for enlightenment."

"Whatever," the beast grunted. "Are you bastards the ones who meddled with the preordained trajectories?"

"Fate cannot be meddled with. It can only be," Sacred Insight said with a calm gaze. "And benefactor should sense the bringer of change is separate with the Sangha."

"Should I?" The beast said, her bestial eyes turning to Thea. "Then why are the Heavens pointing me to this one? Why do I feel your repulsive mark hiding in the river of fate?"

"All is one, and one is all," Sacred Insight said. "The trajectories may have changed, but the destination remains the same."

"That's right. All paths lead to my belly," the beast said as an unnaturally wide grin spread across her face.

Warning signals were going off in Thea's mind, and she inched away despite knowing it was futile. There was no escaping the suffocating pressure before them.

Two men suddenly stepped out of Sacred Insight's shadows. The first looked almost identical to the original, but his aura was many times greater. The second was barely a hazy outline, yet that glimpse was almost enough for Thea to lose her path. What terrifying attainment in the Dharma.

What was going on? It almost felt like Sacred Insight had invited incarnations of himself from the future. Or was it his current form that was false? The middle avatar kept growing more tangible, while the original felt more and more like a dream.

One thing was certain. He was now a better match to the stubby monster looking ready to swallow them whole. The standoff went on an uncomfortably long time until the Primordial snorted.

"You will die by my hands like the others," she said as the enormous hand faded. "But not before you've helped me open the path."

"Amitabha. What will be, will be."

"Thank you for—wait!" Thea shouted with exasperation upon realizing Sacred Insight was already floating away on a cloud. She had to strain herself just to keep up. "What were you talking about? What's happened?"

The monk slowed down and turned to Thea. She didn't flinch before the intense scrutiny, glaring right back even if she knew it was empty posturing. She might have become a Soultaker of Ultom, but she held no illusions that'd allow her to contend against this man. It had only made the huge chasm slightly smaller.

And while his face was impassive, Thea had spent enough time among these monks to glean that he was extremely annoyed.

"Fate has worked to keep the Flamebearers separate, but your friend went against the natural order. Fate's tide is rising, and the trajectories are in flux. Our time is running short."

"Running short? What does that mean?" Thea said, but the question was thrown into the back of her mind. "Wait, my friend? You mean Zac fought a flamebearer?"

Thea urgently opened the screen.

[Stars of Zecia: Early D-grade]

1st – Zachary Atwood, Atwood Empire

2nd – Emily Larkin, Atwood Empire

3rd – Kelvinios

4th – Ynar Solefair

5th – Kerokas, Kavriel Province

6th – Helian Ailo, Allbright Empire

7th – Nori Vera, Starforge

8th – Fateblight, Hanor Clan

9th – Arcaz Umbri'Zi, Atwood Empire

10th – Keshka'Vur, Entroso Clan

[...]

100th – Uroso Kavriel, Kavriel Province

Thea blankly looked at the update, even more shocked to see the second-place holder than the first.

"You—" Thea said, realizing the monk was already gone.

Since he was alive and well, he must have been forced to step into Middle Hegemony to make the Primordial back down. Was that why he looked so annoyed? Thea's lips curved into a smile at the thought, but the glee was soon replaced by confusion and loss.

It seemed extremely unlikely for the Zac she knew to surpass the monsters at the top of the ladder, but that was over a decade ago. Achieving the impossible was right up his wheelhouse, so it almost felt expected to suddenly see him shoot to the top like a rocket.

But what about Emily? Thea felt a pang of regret as she saw the familiar name. The only way Emily could have reached such a height was through having her fate swept up in Zac's, something she'd welcomed in contrast to Thea. Would that have been her if she'd fought a bit harder to get back home?

No, she had her path to walk while he had his. She would be the one to choose the direction, even if that meant her journey ended earlier. And while a slew of new names on the ladder had made it harder to thwart the Sangha's plot, she suddenly had a feeling she'd reunite with Zac and the others sooner than she'd expected.

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Chapter 1170: Return

Zac took his and Emily's appearance at the top of the ladder in stride. Anything else would be a surprise, considering the situation. He was more curious about the other changes. For one, the previous first place-holder was gone rather than pushed down two pegs, and he wasn't alone.

Six more entries had disappeared since the last update. It wasn't unheard of for rankers to die, especially among the bottom fifty of the ladder. However, there was rarely more than one per week. Those who managed to break into the **[Stars of Zecia]** leaderboard were the best of the best, possessing strength and means.

For six to die in one day, including the twelfth-place holder, would have been considered a disaster if the Kan'Tanu hadn't lost so much more. Replacing the seven were Galau and the others. They took up a whole block between positions 39 and 46, pushing down those below a full eight spaces.

"Sacred Insight was caught in the trap?" Zac muttered as the trio made their way out of the underground levels.

"It doesn't look good for the others, but the baldy's fine. I've already gotten a report. He's just broken through and is currently sitting in the 34th position on the Middle Hegemon Ladder," Tusko said, looking at Zac with a toothy grin. "Perhaps that baldy felt a foul wind coming from behind and opted to quickly break through before he lost his face?"

"He wouldn't be much of a monk if his heart were that brittle," Zac snorted.

"I suppose," Tusko shrugged before looking at Zac curiously. "How does it feel? Standing at the peak?"

"Like there's a whole lot of even taller mountains all around me."

"What a bore!" Tusko snorted. "You should live it up a bit. Heavens knows you have the resources. If not, you'll regret it later."

"Regret?" Zac said with a raised brow.

"Being the strongest comes with all kinds of hidden benefits, but heavy is the crown," Tusko shrugged. "To cultivate is to go against the Heavens. To reach for the peak. Your mere existence is blocking their way. How can one dream of ascension before proving themselves strongest among their peers?"

"People will be coming for your secrets, too," Galau added, getting a gleeful nod of agreement from Tusko.

"I get that," Zac said, looking at the lumbering general askance. "What I don't get is why you look so damn happy about it."

"I'll take what I can get after you scammed me that badly," Tussar guffawed. "That'll teach you to be greedy."

"We'll see who ends up being taught a lesson in the end," Zac snorted as he closed the ladder.

To think that Sacred Insight's merit wasn't even enough to break into the top 30 at the next grade. It was hard to say exactly how much merit the mysterious monk had. Zac had a decent understanding of the ladder's tail, especially now that the Muscle Brigade had added a data point. However, the top ten was still a mystery.

Zac had fought tooth and nail since day one, yet he'd lost positions. Sacred Insight could be sitting at twice his original contribution. Perhaps even more. However, Zac couldn't imagine Sacred Insight could compare to his current tally, even considering his presumed background.

Sacred Insight officially lacked any affiliation, but there was only one place such a mysterious, immensely powerful monk would come from—the Sangha. There was no way the Buddhist monks would sit out the competition for the Fifth Pillar, but their actions were hard to follow.

They kept popping up randomly across the sector like they'd walked out of thin air. Occasionally, they entered the fray to save a struggling faction. Mostly, they simply watched as planets were slaughtered before driving out the Kan'Tanu. They'd bury the corpses, administer rites of passage, and move on. Calling them an ally would stretch the term.

However, the Sangha had to be doing something in the shadows that the System considered meritorious. They still had two names on the Early D-grade ladder and now three in Middle D-grade. Either they were fighting in the

dark or had found another way to aid the war effort. Outright fighting wasn't the only method to accrue merit. It was just the most lucrative, though there were bound to be exceptions to the rule.

The tower was a great example of that. Galau and the others would have walked away with just as much merit even if Yselio hadn't shown up. Perhaps even more, considering Zac ended up taking most of the contribution by holding back the Tobrial prince. And if Ibtep actually managed to raise his space-devouring maggots, he might shoot right to the top of the ladder like Emily.

Zac took one last look at the fortress base as the three stepped onto the platform. It had appeared out of nowhere and had completely upended many of his plans. Even his fundamental understanding of the cosmos and himself had taken a hit. He had walked away stronger from the experience, but the road ahead seemed more difficult than ever.

"I'll have to stay here and wrap things up. I'm curious to see what we managed to save before Hurricane Zac swept through the city," Tusko sighed.

"Don't worry. I haven't forgotten our deal," Zac said as he took out two treasures and handed them to a confused Tusko.

"The Atwood Empire will remember this great *favor*, General Tusko," Galau somberly added as he offered the guardian a deep bow, prompting a few nearby soldiers to furtively look over before quickly turning away. "It's only right we provide a small token of appreciation."

Zac's mouth tugged upon seeing Tusko blanch at Galau's words, but he kept his face impassive. It really was convenient to have smart people by his side. Like it or not, the Alliance ran on favors and connections. Between the 'gift' and Galau's words, a hasty promise suddenly looked like a shady backroom deal between the elites of the upper echelons.

It was underhanded, but the rice had already been cooked. Zac needed the items, and frankly, they wouldn't have been the Alliance's to seize if not for his and Galau's efforts. This way, Tusko at least got some remuneration for his misstep.

"Ai—" Tusko grimaced as he stowed the items. "Fine, I'll eat this loss. Can I ask what you bast—uh, young masters, will do with the items? Warlin wasn't lying before. The Alliance always needs unique treasures, and we have many

things to exchange with. The Dynasty is also looking for items to help our elites break through."

"It's not impossible to exchange some of the things. Do you have any appraisers aboard the ship?" Zac asked.

"I'll send someone right over," Tusko said before hurrying away, barking orders.

Tusko once more exuded the air of a domineering general, but Zac still felt he'd turned tail and escaped before he was taken advantage of again.

"No wonder your pupil boasted your wealth. We racked up more treasures in one hour than I did over months," Galau commented as they continued toward their private wing. "You're like a locust. Insatiable and without shame."

"What kind of locusts have you encountered?" Zac snorted. "And times are tough. We have to be a little shameless to stay afloat."

"It's rarely the righteous who live the longest," Galau agreed. "It's a shame we didn't get the chance to enter the depths. Some interesting items should still be hidden there, waiting for the right person to come along."

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"You don't seem very surprised?"

"Over your exceptional 'nose?' Why should I be?" Galau shrugged. "I'd have to be a fool if I still measured you with common sense. Since I've decided to board your pirate ship, I'll just have to get used to the waves."

"After your time in the Muscle Brigade, I think you'll fit right in," Zac smiled.

The two soon reached their chambers. Emily was still busy absorbing the treasure, so he didn't get the chance to see her reaction to the ladder update. However, all the members of the Muscle Brigade were constantly glancing at her door like they were waiting for her to come out. It was impossible to tell whether they wanted to fight or marry her by their heated gazes.

Their attention was finally diverted when Zac began taking out the things they'd looted. Altogether, they managed to snatch twenty-eight treasures of

high enough quality for Zac to sense them. However, six emitted such a weak pull Zac doubted he would have noticed them before getting the **[Void Path]** title and the accompanying boost of Luck.

Apart from that, there were piles and piles of rare resources they'd picked up along the way, many of them materials without any supply in the Zecia sector. They would sell for a fortune, even with most of their spirituality lost.

Zac directly put aside roughly half of the boxes. Two held materials he believed useful for his Core Formation, while one was already marked by Verun. A fourth box held an incredibly ancient stone with a crack in it. It seemed even older than the Limitless Empire, from the chaotic era when the Dao was still reforming.

Something had attacked the stone, leaving a scar reminiscent of the huge chasm cutting through the fortress base. However, there was no Killing Intent coming from the stone. Instead, there was a spiritual aura of war. The stone was just an E-grade material, but its spirit was incredibly pure and profound. Zac believed it could become a core material when he finally figured out his **[Thousand Axes Avatar]**.

The rest were meant for his sealbearers rather than himself. For instance, there was a bronze scabbard holding immense amounts of Faith Energy. Since it was a path Rhubat was researching, Zac felt they might be able to glean something from its aura. If that wasn't enough, there was also a scroll stowed in the sheath instead of a weapon.

Another was an orb of immense darkness, which also held a hint of the Stellar Peak. Zac felt he was looking at a star that had collapsed to the point it radiated darkness. He had no idea what its use was, but he felt it was a perfect fit for Rhuger.

The Muscle Brigade eagerly took out some treasures of their own. Most of the things they'd found had been used up to survive the tower's onslaught, but they still had a surprising amount of impressive items. The secluded wing quickly became a bazaar where Zac and brigadiers traded for more suitable items. Zac pulled out more and more treasures from his rings until he'd traded for everything he wanted.

The Appraiser arrived soon after, and she gasped upon seeing the piles of rare treasure filling the room. And that was just the treasures they were willing to trade, while the best stuff had already returned to their rings. Still, she

displayed commendable professionalism and began working through the fortune. Scrolls, tomes, and measurement tools appeared and disappeared in rapid succession like she was putting on a magic show.

There was even a grand finale at the end when the Appraiser's domain suddenly spiked as a marvelous aura spread through the room. It was like she'd become a human nurturing array, showering the treasures with an energy that helped them rekindle some of their lost glory.

"Thank you, young master," the Appraiser said with flushed cheeks.

The last step wasn't planned. Encountering so many ancient treasures and unusual items had let the Appraiser gain an epiphany and upgrade her Dao Branch.

"I'm the one who should thank you," Zac smiled. "So, what are we working with?"

The Appraiser studiously went through the items one by one, even though she could only name a single Natural Treasure among those with fate's pull. It was rough metal called a **[Termic Lever]**, and she only knew it because she'd read about it in an ancient tome the Dravorak Dynasty had picked up in a ruin. Despite looking like a rusty block, it could nurture fire attunement by rubbing it against materials or other equipment. Essentially, it was an affinity booster for weapons rather than a cultivator.

The Appraiser also provided a decent approximation of most of the remaining treasures he and the Muscle Brigade had put forth. Ultimately, Zac handed over most of the raw materials and eight treasures. A few would go to the Alliance and the rest to the Everlast Monarch and the Dravorak Dynasty.

It wasn't a gift. It was a trade where Zac asked for similar-graded treasures in return. He'd only found items for half his sealbearers, so he wanted to get something for the others. The brutality of the past few days had driven home the dangers of the frontlines and that he wouldn't always be there to protect his people. His sealbearers needed to be able to stand on their own as soon as possible.

The brigadiers traded some but kept everything that wasn't leaking spirituality. They probably wanted to deal with the Allbright Empire or the Peak Family instead. They barely had time to finish the exchange before being ushered out of the ship with great urgency.

It wasn't that the Everfast Monarch had kicked them to the curb now that he had the items he wanted. It seemed as though he'd received top-priority orders and had to set out immediately. They even left behind the thousands of soldiers exploring the lower floors of the fortress.

The battle over the Sixth Centurion Lighthouse was coming to a close, with the Alliance seizing the greatest victory. Space was still too unstable to safely teleport, so Zac and his men boarded one of the Alliance's Starflash ships to take back.

The journey would only take a couple of hours instead of three days if he took out the Yphelion, but Zac refused to expose his ship to save some time. Besides, it wouldn't change anything. It would take the Acheron Company a few days to return while everyone aboard the ship was busy absorbing the treasures they'd gathered.

Back on Earth, Zac opened his eyes and took a deep breath of the miasmic mists surrounding him. After eight hours, he'd finished upgrading **[Desperation's End]**. The new fractal wasn't the most complex, but it had the highest number of runes and connections of his skills. Even then, the upgrade had gone without a hitch, thanks to Ultom's enlightenment almost branding the knowledge into his brain.

Zac opened his skill screen to inspect the transformation.

[D] Desperation's End - Proficiency: Early. The verdict is Death. Upgradeable.

Of the three skills he used Ultom's insight on, **[Desperation's End]** retained most of its original patterns. Still, there were significant overhauls, to the point it was somewhat surprising that it retained its name. Then again, the new flavor text proved it wasn't the old skill.

On paper, **[Desperation's End]** was perfect with his class, especially after the five floating spheres replaced the unwieldy wings at Peak Mastery. It restrained the enemy and cut them down, embodying the essence of his Inexorable Stance and his Inexorable Apostle class. The problem came from the restriction. Follow current novels on [NovelFire\(.\)net](http://NovelFire.net)

Simply put, it wasn't needed.

His Draugr's class still carried echoes from its defensive origins, and he already had multiple ways to restrain his opponent. Between Alea's nigh-unbreakable chains, his restraining technique, and skills like **[Pillar of Desolation]**, having that feature on his finisher was redundant. A fractal could only carry so much meaning, so any space used on restriction took away from its lethality.

He'd already realized that Inexorable Stance wasn't just a slow suffocation of the enemy back in the Orom World. He was the arbiter of life and death; his axe needed the power to mete out judgment. Like the flavor text said, **[Desperation's End]** was the skill meant to deliver the verdict after the other skills had done their job. It was an executioner's edge, and that didn't need any frills or pomp.

It needed speed, sharpness, and intractable power to cut through any last attempts at resisting fate. Zac felt that was exactly what he'd accomplished with his new **[Desperation's End]**.

The better part of a day had already passed since he left the frontlines, so Zac needed to head back sooner rather than later. He feared the System would throw a tribulation his way if he stalled any longer. Or worse, it would punish Earth with harsher enemies.

If nothing else, his communicator was already going warm. The Undead Empire was wondering what the hell was going on, why 'Zac' had suddenly overshadowed 'Arcaz' in such an overbearing manner. Even his dreamer disciple had passed their chosen partner on the ladder.

Zac didn't know how to deal with the situation. The fortress's sudden appearance had completely ruined his plan of letting Zac half trail slightly behind Arcaz to keep Kator and the others happy. Now, his human side had overshot him by over one million merit. It was impossible to catch up without crippling his progress. Even then, it'd take years unless a similar event came along.

The thorny situation made him think of Catheya and Ogras. They might have bickered like an old married couple, but they had been an important factor in his rapid progress inside the Perennial Vastness. They had swept aside all minor inconveniences, allowing him to focus wholeheartedly on his cultivation.

Zac sighed and looked to the sky as he walked through the forest of his private compound. How were they doing now? They should have finished their

Cores already, meaning they would be in the middle of whatever opportunities Sendor provided the two. He sincerely hoped they had the chance to return before the trial began. They had a chance to catch up and reap the war's rewards if the mission for the Centurion Beacon was as lucrative as the tower.

"Oh, the great emperor finally deigns to visit his poor subject? What an auspicious day."

Zac sighed and turned to the gaudy tower before him—the last stop before going back.

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