

The Fall 1018

[Chapter 1018 - Tears of Belsim](#)

The cold no longer felt as invasive as Catheya led Zac toward one of the outermost pagodas.

"This region is called Tears of Belsim," Catheya said. "According to legend—"

"What legend?" Zac said with confusion. "Was this a part of the empire before?"

"How could it be? You know, there is a lot of information in the libraries. Maybe if you stopped swinging your axe for a moment..." Catheya smiled.

"I've been planning to get around to those scrolls," Zac coughed.

"Anyway. According to legend, Belsim was a spirit born from a supreme natural treasure. The day it awoke, the whole world froze over. The civilizations which lived on the planet were extinguished, and not even the ancestors could avoid their demise.

"Belsim didn't know any of this. It was innocent to the ways of the world. It didn't understand its birth had come at the cost of billions of lives. But as it grew older, the spirit started to wish for more. It left its birthplace, traveling across the world of ice and death. Wherever it went, it felt echoes of itself.

"First, Belsim didn't think there was anything odd with it. It was one with the land, so it was natural for it to sense its Dao in the ground and air. But then, it found the civilizations. Whole cities of small beings frozen in place, their citizens filled with death and resentment. Places that weren't meant to have Belsim's mark.

"Eventually, Belsim figured out what had happened. The price of its becoming. It tried to fix what it had done, absorbing the energy it had imposed on the small creatures. It wasn't enough. Then, it swallowed the death of a world and was indelibly transformed. But that only meant the small creatures had become hollow husks without energy. Those people were gone forever. These ponds are the tears Belsim shed as they realized there was nothing they could do."

"That's..." Zac hesitated.

"I'm sorry, the story is a bit heavy," Catheya coughed as she led him into the leftmost pagoda. "Come, let me show you something else."

A familiar wall filled with scrolls lined the inner wall, while the rest of the interiors looked like a living room. The interiors didn't mirror the cold and blue of the outside world and were instead filled with warmth and color. A series of intricately woven rugs covered the ground, hiding the cold hard stone beneath. They reminded Zac of a Bedouin tent, though the room had classical furniture.

There were reading nooks and sofas, all of them in warm colors. The scene was quite different from what he'd expected as Zac remembered how Catheya usually formed ice furniture for herself and a stark juxtaposition to the cold palette outside. The walls were no exception to the decoration. Over a dozen paintings covered the walls, all painted with stark colors and bold strokes.

They initially seemed like abstract splashes of color, but Zac soon stopped and looked to the side. It was a painting dominated by splotches of angry red, with accompanying details of deep blue, gold, and

purple. Something about it was drawing him in, and a few seconds passed until he realized there was order to the madness.

After a few more seconds, he felt the scene shift. The red splotches were no longer dots of paint but rustling leaves of tree crowns. Gold rivers ran between the trees, all under a purple sky dominated by blue flying creatures.

"This is?" Zac asked curiously as he walked over.

"A small hobby of mine," Catheya smiled as she walked up next to Zac. "This is an unstable realm I visited inside the Million Gates Territory. The moment I stepped through the spatial rift, I knew it would make a great painting."

"You painted all of these?" Zac said with surprise.

"Of course," Catheya said. "I'm not sure how you're able to keep constantly pushing forward. Most of us need outlets to decompress. This is something I learned from my mother."

"Your mother? I think that's the first time you mention her?"

"She's from a distant subsidiary branch of Sharva'Zi. She and my father had a short romance when he emerged from secluded cultivation. They met when he saw her paint a mountain range. When I was born, I was lucky enough to have a strong mark of Zi even though my mother's weak heritage. So I became an official daughter of the main clan."

"If you hadn't had the bloodline?"

"Then I would have lived with my mother's branch, though my father's identity would likely have resulted in me getting adopted by the clan leader," Catheya shrugged. "I still visit when I get the chance."

Zac hummed and looked around. Draugr society was mostly similar to what he was used to, but there were some distinct differences. Marriages were uncommon and almost only took place between Dao Partners. Perhaps it made more sense. Until death do us part had a completely different meaning when some lived for millions of years.

It was more common to have shorter trysts between cultivation sessions or missions, and those affairs occasionally resulted in children being born. Of course, this was mainly for Hegemons and higher. Those stuck in the lower grades had more traditional family structures.

Catheya's situation was pretty normal, though the difference in status between her parents seemed unusually large. Bloodline decided which clan the offspring would be part of, though there were rare exceptions. For example, if Catheya's father had wanted to adopt his daughter even if she was born with the lower bloodline, he probably could've.

By the sound of it, her parents were no longer together, which meant Catheya's mother would have returned to her clan. Perhaps the two split when Catheya was young, which would explain why Catheya still had a connection with her even though their bloodlines didn't match. Many parents severed their connection shortly after birth if their bloodlines didn't match.

Ultimately, the clan was considered the true family unit, and being a father or mother was not seen as very important. It all felt a bit foreign to Zac, but it was quite normal compared to some societies he'd read about over the past years.

"What about you?"

"Me?" Zac said, hesitating a bit. "My dad died during the first month of the Integration. He was a mortal like me, but we were split up. He was killed when the batch of cultivators returned from the tutorial. My mother died when I was young. My sister... died a few years after the Integration. Only me left now."

"I'm sorry..." Catheya sighed as she placed her hand on his arm.

Zac gave her a weak smile before turning to another painting. It almost looked like a starry sky partly shrouded by an ethereal haze. It was beautiful but gave off a sense of danger. Zac immediately recognized the scene. "The Vigorbloom Lilacs."

"That's where I got to know you. Well, some of your secrets, at least."

"It's beautiful," Zac smiled. "You're really good."

"You can't have it," Catheya grinned.

"I wasn't fishing or anything," Zac assured, though he muttered under his breath. "Stingy."

"I'll paint you something else," Catheya laughed. "Come."

The two toured one building after another, where Catheya excitedly showed off interesting plants she'd trapped in ice or paintings of her visits. Eventually, they reached a padded bench overlooking the mysterious pond at the foot of the hill, where a bottle and two glasses already stood waiting on a table. The two sat down next to each other, and Zac's mind shuddered as he felt a brief bout of *deja vu*.

The view was completely different to back home, but the situation was still reminiscent of those mornings he'd shared with Thea in his pergola. He didn't push the thoughts aside but let them pass on their own. More than a decade had passed since then, and Zac knew he had to let go and move on. Doing so didn't mean he'd forgiven his mother or forgotten his goals. It meant he would look ahead instead of being trapped in the past.

"By the way, how's the kernel?" Zac asked. "No problems, right?"

"It's the opposite, really," Catheya said as she poured Zac a glass. "It's amazing. It almost feels like I have another Hidden Node. Energy flows smoother, and the Dao feels clearer. It's a shame it'll be gone after I form my Cosmic Core."

"Who knows, it might have lasting effects," Zac mused.

"Really?"

"Well, they felt a lot more powerful than normal kernels. They might permanently improve your affinity."

"Then it'd be the second time you got me something that raises my talent," Catheya said as she looked deeply into Zac's eyes. "My fate really has been sent off-kilter by you."

Zac's mouth opened, but his mind went blank.

"It's quite the view. This place really is perfect for you," Zac coughed after a few seconds of awkward silence. "You were a lot smarter than me when picking your home base."

Zac had expected Catheya to use the prompt to explain the mysterious pond beyond its mythological origin. Still, he was surprised to find her smile turn crooked as some sorrow appeared in Catheya's eyes.

"Perfect for me," Catheya sighed.

"What's wrong?"

Catheya didn't move for a few seconds before answering.

"I was born with a great affinity to Ice and Death, so my father entrusted me to his friend who walked a similar path. I've lived and cultivated within environments such as this all my life. It's, as you say, perfect for me. But it sometimes feels like a prison.

"The Perennial Vastness is a gateway to all kinds of wonders. There are thousands of worlds holding environments I didn't even know existed. Yet I'll have to keep going back to the worlds of Ice and Death. The rest are hostile to me, in a way I don't think you living understand." Catheya said, shaking her head when Zac was about to interject. "I can tell you don't really feel the suppression like I do. Some places are so damaging I can feel my body dying unless I actively resist with beacons or Miasma Crystals. I'm relegated to a corner of the Heavens.

"Maybe that's why that story with the Belsim resonated with me."

"I'm sorry, I—" Zac said, but Catheya shook her head as she placed her hand on his.

"No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't complain. I know I'm far better off than most. Staying in the Perennial Vastness is just a constant reminder of how we are outsiders."

"Well, how about this?" Zac said after some thought. "I'll sneak into the Heart of the Empire when I visit. That place probably has all kinds of good things. Finding something that will allow you to travel the Multiverse shouldn't be too hard."

"You'll fight the Primo and steal his stuff for me?" Catheya grinned.

"He can try to stop me, but I've gotten pretty good at blowing up stuff and creating a mess," Zac winked.

Catheya laughed before leaning her head against his shoulder. "Then I'll be waiting."

The two were content sitting like that for a minute until Catheya spoke up again. "What will you do next?"

"I got a treasure in the inheritance that needs to be fed with treasures from all Dao Peaks, so I'll be visiting one Red Zone after another," Zac sighed. "It's weird. I was ahead of schedule, but now I feel I'm somehow behind again."

"When are you setting out?"

"I..." Zac said as he looked down at Catheya. "Uh... Maybe tomorrow?"

A mischievous smile appeared on her face as she stood up. "Come, there's one more thing I want to show you."

Zac grunted as he slowly heaved himself up the ledge, his muscles shuddering from the exertion. His fingers were slick with sweat, but the rough rocks were thankfully providing enough purchase to avoid falling. Just two hours, and he felt as though he'd been fighting for his life ten days and ten nights straight. Yet when looking down, he saw he'd only managed to ascend a few thousand meters. Barely enough to make a dent.

By this point, the sun was high in the sky, drowning the sharp peak in light. When he arrived, the sun had just appeared on the horizon. There was no warmth to the light like a normal sun, but neither was there anything else. It was just pure light containing an invasive and unyielding force. Zac tried to resist it the best he could, but not even [Void Zone] worked against the rays. It was like the light had a physical characteristic, glomming onto him and weighing him down.

As if the intense gravity of the mountain needed any help making his life miserable. And it would only get worse from here. Soon, the light would be replaced by darkness. Active darkness, and not just the absence of the sun. It would pour onto him just like the light now was, putting even greater restrictions on his body. This was the true danger of the Imperial Spire. The longer you stayed, the more cycles of light and darkness you'd experience. Each cycle would tack on the weight you experienced, and there was no way to cleanse it except to leave the region.

If you were too slow, the weight would overwhelm you before you reached the upper reaches where the treasures waited. And if you weren't careful, you could find yourself stuck. Gravity increased the further you climbed, and the cycles of light and darkness would continuously worsen the situation. It was easy to reach a point where you didn't have the strength to descend the mountain safely. Just breaking a few bones was the least of your worries. There was a real risk of being turned into meat paste on the mountain slopes.

Zac looked up at the almost vertical peak, sweat pouring down his face. Still a long, long way to go before he reached his target.

[Red Mission: Extract Revolution Orbs from the Imperial Spire. Bounty: 200 Mana per extracted Revolution Orb. Orbs must be fully removed from the Imperial Spire to be considered extracted. Maximum Participants: 1. NOTE: Multiple guests can accept this mission.]

The [Revolution Orbs] didn't have anything to do with overthrowing the unnamed emperor after which this mountain was named. They were Natural Treasures formed by the revolution of light and darkness that kept him and all other guests on their toes. Just as the revolutions left some mysterious energy on his body, so did they leave behind energies on the mountain itself.

Sometimes, these energies turned into [Revolution Orbs]—treasures encompassing all three major directions of the Peak of Taiji. And the target for Zac, who hoped to kill two birds with one stone. Earn some Mana and feed his Omnitool, which apparently was the real name of the hammer pick floating around in his mind.

This was the first Peak he targeted, even before going after the supreme treasures of his path. It would have been easier to target those two, but it wasn't convenient right now. For chaos, there was the Calamity, but that region was still in flux. And since Zac needed to return later to pick up the Remnants anyway, there was no point in heading to a similar zone.

As for the Peak of Conflict, he didn't have access. There were two good options, both of which were ancient battlefields. However, they contained such dangerous lingering resentment that one required the fourth echelon to access and the other the eighth. There were less dangerous places as well, but visiting those felt like a waste of time. He had reached the third echelon just this month, though, so he was still some ways off.

That left him with the Imperial Spire. It was by no means the easiest or safest of the Red Zones, but he had an inherent advantage. Apparently, most living races had an advantage when climbing under the light, while they faced incredible suppression in darkness. Conversely, undead, most golemoids, and some other species could make swift progress in the dark, relatively speaking, while they suffered under the light.

So someone like him could keep going without suffering the full weight of the zone.

Zac kept going, climbing higher and higher. Neither Vivi nor Alea was much help. They barely managed to raise their tendrils against the gravity, and the extra weight of the two made climbing even harder. So Alea returned to her necklace form while Vivi retracted all but a bulbous flower that soaked in the light.

Skills were no good either. For one, the gravity was so overbearing even his Cosmic Energy was suppressed. He had narrowly managed to activate his skills, but [Ancestral Forest] instantly failed, and [Earthstrider] only moved him a few meters at the cost of almost killing him. He didn't even dare try [Abyssal Phase] under this suppression.

Thankfully, [Void Zone] was able to give Zac the occasional breather. And with his enormous pool of Strength, he covered more ground in a single light cycle than most did in five. Soon, night arrived, and Zac wordlessly swapped over to his Draugr form on a ledge and kept going. Four days passed this way until Zac finally saw a blast of light from a ledge above. The scene filled Zac's exhausted body with newfound strength, and he swiftly crossed the final stretch.

It was lying there right in the open—a grey pearl containing an immense sense of weight. It occasionally emitted bursts of intense darkness or light, which was what he'd seen before. Zac walked over and almost stumbled upon feeling the intense gravity zone the orb had created.

"Holy crap," Zac grunted, feeling like he would slip a disk when lifting the fist-sized orb.

It dislodged the natural formation that kept all [Revolution Orbs] spatially locked, but it didn't do much to help with the weight. He knew he couldn't put it down. According to Null, it would fuse with the mountain if he did, so he desperately held on with his right hand as the Omnitool appeared in his left.

Zac lightly tapped the hammer against the orb according to a set pattern. There was no response. Zac tried a few more times, but the orb was about to slip out of his grasp. He recalled the tool with a sigh before stowing away the [Revolution Orb] in a spare high-quality spatial ring. Those things were so heavy they could damage the subspace of the Spatial Tools they were in. His main ring was probably sturdy enough, but why take the risk?

He had reached the altitude where the [Revolution Orbs] started to appear. The conventional method to finish his quest would be climbing sideways in search of more orbs. When you could no longer endure the layers of light and dark, you'd descend with your haul. But Zac's gaze turned upward. The Omnitool didn't want [Revolution Orbs], but nothing said the orbs were the only things that could appear on the mountain.

The best things were no doubt at the peak.