

The Fall 1028

[Chapter 1028 - Candor](#)

Zac swore as one rune after another sprung up around the shield, and he immediately shot toward the closest wall. A herculean swing slammed into the wall of light, but Zac felt like he was fighting the whole world. His attack only left a discoloration that was soon washed away. Breaking through this thing would require far more energy. A moment later, the pillar had closed, forming a solid dome.

He should have expected as much—these people were obviously prepared. They must have scouted ahead to know there'd be such a good location to launch an ambush. Between the haze and the barrier, who'd notice even if they unleashed their skills to the fullest?

Zac's eyes lit up at the thought. That's right. They were only a hundred meters from the shroud's edge. They'd been even further in when they almost got blasted by the pillar of fire. It was only a matter of time before another attack from one of the Golden Champions or White Sigils reached this section, and the barrier was a huge target.

But just as the hope was born, it was murdered. The dome was actually moving, dragging the two away from the edge of the haze. Zac felt like a fish being reeled in, and pushing against the wall did nothing.

"This is new," Kruta curiously muttered as he was forced to jog along. "Movable and sturdy. Should we break out?"

Zac hesitated. The question was what they had his enemies had planned. It would be troublesome if his captor planned to drag him over to the region through which the puppet reinforcements would arrive.

"Can you tell what direction it's moving?" Zac asked

Kruta fiddled with a few bones for a couple of seconds before nodding. "Out and toward the Edge."

"So away from the puppets," Zac sighed with relief. "For now, let's see what they have planned. But if they move too far..."

"Then they're dragging us into a trap," Kruta said before laughing. "Well, another one, I guess?"

"You two are quite laid-back," an unfamiliar voice drifted from the haze.

The next moment, a party of fifteen people appeared through the shroud, and Zac noted with interest that the dome opened a hole to let them inside. So it separated bidirectionally, meaning wandering puppets would have to fight their way through. The pillar stopped and sealed the area as soon as the new group had entered, and Zac curiously looked at the newcomers.

The one who had spoken before was a beautiful woman in the front. She was a human, and Zac was surprised to see her complexion slightly remind him of Karz. She had olive skin, golden eyes, and a mane of blonde hair. She was decked in gear resembling white templar armor, where only her head was exposed.

Her breastplate was made out of solid white metal, while the other parts were protected by chainmail. Golden scripts covered every inch of her armor, all radiating a pure light that could only belong to the Peak of Taiji. A golden crown inlaid with seven jewels was atop her head, each emitting a frightful aura.

Her gear gave off a familiar feeling—it was similar to the black armor Uona wore during their final battle. It had proven incredibly difficult to break through, to the point Zac had been forced to kill her with the Remnants. And this armor gave off an even greater pressure. Was it a War Regalia? It was the first time Zac had seen an E-grade cultivator able to power such a thing. Even he couldn't, at least not anything he could get his hands on.

With the large cape behind her back, she reminded Zac of his [Arbiter of the Abyss]-transformation. However, this woman gave off a very different aura. She emitted the pressure and air of an empress, and Zac was almost filled with a desire to kneel. The Conflict in the air was curtailed and turned into a sword against her enemies. She was a beacon of light in this world of falsehood, her mere presence showing the path.

Such a powerful Mana Domain. She had to be a tenth-echelon guest, at least.

Behind her were fourteen people, ten of which wore identical equipment. They looked every bit the part of soldiers in an army as the Hero Souls, and the runes on their equipment indicated they came from the same faction as the young woman. All of them had a glowing rune behind their back, and Zac could see the streams of power entering the leader.

A War Array, and a very potent one at that. When fueled by ten powerhouses at the same level, the effect likely eclipsed most berserking methods. It was also the answer to how she could use War Regalia without sacrificing much of her own energy capacity. The warriors were not just batteries, though. They all had auras that would place them in the upper tiers of all guests. One by one, they weren't a threat to Zac. Together, they'd be a headache.

Finally, there were four mages or clerics hiding behind the meat wall. Their features were covered in hoods, but their hands were held in different mudras. Zac couldn't be certain, but he believed they were chanting something under their breath. Most likely, they were responsible for maintaining the barrier, while possibly assisting with the War Array. After all, four runes floated behind their backs, matching the four runes that covered the cardinal directions of the dome.

Zac could also see a string of energy connecting them to a fifth rune placed just beneath the tip of the dome. An identical, or rather inverted, version hovered outside the shield like a mirror image. Both emitted a powerful Dao of Conflict. Zac glanced at the runes suspiciously. Something about them was odd—it didn't seem like the Dao of the guests. It was rather the path of the Stand. Had they stolen a corner of this realm's Dao and used it to harmonize the domain with the environment?

Or did it even allow them to use the ambient energy to power the barrier? If so, then it would be extremely difficult to crack it open.

He'd known his enemies would be dangerous—why else would he have felt this looming threat for weeks? Even then, he knew the situation was far more troublesome than his projections. Being confronted by fifteen people normally wasn't a big deal for him, but it was different in the Perennial Vastness. The leader alone gave off a pressure that told him he'd have to go all out. Worse, all her followers had dense auras of elite warriors tempered by blood. They weren't the kind of glasshouse elites he'd occasionally run into here.

That wasn't the only issue. Zac was drawing a complete blank. He was certain he'd never seen her before, and her appearance didn't match the description of any famous high-echelon guests who ran the more powerful coalitions. Who was she, and why was she targeting him? Was it really related to Ultom?

However, the drastic change in Kruta's demeanor told Zac everything he needed to know.

"That's Valsa Planur," Kruta said with undisguised fear on his face. "Of all the guests, why her? We're in trouble. I—"

"Don't worry," Zac said, glancing at the light dome. "I'll get you out of here."

"I'm sorry, her origins are too scary," Kruta sighed. "Contending with her has ramifications beyond this realm."

"I understand," Zac nodded. "I'll—"

The roaring sound of a forest sprouting from the ground drowned out Zac's words. He was gone the next moment, entering the closest tree of [Ancestral Woods] before it was fully grown. As he stepped into one sprout, he simultaneously emerged right behind a clump of three guards. Their swords were already ripping toward Zac's throat when he emerged, but a golden domain strained their movements.

A set of pillars had appeared from where Zac once stood as though they'd appeared out of nowhere. Its appearance and position were made possible by starting the activation with Cosmic Energy, then instantly finishing the process with Void Energy at the exact moment suppression would have the greatest effect.

Four vines slightly delayed the incoming attacks, and two small delays were all Zac needed. A condensed scar four meters long ripped right through the warriors before they had a chance to react. From there, it didn't continue toward the other guards or even Valsa herself. Instead, it shot toward the solitary rune of Conflict floating in the middle of the dome. A shockwave of Void and Dao-empowered leaves created utter chaos that prevented any interruption.

Zac knew he was working against the clock. He could feel the storms of Cosmic Energy surging in the surrounding enemies, like ancient beasts awakening from their slumber. A flash forward and the activation of [Void Zone] strangled the Dao and the energy of the mages, who found themselves at his mercy.

Two enemies fell in the blink of an eye, but a scream of deadly danger warned him time was up. Zac tried to move out of the way, but a glowing sword pierced right through the protective barrier of [Empyrean Aegis] and tore up a huge wound in his side. Eight attacks were right on the heels of Valsa's strike, and Zac was forced to eat two as he desperately held Valsa back.

It felt like he was caught inside a beast's maw, with the remaining enemies collapsing upon him. Valsa's attacks were fast and ruthless, and he was alarmed to realize he couldn't match her in either speed or strength. Zac had a hard time imagining her raw attributes were as high as his, but she did wear a War Regalia that likely provided both offense and defense. Just dealing with her pushed Zac and his technique to the limit, but there were also seven warriors tacking on the pressure.

Avoiding everything was impossible. He blocked what he could while Vivi worked overtime, but it wasn't enough. He could only prioritize the strikes, making sure lethal attacks were demoted to grievous wounds and that crippling wounds didn't hurt anything that would directly weaken his combat potential. Organs and innards could be regrown, but he couldn't lose a leg or his axe arm. That would be the nail in the coffin.

Zac's body screamed in agony, but a bloody smile spread across his face. This was the kind of situation where fate and paths were tested. It was at the edge of life and death where your convictions crystallized into something greater, where you could glimpse what waited beyond. Zac wanted to test out the properties of the armor, but he had a hard time staying alive, even with less than a second passing.

Still, he gritted his teeth, and waves of murderous intent flooded the surroundings as he stepped forward to fight fire with fire. But suddenly, he was yanked back, dragged away from a surprised-looking Valsa. It was Vivi who had wound herself around a nearby tree, and Zac entered its trunk after shooting out a burst of Void-generated fractal leaves. Simultaneously, [Rapturous Divide] reached the rune in the sky.

Zac appeared right next to a surprised-looking Kruta, inwardly shocked at the wretched state of his body. He had known these people would be strong, but he hadn't expected to almost get himself killed by an opening exchange.

A loud rumble shook the whole domain as the spatial blade of [Rapturous Divide] ripped into the large golden rune. With two of the mages executed and the remaining duo forced to create shields to block [Nature's Edge], the rune flickered ominously. Large scars appeared on the dome, but Zac inwardly swore upon realizing the damage was only temporary. Still, it was enough as Kruta turned into a streak of light that shot right through one of the exits, fleeing west.

'Hold out! I'll bring reinforcements.'

Zac made no sign he'd heard Kruta's voice, but he still felt some warmth as he turned back toward the armored woman. There were no guarantees Kruta was telling the truth, but he believed they were. Kruta would try to drag a puppet army to their side. Of course, he wouldn't bet his life on Kruta succeeding. This was his mess, and he had to rely on himself to clean it up.

His opening gambit was a success. Zac had two goals with his ambush; thin out the number of supporting warriors and provide Kruta with a way to escape. He'd considered going for a Void-summoned [Arcadia's Judgment] right out the gate, but his instincts told him it would backfire.

That strategy had served him well before, but these people were too powerful. He'd already been given a taste of the leader's power. She would have been able to mitigate much of the skill's damage by herself, and the rest were strong enough to survive the aftershock. Ultimately, [Arcadia's Judgment] was a bit too slow even when activated with Void Energy, and it was better to keep his finisher in the pocket for a time when it simply couldn't be stopped. By using [Rapturous Divide] instead, he dealt a significant blow without expending too much force.

Surprisingly, the enemies weren't following up on the initial exchange. They stood like statues, except for one of the mages who sent healing waves to those cut by [Nature's Edge]. Taking a breather was fine

with Zac. He was covered in wounds, and the one in his side was especially sinister. This Valsa had at least one Late Dao Branch that was currently wreaking havoc on his organs.

Luckily, his body was incredibly good at dealing with these matters, and the Kill Energy of five dead elites was already pouring into [Surging Vitality]. Seeing how desperate the situation was, Zac also fixed some of the more problematic wounds with small amounts of Creation Energy. For a few seconds, no one said anything, until the armored woman spoke up.

"I wonder how you accomplished that just now. You carry surprising secrets," Valsa said, glancing in the direction Kruta fled. "You might have been able to escape if you joined your friend."

"Why would I escape?" Zac said as he cracked his neck. "You've been targeting me for a while now, and I finally have you in front of me."

"Oh? You knew?" the woman said, a small smile spreading on her lips. "How embarrassing."

"As far as I know, we have no enmity toward each other," Zac continued. "Want to explain why you're here?"

Zac was curious about the answer and had everything to benefit by stalling. Apart from his rapidly healing body, there was Kruta, who was hopefully bringing some chaos to the battle. He also needed to find the weaknesses in the dome. Those runes had so perfectly fused it with the realm that Zac wasn't sure the puppets would attack it. He was also no closer to figuring out what powered it or how it could move.

Without dealing with that, he was trapped. Reactivating [Ancestral Woods] with Void Energy was useless if Valsa could just move the domain to his location.

At least their operations had to be costly. Whether it was the array or the War Regalia, they had to drain large amounts of energy every second. The more time they wasted, the better his position would be.

"I think you know," she said. "The Left Imperial Palace is emerging. Some are fated. Others have to seize fate."

"So you're just a greedy thief," Zac sighed.

"A Thief?" a peeling laugh echoed through the square, but Zac was surprised by the shocking killing intent the followers suddenly emitted.

They hadn't so much as frowned when he killed five of their companions. Now, they looked ready to eat his flesh and drink his blood? These people were extremely loyal. Making them scatter after killing a few more was not an option.

"Perhaps in your eyes. But the Pillars were made by the Empire. They belong with us. Your individual fate cannot match the Imperial Destiny."

"So you're from one of the traitor clans," Zac sighed, finally putting two and two together. "That explains some things."

"We did what we had to survive. How does that make us traitors?" a hint of sharpness suddenly in her voice. It looked like she was about to continue, but she suddenly looked at the sky. "Ah, here we are."

At first, Zac didn't understand what she was talking about. Then, the haze above the dome was dispersed by a radiant glow. It was like a morning sun had risen to drive away the gloom, even if the view was still the familiar night sky of the Stand of Saeward. The stars moved about, and no attacks were raining down from above.

Then, he saw it.

Zac's eyes widened in shock as the stars rearranged themselves, forming an enormous rune in the sky. It wasn't an array; it felt more like a fundamental Law of the universe taken form. This was far beyond the scope of an E-grade cultivator could accomplish, yet Zac's instincts told him this wasn't an illusion. That thought alone was incredibly terrifying. Was one of the old monsters in the Perennial Vastness working with his enemy?

Candor.

That was what the rune meant. Not in the standard Multiverse alphabet but rather in the script of the Limitless Empire.

"Under the Imperial Edict of Candor, justice will prevail," Valsa smiled. "There can be no duplicity."