

## Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1141: Guiding Light - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1141: Guiding Light

### Chapter 1141: Guiding Light

There was one more potential explanation for the **[Court Cycle Token]**'s energy loss, apart from the drain of opening doors—an explanation Zac had staunchly refused to entertain until now. However, sensing Emily's rescue beacon within the storm forced those insidious whispers to the surface. It might have been one of his sealbearers dying, where Emily and Ra'Klid faced the greatest danger. And Ra'Klid couldn't be the reason for the dip since Zac had yet to infuse the demon's seal into the token.

Sensing Emily's beacon through the turbulent storm filled Zac with fear and hope. Waiting for the Dravorak to find a stable path into the tower was out of the question, but his impulsive action left him floundering. He'd lost the signal the moment he entered the hurricane, and it was impossible to gain his bearings.

Zac's energy was rapidly consumed by **[Ossuary Bulwark]**, despite its defensive domain being only marginally better at defending against the onslaught than **[Void Zone]**. It protected his body, but scars were constantly added to his armor while streams of chaotic energy slipped right through the cracks. **[Void Heart]** still hadn't returned the mysterious force from before and was unwilling to stop its refinement to deal with the new invading energies. Lagoon witnessed the first publication of this chapter on November 1st.

The influx was still manageable by relying on his Daos. The real headache was the unusual spatial pressure. Space wasn't linear inside the chasm, and there was a powerful force trying to twist him like a rope. Nothing he did seemed to reduce the painful pull, leaving him with nothing to rely on except his body's basic durability.

Not even his Soul Sense was spared, and a painful backlash made Zac cough up blood inside his helmet. His Mental Energy had been dragged beyond its breaking point when it expanded from his body. He'd effectively been blinded, and direction couldn't be trusted any more than inside the Void.

Should he just leave and regroup? **[Apex Jungle]** should still be able to reach outside, and using Void Energy should let him teleport out before the domain was ripped apart.

It was almost like the universe could hear his thoughts. The beacon's signal returned just as Zac considered retreat, and he furiously channeled **[Skystriker]** to force his way further into the storm. The turbulence worsened, putting increasing pressure on **[Ossuary Bulwark]**. Meanwhile, the Killing Intent dragged into the chasm was growing increasingly concentrated, approaching the levels where it gained a will.

The good news was that the signal gradually grew stronger, confirming Zac successfully navigated the chasm while giving him a better sense of direction. Purpose burned as he forcibly activated his movement skill over and over until a warning call echoed in his mind. It came from his gear rather than danger sense, cautioning that the beastcrafted armor was approaching a point beyond its self-recovery capabilities.

Zac still forged ahead, replacing bone armor with the suppressive force of his bloodline. He condensed **[Void Zone]** to only reach a hand beyond his body to conserve energy and slightly strengthen the nullification field. It was still woefully incapable of dealing with the onslaught, but that didn't change Zac's conviction. He pressed on, constantly channeling **[Surging Rebirth]** with Kill Energy.

It wasn't often that Eoz's parting words resonated with him as much as it did today. Zac's ancestor had found purpose through his descendants, and through purpose came strength. Zac felt that same strength as he fought to reach his disciple.

Purpose and iron will brought Zac further than he'd reach on his own, but his Draugr Nodes weren't without a limit. He was eventually forced to swap out **[Void Zone]** with the absolute defense of a D-grade Defensive Talisman. It gave him a breather against the chaotic energies, but the Killing Intent had already reached critical mass. Murderous intent so dense it gained physical form and malignant will crashed into the barrier. Some of it seeped through, which finally stirred the slumbering **[Void Heart]** to action.

It was a small comfort but painfully inadequate to turn the situation around. A pang of danger provided a last-minute warning before a wraithlike warrior stepped out of the rampaging winds, slashing at Zac with overly long fingers.

The attack tore through the exhausted talisman, but a golden domain rose to meet the attack. **[Empyrean Aegis]**

managed to block the ambush at the cost of three pillars, but more vengeful ghosts were already forming around him.

The situation was unsustainable.

Zac had no choice but to finally activate his Hail Mary. Large amounts of Void Energy were spent to conjure a vast jungle within the storm. Zac stretched the skill as far as he could, even if that meant its collapse would come sooner. Hundreds of trees were shredded the second they appeared. Zac forcibly regrew them, unheeding of the strain it put the skill fractal under.

The ghosts were barely affected by the domain, and a swipe destroyed the remaining pillars of Zac's defensive skill. He used the attack's momentum to fly into the closest tree of his rapidly crumbling domain. Zac had no frame of reference as to where the tree he teleported to was located. He only knew the emergency beacon was loudest here.

The jungle had already been ripped apart by wraiths and spatial distortion when Zac emerged. The tree behind him was the last of its kind, bravely holding on until it finished its mission. The winds were much calmer where he appeared, but it was replaced by something even worse.

He'd entered a world of overwhelming Killing Intent, filled with jagged screams and discordant memories. He'd fallen into a sea of blood which broke down his body and corroded his sanity. Yet the rescue beacon was like a lighthouse's lantern, urging his body forward. Suddenly, he felt his hands and knees touch solid ground, but it barely registered over the war raging in his mind.

Too much intent had flooded his body. Dozens of red streaks had formed, and **[Void Heart]** was utterly incapable of containing them. It slowly nibbled away at the energy, but Zac knew he'd go mad before it was done unless something changed. He tried to enter a Void State to combat the roaring madness, only to find his sanctuary repeatedly encroached and destroyed.

He unsteadily got to his feet, stepping forward while forming a familiar mudra. One position followed the next as Zac let muscle memory lead him through the first layer of the **[Void Vajra Sublimation]**. The familiar movements and their conditioned effect helped Zac take better control of his state of mind.

The crumbling Void eventually stabilized, becoming a stone that resisted the river. The only thing he accepted into his Void was the stable call of Emily's beacon, which represented his self and his purpose. Everything else was held at bay.

Zac had no idea how long it took before the Killing Intent was exhausted and the fiendish energy consumed. He slumped onto the ground, his body once more a bloody mess. The remaining Kill Energy flooded **[Surging Rebirth]**, rapidly closing his lacerations.

It was only now he'd gotten a look at his surroundings. Zac knew he'd passed the chasm, but he hadn't expected to reach the tower interiors directly from the storm. However, there was no other explanation for the densely engraved walls of the wide hallway he found himself in. The details and materials differed from the buildings outside, and he only needed to turn around to confirm his location.

The hallway abruptly ended just ten meters behind him, giving a spectacular view of the miniature world. The buildings were so far below him they looked like small toy blocks. He hadn't just entered the tower; he had already reached one of the upper sections damaged by the immense sword scar. There was no hint of Killing Intent around him, but Zac knew that taking a few steps toward the opening would put him right back in that torture chamber.

Thankfully, Emily's beacon wasn't asking anything of the sort. Its signal was still weak but significantly stronger than inside the hurricane. It clearly indicated for him to go up and further into the tower. Which coincidentally was the same direction his treasure sense urged him to go. Far more fate was gathered in the upper reaches than the rest of the tower combined.

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Had his luck finally rubbed off on his disciple, sending her right past the finish line to claim the prize?

He tried to send her a message without any luck. Perhaps she wasn't in a state to answer. More likely, the tower blocked unauthorized means of communication. Zac took a shuddering breath as the tracker suddenly began moving. She was neither getting closer nor further away. Emily was moving back and forth in a space of roughly fifty meters.

She was alive, and she was trying to communicate through the signal. Zac's heart flooded with relief even greater than after surviving the passage. The signal was bidirectional, so she should have sensed his arrival. Was Emily saying she was okay by moving back and forth? Or that she's trapped? There was only one way to find out.

Zac ignored his body's protests as he moved further into the hallway. He didn't give the dozens of identical doorways a single glance as he passed them by, though his Soul Sense ensured he didn't miss a single detail. It quickly became apparent the fortress's damage wasn't limited to the immediate vicinity of the sword scar.

Most inscriptions lacked Cosmic Energy even further inside. Meanwhile, others were so overloaded they had become ticking time bombs, where cracked walls and scorched hallways impressed just how much force they were talking about.

And while Zac couldn't sense any spatial instability right now, it clearly hadn't always been so stable. Wherever he looked, there were the small, clean incisions of spatial tears. Only a few contained lingering traces of Spatial Energy, though. The damage was recent but not ongoing. Had the interiors stabilized when the tower began spinning?

Zac's Soul Sense couldn't penetrate the walls or the doors he passed, but the damage provided access and allowed Zac to confirm he'd been deposited into something like a sealed cultivation corridor. He passed a door every ten meters, and the only thing on the other side were small cubic rooms covered in odd arrays Zac didn't recognize. Odd in the sense they seemed designed to extract energy rather than deposit it.

It was curious, but Zac wasn't in the mood to solve the mystery or waste his token on opening one of the intact chambers to confirm. He soon reached the hallway's end, finding himself before a much sturdier door. Zac had already mentally prepared himself to use more of the token's energy to reach Emily, but a few jarring details made him stop ten meters away from the door.

First of all, the door exuded a palpable sense of danger. Its design differed greatly from those outside. It was covered in complex patterns that made it resemble a piece of art. Zac could tell it was made from Peak D-grade materials, at the least, and the energy coursing through it indicated it was being actively guarded or reinforced by arrays. There was also a control rune to the side, indicating it wasn't automated like the doors outside.

None of that was enough to give Zac pause. The two corpses slumped on the ground, however, were. They were Alliance Hegemons by their appearance. They were wounded, but not to the point it could explain their deaths. There was simply no way they'd entered the same way as he. Like Emily, they must have been deposited right inside the tower.

Were they early arrivals from when the spatial instability still reigned, or was it possible for pathways to form inside the tower despite its additional protections? It was likely the latter based on a few clues.

Zac had hoped Emily would be the exception to the rule because of their unorthodox method of entering the fortress, but Zac feared it might not be the case. Perhaps there were already hundreds of people fighting for the opportunities within. Or would any new arrival end up trapped like Emily and the two men before him?

The Hegemons must have realized the dangers of leaving through sword scar and opted to break through the door. Zac could sense lingering energy on three sections of the doorframe, and there were piles of dust right beneath the spots—array breakers, most likely, and not used more than a couple of hours ago.

The result was evident. The door remained closed while the Hegemons were deadlier than dead. The bodies completely lacked any spirituality or energy, like an invisible pulse had annihilated their souls and dispersed all energy within their cores.

Zac inched closer while monitoring the door, ready to flash away at the slightest sign of danger. He grabbed the closest hand to access the Hegemon's Spatial Ring, only for the hand to crumble like dry wood. The door's defenses were no joke to kill a D-grade cultivator so utterly.

The Spatial Ring wasn't in much better shape. It didn't crumble to Zac's touch, but cracks began to spread when he infused some energy. There was no time to worry about seals or traps. Zac urgently scanned its contents for clues and treasures while the subspace crumbled, knowing he could only extract one or two items before the whole thing crumbled. There was a little bit of everything, from manuals to crystals and treasures.

All normal things you'd find on any Hegemon, yet Zac knew something was off.

Zac had long since lost count of how many Cosmos Sacks and Spatial Rings he'd looted since the integration. He'd seen everything from mountains of treasures to such meager reserves it made Zac wonder whether his opponent had even been a cultivator. Some spatial treasures were all business, containing only the items needed for a mission or their ongoing cultivation. Others carried their entire lives on their fingers.

Some held the tools of hobbies or secondary trades. Others, thousands of worthless trinkets and mementos. He'd found one with tens of thousands of leaves, none from Spiritual Plants, yet all carefully organized. Another, thousands of self-drawn portraits. All different, but they had one thing in common. They told a story. A Spatial Ring was a window into its owner's psyche, exposing their background and pursuits.

And the story Zac was seeing rang false.

Zac didn't know why he felt that way since nothing stood out. It simply felt too intentional and synthetic. Zac chose to follow his hunch since there wasn't anything valuable in the ring anyway, so he extracted the item that gave him the strongest sense of wrongness: a wooden wardrobe holding five sets of casual robes.

The wooden armoire was only made from F-grade materials and crumbled from the unstable extraction. Zac flashed away as a gust of energy spewed a pile of items. It wasn't the robes, though, but a slew of items he hadn't noticed before.

The wardrobe actually held a second subspace, something Zac didn't even think was possible. It couldn't have been larger than a bucket, but it was still an incredible accomplishment. Could it have used a different storage method than the Dao of Space? Zac hadn't heard of anything like that before.

But if there were Cosmic Vessels based on various Daos, why not storage devices? Zac would be lying if he said he wasn't jealous. Who wouldn't want a hidden compartment for their most important treasures and secrets in case their Spatial Ring was searched?

It wasn't hard to guess why this seemingly average Hegemon had needed such an extravagant hiding spot. The items that spilled forth were wholly unfamiliar, yet they brought back memories of Kenzie's workshop and the laboratories inside the research base. The corpses were Technocrats.

Zac swore as he looked at the pile of gadgets, knowing his fears had come true. The technocrats were really a step ahead of the competition. It increasingly looked like they were his greatest adversary rather than the cultists. But so what? Emily was waiting for him, and some Technocrats wouldn't change anything. He'd cut them all down, no matter how many got in his way.

The door shared his antipathy, and Zac urgently created even more distance as the arrays on the doorframe lit up. A powerful pulse shook the corridor, and Zac was forced to activate **[Void Zone]** when a nearby rune broke and added to the chaos. The chaos only worsened, so Zac squeezed into one of the side chambers through a broken door and barricaded the gap with a block of Spiritual Metal.

The commotion only abated after thirty seconds. Zac ate another set of Healing Pills as he returned to the doorway, even if the effect was limited. He'd been overindulging the past hours, and the effect would only get worse until his body had stabilized and flushed out all the medicinal dregs.

He should've known a Limitless Empire War Fortress would be installed with defenses against the Dao of Technology. The question was, would it be able to sense the stain of technology on his body? After all, he was technically a descendant of the Kayar-Elu, one of the original Selvari Clans chosen by the Technocrat Codex.

Wouldn't he be considered enemy number one? Would the whole tower go berserk if it recognized his bloodline?

Zac looked down at the **[Nine Courts Token]** with hesitation. He hadn't been fully confident if it'd work inside after the token failed to prevent the danger of being exposed to the tower. Now, there were suddenly more variables at play. No, it shouldn't be like that. He wasn't a real Kayar-Elu, and every part of him was within Heaven's purview by design. He was designed to trick even the System, so a C-grade fortress shouldn't be a problem.

The pile of Technocrat tools had been reduced to dust, as were the corpses. Zac sifted through the piles, but there was nothing to salvage. Besides, would he even dare activate a Technocrat computer if he found one? He was extremely curious why a bunch of Technocrats were so interested in a dilapidated fortress, but he lacked the implants and skills to look for answers.

Zac looked at the control array for a few seconds before moving the token closer. The door felt like an agitated beast about to lash out again, with its energy precariously fluctuating. His heart thumped when he put the token right against the sigil. His worries only increased when energy surged toward the gate from the surrounding walls.

Finally, he couldn't take it any longer. He disappeared, instantly moving halfway across the corridor with **[Skystriker]**. However, no soul-destroying pulses or lethal lights pursued him. The door slowly opened, though it stopped halfway when its arrays failed. Zac stepped forward, his axe already in hand.

The gates were open and destiny was calling.

## **Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1142: Caches - Read**

### **Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1142: Caches**

#### Chapter 1142: Caches

Zac took in the large hall he'd entered, finding it grander in scale and make than the corridor he'd come from. It reminded Zac of a cathedral, its ceiling reaching over 50 meters into the air. His guess was likely not far off. Their exploration of the Ensolus Ruins had already shown that the Limitless Empire cultivated faith to some degree. There was also a hint of lingering will gathered in a few of the pillars.

Its character was a stark contrast to the decaying murderous intent of the sword scar. Despite being faded, it maintained clarity and strength of will, which was doubly impressive since there were traces of the corrosive Killing Intent in the hall. The Faith Energy gave Zac the impression of an ancient war god's blessing, its mark all but gone after eons of abandonment. Just standing in the cathedral helped wash away some of Zac's doubts, filling him with motivation to forge ahead.

He finally understood the engravings within the small cultivation chambers. They were Faith Catchers that nurtured the cathedral and possibly the whole fortress. Zac felt mixing war and faith was a two-edged sword, similar to relying on the Emotional Daos when fighting. Every victory would strengthen the fortress, leading it to greater glory.

However, losses would dampen an army's spirit, weakening the faith gathered in the halls. Just encountering a powerful enemy could weaken its defenses before it even was hit. Of course, it was possible to forge an unyielding faith

that would stand tall against any threat or tribulation. The Limitless Empire could very well have reached that stage, which would explain how the faith had withstood the superior Killing Intent all these years.

It was slightly odd that a sealed hall was infected while the hall directly exposed to the sword scar was not, though Zac suspected it could be explained by the chasm. When the tower started spinning, the intent was dragged out of all open areas. Meanwhile, whatever intent had made its way to the inner regions was trapped, thus safe from the hurricane's pull.

Zac walked further inside, a slight frown on his face. The intent was there, but its creators were not. Like the hallway, the only damage came from broken arrays and spatial tears. There were no signs of battle, nor were there any corpses.

There were even unusually little signs of habitation. He was only guessing the large hall was once a war cathedral because of its design, but there were no furniture or installments that could help corroborate his theory. It was swept clean, with not even a layer of dust on the ground.

Had some Technocrats swept through the region, picking everything in their path? Zac shook his head. Why would they bother with random items without value? It felt more like the room had been emptied during an evacuation.

However, that theory didn't make much sense either. Zac could feel the pull of at least one hundred valuable treasures spread through the tower. And that was just the best stuff that could trigger his **[Lucky Beads]**. It was probably just the tip of the iceberg. Why leave all that wealth behind but take worthless furniture? Perhaps some logbooks or reports could shed light on the mystery.

The cathedral had dozens of doors lining its sides, but Zac suspected they led to hallways like the one he came from. Instead, he flew into the sky and entered a gallery after confirming it led further into the tower's heart. Just as Zac landed, he sharply twisted and shot forth with **[Skystriker]**.

A spatial tear appeared without warning, and two harried cultivators emerged. Both were Hegemons dressed as alliance members. Their apparent allegiance didn't stop **[Verun's Bite]** from finishing its trajectory. The first died before his whole body had emerged from the tear, while the other had an arm cut off before being punched in the head with enough force to knock him out. The attacks had destabilized the tear, and Zac finished the job by launching a series of Dao-Empowered Fractal blades into it.

The high-pressure situation wasn't enough to make Zac give in to paranoia and strike at anything that moved. He could tell something was wrong with the spatial gate. There was a familiar energy mixed with the powerful Spatial forces—the refined energy Technocrats used to power their machines. He'd seen it both aboard the Jaol's old ship and in the research base.

Zac considered throwing a bomb into the gate just as it closed but ultimately decided against it. There might be actual allies on the other side, unaware their ranks had been infiltrated. Zac turned to his unconscious captive, who'd already been wrapped up in Vivi's vines. Since the mere presence of their tools angered the tower, he'd simply have to drag the truth out of this guy's mouth.

A blast of energy destroyed Vivi's vines and Zac's hopes for answers, and he flung the body further into the cathedral while escaping further into the hallway. A tremendous explosion threw him off his feet, but an overbearing pressure subdued and contained the inferno to the cathedral. Zac sighed after confirming nothing of the Technocrat remained. These guys could even trigger self-destructs while unconscious? Or was someone remotely observing their actions?

It looked like it would be harder than expected to figure out the Technocrat's schemes. Then again, their goals didn't matter compared to finding Emily. Their presence would make it difficult to take control of the fortress, but did that matter?

Zac couldn't imagine the fortress lasting long, especially if used in battle. Less than half the arrays were functioning, indicating widespread damage to the energy channels within the walls. Besides, Zac had his backup plans if things went south. He would ensure the tower and those inside wouldn't survive the day.

For now, securing Emily and finding an escape route was priority number one. Zac resumed his journey, eventually finding a path leading further up that wasn't protected by new barricades. Emily's signal was still some distance away, and his token wouldn't last if every corridor had a safety door.

It was quickly becoming clear that the tower was much larger than it looked from the outside, though the difference wasn't at the level of the Tower of Eternity, where each level held a whole world. Zac ran back and forth through the labyrinthian design, eventually concluding its diameter was roughly ten times larger than it appeared. The dimensions were normal, though, meaning

it wasn't the result of spatial expansion like the research base. More likely, it was the work of the chasm.

The first five floors forced Zac to use his token four more times, and the only thing he found was more chambers and rooms related to the Faith of the Limitless Empire. Zac ignored all rooms that didn't provide easy access, even two doors that released a steady wave of alluring aura. There was no inexplicable pull indicating the presence of a top-tier treasure, but there were likely resources whose spirituality had seeped through the materials.

Zac wouldn't trade his token's lifespan for some random resources. Furthermore, the fact he could sense the energy from the hallway meant the materials had lost most of their spirituality. However, Zac couldn't help but stop when he stumbled upon a grand door marked with 'Sixth Library' in the script of the Limitless Empire.

What kind of books would be placed inside a C-grade Fortress's Library? Cultivation Manuals, skills, Arrays, and blueprints for War Machines. There might even be the blueprints for the whole fortress waiting inside. Gathering the materials required would be tough in Zecia, but what really made the construction of facilities at this level impossible was the lack of knowledge.

They were missing the methods to create high-grade minerals and alloys, not to mention the millions of arrays needed to erect an impregnable fortress. Zac couldn't resist the attraction and placed the **[Court Cycle Token]** against the sigil.

"Shit!" Zac swore and flashed away, his eyes wide with alarm after a wall of rejection rebuffed his mind.

It wasn't accompanied by an attack or a sense of threat. It felt like a brusque warning that he didn't have the credentials to enter the library. Zac looked at the sigil with a frown. Was the problem that he had too few sealbearers infused, or did some facilities require specific credentials? Either case, Zac wasn't ready to give up just yet with an invaluable repository just a stone's throw away.

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The fractal for **[Apex Jungle]** had multiple cracks after being forcefully used inside the hurricane, yet Zac pressed on. Cramped trees exuding an archaic

air filled the hallway, filling every nook and cranny with nigh-impassable verdure. However, when the jungle tried to spread into the library or any other sealed rooms, it encountered an impassable barrier.

Zac refused to give in, and the domain rapidly expanded beyond the immediate vicinity. It continued down the stairs he came from, searching for a point of ingress through a dizzying network of connected paths. There were none. Zac gave the stalwart door a final reluctant look before disappearing into a tree.

His go-to cheat didn't work, though Zac sincerely doubted the fortress was equipped with methods to block the Void. The problem was that the stones were imbued with a natural isolation that trumped whatever theories his Void Energy utilized. It was just like the Orom World. He'd tried the same thing to escape through the spatial barrier at the world's edge, only to realize the trees couldn't grow beyond a certain point. The premiere release of this chapter.

It was still a worthy experiment, though. Better know now than in a pitched battle. And while he couldn't get his hands on the repository, there were some other goodies.

Zac appeared inside a large room and swiftly stowed a holstered sword and a box before entering the tree he came from. The next room was liberated of a bookshelf full of dusty tomes and a slab of green stone that had been used as a prayer mat. Zac was like a mischievous forest nymph who stole a few items from twelve rooms in rapid succession before teleporting to a tree next to a set of stairs.

The jungle dispersed, and Zac continued on his way. The walls could block his skill, but age and frayed space had created small openings. A few doors had become slightly tilted, while wall cracks created an opening to some other rooms. The slightest gap was enough for **[Apex Jungle]** to squeeze through.

None of the rooms he accessed held overly precious materials, and they had lost much of their spirituality. Still, they were relics from an ancient era, half made from materials Zac didn't even recognize. There was no way he'd leave such goodies lying on the table. Unfortunately, the tomes were only ledgers and purchase orders from the floor's quartermaster.

Zac forged ahead, his appetite for plunder whetted, and his worries slightly alleviated. Five floors and one skill activation later, he hadn't seen a shadow

of the Technocrats or their operation. He'd been worried after encountering two groups at such close intervals, especially when it looked like they had a method to direct the pathways. Luckily, they seemed limited in method or manpower.

In fact, the whole tower was almost suspiciously safe. He'd half-expected to run into energy sentries or get blasted by hidden turrets when rounding a corner. There seemed to be no such safeguards beyond the safety checks at the sealed doors.

The tower provided other surprises instead. Zac stopped and looked around in wonder after exiting the stairs, almost wondering if he'd been teleported off-world without noticing. Why was there a rustic city square this far up a military facility? There even seemed to have been flowerbeds and trees lining the streets once upon a time, though only a few calcified trunks remained.

Zac looked around with confusion as he passed dusty storefronts whose wares were either looted or long since turned to ash. It was clear that these civilian buildings could not preserve their interiors like the reinforced chambers. He could even use Soul Sense to sweep the buildings without meeting any resistance. Perhaps the city square was only a temporary installment meant to be replaced with other forms of entertainment after a while.

It was undeniably odd. He'd somewhat assumed the tower would be a pure military facility while soldiers lived in the vast protected spaces underground. But the rooms he'd looted indicated some really lived in the tower, and he remembered seeing similar arrangements inside the Technocrat Mystic Realm. Perhaps it was a requirement to maintain the mental health of those stationed.

High-grade cultivators had incredibly tough mental fortitude, but the damage they could cause if their Dao Hearts and mental state deteriorated was devastating. Using a few floors to give these warriors a sense of normalcy wasn't a high price to pay.

Zac walked through three levels of the simulated town. It became increasingly clear it was just for enjoyment. His Soul Sense exposed that most buildings were empty above the restaurants or storefronts on the ground floor. Normally, those floors would be offices or living spaces for the owners, but there was no evidence they'd ever been occupied.

Only a few buildings diverged from the norm. Zac glanced at a faded sign of a woodworking shop. Most wares had turned into dust on the ground except for a few carvings made from Spiritual Wood. The shop looked no different than its neighbors, but it was outfitted with a massive living space that continued into the neighboring buildings.

There was also a damaged top-tier cultivation chamber in the basement, whose arrays were far more intricate than anything Zac had encountered in the tower thus far. Perhaps some higher-up came down to play woodcarver as a stress relief? There was nothing of value left behind, but the woodshop wasn't the only place that stood out.

Zac found himself drawn toward a small store hidden in a corner of the makeshift village, even passing the stairs leading to the next level. He felt like a monster constantly being side-tracked on his rescue mission, but Emily's beacon moved every ten minutes. It had already taken him an hour to navigate the complex layout.

What was a few minutes more when fate pulled at him with such urgency? He'd ignored multiple buildings holding the promise of treasure on his way to the tower, but none had been so accessible or powerful. His stomach rumbled, and his cells itched as he passed through the door and an invisible barrier. Even Haro stirred through **[Adaptive Symbiosis]** because of the irresistible scent of primordial life.

The dusty storefront looked the same as the others, but Zac followed the scent until he reached an office in the back. The small room would have looked wholly ordinary if not for the erosion of time. One of the walls flickered, occasionally exposing the hidden compartment the scent of life originated from.

Zac observed the broken set of arrays for over five minutes before coming up with a solution. However, he didn't even have time to infuse the first talisman before a scream of danger forced Zac to flash away. He was too slow.

A silver streak punctured a hole through his gut as an eruption of energy consumed everything in the office. The storm lasted a few seconds before abating, at which point Zac reentered. The wound hurt like hell, but Zac knew he was lucky.

The compartment was outfitted with a concealed array Zac hadn't noticed at all, but the damage made it fail before it could properly go off. He would have

been hit by dozens of silver pellets if it had worked properly. But intentional or not, his solution worked.

A small cubby had been exposed on the other side. It was covered in sublime engravings from floor to ceiling, and some still seemed to be working. The arrays used a lot of patterns that diverged from those Zac was familiar with, but he could vaguely understand their function. They were an archaic form of treasure-nurturing arrays.

Most materials and Natural Treasures lost spirituality over time. Putting them in containers and spatial rings drastically slowed the process, but it wasn't nearly as effective as having arrays nurturing them. It was the second-best option after nurturing the treasures in the unique environment that gave birth to them.

That was why established factions had proper treasuries instead of some elders keeping everything inside their rings. The best items would even have custom-designed arrays to create an optimal environment. For whatever reason, someone had constructed such an arrangement here and hidden it behind a combination array.

Were the three engraved containers ill-gotten gains that needed to be hidden from the officers? Their markings perfectly blended with the cubby's arrays, showcasing exquisite workmanship. Unfortunately, two had already broken down, and the treasures they held only emitted the aura of E-grade.

The third box's array had also failed, but it looked like it had held on far longer than the other two. A tendril of vibrant energy seeped out of a crack, and a gurgling sound confirmed it was what he'd come for. He opened the broken chest, finding a single quill encased in a crystal covered in the markings of a natural formation.

On second look, Zac realized it might be the spine of a cactus. Furthermore, it wasn't the spine that was valuable, but rather the liquid it held. Zac greedily inhaled the aroma, marveling at how well the ancient Dao of Life had been preserved. It was rugged and primal but incredibly pure.

Haro's vines moved in his sleep, and not even Vivi could sit still. Zac was just as interested in the shockingly pure essence of life. He could tell it could provide a much-needed boost to his **[Void Vajra Sublimation]**, saving months of arduous cultivation. Furthermore, the spine was rapidly losing spirituality now that it had lost the treasury's protection.

But he was already halfway to Emily. Zac gritted his teeth and sealed the box the best he could. Absorbing it would have to wait until he'd confirmed Emily's situation. Waiting an hour or two shouldn't worsen the effect that much.

A stabbing pain made Zac groan and clench his chest as he emerged from the inner room. Not the pain of regret but of his chest being flooded by a malevolent storm. Once more, Zac was attacked by dozens of red streaks of Killing Intent. His eyes were wide with panic upon realizing **[Void Heart]** couldn't save him this time.

After all, it was his Hidden Node that cracked, unleashing its contents unrefined and ahead of schedule.

## **Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1143: Malevolent Potential - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1143: Malevolent Potential**

### Chapter 1143: Malevolent Potential

A feral growl escaped Zac's throat, brought forth by the streams of malevolent energy rampaging through his body. The world was drowned in red, and the discordant roars in his mind pushed him toward a deviation. Zac furiously fought back as he searched for a solution. The painful throbbing in his heart was a poignant reminder that practicing the **[Void Vajra Sublimation]** wouldn't help. Last time, it let him endure the assault, yet it was **[Void Heart]** that dealt with the root of the problem.

He had to deal with it some other way. But how? Eons of slumber had weakened the anger that drove the sword through the fortress, but its source was ultimately an Autarch. Even scraps of such powerful beings were enough to threaten a Hegemon's life. His Void Emperor bloodline had worked against all odds, but it was only E-grade. Using his own Kill Energy was like smashing eggs against a rock and only aggravated the onslaught in his mind.

Could he only do that?

The deep groan of ancient wood interrupted his thoughts, warning him that the situation had worsened. The huge chamber holding the city square was coming alive, flooding it with gravitational forces. An insistent warning of imminent danger pierced the madness. Flying had become impossible, so Zac ran out of the building, each step leaving deep imprints on the ground.

A pillar of light descended from the sky, reducing the building to ash. The sudden attack helped subdue the intent, and it gathered into a ball like it was facing a great threat. Still, the red tangle retained its fiendish nature. Clamors for violence shook Zac's Soul Aperture, urging him to let go, to strike back at the oppressors who almost burnt him alive.

Muscles trembled with barely contained explosive force, and Killing Intent seeped out of Zac's body. However, there was still an unyielding core of clarity that let Zac calmly analyze the situation. Part of his resilience was thanks to the brush with death, triggering deep-rooted survival instincts.

Most of the credit had to be given to **[VoidHeart]**. The fiendish energy had ultimately broken out of the Hidden Node, but not before a third was refined. With the remains being suppressed by the tower, he temporarily had some leeway. He needed to seize the opportunity to get out of this mess.

Not even the reinforced treasury survived the blast, and the lingering aura of life was replaced by desolation and ash. The neighboring buildings were already straining under the increased gravitational force, and the following shockwave leveled half the neighborhood.

Local pandemonium became the trigger for wider turmoil. Enormous runes glowing with steel and conviction had appeared on the chamber's walls and ceiling, but their state was no better than the rest of the fortress. Some fluctuated precariously while others had gone dark. Sustaining a powerful gravity chamber while releasing powerful bursts of energy was asking too much of the run-down arrays.

A whole range of runes exploded on the other side of the township, unleashing a wave of light and immense pressure. Zac discarded all attempts to deal with the fiendish energy in favor of immediate escape. He ran toward the exit, even going so far as to stow **[Verun's Bite]** to weaken his ingrown battle-readiness.

Zac only got three steps before he was forced to his knees. The gravity cascade contained enough force to make the whole tower strain and shudder, and Zac was given a front-row seat. Its immense weight kept it contained to the other side of the hall, but Zac felt like he was drowning. The vortices in his cells had slowed to a crawl, and even his Soul Aperture shuddered precariously.

A deafening tearing was like a heavenly trumpet. The eruption had collapsed unto itself, forming a singularity that tore right through the reinforced floor. With it gone, Zac sprung to his feet, taking a gasping breath as his body came alive.

The whole township was gone, crushed into dust. The only lingering proof of its existence was the handful of installations made from the same reinforced stone as the tower, such as the woodworker's residence. Even those were twisted and broken, proving just how immense the pressure had been. If the cactus spine had been placed in the middle of the town, Zac would have been turned into red paste.

He'd narrowly escaped death, yet Zac knew the interruption had dashed any hopes of escape. Two dozen energy constructs had emerged from the swirling dust, forming a half-circle around him. They were twice the size of the sentries they summoned when entering the fortress proper and more closely resembled humanoid figures. They even held a large amount of Faith Energy, which gave them a holy aura.

Not the aura of a saint but that of a paladin on a mission to purge evil. They were the swords of judgment that would deal with any sinners who targeted their homes. Even one felt like a threat to his life. Taking out twenty was out of the question. Zac did the only thing he could.

"I'm an ally!" Zac hoarsely roared as he waved the **[Court Cycle Token]** back and forth like a white flag. "I'm dealing with the threat right now!"

The sentries stopped their approach, but they didn't back off. They silently floated in place like they were trying to compute the unexpected turn of events. Zac scanned the exits, inwardly swearing upon confirming his fears. Trapdoors had blocked all exits except for the hole in the floor. However, it still exuded immense gravitational force, making an approach impossible.

Worse, the energy fluctuations were growing increasingly unstable. It was just a matter of time before another singularity formed. That time, he might not be as lucky.

Zac barely had time to examine the surroundings before the token's energy dropped, turning his face a shade whiter. He was actively losing energy to keep the guardians at bay. He needed to deal with the fiendish energy, and quickly.

It wasn't just to deal with the sentries. He was reaching his limits resisting the corrosion with willpower alone, and he'd only be asking for death if he started practicing the **[Void Vajra Sublimation]** with such a bloodthirsty audience.

Zac turned to his bloodline for help, yet the Void remained indifferent to his plight. A second ripple weakened the token further. Zac channeled the desperation as he delved deeper, using it as kindling to illuminate the path. And with a furious pull, he brought the Void to the surface.

A small black swirl formed right by Zac's chest, its appearance not causing so much of a ripple of energy. Instead, there was only a bottomless hunger. Debris and dust were dragged inside. Even the sentries flickered precariously from the pull.

The sense of impending peril skyrocketed as the constructs advanced, but Zac didn't dispel the black hole. Just conjuring it was pushing the limits of his bloodline; stemming its voracity was beyond his ability. Instead, he focused on finishing his task.

Zac's body shuddered with strain as he forced the bundle of malevolent energy out of his chest. It was reluctant to leave the comparative safety of his body, but it couldn't overpower Zac and the black hole's combined force. The bundle was stuffed into the vortex and swallowed. Then it was gone, and the sentries froze in place.

"I've defeated the invader," Zac gasped, his mind still a mess from the murderous intent.

A deafening silence reigned in Zac's nervous standoff against the tower. Finally, the arrays flickered and deactivated, and the immense pressure disappeared like a figment of his imagination. The sentries also left by sinking into the floor.

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Zac's heart bled as they took a third sealbearer piece with them on their way out. But what could he do? It was preferable to death.

As expected, the root of the problems had been the sword Autarch's intent. It made sense, considering it was made from the intent of the tower's enemy,

but Zac hadn't expected its senses to be so keen to even notice it while trapped inside his body. Or that it would react so violently.

He'd activated multiple skills and used his Void Energy without any reaction. Even the Technocrats arrived through gates marked by their Dao of Technology without creating a stir.

Zac put away his token, suppressing the pain in his heart. It was time to cut his losses and get a move on. The commotion had gotten way out of hand. It was impossible for any nearby party not to notice. Worse, the powerful vibrations had probably spread through walls. He needed to leave before someone came to investigate, so he threw out a handful of aura-removing powder and escaped into a hallway.

Worries gnawed at Zac's heart as he resumed his ascent. It wasn't the threat of exposure but rather the price of his actions. There was no telling what ramifications could come of sending the fiendish energy into the Void Spiral. Zac knew next to nothing of what existed on the other side, except that it wasn't just some random dimension or plane.

It was a hidden space belonging to his bloodline, where all materials were sent during his breakthroughs. Zac also suspected that all the energy **[Void Heart]** kept for itself went there. Zac knew he hadn't expelled the dangerous energy. He had just hidden it deeper within his body, where not even the tower could sense it.

Doing so felt like injecting yourself with a dangerous virus, but Zac didn't have a lot of options. His only other idea was to use his Oblivion Energy, which was out of the question. With Technocrats and possibly Imperials skulking the hallways, he needed a proper fallback. Besides, who knew how the sentinels would react if he suddenly conjured a blade of pure destruction? And what would happen if the fiendish energy entered the fractal? At least he was safe for now.

Or so he thought.

Zac swore with alarm and used his token to escape into a sealed room, unheeding of the cost. He briefly scanned the interiors to confirm there were no threats before turning his gaze inward. An ochre mist had begun seeping out from his damaged node. Zac felt like he was caught in a loop, reliving a nightmare.

However, it didn't take long for Zac to realize there was something very different about the fiendish energy. It still emitted a brutal aura, but it lacked any hint of the ancient Autarch's will. The mist had to be the part **[Void Heart]** finished refining before the red streaks broke free.

It didn't rush through his body or assault his mind. Instead, it fused with his blood and joined its journey through his body. Zac looked on with horror and urgently created a Mental Energy trap around his Hidden Node. It successfully isolated the emerging mist from the rest of his body. But so what? It was still there, and more was escaping his Hidden Node every moment.

It wasn't certain the refined energy would trigger the tower's defenses, but Zac didn't want to take the chances. At best, it meant another drain on the token, which he absolutely couldn't afford. Not to mention, there was no guarantee the sentinels would accept his explanation after emitting the aura of their enemy a second time. But what should he do? Open another vortex?

Corralling the mist would be easy. It had been stripped of its will, so it didn't resist being trapped or moved around. But the gas was seeping out so slowly. It would take at least half an hour for it all to emerge. Zac could barely open a vortex as things stood, so holding it open that long was out of the question.

Zac was also reluctant to throw it away. Getting his hands on the mist had almost cost him his life. Besides, he'd always benefitted from **[Void Heart]**, no matter what it spat out. Even Tribulation Lightning became a tonic most cultivators could only dream of. And while the ochre mist may not be sourced from the heavens, it was still the product of a B-grade cultivator's evolved Killing Intent. It had to be useful to someone cultivating the Dao of Conflict. If Zac could figure out the benefits of this energy, perhaps he could eventually do the same with his own Killing Intent.

If only **[Void Heart]** had spat out an instruction manual along with its creation. Zac found himself stumped as he looked at the sanguine blob that had formed inside its cage. His cells weren't screaming with hunger, and the mist didn't react to his Mental Energy or soul. It didn't seem useful for his Cosmic Core or gaining levels, either.

A prickling sensation provided the answer. The mist that mixed with his blood was entering cells throughout his body. Discomfort transitioned to outright pain as more fiendish energy entered his cells. It was a pain Zac was familiar with. It was the sweet agony of Body Tempering, of being broken down to be rebuilt stronger.

The torture brought him back to those early days of his struggles, where his lack of Death-attuned resources forced him to turn to crude concoctions like **[Bone Forging Dust]**. The red haze acted like a catalyst for his cells, forcibly expanding the golden whirlpools by making them spin faster.

Zac looked at the change with interest. Only a sliver had entered his bloodstream, yet he could feel his limits being broken and surpassed. What would happen if he released all the energy he'd collected? However, Zac soon realized there was a problem.

The golden whirlpools weren't actually getting stronger. The fiendish energy performed half the steps of a body-tempering method. It broke down his cells in a way that would let him surpass his limits, but it lacked the materials to build it back up. If nothing changed, he'd just end up with damaged foundations.

Sometimes, you simply couldn't avoid fate.

Zac gritted his teeth as he took out the box he stowed just minutes before. A powerful gust of ancient, unyielding life filled the room when he opened the lid. Without the containment array, the thorn was rapidly losing spirituality. It might as well be the fuel for his rebirth.

There was no time to figure out the best way of extracting the liquid, so Zac did what felt natural. The spine reminded Zac of the spikes he'd taken from the faceless assassin back in the Tower of Eternity, so he might as well use it the same way.

Zac's eyes shone with determination as he shattered the protective crystal. His hand moved like lightning, grabbing the thorn before stabbing it into his chest. The thorn proved its lofty origins by effortlessly piercing Zac's reinforced skin to deposit its contents right into his heart.

Meanwhile, Zac opened the cage, letting the ochre mist back into his heart. The two ancient forces joined, and the effect was instantaneous.

Zac crashed out of the room like a rampaging bull, the veins on his forehead writhing while every muscle in his body twitched. The root of the spine was still sticking out of his chest, and expanded veins had formed a golden rootlike pattern around it.

Letting a sliver of the mist into his cells had been painful. Opening the floodgates was a hellish torture that made the **[Bone Forging Dust]** seem like a joke. Every part of his body was dying and being reborn. Zac wanted to curl into a ball. Or better yet, practice the **[Void Vajra Sublimation]** to escape the woes of his mortal coil.

But Emily was waiting.

Delirious, bloodshot eyes scanned for threats before moving out. His gait was convulsive, like he'd been struck by lightning. And yet, each step echoed with the cadence of life, borrowing from his body tempering manual without practicing it outright.

Zac was barely aware of his surroundings. He desperately held onto his Void State while following the movement patterns he'd invented. Just the act of movement helped take Zac's mind off the torment, which was exactly what he needed. He was running out of time, but he had to make the most of the heavenly materials he'd been given. Because that was what they were.

Every breath was the equivalent of practicing a whole cycle of **[Void Vajra Sublimation]**. Fiendish energy broke the shackles holding him back, while ancient life imbued him with the power of the Cosmic Behemoths born from the primordial Dao.

Corridors and stairs blurred together. A distant pang of danger warned him of an ambush, but it didn't matter. The power to shatter mountains and swallow stars was coursing through his veins. The six Technocrats were reduced to broken bones and torn flesh, while the wounds on Zac's body closed in seconds.

Another group was slaughtered before Zac was left alone. Perhaps they'd given up, or perhaps they'd simply lost him. Not even Zac knew how many corridors he'd passed or how many floors he'd ascended, and he had the token to access areas outside the reach of others.

Zac realized he was just a few hundred meters from Emily's beacon by the time he came to. He'd run out of ochre mist and golden energy around thirty minutes ago, but it had taken him until now to finish digesting it. He felt wrung out, but his body was in pristine condition. He even exuded a vibrant aura that could be mistaken for a Natural Treasure.

He was curious about his gains, but it would have to wait. Zac was almost at the finish line, so he willed his body to finish the last stretch. Soon, there was only a single door separating him from his disciple. He'd used up another sealbearer's energy reaching this point, despite keeping its use to a minimum. In total, five out of eight were lost.

Zac threw any distracting thoughts out of his mind and readied himself. There were no guarantees that only Emily was waiting on the other side. There might be a whole swarm of Technocrats keeping her captive. Yet there was no hesitation as he put his token against the sigil, and the door soundlessly slid open.

"Welcome. We've been expecting you."

## **Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1144: Imperial Envoy - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1144: Imperial Envoy**

### Chapter 1144: Imperial Envoy

The unfamiliar, monotonous voice and the dense stench of blood permeating the room were enough to ignite a fire in Zac's chest. Seeing a bloodied Emily turned those smoldering flames into a blazing inferno. Cascading waves of power coursed through his reforged body, and any lingering sense of exhaustion was swept away. However, a shaky voice pre-empted Zac's plans.

"Welcome, Imperial Envoy!"

Emily's unexpected form of address made Zac stop in place and take in the situation properly. The room smelling like a torture chamber seemed to be a canteen. Dozens of metallic tables were soldered to the ground, and Zac believed the dusty scraps in one corner were the remnants of a lounge area.

On the opposite side, there was a semi-open back room resembling an ancient industrial kitchen. The stench didn't come from Emily, but rather from five utterly destroyed corpses to the side. Their heads had been disintegrated, leaving nothing behind but a scorched neck. However, their attacker hadn't been satisfied with such a clean end. Someone had cut and torn into their corpses until only piles of flesh and broken bones remained.

The scene was so gruesome even Zac grimaced. This wasn't the work of a warrior. Only a lunatic would go so far, and this lunatic was holding his disciple hostage.

Emily was sitting at one of the tables, her face pale from blood loss. Zac's heart ached upon seeing the many lacerations across her body. One, in particular, had almost cut her left arm clean off. Thankfully, her aura was still stable, if significantly weakened. Her Cosmic Core shouldn't be damaged. She would recover with rest and medicine, but the fact that she still didn't dare move despite his appearance was incredibly alarming. He forcibly calmed down, knowing that the wrong move might trigger another tragedy like the six presumed Technocrats.

Despite Emily's obvious duress, it looked like she was attending a dinner party. The table was richly decorated and set for five people. Food had already been served, and Zac's eyes widened in horror upon realizing what had been put on the plates. Pieces of Technocrat. Four of the chairs were already occupied, while the place at the head of the table was left open.

Was it for him?

"Join us, lord Envoy," Emily entreated.

Emily nodded at him to play along, so Zac slowly approached while inspecting the other dinner guests. Two were puppets who were familiar yet incredibly confusing. They seemed to be the D-grade sparring puppets used in the Atwood Army. However, their facial features had been altered to bear a striking resemblance to himself and Joanna.

They were badly mutilated, yet Zac felt a vague threat emanating from them. Normally, his unexpected doppelganger would be Zac's main point of focus, but that mystery paled in the face of the final guest at the table.

Zac had expected Emily's captor to be a Technocrat or possibly an Imperial, but he was way off. The lunatic who had desecrated the Technocrat corpses was another puppet, one of ancient make. It was this automaton who greeted him when he opened the door, and it was now silently staring at him while holding a mottled knife.

It appeared to be made from a reddish alloy, but it was hard to tell beneath the coatings of blood and viscera. Zac's instincts still told him to destroy the butcher puppet with a swing of his axe, but he held himself back upon seeing the frantic look in Emily's eyes.

"Imperial Envoy?" the puppet muttered, its voice slowly rising with intensity. "Imperial Imperial Where?"

Emily's eyes widened in alarm, and Zac paled in fright upon feeling a familiar pressure. The door behind him banged shut as immense weight was imposed on his body. The feeling was the same as in the fake town. No, the pressure was even greater as it was limited to a much smaller room.

"General, time is limited! We need to discuss the mission!"

This puppet was a general? Zac inwardly shook his head. There was simply no way. The puppet was the equivalent of an Early D-grade cultivator at best, barely enough to be considered a soldier in a fortress of this grade. The only threat it posed was its apparent connection to the fortress defenses.

Judging by their location, the knife, and the gruesome banquet, its real identity was clear. They were dealing with a cooking golem.

Clearly, the golem was suffering from the same mental illness as Brazla, where it had lost grip of its real identity. However, the chef was in a far worse state than the Tool Spirit of Zac's Dao Repository. The golem's spirituality had to be on the verge of total breakdown for it to act in such an unhinged manner.

It looked like the golem considered Emily's words, and it slowly nodded. However, Zac almost threw caution to the wind when its arm turned into a blur. An erratic flurry of slashes left a new set of wounds on the Joanna puppet. Thankfully, the mechanical chef and the room's arrays calmed down soon after. Zac gradually relaxed, though his pent-up anger only grew.

He'd been telling himself Emily's miserable state was mainly caused by crossing the dimensional storm not to explode from rage. It was getting very difficult to hold onto those beliefs. No wonder she'd placed durable training puppets beside and opposite the malfunctioning chef. They might have saved her life by taking the brunt of its outbursts.

Zac would have to be a fool not to understand Emily's plan. She had given him a lofty identity, and he needed to use that to get out without triggering the tower's defenses. He chose to trust her. For her to act this way despite his ability to instantly destroy the automaton meant there was more at play. Of course, if things went south, he'd have to go all-out and pray his token could deal with the fallout.

"I am the Imperial Envoy," Zac said, trying to give the imposing air of a dignitary as he sat down. "Identify yourself."

"Yes Protocol" the puppet drawled. "I am Sibel Urnovok, general of the Sixth Centurion Lighthouse of the Tethered Phalanx. Thank you for responding to my call."

Zac's eyes lit up at the chef's words. He'd never heard of the Tethered Phalanx, but it wasn't hard to put two and two together. He knew a massive war had been waged to prevent the erection of the eight pillars. Each Outer Court defended one direction, controlling armies that dwarfed anything happening in Zecia. This Peak C-grade fortress was likely a subsidiary of the Starfall Court, though Zac had no idea why the golem called it a lighthouse.

It might be nonsense conjured by a damaged spirit, but Zac doubted it. After all, he'd actually seen the name Sibel Urnovok in the ledgers he found earlier. Even if insane, the chef seemed to remember some real details of the fortress. Perhaps it could clarify some things that had bothered him until now.

"It's my duty. The Empire would never abandon its defenders," Zac nodded. "On that note, where are your men? No one came to meet me when I arrived."

"A-A"

"The attack," Emily quickly interjected, prompting the chef to calm down before it went berserk again.

"Yes. Attack. We lost contact with the Empire during our mission. I tried to contactah I did? No."

"I'm sorry, we didn't receive the call. It must have been intercepted," Zac said. "Go on."

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"Yes Blocked. No signal. Stranded. We thought the Selvari had found out about our mission. About the project."

"What proj" Zac said, but quickly cut his words short when Emily shook her head in panic. "Ahem. What happened next?"

"Betrayal!" the puppet roared, unleashing a wild barrage with his knife.

The puppets received the brunt of it, but not even Zac was spared. Bleeding gashes were opened across his chest and left arm, but he didn't so much as blink. The chef knife might have once been a D-grade tool, but its edge had been eroded by time and excessive use. The puppet barely broke his skin, and the wounds closed in no time.

What was more disturbing was that the puppet had leaned forward, its face suddenly inches away from Zac's.

"Welcome, faraway guest. Our chefs have prepared a banquet in your honor!"

"Thank you, general, but I'd like to finish the briefing," Zac said, working hard to maintain a steady gaze. "The Empire is facing enemies in every direction. There's no time to waste."

"Tell Lord Envoy about the man with the sword," Emily said.

"The sword," the puppet muttered as it leaned back. "The sword Intent. Treasonous natives! The colonies dare bite the hand that feeds it! Ahall gone."

"The traitor will be dealt with," Zac said. "Did the traitors take your people away?"

"A great pressure, and the room twisted. The guests disappeared, even taking masterah? Who?"

"What happened next?" Zac pushed.

"I Flashes of darkness Gods hiding between the cracks. Watching Watching."

Zac frowned. He'd been able to keep up with the puppet until now, but it was getting harder and harder. The Sixth Centurion Lighthouse must have lost contact with the Empire because of the System's activation, and the Autarch of a conquered region attacked them out of anger. What happened next? It sounded like the puppet was describing its real memories at that point.

It had been working in the canteen when the Autarch struck. However, great pressure and the room twisting didn't match with the sword scar or its Killing Intent. It rather sounded like the attack had been powerful enough to tear a hole in space, and the whole fortress was thrown into the Void. But what the hell were flashes of darkness and the hiding Gods?

"Was it Selvari who took the people?" Zac asked. "Did you see the Dao of Technology?"

"All lost I'm I'm General Sibel Urnovok Yes. I am a Half-Step Celestial. I must have overcome"

"You resisted the abduction but were badly wounded," Emily said with a soothing voice. "You have a plan. A plan that needs Lord Envoy's help?"

"Yes!"

"Traitors Selvari All eye my fort. Everyone knows it's not ready, but the cracks" the puppet said, suddenly looking at Zac with eerie solemnity like it had really become the general. "I request Lord Envoy to work with the others and activate the beacon. Call them from the depths, and we'll destroy our enemy!"

"I" Zac hesitated. He wanted more information, but his instincts told him it was time to go. Something was happening inside the puppet. It had grown too agitated, prompting its arrays to go into overdrive. "On behalf of the Empire, I agree. However, the fortress is damaged, and I need to survey the situation before we strike back at our enemies."

"I shall assist you," the puppet said, accentuating his statement by cutting off the head of the Zac puppet.

"Thank you, general, but this is an important matter. We can't allow any mistakes, and your talents are better used elsewhere. Why don't you return to your place of work and finalize our attack plan while we deal with the minor matters on our end?" Zac said, pointing at the kitchen in the back.

Zac looked confident, but the silence was nerve-wracking. The puppet's eyes flickered ominously, making Zac wonder if he'd pushed things too far. Eventually, the automaton turned toward the kitchen.

"Yes. My domain. I will return."

The puppet got to its feet and stumbled toward the kitchen as though it was drunk. " in the cracks in the cracks"

Zac nodded at Emily, and the two appeared right by the door. Zac flashed his token, and the two were halfway down the corridor before the gates had fully swung open. They only stopped after putting a floor and dozens of corridors

between them. Zac still felt unsafe and kept scanning the surroundings in case the general picked up their scent.

However, he was stopped by two arms wrapping around him. "You really came."

"Of course," Zac said. "Are you okay?"

Emily only let go after half a minute. Her face was still pallid from accumulated stress and terror. Zac was surprised she was keeping it together at all. His nerves felt like they were on fire after staying a few minutes in that canteen. Emily had been stuck there for hours.

"Thank god you came when you did. That lunatic went crazy every time I rejected his 'food,' and I was running out of ways to distract him. Any later, and I'd either have to become a cannibal or get turned into dinner. Not sure I'll ever be able to eat again."

"Will it follow us?" Zac asked, warily looking at the way they came from.

"I don't think so. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if it has already forgotten about us. Its short-term memory seemed to be non-existent. I kept having the same conversations over and over."

"Crumbled spirit. The price of longevity," Zac said.

"Should've had the decency to get abducted with all the others," Emily muttered as she inspected the hallway. "Wait, where's Ra'Klid? He's not?"

"He's fine. We had to split up since it would have been too dangerous for him to enter this place. You've been held hostage since you came here?"

"Not exactly," Emily said. "After I jumped into the scar, everything was chaos. I thought I was going to die, but I suddenly saw this place appear out of nowhere. I jumped inside and ended up trapped in that house of horror."

"Appear out of nowhere?"

"It was weird; it almost looked like a mirror whose frame was made from an odd energy circuit. It looked like the energy was growing the gateway, but it was already large enough for me to squeeze inside."

Zac thoughtfully nodded. It seemed like Emily had encountered a stroke of good fortune by finding a Technocrat pathway. It let her bypass most of the storm, though it exposed her to another form of danger.

"There was nothing here when I arrived, and I couldn't contact you or Ra'Klid. So I tried to get out by blowing up the door. Very bad idea. The door almost killed me, and it made the puppet appear."

"The puppet came from the outside?" Zac asked with a frown.

"No, it came from the kitchen, knife swinging. Shouted about invaders and the glory of the Empire, waking the whole room up. Weirdly enough, I had already searched the whole place. Not sure how I could have missed it."

"I found some fake walls before. It might have been inside one of those. What about the corpses?"

"They arrived at that exact moment, poor bastards," Emily said with a shudder. "I shouted at them not to do anything stupid, but they didn't listen. They attacked the 'general,' but some energy guard rose from the ground and blocked their skills before turning their heads to ash. Actually, they saved my life by targeting me too. It made the puppet consider me a friend. It asked me if I came bearing news from the Empire. I didn't want to have my head blown up, so I said yes."

Zac could guess how things went from there. The schizophrenic golem had tried to fulfill both its roles, leading to the macabre dinner-turned-interrogation.

"I know they attacked me, but I feel bad leaving them like that. They were our people. They probably thought I was a cultist."

"Don't feel too bad," Zac said. "They weren't real alliance Hegemons. They were Technocrats."

"Technocrats?" Emily said with a look of utter confusion. "What's going on?"

"A lot," Zac said before going over his experiences since they split up.

"So that scheming guy finally got his seal," Emily grinned. "Guess he won't have to skulk the corridors any longer."

Zac laughed, remembering Ogras' stories of his trip to the Million Gates Territory. Ra'Klid was no fool, and he'd quickly realized there was more to their expedition than just getting some early war contribution. He'd tried various methods to figure out what the others were up to, but fate hadn't been on his side. Those efforts had only intensified after the rumors and bounties popped up.

"Well, it's good he got one, and you needed a second Reignender anyway," Emily said before her face sobered. "So those people were Technocrats. I know they're technically unorthodox cultivators, but I didn't expect them to join up with a faction like the Kan'Tanu. Well, it shouldn't be too bad, right? There's no way the System will let them officially join the war. Those imperials sound like the bigger threat."

"We can't underestimate the Technocrats, even if those we've encountered so far haven't been too impressive," Zac sighed. "The Imperial Clans are powerful, but they're bound by the System's rules. They have limited manpower, and their elders will restrain themselves because of the trial."

"I guess," Emily thoughtfully nodded before her eyes widened. "Wait, how did they even get here? Aren't the outsiders blocked from entering as they want? That means"

"That's exactly what I'm worried about," Zac sighed. "The System would never let Technocrats through Zecia's blockade, yet they're still here. They must have figured out a way to sneak into Zecia unnoticed."

"Probably through the Eternal Storm," Emily agreed. "And that means they might not be limited in manpower like the other outsiders. But they'll be shooting themselves in the foot if their target is the Left Imperial Palace. All those powerful factions can't be wrong about using limited force to seize the inheritance."

"Who knows if they're even after the inheritance? And if they are, they might just try to snatch it in the winner's hands," Zac said. "I'm more worried about what their goal is with the fortress. It never felt like they would care about this crumbling piece of ancient history, but after listening to the robot..."

"The project!" Emily exclaimed.

"Exactly," Zac said. "They're not here to seize the fortress. They're after its secrets."

## **Defiance of the Fall #Chapter 1145: In the Depths - Read Defiance of the Fall Chapter 1145: In the Depths**

### Chapter 1145: In the Depths

"The fortress is already powerful enough to make the alliance go crazy. Can you imagine how dangerous the 'things in the depths' are? They must have the power to blow up half of Zecia," Emily said.

Beads of sweat had appeared on the shaman's forehead from applying medicinal paste to her wounds. Thankfully, the chef puppet only possessed raw strength, so the wounds would heal quickly and without leaving any sequelae.

"Well, it's been a long time," Zac said as he infused another stream of his Branch of the Kalpataru into his disciple. "The odds of those things being functional and close enough to be summoned are pretty low."

"The Technocrats might be after schematics or blueprints rather than the finished product. We won't be able to build it, but they probably could," Emily agreed before looking at Zac askance. "Then again, doesn't it feel too coincidental? A war involving the System and the Limitless Empire breaks out, and here's one of their old fortresses?"

"That alone is enough to make my instincts tingle. And adding you to the mix, isn't it a done deal already? I'd bet what's left of my left arm the 'project' is just waiting for someone to light the beacon."

"I" Zac wanted to refute her claim, but he had to admit that what she said made sense. The pillar's ascent was dredging up more than just the inheritance. "It's possible. Did you find out anything more about it before I came?"

"Not much. I bet the puppet's knowledge was limited to random scraps of information it overheard while working. Mentioning the project or details of the lighthouse's mission made it lose its mind," Emily sighed. "It went berserk every time I tried to dig further, accusing me of being a spy. I gave up after I almost lost my arm."

Zac nodded in agreement. What the puppet knew should be limited unless it had somehow been given access to the tower's database. It was unlikely, but

not completely impossible, since it seemed able to trigger the defenses based on mood swings.

"It did mention two things, though. 'They should be dead,' and 'taming a calamity.'" Emily said. "It screamed those things when I asked about the gods in the cracks. I think the soldiers knew who took them."

"Gods in the cracks that should be dead. A project in the depths. Taming?" Zac muttered in thought before looking up. "Do you remember Salvation?"

"You think that's the project? The Limitless Empire was trying to refine a bunch of godlike beings into puppets?" Emily said with interest. "But some of them survived to take revenge on the Sixth Lighthouse? Or perhaps they regained part of their sentience when the empire collapsed."

"It's one possibility," Zac agreed, thinking back to what he'd learned of the chaotic age at the beginning of their Era. "There was no lack of such beings back then."

The Dao was young, wild, and unpredictable. The dimensions were more separated than today, where a few were showered by the majority of Heaven's favor. These prime dimensions gave rise to powerful civilizations like the Limitless Empire and the Selvari. More importantly, they gave birth to incredibly powerful Innate Existences. The Spark of Creation and the Heart of Oblivion were most likely two such examples, and Zac suspected the Primo was another.

Innate Existences are born from the Cosmos and endowed with unfathomable power. A few of these unique beings were Supremacies at birth, and even the weakest would naturally step into Autarchy in adulthood. Their downside was that their future was limited. Stepping beyond their inborn potential was almost impossible.

These Innate Existences were essentially mythological creatures in modern times. They might still appear in the depths of the Eternal Storm, but the environment within integrated space didn't allow for their birth. The Heavens were already claimed, and any seed of potential would become a lucky encounter for some established faction long before it could turn into a creature.

Rounding up a group of such powerful beings to turn them into weapons sounded ludicrous. But was well within the realms of possibility for the

Limitless Empire. And even if the 'gods' weren't Innate Existences, they could be some powerful race like the Starbeasts or Giants.

"You might be onto something," Emily said. "So what should we do? Try to stop their plans? There's already fighting going on up there, so we might be able to deal the finishing blow."

"Fighting?"

"Yeah. There's been three major commotions in the tower since I arrived. One shortly after I came. Then there was you an hour ago. Finally, there was that thing twenty minutes ago."

"There was?"

"You didn't notice?"

"I, uh, was slightly preoccupied with my body almost blowing up from that spine I mentioned."

"I still can't believe you," Emily glared with mock anger. "Since when does the knight in shining armor make treasure-hunting pitstops before saving the damsel in distress?"

"I'm sorry," Zac grimaced. "I only planned to pick up one or two things on the way. Didn't expect things to escalate like that."

"I'm kidding," Emily laughed. "You'd have to be crazy to ignore a supreme treasure in arm's reach. Anyway, the last thing was three smaller shockwaves in short succession. It felt like a battle rather than a bomb. I tried to have the puppet investigate, but it ignored me. I figured it was alliance versus Kan'Tanu. Now I'm thinking it was Technocrats dealing with tower guards or imperials."

"Could be infighting over the information," Zac agreed, his brows furrowing. "But that'd mean there are two powerful forces to worry about. I'm still hoping their schemes are limited to stealing seals on the outside."

"We could just try to complete the alliance mission if the outsiders are too dangerous to deal with," Emily offered. "If our guess is right, they won't care what happens to the fortress, and the amount of contribution we'd earn is crazy."

"This has turned into a fine mess," Zac sighed. "My original plan was just to loot the tower. If I felt there was a chance to seize the fortress, I would give it a try. If not, I'd sabotage it before leaving. Now we're suddenly talking about beacons and God Puppets."

What Zac said was mostly the truth, but he didn't mention his real end goal. The tower was supposed to be his ticket to finally evolve his Void Emperor Bloodline to D-grade.

The fortress was a treasure trove far surpassing the Twilight Chasm, easily solving the immense resource requirements. Furthermore, Zac's control over his Void Emperor bloodline had reached the point where he was confident he could at least partly control the breakthrough.

Suppose he managed to claim the tower, great. He'd just collect as much treasure as possible before handing it over to the alliance. If it was unclaimable, or worse, about to fall into the hands of the enemy? A few well-placed vortices should blow the whole thing up. That would dash the hopes of anyone using the fortress against him or the alliance.

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However, his plan had become flawed. For one, blowing up the tower might not be enough. It might even backfire. What if his breakthrough destroyed the defenses protecting the information? It didn't even matter who their hands on it. The information being brought out would spell disaster for Zecia.

But how was he supposed to stop the outsiders? Whether Imperials or Technocrats, a mission this important would be led by top-tier individuals like Tavza and Kator. Zac still wasn't ready to face experts at that level, especially if they had helpers. He'd have to figure out a way to use the tower against them.

Zac also had Emily to worry about. How could he rip the tower apart when she was in it? Even he didn't have full confidence in walking out in one piece. At the very least, he needed to send her out of the tower before triggering his breakthrough.

"We need to figure out an escape path before worrying about what the Technocrats are up to."

"Can we leave the way you came?"

Zac considered a few moments before shaking his head. "It's too risky. I mostly got across the chasm by following your rescue beacon. We have nothing to lead us back, and there's still the Killing Intent to deal with. I think we're better off looking for the tower's emergency exits. They should still be around since the original owners were abducted."

"So let's keep going," Emily said, pointing upward. "The main control room should be somewhere above, maybe along with the private chambers of the big bosses. Sounds like a good place to look for escape pods or teleporters. That way, we can pick up some good stuff while investigating what the outsiders are up to."

"Sounds like a plan," Zac agreed. "If all else fails, we'll just have to cut our losses and jump into a spatial tear and take things from there. They should start popping up when the realm starts to fall apart."

Of course, finding a teleporter would be best. That way, he could send Emily off before going with his original plan.

"Good thing you're here," Emily giggled. "I've never heard of anyone with as much experience blowing up and escaping Mystic Realms as you. You should have a good idea of what to expect."

Zac rolled his eyes, but he had to admit his track record wasn't great. It had even become such a common occurrence that he always carried some items that would come in handy in case he got stranded in the Void. It was half the reason he dared attempt a breakthrough in such a volatile environment.

"Well, no time to waste," Emily said as she got to her feet. "You've saved the cheerleader; now it's time to save the world!"

"You're chipper, all things considered," Zac commented as they set off, searching for a passage that would take them further up.

"I've been hearing about all your lucky encounters for decades," Emily said, her eyes gleaming with anticipation. "I finally get to join one."

"We'll see if you say the same after having enjoyed one of my 'lucky encounters' first-hand," Zac said with a roll of his eyes.

Zac kept a more measured pace now that he'd reunited with Emily. He'd encountered a few more sections damaged by the sword strike during his ascent, and the clouds were already so close it felt like he could reach out and touch them. There couldn't be more than a few dozen floors left to climb. Possibly even fewer since Zac doubted the tower would have floors all the way to its tip.

Every sealed door he opened going forward could release a whole gaggle of Technocrats. Luckily, his lucky encounter had completely fixed up his body. The internal wounds had disappeared during the frantic cycle of destruction and rebirth. Even the damage to his foundations caused by channeling so much Creation Energy had mostly been fixed. Of course, that was only a bonus on top of the real gain.

The combination of refined high-grade Killing Intent and ancient Life-attuned cactus sap far exceeded his expectations. The golden storms within his cells had almost doubled in size and teemed with vibrant force. They had even gained a hint of ancient aura that reminded Zac of his Void Emperor bloodline.

Zac could tell that some of the energy wasn't fully integrated, but that only meant his body would be as unkillable as a plant king until the excess energy was exhausted. And while it wasn't enough to finish the fourth layer of the **[Void Vajra Sublimation]**

, it put him very close to the threshold. Much of that progress came from months of hard work, but it had saved four or five months.

Another month of practice and digesting the opportunity should be enough, which should finally fix the sense of imbalance that had plagued him for close to half a year. To this day, he hadn't dared work on his Undead Constitution since the Abyssal Pond, despite having found the method to advance his Eoz bloodline.

Similarly, the seed left in his Soul Aperture by Eoz still floated about like a wayward meteor in space. Zac fought his burning curiosity, neither investigating nor nurturing, fearing its germination would bring about a second awakening that would completely break the balance between life and death.

Speaking of burning curiosity.

"Uh By the way," Zac said, his gaze averted out of embarrassment. "Those puppets Do I need to be worried?"

Emily stumbled a bit as the tips of her ears reddened. "It's not what you think I haven't gone crazy. It's an idea I've been tinkering with lifelike boobytraps looking like the leaders of our army. Imagine that ambush from before. What if the enemy triggered that expensive-looking trap, only to discover their target is a puppet with a doomsday device installed in their belly?"

"You turned me into a bomb?" Zac said with disbelief.

No wonder he felt a vague threat from the sparring puppets. Whatever Emily had put inside had to be unstable and at the level of multiple D-grade talismans for him to feel a latent threat. She must have gotten her hands on one of the Ishiate Tinkerer's experimental bombs. It had their smell all over it.

"How else would capture your essence?" Emily laughed. "There are still some things to figure out. How to replace yourself without being noticed is the big one. I also need a stronger bomb."

Zac hummed as he kept scanning the hallways. He wasn't sure how viable the idea was. Like Emily said, swapping your position with the puppet without notice was easier said than done, especially with enemies so strong you'd need to use the puppet in the first place. However, there was no point in shooting down the idea. Who knew, it might lead to something impressive down the road.

"So, how do we know which rooms to open?" Emily asked, seemingly eager to change the subject. "How do you usually look for treasure?"

"I just follow my guts," Zac said. "I have a fate-augmenting treasure that helps focus my large pool of Luck. Why?"

"We only have a few tries with your token, right? That reminds me, let me take a look at that thing."

Zac handed it over, equally curious to see the result. His eyes lit up upon sensing a wisp being transferred over, which pushed the seals to four charges.

"Roughly two-thirds compared to last time?" Emily hummed as she handed it back. "Looks like it's rechargeable."

"Thank god," Zac exhaled.

Two-thirds was just right, considering how much energy he'd spent reaching their current floor. In other words, he should be able to use up the whole thing before leaving. It was a bit of a headache collecting the infusions with how spread out they were, but the small inconvenience was nothing compared to the benefits it could bring.

Better yet, it might mean they had unlimited access, provided Emily could continuously recharge the token without any drawbacks.

"How are you feeling? You didn't feel a drain on your longevity or anything, right?"

"I don't think so?" Emily said. "I feel no different than last time."

"Can there really be such a good thing?" Zac muttered as he looked at the token skeptically.

"Might be an unintended effect. I doubt it'll work like this during the real trial. Seems like a cheat if you can continuously top up the token to claim more treasures."

"That's fine. I wouldn't be surprised if we lose our seals upon entering, like we're handing over a ticket."

"So we have a key and your treasure nose. But that won't lead us to any teleporters, right?"

Zac nodded. The next moment, a small gerbil with four oversized ears appeared on her shoulder. The turbulent energy seemed to frighten it, and it activated an ability that made it invisible. Of course, Zac could still see it with his Soul Sense.

"You have a contracted beast?" Zac said with surprise.

"It's a Wavecatcher Gerbil," Emily smiled. "Most call them Treasure Rats. They have a similar ability to the Zhix, where they can hear all kinds of energy fluctuations. This one is trained to search for arrays and Natural Treasures. I got it to help me find troves in the graded battles, but it should be able to find teleporters with some guidance. Hey, give me a Spatial Crystal."

Zac handed over the crystal and snorted when the gerbil stuffed it into its mouth, prompting its cheeks to bulge. Two minutes later, the Treasure Rat

indicated a sealed door with a weak squeak. Zac tried to figure out what was different about this door, but it completely eluded his senses.

He looked at Emily, whose eyes spoke volumes. He wasn't sure if she even remembered the matter with the teleporters. Her mind was fully occupied with the promise of ancient treasure.

Zac coughed and took out the **[Court Cycle Token]**. "Well, I guess this is as good a place as any to start."

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