

Defiance of the Fall

- Chapter 1171: Finding an Answer

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Catheya's eyes snapped open, and she took a shuddering breath. It was a big mistake. Icy liquid poured into her lungs, nourishing the frigid chill that had already invaded her body. She was drowning, entombed, in the dark waters far beneath the surface. Desperate and confused, her mind latched onto a comforting memory.

Her plight was oddly familiar to her first visit to the depths of the Abyssal Lake, even if this experience had ensconced her in utmost cold. Back then, she'd been overwhelmed by boundless Death to the point she'd questioned her heritage. Thankfully, she eventually found the common thread, and the lake grew more hospitable.

The similarity helped Catheya rein in her confused and panicky state. The liquid gate suddenly felt like a womb. The change in perception didn't award a sudden immunity to the immense chill, but it let her rouse her Three Purities and harmonize with the surroundings. It was a feeble defense since the past days had left her utterly drained. As luck would have it, she had another item to protect her.

Catheya shifted her attention to the three crystals secured within her robe, each exuding ancient cold that resonated with the pod's turbid waters. They were still there, existing as physical objects. Catheya had been uncertain they'd be waiting for her when waking up, considering she still couldn't tell whether her journey had been taken with flesh or spirit. Hopefully, three was enough.

She held onto the feeling of Ice and Death becoming one as she dug through the tundra. Unfortunately, the sense of overlap was gone when she reached the surface. Death receded when faced with the blistering winds, mimicking the retreat of Death before Ice within her body. Yet a smile spread across her face as she looked at the swirling belts of glimmering ice overhead.

Her idea was feasible.

Cathey's abyssal eyes turned to the desolate fields before her. It was the same view as the one greeting her when her return from the Perennial Vastness was interrupted.

She'd pushed herself to the brink of collapse in her desire to return to Zac's side. More than forming her core, Cathey had looked forward to seeing the shock on his face when he saw what she'd accomplished. A liquid core combining the essence of Abyssal Death with frigid waters like those she'd endured for years inside the Tears of Belsim. A core that was an ocean while her pathways became tributaries.

Those desires were dashed when the transportation sphere spat her out in this hellish environment, where her newfound pride was quickly pushed down a peg. The cold was so overbearing she only managed to rotate a trickle of energy. The rest was frozen solid, like a river enduring a blistering winter. It was the same for her soul, even her heart.

Taking a single step had felt like a tribulation as punishing as Heavenly Lightning. Thank the Heavens she'd already stepped onto the path of Harmonization. It was barely enough to avoid being frozen solid, though it didn't solve her predicament. There was no contacting home or calling for help in this glacial world, and Cathey would die the moment her soul was drained, and the Harmonization failed.

She'd refused to give in, stubbornly taking one step after another in the direction that best resonated with her path, hoping it would lessen her burden. She wanted to walk out of the tundra that way or at least find a spot that wasn't so monstrously cold. Flying would have been faster, but how was that possible with her energy frozen solid? Not to mention, the sharp winds above the valleys would have frozen her into an ice cube.

Any thoughts of home, Zac, her cultivation, and the future were eventually trapped in ice. Only the cold remained, occupying the entirety of her mind. No, the cold and her determination to keep going. It was only later she realized her trek took two months, when the distance traversed could have been covered in a couple of hours.

The person who stumbled into the small abode that day was different from the one who began the journey. Every part of her had been harshly tempered by the environment. It was a rebirth through suffering. Even her Daos had jumped forward because of the intense strain. Her **[Black Ice**

Cosmos] had seen the greatest transformation, where the fusion between Ice and Death seemed refined over decades.

Today, that Earthly Domain was strong enough to seize control over a small piece of the tundra, and she moved like the wind between crags and frozen trees. The journey was still arduous, and it almost felt like the damp robe caressing her body was on fire. It was the lingering cold of the place she almost failed to escape. A realm that could possibly match the Abyssal Lake in power.

The simple abode eventually came into view, and the unbearable cold suddenly disappeared. It was still all around her, even stronger than before. However, it was as though the cold itself had been frozen and rendered unable to act on its surroundings.

Catheyia exhaled and drove the chilly water out of her robes before entering, creating a sparkling shroud of ancient water in her wake. Unfortunately, she couldn't do the same with the cold that had dug into the depths of her bones.

"Teacher," Catheyia said, bowing with genuine deference.

The woman sitting in the back of the simple wooden cottage looked the same as when they first met. Beautiful, tranquil, and distant. Catheyia called her teacher, but there was no official bond of discipleship between the two. Catheyia didn't even know her full name. It had taken her over a month of wheedling just to get the name Hivissul.

Hivissul was like the world around her, unchanging. She rarely moved, except once a week when she watered the clay pot by her side. She wore a deep-blue robe made from icy silk, her horns looked like dead trees covered in frost, and her graceful features could have been cut from white marble. Despite her elegant appearance, hiding the domineering aura her body passively exuded was impossible. Read Web Novels Online Free - [_](#)

The brutal air only pureblooded dragons possessed.

It had been a huge shock to stumble onto such a peerless existence at the end of her arduous journey, and the stubborn determination that had kept Catheyia going almost collapsed from an innate, primal fear of the predator before her. There were many races of dragons, but a pureblood adult should be at least an Autarch. Hivissul's mere presence would have disintegrated Catheyia if she hadn't allowed her approach.

There was one more thing that gave Catheya some confidence she'd survive their first meeting.

"How was it?" Hivissul asked, opening her eyes.

The miasmic azure felt like the true face of Death, and Catheya was close to having her path realigned to the path in the depths of Hivissul's pupils. Her teacher might be a dragon, but she was also undead. Unfortunately, that was pretty much all she'd been able to gather since arriving. Hivissul ignored any inquiries into her background, though she had confirmed she wasn't part of the Undead Empire. Neither did it seem she'd awakened naturally.

The vast difference in cultivation made it difficult to find the usual clues, but Catheya believed she'd been realigned in the prime of her life. Whether it was the work of a Supreme Lich or a blessed ground was impossible to say, though the fact she remained unattached indicated the latter.

Catheya didn't know why Hivissul stayed in this small homestead despite her overwhelming strength. Catheya didn't even know whether the woman before her was the reason her teleportation had failed. The dragon had taken her appearance in stride, seemingly not caring what Catheya did. Catheya couldn't even pretend to be so indifferent.

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It had only taken a glance to realize Hivissul's cultivation and Dao far surpassed any being Catheya had ever encountered, and their affinities were even a match. Despite being anxious to return, Catheya knew she couldn't ignore such a monumental opportunity. She still hadn't worked up the courage to officially ask for discipleship, fearing it would prematurely end this huge opportunity.

However, her recent trial was hopefully the first step in that direction.

"I only found three," Catheya admitted, taking out the **[Permafrost Lodes]**. Suddenly, the small pieces she'd suffered to find felt somewhat lackluster, so Catheya quickly added something she hoped would better her chances. "But the visit allowed me to confirm my idea was feasible. I will be able to stay longer in the future after incorporating what I learned into my Earthly Domain."

When Catheya first arrived, the dragon had simply ignored her. Unwilling to give up, Catheya spent the next few weeks cleaning and beautifying the surroundings. The cultivation environment was unmatched, but it was simply too dull. Catheya assumed Hivissul enjoyed gardening since she was watering a pot, so she'd built a whole garden around the house.

Finally, Hivissul awarded her efforts by handing her a manual called **[Three Purities]** and a gem-studded necklace. Its name was simple, but the technique was extraordinary. It was an Ice-Death Fusion Manual that cleansed and harmonized one's three fundamentals: Body, Heart, and Soul.

It was Body Tempering, yet it wasn't. The same could be true for the Soul and Heart. Cultivating it wouldn't put your constitution on par with a powerful Body Tempering Cultivator, and your soul wouldn't be a match to a Mentalist's.

It was a unique method Catheya hadn't seen before that purified and linked Heart, Soul, and Body into one unbreakable whole. No aspect would stand out, yet none would be lacking. You would become flawless like a pristine piece of ice. Bottlenecks would become easier to overcome, and she wouldn't lack in any aspect of her cultivation. And with her fundamentals evolving and harmonizing, every aspect of her cultivation would benefit.

However, Catheya quickly ran into a problem. The technique was a perfect fit, having already been modified to use Death and Ice to cultivate. And yet, Catheya was unable to practice the method without drawing from the limited energy contained in the necklace's twelve gemstones. She could use her Draugr heritage to barely provide pure enough Death for **[Three Purities]**, but neither Dao, treasures, nor the tundra could provide the cold she required.

The issue was very similar to the one Catheya had encountered with her own creation of fusing Earthly and Heavenly Harmonization and Dao Domain into an Earthly Domain she called **[Black Ice Cosmos]**. Just getting this far was already a huge accomplishment, but Catheya wasn't satisfied with just this. Her creation was taxing to use and limited in effect if channeled in a hostile environment.

How was her Dao supposed to contend with the true cosmos before she reached the peak?

She needed to add a power that would let her Earthly Domain fully override the ambient Dao for long enough to finish her battle. Relying on her ancestry was the obvious choice. She'd infuse the Abyssal Lake into her domain, using

her bloodline as the conduit. However, doing so would skew its nature too heavily into Death, clashing with the direction she'd decided.

The Earthly Domain needed balance, but few things could match up to the power of the ancestral lake hidden within her bloodline. As with the **[Three Purities]**, the problem was the Dao of Ice. She had the affinity yet lacked the heritage and foundations.

Catheyra wracked her brain trying to figure out a solution, hoping the unique environment held the answers she sought. The necklace couldn't be relied on. She'd only be able to set foundations before running head-first into an unbridgeable bottleneck. Practicing a manual to such a shallow degree was worse than not practicing at all. At the same time, Catheyra sensed that refusing to practice it meant rejecting Hivissul's teachings, severing their tenuous Karmic Link.

The problem consumed Catheyra's every waking moment, but she ultimately came up short. Ultimately, she approached Hivissul to explain her problem rather than doggedly searching for solutions out in the wild. The impartment had been a test of character, or as Hivissul put it, *'Blindly following severs the future. Traveling alone will send you down winding paths.'*

The dragon then provided the path forward. There were dozens of gateways beneath the tundra, leading to a realm Catheyra had never heard of before. The Permafrost Gorge, a lower plane holding the chill of multiple Eras. Using one of the gateways to collect lodestones could solve her problem with the ice, with the caveat being that the gorge was incredibly dangerous for a low-grade cultivator such as herself.

The only way to survive her was by reaching preliminary mastery of **[Three Purities]**, which was what the necklace was for. Even then, she'd only survive a short visit. Worse, the gorge's deadly chill would infiltrate one's body, becoming a poison that would severely damage her foundation.

It was a gamble. Either pass on the opportunity or bet your life on it. The lodestones were the key to dispelling the cold poison and practicing **[Three Purities]**. Finding enough meant solving her bottlenecks and continuing her tutelage. Failing meant death or her foundations so damaged she might not recover in time for Ultom. Perhaps ever.

Catheya chose to roll the dice, and the jury was still out on the result. She found the lodestones, but the ancient frost was still digging deeper into her body.

"Feasibility was never the issue," Hivissul calmly said, not bothering to look at the stones Catheya faced true death searching for. "Fate is key."

"Are three enough?" Catheya asked nervously. "I can feel the chill digging into my bones."

The dragon didn't answer for almost a minute. "Of the three, which do you feel is best suited?"

Catheya's brows furrowed in confusion as she looked down at the three pieces of unmeltable ice in her hand. Was it another test?

Hivissul never explained how to use the **[Permafrost Lodestones]**. The dragon said explaining it before proving herself was meaningless. Catheya had assumed the more stones, the better. She found one the first day, so she'd set a goal to find five before the realm overwhelmed her. If that weren't enough, she'd train and head back until she had bags full of the things.

Now, it looked like only one was needed. So which one should she use?

Catheya scrutinized the three pieces. They all looked roughly the same, resembling uncut gemstones the size of a fingernail. If one looked closely, you could see their uneven surfaces were a tapestry of natural runes. Should she pick the one with the densest runes? Or the one whose icy energy was slightly stronger?

One held superior truth, the other superior energy. And yet Catheya's gaze stopped at the one that excelled at neither. It was the last one she found just before escaping. The place she found it wasn't special, and it didn't harmonize with her in a way the others failed. Yet, there was something about it that pulled her closer.

"Fate..." Catheya whispered as she picked up the stone. "This one, I guess."

"Good. To have been chosen by three lodestones is decent. For one of them to be a True Faestone proves you've been chosen," Hivissul said, and a rare smile appeared on her face as the other two stones floated into the air. "It wasn't meant to be."

Catheya looked on with surprise as immense waves of energy burst from the small crystals before they collapsed onto themselves. The lingering aura of spatial ice indicated they had gone back home, without Hivissul's help. Catheya looked at the remaining crystal with marvel. These little things hid such amazing power?

"Chosen for what? And by whom?"

"As a friend of the gorge by its denizens."

"There are actually beings living there? It looked and felt completely lifeless," Catheya said.

"Some would consider the Fae of the gorge as Natural Formations or unusual energy loci. However, as a being of Death, you should understand that the rules of existence are not cut in stone."

"So this is a living thing?" Catheya asked.

"You will have to figure out that answer yourself," Hivissul said. "Remember never to betray the trust. You are not strong enough to pay the price of disloyalty. When the Earth turns its back against you, so will the Heavens."

"What should I do now?"

"As I said. You have to find the answers for yourself," Hivissul said as a gate opened before Catheya. "Only then will the triumvirate path open."

Catheya inwardly grimaced but didn't let any displeasure show on her face. Her teacher seemed unwilling to explain further or even solve the creeping frost. The test wasn't over.

At least the dragon hadn't discarded her. The gateway didn't lead to the Permafrost Gorge or off the tundra. The cultivation cave she'd dug for herself in a mountain right at the edge of Hivissul's domain waited on the other side of the portal. Half of it held the full fury of the blistering cold outside, while the other was under the control of Hivissul's domain.

The unique environment had given her plenty of insights into the Dao of Ice, and the remote location allowed her to cultivate without disturbing her teacher's rest. It looked like she had to seclude herself and figure out how to use a True Faestone before the ancient frost crippled her.

Catheya was anxious to get started, but she stopped just as she was about to pass through.

"If I succeed—"

"Then I'll uphold my promise," Hivissul said, her eyes closing. "I will take you to the Fifth Pillar."

"As I said before, The Starbeast Alliance is contending for the pillar..." Catheya hesitated. "What if—"

"The Starbeast Alliance will not stop my advance. As for the trial itself, I will not interfere," the dragon said, and Catheya felt a wind push her through the gate. "Remember, face the Earth, face the Heavens. Only an open heart can let divinity inside."

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Chapter 1172: Sacrifice

Zac felt a surge of annoyance flare up at the grating voice, yet it was followed by a flicker of guilt. Brazla's sarcastic remark hinted at an undeniable truth. He had only visited Brazla twice over the past six months, having been too busy with the war. And Zac wasn't much better during his years of seclusion, despite only being a stone's toss away.

It wasn't like anyone else visited either, except for the occasional soldier trading their Atwood Empire Contribution Points for one of the repository's skills or to peruse the complete heritages. Zac couldn't help but recall the claw he and Emily found in the tower and the chaotic storm that was all that remained of the Tool Spirit's mind. Eons of loneliness until it couldn't hold on any longer, collapsing into a storm of anger and regret.

"You know, I've been thinking," Zac slowly said as he entered the Towers of Myriad Dao. "It's like you said, I'm an important person. So important that my compound has become a taboo area people don't even dare come close."

"Big talk for a child emperor of a two-planet empire," Brazla scoffed.

The Tool Spirit was still drabbed in gold and gemstones, but there was a hint of desolation hiding behind the haughtiness as he lazily floated in the air, surrounded by coruscating waves of golden lights. The scene made Zac even more certain of his sudden idea, even if he knew it would raise some waves.

"Nevertheless," Zac said. "The defenses are a necessary evil, but it also means the common populace has fewer and fewer opportunities to marvel at the wonder that is the Tower of Myriad Dao."

"What are you suggesting?" Brazla said, stopping to look down at Zac with a raised brow.

"How about we move you to the Atwood Academy instead?" Zac offered. "We can set up an identical environment there, and the 50,000 students will get the chance to interreact with you without being cleared by security and accompanied by soldiers. We could even make you a resident professor of the Academy. Who else is better suited to hold lectures and teach the next generation?"

"Hold lectures? Teach?" Brazla hummed, clearly interested.

"Isn't that what this place is all about? It's a repository of great knowledge. It's a waste to have someone of your expertise tucked away here. And haven't you always complained about the lack of good conversational partners since my sister departed?" Zac crooned. "I'm afraid those kinds of people don't grow on trees. But they could appear again if they had had the right guidance."

"Indeed, who but the great Brazla could—" the Tool Spirit muttered before looking at Zac suspiciously. "You come bearing gifts and speak sweet words. Since when were you so agreeable? What scheme have you cooked up this time?"

"I'm just trying to use our assets to their fullest," Zac said. "Though now that you mention it, there's a grave matter where only you can help."

He wasn't completely lying. The idea to have Brazla become a resident lecturer had never crossed his mind until today. However, meeting 'Senior Silver,' the powerful Array Spirit of the Dravorak Dynasty, had proved it was a viable solution. And while Zac often sang Brazla's praises to solicit help, he was undeniably very knowledgeable. Especially when it came to the inheritance of his creator.

Sending him over to the Atwood Academy would let him interact with the world again, helping his spirit stabilize while the students got access to a new source of knowledge. It was a win-win scenario that might even help heal Brazla's fractured mind. The source of this content is [novel\(F\)ire.net](http://novel(F)ire.net)

Of course, all that didn't mean Brazla was wrong about his suspicions. Zac did have something he needed the Tool Spirit's help with.

"Spit it out."

Zac didn't put on any more pretenses and explained the situation with Vilari and the bell the best he could.

"Oh? An **[Epiclesis Bell]** has appeared?" Brazla scoffed. "I didn't expect to hear of that fell thing again. You're about to have a bad time."

"Do you know something?" Zac said, his heart beating with anticipation and anxiety.

"My creator mentioned it once. Such a bell appeared in our original sector, causing havoc for 30 years. Wherever it passed, misfortune followed. Crops wilted. Plagues spread. Flourishing worlds turned into wastelands, and people went insane."

"It appeared in your sector, too?" Zac frowned.

"Yes. And shortly after, the Crown of Despair inheritance was installed," Brazla nodded. "Your suspicion is likely not without merit."

"Are you able to bring a wisp of her consciousness out?" Zac asked. "Not with her power, or she might kill us both."

"Not forcibly, no. She's long since reinforced her realm, making it impossible for me to even enter," Brazla said. "But I could ask her."

"There's no need. I've heard it all."

"What!" Brazla and Zac shouted in unison, and their actions were equally synced.

Both ran for their lives, with Brazla diving for the ground while Zac ran for the door. Neither had any desire to face the Crown of Despair while the extent of her reach into the main dimension remained unknown. Zac cursed under his breath at the unreliable Tool Spirit, whose seals had been tampered with without his notice. The System, who loved repurposed items as quest rewards despite their flaws, also received a few choice words.

Zac lunged for the still-open door but encountered an impassable barrier made from pure Mental Energy. Brazla fared no better. He may as well have taken corporeal form by his utter failure to sink into the ground. Meanwhile, an oppressive gloom spread through the halls. If not for Zac's powerful Dao Heart and Soul, he would have collapsed in abject despair.

Instead, he solemnly looked at the translucent woman who stepped out of her much-larger replica in an uncanny recreation of Leandra's descent the day she took Kenzie. Her face was shrouded in darkness, making it impossible to guess her intentions. Should he make a run for it? Zac could tell there was no way he had the strength to cut through the Mental Barrier, but that didn't mean he was out of options.

He only managed to scratch the surface of his upgraded bloodline before the Everfast Monarch interrupted his experiments. For instance, he hadn't tried infusing the Void Sigil on himself. Zac still held out hope it would let him enter an out-of-phase state like when he was breaking through. If it worked, he could step right through the barrier.

Yet he didn't move. It wasn't because of fear of the Soul Wisp of Ralz Calzood, even if it was related. Seeing the Crown of Despair in the flesh brought Vilari's plight to the forefront. He couldn't just walk away when answers were right before him.

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"It can only mean one thing if one of the remaining **[Epiclesis Bells]** is descending without a Beseechment Ritual," Ralz calmly said as she looked at

Zac. "It's hunting. An immense opportunity has appeared in the region, am I correct? Perhaps even an Eternal Heritage?"

Zac didn't answer her question, still unable to tell whether Ralz was friend or foe. "Your disciple has been taken, and this is what you're worried about?"

"Your Soul has seen remarkable tempering for a warrior, but you cannot hide the truth in your heart," Ralz said. "As expected, it all leads here."

"Is this why you set up this inheritance? To follow the bell? Did you use Vilari as bait?"

"This inheritance is but a seed of potential," Ralz frankly admitted. "Though one I hadn't initially planned on planting."

"So you set Vilari up," Zac growled.

"I knew this was a possible outcome. Suffering is inevitable on the road of cultivation," Ralz said. "Knowledge holds power and binds through Karma. Only if she can survive in the depths of despair can she face the long road ahead."

Zac took a calming breath before he lost control. It almost felt as though the Mentalist intentionally channeled the speech patterns and mannerisms of Leandra to push his mental state off-balance. Had Ralz Calzood been spying since day one? Perhaps she hoped to create a weakness to target. Perhaps it was only a quirk connected to her path, like Yrial's narcissism.

"I came here hoping you could help me save her."

"By your account, she entered the bell willingly," Ralz said with a shake of her head. "Taking her out will do more harm than good. The **[Epiclesis Bells]** holds the true heritage of the Beseechment Pavilion."

"The what?" Zac asked. "Is that the force you belong to?"

"Alas, no," Ralz said. "The Beseechment Pavilion is long gone, destroyed by their pursuit. An ancestor of mine found a fragmented heritage and some accounts of the pavilion. It became both the blessing and curse of House Calzood."

"Please, anything you could do to help me get her back," Zac pleaded. "I'm not sure if you encountered the same bell before leaving your imprint here. You can't imagine the evil that hid within. There's no heritage to find in that darkness."

"I believe in your daughter's discernment and conviction," Ralz said. "And fate is working in her favor. I can feel the storm of destiny descending on this region. You seem untouched, yet you are the eye of the storm. You and my disciple are embroiled in the struggle for the Eternal Heritage. As long as that is the case, Vilari will be safe."

"What's the **[Epiclesis Bell]** and Beseechment Pavilion got to do with the Eternal Heritage?" Zac frowned.

"It's an ancient story, one of which I have limited knowledge," Ralz said. "As I said, my heritage is incomplete, and millions of years of effort did little to fill those gaps. All it left us with was misfortune and despair."

"Still."

"Very well. Time will tell whether your fate can withstand the curse of knowledge," Ralz nodded. "The Beseechment Pavilion was a powerful faction from the age of the Limitless Empire. Despite their great strength, they failed to emerge from the great darkness. No true lineage remains today."

"How can you know that if you just stumbled onto a remnant?"

"Because they didn't slowly fade away during the darkness like the other factions. Desperate, they brought about their own destruction when faced with a dying Cosmos. The remnant we found was left by a 'Grand Caller' of the pavilion, scribbling down notes while fighting the throes of madness. The rest had already met similar ends to the men you described before."

Ralz turned to look up at her statue, which held her head in her hands. "Only by reaching profound levels of despair could he stave off the joyful madness long enough to leave a flickering flame for the future."

Zac took a shuddering breath as his eyes widened in realization. Was that what the Crown of Despair-heritage referred to? It wasn't just cultivating the soul by witnessing and experiencing the woes of the world. It was a way of defense against the terrifying evil that made people dig out their hearts with a smile.

"Caller... Beseechment," Zac hesitated. "Were they Summoners?"

"In a sense," Ralz nodded. "However, not of the spirits of the lower planes. They were summoning God."

"God?" Zac said with confusion. "Which one?"

"The hand behind the curtain," Ralz said. "The Beseechment Pavilion had glimpsed the Terminus and concluded that no Cultivator could ever hope to cross that threshold. Only a grand Creator could wield such power, and only such a being could give birth to our reality. So instead of fighting against nature, they decided to ask for help."

"They reasoned that the Multiverse would be no more than a speck of dust to such a transcendent existence. They might not even realize civilizations had grown in the shade of their glory. The pavilion wished to create a bell that could be heard beyond the curtain, to garner God's attention so that they could beseech his teachings and salvation."

"I'm guessing it didn't work," Zac snorted.

"But it did."

"What? Impossible!"

Zac would have to be crazy to reject the notion of an even greater existence when Cultivators more powerful than Gods walked the lands. What was Sendor, if not a God? However, there was no way this Beseechment Pavilion would succeed when far greater factions failed to overcome the Terminus.

Not to mention, Zac had seen what waited beyond the edge of reality when he visited the Void Mountain. There was no higher Heaven beyond the curtain. There was only nothingness, a desolation so profound it had almost destroyed Zac's mind.

"Of course, not the way they intended," Ralz said. "The pavilion had sought their creator's attention for eons without success. The fall of the Limitless Empire and Heaven's demise became the source of despair and desperate hope. They believed they had one final opportunity to toll the bells before it was over. One final Beseechment Ritual whose song wouldn't be blocked by the Heavenly Dao.

"They rang, and something answered," Ralz said. "You've seen a wisp of it first-hand."

Zac nodded, having expected that outcome.

"They had no idea what they'd attracted, but they knew it wasn't God. If anything, it was the Devil. Horrified at what they'd unleashed on the world, the upper echelon trapped most of its spirit in the main bell and sacrificed themselves to destroy it. But it spread like a plague through the 72 subsidiary bells and lives on to this day."

"So why is this remnant spirit looking for the Eternal Heritage?" Zac asked.

"This matter is outside the scope of our original heritage, and its answer is solely a deduction of House Calzood. We found records of **[Epiclesis Bells]** while searching for more remnants of our heritage. There were two common denominators. One, misfortune follows in their wake. The bells feed on providence to survive, so they target rising factions and flourishing lands. Read Web Novels Online Free - [-](#)

"Secondly, destroying a bell will call forth an immense Heavenly Tribulation. The records detailed seas of purple and gold."

"Both the System and the Heavens work together to attack the spirit?" Zac exclaimed. "How did it draw such ire?"

"I believe it's an invader," Ralz said. "The Beseechment Pavilion managed to guide something from beyond the Terminus, and the Heavens cannot abide its existence. The bell can hide its aura from the Heavens, but they are old and damaged. If it recovers too much energy, it'll be exposed. Only unique environments such as Eternal Heritages can hide its existence and allow it to recover."

Zac slowly nodded. It was impossible to say whether what she said was true or false, but it was suspicious how she'd put the card on the table without any fight. While Leandra was a zealot, she was still his mother. If that wasn't enough, she still needed Zac's help. So what did Ralz Calzood need?

"Why are you telling me all this?" Zac asked. "What's your objective?"

"House Calzood has fallen. Only me and a few others are holding on," Ralz said. "I came to the frontier based on a clue. Before the Beseechment Pavilion

fell, they were drafted by the Limitless Empire for one of its undertakings. They had to build something to stabilize a 'pillar.' We believe it was related to the System itself. I can tell you d,o too."

Zac inwardly swore. He'd held onto his Void Heart since being exposed before, yet it proved useless before this old expert. Her guess was right on the mark. The pavilion's situation sounded all too familiar. The same thing happened to the Primo, according to Lova. Laondio had demanded he help build the Hollow Court, even leaving behind a supreme treasure of his.

"We're looking for lost pieces of the Beseechment Pavilion's heritage to rid ourselves of the curse of joy that has infiltrated our bloodline. I believe the pavilion left something behind when stabilizing the pillar. I want it."

Veins throbbed on Zac's forehead as yet another task was added to his Ultom Itinerary.

"I can't promise anything," Zac said. "You're right; I'm chosen for a trial set up by the System that involves the pillar. That doesn't mean I'll come across the thing you're looking for. And I'm not looking for anything while Vilari remains trapped by that thing. Help me get her out first, and we'll do our best to find your heritage."

"I can teach you a modified Beseechment Ritual used to call the **[Epiclesis Bell]**. The Heavens will do the rest so long as you damage it. However, to beseech the Devil, you must embrace the Devil. Are you willing to pay the price?"

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Chapter 1173: Inversion

Zac stepped out of the Tower of Myriad Dao, his mind a mess. Ralz Calzood had fulfilled her promise by teaching him how to set up a Beseechment Ritual.

The **[Epiclesis Bell]**'s true spirit had fused with and been twisted by the evil entity, but Vilari's captor was forced to take on some of the bell's characteristics. Otherwise, the bell would lose its function, exposing the entity.

Unfortunately, Ralz's warning was right on the money. The original ritual wasn't enough to summon the bell. It would only act as a warning to the entity, exposing Zac's location and intentions. The bell could still be attracted so long as the ritual provided a delectable enough offering to have the entity's instincts overwhelm reason and follow the call.

Human sacrifice.

The bell craved providence, and Ralz knew no other method of offering that than capturing talented cultivators to use their potential as bait. And with fate gathering across the sector, there were promising prey everywhere for the entity to feast on. The offering would have to be significant to draw the entity's attention.

Zac definitely wasn't comfortable doing what Ralz proposed, even if he used Kan'Tanu cultists to power the evil ritual. Even if he did, there were many other roadblocks in the way. The ritual was incredibly complex and required rare, specific materials to work. There was no way he'd manage to set it up alone. Galau could probably do it, but it would take months of preparation.

That left the biggest hurdle—what to do when the bell appeared. Zac could always invite a bunch of Monarchs, relying on their greed upon seeing the bell. He remembered the large cracks covering its surface, with two array patterns already broken. It shouldn't take too much effort to push it over the edge and summon the Heavens.

Which begged the question; what then? How could Zac possibly guarantee Vilari's safety in such a chaotic situation? Ralz felt he was better off leaving the matter alone, leaving Vilari to fend for herself until the trial began. The entity's goal was the inheritance, so the Crown of Despair believed the entity would keep her alive and sane to guarantee access.

Zac wasn't willing to wait that long. Ralz's ideas and suggestions were largely based on guesswork rather than fact. Zac sincerely doubted that the creature was some overwhelmingly powerful being who had crossed the boundless nothingness. If it possessed such strength, then the Beseechment Pavilion wouldn't have been able to take out its main body. People like Karz and Laondio would have to step in.

It seemed far more likely that the entity came from the Lost Plane or a similar hidden realm. Iz had called the corruption "Dead Dao of a previous Heaven," leaking out of a crumbling Eternal Heritage. If it was happening to Ultom, it could happen to the other heritages spread throughout the Multiverse. That would explain Heaven's anger. The entity would be a creature born in a previous Era or formed from its Dao. It could be considered an enemy of the current Dao, just like an invader would.

Zac still didn't know exactly what the deal was with Eternal Heritages. Someone unfathomably powerful had to expend immense effort to let a remnant survive the Dao's collapse. Would these ancient cultivators, who had likely transcended Supremacy, go through all that trouble to give their heritage to some strangers far in the future?

Some might, but Zac felt Eternal Heritages made more sense if you looked at them as Arks designed to cross a stormy sea. The cultivators of the previous Eras weren't willing to go quietly into the night, having all their accomplishments erased along with the Dao.

If that were true, then the heritages might not be unclaimed treasures waiting to be discovered. They were dimensions occupied by immensely powerful beings from a previous era and their descendants. Maybe that was why the Undead Empire still hadn't seized control over the Heart of the Empire. Were its original owners fighting back, leaving the Primo locked in a stalemate?

Perhaps he could find some answers in [Foreign Gods], but more important than the entity's origin was the fact that Ralz's priorities weren't aligned with his. Ralz's similar personality to his mother was possibly fake, but Zac could tell she prioritized the Beseeshment Pavilion's heritage and House Calzood far higher than Vilari's safety.

Truthfully, it was understandable. Many masters were quite callous when it came to their disciples. They provided guidance and materials, but the disciple's life and death were up to themselves. This chasm between high- and low-grade cultivators could be seen everywhere. Generations would come and go in the blink of an eye to those at the top of the pyramid. You only qualified for true impartment and nourishment when you reached a high enough stage.

This harsh reality was doubly true for the masters of the Tower of Myriad Dao. The cultivators who left their inheritances with Brazla did so under duress to

solicit his services. It was a transaction, and Ralz Calzood had lived up to her side of the bargain by providing manuals and treasures like Yrial.

Just as Zac was about to step onto the teleporter and return to the Calamity Company, he stopped in thought. Being trapped by the Crown of Despair was another reminder that threats could appear anywhere and anytime. And the mention of invaders from beyond the Terminus made Zac's thoughts turn to the Void Mountain. He hadn't needed to rely on his Bloodline Talent to escape this time, but this was the last time he'd be alone and unmonitored in a while.

Zac hadn't dared infuse **[Void Mountain]** on himself while aboard the Everfast Monarch's ship, fearing some of it would leak into his human body like what happened with **[Void Heart]**'s refined energies. However, the strongest man aboard the Cosmic Vessel taking his other half to the floating barracks of the Swenty Sixth was only at Late Hegemony.

Better yet, Zac still possessed the master key to all Creator-made Cosmic Vessels. He never removed that feature on the ships he sold, and no faction and Zecia had discovered the back door access. It was meant as a safeguard for the future. If any of his business partners turned on him, he could take back his goods or even unleash them upon his former allies.

The absolute authority came in handy today, even if Zac doubted anyone had time to bother with him right now. A simple order turned his chamber into a fortress, and all attempts to use the ship's systems to spy on him would return falsified data. Continuing his experiments on his Draugr side wouldn't leave any clues to discover aboard the ship.

Zac returned to his Cultivation Cave and activated his Bloodline Talent, determined not to leave any stone unturned. The illusory mountain returned, and Zac slowly savored the feeling now that he wasn't as pressed for time. The Void Mountain was a part of him now, which ultimately was preferable to having yet another external object lodged in his mind.

The effect of **[Void Mountain]** on external objects had already been confirmed; pure destruction of spirituality. It was an interesting ability, yet it couldn't be the Void Sigil's only use. Perhaps it wasn't even the intended effect, just something that happened when used on the wrong items.

The mountain was weak and hollow right now, but it had room for growth. At least, Zac assumed it did. His new Bloodline Talent was essentially the same as the one in Karz's vision, though his predecessor formed sigils of the

seventeen Dao Peaks. True to form, Zac's corrupted bloodline rather conjured the Void Mountain that propped them up.

Another difference was the permanent presence in Karz's Soul Aperture, compared to Zac needing to actively summon it at the cost of Void Energy. The contrast might be a temporary stopgap. Karz hadn't automatically formed his seals when entering D-grade. The rune representing the Peak of the Grand Materia formed first, thanks to Karz's steady access to matching materials.

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Meanwhile, half the sigils remained unformed at the time of the vision despite Karz having been a Hegemon for decades. Zac believed his situation was the same. He could form a permanent Apparition of the Void Mountain as soon as he'd absorbed enough Void Treasures.

Or was he supposed to go the same route as Karz, forming one sigil for each Void Peak, if there even were such a thing?

Zac hoped that wasn't the case, since such an arrangement wasn't suited for him. Karz sought an almost unthinkable path of omniscience by grasping every Dao under the Heavens. Meanwhile, Zac was only cultivating the Peaks of Conflict and Chaos, and he would possibly add their respective Voids down the road.

It was impossible to say which route his bloodline would take by looking at the illusory mountain. However, Zac had a feeling he might have inadvertently altered its trajectory over the past months. He still didn't understand why he'd been sent to the true Void Mountain during his duel with Kator, but it resulted in its apparition taking up residence in his mind.

Then, just minutes before his breakthrough, the Void Mountain fused with his body with the help of the Limitless Emperor and the Tribulation Throne. Maybe that was enough to transform his Bloodline Talent. After all, his apparition looked like an actual mountain, while Karz's sigils more resembled runes or skill fractals.

One thing was for sure. Karz's method of progress was a lot more straightforward. The original Void Emperor could absorb the spirituality of any treasure, and the responding affinity and sigil would improve in tandem. How

was Zac supposed to do the same for his Void Mountain? Void Treasures were incredibly scarce, only occasionally appearing in unique environments such as the folds between dimensions.

It was impossible to replicate his feat of repairing **[Cosmic Forge]**'s Omnitool. He'd only managed to get treasures of all seventeen peaks because of the unique environment inside the Perennial Vastness. He could spend a thousand years on the outside without finding such a wide variety of high-quality Void Treasures.

Wait, high-quality treasures?

Recalling the second half of his vision, where Karz created what he called Millenium Herbs, Zac realized he might not have to look for Void Treasures. Maybe he could make them.

Zac took out an F-grade Void Stone and activated **[Void Mountain]**, trying to replicate Karz's money-making scheme. Nothing happened. The Void Mountain generated streams of energy, but infusing the Void Stone proved impossible. It felt like the energy had become solid matter, refusing to budge or enter the stone. His Bloodline Talent didn't work on Void Treasures? Unwilling to give up, Zac took out a piece of Death-attuned wood.

"What the hell!" Zac swore ten seconds later as he threw the block onto the ground.

It shattered like a piece of coal, just like the first herb he experimented on. The scene only made Zac more annoyed. This time, he'd used an E-grade material attuned to his Dao, hoping that a careful infusion would create a different effect than the wanton destruction. It was no use. The only difference was that the spiritual extinction took more time and energy.

Zac's bloodline corruption felt like a practical joke sometimes. His ancestor had essentially invented an infinite money glitch where he could turn trash into treasure. So why was he instead given the ability to turn treasures into trash?

Sure, having Void Energy raise the spirituality of treasures seemed far-fetched, but couldn't it have turned items into Void Treasures? Like his bloodline was inverted from Karz's, he'd create a Void of Death Treasure. However, there were no signs of the item crossing over from Dao to Void when it became mundane without a shred of spirituality. When no spirituality was left to extinguish, **[Void Mountain]** switched to eroding physical matter.

Zac frowned at the ruined scraps, wondering if the ability only worked as a weapon. Item conversion seemed hopeless, and Zac couldn't fathom the talent working together with **[Cosmic Forge]**. **[Essence Extraction]** required much more finesse than the overbearing destruction of **[Void Mountain]**.

Then again, maybe he was basing his theories on the vision too much. Come to think of it, Zac might not even have to rely on Void Treasures to upgrade **[Void Mountain]** just because Karz used Dao Treasures for his Dao Sigils. Void Treasures were undeniably the best fuel for his bloodline breakthroughs, but most of the materials that went into the furnace were normal treasures filled with Dao. Whether it was through relying on **[Void Heart]** to transform the energies or directly absorbing Natural Treasures, he'd find a path forward.

Finally, Zac moved on to the most important matter; testing the Bloodline Talent on himself. Zac drew upon the Void Mountain, relieved to see nothing changed to his human half when the Bloodline Talent integrated with his undead form. Zac felt the abyssal ponds in his cells darken as the shadowy streaks of Void expanded to cover its surface.

The sense of disconnect from the cosmos he'd felt since having his body realigned by the Tribulation Throne amplified, and Zac's eyes glimmered with excitement as he ran over to his museum of failures. He jolted like he'd been zapped by a stun-gun as he pushed into a hidden barrier, yet he actually squeezed through.

The effect wasn't as good as his state mid-breakthrough, and he felt some of the stored Void Energy in his cells being expended. But it worked. He had become the Void, removing the need to rely on skills like **[Apex Jungle]** to cross through Dao-empowered barriers.

A large mirror thumped onto the ground, confirming what Zac noticed through his Soul Sense. In contrast to Karz's ability, **[Void Mountain]** didn't leave a sigil on his forehead or transform his appearance. Like the true Void Mountain, it was hidden beneath the surface, supporting the firmament unseen. This effect was so pronounced that the Void Energy coursing through his body had become invisible, removing any hint of its unique calling card.

That gave Zac another idea, and streams of the Branches of the Pale Seal and War Axe flowed through his body along the pathways of his **[Thousand Lights Avatar]**. There was no resistance and no loss through mutual destruction when Void and Dao intersected. This didn't change when he

passed through the barrier again, though Zac noticed the drain on his body's Void Vigor was substantially greater.

Activating skills didn't cause any complications either, proving how marvelous his transformation was. Until now, he was generally forced to choose between Void and Dao, since using abilities like **[Void Zone]** would restrain his energy as much as his opponent's. This issue was incredibly pronounced when he tried to infuse the Void into his technique.

The Void Energy and his Daos clashed, creating bursts of power while they fought against each other. It resulted in a potent burst of power, but it wasn't a sustainable method of forming a Void-empowered technique. If Zac could figure out how to improve **[Void Mountain]**, where the infusion took the form of Void Life or Void Death, he'd only be missing the **[Thousand Axes Avatar]**.

He'd embody the three pillars of the evolved Evolutionary and Inexorable Stances he'd invented during his duel with Kator without borrowing from a Void Apparition or suffering from energy incompatibility.

Even his **[Origin Revolution]** and **[Extinction Event]** would benefit if he could use the Void in this more stable form. He'd seen the power of adding Void Energy when fighting the deathsworn. Zac could already tell **[Void Mountain]** could easily be used to solve the instability he had to deal with during that battle.

The benefits didn't end there. Using **[Void Zone]** while infused with **[Void Mountain]** resulted in a noticeable boost in its nullification strength. Even **[Force of the Void]** benefitted, though it wasn't as flashy. If anything, it was the opposite. **[Void Mountain]** helped obscure Void's aura, making it harder for his opponents to expose his secrets when activating skills with Void Energy.

The talent didn't seem strong enough to affect his Hidden Nodes yet, but Zac confirmed the change he'd hoped to see. The resonance with **[Spiritual Void]** had grown much stronger when infusing his body, and it felt like the node was at the cusp of transforming. Zac tried to push it a bit further while pushing his Branch of the Pale Seal toward it.

The harmonization broke, but Zac almost leaped in joy after seeing a flickering mote of Void of Death appear from **[Spiritual Void]** before his Dao Branch snuffed it out. The Hidden Node in his Soul Aperture had seen an upgrade

after all, providing what he critically lacked: converting Dao to its matching Void.

This ability could become more important than any other aspect of his bloodline, skyrocketing **[Spiritual Void]**'s importance. Reliable access to the Voids of Life and Death wasn't just a means to temporarily strengthen his remnant-powered skills or buff his stances. It was the key to unleashing his path's full potential for both classes.

Right now, the Branch of the Pale Seal was just an attribute boost to his Human side, with the same being true for his Draugr form and the Branch of the Kalpataru. He was fighting at only two-thirds of his strength, using two Daos out of the three he practiced. If he could do the same thing with Dao and Mental Energy as with his core, he could apply its theories to every aspect of his cultivation.

The sky was the limit.

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Chapter 1174: Emptiness and Life

Zac walked through the sprawling camp, returning the enthusiastic greetings of his soldiers. The Starflash Vessel had let him and the others off on a fortified planet instead of the floating army bases they first appeared on. The Atwood Empire had been designated a proper garrison on a Middle D-grade world instead of the crude barracks they'd seen, one of the many perks they got to enjoy after his contribution to the cause.

Emily had already brought Galau and Bubbur back to Earth to get oriented. Zac had also asked Galau to bolster the arrays around the Ensolus Ruins until they figured out how to best crack open the temples. Average and the rest

were eager to go home, while Ra'Klid rushed off to discuss his Ultom-empowered insights with his tribal council. It left Zac alone with his thoughts, even when surrounded by a sea of his people.

Seeing his subordinates had returned even before he did was a relief. Many sported injuries of varying degrees, but it wasn't much worse than how they usually looked after one of his blitz campaigns through the battlefronts. The Dravorak Captain at the Wolf Teeth Camp assured him they wouldn't be put in a deadly situation before leaving. It looked like he'd kept his word.

The elite soldiers Zac brought to the next world were even better off. Their fighting ended just after he left for the fortress, and Dossin's unit hadn't encountered any new enemies after the bell took care of the Kan'Tanu. According to what he'd heard during his four-day journey back, that whole army and a few others had been put under quarantine while the Alliance investigated how powerful deathsworn and Technocrats could have appeared within their ranks.

Zac eventually reached the garrison's heart, where he spotted a forlorn Werewolf waiting for his arrival. Janos stood by his side, his face inscrutable as ever.

"I'm sorry," a shamefaced Rhuger said before Zac had the chance to greet them. "I just watched as big sister flew into the bell."

"It's not your fault," Zac sighed. "Did she say anything before she left?"

"She only said we all have a destiny we must face," the large werewolf said with a helpless look.

"Destiny," Zac muttered with a stubborn gleam in his eyes. "Well, destiny can be changed. I've already discovered some clues on how to save her. We'll find the bell and bring her out even if we have to turn the whole sector on its head."

"Of course," Rhuger quickly nodded before glancing at the command center to their left. "Until then, what should we do? With big sis gone, I—Elysium is without a leader."

"What are you talking about? Elysium still has you. You haven't realized your greatness because you've walked in Vilari's shadows since the two of you were born. This is an opportunity for you to grow by facing the spotlight. I

believe the experience will let the darkness in you grow deeper," Zac said, patting Rhuger's shoulder. "And don't forget, you're never alone."

Zac held a quick meeting with the Acheron Company's leaders to debrief them before excusing himself. Their only orders were to rest up and make use of the amazing environment. The Alliance currently had bigger matters to worry about than their little faction. Zecia had reached a boiling point during his trip home, and the whole frontline was performing an unprecedented push.

The scouts had already confirmed what the **[Centurion Spear]** accomplished in the Million Gates Territory after blowing up the Worldfort. The weapon shattered an important relay station that acted as a nexus in the Kan'Tanu's teleportation network between the Space Gate and the Allbright Empire's frontlines. Read Web Novels Online Free - [-](#)

Destroying it wasn't as good as blowing up the Space Gate, but it severely limited the Kan'Tanu logistics and reinforcements. The cultists did have backup routes, but the tower's final blaze of glory had created such a storm that subdimensional ripples spread through the territory, sending spatial storms into the previously stable paths.

The Kan'Tanu in Zecia were stranded, and the Alliance was determined to capitalize on the momentum. World after world was ripped back from Kan'Tanu hands, and Monarchs attacked en masse. The cultists had suffered major setbacks on the frontlines since the push began, but they showcased the advantage of being a unified force.

The Space Gate wasn't the only path to Zecia. The Kan'Tanu countered by launching a brutal sector-wide assault through the graded battlefronts. They spent money and contribution like water to increase their army effectiveness, causing chaos within the fractured Alliance. There were already countless reports of factions collapsing. The pressure on the Alliance was quickly mounting, with Clan leaders and faction heads demanding to recall the men they'd sent to the frontlines.

Zac and the Atwood Empire were mostly isolated from the carnage. Their contribution was more than enough to sit out the frontline push, and the Kan'Tanu had no hopes of conquering Earth's battlefronts with the means at their disposal. Who could compare with the Atwood Empire's almost boundless resources? Zac had his people lock down the battlefronts, stalling as long as possible while relying on their fleet of portable Cosmic Vessels to hold absolute advantage. If the situation worsened, they had a terrifying war

chest of over sixty million faction merit to quickly bolster their defenses or reset the battlefield arrays.

The situation was worrying, but there was not much Zac could do. Opportunities like the tower, where an Early Hegemon could impact the whole war effort, were vanishingly rare. And truth be told, he was exhausted. He'd constantly fought since returning from the Perennial Vastness while his subordinates rested in shifts. With two bodies, the carnage he'd experienced was doubled.

He didn't get the chance to digest that accumulated stress before he was thrown into the struggle over the fortress. But Zac could feel it all had caught up with him during the journey back. He exhaled as the doors to his private residence closed behind him. The small garden was so silent you could hear a pin drop thanks to the powerful isolation arrays, but he still felt he could sense the presence of his subordinates outside. It was a comfort, yet it failed to stave off the bleakness that had taken hold.

Walking through the garrison was a reminder of the costs that came with the unfathomable gains from his adventure. He still felt like a piece of his soul had been cut off where his connection with Vivi once existed. The warm, gentle presence had been a steady comfort since his days in the Orom World, accompanying him through thick or thin during his journey. The new treasures lining his pocket were nothing compared to that.

She'd been by his side for almost two decades if you counted the Temporal Chambers. It might not be much in the eyes of the Multiverse, but Zac wasn't even sixty yet. He'd accepted her, knowing their time together was limited, but part of him always believed he could turn the situation around. That he'd somehow reforge Vivi's fate as he had the others around him.

Zac hadn't just failed that ambition; he'd hastened her death by decades by bringing her into increasingly dangerous situations. And yet, she sacrificed herself to save his life. Guilt and doubt gnawed at Zac as he recalled escaping the Orom World. When he threw Heda's seed into the Chaos Gate.

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The botanist's parting words were, 'Please take care of Vivi.' Vivi might have already broken through to D-grade if she had stayed by Heda's side. What Heda could accomplish inside the Orom World and on the outside were very

different. After all, the botanist was an elite among Monarchs to survive inside the Orom for so long, and she'd no longer be restricted by limited resources and the constant need for personal growth to avoid relegation.

Vivi's death made him hesitate about Verun and Alea. He'd never considered swapping them out as he progressed. Their journey was one. As long as he kept going, so would they. But the day could come when Verun shattered under an overwhelmingly powerful attack or when Alea's defenses were broken. The only thing he knew for certain of his future was that it would be a bloody road filled with danger.

Was it a mistake to consider his Tool Spirits close companions, brothers in arms? Would it be better to switch to weapons he didn't have such an important place in his heart?

Some said his providence was like a whirlwind. Some benefitted immensely from being swept up in his wake, but others had paid the ultimate price for having their fates entangled. Vivi and Vilari were only the latest victims, and he was afraid recent events were just a taste of what was to come. There were over two years of intense battle until the trial began, and the battle for the pillar was bound to become an even bloodier struggle. This chapter is updated by NoveFire.net

It wasn't just his closest companions and sealbearers who suffered, either. Thousands of his men had fallen over the past days, including captains he'd gotten to know over months of relentless campaigning. How many of the men who'd greeted him upon his return would be here in a month? A year? Zac wouldn't even know if they'd died. They'd become another number in the reports piling up in his Spatial Rings.

Zac shook his head, snapping himself out of his state. They were at war, and people would die whether he was there or not. He couldn't blame himself for this inescapable reality. And both Verun and Alea had made their desires perfectly clear. They knew the risks of their chosen path, and they didn't back down. So, how could he falter now? Instead, he should keep working on his cultivation to better keep everyone safe.

Like on cue, a surge of energy flooded his body as the gates to the Hidden Node in his heart opened wide. Zac quickly activated **[Void Mountain]** on himself, hiding **[Void Heart]**'s refined energy from any prying eyes. Zac's cells greedily clamored for the refined energy, which felt like an amorphous force holding something resembling the Void of Death.

The source was a top-quality Death-attuned treasure he'd bought on credit from the Alliance, as his contribution still hadn't been tallied. The refined energy joined the golden hurricanes in his cells, and they grew a shade darker as motes of Void Energy joined the vibrant life. Soon enough, he was fully topped off.

The shielding ability of his new Bloodline Talent had allowed Zac to continue exploring with impunity during his return journey. The annoyance of being unable to create Void Treasures was long gone, replaced by excitement over the talent's broad scope of use. Between using the talent to infuse other things and infusing himself, Zac felt the latter held greater use.

However, that ability came at a price. The external **[Void Mountain]** purely ran on the Void Energy stores from **[Force of the Void]**. Using the sigil on himself also drained the motes of Void that had infused to his cells. It was just like how his Eoz nodes cost Vigor to use. Luckily, replacing what was lost wasn't very difficult.

His Human body needed to feed **[Void Heart]** Death-attuned treasures to stock up on Void Vigor. The Hidden Node returned something similar to Void of Death, which harmoniously joined the golden swirls. The phenomenon perfectly matched the situation with his core and the path he'd envisioned after realizing **[Spiritual Void]**'s new ability.

It all meshed together so perfectly that Zac almost felt he was being led by the nose. His bloodline had been corrupted, and his second body becoming a Draugr was supposedly an accident. He had to invent an unprecedented core to step into Hegemony. His path was defined by struggle and setbacks.

Now, everything suddenly fit like a glove. It didn't feel right, but Zac couldn't tell whether these feelings were warranted or the result of being schemed against multiple times already. Had he become so addicted to suffering that he couldn't accept something working without a hitch?

No, there was more at play. Zac thought back to his experience in the Tribulation Throne. It increasingly looked like the realignment to his personal 'Void Path' was the key to his current situation. The wisp of Laondio Evrodok's will saw through his path and made the necessary adjustments. As for why, Zac had no idea and no way to find out. The question was added to the ever-growing pile of multiversal mysteries in the back of his head.

For now, he had a constitution to evolve. The golden swirls in his cells had never been so full of energy. His body had been drained after evolving his bloodline, but that didn't take away the amazing transformation brought by the cactus spine, Fiend Energy, and the Tribulation Throne. After four days of recovery and stabilization, his Life-attuned constitution had fully recovered and stabilized at a point that had transcended the supposed limit of the **[Void Vajra Sublimation]**'s fourth layer.

Zac walked further into his residence, finding the stairs leading him to the cellar. There was only a small hallway and three reinforced gates belowground. One led to a small smithy, the other a customized Cultivation Chamber matching his element. Zac was curious how well his forwarded requests had been met, yet he passed them both, heading into the room the furthest inside.

Vibrant, fiery energy rushed out of the inner chamber as its gates slid open. Zac nodded in satisfaction as he walked inside, completely unfazed by the sweltering heat. The leaders of the Alliance had their hands full, but his unique status within the Twenty-Sixth had its advantages. The supply department had been more than happy to refit his residence based on his requests, and they had seasoned Artisans and Array Masters who could create miracles in no time.

Zac was already leaning toward staying with the Twenty-Sixth instead of joining his other army, and this kind of VIP treatment was definitely a point in favor. There was also value in separating Earth's two strongest armies in case disaster struck. The battle for the ancient fortress had turned out well for them this time, but there was no telling what kind of struggles the Field Armies would see over the next years.

The inner chamber was a dual-purpose chamber designed to help with his Soul- and Body Tempering. Four great braziers were placed at the chamber's corners, and an array drew their flames toward a central cultivation platform five meters across. The flames had a clear touch of Life attunement, making them a perfect supplement for tempering his body. In addition, gathering arrays were infusing significant amounts of Divine Energy into the chamber, further elevating the environment.

Zac took off his clothes as he walked to the central array. The pure flames weren't quite at the level of his previous breakthrough, but it was enough to lend a helping hand. And it wasn't the only thing he'd prepared for today. A set

of crystals teeming with fiendish energy appeared from his spatial ring, and Zac absorbed the ancient Killing Intent until **[Void Heart]** reached capacity.

The next forty minutes were spent in silent meditation, where Zac calibrated his mental state. He'd already measured the time it took **[Void Heart]** to refine the Fiend Crystals. With this delay, the fiendish energy would be returned at the end of the process. It would help fuse the large amounts of Life with his body and dig into its potential.

The final step was drawing the runes on his body with life-attuned paste. This time, both the paste and pattern were switched up. The Natural Treasures that had gone into the dense mix he'd prepared aboard the Cosmic Vessel possessed far greater spirituality and energy than what he normally used. Similarly, the patterns he drew across his body were much more detailed to facilitate his breakthrough.

With everything in place, Zac walked over to a cubby in a corner to place his Spatial Rings for safekeeping. He also took out four pieces of Middle D-grade Life-attuned wood and threw them into the braziers to bolster their flames on his way back. Zac stopped in the middle of the platform, taking a few steadying breaths as he let the flames lick his body.

It was impossible not to recall the desperation he'd felt during his previous breakthrough inside the Perennial Vastness. His body failed to contain the massive amounts of energy and exploded into a golden haze. He quickly realized it was part of the process and drew himself together, but the experience still left a shadow on his heart.

All distracting thoughts were set aside, and Zac's heart was calm as he took the opening step of the fourth layer of his Body Tempering Method. The many matters weighing on his mind faded as he became the Void surrounded by Life. It had begun.

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Chapter 1175: Falling Stars

The third layer of his Body Tempering Method represented a major threshold, taking you into Minor Sublimation. The fourth layer further built on that reformed foundation. The original **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]** said that the fourth to sixth layers represented the Shackles of Man, Earth, and Heavens, respectively.

The Shackle of Man represented one's past, distractions, and 'lowly pursuits.' Only by earnestly facing the Dao with a clear heart could one be reformed by the Dao into a pure Vajra. It also referred to the mortal flesh you were born with. The Minor Sublimation set you on a path forming an unmatched constitution, where flesh was not flesh but an endless fount of Life.

The Shackle of Earth referred to one's reliance on factions and the desire for political power. The boundless Cosmos would be closed off to anyone who'd sullied their heart with court intrigue. It also seemed to refer to the Lower Planes, but Zac didn't quite understand how and why. He had only scratched the surface of the Fifth Layer, and he hadn't even begun to redraw it.

The meaning behind the Shackle of Heaven was even more of a mystery, but Zac did know breaking it meant achieving Major Sublimation and reaching the next stage of Heart Cultivation. Zac wasn't too worried about it. The Sixth Layer could only be cultivated after forming an Inner World. He believed he'd better understand the method's intricacies by then. Read Web Novels Online Free - [_](#)

Zac's reinterpreted version of the Fourth Layer would still break these chains, though the symbolism behind them had changed. To Zac, breaking the Shackle of Man referred to one of the central tenets guiding his path; taking control of his fate. By becoming a Void Vajra, he'd stand outside the schemes of the mundane world, pursuing the Dao and his goals.

Flames and the smoky haze of burning wood swirled around Zac as he transitioned from one step to the next. They formed matching patterns echoing the truths hidden within the movements, and those truths formed transient runes that reshaped the room's energy.

Zac's heart remained a tranquil lake as the minutes passed, and his muscles barely felt any strain when progressing into the more demanding positions.

His body had already reached the apex of the fourth layer, and his constitution was further bolstered by his two bloodlines.

What made the biggest difference were the motes of Void Energy fused with his cells. They had made his body far more suited to practice the **[Void Vajra Sublimation]**, helping him exert a greater pull on the surrounding Life-attuned into his body. Of course, that came with increased agony, though that was a small price to pay for speeding up his cultivation.

Even then, Zac felt his carefully maintained Void State ripple as his cells resisted the infusion with increasing insistence. The cactus spine had already pushed his body to the limits of the amount of Life-attuned force it could hold. Taking on any more was like trying to squeeze something into a suitcase already stuffed to the gills.

Something had to give, or he'd burst at the seams. Zac staunchly kept going, enduring the tearing pain of having millions of tiny cracks spread throughout his body. Breaking free from the Shackle of Man didn't come without a price—in a sense, it was discarding your mortality to become a being forged by the Dao. The first shackle would take you closer to the Innate Existences who naturally communed with the cosmos.

Each sutra came slower than the one before. Zac felt like he was being physically restrained by hundreds of real chains as he kept going. He struggled with everything he had, yet it wasn't enough. With just ten sutras short of finishing the circuit, Zac found himself unable to move so much as an inch.

His Draugr Hidden Nodes had already pushed him further than he could have gone on his own, but they could take no further. Zac's body shuddered under the strain, worsening the cracks covering his body. Oily sweat poured down his body, forming plumes of haze as it was vaporized by the raging inferno. The swirling flames gradually calmed down as the rhythmic cadence Zac had built up over the past hours waned.

It was at that moment a deep thud from Zac's chest reignited his stalled momentum. A primal force poured out of the Hidden Node and into his true heart, spreading to every inch of his body through his bloodstream. The refined Fiend Energy had been released right when Zac needed it most. It acted like gasoline to the fire as it entered the overstuffed hurricanes.

They shuddered and began spinning with unprecedented ferocity, pushing against the boundaries of their confined space. Zac felt like the raging storms were tearing him apart, but the agony brought new power. Zac staunchly held onto his Void State while his arms continued their measured circuit. The invisible chains holding him back groaned with complaint when the impossible was made possible.

Then, Zac heard a snapping sound, and the resistance lessened. A smattering followed the first, and Zac almost lost control. Part of it was the unfamiliar power coursing through his body, making familiar movements seem foreign. Most importantly, each shattered chain brought agony similar to forcing open a node.

Thankfully, he was almost there already. With a final stomp, the circuit closed, and the last shackle snapped. He was unbound, unburdened, and complete. Billions of hurricanes roared as the last barriers were broken through, and they rapidly expanded. A burning hurricane erupted in the sealed chamber with Zac as its eye. The immense amounts of ambient energy were all dragged into his body and became fuel for the eternal storm within.

Zac remained unmoving in his closing sutra, yet felt his form growing tall enough to touch the ten-meter ceiling before shrinking to the size of a Sky Gnome. Contraction and expansion followed each other, each cycle dragging more energy into his body. With each contraction, a large number of cells split. When the last mote of energy in his supreme-quality paste was siphoned off, the number of his cells had increased by fivefold without changing his stature. However, Zac believed he would break any conventional scale if he stepped onto it right now.

The process was over. Zac stayed in place for the next twenty minutes, savoring the changes in his body. The fourth layer was just a minor bottleneck compared to the previous breakthrough. That didn't mean the transformation wasn't noticeable. It almost seemed as though his cells had formed individual miniature worlds, creating a paradoxical scene where the hurricanes had grown a few times, despite the cells being concentrated to a fifth of their original size.

Boundless Life coursed through his veins, and Zac could tell he'd reached a point where he could regrow limbs without relying on any skills. The small cracks that had formed during his breakthrough were already closing on their own, leaving not a trace behind. Finally, Zac opened his Status Screen to inspect the changes.

Name Zachary Atwood

Level 171

Class [D-Arcane] Evolutionary Precursor

Race [D] Human - Void Emperor (Corrupted)

Alignment [Zecia] Atwood Empire – Baron of Conquest

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

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

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

Core [D] Evolutionary Core

Strength 124,477 [Increase: 219%. Efficiency: 451%]

Dexterity 59,560 [Increase: 171%. Efficiency: 300%]

Endurance 74,239 [Increase: 193%. Efficiency: 472%]

Vitality 77,573 [Increase: 206%. Efficiency: 470%]

Intelligence 12,250 [Increase: 150%. Efficiency: 300%]

Wisdom 20,707 [Increase: 152%. Efficiency: 315%]

Luck 1,363 [Increase: 184%. Efficiency: 393%]

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Free Points 0

Nexus Coins [D] 19 348 395

[Life] Void Vajra Sublimation (Fourth Layer): Base Attributes +300. Vitality +3250. Endurance +550. All Attributes +10% Vitality +25%. Effect of Vitality +15%.

Zac nodded in satisfaction. His Life-attuned constitution had finally caught up to his Draugr bloodline, and the fourth layer provided a sizeable chunk of attributes. The strong skew toward Vitality actually allowed the attribute to surpass Endurance after all this time. There were no twists or mysteries like with his Void Emperor Bloodline, which felt very welcome after these past days.

The only surprise was that unyielding resistance when he tried to cross the threshold on his own. He'd expected to almost seamlessly step into the next stage. The Fiend Crystals had sidestepped the issue today, and he had more fallbacks in case they proved insufficient. However, it was important to keep in mind for the future. He couldn't allow himself to grow lax just because his triple constitutions made Body Tempering far easier.

The last flickering flames in the braziers went out, dragging Zac out of his thoughts. A glance confirmed the array was still in working order. It had simply run out of energy during his breakthrough. He closed the screen and got dressed before moving to the normal cultivation chamber.

Streams of Life- and Conflict-attuned energy swirled inside. Someone had even placed a number of matching plants along the walls, creating a similar feeling to his **[Apex Jungle]**. Zac took a deep breath as he sat down with a Divine Crystal in Each hand. His upgraded constitution was clearly able to hold far more Life, and his cells needed to be topped up. Life-attuned Beast Crystals would have provided much better nourishment, but Zac wanted to give **[Void Heart]** a breather after the refinement.

Zac's mind wasn't really on cultivation, though. His body would recover on its own soon enough. Meanwhile, Zac felt it was time to finally turn his attention to one of the items that had stayed hidden inside **[Purity of the Void]** since his Draugr half returned to the frontlines; the ancient tome called **[Foreign Gods]**.

The purification sphere had proven quite useful for long-term storage, especially after Zac realized he could suppress the space to drastically weaken the corrosive Void Energy inside. Not that it was necessary when it came to high-grade items like the **[Court Cycle Token]** and the **[Centurion Beacon]**. They were made from incredibly durable materials that effortlessly

endured Zac's bloodline. The thick tome was no different than the metallic objects despite being made from ancient hide. It silently floated in the hidden space, waiting to share its secrets.

Zac had no plans of taking it out. There still was a small chance he was being observed. More importantly, he was afraid the book would release more sinister energy when flipping the pages. He was better off perusing its contents while it stayed in the Purification Sphere, where he could crank up the Hidden Node in case something went wrong.

A mental nudge opened the cover, exposing a page written in majestic letters of the Limitless Empire's script.

'On the 15,323th year of the Seventh Hexagram Order, the Foreign Gods were discovered hiding in the cracks of reality.'

After twenty years of study, the Starfall Court determined the origin of the corroded realm that had given them birth. It was the fragment of a Stellar Wanderer, one of its three races of Ancient Arcana. The glory of the Ancient Arcana is largely upheld by the Eternal's mark through the river of time, reducing these gentle giants to obscurity.

However, the might of these beings born from the eddies of our Grand Kalpa cannot be overstated. Towering over the Primordial Fiendgods of our age, wielding the strength to tear apart the Chaos Apostles from the Era of Disorder with a simple tug. They were suppressed by the Terminus from birth, forever wandering the cosmos in search of a higher Heaven.' NEW NOVEL CHAPTERS ARE PUBLISHED ON NOVEL FIRE.NET

Zac briefly paused, and not just because of the many unfamiliar terms. A deep groan, like the shifting of ancient wood, rang in his ears, and Zac realized his nose was actually bleeding golden drops. The power imparted within these words was immense. The person who wrote **[Foreign Gods]**, or at least its introduction, couldn't possibly be someone stationed on the Sixth Centurion Lighthouse.

He was far too powerful, quite possibly a genuine Supremacy under the Limitless Empire's Banner. How could the fortress have fallen so such a state if the author was there the day it was attacked? He would have annihilated the enemies with a flick of his fingers. Zac shook his head to clear his mind of the overwhelming pressure and read on.

'Sediments of undying will have mixed with Fallen Dao, giving birth to the Foreign Gods. Cruel, bloodthirsty, and vengeful, these miscreations are a blight and a mockery of the vaunted existences they were molded from. However, while only wielding a shadow of the true Wanderer's might, they possess several desirable characteristics.

These constructs made from corrosion are neither living nor dead, forever locked in a tormented existence. They also showcase the incredible resilience of their source, requiring the work of multiple Imperial Preceptors to disperse. One of the Elder Gods even survived the strike of a Blade Cardinal passing through.

Cruelty and drive can be wiped. Purpose can introduced. Order can quell the Corruption. It would be a blessing for these pitiful existences and an act of positive Karma with the Lost Era if the Foreign Gods were given purpose beyond base instincts born from the Fallen Dao. The Empire will light a torch in the darkness for the Foreign Gods, just as we do for the Cosmos. With the authority of the Starfall Court, I establish the Centurion Project. May they act the lighthouse and guide the path toward the zenith.

The stars are falling, unknowing of their origin. We are running out of time. The pillars will hold up the vault of Heaven, and the Foreign Gods shall become their eternal guardians.

Zac's vision was already swimming by that point, but he pressed beyond the introduction in search of answers. Finally, he found what he was looking for a mention of the beacon. Zac endured the deafening roar as he skimmed the next page before decisively cutting the connection with his Hidden Node. He took a shuddering breath and swallowed a Soul Nurturing pill to alleviate the splitting headache.

The book resembled the **[Book of Duality]**, where each word was imbued with powerful meaning and endless layers of truth. However, there was something wrong with the pages beyond the first. Only the introduction was protected by the unbending Faith of the author. The rest seemed penned by the same hand, yet their truths had been tainted by the Corruption.

[Purity of the Void] had only managed to cleanse the actual tainted energy that seeped out of the pages. The source was still there, its grade or nature resisting his Hidden Node's efforts of purification. The problem wasn't unbridgeable, but he would have to go through the book bit by bit while monitoring his mental state.

Zac's first session brought many new questions, but it thankfully provided some much-needed answers. The Limitless Empire had really found these "Foreign Gods" in what seemed like the Lost Plane. Or more likely, a higher-grade fragment than the one the Ra'Lashar Goblins stumbled onto. The whole Ra'Lashar kingdom would have been wiped off the map by a single Foreign God, let alone one of the 'Elder Gods' mentioned.

Despite their factions being diametrical opposites, the Limitless Empire had actually chosen the same route as the goblins—to seize control of the entities born from ancient taint. Of course, the Limitless Empire was far better equipped to deal with the mental Corruption with their Faith Energy. The Corruption was powerful, but Zac couldn't see it stand up to the Imperial Faith of the Limitless Empire in its heyday.

Most importantly, he found a brief introduction to the **[Centurion Beacon]**. It was more accurate to call it a tracker, as it wasn't the actual beacon that would let him unleash the Foreign Gods on the Kan'Tanu. Zac had already suspected something of the sort after getting his new quest. The quest told him to find a breach in the Eternal Storm, and the tracker was the key to locating it.

In other words, he had to follow its guidance to find the real **[Centurion Beacon]** inside the breach. Lighting it up should technically let him summon the refined Foreign Gods from wherever they were being stored. And provided they actually were still around, which didn't seem clear, considering the fortress seemed to have run into some of their former test subjects at the end.

Zac was also curious about the author and the things he mentioned in the foreword. What was a Grand Kalpa, and who was the Eternal to leave such an impression? They must have been the Lost Era's leading figure. And someone who stood out among their peers by the looks of it. In fact, it almost seemed as though the cultivators of the Lost Era were decisively stronger than the peak existences of the later Eras.

Was that what the author indicated at the end? *'Stars are falling, unknowing of their origin.'* It almost matched the cryptic words Laondio muttered in Zac's Bloodline Vision to a tee. Were they saying that each time the Dao collapsed, it was left a little weaker?

And if the Stellar Wanderers were born in the 'eddies of the Grand Kalpa,' did the author mean the Lost Plane was the actual first Era, not just the oldest known Eternal Heritage?

Zac's mind churned as he felt himself drawing closer to monumental secrets buried in an ancient past. He almost dove back into the tome despite feeling like he'd taken a long bath in tainted lake water. Luckily, a light chime provided a much-needed distraction. Someone had rang the bell of his residence.

"What's wrong?" Zac asked as he opened the door.

"Everything's fine," the Valkyrie said and handed over an information crystal. "The Administrators said you asked for some information, and they've finished compiling it."

"Oh, it's done already?" Zac said with excitement, temporarily shelving the mysteries of **[Foreign Gods]**.

It was the complete tally of the current Middle D-grade Limited Exchange. With his breakthrough around the corner and a mountain of merit, Zac needed to decide whether to splurge in the Early D-grade shop or save his money for the higher-graded store. After all, the resource scarcity in Zecia grew exponentially more noticeable at every stage of Hegemony.

Zac briefly scanned its contents as he returned to his cultivation chamber, suddenly stopping in his tracks as he reached the middle. His lips twitched as he glanced at the ceiling, or rather at the System hiding in the sky. It couldn't wait any longer for another bite?

The items were a Splinter of Oblivion and a Shard of Creation, each prized at a very reasonable 250,000 merit. Their descriptions were foreboding enough to be left alone, calling them cursed and possessed by undying will that would corrode one's rationality. That may have explained why they were left alone until now if not for the annotation indicating they'd been added just four days ago. Right after he left the tower.

It felt like such an obvious bait, making Zac inclined to reject the notion out of principle. However, various threads began to weave together into a plan. The beacon, the Foreign Gods, the **[Epiclesis Bell]**, and now the remnants and the chance at Atavism. Perhaps there was a way to deal with all these matters in one fell swoop. Zac would have to get a whole lot stronger before enacting such a dangerous scheme. He also needed capable helpers and some scapegoats to pave the path and shoulder the fallout.

Luckily, he knew just the people.

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Chapter 1176: Light from Darkness

The roiling oil of the upper seas created a nauseating green light show on the windswept range below. The lack of sound forced by the region's current taboo amplified the kaleidoscopic torture, but Ogras preferred it over having any of his other senses sealed. Attackers wouldn't make a sound before striking in either case, and the unusual light from the noxious seas dispelled most obfuscation skills.

The tearing pain finally abated. Ogras spat as he recalled his illusory lifelines from the surroundings while ripping out the rune dagger from his enemy's chest. The underlings created with the Dreamgeist's Bloodline Talent could become his true body in case of a deadly ambush. It looked like there would be no need for that today.

There were no movement or signs of more faceless lunatics in the area, though that didn't mean much. It wouldn't be the first time **[Worldly Cognizance]** failed to expose these intrepid assassins despite being a Supreme-level scouting skill. Ogras thought his horizons had been plenty widened after years of struggle inside the Perennial Vastness. Months of painful and deadly lessons had proven there was always more to learn.

At least the benefits matched the dangers. Ogras had never heard of a realm like this accursed place. How could there be a world under Heaven's purview where fundamental functions such as Kill Energy were subverted? How could the Ruthless Heavens abide what the Heart Burial Domain provided instead? Stealing the foundations of the slain to temper one's Heart, Soul, and Body came awfully close to the heretical methods of the Kan'Tanu and similar cults.

Ogras still wasn't sure whether he should thank or curse the mysterious assassin who abandoned him here. Well, not so mysterious, it turned out. It didn't take much digging to learn his new teacher was called Ponel Pustori.

The name was known by every single assassin he'd fought since entering the Heart Burial Domain. Some had even visited his homeworld as part of a pilgrimage, leaving a red handprint on the walls of his courtyard.

An assassin having his identity exposed normally meant death, but Ponel was an exception to the rule. Ogras couldn't blame the relatives of Ponel's innumerable victims. Who'd be foolish enough to seek revenge from one of four known assassins who'd successfully dragged down a Supremacy from their throne? Might as well skip the middleman and jump into the netherworld yourself.

Famous or not, Ponel's guidance left much to be desired—no explanation or preparation before dumping him in this barghest pit. Ogras shuddered at the memories of his first days after arriving. Before he understood the rules of survival, the shifting taboos adding uncertainty and danger, or how to benefit from the realm's sinister blessings.

Ogras was initially reluctant, but he didn't have much choice but to partake. His core was just formed, and there were thousands of established Hegemons skulking about in this demented world. It was another tally on his mottled Karma, but so what? He was already so deep in debt that some new additions wouldn't make much of a difference.

'Took you long enough. But that means this is a good'un,' K'Rav gleefully hummed, gazing at the fallen assassin like he were a delectable meal.

Ogras grunted in acknowledgment as he spread corpse-eroding dust over the body while the goblin extracted his soul before it could dissipate. Ponel was a right bastard. Ogras thought he'd at least get to enjoy some peace and quiet after enduring K'Rav's incessant chattering for years, only to find out the **[Shadewar Flag]**'s seal was limited to the trapped spirits. The annoying goblin could still come and go as he pleased.

Then again, it would have been impossible to decipher the ancient scribbles hidden throughout the Heart Burial Domain without K'Rav's help, giving him a much-needed up on the competition. Enduring some sarcastic remarks was a small price to pay for life and power.

Cascading waves of resentment pushed against his sanity as another soul was added to the rising tide inside the flag. A bout of darkness gripped him, different from the agony of heretical refinement or the lost windows of time where his alter egos took over.

This was a darkness that had to be fought with tooth and nail, as succumbing meant joining the ranks of his Shadewar Army. The torment relented, and Ogras took a shuddering breath as he reoriented himself. Two seconds lost. Not bad, not great. Ogras sank into the shadows, picking a route at random. If he didn't know where he was going, then neither would any daggers hiding in the dark.

Ogras wanted nothing more than rest after months of looking over his shoulder, of playing a deadly game of cat and mouse with the other participants. Unfortunately, he was fighting against the clock in more ways than one. Ponel had given him a year in the Heart Burial Domain. Half that time had passed, and there was still much to do.

And Ogras had a sinking feeling that seemed more likely by the day. If he didn't finish the transformation in here, the chained spirits would drag him under. Almost all the souls inside the **[Shadewar Flag]** were replaced by Faceless Assassins by this point, and their numbers had grown a few times over. Ponel hadn't been lying when he said this was the perfect place to raise an army.

Ogras had been fearful his unorthodox cultivation methods would make him stick out like a sore thumb and attract the overseers of the training ground. Laughable. At least two-thirds of these insane bastards practiced various forms of heretical cultivation. The rest were no better. The amount of fell Karma they carried was strong enough to blot out the sky, making his dabbling in unorthodoxy appear as nothing but an innocent dalliance.

Did Ponel know the plan for the **[Shadewar Flag]** was doomed to fail when he threw out his hint? No, how could he? He must have thought that such foul auras would be a good match to such a foul weapon. Ponel shouldn't have realized unorthodox souls were necessary to turn the flag into an orthodox weapon that wouldn't accumulate a karmic debt every time it was used.

Even Ogras didn't at first. Not until they deciphered the first set of scribbles. Ogras's original plan was to turn accumulated sin into an illusion, replacing darkness with light when real became fantasy. However, even if the crazy plan cooked up under Ultom's guidance had the legs to stand, it was only a piece of the puzzle. The best lies held a seed of truth, and the strongest illusions were based on something real.

The **[Shadewar Flag]** broke the Laws when it trapped the souls that should have been returned to the cosmos. Balance was broken, and the crime would

only get worse the stronger the flag grew, and the more it affected the river of fate. Ogras needed to generate merit if he wanted to subvert the sin of the flag's operation. The scattered mentioned a cruel road of spiritual cannibalism.

If practicing a heretical method went against the natural order, then slaughtering all other practitioners would help restore balance. Sin as much as you wanted, so long as you enforced the same law as you broke. This was what the **[Shadewar Flag]** lacked, what prevented him from transforming its innate nature.

Going forward, it would become a purgatory punishing those who went against the Heavens. It would generate merit by stopping heretics from breaking the Laws any further. The fouler the Karma of those he captured, the higher the chance of success.

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He only had to survive until then. He hadn't come close to the levels of trapped sin required for his plan to work, and K'Rav was years from brainwashing the stubborn assassins. Yet every sinner he added to his prison added to his spiritual burden. Giving up wasn't an option, either. K'Rav was right. His fate was indelibly stanied now that he'd set down his path. He'd have to see it through to the end, or the resentment would drag him under.

The key to success, or at least survival, could be found in the Heart Burial Domain. The fourth of seven rune daggers should be nearby, the next fragment of the **[Red Hand Avinasa]**. One of the seven strongest methods strewn across the training realm and the inheritance left by his introducer. The simplified version he practiced when wielding the rune daggers was already overturning his understanding of what was possible, and allowed him to advance far quicker than the other trialtakers.

Ponel probably hadn't been exaggerating when saying his foundations were much too weak to endure his methods. The tempering method was the key to surviving his true heritage while giving him the strength and resilience needed to drag the **[Shadewar Flag]** into the light. He'd truly become the Shadewar Sovereign, a ruler of the underworld who guarded the order through steel and blood.

A natural predator to those heart-cursed bastards.

'It's time.'

Perala's eyes slowly opened, the storm in her heart mirrored by the blight ravaging her Inner World. She briefly considered using her injuries as an excuse to avoid facing reality but soon rejected the notion. The river of fate would keep flowing, uncaring of her thoughts on the matter. How could she not be there for her disciple at this time?

A flash of anger ignited in Perala's heart as she ripped open a passage. Why did that young man insist on creating problems? Why did he have to steal what little time they had left? If not for him, wouldn't her old friends still be alive today?

Perala adjusted her mental state before it affected her Inner World. It was easy to blame Zachary Atwood for thoughtlessly throwing oil on the raging flames of war. However, there was nothing that said they would be any better off if the fate of the Centurion Lighthouse went another direction. Still, it was hard to completely erase the seed of resentment as she stepped into the small courtyard.

They were still inside the War Fortress, but arrays and foliage had given the illusion of a countryside manor far removed from the woes of the frontlines. The truth couldn't be hidden from Perala's senses. The empty cultivation chambers, the nuns anointing the few fallen who left a body to put to rest. The suppressed atmosphere of an army whose belief in victory had been suppressed by superior force.

"Y-Your Eminence," Vai stuttered as she shot to her feet.

"Master! You shouldn't be running around with your wounds!" Leyara fussed as she rushed over to her side, her eyes wide with worry. "What's wrong? Is he back?"

"No, he's gone," Perala said with a gentle smile, hiding the pain in her heart.

So many had died in that sudden burst of violence. Perala could still see Kantaja's blazing eyes as she stood by the unmoving body of her husband, the hatred burning in her heart as she struggled with the harsh reality of her insufficiency. How many in Zecia could withstand the Chapter Heads of the Kan'Tanu? Ten, maybe.

A newly ascended Monarch was nothing before them, and four Chapter Heads had been deployed to break the Alliance's offensive and Zecia's will. And they were just the appetizer used to draw out the real targets.

"The Lord of the Kan'Tanu should be unable to emerge again for the time being. Our final attack destabilized his Inner World enough to force him back into seclusion. He can't leave a single blemish on his foundations with that monstrous curse he's nurturing."

In truth, their sacrifice had only bought them a year or two, and it cost them four of the most powerful Dao Reserves hidden in their sector. There would be no Eimon Dravorak, Tasil Allbright, or Aposto Heliophos to push him back. With the other sacrifices, Zecia lost over 30 powerful Monarchs to kill one Chapter Head and buy some time. She was supposed to be detached from this mundane struggle, but Perala's heart bled at seeing the flickering hope of her home die out.

And now, destiny had come for her disciple.

"It's something else. Come with me."

Another gate opened, and Perala led Leyara into the chamber hidden in the War Fortress's depths. A solemn air swallowed all sound as they stepped onto ancient stone. Leyara opened her mouth, yet no words came out until Perala covered her disciple in a protective barrier.

"This place..." Leyara muttered as she looked around.

Soon enough, her gaze stopped at the illusory flame silently burning atop a small podium. Unfathomable barriers protected its essence, yet it was impossible to fully isolate the tremendous truth hidden within. In that flickering flame, the past, present, and future converged, forming a bridge to the beyond.

"Is this a seal? No, it shouldn't be," Leyara said with a frown, looking at Perala with unanswered questions. "Unless it's a Flamebearer seal? Why would such a thing be here?" THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY NOVEL(F)ire.net

"Because we are the Vigil," a third voice answered, and Leyara jumped in shock upon noticing a woman standing by her side.

"Who are you!"

"The Vigil's core tenet is non-interference," the woman continued like she hadn't heard Leyara's question. "However, occasionally, we have to light a candle in the darkness to illuminate the path. Simply watching when fate's led astray could undo untold sacrifice."

"Silsea Tromok, Emissary of the Eternal Watch," Perala said with a neutral expression.

"Eternal Watch? The headquarters?" Leyara said before her face rapidly shifted, and she turned to the ancient altar. "Then this is..."

"A Flame of Destiny. *The* destiny," Silsea confirmed, finally turning to Leyara. "We all have a destiny we must carry, and I admit our burdens aren't made equal. I understand you have misgivings regarding the matters of the Vigil. That you feel your life's path has been subverted by distant matters with no connection to you. Yet we can wait no longer, or we'll be consumed by fate's rising tide."

"That's..." Leyara hesitated, unable to meet the intense gaze of the nun.

"I've met the man who left a mark in your heart," Silsea commented. "He's a storm, rudderless and unpredictable. Dangerous. He's already hastened the pillar's ascent by half a year, causing tremendous ripples on fate's tapestry. Steering us into an unknown sea. Many will rail at having their trajectories and plans undone. This is your chance. You can calm the storm and lead him back to the light."

"You want to control him through me? Forget it," Leyara glared. "I've already gone against my beliefs over and over to live up to your rules despite being kept in the dark. That's nothing compared to Master's grace over the years. But I won't betray Zac. He's not just a friend or a participant of some event. He carries the fate of Zecia! You might not care what happens if the Kan'Tanu wins, but I do!"

"This is not about control. It's about balance," Silsea said. "The Vigil does not wish to dictate which Flamebearer enters the court or what choice they make. Your friend is no different in that regard. However, with destiny in flux, he might uncouple the river altogether. The pillar would return to the depths, delivering an irrecoverable blow to the Heavens."

"Where would that leave him? He'd become an eternal sinner, an enemy of the cosmos. Thrones or Seals, destruction, rebirth. It won't matter if the gates remain closed. Destiny's river must be allowed to keep flowing."

Perala's heart trembled as she saw the confusion in her disciple's eyes. She'd tried to explain, to prepare her, since the first signs appeared. However, Perala only knew a corner of the truth. She was only an outer disciple stationed in a desolate corner of the frontier. Leyara's connection with the Vigil was even more tenuous. Asking her to take on such a mission was asking too much.

"You don't—"

"If I absorb this, I'll become a Flamebearer as well? Will I be able to enter the Left Imperial Palace?" Leyara interjected, her eyes somber. "Master said my identity is unique. That it would award me certain influence?" Read Web Novels Online Free - [-](#)

"You will gain entry, but not as a Flamebearer," Silsea confirmed. "You'll become the Vigil's Flameguard, protecting the flame of hope from the winds and rain."

"Will... /... remain?"

Silsea silently looked at the flames for a few seconds before lightly shaking her head. "I don't know. You will be annealed in the purpose of our undertaking, reborn to withstand the weight of destiny. Part of you might remain, but you could fade under its light. It depends on the strength of your conviction."

Leyara silently looked at the flickering flames for over a minute before a radiant smile appeared on her face. She turned to Perala, who found it harder to meet her eyes than face the assault of the Chapter Headers.

"No matter what, I'm confident I'll always remember you."

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Chapter 1177: Blackwood College

Zac stepped off the platform, taking in the fresh air of Earth. It felt like the sweetest perfume after smelling nothing but ash, steel, and blood for over two months. The honeymoon phase after dealing a blow to the Kan'Tanu had been woefully short, and the shocking appearance of the Kan'Tanu Pope hadn't stopped the battles at the lower levels. If anything, the Alliance was desperate to communicate they weren't backing down.

The worry hidden in the corners of the frontline soldiers' eyes was present in his subordinates back home. Alliance had tried to keep things under wraps, but how could the Kan'Tanu pope's terrifying prowess be kept under wraps? Three Field Armies had been annihilated to the last man, turned into fodder for a Heart Curse the size of a planet.

Even then, the common populace didn't know just how bad it actually was. Zac had pieced together the truth by extracting snippets from his many connections over the past month. Dozens of Monarchs had fallen during the assault, including three of the extremely limited Late-stage Monarchs of the sector. Two more Late Monarchs were grievously wounded. With their advanced ages, they were essentially out for the count.

In addition, multiple Clan-protecting relics had been expended to drive back the bloody pope and his subordinates. Altogether, it was a devastating blow to Zecia's peak strength and a painful reminder that numbers couldn't make up for raw strength in the Multiverse. When the pope returned, there would be fewer guardians to hold him off. If they failed, Zecia would have another Eventide Asura event on their hands.

The outsiders didn't participate in the battle, though Zac had to admit they had a hand in making the Kan'Tanu back off. It wasn't out of benevolence or camaraderie. They couldn't let the war end early, as it was the best way to form Karma with the upcoming event. Ideally, they wanted a stalemate, where their champions could gather fate by wantonly butchering natives in a locked war.

If you needed to find something good coming from the disaster, it would be that the added pressure acted as a catalyst for growth. Everyone was feeling the pressure, the abject weakness before the Kan'Tanu's peak masters. It broke the spirits of some, but hearts had been tempered by close to a year of constant battle.

His subordinates were no different and used the suffocating pressure as fuel for change. They worked harder than ever, and not just the soldiers. Zac could barely recognize the war camp as he passed through it on his way to the teleportation station. It had been completely rehauled, turning into a monolith of steel and impregnable strength.

The ingenious designs would be familiar to anyone who had visited the Ensolus Ruins or any other remnant of the Limitless Empires. The bases were simplified versions of the ancient schematics Galau brought back from the fortress.

The designs collected in the Sixth Centurion Lighthouse and Galau's insights into arrays triggered an industrial revolution. Ishiate Tinkerers, Volor Stoneturtles, and artisans worked tirelessly to expand their operations. Millions were hired to open up huge foundries on Pangea and Ensolus, and the first prototypes had already left the production line. It wasn't enough to change the overarching direction of the war, but it would make the Atwood Empire's upcoming ascension smoother.

The three designs far beyond the Atwood Empire's capabilities, which they provided the Alliance free of charge, could potentially nudge things in Zecia's favor, though Zac wasn't overly optimistic. He'd seen the schematics and their unbelievable intricacy. Construction would take years of trial and error, if it could be done at all.

Nevertheless, Galau was personally making great strides since joining his ranks. His war designation became Chief Engineer, and his seal quests were progressing even faster than Zac's shipyard quests. He'd given up on any hopes of becoming a true Merchant already, shifting his goal to becoming a titan of the arms industry.

There were still a few hours before the meeting, and Zac didn't want to seclude himself in his cave until then. The course had already been set, and he would spend enough time in seclusion already. Instead, Zac toured his Empire, visiting cities on both Ensolus and Earth. It was impossible to escape the notices plastered everywhere, and the messages were always the same.

Half were the recruitment posters for the army and its support branches. The second was the upgrade notice. In three days, Earth would ascend, becoming a Middle D-grade world. The notices urged everyone to stay calm during the upheavals. Zac had already seen recordings of F- and E-grade worlds. The upgrade didn't create much of a commotion, but the energy levels involved were far lower than what Earth would face.

Zac walked unnoticed among the populace despite his unique Draugr appearance, thanks to the shrouding items he wore. Eventually, he found himself before an institution he hadn't visited before; Blackwood College. It made him recall a few matters. He deactivated his equipment, which caused some commotion among the guards until they realized who had just popped out of nowhere.

"Emperor Umbri'Zi!" the Revenant soldiers greeted with respectful bows.

Blackwood College was one of Elysium's elite training grounds and where many of the martially endowed Revenants ended up after their six-month general orientation. Raising undead citizens was quite different from their living counterparts, at least in Port Atwood, where the naturally-born undead still made up less than one percent.

A Revenant raised from a cultivator could technically restart their journey the moment their spirit awoke, and madness gave way to sapience. However, these people were blank slates, ignorant of everything you'd normally learn as you grew up. As such, newly awakened had to go through a comprehensive course that would allow them to function in society.

It sounded almost impossible to impart the upbringing, experience, and basic education that young adults possessed in such a short time. Then again, awakened Revenants were born with fully-formed minds and bodies, and the orientation's first two weeks were a training course that allowed them to get used to their bodies while gaining levels and a few titles.

At that point, they'd have enough attributes to be considered unprecedented geniuses in a pre-integration society, and they rapidly soaked up everything they needed to know. It even seemed as though they were re-learning as much as learning, with their predecessors' experiences becoming something akin to instinct. Still, orientation would normally last three full years to provide better foundations and give them more time to find themselves.

That wasn't possible with Zecia's current situation. They had no choice but to accelerate the process so the awakened could graduate to military training camps, factories, or the many other departments that screamed for manpower. Only those displaying the greatest potential could continue their studies in elite institutions such as the Blackwood College or the Atwood Academy.

"Good work. Don't mind me," Zac said to the guards, smiling as he saw Pika run over.

"Lord Atwood, we weren't expecting you today," Pika said. "Are you performing an inspection? Is it the Echelon Class?" The source of this content is NOVEL(F)ire.net

Zac nodded after some thought. "In a bit. I'm here to see Max first. Where is he?"

"Max? He should be on the Sword Plateau," Pika said, her head gaining a hesitant tilt before continuing with a whisper. "He's... confused. There is something wrong with his weapon."

"I heard. I'll deal with it; you don't need to accompany me," Zac said.

"I'll arrange everything with the Echelon Class, then," Pika said and hurried away. Read Web Novels Online Free - [-](#)

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The world darkened and time slowed to a crawl as Zac activated **[Abyssal Drive]**, careful not to impact the students and teacher with its domain. It wasn't difficult finding the Sword Plateau despite not knowing the layout. It resembled a large sparring platform in the woods behind the main building. Three array pillars surrounded it, each emitting sharp auras.

It was a training array that could conjure large numbers of flying swords that would attack anyone atop the platform. You could meet the onslaught alone or in the group, and you could train anything from battle technique to evasion within. Since the arrays were made based on the Dao of Swords, cultivators could also search for inspiration in the heat of battle.

Right now, the array wasn't running, and the area would have felt abandoned if not for the young man sitting atop one of the pillars with a shortsword in his

lap. Zac felt a twang in his heart as he saw the familiar features. He didn't know why he felt the need to see the young swordsman, but he knew better than carrying this knot when entering seclusion. He might be overprepared for his upcoming breakthrough, but that didn't mean it would be easy or fast. This time, he didn't have the Perennial Vastness to help out.

There were also troubling reports of Max talking with the sword when he thought no one was looking. There were no signs of mental issues, but the doctors felt it possible something went wrong because of the rare resources that went into Max's awakening. That splinters of his previous soul were lodged in the depth of his aperture, causing a mental illness resembling schizophrenia.

Seeing Max this close up, Zac had another theory. The easiest way to uncover the truth was to apply some pressure. Zac shot right for the boy, only returning to his corporeal form at the last second. Murderous intent covered the plateau as **[Love's Bond]** descended toward the boy's head in a brutal arc.

Max sat in silence, feeling the buffeting of **[Second Wind]** against his mind. It helped calm his nerves. He didn't know why he'd been so on edge today. He'd heard the whispers among the custodians. Something had gone wrong with the war. However, those matters felt distant and abstract. It wasn't the source of his unease.

He sometimes missed the days before the clouds in his mind parted. It was only him and his companion, free from any errant thoughts or troubling matters. Every day, he learned something new, and the joy of discovery had started to turn into a suffocating pressure. The world was growing too fast. He didn't even know himself, so taking it all in was becoming too much.

These escapes into the wilderness, where it was only him and the Dao, were the only thing that kept it from spilling over. Max smiled as **[Second Wind]** incorporated another sliver from the pillar. At least he wouldn't be alone forever.

The tranquility was broken by a roiling wave of deadly peril. Max gaped in fear upon seeing a terrifying man appear before him, reeking such bloodlust the ichor in his veins froze over. Yet Max's arm moved on instinct like he'd been in this situation a thousand times before. The shortsword rose to meet the

descending edge. More than ever, **[Second Wind]** felt like an extended part of him.

Reacting in time wasn't enough. Instructor Dwayne would have shaken his head, complaining about form without purpose. How could you bring out your true strength when your heart was in turmoil?

Rationally understanding the problem didn't magically solve it. The immense force within the axe was like a collapsing mountain, and Max felt like every bone in his body would break as he was thrown off the pillar and into the arena. The pain helped dispel all errant thoughts, at least, allowing the training to kick in. Max rolled to his feet, his sword held in a defensive position as he found his bearings.

His attacker was already standing before him, his features hidden by a cloak and a haze of Death. Powerful, incredibly powerful. Max listened for the footsteps of guards running over, but the forest was deathly silent. It was as though the arena had been cut off from the world and his chances at survival with it.

"Who—"

His question was answered with more violence. The gleaming axehead moved in for the kill, the intent imbued in the strike far surpassing the murderous air of the visiting veterans. Yet the sharper the Killing Intent levied against him, the louder the swordhymns grew in his ears. Max followed its urgings, meeting the overbearing attack with a glancing deflection that allowed him to move within his larger opponent's reach.

Where a fist was waiting.

Max saw his impending doom, yet his body wasn't ready to give in. A narrow dodge reset the battlefield, yet the pressure immediately returned. Max desperately endured, but he felt his grip on reality slipping. The swordhymns were joined by roars and flashes of unfamiliar scenes of foreign lands. Of furious struggle, of twisted faces glaring at him from the other side of a set of clashing weapons. **[Second Wind]** felt burning hot in his hands, a fire that gave him the courage to fight back against this terrifying opponent. Dreams and reality converged as Max followed the call as though possessed.

Yet it wasn't enough. Whether real or fake, Max was being suffocated as he steadily lost ground. Max could as well have been fighting ten people from

how the axe seemed to be everywhere at once. Even then, his mind settled as he was pushed closer to the inevitable end. Now that a few seconds had passed, Max understood the truth. If this man wanted him dead, he'd be dead after the first exchange.

This was a test.

"Not bad," the man said when Max finally couldn't resist and removed the cowl hiding his features.

The previously calmed heart threatened to jump out of Max's mouth as he stared into the pitch-black eyes of the warrior. They felt like the true expression of Death. The true face of the very land he stood on.

He was such an idiot! Why didn't he realize sooner?

"H—hello, Emperor!"

Max had assumed it was another veteran Headmistress Pika had brought to share their experiences and insights with the students. Maybe he'd seen Max sitting atop the pillar and decided to test him out. To think it was Arcaz Umbri'Zi, the ruler of the whole Empire!

The realization brought a new dimension to the questions he'd grappled with over the past months. Of the inexplicable treatment he enjoyed. He was no slouch, and he did work hard on his swordplay. But he couldn't hold a candle to the talents of the Echelon Classes. So why the special treatment? And what about the other odd things he'd noticed?

Was he really someone special in his past life?

"Do you know me?" Emperor Umbri'Zi asked as his axe transformed into a beautiful necklace.

"Uh," Max hesitated, his soul trembling under the intense stare. Was it a test?

"N—no. I don't remember anything from my past life. But there's only one person with your eyes. Th—there's a painting of you in the commissary."

"Hm," the Emperor nodded, his expression growing distant.

Max couldn't bear the silence or the questions rattling in his mind.

"Can—can I ask who I was before I died?" Max asked.

"You should have been given the report."

All reanimated citizens were given a file on their old life, containing a brief description of their past selves. It was up to them whether they read the report or not and whether they wanted to apply to meet their predecessor's family. The situation with the Echelon Class seemed different, but Max was normal in this regard.

Of course, he'd looked. Who wouldn't be curious about their background? Max also believed it held the answers he sought about **[Second Wind]**. Why did he awaken with a weapon already bonded with his soul? However, the short life story in the file had left Max sorely disappointed.

"It doesn't make sense," Max pressed. "According to the report, I was a nobody. So why do I retain more of my cultivation than the others? Why do I have access to better resources? Is the report fake? *Who am I?*"

Emperor Umbri'Zi didn't immediately answer. Eventually, he sighed and shook his head. "A nobody? He had friends, family. Companions who trusted their backs to him. He was hard-working. He had aspirations. He wasn't a nobody. His journey simply ended early. That doesn't mean he didn't leave a mark or matter."

"Then... it's true?" Max said, his eyes glazing over as he felt the fantasies he'd built come crumbling down.

He'd often daydreamed his differences came from a hidden identity. Maybe he was the son of one of the Empire's generals. The truth of his origin was obscured to protect him, and he was left **[Second Wind]** as a safeguard. One day, they'd step through the gates of the Blackwood College and bring him home.

It was all nonsense.

The Emperor shook his head, and Max gasped as he felt **[Second Wind]** fly out of his hand.

"I understand things don't make sense right now. The best explanation I can give is that Karma connects us. I was the one who gave you this sword when you were a human child who hadn't stepped onto the road of cultivation. It was a chance encounter, and I didn't see you again until the moment you fell in battle. You died the day I returned."

The sword returned to Max's side, and he breathed out as he felt whole again. Yet he didn't know what to think. His treatment was simply the result of a coincidence? A simple word from the Emperor, and he could enjoy unearned benefits. However, the next words from the Emperor blew the gloom away.

"Are you willing to take me as your master? You'd become my second disciple after Emily Larkin."

"Disciple?" Max's eyes lit up before a cloud of hesitation put a lid on the excitement. He glanced at the necklace around the Emperor's neck. "Would I have to...?"

"You don't need to switch to an axe," the Emperor laughed. "I'm walking the path of conflict. The axe is how I understand this Dao. There is nothing preventing you from doing the same with the sword. Besides, I'm pretty hands-off. I won't interfere with what direction you take."

What else were there to say?

"I'm willing!"

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Chapter 1178: Echelon Class

Zac nodded, feeling the knot in his heart loosen. He initially had no plans to take Max as a disciple, and the young swordsman's strength, frankly, wasn't impressive enough to warrant it. His affinities had clearly risen compared to his human counterpart, thanks to the special attention that went into his awakening. It was still only at the level of an elite, a noticeable gap from people such as Vilari and the Echelon Class.

Reaching Hegemony was up to fate, and rising above would depend on the unique bond he'd formed with his Spirit Tool. Or perhaps, it was more

accurate to call it a Soul Sword now. The nascent spirit in the sword Zac gave Max after returning from the Orom World had somehow fused with Max's original soul. The sword was now closer to **[Love's Bond]** than a normal Spirit Tool.

Max's connection with the sword might be even stronger despite the spirituality still being weak. There was some sort of unique entanglement happening. Zac had no idea what would come of it. Perhaps it was a blessing; perhaps it was a dead end. However, he saw an echo of his situation in Max. With their Karmic entanglement already there, Zac felt it made sense to take him as a disciple.

Or was Zac just seeing what he wanted to see?

"You have been nourishing your blade with the latent energy of the Sword Plateau. However, the effect is limited, and the sword is of average quality. It will not be able to keep up with your advancement as things stand. I have better swords—"

"I'd like to keep using **[Second Wind]**!" Max said with dogged determination, though the young Revenant failed to hide the panic in his eyes.

Zac was gratified yet worried, his thoughts returning to Vivi. What would happen if the sword snapped? Max's dependence on **[Second Wind]** was far greater, to the point his soul might as well live and die with the blade. Would he even survive its destruction?

"What if you face a strong enemy like me? Taking **[Second Wind]** into the battlefield will only harm you both."

"I'll find a better way to make it stronger!"

Zac slowly nodded. "Let me take a look at it."

Max was hesitant, but he still handed back the shortsword. Zac scanned the Spirit Tool for over ten minutes, comparing it with the materials available in his spatial ring. Its grade was low, and the materials that went into its creation were ordinary. The craftsmanship was solid, at least. Giving it a boost with **[Cosmic Forge]** was child's play.

"There is currently a mismatch. The spirit you're nurturing is marked by death, something that the materials that went into **[Second Wind]** lack. How about I

strengthen its spiritual nature and infuse the Dao of Death?" Zac said. "It will deepen **[Second Wind]** 's foundations and make its transition into E-grade smoother. Of course, you will still have to figure out the way to nourish the blade and its spirit yourself."

"I will, thank you, Master!" Max said with excitement.

Zac nodded, and dozens of attuned materials flew out of his Spatial Ring to form a constellation around him. The Omnitool came next, and Zac began the delicate process of extracting heterogenic strings of from the weapon before weaving in an intricate pattern of Death and Conflict. Crafting Dual-attunement equipment was much harder than just sticking to one Dao, but Zac could craft this particular combination in his sleep. It was essentially his Inexorable Path, with some minor alterations to remove any connection with axes while reinforcing the budding Dao of Sword the Soul Sword already held.

Layer after layer was added with pinpoint precision. Zac's skill in **[Cosmic Forge]** had reached new heights after three months of diligent preparation. Zac still wasn't at the level where he could complete the quest to unlock **[Essence Union]**. Still, there were noticeable improvements to his control over the fragile tendrils of essence compared to his time in the Perennial Vastness.

The newfound ability didn't just come from practicing the method during any breather he had. Much had happened in the ten months since he emerged from Sendor's domain. He'd elevated both constitutions, moving them closer to the Daos of his path. His Daos had also broken through, becoming Late Branches.

He'd even touched upon the Four Laws and the One Destiny when using the Tribulation Throne, an experience that couldn't be compared to the illusory hints he'd witnessed atop Mount Illumination. With deeper foundations, progress came easy. At least when dealing with refinement connected to his path. this chapter is updated by NovelFire.net

The upgrade only took an hour, at which point Zac had infused one and a half cycles into the sword. It wasn't its limit, but Zac felt it better to leave some room. The more spirituality he infused, the more it would mirror his path. Max should be the one who decided the sword's direction. Besides, gathering the materials to upgrade your equipment was a fundamental aspect of cultivation. It would just harm his progress if Zac just handed everything to him from the get-go.

"This should let you go a bit further," Zac said as he handed over the sword.

Max lovingly looked at the blade, which had gained a darker hue while its inscribed edge emitted a cold sharpness.

"This is my first gift as your master. My second gift is an opportunity," Zac continued. "There is a Dao Repository in the Atwood Academy in the capital, and there is a sword inheritance inside. If there's anyone in my Empire who knows how to nurture a sword and its spirit, it's the Blade Emperor.

"However, nothing in this world comes for free, even if you're my disciple. Only seven individuals in the Empire can accept the inheritances of the Towers of Myriad Dao. Half the slots are already taken. You currently have a Late Seed of Sharpness and an Early Seed of Hardness. Form a Fragment of the Sword aligned with your path within six months, and the opportunity is yours."

He'd expected reopening the doors to Irei's inheritance to dredge up some unwelcome memories, but his heart remained calm. Instead, he recalled those days when he sat under a tree, pondering on his path while Thea swung her sword in the yard. Those tranquil years between the Integration's end and Leandra's return felt like a distant dream most days, but they suddenly felt very real. It was bittersweet.

"Blade Emperor..." Max intoned, nodding with determination. "I'll work hard and prove myself worthy! Master, could I join the Military Camps? That way, I can visit the battlefields and gain experience."

"Don't be too eager to step onto that stage. There are other ways to accumulate experience and comprehension," Zac rejected. "Your predecessor made the ultimate sacrifice. Don't let his gift be in vain. You walk the path of the sword—you'll see enough bloodshed in your life whether you want to or not. For now, come with me. I'm speaking before the Echelon Class, and you should listen in."

Zac grabbed Max's shoulder and took him away from the Sword Plateau. The two appeared before the doors leading into a small auditorium, with Pika and a group of lecturers and instructors waiting outside.

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"They're all assembled," Pika said. "Is there anything you need from us? We have prepared some activities in case you wish to gauge their progress."—

"That's okay," Zac rejected. "I've read the reports; you're doing great work. I'm just here to see them and share some of my experiences."

"That's—Do you think we could..." Pika said, glancing at the eager-looking teachers behind her.

"The more the merrier," Zac smiled as he pushed open the door. Read Web Novels Online Free - [-](#)

Zac led a nervous Max inside, and the silence was deafening as sixty-two sets of eyes focused on him. Zac pointed for his disciple to take a seat at the side while the instructors lined up in the back. He didn't say anything for a minute after taking his place behind a podium, silently taking in the familiar faces and recalling the memories that came along with it.

A trio of humans sat in the front, together in death, just like they were in life. They emitted a dark but stable aura, making Zac think of a tomb that had endured the winds for ages, soaking up the Death and Earth of the cemetery it stood in. They were the believers in Azra who targeted him at the beginning of his visit to the Perennial Vastness.

Not that far away sat a reptilian cultivator with a line across the scales of his throat, whose aura almost perfectly blended with the environment. Sendor's seal had locked away the specifics of the zones he visited during his training, but Zac could still recall the series of events. He'd broken through with his soul, at which point the reptilian tried to ambush him.

He'd found the life-death **[Calamity Core]** that later became the nucleus for his Cosmic Core, and the three Earth Cultivators had tried to intercept him on his way out. Each face carried a similar story of conflict and struggle at the edge of life and death.

Zac's eyes shifted to a muscular Revenant resembling a statue. Astara, or Lesindi as she was now called. They'd arrived around the same time, and the spearmaster was the strongest opponent who became attracted by the global notice targeting him.

She'd approached him again after he claimed **[Cosmic Forge]**, proudly declaring she'd be the one to leave her name behind in the end. Zac hadn't

put her proclamation to heart and moved on with his matters. It turned out he'd taken up a much larger place in her heart. His series of explosive achievements became daggers stabbing into her Dao Heart until she couldn't bear it any longer.

His second run-in with Astara was a full six years after his arrival, making her the second-last guest he killed before forming his core. She'd tracked him down during an outing for resources. What followed was a short but brutal battle where she sought to kill him to disperse the demons that formed in her heart. Now, Lesindi was one of the standouts of the Echelon Class.

Astara's fate left a bitter taste in Zac's mouth. She was a rare genius who had managed to nurture both Intent and Technique. With her immense foundations, she had easily climbed to the ninth echelon. For her to fall in the E-grade felt like a huge joke. At the same time, Zac didn't feel pity. The weakness in her Dao Heart led her down the wrong path, where she tried to murder him solely to reinforce her convictions before breaking through.

The Echelon Class was fully made up of the elites he'd killed inside the Perennial Vastness, except for a handful who'd been dealt with by Catheya and Ogras. Imperial Deathsworn, handpicked by Valsa Planur, carefully nurtured scions from vaunted backgrounds and rare geniuses who had seized a Vastness Token one way or another. Each was a talent that would easily have broken into the Stars of Zecia Ladders were they still alive.

Zac hadn't spared any expense for their awakening. Catheya had worked on the corpses for years inside the Perennial Vastness, and he used the best available methods and rare treasures to facilitate the transition. Furthermore, the catalyst of their awakening was Zac's fully awakened Draugr bloodline, which awarded them an even greater affinity with death.

They quickly gained sapience and were put on specialized training programs based on his memories of their talents and the methods he found on their bodies. Boje, who was still relearning his Alchemy by starting at F-grade recipes, provided top-tier medicine to expedite their growth.

Like Max, they weren't strong enough yet to join the war effort. He could tell they were all at Peak F-grade, currently in the stage of building sturdy enough foundations to target Hegemony and beyond.

The former Heaven's Chosen silently looked back at Zac with emotions ranging from veneration to fear. Pika, Vilari, and Rhuger all believed that

explaining their origin was for the best. Their unique composition of races, some of which didn't exist in Zecia, would quickly expose that they weren't like the other newly-raised Revenants of the Atwood Empire.

Zac felt odd coming face-to-face with a roomful of people who'd tried to kill him before, whose life he'd ended himself. He could only imagine how it felt for these children. If nothing else, the mythos of the dual Emperors of the Atwood Empire had only grown greater during the war. His human persona stood in the limelight when it came to the sector at large, but Arcaz Umbri'Zi was figuratively and literally the founding ancestor of Elysium.

"I'm Arcaz Umbri'Zi," Zac simply said. "While this is the first time we meet, I have been following your progress from a distance. I'm sure this is all confusing, and I know we've pushed you kids hard. I'm sure you've understood the reason already. Your talents are extraordinary, and you carry seeds of great potential.

"However, the Atwood Empire doesn't employ deathsworn. We are at war, but we are far from reaching the point where we need to force children onto the battlefield. Neither is there any grudge between me and you all. It's true that I've fought most of your predecessors, which is why you're sitting here today. But remember. They are they, and you are you.

"Your predecessors can only give context to your being, but the future is solely in your hands. You can choose a different path than the ones detailed in your inheritances. All of your predecessors were great warriors, but that doesn't mean you have to follow in their footsteps.

"There are as many roads as there are cultivators, and those who travel the furthest aren't necessarily the most talented. It's those who have found their calling, whose conviction and drive let them brave the winds of their long journey. I gathered you here today because I wanted to dispel these doubts and share some pieces of my journey in hopes you can find something similar for yourself."

Zac began sharing the stories and insights he'd gathered over the years, starting when he was alone and fumbling in the dark on Demon Island. He hid nothing, smiling while retelling some of Emily's favorite stories that greatly clashed with his current status and renown. Those mistakes and misadventures were his first lessons in the realities of cultivation.

He didn't speak on the Dao beyond the joy of coming closer to the truths he sought and of the struggles he'd faced when formalizing a path that resonated with the essence of his being. Instead of techniques, skills, or battle, he covered heart, aspirations, and purpose.

Soon enough, Zac was speaking to himself as much as the captive audience. The words just kept flowing. It was a reaffirmation of his path, of why he stood here today, and what he needed to do. By the time Zac finished half an hour later, Zac found more than a few students had the glazed-over, distant gaze of someone swept up in their cultivation and at the cusp of an epiphany.

A few had gone even further, closing their eyes as their auras gave hints of breaking through. The teachers in the back were similarly affected, but they quickly isolated these students with arrays, making sure they wouldn't be disturbed by or disturb the others. Max was in this group, his eyes shut as he tightly gripped his weapon.

Disappointed looks appeared on many of the remaining students as they furtively glanced at their classmates.

"There's no point in being jealous of others when it comes to cultivation. We all have our own roads to walk. Today, these children managed to take another step forward. Tomorrow, it might be your turn," Zac smiled. "What's important is that you find something you're passionate about and work hard at reaching it."

The silence stretched for a few seconds before one of the Revenants eagerly raised his hand.

"Uh, Mister Emperor," the scarred man asked, leaning forward with excitement. "Is it true you have visited many amazing places? Other worlds? What are they like?"

The one asking was once one of Valsa's deathsworn, and the bubbly youthfulness looked incredibly off on the face of a hardened warrior. It was doubly so for Zac, who remembered his steely demeanor during their desperate deathmatch.

"It's true," Zac grinned. "All kinds of places. I've seen things you wouldn't believe. Worlds fully underwater, worlds so hot an F-grade cultivator would turn to ash. Stars holding thousands of worlds inside. I've even been swallowed by a fish larger than this whole continent."

"What, really?!"

Soon, another lecture took place, with the elites of the Echelon Class more resembling a gaggle of schoolchildren who hollered and giggled as Zac shared some more misadventures. It was only an hour later he left the group with a smile. He was already late for the meeting. It was worth it.

His heart felt full, clear, and ready to face Middle Hegemony.

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Chapter 1179: Facing the Bottleneck

Zac hadn't realized how much he'd needed a short break from the pressures of office. The bloodshed and constant threat of death were bad enough. He also had to play the roles of the Atwood Empire's tyrannical emperors. Any hint of weakness could ripple through the ranks of his men or invite trouble from those eying their wealth and position.

The wide-eyed innocence of the newly awakened allowed him to put all that aside. He'd felt like an uncle entertaining a gaggle of kids at a family gathering. Zac was also happy to see his impromptu appearance helped the Echelon class let go of some worries. More than one had carried misgivings about their purpose and role in the Atwood Empire.

Just knowing that no one was out to get them had helped as much as his lecture on cultivation. Altogether, eight managed to elevate their Daos, while two rekindled the abilities of their predecessors. One was Lesiti, who formed her first sliver of Spear Intent. The other was the curious deathsworn, who was now called Wright. He'd actually triggered a bloodline resonance, awakening a Bloodline Talent that seemed very useful for scouting.

Max's gains were harder to nail down. He didn't seem to understand it himself. It seemed as though the link between himself and his Soul Sword had grown

stronger, forming a give-and-take similar to his **[Adaptive Symbiosis]** with Haro. It was interesting, but Zac had no plans to delve deeper into Max's secrets.

Ultimately, Zac had too much on his plate to give point-by-point instruction to his new disciple, and he couldn't very well bring Max back to the frontlines. He'd already provided a path forward, and Max would have to prove himself by accomplishing the task he'd laid out. Hopefully, the challenge would become his first step in formalizing a path of his own.

Zac was even less worried about the Echelon Class. With their talent, it wouldn't be long before they made a name for themselves, no matter if it was on the battlefield or in other departments. They did, however, hint at a worrying trend. The undead side of his empire was starting to become too powerful, eschewing the balance between Life and Death.

Their population was just a fraction of the number of living citizens, but Elysium was producing an excessive number of extraordinarily talented cultivators because of him. It hadn't been an issue when there was only Vilari and Rhuger who stood out. But the Echelon Class would blaze through the ranks until Peak E-grade, as the foundations for the first two grades had already been set by their predecessors. Between their talents and Earth's upcoming upgrade, they wouldn't need to waste much time before pushing for Hegemony.

Furthermore, the Echelon Class was only the latest addition to Elysium's ranks. There were also the Revenants and Corpse Lords from high-quality corpses collected during the war. The Kan'Tanu rarely left usable corpses, but Zac wasn't limited to only collecting those his soldiers slew.

The Kavriel Province already had an agreement with the Alliance to buy any usable corpses. However, it wasn't easy to forget the eons of enmity. Many were cautious about providing their old nemesis with too much ammunition, afraid it would come back to bite them in the future. The Atwood Empire didn't face similar resistance, and they'd been able to set up multiple channels to discreetly procure bodies for cents on the dollar. Then there was Ultom and the elites who'd participate. Zac's Corpse Sack would soon fill up again.

How was the living supposed to keep up?

Certainly, Earth had an unusual number of cultivators possessing bloodlines. But so what? The purity wasn't very high. The locals wouldn't measure up to

the Echelon Class even if they managed to trigger a bloodline awakening. Their predecessors would be considered talents anywhere in the Multiverse, and most had stronger bloodlines than the descendants of the Tsarun Clan's research subjects.

Let alone Earth, barely anyone in Zecia could stand shoulder to shoulder with the Echelon Class in terms of pure talent. Even the established clans in the Undead Empire Heartlands would fight tooth and nail for such an incredible batch of corpses. Any one of the sixty-two had the potential to become the ancestor of a powerful branch.

If nothing changed, the Atwood Empire would eventually be divided into a small group of powerful undead ruling over a larger population of living citizens. Take it further, and a day might come when the undead feel it is a waste to have a bunch of dreamers running around. If all the leaders and guardians of the empire were undead, why not just realign the whole faction?

Zac could quash any such developments while around, but he couldn't stay on Earth forever. There was his mission to Sanctuary, which could take decades, depending on the distances involved. Furthermore, his road was growing increasingly narrow on the frontier. Zecia couldn't provide the resources and facilities needed for someone like him to target Peak Hegemony and beyond. Just Middle Hegemony would have been a headache if not for the contribution store and a few established factions opening their private treasuries because of his performance in the lighthouse.

These were all problems for later, though, and the imminent rise of the Echelon Class did help him in the short run. As expected, Kator had been on his case since Zachary Atwood shot straight to the top of the ladder. Giving his undead followers some extra attention was one way to show he hadn't forgotten his Draugr side. Thank god the Reaver successfully stepped into Late Hegemony two weeks ago, and his human side wouldn't compete with Kator for the top spot on the Middle D-grade ladder.

The other participants were already waiting in the meeting room when Zac arrived. Representatives from all races were present, as were the branches of government and military. His human half was already sitting at the seats of honor, and Zac nodded at himself as he took his seat to his left.

"I'm sorry about the delay. Let's begin."

At this stage, there was not much left to discuss. The plans had already been drawn up and implemented, so the meeting was more of a once-over to confirm everything was in place. Zac hadn't been very involved in the nitty-gritty, leaving the details of Earth's upgrade in more capable hands. He'd read the reports and provided general direction. The short of it was that they'd purchase the energy upgrade for Earth the moment Zac's successful breakthrough was confirmed. Meanwhile, Zac would trigger the shipyard's upgrade.

Some final details were ironed out, and Zac added a few notes on his own. Altogether, they were done within two hours.

"Is there anything else before we wrap things up?"

"There is," Ilvere said. "We just received a report. The bell was spotted again."

"Is it still only attacking Kan'Tanu?"

"Yes, but a Monarch appeared to snatch it. He failed, but the bell seemed to have taken some damage before it slipped away."

Zac frowned for a few moments before shaking his head. "It's fine if it managed to escape. Its actions prove that Vilari is still in control. She'll be more careful going forward."

Zac was only making educated guesses, but there was not much else he could do. He wasn't ready to deal with the **[Epiclesis Bell]**, which was one of the reasons he was pushing himself so hard. Vilari's plight reignited the urgency burning in his heart. He stood up and turned to the door when a hesitant call stopped him.

"Wait! Should... Should both of you really break through at the same time? The risks involved..."

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The one who asked was Julia. It was a valid question for those who didn't know the truth of Zac's split existence. If something went wrong, the Atwood Empire would lose both pillars at once. The empire would descend into chaos, and their riches would be eyed by Kan'Tanu and locals alike.

"That's precisely why we have to go at it as a team," Zac said while his other half nodded in agreement. "We were once one. Our Mental Energy is still indistinguishable, and we have a complete understanding of each other's paths. One might be able to help the other through the process, significantly reducing the risks."

"But using a Temporal Chamber is too dangerous."

"What choice do I have?" Zac sighed, even if he wholeheartedly agreed with Julia's warning.

He was taking a big risk by stepping out of the river of time once again. He had already borrowed too much between his seclusion and the Perennial Vastness. The disjointed time flow he'd experienced after returning was his final warning. With another infraction, the river would come to collect.

"It's not just Vilari—we're all running against the clock. You have grown immensely over the past year, but the past months have proven how quickly disaster can strike. Even if I were willing to hand over the reins and seclude myself for a few months, how am I supposed to focus on my breakthrough with constant worries rattling around in the back of my head? Don't worry; I have found some methods to weaken the temporal imbalance. One quick seclusion should be fine."

There was one more reason Zac reluctantly decided to take the risk, one not suitable for such an open forum. Suddenly and without warning, the Sealbearer quest's deadline had jumped 197 days closer. Instead of two and a half years until the trial began, they now had just under two.

The shift was related to his actions inside the fortress according to Tavza. Zac didn't understand why that should make any difference. The Lighthouses and Centurion Project were only tangentially related to Ultom. At the same time, the timing and that nun's presence on the Everfast Monarch's vessel couldn't be a coincidence. The fact that the Void Gate completely cut ties with him shortly after gave Tavza's theory more credence.

Since the deadline could change once, there was nothing that said it wouldn't happen again over the upcoming months. There was also his mission to call forth the Foreign Gods and seize the final piece of his seal. If a Lighthouse could cut six months from the Fifth Pillar's ascent, what about the real thing? It could immediately trigger the trial, depending on when he took action. Read Web Novels Online Free - [-](#)

Middle Hegemony was only his minimum requirement. Ideally, Zac wanted to reach the peak of the stage and upgrade his Daos before it was time to set off. He no longer had the luxury of spending months on core breakthroughs and redrawing his pathways.

Zac left for the closest teleporter, with both bodies appearing in the lobby of his Cultivation Cave. Triv was already waiting for him, while Galau arrived soon after.

"How is it?"

"We've gone over the arrays and installments twice over the past week. Everything is in order," Triv assured.

"Or damaged with in a way that's beyond our capabilities to discern," Galau shrugged.

"How can you curse the lord right before his seclusion!" Triv chided.

"It's fine," Zac said. "Thank you for your hard work."

"Then, good luck, master," Triv bowed. "I will stay nearby should you require my assistance."

"Be careful about getting too close. I might generate dangerous energy storms," Zac said before turning to Galau.

"I'll be careful. I always am," Galau said before his brows furrowed. "I spoke with Average and the others."

"How is he?"

"Not good. Ultimate was their pillar for so long. The family is floundering without his leadership. Most of them are meatheads, so they've thrown themselves at the Kan'Tanu like they're holding the answers."

"We all have our process to grieve," Zac sighed. "Our plan?"

"Average doesn't think it's a good idea. At least not now," Galau said with a shake of his head. "Kantaja is out of her mind, and Greatest is facing immense pressure to hold it all together. He's desperate for power. If we bring him here..."

"He might do something drastic," Zac filled in. "Alright, we'll table the matter. Please keep looking for other ways inside when you have time."

Apart from rehauling Earth's defenses over the past months, Galau had also dealt with the Ensolus Ruins. The majestic temples were now properly hidden, but he hadn't found any way inside using the knowledge gathered in the fortress. Zac's backup solution was to roll the dice and bring Greatest to force open the barriers. The only other Monarch Zac could even consider bringing to Earth was the Void Priestess, but that was also out the window since their attitude changed.

It looked like the temples would stay locked down for the foreseeable future. Zac had already tried using the beacon to pass through the barriers, but the two didn't seem connected. In fact, he'd already confirmed the breach wasn't anywhere near Zecia by activating it in different regions. The beacon's only response was imparting a sense of incredible distance. The quest wouldn't be solved with a quick skip into the Million Gates Territory.

Zac went over the details of the arrays with Galau before entering the inner section alone. The cave had seen a large overhaul since he visited last time. Galau and Triv had worked in tandem to upgrade and expand the arrays and natural formations. The energy density was more than twice as high, though it still couldn't quite compare to the environment atop Mount Illumination.

Improved energy wasn't the only difference. Zac walked to the cave's nexus, where his prayer mat had been replaced by a scarred totem pole over five meters high. It emitted an incredibly fierce aura, to the point Zac felt small scars appearing on his skin when he came within ten meters. It stirred the ambient energies, generating a storm far greater than anything Zac triggered while cultivating.

The pillar was called **[Might of Ouombos]**, and one of the awards he received from the Alliance for his contribution. It was a unique treasure excavated from a special realm under the control of the Deonsir Clan, one of Zecia's 'Eight Grand Clans' and a founding member of the Alliance. The realm was called Tribulations of Ouombos, and it was a System-controlled trial zone like Twilight Ascent.

It was only accessible by Peak Hegemons and only opened once every 83,000 years. Since it held opportunities that could increase the chances of opening a proto-space, the Deonsir Clan was forced to hand out some of the entry slots every time. **[Might of Ouombos]** had been brought out three trials

ago by a talent from the Tribal Constellation. The troll had paid an immense price to seize it and died soon after from his wounds. His tribe quickly declined without his protection, and they opted to pawn off the totem pole before it was stolen.

It wasn't clear how it found its way to the Alliance coffers, but it didn't much matter. It was a powerful Conflict-attuned amplifier, taking unattuned energy from the Nexus Veins below and turning it into Conflict-attuned energy. **[Might of Ourombos]** was extra valuable because it didn't add any will or resentment to the energy, something which was often a problem with treasures attuned to Conflict.

Because of it, his cave finally had all three elements of his path, where Conflict in the middle kindled and elevated Life and Death. The pillar wouldn't last forever, but it was a Peak D-grade treasure that could keep chugging along for millennia before being exhausted.

Surrounding the pillar were nine densely engraved boxes as tall as Zac—three for each of his elements. They were Spatial Treasures holding immense amounts of stockpiled energy. They were also connected to pure Nexus Veins on Pangea and Elysium through spatial gates, allowing them to bring over even more energy if needed.

Zac didn't want to recreate the desolate scene around Mount Illumination, even if he didn't think his breakthrough would be as energy-demanding. Most of the energy from the drained mountains went into upgrading his Duplicity Core and erecting his quantum spaces. Without their pull, Zac would provide most of the energy needed through the treasures going into his core. The Spatial Batteries were a safeguard in case his estimates were wrong.

Continuing into the heart of the Life-attuned half of his cave, Zac found the next addition in the form of an ancient array platform—another reward from the Alliance. Actually, most of their rewards were centered around facilitating his breakthrough.

Sharing his Shipyard quest had clearly made them burn with anxiety, and the recent setback only increased their desire for strong weaponry. If his Cosmic Vessels could lessen the pressure from the Kan'Tanu's general assault, then the Alliance could divert more resources to prepare for the pope's return. The source of this content is NovelFire.net

The platform was an ancient relic extracted from a treasure realm, a Core Formation array borrowing certain concepts from the Limitless Empire. The array had been repaired and further modified by a Monarch Array Master following Zac's specifications, and there was an identical one in the Death-attuned half of the cave.

His unexpected split into two bodies had thrown many of his plans on their head, but Zac believed it worked in his favor when it came to his core. One of the biggest struggles Zac faced during his Core Formation was that one of the three elements in his core was always in a quantum state and impossible to manipulate. With two bodies, he'd be able to manipulate his core from both directions. It would speed up the process and drastically lessen the risk of the imbalances that lead to explosions or imperfections.

It was a much-needed advantage, considering the other hurdles he needed to cross.

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Chapter 1180: A Battle Against Fate

Hegemony only had three bottlenecks to E-grade's seventy-five. In return, each was like walking a tightrope where the smallest mistake meant death. The only way to upgrade one's core was through a process of breaking down and rebuilding. Pathways needed to be multiplied and expanded, and schematics needed to be upgraded to accommodate higher energy levels and loftier Daos.

Tackling the minor bottlenecks of Hegemony could be broken down into three stages: ignition, ascension, and formation. The fuel for the process was already stored within the core. It was the spirituality you'd infused into your somewhat barren Cosmic Core during the first twenty-five levels of Hegemony. Ignition meant unleashing those accumulations to return the core to a malleable state.

A cultivator's Cosmic Core had natural fault lines that allowed for a controlled release, lessening the risk of damage or death from the ignition. Even then, the forces involved were far too great for the core to withstand. Like a tree bending with the winds instead of forcibly enduring, the core would actually collapse into a set number of pieces. Ascension meant upgrading those pieces individually, while formation was to put it all back together.

Simple enough, in theory, at least. The reality was seldom so neat and clean. Pretty much all Cultivators had imperfections in their cores, stemming from lacking comprehension, Daos, and mistakes or mismatches in the Cultivation Manuals. Using treasures or pills to assist the Core Formation also left its mark.

Every blemish was an unplanned faultline during the ignition. As a result, the controlled release usually devolved into a chaotic explosion. Some turbulence was fine, even expected, so long as you kept the overall situation in check. Yet most who challenged the bottleneck died from the ignition.

Mortals, true to form, were even worse off. Their cores were mashed together with foreign materials. They absolutely had faultlines, though they were rarely planned. Beyond the imperfections they shared with cultivators, they also had to deal with the seams of improperly fused materials and sequelae from the crude Core Formation Method used—a far cry from the natural breakpoints formed by the Dao.

Even in the best of scenarios, triggering a breakthrough could be likened to activating a bomb. That was why mortals, and most cultivators on the frontier, aimed for as weak a Cosmic Core as possible. It was the only way they'd survive the initial eruption. If they somehow survived, they could try to reform something better from the rubble while adding new materials to raise its grade.

Whether Cultivator or Mortal, everyone wanted to minimize the danger of the first step. A popular method on the frontier was to bring the Cosmic Core out of your body and dismantle it in a reinforced pressure chamber similar to a Skill Upgrading Array. It would lessen the dangers, but it would severely worsen the quality of the finished product.

Not that it was an option for Zac, who couldn't take out his Cosmic Core from the quantum space. Established factions had better methods to assist through the three stages, relying on a common heritage or bloodline. Zac had actually

gotten a few such methods from Tavza, but they were useless for him. His path was too different, and you had to be a cultivator to use them.

Zac considered reworking one of them for his future breakthroughs, considering each bottleneck would be deadlier than the last. Today, he'd opted for a simpler process, and the difficulties he'd face would let him adjust for the future.

The Core Formation Platform before him was the best solution Zac could find. It was based on designs from a Pre-system age when energy was impure and cultivation more heterogenic. Cultivators faced danger levels similar to the mortals of today, so the Core Formation Array came with unusually sturdy barriers. Hopefully, they'd be sturdy enough to contain the ignition of Zac's immense foundations.

Surrounding the main array were refinement arrays, just like during his first breakthrough. They were obviously not as good as those in the Perennial Vastness, but they had been custom-designed to deal with the materials going into his breakthrough.

Zac inspected every single array twice over. He trusted in Galau's discernment, but the unique insight awarded from the tainted lake water had a penchant for finding things others missed. Truthfully, he'd already performed these scans when getting the arrays, and everything still looked in order.

Instead of rushing into things, Zac sat down atop the two refinement arrays and closed his eyes. Dense clouds of Death and Conflict surrounded his Draugr half while his human side enjoyed the vibrant air of the Life-Conflict attuned forest.

Zac's two bodies were rarely in the same place, mostly by design. Dealing with the confusion brought by overlapping sights and sensations had gotten easier, but he still fought better when keeping his halves separate. As such, each side was always off doing its own thing, and Zac had long since grown accustomed to having two trains of thought run parallel. It helped him accomplish more during his limited time, but there couldn't be such a disconnect during his breakthrough.

Gradually, it all crystallized into a singular. Thoughts harmonized, and the line between Zac and Arcaz disappeared. Zac remained unmoving for another five hours, taking in the surrounding Daos before the Temporal Chamber distorted

them. Finally, it was time. His two bodies moved as one, converging in the cave's center.

Zac took out a glistening orb thrumming with Temporal Energy and activated it. A storm of time rippled out from the cave's center, covering more and more ground. The Temporal Chamber he'd used was one of the best available in the Merit Exchange, costing more than ten times as much as the single-occupant versions his subordinates used.

Paying over 150,000 Merit for a Temporal Chamber hurt, but it was the only way to cover his whole arrangement. Luckily, he'd only needed to spend another 55,000 on materials as the Alliance and the Undead Empire provided everything else he lacked. The cave and its clouds of energy froze in his vision before regaining its momentum when swallowed by the expansion.

The Conflict-empowered war between Life and Death shook the two-thirds of his cave that had become temporally locked. Some slipped through the Temporal Chamber's barrier, instantly freezing because of the difference in time flow. Leakage was impossible to avoid since the Spatial Batteries were still running, readily replacing what was lost to maintain the required density.

The escaped energies were quickly forming an opaque bubble. When his cave returned to the river of time, the accumulated leakage would become a bomb that shook the whole mountain. Zac didn't have the time to worry about that, facing a more immediate threat.

Zac groaned as time unraveled around him, trying to simultaneously enforce two trajectories on his bodies. Part of him was being pushed to rejoin the natural velocity, while some remained outside time's domain. It was impossible to exist in two separate times at once, and Zac felt his body being ripped apart on a molecular level.

Having expected the outcome, Zac threw out a small clay puppet that grew into an alien figure with four arms. Glowing runes appeared on its hands that absorbed the temporal paradox appearing around Zac. Cracks rapidly appeared across the puppet as it took on the punishment meant for someone else. It shattered in seconds after having borne the brunt of the gathered forces. Zac was still facing his bodies' disintegration, but he was confident now that energies had reached manageable levels.

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Time, ultimately, was Dao rather than Law. And Dao could be countered. Two spheres of **[Void Zone]** doused the energies in the Temporal Chamber's center, superimposing as Draugr and Human stood right next to each other. Releasing his bloodline talent from both bodies simultaneously actually strengthened its nullification, and the tearing agony was reduced to dull pain.

Zac kept **[Void Zone]** running for the next thirty minutes until the punishment relented. Zac exhaled as he got to his feet. He'd come out mostly unscathed, except for the thousands of micro-tears that had opened up within his body. The small wounds were already closing thanks to the monstrous recovery awarded from his Void Vajra Constitution.

Still, this was just the first temporal infraction. He'd have to endure an even greater calamity upon returning to normal time, one that would grow deadlier for every second he spent on the inside. He'd exhausted two-thirds of his Void Energy to tide the lesser of the two backlashes. Would his energy stores be enough when he emerged? Zac shook his head as he took out a Void Core. Like the energy accumulating outside, that was a problem for later.

Time was limited, yet Zac spent the next twelve hours recovering to a perfect state, using the pause to review his blueprint and Cosmic Core. The temporal fluctuations around him had mostly stabilized at that point. He still felt slightly out of phase with the Temporal Chamber, though not to the point where he had to delay his breakthrough.

Zac was already sitting atop the individual Core Formation platforms. He couldn't see his other half through the dense energy and trees, but his Soul Senses could just barely touch in the cave's center. Not that he was interested in looking around. His attention was turned inward, on his Duplicity Core, to be exact.

The Kayar-Elu presented him with a shocking surprise the last time he broke through. As this day crept closer, Zac often found himself scanning the indecipherable patterns covering his Duplicity Core, trying to discern or intuit if something similar would happen again. He never found anything suspicious, though it didn't do much to alleviate Zac's fears.

His current state of two separated bodies wasn't part of the original script, which could cause unexpected problems when reforming his core. There were no indications that was the case, and Leandra's tepid reaction to his two-body situation actually felt quite reassuring.

There was only one way to find out the truth. Zac took a steadying breath as he pushed against a particular spot on the Duplicity Core. A hatch opened without complaint, and Zac suddenly felt a tremendous drain on his Void Energy and Dao Avatars. A flash of panic galloped through Zac's mind before he noticed a mysterious undulation. One was followed by another, and Zac felt the energy within his Cosmic Core stir.

The Kayar-Elu had come prepared.

A Cultivator only needed to rotate their manual and channel their Daos to trigger the spiritual ignition. A Mortal lacked that kind of connection with their core and had to rely on more forceful methods. Zac had prepared pills and talismans just for the occasion, but it looked like they wouldn't be needed today. His Duplicity Core was actually mimicking the effect of a cultivation manual perfectly attuned to his core. His core would ignite when the ripples grew strong enough.

Zac took out another Void Core to refuel through **[Void Heart]** while monitoring the progress. He had no first-hand experience with what would come next, but he understood his core better than almost any cultivator. When Zac felt the ignition imminent, he finally activated the Core Formation Arrays. The most update novels are published on [novel\(F\)ire.net](http://novel(F)ire.net)

Hundreds of glimmering runes echoing his Evolutionary Path appeared in the life-attuned forest, forming a bubble around him. Meanwhile, Inexorable Runes drenched the Miasmic forest in darkness. All ambient energy was dragged over, and it looked like it simply disappeared when touching the runes.

In reality, the energy was absorbed and funneled into matching sets of runes that had sprouted inside Zac's bodies. Initially, they formed a protective barrier enclosing his Duplicity Core. Zac activated **[Void Mountain]** before pushing the arrangement through the hatch inside a blob of Void Energy. It worked.

Life, Death, Conflict, and Void joined together, and two spheres became one. An impregnable barrier based on the same concepts as his Cosmic Core shielded the Duplicity Core's inner wall, just like **[Hollow Core]** did during his previous breakthrough. Zac grinned at the effortless formation. His new Bloodline Talent was truly a gift from the Heavens. It unified Dao and Void, effortlessly replicating the harmonizing effect of the Chaos Motes.

No, it went one step further. The illusory mountain disappeared, yet the trinity barrier remained as stable as can be. All the requirements for forming a stable structure inside the quantum space were already in place. The Duplicity Core's undulations also passed through the barrier without issue, pushing his core closer to ignition. Read Web Novels Online Free - [-](#)

Zac's core wasn't like a normal mortal's. It was made from outside materials, but each addition had been woven into a whole with skill and precision. The core was already qualified for a second breakthrough after its formation, and it had seen great improvements since. With his Duplicity Core triggering a more harmonic ignition, he was even better positioned.

Yet Zac felt beads of sweat trickle down his backs as the energies within his core grew stronger. Soon, his core was vibrating from the pent-up pressure. He might have everything in place, but his core was far beyond the norm. The System had categorized it as S-grade Energy Capacity and Potential, and he had needed shocking amounts of energy for every level. Even elites could have reached level 175 ten times over on the energy he'd accumulated. Now, ten months of struggle were about to be unleashed in one go.

The first cracks finally appeared at the seams between materials, releasing terrifying discharges of spirituality like solar flares painted in his Dao. Zac was prepared, covering the spots with layered Mental Energy to contain the leak and balance the energy distribution. It was futile. His barriers may as well have been paper when the first cracks triggered a destructive chain reaction.

The explosion felt like a true death, with Zac's vision momentarily going white. Like a sun going supernova, his core rapidly expanded while a shroud of supercondensed energy and Dao took the vanguard. The pain was unbearable, but the shock to his mind was actually greater. His soul hadn't been damaged. However, the scene taking place in the quantum space was breathtaking.

Zac felt like he was witnessing the birth of a universe—a universe fully crafted according to his path. The feeling only grew stronger as the shockwave rapidly expanded, warping Zac's perception until it seemed as though the small quantum space held an area larger than his mountain range. And it actually was.

The immense forces released from the spiritual ignition created a temporary subspace. It wasn't wrong to say it was the embryo of the Inner World you'd form when stepping into C-grade. This was just a taste of what Monarchs

experienced every day. Zac's thoughts couldn't help but drift to the distant future when he formed the real thing.

How extraordinary would that scene be? Of course, this subspace wasn't stable enough to last very long. Exactly how long you had mainly depended on the number of imperfections in your core and your control over the process.

Anything over thirty days was generally considered a perfect ignition. If you barely survived or other missteps occurred, you only had days to somehow put everything back in place. If you really messed up, the space would collapse and take you with it.

The sobering notion cleared Zac's mind. He rallied his soul, pushing Void Energy and dozens of mental tendrils into the storm the moment it crashed into the Core Formation Array's barrier. The array was among the best Zecia had to offer and tailored to his needs. And yet, the shield groaned and strained under the monstrous amounts of unleashed energy.

The arrays fought back, forcibly drawing immense amounts of energy to bolster its defenses. But the full weight of Zac's Cosmic Core couldn't be denied. Cracks spread in the shield, and streaks of energy pushed through the gaps. Zac looked at the Duplicity Core with worry and swore when the streaks passed right through it. Instead, Zac's bodies were the ones to withstand the blast.

Curses turned into wet groans as Zac's midribs exploded with almost perfect symmetry. The rampaging energy only lost traces of its momentum from digging through his flesh, and the Core Formation Array's outer barrier only managed to trap half. The rest continued into the forest, undoing Triv's efforts in one swoop.

Every streak escaping his arrangement meant his core was permanently losing some spirituality while the temporary subspace was growing more unstable. It was regrettable, even if Zac knew from the get-go this was an inevitable outcome with his foundations. Not being knocked unconscious while your core ripped you apart from within was considered a rousing success.

Blood and ichor pooled atop the platform, triggering soothing energies to rise from below. They helped his natural recovery, yet new wounds opened as old ones closed. The storm was only growing fiercer after being rebuffed by the

barrier. Zac needed to take charge of the process before he became another cultivator dying from overestimating their capabilities.

This was a battle against fate, one Zac intended to win.

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