

Defiance of the Fall

Chapter 1181: Step of Destiny

The unfettered storm raged within Zac's quantum space. He was the universe, ripped apart and reborn in a Big Bang of his own making. The next minutes would decide whether the road that led him here was paved with discernment or hubris. The calamitous mayhem mostly adhered to his path, but there were hundreds of discordant notes in the mix—disarray brought from the core's imperfections.

His Cosmic Core may have been High Quality in terms of qualifications, but there were still weaknesses to its makeup. Even he faced the unavoidable problem of incompatibility brought about by using external materials to forge his core. These hidden daggers of heterogeneity were now trying to impose their beliefs on the universe. If left unchecked, they would destroy what he'd created with blood, sweat, and tears. He wouldn't let it. [READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT N\(o\)VEL\(F\)ire.net](#)

His first set of Mental Tendrils had already been shredded, so he conjured a second one. Many were destroyed before they even reached his Duplicity Core because of the energies ravaging his body. Each loss felt like a cut on his soul. A few fared marginally better and successfully entered the quantum space. Where the destructive forces of dimensional genesis waited.

A miserable cycle of destruction and reformation began, where Zac desperately tried to connect his Dao and Mental Energy with the struggling barrier to bolster its defenses. With every defeat, Zac's resources dwindled while the opposition grew fiercer. Zac's plight only worsened when the first pieces of his shattered core crashed into the barrier.

The array had already shown incredible resilience withstanding the energy shockwaves. However, it simply wasn't capable of dealing with the monstrous force released from Zac's Trinity Core. Cracks multiplied and spread, worsening the punishment Zac had to bear. Blood and ichor fell like rain, to the point Zac had to keep his bodies together with willpower and energy. Any other mortal would already have died from the onslaught.

The situation far exceeded Zac's expectations, but treacherous thoughts and seeds of fear were strangled and replaced with determination and purpose.

So what if his ignition surpassed any recordings or estimates he'd seen? It only proved his path was one aimed at the peak. And like many times before, he'd prove he had the qualifications to tread this path of supremacy.

Zac roared as Hidden Nodes went into overdrive, and space buckled when he unleashed his constitutions to their limits. Human skin turned resplendent gold as grievous wounds wriggled and closed, and archaic scripts echoing the bottomless darkness of the Abyss covered his Draugr body. The unbreakable strength and conviction of the Vanguard joined the enduring composure of the immutable Void Vajra to turn him into an everlasting kingdom.

Abyssal ponds and lifegiving hurricanes flooded his bodies with primal power, generating an immense pressure. Errant streaks of spirituality were caught and pushed back into the quantum space, and the mayhem was corralled into a retreat. Following in the wake of the rallied defenses was a storm of Dao-Empowered Mental Energy.

Zac knew grit and determination alone couldn't tide him through this calamity. It would, however, suppress the ignition long enough to connect with the Core Formation Barrier. Stabilizing it would be the first step in creating a stronghold that would let him mount a crusade of reclamation on the quantum space.

Dao descended on failing runes like rain replenishing parched lands. The essence of Zac's Life, Death, and Conflict strengthened and subtly reformed the shield, allowing it to better combat the ignition's matching energy signature. The tides were finally turning.

A tremendous clap of thunder shook the Temporal Chamber, disrupting the energy streams supplying the Core Formation Arrays. The sudden blast was like a hammer to Zac's consciousness, almost forcing his soul out of his Soul Aperture. The connection with the Core Formation Array was cut, and dozens of flickering runes were destroyed when the array failed to supply the necessary energy.

Zac came to and desperately slapped a talisman against his chest, generating an immense gravitational force. Bones snapped, and new imperfections were introduced into the unstable storm. However, it was enough to temporarily force back the escaping energy before he reached a point of no return.

Wrath matching his attacker burned in Zac's eyes as he glared at the ceiling. It felt as though his stare pierced time and space to gaze upon the storm

gathering above—a Heavenly Tribulation, something that shouldn't appear when stepping into Middle Hegemony.

The why didn't matter. He'd been targeted, and the Heavens weren't done with him yet. The animosity almost felt personal, and the timing ruined the ace he'd prepared. It wasn't easy to ignite his constitutions to that level, and it cost huge amounts of Vigor. Recreating the effect in the short run was impossible, and both barrier and spiritual storm were in a worse state than before.

Zac gritted his teeth as fury almost overcame reason. The burning anger helped rouse his defenses and somewhat stabilize the situation, but it wasn't enough. Zac's mind moved a mile a minute as he went over plans and contingencies, but none of them was suitable. How could he possibly have expected a tribulation to appear, especially when his breakthrough had barely started?

The world had gone insane, so he would embrace the madness.

A primal axe burning with desire to break the chains of fate and tear the Heavenly veil appeared in a hand scarred by endless slaughter. The darkness grew deeper atop the other platform as a gleaming edge released a keening cry filled with such inviolable command neither Dao nor destiny could escape.

Together, they pointed at the Heavens in an undisguised challenge. The Heavens wanted to stop his ascent? It could try. A second clap of thunder answered, resounding like a war drum heralding the primordial forces of abrogation.

Zac's eyes gleamed with insanity as he swung his companions. Three streaks of Dao and fury ripped apart the lingering woods as they converged in the cave's center. Three Spatial Batteries exploded, unleashing a hurricane of stored energy and compressed space.

Time and Space converged and collapsed, releasing a paradoxical blue light that led to the crossroads of Destiny. The Dao of Continuum. The flash was gone before it appeared, but Zac's fate and memories refused to be rewritten. An aura older than time itself had joined Life and Death in Zac's bodies as the illusory Void Mountain declared its defiance against the Heavenly wrath.

A grabbing motion formed Void Vortices where the Spatial Batteries once stood, forcing their way into the echoes of the Spatial Tunnels. Waiting on the other side was the fuel Zac needed to take control of his breakthrough and

fate. Pristine Nexus Veins on the other side of the planet collapsed in a puff of paradoxical spacetime as they were dragged out of the river of time.

Torrential amounts of Life, Death, and unattuned energy poured out of his cells as the Void complied with his demands. There was no Nexus Vein holding the Dao of Conflict on Earth, but Zac didn't need it. Facing the rumbling sky, he embodied the most fundamental conflict of cultivation. Man against Heaven. Desire against fate. He was both source and terminus for his path.

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Energies wild enough to match the storm raging within the quantum space threatened to rip Zac apart before his ignition could. Meanwhile, the Soul Cores in his aperture were releasing blinding light. The galactic shrouds surrounding them spun with such speed they'd almost fused with the cores.

"Go!" Zac roared, and his Soul Cores took flight.

Like the previous time they moved, they crashed into each other with apocalyptic force. Zac's thoughts and memories fractured when a tsunami of Mental Energy was shaken loose. He kept it all together and extracted the spiritual ocean from his Soul Aperture. Soul, Dao, Void, and limitless Energy joined into an unstoppable army with billowing momentum.

Even the Duplicity Core seemed subdued, turning illusory to not get caught in the crosshairs. Zac's all-out assault flooded the quantum space. The destructive storm that had effortlessly destroyed his Mental Tendrils became prey to a fiercer predator. Imperfections were swept away, destroyed, or consumed. Zac didn't try to control the storm. He became it, seizing authority to dictate fate.

The chaotic mix of energy and shrapnel was put under control with unprecedented speed, and the immense infusion of energy added to the virgin dimension's stability and strength. So long as the space didn't collapse from energy overload, the added spirituality would help him through the next steps.

The Heavens appeared personally affronted upon seeing him continue with his breakthrough. The pressure mounted, and Zac couldn't help but shudder as he saw red strings of distilled extermination form just a few meters away from him. Their appearance was the beginning of the end, and the Temporal Energies keeping his chamber stable began to unravel.

It was the same sort of sanguine rift that formed just before the final bolt of his previous tribulation. He'd been absolutely helpless before that level of destruction and only survived thanks to his Duplicity Core hiding his location. This time, the strings actually appeared before the first bolt had formed. Just how much animosity did the Heavens hold against him? What Laws was he violating to elicit such a response?

This time, no Kayar-Elu barrier sprung up to save the day. The Duplicity Core may as well have become an empty casing from how it had completely erased its presence. Zac snorted and took out a gleaming crystal covered in golden runes.

"This isn't right! This isn't balance!" Zac roared over Time's collapse as he infused his will into the portable Nexus Node. "If you want to see the Void Emperor's bloodline reach maturity, you'll block the Heavens for me!"

Zac was pissed off, but he hadn't lost his mind. How could he possibly defy the Heavens while the ignition tore him apart and the Temporal Chamber collapsed? His confidence came from the second presence hiding in the shadows of the heavenly wrath. The System had already descended, attracted by him or Heaven's unexpected appearance.

It hadn't intervened so far, seemingly content to observe the events unfold. Zac wasn't sure what it was waiting for or what it wanted to see. After having some light shed on his origins by Leandra, Zac often wondered if he really was a crop being raised by the System. If that were the case, then the System would have to protect its investment from the winds until it was ready for harvest.

So Zac had shown his increased control over his bloodline, conveniently using it to deal with the mess with his core. The rest was out of his hands. Zac still held Sendor's seals, but there was no way such an ancient existence was willing to go to bat against the Heavens for him. Interfering with another's tribulation was a good way to conjure one on yourself. And the Realm Spirit had somehow achieved false immortality, which seemed to be one of the greatest taboos.

Each second felt like an eternity, but Zac breathed out in relief as an immense silence swept away the chaos. The heavenly wrath was still there, but its advance had slowed to a crawl. Time stabilized, and the red strings shifted into purple before disappearing. The System had come through, restraining

the Heavens for him. The suppression wasn't complete, but the situation didn't seem hopeless any longer.

It was a stay of execution.

Zac had no idea how long the protection would last, so he was determined to make every second count. The further he got with his breakthrough, the better he would be positioned when all hell broke loose. However, a screen appeared just as he was about to resume his work.

The First Step of Destiny (Void Road): Form a High-quality Middle D-grade Cosmic Core of the Void Road. Reward: - (0/1) [17:00:00:00]

The sudden quest came with both answers and questions. Most importantly, the System had given him a seventeen-day deadline. It was decidedly less than what his subspace could survive, so there had to be something else behind the specific time. Seventeen days for seventeen Dao Peaks? Even Zac felt the pressure from such a tight schedule. His estimates put him at over 20 days to reforge and reassemble his core, and that was before all these problems cropped up.

The Void Road was the path he chose for himself when rejecting the Imperial and Heavenly Destiny in the Tribulation Throne. It was the source of his only upgradeable Limited Title, but he would have to be a fool not to understand it held deeper implications. Now, the term had become a quest type, clarifying the System's stance on the matter. It wanted to see where his road led.

The quest had no reward, though protecting him from the Heavens could be considered a reward of its own. Passing it would keep things going, and it was possible the next quest would come with the title upgrade or other benefits.

The quest also provided an important clue to the root of Heaven's sudden antipathy. It no longer seemed as though the Kayar-Elu and their Heaven-defying experiments were to blame. At least not in the way he previously thought. He'd believed his Duplicity Core was what triggered the unnaturally fierce Tribulation Lightning when stepping into Hegemony.

That may be part of it, but his Technocrat Heritage had been almost completely silent this time. The only answer Zac could think of was his bloodline, or rather his cultivation of the Void. His tribulations had always been more powerful than the norm because of his heavy foundations. Still, it was

only after officially integrating Void into his path that the tribulations felt like no-holds attempts at extermination.

Void and Dao couldn't coexist, so it would make sense if the Heavens wanted to purge his existence to restore balance. If his theory was correct, Zac was in trouble. Utilizing the Void wasn't just a temporary stopgap to get his core blueprint to work. It had become the glue that held his path together, and his bloodline breakthrough had opened new ways to weave the Void into his cultivation.

He was still far from Monarchy and forming a real Inner World, but seeing the embryonic subspace confirmed Zac's beliefs the Void was there to stay. Did that mean the Heavens would come knocking every time he broke through, where the tribulations far surpassed what was normal? This time, the System came to his aid, but could he put his fate in the System's hands?

Absolutely not.

Zac shook his head, discarding any distracting thoughts as he wholeheartedly focused on his quantum space. He would have to survive this tribulation before having the qualifications to worry about the future. He had seventeen days, and Heaven's lingering presence indicated the System wouldn't completely keep it at bay.

Order had been restored in his subspace thanks to his daredevil gambit. Thousands of shrapnel pieces formed dozens of interlocked asteroid belts, and their trajectories controlled the immense amounts of energy that still filled the subspace. The cycle was stable, though the unnaturally high energy density created eruptions that rocked the shielding. That much was well within bounds. Read Web Novels Online Free -

The next step was originally to have the Core Formation Array shift from solely defending to also infusing his subspace with energy. There was no point in doing so for the next few days now. Perhaps at all, considering the Core Formation Array wasn't the only source of energy.

His body was instinctively nourishing the subspace with Dao. In addition, energy was being funneled into the quantum space directly by the Cosmos. The subspace was like a true universe, seemingly drawing energy and truth out of thin air. In reality, it came from other dimensions and lower realms.

Zac ate a handful of pills to nourish his damaged soul and heal his physical wounds. He was exhausted, yet he formed a Dao Braid and delved further into the subspace than he had gone before. The tendril continued unimpeded, thanks to Zac's intuitive understanding of the energy flow, until it reached the subspace's center.

The area was shrouded by a layer of energy so dense it had almost become liquid. Zac pierced the veil, breathing out in relief upon finding what he was looking for—his Core Nucleus, scarred and disfigured from withstanding the ignition. Despite its wretched appearance, it was whole, functional, and retaining most of its spirituality. A bloody grin spread across Zac's faces, and the devastation around him no longer seemed so bad.

Many of his plans were out the window, but this part had worked out just fine.

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Chapter 1182: Unexplored Path

Like the rest of the Cosmic Core, the nucleus was supposed to be dismantled and rebuilt. You could argue it was the most important step, considering the nucleus was the foundation that kept the core stable. Zac had no intention of adhering to convention on this matter, so it was an immense relief to see it survive despite his failure to protect it during the ignition.

The nucleus's resilience only proved the merit of Zac's untested idea. It was made from materials so incredible they couldn't be properly graded and forged with the help of true Chaos and one of the best arrays in the Multiverse. From there, it had been further tempered by his fortuitous encounters.

The transformed paths, courtesy of the Tribulation Throne, were especially ingenious and elevated it beyond its original limits. Dismantling the nucleus couldn't possibly produce something better with his current resource limitations. Zac had always been reluctant to dilute it with more materials, and

his Minor Enlightenment from the quest confirmed there was another path he could take.

Zac wouldn't break it down, but that didn't mean it could stay the same. Zac ate four pills after confirming his Soul Cores weren't too damaged to keep going. A tempest of energy resembling a galaxy full of primordial vigor coursed through his body. It didn't need much prodding to enter the hatch of his Duplicity Core, and Zac dragged it to the nucleus. Following it on its heels was a leaf resonating with the Temporal Chamber.

A Peak-quality Longevity Treasure. His cells screamed with desire, but Zac ignored the clamor as he had its essence join the cosmic swirl in the depths of this quantum space. With everything in place, Zac took out a ghastly spike covered in esoteric runes.

Taking a steadying breath, he stabbed the pick into his stomach, tearing through just-reformed flesh and muscle until the edge reached the Duplicity Core's hatch. Like a swarm of critters, the runes skittered off the spike and into the space. Some glommed onto the swirling fragments of Life, Death, and Conflict, resisting Zac's attempts to drag them off. Most continued into the depths, attracted by the superior energy signature emitted by the Core Nucleus.

The parasitical runes ran into the swirling galaxy from the **[Realm Ether Pills]** before they could reach their prey. The runes tried to break free, only to find themselves caught in a quagmire. As more runes joined the unstable soup, they grouped into repeating patterns that formed a shell around the nucleus.

The struggle between Pill Energy and runes released unstable bursts of power that tainted the harmony of his microcosm. Zac continuously had to put the pieces back into order to prevent the immense energies from ruining the hard-fought balance. Eventually, the runes stabilized into a complete array. Read Web Novels Online Free -

Unfamiliar waves of energy joined by the pure force of the stellar dust showered the nucleus, which began vibrating and spinning with increasing velocity. The pill-spike combination ran out of juice after ten minutes, having accomplished the purpose. The nucleus shone like a star in the heart of his quantum space, showering it in gold, steel, and black.

The nucleus was ready to be remolded without having sacrificed any of its spirituality for the ignition. This was something considered almost impossible, or at least so prohibitively expensive and difficult that there was no point. It had taken Zac time and effort to find the materials needed to give the nucleus the final push. The spikes, for instance, were sourced from the hands of Remoulded from the Chapter of Glorious Ascent.

True to the Kan'Tanu's aggressive cultivation system, the spikes would forcibly agitate a core with a unique array. It would speed up the formation process by sacrificing longevity. Adding the nourishing **[Realm Ether Pills]** removed the side effects, while the **[Pexor Leaf]** replaced Zac's lifespan to fuel the ignition. The latest_episodes are on_the_novel(F)ire.net

The asteroid bands began spinning quicker on Zac's order. Soon, they looked like solid bands. Their revolutions generated a natural pressure on the subspace's center. The whole subspace shook when Zac activated the second feature on his Core Formation Arrays, adding another layer of pressure on the nucleus to ensure it would stay malleable.

[Void Mountain]'s illusory peaks reappeared, allowing the Void to spread through his body without clashing with the energy flows. Next, dozens of tendrils of Mental Energy descended from his aperture, seemingly fusing with strings of Void Energy.

The tendrils entered his Duplicity Core from both bodies, acting as surgical tools splitting and weaving together the complex network of paths within the nucleus. Apart from increasing the number of pathways, Zac also mended damage from the detonation and imperfections left by his previous breakthrough.

The reformation was akin to splitting strands of hair into ten strings of identical width before joining them into intricate braids. Zac's fine control was normally far from the level required to accomplish such a feat, especially when he didn't have the unique arrays of the Perennial Vastness to help. And yet, it looked like he'd performed the experimental remodeling hundreds of times before.

It was all thanks to the combination of **[Void Mountain]** and **[Cosmic Forge]**. Dasorm's crafting technique could only be used with Void Energy, where Zac possessed far greater control. If not, he wouldn't have made such rapid progress with **[Cosmic Infusion]** and **[Cosmic Extraction]**. In fact, his skill with **[Cosmic Forge]** had improved noticeably as a result of evolving his bloodline.

However, the first layers of **[Cosmic Forge]** only dealt with energy and refinement. They couldn't even interact with physical matter. That was why Zac had to use the Omnitool to engrave patterns on the materials he worked on and why he hadn't used **[Cosmic Forge]** much when forming his core.

Gaining **[Void Mountain]** changed all that. Zac could actually use the crafting method to guide the Mental Tendrils when his Bloodline Talent was running, allowing him to use them like the array provided by the Perennial Vastness.

The combination technique wasn't perfect since Zac still couldn't fully fuse the threads with **[Cosmic Forge]**. It was more like the Mental Energy had become mittens that were controlled with hands made of Void Energy, resulting in a slight unresponsiveness. This delay meant he couldn't use **[Cosmic Forge]** to weave intricate Dao Arrays in the heat of battle, but it worked just fine when dealing with core refinement.

Zac suspected he could even use **[Cosmic Forge]** to redraw Skill Fractals with greater precision than his arrays in the future. Perhaps it would be the key to turning his spiritual framework into his theorized **[Thousand Axes Avatar]**. With the tight schedule, he hadn't had the opportunity to put these theories to the test, though.

Between the superior method and two selves working with perfect rapport, Zac was progressing more than three times faster than when he first formed his core. Meanwhile, the subspace was readily providing the energy to fill up the reformed paths. Even his Duplicity Core woke up and began infusing Void Energy into the nucleus.

This phenomenon was the reason you couldn't back out even if your ignition went badly. It wouldn't take long before his subspace would hold more energy than an Early-grade Cosmic Core could withstand. Creating an identical core to the one you dismantled would only lead to an explosion from energy overload.

This knowledge brought some mental pressure, but all that energy entering the nucleus did come with benefits. His rapid pace allowed his nucleus to absorb more energy than the cosmos provided. The pressure in his overstuffed subspace weakened, and the explosions rocking the barrier were cut in half. Of course, if he drew too much, the energy starvation would make the subspace collapse. It was a balancing act and a race against time.

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The preliminary work was eventually finished, at which point a number of boxes appeared on the platforms. Zac opened a few and threw the Natural Treasures onto the refinement arrays. Next, he turned to two of the boxes covered in dense scripts. Each held a bone, though they looked opposite to each other. The first seemed crafted from gold and was covered in odd growths like it had kept transforming after its owner had died.

The other was dark grey with veinlike patterns of black runes. Both exuded immense spirituality, though a round of refinement had already removed any lingering hints of will left from their previous owner. Both were Middle D-grade Supreme Treasures, one Life and the other Death. They weren't quite at the level of the three treasures that went into his nucleus, but they were qualified to take up a supporting role.

Zac carefully engraved a set of runes on the golden bone, and the ancient patterns from the First People formed a natural complement to the seemingly random growths. The small hammer disappeared in a flourish the second the engravings were complete, appearing in his Draugr half's hand thanks to **[Purity of the Void]**. A similar pattern was added to the deathly bone before the Omnitool jumped back.

A powerful shockwave in his subspace reminded Zac he couldn't grow distracted for a second, or the subspace would devolve into an unstable storm again. At the same time, he couldn't just pause the engraving since they were already destabilizing the treasures. As such, the hammer jumped back and forth, where one side added to the runic tapestry while the other maintained order inside the quantum space.

Finally, Zac extracted a pristine string of essence holding the distilled truths of Life. He glanced at the Core Formation Array's transportation disk, shaking his head before pushing the essence against his belly. It moved into his body without causing any trouble, and Zac exhaled when he successfully picked it up with a Void-controlled Mental Tendril. Zac carefully infused the essence into his nucleus, adding to the already incredibly complex network of connections.

The nucleus' aura subtly shifted, growing deeper. By the time the delicate work was complete, a Death-attuned string of essence was already moving in to restore the failing balance. For the next hours, one side extracted, while the

other infused. Altogether, the essence of six Supreme Treasures was added to the mix—two for each Dao. Zac even managed to extract two essences per item, an incredibly difficult feat.

When using **[Cosmic Extraction]** on your equipment, you only took the heterogenic spirituality that would then be discarded. The focus was on maintaining the stability of the weapon. Extracting essence from a raw donor treasure with **[Cosmic Infusion]** was the opposite. You only wanted the best of the best, and it needed to be a coherent whole. It didn't matter if the material became scrap afterward since it had served its purpose. Zac only succeeded thanks to ample preparation and the overflowing spirituality in the Supreme Treasures.

Between the infused essences, redrawn pathways, and energy influx, the nucleus was completely reborn. The unique spirituality of the **[Calamity Core]**, **[Warstone]**, and **[Void Engine]** remained intact while the nucleus as a whole had ascended into a High-quality Middle D-grade nucleus. Zac smiled at the sight. The hard-earned lessons learned when stepping into Hegemony paid dividends today.

Surviving the ignition and dealing with his nucleus were the most difficult hurdles. What came next simply built on the stable foundation he'd set. That didn't mean Zac could relax as he turned to the asteroid belts surrounding his nucleus. Their trajectories had gone slightly off-course while he dealt with the nucleus, so Zac spent the next thirty minutes getting everything back in place.

When he was finished, the first set of outer treasures was refined and ready to be incorporated. The rest of the core needed an infusion just like the nucleus, but using **[Cosmic Infusion]** on thousands of pieces was impossible. He was already using a large amount of Void Energy to control the tendrils, and he couldn't keep **[Void Mountain]** running around the clock.

It wasn't much of a loss. The treasures that went into his Core Nucleus had the potential to carry the weight of his cultivation all the way to Peak Hegemony. The same couldn't be said for the rest. They needed to be reformed with the help of Middle D-grade Materials.

An optimal solution would have been to replace all the damaged pieces with better ones. Unfortunately, that wasn't possible. His core was still one unit despite being turned into a field of debris. Each piece held a sliver of the core's essence, and swapping them out was like using pieces from another puzzle.

Days passed as Zac integrated new with old. Refinement Arrays were constantly running while two sets of tendrils dragged one piece after another from the asteroid belts. It was crushed by the immense gravitational forces and joined with white-hot Middle D-grade treasures before being added to his growing Cosmic Core.

Meanwhile, **[Void Heart]** was refining and spewing out incredible amounts of Void Energy. Having evolved the Hidden Node to D-grade drastically lessened the pressure Zac faced. Even then, the core formation only became more taxing as time passed. The biggest strain came from using **[Void Mountain]** to control the Mental Tendrils.

It wasn't designed to keep going indefinitely, at least not at its current stage. Three months of experimentation had shown the path forward. **[Void Mountain]** could be upgraded, and it wasn't very difficult. He simply needed to have **[Void Heart]** consume Peak-quality treasures of all seventeen Dao Peaks. A small amount of the refined energy would bolster his Bloodline Talent.

Unfortunately, it had become painfully clear the upgrade was a long-term project. The sigil had barely seen any improvements despite **[Void Heart]** running around the clock. It was obvious some treasures worked better than others, but Zac hadn't figured out the rules behind the differences. It seemed completely random, where some mediocre treasures worked better than top-tier materials.

[Void Mountain] wasn't the only way for him to refine his core, but it was much better than relying on the Core Formation Arrays and supportive tools. They were slower and imprecise, leading to mistakes and imperfections.

The other problem Zac faced was the deteriorating situation within the subspace. As a temporary dimension, the subspace became less stable by the day. The energy infusion grew erratic, which created constant disturbances. Even the core formation process made exerting control more difficult.

It was the asteroid belts that kept the energy flow stable and helped generate the gravitational pressure. Zac lost some of his control with every piece removed and integrated with the core.

All this was accounted for in his original plan. He'd planned to slow down the formation process while recovering his Void Vigor, taking that time to reinforce

his subspace. It wouldn't be a problem so long as the ignition formed a subspace strong enough to give a few days' worth of leeway.

With a seventeen-day deadline, that wasn't an option. Zac had to keep going, even if it meant making some compromises and relying on outside help. Pills, Talismans, and Natural Treasures began sharing his burden as he passed the ten-day mark. Each came with side effects, though some were better than others. For instance, Zac had some that destabilized the subspace and shortened its lifespan. Since he had to wrap up his work ahead of schedule, that wasn't much of a downside.

Eventually, Zac saw the light at the end of the tunnel. The asteroid belts had been reduced to one solitary piece each, and those were added to the almost fully formed Cosmic Core. It was more than five times larger than his old core, and the last pieces added some additional heft.

The core looked incredible, like a newly forged world teeming with energy and potential. It wasn't just appearance. Despite the rushed process, Zac had managed to accomplish everything he'd set out to do. Relying on so many treasures to make the deadline had added more imperfections than he'd anticipated, but he was still in a good position. **[Cosmic Forge]** had let him remove some of his old mistakes, so it should still be counted High Quality.

Its size wasn't a good thing, though. It couldn't even fit inside his Duplicity Core after the subspace dispersed. It wasn't a mistake on his part; it just meant there was one step remaining to the formation.

Zac ate a pill teeming with Spatial Energy and put a matching talisman against his belly. Coruscating waves of Space entered the Duplicity Core, fusing with the failing dimension. It began convulsing, which kicked the large amounts of ambient energy into a frenzy.

Each contraction unleashed the force of a world on the newly formed core. More energy was crammed into its pathways while the immense energies forced the core to compress. The process was incredibly painful, and Zac held on for dear life while guiding the compression the best he could. And then the universe imploded.

Zac briefly passed out from the shock, but an angry thunderclap immediately woke him up. He urgently turned his gaze inward after confirming the System still held the Heavens at bay. And there it was: his upgraded core floating

within his Duplicity Core, surrounded by a haze of energy. The subspace was gone, having accomplished its purpose.

The formation was a success, which meant it was time to face the music.

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Chapter 1183: Cry of Glory

Zac was mentally and physically exhausted after madly pushing through the breakthrough. Time waited for no man, so Zac steeled himself as he faced the rumbling sky. Nothing happened beyond the palpable feeling of anger being stronger than before, and a smile spread across Zac's lips as he opened his quest screen.

The First Step of Destiny (Void Road): Form a High-quality Middle D-grade Cosmic Core of the Void Road. Reward: - (0/1) [00:18:46:24] (COMPLETE)

He was wrong. Time *does* wait for some men. The System was still keeping order, which meant he had some options. Zac sat back down and took out a vial containing a special set of recovery pills. They were called **[Cry of Glory]**, a product of one of the Grand Clans. Their effect was amazing, like a hearty meal and a nourishing pill cocktail wrapped into one. And yet, few would take them unless they were left with no choice.

Normal recovery pills used materials with gentle energy and focused on minimizing Pill Toxins. Any sequelae left behind had to be the easily-removed kind. After all, most warriors were forced to eat such pills every other day. If they left lasting damage, the pills would be useless. Leveling or Dao Pills, in contrast, were used so seldom that most cultivators were willing to accept some stubborn Pill Toxins in return for extra progress.

[Cry of Glory] was the exact opposite of the norm, providing immense recovery at the cost of riddling the body with toxins. Even his D-grade **[Purity of the Void]** couldn't fully deal with the unique pills. As such, warriors would only use it when staring death in the eye in hopes of unleashing a final cry of glory.

His furious blitz through the Core Formation had already added a significant amount of impurities, and using **[Cry of Glory]** would only add to the mess. But so what? There was a tribulation right around the corner that would deal with that headache.

Zac groaned in a mix of pain and pleasure as the pills exploded in his stomach, releasing fiery waves that swept through his body. Body and soul were rapidly being invigorated as the medicinal energy burrowed into cells and Soul Cores. No pill could let him return to peak condition in such short order, but **[Cry of Glory]** was a good start.

The real question was what he should do next. Zac opened his Quest Screen again, his eyes turning to the two other quests marked as complete. He shook his head and closed the screen. This wasn't the time to upgrade his Supreme Pathbound Skills, even if it was part of his original itinerary for the Temporal Chamber. It wasn't like skills were very useful when facing a tribulation, and his limited time was better spent on something else.

It all depended on how high his ambitions were. Danger and opportunity often came hand in hand, and the tribulation did present some unique opportunities. One was the extra round of cleansing lightning. However, the big one was the chance to let his Cosmic Core go through a second round of refinement.

Facing the tribulation was a necessary step when forming your Cosmic Core, where it provided a final round of tempering. Zac remembered how the harrowing experience had further compressed his core and fused some materials that hadn't fully meshed. Zac was overall satisfied with his current result, but that didn't mean it couldn't be improved.

At the same time, his Cosmic Core was currently like a piece of metal rapidly cooling after being taken out of the furnace. The core would have long since solidified if he spent the whole deadline on recovery, running his chances of rebirth. There was also the Temporal backlash to worry about. He had come up with a few theories and ideas over the past weeks, but there were still many questions that remained unanswered.

What kind of tribulation would he face? Would the System restrain it to a reasonable level if the Heavens went out of control? Could he leave the Temporal Chamber without triggering the quest?

Zac scanned his Spatial Ring to confirm what resources had left as greed fought with caution. His eyes landed on a set of talismans, and greed won over. He was already in deep, so he might as well take a gamble on himself. Besides, another 18 hours of rest wouldn't make much difference if the Heavens blasted him with a tribulation far beyond his means. The most update novels are published on NovelFire.net

A large box appeared on the Core Formation Platform. Zac opened it and threw out its contents in every direction. He also turned off the Spatial Batteries and activated a set of arrays. The dozens of engraved crystals he'd thrown began drawing on the ambient energy, and Zac nodded in satisfaction when nothing was supplied to replenish. The effect wasn't big right now, but the Temporal Chamber would be an energy wasteland by the time its one-year isolation ended.

Zac flashed away, taking a steadying breath as he approached the Temporal Chamber's edge. A screen suddenly appeared, forcing his two bodies to a screeching halt.

[WARNING: Reentering Multiversal Timeflow will end limited quest.]

One question answered, at least. Zac shook his head with regret before returning to the platforms. He'd hoped to leave early, giving him a chance to deal with the Temporal backlash before facing the tribulation. That wasn't an option, so he'd just have to pray his theory was correct.

Back at the arrays, Zac took out the **[Golden Spark Talisman]** and placed it against his belly. It turned into a streak of light that shot into the quantum space. Inside, it caused a huge commotion by igniting the remnant energies surrounding the core. Meanwhile, Zac reactivated the Core Formation Platforms, triggering a huge influx of energy that drained the chamber far quicker than the hollow energy crystals.

His core shook from the sudden mayhem, and Zac felt like he was getting stabbed. The pain was worth it, considering the **[Golden Spark Talisman]** would let his core stay in a moldable state for half a day. The talisman was normally used for last-minute repairs after detonating the

subspace, though the damage it caused usually left you in a worse state than when you started.

Zac would obviously make use of the opportunity to make some alterations. If he didn't, the core would probably be pushed back to Middle Quality. However, the real reason he used the talisman was to deal with his pathways. He'd done what he could over the past sixteen days, but they were still in disarray after the ignition and the constant energy eruptions during the reformation.

The sections around his core were unsurprisingly the most damaged, severely limiting the amount of energy he could draw. If he wanted to benefit from the tribulation, he first needed to ensure he could utilize the added strength from his breakthrough. Disintegrated connectors were redrawn at a rapid pace, sturdier, and more sophisticated than before.

Upgrading the pathways before he'd seen his Cosmic Core's final iteration was to put the cart before the horse. Even disregarding the tribulation, most Cultivators held off on upgrading their pathways for a while. This time, the System wouldn't lend a helping hand and make the first adjustments, and many needed to use their core for a while before figuring out what kind of alterations they needed to perform. Read Web Novels Online Free -

Zac's understanding of his Daos, Class, and Path was more than enough to skip that step. Even if the upcoming lightning bath altered his core like the Tribulation Throne, it wouldn't greatly impact the pathway design.

The Middle D-grade overhaul wasn't as comprehensive as when you first stepped into Hegemony. Still, Zac was far from finished when he stopped after five hours of frantic construction work. The effect of the **[Golden Spark Talisman]** was running out ahead of schedule, unable to keep Zac's core malleable nearly as long as advertised.

Still, Zac was much more confident as he felt dense rivers of energy course through his bodies. Most of his pathways remained in Early D-grade, but the main circuit had been fully upgraded. Furthermore, all the damaged sections were mended, leaving his energy flow smooth and stable. He'd even taken the opportunity to deal with some of the imperfections in his core, though the damage caused by the **[Golden Spark Talisman]** canceled out most of his progress.

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It was time to get going.

Zac's two bodies gathered by the exit, each gripping a **[Time Devouring Puppet]** despite their limited reusability. Zac grabbed the shoulder of his Draugr body and flashed forward, cutting through the curtain of Temporal doldrum and the accumulated wall of frozen energy beyond. The Void shielded their bodies from the temporal difference when passing through the barrier, but it wasn't enough to quell the tearing pain.

A tremendous explosion left Zac's ears ringing, and he was flung into the hidden hallway. The energy vacuum created by the hollow crystals wasn't enough to pull back the immense amounts of leakage that had already left the Temporal Chamber. The force was terrifying, and large cracks spread across the ceiling and floor. Only the emergency hallway was spared, thanks to a coffin blocking the mayhem long enough for the Teleportation Array to whisk him away.

The transfer was nigh-instantaneous. Malevolent red replaced gold and black as Zac appeared within an illusion array in the secluded mountain valley. A deafening crash turned four mountain peaks to dust as the Heavens pursued him into flowing time. Its churning clouds were already so overstuffed with extermination that Zac was given no warning before a pillar of lightning came crashing toward him with blinding speed.

The puppets had already crumbled, unable to withstand the immense Temporal backlash, forcing Zac to bear the full weight of his sins. His tempered bodies fought back with everything they had, yet he found himself dying piece by piece. **[Void Zone]** could have helped, but Zac kept his bloodline in check while glaring at the incoming tribulation with agonized determination.

He clawed at the sky, using his right hands to conjure huge blades displaying his path. Evolutionary and Inexorable axelights tore through the sky, becoming one just as they met the descending lightning. The valley shook, Dao was exterminated, and the pillar poured into Zac with most of its energy intact.

A familiar agony tore through Zac's body, seeking to extinguish his path and rip back what he'd stolen from the Cosmos. Whether spirit or physical body,

they were drowned in a sea of crackling red. Arcs of lightning burrowed into his cells, targeting the golden hurricanes and bottomless ponds. His body was covered in gruesome wounds and angry scars in no time, making Zac look like a crumbling statue as he stood rooted in place from the sensory overload.

Not even Time was spared from Heaven's relentless assault.

Zac's laughter joined the thunderstorm's deafening roars as he was cleared of temporal debt through Heavenly intervention. This was why he'd taken the first bolt head-on after measuring its strength. Tribulation Lightning could purge pretty much anything, and it turned out the Temporal backlash was no different.

It was as though the lightning realized it had been tricked, and it rallied with redoubled vigor as it poured into his quantum space. Facing the tribulation with two bodies had caused the punishment to split, but it fused back into one before descending on his Cosmic Core. His newly formed core shook and crackled as it withstood the punishment with dogged determination.

The pain was like having nerve endings set on fire, spreading across Zac's bodies through his pathways. Zac called on the immense power of his Middle D-grade Core, and the lightning was submerged in a sea of energy that filled his Duplicity Core before pouring into his Pathways. Faced with such an overwhelming resistance, some of the lightning sought other targets to destroy.

Just as the tribulation was about to break into his Soul Aperture, a second sea poured out of the hidden space. Dao joined energy, forming an unbreakable army that began a war of mutual destruction. Wrathful lightning was subdued, diluted, and dispersed, though only after exacting a price of flesh.

This was the normal way to combat Tribulation Lightning when you lacked special methods like **[Void Heart]** or Technocrat arrays. It was nowhere near as effective, but Zac couldn't blow his best cards on the first bolt. The tribulation destroying the temporal energies was his best-case scenario, and the System was clearly holding back some of Heaven's power. However, the energies gathering above confirmed this would be a tough fight.

A second bolt descended before Zac had fully routed the first, holding as much energy as the final bolt of his previous tribulation. It only took a look for Zac to activate both **[Void Zone]** and **[Void Mountain]**, and he shrunk the

superimposed nullification spheres as much as he could to maximize their effect.

Most Middle Hegemons would be rendered utterly helpless within such a powerful domain of anti-Dao, yet it wasn't nearly enough to deal with Heaven's wrath. It tore into the domain, only losing a fifth of its force as it drew closer. The oversized bolt slammed into Zac's raised palms, and it briefly looked like time had stopped again.

The illusion only lasted a fraction of a second before Zac spewed blood and stumbled to his knees. The lighting continued into his body, noticeably weakened. Despite the mysterious loss of energy, Zac had his Soul Aperture overrun with furious lightning, momentarily surpassing even his quantum space. The Heavens were out for blood, but their target disappeared before they could cause any real damage.

Zac's Soul Cores became the victim of the seething extermination when the tribulation couldn't find its real target. Luckily, the lightning was bound to its purpose, and it continued toward his Cosmic Core before causing permanent damage. Zac thanked the stars he'd deactivated **[Void Mountain]** before it was too late.

He was shocked at how effective his Bloodline Talent was at dealing with the Tribulation Lightning. He'd activated the external version, and any lightning touching his palms had simply disappeared. Zac would have saved it for the final bolt if he knew how strong it was. The consumption was just as shocking, though, and he'd used up all but a tenth of his **[Void Energy]** in that short window.

Worse, his actions seemed to have truly pissed off the heavens. The clouds shuddered, forming complex patterns that caused a sharp, throbbing pain in Zac's mind. Meanwhile, a familiar aura appeared in the depths of the storm, one that almost made Zac forget that half a lightning bolt was still rampaging through his core. It was Law, all four of them mixed into one terrifying force.

Had he actually summoned a real Four Desolates Tribulation in Middle Hegemony?

Zac was about to lodge a complaint with the System, praying it would step in again. However, the words died in his throat upon realizing the flicker of Law didn't grow stronger. Few would even notice it without previous experience.

Such a small amount should be within his limits, right? Even if it were the real thing and not an imitation like the Tribulation Throne. He might even have formed some natural resistance because of his rebirth.

Wasn't this what he came for?

Zac panted, his bodies twitching from the remnant lightning while red strings appeared all around him. He'd felt despair the last time he faced a similar scene. This time, there was only determination. He was still an ant before the Heavens, but he was not the same person as before. The System wanted him to prove his Void Road? Then he'd oblige by taking a bite out of the sky.

What little Void Energy Zac had left flooded his body as he fully opened the floodgates, and all lingering arcs outside the quantum space were summarily snuffed out. It was like the Heavens had caught his scent, and the final bolt came without delay. It looked almost the same as the previous one except for a slightly darker hue. However, Zac could vaguely discern illusory runes floating in its center. They flickered like they lacked the energy to fully express their meaning, yet they held far greater horror than the rest of the bolt.

Zac pushed with everything he had, and space shuddered between himself and the incoming lightning bolt. There was a powerful resistance like the Void didn't wish to be dragged into this matter. Zac broke through the opposition, ripping open a vortex fifty meters across just in time to block.

The tribulation lightning seemed equally reluctant to face the nothingness within the large swirl, but Zac didn't give it a chance to avoid a collision. Extermination poured into the beyond until Zac couldn't hold on any longer. Less than a third remained as the bolt continued toward Zac, who finally unsealed the frantically struggling **[Void Heart]**.

The Hidden Node had been forced to witness its favorite food being squandered, and it seemed adamant to take what remained for himself. It thumped with enough force to create actual winds and the remaining, and most of the remaining lightning was swallowed before it could even enter the quantum space.

Zac glanced at the clouds reluctantly parting, confirming the Heavens didn't have a fourth bolt in the chamber before turning his gaze inward. **[Void Heart]** had gone silent like it always did after overindulging. Lingering lightning still crackled along his newly formed pathways, but the Law Runes were mysteriously gone. Zac frowned until he felt a chill of premonition.

It was at that time a figure suddenly landed before him. It was Joanna, her eyes scanning the surroundings for dangers.

"I'm fine, but it's not over. Give me a minute," Zac said with a hoarse voice before sitting down.

His words became prophetic as he was beset by intense prickling pain, like he'd fallen into a barrel of burning needles. **[Void Heart]** was holding steady, but the Tribulation Lightning had found another outlet. It clawed its way out of the depths, emerging from Abyssal pools and golden hurricanes. The Void couldn't or wouldn't consume the full wrath of the final bolt, and Zac finally felt the aura of Law return.

But why was it slightly different?

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Chapter 1184: Drain

Billions of dark red trickles poured out of the depths of Zac's cells as the Void regurgitated its unpalatable fare. The lightning looked innocuous compared to the tyrannical arcs that had ravaged his body just moments before, yet they held whispers of a far greater terror—morsels of eradication sanctioned by Law.

Whatever they touched seemed to fade away, whether it was flesh or the spiritual elements that made up his path. Even the Abyssal ponds turned into a faded grey after the lightning had passed through. Zac saw how he was being removed from existence. It didn't hurt in the slightest, but Zac would have preferred the agony of the previous posts to this terrifying erasure.

This was different from his experience in the Tribulation Throne. That ancient trial had built-in safeguards, like the earthly aura rising from the throne to keep his state steady. This time, Zac was facing the Four Desolates all alone.

Energy and Dao rallied to combat the onslaught, only to become dust in the wind. The Laws were immutable as they gathered on their way to his Cosmic Core.

The only reason Zac wasn't losing his mind with fear was the subtle change to the aura hidden in the lightning's depths. It was clearly still Laws manifest, yet it felt inverted. Intimately close, almost. Zac felt he could move even closer if he added the Void to his body. Perhaps it could even revert the faded state spreading through his body. This chapter is updated by NoveFire.net

But he was plumb out of Void Energy after conjuring the vortex. His backup generator, **[Void Heart]**, was no use either. It was fighting its own war, refining the rest of the tribulation lightning, unable to supply Void Energy. Neither did he have any Void Pills for obvious reasons.

In desperation, Zac could only turn to his Cosmic Core. The first streams of Law-sanctioned lightning had already entered its pathways, and it groaned under duress. Wait, duress? Zac grasped onto the incongruity like a drowning man, pulling with everything he had. And the Void answered.

A soothing nothingness emerged from his core, passing through the walls of his Duplicity Core before spreading through his body. It was pure Void Energy, unmarked by the ancient aura of his bloodline. It seemed to exist in another plane than the lightning, where the two coexisted without any interaction. His body was different, and Zac looked on as sections erased by Law slowly recovered like paint being added to a blank canvas.

The reformation wasn't as quick as the destruction, and his work was constantly undone as new streaks of lightning passed by. It was enough to give him a fighting chance. There was only so much lightning to spit out, and the first wave was already fading after impressing the Laws on his Cosmic Core.

It was all thanks to **[Void Engine]**. Each piece entering his Cosmic Core had unique features, where the **[Void Engine]** could continuously produce Void Energy. Similarly, Sendor said that the **[Warstone]** would let him recover energy in the heat of battle, providing an inherent ability similar to **[Fields of Despair]**.

Those features had been conspicuously absent during the past ten months. He'd worried his unorthodox core formation method had ruined the spirituality, but that wasn't the case. Igniting his core had put its inner workings on full

display, and the familiar auras were still there. With the added spirituality and strength from the upgrade, the core was finally able to display at least one of these abilities.

Zac held on for dear life, forgoing any attempts to direct the changes in his Cosmic Core. Whether it was a blessing or a curse, he would have to take what he got. Luckily, Zac was almost certain it was the former, provided he had the strength to last to the end. The small changes taking place throughout his core looked random, but he felt an echo of the realignment he'd undergone.

A sudden and immense energy draw forced Zac's attention away from his core. It was the Duplicity Core coming alive, stealing both refined Tribulation Lightning and what little energy he'd saved from being erased. Worse, it drew on the Void, preventing any from leaving the quantum space.

Zac's thoughts grew hazy as his very existence faded. It would have been easy to curse the Kayar-Elu for stealing his lifeline. However, Zac knew they weren't the perpetrators behind his current plight. He roused his fading consciousness as he glowered at the starry sky.

It was almost as though he could see a set of eyes gazing down at him from far above. Zac's hand shot forth while the illusory Void Mountain reappeared in his Soul Aperture, fueled with what little Void Energy hadn't been siphoned off.

The 'unaffiliated' Void Energy was slow to follow his commands, especially when he tried to use it for a Bloodline Talent. Fear and urgency broke through all restrictions, and a pulse of severed fate spread through the valley with him as the epicenter. The overbearing Karmic thread held at bay by his Duplicity Core had been destroyed by the [Void Mountain]'s unstable infusion.

The last tribulation clouds dispersed the next second, severing the bridge between Zac and the mysterious intruder. The Specialty Core calmed down, and Zac slowly exhaled as Void Energy once more began undoing the desolation. The crackling reformation lasted another ten minutes before the trickle of lightning finally stopped.

The first two bolts had left his Cosmic Core wretched, shrunken, and burnt. The final bolt was even more terrifying. The core currently looked like a hologram, like it didn't exist in either quantum state. But, like Zac, it was slowly coming back to reality.

Zac glanced at the starry sky with lingering fear. Was the last-minute addition of Law Runes really a response to using **[Void Mountain]** to combat the second bolt? The wrath had felt so palpable and targeted, almost making Zac forget the Heavens wasn't a conscious entity like the System.

Cultivating Void shouldn't go against the Laws any more than cultivating Dao. They were cardinal rules governing both sides of the coin. It made more sense if it related to the Void Road, his rejection of Cosmic Destiny.

Zac had tried to get a better understanding of the Laws and Destiny since returning from the Centurion Lighthouse. Remaining ignorant was too dangerous when Laws had remolded his core, and he had stepped onto an unprecedented path of forming his own fate.

Unfortunately, Zecia didn't have the answers he sought. Most considered the 'One Destiny' as the natural order and not something that related to cultivation. That was more or less true for a place like Zecia, but it obviously wasn't the full picture. The Limitless Empire had formed an independent Imperial Destiny, and wasn't the struggle between the Thrones and Seals an attempt to shift the natural order?

Zecia's understanding of the Four Laws was not much deeper, and the few available insights were hoarded as core secrets by the peak faction's Dao Reserves. However, Zac had discovered that Four Desolate Tribulations was even rarer than he'd thought, thanks to Tavza. Most Monarchs would never encounter one, instead facing Grand Minor Tribulations and two-cycle tribulations like Saeward.

This was cause for both relief and regret among C-grade Cultivators. In fact, Zac had only recently realized just how big the opportunity presented by the Tribulation Throne was.

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The problem all Monarchs faced, whether Cultivator or Mortal, Boundless or Heavenly, was the constant energy drain. Inner Worlds could draw energy from the cosmos, but no C-grade cultivator could form a perfect dimension. Accordingly, what leaked through the imperfections was more than what they received.

Just staying afloat required diligent cultivation to supplement the natural influx. Even that wasn't enough for Monarchs on the frontier, where heritages were shallow and the energy thin. They also had to supplement their Inner Worlds with mountains of treasure.

Mortals such as himself would feel this uphill battle far more since they had no Cultivation Manuals to combat the drain. In addition, their Inner Worlds were unstable and filled with imperfections. Zac hadn't found a single example of a Mortal going beyond Early C-grade to this day, proving just how hopeless the situation was.

Zac still had no plan on how to deal with that problem. Any Inner World formed with his heavy foundations was bound to require terrifying amounts of energy, especially if you accounted for how voracious his bloodline was. His only idea was to rely on the Void the same way he did with **[Void Vajra Sublimation]**. He would take what he needed from the Cosmos while giving nothing back. Zac didn't have the faintest how that was supposed to be accomplished in practice, though.

Technically, crossing each threshold of Monarchy was an opportunity to alleviate the drain by improving your Inner World. In reality, the deficit usually got much worse. A breakthrough drastically expanded the Inner World, increasing its power and energy requirements alike. You would have a harder time keeping up even if the world quality remained the same.

Just surviving the bottleneck was difficult enough, so most Monarchs saw their Inner Worlds deteriorate rather than improve. Only the utmost geniuses throughout the Multiverse had the luxury of improving their foundations while expanding their world.

However, there was one circumstance that could significantly stem the drain—the Four Desolates Tribulation.

There seemed to be no rhyme or reason for who got picked to be tested by Laws. It affected both cultivators walking the Boundless and Heavenly paths. Some only got picked once; others faced it at every step. It did target Heaven's Chosen and Eonic seeds to a higher degree, but there were records of second-rate Monarchs being targeted by the Four Desolates.

It even seemed random who survived and who perished, though the vast majority died. Zac wasn't surprised after having just a taste of the real thing.

You weren't getting through that experience without something unique to fall back on.

The few who didn't get erased would see benefits similar to Zac in the Tribulation Throne. Their Inner Worlds would be realigned, improving their ability to pull energy from the Cosmos. This surplus often snowballed into great momentum that let the chosen Monarchs progress through the grade.

No one had ever found a method to call down the Four Desolates, and not for lack of trying. Consequently, it was considered a matter of fate. In fact, the term 'Heaven's Chosen' originally came from this phenomenon, though its meaning had long since shifted to include any talent with the potential to rise above their generation.

After today, Zac understood how correct this notion was. Those who faced the Four Desolates probably had the potential to influence Destiny and the Era's direction, no matter how small. Perhaps the reason he was targeted so early was that he'd picked an entirely new road to follow. Perhaps each minor bottleneck would add a bit more of the Laws.

What kind of core would he have after annealing it in two more rounds of Law-empowered lightning? Any C-grade Cultivator would go insane with envy if they learned he got to align his core with the Laws three times before assaulting Monarchy. It would make for the perfect foundation for his Inner World.

And yet, Zac found it hard to get excited over the subtle alterations within the Cosmic Core. Was he overestimating himself? Three times now, he'd required assistance to survive these high-grade tribulations. First, it was his Duplicity Core protecting him atop Mount Illumination. Then it was Laondio who saved his life and forced open the Void Road. This time, he only got to reap such a big harvest because the System restrained most of Heaven's power.

What if he broke through inside the Eternal Storm the next time? Or some part of Ultom where the System couldn't reach? Who was supposed to save him then? He needed to figure out a way to deal with the problem himself. But how? Dealing with that intractable erasure head-on seemed impossible, especially if it would keep coming at the beginning of his breakthroughs.

Not to mention, his actions were obviously drawing unwanted attention. The presence gazing in his direction across the river of fate was neither the System nor Heavens. It was a cultivator, a very powerful one. His Duplicity

Core's anti-karma protections had almost been overwhelmed despite the immense distance between them. Zac was almost certain he'd prevented his identity from being exposed, but that didn't mean they came away empty-handed.

Were they looking for him, or had they noticed something unusual happening and tried to find out what? Zac frowned, opening his Quest Screen. Nothing had changed except for the **[First Step of Destiny]**-quest being gone. He'd been worried he'd somehow dragged the trial closer yet again. [Read Web Novels Online Free](#) -

Zac shook his head and got back to his feet. He had no way to investigate that spying presence. The Sangha was an obvious suspect, considering they tried to bind him with Karma. However, it could be any old faction who kept watch for changes in the river of fate. Zac could only be careful and keep his ears to the ground. Which changed nothing, considering he'd been on full alert since getting his hands on the first seal of the Left Imperial Palace.

Zac turned to Joanna, who stalwartly stood guard with spear in hand. He left her at the frontlines, so she must have returned to act as a Dao Guardian during his pre-breakthrough meditation. Deathly Miasma seeped out of the ground, seemingly drawn by her immovable figure. It was no surprise, considering the amount of carnage that spear had caused over the past month.

"Congratulations," Joanna said as she walked over.

There was not a hint of surprise or confusion on her face. The fact that he'd successfully stepped into Middle Hegemony was a matter of course, and an unplanned tribulation wasn't enough to shake her unwavering belief in him. Zac inwardly grimaced upon seeing the latest scar on her face. This one had almost taken her left eye.

He didn't know what to think of the transformation that began after she emerged victorious from her Sealbearer quest. The differences weren't too noticeable at first. It felt like she was simply getting used to her newfound power and the frontlines. Yet with each battle she led, the baleful air around her grew more intense while new wounds were added to the tally.

Passing the trial and Seizing the Indomitable Seal showed her a path forward and pushed her strength to the next tier. However, she intentionally suppressed her breakthrough and kept honing herself by treading the edge

between life and death. Thankfully, it was soon over. Her baleful aura had begun transforming into something else.

Faith Energy, where he was the target. Joanna had chosen to fully embrace the path that allowed the Limitless Empire to lord over all creation, and her path was already spreading among the Valkyries. He'd already seen hints of the terrifying power brought by her beliefs. Her Endurance was nowhere near his, yet she'd almost seemed harder to kill as she tore apart one Kan'Tanu Hegemon after another in bloody melees.

"Thank you," Zac said, once more swallowing his misgivings. "Has your domain grown stronger?"

"When the Emperor prospers, so will his subjects," Joanna said, a small smile finally appearing on her face. "I'm breaking through as soon as we've confirmed the situation is stable."

"Good," Zac nodded. "How's the situation?"

"The Atwood Empire was upgraded to a Middle E-grade Faction in the War System twelve minutes ago," Joanna said. "The twenty-four hours have started."

The twenty-four hours referred to the Battlefront Arrays. After that short window, they would match his armies with enemies one stage higher, whether you were in the middle of a campaign or not.

"Any new Battlefronts opening?"

"Not as of right now."

"Good. Order the full reset and the upgrade," Zac said.

"Wait, there's something else," Joanna said, taking out a Cosmos Sack. "I received a package just before returning, along with a note to not drop this on your head? I had the Warfort quartermaster scan it for danger to make sure. It should be safe."

"Not drop on my—" Zac muttered as he took the sack, eyes suddenly widening with realization.

Ventus Kalavan. Their duel in the Twilight Ocean ended with the Numerologist's abacus dropping on his head. Was this about their agreement? Wasn't Ventus supposed to perform a divination only right before they entered the Inheritance? Something must have changed. Zac wanted to investigate before upgrading Earth, but Joanna's next words made his mind come to a complete stop.

"Furthermore, Mr. Trang left his post three hours ago, handing over command of his beast to his grandson. He's entered terminal seclusion."

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Chapter 1185: Terminal Seclusion

"Terminal seclusion?" Zac said with a sinking feeling, trying to recall the old man's latest reports. "That can't be right. He should have centuries left."

Almost any breakthrough came with a very real risk of death, but Terminal Seclusion referred to a specific scenario. It referred to aging, bottlenecked cultivators who chose to risk everything before their lifespan ran out. It was a final, desperate gamble to claw back some longevity from the Heavens. They'd either breakthrough or they'd die.

"He can't be pushing for Hegemony, right?"

"No, it's not that. Mr. Trang is still in Late E-grade," Joanna sighed. "I made some inquiries. It turns out he made a trade with one of our captains, exchanging local contribution points for a pill in the Public Merit Exchange. You know how he's been lately."

Zac slowly nodded in defeat. Sap Trang had always felt guilty about not joining the war, and those feelings had only grown stronger as the death toll increased. Zac and many others had tried to assure him it was fine. Sap Trang's role had actually become increasingly vital lately. The number of

Beast Kings in the oceans was growing by the day, and he was the best suited to maintain order when coastal garrisons were emptied to fight the Kan'Tanu.

He hadn't listened. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that he'd listened too well. He'd launched an almost suicidal crusade against Earth's wildlife as if trying to make amends. Zac could see the old man doing something drastic when facing the threat of a planetary upgrade.

"What pill?"

"**[Burning Youth Pill]**. It's already underway."

"That fool," Zac groaned.

[Burning Youth Pill] was a forced breakthrough pill for those with limited potential or exhausted momentum. It had a small chance of raising one's race and reigniting momentum as a result. However, the pill's cost was right in the name—you sacrificed your lifespan for a chance at resuming your journey. Even if the breakthrough succeeded, you would barely gain any longevity because of the steep cost.

And if the breakthrough failed... It was truly a Terminal seclusion if that pill was involved.

With such horrible drawbacks, the pill didn't even deserve to appear in the Limited Exchange. It was a common good, costing just a few thousand Merit. Worse, **[Burning Youth Pill]** wasn't designed for the elderly, which should have been evident from its name. Their longevity was too weak, even if they technically had many years left on the clock.

Zac sighed. He'd already offered the old fisherman far better pills, but Sap Trang always said there was no need. Why couldn't that stubborn old man have contacted him if he'd changed his mind and wanted to rekindle his momentum? Why take it upon himself to cook up such a hopeless plan?

"It'll be decades before we see wide-scale growth in Beast King populations," Zac complained. "He's rushing into things."

"The captain who provided the pill?" Joanna asked when she saw Zac's overcast expression.

"He broke no rules," Zac waved, feeling a different exhaustion than from his breakthrough.

There was nothing Zac could do if Sap Trang had already eaten the pill. The slightest distraction could lead to disaster. Zac couldn't even add any arrays or treasures to his environment since the shift might put the old man off-balance.

"It's up to fate now," Zac said, steeling his heart. He had billions of people depending on him, and he couldn't put everything aside because of his old companion's decision. "Send Lily and Verana to Little Bao's side. They might be able to help if something happens and the Kraken goes berserk."

Joanna nodded and sent a few orders through her Communication Crystal while Zac turned his attention to the Cosmos Sack. Inside was a box with an unusual seal. Zac took it out, inspecting it for a few moments before realizing what was going on. He infused energy in a particular order, essentially recreating the flow of their duel.

The box clicked open, exposing a letter and an information crystal.

'You've become the flame leading fate down an unknown path. However, some constants remain in the everchanging calculations of fate. I've peered through the curtain, and I hope my findings will help you on your quest. Your journey is linked to two outside variables. You have 403 days before the window closes. I shall see you on the other side.'

Zac turned to the crystal, and his eyes glazed over as his mind was flooded with thousands upon thousands of linked orders. It took him over a minute to even understand what he was looking at.

"Do we need to alter our schedule?"

"No. This is about something else," Zac said, handing over the crystal. "See for yourself."

Joanna soon frowned when faced with the immense amount of data. "Such detail. But what's the purpose of micromanaging our battlefronts to this level? And in this direction? We'll lose millions of Faction Merit no matter which route we pick."

"Help me on my quest..." Zac mused as he held the letter. "I think I understand. You haven't recalled the armies yet, right? Do we have any battlefronts currently active in the Zurbor Sector?"

"The Eighth," Joanna nodded. "You're too high-leveled to enter now."

"I know, but you can," Zac said, handing over the **[Centurion Beacon]**. "Take this and head to the Eighth. Then go to our recruitment station in the Allbright Empire and do the same."

"I'll be back in twenty minutes," Joanna assured after Zac had shown how to activate the tracker.

"Thank you. Don't let anyone see what you're up to," Zac said. "A better world will await you when you're back."

Joanna left to investigate Zac's hunch while he sent out the orders for advancement, only excluding the Eighth from the reset. The response was high-instantaneous. The fog shrouding the valley thickened as more energy seeped out of the ground. Meanwhile, shimmering streaks of Dao formed in the night sky, showering the mountains in ethereal light.

Zac flew to one of the shattered peaks, taking in the spectacle. Color seemed clearer, the air fresher, and the Dao had never been closer. The changes would be the most obvious in the energy hotspots like his island, but similar scenes should be appearing across the globe. Earth was awash in Origin Dao for the first time since the integration, though it was only a brief visit this time.

The upgrade would take around one day, and it presented a rare opportunity. The sudden influx of energy and Origin Dao would shake loose bottlenecks and trigger epiphanies on a wholesale scale. Most likely, that was what Sap Trang banked on to survive the destructive pill.

The upgrade would also birth numerous Natural Treasures. Since they were advancing to Middle D-grade, many of these treasures would be beneficial for Hegemons. They could be considered natal treasures born from the Cosmos with unusually pure Daos and almost no heterogeneity. While tempting, Zac wasn't about to go on a treasure hunt. He already had people stationed at all high-grade cultivation grounds, and he didn't feel the need to compete with his subordinates over these opportunities.

Neither had Zac expected to gain much from the Origin Dao, believing he had a better chance to find the answers he sought by facing powerful enemies on the frontlines. However, Zac felt his drained mind quake as the multiplying streaks of Life and Death above the mountain range clashed. His experiences on the frontlines crystallized, from the fortress to the following months of bitter struggle.

Joining them was the truth of Conflict he embodied when facing Heaven's unexpected descent. Even Joanna's burgeoning aura added a piece to the puzzle, and it all clicked into place. Zac turned his vision inward, locking onto his axe-wielding Dao Avatar. His miniature replica was faded, bent over. Spent.

And willing.

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To live was to fight, and few had the luxury of picking which battles they'd face. Struggle was Heaven's mandate—it didn't make a difference whether you pursued the Dao of Conflict or not. What mattered was how you faced the trials and tribulations coming your way, knowing Conflict was without end. It was eternal, so your willingness to face fate had to become eternal, too. If you let defeats or near-death experiences twist your heart, whether it was by filling it with bloodlust and hatred or with fear and doubts, you'd end up sacrificing a part of yourself for every step you took. Eventually, nothing would remain.

The Dao Avatar got to its feet, the action weakening its illusory form even further. Still, it exuded a ruthless aura that declared it wouldn't back down even if the Heavens returned, which was a distinct possibility if Zac followed through. Who knew what rules governed when he'd be targeted by a tribulation now? Forming a Peak Branch shouldn't be enough, but neither should entering Middle Hegemony.

Grasping the truths laid before him came with a real threat of death. He was exhausted and utterly unprepared for another round of heavenly wrath. However, backing down now meant discarding the Dao he'd envisioned, giving up on that aspect of his path. How could you nurture an unbreakable fighting spirit while hiding from the Dao? How could you aim to break the chains of fate and control your destiny?

The choice was easy. Zac sent out a series of altered commands before taking out a set of Dao Treasures. Streams of Origin Dao had already formed an invisible swirl around the mountain peak, but it wasn't enough to fuel Zac's unusual constitution. Time lost all meaning as Zac became one with the Dao under the shimmering sky.

A clap of thunder could shatter the calm at any moment, announcing Zac's next war. It never came, and Zac eventually opened his eyes. Hours had passed, yet the night sky remained the same. If anything, the Daolights had grown clearer. Zac enjoyed its simple beauty for a few minutes, not trying to deconstruct the Dao lights with his comprehension. But soon, curiosity trumped tranquility, and Zac opened his Dao Screen to inspect his gains.

[Branch of the War Axe (Peak): All attributes +50, Strength +17500, Dexterity +10000, Wisdom +2500. Effectiveness of Strength +25%.]

Zac looked at the numbers with satisfaction. He'd jumped over 10% in raw attributes thanks to the huge influx of flat attributes provided by a Peak Branch. The distribution had seen a small shift, adding to Wisdom at the cost of Strength. It was an expected result of the insights added to the Dao Branch and a welcome change in Zac's book. He would face the Atavism soon enough, and everything strengthening his soul or heart would come in handy.

"You were right."

Zac closed his screen and glanced over, catching the **[Centurion Beacon]**.

"So it's outside the Zurbor sector," Zac nodded.

"You think the rearrangement will lead us to the Foreign Gods?"

Joanna, being one of his closest confidantes, already knew about his quest and the events in the Centurion Lighthouse leading to them.

"Lead us to the right part of the sector, at least," Zac said. "Ventus really did us a solid if this works."

The Zurbor Sector was, just like Zecia, right at the edge of integrated space. However, that didn't mean the whole sector shared borders with the Eternal Storm. The System wanted to keep the frontier separated from the outside as much as possible, so there were only a scant few places that touched. The

rest actually pointed toward the Multiverse Heartlands, no matter which direction you set off in.

In Zecia, the borders were the Million Gates Territory and a region called the Sallow Sea. The latter was almost the opposite of the Million Gates Territory's wild mix of risk and opportunity. It was a huge nebula filled with sand that made dimensional travel extremely difficult. Entering it was like stepping into a quagmire that slowly drained your energy.

There were some opportunities hidden within, but the vast distances and difficulties involved left the Sallow Sea mostly abandoned. And beyond the sea waited the full chaos of the Eternal Storm, a region far deadlier than the Million Gates Territory.

The situation in the Zurbor Sector was mostly the same. Zac knew of three borders, one of which connected to their Million Gates Territory through the Spatial Gate. It was easier said than done reaching either, no matter which of the three held the rift for his quest. Even after upgrading the Yphelion, he couldn't just set off from any random Kan'Tanu world.

He'd have to spend months crossing the sector just to reach the Eternal Storm's edge, and there was no telling how deep the rift was located. All the while, he'd risk exposure and being hunted down by Kan'Tanu Monarchs attracted by his unique Cosmic Vessel.

What Ventus had provided was essentially a treasure map that would let him manipulate the battlefield system to the right position, avoiding most dangers of such a voyage.

"You upgraded your Dao of the Axe. I think I saw some of myself in it," the Valkyrie commented as Zac stowed the beacon. Her spear tore through the air, forming complex swirls in the mist.

"Well, you were part of my inspiration," Zac smiled, seeing his path in her stabs. "Alright, I'm late. We'll discuss our next move later. Don't bother with the rest, focus on your breakthrough."

Zac's Draugr half went to one of his private Death-attuned islands to bathe in the surging Energy and Dao of Death. His living side would soon do the same, but there was one thing he couldn't outsource.

"The world is ascending before our very eyes, and yet you're here," Karunthel grinned as Zac stepped into the shipyard reception. "Shouldn't you be out looking for freebies?"

"I'll leave this one to my people."

"Not enough to catch your eyes now that you're a Middle Hegemon?" Karunthel grinned, his mechanical eyes scanning Zac up and down. "What a freak. I can't believe how far you've come since we first met. And a minor stage in ten months? Are you really a Hegemon and not an F-grade brat?"

"Wouldn't have been possible without the war," Zac shrugged.

"I guess that's true. War is a furnace that will incinerate a thousand to temper one," Karunthel said with the callousness of someone who had experienced winds and rain. "Be careful. Even the best of opportunities will create a rickety vessel if they're not properly integrated."

"You're right, but the System isn't giving us much choice," Zac sighed as he looked at the spectacle outside. "There's no stopping until we've won. We'll just have to patch up our mistakes whenever we catch a breather."

"Such is the reality of cultivation," Karunthel agreed. "The Heavens rarely wait for us to be ready to defend our path. Anyway, I guess you're here to get some stronger toys."

"Exactly," Zac said. "My communicator might blow up from all the requests for your vessels."

"How can some frontier tin cans compare to our beautiful designs?" Karunthel laughed before growing somber. "However, don't expect one upgrade to drag you out of this pit. It takes much longer to craft Middle D-grade vessels, and they won't be strong enough to deal with the real threats you face."

"I know. But every bit helps," Zac said. "How long will it take?"

"Same as last time. Two weeks."

"Can you share the new catalog? Or the next quest?"

Karunthel glanced at Rahm, who shook his head.

"Guess not. They will follow the same standard and purpose as your current catalog, though. Oh, you'll still be able to build the Early D-grade vessels. Our production capacity will see a big boost, and I've petitioned to add a dedicated after-service division. Repairs, replacements, and upgrades will go much faster. It's a good opportunity for both of us to make some extra money now that your wares have seen some action."

"Upgrades? Like the Yphelion?"

"No, that's a separate matter," Karunthel said. "But you'll be able to provide full or partial upgrades for our ship. Like giving a Starflash with a Middle D-grade hull or adding an elite unit to a drone carrier. It won't interfere with our regular production line, and it can give your enemies a nasty surprise after having gotten used to a certain performance."

"That's amazing," Zac said with wide eyes before looking at Karunthel with suspicion. "You can just add something like that?"

"Well, our department has to pay a small price to the Heavens," Karunthel shrugged. "You could say we're making a bet you'll let us recoup the investment and more. Not to mention, there's a lot of good potential customers here nowadays, making the war an opportunity to showcase our craft."

"Thank you," Zac said, knowing altering the System's rules couldn't possibly involve a 'small price.' "I won't forget the favor."

"Don't mention it. Are you leaving your skipper with us?"

"I can't waste your production lines on upgrading the Yphelion right now. Things are too chaotic. I'll keep it with me until I get a break," Zac said.

"That's fine. Don't get it blown up, though. We can't upgrade a pile of scraps," the spidergolem said, glancing out the window. "It's a waste for you to stay here. Go, we'll deal with the upgrades."

"Then I'll take my leave," Zac smiled. "I'll be back when the upgrades are complete."

"Have fun," Karunthel waved as Zac flashed to the teleporter and disappeared.

The orderly interiors were replaced by a wilderness teeming with Life, facing a great revival from the planetary upgrade. A glance was enough to confirm it wasn't enough to make a similar push with his Branch of the Kalpataru, but Zac didn't mind. Between the dense Dao of Life and the lingering clarity of his breakthrough, it was the perfect opportunity to make his skill upgrades. Read Web Novels Online Free -

It was over forty days since he reached level 175, at which point he received the first and only set of class quests in Hegemony. Normal cultivators would get one more, but an Arcane-class cultivator was expected to mostly deal with their skills themselves. Zac had held onto the upgrades until now because of his impending breakthrough. IF YOU WANT TO READ MORE CHAPTERS, PLEASE VISIT [novel\(F\)ire.net](http://novel(F)ire.net)

He'd been worried the incredibly complex Skill Fractals would be damaged during the ignition, rendering them unusable for months. This was especially relevant for **[Primal Edict]** because the fractal was placed almost right next to his Cosmic Core. He'd been absolutely right. The fractal was ravaged after facing the combined wrath of the ignition and tribulation.

[Pillar of Desolation] was slightly better off thanks to its placement by his solar plexus, but it would take a lot of effort to fix it himself. It wasn't the first time these skills were damaged, but it was always a headache because they contained sections based on Creation and Oblivion that Zac didn't fully comprehend. If they were already upgraded to D-grade, it would have been even harder.

The class quest was the perfect shortcut. Zac had already confirmed that the System wouldn't penalize him for using the quest reward on damaged Skill Fractals, and it'd always create a skill in perfect condition. This was actually something cultivators often utilized to fix damaged or broken skills.

Zac wordlessly sat in the heart of the two islands, showered in Life and Death as he waited for the transformation to reach its zenith. Every breath filled his drained body and core with vigor. Every minute filled him with inspiration.

"Four hundred days..." Zac muttered, feeling the winds of fate growing stronger.

Was it enough?

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Chapter 1186: A Well-deserved Beating

"You're still alive? Let me see."

The Thousandflame Eccentric sat at the same spot as before, locked in the same position, holding the same leaf. It was as though a month hadn't passed since she hurled him into that pit of despair to reforge his core. Kruta stuffed down the choice words that were always bubbling just beneath the surface.

"You don't have to sound so surprised every time," Kruta sighed as he rotated his cultivation base.

Steel and flames coursed through his body, fueled by his Middle D-grade Cosmic Core. An illusory flame appeared on his head, spreading down his torso and into his hands. Kruta felt his muscles straining with barely repressed destruction, and the burning spirit of his ancestor appearing behind him exuded a matching ferocity.

Kruta had to admit that while staying by his Master's side meant constant suffering, the gains were more than a match. The path she'd illuminated, or rather kicked open, held boundless potential while perfectly matching his heart. Even the benefits brought from the seal of the Indomitable Court paled before the rebirth she'd guided him through.

"Little Candle, when did you become so confident?" the mad Supremacy grinned as she stuffed the leaf into her mouth.

"Please, just call me—"

The universe shook, and Kruta saw his life flash by when a tendril of living flames flashed past him, entering the mountain range he'd spent the last few months in. Space collapsed, the Dao unraveled, and the Cosmos cried as a

piece of its fabric was forever lost to the monstrous conflagration. Kruta groaned and fell to his knees, his memory repainted with fire and fate's culmination.

That wasn't a controlled demolition of his training ground. A sliver of energy had escaped through his Master's teeth while chewing her treat. Thank the ancestors she hadn't felt peckish while he was undergoing his breakthrough. His ancestral spirit collapsed, retreating into the depths of his Soul Aperture. If it were possible, his ancestor would have dug a pit and hid inside.

Who'd ever heard of a soul burning with the flames of war being afraid of fire?

"Ah? What's that?"

"Little Candle," Kruta said with resignation. "Please call me Little Candle."

He hated the nickname he was given after his **[Thousandwar Flame]** was awakened. At that time, he'd only been able to release the flames on the top of his head. His dear Master had laughed for ten straight minutes. Meanwhile, he'd been halfway through death's door, greeted by ancestors adorning pitying smiles. Then he was dragged back, denied the final escape from his nightmare.

"So weird," Thousandflames scoffed, oblivious to the destruction she'd caused. Her face had gained a mesmerizing blush as she swallowed the terrifying treasure. "That's the stuff."

"So, about the small vacation master promised... No, I mean seclusion to incorporate Master's teachings."

"Ah? A break?" Thousandflames said, her eyes going apart while scratching her ear. "That doesn't sound like me. And why would you need a break? The fact that you're acting so confident can only mean my efforts have borne fruit. We should look into intensifying your training. You're not pushing yourself hard enough if you can't feel the shadow of death creeping closer."

As expected, avoiding disaster was all but an impossibility with his Master. There was no point in complaining or railing against her broken promises. She wouldn't mind the outburst—in fact, she'd welcome it. However, her rewards for 'showing mettle' still haunted his dreams. He couldn't believe he longed for his grandma's punishments. What was hog duty to being flung into the horrifying realms this scourge had collected throughout the Eternal Storm?

"Actually, training will have to wait," the beautiful orc said with regret, igniting a small flame of hope against Kruta's better judgment. "We're picking up little Iz. I can't have you looking like a toasted rump; it will reflect poorly on me."

"Ah?" Kruta said, finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. "I passed?"

"Don't get ahead of yourself. Only the ancestors know whether your fate is strong enough to glom onto the family," Thousandflames scoffed. "However, something's changed, and we have to hurry up."

"Is it the trial?"

"Your little friend is messing with fate," Thousandflames grunted, a hint of displeasure appearing on the eccentric's face. "He stole half a year from the little miss, and fate's still in flux from his meddling. He's lucky his little region is protected by the Ruthless Heavens."

Kruta's face paled, knowing all too well the fate of those who displeased this maniac. The penal colony he woke up in only represented a corner of the gallery of suffering in this planet-sized Cosmic Vessel. THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY NOVEL(F)ir(e).net

"I'm sure he had his reasons! I even bet it was on accident. Zac's just as dumb as me. What does he know about messing with fate?"

"Whatever the reason, we need to leave ahead of schedule. We can't stay on the sidelines, or fate might slip through our fingers. I'm sure the others feel the same way."

"Others?"

"Some joined the party early. Others have their own ideas, hoping to use side doors to grab onto fate's tail," the orc shrugged as she got to her feet. She stretched, creating a mesmerizing ripple of chiseled muscles. "How do I look?"

"Perfection," Kruta whispered, his breath swept away.

"This old lady's still got it," Thousandflames laughed. "If you only knew how many chieftains were running after my skirts back in the day. Maybe I should visit a few of them when this is all over."

"The Red Sun Council was rooted out during the war," Kruta sighed, a flare of grief and indignation flickering in his chest.

"Why look like that?" Thousandflames said with a roll of her eyes as their surroundings exploded. "It's not like you knew those irascible old goats. They would probably have killed each other if the Second Heaven hadn't gotten to them first."

"It's just... The tribes were scattered, and now we're essentially subordinates to the Imperial Heavens." Kruta said with sorrow. "We only grow more dependent while our oppressor grows stronger."

His Master didn't say anything for a few moments as they passed through a tunnel of spatial flames, but Kruta noticed a dangerous flicker in her eyes. "Fate's a tricky thing. Accumulate too much, and you'll be crushed under its weight. The Imperials have pigged out on the providence of others for a very long time. Eventually, balance will be restored."

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"You—" Kruta said with hope but groaned when a painful flick to his forehead shook his soul.

"Don't look at me. Even Master would have to think twice before setting the Heavens ablaze. Besides, the Imperial Clans did help us out during our rough patch. It would reflect poorly on the Emyrean Quadrant if I caused trouble."

"More like took advantage of your conflict to expand their borders," Kruta muttered.

"So? Enemy of an enemy, and all that. If you don't like it, do something about it," Thousandflames scoffed as the flames deposited them in a garden. "Make a good impression, and you'll get the chance to kill some imperials in the upcoming years."

Kruta didn't get the chance to ask what that meant before an immense pressure almost crushed every bone in his body. The trees before him had disappeared, giving way to a mountain burning with golden flames—a living mountain whose glare threatened to erase Kruta's existence.

"This is the kid? You better not act out of turn with my niece, or I'll—"

"Little Rock, you've grown since I saw you last," Thousandflames grinned as worldending force gathered in her fist. "You even dare threaten my disciple."

The flames shrunk, and the mountain transformed into a hulking golem twice Kruta's height. "Wait, Mistress Valisa!"

The Thousandflames Eccentric answered with a burning punch that forced the wailing golem into another dimension.

"I don't like that name," Thousandflames muttered, glancing in Kruta's direction.

"Ah, Kru—uh—Little Candle heard nothing."

"Good. Anyway, what Little Rock said was right. Eruz Tayn was like a daughter to me, so Iz could be considered my only grandchild. How could I face Ruru in the future if her child suffered under my watch? You better be smart and alert."

Kruta eagerly nodded.

"She's here. Go on, make me look good."

"What? How?" Kruta whispered as a fiery portal opened up before them.

"That's perfect. Just keep looking stupid, and I'll come off in a better light."

His Master's scathing remark became a distant whisper as Kruta mutely took in the being stepping out of the flames. He'd heard the rumors. To think they paled before reality. How could the Heavens tolerate such a beautiful being? Her appearance was truth, subverting the natural order.

"Mistress Thousandflames?" the Heavenly Creature asked as she looked around. "Uncle's not here?"

"Just call me Aunty Valisa," Thousandflames said with a warm smile as she grabbed the newcomer's hands. "Valderak had a few things to take care of. Now, look at you. What a pretty child! I can see Ruru in you. And you've even awakened your father's flames. How marvelous."

"It's nice to finally meet you, Auntie," she smiled, prompting the Dao to bloom. "I'll do my best to live up to your expectations and hard work."

"What expectations?" Thousandflames said with a gentleness that shouldn't exist. "Just living well is enough. Is there anything you need before we go? Should we visit Lord Mohzious?"

"I just said goodbye to Grandpa. Everything else is ready," the Celestial Spirit said. She turned to Kruta, who once again lost himself in her sapphire eyes. "You're Aunt Valisa's disciple? The one who knows Zac?"

For the first time in Kruta's life, he cursed his suave grandfather for another reason. Why couldn't he use his chiseled frame and slick mouth to charm another human instead? Then Kruta would also have been human, increasing his odds of courting—A painful stab quashed the taboo thoughts, and Kruta inwardly thanked his ancestral spirit for saving him from the pyre.

"You do somewhat resemble him," Iz Tayn continued with a small smile. "Going by convention, I should call you Eighth Uncle."

The fear gripping Kruta's heart when sensing his Master's glance far surpassed what he'd experienced during his numerous brushes with death. His soul shook as the walls closed in. It felt like the Ancestors turned their backs on him across the river of time, drawing a clear line in the sand to protect the tribe. Even the Dao was abandoning him, unable to bear the weight of his new title.

Kruta had never felt so exposed and alone. His instincts told him to shake some sense into this beautiful calamity before she got him killed. His brain screamed at him to prostrate on the ground and plead for mercy.

"N-no! We're the same generation, so Mistress Tayn does not need to worry about honorifics," Kruta stuttered, settling for wringing his hands and smiling pitifully. "It would be unnatural if I became the uncle of my friend's friend. Kruta is just Kruta. Or Little Candle, if Mistress Tayn prefers."

Iz's head tilted in thought, and Kruta almost cried with relief when she nodded. At the same time, Kruta felt he'd lost something as her expression subtly changed. The distance between them suddenly seemed as great as the endless steppes.

"I'll bring you to Zecia. You will also join my subordinates in their training over the upcoming year to better prepare for fate's culmination. In return, you'll avail yourself inside the trial, should I require assistance."

"Of course! Thank you, Mistress Tayn! Kruta will work hard!"

Kruta shrugged off the disconcerting feeling, his heart singing with anticipation. He'd crossed the hurdle, and he only needed to endure one more year. By then, he should be strong enough to give Zac a well-deserved punch.

"Not bad," Ponel said without looking up from the parchment before him. "You actually earned yourself a Four Star Bounty. I didn't think you had it in you."

"What! Faceless Monarchs are coming for me? I didn't even kill that many. Well, maybe things got a bit out of hand in the end, but that wasn't completely my fault," Ogras said, his excuses giving him the unsettling feeling he was turning into that brute back home. He pushed down the terrifying notion, flashing an ingratiating smile. "Surely it would only require a word from Your Excellence to remove a kill order?"

"You're right."

"My sincere—"

"1,474 C-grade Nexus Coins, or treasures of equivalent value if you prefer."

Ogras blankly looked at the youthful assassin for a few breaths before shaking his head. "Nevermind. The pressure will help sharpen my instincts."

"So it will," Ponel agreed. "I received word from your benefactor. The deadline changed, and you're running out of time."

"I am?" Ogras frowned, his intuition telling him this was all because of that troublemaker. "How do I get home?"

"Here," Ponel said, throwing over a crystal and a teleportation Token.

Ogras scanned the list of names and locations, not recognizing a single one. "This is?"

"Targets. The kind of people who would make perfect additions to the little underworld you're building," Ponel said with a pointed look.

"Uh, you saw that?" Ogras coughed. "I'm simply—"

"I don't care. It'll hold impressive power, but it will forever be bound by strict rules and restrictions. One misstep and you'll be dragged under," the assassin said. "How can that headache compare to a simple stab?"

'Easy to be picky when you're sitting at the top of the ladder,' Ogras inwardly complained, though he didn't show any displeasure on his face.

"I've had one of my disciples place a Teleportation Token and a piece of my technique in each of their Spatial Rings. You'll be back in your neighborhood by the time you've made your way through the list, having fully digested what you seized from the Heart Burial Domain. Don't dally. The targets are very tricky, some having eluded capture for millennia."

"Uh, what if I can't find them? Or if they get themselves killed before I reach them?"

"Then I guess you're out of luck," Ponel shrugged. "You can always try to get to the next target if one slips through the net. You'll probably have to rob a couple of factions to afford the teleportation fees, though. The distance between each jump is quite big for a Hegemon."

"Fine. These are all Heretical Cultivators with great fell karma. They must have massive bounties placed on their heads," Ogras said, his eyes gleaming.

"Of course. 1,474 C-grade Nexus Coins, to be exact," Ponel nodded, his next words stifling the mad laugh already escaping Ogras's lips. "Don't worry, I've already claimed the bounties in your name. So work hard."

"You've—" Ogras wheezed, looking wide-eyed at the crude doodle of a fountain held up by his Master.

"I can finally have my winter garden renovated," Ponel said, a dangerous gleam appearing in his eyes. "You better not mess up my budget." Read Web Novels Online Free -

"Your budget? Wait, the bounties exceed a thousand C-grade Coins? Just how powerful are these heretics?"

"It should be within your capabilities so long as you and your flag improve fast enough," Ponel said as the Teleportation Token triggered in Ogras's hand, dragging him into a spatial rift.

The extremely fast teleportation was agonizing despite the resilience awarded from sacrificing half the Heart Burial Domain. Ogras didn't dare make Ponel the target of his bellyful of anger, afraid the assassin's supernatural senses would pick up on it. So he could only settle for the next best thing.

One more year before he could thank Zac with a well-deserved stab.

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Chapter 1187: A Thread of Potential

A small settlement had formed at the breach, with dozens of grand palaces of varied origins floating in space. The settlement had an air of expectancy and youthful vigor, with dozens of heated duels taking place on specifically erected platforms. Others sat right at the edge, silently searching for Karma.

True Destiny took in the weak swirls of fate. Some carried seeds of potential, yet none came close to the display his Eminence relayed four weeks ago. The Arhat stopped before the invisible boundary, the trail's terminus obscured by the Boundless Heavens.

His six brothers emerged from golden portals soon after, exposing their presence to the onlookers. Youthful vigor was replaced by crushing power as the young cultivators rushed to the sides of the entities observing them from the palace depths. True Destiny paid it no heed, and his brothers formed an impassable wall separating him from the mundane world. For seven days and seven nights, he listened for fate's muted whispers.

"The young benefactor is directly connected to the Pillars of Tīrthika."

True Merit and his other brothers took the news in stride. "Shall we contact the acolytes beyond the curtain? They are sent under his Eminence's order."

"Their trajectories are fraught with uncertainty. Involving them in the investigation of the obscured Candidate might do more harm than good," True Destiny slowly said. "We'll only involve them if left no choice."

"Forceful interference before the path has been decided may similarly cause a Karmic backlash, harming the Sangha's fate," True Benevolence said.

"We still have time. The Cosmos will provide a path, even if we have to wait for the curtain to fall," True Destiny said, glancing at the thousands of young elites peering at them from within protective barriers. "Until then, we can minimize the number of variables."

The seven chose a spot overlooking the divider, and True Destiny led his brothers through the opening chants. Lotus flowers radiating immeasurable merit bloomed beneath their seated positions, and a golden temple echoing the true path materialized.

Horried shouts came from the group of misguided travelers hoping to form Karma with the fifth pillar. Buddha's Love was Heaven's path. How could physical barriers hold it back? It was regrettable that the young mistook benevolence for malice, but they'd eventually understand the gift.

"You got some guts, you bald bastards, trying to influence the children!"

Space shattered like a mirror, exposing two malevolent eyes staring down at them. The temple shook, and red veins appeared on the lotus leaves. True Destiny shook his head with regret, seeing falsehoods had obscured the eyes of the wayward.

"Every being holds the potential for Buddha's love, benefactor," True Destiny calmly responded. "One simply has to open their heart to grasp it."

"Warison of the Seven Severance Grotto greets the Esteemed Arhats of the Boundless Ocean," a deep voice seemingly coming from the depths of the Cosmos spread through the region as a cave mouth formed. "According to our understanding, the Sangha doesn't use these pathways into the sector, and I see no acolytes among your ranks."

"This humble one has no design on the emerging threads of Karma," True Destiny confirmed.

"Then could the lords give us some face and proselytize further to the side? Your hymns will make it impossible for our young to search for their opportunities," the voice said as two more presences joined.

"Regrettably, this one cannot comply," True Fate calmly said despite the immense pressure on the temple. "We exist to safeguard the balance, and fate led us here."

"So you're just here to cause trouble because your young has already found a way into the trial?" a third Autarch interjected with anger.

"Enough nonsense! Your actions are breaking the agreement! Do you think the Sangha can cover the sky? Dozens of factions have divided the pathways, and more people are arriving by the day!" the first Autarch growled as a roiling sea of wrath seeped out of the hidden dimension.

"Amitabha," True Destiny said. "Benefactor should remain focused on the inconstancy of all fabrications. Only then can ignorance be abandoned, giving rise to clear knowing."

"Then you leave us no choice!"

The mundane plane couldn't withstand the pressure and collapsed. Boundless darkness spread across the horizon, only illuminated by the protective spheres surrounding the young. True Destiny calmly took in the scene, his hands clasped in a mudra.

A world was born from his heart, bringing the gift of Akaniṣṭha to the void. Mountains rose to meet the descending apparitions; rivers poured into the roiling ocean. Reality stabilized, yet the violence threatened to disrupt the fraught balance.

"The sea of regret is endless," True Destiny sighed as four of his brothers silently stood up.

Twenty days later, darkness gave way to light. The flickering stars returned as the dimension healed under Dharmic blessings. Palaces, domains, and platforms were gone. Instead, the small temple floated above an ocean of blood containing the broken ruins of a world. A shattered sword floated in the distance, its sharp edges bleeding Heavenly Dao. Like the ocean, the sword was gradually giving back to the Cosmos what had been borrowed.

The air was awash with truth, and the region was full of promise. Yet the few remaining supplicants didn't dare search for opportunities within, nor did they dare so much as glance in the direction of the Boundless Heavens' barrier. The unrepentant had been purified, and the observers hiding in the dark had retreated like shadows put under the light.

Weeks turned to months as tranquil chants reverberated through the frontier. Each sutra delved into the river of fate in search of an answer.

"Hm?" True Destiny said, opening his eyes.

He'd finally caught onto the thread of potential and turned his attention to one of the supplicants abandoned months before. Like the others, he'd been trapped by indecision, neither advancing nor retreating.

"Young benefactor, I can see that fate connects us. Tell me your name."

"I—" the golem stuttered, his aura and Heart unstable. "Please, great Lord. I don't—"

True Destiny traced the golem's Karma to a different sector of the frontier, vaguely sensing the possibilities hidden within. "Fate has brought us together, and we'll have to rely on each other to navigate these troubled waters."

The boiling seas strained under the mighty auras exuded by the floating palaces. The metallic waves were tamed and turned into passable ground for the engineering corps of the Chapter of Noble Pursuits. Of course, most of the sprawling army below was made up of guardian slaves tasked with protecting the church's greatest minds. Ker'Ero felt like an esteemed Chapter Master as he stood atop the walls, looking up at his creation being guarded by thousands of stalwart warriors.

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"The increase in activity is not random. They know we're here," Jezho muttered as she scanned the sky for incoming threats.

"So?" Ker'Ero grunted. "We should be happy these fools are willing to become live targets for a live experiment."

"Don't let our recent victories blind you," Perl frowned. "Our enemies are faltering, but they still have more than enough firepower to wipe out our unit from the map. Worse, they have been targeting our locations as of late."

"Because they understand we pose the greatest threat," Ker'Ero grinned, his heart surging with pride. "We've already begun unraveling the secrets of their most recent toys. Without those toys, they'll be like sheep for the slaughter."

Certainly, their individual strength fell short of most of the other chapters, and they hadn't been able to take out as many high-tier targets as Tripartite Truth or Warborn. But who could claim the honor of reaping the most lives but Noble Pursuits? Most of the War Machines and Cosmic Vessels were either crafted in their workshops or derived from their designs.

Hell, even the Gateways leading to the Zecia sector was their creation. Noble Pursuits were the ones who'd break through the final resistance, and he was one of the esteemed Grand Mechaneers making it possible. What were some Remoulded before the steel and blood beneath his feet?

"That's what I'm saying," Jezho said. "They know our research is bearing fruit and are adamant on stopping our progress. Worse, they are somehow sniffing out our hidden locations. We might have a breach, or they've gained access to powerful scanners that can pierce our shrouds. Maybe another Variable-signal Vessel?"

"Speaking of, I heard that one of those bastards might be in the area," Ker'Ero said. "The bounty on their heads..." THIS CHAPTER IS UPDATE BY No(v)ElFire.net

"Ignore it. Our task is to scout for threats and nothing else. Our research is finally bearing fruit after the immense investment. We'll deal with the Atwood Empire through our inventions rather than fists," Perl said. "Not to mention, the information is most likely false. How many times have our people tried to track down the armies of the Atwood Empire only to find Monarch waiting for us?"

"I supposed. Still, I'd like to see that maniac come to our neck of the woods," Ker'Ero grinned. "There wouldn't be anything left for the brutes below after my inventions are done with him."

"Then I shall oblige."

Ker'Ero's heart lurched when the abyssal voice appeared out of nowhere.

"Defend!" Perl roared as the sky was swallowed by desolation.

The arrays came alive, shifting the passive defenses into an alert state. And yet, a lance of utter Death passed right through the powerful barriers. Ker'Ero's eyes bulged at the sight, and he felt his worldview come crashing down along with a dozen Array Towers. The *Seafarer* was his greatest accomplishment and proof of his expertise. He knew every bolt and array like the back of his hand.

What had just happened was supposed to be impossible. It was as though the ironclad laws of energy and Dao had become a joke before the towering murderous intent. Ker'Ero's confidence was long gone after coming face to face with their attacker. Emperor Arcaz Umbri'Zi of the Atwood Empire. The nightmare of the Remoulded, who even had the blood of Reincarnators on his hands.

Why had he insisted on joining the maiden voyage? He was just a researcher—Ker'Ero was supposed to wreak havoc from the safety of his laboratory. It was too late for regret and too early to dissect the impossible breach. A deathly shroud fell down the slopes of the pyramidal fortress, and the neural feedback indicated damage was rapidly accumulating within the haze.

Meanwhile, a deafening explosion created huge squalls as the subsidiary fortresses found themselves under a crossfire. A full armada had eluded their scanners, raining hellfire from above. Their side fought back, but a shimmering barrier blocked the barrage.

"Shit, they have an Aegis, no two!" Jezho swore as dozens of screens appeared around her. "It's a full Starswallow Armada! Only the *Seafarer* is equipped to deal with them!"

"What are you fools doing? Fire the disruptors!" Ker'Ero roared into a communicator. Only screams answered.

"They're already inside!" Jezho inhaled, looking with horror and confusion as another deep grove was carved into the *Seafarer*. "He's completely disrupted the energy flow already! Most weapon systems are crippled. How does he know which sections to target?!"

"Defensive formation!" Perl growled as a pitch-black hammer appeared in his hand. "We'll win if we can drag this out for ten minutes. Don't let the target escape!"

Perl was right. The unliving maniac had appeared out of nowhere and breached their defenses, hoping to wreak havoc in a blitz before they could mount a resistance. Then, he'd escape under the cover of the protective bombardment. However, his inventions weren't so easily overcome.

Thousands of gargoyles came alive, shrieking with malice as they glared at the intruder. Some took flight to block the Draugr's descent while the rest unleashed a storm of ranged attacks. All the while, Jezho rapidly reconfigured the arrays to circumvent the damage.

It wasn't enough. Pitch-black chains indiscriminately ripped apart guardians and engineers en masse. Their controller was a blur of unfettered violence, ripping apart Ker'Ero's creation piece by piece. His heart bled, but the Mechaneer knew there was no backing down now.

"Bastard," Ker'Ero growled as he adjusted a set of arrays.

"Wait—"

An earthshattering explosion drowned out Jezho's warning. A whole section of the *Seafarer* blew up thanks to Ker'Ero's changes, yet he only felt vigor as he saw their attacker being swallowed by the conflagration. His sense of victory was short-lived. The cursed creature emerged from the mayhem unscathed.

Four skeletal minions reeking of danger had appeared behind his back, one of them holding a coffin covered in scorch marks. Perl was already on the move, unleashing a wailing storm of spirits with a herculean swing of his hammer. The attack ripped apart anything that stood in its path, from gargoyles to axe-wielding specters. And yet, Arcaz Umbri'Zi didn't spare it a second glance as he resumed his dismantling of their experimental fortress.

Ker'Ero couldn't believe his eyes when the all-out attack of their Late D-grade captain was covered in a swirl of darkness and disappeared.

"No!" Perl screeched, stumbling backward like he'd taken a hit, just as Ker'Ero felt a whole section of arrays going dark.

It was at that point dozens of powerful auras burst through the shroud, destroying the axe-wielding specters that had formed. Ker'Ero breathed out in relief, seeing that the first batch of reinforcements had arrived ahead of schedule.

"Go!" Perl roared, his skin wriggling from activating his Heart Curse. "Take him down!"

"It looks like we're all here," Arcaz said, his voice filled with an eerie calm despite being attacked from every direction by their elites.

And for good reason. Ker'Ero was beset by mortal dread as a sacrilegious eye formed atop the *Seafarer*. It was over fifty meters across and made from utter darkness. Just being drowned in its darkness chipped away at Ker'Ero's fraying sanity, erasing his thoughts and future. Those unlucky enough to be caught in its vicinity were simply erased.

Surrounding the darkness were two thick bands of carved bone, depicting countless anguished victims caught in the eye's orbit. It seemed as though the chained sculptures tried to break away yet were forever trapped by the gravitational pull. Others sought release, looking longingly at the ball of nothingness as they revolved around it. Release that would never come.

The whole fortress seemed to have been swallowed by the darkness. The sounds of pitched fighting outside were gone, and Ker'Ero's connection to the numerous control units was severed. It felt like they'd been dragged to the depths of hell, and none of Ker'Ero's scans could pinpoint a weakness. Neither could he spot its controller.

Both the Draugr and Perl were gone, leaving Ker'Ero utterly alone. Screams of despair echoed through the fortress as thousands of warriors found themselves caught by unbreakable chains. Ker'Ero considered hiding and waiting things out, but a stabbing pain quashed that train of thought. He gritted his teeth, attention returning to the sculptures. They were the ones wreaking havoc on his men and the only obvious target.

Ker'Ero unhesitatingly detonated another energy purifier, unleashing a powerful wave of destruction on the closest band. Cracks appeared across the sculptures, and the Grand Mechaneer grinned with a manic gleam in his eyes. Read Web Novels Online Free -

That's right, they weren't dealing with a Monarch. The young Emperor was only a Middle Hegemon. How could his skills possibly withstand the stockpiled energies within the *Seafarerer*?

However, Ker'Ero lost his train of thought before he could trigger another explosion and shatter the band. His eyes were drawn to one particular sculpture chained to the cycle of suffering by a band of thorns. Time seemed to have stopped for everything except the statue, which slowly turned to meet Ker'Ero's gaze.—

Ker'Ero mind was overwhelmed by existential dread as his twisted doppelganger grinned, the scene only made more horrifying by the cracks covering the statue. It was only later the Grand Mechaneer vaguely realized a chain had penetrated his chest, impaling his curse and shattering his core.

Then, nothing mattered as he entered Oblivion's embrace.

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Chapter Schedule Update

The main goal with this change is to fix my messed-up work-life balance, which I'm hoping will have cascading positive effects for me and the story. It'll give me more time to refine each chapter and properly plan out scenes/arcs instead of chasing the daily needed word count. Read Web Novels Online Free -

I'm also assuming the chapters will get better if I'm not stressed/tired all the time. Honestly, I should have seen the writing on the wall months ago and made the swap then, instead of doubling down by working extra on weekends to keep my head above water.

This is the first big shake-up since the Twilight Harbor Arc years ago, where I went from six ~2.2k word chapters to five ~3k every week. I think it changed

the story for the better, where the added room to work with made it easier to add enough content for the chapter to feel "complete" and moving the story forward.

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I'm hoping the same will happen with this change, where the added time will allow me to say more in each chapter.

This also means I'll stop doing the monthly editing days, or catching-up-after-falling-behind-days as they've kind of become as of late. In practice, I'd say that the story will go from 17-18 chapters/month to 12-13, depending on how the days fall. I also hope I'll be able to go back to doing occasional bonus chapters when the situation calls for it, instead of having to do these delay/cancellation posts. Follow current NOVELS on [novel\(F\)ire.net](http://novel(F)ire.net)

The planned release schedule is **Mon-Wed-Fri**, and this change will affect both Patreon and RoyalRoad. The Amazon release schedule will have to see some adjustments from Book 15 or so.

Thank you for your patience and understanding,

TFD

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Chapter 1188: Falling Apart

Miasma was rapidly exchanged for Kill Energy as one cultist after another fell victim to the combined onslaught of Zac's overlapping domains. Keeping five D-grade skills running, four of them at middle D-grade, would normally be pushing it, even for a cultivator at level 186. However, the combination

of **[Fields of Despair]** and his Cosmic Core's **[Warstone]** was almost like having a second energy battery.

Zac's first domain skill had seen some changes with its D-grade evolution, though its energy recovery and large-scale debuff were retained and strengthened. Zac had ultimately given up on omniscience in favor of something more useful since he had Soul Sense to fill that function. Instead of strengthening his vision, **[Fields of Despair]** now impeded that of his enemies. The dense shroud acted like a confusion array, and the effect only grew stronger when adding his other domains.

Now that he kept both **[Eye of Desolation]** and **[Deathmark]** running, even Middle Hegemons would get turned around and have their senses severely restricted. It wasn't at the level of the An'Azol's branch's absolute deprivation, but it was enough to let Zac operate in the middle of hostile territory without getting overrun. Of course, the engineers of the Chapter of Noble Pursuit had their hands full holding off death, making it impossible to mount a proper resistance against his blitz.

Large scars marred the *Seafarer's* reinforced plating, and the backup energy barriers were useless before Zac's Void-empowered **[Deathmark]**. His spectral minions had free rein on the thousands of non-combat personnel hidden within. The trained soldiers and warslaves grouped up to resist the assault, but activating **[Eye of Desolation]** had dismantled their War Arrays before the cultists could show off their might.

Zac moved through the darkness, seamlessly shifting between the two realms formed by the upgraded version of his Supreme Pathbound Skill. Half the Kan'Tanu were trapped on each side, forced to independently fight for a path to survival.

Less than a minute had passed, yet all E-grade cultivators had already fallen to Zac's lethal skill combination. The corrosive element of **[Deathmark]** alone was enough to deal with them after evolving the skill to Middle D-grade. Most of the Early Hegemons didn't fare much better. Defending against either skill pushed them to their limits, and being pincered between specters and life-seeking chains quickly proved too much.

Only the Middle and Late Hegemons were able to fight back with some success. The partitioned domain of **[Eye of Desolation]** was incredibly difficult to escape, but the sculpture bands weren't indestructible. The targeted

explosion from before had severely damaged one despite all damage being uniformly spread across the whole band.

The Kan'Tanu elites furiously worked together to finish the job while Zac picked them off one after another. However, there were dozens of targets that each required some effort, and the bands had a diameter of over 500 meters. The sculptures tirelessly resisted the hail of attacks, but the construction finally couldn't take it.

An immense explosion pelted the whole fortress with innumerable bone shards empowered by Zac's Daos. Meanwhile, Zac's overlapping vision converged as the two separate prisons collapsed into a single space. The sudden eruption imparted another surge of Kill Energy, and Zac took advantage of the confusion to pounce on two of the four remaining Late Hegemons.

The elite warslaves had survived the explosion by growing an impenetrable wall of flesh. One protected against the front while the other warded off the vengeful specters who'd formed around them—an even more dangerous task, considering he faced three seventh-generation specters that had gained power with each rebirth.

A single combatant and small parties could counter **[Deathmark]** by restraining instead of destroying specters. There was a limit to how many specters could form per target, so the danger would only cross a certain threshold if the enemy messed up. However, even if some observant opponents figured out this strategy, it was almost impossible to follow on a chaotic battlefield.

Zac emerged from the darkness, joining his specters for a pincer attack. The Late Hegemon roared as cracks formed across his skin, which unleashed a powerful soundwave. The powerful specters turned into dust before the self-mutilating attack, but a blue gem on Zac's lapel released a soothing hum that countered the attack.

Losing his companions didn't make any difference to Zac. He was Inexorable Death, and he wouldn't be denied. He passed through the soundwave, his axe digging into a chattering skull blocking his path. The defensive skill narrowly managed to block Zac's axe, but a barely visible pulse passed straight through it.

The Hegemon roused his mental defenses to block the intangible edge while desperately swinging his sword at Zac. However, the blade suddenly lost its momentum as the cultist's manic glare became cloudy. Zac was already on the move, sliding under the jagged sword to unleash a lightning-quick swing.

The Late Hegemon's head flew into the air, his face still sagging after having his soul jolted by the spiritual component of **[Fatehew]**. His chest burst open, but Zac ignored the emerging curse as he continued toward his second target. Instead, a pitch-black chain covered in dense runes punched into the wound.

A fierce struggle between ownerless curse and Abyssal links ensued, and the victor quickly became evident. The intractable chains of **[Love's Bond]** were like a boa constrictor, expertly winding around the struggling tendrils and squeezing the life out of the curse. A few tendrils escaped their bondage and tried to stab into Zac, but they moved sluggishly as though fighting their way through quicksand.

This was the work of **[Inexorable Subjugation]**, the reformed version of **[Blighted Cut]**. The lacking lethality of his undead class had long since been remedied, where **[Fatehew]** and **[Desperation's End]** better fulfilled **[Blighted Cut]**'s original function. As such, Zac had completely removed the cutting aspect of the skill, turning it into a skill purely meant to augment his chains.

[Inexorable Subjugation] provided a comprehensive boost to **[Love's Bond]**, increasing the speed, durability, and control of his armament. That alone wasn't enough to let his new skill stand shoulder-to-shoulder with his Peak Quality and Supreme skills. **[Inexorable Subjugation]** also imbued the chains with the essence of his Inexorable Technique, where he restricted and sealed his opponent's options and, eventually, fate.

The effect was similar to a mix between a gravity array and an energy blockade. It was enough for Zac's chains to touch his opponent for them to be affected by the skill, and the effect would become more pronounced the more chains he used. And since **[Inexorable Subjugation]** could be used together with **[Fatehew]**, the chains could both suppress one's mind and body.

Zac's classes faced a similar weakness, one that was only partly remedied when Alea and Haro entered D-grade. His Armaments tended to provide the least utility when he needed their help the most. **[Inexorable Subjugation]** was a way to ensure his armament could provide assistance

even when he faced opponents strong enough to break out of **[Love's Bond]**'s binding.

With the Late D-grade Heart Curse restrained, Zac could deal with the second Hegemon without worries. The cultist had already erected a protective barrier while blinding amounts of energy coursed through his body. Void Energy churned, and Zac passed through the barrier to stand before a gobsmacked enemy.

The warslave acted decisively despite the shock, unleashing a turbulent storm of energy from his mouth. The plaguebringers were a recently added terror on the battlefield, relying on the virulent diseases they carried in specially implanted organs. The plagues also made their Heart Curses incredibly dangerous, undoing much of Zecia's hard work to counteract their threat.

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Unfortunately for the warslave, Zac was his worst possible opponent. Zac calmly pushed through the virulent deluge relying only on his constitution, his axe digging into a hardened arm. The warslave's eyes turned bloodshot when a spiritual edge passed through his arm and into his head. He only managed to keep his consciousness by maiming himself by unleashing a dozen infected tendrils from his chest. Even then, his soul was left unstable after losing a significant chunk of Mental Energy. [READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT NOVELFIRE.NET](#)

The Abyssal swirls surrounding **[Death's Duality]** had already turned into small rivers after harvesting the souls of dozens of powerful combatants with **[Fatehew]**. The Weapon Imbuement skill had accumulated enough fuel to essentially become a ranged skill. Better yet, the overbearing attack on his opponent's Dao Heart grew stronger with every use, requiring more Mental Energy to overcome. The feature hadn't made a difference when sparring with Pavina, but it had become Zac's bread and butter when dealing with the Kan'Tanu.

The cultists possessed stronger will and Dao Hearts than the average Zecian cultivator from constantly fighting off the influence of their Heart Curses. It was similar to Zac's struggle with the Remnants. However, their cruel cultivation method often left imperfections in their minds, and **[Fatehew]** was incredibly suited for disrupting the delicate balance between cultivator and curse.

[Profane Exponents] easily blocked the Heart Curse, though Zac noted his coffin-bearing skeleton was nearing its limits after blocking the explosion and dozens of subsequent attacks. Zac could tell his opponent was about to finish infusing his ultimate skill with energy, so he briefly activated **[Void Zone]** just as **[Love's Bond]**'s chains lashed the cultist. The timing made it seem as though **[Inexorable Subjugation]** was the cause of disrupting his skill.

Having a skill fail just as it had accumulated enough energy to activate caused a powerful backlash, one that cost the Late Hegemon his life. A belated warning of danger narrowly preceded a river of vengeful spirits swallowing him whole. The *Seafarer's* captain had sacrificed his two strongest subordinates to create an opportunity. Read Web Novels Online Free -

A barrier sprung up around Zac, lessening the deathly chill spreading through his body. Zac shook his head upon realizing the cultist had imbued the attack with a large amount of life force. It was an unusual move since the Heart Curses usually prevented such actions.

[Profane Exponents] desperately fought against the tide through direct defense and displacement. The coffin in the skeletal warrior's hands soon shattered, followed by the skeleton itself. Both turned into a stream of energy enclosing Zac, creating a layer of plating covering Zac's exposed left shoulder.

Zac snorted and had the tome-wielding pygmy empower the displacement effect, throwing the raging river onto the other Late Hegemon. The action exhausted the last of the swirling darkness, and the second pygmy became gleaming armor.

The incoming skill had lost most of its force, and Zac dispersed what remained with a powerful swing while taking in his opponent. The captain's bulging muscles twitched from having fully ignited his curse, and his aura flickered precariously. An alabaster chain had impaled his left leg, but the sculpture wasn't strong enough to pull in its prey. Still, it was the beginning of the captain's end and dividends to Zac's immense investment.

Zac had allocated a huge amount of resources to restrain the captain since activating **[Eye of Desolation]**. He'd dedicated a whole stretch of sculptures to targeting him, which exposed the skill to harassment from the others. Meanwhile, two of his skeletons had almost exhausted themselves, making the captain's life a living hell.

[Profane Exponents] was one of the E-grade skills Zac was the most satisfied with. As such, it had seen very little change after entering D-grade. The pygmy skeletons had mostly seen a general boost to autonomy, capability, and range. The latter had turned the lantern- and darkness-wielding skeletons into long-range turrets.

One continuously dismantled the captain's defenses, from skills to talismans and equipment, while the other redirected his attacks with swirls of darkness. Even their timing was impeccable, which repeatedly left the man exposed to **[Eye of Desolation]** and **[Deathmark]**. Even an above-average Late Hegemon like the *Seafarer's* captain had eventually made a mistake and been gored.

It was just in time, as the flickering flame inside the lantern winked out, and its wielder became a set of leg bracers. This feature was the only real change to **[Profane Exponents]**. When the skeletons ran out of energy, they'd become armor pieces that generated a passive protective domain. Zac could even shatter the pygmies prematurely if he wanted to add new pieces of armor.

Zac still had multiple cards left to play, but there was no point. The Chapter of Noble Pursuits didn't pose much of a threat when their machines were taken out, and he had already crippled the *Seafarer's* energy transmission and killed its high-ranking controllers. The battle was already over when they started detonating pieces of the fortress.

The captain seemed to understand as much, and he did not attempt to follow up on his desperate life-force-imbued skill. He even seemed to suppress his heart curse to prevent its self-destruct feature.

"Your star might be shining now, but so what?" the captain spat through bloody teeth. "A Middle Hegemon can't change destiny. Zecia is falling apart. You won't be able to hide much longer."

"We'll see about that," Zac said before ending the man's life with a clean strike.

The last pockets of resistance were already crumbling, where Zac's energy reserves won out against the Kan'Tanu's firepower. The second band of **[Eye of Desolation]** was covered in cracks, yet it didn't stop the sculptures from gleefully pulling in their prey for an eternal embrace.

And yet, Zac felt a sense of impending peril. Wasting no time, Zac turned into a streak and entered one of the *Seafarer's* cracks. The location of the Axe Wraiths had already given Zac a rough layout. It was obvious the pyramid-shaped fortress was mostly the same as the common models, where only a few modules and weapon systems had been swapped out.

The core was in the same place as usual. Zac dismantled the final defenses with practiced ease and installed Galau's and the Ishiate Tinkerer's latest joint creation. He only stopped running after creating a few miles of distance with **[Abyssal Drive]**, at which point a loud thump shook the *Seafarer* from within.

A crackling band of explosions followed as the bomb's chaotic shockwave ignited the remaining energy repositories through the fortress. The fortress fell from the sky, and Zac's mission was marked as complete. It was just in time. A terrifying aura had just entered the atmosphere, making a beeline for the Calamity Company—a Kan'Tanu Monarch.

"Return."

The mercury world and its descending guardian disappeared in a flash of light. The next moment, Zac stood on familiar soil. Zac took a deep breath, feeling Earth's pulse beneath his feet. He eventually turned back to the sea of people standing behind him. The whole Calamity Company had been teleported with him, along with the fleet floating above their heads. Even the wounded left on other planets and back at the War Fortress had been teleported over, though Zac feared there were none left among the latter.

Zac pushed the troubling thoughts aside and tried to put up a calm front for his soldiers. They were back safe and sound after a hellish year, though less than half remained of their original ranks. They were also aware of the general outlook. Zac didn't agree with the Kan'Tanu captain's claim a middle Hegemon couldn't change the war. But he was, unfortunately, right about Zecia's current situation.

It didn't look good. Another Field Army had fallen, exposing another path into Zecia's inner regions. The Allbright Empire wouldn't be able to stop them, considering they were forced to abandon everything but their central region two months back.

"You did good. Head back and rest up," Zac said. "Don't worry about the rest for now. We're far from giving up hope."

He desperately wanted to believe his own words, but the worries came creeping back as he teleported back to his compound. Earth was safe for now, but their budding empire would be assimilated into cult-controlled ruins in eighty years unless something changed. Zac wanted to give them some assurances, but the plan he'd worked on for the past ten months couldn't be exposed.

Zac was in desperate need of rest after the past couple of weeks, so he headed for his mansion rather than the cultivation cave. The doors swung open on their own, and Zac found his butler waiting inside.

"Ah, my Lord, you're back!" Triv exclaimed upon seeing Zac.

"We're back, for now," Zac sighed. "Anything new?"

"Nothing new on the war front," Triv said and handed over an inscribed box. "I, however, did just receive a coded message from your merchant. I was about to forward it to you when I sensed your return."

"A coded message?" Zac said, his eyes gleaming with anticipation.

They were running low on time, yet a few important variables remained unresolved. Could this be the change he'd been waiting for?

A smile tugged at Zac's lips as the recorded message oozing with indignation played through his mind. The last months had been trying, but meeting an old friend could hopefully help lift his spirits.

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Chapter 1189: Old Friend

"Fancy meeting you here," Zac smiled as he sat down on a lush pillow.

The tracking signal had led him to the deck of a large teahouse overlooking dozens of glistening waterfalls. The establishment was clearly popular because of the scenic view, but the hundreds of patrons didn't seem to notice the Draugr in their midst. More impressively, they appeared completely oblivious to the gargantuan toad sprawled atop a mound of pillows, taking up a good chunk of the platform.

"I thought the System's restrictions couldn't *possibly* restrict the great Esmeralda?"

An infuriated series of croaks shook the teahouse, and great gusts of wind threatened to throw the F-grade patrons into the misty clouds as Esmeralda peppered off a string of what Zac could only assume were sign-language curses.

"The System has strengthened Earth's shroud? What does that have to do with me? You made it sound like I intentionally was making it difficult for you," Zac said, helplessly shaking his head when Esmeralda frenetically signed a retort. "Wait! I can't talk with you like this. You have to do something about your size."

The current Esmeralda towered at over fifteen meters, large enough to stuff half the tourists into her mouth. Facing her was like looking into a hill of black flesh, and he couldn't even see her hands without relying on his Soul Sense.

The toad's antics were causing a commotion, yet the patrons seemed to think sudden gusts of wind were to blame. It was like the whole area around them had become a blind spot they both mentally and physically avoided. The effect actually went beyond that.

They were sitting right in the open, yet Zac felt as though everything within twenty meters was hidden from Heaven's gaze. The feeling was actually a bit reminiscent of his Void State, and Zac was all but certain not even Monarchs could listen in on their conversation.

The effect surpassing any illusion array Zac had seen was obviously made possible by Esmeralda's bloodline. Spots of mysterious runes had appeared on her cheeks since they met last, which were currently emitting an unusual energy signature. Otherwise, her appearance hadn't changed much since they last met in the Perennial Vastness.

The only noticeable improvement was the mysterious vats on her back. The black liquid inside had become even darker and emitted a dense aura of Death. It almost felt like the old thief had visited the Abyssal Shores to siphon some of their lake water. Despite the liquid's apparent upgrade, it failed to perfectly contain the ripples of time from within.

Looking at the vats resulted in an uncomfortable throb, where Zac felt a weak temporal pull. It was like something was trying to drag him back to a prehistoric age, triggering his overexposure to temporal fluctuations. Thankfully, the effect didn't go beyond a mild inconvenience.

Esmeralda herself didn't emit a speck of aura, though Zac's instincts told him she'd recently stepped into Middle Hegemony. Such advancement speed wasn't very impressive, considering Esmeralda's current incarnation was already an Early Hegemon when they last met. Then again, beasts required far more time and energy to gain levels, and stronger bloodlines demanded even more.

An ancient beast like Esmeralda had to require terrifying amounts of time and effort to advance, possibly to the point her Early D-grade levels needed as much energy as Zac did in Middle D-grade. Zac was painfully aware of just how harsh those demands were.

It had been eleven months since he stepped into Middle Hegemony, so he'd only averaged one level per month. Actually, it was half that, considering six of his levels had come using the best Natural Treasures and Pills money and merit could buy. This speed was considered shocking and only made possible by his two bodies fighting without rest on the frontlines. Had he progressed just by adventuring in Zecia, visiting danger zones and Mystic Realms, he might not have gained a single level in that time frame.

Reaching peak Middle D-grade before the Left Imperial Palace seemed all but impossible. It had taken two rounds of pills to gain just six levels: one after upgrading his Supreme Pathbound Skills and one after **[Void Heart]** finally spat out the refined Tribulation Lightning two months later. Considering each level required exponentially more energy, a third round wouldn't make much of a difference, even if he figured out a way to use leveling pills again in the short term.

The slowdown was to be expected and generally not considered much of a problem when your lifespan was measured in millennia. However, it left Zac lost on how he was supposed to progress in the future. The kind of targets

he'd need to kill to reach Peak Hegemony didn't exactly grow on trees, even in the Multiverse Heartlands.

Monarchy posed an even greater challenge. Suppose he formed an unprecedented Inner World thanks to his encounters with the Four Desolates, reducing the drain to a minimum. Then what? Nurturing a world requires vastly more energy than a core. He could become the second Eventide Asura and wipe out a whole sector without gaining more than a level or two.

A scathing croak dragged Zac out of his thoughts. Despite her attitude, Esmeralda did shrink to a more manageable size as she kept forming signs.

"I didn't mention someone has already breached the shroud, triggering a failsafe?" Zac muttered. That was actually true, though Zac wasn't about to throw Iz under the bus to appease Esmeralda. "I don't know anything about that. And how have you still not learned to talk? I only understand half of what you're saying without Lova translating."

'Why should I use crude forms of communication, limited by the lowest commonality, to placate some featherless heron? Movement is truth, and truth is meaning. Feel instead of see, comprehend instead of complain,' an ethereal voice shook Zac's mind.

At that moment, Esmeralda made her move. Her tongue lashed out, and the labyrinthian layers of meaning hidden in her voice made Zac's mind lock long enough to get tapped on his forehead. Zac was startled awake by the nudge, a flash of anger igniting in his heart when **[Immutability of Eoz]** briefly triggered before losing trace of whatever Esmeralda marked him with.

"What the hell did you do?" Zac growled, **[Death's Duality]** already in his hand.

'Guiding light for a fumbling fool.'

Zac's thoughts of retaliation were forgotten. Esmeralda hadn't used her mesmerizing voice again. In fact, she hadn't used a voice at all, and words weren't words. Zac's eyes were glued to Esmeralda's hands, struggling to make sense of the intense clarity of the message they'd imparted.

That's right, how did he usually understand what the toad wanted to convey despite her seemingly random gestures? Esmeralda obviously wasn't using

real sign language. There was no structure, syntax, or repetition as you'd expect from language.

It was communication through Dao, following the Laws of the Cosmos instead of the rules of language.

Esmeralda's gestures expressed the fundamental basic building blocks of all Daos, transforming them into context and meaning by linking them together. The realization was like curtains parting, and Zac understood what she meant by feeling and comprehending. The Dao encompassed everything and could thus convey anything. New novel chapters are published on [novel\(F\)ir\(e\).net](http://novel(F)ir(e).net)

'That's better.'

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"Could have given me a warning," Zac muttered, stilling his beating heart.

He'd momentarily felt like he'd come into contact with the Grand Dao, though that clearly wasn't the case. Curious, Zac tried to replicate Esmeralda's comment with his hands.

'A Mortal trying to speak in Dao Script?' Esmeralda signed as a braying croak full of jibing joy echoed through the valleys. The old thief was clearly delighted at pulling one over on him after having her grand entrance to Earth foiled. *'That's like... That's like...'*

"Like a toad trying to eat swan meat?"

'You mock, but I'll have you know I have eaten swan meat. Bony birds without merit. Wait, it's here!'

Zac frowned, readying himself for battle as he saw Esmeralda's eyes turn serious. Esmeralda's demand to come pick her up had led him to a late F-grade world, but that didn't guarantee no threats were lurking in the dark.

However, no Kan'Tanu assassin popped out of the shadows. Instead, it was a large insect emerging from a hidden cave behind a waterfall. It resembled a flea carved from cobalt, the sun reflecting on his lacquered chitin. It looked novel, but that was about it. It was alone, weak, and it didn't appear aggressive since the other patrons took its appearance in stride.

Then, it disappeared. Zac would have assumed it had been teleported away if he hadn't vaguely seen a streak of black flash between the nearby cliffs. Crunching sounds emerged from Esmeralda's mouth as she chewed with relish.

'See how convenient? You can eat and talk this way. I'd like to see you do that while flapping your gums,' Esmeralda signed. 'Too bad, this is beyond your ability. How can you speak the truth when you have only seen a corner of it? Before you've made it your own? You can give it a try if you ever manage to Defend your Dao. You're kind of stupid, but you do have the structure down, thanks to the gift of the Lost Era.'

"I'll try to endure until then," Zac shrugged, not overly concerned.

Esmeralda's ability was impressive, but it didn't seem to have much use despite requiring the insights of an Autarch. Zac guessed it also required immense practice and study, possibly more than practicing one's Soul. You had to reach a certain level of comprehension of all Daos and their connection to weave the Grand Dao into language. After all that, Zac could only vaguely intuit her words until she marked him with a translator. It didn't seem worth it.

'Ignorant.' Esmeralda gave him a pitying look. 'Language is truth, and truth is possibility. It's access. Do you think I only relied on my bloodline to pass through taboo regions and supposedly unbreakable Defensive Arrays? If you control the language of the Cosmos, you're qualified to rewrite Destiny.'

'And just so you know, I still could have entered your hovel if I wanted! I just didn't want to draw unnecessary attention. An experienced extractor only takes risks when the rewards warrant it!'

"Alright, alright," Zac smiled, raising his head in defeat upon seeing Esmeralda's intense look. She looked ready to come to blows to defend her thief's honor. "Anyway, it's good that you're here. The trial has already been brought closer once. It might start at any moment."

'I'm not surprised. This region's providence is dwindling, and the System will invariably pick the path deemed to hold the greatest returns. Fate's direction has been thrown into chaos. I bet it's costing that old thief an arm and a leg to keep the pillar's ascent entangled with your war. It might just cut its losses and let fate take its course at this point.'

Zac's eyes briefly widened, feeling like he'd just been shown a glimpse of the vantage of someone who'd stood at the peak. The feeling was ruined shortly after when Esmeralda caught another insect, her face full of bliss as she chewed on her treat. Having been given the key to deciphering Esmeralda's method of communication had only made her seem odder.

The sense of dealing with a mischievous child was still there, but it was now mixed with hints of an ancient mind. Was the immaturity part of her personality, or was it the result of her regressive curse?

Esmeralda's analysis also shed some light on the plight Zecia currently faced. The heroic advance where the Alliance pushed back the invaders after unleashing the **[Centurion Spear]** amounted to nothing but a brief moment of glory in a bottomless downward spiral. Only half their Field Armies remained, with the rest being annihilated or crippled to the point it had to be joined into another.

Every month was worse than the last, despite the Pope never returning. One appearance had been enough to cast a shadow over Zecia's war efforts, a shadow that had only grown over time. Many Monarchs, fearing for their lives, became increasingly unwilling to participate in critical missions and raids. This led to a series of missed opportunities and disastrous losses, where each setback was another chink in their cohesion.

At first, the outsiders tried to stabilize the situation through various means, from mobilizing their Monarchs to infusing capital and resources to bolster the local forces. With new powerhouses sneaking into Zecia every day, it looked like they'd at least maintain the status quo until the trial.

However, their presence all but disappeared three months ago. They still fought on the frontlines but seemed content to have their youths engage in minor skirmishes. Anytime the danger reached a certain threshold, the outsiders disappeared, leaving the locals to fend for themselves.

It was like the outsiders had come to a mutual agreement that Zecia was the loser. Conquering a Sector was a long-term undertaking, even if one side held a clear advantage. With only 380 days left before the trial began, why waste time helping the losing side?

As Iz would have said, Zecia wasn't fated, and helping them might even harm their Karma with the Left Imperial Palace. Fishing in the muddy waters of a

sector's gradual collapse held better chances of awarding sealbearers, including from those supposedly on the same side.

Of course, the Kan'Tanu were well aware of these considerations, so they kept a steady pace to not rock the boat. They were slowly spreading through the sector, isolating the larger factions without delivering a fatal blow. They were setting the stage to pounce after the trial had begun and the outsiders were gone, removing one threat at a time.

The latest target was the Thirty-seventh Field Army, the place the Calamity Company had called home for over a year. The Endemire Sage had fallen, his War Fortress destroyed. The Calamity Company would have met the same fate if they hadn't been out on a campaign at the time.

The Thirty-seventh's fate meant they'd been stuck in enemy territory with a huge bounty. Their many seals had been the bait for multiple successful operations with those who still fought the good fight. Without a Monarch watching their backs, their next ambush could prove their last.

Normal teleporters had long since stopped functioning in the war-torn region, rendering his escape bangle's feature useless. Thankfully, the System provided a path to survival—destroy the *Seafarer* to earn an army relocation. That was why Zac had pushed deeper into Kan'Tanu territory to take out the experimental fortress, even relying on the Void to bring it down.

Zac still wasn't fully comfortable openly using his bloodline in such a public forum, even if **[Void Mountain]** let him mask its unique aura and energy signature. He could only pull so many impossible feats before someone figured out the truth. Ultimately, keeping secrets couldn't be compared to the life of his subordinates. Besides, Zac already had so many targets on his back that it wouldn't make much of a difference if someone figured out his connection to the Void.

If anything, he was more worried about having to call in such a troublesome favor to get the location of the *Seafarer* before his location was exposed. The Sindris Clan weren't fools, and Zac hadn't managed to glean their intentions from their brief exchanges. Friend or foe, each encounter held the potential for disaster. Read Web Novels Online Free -

'You look like someone has snatched the food from your tongue,' Esmeralda signed. 'Don't lose your mind over something so small like a border region's

collapse. It happens all the time. You're rich and connected. Just bring your people away from here if you're worried.'

It was true, though only to a certain point. Many were already looking for ways to leave the sinking ship. Doing so was easier said than done. Even factions like the Dravorak Dynasty would have to sacrifice their foundations to gain refuge with their main branch, where only the top talents and Monarchs would be brought back.

The Kavriel Province was no different. He'd already heard rumors of a planned exodus unless something changed. The Kan'Tanu were probably not foolish enough to target a branch of the Undead Empire, but there wasn't much point in staying if all dreamers in Zecia were infected with Heart Curses.

The Undead Empire would extract the spirituality of the Kavriel Province's continent and cultivation havens before relocating the Kavriel Clan and a few others to another frontier sector. The trillions of common citizens would be abandoned, as they weren't even considered true citizens of the empire. With the established factions being so ruthless to their own, how could Zac possibly secure passage for over a billion people? He'd be lucky if he could bring away a few thousand, and the assistance would come with strings attached.

"Let's not talk about this," Zac exhaled. "I'm not ready to give up on Zecia yet, and much can happen over the coming years. How are your preparations?"

'I had to give up on some of my plans, but the most important matters are dealt with. I just need you to provide passage,' Esmeralda signed, a teasing grin spreading across her face. *'How's my temple looking, little priest?'*

"Just missing the final touches," Zac grunted as he got to his feet. "Let's go back and wrap things up."

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Chapter 1190: Enshrinement of Kanba

Esmeralda's ticket into the inheritance was through the **[Enshrinement of Kanba]**, the unusual beast-contracting technique Lova discovered in the Eternal Storm. The Kanba priests formed small subspaces within their bodies to house their beast deities and gained some of their abilities in return. Esmeralda had picked this particular method to form a contract as it had less impact than most pet contracts. There was no need for any System-authorized link or a Skill Fractal like **[Adaptive Symbiosis]**, and the space could be dismantled as soon as they were done with the trial.

Zac had vigorously scoured the technique both inside the Perennial Vastness and after, and there really didn't seem to be anything amiss. As such, he'd erected the shrine's foundations after stepping into Middle Hegemony, but it was impossible to finish the process without Esmeralda's help. Activating the shrine required the 'deity's anointment,' meaning Esmeralda had to infuse her blood and Dao to stabilize it.

'Then let's go. Do you have anything tasty on your world?'

"I'm not sure what you'd consider tasty, but you'll probably get along with my friend Ibtep. Hey, where'd you go?"

Zac looked around with confusion. Esmeralda had disappeared so thoroughly that she may as well have winked out of existence.

'Down here.'

Zac felt a weak nudge, and was shocked to find a black bracelet added to his left hand. He hadn't noticed at all, and his Soul Sense still couldn't tell it was there. It was affected by the same mental blind spot she'd used to sit openly among hundreds of humans. If Esmeralda hadn't nudged him, he might never have noticed the bracelet was there.

"What are you doing? And how are you still communicating through Dao?"

'Why can't I? The Dao's still here, isn't it? And this is just a small trick any decent thief should know. Do you know how much work it is to break into certain places? More often than not, it's easier to have a rube bring you along. You should understand the concept, being one of the rubes.'

"So why bother with the subspace if you can do this?" Zac sighed as he left the teahouse, once again wondering if he was making a mistake taking on this shifty troublemaker.

'I'm just a little tadpole who's forgotten the upper layers of my techniques. How could I trick the System like this? But I'll be back.'

The answer contained an intense mix of emotions. Sorrow, longing, and existential weariness held at bay by unbreakable conviction. Zac felt the ichor course with greater vigor as his bloodline resonated with Esmeralda's firm certainty she'd return to her prime one day. Zac nodded, flashing past the guards protecting the teleporter.

He had to stop letting his guard down because of Esmeralda's antics. No matter how she acted, she was a master who'd conquered a corner of the Heavens. That wasn't something you just stumbled into while messing around. Even the greatest Innate Existences needed immense determination, luck, and smarts to avoid becoming some old monster's ingredient before reaching adulthood.

The teleporter activated, prompting shouts of alarm. Zac didn't bother with the incoming guards as they were whisked away. They soon reappeared in his compound, where his human half already waited. The Acheron Company had already returned two weeks ago, shortly after news of the Endemire Sage's fate became known.

Doing so hadn't taken nearly as much effort as taking out a Warfortress hidden on a distant moon. The Everfast Monarch had kept true to his word to this day, remembering the favor even during adversity. He'd used his status as a Field Marshall to sign a release order, allowing the Acheron Company to return without being marked as deserters by the System.

'I heard from that dusty old spirit you got split in two,' Esmeralda said, returning to her normal form to curiously study his doppelganger. *'How did you accomplish this? I can't figure it out.'*

"We all have our secrets," Zac said as he walked toward the undead side of the compound. "Let's go."

He wasn't surprised Esmeralda knew about his situation already, and it didn't matter much. The contract they'd signed was no joke, and it included extremely harsh clauses to protect any of his secrets. Besides, she was

bound to have figured it out one way or another. If nothing else, she could probably come and go as she pleased without anyone being the wiser on Earth.

'You're up to some mischief, aren't you?' Esmeralda grinned. 'I can smell the stink of a plot from a mile away.'

"Well, two bodies means I can split up and loot more effectively, right?" Zac said.

'I've tried that. Easier said than done,' the toad signed. 'So, which one am I bonding with?'

"Me," Zac said from his Draugr half. "Makes more sense for undead to stick together. It'll be easier for me to provide Miasma when necessary."

'Fine, though I'm not undead. I'm just slightly dead to slow down the curse. It's strictly temporary.'

"What? Really?" Zac said with surprise. "Do you have a way to turn back?"

'It's not very hard. I just need to borrow a couple of treasures from some stingy old guys.'

"Do you know any method that'd let a Tool Spirit regain their life?" Zac asked, ignoring the wave of displeasure filling his mind.

'Regain life? That weapon of yours?' Esmeralda said, glancing at the necklace around Zac's neck. 'Reforming a vessel is easy. Any decent treasure connected with the Heavens is enough to birth a body that can house true life. Turning an immortal spirit into a soul is another matter. I can't remember any solution, but I know it's possible. You'd have to look into Serelius... Uh... Serelius something.'

"Who?"

'An ancient Tool Spirit who seized true life. Forgot his last name.'

"That's fine. Thank you," Zac said, engraving the name in his heart.

Alea had made her stance perfectly clear, but the path of cultivation was long and full of turns. Who was to say how she'd feel in a thousand years, in a million? And there was also the question of whether the Heavens would

tolerate her continued advancements. Her tribulations were almost as bad as his. Just having a name was a weight off his shoulders, a clue in case something should change.

The trio soon reached his courtyard, which was shrouded in dense puffs of Miasma. The energy density was almost as high as his Cultivation Cave before upgrading Earth, despite only being supplied by a decent Gathering Array. It was a huge step up, one that everyone across Earth had benefited from.

'Okay, let's do it,' Esmeralda urged. 'I've been running around for months. I need a nap.'

"Wait. Before we start, we need to make some changes to our deal to account for the latest developments," Zac said.

'Changes? Your deal is more than fair already,' Esmeralda looked at Zac with suspicion. 'I knew it. You're up to no good.'

"You're overthinking things," Zac said and threw over a paper. "It's just a small expansion on our agreement, nothing that will impact you overly much."

The toad caught the document, glancing at the short clauses. "This is it? No binding contract?"

"That's it," Zac said. "You'll help me break into a set of temples connected to the trial, and we share the opportunities within, except for anything that might help in Zecia's war efforts. Of course, if it's beyond your abilities, we'll leave it be. You *do* seem a bit rusty."

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'Do you think I'm so easily goaded?' Esmeralda said while angrily stomping her feet. 'Bah, some dusty old ruins won't be a problem. The Limitless Empire's arrays have been dissected and studied for eons. But explain the other clause.'

"I want to use the shrine to store something, so we need to expand its dimensions. I've already done the heavy lifting—you just need to expend a bit more energy than the original method requires to fill it up."

'A bit more energy?' Esmeralda huffed. 'Everyone could become a Monarch if it were so easy to open subspaces. And you'd have to add the essence of whatever you wanted to bring inside to the scroll, which will destabilize the method. I'd have to sacrifice even more blood to keep it stable.'

"I know, but I don't need much. Just enough to fit a—"

'A clone? I see where you're going with this.' Esmeralda smirked, glancing at Zac's other body. 'It's not impossible, but I see no mention of what I get in return. How can there be trust without reciprocity?'

"I'll use my human body to help you look for the thing you need inside the Lower Courts, depending on how the trial is designed. Although, protecting the lives of my subordinates will take precedence if the two goals clash."

'What good are you for my mission? Staying with me longer than planned will benefit you more than me.'

"You don't know that. The only thing we know about this trial is that it's dictated by fate, and I'm standing in the middle of it. Meanwhile, you're sneaking in through the back door. Can you guarantee you can accomplish your goal with your current limitations?"

'With these terms, I would have to pay up now. Meanwhile, your thing is only after the trial begins. Worse, you don't wish to sign an official agreement.'

"What's the point? We're almost the same level and have unusual means. We can both find ways to break any agreement we enter alone. You'll have to take a leap of faith. How can there be reciprocity without trust?"

The toad seemed to be struggling for a minute until she croaked with annoyance. *'Fine!'*

Zac grinned and activated the ancient scroll holding the **[Enshrinement of Kanba]** before the toad could change her mind. A weak pulse made his right lung vibrate, and six unusual runes lit up. They were the foundation he'd built over the past month through a process that mixed chanting, Mental Energy, and very specific breathing patterns. It wasn't actually that different from his **[Void Vajra Sublimation]**, with a splash of **[Thousand Lights Avatar]**, making the process very smooth.

"I'm starting!" Zac shouted as he began the contracting chant.

The humming runes added an otherworldly cadence to Zac's voice. He almost felt like a priest as he held up the scroll before his patron saint. Six runes had appeared on its edges, with smaller scripts forming weblike patterns leading toward an empty circle in the scroll's middle. Esmeralda still looked reluctant as she spat out a blob of shimmering blood that exuded an immense, ancient aura. Read Web Novels Online Free -

The toad's aura flickered, and the liquid in her vats receded by over 30%. The blood landed in the middle of the scroll and was rapidly absorbed by the old parchment. The script gradually lit up under Zac's chants, and energy streamed toward the larger runes, gradually activating them. Esmeralda looked exhausted, but she readily supplied the required energy and Dao.

It wasn't just a bargaining trick when Esmeralda complained of the difficulties. The enshrinement required Esmeralda's Essence Blood, a pure extract holding her bloodline. You only had so many drops of it, and adding a few more would further weaken the toad. She'd have to waste weeks on recovery instead of progress when the trial was drawing closer.

But what could he do? He needed that extra room as a safeguard. Minutes passed as one rune after another lit up, forming a resonance with the ones in his chest. When the fifth one came alive, Zac spat out a drop of golden blood holding his Void Vajra Constitution. It was a necessary evil, as only those bonded by blood could enter Kanba's Shrine.

"Just a little bit more!" Zac urged from his human body while his Draugr half continued the chants.

An angry croak was followed by a small spurt of blood adding to the scroll, and the final rune lit up after five more minutes of energy infusion. The writings atop the scroll came alive, and the scripts dragged the larger runes into the center. The runes fused into an incredibly intricate pattern, and the scroll combusted.

A powerful shockwave interrupted Zac's tantric chants as a rippling ball of energy appeared within his lung. It looked like it would collapse at any moment, but the six runes he'd crafted melted into the shrine and stabilized it. A connection similar to Haro's formed, and Zac felt a surge of ancient power pour into his body. Zac enjoyed the sensation of being imparted the gift of Esmeralda's bloodline. Any one of her talents could become a huge asset during the trial.

The feeling lasted for roughly one second before Zac's eyes snapped open with alarm.

"What the hell is this? *What is this?*" Zac almost shrieked while pulling on the black, coarse skin on his suddenly paunchy cheeks. His horror only mounted upon spotting the almost translucent webbing between his fingers, reaching up to the second knuckles. "What did you do?!"

He'd become part-toad, and his cheeks weren't the only spots looking like they'd suffered necrosis after frostbite. An urgent scan found four similar spots on his back. Worst of all, he'd actually gained a stubby little proto-tail at his tailbone, jutting out roughly an inch.

'Ah, so tired,' Esmeralda said, almost looking like she'd melted on the spot. *'What? Your beauty marks? I think it's an improvement.'*

"Don't mess around!" Zac shouted. "Why did my skin change? Where are the bloodline talents?"

'Look, you wanted a nice expansion for your alter ego. Do you know how much energy it would have cost to pick one of my bloodline—'

"Pick?! A talent should have been extracted at random from the Blood Essence," Zac squeezed through grit teeth. "You manipulated your blood? You're already breaking the agreement!"

'Huh? There's nothing covering this scenario in the contract. I infused the energy and essence like I was supposed to. It never mentioned which part I had to use,' Esmeralda countered. *'And hey, I did give you one of my skills. Didn't you see your hands?'*

Zac glanced down at the webbings, desperately trying to find some light in the darkness. Perhaps the webs were part of why Esmeralda became such a successful thief? If he combined it with his own techniques—

'They can secrete a sticky substance that'll let you climb up the smoothest surface without any problem.'

"WHY WOULD I WANT TO CLIMB UP A WALL WHEN I CAN FLY?!" New NOVEL chapters are published on [no\(v\)elFire.net](http://no(v)elFire.net)

"Pft!"

Zac swirled around, **[Death's Duality]** already tearing through the air where the laugh came from. His attack hit nothing, and he only narrowly avoided a flash of steel going for his throat. His Danger Sense gave nothing, his Soul Sense remained blind, yet dozens of more stabs were already descending on him from every direction with very real force within. He was under attack by a powerful assassin, yet a smile crept up Zac's lips as rattling chains began weaving an inescapable web.

A storm was kicked up in the courtyard as Zac flickered back and forth, trying to catch his unseen attacker. The assassin showed incredible skill, holding his own against Zac's refined technique while constantly attacking from unexpected and hard-defended angles. However, death was inexorable.

"Do you want to keep going? You're about to run out of room," Zac smiled, glancing at the nearby corner.

"Damnit! Couldn't even let me have this, could you?"

The attacks stopped, and Ogras stepped out of thin air, looking like he'd swallowed a fly. He wore an exquisite set of black leather armor beneath a hood covered in silver fractals. Both were obviously of extremely high quality, with the former being a proper War Regalia. Zac couldn't make much of the demon's aura, but their brief spar clearly indicated the demon's progress was more than enough to retain his position as the Atwood Empire's number two.

The biggest change was in the demon's demeanor. Ogras still carried himself like a shifty hoodlum, but Zac could feel stability and confidence he hadn't seen before in his friend.

"One was a headache, and now there's two of you? How are the rest of us supposed to live?" Ogras continued, a teasing grin tugging at his lips. "Well, At least the Heavens have some conscience, giving you such a... unique makeover."

Zac gritted his teeth and entered Void State to take control of his new ability. He suppressed the link with the shrine and almost cried with relief when his body returned to normal. Zac couldn't completely stop the transformation without also severing his connection with Esmeralda. The huge splotches were reduced to small black dots at least, while the webbing almost fully disappeared.

"That's better," Zac exhaled with immense relief as a smile spread across his face. "It's good to have you back, buddy."

"It's good to be back. You don't know half of it," Ogras grinned, slapping Zac's shoulder. "Senior Esmeralda, you're looking more beautiful than ever!"

'This is a good one,' Esmeralda grinned, clearly pleased.

"How did you get inside without triggering any of my alarms?"

'He hid in the shadows of this building's arrays,' Esmeralda lazily said, looking at Ogras up and down. *'Why do you have Ponel's smell on you? That greedy guy's no good.'*

"Ponel? Who's that?"

"Ponel Pustori. The Faceless Patriarch, The Hidden Heart. Slayer of Supremacies and the bane of my existence," Ogras said, his eyes veritably burning as the grip on Zac's shoulder turned into a vise. "Bastard, just let me stab you once, or I might just form a Heart Demon. Sending me to such a lunatic, do you have any conscience?"

"I'm sorry about that. I only asked the owner of the Perennial Vastness to provide an opportunity that could help you before the trial," Zac coughed.

"Don't mind me; I'm just a bit strung up after a hectic couple of years," Ogras shook his head. "Thank you. I do appreciate the chance you gave me. I'd say I'll pay you back, but I don't know how."

Zac smiled and took out a vat of incredibly expensive wine he'd prepared for just this occasion. "Sounds like you have a few stories. Tell me about it over a glass, and I'll catch you up to speed on this end?"

"A drink doesn't sound bad at all," Ogras said, his eyes gleaming upon smelling the exquisite aroma coming from the D-grade liquor. However, he shook his head and looked at Zac seriously. "But before that, I need you to do me another favor. Can you bring me home?"

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