

Defiance of the Fall

Chapter 1191: Internal Affairs

"You didn't have to come, you know." Read Web Novels Online Free -

"And miss the chance to see what kind of environment could nurture such weaponized paranoia?"

Ogras scoffed, glancing at his hooded companion. "Don't act like it hasn't served you well over the years. Who knows what kind of mess you'd found yourself in without at least one voice of caution reining you in."

"I know, I know," Zac laughed while looking around. "It's nice. I see where Azh'Rodum got its inspiration."

Ogras took in the familiar sights of living homes, noting how little differences two decades of absence made. It almost felt like Azh'Rezak had been trapped in a Temporal Chamber during his absence. It was the same, yet different, after being observed through the lens of experience.

The capital's grand buildings and unmatched energy density had felt like the peak of civilization, proof of his noble birth. He could still remember the envy he felt over the main branch monopolizing such benefits, and the schemes he'd weaved to extract just a sliver without attracting unwanted attention.

Azh'Rezak, the glistening pearl of his childhood memories, was barely fit to be called a hovel. A rational part of his mind had already been aware of this fact, but it was only after his arduous journey home he'd fully understood it.

He'd passed through over two dozen kingdoms, big and small. He'd seen true grandeur on continents holding greater populations than all of Zecia, where being a Hegemon didn't even award high enough status to fly through the air. Even the remote worlds Ogras visited when tracking down his targets blew anything he'd seen in Zecia out of the waters.

The Azh'Rezak treasury wasn't even worth the space it would take up in his Spatial Rings today. That bastard had stayed true to his word, claiming the bounties in his name. Thankfully, Ponel wasn't completely heartless, leaving their treasuries intact. Most of the heretics were dirt-poor, which was an

important reason why they relied on such sinister methods of progression in the first place.

A few had gained sizable fortunes through pillaging, though. Sinister traps always guarded the hoards, but few defenses could withstand K'Rav's manipulations. While far from the 1,474 C-grade Nexus Coin bounties, he should have accumulated over 50 C-grade Nexus Coins in treasures and materials. Perhaps even more, provided the potential buyers hadn't already emptied their coffers. It was a real risk if this was the state of affairs across Zecia.

While the city's bones remained the same, there were clear signs of clan Azh'Rezak's current predicament. Few walked the streets, and those they passed shared one of two common traits. Either they were missing any hint of spirituality, making them the lowest rung of mortals, or they carried grievous wounds from battle. The occasional child peered out from windows or tree crowns, but the bustle was all but gone.

All capable hands had been drafted into the clan's failing war machine. The clan had initially fared relatively well, according to Zac's accounts, but two years of constant struggle had left its mark. Azh'Rezak wasn't the Atwood Empire. They lacked resources and foundations, which meant victories were hard-won and paid for in blood.

The gains from accruing contributions couldn't outweigh the constant drain on manpower, and replacing veteran clan members with hastily trained civilians only weakened the armies. It had finally reached a breaking point where Clan Azh'Rezak could endure no longer.

You could say he'd appeared just in time. But to do what? Ogras still didn't know.

"And you're sure you didn't hear anything?" Zac asked, saving Ogras from facing that nagging question.

"No, there were no signs of your little wife where your backroom deal sent me," Ogras sent with a roll of his eyes. "I'm sure she's fine. Maybe she'll even be back by the time we're done here."

"Let's hope so. We're running out of time," Zac muttered.

Ogras grunted in agreement. He couldn't believe how bad things were after just a few years. War seldom was this cut-and-dry. The Horde had fought against its mortal enemies for eons without either side gaining an edge. The same could be said about the Undead Empire's eternal war against the living.

Was it even possible to get his hands on the final piece of his seal? It seemed as though the window had closed for seizing opportunities. It wasn't that he was dissatisfied with what he gained instead, but what kind of fool would be content with their lot? Well, Zac mentioned he had a plan to deal with this mess. He and the rest of Zecia could only pray that the Deviant Asura could pull off another miracle.

"So how do you reckon she'll react to suddenly having two men in her life?" Ogras grinned. "Actually, I did find an interesting dual cultivation technique involving clones during my travels. Want to take a look? Or are you half-single now? Is that fiery beauty back?"

"Alright, alright," Zac laughed. "I have no idea, honestly. I haven't thought that far. And no, Iz isn't here yet. I'm also waiting for word on Kruta too. Oh, he's the—"

"I remember," Ogras said, getting a surprised look from Zac. "I don't know. A lot of the details from the Perennial Vastness just became clear after I saw you and your new Deity. It's like your special deal spread to me."

"Interesting. Let's hope that doesn't extend to my enemies."

"Well, most of them are your children now," Ogras said. "I toured the island while waiting for you to come back. I saw some of them in the academy. Little monsters."

"They're growing up so fast. I'm not sure whether I should be relieved or regretful they're too young to participate in the war. It would have been a huge opportunity for them," Zac said before stopping. "So, decided what you wanted to do?"

Ogras sighed as he turned to the Ancestral Gate towering before them. It was crafted from the **[Deeparc Steel]** their founding patriarch collected during his travels and held the outer core of their Clan Protection Array. An array that currently wasn't running, further proof of the clan's strained situation.

"I guess I'll just have a talk with the old goats and take it from there," Ogras said, releasing the obscuring shroud around the two.

"Halt, who goes there!"

"A ghost from the past," Ogras smiled and activated **[Gloaming Tide]**.

A sea of spear shadows welled from the ground, forming a twenty-meter tsunami that crashed into the gate. The early E-grade guards would have been ground to paste by the Middle D-grade skill if a group of illusory shadows hadn't thrown them out of the way at the last second. The gates that had stood for 40,000 years were ripped from their foundations and punctured full of holes.

A resounding crash shook the ancestral mansion as a dust plume rose to the sky. Ogras glanced at his companion, who returned the look with a raised brow. Zac said nothing, but Ogras could see the unspoken question. *'This is what you mean by talking?'*

"I guess we've rubbed off on each other. I have to say, it doesn't feel bad acting the brute for once," Ogras grinned as they stepped over the rubble. "And a proper display of strength can solve most issues. This way, we won't have to wait for long."

Thousands of warriors poured out of the nearby buildings, yet none dared approach the two strangers who had forced their way into the manor. Neither did they dare desert their post, so they warily formed a half-circle at a distance. Ogras ignored the F- and E-grade warriors. Instead, he activated his scouting skill, quickly finding what he was looking for.

"You don't have to explain yourself to me. It's up to you to decide how this chapter of Karma should be closed," Zac said. "I'm just here as moral support."

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"You mind dealing with the trio hiding in the corner in case they dare show up?" Ogras said, sharing the vision of his skill.

"Late D-grade?" Zac said, surprised rather than worried. "That's fine. Shouldn't be a problem for you, though?"

"I have a good idea who those people are. They're not part of this, so it's easier if you scare the outsiders away. Oh, here they come. Huh, they've improved."

Twelve auras rapidly approached in the air, all of them familiar. Of course, the last time Ogras saw nine of them, they were just Peak E-grade Cultivators who'd been stuck at their level for centuries. Meanwhile, three of the old elders were missing, having fallen during the war. At the front, a stalwart warrior showing signs of age flew, surrounded by arcs of black lightning. Kerto Azh'Rezak, the fifth-generation patriarch of the clan.

"Lords, may I ask why you've visited my humble family this day? If one of my unfilial descendants has caused any unhappiness, Azh'Rezak will surely remedy the situation," Kerto said with a bow, unable to hide the misgivings of having two powerful strangers pop up in such an overbearing manner.

Ogras had a sudden urge to embrace the role of a mysterious stranger and cause some trouble, but the worried yet determined expression on the old man standing to the side softened his heart. Ogras laughed as he removed his hood.

"I never thought I'd see such a look on your face, you hoary old bastard. Didn't you always say that a warrior can bleed but never bend when you sent my siblings to their deaths?"

The elders looked at Ogras with confused apprehension, clearly unable to connect his current appearance with the young wastrel they sent away decades ago. Ogras couldn't blame them. Because of his series of transformations, he only carried a passing resemblance to Torrid Demon. Even his features had changed for the better after multiple affinity-boosting encounters. However, one among the group was different, looking like he'd been struck by lightning.

"Oggy? Is that you?" a rough voice exclaimed as the old man took a hesitant step forward.

"Long time no see, Gramps," Ogras grinned though his heart twanged with pain.

His Grandpa looked even more worn than before, with new scars covering his face. Okral Azh'Rezak lost his first horn long before Ogras was born, fighting as a mercenary for the clan. He was now also missing his second one, taken

from an attack that had also claimed his left arm. It was generally considered a huge dishonor to be dishorned, and Ogras knew it had to weigh on a traditional mind like his grandfather's.

There were ways to grow them back, but would the clan pay such a price when they wouldn't even help him recover from wounds that had harmed his foundations? War was supposed to provide opportunities for those who fought and survived, and Ogras knew his grandfather wouldn't have shied away from battle. And yet, his aura was weaker today than when Ogras saw him last.

His appearance, and that of the two other outer branch elders, was a stark difference from the rosy faces and clean robes of the main branch Hegemons. Knowing how things worked with these craven bastards, they must have commandeered his Grandpa's merit, toting nonsense like the 'greater good.' The same was likely true for the resources Zac had secretly sent over.

"Look at you. You should have just used the Teleportation Token and left these old fools behind," Ogras lamented.

"It was really you," Okral said with a shaky voice. "You're really alive."

Ogras sighed. Communication had been intentionally cut after the incursion ended. The clan knew some had stayed behind out of fear of returning, but he was presumed to be dead with the others during the fight over the **[Fruit of Ascension]**. Ogras had chosen to keep things that way, embracing his role as Zac's shadow.

He knew his grandfather had faced some punishment for the way the incursion played out. Thankfully, Rydel was the one who led the disastrous expedition that killed the main forces, despite his recorded disagreement. But if it became known Ogras survived and helped their killers?

Part of him had somewhat expected the Azh'Rezak Clan to figure out the truth anyway, but he'd underestimated how ill-connected his family was. The explosive events in the Tower of Eternity never reached his little home planet, and they never realized their incursion had been foiled by the famed Deviant Asura. Hell, they didn't even know who he was until the Stars of Zecia-ladder came along.

However, rumors of Torrid Demons among the famed Atwood Empire eventually reached Clan Azh'Rezak, so they had likely begun suspecting a thing or two.

"But child, the commotion you've caused—"

"You! You actually betrayed the clan back then?!" an infuriated growl cut his Grandfather short. "I knew something was wrong! Where's my son?!"

"Oh? I guess Rydel's where I left him after I ran my spear through his heart. Well, his bones are, at least," Ogras said, a ruthless smile appearing on his face. "I can't believe a dog like you managed to step into Hegemony, if barely."

"Bast—"

Words were swallowed, and anger was replaced by a brief flicker of horror when shadows ripped apart the patriarch's second son. With such crude foundations, Ogras didn't even need to use one of his skills. His shadows were more than enough. A shocked commotion shook the large square before a suffocating silence took over.

"The Main Branch is the same as ever," Ogras lazily said as a calm glance passed between the elders. "I hoped some setbacks would have been enough to temper your attitudes."

"Child, no matter what you've been through, your roots are with Clan Azh'Rezak. If you have grievances to address, we are willing to listen."

"You want to talk?" Ogras said with a raised brow. "Can conversation bring back my siblings? I think it's better to send you all on your way so you apologize in person."

"Your siblings?" the patriarch said with a confused expression utterly incapable of fooling Ogras. Some of the elders were even worse, sharing worried looks full of guilt.

"Oggy, the clan has treated us well, and we're facing a crisis. Why don't we all take a step back?" his grandfather urged.

"Grandpa, I'm not you. I can't suppress these matters," Ogras gently said, turning back to the main branch elders. "I've always felt uncertain about what I should do if I returned. Well, seeing you all today finally gave me my answer."

"Oggy, don't—"

"I can't erase the shadows of the past," Ogras continued as the sky darkened, shrouding the manor in the gloom of his wrath. "But I can make them mine by killing all those who cast them."

"Y—you! The council has officially met with the Lords of Erz'Kerus and accepted their gracious invitation!" the second elder shrieked as shadows began to climb up his legs. "The Lords will not tolerate this!"

His words were soon proven right. The three powerful auras who'd been content observing from a distance until now were finally on the move.

"Kick the dog, and the masters appear," Ogras grinned.

"I did not know Clan Azh'Rezak had given birth to such an excellent descendant. Impressive, impressive!" the elder in the middle smiled as a fiery aura rebuffed the shadows around them. "Though I have to inform the young master that you are wrong on one point. Clan Erz'Kerus has raised the banner, sincerely inviting friends across the region to band together. The proud warriors of Azh'Kir'Khat can only survive this tribulation if we fight as one."

"Save the recruitment speech," Ogras snorted. "I've no interest in becoming a warslave for some local tyrant."

The Heavens were ruthless, and those beneath it were no different. 'Banding together' was just a nice way of saying 'recruiting cannon fodder while robbing their heritages.' Erz'Kerus was only one of thousands of established clans doing the same. Most factions were pushed to the limits after two years of fighting, and the battlefronts didn't relent.

Many saw no other way to survive than to disband their clan and sell themselves to a stronger faction that still had energy left to spare. Of course, these factions would only take the useful ones, leaving the rest to fend for themselves. The battlefronts would be split between the new and old factions. And since most of the population would be left behind, the abandoned would also have to carry most of the weight.

Ogras hadn't expected a Late Hegemon to appear in their little fiefdom, but he guessed they weren't specifically here for Azh'Rezak. They were making the rounds, snatching all Hegemons and talents across the planet. It was an easy sales pitch, considering the world would be teeming with cultists soon enough.

"Young man, we're sincerely extending an olive branch," the Middle D-grade accompanying the elder frowned. "We're happy to hear you out, but any further disrespect will—"

"Will what?"

It was Zac, and his question was punctuated by an explosion of monstrous killing intent, which even made Ogras's hair stand on end. It roiled through the mansion, forcing thousands of hardened warriors to their knees. Not even the elders could fully withstand it, paling before the onslaught. The awe-inspiring display accomplished its goal, yet it only left Ogras hollow. Just how much slaughter had his friend been forced to endure over the past years to keep the ship afloat?

"You—Who are you?!" the Erz'Kerus elder exclaimed while contracting his defensive domain to shield only himself and his two companions.

"Zachary Atwood of the Atwood Empire," Zac said, removing his hood. "The one who's been selling Cosmic Vessels to your bosses." [NEW novel chapters are published on NOVEL_FIRE.NET](#)

The old man froze for a moment before his eyes grew into saucers. "Lord Atwood, I'm sorry I didn't recognize you. It's a great honor to meet the Star of Zecia! Can I ask what brought you here today?"

"Ask my friend."

"I want the fourth and seventh branches," Ogras calmly said when the attention was back on him. "Every man, woman, and child. As for what happens to the rest of Clan Azh'Rezak, I don't care. But the Main Branch has conspired against me and my family, so I'm not comfortable leaving such a threat behind. Even if they join Erz'Kerus."

"My lord!" Azh'Rezak's patriarch exclaimed with horror. "The resources—"

"Ai, this old man has made a fool of himself, interfering in the internal matters of others," the envoy cut the frantic patriarch off, taking out a shimmering token. "We have many more clans to meet, so we will not intrude on Emperor Atwood any longer. Should the young lords ever find themselves in this area again, we would be honored to host a banquet in your honor."

"Mh," Zac noncommittally said.

Ogras inwardly snickered when the trio escaped with all the speed they could muster. A proper display of strength could really solve anything. He turned to the horrified elders, darkness swirling in his eyes.

"Now, where were we?"

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Chapter 1192: Ruthless

There was no suspense after the envoys from the Erz'Kerus Clan made their hasty escape. Zac calmly watched as Ogras descended on the Main Branch Elders like a vengeful ghost. This chapter of Karma wasn't his to deal with, so Zac didn't join the slaughter. He only had Haro encircle the manor while pulling Ogras's grandfather and the fourth branch's elder to his side. The latter was frozen solid from shock, while Zac had to restrain Okral Azh'Rezak from jumping into the mayhem to stop his grandson.

"There's no returning now. Azh'Rezak was fated to disappear today, one way or another," Zac said.

"Killing kin to alleviate resentment is to replace one poison with another," Okral said with a shake of his head, though he stopped struggling against the Heavenrender Vine's restraints.

"Perhaps. But this way, it's Ogras who got to pick the poison."

"Ai, little Oggy," Okral whispered with sorrow in his eyes. "I failed you."

"Bah, what's the point of feeling broken up for those shameless bastards? We've bled until our veins ran dry to keep the clan aloft. And what's our reward? Bringing fifty descendants to Erz'Kerus to their five thousand, and only young women to be married into other families. Our lines would have ended," the other elder growled, his face full of resentment.

"I know...I'm sorry. I thought I had lost all my direct descendants, and I didn't consider your side. I just felt that it was an acceptable sacrifice, so long as a seed of our ancestors would live on," Okral sighed before turning toward Zac. "Young lord, can I ask how you know my Oggy? How did he become so powerful?"

"I think the latter is best explained by Ogras himself. As for how we know each other... Clan Azh'Rezak's incursion dropped right on my head. Your reared barghest were my first enemies in the integration," Zac said with a crooked smile, continuing when the faces of the elders paled in fright. "Ogras saved my life and brought the former members of your clan to my side. They became the first citizen of my empire. He's my close brother now."

"Then, what that rasc—uh, young master Ogras—said..." the other elder asked hopefully.

"Azh'Rezak has fallen, and your lands will become part of the Atwood Empire. However, defending this planet will waste too many resources, and I can't use the War System to relocate it to our side," Zac said. "Not to mention, I don't believe that's Ogras's intent."

"That's right," Ogras said as he appeared in a puff of shadows, looking refreshed.

Zac couldn't sense any energy fluctuations from him despite seeing shadows rip apart scores of main branch warriors. Zac wasn't even sure if it was the real Ogras standing before them. The demon hadn't just stepped into Middle Hegemony in this short duration. He had also mastered some very powerful abilities that meshed perfectly with his fighting style.

"We'll just have the fourth and seventh swear allegiance to the Atwood Empire and teleport them over to our world," Ogras continued. "What happens next is none of my concern."

"Bastard! You've been living well, I see! Yet not a word to your grandpa!"

Ogras grinned and easily dodged a couple of half-hearted swings. "I figured you could use the break, old man."

"Ai, the days I wasted sitting before your grave."

"Should have spent that time siring a few new descendants."

"Don't think I can't hit you just because you've turned into a shadow!" Okral glared before his eyes softened. "Boy, it's good that you're alive."

"It's good to see you again," Ogras smiled.

"But this... it's enough... Any more will only become chains weighing you down," Okral said, the screams of fear and despair around them underlining his point.

Ogras glanced at the ruins, eventually nodding. "I guess I deserve to get killed if any of these fools gain the strength to take revenge."

Zac had to agree with the assessment. All the elders were dead, along with most elites and budding talents. "Then I'll return for now. I'll send some people over to help with the transfer."

"I'll talk to you later," Ogras agreed.

Zac was soon back in his compound, where he took a much-needed rest. He still felt drained after extracting some essence of his Life-attuned constitution, so he took a midday nap. He only woke up four hours later, unable to remember the last time he slept for so long.

Life on the frontlines had never allowed for real rest. He was either traveling, fighting, or cultivating in an endless cycle of carnage. Zac even felt lost now that there wasn't anything requiring his immediate attention.

Normally, Zac would take the opportunity to work on some aspect of his cultivation. His Soul, for instance, hadn't seen much improvement lately because of his time constraints. The two seals hidden in his Spatial Ring were a reminder that it would soon be put to the test.

Each seal led to a hidden cave, one on Earth and the other on Ensolus. Each held one of the remnants which he'd already bought from the Merit Exchange. Just purchasing them had almost woken up the slumbering remnants despite the System's absolute seal. Buying them early was an insurance, but also a test of sorts. For his plan to work, he would have to bring the sealed remnants with him to the Zurbor sector.

Despite being aware of the upcoming challenge, Zac chose to wander across his island. The flourishing streets filled with people were a stark contrast to the repressed atmosphere on Ogras's homeworld. Eventually, his meandering

journey led him out of the city and toward the military complex. He didn't enter, instead turning toward the shores.

There was a small residential district nestled between the academy and the attached military base, mostly occupied by officials and lecturers. Zac passed by the buildings unseen, eventually reaching a secluded cliffside leading into the ocean. He jumped down and disappeared, leaving ripples of an illusion array in his wake. Read Web Novels Online Free -

The waves gently pushed against the reinforced pier, forming a soothing song of the sea. The distant gleaming lights of civilization formed a starry backdrop in place of the overcast night sky. Zac silently stood atop the small platform at the pier's edge, unthinking as he looked at the deep-sea stone erected in its center.

"There you are."

Zac glanced over, finding Ogras stepping out of the night sky. It was only then Zac realized he hadn't moved for almost half an hour.

"There was something about your grandfather that reminded me of him," Zac sighed. "Is everything settled?"

"It'll take a while to gather and ferry everyone over, but that part doesn't need me. Grandpa is overseeing the exodus with the help of your soldiers."

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"How is he?"

"Angry and disappointed, but he'll come around. The relief and excitement of those who'll live will wear him down," Ogras said as he placed a small flask by the memorial tablet. "Do you agree with him? Too ruthless?"

Zac understood what Ogras was getting at. He had only killed a few thousand demons in his purge, but the actual death toll would be far greater. There was no way Erz'Kerus would dare take away the remnants of Clan Azh'Rezak, not that they had any reason to after Ogras removed anyone of value.

Meanwhile, the Atwood Empire would rescind its claim on the distant planet as soon as everyone had been sent back to Earth, leaving the vast majority of

the clan to fend for themselves. Ogras could have easily saved those people. Teleportation wasn't cheap, but transporting a few hundred thousand people within the sector wasn't much of a hit to their finances.

And yet, Ogras decisively severed their path to survival, sticking to his promise of only taking his branch and the ones that had stood by their side and faced suppression as a result.

"What qualifications do I have to talk about ruthlessness at this point?" Zac sighed. "Their fate would be the same even if we hadn't appeared. Besides, the Kan'Tanu aren't culling populations now that they have such a decisive advantage. They still have a chance of survival if my plan works, even if they have to go through some suffering first."

The silence stretched for a minute until Ogras sighed.

"It's nice. I think the old man would have liked it."

"I think so, too."

"I've only been gone a few years, and there's so many faces missing. Both here and back at the clan," Ogras said, taking a swig from another bottle. "How're you doing with everything?"

"I'm tired. Tired of fighting, of the death all around me," Zac said, looking down at Sap Trang's final resting place. "But we can only keep going."

"The lonely road of power," Ogras said. "Alright, enough of this. I'm still waiting on that drink, you know."

"Let's go."

The two returned to his courtyard, where Ogras shared his experiences since they parted. Zac was surprised to learn he'd been training under the Faceless Assassins he encountered in the Tower of Eternity and that the Pone! Esmeralda mentioned was its founding patriarch. The demon's exploits as a bounty hunter paying for his return fare with heretical cultivators ignited Zac's longing for adventure, one that didn't involve so much bloodshed as the soul-numbing slaughter of the war.

In return, Zac shared his experiences since he secluded himself to form his Cosmic Core, from the general progression of the war and his dealings with

the Undead Empire to the events in the Centurion Lighthouse. The only part he didn't mention was his recent involvement with the Sindris Clan, who had repeatedly approached him by infiltrating the Field Armies.

His split bodies had unsurprisingly failed to trick them, considering they knew all about the Kayar-Elu's heritage. For now, things hadn't progressed much, though the Sindris Clan had agreed to help by gathering intelligence and taking on a peripheral role in his plan. Zac hadn't given anything tangible in return, and the Sindris Clan hadn't asked for anything.

They had repeatedly mentioned there was a place for him back at their home and that returning with them was his best bet at understanding his bloodline. Of course, Zac wouldn't take them up on such an offer with or without his mother's warnings. It was perhaps possible to facilitate a cooperation agreement like the one he had with the Undead Empire, though it seemed laden with pitfalls. Unlike the empire, he didn't have protection from allies like the Abyssal Shores when dealing with the Technocrat outcasts.

It wasn't that he didn't trust the demon with these matters, and Ogras was one of the few who knew of his Technocrat heritage. Zac didn't want to inform Esmeralda of this aspect of his background. She already knew enough of his secrets, and there was no way to know what could come back to haunt him in the future.

It was a liberating feeling to exchange stories by a campfire with an old friend, especially now that he'd fully withdrawn from the frontlines. Battles were still raging on the graded battlefronts, but the dangers and losses were far lower there. Eventually, they were all caught up, at which point Zac moved to his plans for the future and his quest to awaken the Foreign Gods.

"What a mess," Ogras eventually exhaled. "So we have around 50 days, according to the Numerologist? What happens then?"

"I'm not sure. At first, we thought it might have to do with shifts in the Eternal Storm making access impossible or that someone would get to it before us. We're not the only ones looking for opportunities in that area. But lately... I've been wondering if it's the war that's the problem."

"You're thinking the Ruthless Heavens will close down the battlefronts?"

"Either that or start another phase of the war that will restrict our path to the Zurbor Sector. Maybe the battlefronts will be shifted to only lead to contested areas in the Zecia sector. A final defense, of sorts."

"Seems as likely as anything else. Why would the Ruthless Heavens waste energy teleporting us to another sector when we can't even protect our back garden? But why do you want to include outsiders in your scheme? It spells trouble."

"I don't have much of a choice," Zac sighed. "I needed something to get the Undead Empire off my back. The events in the lighthouse left our cooperation rocky. Our trade channels were being squeezed, and I worried they'd assassinate my other half if they didn't see a path for 'Arcaz' to reclaim the top spot."

"That can't possibly be the full picture," Ogras concluded. "You'd rather take your chances and hoard the opportunity than involve people with suspect motives. You need them for something."

"You know me well," Zac smiled and threw over an Information Crystal holding the intelligence gathered by the Sindris Clan. "It'll be almost impossible to reach the Foreign Gods without their help. See for yourself."

"What the hell? Why are there so many Kan'Tanu stationed near our target? And there are even outsiders running around? Have they discovered your plan?"

"No," Zac said. "Well, not this particular rift, at least. It turns out the border we're aiming for is pretty special."

"The Imperial Graveyard," Ogras muttered as he read on. "Well, it makes sense the puppets would be found in such a place."

Zac had initially worried Ventus had made a mistake when his detailed battle plan led his battlefronts away from the three known border regions of the Zurbor Sector. However, he'd kept going after measurements confirmed he was gradually closing in on their destination. It was only two months ago they'd discovered they were approaching a hidden fourth border by interrogating a connected World Lord.

The Imperial Graveyard was the remnant of an ancient battlefield where the Inner Worlds of thousands of fallen Monarchs and Autarchs had mixed with

the turbulent space of the Eternal Storm, forming a unique region full of danger and opportunity. The Kan'Tanu World Lord had no idea who'd fought in the ancient battle, but it wasn't hard for Zac to realize the Limitless Empire was involved after hearing some descriptions.

Exploring the area was incredibly dangerous because it combined the dangers of the Million Gates Territory with the sort of threats he'd faced in the ancient lighthouse. Spatial storms, attacks from malfunctioning weaponry, and War Arrays that had turned into dangerous Natural Formations fought to take out any explorers entering the graveyard.

And yet, the Kan'Tanu constantly kept significant forces there. It wasn't an exaggeration to say the Kan'Tanu lost more men to the Imperial Graveyard every day than any given Field Army. Even one of the seven chapters had its headquarters blocking the entrances—the Chapter of Carnal Resolution, the defenders of the cult doctrine.

The placement was both strategic and symbolic, considering more than half of the Kan'Tanu's heritage came from the Imperial Graveyard. The Kan'Tanu's pope had discovered the graveyard back when he was only a discarded disciple of the Black Heart Sect. He'd been a Late Hegemon whose core was almost crippled during the intense internal struggle of the sect. Google search NovelFire(.)net

Knowing he would just become fertilizer to a Remoulded or Reincarnator if he returned, he chose to flee to the frontier. Discovering the Imperial Graveyard was the lucky break he needed to be reborn. The pope slowly took control over the nearby factions of the Zurbor Sector, using Heart Curses to enslave key members of the clans.

Eventually, the Church of Kan'Tanu was born, and it only took him sixty-thousand years to take complete control over the sector by relying on the techniques and manuals he'd extracted from the Imperial Graveyard. Since then, almost a million years had passed, and nothing remained of Zurbor's original factions.

Even with the war raging, the excavation was in full swing. The pope was most likely desperate to find an opportunity to break through. He was over a million years old already, having surpassed the natural lifespan of a Monarch. He was running out of time, even if he'd extended the time he had through normal and unorthodox means.

Meanwhile, the nature of the ruins made the Imperial Graveyard the prime source of seals for the Zurbor Sector, much like the Million Gates Territory used to be for Zecia. The outsiders had already caught on, and some opted to explore its depths instead of joining the war.

"This is insane," Ogras vehemently rejected. "Why not just rob the Kan'Tanu Grand Cathedral while we're at it?"

Zac remembered the shock he'd felt upon reading the reports the first time. Even the usually boisterous Kator had been subdued upon realizing the dangers he'd face if he wanted to join Zac on his mad caper.

"Please tell me you have a plan."

"Oh, you're going to love this," Zac grinned, and Ogras's face collapsed.

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Chapter 1193: Caper

"I should have known better than expecting my suffering to be over after making it home in one piece," Ogras groaned. "Fine, I've already boarded this pirate ship. The first problem is the barrier. I'm guessing this is why you needed to bring in outside muscle?"

"It's an important reason," Zac nodded. "The Great Wall of Resolution spans the whole entrance to the Imperial Graveyard. A normal Monarch can't force their way inside, let alone us."

"So what good are those skeletons? Zurbor is sealed just like Zecia. Their sealed Monarchs won't be enough, if they can even teleport them over. Isn't it almost impossible?"

"It's prohibitively expensive because the highest battlefronts are Peak D-grade," Zac nodded. "Any determined Monarch let loose behind enemy lines could wreak havoc. Just bringing one will eat up a good chunk of the Kavriel Province's accumulated Faction Merit, though they are trying to have more sneak into Zurbor from the outside."

"So what then?"

"Their Monarchs aren't the important aspect. Only they have the means to drag the **[Epiclesis Bell]** to the Zurbor Sector. The bell's the key to breaking through the barrier."

"I was wondering why you hadn't dealt with that thing yet."

Zac carried a ball of shame over still having done nothing to help Vilari despite Galau having mastered the ritual more than five months ago. He'd even turned the core features into an array disk. If Zac's understanding of the necessary bait was correct, he could have replaced the sacrifices with himself and easily pulled the bell over.

Yet he'd held off, watching from the sidelines as it consumed more and more Kan'Tanu. Some of its damage had already been mended according to reports, which probably made the danger Vilari faced even greater. Ralz Calzood maintained her belief it was for the best, that the benefits outweighed the dangers for her disciple. Zac wasn't convinced.

"Uh," Ogras coughed upon seeing Zac's face. "So how do the Undead Empire factor in?"

"Sacrifice," Zac sighed, explaining the method to summon the bell.

"What a nasty thing," Ogras said with scrunched brows. "But why would we need the Undead Empire for that? If you're willing to go that far for your plan, can't you pick a world in the Zurbor Sector with particularly nasty cultists and call it over?"

"Zurbor is too far away. Even if the bell manages to sense the summon, the pull will be so weak that it can resist the attraction. Instead, we have to create a trail of breadcrumbs to follow."

"You've had the Undead Empire set up sacrificial rituals at worlds between Zecia and Zurbor," Ogras exclaimed. "The logistics involved..."

"We've picked six unorthodox factions at the border of the Eternal Storm. The advance forces should have arrived already."

The System clumped together habitable regions into sectors, with large chasms of nothingness between them. The Eternal Storm was more random, and you could find isolated worlds peppered throughout if you looked carefully. Even Ogras, who'd left a trail of bodies on his long journey home, looked slightly taken aback.

No matter how you massaged the facts, the reality was that six factions unrelated to their struggle would be slaughtered on his order. Unorthodox or not, some innocent people were bound to live on those worlds. Zac wasn't proud of it, but neither did he waver in his decision.

This was a war for survival. For Earth, for Zecia as a whole. Summoning the Foreign Gods was perhaps their only shot left at making it through alive. Getting the final piece of his seal was nothing before that fundamental desire for survival. If some planets had to fall for that to happen, so be it. Zac would carry that weight. If anything, he would go even further to save his people.

"All this effort... Is the bell really that powerful?" Ogras muttered.

"It's the thing hiding inside I'm after. There's something very wrong with that entity. It might be a spirit from a previous Era. Both the Heavens and the System have gone berserk every time those things have been exposed, and they've devastated whole regions to take it out. The Great Wall is strong, but not strong enough to withstand true Heavenly wrath."

"What if the Undead Empire doesn't hold up their part of the bargain? Or if they mess up?"

"It's a risk I have to take," Zac sighed. "I'm betting on Kator's greed and the importance the Undead Empire places on this trial. Gaining access to the Imperial Graveyard and a huge amount of merit should far outweigh the value of the bell and ensure there'll be no trickery. If they betray us, it's most likely after we've entered the graveyard."

"So I think I get it," Ogras said, massaging his glabella. "We sneak as close as possible, and the skeletons summon the heretical bell. We crack it open and unleash Armageddon, somehow surviving the thunder and the cultists who will no doubt sense the intense energy fluctuations."

"While also saving Vilari." The latest_episodes are on_the
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"Of course. So we sneak inside during the chaos, praying the commotion and our allies can stall any pursuers long enough as we follow your tracker to the ancient puppets. And then what?"

"Well..."

"And then what?" Ogras repeated, his eyes thinning with suspicion when the silence dragged on. "Don't tell me—"

"Uh, yeah. The details aren't really ironed down beyond that point," Zac coughed when he saw Ogras's incredulous expression. "I mean, I've already had to change the plan a couple of times. We'll have to take things as they come."

"As they come? In the middle of a deadly region where even Monarchs must tread carefully? Which is heavily guarded by our enemies? Can we escape the Zurbor sector through the Imperial Graveyard after we're done?"

"It doesn't look like it," Zac scratched his head. "There seems to be an incredibly dangerous region in the depths, essentially cutting off access to the real Eternal Storm. That's why we can't sneak in the back door."

"So we'd have to return the way we came to reach a teleporter? Past our enemies' stronghold, where a whole lot of very angry cultists will probably be waiting."

"Something like that."

"Well, the best of luck to you."

"What are you talking about? You're coming with, of course," Zac said. "As is Esmeralda."

"Are you crazy?!"

'Absolutely not!'

Esmeralda appeared in a flash, clearly having listened in on their conversation from some hidden spot.

"I have no idea how difficult it'll be to activate the Foreign Gods or what kinds of defenses might be blocking my way. I will need my two most skilled infiltrators on the job," Zac smiled.

'Why should I join you on such a dangerous mission? I'm already hiding from the Heavens as is! This is not part of our contract.'

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"Well, I can't force you," Zac said with an innocent expression. "But the pillar's ascent was brought forward by half a year because of the Centurion Lighthouse. Who's to say what'll happen when the real Centurion Project is dragged to the surface and activated? The System might whisk us away to the inheritance right away. Are you sure you want to stay behind and risk missing the boat? My undead body has no choice but to go because of my agreement with Kator."

'This—this—' Esmeralda frantically signed while stamping the ground in agitation. *'You're forcing my hand, breaking the spirit of our agreement!'*

"I'm simply explaining the situation. Also, this scenario isn't covered by our agreement," Zac said, feeling a great sense of satisfaction from throwing back Esmeralda's words in her face.

Honestly, Zac wasn't too broken up about losing out on the ancient toad's bloodline talents. He'd never included them in any of his plans, and her trickery gave him the perfect excuse to bring her along on this admittedly half-cooked caper. Since he was already on a roll, Zac turned his attention to Ogras, who looked ready to run for the hills.

"I know you've enlisted and checked out the exchange by now. There are some pretty amazing things, aren't there? Things you'd need to keep up your momentum when our resources run dry. But how will you get the merit to get your hands on the good stuff? We've already abandoned the frontlines because it became too dangerous. Oh, you also need another piece for your seal."

Ogras's face flickered with indecision until greed overcame caution. "What if the trial doesn't start when you finish your quest?"

"I don't know," Zac admitted. "Depends on the Foreign Gods. Maybe we can ride on their shoulders as we steamroll the Zurbor Sector. If that doesn't work out, we'll have to hide inside the Imperial Graveyard until the trial begins. It shouldn't be hard. It's almost as large as the Million Gates Territory and way more chaotic. The Undead Empire is planning on sending multiple units with that strategy."

Of course, Zac wasn't planning on telling Ogras these units who'd sneak inside on separate vessels were disposable deathsworn. They'd act as a diversion while searching for seals. Coming back alive, whether they became sealbearers or not, was not something Kator planned for.

"I guess it's about time you advanced to blowing up whole sectors," Ogras sighed in defeat. "And I admit the plan seems feasible in a deranged way. I bet those curse-cultivating maniacs will turn into natural lightning rods when the Heavens descend on the area."

"That's what I hope."

"So when are we going?"

"We have a hard deadline to set out with Kator in a month," Zac said. "We could go even sooner if something changes."

"And until then?"

"We'll keep at it, figuring out ways to increase our chances of survival," Zac said. "And first on the docket is cracking open the Ensolus Ruins."

"Well, the ruins will still be there tomorrow," Ogras said and took out a ceramic vat covered in odd scribbles. "I think I need another drink after hearing your master plan."

Ogras stayed a few more hours before returning to Azh'Rodum. Zac dispersed the alcohol from his system and teleported to his own cultivation cave. His chat with Ogras had helped settle his heart, and seeing the demon's exaggerated reactions even helped alleviate Zac's misgivings about the mission.

Zac spent the rest of the night cultivating his soul, letting the vast amounts of Mental Energy wash through his spiritual body. The **[Thousand Lights Avatar]** had long since reached the limits of the technique he'd picked up from

the Eidolon elite. Going any further required an actual spirit body, while the upper layers remained exclusive for Eidolon.

The spiritual form spanning both his bodies was slightly different from the original. There were weak hints of his Branch of the War Axe in the previously unattuned framework. Adding it wasn't very difficult. He cultivated his soul with a war between Life and Death, which he harnessed and amplified with his Dao Branch as he let the shockwaves from his Soul Aperture spread through his body.

It was still far from becoming anything close to the **[Thousand Axes Avatar]** he'd envisioned, nor did it have any effect in combat. Zac still kept at it to observe the transformation conflict brought to spirit. Achieving his goals would require a comprehensive rehaul of the Eidolon technique, for which he only had some theories so far.

The rehaul would require a herculean effort of trial and error or Ultom's epiphany. But even the latter wouldn't work without a foundation and direction to build upon. The suns had already been up for hours when Zac appeared in his compound, and he enjoyed the fresh sense of clarity of rotating his Mental Energy.

'You should practice this method every night going forward,' Esmeralda said from within her subspace.

"You think my soul will be important for the trial?"

'Who knows? But I felt like I was given a luxurious mud bath when you practiced.'

"So that's it," Zac scoffed before teleporting over to his other planet.

The group was already assembled and waiting outside when Zac arrived—more than half his sealbearers. Ogras was missing, but a flickering shadow indicated he was nearby.

"Let's go," Zac said and flew into the sandstorm.

The rest followed behind, and they soon found themselves in the Ensolus Ruins. A haze covered the ruins, limiting vision and making it look like the root-covered city was in the middle of monsoon season despite being placed

in the middle of a desert. Zac glanced at Galau, who nodded and took out an array disk.

The illusions popped like soap bubbles, exposing one magnificent temple after another. The temples and mansions of the Ensolus Ruins looked exactly as grand as they did when Zac first unearthed them. No, that wasn't strictly correct. They were even more resplendent, having benefited from Ensolus' upgrade to Middle D-grade Energy.

"To think these things were hidden among the rubble," Ogras exclaimed as he stepped out of the shadows, drawing surprised looks from the others. "Makes one want to start digging for treasure."

"You're back! No wonder all those demons popped up over the night," Emily exclaimed, looking at the demon expectantly. "Do you have a way to pierce the barriers? Is that why we're gathered today?"

"We'll see," Ogras muttered, only half-listening as he directed hundreds of shadowy strings to burrow into every nook and cranny.

"It's no use. We've already scanned the area in various ways. If there's still subterranean ruins or spatial pockets hiding, they're sealed so tightly even a Spatial Monarch would find it hard to unearth them."

"Guess I'll have to take your word for it. Who could have imagined a worrywart like you would become a blinding sun?" Ogras grinned and put his arm around Galau's shoulder. "I was sure you'd get yourself killed after you were sent off to the army."

"It wasn't easy, but we got him on the right path," Bubbur nodded, looking at Galau like a proud mother.

"Grand Formation Master. Weaponsmith. I even hear you've conquered this feral little thing. A real triple threat."

"Want to test if your shadows are flammable?" Emily glowered. "If anything, I'm the conqueror here, alright?"

"That's what you're worried about?" Galau rolled his eyes. "And I don't know about a triple threat or sun. I was simply fortunate enough to get swept up in this mess and survive. Most are not so lucky."

"I heard there's been casualties?" Ogras grunted, glancing at Zac.

"We've lost five. More than ten times that number if you count repeated casualties to the same seal," Zac confirmed.

"It's like it's become harder and harder to hold onto the seals," Emily sighed. "Meanwhile, it's like those who got picked early have a guardian angel. Oh, I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's true," Lissa said with a weak smile.

"It'll be ok," Carl muttered, seemingly telling himself as much as his wife.

Zac could empathize with Carl's fears. Not a single of his original Sealbearers had fallen, even if Rhubat and Ra'Klid were on bed rest, recovering in specialized arrays after nearly dying in battle. Rhubat was the worst off, having their body almost completely shattered shortly after seizing the second piece of their seal. The Zhix leader had been in a sealed state for over four months, only kept alive through the enduring nourishment of Faith Energy from the hives.

Meanwhile, it almost felt like the seals had become death sentences to those who got them late. Fate was testing the candidates and their worthiness, and most came up short. The seal-inflicted deaths had hit his second-generation Hegemons the hardest, including two Valkyries and Harvarth, the demon captain who'd fought by his side since day one.

Lissa was his most recent sealbearer and an accidental one at that. The demoness had stepped down from active duty to care for her daughter, instead taking up a job as an elite guard in Purgatory. An ill-fated prison escape had cost Zac a Zurbor-native navigator and Ogras the final piece of his Hollow Court seal.

Admittedly, Lissa was the final piece of the puzzle. He now had two full cycles, with two sealbearers to spare. Zac had already given up on forming a third, even if there was a small chance of success through the Imperial Graveyard. Instead, they'd focus on completing the seals they already had.

Only two had already accomplished that feat—Emily and Janos. Their experience was the same; the final epiphany was even greater than the first two. Janos was still caught in a near-catatonic state as he digested the insights. Zac hoped he could provide the same thing to a few more of his

sealbearers before running out of time, which was why he'd brought so many today.

"Can you get inside?" Zac asked when he saw Ogras inspecting a barrier.

"No way," Ogras said without hesitation. "I have learned some infiltration techniques, but they won't work against this kind of absolute defense."

Zac had expected as much. He'd visited a few times over the past months, hoping his accumulated experience and progression with **[Void Mountain]** would be enough. It wasn't. His keen senses couldn't find a weakness in the barriers, and neither could the Void force a path.

'Can you do it?' Zac asked through the mental connection with Esmeralda.

'...'

'What is it?'

'You never said the ruins were a blessed city! These temples are the training grounds of Imperial Templars!'

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Chapter 1194: Templars

Zac could feel Esmeralda's agitation and embarrassment through the link. It would have been funny if it didn't mean something had gone wrong with his plan.

'Imperial Templars, what's that?'

'The Limitless Empire had many Monastic and Templar Orders,' Esmeralda said as she emerged from the shrine in his Draugr half's chest.

None in the group reacted to the sudden appearance of a bison-sized toad, meaning Esmeralda's stealth worked even against his strongest subordinates. Zac asked the others to give him a minute as his two halves and Ogras stepped to the side. The contract said he had to keep Esmeralda's identity hidden, though he would have done so without the stipulation. She and the **[Shrine of Kanba]** were a hidden ace. The less people knew, the better.

Esmeralda gingerly tapped the nearby barrier a few times and shook her head. *'They were special organizations separated from their armies. Esteemed, mysterious, and very dangerous. This seems to be a remote training base. The Templars erected bases like these at the frontlines and in extradimensional colonies toward the end of their reign.'*

'It contains all the facilities needed to recruit, train, and equip the local elites, raising the next generation's heroes and generals who'd continue the expansion.'

"So it's like a predecessor to the System?" Zac said with excitement as his vision roved across the horizon and its many towering temples.

He'd been worried they'd find empty manors abandoned by their masters or places of worship for a faith that had been long since forgotten. A training ground to nurture elites was far more practical. Wouldn't it mean every temple had something like the Tribulation Throne?

"What? What did she say?" Ogras urged.

"Oh, sorry," Zac said, conveying Esmeralda's words.

Esmeralda was either unable or unwilling to give others the translating mark. Ogras, whose theoretical foundations weren't quite as strong, could only make out bits and pieces without a translator.

"So?" Zac said. "These buildings can make us stronger?"

'They should. The Templars were the handpicked holy warriors of the Limitless Empire. Many of its top generals came from their ranks. I've only heard of these installations in passing, but I figure the Templars knew what they were doing. But that's not the point. These bases are always blessed by Imperial Faith.'

"So? Sounds like everything related to the Limitless Empire is?" Ogras said, echoing Zac's sentiments.

'Of course not! Having faith is one-directional and does not provide the believer with any strength. Cultivating faith is different. The population generates faith and its chosen harness that limited resource. If too many did that, there'd be nothing left. Many Heartland factions have no spiritual warriors because those at the top are hoarding the Faith Energy.'

"So what about the blessing?"

'A blessing means the Deity or their representative reciprocated that faith, permanently imbuing a person or object with a sliver of their power. It's like a Dao Impartment. Depending on the blessing's strength, it can cause a huge transformation. A normal rock blessed by the Limitless Emperor would become a divine weapon that could tear a hole in the Heavens.'

The concept was new yet familiar, and not just because of the Dao Impartment Zac received from Yrial long ago. The concept sounded identical to the Tribulation Throne. It would also explain why his breakthrough managed to unearth all these buildings. The throne's blessing must have resonated with the one here. Read Web Novels Online Free -

"You're saying the Limitless Emperor has marked this place?" Zac asked.

'I would already be running for my life if this frontier station had been personally blessed by the Mad Emperor,' Esmeralda signed while croaking nervously.

"Are you sure? What about the Tribulation Throne I mentioned yesterday?"

'That refinement chair was probably created by some Monastic Ascetic and sent to the fortress.'

Was he mistaken? No, Zac was certain he'd felt Laondio's presence even if what Esmeralda said was correct. More likely, the Limitless Emperor's lingering will had sensed his presence through the Imperial Faith and used the throne's blessing to form a spiritual bridge.

"What about this place?"

'The faith imbued in this barrier should be on the lower end. Still, any Monastery or Temple would be blessed by someone at the Cardinal level or above,' Esmeralda continued. 'Those are not figures we can discard at our current level.'

"Cardinals," Zac muttered, remembering the introduction in the Foreign Gods tome.

It mentioned a 'Blade Cardinal' having passed the region, almost annihilating an Elder Foreign God with a single swing. Zac guessed they had to be Autarchs, at the very least, extraordinarily powerful ones if they were empowered by the immense Imperial Faith of the Limitless Empire. It was probably a lucky break he never invited a Monarch to forcibly break the barriers. Who knew what could happen if the lingering will lashed back?

"So would we be able to use these facilities? I don't want to turn my followers into zealots," Zac frowned.

'I think so? Only a few graduates would earn consecration and become actual Templars. Most would take up other roles within the empire. If nothing else, there should be a treasury and repository somewhere.'

"So what's the problem? You can't deal with the cardinal's imprint?"

'How can some outer temples stop me!' Esmeralda huffed. 'But you'd have to brand a stele inside the main cathedral to claim ownership of the whole city. I wouldn't dare mess with that building even if I'd undergone another bloodline awakening. It's like an ancient powder keg full of deadly conviction.'

"So we'll skip that place and hit the smaller temples one by one?"

'...One. I can open one barrier in my current condition. I have to trigger a Bloodline Talent beyond my current level to subvert the blessing, and I'm already drained after helping you expand the shrine.'

"Don't you think I can tell your exhaustion's feigned?" Zac scoffed. "You did something yesterday to rapidly recover. The temporal ripples are still messing with my perception."

'One and no more! This is my limit before the trial, or it might impact my mission. Besides, blessings are an impartment of will. They are intelligent like an Array Spirit. It'll notice something's wrong if I keep at it.'

Zac grimaced as he looked around. One was better than nothing, but not quite what he'd hoped for.

"Manuals and techniques would take too long to showcase their worth. Even skills might need to be refitted to work with our current system," Ogras muttered. "Equipment or Treasury? Or something similar to the throne? Most of our sealbearers have empty Limited Title slots or very weak ones taking up space."

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"Do you have any suggestions?" Zac asked Esmeralda.

'There is one way you can get around the limits. Everything seems to be in working order, so you could target the Hall of Service.'

"What's that?"

'Registration and missions. My technique will make it so that anyone entering the Hall of Service is considered a candidate rather than an intruder. If you pass the initial screening, you'll become a low-level trainee. I'm not sure if the Hall of Service can give out missions now, but the Templars were big on trials and feats of strength. You could gain access to the other buildings if you perform well enough.'

'This way, you and your followers can get a bit of everything, reaping the rewards in subjects where you excel. However, you'll have to follow the rules and only take what your performance awards. If I unseal another temple instead, we can pick it clean.'

"What do you think?" Zac asked.

"It might be our best option," Ogras slowly nodded. "I doubt there'll be anything here that can impact the war if it's a high-grade training base. And if there is a secret templar weapon hidden somewhere, it'll probably be in the main cathedral, which we can't access."

'I don't know about any weapons, but you will be able to enter the cathedral if you perform well enough. There might be an opportunity to snatch something then, though you'll definitely be marked as a traitor. And before you ask, I

won't get involved with robbing that place. That's how a thief ends up on the gallows.'

"Let's go with the Hall of Service then. We'll be strong enough to seize the cathedral sooner or later. We can extract the rest of the benefits at that point." Zac turned to Esmeralda. "Where to?"

'...'

"You don't know which one it is, do you?" Ogras sighed.

'How am I supposed to remember every little thing! This is your expedition, you figure it out!' Esmeralda scowled before escaping into the shrine.

Zac helplessly looked around. How was he supposed to know?

"Let's ask the merchant," Ogras shrugged. "He's spent some time investigating these buildings, no? And he's lived inside a fortress with a shared origin."

Zac agreed, and they reconvened with the group.

"A Templar training facility? How do you suddenly know all this?" Emily asked after Zac had explained the situation.

"I can't explain why or how we're going to open the temple," Zac said. "Suffice to say, we want to find the Hall of Service, or at least eliminate as many buildings as possible to improve our odds of picking the right one. I think everyone here has visited the ruins once or twice to see if you have affinity with any of the temples. Any impressions and ideas are welcome. For instance, I don't believe it's that palace."

Zac pointed at a domed ceiling in the distance. The temple had six braziers with blue flames burning at equidistant locations. He'd felt it reminiscent of the building where he inherited the **[Cosmic Forge]** and given an extra look. The similarities ultimately ended with the braziers and the spherical nature. Any aura was prevented from leaking, but Zac had felt his soul throb upon looking at the six abstract sculptures that lined its entrance.

"I don't know why, but I feel that building relates to cultivating souls. And another on the opposite side should be a smithy."

"I know the one!" Emily nodded. "With the flat slated ceiling, right? It's always made me think of an anvil for some reason."

"I believe the temple made from blue stone, with five spires, relates to rearing beasts or bloodlines."

Zac turned to Ibtep with surprise. "Really? It looks like a church to me."

"The engravings on each tower make me think of different lineages of ferocious beasts. One, in particular, seems to attract my pets."

"I think I can safely exclude a few," Galau said. "Do you know the names or features of some other structures?"

'Esmeralda?'

The group excluded one structure after another, relying on deduction, intuition, and Esmeralda's scattered memories. Eventually, they were left with three, which gave off a neutral aura that gave no hint of their purpose.

"This one seems like the best bet, right?" Zac eventually said as they gathered before one of the outermost temples that had appeared. "The whole city is forming a huge array."

The temple didn't look much different from any others. It resembled a gothic church with pitch-black spires, buttresses, and a large rose window covered in dense engravings. Its entrance was a huge arched vault, and there was another one on the other side. One gate let you into the Templar Order, while the other was pointed right at the main cathedral.

"And this should be one of its mouths," Galau agreed. "Registration at the entrance, where you can take up missions and immediately set out."

"Everyone back away for a bit. No one come over until I give the go-ahead."

Everyone clearly held onto unanswered questions, but they quickly followed the order. Soon, only Zac's two halves and Esmeralda remained by the barrier.

'I'm a bit rusty, so this might take a while,' Esmeralda said as she jumped forward and placed her hand on the barrier.

She remained unmoving for over three hours, but subtle changes to the barrier indicated she wasn't just meditating. The Faith Energy Zac had seen on full display when the temples emerged was being drawn to the surface, and it actually looked like the barrier was becoming stronger.

The barrier's radiance eventually reached a level that triggered the other temples. Fate was gathering like a hurricane, and a dangerous pressure descended on the ruins. It was like a primordial beast was waking from a long slumber and was searching for the culprit who interrupted its sleep.

Just as Zac was about to tell Esmeralda to stop, she grew to match the grand hall before her. She emitted a heart-palpitating aura, and the vague runes that had appeared on her skin spread across her body. Six profound magic circles formed over the vats on her back, and Zac was amazed to find them a perfect blend of Imperial Faith and deathly time.

The toad moved like a blur, slapping the barrier at dozens of precise spots. Zac could only vaguely make out the six circles fusing with the barrier before Esmeralda was back where she started. The burgeoning storm of fate collapsed, and the six black circles gathered at the barrier's front, superimposing to form a six-meter-wide gap.

The barrier didn't seem damaged. In fact, the hole felt like a natural feature of the shield, and the temple actually seemed to reinforce it.

Esmeralda looked tired, but she wasn't done. Her throat bulged, and she spat out two large poles covered in the viscous liquid from her vats. She stabbed them into the ground, and runes resembling those on her skin lit up across their surface.

'It's done.'

Esmeralda's exhaustion was clearly not feigned this time. Her vats were almost empty, and her aura felt hollow.

"Amazing work. Thank you," Zac said. "We can just enter? What about the defenses inside?"

'It should be safe. The doorstops will warn you if otherwise. But like I said, I'm no historian,' Esmeralda signed before lashing her tongue at his human body. *'I'll be able to share your sight now and warn in case something goes wrong.'*

Esmeralda disappeared into her shrine, triggering a powerful pull of Miasma.

Zac slowly approached the entrance with his Human body, afraid an undead might trigger something. The powerful faith gathered around the barrier felt like a god staring down at him. Zac kept going, worried that backing down would backfire on him. He passed the doorstoppers and sensed an invisible swirl of energy emerge. And then, he was through the gate, standing before the entrance as a Templar.

It was as though a lifetime's worth of slumbering memories had sprouted. Zac was filled with faith and valor, remembering how he'd fought the empire's enemies in the eight directions. Zac blinked, and the memories of his life as an Imperial Templar were gone. They were clearly fabricated, but it didn't matter. Zac could tell the experience had marked him, allowing Esmeralda's portal to forge an identity and connect it with the blessing.

Zac exhaled and continued up the steps. The grand arched doors automatically opened to his approach, but Zac stopped with hesitation when he saw a wall of shimmering spatial energy. It wasn't a barrier but rather a spatial gate like the one that led to the Twilight Ocean.

'What's going on?'

'What? Did you think these small buildings could hold a whole training center without some spatial manipulation?' Esmeralda scoffed from the safety of the shrine. *'The main cathedral could very well hold a whole artificial Mystic Realm.'*

Zac shrugged and stepped through, finding himself in an enormous atrium. He turned around, exhaling with relief upon seeing the shimmering spatial gate behind before inspecting the interiors. There had to be over a hundred doors lining the room, along with dozens of steles filled with names. There was also a shimmering gate at the opposite end emitting much stronger spatial fluctuations.

Long-distance teleportation, perhaps? But where?

There was an intangible forbidding power when Zac focused on the various features in the large hall, preventing Zac from looking too closely. The only exception was the large service desk at the center and the raised platform behind it.

'That's the one. You have to step onto the platform and be scanned. It's like a sect entry test. After that, you can start knocking out trials behind the doorways.'

"Will I be okay?" Zac whispered. "I mean, I'm a mortal."

'I can help you feign some affinity in case it tests for it.'

Zac nodded and walked toward the testing platform, but he only got halfway before his path was barred.

"The Emperor spoke, and I answered. Yet a thief rather than prophet steps through our gates. Explain your presence."

Profound horror was transmitted through Esmeralda's link as Zac blankly stared at the vaguely humanoid entity that had formed before him. It contained such terrifying amounts of energy and faith that Zac's soul had frozen. Only a frantic shout in his mind shook him awake.

'Why's there an Eternal Servant in this kind of place?! RUN!' READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT [NOVEL\(F\)ire.NET](http://NOVEL(F)ire.NET)

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Chapter 1195: Eternal Servant

Esmeralda's warning was entirely superfluous, considering the very core of his being screamed of mortal peril. The voice of the ghost before him had been calm, but there was a chilling killing intent hidden in her question. The kind he'd felt from his mother when she talked about the System or those who betrayed the Kayar-Elu.

Zac would have loved nothing more than to follow Esmeralda's urgings to escape. But did he dare, knowing running was an admission of guilt? He'd be

lucky if he got halfway to the gate before a blast of faith turned him into consecrated ash.

This 'Eternal Servant' possessed power far beyond Hegemony, possibly beyond anyone in Zecia. And even that terrifying power felt like the tip of a bottomless iceberg. Zac wasn't an unfettered thief like Esmeralda, who could disappear when she was exposed. A simple thought could annihilate his team waiting outside, and Zac didn't dare give any indication through his other body.

Besides, escape where? A barrier made by Faith Energy had blocked the exit. Worse, a hidden array had activated when the Eternal Servant spoke, sealing his Cosmic Core and Soul Aperture. Even the brand holding Sendor's lifesaving mark had been sealed, preventing him from using one old monster to fight another. Seeing it triggered a flash of anger as it made Zac recall Sendor's reluctant face when he imparted them.

That old Realm Spirit had really pulled one over on him. Zac had already discovered the reason why Yselio had so effortlessly blocked its activation. It wasn't that Sendor had betrayed him and shared the secret with the Imperial Heavens. Rather, Sendor had taken advantage of Zac's lacking experience, knowing the letter and spirit of Zac's request were very different.

What Heartland Chosen didn't have one or two lifesaving imprints on their bodies? Localizing and neutralizing them was an important aspect of life-and-death battles between scions of high-grade forces. It was a constant battle where opposing factions investigated and reinvented their seals to gain an edge. Meanwhile, Sendor had placed his seals right in the open without protection or obfuscation.

That way, the Realm Spirit wouldn't have to worry about Zac activating the seal against powerful outsiders, creating unwanted enmities. Only the barbarians on the frontier would fail to recognize the seal for what it was, and Sendor wouldn't mind saving him from some local Monarch.

Without any escape route or protection, Zac could only fall back on old tricks.

"Wait, wait!" Zac urged as he took out the **[Court Cycle Token]**. "I'm not an enemy of the Empire or the Templars! I accidentally unearthed these buildings, but we thought they were long abandoned!"

Using the token as credentials seemed like the best route. It had gotten him out of similar situations inside the Centurion lighthouse, even if the energy sentinels back then were nothing compared to this so-called servant.

Exposing his bloodline was more likely to backfire than not. Even Zac didn't know whether Karz joined the Selvari as part of a plot or if he truly became the Emperor's enemy. But to the outside world, his ancestor had publicly been part of the Sindris clan for hundreds of thousands of years and greatly assisted them in slowing down the Limitless Empire's advances. If this servant recognized the Void Emperor bloodline, she would most likely know it as a high-priority enemy.

'It's pointless! These servants are lunatics who have given up on everything to serve. Their soul, their self, even reincarnation! Their minds have fused with their Emperor's mad crusade; they can't be reasoned with.'

"A flawed creature exiled from the lower planes think they can understand our undertaking, our sacrifice? Impudent." Read Web Novels Online Free -

Zac didn't have the chance to react before a flash of light preceded blinding pain. Esmeralda's mark had been destroyed, taking a chunk of flesh with it. There didn't seem to be any Dao behind the attack, and Zac's dual constitutions would normally have healed such a wound in no time. And yet, Zac felt cracks spread from the scorched wound as a mysterious force destroyed him from within. His Hidden Nodes fought back, but it did little to help. It felt like he was being banished by the universe, crumbling bit by bit.

'What should I do?' Zac's Draugr half frantically asked Esmeralda while struggling to slow down the spread.

'I told you, escape, whatever it takes! Eternal Servants have become a part of faith based on endless conquest, where everyone not sharing their goal is an enemy. They're almost immortal, but they can only exist where the Imperial Faith does. If you escape the Hall of Service, it shouldn't be able to follow.'

'Shouldn't?!'

"What do I know? I'm only going on hearsay. I've always been extremely careful not to trigger these things any time I've visited a place that might hold one. And before you complain, this isn't my fault! Eternal Servants are only supposed to guard critical functions and holy relics of the Limitless Empire,

not hang around in long-forgotten forgotten training camps. Stumbling onto one was as likely as finding a pureblood dragon napping inside the temple.'

Zac didn't get the chance to ask anything else as a wave of weakness he hadn't felt in years swept through him. His connection with his other body had been severed, reducing his shot at survival even further. Sweat poured down his back as he held up the token, silently enduring the pain. The Eternal Servant looked at the token, and Zac's heart sank when she slowly shook her head.

"Stolen valor and heterogeneity, a parasite feasting on our history."

More cracks opened across Zac's body as the chamber's restrictive array joined the wound to reject his existence. Zac knew he was out of options, and a primordial aura exploded from his body. The Void suffocated the invading force, drastically slowing down his slow and agonizing death. The large hall was instantly covered in trees from **[Apex Jungle]** as the array failed to contain the Void.

The skill was still torn apart with prejudice by the chamber's latent power. It didn't matter. A fraction of a second was all Zac needed. He had conjured a tree on top of his position, whisking him away. The Void Energy had failed to pass through the faith barrier barring his way back, so he emerged right before the spatial gate at the opposite side of the building.

Its Spatial Energy was far greater, and there was no telling what waited on the other side of the shimmering film. Most likely, it would malfunction from having lost connection with its other end. Rolling the dice was better than staying. His gambit was as much a way to gauge her reaction to his bloodline as an actual escape plan—her reaction would decide whether he stepped through the gate.

The burgeoning Killing Intent that almost twisted the pure nature of the immense Faith Energy was all the answer Zac needed. And yet, Zac didn't step through. A spear holding a sea of death and boundless conviction had torn through the faith barrier on the other side of the hall like it was made of paper.

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Propelling it forward was Joanna, radiating unbending faith that bravely fought against the far-greater Imperial Faith latently emitted by the Eternal Servant. Joanna's faith rapidly transformed into an illusory avatar, also pointing a spear at the servant, an ability Zac had never seen before.

Everything about the avatar was blurry and hollow except the eyes. They held a sea of blood and mountains of corpses. The monstrous accumulation of death and carnage made the whole chamber shake, causing disruptions to its arrays. Even the Eternal Servant seemed to take the threat seriously, forming a radiant shield made from pure faith.

'Go!'

Zac followed Joanna's desperate urging, except not in the way she hoped. She wanted to use some hidden method to exchange her life for his, but his conscience couldn't stand for such a thing. This wasn't the battlefield where death waited around every corner. He was the one who had been too desperate for power, unsealing something that should have remained buried. How could he let someone else take the fall for his greed?

Madness shone in Zac's eyes as he shot toward the Eternal Spirit for a pincer attack. Of course, he held no delusions that their attacks would be able to harm this being. However, he did have something that had a small shot at creating an opening. A box radiating both Merit and Mara appeared in his hands, and he rapidly began undoing its seals.

It was the very box Esmeralda gave him when she and Lova first visited him in the Perennial Vastness, having just stolen it from the ghost temple where he got his **[Lucky Beads]**. Zac had kept the box by his side since he got it, occasionally infusing it with his Dao to whittle away at the sinister energies inside. Years had passed, and his efforts had barely yielded any results. It was to be expected since Lova had said it would take centuries of work before the calamitous item could become a Dharmic Instrument.

He'd never considered using it during his many desperate situations. After all, the cursed item clearly had some form of sentience that resisted his refinement. It was more likely to target him than his enemies if he undid the seals. However, this was the best thing he could think of. Maybe faith and sin would cancel each other out, giving him and Joanna a chance to escape.

Another flash of light dashed any hopes of opening Pandora's box and unleashing a storm of mutually assured destruction. The Eternal Servant

proved that neither Void nor hidden aces mattered before utmost power. Zac had been transported to Joanna's side, and they were forced to the ground under an intense suppression. Meanwhile, the Eternal Servant was holding the box, which seemed to struggle to escape her grasp.

"You—" Joanna said while fighting against the pressure.

"You know me better than that," Zac smiled, knowing what she wanted to say. "How did you figure out I was in trouble?"

"I suddenly saw through the barrier and acted on instinct," Joanna said. "Maybe my Faith Energy resonated with this room."

"Thank you for trying. Sorry for getting you dragged into this mess," Zac sighed, maintaining a façade of helplessness as he sought other ways out.

"I have no regrets, except you not taking the chance to escape."

"Don't be too sad," the entity said, and Zac's heart lurched upon seeing her throw the box with the force of a cannonball.

Zac felt a powerful force crash into his back the next moment. Lying on the ground was the box, having been spat out of the other exit. Zac wryly smiled as he picked up the box, seeing a set of Faith-based seals had been added. He wasn't opening this thing anytime soon.

As expected, escaping or defeating this unfathomable guardian was futile. Everything had been under her control from the beginning, which was incredibly good news. After all, they were still alive.

"This was all a test?"

"I figured I could use the toad's disdain of my mental faculties to get the answers I needed," the servant calmly said. "Only at the edge of death can you see a man's true nature. And if you couldn't overcome such a small hiccup, I could only assume the Emperor's voice was an enemy in disguise. There's no lack of forces trying to sabotage our undertaking."

"So, did we pass?" Zac asked.

The Eternal Servant ignored the question and turned to Joanna. "You carry the legacy of Godking Eyler. Your path is bound to be filled with struggle, but

that is the case for any worthy goal. Are you willing to suffer to save this man?"

"I am."—

"Then go," the servant said, and a nearby gateway lit up. "Pass the trial and prove your faith, and you can both leave. Of course, you're free to leave on your own. The templars owe the Emperor's Spear that much."

"I'll be back," Joanna said and flashed away.

Zac smiled with relief when Joanna disappeared through the gate. It wasn't that he was confident in Joanna's ability to pass whatever test waited on the other side, but he believed she would be safe whether he lived or died. As for the Eternal Servant's promise, he treated it as air. Imperial Faith was already digging into his body now that Joanna had left.

"Your bloodline carries dangerous implications," the servant said. "I cannot tell whether your existence is a blessing or a curse. You're a variable that shouldn't exist. The whispers from the past urged us to help you, but I can't ascertain whether it's the right path. Not even the Emperor's word can supersede the undertaking, and the eddies of time have created uncertainties."

"What can I do to nudge your judgment in my favor?" Zac sighed.

"First, how fares the empire?"

"That's..." Zac hesitated. "It's gone. Has been for a very, very long time. The Emperor awakened the System and disappeared, ushering in the Dark Ages. There was nothing left when the Heavens returned. No one seems to know exactly what happened back then."

Zac steeled himself, afraid the Eternal Servant would go berserk. But he also didn't dare lie.

"Flesh and stone crumble. Faith remains. I can sense it. How marvelous. It's too early, but the Zenith approaches," the servant said as she looked to the sky. Only much later did she speak up again.

"Explain how you awakened this realm without the mark."

Zac felt like the servant had dug another pit for him to jump into. The burning purpose of Laondio's Imperial Destiny made up the very core of the Eternal Servant's being. Meanwhile, he had rejected that path to forge his own, even using the Imperial Destiny as fuel. If that wasn't heresy, then what was?

Even then, he dove into the explanation he'd already arranged in his mind. He didn't hide much, explaining how he'd attracted the wisp of the Emperor when using the Tribulation Throne. It required him to partly expose the connection with his other half, but Zac suspected the Eternal Servant already had a decent idea of his situation.

"You rejected the Imperial Destiny yet were blessed by it," the servant said, shaking her head. Another silence passed before she spoke up again.

"Nothing is as it should be, so I'll remain neutral. The Eternal Pillar is rising, and you came to the Halls of Service in search of power. Very well. Go ahead."

"What?" Zac exclaimed with disbelief as the pressure disappeared. He felt like a mouse caught by a cat, only released to be toyed with again. "You'll help open the other temples?"

"Of course not. Destiny led you here, so I will give you an opportunity to plunder our temples," the servant said as five of the more exquisite steeles in the hall lit up. "Of course, you will have to prove your worthiness by taking on the test of knighthood. Only those who pass the pilgrimage qualify to join our order. You must do the same."

"Pick one of the five?" Zac said, looking at the spatial gates that had opened up before the steles.

"The Pilgrimage of the Empyrean Chalice will test all aspects of a Templar. Mind, Body, Heart, Strength, and Faith. Pass three, and you may live. Pass four, and I will let you use your accumulated merit to trade for opportunities. Pass all five, and I will fully awaken the Halls of Service for you and your subordinates."

"Only three to pass?" Zac asked to confirm.

He didn't have much hope in passing all five, seeing as he had no faith to speak off. But three or even four seemed more than doable, considering he was quite confident in all of them.

"Don't look down on our Order," the servant said. "I can see that the Imperial Tutor has widened the path, but that does not solely come with benefits. There is a weakness in you and your subordinates. And weakness means death on the battlefield."

"Fine. Any order is fine?" Zac slowly said and walked toward the stele with the ancient rune for Strength after getting an affirmative nod.

Zac only stopped right before the swirling gate, which still didn't give any hint of what waited on the other side. He turned back, looking at the flickering mass of faith and power. "How should I address you?"

"Your beast was right about one thing. I discarded my name when I took the Eternal Vow," the spirit said, cocking her head. "You can call me Instructor, provided you survive."

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Chapter 1196: Pilgrimage of Strength

"Stop, it's okay!" Zac shouted, using Dao to cut through the sandstorm's roar.

Zac kept a calm demeanor, but he had to hold back tears of relief when memories and power came rushing through the **[Omega Link]**. Looking death in the eye and having his link severed had almost thrown him into a pit of despair, one that only worsened when Joanna broke through the gate in an unexpected burst of violence. Not knowing whether the Eternal Servant had killed his other half, he could only urge his remaining sealbearers to run from the taboo being they'd awoken.

"What's going on?" Carl asked, warily looking around with bow in hand.

"That's..." Zac hesitated. "I got word from the other side. The guardian spirit didn't kill Zac and Joanna. It chose to test them instead, and it'll all be fine if Zac passes."

"What about Joanna?" Emily asked.

"The spirit seemed to recognize her heritage. She's been given an opportunity instead."

"We should have known," Ogras exhaled as he appeared from the shadows. "The Heavens wouldn't let its darling fall in such an ignoble way. Should we head back?"

Zac gave it some thought. "Just you. Everyone else, please head back to the base for now. We'll call everyone back if Zac manages to unlock the Halls of Service. Of course, I understand if you wish to pass after recent events."

"Are you sure you don't need help? What's going on?" Emily asked with a low voice.

"It'll be fine. I have certain restrictions placed on me," Zac whispered. "Only Ogras is exempt."

"Fine, but just call if you need our assistance!" Emily said before leading the others through the storm.

Zac and Ogras turned into streaks that tore through the sand, quickly reappearing on the outskirts of the Ensolus Ruins.

"Come out," Zac grunted. "I need an explanation."

A tired and shamefaced Esmeralda soon appeared. *'This doesn't make sense. An Eternal Servant isn't supposed to retain so much of their identity, making deals and using misdirection. Their method of immortality comes at a steep price; they are supposed to be mindless killing machines guarding their domain. Could it be an Array Spirit that has lost its mind? No, it's too powerful, and there's no mistaking that aura.'* The most update novels are published on N(o)vel(F)ire.net

"Well, whatever's going on, we'll just have to play by her rules. Can we do something to help?" Ogras asked.

"Maybe," Zac said, explaining the five-part pilgrimage and the rules.

"Shouldn't be a problem if some ancient trainees could pass, no?" Ogras said with a raised brow.

"That's the thing. The spirit had seen my strength and still didn't seem convinced I'd survive the trial," Zac said, turning to Esmeralda. "Have you heard of the trial? Or do you know the strength or stage required to become a templar?"

'I don't know about grades, but I know you can't become a templar before reaching a certain level of power. Being baptized and becoming a Templar meant joining their legions—you can't have weaklings creating weaknesses in your formation. Even if the order accepted a talent at a very young age, they would only be called a seed or a trainee until they met the prerequisites.'

"So it could be a set-difficulty trial?" Ogras frowned, voicing Zac's worries.

Zac hadn't even considered that possibility when stepping through the spatial gate. He was so happy to escape death's clutches that he forgot to consider the ramifications. This wasn't an individual trial designed by the System, which was often calibrated to your level or grade. It was an entry test to an elite army, so it could have a set difficulty level regardless of who took it.

'I remember!' Esmeralda suddenly exclaimed. *'A historic remnant I visited had a poem. It mentioned ranks of a million Perfected Lords holding back the darkness.'*

"Perfected Lords? Peak D-grade?" Zac grimaced. [Read Web Novels Online Free](#) -

Zac might be able to pass a combat test designed for Peak D-grade templars by relying on the biggest advantage he had compared to ancient cultivators—Titles. Certainly, cultivators of the pre-System age weren't quite as unrefined or weak as Zac was initially led to believe. They could unlock their body's potential through various training regimens, lucky encounters, and devices like the Tribulation Throne.

Ultimately, those gains couldn't compare with the System's structured and perfected boosts through the Title System. An elite today, especially someone like Zac, who had such an extraordinary accumulation of titles, would hold a

clear advantage over the elites of that age. Adding all his other strengths, he should at least measure up to the weakest among the ancient Templars.

Zac was also confident in his soul, body, and heart, but he had to be realistic. His foundations were very good for his age and level. But compared to an elite candidate who might have tempered their minds and bodies for millennia, using the methods provided by the templars themselves? He couldn't even pass the Tribulation Throne without 'cheating,' and that opportunity wasn't designed to sift out the best of the best like the pilgrimage.

"How much time do you have? Are you in a temporal chamber or an Inheritance Realm?" Ogras asked.

"I think it's normal space. It feels like I'm standing in a real waiting room with my real body, though I can't confirm I'm not in an illusion. There's no temporal difference, though," Zac said as he looked around with his other half. The Spatial Gate had taken him to a chamber looking like a smaller version of the Hall of Service. The circular room was only ten meters across, holding five pathways instead of hundreds. "The first trial has a one-day deadline, but it hasn't begun ticking down. The trial will start when I pass through another doorway."

"You could play it safe," Ogras offered. "Just hang around and cultivate until you're confident to keep going."

Zac slowly nodded. There was barely any Faith Energy in the chamber, which might explain why the link had been reinstated. Perhaps the trial areas were outside of the Eternal Servant's reach.

Staying put would throw a wrench in his plans, but it wouldn't ruin them altogether. His Draugr half wasn't trapped, so he could still go to the Imperial Graveyard. He could even pass items back and forth between his bodies through **[Purity of the Void]**, ensuring he wouldn't run out of cultivation materials.

"It might work, but I can't trust that servant. It might decide I failed because I took too long. I'd have to wait it out until the trial started to be safe. And there's no guarantee I won't be sent right back afterward," Zac muttered. "Well, we'll find out more after I step into the trial, though I might lose connection again."

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Not to mention, the very idea to back down from this challenge triggered a fierce reluctance in Zac's heart. It wasn't just about losing out on the benefits hidden in the other temples. It was about giving up on himself before he even tried, harming his Dao Heart and conviction.

"I'll just stick around in case you need some ideas," the demon offered.

"Thanks," Zac said before focusing on his human side.

The only thing in the trial waiting room was a copy of the large tablet representing the Pilgrimage of Strength. It had no rules or explanations written down, though the fierce aura emitted gave Zac a rough instinctual understanding of the trial. The Pilgrimage of Strength was a combat trial, as he'd expected, which was why Zac chose it. If he couldn't pass a trial of combat, the others would be absolutely hopeless. The amount of effort he'd have to put in would provide a baseline for the other trials.

Each gate lead to a different trial, depending on which path you took. For example, an offensive fighter like Zac wouldn't have to face the same challenge as a general. He only needed a glance to find the one suiting him—the Path of Carnage, whose doorway said '*salvation through slaughter*.' The record-holder of that path was called Sepum Eldor. His entry was just shy of two hours, which put him in third place overall on the stele. To appear on the stele's top 100, he needed to pass within 9 hours.

Zac wasn't planning on stalling things out, but he also wasn't in a hurry. He hadn't quite finished healing the wounds covering his body after his meeting with the Eternal Servant. Thankfully, it proved very easy since there was no lingering Dao fighting back, and he'd managed to make some guesses based on the stele.

Waiting any longer would harm his momentum and sow seeds of doubt in his heart. He got to his feet as durable bone enclosed his frame while **[Verun's Bite]** appeared in his hand. Sensing Zac's fighting intent, Haro emerged from the World Ring after having been scared by the servant's aura. Together, they stepped into the darkness of the Path of Carnage.

Zac felt a mysterious undulation before he found himself in a ruined town square. The buildings looked a lot like the intact remnants of the Ensolus Ruins, even if the environment was foreign. The sky was beyond anything Zac had ever seen—a whole continent shaped like a tube was staring down at

him. The horizon was equally marvelous. He could vaguely see the ground bending far in the distance.

He was inside a manmade world shaped like a tube with multiple layers. How many, Zac had no idea, but it was clear the world was under attack. A crack the size of a city loomed in the distance, exposing the environment to outer space. The sky was constantly lit up from the heated battle, and Zac could sense C-grade fluctuations that easily matched anything he'd experienced in the intersector war.

The world's defenders were holding the strongest enemies at bay, but raiding parties had slipped through the defensive lines and were wreaking havoc on the inner regions. There were screams and sounds of struggle, though the only nearby beings Zac could sense were civilians hiding in cellars around him.

The experience was incredibly real, even if it was an illusion or recording of some pre-System war. The ambient energy was tainted in a way that Zac had only encountered in his bloodline visions, and he could feel the rough state of the Heavens.

At the same time, it was more than a simple illusion. He was there as himself rather than taking someone's place, and the trial hadn't done anything to mess with his perception or memories. His Hidden Nodes were already in a constant state of cleansing against the mortal filth of the ancient era. It was highly likely he had physically stepped into the illusion like Janos during his trial rather than standing in some empty hallway with glazed-over eyes.

There were no quest prompts or clear guidelines, but Zac didn't need to wait long to find direction. Five humanoid warriors were rapidly approaching, flying at a low altitude. Each emitted fierce, archaic auras, yet Zac exhaled with relief. Real or not, the energy coursing through their pathways indicated they were Late Hegemons who had just stepped into the grade.

It was clear they were enemies. They were completely unfamiliar, yet their appearance triggered a deep-rooted hatred and desire for bloody vengeance. The trial was urging him on, though not with such intensity it could muddy his faculties. Zac restrained his aura as he observed the incoming quintet, remembering the sentence on the gate.

Did the Path of Carnage require him to slaughter these interlopers before they reached the town, thus saving the hiding civilians? Zac rose to the sky,

shooting straight for the enemies. He didn't bother with stealth or subterfuge against such a small group. They were just the first stage of the trial, so he needed to take them out before complications arose.

The ancient warriors looked surprised to find a Hegemon in this remote corner, and Zac gave them no chance to figure out a proper response. He activated multiple skills at once. The resilient trees trapped the raiders within **[Apex Jungle]**, whose size and natural formation had grown greater since reaching Middle D-grade. It was enough to stop the Hegemons from splitting up.

Meanwhile, Zac looked completely different as he moved in on his prey. The refined and expertly crafted bones of **[Ossuary Bulwark]** had gained a rough and brutal appearance, like someone had crammed together the sharpest and sturdiest bones from whatever animals they'd felled. And it was as though the souls of these fierce beasts had been trapped within the armor as primordial spirits kept jumping out of the bones before being pulled back in.

Even **[Verun's Bite]** had seen a small transformation, having grown one-half in size just like Zac, while the counterbalance teeth had multiplied. Furthermore, both armor and axe were covered in rough scripts that wriggled like worms, constantly changing to allude to different truths.

The enemy leader shouted something **[Primal Polyglot]** failed to decipher, but his meaning was obvious. All five raiders were fire cultivators, and the ancient jungle was consumed by a raging wildfire as five opposing domains overlapped. Their energy utilization was clearly not as refined as what you'd expect from modern skills, but the massive amounts of energy a Late Hegemon could wield more than made up for it.

Zac's trees were made from Life and Conflict rather than wood, and thus lacking any innate weakness against fire. Even then, **[Apex Jungle]** skill almost fully collapsed from the onslaught, while Zac was forced to expend a lot of energy to cut a path through the flames. He only managed to stop the raging flames just before they escaped the jungle and continued into the village.

The smell of burning flesh filled his armor, but Zac didn't mind. What did some burns matter when his enemies had fallen into his trap? **[Apex Jungle]** was a retaliatory skill, and hitting the whole forest at once would bring a calamity down on the raiders. Thousands of trees succumbed to the inferno, each unleashing a fierce axelight as a final act of defiance.

A beast tide made from Dao and energy had appeared in the conflagration, digging into the heart of the storm. The pyromancers barely had time to unleash their attacks before finding themselves attacked from every direction by hundreds of attacks holding Zac's Daos and immense attribute pool.

Zac felt a sense of cruel satisfaction upon seeing his opponent's confidence, taking his counter-attack head-on instead of splitting up. They somehow pulled back the sea of flames, transforming it into an impenetrable barrier. Their plan had some merit, considering the flames held enough energy to endure **[Apex Jungle]**'s death throes. However, they had failed to take into account **[Conformation of Supremacy]**.

The ninety-nine runes covering Zac's body skittered down his right arm, entering **[Verun's Bite]** before fusing with the swirling haze of **[Evolutionary Edge]**. His arm turned into a blur as he unleashed six attacks in rapid succession, each holding over fifteen runes. The blades formed by his skill looked different from usual, almost resembling waves of vengeful ghosts crammed together.

The attacks ignored the enemies hiding within the barrier, instead leaping into the densest accumulations of axelights targeting the flame curtain. A nudge made the primal spirits spread into the storm of incoming attacks. Zac shielded his eyes and braced himself for what was about to happen.

Even then, Zac felt as though a giant had punched him in his chest as one hundred spheres of destruction fused into an ephemeral sun formed by ninety-nine aspects of evolutionary brutality. Space trembled, and blinding white overwhelmed Zac's physical senses. Even the distant battles seemed to have stalled as the world bore witness to the display.

The sun disappeared as quickly as it formed, leaving an eerie silence in its wake. The sea of flames was gone, as was the barrier and its controllers. Zac rapidly blinked to regain his sight and turned into a blade that cut into the terrifying explosion's expanding shockwave. A swing of **[Verun's Bite]** decapitated a grievously wounded pyromancer, and another one died soon after from another swing from **[Evolutionary Edge]**.

It was jarring to fight without the certainty of Kill Energy. This time, Zac needed none. If anything, Zac was surprised one managed to survive. Let alone Late Hegemons just 15 levels above him; even Peak Hegemons would have to be careful when facing the supremacy of his Evolutionary Path put on full display.

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Chapter 1197: Weakness and Strength

Taking out five Late Hegemons rarely went so quickly or smoothly. Reaching that level was reserved for the top talents on the frontier. Even the weakest ones who'd reached such heights had millennia of experience and all kinds of tricks that had kept them alive during their cultivation. This had to be especially true with ancient cultivators, who accomplished the same without the System's help and the orderly progression envisioned by the Apostate of Order.

Zac only dared to use such a direct method because he'd seen how crude their skills were. They did possess runes that felt like proto-skills, but most of their energy manipulation was done manually. Complex multi-function skills you'd see in modern times were far too difficult to use, at least without long casting times. As such, they hadn't been ready to face such a powerful combination attack.

[Conformation of Supremacy] hadn't changed name since his epiphany, but almost nothing about it remained the same. The transformed skill had only unlocked one avatar upon reaching Early D-grade, which was the cause of his current appearance. It had no official name, but Zac called it the Ancestral form, and it didn't look very different even if he didn't use **[Ossuary Bulwark]**.

The skill didn't rely on a specific memory or impression, like the axe and shield he'd used with the old skill. The things he'd borrowed from his Dao Visions were ultimately outside help. The new skill was instead an imaginary avatar embodying his evolutionary path. It was the first human, born in an age before order or cultivation. A small creature surrounded by primordial beasts wielding the power to level mountains and swallow seas.

Despite humanity's lowly start, their tenacity and adaptability let them survive by slaying the beasts around them. And in a battle for survival, they found a

path to power. The beasts became weapons and armor, and the spirits of the fallen were tamed and turned into spiritual totems. And as the prey grew stronger, so did the ancestors.

The transformation's purpose was simple—large-scale destruction. The transformation didn't provide any attributes or boosts to one's Dao, though the transformed armor was slightly stronger than the original. The real benefit came from the wriggling runes, which provided both active and passive benefits. It was the active effect that had ended the battle in only a few seconds.

The runes could add an axe detonation to any of his cutting attacks or skills. The damage from the explosion was set, so a stronger attack wouldn't unleash a more powerful secondary strike. The explosion's radius, however, was based on the original strike's power and Dao empowerment. A full-powered swing could decimate everything within a hundred meters, not to mention the terrifying shockwave he could add to his D-grade finisher. That explosion stretched for over a mile, allowing it to take out a whole army as a side thought.

Even melee attacks could generate secondary blasts that would put any enemy under additional pressure. Thankfully, the runes could absorb any attack generated by **[Conformation of Supremacy]**, so the skill only resulted in mutual destruction when he'd exhausted all his ammunition.

Adding a weaker large-area effect to his attacks was a great way to whittle down defenses or take out large numbers of enemies in a cost-effective manner. However, the Ancestral form could also create a terrifying stacked attack when enough blades overlapped. It was almost impossible to line up things as well as just now, but stacking attacks before detonating dozens at once had become a common strategy. At the very least, a stacked explosion would exhaust some defensive measures while often creating an opening to finish the job.

The passive effect hadn't come into play during his blitz. The spirit totems within the runes could autonomously attack any enemies that came within a few hundred meters. These attacks didn't expend the rune, provided the target didn't manage to destroy or exhaust it. Retaining more runes meant more automated attacks, turning Zac into a mobile turret. Zac could even detonate the beasts mid-attack to trigger their explosion.

Of course, the skill wasn't without limitations. For one, the runes were a shared resource, affecting the second form he unlocked when evolving the skill to Middle Mastery. It took almost twenty seconds for a rune to form, and each cost a significant amount of energy. In other words, it would take just over half an hour to top up his reserves, provided he didn't use any more during recovery.

Resetting the skill couldn't bypass this cooldown whether he used Cosmic or Void Energy. The only exception was **[Arcadian Crusade]**. Its ability to reduce cooldowns worked extremely well with **[Conformation of Supremacy]**, allowing for a full recharge within its duration.

It was also impossible for Zac to control the passive effect. Like his Evolutionary Stance, totems were everchanging and unpredictable. It was like the skill was equipped with a random number generator, where Zac only had a slight edge over his opponents since the attacks were limited to actions based on his path.

There were no signs of more enemies, and rummaging through the pockets of the two raiders who survived the blast yielded nothing. Zac looked around with a frown. Should he just keep going, picking a random battle to assist or settlement to save? Then what were the criteria for passing? It couldn't possibly be to rebuff the whole invasion since the Monarchs fighting by the breach would decide that matter.

A tremendous roar shook the artificial world, and a scorching wave swept the area with such speed Zac didn't have time to react. Something entered his body, glomming onto his Soul Aperture. Both **[Immutability of Eoz]** and **[Purity of the Void]** furiously fought against the burning brand without much success. His soul had been fully sealed, barring him from using his Daos. It would take at least ten hours to whittle it down.

Zac frowned as he inspected the infernal sigil. Losing his Daos was extremely punishing to someone like him, who had ample Mental Energy, high accomplishments, and a full set of skills perfectly tuned to his path. And It wasn't just his Daos that had been sealed off. Two of his bloodline abilities stemmed from his Soul Aperture; **[Void Mountain]** and **[Spiritual Void]**.

The latter was an important component of dealing with higher-leveled enemies, and the former was perhaps his most versatile ace. Losing them and his Daos at once would drastically weaken him. Unwilling to wait half a day,

Zac opted to take a risk and remove it with Void Energy. The Void Servant had already seen him use his bloodline, and the illusions wouldn't tell anyone.

The burning sigil shuddered the moment he roused his bloodline, and Zac was beset by a scream of mortal peril before he even had a chance to activate **[Void Zone]**. Ignoring everything else, Zac flashed away, pushing **[Skystriker]** to its limits. His quick reflexes narrowly saved his life as a streak of flames came at him from outside the world tube. It entered through the breach and crossed the equivalent distance of a country in less than a second.

The world shook, and Zac desperately activated **[Empyrean Aegis]**. A golden wheel appeared behind his back, but the Early D-grade skill and its barrier cracked like an egg before the tremendous shockwave that swept through the area. Thankfully, the skill had absorbed enough energy to only leave Zac with some broken bones and damaged armor.

Zac looked back at the mile-wide crater and its still-burning flames that could incinerate the dimensional fabric. That attack definitely came from a Monarch. It looked like the burning seal had sensed danger from his bloodline and become a homing device. Zac's back was slick with sweat as he got to his feet and kept going, afraid another attack was just around the corner.

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Thankfully, a huge golden barrier sprung up to block any follow-up from the unidentified Monarch. A distorted voice spread through the world. Zac couldn't make out any words, but he understood its meaning. It was an order to intercept an army of elementals that had slipped through the cracks. Zac immediately set out, happy to add more distance from the crater.

Zac was alive and only lightly maimed, but it was clear his bloodline had been effectively sealed. Was it the Eternal Servant manipulating the trial from the shadows, or was it some built-in safeguard against taboo techniques? Taking out energy beings like elementals without the help of Dao was a headache, but he didn't have much of a choice.

It took ten minutes of rapid flight to spot his target. There were around a thousand of them, and a tenth had stepped into D-grade. The lineup looked intimidating, but the warband was actually weaker than the group of raiders

from before. Only the leader in the front was a Late Hegemon, and it had ten Middle Hegemon lieutenants.

A hundred D-grade opponents would still be rough without the assistance of Dao, especially if the smaller elementals could help empower their elders with war arrays. Even then, Zac didn't feel overly worried as he descended on the elemental army. After travel and a few minutes of observation, Zac had already recovered half of his runic sigils, and they'd be enough to take a bite out of their numbers.

Roars and earthshattering explosions shook the area as Zac dismantled enemies scores at a time. Early Hegemons were almost helpless before him, and three Middle Hegemons fell in rapid succession. The Elementals cared nothing for their lives, though, maniacally unleashing everything they had. The leader also foiled Zac's ambush before disappearing among its subordinates.

Zac was durable but not unkillable. The damage was quickly adding up, and **[Empyrean Aegis]** was still on cooldown. Worse, **[Surging Rebirth]** was hobbled inside the trial since there was no Kill Energy to power its mid-battle recovery. He had no choice but to switch tactics after culling a third of the army in his opening salvo.

The creaking groans of the wild replaced the explosions and roars from spirit totems. His bone armor transformed again, suddenly looking like fossilized bark. Stony branches jutted out here and there, and his helmet sprouted a small crown of leaves. This was the form of **[Conformation of Supremacy]** he'd unlocked when upgrading the skill to Middle D-grade. New novel chapters are published on NovelFire.net

The forest he'd held back on summoning sprung up with unprecedented vigor. Meanwhile, dozens of vines burst from Zac's left arm, each rushing for nearby targets like beasts on the hunt. Few of the elementals could withstand Haro's bloodthirsty assault. Even the Early Hegemons lasted less than a minute despite Haro also being Early D-grade.

The Heavenrender vine had greedily absorbed Zac's teachings over the past year, becoming an eager participant in the war. Haro hated the Kan'Tanu because of their aura, and he hated them even more after Zac explained they were allies with Yselio. Haro had indiscriminately slaughtered any Kan'Tanu he saw since then, not even sparing the weakest E-grade warslaves. Read Web Novels Online Free -

The plant's kill count was simply terrifying, yet it had only managed to reach halfway into Early D-grade. Zac hoped a combination of treasures and opportunities in the Ensolus ruins would let him step into Middle Hegemony, even if it seemed like a long shot.

The elementals set the whole area alight in a desperate attempt to fight back. It didn't stop their rapid collapse. Haro was like a fish in the sea, freely entering and emerging from trees to target his prey from unexpected angles. And no matter how many times they burnt off his iron-like vines, the Heavenrender Vine would just produce more. And with each kill, Zac felt a small amount of energy enter his body.

It wasn't Kill Energy, but a benefit from **[Conformation of Supremacy]**. The second avatar of supremacy lacked any active attack, but it added significant benefits to drawn-out battles. For one, the Ent Elder form increased his defenses, providing a passive alternative to the long-cooldown **[Empyrean Aegis]**. The main benefit came from his plant-based attacks, whether they were his plant companion or skills like **[Apex Jungle]** and **[Primal Edict]**.

Like himself, they received buffs to their durability. More importantly, his enemies would become fertile soil, providing nutrients for him and his plants. Each kill provided a small amount of pure, vibrant energy that could heal wounds and recover energy. The effect on his skills was equally interesting, as it helped his summoned plants propagate and grow faster.

The hundreds of elementals fiercely fought back, but trees were already sprouting to replace those that had burnt up—without any energy being drawn from his Cosmic Core. Zac wouldn't simply sit around, and he began moving through the jungle to deal with the stronger foes.

Ten minutes later, Zac floated above a field of devastation. He hadn't expected the elementals to have the ability to join and rapidly increase their strength before the unstable fusion resulted in a tremendous explosion. Zac was starting to realize why there was such a huge difference in times on the ladder. The previous battle against five strong opponents could only take so long. You either won, or you'd have to flee.

Dealing with a whole army was different. Few candidates would be able to endure the onslaught of a thousand opponents, forcing them to fight with guerilla tactics. Such a strategy could take hours instead of minutes. The weakest would have to wait even longer, avoiding danger until they'd whittled

down the burning curses. For the first-place holder to only need two hours, he must have crushed each stage like Zac had until now.

Ten minutes was acceptable, and he'd retained most of his energy and cooldowns for the upcoming battles. Just as he was about to look for targets, a familiar roar shook the world. Zac grimaced when he saw fiery sigils appearing around every single one of his Skill Fractals. He couldn't help but look at the fierce fighting in the distance with complaint. If the opponent could send out large-scale curses, why couldn't some templar bigshot provide him with some blessings?

Of course, the situation didn't look good. The defenders were losing ground, and the artificial world was becoming more of a hellscape by the minute.

It looked like he'd given himself extra work for nothing, holding back on using his stronger skills. There was nothing to do but keep going. He'd already received another order, and he moved further into the trial. This time, Zac was intercepted thrice before reaching his real targets. Thankfully, these victories didn't add more burning seals to his body.

Occasionally, he passed defenders desperately trying to prevent the base's seemingly inevitable defeat, either in groups or alone. A lone templar had even lost all his limbs yet flew straight into a group of raiders to detonate his Cosmic Core. Zac couldn't help but be swept up in their frenzied desire to protect their home.

One group of invaders after another was torn apart with brutal efficiency. The third task was passed after an hour, awarding Zac with a curse that lowered his attributes by over thirty percent. Zac couldn't even see the breach any longer, his vision blocked by dense plumes of smoke.

A fourth group was dealt with, and a wave of flames incinerated his equipment. Zac almost went berserk upon seeing **[Verun's Bite]** being reduced to ash. Thankfully, his mental connections with Verun and Haro confirmed it was just part of the illusion. Finally, Zac even lost access to his Cosmic Core, where nothing but a weak trickle seeped through a burning barrier.

Zac was like a mortal as he stumbled through a burning forest, sweat pouring down his soot-covered face. He couldn't even defend himself against the ambient heat, let alone the flames that had spread everywhere. His eyes scanned the sky as he advanced under the cover of the smoky curtain, his

heart thumping any time he heard the clashes of battle or eruptions of energy in the area.

He may be restrained, but the enemies were not. Even an E-grade cultivator could snap his neck like a twig in his current state. Had he misunderstood the trial? Was he supposed to deal with the seals before he kept going? No, it couldn't be. Their resilience made it impossible unless they were susceptible to Faith Energy.

Zac eventually had to give up. Not on the trial but on reaching the next checkpoint. He was already approaching his limits and would be burnt to a crisp if he kept forcing it. Even if he hated the idea of adding twelve hours to his tally to deal with the seals, it was still well within the trial's deadline.

A deep thud and a groan made Zac stop in place before he could set out in search of a hideout. A raider commander had fallen to the ground, his body riddled with wounds. His core and pathways had been shattered, and his soul was already dispersing. In a sense, the fallen warrior was a mortal just like him. The raider seemed content to lie down and wait for death until he spotted Zac behind a tree. A cruel smile appeared on his face as he struggled to his feet.

Eyes locked, and Zac knew he'd found the final boss.

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Chapter 1198: Body

The acrid smell of salt, ash, and despair was overwhelming. Zac furiously tugged, and the desperate struggle ended with a crunching snap. The raider's grip on Zac's forearm weakened as his final vestiges of life escaped his lips. Zac lay panting on the ground, too tired and weak to even push the corpse off his chest. A tremendous rumble forced his eye open, and he could vaguely see a river of stars sweep the flames away.

"Salvation through slaughter," Zac wheezed as the world faded.

He was back in the waiting room, lying right before the stele. Seals and soot were removed, but the wounds covering his body remained. The weakness was swept away by the rivers of truth and energy. And yet, Zac didn't move for over a minute, his hands shaking as he blankly stared at the ceiling.

Zac had lost count of how many times he'd come as close to death. And yet, the brutal, almost intimate, grapple had shaken him. It was the utter lack of fallbacks, of feeling truly exposed. At that moment, they'd been like beasts wrestling in the mud, caught in a deadly dance where Attributes, Dao, and hidden aces meant nothing. Even his refined technique meant little without the energy and Dao to enable its movements. It had been a brutal brawl where ferocity and experience reigned, and Zac only barely managed to get the upper hand.

Was this the weakness the Eternal Servant referred to? Even frontier cultivators were coddled in a way you wouldn't see back in the day. The path toward the Terminus had become gamified, and there were often safeguards in place to fall back on. Like how the System teleported his whole army across the sector when a Monarch was bearing down on them.

He had carved his path in a way that the scions of the Heartlands wouldn't understand, but even he had benefitted greatly from the System's arrangements. It had even personally intervened to save his life on multiple occasions. There was always that comforting notion in the back of his mind that the System valued his existence and would step in to protect its investment. The ancient cultivators never had that safety net. Each step was a struggle against the Heavens, the Earth, and yourself, and death was a constant companion on their journey.

Zac eventually exhaled and sat up, feeling surprisingly balanced after the surge of fear and adrenaline had settled. The experience had helped unearth an aspect of himself he thought had died years ago. He didn't know exactly what to do with it, but he felt there was something in it that spoke to his Daos of Life and Death and possibly his techniques.

The stele's energy was gradually fading, indicating he needed to leave for the next trial before the one-day deadline was up. Zac tried to glean something from its aura in case it was like the Gates of Rebirth. Zac didn't sense anything he could use, so he turned to inspect the surroundings.

The waiting room wasn't exactly the same as before. There were only four doors upon his return, none of them looking the same as before. Instead, they led to the four remaining trials. The trial stele had also been updated, adding a new time without a name.

Seventeenth place with a time of 3 hours and 34 minutes. It was a respectable yet disappointing number and not what Zac had expected when comparing himself with pre-System cultivators. He couldn't blame the trial difficulty for taking almost twice as long as the top name. The challenge had obviously been adjusted for his level rather than a Peak Hegemon. The final clash was precisely calibrated to his level.

Zac could have shaved off another ten or twenty minutes if he'd known about the seals and their order beforehand, using more of his firepower before it was taken away. Still, it would only have improved his placement with a few spots at best, definitely not enough to enter the top ten. You really couldn't look down on the ancient cultivators.

The experience was both humbling and uplifting. The seventeenth spot was most likely as good as it would get, but Zac was confident in passing at least two more trials after the Pilgrimage of Combat. The only thing that left Zac wary was the lack of an exit.

Zac glanced at the right-most door, whose arch was filled with Faith Energy. Would he really have to step into that trial no matter what, even if passing three was enough to satisfy the Eternal Servant? Was that the real reason the Eternal Servant doubted his chances of survival?

The burns and cuts covering his body were gradually mended over the next hour. Meanwhile, he went over his experience and the lessons he'd learned. Finally ready, Zac turned his attention to the four doors, his gaze eventually stopping at the Pilgrimage of Body. Out of Soul, Heart, and Body, Zac was most confident in his triple-empowered constitution.

The stacked benefits of two constitutions, terrifyingly high Endurance and Vitality, and a full deck of Hidden Nodes made him almost as durable as a Beast King. Zac got to his feet and placed his hand on the stele, adding his name to the ladder before stepping through the gate.

A flicker transported him to a new environment. He was still in a waiting room, though this one looked slightly different. It was a murky, rectangular hall surrounded by rough stone walls, the ceiling only three meters. There were no

gates, only crude openings leading into winding hallways. He'd been transported to the middle of a maze, by the looks of it. There was no aura of death, but the gloomy atmosphere made it seem as though he'd been thrown into a guarded crypt.

The teleportation had left him severely weakened, even with his connection to his Draugr half remaining intact. A quick calculation indicated that all attributes from skills, classes, levels, and Daos had been sealed. All his items were gone, replaced by a simple set of pants and tunic. Unsurprisingly, his connection with Haro had been blocked, stopping the free influx of Vigor.

Even then, the situation was better than Zac had expected. This was a test of the body, so all attributes from his constitutions remained. Better yet, the trial considered the attributes from his titles as a part of his body's strength. That had to give him a leg up on the competition.

The trial stele was placed in the middle of a small basin, making it look like a fountain. The basin was filled with a shimmering liquid, which felt like a candle holding back the labyrinth's gloom. The liquid emitted a fragrant aroma that left Zac's cells shuddering with desire. Just taking a deep breath of the steam rising from the waters filled him with energy. It was clearly a tonic that could rapidly recover his Vigor, but it was slowly dissipating.—

The stele was equally inscrutable as the previous one, its aura only giving a vague hint of the trial's rules. He had to pass before the pond ran out of elixir, relying only on his body. In other words, the trial had already started. Between the limited rest time and being thrown right into the action, the fallback scheme to hide in the waiting room until Ultom was rendered moot.

The arrangement could be part of an overall score where rest time was added to the tally. Or perhaps the Eternal Servant had managed to overhear his earlier discussion and threw a wrench in the plans. It didn't matter much to Zac. The first trial had only left him with surface wounds, and the many restrictions meant his reserves were almost full. Read Web Novels Online Free -

The ladder results didn't give Zac any idea of how difficult the trial was. The entries were graded with points, and Zac had no way of knowing how the points were tallied. The only other clue was six grooves on the stele, the number matching the six pathways. Zac conveyed the situation, agreeing with Ogras's assessment that the trial required him to retrieve a key from each passage.

Zac immediately set out, picking a path at random. Desolate wails filled with hunger emerged from all six corridors the moment he entered the maze, and the gloom seemed to grow deeper. That much couldn't shake Zac's heart, but he did keep a careful pace as he assessed the dangers. Zac peered into the dark tunnels, finding no traps or beasts.

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He soon rounded a corner, and the weak light from the starting point was replaced by darkness. The lack of a light source didn't do much to limit Zac's vision as a Hegemon. However, the darkness almost felt like a blanket on his shoulders.

No, not almost.

Zac inspected the gloom, finding no Dao to explain the very real pressure he felt. He did, however, notice specks of dust blending into the darkness. Zac waved his hand, creating a gust in the hallway. It had no effect on the microscopic motes, but that didn't mean they remained unmoving. They were drawn to Zac like moths to the flame.

Suddenly, both **[Purity of the Void]** and **[Immutability of Eoz]** came alive, releasing cleansing waves through his body. It was only then Zac realized that hundreds of motes had already snuck into his body without his notice. The two Hidden Nodes working in tandem meant the specks were both considered hostile energy and a curse. And they were resilient.

The Hidden Node's tireless work only managed to cleanse a third of the specks that infiltrated his body before they seeped into his cells. They fused with the golden swirls like parasites and began generating weak ripples. It was no wonder he felt like something was weighing on him.

It wasn't quite a gravitational restriction, but the effect was close. Each added mote felt like a small droplet of lead added to cells. It would be a while before it became a problem, but Zac had only explored a small corner. He might be unable to even move by the time he reached the edge.

It wasn't hard to find the solution. He only needed to rouse his constitution, and the golden hurricanes began grinding down the specks, displaying an efficacy almost matching his Hidden Nodes. It wasn't the vibrant life of his

Void Vajra Constitution that cleansed the specks, though. It was Vigor that erased them through mutual destruction.

There were an endless number of racial perks, bloodlines, constitutions, specialty cores, and other things that could strengthen one's body. These advantages could have all kinds of effects, but almost all forms of body tempering and innate advantages would result in higher amounts of Vigor. This was true for Zac long before he awakened his bloodlines and constitutions, where his Draugr side greatly outshone his human half.

In other words, measuring Vigor was a decently equitable way to test one's body. Even those whose body tempering came with attribute advantages instead had an advantage. Zac believed he could carry more than twice as much dust as most trial takers, thanks to his titles, and keep a higher pace.

The hungry wails steadily drew closer. Zac used the sound as a beacon, believing it was the crux to quickly passing the trial. Following the sound led him down paths with the greatest amount of restraining dust, and the density only kept increasing. That didn't mean the side paths were dead ends. Esmeralda posited that all roads lead to the key, with the guarded path being significantly shorter. Google search NovelFire(.)net

This gave the trialtaker options—take the short, difficult route for a better result or take the route with fewer restrictions at the cost of sacrificing time. Some dexterity-based cultivators might even see better results choosing such a strategy. It was an easy choice for Zac, though he began doubting himself after coming face to face with the howling guardian.

The ghost looked just like the unthinking, often malevolent wraiths that could appear in sealed environments. The ghastly figures formed from the Autarch's resentment in the Centurion Lighthouse was one variant. This creature was instead made from the same curse that suffused the labyrinth. Just being in the same corridor flooded his body with sealing dust, to the point Zac had to spend twice as much Vigor as before.

The wraith noticed Zac's presence at the same time, and it released a gleeful howl. Zac almost found the situation funny, wondering if he should be looking for cherries as the wraith hurtled toward him. But it was difficult to laugh, seeing just how much black gunk the creature had accumulated.

The closer they came, the faster the ghost got, and Zac unleashed a powerful punch after confirming he couldn't circumvent or outrun it. It accomplished nothing, but it felt better than just passively letting it pounce.

A flood of darkness entered his body, greedily sapping his strength. The golden swirls turned into a murky brown and were almost forced to a halt from the accumulation. Zac groaned, and his knees almost buckled from the immense weight suddenly tacked onto his body. Zac unleashed his constitution to its fullest, triggering a war between light and darkness throughout his body.

Zac's vast reserves of Vigor were gradually gaining an edge, though it was a pyrrhic victory. Zac took a few stilted steps, feeling as though his muscles and tendons were full of rust. The good news was that the darkness found it harder and harder to squeeze into his cells as his restrictions increased, making it easier for his Hidden Nodes to deal with them.

Eventually, Zac was able to run again, at which point he suppressed his cells and **[Immutability of Eoz]**. Only **[Purity of the Void]** kept toiling away. He only had so much Vigor to spend, and the Eoz Hidden Node used it as fuel, too. Meanwhile, **[Purity of the Void]** only ran on Void Energy, which he had ample reserves of.

The Void Node barely managed to maintain the status quo with the occasional burst of Vigor. Zac still felt like he was carrying a boulder on his shoulders as he reached the maze's depths. It was a small square, looking like an inverted version of his starting point. But instead of a stele and elixir, there was a floating crystal above a basin of roiling darkness.

The crystal was obviously the source of the darkness, and dust so condensed it had become liquid dripped into the pool below. Zac glanced at the waters, feeling something stirring. Another wraith would be born with another twenty minutes or so of the crystal's nourishment.

Zac's bones creaked as he went into a sprint and lunged over the basin, snatching the crystal before landing with a crash. A steady stream of darkness burrowed into his hand, and nothing he did helped stop it. The crystal exhibited a fierce resistance to being taken away. It felt like there was a magnetic pull between it and the pond.

Between the curse and resistance, the journey back became a lesson in suffering and resilience. Zac doggedly put one foot in front of the other until he

reached the starting point. He was utterly exhausted, and the sweet aroma from the fountain was delectable enough to almost drive him mad. He hurried over and slotted the crystal in its matching groove.

Zac greedily took a deep swig of the shimmering waters, finding its taste even better than his almost delirious fantasies over the past twenty minutes. A cleansing wave spread through his body, expunging the taint far more effectively than he could on his own. Just as he'd expected, saving his energy by carrying as much restriction as possible on your way back was the way to go.

Meanwhile, a single mouthful had recovered a third of his spent Vigor. Zac took another gulp, estimating the efficacy had decreased by almost ten percent. Repeated use came with diminishing returns. Not to mention, completely recovering one's Vigor this way was impossible, just like eating Soldier pills couldn't replace natural recovery.

In a way, the fountain was part of the test. A high-quality body was like having high affinities. Some could extract more benefits from pills and treasures; others could consume larger quantities before they built up a resistance. Zac had both. A sixth of the trial was over, and less than five percent of the water was lost.

Each round would get harder, and he would probably have to spend some time dealing with the ghosts before the third or fourth round. The walls from the remaining five corridors were noticeably closer, and he had a strong feeling that letting them reach the fountain was a very bad idea. Still, passing was more or less a given.

The question was how he'd measure up to the names on the leaderboard.

Hours later, Zac wobbled out of the hallway, veritably dragging himself into the fountain to slot the final key. He fell into the waters, his body screaming with complaint. He forcibly held onto his fading consciousness, eager to see what score his performance would translate to. The stele's aura rapidly rose after the last crystal was inserted, and Zac felt the water being absorbed by the plaque.

A powerful pulse of cleansing faith burst from the stele, sweeping away all taint in Zac's body before continuing into the labyrinth. The ravenous shrieks that had accompanied him for the whole trial were cut short, but Zac barely spared it a thought as he looked at the stele with disbelief. He'd been mentally

prepared his placement would be worse. But to this point, while having access to his titles and **[Purity of the Void]**?

To think his run only amounted to a 58th placement. How did the top-ranker have a score almost 40% higher than his? More than half the elixir remained when Zac wrapped things up, so the leader must've had around 75%.

Had he missed some aspect of the trial, or had the maniacs at the top bulldozed right through the walls to pick up the pieces at record pace? Or were they simply so strong that the erosion couldn't exhaust their reserves or slow them down? Zac turned to the labyrinth entrances, which had been blocked or replaced with gates to the remaining trials.

Zac was tired, but his competitive spirit burned. Not to mention, he was growing increasingly curious about the facilities outside which had helped raise these monsters.

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Chapter 1199: Faith

Zac took a deep breath as he emerged from the hell of his own making. He'd hoped the Pilgrimage of Heart would resemble the trial he overcame to get his hands on the Shard of Creation and the **[Boundless Vajra Sublimation]**. Facing a superior path would be even better, as his Void State was excellent at rebuffing that kind of influence.

In reality, the Pilgrimage of Heart was a lot closer to the tribulation he overcame when reaching E-grade. He'd been forced to face the victims of his path, and there were a lot of them. A sea of anguished souls had forced him to witness futures that would never be because of his bloodthirst. Each family torn apart and dream cut short became a fetter, making his steps heavier.

Zac knew that his bloody path was born out of necessity and survival, not savagery or bloodlust. And the rough road to his current level had nurtured a far stronger Dao Heart than those who grew in the shade. However, the pilgrimage had turned what should have been a strength into a weakness, twisting and amplifying his deeds. It had almost been enough to push him over the edge.

The stele's energy had almost faded. Its aura left him with nothing but an indication he'd passed with less than ten minutes to spare—not even close to getting a spot on the stele. Zac had realized the Pilgrimage of Heart would pose a challenge after the combat trial, but to think it was this bad. Maybe he'd become arrogant after the surprisingly good showing in the Pilgrimage of Mind, where he actually seized the 34th spot.

Finishing with ten minutes left of a whole day was undeniably a disappointment after reaching this point. It would drag down his grade, reducing the rewards he'd secured after passing four trials. But like the previous pilgrimages, passing came with some benefits. The trial had almost done him in, which would have resulted in death or insanity. But it also helped him process the carnage he'd been forced to participate in since the war began.

A trial wouldn't miraculously fix the accumulated mental toll, but it had helped him expose some spiritual cracks and begin the healing. It was possible those wounds would have slowly recovered on their own after the war. They could also have been left to fester until they turned into Heart Demons or weaknesses to be exploited by the remnants or Heart Cultivators.

The experience had left him unraveled in a way a few minutes of rest couldn't fix—not what Zac had hoped for with the final trial right around the corner. As expected, there was still no exit provided after the fourth trial.

"Hello?" Zac shouted. "Can I come out? I've passed four like you said."

The Eternal Servant didn't respond, and Zac turned to the final door and the uncertainty it represented; faith. How was faith tested? He tried picturing replacing faith with the resources in the other trials. He would die if the Pilgrimage of Faith were anything like the Pilgrimages of Heart and Combat. The Pilgrimage of Mind, where he used Mental Energy and his Daos to lead a group of refugees through a snowstorm, was iffy.

He wouldn't be able to progress, and his protectees would have died. But with his other advantages, he could survive and run out the clock. It was the same with the Pilgrimage of Body. He could have stayed by the fountain or in a side passage until the wraiths drained the elixir, and he failed.

The odds of passing a Pilgrimage of Faith were essentially nil unless there was a huge loophole in the trial. It definitely wasn't worth gambling his life on such a long shot.

"I concede! Please teleport me out," Zac tried again.

Still nothing. Zac refused to give up on giving up. The waiting room wouldn't last much longer. Maybe he'd be sent out after the timer ran out.

Minutes passed, and the surroundings grew increasingly unstable. Just as Zac thought he'd succeeded, the runes lining the trial gate lit up, unleashing radiant waves of faith-attuned light. Zac swore and grabbed onto the ground as the light formed hundreds of appendages dragging him toward the trial. Resistance proved futile.

Zac sighed in defeat as he took in the new environment. He couldn't see the trial stele, but he was obviously not back in the Halls of Service. He'd been sent to a grand corridor exuding an air of profound dignity, where every inch of floor, walls, and ceiling had been lovingly formed by master artisans. Every few meters had a niche on either side, displaying relics radiating undying glory.

Together with the dense Faith Energy, the hall gave off an intensely sacrosanct aura. Even Zac, who didn't share in the common belief of the Limitless Empire or their templars, was swept up in the atmosphere. It truly felt like he'd embarked on a holy pilgrimage, and he was beset by an incredibly strong compulsion to walk down the corridor toward the gates waiting at the other side. Zac only barely managed to resist the coercion to look behind him.

Not an exit. The corridor just stretched toward infinity, and Zac couldn't even will his body to turn around. His exhausted Dao Heart was already fraying from resisting the pull, and Zac eventually had no choice but to take one reluctant step after another. Only when he reached the first alcove did the pressure relent.

The enshrined relic was an azure-blue sword snapped right above the hilt. The engraved array lining the alcove flickered, and a solemn voice spoke in Zac's mind.

'The sword of Her Holiness Eleani Ano, Cardinal of the Twenty-fourth chapter. Her holiness embraced the Origin in the year 133,305 of the Fourth Trigram Order. Her sacrifice saved the lives of 3,847,318,324,521 citizens of the Rosini Colony.'

Zac's vision shifted, and he was almost overwhelmed by terror as he found himself facing a sea of flying beasts. Paradoxically, it was their overwhelming aura that quickly helped Zac calm down. After all, this swarm couldn't possibly be the trial he was supposed to face. A beast tide this size could probably devastate all of Zecia if given enough time.

The swarm almost seemed endless, filled with too many Beast Kings to count. There were also hundreds of Beast Emperors, each larger than a city. Massive armies of smaller descendants accompanied the larger beasts, some of them even clinging to their bodies.

Their goal was evident—they might look like reptilian birds imbued with the Dao of Space, but they acted like locusts. Drained shards of over a hundred D-grade planets drifted in the distance, an appetizer before the swarm set its sights on the main course. Zac turned around, seeing a massive continent stretching as far as Zac could see.

A sole guardian floated at its edge—a human templar, holding a whole version of the broken sword he'd just seen. One moment, she felt like a mortal lost in space. The next, she was the embodiment of Heavenly Judgment, her aura reducing millions of beasts to dust. Zac had only seen such a display of power once before; when he escaped the Orom World and encountered Iz's guardian.

Beast Kings died by the millions as the templar unleashed a one-woman crusade against the swarm. Each of her attacks had the power to destroy Earth, yet it was barely enough to make a dent in the sea of beasts. The templar didn't relent, nor did she back down, and not a single beast made it onto the continent.

Days passed, and Zac couldn't begin to compute the number of deaths he'd witnessed. However, even an Autarch would eventually run out of energy if put under a relentless and unending assault. The Cardinal was clearly

reaching that point, with something having changed about her attacks. They contained a different aura, which made Zac think of attacks imbued with life force. If Zac had to guess, she was sacrificing pieces of her Inner World to keep attacking.

It would have been easy for her to escape. The beast tide was endless, but the strongest Beast Emperors were Middle Monarchs. Yet, like the ancient protector from Zac's Dao Vision, Eleani Ano refused to abandon the trillions of lives behind her.

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An earth-shattering wail filled with turbulent Spatial Hunger shook the universe just as it looked like she might pull through. Enormous cracks tore toward the continent, and the templar's waning aura grew erratic as she narrowly prevented the ambush from getting past her. Space buckled as three gargantuan birds emerged from hiding. Each was the size of a small D-grade world, and their auras had clearly surpassed the C-grade.

The swarm had been reduced to a third of its original size, and it looked like the true leaders couldn't sit around any longer. Or perhaps they were happy to thin out their herd after it had grown too big, especially when it let them exhaust a dangerous enemy.

With such a difference in aura, Zac would have run for his life. He couldn't see any path to victory when placing himself in the templar's shoes. Of course, Zac knew that wasn't how things would play out after hearing the introduction.

There was no joy or sorrow on Eleani's face as she pointed her shimmering sword at the three incoming giants. A six-winged avatar even larger than the Primordial Beasts formed behind her, and it was like the gates to the Heavens had opened above the continent. Innumerable streams of prayer rose to the sky as a whole civilization prayed for salvation.

Faith and sacrifice gathered into a singular point at Eleani's sword tip, and the cosmos dimmed before the destruction that was unleashed. The echo of a sword snapping echoed through the vacuum of space, followed by a heavy silence. The three giants were utterly annihilated, and only a few wayward beasts remained from the swarm.

It was a victory, but it cost everything. The templar was slowly disintegrating, breaking apart into motes of azure light. She had sacrificed her Life, Dao, and Soul, joining them with the world's faith to wipe out the threat. Zac witnessed her final moments, entranced by the tranquil conviction of her gaze. The scene faded, and a woman's voice echoed in the darkness.

'The blood of the Empyrean Chalice feeds the flame.'

Zac was back in the hallway, facing the broken sword. The days of struggle had only taken a minute in real time. The pull urged him to keep going to the next relic, and he complied after bowing at the sword. [Read Web Novels Online Free](#) -

Not all scenes were as overwhelming as the Eleani's final stand. A few of the relics had even belonged to Peak Hegemons, though Zac didn't have a shred of confidence in taking any of them on. They were monsters through and through, one of them even slaying ten Monarchs before detonating his core to stop an evil ritual.

The enshrined saints had one thing in common. They had paid with their lives to create a miracle, saving uncountable lives and preventing deadly calamities. Just as shocking was that every single one of the interred templars belonged to the same chapter, and Zac recognized a third of them from the ladders. These amazing, terrifying people weren't even the greatest martyrs of the Order of the Empyrean Chalice. They were just the local standouts.

Zac's opinion of faith-based cultivators had always been strained. His first encounter with the concept was the Church of the Everlasting Dao, the body-snatching lunatics who'd caused mayhem during the Integration. Then there was the Great Redeemer, who used faith to form a Karmic link with his chosen. Not to mention Salvation, his crazed apostle. Even the Monks of the Sangha reeked of holy malevolence, hiding their ruthless schemes behind congenial smiles.

These templars felt different. They seemed like true guardians of civilization, no matter what Laondio's ultimate goal was or what the Imperial Destiny entailed. Sure, the templar order would want to convey an image of righteousness, and this journey through history could be considered conditioning or even propaganda. Zac still felt the core of it was genuine and that these feats weren't fabricated or embellished.

Eventually, Zac reached the end of the hallway where the golden door waited. The short walk had only taken an hour, but he'd spent weeks accompanying the saints on their final journey.

On each door was a large rune in the script of the Limitless Empire—'flame' and 'uphold.' There was an unbelievable amount of meaning stored in those words, returning Zac to when he faced the Imperial Destiny in the Tribulation Throne. Whoever carved those runes must have been an Autarch, and a Faith-based cultivator could likely gain far more from them than Zac did from the wall in the Big Axe Coliseum.

The gates swung open on their own, and Zac almost stumbled back when a cascade of pent-up Faith Energy came pouring out. It was far beyond the hallway or what he'd faced in the Halls of Service, though it thankfully wasn't weaponized against him. Even then, Zac had to safeguard his mind to avoid having his path led astray. The holy atmosphere might give him the final push to accept consecration after witnessing those feats of valor if he wasn't careful.

"Hello?" Zac hesitated as he stepped inside. "Uh, Lady Instructor?"

The only response was the slam of the gates closing behind him. Zac looked to his left, finding a familiar face looking down at him. It was one of the saints he'd just seen, carved from a white stone with perfect detail. It almost felt alive because of the immense amounts of Faith Energy it held.

Perhaps it was. Zac could vaguely sense a hint of spirituality within, which was constantly being nourished by the room. Unfortunately, the high-grade materials and large amounts of energy coursing through the statue made it difficult to glean anything specific. Zac took a step closer before quickly moving away.

The energy inside the statue stirred from Zac's proximity, exuding a minacious aura. It was like the fallen saint roused himself from his eternal rest to slay another enemy of the empire. Zac continued, relieved to see the statue calm down from the added distance. However, the hall was lined with similar statues, and another slumbering presence stirred when he moved into reach. It carried a similar forbidding threat, forcing Zac to keep going.

It didn't take long to get a full scope of the inner sanctum. It was a catacomb of interred templars shaped like a T. There were only statues, and no graves. Maybe they had no choice, considering only a few of the saints left a body

behind. The trial stele stood in the sole intersection. One hundred and eight candles were burning before it, one for each saint.

Apart from the 108 statues and the stele, the central crossing was also furnished with three oversized weapons. A scepter and a sword to his left and right, while a human-sized chalice had been placed at the place of honor behind the trial stele. They didn't emit any spirituality like the statues, but Zac could tell they were anything but ornamental. If he had to guess, they were all powerful Peak D-grade weapons. The chalice might be something even greater.

Thankfully, they were inert, only giving Zac a vague sense of danger. The intersection also seemed to be a blind spot for the slumbering saints. The closest ones didn't stir so long as Zac stayed within a few meters of the stele.

Taking in the stele's aura finally imparted the rules for the Pilgrimage of Faith. Recognition. Zac needed to gain the blessing of at least one statue before the candles burned out. It didn't sound very hard, but the saints were obviously very discerning. Even the top ladder holder had only gained sixteen blessings, and four was enough to get on the ladder.

Of course, none of that mattered to Zac. He might have common beliefs with most of the saints, and a few walked similar paths. However, he wasn't a templar, and he had no Faith Energy to commune with the statues. More importantly, he had fully rejected the Imperial Fate of the Limitless Empire to create his own path, essentially marking him as an enemy of the faith.

His failure was already a given, let alone appearing on the ladder. Zac wasn't too broken up about it. Just passing through the hallway had been an eye-opening experience that broadened his horizons.

More importantly, the trial held no danger so long as he stayed close to the stele. He just needed to withstand the ambient Faith Energy for a couple of hours before being sent out with a failing grade. Having passed the other four pilgrimages, he would be spared and even get some benefits. This was already the best-case scenario.

Zac was content standing next to the stele doing nothing. His Heart had already stabilized after the many visions, but he saw no point in rocking the boat. He could try some alternative methods to gain the acceptance of the D-grade saints just before the flames went out. All his items and abilities were

unlocked, so he'd be able to endure a short time even if he triggered a violent rejection or awakened the weapons.

Half an hour passed. Zac had all but become the 109th statue in the catacombs. He kept his aura sealed, silently watching the candles while his other half discussed possible ways to gain a blessing with the others despite the overt antipathy from the interred spirits. Unsurprisingly, Esmeralda suggested stealing one by extracting the wisp of spirituality inside one of the statues.

Zac had no idea how he'd go about something like that or if the spiritual wisp was the actual blessing. Not to mention, desecrating a saint seemed like a good way to get ripped apart by the Eternal Servant upon his return. Ogras had a few ideas to trick the statues, like faking faith with an Aura Modulator. Ultimately, they agreed the best solution was to display his path to the statues Zac felt the most affinity with, hoping it would outweigh his lack of faith.

Their discussion was suddenly interrupted by a vague sense of foreboding. Zac flashed out of the way, feeling like a ghost had been breathing down his neck. He was almost right. A spiritual tendril had emerged from the closest statue, its aura almost indistinguishable from the ambient energy. It had just been a few inches from entering the back of his head.

Zac knew well enough to trust his instincts. The feeler didn't appear dangerous and the statue appeared calm, but coming in contact with it was a very bad idea. That notion only grew stronger as the statues came alive, one by one releasing tendrils like they were searching for the interloper that previously eluded their grasp. New novel chapters are published on [novel\(F\)ire.net](http://novel(F)ire.net)

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Chapter 1200: Incompatible Destinies

More and more statues were coming alive, including those Zac hadn't passed yet. It didn't take long before Zac was forced to stay on the move to avoid the feelers emerging all around him. But the space was too narrow, and his movements stirred up the Faith Energy, exposing his position. There was no way he'd be able to avoid detection until the candles went out.

Zac narrowly avoided being pincered and appeared before the stele. He reached for one of the candles but shied away like he'd been burned when the vague threat turned into overwhelming wrath. Hidden runes on the ceiling and floor had briefly appeared to weaponize the immense amounts of Faith Energy.

Even the **[Lucky Beads]** around his neck hummed with warning, telling him in no uncertain terms that snuffing out the candles ahead of schedule would only result in death. The catacombs thankfully relented when he backed down, but his actions had awakened the last of the saints.

He was left with two options—hide his presence even further with his Void Emperor Bloodline or interact with the hostile saints. Each came with very real risks. Activating his Void Emperor Bloodline could be considered putting his Void Road on full display, flagrantly flaunting his rejection of the Imperial Fate that nourished the interred souls. The latter seemed marginally safer.

He might have been making a mountain of a molehill, where the sealed spirit's actions were a response to sensing an unidentified presence. They might lose interest after coming into contact and confirming there was no threat. Right or wrong, Zac had no time to perform a deep analysis with over a hundred feelers coming his way. He zigzagged further into the right corridor, appearing before a certain statue. READ LATEST CHAPTERS AT [NOVELFIR\(e\).net](http://NOVELFIR(e).net)

It depicted a rough-looking warrior holding onto a bardiche. He was a human, just like Zac, and one of the few Peak D-grade saints. He'd fallen defending a teleportation array far beyond his breaking point, allowing reinforcements to arrive. Among the many saints, Zac felt this man was the one closest to him in path and strength, which would hopefully count for something. Zac touched the D-grade saint's spiritual thread, channeling his Evolutionary Path while conveying his beliefs and desire to protect his home from invaders.

Rejection.

The saint's answer was a fierce, murderous rejection that made the statue vibrate with Killing Intent. It was like the spiritual wisp inside was so angry it tried to force its immobile housing to strike down the interloper. The reaction spread like a wildfire, passing through the gallery of saints in less than a second. The feelers were retracted, apparently knowing all they needed about the intruder.

Zac's heart hammered as he directly touched the statue's chest, desperately trying to find common ground with the agitated spirit as his Danger Sense grew increasingly urgent. The three weapons hanging in the central crossing were coming alive, pulling in vast amounts of Faith Energy to light up golden runes across their bodies. The Killing Array was even faster, blazing to life and kicking up a storm.

The ambient faith poured toward Zac like a swarm of angry wasps. Cracks identical to the wounds he got in the Halls of Service returned with twice the speed. The rejection of his presence was so absolute and determined that the damage spread to his other body, making Zac curse with fear and anger. Ogras and Esmeralda tried everything to slow down his collapse, even hiding his presence from the Heavens. Nothing worked against the unrelenting judgment of the Imperial Faith.

Zac's eyes were wild as he unleashed his bloodline to the limits. What was the point in holding back when things had come this far? Activating his imperial bloodline did nothing to calm down the commotion in the catacombs, but neither did it make it worse. Channeling his bloodline wasn't enough. It only made his torment more drawn-out, so Zac also activated **[Void Zone]**.

A five-meter sphere of nullification formed around him, hiding the area from the Heavens and weakening the Imperial Faith. Only a hollow husk was left as the Killing Array entered his body, which only barely overcame his body's natural recovery rate. His D-grade bloodline would never have been able to accomplish such a feat when the Limitless Empire was still around to nourish and bolster their communal faith. Today, it was rootless and greatly weakened.

Unfortunately, **[Void Zone]** didn't offer a permanent solution to his plight. Holding back the catacomb's seemingly inexhaustible Faith Energy came with a huge drain on his Void Energy reserves. Meanwhile, the inert guardian

weapons were feeding on the palpable Killing Intent. It was only a matter of time before they joined the attack.

The slow-burning candles indicated there was over an hour before the trial ended. How was he supposed to endure that long when his Void Energy would last half that at best? Escape to the outer hallways? Impossible. He'd never make it through those high-grade gates. Even if he did, so what? Some of the relics outside belonged to Autarchs. Even damaged, they posed a far greater threat than the defenses in here.

A loud snap interrupted Zac's thoughts. A large crack had appeared on the statue before him, which rapidly spread and forked.

"Wait—" Zac's gasped.

The saints were already angry enough to eat his flesh and drink his blood. He didn't want to even imagine how they'd react if he destroyed one of their brothers. A quick inspection confirmed he was the cause. His nullification sphere had disrupted the internal energy flow, creating dangerous leaks and faultlines. The Void had also damaged the spiritual wisp, making the large amounts of energy it controlled go berserk.

Was it a clash of incompatible Destinies? These saints weren't necessarily the strongest templars, and they weren't the only ones who had sacrificed their lives for the cause. There had to be something else about them that warranted this kind of immortalization. Each might have grasped an aspect of the Imperial Fate, which qualified them to pick who qualified to become a templar.

Zac was the progenitor of his Void Road, a solitary path that rejected outside influence, holding the same status as Laondio did for the Imperial Fate. His Destiny had barely formed, and comparing himself to the Limitless Empire was almost delusional. However, he wasn't facing Laondio today. He was dealing with an incomplete, discarnate soul following a path at its nadir, and the disparity was evident.

The statue crumbled before Zac's eyes, releasing a gust of gravelly dust and ancient faith. The already intense Killing Intent bearing down on Zac reached unprecedented heights. Zac's brows rose when he felt the pressure grow marginally weaker. A streak of light emerged from the statue's core, preempting the plan that had begun forming in the back of his mind.

The shimmering sphere held faith, yet it felt benevolent, inviting—a stark contrast to the rest of the room. The light filled Zac with the same desire as when he encountered top-tier treasures. There was even a hint of providence swirling around the blob, proving the mysterious energy was extraordinary. There was no hint of the spiritual will, which could only mean this was the thing the saint was guarding—its blessing. Zac instinctively reached out, and it was like the wisp was drawn to him.

Releasing **[Void Zone]** for even a second was out of the question. Thankfully, the light only partly dimmed as it passed through the Void to enter Zac's body. The Faith Energy had protected the mysterious force hidden within. **[Void Heart]** stirred while **[Purity of the Void]** and **[Immutability of Eoz]** remained calm, confirming the light was beneficial.

More crackling sounds made Zac turn his head before he got a chance to investigate the blessing. The statues next to the baldriche-wielding saint had partly been within **[Void Zone]**'s sphere of influence, turning them into collateral damage. The pressure further lessened with three statues down for the count, and two more lights snuck into Zac's body.

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Zac's cells were veritably screaming with desire at this point, and he had to stop his Void Emperor bloodline from absorbing the blobs calmly floating in his chest. Judging by the makeup, the largest benefit from the lights was the incredibly pure Faith Energy. Zac suspected it could catalyze and refine a templar's accumulated faith. Even someone like Joanna should be able to benefit greatly despite having a different faith.

That part wasn't of much use to Zac, and he let it be extracted and absorbed by **[Void Heart]**. Expelling such pure energy seemed like a waste. The rice was already cooked, and spitting out a part of the blessing wouldn't make any difference after coming this far. It was better used as nourishment for **[Void Mountain]**, which hadn't gotten to absorb many Faith-attuned Natural Treasures.

The Faith Energy didn't resist at all, voluntarily entering his Hidden Node to be refined. The mysterious force that remained was even more interesting. The closest aura Zac could think of was Attribute Fruits, though the lights felt far purer and more profound. Esmeralda had said that a real blessing could impart a permanent raise in power, whether it was a person or treasure. This

had to be it. Getting a saint's recognition in the Pilgrimage of Faith wasn't just a requirement to pass. It was an opportunity to gain an actual powerup.

The three lights were like raw bundles of potential. Better yet, the energy seemed wholly detached from anything related to the templars or Imperial Fate. He could use the blessings however he wished to improve. Interestingly, they weren't quite unattuned like Origin Dao, instead carrying their own characteristics without emitting any real sense of Dao. His Soul Cores only seemed to be interested in one of the lights, while his Cosmic Core wanted two. Of course, his voracious bloodline wanted them all.

Zac's eyes shone with madness and greed as he looked at the neat rows of heroes and guardians. Accidentally destroying three statues had lessened the pressure he faced by an equal amount. If he took all of them out, wouldn't he have stopped the Killing Array entirely? And each pinata—no, saint—even held easily-refined powerups?

"I'm sorry, but you've left me no choice."

Three more statues came under the attack of the Void as Zac switched positions. The sense of peril coming from the guardian weapons grew more urgent as the statues resisted his domain, and Zac frowned with impatience. Hungry tendrils shot out from his World Ring as one vine after another latched onto the saints on the other side.

Haro's efforts weren't enough to even budge the statues, let alone drag them into Zac's nullification zone. Zac felt the Heavenrender's fury through their link, but his attempts to tear the statues apart didn't leave so much as a scratch. Faith protected the statues like armor, and only the Void could deal with the vulnerable sections within. That didn't mean **[Void Zone]** was his only option.

The illusory mountain descended in his Soul Aperture, and Zac drove large amounts of Void Energy into his arms. He placed his hands against the statue's chest and flooded it with his Bloodline Talent. Infusing the stone with **[Void Mountain]** was almost too effective. It exploded like a shrapnel bomb, hurling Zac into the opposite wall with enough force to make him see stars.

Zac shook his head and lunged back, snatching the blessing before it could escape or disperse. Only then did Zac notice the palpable hunger from **[Void Mountain]**. His newest bloodline talent seemed just as interested in the blessings as his cells and was willing to take on all four blessings

without **[Void Heart]** refining them first. Zac didn't need any deliberation before funneling the blobs into his Soul Aperture, forcibly quelling the hunger from his cores.

One by one, the blessings seeped into the mountain, which released grand ripples of anti-truth in return.

"Holy crap," Zac whispered, almost forgetting the predicament he was in.

How could the blessings be so effective? They weren't even refined and inverted into a semi-void state by **[Void Heart]**. The first blessing he got added more progress than a month of constant refining and infusing Natural Treasures. The blessing from the C-grade Saints was even more useful, providing almost twice the gains.

The discrepancy should stem from the deeper comprehension of a Monarch. A blessing was an imprint of someone's cultivation. Even if the lights contained roughly the same amount of energy, one was made from better materials. It was just like the Life and Death he'd generated by splitting a Chaos Mote during his D-grade breakthrough. On the surface, the truths were no different from normal Life and Death, but something deeper was encoded in their DNA. Read Web Novels Online Free -

Then what about the B-grade cardinals like Eleani Ano? Would the benefits be twice that of Monarchs? Or even more?

If he let **[Void Mountain]** absorb the whole sanctum, he would save decades of work on his Bloodline Talent. It might be enough to make it permanent or even unearth the hidden feature of **[Spiritual Void]**. It wasn't just a matter of saving time and money. Having **[Void Heart]** constantly refine energy for **[Void Mountain]** had a high opportunity cost. Whether it was his Cosmic Core, **[Force of the Void]**, or his Eoz bloodline, all could benefit from **[Void Heart]**'s tempered energy.

Any lingering misgivings about the Eternal Servant's deadly response were thrown out the window as Zac tabulated the benefits. The servant still hadn't appeared, but his human half was probably already slated for death. So why not make the most of the situation? Who knew? It might even be possible to reform this half like a missing limb so long as the other side survived.

Zac's vision of a bright future was interrupted by a scream of danger. One of Haro's vines dragged Zac backward, allowing him to narrowly avoid a

terrifying blade formed by the guardian sword. The attack was formed by a huge amount of pure Faith Energy, and it had to be imbued with something equivalent to an Earthly Dao. The blade hadn't even fully awakened, and it was already releasing attacks at the level of Peak Hegemons.

The scepter was just a step behind. The empty chalice needed more time, but Zac's hair stood on end as he sensed its well-contained aura. It was drawing extraordinary amounts of Faith Energy, condensing it into a shimmering liquid. The chalice was only half-full and already held enough power to threaten his life.

Zac turned into a blur, rapidly slapping six statues with the Void. At that moment, an illusory crystal sprouted right in his face, expanding to take up half the wing. The scepter's attack didn't harm a hair on the statues, but both Zac's figure and space tore apart. The real Zac appeared on the opposite side of the inner hall, glancing fearfully at the dummy formed by a displacement treasure.

Another five statues received a touch of death before Zac used **[Skystriker]** to return to his original position. His movement skill was so fast it looked like he teleported in the confined environment. In reality, he had not. The guardian weapons were placed in the catacomb intersection, and unbearable pain almost made Zac lose control of his skill when he passed the stele.

He appeared in a burst of blood, picking up the six blessings waiting for him before touching a few more statues. The sword had generated a hidden domain, and passing through left him with deep lacerations. He was given no time to recover as another blade tried to cut him apart. The attacks grew increasingly frequent, forcing Zac to change strategy.

An armor of bark appeared over his body as the small crypt was filled with trees. They rapidly withered under the unrelenting onslaught of the Killing Array, but they did help Zac briefly lessen the pressure by taking on most of the punishment. Zac emerged in the intersection by the chalice, stepping out from a tree just before it was shredded.

A wheel made from golden wood appeared behind his back. It was no larger than a manhole cover, and its golden luster made it look like a divine halo. Five densely engraved spokes connected the wheel with its hub, replacing the pillars of old. The center of the wheel was a round wood cutting depicting the cycle of nature.

The D-grade version of **[Empyrean Aegis]** had instantly crumbled when protecting him in the Pilgrimage of Combat. However, that fireball had been launched by a Monarch, and just surviving the shockwave was a blessing. And while Zac wouldn't trust the golden barrier to fully deal with the faith-imbued attacks from the guardian weapons, it was enough to temporarily block out the Sword Domain.

Zac looked at the sloshing waters of pure faith within the chalice, his brows furrowing with determination as he activated **[Void Zone]**. The nullification zone fell completely flat in its attempt to snuff out the glowing runes on the chalice's surface, though it did ruin the efforts of drawing Faith Energy. It was like the chalice had been sealed in an airtight container, unable to reach the dense energies waiting on the other side.

That wasn't enough for Zac—the other weapons were dangerous enough. He didn't want to see what kind of mayhem the most powerful treasure would cause when the chalice was filled. Zac knew his plan would drastically exacerbate his growing list of sins, but what else could he do? He'd need to get out of the trial before he could worry about getting a death sentence. So long as it gave him a slim chance at survival, he'd tear down the whole crypt.

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Chapter 1201: Collapse of Faith

The extinguishing force of **[Void Mountain]** poured through Zac's arms and entered the massive chalice. A tremendous rebound answered, and Zac grunted with pain when his arms broke in multiple locations. The only thing he got for almost crippling himself was three runes briefly fading before they regained their glory by using an inch of the liquified faith. There was simply no way it would work.

Streams of Creation Energy mended Zac's bones, and he switched to his backup plan. A step took him into the heart of the sword domain, and he noted

it had expanded by over a meter since before. If it kept going like that, it would soon cover the whole sanctum. The domain put **[Empyrean Aegis]** under immense pressure. Zac reactivated his Bloodline Talent, this time targeting the blade instead. It proved far more resilient than any statue, but it was within his tolerance.

Each second felt like an eternity. The wheel behind him creaked and groaned as it was forced to withstand the combined assault of the Killing Array and Sword Domain. Zac kept regrowing trees to carry some of the load, but most were torn apart before they could fully emerge. Meanwhile, Zac's danger sense grew increasingly urgent.

Just as the warning bells reached a crescendo, the wheel turned 180 degrees. The etching on the hub distorted in a disorienting flutter before settling on a completely new motif. A powerful pulse of gold and Void burst from his defensive skill, spreading through the whole crypt. Most of the damage to the wheel had been mended, and the golden barrier shifted to gain a steely hue.

The Faith Energy grew turbid wherever the pulse passed, and the runes on the guardian weapons dimmed. The chalice lost a large amount of Faith Energy and was forced to restart its absorption array, and the devastating attack the scepter was about to launch was fully canceled. The same was true for the sword, giving Zac a much-needed window to continue wearing it down.

The pulse was an intentional change when upgrading **[Empyrean Aegis]**. The restrictive domain of the old skill was also good, and it had allowed him to turn the tables more than once. However, he'd found the initial surprise when activating the skill was the most useful part, and that most experienced cultivators quickly adapted to the domain.

Therefore, Zac chose to replace the continuous restriction with a sudden pulse packed with greater power. He'd also incorporated his Evolutionary Path into the skill, where turning the wheel recovered much of the sustained damage in a faux-rebirth. Doing so also shifted the defensive properties, making it harder for the enemy to discover a weakness.

Seconds passed until the threat level returned to unbearable levels, at which point the wheel turned again and threw the weapons back to square one. Even a prepared cultivator would have had a hard time defending against the pulse with its randomized energy signature.

Two pulses was the skill's current limit, but it was enough. The sword shattered before it got the chance to unleash a real attack or grow its domain beyond the intersection. The weapon seemed intent on dragging Zac with it to hell, and its destruction unleashed a tremendous blade storm fueled by its stockpiled spirituality and faith. It was like dozens of sword domains layered at once, more than enough to tear Zac apart a few times over.

A vine tugged, and Zac was dragged into a nearby tree before the fallout could consume him. He appeared on the far end of the hall, his danger sense still blaring. Layers and layers of empowered trees were reduced into splinters, utterly incapable of stopping the shockwave. Zac's armor transformed, and the responding axelights erupted in large explosions that pushed back against the sword tide.

The contained space made the mayhem even more appalling, yet Zac fanned the flames by adding **[Evolutionary Edge]** on top. Together with **[Conformation of Supremacy]**'s explosions, the attacks were like hyenas nibbling at an elephant. Their strength couldn't be compared to the guardian's revenge, but the vast quantity did help exhaust parts of the incoming shockwave.

Having almost spent all his runes, Zac swapped back to his Ent Elder form and threw out a Life-attuned Defensive Talisman. A wall of thorns filled up the hallway, blocking Zac's vision. Haro emerged from the World Ring, sacrificing a mile's worth of vines to lessen Zac's load. The defensive blockade was torn apart, and the sword tide crashed into **[Empyrean Aegis]**'s golden barrier. Google search NOVEL_FIRE.NET

The five spokes on the empyrean wheel snapped in rapid succession until the skill collapsed. Having been forced to use both resets to interrupt attacks meant he couldn't reset the skill to prolong its defenses. Still, only a shadow of the original tsunami remained by that point, and even that was weakened by **[Void Zone]**'s erosion. It was barely enough.

Pieces of **[Ossuary Bulkwork]** fell like rain, and deep lacerations were carved across Zac's body. Zac grimaced, but rest wasn't an option. He dove into the wake of the shockwave, worsening his wounds even further. His previous location was torn apart by another golden crystal just a second later.

Zac appeared close to the intersection and crammed a handful of healing pills into his mouth. He branded the nearby statues before moving out again. He ignored the scepter, even when it began spitting out a large number of smaller

crystals that followed him like heat-seeking missiles. He had no choice. Destroying the sword had cost him too much Void Energy and time.

Since he couldn't deal with the chalice, he needed to escape before it filled up and came alive. The good news was that the candles went out as statues crumbled. And with the sword gone, he only needed to avoid the scepter's attacks while alternating between picking up blessings and destroying statues. It was getting harder as the room filled up with floating mines.

Eventually, Zac didn't have time to split his attention on the blessings. A few of them had also been rejected by **[Void Mountain]**, so he simply let them accumulate in his chest to investigate later. Sixty, Eighty, and finally one hundred statues crumbled. Zac was right at the end, but his face was pallid, and his eyes were dark as he shattered another statue and snatched its blessing.

He couldn't even see the sanctum's other end because of the large number of bombs. He'd tried to keep their numbers down, but they were intangible balls of faith. Haro passed right through them without triggering an eruption, and his skills were equally useless. Only one thing worked. Zac's face remained unmoving as he cut off strips of muscle from his thigh and threw them at bombs blocking his path.

Each crystal unleashed a contained blast upon sensing Zac's aura in his tissue. He was literally paying a pound of flesh to absolve his sins. Zac flashed forward the moment the path was clear, already collecting more grisly tributes as he dismantled the next saint. It took almost two seconds, forcing him to keep throwing out more flesh to stop the approaching crystals.

He'd already reached the bottom of the barrel for his Void Energy, and **[Void Mountain]**'s aura was unstable from overuse—something infusing blessings couldn't resolve. He'd long since been forced to turn off **[Void Zone]** to continue his work. Thankfully, the Killing Array was already so weakened it didn't pose much of a problem. He was doing more damage to himself than the arrays were.

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Again and again, Zac dug deeper when his Void reserves were tapped out, and the whole sanctum floor was painted red by his sacrifice. Eventually, there was only a single saint left to deal with. Eleani Ano. It wasn't just

because she stood next to the scepter he'd saved her for last. She was the first saint he'd encountered, and seeing her end had left the strongest mark. He'd subconsciously picked other statues when she stood nearby.

Now, there was no one else to pick, and he was out of Void Energy. It was nothing short of a miracle he managed to extract enough energy to activate **[Void Mountain]** for the past three statues. But he had nothing left to give, no matter how hard he squeezed. Zac's vision swam, and he found himself losing balance from the strain, forcing him to grab onto the statue with a bloody hand missing multiple fingers.

His mind screamed with danger, but his body no longer listened. Zac tried to rouse himself one last time, to try something, at least. He had to lean against the saint for support as the crystals drew closer, and he went with the only thing with a chance of breaking the statue. Chaos.

Streams of Oblivion and Creation were dredged from the depths and moved toward his shoulders. However, a rumble and something heavy touching his head stopped his attempt to activate the last-ditch skill he hadn't dared use since the Void Star. Zac's drifting consciousness was shaken wide awake, and his eyes widened when he saw the statue look down at him with a gentle smile. The thing touching his head was the statue's hand.

'Flame...'

The weak, distant whisper seemed to come from the past. The statue crumbled, the last candle went out, and the guardian weapons dimmed. Zac exhaled as the last blessing entered his chest, bringing with it a spiritual surge that had been absent from the blessings he stole. It swept through his body, giving him the strength to keep going a bit longer.

It was at that moment Zac realized the trial wasn't fading like the previous four. The catacombs rumbled, and Zac quickly swallowed another set of soldier pills as he warily looked around. The threat came from below this time. The floor gave way, exposing a bottomless darkness. It was like an enormous sinkhole had formed beneath the cathedral, swallowing it whole.

Bricks and pieces of marble fell like rain around Zac as he plunged into the trial's hidden underbelly. He tried to control his descent, but the environment overruled his control. Then, his whole body disappeared, reducing him to a discarnate consciousness caught in a storm.

The waters collected by the almost full chalice spilled out, forming rivers of faith that snaked through the hurricane of rubble. Zac looked on with confusion and shock as the sanctum's falling pieces rearranged themselves into the statues he'd destroyed. Most were only half-formed and partly made of floor tiles and pieces of wall, and liquified Faith Energy filled in the blanks.

The saints looked broken and worn down. And yet, they felt more alive than the statues he'd faced moments ago. There was true consciousness in the gazes that lasted a second or two before the statues were returned to the storm. The wrath and Killing Intent were gone. Replacing them were conviction and anticipation.

The rain of rubble was gradually thinning out, with piece after piece being swallowed by darkness. Soon, there was just Zac, who kept scanning the surroundings for threats. His Danger Sense had calmed down, but that didn't make him feel much better. Had his desperate gambit dismantled the whole trial, forcing the environment to unravel like a video game bug? Or was it responding in kind, throwing him into the Void after Zac used the Void to destroy it?

Finally, there was a spark of light in the distance. Zac warily watched it grow until it took up most of his vision. He relaxed after confirming it wasn't a blast of faith coming to do him in, but his guard soon went up when he sensed another familiar aura—the Heavens, the current one and not a vision from the pre-System era. Zac desperately tried to get away, but he was pushed into the grand tapestry all the same.

Zac didn't dare so much as think, afraid he'd draw another tribulation on himself. Thankfully, he passed through without causing so much as a ripple. The light faded and was replaced by dark oceans made from incomprehensible patterns. It was the Four Laws, engulfed by boundless radiance before Zac had a chance to derive anything.

The Imperial Fate he faced in the Tribulation Throne was back with a vengeance. It exuded a boundless conviction that could overturn fate and usher in a new era. A common thread, a common goal. A prime undertaking made possible by the grace of the Emperor.

This time, there was no Cosmic Destiny to curtail its expansion. The boundless ocean of communal belief covered all reality, and Zac's soul groaned from being forced to take in just a sliver of its scope. It was like he

once more was facing the silent, enduring power of the incomprehensibly large Void Mountain.

A flickering aura different from the rest gave Zac something to focus on, which helped alleviate the pressure. It was the closest anomaly of many, and Zac vaguely sensed more than ten far in the distance. It soon became apparent he was moving, or rather being pulled, right toward the congregation of undying will.

The particular aura congealed into a familiar rune. It was sigil for the Order of the Empyrean Chalice. The brand was like an array flag, helping sustain and stabilize the fading faith of a long-gone era. Like the Imperial Fate, the rune showed signs of age. It wouldn't fail today or tomorrow, but it couldn't overcome the Law of Impermanence. Zac shot right into the sigil's center, expecting the vision to end there. It didn't.

Zac passed through the shimmering curtain, coming face to face with an endless expanse of nothingness—utter, absolute nothingness. It was the same horrifying void as when his inspiration took him to the Void Mountain. Zac felt his very being erode from being exposed to the boundless beyond. Thankfully, the suffering didn't last long before something pulled him back.

In the heart of the order's sigil was an unadorned chalice filled with the waters of destiny. A drop fell into the cup, and the gentle sloshing conveyed a universal yearning. It stemmed from the earliest eddies of the Grand Kalpa and stretched to the unknowable haze of a distant future. Zac could vaguely sense the marks of the exalted existences that had contributed to the cup.

'In accordance with the Pact of the Flame, we name you the Terminal Son of the Empyrean Chalice.'

The vision faded. Zac was back in his own body, his wounds already healed. He stood atop a platform in the middle of a round church, showered in multifarious light from glazed windows. Surrounding him were the five steles of the Pilgrimages of the Empyrean Chalice and an exit leading to the Halls of Service. Lofty faith seeped out of every corner of the building, and the ambient energy was no less than in the Pilgrimage of Faith.

The swirl of faith wasn't threatening. Instead, it was almost protective, welcoming. The sense of safety didn't do much to calm his nerves. The Pilgrimage of Faith had given him too many shocks, from narrowly escaping death to the shocking vision that followed.

"Feeding the flame," Zac muttered as he turned to the fifth stele.

His name was already added right at the top. The entry loomed above the other candidates like an unreachable peak, but it did little to lift Zac's spirits. The Eternal Servant had called him a thief, and he really felt like one now that the dust had settled. He'd pillaged the catacombs and was shown a vision meant for someone else. Like rejecting his notion, a screen appeared before him.

[Holy Son: Wielder of the flame]

Zac sighed in defeat as he looked at the title. It wasn't the first time he'd gained a title that didn't provide any attributes. He received the Pathstrider in E-grade, which 'marked him for further training.' Then there was his hidden Terminus title, whose purpose was still unknown. Zac scanned his body, finding no brand or impartment.

Even then, Zac had a strong hunch he'd been tricked again. By Laondio and the Eternal Servant waiting outside. The title had put a claim on his future in a way that his heritage failed to defend against. This encounter was another piece in the Laondio's vast plot, and Zac had been dragged further into the conspiracy. He was still clueless about the details, but he was almost certain his life wasn't at risk anymore.

Zac tried to glean something from the vision while the memory was fresh. The Imperial Fate was at the highest layer of reality, above the Dao and Laws. It would have made sense if it was part of the System, but it didn't seem like it. The System's aura was distinct from the Imperial Fate, and the former was at its strongest while the latter was waning.

It had almost felt like the Imperial Fate acted as a barrier covering all creation, protecting the Multiverse from the erosion. Was Ralz Kalzood actually right? Could there be threats lurking in that endless expanse?

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