

## The Fall 1030

### [Chapter 1030 - Sacrifice](#)

Just as the vine swarm was about to reach its target, a shimmer emerged from Zac's axe. It pounced at the beleaguered warrior with perfect timing, roaring with excitement. The pressure became too much, and the deathsworn wouldn't survive without using a skill. A twenty-meter scythe formed a band of death around the warrior, destroying vines and Verun alike.

Of course, Verun was an intangible Tool Spirit, and the vines wouldn't give up now that they were closing in on their target. But they didn't just keep growing. Instead, dozens of regions in the dome grew dull as moss died and vines withered. They'd been robbed of all their energy and Longevity. In return, broken tips exploded with renewed vigor as new vines emerged from within, gleaming with a golden luster. It almost looked like a snake shedding its old shell, but what came out was not the same.

Rebirth through Creation.

Some vines looked illusory, as though they were made of light. Others seemed more metal than vine. A few had odd growths humming with unstable power, while some had actually grown axe-like protuberances.

Zac vividly remembered his first weeks in the Orom World, where he traveled through a forest filled with the Dao of Nature before passing into one governed by Life. They were nothing alike; one was balanced and harmonious, while the other was a mad scramble for space and power. Seeing that place had really helped him better understand the Dao of Pure Life.

His attack ultimately wasn't a punishment from nature. That wasn't his path, and neither wasn't his Evolutionary Stance. His was a path of death and rebirth, constantly remolding yourself into something better, something deadlier. How could his vines be any different? There was even a bit of Creation Energy required to run the skill, which allowed the vines to accept anything and make it their own.

As the Heart of Creation said, Creation was never over. So long as he had Cosmic Energy to spare, the vines would keep coming and only get deadlier. Zac could even sacrifice some of his vines to speed up the process. His control over these empowered vines was pretty bad, but that was fine. If Zac didn't know how they would attack his enemies, how would they? And if they failed, something better would grow out of the ashes.

The man tried to destroy everything with another large-scale attack, but these weren't so easily dealt with. He was drowning in waves of unpredictable violence, with a dragon hyena waiting to seal the deal. The other warriors moved to help, but that meant a second tree got a chance to sprout. Another swarm of vines joined the madness.

Zac didn't bother with them. He used the chaos to get to the two mages, hoping to deal with them first. The two still hadn't moved a step, which on its own was incredibly suspicious. The vines that got too close were destroyed by flashes of light, though, proving they had some sort of protective domain.

An eruption of light almost threw Zac off his feet, and he inwardly swore as he felt a scream of danger. Valsa had shredded his outburst of fractal leaves, and she was coming at him fast. Then, the swarm of swords was upon him, and Zac found his progress halted as new wounds were carved into his body. In

fact, he was even pushed back as the Sword Array forced him to surrender ground to avoid grievous wounds.

Meanwhile, Zac finally sensed a skill activation from the two mages. Were they preparing to flee? If things continued this way, there was no way he'd catch them. He needed to do something about the monster nipping at his heels. Zac had hoped to save this for a bit later, but it looked like he was out of options.

The familiar coffin appeared on his back, the rattling sound of chains joining the creaking of growing vines. A pitch-black swirl appeared above Zac's head, and a viper-quick pitch-black chain shot out. Simultaneously, a second Dao Mold emerged from his Inexorable Core, and a stream of empowered Dao entered [Love's Bond].

He had already called upon one of his Tool Spirits, so why not the second? Valsa was right in melee range, swinging that radiant sword to cut apart empowered vines like they were made out of paper. But the powerful chain of [Fate's Obduracy] was unrelenting in a way that eclipsed even [Primal Edict]. As she cut one, two attacked. When she cut those, she found herself attacked by four.

Not attacking wasn't an option either. The chains were filled with death and corrosion, and even Valsa would be in trouble if she let herself get trapped. Between her 49 flying swords and the one in her hand, the initial lone link had turned into hundreds in no time. They were an unrelenting tide that tried to swallow her whole.

Zac used the opening to run toward the mages, but they had already realized they were in trouble. They weren't about to sit and wait for death like their two companions. The mages started to grow translucent, and the augmented vision from [Ancestral Woods] showed how orbs of light lit up across the arena.

Teleportation points.

Zac frowned, but he was inwardly delighted. The two mages had similar paths, but their Dao fluctuations were a bit different. It wasn't hard to tell which of the orbs belonged to which mage. There was no way he'd reach them in time, so Zac hurled [Black Death] at the closest mage. Meanwhile, he sent a series of commands to the seething mass of vines that covered the dome by this point.

Valsa hadn't given up on her rivers of light, nor had he on his evolving swarm of vines. They couldn't. The moment one side gave in, it would be game over. Nothing would be stopping the knives anymore, and Zac would drown under a hail of projectiles. Similarly, the vines had reached a deadly mass, even to Valsa's deathsworn. The vines would overwhelm her helpers if they no longer needed to counter the blade rivers.

At the command of Zac, some of the vines redirected to stab into the empty spheres of light. Meanwhile, Vivi and Alea slithered through the chaos, positioning themselves near the teleportation points inside the winged domain. The axe ripped forward like a cannon, leaving tears in the air.

It was too late. The mage turned illusory just as the axe was about to carve a hole through her chest, and he felt a weak fluctuation to his side. Zac wasn't deterred and lightly slapped the chain as he pursued. The axe turned under the manipulation of the links, making a beeline toward a nearby sphere whose energy was rising.

His armaments and [Primal Edict] followed suit, and one point after another was destroyed. The moment the mage appeared, she was forced to disappear again. Two of the warriors tried to stop Zac as he barreled forward. But without Valsa, how could they bar his path? They narrowly avoided getting eviscerated as Zac followed the scent, and the mage was forced to make two more desperate jumps.

She disappeared again, at which point Zac turned and rushed toward the next mage. He had finally forced the first mage out of the winged domain and into one of the spheres of the jungle. His jungle.

A scream echoed and was followed by a crunching sound as hundreds of vines from a dozen nearby trees ripped the mage apart when she appeared. The plan had worked perfectly; destroy some of the teleportation points and turn the others into traps. Eventually, she would have no choice but to meet him head-on or walk into a trap.

Three down, one to go.

The second mage hadn't moved far and was currently hiding behind the twenty-meter wall ball of chains formed from [Fate's Obduracy]. Just as Zac began his hunt, he felt a second wave of Kill Energy enter his body. A victorious roar echoed through the cave, and Zac saw Verun holding the head of a warrior with a long scar running down his face.

Its form was already flickering, and Zac could feel deep exhaustion from the spirit. It had hidden behind the vines, waiting for a chance to pounce, but the enemies all had Dao Branches. Their strikes were very harmful to the spirit projection, and it dissipated just after finishing its hunt. Truthfully, Zac was surprised it managed to kill one of the warriors at all—his goal had been to wound and stall.

The remaining warriors were in various states of disarray, where half fought the vines while the others moved to protect the final conjurer. None dared get close to Zac with their leader temporarily restrained, but a scream of danger indicated his window of opportunity was fast closing.

Zac looked over and saw a seething ball of thousands of chains strain against their captive. [Fate's Obduracy] had held Valsa for almost two seconds. It was an incredible accomplishment, proving just how powerful Alea had become. Then again, Alea had always been far stronger as a Tool Spirit than when she was alive. For instance, she'd fared well in the Twilight Ocean while still an F-grade Spirit Tool.

Since then, Alea had eaten a plethora of treasures and evolved a full grade, leaving her right at the threshold of D-grade. However, two seconds was already pushing it. Thousands of radiant streaks pierced through the gaps between the links, and it looked like a sun was being born inside. Zac urgently ran past it, his eyes screaming murder as he stared down his next target. Their eyes met, and Zac saw primal fear in the mage's eyes as his body grew intangible.

A scream of danger wasn't enough of an early warning as the world turned white. Intense pain wracked his body as invisible blades carved deep cuts into his body. A searing Dao tried to consume him from within as he was flung toward the barrier. A fourth pillar crumbled while cracks appeared on the fifth, meaning [Empyrean Aegis] was about to collapse. Thankfully, it had protected him from what would've been grievous damage.

However, Zac knew the winged domain would soon exert far greater pressure on him, and he could feel a beast within the blinding light shooting toward him—an enraged Valsa. He only had one shot.

The world was still a sea of white, but the combination of his Draugr vision, [Cosmic Gaze], and [Ancestral Woods] at least provided him with the outlines of his enemies and vague hints of concentrations of Dao. Valsa had already launched another strike toward him while he was in mid-air. Zac gritted his teeth as he threw [Black Death].

Not toward Valsa but toward the spot where the mage had reappeared.

Valsa didn't bother with the mage as he was already phasing away again. Instead, she flew toward Zac, who was blinded and with his back against his wall. Zac crashed into the barrier, and Valsa's follow-up strike ripped apart the final protection of [Empyrean Aegis] before carving a deep wound across his chest. He didn't care. Zac's eyes were trained on the mage and his axe that was still shooting toward him.

Just as the mage was about to teleport away, a shadowy figure appeared behind him as though out of nowhere. It was Alea, or at least a projection of her. She gently embraced the mage, and he froze in place. Literally. His teleportation was interrupted as his energy stopped moving. Within their embrace, there was nothingness.

No past, no future. Fate was sealed, and the river of time ground to a standstill.

The effect only lasted a fraction of a second, but it was enough. [Black Death] punched through the mage's head. None of his protective measures had been activated. Alea's avatar disappeared, looking like she'd shattered like broken glass. The mage crumbled, and a surge of Kill Energy confirmed the death of the final sorcerer. Yet Zac wasn't happy.

"I'm sorry," Zac whispered.

'Don't be like that,' Alea admonished, her words growing fainter and fainter. 'Getting hurt in battle is normal. I love that I can still protect you... But now... you're on your own...'

Zac sighed as the coffin returned to its necklace form on its own, and [Black Death] changed into a streak of haze that returned to his side. As far as Zac was concerned, [Fate's Predestination] was a defective skill, even if its effect was incredible. To completely seal every aspect of a person briefly was heaven-defying. A skill like that could reverse any battle—it almost went against the law of balance.

However, it came at a horrible cost. It harmed Alea's soul rather than draining her energy. Even worse, the stronger the opponent whose fate you wanted to seal, the greater the damage. This mage was at his level and would be considered an elite anywhere, but he was by no means a peak talent with superlative protections. Still, it would likely take Alea a couple of years to recover. Use it too many times, and Zac suspected her spirit would crumble altogether.

For weak enemies, there was no need to use it since he could defeat them on his own. For enemies that pushed him to his breaking point, he risked shattering Alea's soul. Zac hadn't even been able to activate the skill for a long time, as her soul hadn't reached the minimum threshold of soul strength. But even after she reached that point, Zac had been unwilling to use the skill.

Now, he didn't have a lot of options. Zac had nothing else to trap Valsa with, so catching the wizard again would have been incredibly difficult if he had been allowed to teleport away. Now, it was time to make the most of the opportunity Alea had awarded him. The mages were cleared out, and Zac was

relieved to see the barrier start to flicker ominously. It didn't disperse outright, but it didn't look like it would be much longer.

The world of white faded, exposing a furious Valsa already upon him. Meanwhile, Zac had less than a third of his Cosmic Energy remaining because of [Ancestral Woods] and [Primal Edict], and he was covered in wounds.

Yet, he welcomed her arrival. With the mages gone, it was time to wrap things up. Valsa was about to deliver a ruthless strike but skidded to a halt when a huge hand appeared out of nowhere. Not above her, but her remaining followers who were still besieged by a swarm of vines. Zac was running low on Cosmic Energy but retained two-thirds of his Void Energy. Of course, this was still a pretty big gamble, as [Arcadia's Judgment] would eat up a good chunk of that. This was the perfect opportunity.

Valsa was about to flash back and block the strike, but how could Zac let her come and go as she pleased?

"Not so fast," Zac said with a bloody grin as he swung [Verun's Bite] with enough force to cleave mountains.

A dense set of fractals had already appeared across his skin, and his body was surging with power. The pain from the wounds was washed away, and the invading Dao snuffed out. He had entered the crusade, and his enemy stood before him. The runes on the handle of [Verun's Bite] glimmered with sanguine desire, and the air screamed with primal roars of the wild.

"Impudent," Valsa frowned as the crown on her head released a brutal pressure.

Zac's bones groaned, but he was filled with unstoppable momentum. Meanwhile, Zac pushed [Conviction of Eoz] to new heights. He had long since realized this was the true power of the Hidden Node—combining it with berserking methods. He was already pushing his body beyond its original levels with [Arcadian Crusade], so extracting more force from the Hidden Node came at no cost other than his, admittedly waning, Vigor.

It became a multiplier on any Berserking Skill, and Zac was almost half as strong as his original form. Valsa was forced back by the strike, pushed further away from her helpers. She tried to activate a skill, but another swing interrupted her. Zac's current attributes pushed the boundary of what was possible in the E-grade, and not even Valsa could withstand his onslaught.

Another clash almost wrenched Valsa's sword out of her hands while her flying swords cracked and were flung into the distance. He was about to level a finishing blow to her head, but a shield of light appeared as the gemstones on her crown lit up again. The whole world shook, but not because of Zac's strike. Not that one, at least.

Judgment had been meted out, and a huge cleft created a line of demarcation that cut through the whole dome. The controller-less barrier could not withstand the force of a crusade-augmented [Arcadia's Judgment], and it crumbled as six streams of kill energy entered Zac's body. Only two had survived the initial blast, but a vine finished one off while the last was done in by the aftershock.

Only one enemy remaining. Zac was running low on energy, but that didn't matter. He thrummed with power, and his opponent was in melee range. It was just a matter of time before he broke through her

defenses and finished her off. There was no way her War Regalia could save her now that her batteries were gone.

Yet, Valsa didn't look alarmed. Rather, she looked pleased. Zac didn't stop his barrage, hoping to break through the light barrier quickly, but he knew something was wrong upon seeing fourteen motes of light rise from the corpses of the fallen deathsworn.

"What? You thought this was over?" Valsa laughed, and Zac felt a sense of crisis as her aura rose rapidly. "That was the last one, right? Of your skills?"

What was going on? Why did killing her followers make her stronger? Zac's eyes widened in comprehension. Sacrifice. The War Array had a sacrificial feature, where the death of the deathsworn provided a huge surge in power.

"Pretty ruthless," Zac swore.

"Your aura is surrounded by a sea of blood; who are you to talk?" Valsa smiled, her eyes almost burning with hunger. "Every path requires sacrifice. For my ascension, no price is too great!"