

The Fall 759

Chapter 759: When Fates Align

Another ripple was released by the shard, and Zac felt like a universe was growing within his body as a storm of Creation spread out from head to toe. His body was rapidly transforming from the wild impulses it emitted, and he knew that anyone watching him right now would be beyond horrified by what they saw.

He desperately hold on to his image of reality to make sure the changes didn't spiral out of control, but reality suddenly felt malleable, open to reinterpretation. Alluring whispers beckoned for him to take the chance, to transcend from his lowly form, and he felt an echo of agreement from within the cage. Wasn't he disappointed that his human form was so inferior to his Draugr side, be it in energy circulation to storage capabilities?

Why not change it? It only required a single thought.

It was a trap. Zac could feel it even in his muddled state. The remnants only dealt in backhanded gifts, and until it had been locked down and firmly controlled, he had to be careful with his desires. But that was easier said than done. The rampaging remnants scurried back and forth with blinding speed, leaving a trail of destructive creation in its wake.

Try as he might, it seemed almost impossible to curtail its rampage. Why was it so different from the last time? Was it because the shard in the volcano had enjoyed almost unlimited access to vast quantities of energy? Back in the Technocrat vessel, he hadn't turned into a rapidly transforming monstrosity the moment he took on the shard.

Or had he?

Back then, he had been instantly knocked unconscious before getting whisked away by a vision, and who knew how long he had stayed unconscious. This time he had managed to stay awake, for better or worse. Part of him wanted to embrace that sweet darkness to avoid the horrifying agony of having your body reformed into one wretched state after another, but he didn't dare to give in.

There was a good chance this was something new. It didn't seem like the shard's actions were just its natural state of creative exuberance. Rather, it felt like the shard had already sensed its sibling, and it was shooting back and forth in an attempt to locate it. Zac couldn't let the thing continue unchecked, but he didn't even have a chance to figure something out before he felt reality slow down to a crawl.

The seed was suddenly locked in place just below Zac's neck, and his limbs were no longer undergoing wild transformations between a series of ghoulish creations. Even the enormous whirlpool of magma around him had ground to a standstill, and it seemed to Zac that the only thing that moved were his thoughts.

Unfortunately, even they were starting to become hazy as his vision closed in on him. He felt his mind being dragged far away, and he desperately tried to tether at least a remnant piece of consciousness to his body before it all went dark.

A crackling sound full of ebullience echoed out into the void, each snap exuding the primordial Dao. For untold ages the [Spark of Creation] left its mark on the universe, its conceptions inching ever closer to that impossible threshold.

Worlds were born with a single breath, marvels beyond compare conjured with a thought. Its desire was the Heavens and its will the Earth. But as the spark grew more powerful, so did its hunger. Not even Creation could overcome the ancient Law of Balance, and every spark of inspiration had its price.

Worlds were born with a single breath, and stars dimmed to never shine again. The spark didn't mind. After all, change was a form of Creation as well, and it moved through the cosmos in search of more sustenance to fuel its blessings.

Hunger. Growth. Desire. The spark flashed, its tendrils stretching toward every corner of myriad planes. Creation was never over.

With a wave of his arm, the Spring Saint brought life to the desolate fields, his desire for life bending the harsh elements to his will. Of course, nothing came without a price, and his murky eyes turned to his followers whose backs were already bent over with premature age. Two years and they were already like this. He inwardly sighed as his eyes turned back to the seemingly lush grass that was springing up all around them.

Self-hatred burned in his heart, but he couldn't stop now. He couldn't tell his ardent supporters that it was a lie, that the bountiful gardens he wrought were a calamity waiting to happen. It was all a charade, his desire to create something greater supplanted by an older and undying will.

Soon, it would all turn to dust.

Hopefully, he and his followers would be dead before then. That way they wouldn't have to witness the evil they had brought to their world. Even the purest intentions could be corrupted, even the most benevolent of deeds could be harmful. Life without soul was just corruption, and the world he had created was hollow.

The whispers had grown so loud, to the point that they almost drowned out the calls of the wild. Regret gnawed at her as she kept running, desperately trying to create some distance from the site of her outburst. A whole settlement turned to a monument of her folly, her people turned to sacrificial offerings to that insatiable desire.

It was never enough. It always wanted more. More energy, more impressions, more yearning. It could never be satiated, that ancient madness that had permeated her very being. Silence was oppression, stillness was death.

She was so hungry. She had denied herself for fifty years, wanting nothing, doing nothing, wasting her potential and future in an effort to stem the inevitable. Even then, the clamors had grown louder, and her attempts to impose order now seemed so laughable. Four quick jumps took her to the top of the mountain, far from any settlements or reflection pools.

The moons were so beautiful today.

She had been renamed after Sarda'Lavain, the Shepherd, the moment her talent was discovered. The council had hoped she would be a shepherd, keeping the flock safe from the darkness of the Ymrid Expanse. The moons had looked just like they did now during the ceremony.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she finally let herself remember. The whole mountain rumbled as one statue after another appeared, memories given form in one final salute. Ten, fifty, a thousand scenes appeared, wrought with loving detail in stone and wood. They were alive in a sense, as they lived in her desire.

Nature screamed with pain as the Sarda'Lavain led her flock into the one place the curse couldn't follow - nothingness.

Zac's soul was taken on a journey through one horrid fate after another as the world stood still around him. Not one of the visions was a scene of triumph. They all depicted the inevitable doom waiting at the end of absorbing a Shard of Creation, to the point that Zac felt something was amiss. Did the new shard in his body sense that he had already locked away its siblings, and was now trying to wear down his confidence?

If so, it would take more than this. He was just a child in multiverse terms, but his will wouldn't be broken by something like this. He had goals that keep him on the path. He would get there even if he had to extinguish that ancient will that had tainted Creation itself.

And even if he didn't believe in himself, he believed in the System and its greed for more chaos patterns. This wasn't the place where he would fall. He simply let the scenes wash over him, each one of them a lesson to engrave in his heart.

But suddenly, the scenes stopped, like they had two times before. His consciousness once found itself on that lofty mountain, staring at the being sitting on the peak as the sky danced in a thousand colors, each ray containing a facet of truth that far surpassed anything Zac knew.

"Oh?" the Aetherlord said as he opened his eyes, his word rife with the Dao. "You again?"

The last time Zac had been sent to this mountain top he had been in the F-grade and still clueless about a lot of things. He had been a frog in the bottom of a well so to speak, but years of hardship and experiences had greatly broadened his horizons. Only now could he fully appreciate what kind of monster appeared before him.

The cosmos itself bent to his will as Creation had taken physical form by his aura. It danced across the horizon, for as long as his eyes could see in every direction. This was not a Dao Field or condensed intent, this was pure Dao fit to be considered Heavenly Law. This man was simply too powerful, even more so than his Technocrat mother.

His presence put pressure on Zac's very existence, like his soul couldn't fathom that something so grand could be crammed into a single body. Then again, it was perhaps not only his perception that was different this time compared to last. Zac felt more tangible this time, more than just a wisp of consciousness.

"Just a blink of an eye has passed yet you have once more drunk from the poisonous waters of false Creation. I warned you when we parted ways, that the hunger for the boundless will leave you a withered husk," he said with disdain. "Yet you once more run the errands of the Villainous Heavens."

"Aren't you the same?" Zac muttered, and he immediately regretted it.

Or perhaps the Aetherlord hadn't heard him? It was hard to tell in Zac's current form, whether his words were real or just stray thoughts. However, the sneer on the Aetherlord's face quickly gave him an answer, and Zac immediately tried to leave. This man was terrifyingly powerful, but he was a bit of a bastard judging by their last encounter, and who knew what he would do this time.

He only needed to speak with Be'Zi anyway, and seeing this guy was proof enough that the plan was feasible. The world shuddered as Zac tried to drag himself back through his spiritual anchor, but it suddenly stabilized as the connection was cut.

"Don't be so hasty to leave, human," the Aetherlord said. "And don't get your facts mixed up. It is not the shards that bring us together, it is the Cursed Heavens. I took no shortcut to reach my current height, unlike you who invited that madness into your heart."

Zac was shocked to hear that the Aetherlord hadn't actually meddled with the Shards of Creation. Zac had always considered him and Be'Zi as some sort of safety net. Those two had made it to the middle or later stages of Autarchy with these things in their bodies, which should be more than enough to achieve his own goals of finding and saving Kenzie.

But now it turned out it was all a lie? They had simply cultivated Oblivion and Creation without the interference with the shards?

"Well, it looks like you handled the first one surprisingly well," the Aetherlord continued with a ruminating look. "I can barely sense its mark on you. The System stepped in when I would not? Interesting. You might be able to amuse us a while longer."

"Could you tell me how to fuse the shards?" Zac ventured, seeing as the Aetherlord seemed to be in a good mood.

"You still bear the stench of the Cursed Heavens, even more now than last time. Not destroying you is already testing the limits of my patience," the Aetherlord said. "However, there is a saying. One is an eternal curse, two is a calamity. Five is... Heh, well perhaps you will find out? In fact, how about a wager?"

Zac didn't immediately answer, afraid he'd be caught in a similar scheme like with the Eveningtide Asura. However, it didn't look like the Aetherlord Autarch planned on doling out a quest. Zac suddenly realized it might not be possible, seeing as how this man seemed to have completely broken from the System.

"Arrive in front of me with five shards within 100 years, in person or a vision like this, and I will impart you with a Creation of my own," he said with a small smile. "It will be immensely beneficial for your path."

"What if I fail?" Zac hesitated. "And what did you mean by calamity?"

"If you fail, then you will simply be another one who failed to satiate the boundless greed of the Villainous Heavens. Make no mistake. Now that you've set out on this path, there is no return," he said as his smile widened. "As for what calamity means, you will find out soon enough. Now, off you go."

Alvod's eyes shot open and he looked at the Twilight Tapestry with anticipation. It fluctuated precariously for a few seconds as a foreign intrusion made its presence known. However, the unwelcome visitor was soon gone, and the Tapestry returned to normal, even stronger than before.

"That brat actually followed through," Alvod smiled as he rose into the air from his prayer mat.

As expected, that little Draugr hadn't taken his mission to heart, only making a symbolic effort before setting off to look for his own fortunes.

Was his reputation really so bad that someone would distrust him eons after his attack on the entrenched powers? Alvod didn't really care that the world didn't know the truth of the matters back then. He had followed his heart to right a wrong, not just for himself, but for Zecia's very future. But his infamy did make his life a bit harder.

And now, this Arcaz Black had taken one of those cursed objects, the remnant from the Spark by the looks of it. Who knew what kind of trouble the brat would create with that thing kicking around in his body. Being able to impact one's surroundings with such meager strength was a talent worth admiration.

Alvod still remembered how one of the purifiers had washed up on his shores along with the scorched remains of the distillation array powering it. He hadn't believed his eyes when he saw how his tapestry had been tampered with in an attempt to force a system of Life, Death, and War.

"You think my path a lie, a defeat?" Alvod snorted as his gaze turned to another spot on the tapestry a few hundred meters away. "Foolish. There are as many paths to the peak as there are stars to the sky. Just because they have been hidden, doesn't mean they're inferior."

Space bent and he soon hovered in front of the spot he had marked before. Even now, Alvod hesitated a bit, but he soon steeled his resolve. He knew that he would encounter all kinds of roadblocks on the road to Autarchy. As long as he could follow his heart, he could live and die without regret. And his heart told him this needed to be done. Otherwise, it would be like having a fly buzzing around in the back of his head.

"You want to abscond with the treasures while everyone else suffers? The Council, the undead factions, even the Havarok bastards. They risk everything for the advancement of their path. You think yourself above it?" Alvod muttered as a ten-thousand-meter tall wave materialized behind his back. "You think yourself safe after the System's warnings? Naive."

The wave crashed forward, powered by the weight of a supreme world on the precipice of forming its Dao. The tapestry flickered as an ancient will pushed back, but it was too weak. The crashing evening tide turned into nine streams of monstrous power, and the tapestry was forced to give way.

Alvod pushed his hand inside, ignoring the deep clap of thunder above. Searing pain assaulted him, but he crushed the resistance and paved a path.

"Go now, child," Alvod muttered with a distorted voice as the pathway shrunk. "Hurry."

Alvod's pained grimace turned into a smile when he sensed his command being heeded. He sunk back toward his prayer mats as his singed hand gradually was healed by a couple of nurturing streams.

"And thus our fates align," Alvod grinned as his gaze turned back to the original spot. "There is no escaping what's to come. Let's see how you enjoy riding this tiger."