

The Fall 776

Chapter 776: Ripples on the Lake

A slow but steady heartbeat echoed out throughout the void, each thump vibrating with the primordial Dao. For untold ages, the [Heart of Oblivion] grew, with each cycle inching closer to that impossible threshold.

Worlds were destroyed with a single breath, reality itself turned to ash with a thought. Its desire was the Heavens and its will the Earth. But as the heart grew more powerful, so did its hatred. Not even Oblivion could overcome the ancient Law of Balance, and every end had its price.

Worlds were destroyed with a single breath, but the young replaced the old. The heart was angry, but also relieved. After all, without the cycle of Samsara, endless oblivion would be impossible. So it moved through the cosmos in search of more sustenance to fuel its curse.

Hatred. Destruction. Desire. The heart beat, its madness spreading toward every corner of the myriad planes. Oblivion was never over.

Why was she here? Her thoughts felt sluggish as she looked around at the vast battlefield below. Tens of thousands of fallen warriors littered the ground, and she felt a weak recollection as she looked at the insignia on their arms.

Her gaze shifted, turning to the wretched creatures who must have had been the enemies of the fallen soldiers. Many of them sported wounds that no doubt was left by the people's army. At the same time, there were dozens of large swathes of nothingness, where neither soldier nor invader had fallen. The only clues that it wasn't a random occurrence were the cut-off bodyparts lining the edge of those zones, along with a sense of familiarity she couldn't place.

She didn't know why, but a surge of anger filled her as she looked at the ugly faces of those things that had fought against the soldiers. Humans, they were called, she suddenly recalled. She waved her hand, and nothingness followed. Hundreds of bodies were erased, never to sully her gaze again as another zone of nothingness appeared.

"Wavemistress Wana! You are alive!" a call came from behind.

Wana, that seemed familiar, she thought as she slowly turned to the source of the sound. There were two of them, and they were the same as the soldiers, wearing identical clothes and sporting the same sort of wounds. The one on the left sparked some sort of recollection, but it felt like a haze that dispersed as quickly as it appeared.

These two were different.

While the others were perfectly content in perpetual nothingness, these two were vibrant, a blemish on the quietude around her.

"You are different," she slowly said, voicing her displeasure.

“Different?” the man to the left said, his tentacles shuddering hesitantly. “What do you mean? Are you okay, mother? What is this aur-“

Another wave, and the battlefield was quiet once more. She nodded with contentment as she closed her eyes, melding with the nothingness. But even as lay down among the others, a lingering question refused to be erased.

Who am I?

Despair filled his heart as he ran through the narrow streets, his gaze fearfully turning toward the sky in search of his pursuers. How had things come to this? He hadn’t wished for too much. He had just wanted to claim a small piece of the sky for himself, joining those beings in their floating palaces.

But things had gone out of control almost immediately after finding that cursed gemstone in the depths. Power beget power, and as he waved his hands, the heavens cried while he reaped the rewards. But the whispers of destruction had been too much. It was never enough, and it all felt like a nightmare when he looked back at his gruesome struggle for wealth and power.

Had it been him? Had it been the gemstone? He couldn’t even remember what his true nature was anymore. It had all been twisted and muddled as he reached for the stars. Suddenly, he found his escape blocked as a huge golden barrier had appeared in front of him while an overwhelming pressure bore down on his shoulders.

They had found him.

“It’s futile, destroyer,” the man said. “Your path ends here.”

He looked up at the warriors in their glistening equipment, radiant beings that seemed to be one with the Heavenly Dao. This was what he had wished for. To become one of these celestial beings. Yet they looked at him with loathing, with scorn, even though he wielded power comparable to their own.

He didn’t remember what he had been so regretful about any longer. Rage bubbled in his heart as he gazed into those loathsome eyes that were filled with condescension. As long as they were destroyed, the sky would be clear once more.

The Shard of Creation had shown Zac visions of desire, and the inevitable price of giving in. The splinter instead showed him visions of despair, how all dreams turned to dust eventually. Every step forward was paid with your spirit until there was nothing left to be had. Some had fallen into madness quickly, as he almost had after taking on the first splinter.

Others had held on, but they didn’t notice how pieces of their humanity had been stripped away bit by bit. Eventually, they became hollow, mindless killing machines who only sought to destroy. Seeing those visions made Zac feel a sense of dread since most of the people hadn’t sensed their spirits decaying.

Was he the same?

Every time he had used the tainted energies of the Shard of Creation, he had felt how some of his lifespan was being stolen. Meanwhile, he had thought the price for using the energy of the splinter was simply the bouts of murderous intent. But what if there was more? How would he know if he had lost something?

Perhaps, whole facets of his personality that were gone, sacrificed for power during his struggles over the past years. It was undeniable that he was colder and more murderous today compared to the early days of the integration. He had thought it was an unavoidable result of being thrust into the madness that was the Multiverse, but there might have been more to it.

No, it shouldn't be. Even if he had been robbed like the people in the visions, it couldn't have been too much. The splinter had always been caged since day one, in contrast to the two shards who both had spent some time rampaging freely inside his body. He probably hadn't actually suffered the same fate as those in the vision, considering he had almost only dealt with energy purified by the prison.

But it was a stark warning to him of what lay waiting in the future, especially if he was planning on collecting more sets of these cursed things. He would probably be able to recoup at least some of the lost lifeforce with medicines or Natural Treasures, but could you recover from having pieces of your spirit destroyed?

It really drove home the need for him to continue working on his soul. He needed to find a way to purify the energies from the remnants on his own, rather than relying on the prison. He couldn't keep paying such a terrifying price every time he took advantage of these items. The cage probably wouldn't last more than a decade, especially not after destroying another fractal.

At that time, he would be all on his own.

The visions kept flashing through Zac's mind as he struggled to come to grips with this new knowledge, but part of his mind was occupied with the situation by his real body. Thankfully, it looked like time had slowed down for Uona as well. Otherwise, he'd be dead by now. Perhaps it was rather his perception of time that had changed.

In either case, it allowed him to breathe out and plan his next step.

He still felt churning anger as he remembered the pained face of Alea and the cracks that had covered [Love's Bond]. Once again, she had sacrificed herself to keep him safe. It was just like when he fought the Fiend Wolf or the generals of the three mini-incursions. He kept coming up short, and she was the one who had to pay the price.

At least, he had achieved his goal. He had seized the splinter. But having done so, Zac realized he hadn't really thought things through. He had somewhat taken for granted that everything would resolve itself the moment he had collected the splinter, but exactly how? The events last time had been completely out of his control, and it wasn't like the System would zap his enemies if he asked it nicely.

He needed to be in the driver's seat this time around if he wanted to achieve his goals rather than just running the System's errands at the cost of his own safety. Last time, the whole area had been locked down, but time hadn't stopped as far as he could tell. He needed to reach Uona before that happened somehow.

As long as she was next to him while forming the Glimpse of Chaos, he could still achieve what he wanted. His mind scrambled for ways to make that happen, but he was forced to put those matters aside as he found himself in a familiar place once more.

"A fleeting moment has but passed, yet you once more stand before me," a sigh echoed out across the cave, prompting ripples to spread through the deathly miasma around him. "It was inevitable."

Zac looked upon Be'Zi, and he was once more shocked at what he was witnessing, just like when he found himself in front of the Aetherlord the last time. She was the Dao personified, radiating such terrifying energies of destruction that the splinter in his mind seemed like nothing but a firecracker.

If she willed it, he would be destroyed, removed from the river of time entirely. Even the Miasma around her had transformed, becoming something darker than death. It felt like the river of energy was the end of all existence, and stepping into it would result in true oblivion.

"Two aspirants, two appearances, two fates interwoven," Be'Zi muttered, prompting the Miasmatic river to shudder. "To what end?"

Zac had a thousand questions rushing through his mind. How had she created the prison in his mind? What did he need to do in order to purge the latent will from the remnants, freeing himself from the curse? But he ultimately chose to accomplish what he had promised Catheya before anything else.

"It is my honor to meet you again. I have—" Zac said, but he was stopped short.

"I cannot help you again," Be'Zi said with a shake of her head. "Doing so would be a disservice. You have chosen to walk down the Path of Oblivion, and you will need to bear the full weight of that decision. That is your only chance to reach the peak. The path is precipitous and the peak has yet to be fully restored, but cultivation has always been in defiance of the Heavens. I am confident it can be done."

"It's not that," Zac said, though he had to admit he was a bit disappointed she shut him down so quickly when thinking he was about to ask for help.

He had lost quite a few fractals since they met last, and each loss shortened the time he had before all hell broke loose. Getting the cage reinforced would have been a godsend. The two remnants locked in the prison had pretty much provided only benefits with no demerits until now, and the longer he could keep them captives, the better he would be equipped for their unavoidable release.

But what the Draugr Autarch said was most likely true as well. Those cages were just external help, and they were only meant to be a stop-gap anyhow. He would have to find a way to deal with them with his soul alone, or he would eventually become like those people he had seen in the visions.

"Clan Sharva'Zi has asked me to send a message," he explained.

"You know of my descendants? I thought you one of the lost lineages," she exclaimed, her expression undergoing a subtle change. Zac even felt he could sense some disappointment on her face. However, her face quickly returned to that mask of indifference that now seemed even colder after having known the far more animated Catheya for a few years. "Then you should understand I have severed my Karma with the empire."

“Well, I’m not part of the Empire either,” Zac said. “I am simply friends with your descendant, Catheya Sharva’Zi. She looks just like you. She asked me to convey this message.”

“She could smell me on your person,” Be’Zi slowly nodded. “One of the gifts of Zi.”

“They are hoping you can come back home,” Zac said. “Your descendant, Re’Zar Sharva’Zi, is nearing his end, and they have no one to take his place. Your clan is facing relegation.”

“Home... Oblivion comes for all,” Be’Zi muttered as she looked at the ceiling of the dark cave.

Zac didn’t know what she was talking about, but his heart dropped when he looked at her impassive expression. Clearly, the news of relegation didn’t seem to phase her overly much. Zac wondered what he should do in this case. It wasn’t like he could convince an Autarch to do something she wasn’t interested in.

And how could he face Catheya like this? She had considered him their lifeline, and she had risked her life to get him to send this message. And now he had to tell Catheya that no help was forthcoming, that their ancestor didn’t care?

“I cannot return,” Be’Zi eventually said as she turned back to look right at Zac, and he could feel that she gazed at him far more intently than before. “But they need not worry. I can feel that the annihilation of my kin has been abated. Ripples on the lake.”

“What?” Zac blurted, having no idea what the old Draugr was talking about.

“Two fates, two pairs climbing a broken peak. A’Zu set a goal with his fatebound, so I shall do the same. Collect five of the cursed remnants within one hundred years, and appear before me once more. If you appear as your own, and I shall impart on you true oblivion, unsullied by that ancient madness. If you are supplanted by the atavism, I shall free you and return your soul to the Samsara,” Be’Zi said as she closed her eyes. “Thus the cycle continues.”

“Atavism?” Zac asked with urgency as he felt the vision breaking apart.

“One is an eternal curse, two is a calamity. Five is Atavism, where five lingering resentments form a consciousness. To climb the broken peak, an unbreakable will is needed,” the voice of Be’Zi echoed out as the chamber twisted. “Survive, and prove you are worthy to continue climbing.”

Zac’s vision darkened until he suddenly was back in his own body. The moment his consciousness returned, he was immediately beset by searing pain as time started up again. His body was in a horrendous state after having been impaled by the bloody tongues of the Blood Effigy, and his whole body was covered in lacerations.

Meanwhile, two sets of remnants immediately flew into a frenzied battle, where the previously harried splinter fought with redoubled fury now that it had gotten reinforcements. Insidious tendrils clashed against opalescent light in the battlefield that was his body. Zac screamed from the unimaginable pain, but he refused to let go of his consciousness and slip into that comforting darkness.

A shockwave of dark power erupted from within his body, forming a vacuum around him and setting him free from the bloody tongues. The burst of condensed Oblivion had destroyed the effigy from

within, and Zac landed on the ground as the huge holes in his body healed with a speed visible to the naked eye.

He was loath to use even more energy in a crude way like that, but he had to release some to at least somewhat weaken the struggling remnants inside his body. However, such a small outburst was nothing to the ancient madness that had been unleashed, and he felt himself rapidly losing control before he even managed to get back on his feet.

Uona was still lying on the ground in the distance, looking up at him with incredulity in her eyes as the Blood Effigy started to fall apart. Seeing her filled Zac with a towering murderous intent, which was only further amplified by the [Rageroot Oak Seed] and the cascading waves of oblivion coursing through his veins.

He wanted nothing more than to flash over and rip her apart, but he couldn't. He knew that his embryonic plan to create the Glimpse of Chaos in her face had failed, since there was simply no way to delay what needed to be done.

A stream of Fragment of the Bodhi entered one of his shoulders and the Fragment of the Coffin the other. Life and Death, each one of them dragging some of their respective remnant energy into the pathways of [Cyclic Strike]. The two streams turned into something new as they were pushed together in his chest, just like the last time he had tried this.

Two of the remnants immediately entered a panicked state and tried to escape his body, but the two new additions were uncaring as they unleashed barrage after barrage at one another even as they were drained by the funnels. The two older remnants who were wise to what would happen next were unable to escape as well, as their energy had already entered the fractals.

The streams had turned into an unbreakable leash as more and more was dragged into the funnels, turning them into black holes of unceasing hunger. Zac felt the terrifying build-up in his chest once more as the two currents refused to merge. It felt like his whole body was set ablaze, and hundreds of veins of searing heat and blistering cold covered him from his head all the way to his fingertips.

The pain only grew, to the point that Zac felt he would go mad, but the process was thankfully quicker this time around. There were two remnants to fuel the process, though one pair had been drained for years already. The pathways had changed as well, allowing for more energy to course through. Finally, his soul had been completely remoulded, allowing for a torrent of Mental Energy to speed up the process.

Suddenly, two became one, and the effect was immediate.

An immense pressure descended on the area, and Zac found himself locked in place. Even the collapsing Blood Effigy had stopped in its tracks, its cascading rain of blood suspended in the air like an intricate glass ornament. A powerful rumble shook the whole City of Ancients next as a dense cloud covered the sky, pushing the Twilight Ocean away.

Golden arcs of lightning crackled within the hazy gray, each one of them on a completely different level compared to those that had hounded the huge snake back in the chasm. In those arcs, an impossibly vast consciousness waited, gazing down at the city like a god. Zac could feel it.

Power, supremacy, greed.

The System had once more come to collect, and Zac could feel the hunger as the glimpse was starting to form in his chest. However, Zac looked at the blood mistress in the distance, his heart filled with wrath and unwillingness.

“You want this thing, right?” Zac squeezed through grit teeth as he forcibly pushed through the restraints, forcibly taking a step forward by siphoning some of the energy that was forming in his chest.

The moment just a small tendril of that power entered his body he realized why the System was so filled with desire. With Chaos, reality could be subverted. The power to create anything, to destroy anything. It had the power to overthrow fate, bring change to order. It was everchanging, unwilling to be bound.

Yet it was there, in his body, making the impossible possible. Zac felt drunk with success and murder as his gaze returned to Uona, and this time her eyes were filled with unbridled horror.

“If you want it, then you better give me some leeway.”