

## The Fall 831

### Chapter 831: Gathering Storm

Far different from the descriptions of the Orom World going dark, it had instead been turned into a conflagration of flames that elicited a primal fear in Zac's heart. They reminded Zac of the apocalyptic force he saw when forming his Seeds of Hardness and Sanctuary. When that ancient protector had sacrificed himself to protect his world against the end of a universe.

It felt like that kind of judgment had descended on the Orom World right now. There were no heavens, there was no Law of Space – the Dao itself was being incinerated by the inferno above.

Thankfully, something was holding it back, either the Orom or the originator of the attack himself, preventing the brunt of the terrifying energy from descending. Zac wasn't sure even Kaldor would survive if those flames lashed out on the cultivators below. Just looking at the roiling tongues of fire left scorch marks on his body, forcing him to avert his gaze. Enduring them would extinguish him in an instant, and no [Void Zone] or other preparations would do him any good.

At first, he had figured it was the monks making their move, but he immediately shot down that idea. This could not possibly be the work of a Monarch, meaning it should come from the outside. Perhaps a true Boddhisatva had tracked down the Orom to punish it with cleansing fire, but Zac didn't sense the echoes of the Buddhist Sangha in the flames. They were pure and unrelenting, like the primal fires that could both birth and extinguish an era.

Even if the flames didn't originate from within the Orom World, there were still people ready to take advantage of the chaos. Zac didn't even get the chance to take in the scene before eruptions of unbridled power appeared in multiple directions. To his left, coruscating waves of divinity rippled in every direction, and Zac looked on with mute incomprehension as a towering golden diety rose into the air.

It appeared in the direction of the bamboo forest, and if there had been any doubt before about Three Virtues' involvement, it was gone now. After all, it was the avatar of Sāgara who had been conjured, the statue he had seen just a few months ago. The avatar had to be tens of thousands of meters tall, yet it somehow seemed even greater.

Space and scale couldn't properly do it justice – it was like the deity was the size of the cosmos itself. Zac only dared shoot occasional glances in its direction, as he actually felt his heart being moved from witnessing its splendor. If Zac wasn't careful, he'd become a warrior of the Dharma with all of his emotions expunged.

The enormous avatar slowly put its hands together in a mudra, and Zac vaguely heard the chanting of sutras even from this great distance. Millions and millions of lotus flowers were born in the sky, almost shrouding the fiery inferno above. However, the delicate white flowers didn't seem to have any intention of contending with the flames above.

Instead, they were nurtured by it, growing just like normal flowers under the sun. Together, they danced in the lack of wind, the dancing petals setting up some sort of array that filled Zac with dread. The scene was mesmerizing, and Zac suddenly felt his vision shifting for an instant, finding himself standing inside a vast temple where each lotus flower had been transformed into a golden statue.

The next moment the vision was gone, but Zac wondered if the monks had somehow connected this space with an actual temple somewhere in the multiverse. Just what were they planning?

The monks weren't the only ones who had made their move. A pitch-black tower had appeared to Zac's right, and looking at it felt like looking at the true face of death. Even the roiling flames above were somewhat dampened by the darkness the structure radiated, though Zac could tell that the tower didn't dare grow too tall to avoid drawing the ire from what was above.

Zac could even sense powerful fluctuations further in the distance in almost every direction of the Orom World, but it was too far away for him to see what was going on. One thing was for sure though; the seal of the Prison Brand was obviously not as absolute as the Orom had thought, for these kinds of things to appear out of nowhere.

Things had clearly been brewing beneath the surface since long before Zac arrived.

The chaotic scene had thrown Zac off-balance, but he quickly gathered his wits. So what if things were chaotic? Wasn't that exactly what this moment required. It almost felt like the whole world had gone mad as a result of his desire, the desire to drown the Orom World with Chaos.

Now, it was time to leave his own mark on the tapestry.

There was a good chance that the Orom would enact an even harsher lockdown now that things were spiraling out of control, so Zac didn't dare to waste any more time. He took out one of his semi-finished teleportation arrays and urgently spent the next few minutes fixing the final engravings while fearfully glancing at the sky in case something changed.

Thankfully, things were still gearing up, giving Zac enough breathing room to finalize his preparations. He only left one final inscription unfinished on the array before taking it out of harm's way, placing it on the shores on the other side of the lake. He knew all-too-well what came next, and he felt some lingering fear as his gaze turned to the two glass boxes lying on the ground. He couldn't have his escape pod destroyed by a wave of Oblivion.

Cracks had already started to appear on the two glass canisters, and it looked like the trapped remnants were waking up. With the Orom draining the environment of its ambient energy, the two glass cages had lost their main source of power. With Zac also maintaining [Void Zone] they were barely holding on against the burst of energy coming from within.

With the boxes in such close proximity, the two slumbering remnants had finally become aware of each other. They were furiously trying to break free to attack their nemesis, and parts of the arrays were whittled down with every clash. Still, Zac estimated it would take a few more minutes before the seals finally succumbed, and Zac didn't have that kind of time.

After being hidden inside his Spatial Ring for years, [Verun's Bite] finally made its appearance. A furious howl filled with anger and liberation was released as Zac completely unleashed the stored energy in his [Spiritual Void], and the whole lake churned in response as Zac swung his companion for the first time in too long.

Eight streams of Mental energy entwined into a sturdy rope before entering the axe. Half of them were infused with the unstoppable potential for destruction of the Branch of the War Axe, and the other half

with the undeniable force of the Branch of the Kalpataru. The golden markings across the Spirit Tool lit up with golden luster as the weapon was flooded with the Dao, but the sheen was almost drowned in a sanguine brilliance released from the runes on the handle.

The axe fell, and the world grew quiet for a moment before an earthshattering shockwave leveled all the trees on the whole island. However, Zac's eyes became wide as saucers when his mighty swing empowered by his Bloodline and his Dao didn't so much as leave a mark on the glass casing holding the Splinter of Oblivion.

Zac had visualized a scene of the cage shattering like brittle ice in the face of his fury, but reality wasn't quite so satisfying. However, Zac wasn't discouraged. He knew there was a good chance these glass casings were made from some extraordinary materials, but he thankfully had a backup plan.

He was about to stow away his axe, but a wave of reluctance filled his heart while a similar sentiment was conveyed from the Tool Spirit. So instead, he put it on a loop on his belt while forming two new streams in his mind – once more a combination of Life and Conflict. But this time, the streams didn't enter his hands or his weapon, but rather the two unique pathways on his shoulders.

Activating the modified skill fractals for [Cyclic Strike] had an immediate effect as the purified Creation Energy spread throughout his body eagerly started to gather. His body was chock-full of energy from both remnants by this point, in preparation for this very day. A glistening rune appeared between his hands in just moments, and Zac could see endless possibilities inside its depths.

This was the second time Zac had unleashed a Mark of Creation since forming the Branch of the Kalpataru, and he was still mesmerized by the Dao Branch's effect on the skill. Before, the mark was a completely foreign object created by circumstance, but he could feel a tendril of his own presence inside it now.

He wouldn't go so far as to say he had control, but it definitely wouldn't blow up by surprise any longer. More importantly, he felt he would soon be able to mold the mark even further, turning it into something greater than a ball of unfettered Creation. For now, he believed that a normal mid-powered Mark should do the trick.

Zac pushed the ball of Creation against the glass, and he smiled when he saw the sealed remnant inside go insane upon feeling its antithesis encroaching on its domain. The glass might be extremely sturdy, but the energy generated by the remnants was inexhaustible, and the array was already worn down. Besides, it relied on the trapped remnant being in a sleeping state, which wasn't the case any longer.

At the same time, Creation was seeping into the esoteric runes on the glass casing's surface, slowly twisting them with its mad desire for change. The formation resisted, but it simply had no energy to draw from at the moment, and it was fast losing ground. First, it was just the occasional fractal pattern that broke apart or shifted, but that was enough to cause a cascading ripple of change across the array.

Soon enough, a crack echoed out, and Zac was almost blasted off the island by a tremendous burst of Oblivion. Sharp shards of glass had embedded themselves in his body and a good chunk of the island was simply erased, but Zac ignored the pain as he kept breaking apart the cage. He was almost there.

For the umpteenth time in the past weeks, he tried to initiate a negotiation with the System, but even if he heard a slight pressure that might indicate the System's presence, he got no response. Zac didn't know if the System was calling his bluff, knowing Zac couldn't just skip the formation of another glimpse.

A more likely scenario was that the events in the Twilight Chasm were unique, where a creature that shouldn't exist had been nurtured in an E-grade trial. The huge Snake had broken the balance of the Trial, and the System intervening could be seen as an attempt to restore order. Normally, it wouldn't have become an issue since no trial-taker should have been able to survive in that depth.

Alvod had probably paid the appropriate price to make the System look the other way, maintaining the law of balance – until Zac arrived. Thus, an anomaly had occurred, forcing the System's hand. Outside of grade-restricted trials, there were no such rules of conduct – this place might as well be the Wild West.

Even then, Zac didn't give up. He might be able to seize something at the last moment.

The temperature in the Orom World was steadily rising, but that was probably the least of the prisoner's worries at the moment. The Buddhist chants kept growing louder, and Zac felt his mind under assault as he saw glimpses of that mysterious temple over and over. Meanwhile, golden scripts had started to dance around the innumerable lotus flowers in the sky in a display of both might and beauty.

Zac doubted the tremendous waves of faith targeted him in specific, though he couldn't be sure about the prisoners in general. Was a mass conversion about to take place in the Orom World? To bring half a million top geniuses into the fold of the Dharma? Even for a peak faction like Buddhist Sangha, it had to be considered a decent win.

Thankfully, it turned out that [Void Zone] was quite effective at muting the attraction of the Buddhist Chants, though it was only a temporary repose. He was simply too weak to stave off the mental influence permanently, but it wasn't like he planned on staying behind for too long anyway. The Creation from outside and the Oblivion from inside had finally caused enough damage, and the powerful array on the glass cage couldn't maintain its functions any longer.

Leaking cracks turned into a gaping hole as the high-grade glass broke apart, and Zac's hand pushed through the shards to grab the splinter. At this moment the remnants in his mind fully woke up, finally having confirmed another of their brethren waited outside. This time the roles were reversed, with the splinters trying to break out while the shards hampered their efforts.

The sutras were completely silenced at that moment, and the world had grown oppressively silent as Zac held the Splinter of Oblivion in his hands. In reality, it was the remnant that had crushed all sound, annihilated fate, leaving only nothingness in Zac's surroundings. The sense of nihilism seemed to stretch toward eternity as the world slowed down, and then there was only darkness as the third Splinter of Oblivion entered Zac's body.

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Iz marveled at the beauty of her surroundings from her vantage inside her uncle's eye. She had grown up playing on his body, but the opportunities for her to see the true essence of his flames were rare.

All Daos had their strong points and weaknesses, but her grandpa had said it all converged toward the peak. When you completely grasped a Dao, it was whatever you needed it to be. Your truth would

become equal to the will of the Heavens, and Valderak was right at that threshold. His flames surpassed both time and space, becoming a supreme law as he unleashed his might.

The Void itself was incinerated as flames stretched across the horizon, and even the nearby stars dimmed in obeisance. In the middle of it all, a big fish furiously thrashed, but it was locked in place by the Sixteen Pillars of Anguish. The mutated Voidcatcher was unleashing tremendous ripples of space, but it was ultimately just a second-step Primordial Beast.

No matter if it was raw strength, heritage, or Dao, her uncle was far superior. The big fish might as well have been a Hegemon – to the Primordial Golem known across the multiverse as the Emyrean Mountain, it made no difference. Even then, it struggled, desperately trying to break open the dimensional layer

“Serves you right for eluding us for over a year,” Iz muttered before she turned to her uncle standing next to her. “You won’t burn the people inside, right?”

“My flames are not targeted at the captives, so it should be fine,” Valderak’s avatar answered with a shrug. “If people still die, they simply aren’t fated. But don’t worry, your little friend will be fine.”

Iz nodded before once more turning toward the fifty-meter-tall glass pane that was her uncle’s eye.

“What friend? He’s...” Iz muttered, but her voice died down as her brows furrowed.

Just what was he? Even now, she couldn’t put her finger on it. There was just something about him, something novel. But what? He wasn’t too powerful, though Iz guessed he should be one of the strongest people at his grade in this desolate corner of space. Even among the ancient factions, he could be considered a rare talent in terms of raw strength.

But she had met many people like that already during the outings her uncle and grandpa had tricked her to participate in, and she was always filled with annoyance when dealing with those people. Yet she found herself using the Divine Mirror almost every day for a few hours, even when Mr. Bug was just sitting in silent meditation.

At first, it was just curiosity about the one who dared to curse at her, but it had somehow become a hobby she enjoyed far more than any of the arrays her guardians had prepared. Even that Neural Network of the Technocrats or the Heavenly Realm of the ancient Imperials became boring over time, but watching that guy bathe in fateblighted refuse or getting beat up by low-grade beasts never grew stale.

In a way, he was the antithesis of herself. He was a blank slate, with no backing and no idea what he was doing. But he was also Free.

“Have you decided what you will do when you meet him?” her uncle asked curiously.

“Well...” Iz hesitated. “First, I’ll beat him up a bit for calling me crazy. After that, we’ll see. Perhaps I’ll have him take me to some trial? I want to experience his ability to cause all this chaos firsthand. I don’t want to go back too quickly now that grandpa finally allowed me to leave. Who knows when I’ll get to travel again after this?”

“Master worries for you,” Valderak sighed. “He fears the fate of your parents will repeat itself.”

Iz wordlessly nodded, a pang of sorrow filling her heart as she remembered the sealed form of her mother. Even with her grandpa's efforts, it would be tens of thousands of years before Eruz Tayn could wake up. The battle had been too intense back then, and not even her grandmother had been able to directly retrieve her soul from the past.

Of course, a few thousand years was nothing compared to the two million years her mother had been sealed already, most of which Iz had spent gestating inside Eruz's womb. Her grandfather had waited so long and worked so hard to piece together her soul back by scouring billions of temporal fractures in the past. Even then, there was no coming back for her father.

Their enemies had made sure of that.

"Grandma killed all those people millions of years ago already. She even incinerated a whole universe, fraying the Heavens themselves. Who'd dare target me? And what would be the point? Just to anger my elders again?" Iz muttered.

"Never underestimate the lengths people will go to in pursuit of the peak. The old enemies are gone, but new ones will crop up as long as the Tayns control a corner of the sky," Valderak urged.

"Alright, alright," Iz agreed, having heard the same warning so many times before.

It looked like Valderak was about to continue, but he suddenly stopped and turned toward the Voidcatcher. "Oh?"

"What's wrong?" Iz asked with worry as she tried to discern what had changed.

"Fate is gathering, and I sense fluctuations at the threshold of Autarchy inside the Orom's Inner world," the golem said with some interest. "The sangha and the unliving are making a move. More importantly, there was a weak burst of Oblivion just now."

"What? He's starting? We made it in time!" Iz exclaimed, her mouth curving upward.

Just like inside that life-death trial of his, things were coming to a boiling point. This time, she wouldn't miss it.

"Wait, do you think we're part of the storm of fate he accumulated?" Iz asked curiously.

"It's hard to say where the line between coincidence and fate lies," Valderak said. "But he is undoubtedly the fulcrum."

Iz nodded before her brows furrowed with displeasure. "This stupid fish keeps buckling and I can't see anything. Can you send me in?"

"Absolutely not!" Valderak said without hesitation. "The energies within are getting too chaotic. Don't worry, we have some time. I'll toast this bastard a bit more and make it spit out the boy."

Iz reluctantly nodded, and a tragic wail echoed through the cosmos.