

The Fall 832

Chapter 832: Mounting Threat

The lightning-scorched tower had finally crumbled, unable to withstand time and the madness of its master. In the rubble, she sat, her heart burning with hatred and her hands covered in ash. Hatred against what, she no longer remembered. The ashes of whom, she could no longer recall. She had given it all up for power.

Yet now, only emptiness remained.

Zac barely had time to digest the miserable scene before he was whisked away to another, witnessing outbursts of madness and despair. It was just like his previous encounters, with one worrying difference. This time, it all felt so real. Before, the scenes had been visceral, almost to the point they could leave a mark on his mind. But now, it was so much more.

His soul was far superior compared to when he last absorbed a remnant, yet he found himself struggling to hold on to his sanity as the Splinter of Oblivion unleashed its manic obsession. The parasitic consciousness hidden within the crystal had come out in full force, and doubts kept invading Zac's path.

He had seen his absorbing these things as a necessary evil until now, a risky gamble to more quickly gain power. But what if he had unknowingly already fallen to the ploy of the remnants, blindly grasping for more when his true self should have long realized something was wrong? The moment he had learned of the third set, he had not even hesitated when risking his life to seize them – even when he already held the means of escape through the Perennial Vastness Token.

Why?

He had always known he was a pawn in someone's game, be it the System's or the remnants themselves. Yet he had never questioned their end game, and just figured he'd tide it out and walk away a stronger man. Why? Was that how a resource was used? No, it was squeezed of all its benefits and discarded before the master went looking for the next useful idiot to exploit.

Doubts, hesitation, and regrets kept rising to the surface, even rehashing his failures during the earliest months of the integration. Knowing that it was the result of absorbing the remnant didn't help either. If anything it added another layer of torture – Zac knew he was being tricked into this state, yet he couldn't break it, which only further fed into the insecurities he'd gained from being peppered by the visions.

Trying to logically dispel his doubts didn't help either – he wasn't dealing with something that could be reasoned with. Reiterating the fact that there was nothing he could have done for his father, that he returned as quickly as possible to Greenworth, didn't allay the guilt at all. The misery threatened to consume him like he was drowning.

Soon enough, Zac barely registered the visions even if they kept going, stuck in his own private hell instead. If only he could quench all these thoughts. Extinguish everything.

The thought cut through his distress like a knife, but warning bells immediately went off. The unwelcome thought had properly woken him up, and he realized just how dangerous a situation he had

been in just now. He was standing right at the precipice – if he gave in to that feeling, Oblivion, or rather that ancient consciousness, would consume him.

Zac knew the situation was bad, but he still didn't try to remember and regain that tranquil state he had enjoyed during Three Virtues' trial, where nothing could affect him. Neither did he break open his self-imposed seal on the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation] to recite the heart-calming sutras it contained.

That was not his path.

Instead, he focused on his goals rather than his failures, holding onto the vision of Thea being lifted into the air by his mother, of Kenzie being whisked away. The focus wasn't that he couldn't protect them – how could he against someone like Leandra Kayar-Elu? Instead, he focused on how his sister needed to be rescued and Thea needed to be avenged.

He focused on Earth being like a small raft about to be flung out into a raging ocean as the Zecia Sector was about to be embroiled in war. Of Ogras and Billy being stuck in some pocket of space, their fate unknown after having risked their lives to save his sister and Earth. There were so many people he owed, so many things he needed to accomplish. He refused to get pushed down by his mistakes or bogged down by hesitation. He would keep moving forward, and some fractured spirit from a bygone era would never be able to change that fact.

Neither would he drink the poisonous waters of the Dharma to quench his thirst – he had faith that he would be able to accomplish his goals without their aid. Eventually, Zac took a shuddering breath as he opened his eyes. He was back in his own body, and time was starting to start up again.

That was way too close.

Zac knew he had been overconfident. He had believed that after surviving the Calamity A'Zu warned of and then performing a perfect reincarnation, absorbing the third set of remnants would proceed without a snag. But if one could survive the remnants just by cultivating one's soul, then why did everyone in the vision succumb sooner or later?

It had become painfully clear that a powerful soul wasn't enough to deal with the madness hidden within the Splinter of Oblivion. Its energy couldn't just pollute his soul – its attack on Zac's heart was just as formidable, and harder to both notice and defend against.

The distant Buddhist chants resumed as Zac exited his special state, and the air was veritably vibrating with Dharmic power. However, it was drowned out by the railing madness from within. Zac had passed the first hurdle, but the splinter was already on a rampage. It had found his mind, and his Soul Aperture was being drowned in Oblivion.

The Divine Cores in his mind had been put on a defensive, barely holding on with the protection of his Branch of the Kalpataru. Meanwhile, his Branch of the Pale Seal was infiltrating the waves of annihilation, channeling some of the rampaging energy into his Miasmic Cores. Zac knew this was an opportunity for cultivation, but the surroundings were crazy enough as it were.

His powerful soul might have failed in protecting his heart, but its benefits soon became apparent as layer after layer sealed the rampaging splinter within, barely letting a trickle of energy escape. It

furiously slammed against the cage Zac had erected, but even if it managed to break the innermost layers, there were still almost a dozen more layers it had to deal with to escape.

The war inside his remnant prison had entered a fever pitch as well, but Zac wasn't worried at all. The sealing fractals were in pristine condition thanks to the System fixing them the last time around, and it wasn't like it would need to withstand the clashes for long.

Seeing that the situation was as stable as it could be when dealing with ancient madness in a world literally set on fire, Zac breathed out in relief as his gaze turned toward the second glass box. However, he suddenly froze with realization. Something else was different with this round – he didn't get to meet Be'Zi during his spiritual journey.

Had she blocked him from coming over again, tired of getting her cultivation interrupted every few years? Or was it the System that felt there was no need to align their fate any longer since the quest for five sets of remnants had already been agreed upon?

A wave of searing pain suddenly derailed his thoughts, and Zac was aghast at the thought of embers from the ferocious flames in the sky falling down on him. Thankfully, Zac immediately realized that it wasn't the flames that had attacked him, even if the situation was a bit thorny.

The brand on his arm had awakened and it was unleashing some sort of sinister energies into his body. It was like a spiritual acid instilled with a purpose, and Zac felt both his cells and pathways being destroyed at a rapid pace. Did it realize he was about to break out? Or had it sensed that Zac had freed one of the remnants?

Zac was annoyed at the interruption, but he wasn't too worried. His [Void Zone] was already weakening the brand, and his [Void Heart] had begun its feast on the invading energy. It was a shame his natural poison resistance wasn't quite as good in his human form, but that didn't mean he was out of options.

He opened a small hole in the barriers trapping the Splinter of Oblivion in his soul aperture, and a storm of Oblivion Energy was immediately spat out by the enraged remnant. Another layer of small cracks spread across the empty space of his soul, and Zac felt his mind turn a bit numb once more.

This was the first time he had a free splinter raging in his body, with the previous two sets being instantly thrown behind bars. He could tell that using the remnant's energy would work just fine. In fact, the splinter would love it. After all, using its wild energies had a price different from the shard – where the shard damaged his body and lifeforce, the splinter damaged his soul and his mind.

In a way, it was even scarier to use than Creation Energy, even if its price wasn't as readily apparent. You could recover some of the longevity you'd lost, but recovering broken pieces of your mind – your memories, emotions, and convictions – that was a far trickier subject. He wasn't sure there would even be any warning signs. Eventually, he'd just stare around in confusion like all those people in the visions.

Therefore, Zac urgently dragged the energy out of his soul and into his body, wanting to waste as little time as possible. It pushed forward like a tidal wave, swallowing the invading energies and leaving not even ashes in its wake. It was risky circulating pure Oblivion through his body, but as long as he controlled the energy, he could choose what it would target.

The wave of oblivion destroyed the prison brand's assault in less than a second before reaching the brand itself. Another wave of agony erupted on his arm, but he was shocked to see that the brand didn't break from the collision. This was why he had chosen to absorb Oblivion first – to get rid of his seal before taking on the Shard of Creation as well.

Instead, Zac found the rune protected by a thin barrier containing the same laws of space that made up the borders in this realm. Zac could sense it was slowly weakening, but he also felt his control of the wave of Oblivion slowly slipping through his fingers. If nothing was done, he'd end up disintegrating his hand.

At first, he planned on simply discarding the energy, letting it swallow a chunk of the island. However, things were heating up in the Orom World, both literally and metaphorically. The lotus flowers kept perpetuating, covering a larger and larger piece of the sky as they started to descend toward the ground.

Meanwhile, the chants had grown more invasive, and even if he was mostly insulated through the remnant destroying all energy that entered his mind, the visions of all those statues kept appearing at shorter and shorter intervals. It felt like an ominous countdown of sorts, and Zac wanted to be gone before it reached the end.

The situation on Kaldor's side was changing as well, though Zac didn't feel any threat from their direction. Most of the tower that appeared out of nowhere had collapsed, leaving a metal framework behind. It almost looked like one of those support structures for spaceships, but there was no vessel next to it. Instead, a huge femur radiating unreal levels of force was fastened inside.

It was massive, to the point that Zac could see its shape even from this great distance. It had to be at least a kilometer tall, which was confusing since it emitted the same type of aura as Kaldor did. Not that the bone belonged to the reaver himself, but perhaps to some ancestor of his. After all, it seemed as though it might have belonged to an Autarch, making Zac wonder just how it had appeared in the Orom World without the Orom noticing.

The set-up reminded Zac of a gargantuan wall-breaker aimed at the ground itself, and Zac shuddered as he saw the huge femur starting to rise as runes lit up across its surface. Any delay felt risky, so Zac instead chose to go ahead with his Plan B. He flashed a few meters, appearing in front of the still-intact glass cage, and unleashed the torrent of annihilation right at it.

A wave of darkness flooded out from his hands, utterly drenching the area in impenetrable gloom. The scene only lasted for less than a second before the energy disappeared with a crackling sound, prompting a small tempest as air rushed to fill the vacuum the attack created. Left behind was only a cracked glass cage inside a ten-meter crater, and powerful tendrils of pure Creation radiated out from the fractures.

The cage was on the verge of breaking, so Zac jumped down into the hole and seized the remnant the moment the seal shattered ignoring the bleeding gashes as he gripped the Shard of Creation. A primordial clap of thunder joined the chaotic scene above, but Zac didn't have time to see whether the System had arrived – the visions had claimed him once more.

Once more, Zac became an unwilling compatriot to predecessors who had become mixed up with the Shards of Creation. Over and over, he witnessed scenes of futile resistance followed by inevitable tragedy. Most of those who got themselves mixed up with the Spark of Creation had done so not out of greed or megalomania, but out of a desire to help.

To protect their companions, to tame inhospitable surroundings – to make the impossible possible, and seize an opportunity for survival. But the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and the best outcomes in the visions were those who managed to kill themselves before they destroyed around them as their desires drove them insane.

Yet Zac was different – he could feel it. He had witnessed how he was chosen by fate, walking off with rich rewards in situations where anyone else would have died. Where these people failed, he would prosper. He only needed to grasp the power within and subvert the Heavens themselves. He just-

Zac shuddered and forcibly quelled the mad impulses and rampant hubris that had spread to the core of his very being. He had been prepared for his heart to be attacked after the previous encounter, yet he almost found himself failing right out the gates. Once more, he held onto his path, his goals – but more importantly, he held onto himself.

It was true that he had his unique strengths, but being a genius didn't matter in the multiverse. Only power mattered. So what if he was stronger than most E-grade cultivators? Any late Hegemon like Traprandar or Olgoroth could squash him like a bug on the outside when he didn't have the prison brand to protect him. Even Early Hegemons would be hard for him to take down if they possessed powerful-enough War Regalia.

So what was there to be proud of?

Everyone who had reached the later stages of cultivation had overcome innumerable challenges, succeeding where trillions failed. He couldn't get complacent, thinking that some D-grade remnant would allow him to bring about earthshattering changes. It was better to rely on himself, to progress one step at a time until he held true power.

Soon enough, he was back in his own body, and his mind screamed of danger as he felt the Shard of Creation making a beeline for the trapped splinter. Above, thick lightning clouds were gathering, pushing away the flames and lotus petals alike. However, Zac's eyes thinned when he saw the strings of Buddhist scripture rising toward the churning clouds.

Were Three Virtues trying to siphon power from the System itself?

Zac had no time to bother about the plans of the Sangha, and it was not like the clouds above were tribulation clouds that could benefit him. He had played with the idea of using these lightning bolts to temper himself as he had with the Tribulation Lightning, but remembering Uona's end, he wouldn't dare try something like that.

At least not before he became a Hegemon.

The two remnants inside his body were going all out, and it felt like their energy reserves easily surpassed the two he had picked up inside the Twilight Ocean. Was it because they had been sealed all

this time, accumulating energy while the previous set had been free to unleash waves of destruction on their surroundings?

Zac didn't mind – any extra energy was a welcome addition. Zac had even more to spare, and a snap echoed out in his mind as he forced open the gates to his remnant prison. Four shimmering lights emerged from the hidden pocket dimension with wild abandon, joining their two brethren in a struggle for supremacy.

His soul cried as his eleven cores were drowned in waves of turbulent powers. There was no way for his mental energy to restrain all six remnants, and he didn't know what would happen first; his aperture bursting or his soul cores being destroyed. He could only open his mental seal to his aperture, and soon enough the war spread to every corner of his body.

Zac saw how his skin shifted from opalescent splendor to oppressive gloom – all while new cracks kept appearing across his body.

The prison brand was still trying to kill him, but it was barely able to defend itself as it was engulfed in the battle between Creation and Oblivion, let alone striking out against Zac. Still, this couldn't go on. However, Zac was already dragging torrential amounts of Mental energy, Dao, and energy from the remnants into the two pathway highways on his shoulders, as he had two times before.

Zac sensed a wave of fear emanating from the veteran remnants, but it was much too late. The process had started, and it wouldn't end before a Glimpse of Chaos had been born.