

The Fall 926

Chapter 926: Beyond the Concept

Even when finding himself pushed to the limits, Zac had held back his last and most powerful aces. He had wanted to save them until Ogras finished his side of the mission, to give himself something to fall back on in case the Qriz'Ul King went berserk. Now, he found himself without better options, and Zac could only pray that it was enough to break through that impenetrable shield.

The Goblin's struggles grew more frantic as Zac squeezed out more and more Oblivion from his soul, the energy accumulation already passing what he used in the depths. Even more corruption was discarded and disseminated from the creature's labor, but Zac could barely hear it. The storm of Oblivion passing through his body had quieted the incessant voices of madness, utterly extinguishing their existence.

The sudden bout of spiritual silence was almost deafening, but things on the material plane were approaching a fever pitch. The chains of [Pillar of Desolation] had managed to restrain this unrelenting creature for almost a minute, but they could no longer endure under the deluge of tainted water. The last of the fetters snapped, and the Goblin broke free.

But it was already too late. The coffin lid on Zac's back had fully opened by this point, and over twenty chains had already shot toward their target with a palpable hunger. They were pitch black and emitted a cold and unrelenting aura of death, like they were made from the ice of Cocytus. They were also incredibly quick, moving with more than twice the speed of [Love's Bond] 's original links.

Before the Goblin had a chance to speed away, the chains had already wrapped around it in a deathly embrace. Cascading waves of tainted water inundated the links, but a familiar scene occurred. Any time a chain was about to break apart from the corruption, a black pulse ran through its length and split the chain into two, each one in perfect condition.

Twenty chains had multiplied to over a hundred in no time, and the Goblin was barely visible between the chains. The thing looked like a grotesque art installation as it struggled in the air. A sudden eruption destroyed two-thirds of the chains, but Zac could sense Alea had more to give. The chains grew back, and one pulse after another started to run through the lengths of the links until they stayed illuminated by death.

Each chain had wound itself at least three times around the huge Qriz'Ul, forming hundreds of loops that together created a coil. But instead of electricity, death ran through the loops. Even Zac, a Draugr, felt some pressure from the immense amount of death released into the chains, and both Goblin and tainted water froze in place as they turned solid.

They hadn't frozen into ice, though. There was no sense of cold emanating from the construct, except for the chill of death. It was more apt to say the water had died, bereft of its momentum, fate, and energy. All that remained was a useless rock-like compound. The only thing that remained untouched was the warded core floating in front of its forehead, which was still releasing more water.

The lack of kill energy entering his mind confirmed what Zac had already suspected upon seeing the cracked sphere was intact. Not even this was enough to kill this creature. But Alea had still gone above and beyond accomplishing what needed to be done. The Goblin was locked down and trapped in a cycle

of death and resurrection. It couldn't so much as move, let alone form any dangerous outbursts of energy.

Meanwhile, the Annihilation Sphere between his hands was approaching the limits of what Zac could control, which meant it was time. Zac shot forward, running up along one of the links toward the core hovering in the air. The voices returned with redoubled intensity as he closed in on the cracked sphere. Looking at the vantablack orb of destruction between his hands helped a bit, but Zac still felt his mind mired in the Lost Plane's corruptive influence.

Thousands of ideas, most of them irrelevant or downright crazy, cropped up like weeds, leaving behind blemishes on his heart. Zac knew it would take some time to sort out and cleanse all this madness, but that was a matter for later. Ogras was probably struggling in a similar environment in the depths of the lake without Zac's tools to deal with it.

It wasn't only the voices that grew louder. The closer he got, the more did the Goblin's resistance intensify. It railed against the prison of [Fate's Obduracy], and Zac could tell Alea was running out of steam. Meanwhile, the sphere released tremendous pressure, making it seem like Zac was pushing against the weight of a whole world.

The air in the center of the cage twisted and groaned as it was caught in the middle of an unrelenting struggle between death and madness. Searing flashes of pain erupted all across Zac's body as errant Spatial Tears left their marks behind. But he pushed on until he reached the top of the chain ladder — where a world of hyper-condensed tainted water waited for him.

A ball of water had become the final layer of defense against Zac's approach, its corruption so dense that Zac was forced to deactivate [Cosmic Gaze]. Zac knew this would be dangerous, but he could only ward his soul and steel his heart as he crashed into the water, using his now fully-formed Annihilation Sphere as a wallbreaker.

The water in front simply disappeared, annihilated in full by the power of Oblivion. But the water to his side remained unaffected, and it crashed into Zac with the force of a collapsing mountain. Zac felt bones crack and madness stir, but he pushed further, deeper, until he encountered resistance.

A tremendous shockwave shook Zac's frayed mind awake, and he vaguely saw how his Annihilation Sphere was trying to dig into the purple barrier—trying and failing. The barrier had buckled inward and was shuddering precipitously, but it wasn't showing any indication that it was about to break apart. The sphere was constantly extracting energy from the Lost Plane, replacing that which the Annihilation Sphere was destroying.

Meanwhile, Zac could tell he was gradually losing control of his conception. A second or two more, and the Annihilation Sphere would destabilize, and his mission would be a failure. This was exactly what he'd been worried about when dealing with this creature. The power of the remnants had proven to be a reliable ace until now, but there were limits.

After all, they were only D-grade items, and the energy he used couldn't be considered the full expressions of the Daos of Oblivion and Creation. Not only that, but his two attacks were fueled by his own Daos, which were just Early Branches. To deal with a creature that had once been a peak Hegemon at the least, and who had this unique connection to an Eternal Heritage... It wasn't enough.

Then, an idea came to him. An idea born from madness and desperation, but one that might just work.

The Lost Plane's taint had completely spread throughout his body by now, but a pulse of possibility corrupted the corruption. Madness was distorted and reformed in the forge of Creation as Zac roused the slumbering energy throughout his body. It swept through his body, leaving bedlam in its wake. It was the strategy of sacrificing 800 soldiers to kill 1000 enemies, where unfettered Creation Energy damaged both his body and the accumulating taint.

The pain was unimaginable as his body went through a series of chaotic transformations, but the agony actually helped him focus his mind. Focus on maintaining his Annihilation Sphere a bit longer while a set of golden patterns joined the black ones across his face.

Two streams of energy entered the already worn pathways on his shoulders before fusing in his chest. The Annihilation Sphere shuddered ominously, but it was kept in check by Zac's soul working in overdrive. Even then, it was just a matter of time, and Zac knew he wouldn't be able to create a Origin Mark as powerful as his Annihilation Sphere.

Then again, more than half of the sphere had been consumed already from disintegrating the churning waters and clashing against the purple barrier. A weakened version might work even better. After all, his goal wasn't to form a separate attack. It was to balance Creation and Oblivion in one singular strike.

To form Chaos.

Zac slowly moved his hands apart, desperately controlling Annihilation with his right as a shimmering rune appeared in his left palm. Reality bent from the appearance of the Origin Mark, and the tainted waters around Zac started frothing from encountering an even more corruptive energy.

The pain was unbelievable, overwhelming anything else. Zac's whole being was consumed by what he had wrought, but he still pushed his hands together in a final attempt at victory. Black and gold mixed, and space collapsed. A metallic flash illuminated the area, but Zac immediately found himself losing control.

"Go," Zac groaned in his mind, praying Ogras would be able to hear him.

A surge of energy was followed by an endless expanse of white. A lingering thought was all that remained before he faded away.

This wasn't right.

Abyssal flames burned along the bloody tendrils of the water elemental, but it didn't seem to care at all. Iz could tell that nothing remained of the cultivators who had been extracted and pulled into this fell construct of tainted water and unorthodox curses. It was just anger and suffering locked in this prison of its own creation.

She glanced down at her arm, where her wound had already been cauterized. To think this thing could not only block out her attacks but even wound her. It had been forced to sacrifice one of its appendages to break through her barrier, but still. Its attacks were proof her flames weren't infallible, even if this creature was only bordering Middle D-grade by conventional standards.

The flame in her chest had dimmed considerably by this point, exhausted from cleansing the waves of corruption thrown her way. She only had thirty percent of Cosmic Energy remaining, but there was no thought of backing down. The weak demon was still at the bottom of the lake, desperately trying to accomplish the mission.

Meanwhile, she could feel that Zachary had gone all-out, unleashing one of the remnants locked in his mind. Her uncle had told her the price of using those things, yet he didn't even think to back down, to flee. So how could she step down at this juncture? The broach on her dress flickered, and her surrounding started to blur.

It was trying to take her away, out of the Void Star. Iz wouldn't let it.

She ripped off the Fatewarding Treasure and threw it away, before she roused the flame in her chest for one final attack. Her skin caught on fire, as did her hair. Soon she was completely engulfed, transformed into an avatar of purest flames. With a shudder, one became three, and the trinity avatars representing the paths of the Empyrean Flame surrounded the creature, each with a different set of wings.

It recognized the threat, and space collapsed as it launched its core tendrils toward her. Each one was infused with the chimera madness of the lake and the Black Heart Sect, turning into an unpredictable poison that targeted both the body and mind. But it was too late. [Trinity Apocalypse] had already been activated, and Iz released a different creature from each of her avatars.

The wings of the Abyssal Butterfly fluttered, and the ground erupted, unleashing the fires from the deepest recesses of the underworld. The Vermillion Bird keened, and the flames of the first dawn burned everything in its path. The Golden Crow released the sun it held in its claw, and it fell onto the elemental from above.

Three planes, three paths. A trinity of destruction and new beginnings. The elemental tried to resist, to destroy the origin flames that were fast consuming its body, but it was futile. Three paths merged in the center, and the elemental was no more. The three avatars converged atop [World's End], and Iz stepped out from the flames.

She had done it.

A surge of adrenaline Iz had never felt before coursed through her veins as she looked at the scorched remnants. Her thousands of battles, both in dreamscapes and realities, couldn't produce this sense of victory. She finally understood what her grandpa and uncle had told her so many times.

Some things simply couldn't be imparted from the previous generations, even with arrays and domains that subverted reality itself. Even the 'certain-death-trials' prepared by her uncle, where she sealed her memories before going in to provide authenticity, hadn't managed to elicit this kind of response—the burning fires of passion, the fear, the determination.

Iz had expended some of her Everflame Essence, but she believed her grandpa would consider this lesson a worthy trade. It allowed her to retain some of her strength, which might be needed. Something big, dangerous, was happening inside that unstable river of death. However, just as she was about to move over, a voice in her head stopped Iz in her tracks.

‘Go.’ the familiar yet foreign voice said, and Iz involuntarily shuddered from the pain the single word carried.

The lake heaved a moment later before a pillar of water and flames rose hundreds of meters into the air. The demon had detonated the modified [Star Seed]. If she remembered correctly, it had been gifted by that annoying guy from the Stillsun Clan a few years ago. The thought of his gift being used as an incendiary instead of nurturing a custom-made Star made a smile tug at Iz’s face, but the scene in the distance commanded most of her attention.

She could tell the demon was alive, albeit a bit worse for the wear. But the emanations within the river of death made her heart clench. Even with [Sungod’s Eyes], Iz barely managed to make out the scene within. The corruption was just too dense.

But she didn’t need to wait long before the frayed river of death shattered, destroyed by a tremendous shockwave that elicited a primal fear in Iz’s heart. Ancient ruins were leveled by the thousands as the blast consumed the center of the Ra’Lashar Capital, and a tsunami of corruption and lake water followed in its wake.

Everything was swept away, from rubble to corpses and scorched remnants of Black Heart Parasites. Iz suddenly felt extremely exposed without her Fateward Treasure, and she urgently entered the diminished orb of [World’s End]. Her fatebound guardian wrapped the miniature sun in an embrace just as the shockwave reached her.

Iz’s face paled from the tremendous onslaught, from the screams that entered her mind. But a roar from her natal flame extinguished the voices, and the storm passed soon after. She took a shuddering breath before lunging for the glimmering broach on the ground. She felt her fate realign, like a warm blanket keeping her safe.

Everything in moderation; that was the second lesson of the day. There was a fine but definite line between courage and madness, and she wasn’t willing to cross that to accomplish her goals. Her grandparents had sacrificed too much for her to just throw her life away.

However, not everyone seemed to treasure their lives, and Iz’s gaze once more turned toward Zachary with a mix of anticipation and trepidation.

There he stood, at the epicenter of the destruction. The heavy shroud that had hung over the ruins had been destroyed, forming a hole in the sky itself. Weak light shone upon him as he stood unmoving in a crater full of viscous water and broken detritus. Surrounding him were tendrils of chaotic energy, destroying anything they touched.

She could barely recognize him as he blankly looked up at the sky. His skin was covered in runes of forgotten truths and ancient madness, his eyes two metallic orbs with bolts of gold and black. The air around him strained just from his latent pressure, and winds buffeted his tattered robes.

It felt like Iz was looking at the resurgence of the previous Era, of the unstoppable madmen who lorded over the previous sky. This was what she had wanted to witness. Someone who didn’t helplessly float down the river of fate but paved his own path. Someone who left ripples in his wake, indelible marks on history.

But why did she feel so sad?

Beyond the concept was a man. A man covered in black blood and gristly wounds. Both his hands were missing, and his arms looked like cracked marble that ended just beneath his elbows. If not for the pressure he was emitting or his fiercely burning life force, Iz would have thought him dead. But he looked so tired. So utterly drained, hollowed out by the expectations and responsibilities placed on his shoulders.

"What in the," a hoarse voice drifted over from a distance, breaking Iz from her trance.

A wet and scorched demon had crawled up from the lake, his body fluctuating ominously like he was on the verge of losing his physical form.

"He's alive," Iz sighed as she pointed her finger at Mr. Azh'Rezak, activating [Cleansing Pyre].

A swirl of golden flames engulfed the demon, incinerating most of the corruption that had tainted his body. Wounds were cauterized and scabs fell off, exposing unblemished skin beneath.

"Thank you," Mr. Azh'Rezak said with a bow before turning back toward Zachary with a frown. "His hands... Do you have-"

The demon's words were caught in his mouth as something was created out of nothing as two hands regrew. Iz looked on with worry as Zachary slowly bent toward the ground, his movements jerky and discordant like a construct whose maintenance was long overdue.

"What in the-" Ogras muttered in disbelief.

"For every miracle, there is a price," Iz sighed. "Fate... Too dangerous."