

## The Fall 828

### Chapter 828: Words Spoken from the Heart

A day later, Zac reached Pavina's mansion, and he found his teacher sitting with an axe similar to Zac's own in her hand.

"You won," Pavina nodded as Zac arrived, placing the axe to her side. "I'm quite the teacher."

"Yes, you're quite something," Zac smiled.

"How did it go?" Pavina asked.

Zac recounted the whole battle, including how Kaldor started cheating the moment he was about to lose. There was a decent chance that the reaver acted with a hidden purpose rather than being consumed by bloodlust, whether it was to push Zac to find a breakthrough or to sound out any hidden strength. Which one was less obvious, and trying to glean anything from Pavina's inscrutable expression didn't help at all.

She simply nodded like Kaldor's shamelessness was a matter of course. Neither did she try to dig into what kind of bloodline technique Zac had used to turn things around. Zac wasn't willing to divulge that secret either, since it was obviously different from what normal Draugr possessed. He did however want to see if Pavina could shed any light on his most recent find, whether his idea had potential.

So, he recounted what happened when he started using the framework for [Thousand Lights Avatar].

"Soul and technique," Pavina slowly muttered. "Interesting. It sounds a bit like the later phase of the Integration Stage, yet distinct somehow."

"Do you think it's feasible to fuse your soul into one's technique this way?" Zac asked.

"I don't see why not," Pavina said. "Your soul is the bridge between the grand Dao and yourself. If you can really spread your soul, and not just mental energy, throughout your body as you mentioned, it should be helpful. It might not only strengthen your technique, but also increase the pace you improve it."

"Are there any problems?" Zac probed, noticing that the Revenant wasn't looking too enthused even if she praised the method.

"Time," Pavina said without hesitation. "You're young, but you should have already started realizing the time and effort required to walk toward the peak. Every step forward is a tremendous undertaking, be it from skills, Dao, levels, or other aspects of your path. The soul is famously demanding in this aspect, and what you're proposing is to not only cultivate the soul. It is also to form a spiritual avatar and mold it with your stances."

"I don't see a scenario where too many would bother with something like this, apart from a cultivator who has a class based on this kind of fusion between the soul and physical attacks," Pavina eventually concluded. "Even if it can strengthen you, the time cost in proportion to improvement is both risky and limited from what I can tell."

"So it's a bad idea?" Zac grimaced.

“I didn’t say that,” Pavina said with a shake of her head. “I said it wasn’t advisable for most people. But most people do not have your talent for fusing your path and technique. The capability to cultivate their soul is quite rare for most races, and I have never met anyone who dared to walk both these time-consuming routes. But you can only go so far following convention.

“No Autarch had reached their level by being reasonable and measured – their conviction in their path is unbreakable, no matter how crazy it might seem to others. I am simply urging you to confirm whether this method is something that resonates with you and your path. If it does, try it out. The worst that can happen is that you fail and possibly get stuck in some bottleneck. But even then you’ve been true to yourself, and all journeys must end somewhere. That is the fate of a cultivator.”

Zac slowly nodded in agreement. It was just like Pavina said. Time was becoming more and more precious as he grew stronger, even if his longevity kept improving. He was already running late for his planned breakthrough into Hegemony, and the more he added to his plate, the more baggage he would have to carry down the road.

There was thankfully still time to figure all this out. As long as his plan succeeded, he would be back on Earth soon enough, and he could finally take a breather and collect himself. His foundations had never been as solid as they were right now, and he could afford a breather where he properly planned out his next steps.

The two kept talking for another hour, but it was eventually time to go. The splinter was calling him from within his Cosmos Sack, and he was eager to get the shard as well before something went awry. Three Virtues seemed to know much more than he let on and Zac feared that the more time he gave the shifty monk to prepare, the worse a position Zac would find himself in. However, before he let, he was beset with indecision, his heart caught between paranoia and goodwill.

Should he tell her?

This was something he had been struggling over since Pavina had taken him under her wing, putting him back on the right track with his cultivation. Exposing his escape plans might ruin everything, even if Pavina herself wasn’t planning on ratting him out. The Orom was generally oblivious to the Orom World, but who knew what it actually picked up through the Prison Brands?

But could he really just disappear from this prison, leaving behind those who had given him so much?

He couldn’t, his conscience wouldn’t allow it.

“In the next few months, I’ll...”

“Some things need not be spoken,” Pavina interrupted as she glanced toward the sky.

Zac was surprised, but he immediately rephrased what he was going to say. It turned out that he had been worrying about nothing, where Pavina already had a decent idea of what was going on. He should have expected it, considering that Kaldor had already figured out he was the source of the previous blast of Oblivion that failed to break himself out.

“... I’ll go into seclusion. I generally stay close to the border of life and death, I’d be more comfortable if you guarded the area.”

Pavina nodded with a smile. "Go on with your cultivation. No need to worry about me. What will be, will be."

Zac slowly nodded as he said his goodbyes, wondering if he would ever see this mentor of his again.

"He seems confident," Pavina commented as Zac left.

"Little bastard. I was the one who gave him that cursed item and the one who received the backlash for his previous attempt," Kaldor swore as he stepped out from the shadows. "Where was my invitation?"

"That's what you get for going so hard on my little disciple," Pavina smiled. "He seems to remember both goodwill and grudges, weighing them against each other."

Kaldor only snorted in response before his aura changed to a more serious demeanor. "Gather the others. This is it, it's time to complete our mission."

"Should we really heap this responsibility on the child? And not even tell him?" Pavina hesitated. "Can he carry this burden alone?"

"Perhaps not, but he's not the only one making their moves. Fate is congregating, almost by a scary degree. Even the big guy seems to sense something amiss. It has sped up considerably," Kaldor grunted. "But its futile. It's swallowed too many of the baldies. Fate is inescapable."

"The Sangha," Pavina grimaced. "If it comes to blows, I fear, even with master to protect us..."

"Don't worry," Kaldor said with a shake of his head. "Our goals are different."

"What about the child?" Pavina asked. "We're just going to let such a talent disappear?"

"Don't worry, I tested him," Kaldor said. "I divulged some core secrets of the Empire, and I only received some surface damage. He has already one step through the door, he just doesn't know it."

Having delivered the warning to Pavina, Zac felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Better yet, even after a week had passed as he returned to Samsara's Edge, there still hadn't been any issues cropping up. Therefore, he didn't immediately head toward the secluded bamboo forest in the heart of the Life-attuned Zone. First, he visited Heda's farm.

In many ways, the arborist had helped him as much as Pavina, and if Zac didn't offer her this hint as well he'd feel bad about it forever. After all, he couldn't be certain that the seed Heda asked him to throw out was actually an escape measure of hers. It might simply be her way to send out something of hers into the multiverse, a heritage of sorts.

Heda only smiled and patted his head when he told her where she should go for the next months, not giving him any indication at all whether she intended to follow his advice or not. He still stayed behind for a while, and the Arborist checked up on Haro, the Heavenrender Seed left in Zac's Worldring.

"You can put Vivi inside now," Heda eventually concluded. "She will help nurture the seed, and curtail its inherent destructive tendencies."

Zac was elated, and he immediately took out the spatial tube from his Cosmos Sack and put it into the low-quality Worldring. The huge vine hidden within the tube immediately emerged, a giant that

spanned over a hundred meters. Its massive stalk dwarfed the small seed hovering above a series of arrays, yet Vivi didn't get too close.

It gingerly waved its vines around the seed, almost looking afraid to inadvertently hit it. The movements weren't threatening, but rather protective as she formed a defensive perimeter around Haro. Heda had already explained it was quite common, but it was still odd for Zac to see a plant with motherly instincts, especially considering the two plants were different species.

Even with the big vine appearing in the ring, Heda's arrangements weren't harmed at all. The desolate farmlands that the ring originally came with had been completely transformed since Zac purchased the seed, with Heda having set up multiple arrays to automate pretty much everything needed to nurture the Heavenrender Vine.

The only thing he needed to do was allow the small but constant drain of Dao and mental energy into the array. That way, the seed would be imprinted with his spirit, sort of like the undead he raised. That would make it much easier to form a contract as he had with Vivi. Without it, Heda wasn't confident he'd manage to accomplish the task.

Taming an adult Heavenrender Vine was pretty much impossible, they were far too bloodthirsty. They'd even attack an Autarch rather than submit, fighting until their last breath. Only by nurturing a seed did you have a chance, but these things were simply too hard to get. Only mature C-grade plants nurtured a seeds, and they might only give birth to a dozen or two over their nigh-eternal lifespans.

Furthermore, the moment a seed was born, it was immediately flung into the cosmos, often by the vine tearing a hole in space itself. With the seed barely emitting any energy signature, it would just look like a small piece of space debris. Finding one was a matter of luck, which was why they were so exorbitantly expensive on the outside.

Eventually, it was time to leave, and Zac made a beeline for the heart of the zone after reminding Heda to stay close over the next few months. Ultimately, he didn't choose to warn Ubo or any of the other cultivators living around Samsara's Edge that he had gotten to know over the past years.

Ultimately, he couldn't save everyone. For one, there were no guarantees to his plan, and the more people he let know, the greater the odds of betrayal. He had his goals and people who relied on him back home, far stronger connections than those that he had made here out of necessity. If he could, he would properly damage the Orom on his way out, but that was the extent of what he could do.

Zac reached the bamboo forest a week later, and he stopped at the edge like last time.

'Enter,' the voice of Three Virtues immediately echoed in his mind, and Zac suddenly saw a path in front of him.

Zac walked inside, eventually reaching the small tranquil temple hidden in the depths. This time, there were actually over thirty monks sitting in silent meditation on the platform by the river. A muted susurrus of harmonized voices drifted over, but Zac couldn't make out any individual words. Still, there was an intangible phenomenon gathering throughout the area, like some mysterious power was brewing.

The scene reminded Zac of the monks at the Temple of Everlasting Peace by the last time he visited. They had joined together to summon Lord 84th back then. Was this the same thing? The thought made Zac wary as he looked for the dwarven monk himself. The timing was too suspect.

If Three Virtues was really planning something with the help of his acolytes, it had to be related to Zac and his mission. But how?

“Amitabha, Almsgiver,” a voice drifted out from the main hall where Zac had vaguely spotted some powerful statue before. “It has been two years.”

“I have accomplished the task your eminence gave me the first time I visited,” Zac said, his gaze eventually moving away from the monks by the river. Even after Zac spoke up, they hadn’t so much as looked over in his direction. They were completely occupied with their meditation. “I’m here to pick up... that thing.”

“No rush, no rush,” Three Virtues answered, still not appearing. “As Almsgiver blesses us with his presence, fate shift and the clouds part. Benefactor would do us a great honor if he visited this poor monk’s temple to celebrate the completion for the statue of our guardian deity.”

Zac hesitated as he looked at the main hall, remembering all-too-well the fearful emanations that had come from the statue within the first time he visited. This time around, he couldn’t sense a thing, and Zac wasn’t sure whether that was a good or a bad thing. But ultimately, what could he do? He needed the shard, so he would have to play along.

For now.

His nerves were still stretched taut as he slowly entered the temple, ready to flash away at any hint of danger with the help of [Earthstrider]. He was even ready to take out the Splinter of Oblivion if need be, no matter if his danger sense was completely silent as he entered. But no obvious threats were waiting for him as he stepped through the threshold.

The hall was mostly empty, unless you counted the beautifully drawn paintings covering the walls. They depicted various devas and Boddhisatva’s imparting their blessings, but Zac didn’t dare look too closely even if they didn’t emit any energy fluctuations. He knew that layers and layers Buddhist doctrine and impartments were infused in these kinds of imagery, and looking too closely could impact one’s path if not careful.

On the other side of the entrance, Zac finally spotted the monk sitting on a mat in front of a five-meter tall statue. The gilded man depicted wasn’t anyone Zac recognized. In fact, he barely looked like a Bhottisavha at all, but rather a regal warrior who held a sword with a pommel that looked like a dragon.

He did have the familiar halo behind his back though, and now that Zac was this close he sensed a vague hint of faith energy surrounding the statue.

“Sāgara,” Three Virtues smiled as “The chosen protector of this Poor Monk’s temple.”

“Is he real?” Zac couldn’t help but ask, curiosity overcoming his purpose of coming.

Over the past years, Zac had heard and read many tales surrounding Buddha and the Buddhist Sanga. Of mystical realms, powerful warriors, and godlike beings he had never seen or heard of elsewhere. However, these stories seemed distant and hazy, just like mythology back on earth.

There was no anchor to the Multiverse in the stories, no mention of other forces or beings like the Primo. So were these celestial beings that the monks consecrated actual cultivators, or were they rather concepts of the path?

“What is real? What is false?” Three Virtues smiled. “If a kingdom’s throne is empty, is it not a kingdom?”

“Uh,” Zac hesitated.

“Come, sit,” Three Virtues said as he pointed to the mat next to him before lighting two sticks of incense in front of the statue.

“Is there something wrong?” Zac hesitated, feeling like he was being set up for another scam. “I was just planning on helping you getting rid of that thing. I don’t want to take up any time of your time and that of your disciple-brothers.”

“It is our delight to welcome Benefactor back to the temple,” Three Virtues laughed. “Let me ask you, Almsgiver. This unrepentant beast has trapped cultivators of all backgrounds for millions of years. Do you think the Orom deserves punishment?”

“I’m just an E-grade cultivator,” Zac hesitated. “Why do you ask me?”

“Words spoken from the heart contain the power to change the world,” Three Virtues smiled.

“If that was true I’d be long gone from this place,” Zac muttered, but he saw that the smiling monk was still waiting for an answer.

Zac didn’t know if this was some kind of test, and whether there was a correct answer, so he simply chose to answer from his heart. So he gathered his thoughts for a moment as he looked at the imposing sword-wielding deity for a few moments before opening his mouth.

“If speaking from a cosmic perspective, I would have to say no,” Zac eventually said. “What the Orom is doing is ultimately not that different from other cultivators. It is snatching resources to increase its strength, cutting off the path of others to advance its own. From all what I’ve seen since I stepped on the road of cultivation, that is the Heavenly Law. Evolution.

“I have walked through mountains of corpses to get where I am, and I am still nothing but an E-grade cultivator. By the time I reach the same level as the Orom, I would possibly have killed even more than he. Yet I don’t consider myself evil, deserving of punishment. We all knew the risks when we started challenging the heavens to gain power and longevity. To think the Orom to be deserving of punishment because of this would make me a hypocrite.”

“Amitabha, a vast heart is immeasurable. Benevolence is a divine path,” Three Virtues nodded. “Yet, I sense Almsgiver is not done.”

Zac slowly nodded. “While I don’t think it is inherently deserving in the grand scheme of things, it is still deserving of punishment from my perspective. It has robbed me of years I could have spent with my

loved ones, of my momentum, of friends, and who knows what else. I am not an enlightened being, my heart cannot encompass all beings like you monks. If given the opportunity, I'll retaliate against my captor."

Silence echoed in the hall after Zac's proclamation, and it almost looked like the head of the deity had grown more sinister as the swirling clouds of incense gathered around it.

To the side, the smile of Three Virtues grew wider.