

The Fall 829

Chapter 829: True and False

After having spoken his piece, Zac felt an odd premonition that he couldn't decipher. It seemed as though something had changed, yet everything was the same. The temple, the monk, and the statue – it was all as before. Yet Zac felt out of phase, for lack of a better term.

"A benevolent heart is important, but indiscriminate compassion can bring more suffering than good. Expunging Mara is a great merit, though this poor monk believes no fate is beyond redemption," Three Virtues said, and it was like his words clicked reality back into place.

"Balance is required, I believe Almsgiver understands that fundamental truth quite well."

Zac slowly nodded, though he honestly wasn't quite certain what point the monk was trying to make.

"Almsgiver has helped this poor temple resist the blight of Oblivion, a meritorious deed in line with the Dharma," Three Virtues continued. "In fact, Almsgiver gives this poor monk the impression of a budding arhat, full of life and possibility. With Almsgiver having such harmonious relation to the Dharma, has Almsgiver ever considered ordination?"

"No one can say what the future holds," Zac said, afraid to give a straightforward rejection at this stage, even if he had no intentions of shaving his head and donning a kasaya. "What will be, will be."

With a massive faction like the Buddhist Sangha, there were many layers of membership, and things weren't as black and white as it was with the Undead Empire. With the undead, you were either a member, where the commandments bound you – or you were an outsider, no matter if you were another undead or a dreamer.

With the Buddhist Sangha, the lines were blurred. Most notably, anyone could visit most of the Buddhist cultivation grounds, though the mysterious Paradise and three of the four oceans were always closed to outsiders. The properly ordained monks who permanently resided on the mountains were just a small minority of the total population of the sangha.

The vast majority could almost be considered loose cultivators, and they followed Buddha's teachings to very varying degrees. Some of them were fully committed, becoming self-ordained monks and sometimes running monasteries or temples on the outside. Others were empires with a Buddhist heritage, where many cultivators followed adjoining paths.

There were even people who simply visited the holy lands to make use of the high-quality cultivation environment. The monks didn't seem to mind at all, and they even shared a lot of techniques with the public. Even unorthodox cultivators carrying tremendous amounts of fell karma were allowed inside, much to the annoyance of their pursuers.

Conflict was banned in most regions of the sangha, but there was danger of another kind. As that necromancer had once said, the monks were natural pathbreakers, and that effect was no doubt amplified manifold in the Buddhist Heartlands. Those who visited with impure motives might find their path subverted in short order, some to the point they lost all sense of self.

They became beings without emotions or desires, and they gave up on everything except the sutras and the Heavenly Dao. Visiting the sangha required an extremely sturdy Dao Heart, but that danger was actually a source of attraction to some elite cultivators. Those who managed to hold onto their path might eventually walk away with a tempered heart and a path even sturdier than before.

That fact enticed countless geniuses who had been stuck at some threshold. For them, the gamble of losing your identity or breaking their limitations was well worth taking. The temples were probably happy with the arrangement as well, having a steady stream of great talents being sucked into their path.

While all these types of visitors could be considered followers of the Sangha, they ultimately weren't a true part of it. Like Catheya had said, there were Nine Mountains, Eight Temples, Four Oceans, and One Paradise. These chapters were predominant powers unto themselves, and could all be considered A-grade factions.

The way they went about things was a bit different, but most of the Mountains and Temples had vast arrays of subordinate monasteries and factions as well, who could be considered outer disciples of the Sangha. To be ordained was to officially join either one of the main branches or their subordinate factions.

Trillions of people in the world would jump at the opportunity to officially join the Buddhist Sangha, even if it was for one of the lower temples. However, that path was not for Zac, no matter what the names of his Dao Branches were.

"Amitabha, as long as Almsgiver lives true to his heart, he will always be welcomed with open arms," Three Virtues nodded. "Come, let us close this chapter of Karma."

Zac's eyes lit up and he immediately got back on his feet, relieved to see that the monk wasn't planning on reneging on his offer or throwing a wrench into Zac's plans. However, the relief lasted less than a minute, because he quickly saw something amiss in front of him.

The rear structure where Three Virtues kept his Shard of Creation had completely transformed since the last time Zac was here, where it had gained a golden sheen. More importantly, its insides were absolutely flooded with Creation Energy, along with countless runes that contained vast amounts of Buddhist spirituality.

The scripts were slowly floating around in the middle of the soup of creation, and Zac felt his mind shudder just from glancing at the ever-churning mixture.

"Unfortunately, this poor monk has failed to properly contain the energy released by the shard over the past few years," Three Virtues sighed. "I'm ashamed, I'm ashamed. This one could only contain it to a small area, lest it harms any innocent bystander."

Zac looked at the golden temple, his body shuddering from the intense fluctuations of creation. The shards in his mind were already acting out, their reaction far stronger compared to the response of the splinters when he picked up his third copy at Kaldor's castle. Eventually, his gaze shifted back toward the still-smiling monk, Zac's eyes filled with unspoken reproach.

"Amitabha, heart is all," the monk said. "With an immovable heart, nothing can bar your path."

"I'm guessing the glass casing sealing shard is in the middle of the temple? And I just have to go inside and get it out?" Zac sighed, getting an affirmative nod after each question.

Zac only grunted in response as he stepped forward, not even bothering to complain. He couldn't compete with this level of thick-skinned behavior. Three Virtues was obviously more than capable of dealing with some run-off Creation, even more so than Kaldor judging by the tens of thousands of monastic runes that danced through the stockpiled energy like they had become one.

Not a drop of energy was able to leave the temple, proving how powerful the containment was. There was no telling how the monk had set this thing up, but his intentions were clear; Three Virtues wanted him to undergo whatever trial he had prepared.

Zac had two options as he saw it. The first was to take the plunge, betting on the fact that Three Virtues wasn't actually out to hurt him. Secondly, he could turn around and leave, giving up on the opportunity. The former option was more dangerous, but the latter came with strings attached. Was the Splinter of Oblivion alone enough to break out? How would he get his hands on a shard before the imbalance caused problems? And would Three Virtues even let him back down at this stage?

Ultimately, Zac chose the former. He didn't trust Three Virtues as far as he could throw him, but Zac did trust in his ability to deal with Creation Energy. After all, while the accumulated energy was a bit shocking to look at from the outside, he had been forced to endure much worse after swallowing the second shard.

If there indeed were some trap hidden inside the runes, Zac still believed that he would be able to singe his body clear when forming the Glimpse of Chaos. Of course, there was the implicit comfort when dealing with someone like three Virtues; the monk was probably an Autarch when he split himself into all those incarnations, and even the incarnations were approaching the threshold of Autarchy by the looks of it.

Would someone like this really bother concocting some convoluted scheme? Doubtful. They'd either just kill him outright or tell him what to do. The monk obviously had hidden motives for his actions, but Zac guessed they were rather targeted at something else than at Zac himself.

So Zac stepped inside, readying himself for an onslaught of Creation, but he was relieved to find that the Creation Energy wasn't nearly as wild as what he'd endured back in the Twilight Ocean. However, the moment he let down his guard, he was beset by a wave of agony as his arms turned into huge golden wings.

He urgently tried to turn his arms back to normal, but he was shocked to find that it didn't work at all. He didn't understand what was going on. Zac had encountered situations like these dozens of times by now, but the more he tried to revert the changes, the more Creation Energy his body absorbed.

'Amitabha, heart is all,' the voice of Three Virtues once more echoed in his mind.

The monk's voice was like a bell dispersing some of Zac's anxiety, and he somewhat understood what was going on. So Zac quelled the burgeoning panic and stilled his heart. Soon enough, he closed his eyes and shut out everything except the steady beats from his chest. His panic abated, and when he opened his eyes again he found that his arms had returned to normal.

He didn't know how, but the monk had changed the nature of the Creation Energy, making it respond to one's mental state instead of one's desires. Having gotten the Creation Energy under control, Zac took another step into the temple, but the moment his foot hit the ground, his surroundings changed.

Zac suddenly found himself in a vast temple instead of the small rear building of Three Virtues' temple. He wasn't alone either – there were hundreds of monks sitting in prayer, each one chanting scriptures.

Illusion Array?

That was Zac's first instinct, but his usual tricks for breaking out didn't work at all. It really felt like he was here, with not a single weakness in the facade. Another wave of panic threatened to rise to the surface, but Zac stopped in his tracks and stilled his heart again. There was no telling if his real body would suffer the consequences if he spiraled out of control in this illusion.

There had to be a trick to this – a purpose behind the Monk's arrangements.

Time passed as he properly took in the surroundings. The smell of incense and old parchment, the sounds of crackling scrolls, and hundreds of voices joining into an indistinct chant. The symmetry of the all and the stable tranquility of the ambiance. Eventually, Zac could feel it.

The monks were monks, but they also weren't. Each one was chanting a scripture of their own, and the truths hidden within their words were them as much as their corporeal form. Not one chant was the same either. They all had one thing in common – they were false. They didn't contain the truth, at least not the one he needed.

Having come to a conclusion, Zac immediately set out, walking among the straight lines of unmoving monks. Eventually, his gaze stopped at a specific one. The acolyte looked the same as the others – his appearance almost a carbon copy of the monks he had met back on Earth. His sutra didn't sound different than the others either, but it was different somehow.

"Heart..." Zac muttered as he looked down on the monk who was seemingly oblivious to his presence.

He hesitated for a few moments before he walked over. "Hey, can you hear me?"

There was no response, with the monk continuing his chant unabated. Not knowing what to do, Zac simply chose to pat the man's shoulder, prompting his surroundings to change. He was back in the temple drowned in creation, and he saw that some parts of his body had transformed while he was trapped.

Zac immediately closed his eyes to steady his heart again, and his body was back to normal in no time. There was one difference compared to before though – there was now a line of Buddhist scripture floating around his body.

Was it the sutra he heard in the vision? Or one of the runes that danced around him? In either case, Zac didn't want it. It felt like an uninvited guest, and he was afraid that it'd sneak into his body if he wasn't careful, harming his path. So he pushed his consciousness against the swirling characters, and they actually floated away.

However, the next moment he found himself back in the temple, and he had to once more find the monk who resonated with his heart. Soon enough, an identical swirl danced around Zac's left hand,

allowing him to take another step into the temple. It looked like he was stuck with this thing, at least until he left this trial.

Zac's vision shifted, and he found himself in the courtyard of a monastery this time. In front of him was a vast wall with thousands of plaques, each one inscribed with a short prayer. Zac didn't immediately spot any plaque that resonated with him, but he tried just taking one at random to see if it would allow him to get back to the temple.

It worked, but the second set of characters he had summoned clashed with the first, resulting in both of them flying away. Zac swore with annoyance, a feeling that was further intensified when he realized he had somehow been transported back to the entrance of the temple. He glanced back, and he saw Three Virtues still standing outside with the same smile on his face.

Zac grunted with exasperation, but he quickly regretted it when he found himself breathing burst of flames. He calmed his mind and resumed his journey, effortlessly gathering the first snippet. He was soon transported back to the prayer wall again, and this time, he took some time until he finally found the one that resonated with his heart. Zac still couldn't pinpoint exactly why this specific tablet was the right one – he just knew it was.

As expected, the second line perfectly fused with the first this time around, allowing Zac to take another step into the temple. This time, he was transported to a mountain library filled with ancient scrolls, each one of them containing densely written sutras. It took Zac over ten minutes before he finally found the one that was his, and two lines dancing around him turned into three.

Like this, Zac continued forward, each step taking him one step closer to his goal; the shimmering crystal locked inside a glass cage on the other side of the building. Each step placed him in a new world, where he had to find truth among falsehoods. With each success, the yarn of swirling scripture around his body grew denser, more complete, but Zac still couldn't quite figure out what kind of sutra it was.

Each success did not only add to the scripture he was building, but it also increased the difficulty of his next vision. Passing the fifteenth vision, which required him to pick the correct pebble in a stone garden, took him half a day. There were four different stones that all felt fitting, and he was locked from indecision for hours until picking the right one.

Half a month later, Zac was actually sent back to the start just as he was about to reach the glass case. For the first time in days, he lost control, going through a tumultuous procession of transformations before he managed to calm his mind. He hurriedly made his way back, passing one trial after another.

Even now that he had almost made it to the end, Zac couldn't quite understand what he was doing. But for some reason, he was becoming a lot better at discerning what was true, and what was false. The scroll that took him ten minutes to find the first time around was discovered after just three minutes after having reached the depths of the temple.

More importantly, the Creation Energy barely had any effect on him by this point. Small ripples still spread across his skin when he let his mind stray, but there weren't any big mutations like in the beginning. Was this good, or was it bad? Zac couldn't tell at all, even as he entered a deeper state of tranquility.

Was it something sinister like hypnosis, of the emptying of one's sensations? Or was this some sort of cultivation of the heart? Should he fight it, or should he embrace it? It could be the key to dealing with the whispers of the remnants, but he was hesitant to let this new sensation take hold – especially after what he knew about the dangers of the Sangha.

But he also realized that he found himself incapable of reaching the deeper parts of the temple without entering this state.

Eventually, he chose to go with the flow, but while holding onto his core principles in the depths of his soul. He also started rotating his outer cores based on the concepts in the [Nine Reincarnations Manual], which seemed to bring clarity to the emptiness. Eventually, Zac found himself back in the same village that had thrown him back to the starting point before.

This time, he was staring at a little boy who was helping grind ink for his father who was selling talismans in a small stall. It had taken Zac five days of walking through the streets, of observing the fates of the mortals in this medieval village. But he was sure he was right this time. There was truth in every movement of the child.

In the grating sound as the dark-purple ink was being ground, in his steadfast expression, in how the stacks of talismans next to him were arranged. Zac walked over, but before he had a chance to speak up, the little boy looked up and peered right into his eyes.

He was no longer a small boy in a small mountain village, even if his shape hadn't changed at all. He had become a primordial deva, filled with boundless power. There was infinite potential brewing inside him. Potential for creation. Potential for destruction. It held the truths of the six paths, the truth of eternity.

"Golden. Boundless," the boy said and the world crumbled.