

The Fall 830

Chapter 830: Sublimation

As the world collapsed and the small mountain village was reduced to nothingness, Zac found himself standing atop a boundless ocean beneath a golden sky. There was not a wave or a ripple, yet Zac couldn't see what hid below.

However, he could feel it.

There was harmony. Tranquility. A sense of belonging. As long as he sunk into it, he would be part of it. Part of the unity, where all was one. The moment that thought struck him, he felt a tremendous attraction from beneath as distant chants carried across the waters. All was one, and heart was all.

Zac's path had crystallized, and his heart had grown extremely sturdy after going through innumerable life-and-death struggles. But even he felt it difficult to resist the pull – to just close his eyes and meld with the oneness. It would not only grant strength, it would also free him from all suffering. It was almost like the ocean wanted to swallow him.

That sudden spark of cognizance startled something wide awake in the core of his being, and the tranquility of the boundless ocean no longer had the means to affect him. His heart beat and his soul roared while his cells opened wide with hunger. The sky rumbled, and swirling nothingness consumed the gold as it covered the heavens.

It didn't contain the wrath of the old heavens or the indifference of the new. It contained hunger. An infinite hunger that surpassed the bounds of reality itself. If entering the ocean would mean him becoming one with all, the void entailed being one with nothing.

Ripples finally appeared on the ocean, and founts were starting to rise toward the sky, the water clearly trying to resist the pull but failing. Zac looked back and forth, his role seeming like that of an observer, even if he knew that he was the source of the churning void above.

Or rather, his bloodline was.

The world once more crumbled, and Zac looked around to see what he'd encounter next. He was surprised to find himself standing outside the temple with a glass case in his hands, staring into the surprised visage of Three Virtues as a golden scroll floated in the air. Zac was still in a transcendent state, and he closed his eyes to get a better feel of the situation.

After a few minutes, he could confirm that this was all real. It was not yet another layer of illusions to tempt his heart or trick his mind. He still couldn't tell why he knew what he knew. He only knew that it was true. However, he did feel that this sense of certainty was slowly leaving his body.

It was not because he was beset by a new round of illusion, but rather because the state of enlightenment he had encountered was temporary – some sort of impartment left inside the temple by the monk. Perhaps, the monk wanted to show him a path, or even give him a taste of the benefits of cultivating the heart.

Even then, Zac felt no desire as he felt the last vestiges of clarity leave his body. That kind of path would probably allow him to deal with the lingering consciousness in the remnants, where an immovable heart

would be able to resist all temptations and see through all falsehoods. But he had already staked out his path, and he was confident in his own abilities.

As for the final vision, Zac believed it was the true trial for the shard – the natural pull of the Buddhist Sangha. Succeed, and his foundations would further stabilize. Fail, and he would probably have become further linked to the Dharma, perhaps to the point he lost part of his self. However, his bloodline had thrown a wrench in the trial, being offended by the ocean's influence. It had even gone so far as to forcibly swallow some of the boundless ocean, prompting the trial to end early.

It looked like not even Buddha could subdue the Void Emperor.

"Why?" Zac eventually asked as he opened his eyes, feeling his mental state having returned to normal.

"Amitabha, Almsgiver," Three Virtues smiled. "The Dharma is the greatest of all joys, the highest of all delights. Cessation of desire conquers all suffering, and it is the road to enlightenment."

"Cessation," Zac muttered before shaking his head with a smile, "is not for me. I am much too greedy. How long have I been inside?"

"No more than an hour," Three Virtues said, and Zac felt he could discern some helplessness in the monk's eyes for some reason.

Zac wasn't too surprised that so little time had passed during the trial. Most likely, the illusions themselves hadn't lasted more than a few seconds each. Most of the time had come from the steps in-between and gathering his wits outside the temple.

"What is this?" Zac asked as he looked at the golden scroll hovering in front of him.

He recognized its aura quite clearly; the scripture he had collected had not disappeared after he left. Instead, it had formed an actual sutra by the looks of it, though Zac wasn't able to tell whether the scroll was real or illusory. It was only partly unfurled, allowing Zac to see dozens of lines of text along with the image of a golden cultivator covered in an unfamiliar set of pathways.

The aura emanating from the scroll was somewhat familiar, giving off an undeniable hint of life and creation, but there was much more to it. Part of it reminded him of his own class, of the lofty temple of Arcadia that appeared when he activated [Rapturous Divide]. Unsurprisingly, another part reminded him of the power of Buddha.

"It is truly astounding, Almsgiver. We must be fated, after all," Three Virtues said with obviously feigned surprise. "This poor monk desperately recited the sutras in front of this pagoda for years, hoping to contain the energies within. To think that Almsgiver managed to rearrange the fractured teachings of Buddha into the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation]."

Zac stared at the monk for a moment, rendered speechless by the level of shamelessness. The monk was clearly trying to force a karmic link between himself and the sangha, both by showcasing the value of Heart Cultivation and now throwing in a technique. However, Zac had to admit he was intrigued, both by the energy signature and by the name.

"Varja sublimation?" Zac asked. "A Body Tempering Manual?"

Body tempering was quite widely used among some chapters of the Buddhist Sangha, and there were monks as durable as Izh'Rak Reavers. In fact, Zac had actually seen a corner of their most wide-spread Body Tempering Technique back on Earth already; the [Diamond Sutra]. However, he had never heard of this [Boundless Vajra Sublimation] before.

"Just so," Three Virtues nodded. "A foundational method to temper one's flesh into one possessing boundless life. It quashes imperfections and elevates the divine, setting the stage for greater things in the future. It has unsurpassed compatibility and can be transitioned into myriad advanced techniques. It was created in the earliest era, and numerous great Dharma Guardians of the Sangha started with this method. A blessing, a blessing of the Heavens!"

"Why are you doing this?" Zac asked, obviously not buying the spiel.

"By illuminating the path for others, you also illuminate your own," Three Virtues smiled.

"I cannot accept this," Zac eventually said. "As I said, my path is not the search of nirvana. This thing might end up hurting my cultivation."

"Almsgiver need not worry. Not only have the warrior monks and arhats used this method with great success. Numerous friends of the Sangha have exchanged great merit for this technique, before transitioning it into other body tempering techniques without any relation to us."

Zac had to admit he was tempted after hearing the monk's exhortations, but he still had a lot of reservations.

"Almsgiver, there is a difference between a living being and a being of Life," the monk added, giving Zac a start. The monk's smiling visage turned serious for a moment as he looked deep into Zac's eyes.

"Almsgiver, are you truly in balance?"

Zac looked at the small monk, once more beset by the uncomfortable feeling of having all his secrets exposed. He had even activated his protective array around his Duplicity Core before coming here, but it was probably much too late to change anything. Of course, Zac understood what the monk was digging at.

His trinity of Life, Death, and Conflict was not in a true state of balance, depending on how you looked at it. His Daos were in perfect tune with his path thanks to his hard work in the Orom World, but could the same be said about his races? His Death-side was represented by a Draugr, a race born from the Abyssal Lake, one of the purest representations of Death in the multiverse. It cultivated Miasma since birth, essentially meaning it had a natal Death-attuned Physique.

Meanwhile, his other side was human. That was it. A bog-standard race of the multiverse, where his unique point was that he would get whatever benefits his other side got. However, it was not, like Three Virtues called it, a being of life. His human side didn't use Divine Energy to match the Miasma of his Draugr side, but simple unattuned energy.

Technically, this [Boundless Vajra Sublimation] could be the key to addressing this imbalance, but it brought up many questions. First and foremost – did he really need it? Would a life-attuned constitution on his human side even benefit him? Did every part of his cultivation need to be mirrored in this way?

Ultimately, the trinity was based on Dao, not body.

Secondly, could he even cultivate this thing? What effect would it have on his Bloodline? Would it result in a clash like the one in his vision, where the void assaulted the boundless nature of Buddhism?

Finally, and perhaps most importantly; did he even dare cultivate this thing even if he wanted to? Growing up he had been taught not to look a gifted horse in the mouth, but the opposite was true out in the Multiverse. Three Virtues wouldn't just give away a precious body tempering manual without purpose, no matter what flowery words he spouted.

At best, it would only force him to continue cultivating some Buddhist techniques, binding him tighter to the Buddhist Sangha. But what if there were more sinister concepts hidden within the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation]? What if he ended up an empty vessel the moment he completed his physique? After all, brainwashing was the forte of these monks.

"I need to consider this," Zac slowly said. "Can I store this thing somehow?"

"If you determine your course with force or speed, you will miss the path to enlightenment," Three Virtues nodded. "However, this poor monk has to insist Almsgiver learn the contents by heart before leaving. Almsgiver has seized this opportunity through fate and good merits, but we cannot let a complete copy of the sutra be released into the world."

Did the monk expect Zac to give in to temptation and train this technique after learning all the benefits it could provide? Zac had to admit – it was a pretty good plan. Even then, Zac went ahead and grabbed the hovering scroll, much to the monk's delight. The next moment, he felt a massive surge of information cramming into his brain, like hundreds of books' worth of text.

There were postures you could train in, scriptures that sped up the process, tens of thousands of treasures that could aid in the formation of a 'Golden Vajra Physique'. There were even chapters on Heart Cultivation and alternative methods to train such as tattoos and clones. It was a veritable treasure trove of knowledge, and it was with great reluctance Zac sealed that knowledge in a corner of his mind before he turned to the happily smiling monk.

"Well, it's time for me to head out," Zac said. "Thank you for all your help. I'll remember the benevolence of your eminence."

"Almsgiver is too kind," Three Virtues smiled. "But if this one can give one final suggestion?"

"What's that?" Zac asked.

"Almsgiver has no need to rush. Providence is accumulating, but it has yet not reached a crescendo. The time when fate is most malleable will arrive very soon," Three Virtues smiled.

Zac slowly nodded in thanks before leaving the small temple, the droning sounds of the still-meditating monks traveling with him through the bamboo forest. Only when the decorated bamboo poles gave way to the vibrant steppes outside did he dare relax. He had done it – he had secured the means of escape.

However, Zac was a bit lost at the moment, having expected he needed to absorb the remnants the moment he seized them. Zac had even guessed that was the ultimate goal of Three Virtues – to force the appearance of a Glimpse of Chaos right by his temple. This guess was obviously wrong, but the odd encounter in the temple didn't make things any clearer.

It was too annoying dealing with Karmic experts.

The only thing Zac could be certain of was that every action of Three Virtues had a purpose, from the short chat in front of the statue of Sāgara to displaying the benefits of Heart Cultivation. But it could be anything from advancing the monk's plans in the Orom World to something thousands of years in the future.

The only clue Zac had was the monk's final recommendation. He clearly wanted Zac to wait a bit before absorbing the remnants. It was the one thing where he was completely candid. But even that simple suggestion felt like a mindbender after the mentally exhausting visit. Was it a real suggestion, or was it reverse psychology?

Should he just go ahead and absorb those things immediately, or would he sabotage his attempt by making his move early?

As Zac made his way toward his small island, he ultimately chose to wait a bit. He was ultimately dealing with an Autarch, and it wasn't like he was trying to slip out unnoticed. Forming a Glimpse of Chaos was a real spectacle, and he risked drawing both the attention and ire of the Orom before he could teleport away. If fate really was congregating for some reason, such as the monks preparing some scheme, it would provide a good cover.

Two months. Zac decided he'd give it two months, leaving roughly four weeks to spare before the remnants had to be returned. If nothing had happened by that point, he'd leave and not look back.

Zac didn't bother going back to Samsara's Edge. He was all out of Purchase Points already, having bought the [Hollow Core] in addition to the Heavenrender Vine Seed, something that was only possible through his multiple breakthroughs. Even then, he had been forced to take a pretty big loss.

Even after forming two Boundless Dao Branches, forcibly elevating his levels, Soul, and then improving his Integration Stage, he had been lacking some points. Only by selling off a mountain of resources for 8,000 Purchase Points was he able to afford the second supreme treasure. It pained him, but trading a bunch of expensive, but common on the outside, materials for a unique treasure was definitely worth it.

Soon enough, Zac was back in his hidden cultivation chamber, and he took out the first of the two glass boxes. Kaldor's protective runes were gone, and tendrils of darkness left painful cracks on Zac's arms as he held the case in his hands. As expected, it did release a continuous amount of Oblivion Energy, though this one felt raw and wild compared to what was released from the prison in his mind.

Zac didn't try to break open the casing, but rather put it at the heart of a formation at the right side of the cave, letting the Oblivion Energy fuse with the Miasma that was dragged from the death-attuned Zone. Next, he did the same thing with the shard, turning his cultivation cave into something unique, something containing hints of both Creation and Oblivion.

The two remnants stirred upon being placed in such close proximity, but the seals on the casings were something else, preventing the remnants from awakening altogether.

This was the best Zac solution could think of, where he could make use of the marvelous cultivation cave and the remnants until his deadline. The energy that was released through the runic funnel in his mind

was pure, but the amount was also quite limited – far less compared to what was released from this newly acquired set.

Like this, weeks passed, where Zac silently practiced the [Nine Reincarnations Manual], mentally preparing himself for the ordeal of forming a Glimpse of Chaos. There were no disturbances, but as the days passed, he actually felt a strange sense of something building. It wasn't his soul getting stronger, though using the remnants was definitely effective in empowering the attunement of the outer cores.

It was just like Three Virtues said – it was like a storm was gathering, a hurricane of fate. The feeling was similar to his Danger Sense, making him believe it was related to his latest boost in Luck. It was a welcome new ability, and it was about time he gained something new from the attribute. After all, his effective Luck had almost doubled since entering the Twilight Ocean.

Then one day, the storm arrived.

The arrays in the cave sputtered and failed as the orbs illuminating the chamber dimmed, prompting Zac's eyes to shoot open with glee. There was still a week until his planned escape, a month before the deadline for the remnants. But just as the monk had indicated, an opportunity had presented itself prematurely.

The Orom World had entered a dark state.

Whether it was a sign from above or a direct consequence of Three Virtues' schemes, Zac didn't know, but it ultimately didn't matter. The Orom might have encountered some outside threat forcing it to reroute all its power from the Orom World to itself rather than quelling an internal insurgency. In either case, it meant the big bastard had run into trouble.

The thought alone prompted a smile to appear on Zac's face, the schadenfreude far outweighing the disappointment of his Soul Strengthening session ending prematurely. The more pressing issues the Orom had to deal with, the more he would be able to accomplish in the dark.

As expected, Zac felt a wave of weakness spread through his body as his prison brand flickered, and just moving became a chore. He could still circulate a trickle of energy, but it was barely enough to maintain basic bodily functions. Thankfully, activating [Void Zone] and covering himself in Void Energy counteracted the effect enough for him to move freely. That was enough to accomplish his tasks.

He turned into a blur as he swept through the cave like a hurricane, stowing away the few items he hadn't already secured already, most notably his cultivation arrays, [Mind's Eye Agate], and the twinned Realm Spirits. Finally, he grabbed the two glass casings, ignoring their anger at being so close together, before rushing to the surface of the island.

Only to be met by a sky set on fire.