

The Fall 821

Chapter 821: Celestial Clay

The stone urn was a spatial treasure, and Zac eventually resealed it when the barrel was three-quarter full. For better or worse, there was a lot more of the grey mud stored in the vat, and he had to save it for future endeavors. The stench had spread through the whole cave by now, the environmental arrays utterly incapable of stemming the unceasing emanations.

Zac wasn't any better off after withstanding the initial wave of nausea. His nose, his very being, refused to acclimate to the stench. The hexbrew was something mentioned by Heda, but even she had been unable to recommend it when Zac asked about items with powerful effects but large drawbacks.

The bubbling grey mud was called [Celestial Clay], in what might be one of the most egregious cases of overselling something Zac had ever encountered. It could be considered a natural treasure, something that was nearly impossible to create. It did, however, have a small chance of forming in tainted lands marked by extreme blights, war, or natural disasters. In other words, places with extremely fell karma.

But just like the sign at the Havenfort Chasm said, 'Night is the mother of the day'. Something divine could really be born out of this horrifying product. The [Celestial Clay] was one of the rare items that could boost one's inherent Luck, and it was even more effective than most Attribute Fruits.

Fruits providing Luck were hot commodities, and Zac hadn't been able to get his hands on any even if a few had popped up in the Contribution Store. Everyone could use a bit of Luck in this prison, since it could be the difference between finding inspiration and being relegated. However, while all the Luck-boosting fruits had been sold the first day the store was refilled, the [Celestial Clay] had remained in stock since the previous cycle.

If it was just the smell, most cultivators would simply grit their teeth and jump right in before secluding themselves until the stench had abated. But there was an issue with how the clay was formed. Being born in all that fell Karma, it unsurprisingly contained extremely hard-to-cleanse impurities that spread through one's whole body.

That might just be a thorny problem that could slowly be alleviated for a powerful faction on the outside. Then again, those kinds of factions would probably find other means to fill out their Luck. In the Orom World, where you couldn't spare the time to slowly purify your body, it was almost a death sentence. What good was extra Luck when the impurities were enough to risk your future breakthroughs?

Only two groups of people would dare use [Celestial Clay]; someone like Zac, with the unique abilities to cleanse impurities, or people absolutely out of options. But most in the latter group would rather spend their last Purchase Points on things like the Cultivation Chambers or Dao Treasures.

Zac fought to quell his full-body dry heaves as he dressed down to his underwear before sinking into the mud, letting the sludge rise all the way to his neck before stopping. A shudder went through his body, before he finally dipped his head beneath as well. Thus, he was fully submerged in the profane compound.

Some things were not as bad as they smelled, but the [Celestial Clay] was definitely not one of them. As the weird gunk entered his pores, it felt like his whole body had become an olfactory organ, completely inundating him in the malodor. Zac had to forcibly grip his knees to keep himself from flying out of the vat, ruining the opportunity.

After being taken from its pool of origination, the [Celestial Clay] wouldn't last more than twelve hours outside of a sealed environment. Even sealed, it couldn't last more than a millennium or two, a stark contrast to most items that could last for eons inside a Spatial Tool. Most believed that the Heavenly Secrets locked in the goop couldn't be permanently contained, and it would escape sooner or later.

So Zac could only endure and thank the heavens that there was no one around to see or smell what he was doing. He could imagine the comments if someone like Ogras or Emily had seen this cultivation method. He wouldn't hear the end of it.

But he didn't have many other options.

The rules of his duel with Kaldor were clear; it was a straightforward melee without the use of skills or his remnants. That left him with very few options to improve his odds in the short run. Dao and Technique were the big two, where his other options were quite limited. Boosting his Luck was one of the best solutions he had come up with.

He had room to gain around 20 points raw points in Luck since he had only filled up around half of his ceiling with Attribute Fruits for both F- and E-grade. With all his titles, that would boost his Effective Luck by nearly 100 points, which was a boost completely unrestrained by the Prison Brand. That might be what would clinch victory against a tough opponent like Kaldor.

Luckily, the [Celestial Clay] wasn't grade-restricted like the Attribute Fruits. Four rounds of cultivating like this, one bath a week, should be enough to hit the limit. He wished there was more he could do, but if there were only so many ways to improve. With the rules for the duel like they were, his bloodline was essentially useless, not that he had any way to improve it further at this point.

If the Contribution Store had more treasures that could open up more Draugr-nodes, that would be one thing, but he was out of luck there. He had considered treasures meant to improve constitutions, but nurturing constitutions with an awakened bloodline was essentially impossible.

So apart from his soul and the [Celestial Clay], Zac only had one final solution. He was planning on breaking through a couple of levels since every level gained did slightly improve the speed with which he could circulate the energy in his body. Other than that, he would simply have to continue to train, pushing his Integration Stage techniques even further.

Since the clay would retain its efficacy for half a day, Zac desperately struggled to enter a meditative state to escape the stench. Interestingly enough, his connection to his two Dao Fragments always felt much clearer after running the latest method of the [Nine Reincarnations Manual].

There was something about observing and running those mysterious patterns with his cores that strengthened his bond to those Daos, and today was no exception.

He hoped to break through the first of the two Dao Branches in a month, making this his final opportunity to revise and go over all his insights. The hours passed, and Zac arduously managed to

forget the vile mud he was ensconced inside. Eventually, he heard a crackling sound, which meant the clay had dried into a brittle solid mass that was fast falling apart.

Zac was filled with relief as pushed through the flakes of dried [Celestial Clay], crawling out from the barrel as though it was a barrel full of snakes. He immediately threw the barrel into a Spatial Ring before setting up another array. For the next few hours, Zac was trapped inside a storm of water, spiritual leaves, and coarse sponges that scrubbed him all over thousands of times. Meanwhile, the cave was slowly being aired out by the environmental array, the stench finally giving way now that it was without a source.

Even then, Zac didn't feel completely clean when he emerged, even if every particle of clay had been removed from his skin. Perhaps, he wouldn't feel clean for months after that experience. However, his mood did visibly improve when he noticed that his Luck had improved by a full 16 points from this one session, meaning one bath had provided a full 8 raw Luck.

That was essentially the equivalent of a Peak Luck Fruit at less than a percent of the cost.

With that ordeal out of the way, Zac spent the next week in seclusion, alternating between opening a node with a Node-breaking Pill and cultivating his soul. As Zac expected, the Soul Strengthening Pills he had prepared mostly lost their efficacy after three sessions, but Zac estimated he had saved almost two years of progress this time around.

Of course, in normal situations it might have taken a decade to gradually rid his body of all the impurities, making the method useless for Mentalists. Eventually, it was time for another cursed bath, and this process repeated twice more until the day of his breakthrough arrived. By now, his body was absolutely permeated by impurities – from his soul to nodes and cells.

But the progress was not bad – a greatly enhanced soul and two new levels, for both his races. It could have been more, but Zac didn't want any lingering damage to his body when dealing with the Tribulation Lightning. So he had pulled out all the stops, from using the disgusting [Chainbreaking Pills] to supreme quality node-breaking pills, leaving almost no damage behind.

Most importantly, he had gained a full 51 points in Luck. When adding all the points his Attribute Fruits had provided thus far, Zac realized that he had actually surpassed the limits of a normal cultivator. Even with his background and unique bloodline, he had been unable to gain any more than 25 points in Strength from Attribute Fruits, for example.

Some races could slightly surpass these limits for specific stats. But from what Zac had gathered, 25 per grade was a hard cap on Luck, no matter your origin. Most couldn't even get that. However, Zac had actually managed to gain 27 raw points in Luck per grade, pushing his luck all the way to 591 Points.

Zac had no idea where what allowed this attribute to surpass the normal limits. It might be related to the Fated-titles he got, where a stronger fate might allow for greater leeway. Or it might be something else entirely. In fact, Zac wasn't even sure if he had reached his limits since he had run out of [Celestial Clay].

But that was just as well, considering that it felt like he was covered in a film of oil from all the impurities in his body by now. If not for the upcoming Tribulation and his Hidden Node, he would essentially be crippled by this point. The feeling was extremely uncomfortable, and he was afraid that staying like that

for too long would directly hamper his mental state. Perhaps, it would even affect his ability to absorb the Dao.

So Zac finally left his month-long seclusion and headed toward the [Hallowed Pools], the cultivation ground that matched the [Blackink Mountain] in function. His breakthroughs had provided an impressive influx of Purchase Points, and he sprung for one of the Middle-grade chambers for half a day.

This cultivation cave was a golden pond hidden in a cave underground, where the walls were studded with Divine Crystals. Zac felt like he was looking at a primordial soup as he stared at the shimmering waters, the origin of life. He had developed a small phobia against submerging himself in cultivation liquid thanks to that wretched mud, but there was barely any hesitation as he swam to the depths of the pond.

The moment he entered the waters, Zac was almost forcibly dragged into his breakthrough prematurely. But he held onto his sanity as he reached the bottom of the pond where a small array was engraved. He knew he was pushing it renting a cave meant for Hegemons, but he was confident in maintaining his own vision of life.

For years now, he had delayed his breakthrough as he condensed and perfected his path and his stances. By now, he could see the route he wanted to take so clearly that it might as well be real. Over the past month, he had spent every waking moment pondering on his path, confirming that the truths he had seized during his endless battles over the past years were in tune with his path.

The last time he upgraded his Life-attuned Dao was after the battle with Ventus, the Radiant Temple numerologist. Since then, he had encountered and experienced so much. In fact, he had witnessed so many expressions of life since he started cultivating, from the various facets of the human experience to the more conceptual meanings of life.

For some, like Traprandar, life manifested as a powerful light, a beacon that could both nurture and destroy. It was a force of nature like lightning or fire. It was like the sun, sharing its blessing with the world but burning anything that came too close.

For others, Life represented Divinity – the bridge between mortality and the Heavens. It was the gift of the Cosmos, and what connected almost all beings of the Multiverse. Thus, it represented the cohesiveness of the shared consciousness, where all was one and the one was all – one of the tenets of the Buddhist Sangha.

In Zac's case, he saw life as change; boundless opportunity and possibility, resisting any and all restraints imposed upon it. Since his first vision of the Lifebringer, the celestial tree that outgrew its homeworld, he had delved deeper and deeper into the truths of the transformative nature of life. At first, change was represented through the changing cycles of nature when he worked on his Seed of Trees.

From there, it integrated the ability to break convention by adding the concepts of braving the harsh winds and finding life through death. At the same time, the Seed of Sanctuary added stability. It made his Dao impervious to the wills of external pressures, where life derived from within could break the chains of fate and bring about endless possibilities.

Life represented progress, as materialized through his Evolutionary Stance. Only through a constant cycle of reinvention could perfection be grasped. However, his path was not one of passive discovery, of

accepting whatever change came his way. Seizing and comprehending life was to control life. To control fate. Through his comprehension of life, he would become the arbiter of his future.

That was his Path of Supremacy.

Suddenly, Zac's pores opened wide, greedily absorbing the surrounding waters with such gusto that the whole cave shook. At the same time, the Bodhi tree in his mind detached from its usual spot on one of the Divine Cores. It took position above his central core, like the bodhi was becoming the heavens of his inner world.

Hundreds of small streams of purified insights entered his Soul Aperture and were swallowed by the Bodhi, all while Zac staunchly held onto his path. The Dao Avatar kept growing in response, molding itself into Zac's vision of the Dao of Life. Eventually, his Dao Field exploded out from Zac's body as a massive apparition appeared above his head, stretching all the way to the pond's surface over twenty meters above.

At first, the apparition mirrored the Dao Avatar's appearance, but it gradually started to transform. Suddenly, it had become the Lifebringer, its branches stretching toward eternity, a realm unto its own. The next moment, it was the apocalyptic tree that was created from the volcanic eruption in the Twilight Ocean. The consecrated Bodhi tree that once birthed the [Prajñā Cherry], the small sapling he had found in the Dead Zone.

Both avatar and apparition kept changing, reflecting both his sources of inspiration and the ever-changing nature of his comprehension.

Suddenly, a rumble spread through the world, reaching the very core of Zac's being. His eyes shot open, and he was surprised to find himself standing in outer space. His surprise didn't come from the fact that he found himself overlooking a beautiful galaxy full of vibrant colors, but rather that he had been moved to Orom's Tribulation Dimension without so much as a spatial ripple.

Unfortunately, this space was even more tightly sealed than the Orom World itself, and escape was all but impossible. Of course, the spatial restrictions didn't apply to the Heavens, and Zac saw how an ominous black cloud had started to spread through the emptiness of space shrouding the cosmos above his head. Zac frowned as he saw the roiling darkness kept expanding to the point it stretched for dozens of kilometers in every direction.

It was large. Very large. During his last tribulation, he had been pretty out of it, but he was certain this Tribulation Cloud was larger than last time around. Its diameter was at least thirty percent wider, which Zac could only assume would translate into a harsher punishment. His fears were all-but-confirmed as he sensed the intangible presence hidden within, the boundless wrath of the Heavens.

It was out for blood.