

The Fall 823

Chapter 823: Kalpataru

Zac blankly looked at his new Dao Branch for a few moments before he finally remembered where he'd heard the term Kalpataru before. Seeing something he barely recognized was a bit of a surprise. He had expected something simple along the lines of 'Branch of the Consecrated Bodhi', 'Divine Tree', or even 'Branch of the Yggdrasil' for his new Dao Branch.

Just like its predecessor, the name came from Buddhist scripture. With so many exalted monks living in the life-attuned area, Zac had broadened his knowledge of the Buddhist Sangha quite a bit over the past years. One of the monks had mentioned the Kalpataru, a Divine Tree with the power of longevity, something closely linked to life.

If consecrated properly, it could even grant one's wishes from what Zac heard, which was the domain of Creation. The tree was apparently a real thing and not a myth, but it was more akin to a Natural Treasure than a Spiritual Plant. It couldn't be grown and it produced no seeds. It would appear out of nowhere, born from the Cosmos itself. It even had a will of its own, and if it wanted to leave, not even an Autarch could keep it.

It would just disappear, avoiding all restrictions as it moved to another part of the Multiverse.

Seeing how the name still followed a Buddhist heritage didn't bother Zac. It was ultimately just a name, derived from Zac's understanding of the universe. It didn't mean the monks had managed to subvert his path or infuse the teachings of Buddha into his Dao. He was simply cultivating life through the imagery of a tree and the concept of change, making the name fitting enough.

What mattered was the content of his Dao, and he had never felt so in tune with his life-attuned Dao as he did right now. He finally felt the Dao had become his own. Until now, it had been propped up by Dao Fruits and necessity, but it had been remolded to perfectly fit his path, something that could be discerned through the change in attribute allocation.

Vitality was still the main attribute, followed by Endurance. However, seeing that the Dao Branch had added 300 Dexterity was a welcome surprise. With his two classes and conflict-based Dao Branch, his Strength was running far ahead of his other attributes. It still wasn't at the level where it caused him any trouble, but he ultimately wanted to aim for a more rounded build.

While he had gained a bunch of Dexterity, Zac had actually lost some Wisdom, while his Intelligence barely increased. It was an obvious shift of focus, where the points that should have gone into Wisdom had been allocated into Dexterity.

It was a welcome change, as far as Zac was concerned.

He had needed the points in Wisdom back when his soul and its defenses were lacking. But by now, his soul was becoming extremely powerful, to the point that it was even sturdier than his body. He didn't need the extra mental strength and protection provided by Wisdom, and he was better off gaining some speed instead.

Zac eventually closed the status screen and touched his token next, prompting a [9,715] to appear. Almost four thousand of the tally were left-over points from his earlier cultivation session, meaning he

gained around 6,000 for forming the Dao Branch. The amount of points gained from the breakthrough wasn't the maximum possible, but it was clearly better than the average.

Some didn't even gain 2,000 Contribution Points when forming a Dao Branch. This result was within Zac's expectations as he'd already learned that Boundless Daos provided more Contribution Points in general. Daos within Heaven's Path were more harmonized, while those who entered the boundless were more likely to be individualistic in nature.

Therefore, boundless breakthroughs had greater odds to include new insights for the Orom, which was why an unusually large part of the population of the Orom World walked the Boundless Path.

Zac stayed at the edge of the cultivation chamber until the time was up, using the immense energies to replenish his [Spiritual Void] and further stabilize his newly-formed Dao Branch. In fact, he saw some benefit to his Divine Cores as well, where they absorbed some of the energy and concepts in the golden waters.

It proved that his previous notion was correct; he needed to find attuned cultivation grounds to improve his cores. Unfortunately, this golden water didn't seem too useful for his soul, but there were all kinds of life-or-death-attuned materials out there. He just needed to find the right ones to save years of arduous cultivation.

While making full use of the cave, Zac also went over the state of his body. He had to admit, things were better than expected. After being subjected to that horrifying torture, especially from the third blast, he had expected that his body would almost be in a crippled state. But he was surprised to find that the damage was actually quite superficial.

It didn't make sense.

He had felt how his body was essentially being erased by the Tribulation Lightning, yet he was mostly fine. Certainly, he was absolutely covered in small scars, from his skin to his organs and his soul, but these wounds didn't contain any lingering energy or Dao. It was nothing compared to the stubborn damage left behind when he formed the Chaos Patterns.

Come to think of it, he was pretty much fine when waking up after his previous breakthrough as well. This was completely different from the norm. Even the staunchest elite spoke with hushed tones when discussing the Tribulation Lightning, and most were left bedridden for decades after withstanding them.

In his case, he felt he'd be back in full form in a day or two, even quicker if he made use of one of the healing arrays. He didn't delude himself into thinking he was uniquely talented or anything. This was thanks to something else.

"Void," Zac muttered as he thought back to the bolts of lightning.

It had felt like the purple lightning was the absence of Dao taken form, an anti-Dao of sorts. How was this related to his Void Emperor-bloodline? Was the Void it spoke of the Heavens themselves? Was that why his bloodline had taken such a leap forward last time his [Void Heart] swallowed Tribulation Lightning?

But then, how did Void Beasts fit into the picture? Why was their energy so useful for his Bloodline? And why didn't that ancient aura that his Void Energy emitted feel like the Tribulation Lightning at all if they shared an origin? Zac shook his head, knowing that these answers were too far out of his reach.

But it did make him even more eager to find out more about that ancient era. About Karz and the Limitless Empire. He really needed to get his hands on some sort of manual to go with his bloodline. Right now, he was fumbling along, using the remnants and random encounters to push his bloodline forward.

How few of his impurities he managed to burn away proved how little control Zac had over his bloodline. Zac bet that if he had a proper manual instead of the absurdly simplistic [Bloodline Resonance], he would have been able to really take advantage of the tribulations. More importantly, there was probably a limit to how far he could improve himself using such an unreliable strategy as random encounters.

Just like how the [Nine Reincarnations Manual] had started adding demands on comprehension at the third layer, he needed to better understand his bloodline if he wanted to keep evolving it. Perhaps, he would be able to search for some answers in the Million Gates Territory.

From what he had heard, Mystic Realms and ancient detritus were sometimes spat out from those spatial rifts, containing remnants left behind by the Limitless Empire. Most of it was useless scraps, but some were not. The treasure that made the Void Priestess fight with her life on the line had appeared there, for example.

Of course, Zac needed to get out of this place before he could start planning his next step.

Zac left the cultivation chamber the moment his token buzzed, afraid that he'd get charged for another 12 hours if he loitered. From there, he returned to his cultivation cave, where he once more entered seclusion. This time, he didn't spend any time on gaining levels or bathing in toxic mud.

Instead, he swapped between cultivating his soul and slowly integrating the Branch of the Kalpataru into his Evolutionary Stance. There were still eight months to the duel, and he wanted to spend as much time of that as possible in his undead form. To avoid getting bottlenecked later, he had to take the first steps with integrating his life-attuned branch before that.

One week passed in this manner until he felt a thump in his chest. Zac was in the middle of a cultivation session for his soul, but he immediately cut it short. There was still an uncomfortable amount of impurities saturating his body, and the next few minutes were critical in allaying the situation.

The thud came from his [VoidHeart], meaning it had finally finished processing the Tribulation Lightning. A moment later, it started to spit out one burst after another, each one filled with the promise of both pain and possibility. Last time, Zac hadn't known what to expect, so he mostly let the Tribulation Lightning do its thing.

Now, he wanted to control the events, and he was elated to find that it worked to some extent.

Thanks to [Void Heart]'s purification, the previously uncontrollable lightning was far more malleable, and Zac pushed it through his body on a crusade of purification. The lightning still hurt like hell, but the agony wasn't even at the level of the first tribulation bolt. It allowed him to maintain his concentration

as he used massive amounts of Mental Energy to drag the lightning toward the thousands of spots of accumulated toxins.

With every heartbeat, hundreds of oily spots and stubborn imperfections were singed clear, leaving behind pure cells without any blemishes. This time around, his cells didn't greedily swallow any lightning, and his [Force of the Void] remained locked at 50% capacity. It really looked like he had reached his limits for this Bloodline Talent, at least until the bloodline evolved.

That was fine with Zac since it left him with more lightning to temper himself with. His mind was already drowned in a thunderous storm, and purple blasts hit his cores over and over. The numerous attuned cores had just made a full recovery two days ago, but they were already beset by another onslaught. Thankfully, Zac could tell that the bolts wouldn't leave any lasting damage.

The previously mottled cores were fast regaining their luster as one bolt after another exploded against their surfaces. Not only that, but the energy they emitted started becoming increasingly condensed as the Tribulation Lightning left some of its essence behind, saving Zac even more time to reach the peak of the third reincarnation.

Unfortunately, nothing good lasts forever, and the bolts started to escape through his pores, dispersing into the environment. At the same time, both [Purity of the Void] and [Spiritual Void] absorbed the occasional arc of lightning, though they weren't nearly as voracious as his cells had been the last time around.

The final arc of lightning escaped his body soon enough, leaving Zac covered in a new set of scars. Even if his scorched wounds looked a bit nasty, Zac felt great. It was almost felt like he had been reborn, or at least been returned to his prime condition. That oily feeling, like he hadn't bathed for weeks, was finally gone.

The tribulation itself had removed around five percent of his impurities at best, but this second baptism had removed at least sixty percent of the remaining impurities. That meant a third was still left behind, but there was still the second tribulation to deal with that. Seeing the result, Zac decided to not try to muck up his body any further.

He didn't want any gunk remaining after his second tribulation. Not only would it hamper his energy circulation during his duel, but it was also high time he started to prepare for his next breakthrough – Hegemony. He didn't want to stop at the peak of E-grade for over a century before making his attempt at forming a Cultivator's Core.

Soon enough, he would have spent 10 years in the E-grade. While it wasn't long, Zac was struggling to catch up with Leandra. Taking it slow and steady wouldn't cut it. His initial plan had actually been to reach D-grade within 10 years, matching the one year it took to reach E-grade. Now, he knew that was insufficient to reach the accumulations he wanted.

His new deadline was 20 years at the most, but the sooner the better. If he could push his Dao Branches to Middle proficiency within a few years, while also finding some inroads into properly forming a core that would work in his body, he would immediately crush his Perennial Vastness-token.

Zac knew that a few years probably was too short a time to reach the limits of the E-grade; Late-stage Branches and a thrice-reincarnated soul. But it ultimately didn't matter. Those things weren't something

that couldn't be accomplished after his breakthrough. They would simply make the process of forming his Cultivator's Core easier, but he hoped he wouldn't have to go that far to succeed with its formation.

Soon enough, another month had passed, and Zac had long adapted his Evolutionary Stance to make proper use of his new Dao Branch. The process was even smoother than he could have hoped for. It was like the two were meant for each other, effortlessly fusing into one. And they were.

Zac had somewhat understood the reasoning behind Pavina's suggestion to wait with his breakthrough, but only now did he witness just how spot-on her advice was. His technique had paved the path for fusing his Dao and Path into one, removing the incongruities and forging everything into one coherent system. Or almost coherent.

There was still one aspect that remained to be integrated for his triumvirate path to be perfected – the final Dao Branch.

By now, the foundations on his Draugr side were as stable as an impenetrable fortress, his accumulations even surpassing those that allowed him to form the Branch of the Kalpataru. So it was with a steady heart Zac made his way toward the [Blackink Mountain], only making a short detour to pick up [Empyrean Aegis] at the local Nexus Node.

The quest for this defensive was to gain two Dao Branches, and he wanted to cash in on the reward before forming his Deathly Dao Branch since he didn't know it could affect the nature of the skill. Having imprinted the new skill fractal, which was placed on back of his head of all places, swapped back to his Draugr form and set off.

A few days later, he reached the cultivation grounds where he rented a middle-grade cave to match his previous breakthrough. Soon enough, Zac sat ensconced in the depths of death, pondering his Dao and the road that had led him here.

Just like with life, death had many faces and expressions, something Zac had become all-too-familiar with since the integration. In a sense, it was central to every cultivator's struggle as they fought to cheat death and gain eternal life. Death became the ultimate adversary, always waiting to end their path. Death also became a close friend, following them throughout their journey. Only by walking at the edge of death would a warrior reach the peak.

For some, especially in the Undead Empire, death was also synonymous with war. It was destruction, the act of vanquishing your foe. It was a core component in the struggle so central to both the Heavens and the System. If Zac had been born Draugr rather than accidentally gaining this second identity, he would most likely have taken this path as well; death through conquest.

For others, Death represented control and hierarchy. Both liches and necromancers walked this path, where their death became their tool to gain minions. Then there were the hexmasters, the shamans, the poison masters, and the various different cultivators who infused Death into their path. For them, death was power – a primal force few could withstand.

For Zac, Death was stillness; the end of change and dominion over fate. It was a bridge toward eternity. His finding the Dao of Death had been a circuitous journey, far more accidental than that of Life. However, as the years passed, he had finally started to assimilate it into his own. His Draugr side was no longer a persona, a skill to be used or power to be exploited.

The Draugr was him as much as his human side by now, and his desire to delve deeper into this aspect of the cosmic truths was just as real as his connection to life. It all started with the Seed of Hardness, once meant to become the Fragment of the Shield. Instead, it came to represent the inviolability and inexorability of death.

Next, came the Seed of Rot, born out of necessity and a sense of imbalance. It now represented the transition from life to death, from movement to stillness. After all, just like his Branch of the Kalpataru, his Dao was not a Dao of passive acceptance, even if it was centered around stillness. This was also Pavina's first impartment to him, her display in the arena that showed how death could be proactive.

The vision of the cursed lotus had fused Hardness and Rot into something more aligned with his path. Death was the ultimate cage that all beings railed against, like someone entombed against their will. Sealed in its heart was everlasting nothingness.

To cultivate was to struggle against fate, but death was the ultimate judge of that struggle. By controlling death, he was not just the arbiter of his enemies' fate, but also his own. As their chapters ended, his own road would grow wider, reaching toward that lofty peak. That was his Path of Supremacy.

The cave rumbled as the truths within began to resonate with what was engraved in Zac's heart, and he opened his abyssal eyes to welcome death into his soul. He felt the withered tree rise from its Miasmic Core, and he could hear a spectral rattle from the hanging coffin as the Dao Avatar moved toward a central position in his aperture.

It had begun.