

The Fall 874

Chapter 874: Flamebearer

There was no warning and no pain as his fingers turned to motes of dust. In an instant, his whole hand was gone, reduced to an identical ashy rain that joined Kuru's. The phenomenon was different from anything Zac had encountered before, including his Annihilation Spheres. It didn't destroy anything – it was rather as though the pulse erased all energy and spirituality from any matter it touched.

Out of panic, Zac did everything he could think of to stem his imminent collapse. He knew that talismans or skills would be useless against something like this, so he tried to urge his Hidden Nodes to do something, anything. Of course, he activated [Void Zone] as well, in a desperate hope his own nullification zone would cancel out the one that had been released from the piece of rubble.

And it worked.

Just like that, the collapse of his very being stopped, but Zac had no way to tell if it was a permanent stay of execution. He had never sensed any energy causing the disintegration, and neither had his Hidden Nodes managed to cleanse or absorb anything. With his heart beating like a drum, Zac began to scramble away, but he suddenly froze with indecision.

What if [Void Zone] covering the piece of ancient rubble was what kept him alive? If he ran away, would the stone regain its power and blast him again? Or had the stone accepted him after activating his bloodline talent? Was his survival proof that the stone was really meant for him, connected to his origin? Or was he just lucky? Should he run, or should he grab it?

Barely having avoided irrevocable disaster, Zac's mind was a mess and he was frozen with indecision. But he didn't even get a second to weigh his options before the piece of rubble made his choice for him. A second, more powerful pulse rippled out from the rock, proving that his [Void Zone] was absolutely incapable of restraining it.

Next, it floated up into the air, and Zac desperately flashed away to avoid it as it shot toward him. But the stone seemed to have a mind of its own, and it slammed into Zac's chest with a speed he absolutely couldn't avoid. A deep thud echoed through the spherical cave, followed by a grating sound as the piece of stone crumbled, turning into a fine powder indistinguishable from that on the ground.

Zac mutely looked down at his chest with mute incomprehension. Was that it?

No. His soul shuddered before both his outer and inner cores ground to a halt. He tried to circulate his energy, but it might as well have been turned into ice. Time seemed to have stopped altogether, and he found himself unable to as much as blink, forced to stare at the frozen swirls of dust that had been kicked up by his failed escape.

His mind still worked though, and he quickly pinpointed the source of it all right in his Soul Aperture. Four shining lines had appeared out of nowhere, exuding the very same aura as those he had been subject to in his vision. Zac recognized somewhat recognized the lines as well – they were the very same ones that had been inscribed on the piece of rubble.

At first, they seemed content in doing nothing, but they eventually released a third pulse that spread throughout every corner of his body. It was like his bloodline had been startled awake, the small vortices

in his body opening wide as his three Void Emperor nodes entered overdrive. The scene didn't elicit any fear – rather the opposite.

Zac looked on with expectation as the four lines started to release a pure white light containing that ancient aura, purer and more palpable than ever before. It was familiar, yet it was not. It almost felt nostalgic for some reason. The runes didn't need to explain it, he could understand it by instinct.

Kuru didn't have the qualifications to come in contact with this item, and thus he was reduced to nothingness, not even leaving a shred nor his items behind. But [Void Zone] had proved something to the piece of rubble, and the final pulse that scanned him had confirmed it. No matter if it was because of his connection to Emperor Limitless, or if it simply was because he'd passed some other criteria, he had been accepted by the runes.

And now, it was time to reap the rewards.

A quest screen appeared in front of his eyes, but Zac didn't get the chance to read what it said. His whole perception was flooded by that marvelous light that seemed to contain a million ideas. Primeval, boundless, and even terrifying concepts swept him away, absolutely overwhelming him. Every moment, it felt like more and more was crammed into his brain, squeezing out everything else.

His mind could only hold so much before it reached his limits. There was no ominous cracking of his soul, no tearing of his mind. But what he felt was not much better. The vast truths of the universe gradually turned into dust just like his hand, forever erasing itself from his memories. Left was just a sense of loss and inadequacy.

Zac could barely hold onto his sense of self, but he knew that if he didn't do something, and soon, it would be just like when he got his hands on that mote of Primal Dao back in the Twilight Chasm. He needed to grasp what he could before it all slipped through his fingers. His Hidden Nodes were the only thing that was doing something right now, each one of the three nodes gleefully absorbing the light.

But that wasn't enough – more than 90% of the light was still wasted. His first instinct was to turn to the Dao just like last time, taking the chance to push his three Dao Branches further. However, as Zac tried to use the chaotic hurricane of comprehension to further his path and his Daos, there was no response.

Zac soon realized that while the situation was similar to his opportunity in the chasm, the content of that light was vastly different. Just like the cave itself and the dust of the ground, it was void of any energy or the Dao. But without Dao, what else was there? It was the glue that held everything together.

It felt like a fortune had already slipped through his fingers even if just an instant had passed, but Zac quickly gathered his wits. Of course there were other things to focus on, and he quickly recalled the third chapter of the [Book of Duality]. In an instant, it felt like he'd thrown out a net into that vast sea of comprehension, catching at least some scraps for himself before they were reduced to nothingness.

Out of nowhere, the fundamental workings of duality became so clear. Going over the words in the booklet, Zac remembered every detail, every line, and he felt the hidden implications unraveling for him at a pace that was beyond shocking. Even some imperfections left by the imperfect transcription were amended, leaving him with an understanding even closer to Kalo's original intent.

Or perhaps it was more apt to say it drew closer to the perfect mechanics of the universe.

Cycles, harmonies, chasms, pendulums, waves, interlocking patterns, and so many other methods of utilizing and building upon duality revealed themselves to his mind's eye. A wealth of knowledge was laid bare, filling gaps and lighting a path to the future. But gradually, Zac found that path hazy. It wasn't that he'd run out of time – the light was gradually weakening, but it still exuded far more than he could take on.

He couldn't remember the later chapters of the book.

Zac had repeatedly gone over the earlier sections of the [Book of Duality] over the past weeks, and the first half of the book was pretty much imprinted on his brain. It was his method to gradually decipher the book, but he hadn't gone over the later chapters in such detail. As such, he couldn't continue this path – there was nothing for that magical light in his mind to decipher for him.

He tried to take out the booklet from his Spatial Ring, but it was futile – either he was frozen in place or time was. In either case, he couldn't so much as blink, let alone riffle through a booklet. He needed to change course to make the most of this opportunity. His Void Emperor-nodes were still gobbling up what they could, but Zac could feel that even they were almost filled to the brim.

There were skills, techniques, and professions to consider, but there was something even better. Something that was firmly and fully locked in his brain.

The [Boundless Vajra Sublimation].

For once, Zac didn't fear the path-breaking power in the sea of knowledge that Three Virtues had left behind in his soul. Even the Buddhist Sangha was followers of the Dao. Meanwhile, the shining light seemed capable of completely stripping everything of its heavenly truth, opening the hood to showcase what hid within.

He delved deeper and deeper into the Body Tempering Manual, trying to understand the overarching themes and connections of the method. How were Heart and Body connected? How could the boundlessness of Buddha's heart be removed, or at least replaced by something that wouldn't alter his path?

Zac's mind shuddered and he felt a splitting headache as a million ideas were born and discarded. But it was not for nothing – something was starting to form. Something that was uniquely his. But it wasn't enough. Eventually, his state of clarity began to fade, and Zac felt as though he was being plunged into an abyss.

The truths he needed were getting further and further away, and as the light winked out, they were gone. Left behind in his mind were only the four white lines. But even they released a ripple and disappeared a moment later. Zac took a shuddering breath as he opened his eyes, his heart filled with a confusing mix of elation and deficiency as he saw the world speed up again.

The previously frozen clouds of dust swirled around for a moment before a churning rumble shook the cave as the waters of Hako Lake, once more glowing a bright orange, came crashing to fill the crevasse. There was no way to tell whether the runes had actually slowed time down for him, or if it had just felt that way with the speed his mind worked, but no actual time had passed since those lines appeared in his mind.

Zac let the waters crash over him and submerge the cave as a smile spread across his face. He'd been a bit skeptical upon seeing that piece of rubble, but he had ended up gaining in a big way. That shimmering light in his mind wasn't enough to completely reforge the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation], but it had been enough to open a door he didn't know existed.

The answer was within the void.

The original method aimed to relinquish all distractions, to become an unfeeling Vajra with only their eyes on their path. It could be considered a surrender of the self, where one's heart became empty and boundless to accept the Heavens. That didn't work for Zac, but the epiphany had helped him realize that removing those parts would essentially remove the very foundations of the manual.

The Heart Cultivation wasn't just there as a trap or to lure more practitioners into the arms of the Sangha. It brought purpose to the movements, to the energy circulation, to the patterns, as it incorporated your Dao and your intent into the method. In a sense, it harmonized the method with your path, allowing you to create a life constitution uniquely suited for you. This was the real reason it was considered a top-tier method.

Without the heart component, the method would become utterly flawed. He would perhaps be able to force the first layer or two with treasures considering his wealth, but that would do more harm than good. If he did that, then his constitution would take on the nature of the treasures rather than of one that suited him. Such an incongruity would soon cause problems with every aspect of your cultivation.

But it wasn't hopeless. The details were already hazy since the shining light left him, but he had seen how the Void could replace the Boundlessness. Instead of relinquishing one's self, you'd ensconce it in the void. That way, not even the Heavens themselves would be able to influence your heart or your path.

For a normal cultivator, this path was utterly impossible – it was a path that required an absolute absence of the Dao. How else would you be able to comprehend and welcome the true void into your heart? Affinities were a bridge between yourself and the Heavens, and not even crippling your cultivation could remove that. As long as that bridge existed, you could not truly practice the kind of method Zac envisioned.

In that sense, he was unique, a person completely lacking affinities, with a Void-related Bloodline to boot. As long as he could create that method, he'd become a black hole – he'd take anything he needed to progress, without letting outside elements affect his path or his heart. This would not just solve the immediate goal of getting a life-attuned constitution for his human side – but it would prove something he desperately wanted.

A Heart Cultivation method that would protect you from undue outside influence, no matter if it was the System, the Buddhist Sangha, or the Remnants. He had been led around by the nose enough times by now that the thought of cultivating independence was almost as attractive as the thought of aligning his human constitution with his path.

For a moment, he had seen it all mesh together – Life and Death held together by the Void in his bloodline, just like his triumvirate path were held together by the Dao of Conflict.

Figuring out the path he needed to take with the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation] was the biggest gain, but it wasn't all of it. Zac had fully comprehended both the third and fourth chapters of the [Book of Duality], something that would have taken him months of hard work. Not only that, the knowledge had somehow been expanded beyond what was hidden within his copy.

The former was somewhat understandable – he'd eaten epiphany-inducing treasures before. However, the second aspect was more shocking, since Zac knew those additional insights weren't the fruit of his own understanding. They were far beyond what he could comprehend on his own, epiphany or not. The concepts came from within that rune.

Was he so lucky that it just happened to contain exactly the insights he was looking for? Zac didn't think so. It was more like that rune represented the fundamental laws of the universe, and the underpinnings of duality were just one small piece of that. It made Zac think of that feeling he'd gotten when he was shown the empty courtyard of Ultom. That coherent and supreme understanding that unified everything which transcended the Dao itself.

Of course, the burst of inspiration he'd gotten just now was just a shadow of the real thing. But they had to be connected.

Still, there were some things he couldn't make sense of quite yet. First of all, the incomplete rune he'd seen in his soul for a moment didn't match the one on the steps in the inner courtyard. It was rather part of a repeating pattern he saw on the massive castle for a moment before his vision changed.

It was related, but different. For some reason, it also filled him with a sense of familiarity. Could it be a connection through bloodline, between himself and the Limitless Empire?

Perhaps even more importantly, he'd gained such a huge windfall from finding a random piece of rubble that had been teleported to this random Mystic Realm. What would happen if he got his hands on a full rune rather than a corner? Or something that held even more of that aura?

No matter if it was figuring out a blueprint for his Cultivator's Core or creating his envisioned [Void Vajra Sublimation], it was a huge undertaking. And frankly, it required comprehension and talent that he might not possess. This could be his ticket to solving those two issues in one fell swoop, not just saving time, but elevating his prospects altogether.

Zac suddenly remembered he'd gotten a quest just before the wave of insights commanded all his attention, and he quickly opened it to see if it provided any clues. For a moment he was elated. For another, he was confused. Eventually, he settled with being unsettled. Just what had he become embroiled in this time?

[Seal of the Left Imperial Palace (Unique, Inheritance): Form a seal of the Left Imperial Palace. Reward: Become a Flamebearer of Ultom. (1/4)]