

## The Fall 1058

### [Chapter 1058 - An Axe against the Heavens](#)

Over the past three months, Zac had spent a fortune on talismans, pills, and treasures to pave the path through his Core Formation Process. The total cost was undoubtedly counted in tens of C-grade Nexus Coins if you included the outside value of all the unique treasures he'd picked up inside the Perennial Vastness.

Yet now, Zac didn't take out a single item as he looked up at the sky. It wasn't that he'd run out of money but that some things had to be accomplished on your own. Heavenly Tribulation was the Law of Balance manifest. He'd taken something from the Heavens, breaking his mortal shackles to steal power and longevity far beyond what any human should hold. As such, he needed to pay the price.

Some methods and treasures could help you out, but they generally came with a cost Zac was unwilling to pay. The most glaring one was that withstanding the tribulation was necessary to temper and transform the Cosmic Core one final time. It was punishment but also a path forward. If you weakened the lightning out of fear of getting hurt, you'd lower the potential of your Cosmic Core.

Some sinister methods subverted balance through things like sacrifice, where you used other cultivators as cauldrons to refine the Tribulation Lightning before letting it enter your body. That way, you'd get the benefits while someone else paid the price. Zac guessed Saeward's array was exactly this kind of method. He'd trapped the souls of his soldiers in a cycle of suffering to turn them into something that could help him pass his tribulation.

In a spat of cosmic justice, Saeward failed and was turned into an experiment by Sendor. However, even if he'd succeeded, it wouldn't have been without issues. Such a method was bound to stain your karma, affecting your providence and Luck. It wasn't just a form of punishment meted out by the System; it was Heavenly Law.

Zac would never use that kind of method, not just because he found it revolting and an insult to his Dao. His huge Luck was one of his greatest advantages, allowing him to get this far. Without his Luck, how would he have encountered all the opportunities that made up the cornerstones of his Cultivation System? Without his Luck, he would have died and been forgotten long ago.

Sacrificing all that to enter Hegemony safely? Forget about it.

No, this was a test that needed to be overcome, though that didn't mean he should stand there and eat the lightning bolts. Zac was intimately connected to the domain around him. It was generated by his Dao and energy from his core, so he roused the domain to meet the gathering bolt. The sky had turned into a huge vortex, and the purple lightning in its center was so condensed it had almost turned red.

Becoming a Hegemon didn't mean he'd suddenly gained a connection to the Daos like a Cultivator. However, Zac could still use the same types of tricks as he did when forming Dao Braids. The Dao Apparitions turned into streaks of light, forming nine rivers that wound into a simple but tremendously powerful spiral. In reality, it looked more like a hurricane than a braid, spinning in the opposite direction of the clouds.

A rumbling roar shook all creation as the first bolt descended. It painted the mountain range red as it pierced the storm's eye toward Zac. However, every step was a hard-fought battle where Zac fought back with everything he got. The bolt grew thinner and weaker the closer it got until it was fully consumed. The first bolt hadn't even managed to touch Zac's robes, a testament to his ungodly foundations.

The bolt's descent had been cut short but still brought benefits. The domain was part of him, and he felt his Dao had been greatly consolidated by pitting itself against the Tribulation Lightning. It didn't provide any breakthroughs, but Zac felt like a hidden blockage had been shaken loose in his mind. His path ahead suddenly felt wider, and his Daos full of potential.

The first tribulation had been handled quickly, but it hadn't come without a cost. The seemingly boundless domain had been almost fully drained in one go, leaving him without outer protection for the second bolt. Zac tried to rouse his will to reform some of it, but his speed was nothing when faced with an angry sky. The lightning was ramping up at shocking speed, reaching and passing energy levels Zac had only expected for the third bolt.

It felt like the whole universe teetered at the brink of collapse as small red strings appeared all around him. They felt like the fault lines of reality, forced to the dimensional forefront from the accumulating energies above. The threat of annihilation surrounded him, and Zac felt extremely exposed without the domain to keep him safe.

Was it because of his Technocrat heritage, or was it for cultivating not one but two boundless Daos? Or was it because of his bloodline and its connection to the Void? In either case, the situation far exceeded Zac's wildest expectations. However, he wasn't given any time to adapt or prepare. The sky was so energetic that the second bolt was spat out on the heels of the first.

Zac's mind screamed of danger as the remnant energies of the Dao Braid were ripped to shreds without putting up much of a fight. Zac's acted on instinct as he activated [Void Zone] just before the pillar of red hit him. A zone separated from the Heavens was erected, and the blinding light dimmed as it entered.

But not even the Void Emperor's abilities could deal with the second bolt of Tribulation Lightning. It forced its way through the Void, and the meter-wide pillar condensed to the width of a finger that hit Zac square on his forehead.

The pain was instantaneous and ubiquitous. His Soul Aperture was crackling, his pathways had been turned into conductive copper wiring, and the vortices in his cells and nodes were fluctuating precariously from being overwhelmed by the sudden influx of energy. The only thing unscathed was the Duplicity Core.

The lightning ignored it for some reason, though that didn't apply to the Cosmic Core within. If anything, it was the tribulation lightning's main target, and it flooded the core through the still-open hatch. The core that had just stabilized after months of eruptions ran amok as the punishing lightning squeezed into every nook and cranny.

The whole thing shuddered as it was forced into a brutal struggle for survival of fighting fire with fire, and a pain Zac had never felt before made him keel over and lose control of his flight. He crashed into

the flat peak of Mount Illumination, but the collision was nothing compared to the punishment his body endured from within.

Everything was set aflame, and everything was breaking apart. His Cosmic Core was not the only thing barely holding on. Every part of his body was about to be destroyed, and the Tribulation Lightning felt like a bottomless ocean. Zac tried to withstand the onslaught using the Void and his Daos, but it wasn't enough.

Zac knew he was inviting disaster but saw no option but to release his [Void Heart]. It was the only part of his body that seemed excited by the sudden presence of such unique energy, and it pounced on the Tribulation Lightning the second it was released. A deep thud cut the lightning's momentum in half, and a second ground it to a halt.

A third dragged a large chunk of red lightning over, and Zac witnessed a familiar scene. It was like the lightning had met its nemesis and suddenly wanted to escape rather than advance. However, this time, there was a startling difference. Some Tribulation Lightning entered the Hidden Node, but Zac was shocked to see mysterious patterns light up the Duplicity Core as it swallowed even more.

Between the two, not a spark managed to escape Zac's body before the Tribulation Lightning was consumed. Only the Cosmic Core's lightning was left alone, and it soon exhausted the invading force after it became rootless. Zac could feel something had shifted within the core from the experience, but he had no chance to investigate what because a lot of things suddenly happened at once.

For one, stabbing pain in his chest confirmed his fear and the reason he had wanted to hold off on using his [Void Heart]. The Hidden Node had bested the second bolt, but it was completely stuffed. The tribulation held far more destructive force than the previous ones, and a few sparks leaked out of the vortex before it barely stabilized. There was no way it could help him with the final and most dangerous attack.

The Duplicity Core didn't seem to have the same trouble, but it acted out in a different way. It released foreign ripples that bounced around inside its hollow center, and the runes across its surface writhed like they had come alive. Zac was worried for a second that the Specialty Core was going out of control after finding Zac's blueprint hadn't followed Kayar-Elu's original plan for their experiment.

However, Zac soon realized what was happening and breathed out in relief. The Technocrat housing scanned the newly formed core and was now rearranging itself to fit the creation, using the tribulation as fuel for the process. Zac was happy to see it work as he'd hoped, but why now? Couldn't it have waited a bit longer?

The Heavens hadn't expected its second attack to be dealt with so swiftly, but it was already gearing up for its final punishment. Furthermore, there was no doubt the Heavens had taken offense to having its punishment become fodder. Unfathomable pressure built above Zac's head, looking like a red sun of utter destruction that tried to break through the clouds. It formed a convex bulge of pure lightning, pushing down toward Mount Illumination.

The Duplicity Core had bought some time, but that didn't solve his issue. Zac's trump card against the final bolt was gone, leaving him utterly exposed. Surviving the force accumulating above his head with

grit and willpower was impossible. Zac scrambled for a solution, eventually turning to the two spirals in his Soul Aperture.

The aperture had been annealed by a round of lightning just like the rest of his body, but that wasn't what Zac was interested in. He was rather thinking about the hidden reserves of Creation- and Oblivion Energy locked inside the nebulous spirals around his Soul Cores. Some had been refined and turned into nourishment for his soul and body over the past three months, but most of it remained.

Zac knew that forcibly using all that energy would come at a high cost, and he had no idea if it would even be effective against the Tribulation Lightning. But what else could he do? Zac mentally prepared himself to unleash the same thing he'd once used to deal with the Qriz'Ul King—fusing Oblivion and Creation into an unstable bomb of false Chaos.

The force of such a thing would far surpass his previous experiment, considering it would be powered by all the excess energy from the remnants. If there was anything in his repertoire that could rebuff the ultimate judgment of the Heavens, it was that. Of course, he didn't have much more confidence he'd survive his own attack than the tribulation.

However, just as Zac was about to drag the energy out of the spirals, another shift transpired in his body. The Duplicity Core had stopped rearranging itself and released a powerful force containing hints of the Tribulation Lightning itself. This pulse wasn't like the earlier toll and stopped just five meters away from Zac's body, forming a solid barrier that looked like a perfect replica of the Duplicity Core itself.

Zac looked up at the barrier with shock, recognizing its origin. Some of it came from the energy within the Duplicity Core, but it was actually the array his mother had gifted him to hide his situation. It had always rested by his Duplicity Core, invisible even to him, to the point he mostly forgot it was there. Today, it had created a last bastion of protection against the Heavens.

Looking at the barrier filled Zac with a confusing mix of emotions. Its appearance dragged out thoughts he'd sealed away until he had the power to look for Kenzie and Leandra in earnest. Was Leandra protecting him, her son, or was it a safeguard to protect her investment?

A clap of furious thunder pushed those thoughts back to the recesses of Zac's mind, and innumerable wounds opened across his body. However, the sense of being targeted was rapidly weakening, and the ball of condensed lightning deflated. It was similar to before he finished his core, like the Heavens suddenly had trouble locating him.

So the Kayar-Elu had made some preparations, at least. The increased severity of the tribulation was likely due to their experiments, but the Technocrats were ultimately masters at hiding from the Heavens. For once, Zac didn't mind the hidden hand manipulating him from the shadows. Better that than dying.

Zac hesitated a moment before forgoing his plan of using the remnant energy. More than 80% of the ball's energy had spread through the endless clouds. What remained should be possible to endure without taking such a crazy risk.

Thousand upon thousands of red bolts rained upon the ground, lashing out at everything. It looked like the end—the end of the world, the Dao, and the Era itself. A true apocalypse was unfolding around him, and Zac was in the eye of the storm. A scream of agony was drowned out by the crackling roar of the

lightning sea that had appeared between the mountain peaks. Leandra's array had hidden his presence, but it had done nothing to block the lightning itself.

A painful stab made Zac keel over, but the source wasn't the lightning rampaging through his body. The Duplicity Core had somehow tapped into his body, forcibly extracting all his Void Energy just as he was about to use it to fight off the tribulation. Zac was left without his main defenses against the lightning as multiple vortices opened up around him. Simultaneously, Zac could feel an odd connection with pockets of space across the whole domain.

And then came the energy. Life and Death, agitated by the aggressive force of the scattered Tribulation Lightning, poured over in droves, the quantities far surpassing what had been supplied by the Dao Threads. A different form of rumbles created reverberations that shook Zac's bones as the closest mountain crumbled, its spirituality fully drained.

Zac was still grappling with the streaks of crackling red ravaging his body and could only look on with horror as it all poured into the Duplicity Core. At first, Zac feared the core wanted to forcibly elevate his Quantum Core, something he wasn't sure he could withstand. Thankfully, only a trickle reached the core, while most were consumed and disappeared.

It was like the Duplicity Core had been topped up with fuel after running empty, and the wriggling transformation across its surface resumed. It was happily continuing its evolution, uncaring about the fact Zac was still fighting for his life. A minute passed until Zac slumped onto the ground, his skin scorched and smoke releasing from his pores.

He took out an axe and drew a deep cut across his arm, releasing a large stream of ichor that crackled with red lightning. Zac felt like he'd been through hell and back, yet he smiled while looking up at the sky. The clouds were filled with reluctance, but they were slowly dispersing after finishing their "Minor" Tribulation. It had already pushed the envelope to unleash such force against a D-grade cultivator and had nothing left to throw at him.

The ichor he'd excised contained the last of the lightning, given up because he didn't have anywhere to use it. His soul couldn't take any more tempering, and his cells were on the brink of collapse. Instead of trying to endure another round of refinement, he was better off just giving it up.

The tribulation was over, and he was mostly in one piece, yet the Duplicity Core hadn't finished its work. A second mountain collapsed, and then a third, the scene reminiscent of his bloodline breakthroughs. In this case, he wasn't the beneficiary, though. At least not directly. His bloodline wasn't making any headway, and any attempt at siphoning some of the bountiful energy was rebuffed.

So Zac could only watch on as the Duplicity Core continued its business. Truthfully, he was thankful for the respite. It wasn't just the near-death experience just now, but the last months in general. Constantly being alert and at attention wore down even cultivators, and he had to fight the urge to enter a restorative hibernation.

He couldn't let himself sleep at this juncture. He needed to observe what the Duplicity Core did with his Cosmic Core. What if he missed something important that would cause trouble when upgrading his core in the future? So Zac took out some healing tonics and relaxed while the neighborhood was turned into a wasteland.

Eventually, the process stopped, leaving Zac frowning. For one, it didn't feel like the Duplicity Core and Cosmic Core had connected yet. And since the cores weren't connected, neither was Cosmic Core linked to his pathways. Yet, the vortices remained as the Duplicity Core swallowed unfathomable amounts of energy. A few more seconds passed until Zac realized what was going on.

It was waiting for him.

How could it possibly finish the process when his core wasn't finished? His Cosmic Core had undergone a powerful refinement and was far more condensed than before. However, there was one final step needed to make things official. There was only one issue. How was he supposed to complete that step here?

Zac hesitantly looked around the ruins. His mansion was gone, disintegrated by the unfocused attack of the Heavens. Null didn't answer his call either. Eventually, Zac just opted to speak with the sky. Seeing how chaotic his ascent had been and the damage he was still causing, someone was undoubtedly keeping watch.

"I want to pick a class," Zac said.

His request was immediately granted through a flash of light that made Zac close his eyes. When they opened, a Nexus Node waited right in front of him. Zac's looked at the glimmering crystal with anticipation. The final piece of the puzzle was simple enough, yet the one Zac had looked forward to the most.

Pick a class, and let the System engrave its runes onto your core.