

The Fall 822

Chapter 822: Calamity

As expected, the punishment for evolving a Dao firmly outside the System's purview came with a harsher challenge. The System wasn't shouldering any part of the tribulation this time around. Each rumble felt like a primal call of destruction, with each purple flash hidden within the clouds containing condensed wrath for going against the natural order.

This was not a trial – it was a calamity.

The golden tree that had been conjured by his breakthrough shuddered from the pressure, Zac felt a pang of fear as he looked up at the vast energies that had accumulated. He couldn't stop the pang of primal fear to grip his heart. After all, only 5% of people who directly shouldered a tribulation survived.

Even then, Zac's heartbeat was steady and his gaze was calm. This time around Zac wasn't accidentally stumbling into a breakthrough, he had prepared for this step for a long time. He wouldn't be one of those who had their path cut short. He was here to crash through Heaven's punishment in one go.

Five swirls beneath his feet continuously fed him with insights from the pond back in the [Hallowed Pools], fueling his aspiration as he reformed his Dao Field with the tree in the center. With his Dao on full display, it felt like this desolate pocket of space had become a lush forest full of verve. A clap of furious thunder greeted the arrival of Zac's Dao, and he felt the vast presence fully focus on him as the errant arcs of purple lightning started to gather up.

This time, he wouldn't swing at the lightning bolts like a lunatic. He had done his research on how to best surpass a tribulation. There were some ways to deal with the lightning bolts, Zac had found out, but directly attacking the lightning was not one of them as far as Zac could tell. Perhaps if one was disgustingly powerful you could directly disperse the clouds, but Zac was far from that level.

What he did the last time during his bout of hubris was akin to pouring gasoline on the fire, only worsening the situation. In reality, there were two paths to go about the breakthrough; to hide from the Heavens and to defy the Heavens. These two terms were even older than the System itself, which was no surprise considering the boundless cultivators walked their path with at least one foot outside the System's purview.

Hiding from the Heavens meant figuring out ways to weaken the tribulation or make it spread its focus. Some unorthodox cultivators set up sinister arrays where human sacrifices were performed to hide their fate, or temporarily displace their Dao onto someone else, tricking the Heavens into targeting the innocent. What his mother did to Thea was exactly this, as far as he could tell – sacrificing an outsider to allow Kenzie to pass into the E-grade.

Some unique treasures and methods weren't as sinister though.

The most famous faction who hid from the heavens were no doubt the Technocrats, who had supposedly perfected this technique. From what he'd gathered, they were able to weaken the tribulation by more than 70%, depending on their individual tech. There were even rumors of some sort of Technocrat Holy Land that was completely shielded from both the System and the Heavens.

That alone had ignited another wave of wrath in Zac upon learning. His mother obviously had various means to cheat or weaken Kenzie's Tribulation Lightning, yet she chose to use an unorthodox technique that killed Thea. It was not an act of necessity – it was spite. Just the thought of it made Zac's anger come bubbling again, but he quickly quenched it before refocusing on his breakthrough.

Zac couldn't relax or get distracted at this point; he had no plans of hiding from this tribulation.

The benefits of hiding from the Heavens were obvious; you'd survive where you would likely have fallen otherwise, you carry on with your life. The downside was pretty punishing as well, though. Your breakthrough could barely be considered successful, though Zac wasn't too sure this applied to the Technocrats as well.

From what he'd heard, cheating a breakthrough this way was almost akin to forming a Half-Step Cultivator's Core. While the reality wasn't quite that bad, it was still a far cry from a true breakthrough. At best, you'd have to spend a huge amount of time and effort on shoring up the weak foundations left behind by the false breakthrough.

At worst, your cultivation journey had come to its end.

Few elites who had stepped on the path of the boundless were willing to live with such a drawback, and they chose to believe in themselves and their ability to withstand the punishing bolts of lightning. That was the kind of conviction one needed to defy the Heavens; to stare into the eyes of death and not flinch.

For most, Tribulation Lightning was simply a calamity to be avoided at all costs, and they didn't have the strength to seize the opportunity it presented. In fact, there were benefits to directly taking the lightning bolts of the old Heavens, benefits that not even the System could provide. His bloodline had simply allowed him to take far more advantage than most.

As long as warriors properly withstood the punishment of the Heavens, they could absorb small wisps of the Heavens themselves. For cultivators, it was an opportunity to marginally increase their affinities. Having the lightning pass through their Dao Fields also helped stabilize your Dao, saving you months of hard work.

Zac most likely wouldn't be able to enjoy the former with his unique Bloodline. He should have noticed some change after the previous tribulation if that was the case. But he did think he could benefit from the latter, which was a huge advantage for his upcoming fight. The less time he needed to consolidate, the more time he spend on improving his techniques even further.

His ability to cleanse his body with Tribulation Lightning seemed to be a unique benefit of his bloodline though, and he hadn't heard of anyone else benefiting in this manner. Last time, it was all thanks to his [Void Heart] swallowing lightning and turning it into something usable that had thoroughly cleansed his body and strengthened him. However, Zac believed that he hadn't unearthed the full potential of his bloodline.

Karz had been able to draw sustenance from pretty much anything. Zac bet that Karz would be able to swallow at least some tribulation lightning, even if it hadn't been shown in the visions. The same was true for the mysterious man who had flown through the cosmos in his node-opening visions, swallowing stars like it was nothing.

Zac felt he should be able to do the same. As the first bolt of lightning congealed in the clouds, Zac steadied his mind. He had two goals today, apart from simply surviving. First, he wanted to stay conscious throughout the whole breakthrough, so that he could take full advantage of this opportunity. Secondly, he wanted to seize a bit of the lightning himself, performing an initial cleansing round to remove some of the muck that permeated his body.

The purple arcs of lightning lit up the whole cosmos by now, hatred and spite taken physical form. Even as Zac held onto his convictions, he couldn't completely erase that primal fear from before. This was probably how the ancient cavemen of Earth felt as they hid from the crashing thunder, fearing the wrath of an almighty god.

Zac didn't know why, but that thought somewhat calmed his nerves. Perhaps, it was a connection of sorts. A shared experience from generation to generation, linking them across the long river of time. The cavemen had survived, and this storm, too, would pass.

The first bolt descended, and Zac took a steadying breath as he infused all the willpower and conviction into his Dao Field, which was now shrunk to its absolute minimum. It was so condensed that it barely covered the tall apparition, which now had sunk to cover Zac's whole body. It was like he was hidden in the core of the bodhi's trunk, protected from the raging calamity outside.

This was the true way to withstand a tribulation, to anneal your Dao in Heaven's Mandate.

Unfortunately, being prepared didn't mean you were safe, and the whole world turned white as a pillar of lightning completely covered him and his Dao Field. The shimmering Bodhi was only able to stop the onslaught for half a second before it cracked, allowing the lightning to squeeze inside and target Zac.

It looked like the whole tree was burning, and the golden sheen was supplanted by a blinding purple. Zac felt his whole Dao Field was on the verge of collapse, but he staunchly held on since he felt his Dao being tempered. The only solution he had come up with was to open the gates to [Spiritual Void], unleashing all of his Sealed Dao to strengthen his field.

As far as Zac could tell, this shouldn't be considered a shortcut. It wasn't some outside skill, it was simply his Dao and nothing else. He hoped this would allow his Dao Field to last longer, allowing it to be tempered even further than normal. Unfortunately, he wasn't in any position to gauge the effect, as he was busy just withstanding the brunt of the attack.

His protective bubble was already breached, and Zac was immediately filled with heavenly wrath. His instincts screamed at him to give in, to push it away, to do anything to end this soul-rending pain. He had been assaulted by all kinds of attacks before. Flames, acid, poison, and all forms of weapons. He had bled, he had been maimed, he had hovered at the border of death. He even had his soul ripped apart once, he had never encountered this kind of pain before.

It was all-consuming and final, the ultimate retribution for stealing the Dao from Mother Nature. The tribulation was lightning yet not lightning. It was more akin to Oblivion in a sense, yet it wasn't. If anything, the tribulation lightning rather felt like it contained the absolute absence of Dao, the absence of everything. Everything it touched would be destroyed, since the Dao was the basic building block of the universe.

It was a void.

Zac knew he was screaming from the pain, but he couldn't hear his cries over the crackling sounds of his soul frying. He was using his all to just stay afloat, to desperately try and complete the tasks he had set for himself. His tattered mind pushed and pushed, trying to impose his will on the frantic lightning coursing through his body, trying to use it to singe the largest spots of impurities in an ultimate baptism.

Unfortunately, channeling the tribulation was completely out of his grasp as the lightning had a will of its own, a will far more powerful than his own. His [Void Heart] had already woken up though and started to greedily swallow any bolts that came close. Its momentum was gradually increasing, prompting the tribulation to realize the danger just like last time.

Since he couldn't channel the energy, Zac instead tried to keep it inside his body a little while longer before it escaped the [Void Heart]'s hunger. It would ravage his insides even more, but he had confirmed that while his cells were being destroyed, it took some of the impurities with it. It wasn't quite as much as he had hoped, but it was better than nothing.

He only managed to withhold the lightning for a second before it forced its way out, leaving Zac panting heavily as cracks covered his skin. His Dao Field was completely shredded as well, but Zac roused his spirit to reform it as he ate a cocktail of healing pills. Soothing waves spread through his body and mind, but Zac knew it wouldn't make much of a difference.

After all, the second wave was already descending.

The bolt slammed into his reformed Bodhi tree just a moment later, once more drowning it in purple destruction. The second lightning contained even more power, and Zac couldn't maintain his field for more than an instant before the lightning poured into his body, transporting him to a world of agony.

There were no longer any thoughts in Zac's mind of controlling or taking advantage. He only clung to survival as bleeding cracks opened up all across his body. His Soul Aperture was not much better off, with the tranquil star system beset by a fierce calamity. The Cores were pelted by bolts, covering them in hairline cracks.

What felt like an eternity passed until the lightning finally left his body, and Zac wheezed as he looked up to the sky, his vision blurry and his mouth tasting metal. Just one more. One final strike and he'd be done with it. Even more impurities had been expunged, but the effect was actually worse than after the first bolt.

Was it because he was unable to affect the situation on his own? Or was it because there simply had been so many impurities in his body the first time around, that it was impossible to avoid?

There was no way to tell, and Zac's only thoughts were now on staying awake. To maintain his Dao and hold onto his convictions. There was no turning back at this point, and Zac took a steadying breath before roaring in defiance as the third bolt crashed into him. The Bodhi turned to splinters and his blood turned to ash, overwhelming all resistance.

His soul was lightning, his body was lightning. There was nothing else; only pain and the color purple. He was just a leaf swept up in a hurricane bent on destruction. But he held on to that flickering sense of self, of the golden tree that looked like it could carry the weight of the Heavens themselves.

An instant was stretched to infinity. Eras turned as Zac was caught in purgatory, assaulted from every direction by voices that told him to give in. That he would still pass even if he let go. After all, he was the descendant of the Void Emperor, his lineage would keep him safe. Yet he held on, refusing to rely on that sort of crutch.

A million times he was urged to surrender, and a million times he said no.

Suddenly, the pain stopped, the change so sudden Zac wasn't sure the impression was real, but the vibrant cosmos soon came into view, confirming the lightning had receded. The tearing agony had been imprinted into the core of his being and its shadow lingered, confusing Zac's mind.

But he had made it.

Not only that, he had remained conscious, albeit barely. The clouds slowly parted, their churning undulations filled with a sense of frustration and unwillingness. At the same time, the cosmos started to blur, and Zac found himself back in the bottom of the pond once more. This wasn't teleportation, it was some sort of Space Melding, where two coordinates or two dimensions were fused into one.

Now wasn't the time to think about that, and he rather focused on the storm of energy that entered his body, dragged into his mind by his glowing Dao Avatar. The divine tree was greedily drinking the rich water in the pond it completed its transformation. As Zac looked on, he was filled with an odd sense of discrepancy.

Not with the Dao itself, since it felt it was gradually becoming more and more in tune with his path. It was rather an odd spatial phenomenon, where he felt the tree was rapidly growing even though it stayed the same size inside his aperture. It was like that small avatar was the size of a mountain, yet it kept growing somehow.

His body was riddled with wounds, and his souls were covered in cracks. Yet he suppressed the pain after swallowing another set of pills, his mind fully occupied with observing his Dao Branch.

As the hours passed, the form of the tree didn't change much. The most significant change was how the branches, which had previously formed almost a circle that enclosed the trunk in a protective bubble, were being raised into the air. Soon enough, they all pointed to the sky, giving Zac the feeling they were holding up the heavens themselves.

From the branches, leafy vines hung down toward its roots, their lazy movements filled with whispers of life. He couldn't hear anything from inside his aperture, but he still felt like he could hear a soothing rustle from the Dao Avatar, and he felt like he was transported back to his courtyard in Port Atwood.

Safe, secure.

Eventually, the process stopped, and the tree returned to root itself on one of the Divine Cores. Zac finally let himself relax, knowing he had perfectly passed the tribulation. A quick estimate proved he still had a few hours on the chamber, so he swam out of the pond and sat down on its shore, no longer requiring such massive bursts of energy.

Zac knew he needed to go over the state of his body, of his soul. However, there was one thing he needed to do before all that, and he quickly opened his Dao Screen.

[Branch of the Kalpataru (Early): All attributes +50, Dexterity +300, Endurance +800, Vitality +2250, Intelligence +50, Wisdom +250, Effectiveness of Vitality +25%]