

The Fall 1021

[Chapter 1021 - Transience](#)

Zac's first entry into the hostile Red Zones was the Imperial Spire. The incredibly high mountain had seemed like a perfect place to start his collection of items. Even then, he had found himself at an impasse after pushing himself close to the peak. The final 2,500 meters were impossible to climb, at least for Zac, who lacked a Dao of Gravity.

So he started looking for a treasure at the maximum altitude he could stomach. But even after 16 days, he had come up empty-handed except for a few more orbs. That was when he'd been given a poignant reminder of the importance of Luck.

He'd just changed form and applied a new set of talcum on his hands as day turned to night. The dust from the chalk had made him sneeze, prompting him to turn to the side. At that exact moment, he'd seen an odd flicker in the mountain wall a few hundred meters down. It looked like a shadow appearing out of nowhere. But the shadow was gone a second later, and the spot looked the same as the rest of the mountain.

Zac trusted his eyes and his gut and spent the next 6 hours reaching the spot, but he couldn't find anything. Then, a few hours later, night turned to day, and Zac was surprised to see the wall suddenly disappear. The shift between night and day had deactivated a natural formation that exposed a hidden alcove. Inside, a small flower swayed. A flower even heavier than the Revolution Orbs that became the first fodder for the Omnitool.

Accruing Low to High-quality material was just a matter of having land, time, and resources. Peak materials were mostly things you had to take some risks to farm. However, materials considered beyond the "peak" could only be found by chance. And chance was governed by Luck and Providence.

Until that point, Zac hadn't felt the need to rush himself when it came to Mount Illumination. It seemed pretty dangerous, and he already had a lot on his plate. He'd pick up the Dharmic Treasure before leaving. But things changed after inheriting [Cosmic Forge]. Zac suddenly needed to brave at least 17 dangerous Red Zones, each with environments he'd normally have avoided in favor of realms better suited to his path.

The difference between being lucky and unlucky in a Red Zone wasn't just a matter of Thousands of Mana and finding valuable treasures or not. It could be the difference between life and death. Zac obviously wouldn't trust his life to something as flakey as Luck, but it was better to have it than not. He definitely could have used some extra Luck inside the mind-bending maze of the Chrono Well.

Since then, Zac had started to prepare an assault on the hidden temple. He'd researched Mount Illumination and Heart Cultivation to understand the threat better. He'd climbed dozens of neighboring mountains to temper himself against different expressions of the Dharma. He'd been further tempered by near-death experiences, solidifying and improving his stability beyond what he gained from the Void Varja breakthrough.

Even his long crafting sessions seemed to have helped solidify his heart. Maintaining a Void State helped him control the Void Energy more fluently, and it removed any errant thoughts. The whole universe was pushed away except for the self and the materials. There was not much point in waiting to gather more

Mana, either. The protective environment of his manor didn't stretch beyond the outer gates, and the trial itself seemed designed to circumvent the Mana Domain's protection.

He still would have preferred to wait a bit longer, but it looked like it was time to collect.

Zac made sure all his preparations were in place as he walked to the mansion gate leading onto the peak. He smiled a bit as he crossed the pebbled courtyard. The patterns almost looked like skill fractals by this point, or a Dao tapestry representing his path. The Sangha's love and the Dao of Samsara were greatly muted already. He'd say his courtyard was already halfway attuned to him. Even Catheya and Ogras could make short visits, though they couldn't leave his manor without risking damage to their Dao Hearts.

He reached the gate, and it only took a steadying breath for his view to change. The ghost temple looked the same as usual. To this day, the immense Buddha and its terrifying aura hadn't returned to the temple. But would things stay that way? Doubtful. Zac began his approach, relying only on his conviction to withstand the coruscating waves of Dharma and Samsara.

The peak was rapidly coming alive, with new features appearing with every step he took. It felt like Paradise was descending to the mundane plane, but Zac was unmoved by the call of the cosmos. He was like the solitary rock in a river, letting the waters flow by him.

Soon, Zac reached the midway point. The spiritual pressure was intense, as was the crushing weight of the Dao itself. But Zac maintained his speed as he continued. He'd already been able to reach this point during his first attempt. And while he hadn't made any huge breakthroughs since then, he had made many small improvements that had accumulated into something substantial.

Zac continued toward the small temple that felt impossibly vast from the immense Dharmic aura it exuded. Dozens of Bodhisattvas and Devas already lined the side temples, and the chants of thousands of monks reverberated across the peak. Zac couldn't make out any words, but their words rose and fell, forming a grand cycle that wanted to drag Zac's soul out of his body. If he let them, he'd enter the cycle of Samsara.

The main temple was lined by eight towering figures, four to each side of the stairs leading into the shrine. Oddly enough, Zac couldn't make out what they depicted. It was like his brain couldn't take in their forms. Besides, he didn't dare look at them long. Each emitted an intense aura of holiness like they were the embodiment of truth and virtue.

When they first appeared, they felt like the final guardians of this trial. But as Zac continued his approach, he started doubting whether that was the truth. Were they the guardians, or were they the goal? The distance between Zac and the eight was filled with the unavoidable sea of Samsara, and the chains of Karma Zac had accumulated acted as sinking weights. To reach the statues and step onto the right path, you'd have to sever the past.

No! Zac shook his head with horror from having his perception twisted even when he held on to the Void of his self. For a moment, he felt the statues emit an aura of pure devilishness rather than holiness. Yet he kept trudging on. Each step felt like a rebirth, where the Dao of Samsara tried to wash away his past and have him embrace the new. But Zac refused to let go.

"Kayar Elu. Root Compact. Six Profundity Empire," Zac muttered as he slowly walked forward, his monotone voice almost like a chant.

One word after another emerged from his mouth. Places, people, and concepts which held a special place in his heart. His words lacked the rhythmic cadence of Buddhist Scripture, but they created a counterweight against the immense pressure on his path and self. They became the anchors that prevented him from being swept away, from giving up his self in exchange for liberation.

Each step felt like an eternity, but he'd eventually crossed three-quarters of the distance. The peak was gone already, replaced by an endless square. The gargantuan avatar still hadn't appeared, but Zac could feel a vast presence form in the sky. But it wasn't the Buddha. The groan of ancient wood joined the chants, and Zac's mind shuddered as he saw a huge wheel appear behind the temple, stretching hundreds of meters into the sky.

The wheel of Samsara.

The moment it appeared, Zac knew he couldn't hold back any longer. The wheel radiated ultimate truth and finality, and the whole Buddhist complex came alive. The Dao Surge, the Dharma roared, and the Void of Zac's self teetered on the brink of collapse. Six array disks appeared, forming a protective circle around Zac just before a storm of Dao came crashing down from the wheel. They shuddered but held on, supplied and nourished by Zac's Dao.

Meanwhile, Zac took out the [Mind's Eye Agate] and urgently fastened it to his back. The crystal was already covered with a golden web of fine chains, and over 50 small array disks were fastened at its intersections. The crystal groaned ominously, and a few cracks appeared but managed to soothe Zac's heart and soul. The storm stabilized a moment later, but the danger of the peak had increased by 50% since the wheel's appearance.

Zac felt his perception bend. His mind told him the eight statues were the wheel, and the wheel was the statues. They occupied different spaces, yet they were one. The wheel slowly turned, and Zac could feel his heart shudder. He didn't have much time. But he didn't back down. The arrays had given him a window of opportunity, and the temple was only fifty meters away. He took a few hurried steps but felt his vision lurch at the 10-meter line.

The statues towered over him to his left and right. They were only three meters tall, yet they felt like mountains looming over and pressuring him. Zac hesitated a moment before gritting his teeth, and a small crystal appeared in his hand. The pressure drastically decreased, but Zac looked down at the [Void Engine] with worry. It could subvert the Dao and Energy, but he'd long since learned it wasn't without limit. It would slowly weaken if left unattended in too rich an environment.

And when pressured by the Buddhist Sangha? It would only last seconds. Time was of the essence, so Zac hurried up the steps. The aura of providence felt like a beacon in the raging ocean of Samsara. It was less than ten meters away from him. Unfortunately, Zac found another problem just as he reached the top of the stairs.

He could finally see the interiors of the temple. Until this point, they had been obscured like the statues he'd just passed. Now, it was on wide display, but that didn't help Zac much. The temple was only thirty

meters wide, but its interiors were the size of a city. It was a temple huge beyond compare, with hundreds of enormous shrines and statues erected.

Far in the distance on the opposite side, Zac could vaguely make out the enormous Buddha he'd seen in the sky. It was sitting at the main position of the temple, mostly obscured by a thick haze of incense smoke. Zac couldn't even see its face as it was so far up in the sky, but he felt a huge presence staring down at him. In an instant, dozens of cracks appeared across the [Mind's Eye Agate], and the [Void Engine] flickered ominously.

Luckily, the feeling only lasted a moment, and Zac breathed out as he took a step forward, still silently mumbling his anchoring words. But just as he was about to step into the gate, he found himself unable to so much as move a finger. Two huge Niō had appeared to the sides of the entrance, each looking down at him with scornful eyes. And then they spoke.

"IS THE COSMOS ETERNAL?"

"IS THE COSMOS TRANSIENT?"

The words rumbled like an angry sea or claps of thunder. The words were the Dao itself, and Zac groaned as he felt a deluge of impressions sweep through him. A universe moving toward infinity, slowly growing with each beat. A universe slowly crumbling, each beat a little weaker than the last.

The two questions reverberated through Zac's mind, the words only growing in ferocity and power. There were more questions somehow superimposed on those two, clamoring for dominion over Zac's soul. The words felt like grindstones intent on grinding his self to dust, sending a pure stream of consciousness into the wheel of Samsara.

Zac was about to go mad. His consciousness couldn't withstand the timeframes and concepts conveyed. His Daos were shuddering, his path bending under the strain. The talismans were even less capable of withstanding the onslaught, all turning to dust without dampening the roar. Orange splinters fell like rain from his back, and golden links failed. Only the [Void Engine] was unscathed, but it was essentially drained, so he quickly put it away before it was damaged.

Without his treasures, he was as exposed as a candle in the wind and felt the Dharma breach the Void in his heart. But a primal fury took hold in Zac's heart and pushed it back. He could tell those were questions without answers, traps meant to destroy his path. But he wouldn't give in. He wouldn't be broken by something like this.

"I don't care!" Zac roared as he unleashed his bloodline and opened the floodgates to his Void Energy.

Zac couldn't tell whether it was the determination in his words or the outburst of energy that created a massive shockwave. It was both tangible and intangible, spreading out with him as an epicenter. Large cracks appeared on the Niō, and Zac could suddenly move. He was about to flee before he was caught again, but a flicker ahead threw those plans in disarray.

The insides of the ghost temple had become unstable, flickering back and forth between two vastly different scenes. One contained the endless halls and the enormous Buddha, while the other was much simpler. It showed a normal temple that consecrated a chest without any engravings. No deity was displayed, but Zac sensed a hair-raising aura from the box.

In front of the shrine were three unadorned wooden cups, each holding a different fruit. Zac didn't know why, but it was as though a world hid in each of those fruits, and Zac's body screamed with both hunger and fear upon smelling their aroma. Finally, there was a small tray on the ground in front of the three bowls, upon which a string of Buddhist beads lay. It didn't look exactly like the prayer beads he'd seen in the vision upon first arriving at Mount Illumination, but it wasn't far off.

Zac knew the temple represented a power far beyond what he could deal with, but he could not back down when his target was just five meters away. He gritted his teeth and shot forward when the gateway led to the simpler temple. He could feel the temple trying to resist his entry, but he activated [Void Zone] to force a path.

The whole temple shook, and the constant hymns gained an aura of reproach that bore down on him like a mountain. It was just like when he first tried to cheat with his Bloodline Talent to cross the peak, and Zac realized his Void Energy wouldn't last more than a second under this kind of suppression. But the restrictions no longer held him, and a lot could be done in a second.

Zac lept forward and snatched the string of beads from its plate. The temple shook as reproach turned into righteous wrath, and Zac groaned as bloody tears appeared across his body. The temple was trying to switch back to those vast halls consecrated by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, but the presence of [Void Zone] acted like a lynchpin keeping the reality in place. Somehow, the damage was transferred through the bloodline talent to Zac himself.

The fruits and the chest still stood there, but Zac sighed as he jumped out of the temple gates. They looked like great treasures, but Zac could tell they were traps. Dealing with the Sangha was to dance on a tightrope. You had to know when to back down, or you'd eventually get consumed. The world shuddered, and Zac found himself standing at the gates of his manor, looking at the ghost temple across the peak.

The familiar view made Zac's mind short-circuit for a moment. There were no statues, no wheels in the sky. All was calm and tranquil, with not so much as a ripple in the atmosphere. He'd been prepared to fight his way back across the peak, but it suddenly felt like he hadn't even set out.

Had it all been a dream?

The odd disconnect only lasted a moment before the smarting tears across his body confirmed his experience had been all-too-real. It was further confirmed by the sound of glass shattering as the agate on his back shattered, turning into a fine dust that spread around his feet. Zac sighed as he looked down at the sand. The [Mind Eye's Agate] had been a silent companion for over a decade, always guarding his back when he cultivated his soul. Today, it had made the ultimate sacrifice to keep him sane.

Zac's eyes turned to the string of beads in his right hand with mixed emotions. Hopefully, it'd be worth it.