

The Fall 982

[Chapter 982 - Pure Land](#)

A towering mountain clad in a shroud of green, with a golden cloud circulating its peak. Mount Illumination.

As far as Zac could tell, it was simply the best option available, with the battlefield being the second option. The Storm sounded interesting, but he wasn't creating a Chaos Core. He had already given up on forming a Cosmic Core based on the concepts of Chaos in favor of his Trinity Core held together by the Void, and he wasn't about to give up on the solution he'd found.

The raging energies inside the Storm would definitely be useful. But with a price tag of 750 Mana a month, it would hamper his accumulation too much. Perhaps he could still visit that place over the next years to gain inspiration. For now, he was still not at the level where he could actually fuse Life and Death.

Conversely, the Nimbus was too far from his path, and he didn't want to spend that much time reforging his manor in his image. He wanted to start working on his core as quickly as possible, and overcoming the negatives of the other two places seemed faster. The two environments could even temper his willpower over time, which was free training.

Between ancient bloodlust and the Buddhist pathbreaking, Zac felt the latter would be easier to deal with. He was afraid that a pervasive killing intent from ancient Autarchs and possibly Supremacies would constantly try to kindle the conflict of his core, forcing him to place far more time and effort into keeping the core stable. As a Mortal with a deep foundation, he already had enough problems in that regard.

The Pathbreaking didn't worry him as much thanks to his [Void Vajra Sublimation] and the concept of the Void it had imprinted on his heart. He wasn't foolish enough to think Mount Illumination was just at the level of Mount Everlasting Peace back on Earth, but it should still be at the level of what elite E-grade cultivators could deal with.

His heart was far more tempered than most, and the biggest contributor wasn't even the [Void Vajra Sublimation] or the Splinters of Oblivion and their whispers of destruction. It was the natural refinement he'd undergone through innumerable life-and-death encounters. Each hard-earned victory steadied one's heart and reinforced one's belief in their path. Iz had told him those who climbed mostly on their own efforts generally were better off at the higher stages of cultivation, and this was an important reason.

Besides, Mount Illumination already contained two of his three Daos, just like the Storm. Finally, Zac had to admit the idea of using Mana and his Dao to break the path of Samsara on the mountain was pretty enticing after what they tried to pull with the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation].

"Alright, but prepare yourself," Null said as energy accumulated in the room. "This isn't the Frontier."

Zac took a steadying breath as the final gate somehow shifted from being a window into an actual portal. A powerful gust of energy filled the room, so powerful that Zac's mind almost blanked out. The

feeling was far more powerful than when he first sensed the Energy Nimbus. Not only that, but there was a clear flavor to the energy that filled the room.

There were hints of Life and Death, but it wasn't like the Twilight Energy, where Life and Death made up all the energy. Life and Death were only responsible for half of the insights pouring out of the gate, and they had been moved away from the Peak of Chaos to become subordinate concepts of something else.

Still, this kind of environment was great. The energy density was just shocking, and this was while he still stood outside looking in. The density would be far greater when he found a good spot to set up a gathering array. Even if he just accepted the one half that resonated with him and rejected the rest, he would have more than enough energy for his needs.

Zac stepped through the gate and found himself at the foot of the verdant mountain. However, the scene looked drastically different in person. A Buddha, tens of thousands of meters tall sat behind the mountain. It looked like a whole pantheon crammed into one multidimensional body, a scene somehow both horrifying and comforting.

Its thousands of heads were seemingly staring right at him. Eyes met, and the world disappeared.

Nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine gilded statues sat on the petals of the sky-blue lotus, each one consecrated in the name of Tārā. To take in the heavenly scent was to be annealed in the compassion of Buddha and saved from the suffering of Samsara. Above, an endless world blotted out the firmament, its divinity trickling down like rain toward the lotus.

Akaniṣṭha, the Pure Land.

He was at the threshold, arrived at the doors of paradise, yet still burdened by the sufferings of mortality. But the soothing hymns of the loving mother were slowly replacing suffering with contentedness. His whole soul was being illuminated, its shadows vanquished. His gaze turned to the heart of the lotus, the focus of the guardian devas.

A bracelet of simple wooden beads. Nine were natural brown, with the other eight painted black. At its center was an eighteenth bead painted red, seemingly containing the providence of the universe. Just looking at it made him want to sit down, mirror the pose of the guardians, and accept ordination.

Zac's heart roared in defiance, and the world twisted. The lotus, the statues, and the paradise above disappeared. Replacing them was the lonely mountain, guarded by the enormous Buddha. Mount Illumination was completely different from when he first saw it. Thousands of red temples lined the slopes all the way to the peak, forming an intricate pattern.

The scene only lasted for a moment before his vision returned to normalcy, and the mountain was just a mountain once more. The vision had only lasted a moment, but Zac's back was slick with sweat, his heart wildly hammering as he desperately stabilized his mind. That had been too close. He hadn't underestimated the power of the Sangha, yet it had almost dragged him under for a moment.

"You're back? Are you Zac, or do you have a new name?" Null's voice echoed in his mind.

"Why would I have a new name?" Zac asked with a frown as he shook his head to clear his thoughts.

"That's what happens when the old baldies get you. You'd discard your old identity and take on a Buddhist name. Almost looked like you were ready to discard your robes and don the kasaya."

"And you didn't try to poke me awake?" Zac snorted.

"That's not my job," Null giggled. "I'm just a guide. I'm here to answer questions and help facilitate your stay, no matter if you're an eminent monk or a brute from the Frontier. Saving your butt is not part of the assignment. In fact, getting involved is strictly forbidden."

"Well, you're still stuck with me for the time being," Zac grunted as he looked around. "There are no temples to settle inside?"

"All the temples were removed, but their foundations remain. You can either build your manor on those foundations or pick any random spot on the mountain," Null explained.

Zac slowly nodded, feeling Null's answer was a hint, even if an unintentional one. He didn't think the vision just now was some random scenes his brain conjured from being invaded by the latent will of the Sangha. It was a remnant of the original face of the mountain. Nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine temples, forming an array generating providence.

Could he make use of that fact?

"And I guess the best environment is at the top?" Zac ventured.

"Yep! It's really dangerous up there, though. Much worse than here," Null confirmed.

"Well, let's see how far I can make it," Zac muttered as he passed through the gate and started ascending the slopes.

It was just a theory, but Zac followed his memory of the mountain, heading toward the closest temple he'd seen upon waking up. There were no paths or steps, but the cliffside wasn't very hard to traverse. The forested slopes almost felt pruned, forming natural paths winding up the mountain, paths that further strengthened Zac's guess that the mountain was covered in formations.

It almost felt like he was walking inside the corridors of the Gates of Rebirth again, where the whole forest formed an enormous natural array far surpassing anything Triv had managed to build in his cave. Yet, there was a good chance this formation was a natural result of the powerful truths that the mountain still contained rather than something intentionally built to further its effect.

Zac could feel his Daos in the soil beneath his feet, but he kept his heart closed off from any further input. The trees, their branches swaying in harmony, the leaves rustling like Buddhist chimes. It was reduced to a beautiful tapestry in Zac's eyes. Something that could be appreciated, certainly, but not something that would change the course of his life.

Mount Illumination was almost as tall as the pre-integration Tibetan peaks, but Zac was no pre-integration mountain climber. He was a Peak E-grade Defier who could maintain a leisurely walking pace that would look like a blur to a normal Mortal. It wouldn't take him too long to reach the peak if he pushed himself.

Even when keeping a steady pace to avoid any surprises, it only took Zac a few minutes to reach the location of the closest temple. As expected, he found a foundation hidden among the trees; a simple

square of fine white sand on a raised platform of large stone blocks. It wasn't big, only twenty by twenty meters, but it would be more than enough to set up a temporary manor.

The energy was also denser around the platform than in the forest, and it almost sounded like the rustling leaves were the muted chants of scripture. Zac didn't want to risk losing his composure again, so he took a steadying breath and closed his eyes. A few seconds later, he had become the Void, his heart ensconced in nothingness.

Years of practicing his [Void Vajra Sublimation] had long since allowed him to enter the ethereal state even when not practicing the stances. It had become a good and effective way to clear his mind after absorbing the Lake Water, and Zac also found it useful in this kind of environment. His accomplishments still weren't as good as an actual Heart Cultivator's, but he could always add [Void Zone] to amplify the effect.

He could only maintain the state while emptying his thoughts and closing off his surroundings. There was no way for him to retain the meditative state while walking around, especially not when fighting. Zac didn't even know if something like that was needed since he didn't want to become the Void during battle. It was the opposite, in fact, where he wanted to fuse with his Daos, not the lack of Dao.

After recalibrating his state of mind, Zac slowly opened his eyes. However, he almost lost his composure upon seeing a red temple proudly standing before him. He saw the wooden beams holding up a slated tile roof and the well-polished floor of the inner hall. He even saw a shrine inside, but he couldn't determine what kind of deva was consecrated within before the temple disappeared.

Zac didn't move for a moment, thoughtfully looking at the once-again empty platform. Was it more than an illusion? True and false weren't black and white in the Multiverse. There were various states of existence, and an illusion didn't necessarily need to be a figment of one's imagination. Janos had physically lived inside an illusion for years before finding his way back to reality.

So why couldn't a temple exist when looked through a different lens of reality? It was possible that while the physical temples were gone, some sort of spiritual manifestations lingered. Then again, even if his theory was correct, did it matter?

"Do you like this place?" Null asked, dragging Zac out of his thoughts. "If you pick the platform, I can conjure a suitable manor in ten minutes. It'd take a bit longer if you picked a spot full of trees."

"Can I move my base in the future?" Zac asked.

"Not really," Null said. "There are Relocation Tokens, but finding them is a matter of luck. You can't even buy them with Mana. So you should get it right from the start."

"Why not just let us move as we please?" Zac asked.

"Something about fate," Null said with disinterest. "Plus, it costs money to keep building new ones. The manors aren't just houses. They're incredibly complex arrays that can help form Cosmic Cores. We have a budget to follow, you know."

Zac smiled, feeling like Null sounded like a penny-pinching bureaucrat. "Then can I wait with choosing a manor?"

"Nope, you have one day. Besides, don't you want to meet your friends? You can only find them after picking a cultivation spot and getting access to the teleportation system."

Zac slowly nodded in understanding. He wasn't really planning on settling this close to the base of the mountain. He could withstand much more powerful energies than this. However, he wasn't sure he could withstand the influence at the peak. Especially not if there were almost ten thousand ghost temples on the mountain channeling providence to the main temple at the top. At the same time, Zac was unwilling to settle for a less-than-optimal cultivation location.

"Do I have to spend much time in my Manor, or can I travel about?"

"That's up to you," Null said. "Traveling usually costs Mana, but you have access to some freebies. And even if your trials run out, you got a good amount of starting Mana. For example, you could stay at the Quarry for almost a year if you wanted to. There are many free places to visit, but they don't have as much good stuff as the premium environments."

Zac's eyes turned toward the lofty peak, the focal point of the whole mountain. Even at this distance, he could feel how much fate was gathered. The golden cloud was not just a cloud—it was distilled providence. The environment was definitely far better than at the foot of the mountain, but also far more dangerous. That wasn't just random fate. It was marked by the Dao of Samsara and the Buddhist faith.

But perhaps it was possible if he used his hidden weapon against the influence of Mount Illumination. If Zac could break through with the [Nine Reincarnations Manual] and the [Void Vajra Sublimation], he would improve his resistance against outside influence. However, those two breakthroughs couldn't just be performed without some preparation.

One day wasn't enough. Besides, he had things to settle before that, including finding Catheya and Ogras. But if he could just withstand the pressure temporarily, to the point he could settle his home base, he could leave this place and only return after breaking through.

Having formulated a plan, Zac resumed his climb after giving the platform a final look. He'd see how things looked closer to the peak. If he really couldn't withstand the peak even for a moment, he'd just have to compromise and settle at the upper reaches of the mountains and start looking for a Relocation Token.

The minutes passed as Zac climbed higher and higher, passing one empty platform after another. Null stopped speaking up, perhaps to avoid distracting Zac during his ascent. Zac didn't pepper the guide with questions, instead focusing on the matter at hand. Null was joking around about becoming a baldy, but Zac could tell it was a real risk of that happening in this place.

As far as Zac was concerned, his theory was essentially confirmed after having seen over ten ghost temples. Each one was only visible for a moment before Zac lost his ethereal state, but it was long enough to see the temples act like array flags. Together, they formed a mountain-spanning formation that funneled energy toward the peak.

The mountain didn't have any restrictions or pressure in the normal sense. The threat came from the Dao itself. The further up he went, the greater the impartment was, both on Zac and the surroundings.

He could shield himself, but just looking at a stone would fill him with errant thoughts of the cycle of creation if he wasn't careful.

By the time he passed the halfway mark, he occasionally stopped to meditate to regain his balance. Zac didn't feel like his mind would be swept away again, but the environment made him remember the visions of the Remnants. How the carriers had gradually found themselves twisted by the whispers of the splinters, their personalities being replaced without them noticing.

The dangers of the Sangha were in the same vein. Their attacks were much harder to notice than getting stabbed or blasted by a fireball. At the same time, Zac could tell that just staying at the mountain would be extremely useful for tempering his heart. As long as he didn't lose himself to the ghost temples of Mount Illumination, he'd emerge much stronger. Zac could understand why people kept flocking to the Sangha, even after knowing of the dangers.

By the time Zac reached the upper reaches of the mountains, he didn't dare let his mind freely wander. Every stone, every leaf, was an expression of Buddha's love. If he didn't focus on his path, he'd risk having his personality subverted. Yet, Zac staunchly kept walking, heading toward the peak. As long as he could set up shop up there, everything would be fine.

He could stay at the slopes until his heart met the requirements, only heading up when he needed to form his core in a few years.

Eventually, he reached the very edge of the golden cloud. Zac could tell that continuing forward meant entering the focal point of the mountain-spanning array. The energy was so dense in front of him that he could almost grasp it with his hands, and the truths were more than comprehensive enough to keep up.

Seeing it up close only reinforced Zac's desire to claim the peak. If he could control the area with his accumulated Mana, he'd have unlimited Dao and energy at his disposal. The environment was in a league of its own, even compared to the uppermost platforms he'd passed. The peak reminded him of the hidden valley in the Twilight Chasm—a place where the building blocks of the Dao were a tier higher than any place he'd visited on the Frontier.

"Are you sure about this?" Null asked. "I know you're powerful, but that won't help you here. Remember, this is supposed to be your home. Climbing the mountain is not some trial to conquer."

"You said Mana helps one form their core," Zac said. "Do different environments have any impact on that effect?"

"The greater the environment, the greater effect of Mana," Null confirmed. "As long as you can enforce your path on the peak, you will get at least twice the help from the cosmos compared to where we stand right now. But you need to be alive to enjoy the benefits."

"Then I'll have to give it a try," Zac smiled as a tremendous Dao Field of Conflict crashed out from his body, imposing its harsh truths on Mount Illumination. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."