

## The Fall 983

### [Chapter 983 - A Bet on Oneself](#)

The air rippled as opposing concepts clashed. The golden cloud originally moved in a lazy rotation around the peak of Mount Illumination, like the wheel of Samsara slowly being turned by the river of fate.

Zac's Branch of the War Axe acted like an accelerant, kicking up unstable gusts around him. Simultaneously, the Dharmic pressure lessened on him as the call of the Sangha grew more chaotic through the filter of Conflict. However, Zac frowned upon seeing the effect was limited. The environment was pushing back.

He ultimately couldn't compete with a whole mountain, at least not with a Dao Field alone. The energy stabilized, somehow accepting the ferocity of his Dao without being affected by it. It almost felt like he was screaming at the clouds like a lunatic.

This wasn't enough for him to give up. Two more Dao Fields followed the first, and Zac's eyes lit up upon feeling the energy around him destabilize. Motes of Life, Death, Karma, Order, and a little bit of Time were shaken loose from the energy around him. But not even three superimposed Dao Fields were enough to permanently dismantle the ambient energy, let alone the dense cloud of providence above him.

Perhaps it'd be different if he'd managed to fuse his Dao fields into an empowered field representing his complete path. For now, the energy around him was locked in a perpetual cycle of breakdown and recovery. It even felt like the process represented the cyclic nature of Samsara. Zac looked at the surroundings with annoyance.

If he were a cultivator, he could have absorbed the life-attuned pieces, taking out one of the ingredients. Now, he could only watch on as the Samsara Energy broke apart and reformed.

"Can I stay here while you place down the base at the peak?" Zac asked.

"No way," Null snorted. "That would be cheating. You need to prove yourself strong enough to claim the best region. You need to come with, and you need to stay on the peak during the whole process. But I can tell you that the manor comes with a set of protections. And after it's built, it'll immediately start enforcing your path on the surroundings, though you'd need a lot more Mana to reform this place completely."

"Alright," Zac nodded, not surprised by Null shutting him down.

Nothing good came for free.

The question was whether his Dao Fields were enough for him to withstand the environment inside the golden cloud. It was hard to tell without stepping in. But he didn't dare just enter without enough preparations. He had the [Void Zone] as a final lifeline, but it wasn't a solution. If he couldn't even withstand the peak temporarily without cheating, he'd never be able to live here long enough to form a Cosmic Core, even with his planned breakthroughs.

Was there anything he could add to improve his situation?

"Can you eat the Divine Energy?" Zac asked as he had Vivi extend her vines out from the protection of the World Ring.

But he shook his head and retracted Vivi as soon as she appeared. He sensed Vivi was actually getting confused by the Dharmic truths. It looked like even plants could be converted and consecrated in this place. He'd have to rely on himself for this one.

Zac spent the next ten minutes centering himself through meditation before decisively stepping into the golden nimbus. He immediately felt a tug on his consciousness as the truths around him skyrocketed, but Zac was prepared.

"Ka!" Zac rumbled as he stomped down on the ground, and a shockwave pushed away clouds and Dao alike.

It was the opening step of his [Void Vajra Sublimation], and it allowed him to rebuff the Dharma before it could infect him. But like an inevitable tide, the golden clouds came crashing back. But by that point, Zac had already started adapting to the incredible environment, and he was able to resist the pull this time.

Zac inwardly breathed out in relief. It felt like an immense weight was bearing down on his heart, but he could withstand it. Right now, Zac wouldn't dare stay in this environment beyond a day or two, but that was within his levels of acceptance. Between his breakthroughs, further tempering, and the protection of Mana, he felt confident he could live in this place in the future.

At the same time, it would become a potent protection against any other guest who he might cross over the next couple of years.

Zac resumed his climb, relieved to find the environment didn't get any worse. Just twenty meters after entering the nimbus, he passed the golden curtain and reached the actual peak. The cloud actually formed a band, and it felt like he was standing in the eye of a storm, giving him full vantage of the huge platform on the mostly flattened peak.

The area was large enough to accommodate over a thousand normal platforms, indicating the peak hadn't housed just another small temple. A major complex had once stood here, even if he hadn't managed to see anything when he stood at the base of the mountain. Now, the whole place was covered in windswept grains of white sand.

No, not windswept. Dao-touched.

Zac's mind shuddered as his eyes traced the vast array of seemingly random dunes and valleys covering the peak. They formed an incredible pattern whose complexity far surpassed that of his Dao or blueprint. It felt like he was looking at the actual wheel of reincarnation. Just grasping at the corners of understanding filled Zac with horror and impending doom, and he urgently closed his eyes as he activated [Void Zone].

The feeling disappeared, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief. That had been too close just now. It almost felt like the enormous pattern had tried imprinting itself on his Soul or even drag it into the cycle of reincarnation. Now, he mostly felt the ancient energy of the Void.

That didn't mean the danger had passed. The dunes and their pattern were waiting for him after he opened his eyes, and he wasn't sure the rebuffing effect of his nullification zone would work against the mysterious effect he'd just sensed.

A spare axe appeared in his hand, and he sacrificed a small amount of Void Energy to randomly unleash a barrage of fractal leaves in every direction. Only then did he dare open his eyes again, and he was shocked to find a full monastery in front of him. He was currently standing at the edge of a large courtyard that took up half the peak while the courtyards formed a U-shape around him.

The main temple was on the opposite side, while the side buildings were shrines, zen houses, prayer platforms, and scripture halls. They were all exquisitely crafted but lacked any markers indicating arrays or formations. The temple could just as well have been something you'd see in East Asia pre-integration.

Even then, the complex had a tremendous presence, as though a Bodhisattva resided in the temple before him. In fact, it felt like the monastery was full of monks, even if he couldn't see anyone. Chants were coming from one side, and he could vaguely sense the smell of burning sandalwood. Altogether, it formed a harmonic atmosphere that fused with the surroundings and the nimbus cloud.

Like the peak had become one with the cosmos.

Thankfully, Zac didn't feel his perception being influenced, no doubt thanks to his bloodline talent. He was more curious about why he saw the temple and why it remained in front of him. Was it because of [Void Zone]? The bloodline talent did help him quell any outside interference while calming his heart, but he wasn't in an ethereal state like before.

Zac confirmed his random attacks had rearranged the sands, and he deactivated his nullification zone a moment later. Immediately, the pressure of the Dharma returned. But without the pattern in the sands to amplify the effect, Zac could handle it by just maintaining his three Dao Fields.

The temples soon disappeared, proving their appearance really was connected to his bloodline talent.

"That was weird," Null commented. "What did you do? It felt like I just lost half a minute."

"A defensive measure," Zac muttered, a bit surprised Null had seemingly been deactivated by his [Void Zone].

Thankfully, it didn't look like the big guy upstairs was interested in the matter, so Zac refocused on the task. With the sand rearranged, he thoughtfully looked across the peak. He felt it viable to place his manor on the peak now that he'd ruined the pattern that had formed in the sand. But where?

Should he superimpose his manor on the main temple? That should be the end-point of all the energy gathered by the ten thousand ghost temples on the slopes. Or would that create problems without any benefits? Was there a better spot to pick?

Zac slowly walked across the peak, passing through the center, the side temples, and eventually, the main temple. As he walked, he tried to understand the energy flows without letting himself be influenced by the whispers of Samsara. There was certainly something going on here, even if he didn't sense any threat from the spots taken up by the ghost temples.

Something was wrong. It was incomplete. Eventually, Zac ended up where he started, having made a circle across the peak.

"So, are you happy with this spot, or do you want to keep looking?" Null asked.

"One second," Zac muttered, frowning as he looked across the sands.

He was at the cusp of understanding, but he wasn't quite there. He even conjured the monastery several times with [Void Zone] to see if he had missed anything. Then it hit him. Zac's eyes turned to the left, to the building most likely to be a Library and a Dharmic Repository.

"Truth," Zac muttered, his eyes turning to the zen temple on the other side. "Balance."

The Buddhist Sangha was made up of Nine Mountains, representing the seals on the Heavens. Eight Temples, each representing a peak elevating the Dao. Four Oceans for the Eternal Laws. And finally, one paradise, the heart of their belief—the ultimate destiny. Zac's eyes turned to the main shrine, his instincts telling him it represented the Law of Cosmos. That left one side and one law; Impermanence.

A suitable place for a guest on the mountain.

Zac's eventually walked to a spot he'd noticed before, opposite the temple. It wasn't in the middle nor at the edge. It was one-third to the center from the side where he started. A spot with a slight depression in both energy and truth. He deactivated [Void Zone], letting the temples fade to nothingness.

"Let this spot be the core of my manor."

"This..." Null hesitated. "Are you sure? It seems like you are standing on a fault line."

"I'm sure," Zac nodded.

"Okay," Null said. "But don't use your weird skill to knock me out. It'll make the impartment fail."

"Alright," Zac nodded, and he saw a familiar network of lines spread out from his feet in every direction.

From the ground, a fourth temple rose. A temple wrought from stone, steel, and the colors of his Dao, rather than the red wood of the ghost temples on Mount Illumination. Zac felt like he was raising a banner of defiance in enemy territory, proclaiming his arrival. The response was immediate.

The whole mountain shook while the energies kept rising to unprecedented levels. In just seconds, Zac's surroundings reached levels of truth he'd only encountered on extremely rare occasions. Such as when he pushed Void's Disciple out of the heart of the Dimensional Seed or when the valley of the Twilight Chasm went crazy.

And it kept climbing.

Zac gasped upon seeing both the temples and the immense Buddha appear in the sky, and he groaned upon feeling the radiant sun in its eyes trained on him. He wanted to run away, to activate [Void Zone], but he roused his faltering determination to push back. Instead of depending on his Bloodline, he reinforced his heart.

"Ka!" Zac roared again as he started the [Void Vajra Sublimation]. This time, he didn't stop with the first cycle but kept going toward the next, while desperately holding onto his path.

He visualized himself being the Void, only taking what he needed from the Heavens while keeping the rest out. But the Dharma was relentless, replacing the whole cosmos. Zac fought tooth and nail as he went from one stance into another, but his bubble of security kept getting smaller while his heart grew exhausted.

Zac took out one Cosmic Crystal after another, and the equivalent energy of a Hegemon's Cosmic Core was released as Zac crushed them in his hands. Anything to create imperfections in the terrifying pressure that was bearing down on him. But his feeble attempts at disruption only became kindling to the Buddhist storm that had been conjured.

The calm nimbus had turned into a hurricane, dragging more and more energy out of the mountain. The Dao was so condensed it started to affect reality. Millions of golden marks appeared in the air, naturally forming Dharmic Scripture, while various phenomena danced over the monastery. And bad became worse as Zac sensed something else.

A presence unlike the others was starting to form within the main temple in the distance. It felt like a heavenly descent, like a Dharmic Guardian was gradually taking form because of the storm. The apparitions covering the peaks were just there to herald its arrival. Zac felt despair upon being exposed to the perfection it was.

It was game over if that thing was allowed to emerge from the temple.

"It's done!" Null's voice suddenly echoed in his mind, and Zac almost cried in relief.

Any more, and he would have to run for his life, even if it meant giving up on his base. He wasn't confident that even [Void Zone] could withstand what was coming.

"Exit?" Zac gasped, and a red gate lit up.

Zac didn't know where it led, and he didn't care. He jumped through the gate, running for his life.

The deafening hum of the Buddhist Sangha was completely cut off the moment he was teleported. Zac took a shuddering breath as he got to his feet, feeling like he'd just escaped divine judgment. That had been way too close. He had realized that the formation on the peak was incomplete, missing a flag in one of the four cardinal directions. The golden nimbus rotating around the peak was most likely leakage from the imperfection.

Zac had figured it was a trial of sorts. To unlock the true potential of Mount Illumination, he would have to complete the mountain-spanning array with his manor. He had been correct, but he hadn't expected the activation would lead to such a huge reaction. Hopefully, it was just a temporary outburst as the array was realigned, and by the time he returned, the mountain would have calmed down.

For now, Zac was alive and well. If anything, he was even more optimistic about the Perennial Vastness after his brush with death or ordination. Zac couldn't be certain, but his treasure sense told him there was an opportunity hiding on Mount Illumination. Something was generating all that providence on the Mountain. Perhaps a treasure?

Even better, if he could encounter something so shocking at a starting location, what about the high-grade environments you had to pay to visit?

He looked around, realizing he was standing in a doorway leading to an eclectic city where each building had its own unique and distinct features. On the opposite side of a twenty-meter-wide road, a cavelike building stood. It didn't have any windows like most of the buildings on the street, but it had open sits between sets of stalagmite pillars, allowing him to look inside.

Right above the entrance, a complex mesh of red lines formed a raging flame; a fire-attuned blueprint for a Cosmic Core. Had someone placed their blueprint for the world to see?

"This is...?" Zac asked with a hoarse voice.

"This is Vastness City," Null said, sounding slightly worried. "Are you okay?"

"I'm good," Zac smiled. "Was a close one, though."

"But what about the future?" Null asked. "You'll have to live there."

"Don't worry, that should've just been a temporary storm," Zac said.

"Still."

"This is a bet on myself," Zac explained. "If I give up in the face of adversity like that, how can I aim for the peak of cultivation?"

"I know," Null muttered. "But try not to go too crazy. The Perennial Vastness is full of dangerous places. One mistake, and it's game over. For both of us."

"Hey, I'd love to stay out of trouble," Zac wryly smiled. "Unfortunately, trouble has a way of finding me. Besides, that's the only way to get powerful."

"Maybe it's not too late to put in for a transfer..."