

The Fall 995

[Chapter 995 - Misgivings](#)

Suffering was a constant companion on the journey of Body Refinement. The agony Zac had to endure to forcibly push through three layers of the [Void Vajra Sublimation] in a couple of years would've been enough to break the spirits of most cultivators. Yet that was nothing compared to the pain that now wracked his body.

Millions of tendrils burrowed into him like flesh-eating maggots, each one a stab at body, mind, and heart. The jabs chipped away at Zac's conviction and sanity as he passed new thresholds of pain. The currents of divinity were uncaring about his suffering, spreading like wildfire through his body now that they'd been forcibly dragged down from the Heavens.

It seemed like the energies were more interested in destroying than reforming, and they were like a match to gasoline upon encountering the powerful golden swirls in the depths of his cells. Before, there had been order to the tremendous power hiding those miniature storms. Now, chaos was unleashed as his body tried not just to paint the cells golden but to turn them into actual gold.

Was this punishment for going against the natural order, trying to steal Life from the Cosmos? The bridge to Heaven collapsed, its foundations cracked and in disorder. Zac was left standing at the other shores, seeing what he'd built over the past years be consumed by the raging fire of the glowing runes.

Had he been wrong? He'd been so sure that the method he'd created with the truth of Ultom would work with his constitution, and nothing he'd experienced during his years of diligent practice had given him cause to think otherwise. Now, Zac found himself dealing with what seemed to be a state of mutual rejection between method and body.

Should he give up?

The thought was small and fleeting, yet it created huge waves in his mind. Zac's heart shuddered, and the golden runes flickered for a moment before he could rein it in. Even then, his ethereal state was damaged, and new suspicions and worries replaced the ones he'd pushed down. Zac did what he could to regain his meditative state, but he knew he was in trouble. The [Void Vajra Sublimation] was based on the heart, so when the heart wavered, so did the method. This couldn't go on.

Zac gritted his teeth, and the world dimmed for just a moment. He'd activated [Void Zone] in the middle of his breakthrough, in an effort to forcibly recalibrate his state of mind. Thankfully, the method was fused with the Void. The runes across his body only lost a little bit of energy after being drenched in Void Energy for a brief moment, and the invisible flames readily replenished what he lost.

Most importantly, the sudden wave of nothingness calmed his frayed heart, allowing him to analyze the problem calmly. The method clearly indicated a tipping point where resistance became acceptance. Heavens and Earth would become one, and external would become internal. He just needed to maintain his Heart of Void, continuing to pilfer from the Heavens until he reached that point.

And while the method was more dangerous and agonizing than he'd expected, he could tell he was getting closer. He no longer wielded Life. He was fast becoming Life. Even with eyes closed, Zac could feel his body shine with divine light, like a golden statue.

If it was just pain, he could endure it. This kind of violent reaction wasn't mentioned in the method, but it could have explanations other than a failed breakthrough. His attributes and Vigor were far beyond the norm because of his Draugr half and various experiences, just as his cells could contain far more energy than normal because of his Bloodline. It was also possible his body had a harder time than normal accepting an Attunement because he lacked the affinities to pave the way.

But how could that stop him? He was the inheritor of a bloodline so powerful the System itself targeted it. He wouldn't let a minor bottleneck on a Body Tempering Method impede him. Even if convention and logic told him no, so what? As long as he held on to his path, he'd make the impossible possible. This was just like when using [Bloodline Resonance] to get control over his Bloodline Talents. Sometimes, you just have to keep going.

Yet, the poisonous thoughts crept back as Life continued to pour into his body. Words of caution, of not giving in to sunk-cost fallacy as he ran toward a dead end. That there was just too much energy inside the 189 golden runes that still glowed with inexhaustible divinity.

Not even his cells could accommodate this much force, and the temple was inexhaustible in its accommodation. Zac was just reforging his body, not forming a Cosmic Core. Even his danger sense started to indicate imminent doom as his cells began to show cracks from the overload.

It was like a volcano had been trapped inside his body as Zac furiously condensed, purified, and suppressed with his Dao and his determination. Yet, he found it harder and harder to hold on. The agony consumed all thought, and he could tell the runes were only halfway consumed even when he teetered on the brink of collapse.

He had no option but to activate [Void Zone] again. Not to recover his state of mind but to let his cells rest and stabilize for a few seconds. When he deactivated the talent, the Dao of Life had been pushed deeper and integrated further with the core of his being. This cycle continued for a while, with Zac forced to make up things as things came, using everything from his Bloodline and his Dao to forcibly quell some spillover with Spiritual Ice.

But then, his closed eyes snapped open in horror.

"No!" Zac roared as he tried activating [Void Zone] in a panic.

But it was too late. The threshold had been reached, but not in the way it was supposed to. The volcano brewing in his body erupted, its fury and ferocity so intense that Zac lost the connection to his Bloodline. He was unable to even move as he found himself trapped by the glowing runes. The cocoon of his transformation had turned into his prison.

Blinding cracks spread across his fingers, then his arms, releasing plumes of bloody mist that were instantly burned by the invisible flames. The cracks covered his whole body in an instant, a situation far beyond anything even the splinters had created. The cracks reached the very depth of his body—trillions of cells, trillions of fractures.

And then it all collapsed.

Zac screamed with horror, yet not a sound came out as his body exploded into a mottled dust cloud that was pushed to the corners of the sealed temple. As Zac's body was destroyed, so were his thoughts.

There was no past, no future—only the glowing warmth of life. The feeling was like a blanket on his soul, but a comforting rather than suffocating one.

If he accepted this new phase of existence, he would become one with the cosmos and the Heavenly Dao. Yet a powerful wave of repulsion made the dust shudder. Zac wasn't ready to give in. His determination acted like a beacon, gathering his scattered thoughts. Zac's soul was already spread through the cloud, and he started to pull. And as Zac pulled, he held onto his Dao Heart.

His perception shifted, and the Cosmos was suddenly held at bay. Between the unceasing fount of divinity and himself was an impassable wall of demarcation. He was once more the Void, looking in at Life from the outside. And he started taking what he needed. Zac refused to consider defeat or surrender, even for a moment.

So he'd exploded. It wasn't good, but he was still alive. And the dust was somehow connected to him, allowing him to impose his will on it. He would survive this tribulation, even if he had to create a body akin to Ubu's, the Life Elemental he met inside the Orom World.

From there, he could figure out how to return to a fleshy state. He was already planning on doing the same for Alea, so what was one more body? He might even be able to create it right away with Creation Energy after the situation stabilized. One thing was for sure, though. No matter what, he wouldn't give up.

Zac had too many people relying on him, too many goals left unfinished. So what if he became a walking cloud of Life only held together by sheer force of will? It wouldn't impede his path. As though agitated by his thoughts, the dust churned and roiled as it started being dragged back toward the circle of invisible flames. Like a pilgrimage, where the pieces of his broken self returned to their origin.

And on the way, the mottled dust took in the ambient Life of the temple. And just as Zac took what he wanted with his Heart of Void, so did he repel what he didn't need. As a result, the dust started shedding, their mottled exteriors replaced by gold far more radiant than the motes of life dancing around.

Eventually, the first swirls of dust hesitantly entered the invisible flames. The mottled cloud shuddered even more and smoke of various colors separated from the dust. Black, grey, green. Small oily drops were also formed, falling like a profane rain toward the golden nuggets below. But no matter whether it was mist or oil, black, red, or green, it was all instantly incinerated by the invisible flame of life.

Zac vaguely sensed the transformations taking place and furiously held onto his conviction. To reform what was broken. To continue down his path. And in response, a shape started to form in the center of the circle. It wasn't a hand or a head, but rather the first rune of the [Void Vajra Sublimation].

This time, it wasn't made from medicinal paste or his Heart. It was made from the broken-down and purified rubble of Zac's body. It was completely without blemish, a perfected expression of Life. One after another, more golden runes bloomed under the nourishment of his heart. And with every rune forming, Zac felt his scattered thoughts congeal. It was like an imaginary wall made from his Dao Heart kept his soul in place, gently guiding it back together.

Eventually, 189 runes of purest life had formed an outline of a being. One grand cycle for the Heavens and one for the Earth. Joined together by the nine minor wheels of Life, one body of divinity perfected.

It was still just a hollow pattern, but only half of the dust had entered the Spiritual Flame circle by this point. More refined dust was being pulled in by the second. As long as Zac kept going, something akin to a body would form.

The moment the final rune was perfected, Zac heard a bell in the depths of his mind. Unprecedented clarity was followed by a stream of new information. It wasn't an epiphany that came from his reinforcing his path. It was like the cultivation method in his mind had suddenly unfurled like a flower bud, displaying previously hidden pieces. A grand voice echoed through his mind, filled with power and compassion.

'Only by surrendering the self can the one become the Boundless Cosmos. Only through a Heart of Dao can the Boundless Cosmos become the one. Sublimation through rebirth. Reality subject to an eternal will. The path of the immutable Varja.'

'Sublimation through rebirth,' Zac thought, the hidden despair in the depths of his heart swept away, replaced by anticipation.

With the hidden chapter of the method unfurled, Zac finally understood what was happening. There was actually a hidden tribulation at the threshold of the Minor Sublimation—a tribulation of the Heart. The breakthrough would only continue if your Heart was firm enough, even in the face of disaster.

If it failed, your soul would gradually disperse in the clouds. If inside a Buddhist domain, your essence could be reformed into a Dharmic Will, which could be infused into a statue or a Dharmic Treasure. For someone like Zac, it simply meant death.

Zac had no idea why the hidden danger hadn't shown itself even when he reformed the method with the truth of Ultom, but he wasn't too disappointed. He could feel how his Dao Heart had made a breakthrough even before his body, reaching a state akin to the Integration Stage of technique. Like a metal, a Dao Heart could only be tempered when put into the fire, whether it was life-and-death encounters or significant setbacks to their cultivation.

If Zac had known he was supposed to disintegrate, he would just have focused on the next step, and his heart wouldn't have aligned as well with his path. And from the information, Zac could tell that the heart was the key to passing the Minor Sublimation. Only when one's will was powerful enough to alter reality and control the dust could you reforge your body.

This wasn't a hidden trap of the Sangha but rather a way to increase the rate of success of their practitioners at the expense of the ones lacking fate. The unexpected pain, the growing sense of unease, and finally, the collapse. It was all there to trigger and temper the practitioner's Heart. If their Dao Hearts couldn't withstand the despair of having their body collapse, they wouldn't be able to finish the second half of the breakthrough in either case.

Heart was the key. What he believed real, was real. What his heart deemed false, was false. Everything was in place. Of course, he still needed to complete this breakthrough before celebrating. Just understanding the situation didn't mean he could relax. The avatar made from runes was still hollow, and the burst of information had created waves in his heart.

Some of the runes had already destabilized, while the remaining dust had started scattering. Zac quickly reaffirmed his heart, spreading his will through the temple. The process resumed and sped up until nine

separate swirls entered the invisible flames simultaneously. Seven entered gates that had appeared on his body from the top of his head down to his groin. The final two entered through the hands of the runes, which formed the closing mudra of the [Void Vajra Sublimation]

As the purified dust entered his body, it was dust no longer. Under the transformations of his heart, veins and bones were forged. Then came organs, each one glistening with life like a Natural Treasure. Eventually, a golden statue sat within the invisible flames, perfect and fully formed. The dust was expended, the impurities banished.

He was whole.

Zac stood up and walked out of the flame, but he didn't get dressed. Instead, he touched his spatial ring, and a small vial appeared in his hand. It was the drops Iz had gifted him after his first breakthrough of the Body Tempering Method. Zac carefully swallowed a single drop before hurrying back to the central ring, afraid to lose his current state of mind.

One drop wasn't his limit, but there were only six drops remaining in the small vial. He needed to save some for his other projects, and he had the time to stabilize his breakthrough inside the Perennial Vastness.

He let himself continue to be annealed in the flames of life for a while longer while studying the updated [Void Vajra Sublimation]. Between the incredible temple that had facilitated such a perfect breakthrough and his elevated state of mind, Zac was in a state of utmost clarity and certainty.

Previously unclear parts of the fourth layer of the [Void Vajra Sublimation] were unraveled and fixed, getting closer and closer to a workable method. Only when he heard a soft ding did he slowly open his eyes.

"Thirty minutes, like you asked," Null reminded.

"Thank you," Zac smiled as he stood up.

He was still some ways from finalizing the fourth layer of the method, but the Keys of Ascension wasn't the place to finish that work. It was far too expensive, and using it for anything but breaking through was a waste of Mana.

Zac looked down at his body. He was still golden and glowing with the golden lines of Life, but the radiance receded into the depths of his cells with a thought. Normal flesh had replaced the golden metallic hue. That didn't mean his body had lost anything, neither did it mean his Void Vajra Constitution had entered a dormant state.

In a sense, his body couldn't be fully considered one of flesh anymore. He was moving closer to a Dao Body, something cultivators normally only gained after stepping into Monarchy. By that point, their true being was the world they nurtured inside their body, while their outer body could be considered just a projection of themselves.

Still, his body was not not flesh either. With a thought, a series of runes appeared across his arms as his skin turned golden. A moment later, the markings were gone. Zac nodded in satisfaction. His heart dictated what was real and what wasn't. If his heart said his body was flesh and looked human, it would.

Zac felt like his body had become a treasure trove of hidden benefits, but he began unearthing them as he always did—by opening his Status Screen.

[Life] Void Vajra Sublimation (Third Layer): Base Attributes +50. Vitality +500. Endurance +250. Base Attributes +5% Vitality +5%. Effect of Vitality +10%.