

The Fall 996

[Chapter 996 - Coming Home](#)

The boost to Zac's attributes was mostly expected, though the new improvement to Base Attributes was a welcome surprise. The increases didn't change much for Zac by this point, but you obviously wouldn't say no to free power. Unfortunately, awakening a constitution didn't provide a Title, just like his Soul Cultivation and Technique hadn't.

Some gains were benefits on their own. Besides, Zac guessed these specialized forms of cultivation weren't really part of the System's training regimen. The System was there to mass-produce warriors through levels and grades. Ultimately, it was still more efficient to push more cultivators with weaker foundations to higher grades on a macro scale. Raising peak existences that could push toward the limits of cultivation was ultimately a matter of chance.

Elites would always strive to go beyond the bare minimum in either case and didn't need the System's handholding every step of the way. If anything, that could probably backfire, like how Iz couldn't let her extremely powerful elders explain every step of cultivation for her. Some things needed to be discovered by yourself.

Zac's attributes had taken a decent leap forward, but that was far from the only gain of his breakthrough. His body felt incredibly light, and his Cosmic Energy flowed without impediments. His whole body was in nigh-perfect condition, completely unsullied by the taint of the Earth. He remembered how much putrid oil and multi-colored clouds had been released and incinerated as he reformed.

No wonder the method strongly recommended breaking through within a Spirit Flame, especially a life-attuned one. The clouds and drops were impurities lodged in the very depths of his cells. Pill Toxins, dregs from Natural Treasures, sequela from wounds. Even just the ambient impurities of being a cultivator of the Frontier.

It was all removed at a level rivaling his baptisms by Tribulation lightning. And there was a lot of it. Zac hadn't held back on using treasures to speed up his body- and soul constitution since secluding himself. His soul, especially, was built on a mountain of Life- and Death-attuned treasures that allowed him to keep pace with the unimaginably powerful Moss Crystals.

Normally, a cultivator progressing like that was akin to sacrificing their future. Still, Zac dared do so because [Purity of the Void] and the upcoming Tribulation Lightning from entering Hegemony on the Boundless Path. Now, he was given a baptism ahead of time, a small bonus that would hopefully make his other breakthroughs smoother.

His Cosmic Energy stores had increased by at least 20%, which meant his Void Energy had also increased by 20%. His pathways had become sturdier, and Zac felt each cell was a small sun. Even his stores of Vigor and its natural recovery had improved, a welcome fuel that'd allow him to use his Draugr Hidden nodes to much greater effect.

It wasn't just his Vigor recovery that had improved, either. Zac was teeming with life, which would help with his body's natural healing rate. It would also improve his resistance to almost any form of attack, from poisons to foreign Daos. He obviously wasn't at the level of the ancient Body Cultivators who could

reform their bodies from a single drop of blood, but he suspected that even lost limbs would regrow given enough time.

Most interesting was perhaps the new realm his Dao Heart had reached. The hidden burst of information had, for the first time, explained the three realms of the Heart the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation] nurtured. The first realm, and the one he'd reached upon passing the first major threshold, was called Boundless Self.

The stage of Boundless Self allowed his Dao Heart to impose its will upon his body. A poignant example of this was how the broken pieces had recovered and become healthy flesh through a magical transformation Zac didn't understand. Of course, this didn't mean he'd gained the ability to take any form he wanted.

Boundless Self made what was true real, but not everything was true. For example, he couldn't suddenly turn himself into an elephant or a thousand-meter Beast King. Neither could he suddenly will himself into Hegemony. No matter how much he wanted to sweep through the grades quickly, he knew he was currently in the E-grade.

Being a Hegemon wasn't true. Therefore, it couldn't be made real. But his being human was true in his heart of hearts. As such, his body was human, which was further proved by the fact that his Status Screen hadn't changed.

This kind of transcendent state would come with other benefits as well. The original version allowed your heart to accept outside Daos and influences without letting the self go astray. In Zac's case, he rather nurtured a state of Void Self than a Boundless Self. He would have to try it out, but he believed his natural resistance to the path of powerful cultivators or environments would increase.

This probably increased his resistance against the pathbreaking Dharma of the Buddhist Sangha, which was extremely convenient with his manor being in the middle of a Dharmic storm.

The second realm of the Heart would arrive at the Major Sublimation and was called Boundless Domain. At that level, your heart didn't just see through truths and falsehoods of the self but everything you laid your eyes upon. Illusions would be nigh-useless when faced with someone who had reached Boundless Domain.

Finally, upon cultivating the method to the end of the ninth layer, you'd give birth to the True Boundless Heart. Nothing was actually mentioned about that stage, but it was obviously incredibly powerful. Of course, passing the final layer of the method was almost impossible. Just completing the first layer put you in the top percentile of all who cultivated the method.

To completely master it? There were probably just a handful of those people in the whole Sangha.

The one thing that hadn't improved was his affinity. Even now, Zac didn't feel any closer to the Dao. Trying to absorb some of the ambient energy also failed, proving he still lacked that mysterious connection with the surroundings that allowed cultivators to drag energy out of the air.

Zac was simultaneously relieved and disappointed things had stayed the same on that front. He still held on to some small desire to become a "true" cultivator, but he knew that would come with some huge

drawbacks. The most notable of which was that his core no longer would work since it depended on his lack of affinities to incorporate the Void.

In that regard, Zac felt he'd made the right decision in breaking through. Before, the inherent Death Attunement of his Draugr heritage was much stronger than his Life Attunement. It looked like his human side had passed his yet-unawakened Draugr Bloodline. Still, the difference was not as big as it was before.

If his Draugr side had been inherently 30% more impressive since drinking the [Essence of the Abyss] compared to his Second-layer Void Vajra Constitution, then his human side was now roughly 15% stronger. And with his human side now better suited to restrain the Inexorable Core and to form the Evolutionary Core, he was in a much better position for his future undertaking.

With everything dealt with, it was time to go. Null's earlier warning meant his free trial of the Keys of Ascension was about to run out. And like any self-respecting money-grubbing enterprise, the Perennial Vastness charged for the whole hour at the start of the hour. Zac left the inner circle, only then realizing he'd barely felt the heat of the invisible flame since breaking through.

Zac's robes, rings, and other items were lying in a neat pile by the exit, and he quickly dressed before leaving. The confusing blur of paths and Daos greeted him as he emerged, but Zac's heart was as steady as bedrock as he descended the golden stairs forming in front of him. The surrounding structures and their disorienting movements were no longer enough to confuse him. He even took the opportunity to look around as he descended the stairs, taking in the beauty of the possibilities presented by the Daos around him.

Fifteen minutes later, Zac emerged from the keys and stepped onto the bridge after giving the marvelous structure a final look.

"I guess it's time to see how my home base turned out," Zac smiled upon reaching the exit.

"You sure?" Null giggled. "Getting pretty confident after one breakthrough."

Initially, Zac had planned on only returning after breaking through both his Soul and Constitution. Now, Zac felt it wasn't needed. The protection against the Sangha's Dharma he'd gained from reaching Boundless Self, or rather Void Self, was much greater protection than what he'd gain from breaking through the next layer of the [Nine Reincarnations Manual].

After all, the pathbreaking aspect of the Buddhist Sangha wasn't some mind poison that harmed the soul. Its danger came from the beauty of a vast path approaching perfection, encompassing all Daos and beings. It was so easy to get swept up in the truths of the Pure Lands and their limitless power.

Of course, Null had a point. It wouldn't do to jump in blindly. And he had technically exploded just hours ago. Something like that was enough to create a Heart Demon, even if it was an opportunity disguised as a calamity. So Zac spent the last ten minutes of his free trial on stabilizing his mind, including using [Void Zone] a few times while no one was around.

"Alright, take me to my manor," Zac said after the ten minutes were up, placing his hand on the teleportation pillar.

The pillar split in two, but there was no hint of what was going on the other side this time. There was only a glimmering swirl in gold, steel, and black. That didn't mean something was wrong, but that portals leading to manors had a privacy filter. Zac stepped through and found himself in a large living room with a similar design to his storefront.

If not for the incredibly dense energies, he'd have thought he'd been returned to Vastness City. The Samsara Energy was so dense that small golden numinous clouds floated in the corners and rafters of the room like large mothballs. Looking at them filled him with wonder, even causing his elevated Dao Heart to ripple.

Zac was still delighted to find the truths inside the ambient atmosphere slightly muted, even without him running his Dao Fields. Part of it was undoubtedly thanks to his approaching the second echelon already. He could tell there was a weak hint of discordance emitted from the manor itself, destabilizing the Buddhist Path on the mountain.

His gaze turned to the six pillars that held up the ten-meter ceiling. They were identical to each other, covered in dense engravings. The pillars reminded Zac a bit about the seventeen pillars lining the square when he arrived, though the engravings echoed his Daos rather than the seventeen peaks of cultivation.

These pillars seemed to be the source of the disturbance, and Zac could sense over twenty similar sources spread through the manor. Their aura was still far from reforging Mount Illumination in his image, but it was an important first step. It injected a sense of imperfection and doubt into the Dharmic Perfection, allowing Zac to withstand the pressure more easily.

The problem, if one could call it that, was that the energy density and Dao Attunement had noticeably increased since he left. The energy density was over ten times what he enjoyed in his Cultivation Cave back on Earth, and it felt like someone was constantly crushing Nexus Crystals to push the environment to this level.

More importantly, the Dao was much clearer here than back home. It was akin to the difference between a normal Attuned Crystal and a Top-tier attuned treasure. Even if only a third of it related to his Daos, it was almost beyond what he could deal with. Zac wryly smiled, almost happy he was an affinityless Mortal. It must be torture for cultivators to live in this kind of magical environment only to be unable to meditate on their Daos because of the Time Dilation.

The environment had transformed just like he'd hoped when he placed his manor at the only loophole on the mountain peak. Unfortunately, it meant Mount Illumination was still not suitable for permanent habitation. Even with his Void Self, Zac was forced to release his Daos soon enough.

Thankfully, it wouldn't be much longer. Perhaps by the third or fourth echelon, Zac could stay as long as he wanted without having to use [Void Zone] or his Dao Fields to actively resist the environment. For now, Zac let his Dao suffuse the whole mansion as he carefully walked toward the closest window.

Zac breathed out in relief upon confirming neither ghost temples nor towering thousand-eyed Buddha had been permanently summoned to the peak. Neither could he feel the presence of the entity that seemed to have been forming inside the monastery's main temple. It was all gone, leaving an empty peak covered in pebbles.

In fact, Zac didn't see the golden nimbus that covered the peak earlier, either. Instead, he had a free view of a sprawling mountain range, a scene reminding him of the Eastern Trigram Sect he visited during the Hunt. Plugging up the leak in the array must have meant the energy the nimbus received was reduced to the point it dissipated.

"Hey, Null, are those mountains part of Mount Illumination?" Zac asked.

"Yes, but this peak should be the best one of the low-grade peaks the boss got his hands on."

"And I can explore them for free?" Zac asked to confirm.

"Sure. If you travel somewhere without using our teleportation system, you will not be charged. Technically, you can even find a few top-tier Red Zones and stay free of charge. But I should warn you, the Perennial Vastness isn't just a simple continent. It exists simultaneously in multiple states and dimensions, and many of the best realms are in their specific subdimension."

"I won't waste time like that," Zac smiled. "I just figured it might help solidify my Heart Cultivation if I ascended different Buddhist Peaks."

"Sure, you can do that."

Exploring the sprawling mountain range wasn't something he needed to do right away. But he did want to at least figure out the situation with his own peak before leaving. His compound was completely square when including a large walled courtyard in front of his manor. The building looked like a fortified temple, and the entrance and outer gate were perfectly aligned with the main ghost temple on the opposite side of the peak.

Zac walked out on a pebble path of his courtyard, noting that the native pebbles of the peak had been replaced within his courtyard. Instead of marble white, the stones were all black, gold, and steely grey. They formed a mottled Zen Garden, where the seemingly random placements of pebbles held some truths about his path.

A few minutes passed as Zac wordlessly looked at the ground before suddenly taking out a spear he had lying around in his Spatial Ring. He drew a few runes in the sand, his eyes gleaming as he saw the transformation of colors and their distribution. Zac eventually shook his head and continued to the exit.

The outer gate looked like a larger version of the door leading into his storefront, with his blueprint emblazoned on both sides. There was no door or gate, but Zac saw how the air almost vibrated in the doorway. The Dao of Mount Illumination fought with the Dao powered by his Mana. For now, it was just a feeble struggle, but Zac smiled as he imagined how his path would one day swallow the whole peak.

His gaze moved from the air to the opposite side, and he took a steadying breath as he calmed his mind and conjured the Void. He didn't need to close his eyes or activate his [Void Zone] to become one with the Void any longer. He was the Void, and the Void was he. And as though summoned by his will, the scene on the mountain peak drastically changed.

The enormous Buddha was gone, but the ghost monastery remained. The main temple had, however, gained a halo since he saw it last. It emitted an immense aura of providence, like it carried the fate of the cosmos. The scene made Zac's eyes widen, and not just because of the incredibly powerful Dharmic

pathbreaking truths it exuded. It was because he'd briefly sensed this same aura before, only thousands of times stronger.

The band of beads in his vision.

When he first stepped foot on Mount Illumination, he was shown a brief glimpse of a mysterious Lotus and a band of prayer beads. Back then, he'd felt there was more to the vision than it being some random hallucination. What if the beads were real? That had to be a true Fate-augmenting treasure, one of the rarest kinds of items in existence. Something that magnified one's Luck.

If it were real, he had to find a way to snatch it.