

The Fall 1020

[Chapter 1020 - Cosmic Infusion](#)

"This is the one," Zac muttered, pushing away the sense of doom as he picked up the withered branch with his free hand.

The Omnitool in his other transformed from its standard rock pick into a scalpel axe. He still lacked six of the seventeen peaks, but he'd found that the tool could already be used for half an hour before it needed to be returned. It was enough for his practice. He could have used the artisanal axes as well, but why bother?

The Omnitool wasn't just a gadget that could change shape. It was instilled with the essence of [Cosmic Forge] and naturally helped control the extraction process when Zac channeled his Void Energy through it. Without it, you'd have to work twice as hard for half the result.

One could argue that it would be better practice not to use the assisting tool, but the Omnitool was an integral part of the crafting process. Not using it would be like a blacksmith not using a furnace or an alchemist not using a cauldron. What was the point?

Zac carefully cut the stem open, making sure to infuse the scar with the illusory engravings of [Cosmic Infusion]. One by one, esoteric runes spread across the branch in the wake of the incision. They almost looked like natural markings left by nature itself, but they were rather the result of an intricate web of Void Energy.

The once clumsy attempts had become far more precise, mostly thanks to the synthetic experience awarded through the visions. Practicing extraction and infusing over the past two years had felt like picking up an old hobby you'd put aside for years. He wasn't learning; he was re-learning.

With precision came speed, which was just as important for the success of the extraction. Every second that passed after Zac began the process was a second of entropy where the essence of the branch melted away. The quicker the extraction, the more complete the essence you could use for an infusion. If you took too long, the Dao would become flawed, which was like drinking from a poisoned well.

Soon, Zac had cut a scar along the length of the branch. At that point, it floated into the air, hovering vertically over the workbench. Zac's left hand formed a claw beneath, while the right continuously moved around. One mote of starlight, or rather deathlight, after another appeared on his fingertips and entered the branch.

It had taken months of trial and error to get the ball rolling, but Zac had long since explored the ways [Cosmic Infusion] worked and didn't work in the current Era. Unsurprisingly, it didn't work with either Cosmic Energy or Miasma. He had to solely use his Void Energy to engrave and infuse the innumerable seals that made up the first chapter of [Cosmic Forge].

However, the method did work with his Dao. The method would function without any 'Cosmic Truths' as the First People called it, but Dao did elevate the technique just like how it worked with skills. The extraction became more efficient, as was the infusion. Zac even suspected he could add some of his own comprehension to the process, though he hadn't reached that point yet. Unfortunately, using Dao only

worked when Zac worked with materials of matching attunements. In other words, items crafted for himself would be better than items he crafted for people with different paths.

It was not much of a loss, considering he didn't have any plans to craft on a large scale. He was content as long as he could improve his gear and create useful tools. It was just a welcome bonus if he also could improve the gear of those close to him.

Twenty minutes passed as one mote after another entered the branch. Finally, a glistening grey liquid appeared on the bottom of the branch. It wasn't actually a liquid, though. It was intangible essence taking the shape of sap. With other items, the essence would appear in other forms. One drop after another fell and was caught in the air by Zac's prepared claw.

The technique of [Cosmic Forge] was simply magical. It was based on an unfathomably deep understanding of the interaction between essence and materia. Truthfully, Zac had some trouble understanding exactly what essence was. But essentially, it was the 'magic' inside Natural Treasures. Whatever allowed them to help cultivators gain attributes, open nodes, or even improve their affinities. [Cosmic Forge] took this magic and crammed it into a weapon.

You could liken the essence locked inside a Natural Treasure to a ship moored on a dock with thousands of ropes. [Cosmic Infusion] severed those ropes one by one, without damaging or changing the ship, until it was completely detached. At that point, the ship would naturally sail away. In the second step, Zac could steer the ship into the recipient item. There, the opposite process would happen: he would create thousands of new ropes and moor the vessel at the new docks.

Of course, the analogy wasn't 100% exact. The structural integrity and properties of a Natural Treasure were almost completely dependent on the energy and Dao inside. So when disconnecting the essence from the Natural Treasure, you also had to keep the material stable until you had extracted what you needed. The shallow scars covering his hands were a painful reminder of what would happen if you lost control.

The extraction was difficult on its own, but the actual infusion was another beast altogether. Zac had thought it'd be like building a tower, placing another floor atop the foundation he'd just built. Part of it was true, but there was also another dimension to it. Infusing multiple layers of essence into a weapon also felt like packing a suitcase.

The first couple of layers weren't too taxing. There was a lot of room available in the suitcase. Even if you made mistakes, you could comfortably place the items inside. But the more mistakes, the quicker the suitcase would fill up. By the point you reached the later stages of the Cosmic Cycle, the suitcase was already filled to the brim. Unfortunately, you couldn't just take things out and repack the suitcase. At least not until he mastered [Cosmic Extraction], though Zac wasn't sure that was how the method worked.

Luckily, there were many things that Zac could do to make the process more efficient. The most obvious was to improve his skill in using [Cosmic Forge]. The higher his skill, the more efficient the infusion. But that was just part of the equation. Improving your technique was the first of the three pillars you needed to maximize the result of [Cosmic Infusion]. Or maximizing the result of most crafting methods, really.

The second pillar was a comprehensive understanding of materials. The better Zac understood the materials, both the treasure to extract and the tool you wanted to infuse, the better the result. Each material was unique and required him to adjust the extraction process slightly. Like how he needed to cut a precise incision in this branch and extract the essence from within. There were few shortcuts in accumulating this sort of comprehension. It required endless trial and error. He could somewhat sidestep that requirement for items resonating with his Dao, but practice makes perfect.

The final pillar of crafting was the recipe. Some pills required dozens, even thousands of herbs. But would you throw them all into the cauldron blindly? Of course not. Concocting a pill required exact order and timing to produce the optimal result. Any small changes and the pill might be reduced to toxic gunk.

It was the same for [Cosmic Infusion]. The results would be vastly superior if he followed a 'recipe.' For example, the Life-attuned [Sundew Stalks] followed by the Beast Core of a Transcendence Larva could set a stable foundation to add more infusions. Reverse the order, and you'd have a mess on your hands. The interlocked essence would grow so unstable he could only add one or two infusions from that point.

[Cosmic Forge] didn't contain any finished recipes for creating multi-cycle infusions. Instead, it contained comprehensive sets of rules and concepts that would allow you to build a sturdy theoretical foundation. From there, Zac could either work on instinct or create recipes that would allow him to craft high-quality items repeatedly. Zac was far from mastering these theories, but he had already started to get an intuitive sense of what materials were needed for proper progression. Of course, that was only for his own Daos so far.

In addition, he'd discovered a few tricks that helped. The most basic rule of [Cosmic Infusion] was that the first cycle only required low-quality items. That alone was quite impressive—the ability to create a Middle-quality item with only low-quality materials. And that was nothing compared to the fourth cycle; the ability to reliably create supreme-quality tools with only peak-quality materials.

It wasn't unheard of for a skilled craftsman, but you almost needed the stars to align to accomplish something like that. They'd have to enter a temporary state of enlightenment like when he created [Pillar of Desolation]. And even then, it required a hefty amount of luck. Of course, the skill and planning required to accomplish something like that were undoubtedly staggering even for a top-tier method like [Cosmic Forge]. Even the quest for [Cosmic Extraction] only asked him to infuse two cycles and create a High-quality item.

Interestingly, Zac had long found that Low-quality materials were not just the minimum for the first cycle; they were the optimal choice. Zac had mountains of high-grade materials to practice with, but he quickly realized they contained too much essence and energies that were too complex. Using those kinds of materials right off the bat increased the complexity and difficulty without improving the result.

It was better to start right at the bottom of the pole. Dirt-cheap attuned materials you'd only buy in bulk seemed to be the optimal choice for the first couple of cycles. From there, you'd use better and better low-quality materials until you used something right at the threshold of medium quality for the final infusion of the cycle.

Small streams floated from the essence blob in Zac's hand toward the axe waiting on the workstation. They formed one mysterious pattern after another until the whole weapon was covered. At that point,

the axe floated into the air and turned over, allowing Zac to coat the back. Sweat poured down Zac's forehead as he strained his soul to maintain control.

[Cosmic Forge] had confirmed his energy control with Void Energy was extremely high in contrast to his control over Cosmic Energy and Miasma. But using his Dao to complement the process put pressure on even his Three Fates Soul. To perfectly utilize his Dao, he had to infuse every single rune with a separate stream of mental energy. His current limits were 54 streams, or rather 27 streams from each of his two souls. Any more than that, and he'd get so slow and clumsy that it would do more harm than good. Still, it was a great step forward, and the practice even helped him with his Dao Braids.

Of course, he'd already found an alternative route in that regard.

A full hour passed as the branch grew increasingly withered while the axe started radiating an oppressive aura. Suddenly, the weapon released a weak shockwave that turned the branch into ash. A smile spread across Zac's face as he grasped the axe out of the air.

A full Cosmic Cycle. The unadorned practice axe emitted an ominous aura of Death, and it was clearly sturdier and sharper than before. Scanning it with his senses found no major imperfections. The interlaced layers of [Cosmic Forge] were mostly harmonious, though too many mistakes had been made for it to reach a second Cosmic Cycle. It was only halfway to finishing the quest, but he still felt it was great progress. He had spent two full years reaching this point, but most of that time had been spent looking for items to feed his Omnitool.

Swinging it a few times, he felt far more in tune with the weapon than before.

"What about now?" Zac asked into the air.

'I told you. No bounty,' an exasperated Null answered. 'None of your Void methods, no matter if we're discussing your Body Tempering Manual or the Craftsman heritage, are worth any Mana. And no, I don't know why. I applied and got denied. Try inventing normal things instead if you want that kind of bounty.'

"Well, worth a shot," Zac grunted.

Having finally reached this point, Zac felt it was time to finally focus on that ominous feeling. He had felt like a blade was trained at his neck for weeks, but he couldn't pinpoint the source. At first, he'd thought he was being paranoid since things had run so smoothly lately. But the feeling wouldn't go away, and he could tell something was afoot.

He walked out of his workshop at the bottom of Mount Illumination and began his ascent. As he walked, he opened his Status Screen to make sure he hadn't gained any mana for creating an attuned axe. No changes.

[Mana: 41,023]

Two years had passed since he got his hands on [Cosmic Forge], and he'd barely averaged 1,000 Mana a month since then. And that was after running himself ragged. It wasn't bad by any means, but it was quite a pathetic haul compared to getting almost 20,000 Mana in less than two months. Certainly, part of the reason was he spent a decent chunk of Mana on the simulation array and Enlightenment Chambers to speed up his comprehension of [Cosmic Infusion].

However, the biggest explanation was that some of the zones had been beyond his skill to deal with reliably. Red Zones were no joke, even for him. Finally getting a Mana domain had helped a bit. Still, it wasn't like a low-level domain was enough to keep a Red Zone's incredibly powerful and unpredictable environments at bay. Besides, he had only visited Zones that weren't aligned with his path.

The worst of the bunch was the Chrono Well, where he'd lost over a month's worth of entrance fees without finishing the quest or finding an item for his Omnitool. He'd lost almost 5,000 mana that month alone, and it wasn't the only month where he'd tallied a loss.

Furthermore, the Mana fee was starting to get noticeable now that he'd entered the fifth echelon. It currently cost him 400 Mana a month just to retain his Mana Domain. It was no wonder so few managed to go beyond 100,000 Mana. You had to push yourself quite hard to just break even at that point, especially considering it got harder and harder to earn Mana from duels at the higher echelons. One mistake that left you bedridden could cost you half an echelon's worth of Mana.

Still, the fifth echelon in just over two years was well ahead of schedule. Catheya and Ogras were only on the third, even if they'd worked hard on both missions and bounties. However, they were both still making improvements thanks to the various opportunities in the Perennial Vastness, and they were getting better at using [Perennial Transformations] by the day.

Zac spent the next hour climbing back toward the peak, inwardly grumbling at Null's refusal to let him set up teleportation arrays at the foot or on the other mountains.

"You have a message from Kruta the Second," Null suddenly said just as Zac reached the crest.

"Really?" Zac said with surprise.

Zac had kept in contact with the barbarian after they met in the Quarry. Kruta had come for a duel and to gawk when the rumors of his ability to swap between two races had started to spread. Zac had planned to keep it a secret as a hidden ace after getting so much Mana right out the gates, but he realized it was impossible after a few people had managed to see his blueprint in his human form. It was just too eye-catching, so he had opted to give up on subterfuge and scam some Mana before it was too late.

Kruta had also joined him for two outings into the Orange Zone battlefields. The barbarian almost exclusively stayed in those regions because of his path, and it turned out he had a very useful ability. He was a faith cultivator calling upon the spirits of his tribe's ancestors. A soul whisp of some old warlord lived in his body, resulting in him being adopted by a warchief from the main tribe.

It was an interesting cultivation path, but that wasn't why Kruta was such an asset on the ancient battlefields. The barbarian could actually commune with the lingering wills to some degree. Occasionally, the fallen soldiers took a liking to him and shared some secrets. Their two missions hadn't resulted in any supreme treasure, but both had walked away with massive rewards from the quest.

Had Kruta found a new opportunity? Was this why he'd been so unsettled over the past days?

"Buddy, I have big news," the message began. "Something is happening in the Stand of Saeward. The spirits are stirring like they're about to rise from the grave, and weird tremors are releasing scary

energies. I think something big is about to happen within a week at most. I don't dare go alone, but maybe if I had a helping hand... You up for an adventure?"

Zac thoughtfully looked at the communication crystal for a few minutes. This seemed like a perfect opportunity, but his Danger Sense was tingling. He could almost feel fate gathering in the Stand of Saeward even if he'd never been to the restricted battlefield. Danger and opportunity appearing hand in hand. He'd never had this feeling when visiting the other Red Zones, even if a few of them had almost cost him his life.

There was something special about this one. Zac hesitated for over twenty minutes before finally recording a response. Conflict was the final key of the puzzle, and items that could match the [Calamity Core] and the [Void Engine] didn't appear every day. Not a single item he'd fed his Omnitool over the past two years was a match to those two treasures. He couldn't back down now that an opportunity had presented itself.

Thankfully, he had some time. He'd trust his guts. This excursion would be exceedingly dangerous for whatever reason, so Zac needed to ensure he was prepared. His gaze slowly turned toward the empty patch of land on the opposite side of the peak. A great treasure right within reach.

It was time.