

The Fall 1047

[Chapter 1047 - Union](#)

"Remember, if you want me to lean on you, you better be strong enough."

With that, Catheya sashayed away, her swaying hips creating a hypnotizing dance that brought back some soul-stirring memories from the past month. Zac only snapped out of the trance as Catheya turned a corner after throwing him a final wink.

"Vixen," Zac muttered with a smile as he turned toward his own storefront.

Zac had some ideas about why Catheya acted the way she did, apart from being in a good mood after breaking through. But he'd have to be a fool to stop her. Their time inside the Perennial Vastness was limited, so why not enjoy it? They could be dead tomorrow, and there was no point in leaving behind any regrets. And they hadn't only fooled around. They took some extra time, sure, but both accomplished their goals.

There was only one missing piece to the Omnitool now, but there was no immediate urgency for him to fetch it. The hammer could withstand the Dao-filled environment for over three hours already, which was more than enough to continue working on adding a second Cosmic Cycle to an F-grade tool.

The past year had proven that Cosmic Forge was not only the key to creating a working Core Formation Method. It was the key to passing through Hegemony.

The prospect of forming a High-Quality Cosmic Core right out the gate felt increasingly distant the more details were added to his plan. The glossed-over sections from when he first put together the step-by-step method hid hard-to-solve issues when put under a magnifying glass. At the same time, he didn't have any Cultivation Manual that would slowly refine his core, leaving him with no choice but to add more treasures in the future to push it from Middle to Peak Quality.

His Cosmic Core needed to be ready for that.

Today, he could add twenty-eight layers to his practice axes, just six short of a second Cosmic Cycle. But those axes had maxed out their potential. There was no way they'd ever manage to withstand completing the cycle. As for adding a third and a fourth? Forget about it.

The same thing could be said for his Cosmic Core. It wasn't enough for him to form a Middle-quality Cosmic Core. He needed to do it in a way where he ended up with a stable product whose potential wasn't exhausted. If not, he would be in serious trouble. Hegemony wasn't like the E-grade. The stage couldn't be brute forced, even if you had pills and treasures at your beck and call.

Some unique items could help mitigate the problems with a messy core. However, there was a reason most Hegemons, including Cultivators, were stuck right at the threshold of the grade. They had formed subpar cores with troublesome or even irreparable issues, which meant they had reached the end of their cultivation journey. The few that managed to push a bit further were generally stuck at Middle Hegemony.

There were only four bottlenecks in the D-grade, but each was like an insurmountable mountain if you didn't come prepared. [Cosmic Forge] was the key to avoiding such a fate. The better he understood the

techniques, and the more memories of the inheritance he unlocked, the more time and effort he'd save down the road.

Zac spent another two months working on his crafting techniques and formation plan until he finally found a suitable mission. It would take him into the depths of a Life-attuned Red Zone, one he had detailed information on, courtesy of Valsa—a perfect opportunity to finish his hammer.

The Red Zone was called Endless Cerulean, but it wasn't an aquatic world. It was a jungle, where the vast majority of the foliage was in different hues of blue. The world had five suns, all radiating powerful fluctuations of Life. There were always at least two in the sky, creating an environment of growth without rest.

There were two dangers in Endless Cerulean, one of which was naturally the denizens of the jungle. The rife amounts of Divine Energy put both plants and beasts in a state of forced progress, which often led to unpredictable mutations and unstable mental states. Just as important, most beasts were starved.

The unique environment forced advancement, but ambient energy alone wasn't enough to fuel the process when you reached a certain point. Endless Cerulean was a vast forest full of life, yet starvation was one of the most common reasons for flora and fauna dying. Of course, they were soon turned to fertilizer, and something new sprung up to take their place.

If you wanted to live, you had to eat. And to eat, you had to fight. One day in, Zac had already been forced to kill dozens of desperate beasts. Using his aura to scare away attackers was completely useless. Hunger and pain had driven most animals mad, and the only thing he did by showing off his strength was to attract more predators.

The second danger of Endless Cerulean was related to the first. It came from the suns in the sky, the source of the energy and starvation. Each sun was like a gathering array, releasing vast amounts of Divine Energy. And while there were generally only two or three in the sky, the five suns didn't have the same orbits.

Occasionally, four or even five suns would be up simultaneously, at which point the environment would grow unbearable. Those already struggling wouldn't be able to take the incredible influx of energy, prompting mutations at the cost of longevity. Others simply died from Life Poisoning. Those who could endure would still have the effect of forced growth multiplied, resulting in a mad struggle for sustenance.

So every time five suns shone in the sky, roughly once every ten days, a huge purge would occur in Endless Cerulean. The weak would be culled while the strong feasted. During those times, cultivators had to be extremely careful of the beasts and the overflowing energy. If not careful, you'd also get hit by Life Poisoning, resulting in mutations or deviations. Obviously, Life Cultivators were better at withstanding the effects.

Zac only felt comfort as he stood atop a branch, looking at the four suns drowning the sky with golden radiance. His Cosmic Energy was full, yet large amounts of Divine Energy burrowed into his body. For most, this would be an impossible-to-block attack. For Zac, it was just nourishment. The golden vortices in his cells greedily swallowed whatever they got while [Purity of the Void] removed any impurities.

Cultivating his Body Tempering Method in this kind of environment would be significantly more effective than in his cave back home. Of course, that wasn't why he'd come here today. Zac hid his presence and aura as he continued deeper into the jungle. Even then, he was constantly attacked, and he left a trail of shredded plants and emaciated carcasses in his wake.

The zone's mission was to find Five-Life Fruits, a local specialty that could only appear when all five suns stood high in the sky. Being showered by the Life from the quintuple suns could force certain trees down a road of no return. They couldn't withstand the energy storm, so they focused on the next generation.

The trees used the surge and their spirituality to form a single fruit, dying in the process. The great accumulation of Life and a hint of death resulted in a Peak-quality Longevity Treasure. Every single one awarded 950 Mana, one of the highest rewards Zac had seen for individual items. When the fifth sun finally joined the others, Zac soon understood why.

There was only a short window of opportunity every ten days, and few trees actually managed to form a Five-Life Fruit. Even with [Forester's Constitution] and his [Lucky Beads], Zac barely found one just before one of the suns dipped beneath the horizon. He found it just as a huge snake gobbled it down after slaughtering dozens of enemies for the prize.

Two clouds of Life and Death shrouded the wounded beast just as it was about to slither away, and it didn't even get to release a hiss before its huge head flew into the sky. Zac flashed over and extracted the fruit after some gory digging. It was covered in blood and bile, but it counted according to Null. It was a nice little bonus that would pay for the outing, but Zac was more interested in the real prize. He already knew what he was looking for, thanks to Valsa, and it wasn't far away.

Two days later, Zac stood panting in the middle of an enormous clearing, his body seemingly as small as an ant before the severed tree. Its size was an aberration in this huge jungle of death and rebirth, clearly indicating it had some secret. It had been Zac's target since day one, and it hadn't been difficult to track down. The only reason it was allowed to remain standing was that it exuded an incredibly deadly aura.

The tree stockpiled vast amounts of Life every surge and then transformed into a protective domain that kept even Late-stage Beast Kings at Bay. Even Zac's Void Vajra Constitution wasn't enough to withstand that much weaponized Life, and he had been forced to activate [Void Zone] to get close. Valsa had guessed the tree contained a Supreme Life treasure and had even planned to leak its details to Zac to lure him over. The events in the Stand of Saeward had preempted those plans, and they had turned into an opportunity for him instead.

A throng of corpses was strewn around him, most of them impaled by still-slithering roots. Activating [Primal Edict] in a Life-attuned region had worked wonders, and the skill had even killed the Middle-Stage leader while Zac dealt with the others. The killed beasts had six legs with skin flaps between, looking a bit like supersized flying squirrels.

The squirrels were the only ones who could withstand the old tree's aura, having formed a symbiotic relationship. Yet even they were covered in soul-chilling growths and tumors, unable to fully endure the tree's natural aura. Yet they had desperately tried to defend their home when the domain failed to keep Zac at bay. He was essentially a homewrecker, but he didn't feel bad. These little bastards had been harassing him for days, launching deadly sneak attacks before disappearing into the dense tree crowns above.

Zac jumped onto the trunk, and splinters flew in every direction as he dug toward its center. The tree contained immense life force even after being felled. He could see the broken wood mending before his very eyes, and the tree branches were digging into the ground to create a new root system. The reason the tree had such a stubborn life force was soon made apparent.

In its center was a single strand of hair, shimmering with monstrous amounts of Life. It was almost as thick as Zac's pinky finger but no more than half a meter long. Zac didn't know what kind of beast it once belonged to, but something had transformed it into a Supreme Treasure of Pure Life. It was even covered in dense markings that made Zac think of the Stele of Conflict.

The huge tree had probably absorbed the strand while still a sapling, which allowed it to grow to its current overbearing size. Now, it would become the final ingredient for the Omnitool. Zac wasted no time taking out the little hammer and placing it against the strand. You'd have to be blind to miss this big guy toppling over, and it was just a matter of time before hunger drove one of the local tyrants into investigating.

The exposed strand of hair emitted an immense aura, but it was nothing in front of the First People's methods. A powerful force dismantled the thread and sucked it into the Omnitool, and the tree beneath Zac's feet shriveled the moment it lost the source of its power. Zac observed with rapt attention as the final rune lit up, but a sense of foreboding made him look up.

Just in time to see the golden suns obscured by a rapidly expanding cloud.

A clap of furious thunder shook the jungle, and a familiar pressure pushed down at Zac. Yet he could tell he wasn't the target of Heaven's wrath this time. That was all reserved for the Omnitool. Zac had heard of Treasure Tribulations before but didn't expect to see one right now. For one, the hammer had been crafted an eternity ago, while tribulations were supposed to appear right when the treasure was born.

Secondly, Zac didn't feel the Omnitool was an unorthodox item or something solidly on the Boundless Path. It incorporated all Daos, so it should be considered a mixed-meaning treasure within the System's purview. Of course, it was hard to argue with the crackling lightning above.

The lightning quickly gathered, and Zac had no option but to throw the Omnitool far into the sky. Intervening with a tribulation would only make things worse for himself and the Omnitool. Ultimately, he had faith in Dasorm, the First People craftsman. Even if he lived in a time before the Dao, he would surely have crafted something that could withstand a bit of lightning.

The world turned white, then purple, as the first bolt crashed into the hammer. The Omnitool began vibrating as seventeen runes lit up around it. Then, Zac saw something that made his eyes widen with shock. The Omnitool didn't just withstand the lightning; it actually used the still-lingering bolt to extract tremendous amounts of energy from the clouds above.

It even prevented the bolt from dissipating somehow, and the crackling clouds were shrinking at speed visible to Zac's eyes. The Heavens roared with fury, and a second bolt fell to mete judgment. It didn't help. The Omnitool greedily accepted the punishment and used it to form a second connection to the sky.

A third bolt never descended. The Omnitool had stolen the essence of the Heavens before it got the chance to accumulate one. Zac looked on with awe as the Omnitool floated down into his hand, only a bit warm from the tribulation.

"I can't believe you're so overbearing," Zac muttered with a smile. "I have a thing or two to learn from you."

The hammer's appearance hadn't changed since the tribulation, but it felt far more tangible in his hands. It also emitted a vast aura, like it contained a replica of the Heavens themselves. All Dao was represented inside, and Zac couldn't wait to use it to add some Cosmic Cycles.

A powerful roar in the distance shut down that idea before it could form. One of the rulers of the jungle had been awoken by the commotion, and a vast Late D-grade aura spread through the area. Zac had already activated [Void Zone] to hide his presence, and he made a beeline toward the exit.

Zac appeared in his mansion a few days later and immediately descended to his workshop at the base. Finally having stabilized the hammer was a big weight off his shoulders. He no longer needed to visit unfamiliar and confusing Red Zones. He'd be able to save weeks every month and put the saved time into furthering his studies into [Cosmic Forge].

Eight months passed, where Zac spent more than three-quarters of his time inside his mansion. He never left for more than ten days, only heading into a Red Zone based on Life, Death, or Conflict to make some quick Mana. Yet he made even more Mana than when visiting zones based on foreign peaks.

If exploring the Red Zones based on the other Dao Peaks was like swimming against the current, then visiting battlefields and worlds of Life or Death was like taking a stroll in his backyard. Very few missions managed to stump him, and some resulted in shocking payouts.

Cathey was also quite happy to have him around more, and he was making great progress on his projects. The pile of discarded practice axes gradually turned into a small hill, but his limits kept being pushed. Finally, he reached the point he'd been waiting for. The axe in his hand had already withstood thirty-three enhancements.

Zac had reached this point dozens of times already, but none of the others had been as steady as this one. Zac was nervous, but his hands were steady as he extracted the essence from a piece of rusty metal. It had once been a part of an E-grade war axe, but lying on an energy-dense battlefield for eons had transformed the shard into what could pass as a Peak Quality F-grade Natural Treasure containing the Dao of Axe. It was the perfect material for the final step of the second Cosmic Cycle.

The essence was moved to the practice axe, and Zac didn't blink for almost thirty minutes as he connected one thread after another. Finally, the essence was fully integrated, but Zac didn't relax just yet. The axe was trembling precipitously until it eventually stabilized. A fierce aura burst out of the axe as the edge grew a shade darker.

Success.

Only then did Zac breathe out in relief, but he didn't even get a chance to celebrate before a surge of memories sprouted in his mind. It almost felt like they'd always been there, but he'd just forgotten

about them for some reason. Now, the details of [Cosmic Extraction] were finally laid bare, along with the inherited experience where he somehow remembered practicing the technique for decades.

There weren't any surprises to the technique. It was almost a reversion of [Cosmic Infusion], where you extracted the equivalent of a single essence from a weapon. The process could be repeated, but each modification would make the extraction more difficult. Of course, if you messed up, there was also the risk of destroying the weapon altogether.

Zac couldn't wait to keep practicing, but he first inspected the other burst of information provided by completing the quest. Like last time, he got a preview of the next layer, probably to give him something to work toward.

The third layer of [Cosmic Forge] was called [Essence Union]. It still wasn't a proper crafting technique, but it was getting closer. Zac was only privy to a short introduction to the technique, but that small piece was enough to fill him with excitement and anticipation. The first two layers were pretty straightforward; to add or remove essence to a piece of equipment.

[Essence Union] was a technique that would make the process more refined. It was very rare to find an essence that perfectly matched your path. But what if you could take the useful parts of two different Natural Treasures and add some of your Dao as glue? Creating tailor-made essences would allow you to craft a piece of equipment much more suited to your path.

Zac almost drooled imagining using [Essence Union] to transform all the treasures he'd collected for his Core Formation into perfectly suited materials. Unfortunately, unlocking the next chapter was easier said than done.

Cosmic Forge (Unique, Inheritance): Extract two Cosmic Cycles from a three-cycle refined item. Reward: [Essence Union]. (0/34)