

The Fall 1048

[Chapter 1048 - Approaching the Limits](#)

The quest asked Zac to remove two Cosmic Cycles from a 'three-cycle item' and a refined item at that. In other words, he needed to extract the spirituality of a piece of High-quality E-grade equipment essence by essence until it was reduced to Low Quality. Not only that, but the product needed to be in harmony and not teetering on the brink of collapse.

The task seemed daunting, but Zac was full of vigor as he immediately set out to accomplish the task. Cosmic Extraction didn't provide much use for his Core Formation, but [Essence Union] definitely held a lot of potential. It might allow him to completely reinvent the Core Formation process and side-step the biggest pitfall of being a Mortal Hegemon.

Unfortunately, will and desire weren't always enough to move mountains.

Two months had passed, and Zac blankly looked at the shattered remains of the axe in front of him. He couldn't believe how much more difficult extraction was than infusion. He was making progress, but he hadn't managed to extract a single essence so far. Every piece of spirituality in equipment, even those ill-fitting with the rest, was an integral part of their makeup.

To extract it was to leave a gaping hole in the tool's inner structure, akin to removing an array flag from a formation. You needed speed and a great understanding of energy and materials to quickly rearrange the remaining spirituality before the thing destabilized and exploded. And this was just the first layer. The difficulty would exponentially increase as you removed more and more pieces from the item.

Technically, it was within the realm of possibility to finish the quest before he broke through. He had plenty of gear in his Spatial Rings, and there were always some guests selling equipment stockpiles to make a quick buck. But the task itself was just so incredibly complicated, and the inherited memories were far from enough.

Zac was confident he'd get there eventually, but not within the time limit he'd set for himself. If he wanted to use [Essence Union] for his core formation, he'd probably have to stay inside the Perennial Vastness for another decade or two. For lack of better options, Zac eventually returned to basics.

The problem with [Cosmic Extraction] was that his theoretical foundations were severely lacking. It was just like when he tried to create his two stances. He was putting the cart before the horse, trying to leapfrog the equivalent of the Formation Stage and directly work on the Integration Stage. Practicing extraction like this was simply inefficient.

So Zac decided to start from the beginning. He needed to learn to infuse three cycles into an E-grade axe before he could start dismantling it. Building the weapon himself would help him understand how the essences and spiritual threads held an item together. This kind of practice would also help with his core formation plans.

Their lives had entered a stable routine by that point. Ogras and Catheya often teamed up for missions while snatching the occasional bounty through [Perennial Transformations]. Zac joined now and then, but it wasn't really necessary. Both had managed to push their strength even further with their latest breakthroughs, so Zac didn't feel he had to worry about their safety anymore.

The Seven Heavens failed to ever make a comeback in the Perennial Vastness. As expected, another prince came, but he didn't accomplish much. The Undead Empire attacked with wild abandon, crippling his operations before he could set them up.

The prince ultimately left after just one year, having found himself stuck at an impasse. His movements were constantly tracked, and the previous bloody slaughters had made others leery of lending a helping hand. He couldn't even gather Mana in peace without Revenants tracking his every move.

None ever attacked him, though. The Revenants obviously weren't his match. They just lingered at a safe distance, forming the same intangible threat Zac had endured before Valsa struck. The prince eventually stopped visiting even Green Zones, fearful he'd meet the same fate as his sister. Then one day, his storefront was gone.

As such, there was nothing to hamper Zac's progress, and the Mana was veritably flowing into his accounts. It allowed him to spend extravagantly in the Keys of Ascension and similar unique zones to speed up his progress with Cosmic Forge and his Core Formation plan. Since he had such an abundance of Mana, he even tried other ways to improve.

Unfortunately, he was fast reaching the same conclusion as Kruta. He had exhausted his potential in the E-grade. His Soul and Constitution required far-too-much energy to progress. His technique had reached a bottleneck as well. It wasn't that his stances were refined to perfection but that he had no further insights to infuse. The two techniques were based on his Daos and were just Middle Dao Branches. That level of understanding wasn't enough to reach the higher stages of techniques.

There was only one holdout where he felt there was still room for improvement; Hidden Nodes. He already had an incredible number of nodes, and all of them were the kind that could evolve. Most would be over the moon with such a result, yet Zac would be lying if he said he was satisfied. Was six really the limit?

Certainly, there was also [Quantum Gate], but he didn't count that as a natural Hidden Node. It felt more like the backdoor his Technocrat mother had wanted to use to sneak the Dao of Technology into a cultivator.

Zac was unsure whether there were any more Void Emperor Nodes hiding in some corner of his body. His instincts said no; it felt like the three formed a single system. But there certainly should be more Draugr nodes. There was just no way three was the limit for a bloodline like Eoz. Even Catheya had opened her fifth Hidden Nodes inside the Perennial Vastness, four of which were bloodline nodes.

Yet Zac came up empty-handed even after spending 20,000 Mana and multiple C-grade Nexus Coins on treasures and opportunities meant to localize Hidden Nodes. Catheya had tried to help as best as she could, but nothing worked. Eventually, Zac came up with two possible answers.

One, his odd constitution had made him lose some of his Draugr nodes. Perhaps the Void Emperor-nodes had blocked their appearance. Second, there might be a problem with how he became a descendant of Eoz. Perhaps he didn't carry the full bloodline.

After all, the bloodline had been inherited from some samples found in a spatial crack on the frontier. That Draugr corpse definitely wasn't Eoz himself, but rather some descendant. Even if his Duplicity Core

had somehow purified the bloodline to the point he had triggered an 'Ancestral Descent,' it might be incomplete.

Perhaps that issue would be fixed by visiting the Abyssal Shore and reconnecting with the Abyssal Lake. But for now, the situation looked bleak. Eventually, Zac stopped wasting resources on a fool's errand. He even gave Ogras [Hanamon's Awakening], the node-opening treasure he got from Yrial.

It was extremely precious but worthless to Zac since it only worked when you had already localized a node. The demon had long since done just that and was slowly working on breaking it open. The treasure allowed him to finish the job in one go and spend his extra Mana on other things.

Having nothing else to work on, Zac focused all his attention on Cosmic Forge. It took him one year of painstaking effort to reach two Cosmic Cycles with an E-grade item. The technique was the same, but the far more powerful insights and energies made the process much more volatile. And while he'd nurtured an almost instinctual understanding of [Cosmic Forge]'s concepts, progress only grew more difficult.

A highly anticipated guest eventually provided a break from his practice. Zac had just destroyed another practice axe when a snicker almost made Zac's heart jump out of his mouth. Zac swirled around, finding Esmeralda standing inside his workshop.

The toad hadn't appeared once since dropping off the missives, and Zac was shocked at her progress over the past three years. She was over two meters taller and possessed a significantly more powerful aura. It wasn't enough to pressure Zac, but there was a mysterious depth to her that made him think of his Void Emperor bloodline.

Esmeralda had probably managed to awaken another part of her heritage, which was one of the most important aspects of a beast's cultivation. She was progressing quickly, which was undoubtedly a benefit of her unique situation. Of course, Zac was certain Esmeralda was working hard on her cultivation, just like him. The Left Imperial Palace was the key to breaking her curse and returning to her former glory.

"You scared me," Zac sighed as he looked at the toad anxiously. "It's done?"

Esmeralda grinned, making a few signs that said something along the lines of it being child's play.

"And everything's there?" Zac said with a raised brow.

Esmeralda scoffed and made a series of croaks and explanations. The tirade was both longer and more complex than he was used to, and it took Zac over ten minutes to figure out what the toad was trying to convey. She didn't want to stay long, saying she had to leave to get something important. The next time they met, it would be in Zecia before the trial started.

"My home world is newly integrated and protected by the System," Zac said. "How will you find me?"

Esmeralda grandly slapped her chest, indicating it wouldn't be a problem. The next moment, she spat out an opalescent pearl still covered in gastric juice. Zac looked at the thing with a grimace but still accepted the thing. A few signs indicated that Esmeralda could find that sphere, so he just needed to place it on a Gathering Array on his planet.

"In case your method doesn't pan out, you can send me a message through the mercantile system," Zac said, handing her an information crystal.

Esmeralda huffed with annoyance over Zac's lack of faith but still took the crystal. After that, she left, leaving Zac to his own devices. Zac didn't mind, and he eagerly rushed down to the mountain's base, where he infused a bit of energy into the ring before throwing it out. Even then, Zac was forced to activate [Earthstrider] to get out of the way as a mountain of treasure rapidly formed.

The old thief had already explained the situation. Esmeralda had broken all seals and triggers, even those placed on any items inside. However, doing so had destabilized the ring, much like his experiments with [Cosmic Extraction]. She had applied a technique that would keep it temporarily stable, but the moment it was activated, it would spit out everything before collapsing.

Zac's breaths turned heavy as he gazed upon the mountain of wealth. He almost gave in to the adolescent dream of swimming in a sea of treasure, but he reined himself in. Instead, he called over Catheya and Ogras to help sort through the pile.

"I've been saying you should invite me more often," Ogras said, his eyes veritably burning as dozens of shadowy tendrils dug into the mountain.

He even conjured eight Shadow Servants, all looking like beautiful Torrid Demons, to help out. They were part of the prize for incorporating that odd little thing inside the Shifting Dream into his Spiritlock Physique. Of course, the appearance of the Shadow Servants was all Ogras. When these things had made their first appearance, Catheya had almost blown a gasket. Zac had been forced to seclude himself to avoid listening to her and Ogras' complaints.

However, something had changed after two months, and Catheya no longer seemed to mind the demon's antics. She had even figured out a way to give the Shadow Servants dazzling dresses made of ice and mist. Around the same time, Zac started to receive positive comments about Catheya from the demon, and he recounted stories where having a stable Dao Companion had gotten one demon or another out of a jam.

Zac could smell the conspiracy but was happy to play along since it kept the peace. It took over three days to go through it all, even when working together. The number of arrays, talismans, and raw resources was simply shocking. The First Heaven had probably wanted to prepare for any eventuality inside the Perennial Vastness and just sent Valsa inside with a huge care package.

It made Zac lament that all Nexus Coins on Valsa's person had been returned to the System. He wouldn't be surprised if her wallet held his whole net worth many times over. Still, the prize was nothing to scoff at. A tentative calculation put the normal materials at over 15 C-grade Nexus Coins. And with the Zecia war approaching and resources growing scarce, that number could be significantly higher.

The cash infusion was his biggest one since returning from the Orom World, but it wasn't quite as exciting now that he had a lucrative Cosmic Vessel production line. Zac was more interested in the unique treasures and cultivation manuals. He found items for both [Love's Bond] and [Verun's Bite], and even Haro got some rare resources that would help speed up his growth.

There were six cultivation manuals in Valsa's Possession, though none seemed to be the one she practiced. They were rather those of her followers, and Zac guessed she had them to better understand

the capabilities of her deathsworn. Most importantly, the manuals were all Peak D-grade, which essentially was the limits of conventional cultivation manuals.

After that, you'd have to create something individualized whether you wanted to or not. If you aimed for Monarchy, you were probably better off modifying the manual earlier. Still, any of these manuals was enough to become the foundation of a peak force in Zecia, and Zac suddenly had six of them. It wouldn't help them in the short run but drastically improve Earth's long-term potential.

There were also over twenty Inheritance Skill Crystals, all of them of incredible quality. Just like when he got his hands on [Abyssal Phase], they'd let you inherit not just the skill itself but many memories associated with them. While all the skills were good, Zac didn't find anything he wanted to add to his repertoire.

Every extra skill you added to your pathways would have to be accounted for when forming your core. Creating a skill perfectly suited to your path was one thing; it didn't require a lot of work to incorporate. But a semi-suitable skill not of his own creation? It would create an energy imbalance that could cause problems even for cultivators. Zac already had enough baggage not to want to deal with that headache. He had even forgone his plans to create or swap out any more skills before reaching Hegemony.

Catheya was the same. Most of the skills wouldn't even work with Miasma, and the others weren't suitable for her. She was more interested in some general compendiums and War Arrays they'd found, which would help her broaden her understanding of formations. Catheya ultimately chose to focus on Domains, even with the challenge it presented. But as Zac had suspected, she also wanted to add formations to her path when she had the time.

Ogras took one of the crystals, a scouting skill called [Wordly Cognizance]. The skill was a lot like the mysterious bowl Vai used to help navigate the dangers of the Void Star, and Zac felt it might be extremely useful inside the Left Imperial Palace. It would provide the demon with a second sense where he'd be able to sense any energy disturbances for kilometers in every direction.

Even people trying to hide their aura usually left some clues to their presence in the way the energy flowed around them. Only the most talented scouts and assassins managed to completely erase any trace of their presence. The demon hoped to incorporate his network of shadows with the skill to amplify the effect even further, but he wouldn't use the skill crystal until after breaking through. Just like Zac, Ogras didn't want any extra baggage at this point.

The rest of the skills and resources would return with him to Port Atwood and become another infusion into the budding empire's foundations.

Esmeralda's visit was only a short break before things returned to normal. Months turned into a blur until Zac finally accomplished his goal, where he managed to infuse three full cycles into an E-grade axe. He hadn't even touched [Cosmic Extraction] all that time, only focusing on shoring up his foundations. Unfortunately, there was no time to delve into the method now.

It took another two months to incorporate what he'd learned into his Core Formation Method, and almost seven years had passed since entering the Perennial Vastness by that point. It felt like the years had passed in a flash compared to his seclusion back on Earth. But Zac could feel it in his bones; it was time to finally move on.

Zac opened his status screen, looking at the final line briefly.

[Mana: 109,534]

He was at the limits of the Eleventh Echelon, where he'd stayed for the past three months. He hadn't yet felt any hint of the Mana Poisoning as most described it. However, there was a sense of rejection, like the Perennial Vastness was trying to push him out. It was still manageable, but there wasn't much point in stubbornly resisting.

Climbing any further wasn't really an option either. The tenth echelon wasn't a hard limit on Mana, but hidden safeguards were implemented. Reaching the eleventh had added a whopping 1,000 Mana in a monthly fee, compared to the 100 Mana per echelon in the first ten. He'd still be able to slowly increase his Mana if he applied himself. But with over 3,000 Mana a month in fees, Zac wasn't sure he'd be able to cross the next echelon.

Not only that, but Null had already confirmed that the pressure on him would drastically increase if he kept accruing Mana. He was already pushing it by crossing 100,000. Zac doubted he'd even reach the twelfth echelon before the sense of rejection would mess with his Core Formation. The flip side was that each additional echelon beyond the tenth provided significant benefits.

Reaching the twelfth would improve the environment during your breakthrough by 30%. Better yet, you'd no longer have to pay rent the second you entered seclusion for Core Formation. The Mana you'd gathered would stay with you until the end. And there just so happened to be one final payout waiting for him, one that would let him soar to the 14th echelon in one go.

It was finally time to fetch the remnants.