

The Fall 1039

[Chapter 1039 - Partnership](#)

Zac and Kruta were exhausted even if Sendor had healed their wounds, but the thought of loot brought a spring in their step. The two spent the next thirty minutes breaking the arrays before carefully harvesting the Conflict-Attuned flowers and herbs in the garden, and they didn't even spare the Spiritual Soil. It wasn't every day you found D-grade War Attuned soil, at least not soil that wasn't sullied by resentment and blood.

Next, they turned to Saeward himself. They hadn't dared pilfer through his remains right after returning, afraid some lingering Tribulation Lightning or remnants of Saeward's consciousness hid within the puppet. Unfortunately, they didn't find much of value. The metals that were once supposed to hold the consciousness of a Monarch had been reduced to nothing but scorched refuse that crumbled from the slightest amount of exerted pressure.

Zac even doubted the material had ever been as good as whatever Saeward used in his original attempt. Seeing as Sendor had somehow meddled with the power of the Tribulation Lightning, he'd most likely brought the puppet itself down to a reasonable level for the scenario. Still, they eventually managed to gather three fist-sized clumps of mostly unscathed metal Zac estimated to be at early D-grade, bordering Supreme Quality.

It had looked as fragile as paper when faced with Heaven's wrath, but Zac wasn't able to twist it at all when straining. Better yet, it contained a strong attunement to the Dao of Conflict, and there was even a hint of the punishing aura of the Tribulation Lightning locked within.

'I want this,' Alea's voice echoed in his mind.

'Alright,' Zac agreed. 'Some of those array orbs are still mostly intact. I thought their materials might suit you.'

'You know how to treat a lady,' Alea laughed as her consciousness receded into the necklace.

"Do you want this?" Zac asked.

"No good," Kruta rejected while furiously searching for a spatial ring within the rubble. "The material has gained a hint of tribulation. It would be harmful to my ancestor; you keep it."

Zac nodded in thanks and had soon swept the whole area for anything in decent shape. Unfortunately, they didn't find any Spatial Treasures hidden within the rubble. Their original goal had been to find Saeward's inheritance, but it looked like Saeward took his hoard to the grave when the Tribulation Lightning ripped apart his Inner World. There were still some weak spatial fluctuations around the puppet, but neither Zac nor Kruta had the skills or tools to open a pathway to its crumbling fragments.

And even if they did, would they dare enter? The fragments of Saeward's world were likely extremely dangerous and unstable.

With the atrium and outer sections picked clean, the two tried to break into the hidden compartments of the castle. But no matter what they did, they couldn't find a way inside. It wasn't just an issue of the stones being incredibly durable. A new array had awakened, which rendered their attacks useless. The

two kept trying for over an hour, with Zac even swapping to his Draugr form and using everything but [Pillar of Desolation].

They had managed to carve some decent scars into the stone, but it had healed up in seconds. Worse, they had been able to spot another defensive array within. They never found any weaknesses Zac could exploit either. The array hid within the sealed wing, empowering the stones.

"Damn, the chambers were probably set up to seal shut when the arrays lost their mental connection to Saeward," Kruta said, glaring at the puppet. "A thoroughbred bastard to the end."

"There's nothing we can do?" Zac asked.

"I doubt it," Kruta grunted as he swung his blade at the wall once more. "These types of arrays are a pain in the ass. We'd have to besiege it, exhausting more energy than it can absorb from the environment."

"And that's easier said than done," Zac said, looking across the atrium with a grimace. "The energy density is almost unbearable with Saeward's array gone."

"That's not the only problem. Someone like Saeward would have installed fallbacks. Breaking the array might release a deadly attack or destroy everything inside. Perhaps both."

"And an unorthodox cultivator like Saeward probably would keep anything of value on himself," Zac agreed. "You never know when you'd have to run."

The two deliberated for a bit longer but eventually decided to be happy with what they had. Neither wanted to wait for the rest of the guests to arrive and besiege the inner chamber, which could take months. Zac had already accomplished his goal by getting the [Warstone] and dealing with the hidden threat. As a bonus, he even gained some important information and good materials for Alea.

That fact alone indicated there probably wasn't anything worthwhile inside the inner chambers. Sendor had already provided the scenario with enough benefits through the [Warstone], herbs, and incredible energy density of the castle. So Zac was in high spirits as they left the castle, where they performed a cursory sweep of the battlefield before heading toward the exit.

Kruta's mood was even better, especially after stumbling onto the [Warstone] inside his Spatial Ring while they tried to break into the inner chambers. Zac had completely forgotten to mention the treasure because of the seal appearing, but Kruta had laughed so loud the castle walls shook upon finding it. That jubilation only grew upon learning that Zac already had his own piece. Between the Seal of the Indomitable Court and the [Warstone], Kruta really came out ahead.

"Haha, a good day to be Kruta!" the barbarian said as they emerged from the other side of the haze.

"There's still Valsa's treasure as well," Zac added. "If we figure out a way to open that thing."

"Keep it," Kruta said with a generous wave. "How could some E-grade cultivator's resources compare to the gift of the Indomitable Court? You know what? Here."

Zac looked over curiously and gasped upon seeing the barbarian produce three pieces of bone. Each one was a different color, but they all emitted incredibly ferocious auras and thrummed with bloodline power. Zac felt like he was staring at three primordial beasts rather than bones. At first, it looked like they were engraved, but Zac soon realized they were naturally formed patterns.

"Emperor Bones?" Zac whistled.

"Refined fragments of them," Kruta nodded. "I saw you didn't find anything for your beautiful Beastcrafted axe. C-grade bones would destroy your axe, but my tribe has extracted most of its energy. What remains is far purer than what you'd find from some Beast Kings. They should be the perfect nourishment for your companion's next step."

Verun's desirous roars in Zac's mind confirmed Kruta's words. The Spirit Tool vibrated inside his Spatial Ring, and it almost felt like it would try to break out. Of course, he couldn't let Verun consume something like that in the middle of a Red Zone, so Zac appeased the spirit before turning to Kruta.

"Are you sure?" Zac said.

"What are a few bones between friends?" Kruta grinned.

Zac nodded in thanks and accepted the bones before the two continued. The Stand of Saeward felt quite desolate now that the native inhabitants were all gone, even if the lands were still teeming with energy. With the hidden threat dealt with, they made much better time on their return trip. The only interruptions were a few encounters with other guests, which provided some loot and Mana.

It turned out that none of the other cultivators had experienced the destruction and subsequent reformation of the realm, and neither had they seen the face in the sky or the System's arrival. They had only felt a series of powerful surges of energy coming from the heart of the zone, after which they'd realized all Hero Souls and puppets were gone.

As expected, many were moving toward Saeward's castle in search of answers, but the lack of a quest meant most guests remained cautious. Most believed that the energy surges were just the kick-off to the event, and Zac heard many of Kruta's old theories as they interrogated people. A few coalitions were still trying to guard the exit, but making a bloody example out of a group quickly opened a path.

"I'm going into seclusion for a bit," Kruta said as they appeared in Vastness City. "I need to digest all this stuff."

"We'll talk later," Zac nodded.

Kruta waved, and the two returned to their respective storefronts. Zac sighed in relief as he appeared in his mansion. The familiar fluctuations from within the walls provided a sense of security, and he realized he had held onto a ball of stress all this time. It was no wonder. He had mostly become accustomed to life and death on the battlefield, but it was something else entirely to be targeted by a Supremacy.

There was just nothing that could be done when faced with that kind of threat—he wasn't even an ant to beings like that. Valsa had only summoned a whisp of her ancestor's true power, but that sliver had been enough to disintegrate a whole world.

Suddenly, Zac felt very alone, and he sent out a message. It didn't even take ten seconds before the Teleportation Array activated and Catheya emerged. She breathed out in relief upon seeing Zac was okay before hugging him tightly.

"Thank the Heavens!" Catheya sighed. "I've had a bad feeling for days, but we couldn't find anything. What happened?"

"It's a long story," Zac said as he led her into his living room. "I—"

Zac's words were caught in his throat as a large shape suddenly blocked his vision. A toad.

"What the hell?" Zac exclaimed, his mind trying but failing to figure out how this odd toad had managed to track him down all the way from the Calamity.

Catheya yelled in alarm, and a wall of frigid ice appeared to shield them. However, as a gentle voice spoke, the ice melted like snow in spring.

"Her name is Esmeralda."

The voice had appeared out of nowhere, and Zac had to make a double-take as he saw a woman sitting by the window reading a book. She was human, wearing a simple white linen dress. Her strawberry yellow hair was fastened in a practical bun, and she didn't wear any tools of jewelry—not even a Spatial Ring.

Her unadorned appearance and utter lack of aura could make one mistake her for a village girl, but that obviously wasn't the case. The Dharma was partly muted thanks to his Mana, but it was still enough to drive any F-grade cultivator mad. Of course, there was also the fact that not even a guest would be able to find this place, yet she'd somehow made it her home. And with Esmeralda's lacking strength, she had to be the one who brought the toad here.

This stranger was undoubtedly another old monster, even if she didn't look as intimidating as Lord Engo or his master. The pressing question was where her allegiance lay. Was she another disciple of the Perennial Vastness? Or was she related to Valsa? Was it both?

"Dear, would you let us borrow your friend for a few minutes?" she smiled.

"A- alright," Catheya said after giving Zac a look. "I'll go take a walk in the garden."

Zac nodded, and there were only two people and a toad remaining. Esmeralda seemed content to sit and look haughty while the youthful woman looked at Zac with a mysterious smile. The silence stretched until Zac couldn't take it, even if there weren't any pressure like when Sendor observed him with his creepy gaze.

"Uh, I'm Zac."

"I'm aware. It's nice to meet you. You can call me Lova," the woman smiled as she put down the book.

"Don't mind me. I'm just here to facilitate your meeting and translate."

"Translate... for the toad?" Zac said, glancing at his old traveling companion.

The toad, or Esmeralda, seemed annoyed at Zac's demeanor, and it began croaking while forming a series of signs that Zac, for some reason, felt were insults.

"Esmeralda has been very impressed with your performance over the past years and wishes to extend an offer."

"She said that?" Zac said, looking suspiciously at Esmeralda, who in turn glared at the woman.

"Well, in so many words."

"What kind of offer?"

"A partnership."

"To do what?" Zac asked before realizing what the mysterious woman had said before. "Wait, you've been spying on me?"

"On occasion," Lova nodded. "We've also followed a few more candidates. But Esmeralda picked you since you killed Valsa Planur and cemented your status as a Flamebearer. Personally, I think it's for the best. Valsa Planur's fate was limited. The current generation of the First Heaven is much too disappointing. To think that girl was a direct descendant to Vurkos Planur, who seized the second pillar in such a domineering fashion."

Zac glanced at Esmeralda, who looked at him with a smile that said he had just won the lottery by being graced by her attention. The toad had been a bit lofty even back in the Calamity, but it was nothing compared to now. Was it because she'd brought a powerful backer?

"Were you there in the Stand of Saeward?" Zac asked, unable to prevent the hint of steel from appearing in his voice.

"No. It would be troublesome if Emperor Vastermal discovered us. We did observe her extensively the past days, though," Lova said, not the least shamefaced by their actions.

"And you did nothing to stop her?"

"Why? She did nothing wrong by trying to seize your opportunity, just as you did nothing wrong by killing her in response," Lova said, giving him an innocent look. "The struggle for resources and opportunities lies at the very heart of cultivation. I'm not brave enough to fight against the fundamental laws of Heaven."

Zac took a steadying breath to control the anger bubbling beneath the surface. He'd drive himself into an early grave if he blew a gasket whenever he was used or manipulated by these selfish old cultivators.

"A partnership for what?" Zac asked again, but he had a feeling he knew the answer.

"Esmeralda needs to enter the Left Imperial Palace, so I'm hoping you could take her."

"You're a sealbearer?" Zac said, indignity partly replaced by surprise, but the toad rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"Only cultivators and beasts who have reached Atavism can become sealholders. But that's fine. There are other paths to entry," Lova said as she took out an ancient-looking parchment. "The Enshrinement of Kanba. It's from an interesting society deep in the Eternal Storm. They consecrate beasts in a faith-based cultivation system. This binding will make you the speaker for the Beast Deity."

"Uh, what?" Zac frowned, decidedly unenthused by the idea of becoming the priest of a Toad God.

"Well, that's just in their society," Lova laughed. "In practice, it means Esmeralda could temporarily create a shrine, or a subspace, in your body and join the Left Imperial Palace that way. It will also create a mental link to allow you to communicate better. It will even temporarily allow you to use part of Esmeralda's skills and abilities."

"No offense, but why use some weird method from the Endless Storm?" Zac said with suspicion. "There are many ways to contract beasts."

"It's for your benefit," Lova explained. "For one, Esmeralda is more unique than you can imagine. No Hegemon can bear a conventional binding with her. Secondly, the enshrinement will not leave a mark on your path. It's more of a temporary housing agreement and will not affect your pathways, combat effectiveness, or System evaluation. The only detriment is that you must expend some Cosmic Energy to maintain the shrine. Not much is needed, though, and it will not impact you after forming a core."

Esmeralda eagerly nodded, and her tongue lashed out to grab the parchment. She moved it over to Zac, but he did not accept it.

"No offense, but I've seen you in action," Zac said as he took a step back. "You're pretty fast, but I'll be even faster by the time the trial starts. And your aura is even weaker now than when we last met for some reason. What can you bring to the table?"

Esmeralda looked incredibly affronted, and she made a series of angry croaks. Of course, with her tongue still stretched toward Zac, they came out distorted.

"Esmeralda isn't a beast bred for battle like those Beast Tamers contract," Lova laughed. "Her expertise lies elsewhere. And don't worry. She's in a phase of rapid growth. She'll be much faster by the time you enter the Left Imperial Palace."

Zac slowly nodded, but his inner thoughts were clearly exposed as Esmeralda angrily croaked while Lova smiled and shook her head.

"Truthfully, the Esmeralda you see in front of you now is not her true form. She's not even an undead creature," Lova explained. "Eons ago, she had the reputation of being one of the best... infiltrators... of the Multiverse."

"Infiltrator?" Zac said. "A thief?"

Esmeralda didn't reject the notion. Rather, she excitedly nodded her head.

"Wait, best in the Multiverse?" Zac said. "Does that mean...?"

"She could be considered a Supremacy," Lova confirmed, making Zac look at the unassuming toad suspiciously.

"Are you two messing with me?" Zac couldn't help but ask.

No matter how you looked at it, there was just no way that the supersized toad in front of him matched the aura or power of the two Supremacies he'd just encountered in the Stand of Saeward. Esmeralda croaked with exasperation and looked around. Then her eyes widened, and she suddenly disappeared in a puff. She returned just five seconds later, the parchment in her tongue replaced by another item; a box.

"What?" Zac gasped as he looked at the item. "Isn't that..."

There was no doubt about it. It was the main item consecrated in the hidden temple on the other side. Zac had almost gotten himself killed getting his hands on the [Lucky Beads], and they weren't even part

of the temple arrangements. It had just been lying on a pillow in front of the shrine. Meanwhile, Esmeralda had just taken a few seconds to abscond with what probably was the best thing, barely breaking a sweat? Would she be able to do the same inside the Left Imperial Palace?

It took all Zac's willpower not to welcome Esmeralda to his team then and there.