

## The Fall 1040

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Esmeralda thumped her chest as she wagged the box in front of Zac. He still couldn't believe it was real, so he slowly walked to a nearby window. Catheya was sitting at a bench in the pebble garden, occasionally glancing in his direction. She lit up upon seeing Zac, who waved at her assuredly before walking back into the room.

Catheya hadn't noticed Esmeralda coming and going, by the looks of it, and neither was there any response from the ghost temple on the other side of the peak. He wouldn't have been surprised even if that huge avatar emerged to take back the box, but there was not even a karmic ripple indicating they had been robbed.

It was just too odd, making Zac wonder if Esmeralda even left his mansion. The box was definitely real; it emitted the same hair-raising aura as when he first saw it. But the way Esmeralda got her hands on it wasn't necessarily as advertised. He couldn't help but look at Lova sitting by the neighboring window. It had been a deadly tribulation to enter the ghost temple for him, but for this mysterious woman?

"I assure you, I had nothing to do with that box," Lova smiled. "She really entered the temple just now. Esmeralda's unique bloodline allows her to resist or even ignore many forms of restrictions. That includes the Karmic suppression of the Sangha. Avoiding troublesome Karmic entanglements is a key skill for any good thief."

Zac slowly nodded, though he wasn't sure what to believe. He had no way to confirm what was true and false, though his instincts told him Lova wasn't making things up.

"Besides, I killed too many monks in my heyday," Lova added, looking a bit helpless. "I've spent four hundred thousand years reining in my killing intent and performing merit to whittle away the karmic debt levied on my path. Esmeralda is a dear friend, but I wouldn't undo my hard work by helping her rob one of their Lotus Pavilions."

"I've seen the things inside that temple. Will those things come causing trouble because of this?" Zac frowned.

"What you see is not necessarily real," Lova said with a slight smile. "Though with the Dharma, the bounds between reality and fantasy are often muddled."

"I'm sorry?"

"Suffice it to say, powerful belief can turn the unreal real, but it is a rootless existence. Without sustained piety, creation will return to the bounds of illusion," Lova explained, glancing at the other side of the peak. "This Lotus Pavilion was created from the belief of a powerful Arhat, but he is long gone."

"The temples you see are echoes of memories that retain some of the original's strength through the Karmic Link to the Sangha. The items within are in a state of perpetual uncertainty. They are real, yet they are not. By taking the items, you shifted the needle toward certainty, but it was only possible by Akaniṣṭha sanctioning it. As to why the Sanga allows this, you should well understand."

Zac slowly nodded. The backhanded nature of the Sangha's gifts was nothing new to him. Every gift was a karmic debt, every encounter a karmic link that would bind you closer to the Dharma. They were like a casino. Some would win when coming through the Sangha's doors and walk away with riches, but the house always won in the end.

And everyone believed themselves to be destined for victory.

Was he any different? His eyes gleamed as he looked at the toad, or rather the box she had her tongue wrapped around. "And you're just giving this to me?"

Esmeralda shrugged and threw out the box, and Zac's heart lurched as he urgently grabbed it.

"Esmeralda more enjoys the hunt than the prize itself nowadays. Outsmarting the defenses, breaking the restrictions, and seizing the item is an affirmation of her path," Lova commented. "Oh, you probably shouldn't open that thing. At least not unless you want to blow up this whole mountain."

"What?!" Zac wheezed, his hand freezing just as he was about to open the lid.

"The Sangha's Lotus Pavilions are Dharmic cleansing arrays. The treasures consecrated within are usually calamitous items with immense fell Karma. Even if this is just an echo made real, it's bound to be extremely dangerous."

"Why would the Buddhists consecrate something like that?" Zac asked, suddenly stuck between wanting to throw the box far away and not daring to let go.

"The light shines the brightest after the darkness of the night," Lova hummed, and Zac felt like she was talking about herself just as much as the box. "Eventually, the sin will be purified by the Buddhist Hymns and the soothing waves of the Brahma, and the calamitous item will become a Dharmic Instrument of great power."

"But until then..." Zac said.

"Well..." Lova smiled. "The night is the night until daybreak arrives. Right now, you could consider it a bomb. If everything else fails, open the lid and run for your life."

Zac warily looked at the box. When he first saw it, he'd thought it an incredible treasure considering its place of honor. But it turned out those crazy monks had actually put a doomsday device in their temple. Still, Zac didn't throw the thing away. How many times had he survived by the skin of his teeth by blowing something up? You never knew when you needed a big bomb to get out of a jam.

"Of course, it would be even better if you could continue the cleansing yourself," Lova added. "The Lotus Pavilion has already done most of the heavy lifting, but I can tell the item within is not yet irrevocably bound to the Sangha. You might get a surprising prize if you continue to erode the fell Karma and resentment with your Dao."

That got Zac's attention. Someone Lova called powerful had tried to refine a cursed treasure by using some sort of Dharmic array. Even an echo, which Zac assumed was the same as a replica, of such an item had to be extremely powerful for someone at his level.

"How long would I need to refine it?" Zac asked.

"Not long," Lova said, looking at the box. "A few centuries at most with providence as powerful as yours."

"Oh," Zac grunted and stowed the box away, though only after winding a rope around it a few times just in case.

A few centuries certainly wasn't long to someone like Lova, but it certainly was to him. There was no way he'd refine it in time for the war unless he found some way to supercharge the process. Perhaps Ogras had some idea? After all, the process sounded very similar to whatever he had planned for his banner.

"So Esmeralda is clearly an amazing thief," Zac said, getting an approving nod from the toad. "But she's definitely no Supremacy. And if she were, how would she even enter the trial? The age limit is 100 years. What's going on?"

"Esmeralda was growing old," Lova said. "We all struggle with the concept of death. Truthfully, many grow more fearful the older they get. When you've lived for an eternity, it can be hard to face the fact the end is drawing close. They become increasingly desperate to break through and steal more longevity from the Heavens. Others try to supplement their waning lifeforce through other means."

Lova looked at Esmeralda, who proudly looked back. "I'm sure you can appreciate how rare such treasures are, items that can provide a meaningful amount of longevity to those at the peak. Even if you get your hands on something, it usually only replenishes a few percent. Esmeralda managed to steal an item that functionally made her immortal."

"What!" Zac said with shock. "Immortality is real?"

"True Immortality?" Lova said. "Probably not? At least not yet. But a few aberrations have managed to mimic the effect to varying degrees of success. Esmeralda is one such example. The Primo of your Undead Empire is another, as are a few entities hidden in the depths of the Buddhist Sangha. Unfortunately, even false immortality always comes with a price."

"The item Esmeralda stole provides her with an unceasing font of longevity, but she has been forcibly reincarnated hundreds of times. She loses a sliver of herself each time, and the reincarnations are coming in more frequently. She needs to enter the Left Imperial Palace to find an item that can suppress the effect of the temporal treasure."

"Forced reincarnations? Like a curse? How would that affect me if she sets up shop inside my body?" Zac frowned.

"It's not a curse," Lova said with a shake. "And the treasure has already become part of her body; it can't affect others. Believe me; people have tried. Many have wanted to extract some of Esmeralda's endless longevity and take it for themselves. Part of the reason she's currently staying in the Perennial Vastness is to hide from being captured again."

"You're pretty crazy, eating something like that," Zac said as he looked at the toad, who responded with a smug look that said, 'Worked out in the end, didn't it?'

Zac would be lying if he said he wasn't tempted. Even if she'd lost most of her memories and skills, she had a wealth of experience to draw on. The skills of a world-renowned thief would be incredible when looking for treasures and avoiding dangers.

"Will she even be able to enter if she's so ancient?" Zac asked.

A smile spread across Lova's lips upon hearing Zac's question. After all, it was a partial agreement. "She should. This Esmeralda is only three years old. And don't worry. As I said, she'll rapidly grow over the next few years. She should be at Middle Hegemony by the time the inheritance starts. She still won't be able to fight the other contestants, but she will not drag you down."

Three years? Zac gave Esmeralda a second look and realized there were some small differences in the patterns on her skin. Esmeralda looked back and suddenly released a puff of familiar Dao; his own.

"The kid?" Zac blurted, and Esmeralda nodded with a grin.

"The pillar's sudden ascent came as a surprise to us as well," Lova sighed. "Esmeralda's reincarnation cycle was at an unfortunate state, so she sacrificed her cultivation to birth a second incarnation early. This way, she'll be ten when she enters the Left Imperial Palace. It's not optimal, but someone like Esmeralda will have to be careful about the restrictions. Better safe than sorry."

"Do you think others will do the same?" Zac suddenly said. "Bringing reincarnators or something similar?"

"Of course," Lova laughed. "This is one of the biggest events in recent memory. I don't know about reincarnators, but everyone involved is currently wracking their brains to figure out ways to gain an edge over the competition."

Zac's expression fell upon hearing that. It was bad enough being pitted against centennials from the peak factions of the multiverse. If they also brought a bunch of cheats, how would he and his followers survive?

"The Multiverse was never fair," Lova smiled. "But you shouldn't worry overly much about that aspect. The System is giving this matter an almost shocking level of attention, and it's already indicated it won't accept any foul play. You won't encounter things like what happened inside the Stand of Saeward. The rule on age includes a series of hidden restrictions that even the strongest will have to work within."

"To break those rules would be to declare war against the Heavens," Lova added. "And I don't think we've reached that point yet."

Zac shuddered at that thought, remembering the words of Sendor and Engo. The Thrones, the Seals, the Terminus Council, and the war for the direction of the era. It almost felt like the hidden masters of the Perennial Vastness were holding their breath, just waiting for all hell to break loose. Sendor had assured Vastermal of his neutrality, but that could also mean he had his own plans and ideas.

Silence stretched, and Even Esmeralda seemed subdued by the heavy topic. But eventually, Lova sighed and shook her head before taking out an information crystal.

"I'm sorry. These are not matters you need to worry about. Just focus on yourself and your goals while following your heart. I've outlined the proposed terms of cooperation here. It would be a binding

contract enforced by teacher and the System itself, should you accept. Neither you nor Esmeralda can renege after it's signed."

A quick scan confirmed it was a contract enforced under the ruleset of the Apostate of Order, and it was actually quite generous. Zac's only obligation was to provide passage into the trial. Meanwhile, Esmeralda had to do her best to help Zac accomplish his goals inside the Left Imperial Palace, even after she attained her goals.

There was one problem, though. Esmeralda's goals were identical to the Undead Empire's. She didn't want the inheritance but a certain item within. Was there a conflict there?

"Esmeralda needs a specific treasure from within?" Zac frowned. "That might be a problem. I already have a similar agreement in place. If there's only one..."

"Nine," Lova said. "There should be nine utmost treasures beyond the true inheritance. Like the Heavens, the Pillars were constructed following the rule of eight by nine. Eight pillars, where nine outer courts stabilized the fifth. The one is the Eternal Heritages at their core, and the nine bound it to the Limitless Empire's purpose."

"Still, Esmeralda is cultivating Death, and..." Zac hesitated.

Lova looked at Zac for a few seconds before slowly nodding. "You can see this as a small payment from me for helping my old friend. I can somewhat guess what's going on. The agreement you have is no doubt with the Undead Empire. It makes sense they wouldn't dare aim for the grand prize. Their aim, if I had to guess, is the core of the Hollow Court. Esmeralda doesn't want that item, so there's no conflict."

"How do you know that?" Zac asked.

"Not many would have the answer, but the followers of the Perennial Vastness are awarded some unique insight," Lova smiled. "Teacher has been around for a long, long time. He was even consulted on the grand undertaking back then and recorded some of the details."

Zac raptly listened, afraid to miss a single word or inflection in case it was an important detail.

"The reason I can say with good authority that the Undead Empire is targeting the Hollow Court is that they were the ones who helped build it."

"What? How's that possible?" Zac said. "They didn't even exist back then."

"The ancient era was a different time," Lova said. "The star of the Limitless Empire was almost blinding. It was like an insatiable beast, consuming everything in its path. They had accumulated strength far beyond what you can imagine. Even today, nothing comes close. The Emperor and his trusted generals traveled the dimensions, seizing one powerful treasure after another and slaying everything that had staked a claim on the Dao."

"Some were powerful enough to resist their conquest for a while. But the Empire's expansion could only be delayed, never halted. Even the greatest beings were forced to compromise. The Primo was one of them. He was forced to pay a painful price in return for the Emperor turning his blade in another direction."

Zac could barely believe what he was hearing. The very same Primo that ruled today lived before the System? No wonder he'd never heard any murmurs of the four divine races trying to seize control over the Founders. Messing with that kind of old monster was to ask for trouble. Yet he pushed down the shock and confusion and tried to extract more information.

"Looking the other way?" Zac frowned. "What does that mean?"

"The Dao is Eternal, but the Heavens are neither inexhaustible nor incorruptible. Simply existing for someone at that level is bound to become a hindrance to the aspirations of others."

Zac nodded in understanding. He'd already learned that peak beings impacted the Dao and what it meant. The struggle between the Buddhist Sangha and the Apostate of Mercy exemplified that. Zac didn't know what made Laondio change from the idealistic alchemist in his Bloodline Vision to the ruthless conqueror he was known as today, but Zac could imagine his thoughts.

The Primo was undoubtedly the most powerful cultivator on the Path of Death, possibly the most powerful cultivator of the Peak of Chaos. If Laondio killed him, a good chunk of the Heavens would be freed up.

"I don't know exactly what the Primo was forced to leave behind in exchange for peace, but it was extremely important to him. The events now are a chance for him to take it back, to become whole."

Zac's heart shuddered, and he felt like he'd learned something he wasn't supposed to. Who knew? It was possible that not even Tavza or Kator knew the truth of their mission. Zac compared it to what he already knew, and he could quickly make a few assumptions.

Making the Primo whole, what did that mean? A raw powerup, or could it be related to his work with the Heart of the Empire? From what he'd gathered, the Undead Empire still didn't have full control of that thing, even after all these years. Could the item in the Hollow Court be the key for the Primo furthering his control over the heart?

A personal powerup of their strongest combatant, and possibly being able to extract more benefits out of an Eternal Heritage based on the Dao of Death. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that not even Ultom itself could compare to that kind of benefit, and it didn't even come with the risk of seizing a second Eternal Heritage. No wonder the Primo was willing to pay almost any price to enlist his help, going so far as to draft an unprecedented mandate to enlist Zac.

Still, that knowledge made the pressure on him mount. Until now, he'd just planned to give his mission with the Undead Empire a halfhearted try before packing it in. But with such a personal stake for the Primo, would Zac dare slack off?