

## The Fall 1041

### [Chapter 1041 - Loose Strings](#)

Lova seemed content to let Zac mull over the implications of the Primo and his connection to the Hollow Court, but Zac soon opted to forge on. Lova seemed to know more about the upcoming event than anyone he'd met before, possibly excepting Perala Janodrok. However, the Void Priestess had her own considerations and couldn't divulge too much.

"Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"I've already bent the rules of what's permissible by sharing this," Lova rejected, instantly dashing Zac's hopes for further clarity. "And I have no answers to give except old anecdotes found in the corners of our library. Besides, knowing too much is not necessarily a good thing. It might fill your mind with unnecessary thoughts when you've entered the trial. Suffice it to say, Esmeralda is looking for something else, and you're not even required to help her seize it."

What Lova said was true. The agreement was incredibly lopsided, and in his favor. For example, half of anything Esmeralda snatched on her own would go to him, while he didn't have to share anything he helped extract. She wasn't obligated to fight by his side, but that was fine, considering she wasn't a combat beast.

Still, Zac didn't just sign the thing and carefully read every sentence repeatedly to ensure there weren't any hidden pitfalls.

"I've said what needs to be said," Lova said as a portal sprung up beside her. "Feel free to talk things over among yourselves. If you want my opinion, you should accept. However, please don't feel any obligation on my or Esmeralda's accounts. This is an offer of cooperation, not an order. We'll look for someone else if you're unwilling to bring Esmeralda."

"Wait!" Zac said as Lova made to leave.

"Hm?" she said curiously.

Zac her gaze was gentle, but Zac's heart still beat with trepidation as he remembered her offhanded mention of slaughtering a bunch of monks. Still, this was a rare opportunity, and he had a pressing issue he couldn't solve on his own.

"You have spied on me for a while now, and now you want me to help your friend sneak into an Eternal Heritage. I'm grateful for the information about the Undead Empire, but one could argue you told me that to make sure I agreed," Zac said, ignoring the chill that appeared in Lova's eyes. "You've been spying on Valsa as well, right? You knew she would summon the emperor, yet looked the other way. It doesn't seem right. It's not balanced."

"And what would you say is needed to balance the scales?" Lova asked. The warmth in her voice was still there, but her smile still gave Zac the chills.

"Valsa might have had accomplices, other people in here who know the identities and details of my friends and me," Zac said. "Seeing how motivated the Imperials are, I'm afraid they'll stop at nothing in

an attempt to extract that information. If my cooperation with Esmeralda is to succeed, I need some assurances..."

"You should know that extracting anything tangible is nigh-impossible even for a Supremacy. This is not just empty faith in my teacher; the System itself is a guarantor for the rules put in place for the Cosmic Gallery. Vastermal's attempt was an act of desperation, and you shouldn't worry too much about such an eventuality."

"Still," Zac said, unable to trust this stranger's words for such an important matter.

Even if she was gentle and courteous despite their vastly different strengths, she clearly had an agenda. And it wasn't necessarily true that securing Esmeralda's ticket to the Left Imperial Palace was her only goal in this meeting.

Lova wordlessly looked at Zac for a few seconds before slowly nodding. "The invasion of such a powerful consciousness can easily create dangerous turbulence in the realms used for the Cosmic Gallery. To ensure no one is hurt, we'll disable the ability to leave the Perennial Vastness for two weeks. Everyone will have to visit Vastness City to reset their bracelets at a Temporal Obelisk by the Teleportation square.

"As for who knows your identity... Your new companion knows that better than me."

Zac breathed out in relief upon hearing the decree. Lova was probably right in her assertion, but this was still a hidden danger that needed to be dealt with before Zac could truly feel safe. Vastermal's descent had been something of a wake-up call.

He'd always known the powerful factions from the Heartlands were aiming for the Left Imperial Palace, but it had somehow felt distant. Like the struggles between the Supremacies were kept apart from competition between the younger generation. That feeling had been reinforced by the System sealing Zecia, but he should have realized that didn't mean squat when it came to such important matters.

Lova stepped through the portal the next moment, and Zac thoughtfully looked on as the gate closed. He wasn't so naïve to believe that her only goal in this meeting was to act as an interpreter for Esmeralda. When those kinds of people made a move, it generally involved their benefits or cultivation. The level of obsession that pushed you to Autarchy and beyond wasn't something you just turned off.

Did she want to drive a wedge between himself and the Undead Empire by divulging dangerous secrets? Or was she actually helping the Primo for some reason? After all, Zac suddenly felt a far greater pressure to make sure the mission succeeded. She seemed to have a conflict with the Sangha. Was this an 'the enemy of my enemy'-type of thing? It would explain why she used such a flaky excuse not to share anything beyond the details of the Hollow Court.

Zac eventually shook his head and turned back toward the toad. He ultimately had no way to tell what was going on. However, Lova had one thing right: he could only follow his instincts as he worked toward his goals. Everything else was out of his hands.

"Do you really know who's exposed my connection to the pillar?" Zac asked.

Esmeralda eagerly nodded and made a series of signs.

"Not a single one escaped your notice?" Zac said. "Who are they?"

Esmeralda snickered, pointedly looking at the contract crystal in Zac's hand. Zac wordlessly glared at the toad, but the toad eventually won the staring contest. Filled with helplessness, he resumed his inspection of the old parchment and the agreement. He had tried to extract some extra value from Lova since they needed his help, but she was even more ruthless.

She'd said he shouldn't feel pressured and that they could always find someone else. But that on its own was a threat. After all, Esmeralda knew his identity, and Zac sincerely doubted Lova or this toad were bound by the same restrictions as normal guests. Now, they even held the identities of potential informants hostage while adding a deadline.

It made him even warier about the whole thing, even if the underhanded method didn't necessarily mean their offer wasn't genuine. The minutes passed, and Esmeralda croaked with annoyance at the delay. She even produced an Information Crystal and waved it tantalizingly in front of his face.

"Hey, don't look at me like that. I still have two weeks," Zac snorted. "Didn't you spy on me for years before you decided to approach me? Why can't I take my time?"

Esmeralda stomped her foot and made some signs.

"Not the same?" Zac said with a raised brow. "I know. I'm doing things above-board while you snuck around in the shadows."

Esmeralda responded by mimicking his words and expressions with a series of clearly sarcastic croaks. Zac knew this creature was possibly the second oldest being he'd ever met after Sendor himself, but it was still difficult to treat this oddball with that kind of deference. Whether it was her actions or weirdly human expressions, she felt more like a mischievous kid than anything else.

Of course, it might all be a guise to make him lower his guard. However, no matter how hard Zac looked, he couldn't find anything amiss. The contract seemed quite generous, no matter how you looked at it. And while he couldn't pierce the workings of the mysterious parchment of the Kanba, he felt what Lova said was mostly true.

The inherent instincts provided by years of bathing in the waters of the Lost Plane indicated it really was a very weak contract along with a spatial technique. He couldn't sense anything like the hidden traps he'd run into before, like with the [Essence of the Abyss] or the array for the Twinned World Cores.

There was even a section in the contract listed and guaranteed the effects of the Enshrinement of Kanba. Lova had personally guaranteed the effects to the System. If something went wrong, she'd be severely punished. Still, getting a second pair of eyes on the contracts wouldn't hurt, so Zac walked over to the window.

"Is everything okay?" Catheya asked as she stepped inside, looking at Esmeralda with surprise. "This to— ahem, Esmeralda is still here?"

Esmeralda grinned and greeted Catheya with a wave. Catheya returned the greeting before turning to Zac, her face full of questions.

"What's going on?"

"A lot of things have happened," Zac exhaled. "The threat in the Stand of Saeward was related to that place. And the same goes for Esmeralda here. I could really use some advice."

"Let's call over your shadow, then," Catheya said. "He's a bit annoying, but his scheming mind is quite useful."

Zac agreed, and Ogras stepped through the teleportation portal a few minutes later.

"This place might be even worse than that frigid hellscape," Ogras spat as he entered the manor.

"What's going on? People are saying the treasure is about to be born in the Stand of Saeward, but you're already back? And what's with the toad?"

Zac took a breath and began recounting everything from entering the Stand of Saeward. Just like with Kruta, he skipped some details of his discussion with Sendor. He also didn't mention the matter of the Primo and the Hollow Court, and only said their goals wouldn't clash.

It wasn't that he didn't trust his girlfriend. The two had reached a tacit agreement that Zac didn't talk about any schemes or plans that might go against the interests of the Undead Empire. That way, Catheya wouldn't be put in an awkward position where she was stuck between him and her obligations to her clan and the empire. Zac was also afraid he might trigger some secret safeguards in the imperial commandments if he divulged the Primo's secrets.

Ogras took the news of his battle with Valsa in stride, and Catheya only shook her head with helplessness. They had long since grown accustomed to his uncanny ability to attract trouble. The two also read the agreement and investigated the parchment, but neither could find any pitfalls within. Even K'rav made an appearance, but he wasn't very helpful.

He seemed more interested in the technique for research purposes. He immediately brought up the prospect of fusing the enshrinement with Ogras's Body Tempering Method. You'd turn the shrines into cages so that you could set up a whole prison in your body. Each cage would be filled with a beast, where you extracted some benefits from hundreds of prisoners. Each captive beast would only provide a fraction of the benefit compared to the creatures Ogras sealed the normal way, but this method would replace quality with quantity.

Esmeralda soon couldn't listen anymore and lashed out with her tongue at the goblin. Zac gave the demon a pointed look, and Ogras immediately sprung to action.

"Bastard, thinking of such nefarious things! Senior Esmeralda has brought us such a marvelous plan, and you want to tarnish it with your wicked and unorthodox ideas?!" Ogras swore, his face a mask of righteousness. "Back with you, right now! Don't let me see your face for the next week!"

Esmeralda was startled by the outburst, but she quickly nodded in agreement, looking quite pleased. K'Rav only snickered as he flew back into the demon's sleeve. Esmeralda might have bought the act, but Zac and K'Rav recognized the greedy gleam in Ogras's eyes as he glanced at the old parchment.

"So, what do you think?" Zac asked after having gone through everything.

He would have preferred to talk out of earshot, but Esmeralda clearly had no intention of giving them privacy. And Zac had no confidence in keeping secrets from the old thief if she really wanted to listen in. He doubted even Asta's top-quality isolation arrays could give Esmeralda much trouble.

"You've been busy," Ogras wryly said with a shake of his head. "I guess it was about time you created a mess; you've been too quiet for the past two years. At least it's mostly good news this time."

"I can't believe a Supremacy acted so desperately to tip the scales in their favor," Catheya muttered. "Makes me wonder if the Undead Empire has more plans beyond what we've already seen."

Esmeralda laughed, clearly indicating her thoughts on the matter. Zac had to agree after learning the true nature of the Primo's goals. It was not a matter of if but a matter of what. Zac wouldn't even be surprised if his involvement and the mission given to Tavza and Kator were just backup plans. The Primo was getting that treasure one way or another, even if he had to turn the whole Frontier upside down.

"Let's put the matters of those imperials aside for now," Ogras said, and Zac groaned when he saw the gleam in the demon's eyes.

Ogras was looking at Esmeralda like she was an unparalleled beauty, or perhaps a mountain of treasures. He had already walked over to the toad, looking like an official standing by their emperor's side. Judging by his ingratiating smile, he was only one step away from taking out a fan and tray of fruits.

"An expert explorer wants to join our camp, and we don't even need to provide a seal? So, what's the problem? Don't keep senior Esmeralda waiting. Hurry up and sign it."

Esmeralda grinned widely at Ogras' stamp of approval and even patted his shoulder while giving him a croak full of assurance.

"Then I'll be under your care, senior Esmeralda," Ogras said with a smile. "With you at the helm, we can rest easy. How can a trial for some juniors stump an erudite master such as yourself?"

Esmeralda eagerly nodded, looking more and more pleased by the second.

"Should have known," Catheya snorted, but she didn't dissent. "I think it's for the best. We undeniably lack experience, and the terms are quite good. I don't think the Undead Empire would have any objections."

"I guess that's it, then," Zac said, looking at the toad. "Welcome aboard."

Esmeralda rolled her eyes, like it was about time he came to his senses. Both signed the agreement, and Esmeralda finally handed over the information crystal. Zac briefly scanned its contents before throwing the crystal over to Ogras, who immediately started reviewing the data.

Zac was about to infuse his energy into the Enshrinement of Kanba, but Esmeralda suddenly stopped him.

"What's wrong?"

Esmeralda made a series of signs, and Zac soon snorted in exasperation.

"There's no point in creating the shrine right now? You'll come find me in Zecia before the event starts?" Zac said. "So, you were just trying to trick me before?"

Esmeralda looked back at him innocently, and he decided not to push the matter. "Whatever, suit yourself."

He also preferred not to use the method right away, even if Lova said it wouldn't affect him. It would give him more time to make sure it was safe. The best thing would be getting Iz to take a look at it, though he didn't want to always come running to her with problems. Besides, he didn't want another subspace inside his body, further complicating things when forming his Cosmic Core.

"Wait!" Zac said just as Esmeralda was about to leave, making the toad look over curiously.

"Can you help me with this?" Zac asked as he took out Valsa's ring.

Esmeralda's eyes sharpened as she looked at the ring, and the odd vats on her back started churning. A hint of antiquity spread through the room, but the feeling disappeared after a few seconds. The toad slowly nodded but made a few signs.

"Three years?" Zac asked, hesitating a bit before agreeing.

Esmeralda's tongue flashed, and the ring disappeared from his hand. Zac looked on with confusion as Esmeralda actually swallowed it. He was about to ask what the hell she was doing, but he suddenly spotted a glimmer on her back. The Spatial Ring had been moved to one of her vats, and complex runes slowly appeared on the translucent membrane. Was it a natural array breaker?

Zac glanced at Catheya and Ogras, who just shook their heads, indicating they also had no idea what was happening.

"Remember, I got this thing on my own," Zac added. "The items inside are mine. You can consider it a test for our upcoming partnership."

Esmeralda rolled her eyes and made a sign that said she had no interest in some treasures of an E-grade brat. The toad was gone the next second, her movement technique not even leaving a ripple in her wake.

"You keep collecting weird things," Ogras commented as he took out a bottle of wine.

"Like you're one to talk," Catheya laughed. "If it's not weird ghosts, then it's shadow creatures."

"Well, we don't all have powerful empires to help us out. We commoners have to get our hands dirty if we want a shot at the good life," Ogras shrugged.

"Yeah, poor you," Catheya said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Show me the Imperial in our generation who wouldn't get green with envy upon hearing all the lucky encounters you've stumbled onto since meeting Zac."

"Alright, you two," Zac groaned. "You two keep bickering like an old married couple, I'm starting to get jealous."

"Like he'd ever survive being married with that mouth," Catheya muttered before changing the subject. "We have time to discuss all these issues, but I think we need to figure out what to do with Valsa's subjects."

"Isn't it obvious?" Ogras said. "They need to die. I admit I don't know the next thing about Supremacies, but I don't feel comfortable just trusting that the seals of the Perennial Vastness will keep us safe."

"Honestly, I think the risk of someone like Lova exposing your identities is far greater than Supremacies breaking through the System's seals to extract the information," Catheya sighed.

"Agreed, but we can't do anything to them," Ogras shrugged. "The deathsworn is a nuisance we can deal with. If nothing else, it'll help us in the short run. We're lucky no new batch of guests has arrived over the past week. But I wouldn't be surprised if the Seven Heavens sent another princeling into the Perennial Vastness to recoup their losses. After all, they know now there's a Flamebearer in here."

Zac sighed upon hearing the demon echo his thoughts. That was exactly his worry and why he'd asked Lova for assistance. Sendor had already said he wouldn't bar the young generation from entering the Perennial Vastness. How would they be able to focus on their Core Formation if a constant stream of imperials cropped out of the woodwork?

"Killing the deathsworn won't change that fact, but it will make their work harder. They've failed once and know we're on guard; they'd have to make the second attempt count. I would be hesitant to launch an all-out strike unless I knew with certainty who to target and how Valsa failed the first time," Catheya nodded in agreement.

"And if we kill all the helpers and destroy all evidence, they'd have to start from scratch," Ogras added. "Not just the investigations, but echelons, non-public intelligence of zones. You name it. We could just stay in high-echelon zones for the rest of the gallery, and they wouldn't be able to touch us."

"Alright," Catheya said as she took the information crystal from Ogras. "You two stay here; I'll deal with it. It's time those 'helpers' of ours put some work in."