

The Fall 1042

[Chapter 1042 - Getting Stronger](#)

Neither Zac nor Ogras was surprised Catheya chose to take on this bloody mission. She was simply the best suited for it.

"There are nine names, and there's even Fifth Echelon cultivators among them," Ogras commented. "Dealing with them will be... Expensive."

Zac grimaced at the thought. He remembered his encounter just after entering the Perennial Vastness. Back then, he and the target had only been First Echelon guests, but he still lost over 500 Mana. Wiping out the whole group inside Vastness City would levy extraordinary fines on the killers. But it was easier said than done to lure them into a Red Zone.

"Valsa struck me as someone who'd rather sacrifice all her deathsworn to empower herself than leave safeguards for others. I can't believe so many people remain," Zac said.

"She probably would have if their echelons were up to snuff," Ogras agreed.

"It doesn't matter," Catheya said. "It's exactly for this type of thing they sent reinforcements."

In this case, 'they' referred to the Undead Empire. The Eternal Clan siblings he met back then had already left the Perennial Vastness, but over a dozen new undead had cropped up over the past years. Two had just stumbled upon tokens, but the rest had been sent with the explicit mission to shore up their position inside the trial.

Oddly enough, not one of those entering was a member of the Divine Races. They were all Revenants, Spectrals, and Corpse Lords, seemingly from completely different parts of the Undead Empire. What they had in common was incredible strength, easily surpassing the average guest. Zac had found them highly suspicious, even suspecting the hidden threat came from this group.

Now, the threat was gone, and the reinforcements came in handy.

"Make sure there's no trail leading back to you," Zac said. "People will be talking about this for a while."

"Don't worry," Catheya smiled. "You two just don't go creating any more problems before I've cleaned up this mess, right?"

Catheya left, and Ogras turned to Zac. "So, you got another sealbearer. You think he can be trusted?"

"I think so," Zac nodded.

"Still, having his seal wakened was a big mistake. He's a far bigger threat than those people on the toad's list. What if he gets greedy upon his return? The knowledge he holds is worth a lot of money, and he doesn't need you anymore."

"Kruta would never do that willingly," Zac said. "If anything, he'll keep our secrets out of self-preservation. He knows how these imperial clans act. If word gets out of his seal, his whole tribe will get implicated. They'd extract all knowledge before killing him to move the seal onto one of their own."

"Fine," Ogras sighed. "It doesn't matter much now. I doubt you're willing to kill him even if we found the opportunity."

"Of course not," Zac glared.

"Well, alright then. We'll just have to see where the pieces fall," Ogras said. "At least you've completed your cycle now. That's one problem out of the way. By the way, did the brute really gain an epiphany? Your girl said that wasn't the case."

"The seal was thrumming with that weird energy," Zac confirmed. "Maybe it's because it was from the Indomitable Court?"

"Either that or it's fate," Ogras said. "You have to admit, that particular court is perfect for him. He's also connected to you, the walking seal magnet. He has far more affinity to the Left Imperial Palace than some random guy who's killed a sealbearer."

"Affinity," Zac muttered, slowly nodding. "That might be it."

It made sense if you looked at it from a suitability perspective. Kruta was a perfect match to the Indomitable court, but what if the deathsworn had held a seal of the Daedalian Court like Ventus? Such a pairing definitely wasn't suitable. Perhaps the seal wouldn't have emitted such powerful energy fluctuations if that were the case.

"Guess we'll find out during the war," Ogras said. "It's good news for us, at least. Means we might be able to gain epiphanies even if we find our final pieces inside the bodies of the Kan'Tanu."

"That is good news," Zac nodded. "Unfortunately, I have some bad news as well."

Zac then explained the connection between the Primo and the Hollow Court. The demon didn't have Catheya's conflict of interest and needed to know. They didn't know what would happen during the trial. What if Ogras appeared inside the Hollow Court and consumed whatever treasure was within?

"Nine treasures, and my court's ultimate prize just had to belong to an old monster who's still around? What kind of greedy bastard sticks around that long? Just pack it in and let us youngsters live our lives," Ogras swore, his face scrunching up. "Did you siphon off all my luck? Is that what this is?"

"Hey, you're not under any contract," Zac smiled. "Feel free to go for it."

"And have some undying monstrosity breathe down my neck for the rest of my days?" Ogras spat. "I'd rather marry a Barghest. Still, it might be an opportunity. If those undead imperial hotshots get turned around, and we get the thing on our own..."

"We'd have an undying monstrosity owing us a huge karmic debt," Zac concluded.

Ogras nodded but then shrugged and leaned back into the sofa. "Well, this is all premature. There are a lot of roadblocks before we need to barter with the Primo, these deathsworn being the most immediate issue. Are the undead up to the task?"

"It shouldn't be a problem," Zac said. "Our forces are greater, and we have the element of surprise on our side."

Zac was soon proven right. Just twenty minutes later, news of a shocking event spread through Vastness City. The Undead Empire had gone mad and attacked a smithy, killing everyone within. Eight people had died, two of them from the Undead Empire. Another Revenant had been expelled from the Perennial Vastness after landing three of the killing blows and running out of Mana.

The news barely had time to land before a second piece of explosive news dropped, this time in the form of a global message. It wasn't from a high-echelon guest but from the Perennial Vastness itself. Lova had held up her part of the bargain. The Perennial Vastness was sealed for two weeks, and a large obelisk humming with Temporal Energy had appeared next to Teleportation Square.

The timing was perfect, to the point Zac guessed it was intentional. If Lova had sent out the message right after leaving, the six deathsworn would've likely left the smithy or gone underground. Now, they caught most of their targets in one go.

One day later, two more warriors were executed by undead death squads when they emerged from a storefront. Even then, they weren't finished. On the thirteenth day, a hooded man was killed as he appeared on the teleportation square. His death allowed Zac and the others to breathe out in relief, as he was the last name on the hit list.

Say what you want about Esmeralda; she was thorough. The toad arrived a few days later and spat out a Spatial Ring. Zac first thought she'd unlocked Valsa's ring way ahead of time, but he soon realized it wasn't the same one. Instead, the toad had uprooted hidden depositories left behind by Valsa and her followers. The ring contained both coded and uncoded information crystals. Some were unsurprisingly about himself, but his heart shuddered upon finding detailed accounts of both Catheya and Ogras.

Apart from that, there was also quite a bit of secret information about various Red Zones, insider info only the larger Coalitions would hold. A surprising amount of the intelligence covered zones Zac recognized, zones well suited to his Daos. Valsa had probably felt it too risky to follow him into one of the random environments while he hunted for treasures of the 17 Dao Peaks, and instead opted to research regions he'd eventually visit.

It was just a coincidence that the showdown took place in the Stand of Saeward. Similarly, there were reports for zones suitable for Ogras and Catheya, though those missives were far less detailed. The meticulous plans and data left Zac's back slick with sweat. Thank the Heavens he had his early warning system. He might have been in trouble if things had played out just slightly differently.

Now, the wealth of information had instead turned into a useful tool. He still had some treasures to pick up for his Omnitool, but the next step was to grind Mana as quickly and efficiently as possible. These reports would help out a lot. After all, raw strength often wasn't enough to accomplish the missions in the Red Zones. You also needed to figure out some tricks or hidden rules to reap the maximum rewards.

With that, all the safehouses were plundered, and those with damaging intelligence were slain. If the empire sent new people to investigate, the clues would point to the Undead Empire rather than him personally. He knew it wasn't the best of disguises since his Draugr persona was quite well known, but it was better than doing nothing.

"So what now?" Catheya asked as the trio reconvened.

Five days had passed since the last name on the hitlist had been struck, and things were already calming down. An unusually large batch of arrivals had appeared two days ago. It turned out these newcomers had been stuck in the waiting room where Zac first met Null until the lockdown ended. So far, none of the newcomers were suspicious, but the job of dealing with agents of the First Heaven had been pushed onto the Undead Empire.

"The same thing we've been doing for the past years, I guess," Zac said. "Gather Mana and opportunities so we can break through."

"Good," Ogras said, springing to his feet. "Feels like I've been stuck in house arrest for the past weeks. We're heading out."

"We?" Zac asked.

"Not you," Ogras said before turning to Catheya. "The goblin has calculated another event. It should be a good one, and a lot of people are still busy trying to break into the empty vaults in the Stand of Saeward."

Zac looked over with interest but was immediately met with two tepid stares.

"Don't even think about it," Ogras spat. "Who knows what kind of catastrophe you'll attract? Let us make some money in peace. Go play somewhere else."

"You better stay out of our way," Catheya laughed before kissing his cheek. "See you in a bit."

The two were gone the next second, leaving Zac alone in his mansion.

"Whatever," Zac muttered as he walked into his study. "I guess I can sit one out."

Truth be told, he didn't mind. He had a lot on his plate, and his short stint in the Stand of Saeward had actually added a significant boost of Mana. He'd killed fifteen people in his battle with Valsa, adding 3,000 mana in a few hours. He'd also killed one and defeated three on the way out. He'd already earned more than most months, even without a quest to supplement his income.

Zac spent the next hour standing in front of the huge simulation array, his mind churning as he looked at the intricate paths of his blueprint. Eventually, he walked over to a nearby desk and took out a stack of notes along with the [Warstone]. The papers were covered with various thoughts, ideas, and plans he'd come up with since he started studying his blueprint in earnest.

Hours turned to days as Zac studied every aspect of the [Warstone], using everything he'd learned during his blueprint studies and the insights awarded from [Cosmic Forge]. Its energy signature was analyzed, as were the truths locked within. New pages were added to the stack one after another as Zac forgot about the outside world.

Eventually, other treasures joined the [Warstone]; the [Void Engine], the [Calamity Core], and even the [Hollow Core]. Zac studied what happened when their auras interacted, and he breathed in relief after a while. The items couldn't be considered perfectly compatible, but they had no irreconcilable clashes.

In other words, he finally had all the materials he needed. His blueprint was ready, having even received some upgrades over the past years. Almost nothing was left on his checklist, and Zac could feel how his breakthrough drew closer. He could even feel his momentum slowly stirring, pushing him forward.

Zac wasn't quite there yet, though. For one, he still had some things to accomplish inside the Perennial Vastness. There was also the process itself to worry about. He'd already come up with a general idea on how to form his Cosmic Core when inventing his blueprint, but even Ultom hadn't been able to provide him with an exact solution.

After all, he hadn't known what materials would be used for the nucleus back then. Zac knew he couldn't just cram these items together inside the [Hollow Core] and hope for the best. He needed to consider their specific properties and figure out the best way to extract, refine, and fuse them. That was the only way he'd create anything better than a Low-Quality core. It was the only way he'd form a core at all, really.

Finding [Cosmic Forge] had also opened his eyes to all kinds of new possibilities, and he would be a fool not to take those into account. He wasn't planning on using the technique on his Cosmic Core, but how it fused the essence of different materials was absolutely ingenious.

The biggest problem for mortals, when it came to Core Formation, was the need to use a large number of treasures and materials as a foundation. It made the cores heterogenous and poisoned them with external Daos. Just like infusing Cosmic Cycles into equipment with [Cosmic Forge], you had to ensure the fodder fit. Picking the wrong essences or fusing them in the wrong order would prevent you from adding more than a couple of layers to a piece of equipment.

That was well and fine when practicing on a training axe. But he couldn't be so flippant when it came to his core. The cost of failure there was either death or a broken core. With a foundation as heavy as his own, Zac feared it'd be the former. The amount of energy in the treasures he'd use was enough to blow him up ten times over. And even if he survived, there was no way he'd be able to make another attempt in time for Ultom.

There were various techniques to alleviate the issue of incompatibility and heterogeneity. Still, it was generally a huge problem for mortals to progress through the ranks in the D-grade with their mottled cores. Galvarion, the mortal Monarch, had tackled the issue by only focusing on the Dao of Water and being as weak as possible for his grade. The smaller and more condensed the foundation, the fewer treasures Galvarion had needed to use. That allowed him to slowly and arduously make his way through Hegemony and eventually form an inner world.

That obviously wasn't an option for Zac, but he had figured out various methods to solve the problem. Even then, the results weren't optimal, and the core formation process was fraught with danger and risk. Luckily, the theories within [Cosmic Forge] allowed him to improve various aspects of the process, removing some dangers while creating a better product.

With his materials secured, an actual plan was finally starting to form. It was a marvelous feeling. Perhaps it was the Mana-powered domain, perhaps it was thanks to being finally able to visualize the end of this long project. A decade of hard work was fast crystallizing into a personalized primer for Core Formation, and soon time lost all meaning.

Until a specific message finally dragged him out of his reverie. Zac blinked and looked around, seeing the thousands of pages strewn about. Three full months had passed, where Zac hadn't left his mansion once, even to look for some free Mana through duels. But the message he'd just received wasn't one he could ignore, so Zac freshened up before activating the teleporter.

"You're leaving already?" Zac asked as he emerged atop the huge skull.

"No point in sticking around any longer," Kruta grinned. "Kruta's foundations are as stable as mother Earth. The Eighth Echelon is enough for me. The Stand of Saeward was already meant to be my last mission, and I walked away with more than I could ever dream of. The epiphany even allowed me to fix some issues with my ancestral link."

"Still, one year in here is just one month on the outside," Zac said.

"I've exhausted my potential in the E-grade," Kruta shrugged. "One extra month on the outside as a Hegemon will be more useful than one year in my current state in this place. Besides, I might enter another Time Chamber to gain the levels I lack for the upcoming trial. The less time I spend in here, the better. I need to get a whole lot stronger and quickly."

"I know the feeling," Zac sighed. "I know it all too well."