

The Fall 1024

[Chapter 1024 - The Stand of Saeward](#)

Zac was about to share his prepared excuse, but he sighed and shook his head before leading Catheya into his study.

"It's nothing much. My senses are just telling me someone is targeting me. I just got the Fate-augmenting prayer beads, and they only made me more certain."

"Target you? Who?" Catheya frowned. "Nerven Serku? Didn't he enter seclusion last year?"

"It could be him, but I don't think so. He never really cared about his followers and only made some trouble to save face. I have a hard time imagining him going after me personally over some minor grudge. He's much too careful for that."

"Can your feeling just be from the fact something is happening in the stand?" Catheya asked.

"Only in the sense that I think someone is preparing to ambush me there,"

"Well, both your personas have made some waves, but I can't see someone specifically targeting yo—" Catheya said, suddenly freezing and looking up. "Ultom."

"You think?" Zac said, his eyes narrowing in thought.

"Clashes are rarely premeditated here. A situation like the Calamity is one thing, but this sounds different. But if people know you're a sealholder, it's a completely different matter."

"My blueprint contains many theories based on that place," Zac slowly nodded.

"More than that. We're talking about an Eternal Heritage, a matter important enough to make Supremacies emerge from their sealed realms. If they're willing to pay the price, they can probably find some clues one way or another."

Zac grimaced and slowly nodded. The array his mother had left him did have some special means to obscure his fate, but she'd warned him it would only work on Autarchs. It had seemed more than enough back then, but that was before he became embroiled with the Left Imperial Palace.

"It's just a theory, though," Catheya quickly added.

"As far as motives go, it's a good one," Zac agreed. "But it doesn't help me solve the situation."

"So what will you do?"

"I'm heading in with Kruta in half a day to start looking around," Zac said.

"You're still going even when you think someone is plotting to kill you?" Catheya groaned. "I knew it."

"You know I have to," Zac smiled. "It might be my only chance to get the kind of item I need. Besides, it seems a good place to deal with this threat."

"I hate that I can't join you," Catheya sighed as she leaned her head on his shoulder. "I'm just 4,000 Mana short."

In contrast to Catheya, Zac was quite happy with how things had played out. She was powerful enough that she wouldn't become a liability, but he'd still rather deal with this alone.

"We still have the Everfrost Isles to look forward to. I'll be relying on you then," Zac smiled before turning serious again. "Can you do me a favor? Stay inside your manor while I'm out this time. They might target you and Ogras to get to me. This is doubly true if this matter is related to the heritage."

"Fine," Catheya said. "But I'll get the annoying shadow and do some research first. We'll see if we can find anything out of place. Do you want me to ask for reinforcements?"

"No," Zac said. "For all we know..."

"I get it," Catheya sighed. "Be careful, alright?"

Catheya left a while later while Zac scoured over all the reports again. Normally, he'd travel the markets before heading into a Red Zone, but he was unwilling to expose himself and his recent gains in case someone was keeping watch. He was using his aura-hiding bracelets and the aura modulator, but you never knew.

Unfortunately, Catheya and Ogras came up empty-handed after half a day's investigation. People were stirring, and the gate to the Stand of Saeward had been opened dozens of times already. It wasn't hard to figure out this would become a bloody affair, even if you ignored the threat hiding in the shadows.

It was troubling not even to be able to narrow things down, but Zac couldn't just sit around. The longer he waited, the more thorough his enemy's preparations would be. He needed to move swiftly and drag his enemies out of the shadows. If nothing else, Kruta had already sent him three messages, proving the barbarian was getting impatient.

"Since when were you so slow-footed?" Kruta said with a roll of his eyes when a hooded Zac finally appeared in his storefront.

"Sorry, I had some things to deal with before we headed out," Zac smiled. "Besides, no one forced you to sit around."

"I'd rather be late than miss out on your uncanny luck," Kruta said as the gate appeared. "Well, let's do this."

Zac nodded, and the two appeared in front of a simple hut standing atop a gargantuan skull. The skull had likely once belonged to a bloodthirsty Beast Emperor, and it still emitted fierce waves of carnage. It drenched the hut in a bloody aura, though Zac could tell it had been changed somewhat. It felt protective rather than threatening after being altered by the Mana Domain. Not protective of Zac, though, but of Kruta.

It felt like a huge beast was eying him, ready to strike in case their ward was attacked.

Zac ignored the feeling and turned to his travel companion. "Is everything prepared?"

"Don't know how necessary all this is," Kruta muttered as he took out two small bones.

"Just humor me," Zac shrugged as he curiously looked at what the man was doing.

One of the bones looked like a fang, while the other was a densely inscribed plate. Kruta placed the fang on the plate, and it looked like the primal scribbles crawled onto the tooth. In just seconds, it was completely covered with a set of engravings.

"You know," Kruta said, grimacing as he pushed the tooth into his neck like a syringe. "Scurrying around like a rat might end with you getting targeted by the cats."

Zac only smiled as green scales appeared across Kruta's face while he transformed into a lizardman. The bone disk seemed to be an interesting transformation treasure that allowed the barbarian to take on features of beasts he'd felled. The tooth was imbued with a temporary array, and the array was then injected into Kruta himself. It allowed for a transformation beyond even what [Million Faces] could accomplish.

"There," Kruta muttered as he looked down at his hands with disgust. "Should last two weeks."

"Sorry, this is not my style either. I've just created too many enmities over the past years," Zac sighed.

"That you have," the barbarian guffawed.

"It's only temporary, I promise."

"So, do I pass inspection? Can we go?" the barbarian huffed.

"In one hour," Zac said.

"It's so weird," Kruta snorted as he thumped down on a large shinbone. "Your path is straight, but you're so crooked and paranoid. Is that why you grew a second shape?"

"Maybe," Zac laughed as he sat down as well. "I just want to make it harder for our steps to be followed. If the two of us emerge in disguises right after I enter your mansion, you could put two and two together."

"Whatever," Kruta grunted. "So you know about the Stand?"

"Well, only what the reports are saying," Zac nodded. "The three dangers and all that."

"Right," Kruta said. "Things are changing, though. Normally, I'd be confident talking down the Hero Souls, but I can't make any guarantees any longer. I traveled the outer fields last week. The spirits are angry, almost descending into madness. It's probably even worse in the depths."

"Did any of them hint at what's going on?"

"Well," Kruta shuddered. "Few can communicate, especially now. But the few that do all say the same thing. 'He's coming.' Over and over."

"He's coming?" Zac muttered. "Who? Saeward?"

"Maybe, or whoever forced him to make his stand," Kruta said. "Judging by the anger in the Hero Souls, I'm leaning toward the latter."

Zac slowly nodded. The Hero Souls were the lingering spirits of Saeward's armies. Millions had died during that ancient battle. And while the bodies had turned to dust, their will remained. It mixed with

the environment, forming transient spirits called Hero Souls. Hero Souls often minded their own business, patrolling the lands as though they were still alive.

However, some had been formed with quite a bit of resentment and acted like resentful ghosts. Others were mostly sane but still confused the guests with their enemies and still attacked. Eventually, they'd destabilize and disappear. They weren't true spirits like Spectral Cultivators. It was more accurate to call them physical memories that had occasionally been twisted over the eons.

The Hero Souls were generally the least perilous of the three dangers, especially if you avoided emitting any killing intent around them. Someone like Kruta could even get help from their kind. Unfortunately, it looked like that old knowledge no longer held sway. The Hero Souls were the most numerous inhabitants of the Stand. If they were turning feral, they'd pose a huge threat.

"What about the other two?"

"I didn't run into any of the puppets. But the energy of the land is rising. They'll be able to absorb more power, unleashing deadlier force. Some buried under the earth might even wake up. I think the same will be true for the fortifications."

"That's just great," Zac sighed.

The puppets once belonged to the mysterious force that had attacked and eventually defeated Saeward and his army. They were pure killing machines, some equivalent to Late Hegemons in strength. The more intact ones even had lethal skills they could unleash.

There was only one puppet for every 30 hero souls at most, but you were probably better off meeting a group of hostile spirits. The puppets were apparently incredibly hard to deal with. They were completely made from D-grade materials and thus extremely difficult to damage. Worse, they were seemingly immortal. Even if you managed to grind one to dust, it'd reform not much later. They required incredible Dao attacks to destroy an intangible repair array.

The final threat was the War Fortifications. All kinds of array towers and contraptions were strewn across the battlefield that was the size of a country. None of them were fully functional, but that only made them more unpredictable. A seemingly inert stone pillar could suddenly unleash a sea of fire that swallowed everything for thousands of meters.

Destroying them was even harder than the puppets and liable to bring disaster upon your head. Since they didn't hold any valuables, most opted to simply skirt around anything that looked suspicious.

"Do you have any ideas for an attack plan?" Zac asked.

"Well..." Kruta slowly said.

"What?"

"I've just seen how sneaky you can be," the barbarian shrugged. "I'm afraid you'll take my ideas and run."

"Don't worry, I'll only ditch you when you can't keep up any longer," Zac winked, but the barbarian was clearly not joking around. "I'm kidding. What do you propose?"

"First, let's discuss the spoils," Kruta said. "I get the Mana Bounty, provided we manage to seize whatever item's waiting at the end through cooperation."

"Just like that?" Zac said with a raised brow. "Do you want to duel again?"

"I know you're a bit stronger than me, but strength is not the only factor. I can commune with the Hero Souls, which will increase our success rate more than a strong arm. More importantly, I have the key to solving the Stand."

Zac didn't immediately answer. Not getting the bounty wasn't a big deal, but giving up on the item itself was a problem. He needed an item to match the [Calamity Core] in quality, which would definitely be a defining treasure of the battlefield.

"To be clear, I just want the Mana. I have everything I need for my breakthrough, and I know you are looking for attuned treasures. We split the other spoils six parts to me, four to you. If both want a specific item, we can barter for it," the barbarian added. "And I promise. You won't leave disappointed if you follow me, and we survive."

"What if we get split up or are placed in a situation where we have to contend against each other?" Zac asked.

"Then I still get 10% of your spoils," the barbarian grinned. "Finder's fee."

"You can have the Mana, but I want it if the bounty treasure has an attunement of Pure Conflict. I'll pay 1 C-grade Nexus coin for it," Zac slowly said. "As for the sixty-forty split and a finder's fee, your ghost-talking isn't enough. You'll have to prove this key of yours is worth the extra loot."

"Ghost-talking? My grandma would whoop you until you sang like a canary if she heard you speak like that," Kruta laughed. "I guess your terms are fine. Well, what do you know about Saeward?"

"Except that he died, nothing," Zac said. "The scrolls don't mention it."

"Not died," the barbarian whispered as he leaned closer. "Disappeared."

"What?" Zac said.

"There are no mentions of Saeward dying anywhere," Kruta explained. "In fact, Saeward's army had the upper hand. Then, their War Array suddenly crumbled, and Saeward was gone. A few of the Hero Souls remembered the confusion, the betrayal. Even with Saeward controlling the war effort, they were barely winning. With him gone, things quickly deteriorated."

"He fled?"

"Maybe," Kruta said. "But I personally don't think so. I think he either was ambushed or had to act quickly to stop a looming threat."

"So..?" Zac hesitated.

"Well, I haven't figured out the details yet," Kruta shrugged. "But I think the key to solving this riddle is discovering what happened to Saeward."

"That's not much of a key," Zac commented.

"Well, this is," Kruta said as he took out a thick hide.

It was painted with black ink, depicting two raging armies locked in battle. Zac frowned as it wasn't some ancient artifact from the battlefield. It was newly drawn, probably by Kruta himself. But suddenly, Zac felt himself get sucked into the drawing and saw how the armies and fortifications stretched out in front of him. The artistic depiction suddenly transitioned into a vast strategic overview of the whole battlefield. Additionally, the armies were moving, following patterns and strategies Zac couldn't decipher.

"I've studied the Stand for years: the armies, their movements. The world itself has become an echo of their paths and history. This understanding will help keep us safe in a world that's about to go mad," Kruta explained. "Well, safer, anyway."

"You've drawn a map of the whole thing?"

"No," Kruta said with a shake of his head. "But enough to have figured out a path to where we need to go; the command center."

"From where Saeward presumably disappeared?"

"Exactly. If we're lucky, we might not just walk away with some naturally born treasure. We might walk away with the wealth of a high-grade ancient cultivator."

"What?" Zac asked.

"Think about it. Saeward suddenly disappeared, and his army was slaughtered. But why are the puppets still walking around aimlessly? Why didn't the victors collect them? Why can you find broken spatial rings and Spirit Tools all over the battlefield? Saeward might have been ambushed, or he might have ambushed whoever is now returning according to the Hero Souls. It doesn't matter.

"I think both fell into some hidden spot or pocket space. Perhaps Saeward even managed to drag his enemy into his inner world. In that case, we're dealing with two ancient masters, their heritage and wealth untouched for eons. Since the Ruthless Heavens govern these worlds, they'll surely have formed troves."

"What does this have to do with the surging energy in the zone?"

"I can't say for sure," Kruta said. "But I know this. Until now, it has been impossible to reach the command centers. The Hero Souls guarding that region are extremely aggressive, and the fortifications form a death trap for E-grade cultivators. If there's a trove, then it's still intact. But with the surge of energy, the battlelines are being redrawn. The puppets are mounting a new attack, which might create an opening. It is the key to sneaking inside."

Zac slowly nodded. He had to admit, he could feel the call of adventure. Unsolved mysteries, ancient troves? Not to mention, it would be hard to successfully launch an ambush on him in the depths of the Stand. With the powerful Hero Souls and puppets crawling across the place, you were liable to attract more attention than you could handle.

Or was that what the enemy was planning to use against him?

Zac shook his head. It was no way to know how things would play out. He could only remain vigilant and try to stay based on the changes on the battlefield.

"How do we know your theory is correct?"

"Well, there are no guarantees. But I've been thinking about that message 'He's coming.' I think it means the hidden realm is returning to the surface. Or perhaps some seal hiding the location of Saeward's battle is failing. It's the trapped energy from Saeward's fall that's being released, causing the battlefield's awakening."

"Well, there's a lot of guesswork, but I think you're onto something," Zac nodded.

"And no more than five people have spent as much time as me in the Stand. Of them, only I have gotten the clues from the Hero Souls," Kruta proudly said. "And that's why Kruta gets 60%."