

## The Fall 1025

### [Chapter 1025 - Hero Souls](#)

"Fine," Zac smiled. "You get 60% if we both reach the trove."

"Don't forget the finder's fee," Kruta grinned.

"Are you trying to lead me into the lion's den before scurrying back to safety?" Zac said with a raised brow.

"No, but I know my limits. I'll do what I can, but this isn't a war for the survival of my tribe," Kruta said, his eyes narrowing as he looked at Zac. "But you, you have that madness in your eyes. The madness that will lead you to greatness or ruin. I'm betting on the former. That way, I'll walk away with some goodies."

"I don't know if I agree, but fine," Zac snorted before looking at his companion thoughtfully.

There were no guarantees, but Zac's instincts told him Kruta wasn't part of the plot against him. The sense of doom hadn't changed at all when Zac entered Kruta's manor. If anything, it had weakened slightly after they'd reached an accord. As such, Zac felt bad about potentially dragging this man into a conspiracy.

"Remember your words. You're not here to risk your life. So if you see things going out of control, don't worry about me and just flee."

"What trouble are you cooking up, shapeshifter?" Kruta said suspiciously.

"Hopefully, nothing. But some enmities from the outside can reach even these realms," Zac said. "It's not worth dying over someone else's grudge. Now, how will we reach the command center without getting ourselves killed or in trouble with the others?"

Kruta didn't look surprised or shocked. Instead, he just nodded like it was a matter of course. "The Dao of Conflict is Heaven's path. More so than the other peaks, perhaps. Don't worry about me. Worse comes to worst, and I'll drag all the Hero Souls in the region down on my enemies' heads. And don't worry about reaching the command center, either. Kruta's got it all planned out!"

The two spent the next hour going over routes, hiding spots to regroup, and tactics. Kruta had a wealth of experience collected during his nine years in the Perennial Vastness, much of which had been spent in the Stand and similar battlefields. Knowledge you wouldn't find in any publicly available information package or the manor scrolls.

From there, Kruta activated his teleportation array, leading to one of the cheaper Green Zones. The moment they stepped through, Zac activated the pillar again, leading them to the teleportation square in Vastness City. It was a small trick not to emerge from their storefront, and it allowed them to enter the Stand of Saeward after just spending seconds in the city.

It was Zac's first visit, and the missives weren't enough to prepare him for the incredible resentment in the air. Or resentment wasn't the right word. This wasn't the unadulterated anger, bloodlust, and irreconciliation that had poisoned the Bloodwind Planet. Those feelings were all there, but they were subordinate to the blazing sun of an endless fighting spirit.

Zac felt like he was standing among millions of soldiers roaring in defiance, the ground trembling from their auras. War was brewing. A war for survival, a war for supremacy. It was the fundamental law of progress, and you found it manifest everywhere, from nature's cycles to conflict between men. Kruta was right. Conflict was Heaven's Path.

His whole Soul Aperture trembled, and the Dao Avatar for his Branch of the War Axe danced in the empty space of his mind, right between the two huge soul spirals. The avatar and [Spiritual Void] were greedily feasting on the rich truths around him, but the absorption affected his mental state.

Still, it wasn't enough to affect Zac's senses. He took a calming breath and found his center, holding onto the Void in his heart. He couldn't let himself be controlled by his Dao or swept up by the storm around him. He always had to be the driving motivation behind the conflict. Otherwise, it'd just devolve into violence and madness.

After stabilizing his mind, Zac made another discovery. The threat of death had grown more palpable. He still couldn't pinpoint the source or time, but it was clearly related to this realm. His enemies were already here, which could be considered a good thing. Catheya had compiled a partial list of those who'd entered, and he could treat every person he met as a potential enemy.

Zac looked around and found Kruta looking at him oddly.

"What's wrong?"

"Ah?" Kruta coughed. "It was weird. I felt you become a Hero Soul for a moment there. I guess your path resonated with the lingering will of the fallen."

"Something like that."

"That's good," Kruta nodded. "The better you harmonize with the battlefield, the less trouble will come your way. Either case, looks like you can keep your wits about you. I guess I won't have to worry about you losing your sense of self."

"Worried I'll become the fourth danger?" Zac smiled.

"Other guests losing their minds," Kruta said with a wry shake of his head. "I've not heard of it happening over the past decades, but who knows now that things are like this? I already feel the amount of resentment is growing."

Zac nodded. Kruta might really be onto something with his theories. The Hero Souls were the only ones who could generate resentment in the Stand, and it made sense if their anger came from the resurgence of their enemy.

"The environment wasn't that corrosive before?" Zac asked.

"It's only a bit worse here at the entrance," Kruta explained. "It's much more noticeable further in. So don't let down your guard, or the war madness might take you."

Zac nodded and looked around. The zone was quite beautiful for an ancient warzone. The Stand of Saeward seemed to have occurred on a meteor soaring through space. It was shrouded by a perpetual night sky, though it wasn't actually that dark. Nebulas and radiant stars drenched the world in ethereal light, creating an ambiance that belied the dangers of this zone.

Oddly enough, the stars moved unpredictably in the sky. It was one thing if their position moved as a result of the world turning, but this was different. It felt like the stars were soldiers forming small armies. These armies moved in different directions, clashing with other groups. It was a stellar war, and Zac felt his mind tremble upon looking at the scene. There were truths hidden in the movements. Or was it just a result of the Dao being rampant?

"Best I can guess is that the sky is made up of at least five Heavenly Layers," Kruta commented. "They are like painted glass panes placed on top of each other, each showing a different set of stars. It looks like they are crashing toward each other, but I've never actually seen them collide. It's like they pass right through each other."

Zac slowly nodded, memorizing the piece of intelligence. You never knew what information would prove useful in these hostile worlds. What was for sure, though, was that it would be impossible to map a path using the stars. Ventus might have been able to do it, but the numerologist's storefront disappeared five months after they met. Proof he had either succeeded in breaking through or died—the Perennial Vastness never told which it was.

The land wasn't the sparse rock you'd expect from a world hurtling through space. Neither was it quite what you'd expect from a still semi-active battlefield. Blue knee-high grass covered the ground, and bushes and small trees weren't an uncommon sight. There were some bare sections far in the distance, no doubt a result of one of the three dangers. But with the extreme energy density and ample Dao, the plants would quickly regrow.

No guests were loitering by the entrance, but they only managed to run five minutes before three warriors appeared to block their path. Zac looked at them one by one, his features hidden beneath his hood. He'd once more taken on the visage of one of the people who now lay in his Corpse Sack. The three strangers were all powerful, though that was to be expected in a place so dangerous it had an echelon requirement. Looking at them, even Zac felt a small pang of danger.

However, this danger was fully disconnected from the hidden sword trained at his back. In other words, they didn't have good intentions but weren't connected to the conspiracy. His [Lucky Beads] were already proving their worth. He wouldn't fully trust its signals since some treasures and skills could counter them, but having them sharpening his sixth sense was incredibly useful.

"Three strangers appearing out of nowhere," Kruta grinned as a baleful aura started leaking from his body. The grass rustled, and it almost sounded like swords colliding as a bloody haze was released from the grass. "The grass has grown parched and hungry over the eons."

Zac said nothing, but a nasty two-handed sword appeared in his hand as his killing intent joined Kruta's. He didn't want to fight so soon and this close to the teleportation gate, but it was like the whole world urged him on. Not fighting felt like holding his breath. It was fine for a bit, but it wasn't a natural state in the Stand. Even Zac felt a desire for battle, and veins had started appearing on the newcomers' foreheads. None of them seemed to have a matching Dao with the realm, and they had much-worse resistance to the whispers of war.

Yet, they didn't attack.

"No need to draw your weapons!" a man in the middle said, his voice hoarse. "It's the realm that's playing tricks on us! We are just looking for people who wish to form an alliance. Small groups stand no chance against the established coalitions. If we join forces, we'll—"

"Thanks, but we're still going to explore it on our own," Kruta lazily interjected.

The warrior hesitated a second, but a cold gust swept through the grass before he could act.

Eight ancient warriors had appeared out of nowhere. They were not fully tangible humanoids, and some of their body parts shifted in and out of reality. Armor covered every inch of their bodies, so it was impossible to tell whether they were actual humans or some similar species. Zac's eyes widened a bit as he quickly retracted his aura. He hadn't expected to see Hero Souls this close to the teleporter.

All eight wielded identical gear and weapons, but they were definitely not some cannon fodder troops. Each had a towering aura matching that of Peak Hegemons with mountains of corpses under their belts. Swirls of resentment and ferocity surrounded their bodies, and Zac could sense how the realm protected and nurtured them.

However, something was off about their strength. Most likely, they had been Peak Hegemons before falling, while they only had the energy equivalent of Early Hegemons right now. They were ultimately just memories, unable to bring forth the full strength of their true selves.

Still, seasoned veterans who were once a full grade higher were not easy to deal with, especially when reinforcement could appear out of nowhere when it came to these Hero Souls. Kruta had already restrained his bloodlust as well, but the Hero Souls still stopped right between the two groups. Their stares were quite unnerving, not giving off the slightest hint of whether they were friendly or about to attack.

"Cycle your Dao," Kruta whispered, and Zac immediately let his Branch of the War Axe course through his body.

The effect was immediate. All of the Hero Souls suddenly ignored him and Kruta and instead turned toward the trio, who were incapable of harmonizing with the conflict in the region. The guests hesitated for a moment before backing away, not daring to speak out of fear they'd be attacked. These hero souls were relatively weak, but there were eight of them, along with two hostile guests. Fighting would be quite dangerous.

A moment later, the trio was gone, followed by four of the Hero Souls.

"Boring," Kruta muttered. "They had two more hiding in the distance. They probably wanted to lead us into an ambush, but they're gone now."

"That doesn't mean they've given up," Zac commented.

"True. Preying on solitary warriors is the only thing those kinds of people can accomplish in this kind of event," Kruta snorted before looking at Zac with annoyance. "Of course, this could have been easily solved while also awarding us some Mana."

"Two hours. Then we let loose," Zac smiled.

That was the best Zac could come up with on such short notice; he'd expose himself after they'd left the starting reaches of the Stand. The further they headed, the harder it would be to set up a complex ambush—the Stand was too dynamic a region for preparing a bunch of arrays. You couldn't even lie in ambush for too long. The puppets could sense static energy accumulations and head in your direction.

Conversely, the worst-case scenario was if the enemy stayed by the entrance. They could masquerade as any random coalition if they did, and it was much easier to set up a lethal trap that would be difficult to avoid. He needed to drag the enemy into the depths, where chaos reigned supreme—his home turf.

"Fine," Kruta scoffed before turning to the lingering spiritual warriors.

The barbarian bowed with a reverent expression, something Zac felt wasn't faked. "Esteemed warriors, Kruta the Second greets you. Are you willing to answer a few questions of mine?"

The Hero Souls looked at Kruta for a few seconds before turning away, heading back toward the depths of the battlefield.

"Well, didn't attack us, at least," Kruta shrugged. "Pretty good outcome as things go nowadays. Let's go."

Zac nodded, and the two sped off, making use of starting region's relative safety to use movement skills. Soon after setting out, the two heard a scream and an eruption of energy. The Hero Souls had attacked the trio.

An odd storm was brewing above their heads. It looked like dozens of spatial tears had opened up, dragging energy and Dao into the Void. However, there were no actual tears. The energy was rather imploding onto itself, creating a shockwave that further stirred up the area. The phenomenon looked a bit like beating hearts of pure conflict, and the hearts were beating faster and faster.

"See those clouds?" Kruta laughed. "They're why you have to finish battles quickly and move on. Conflict breeds conflict. It's an insatiable fire. New souls will be born as long as there's conflict and energy, and I've never seen this place run out of either. They're like catnip for the puppets too. We should get out of here. I didn't expect such a big cloud to appear right at the entrance."

Zac nodded, and the two ran deeper into the Stand. Powerful ripples erupted behind them, and Zac shook his head. The ambushers had been forced to release skills, but it hadn't been enough, judging by the continuous eruptions. Releasing so much Cosmic Energy was like pouring gasoline on the fire. It was one thing to use a movement skill to cross large distances occasionally. If you started peppering offensive skills with lethal intent, you'd feed into the conflict of the realm itself.

Such was the danger of the Stand of Saeward. It was easy to get into a fight but hard to extricate yourself. There was a reason this place was not only a Red Zone but one with minimum requirements to enter.

"Danger, right!" Zac suddenly warned as his mind screamed of peril.

He stepped left with [Earthstrider], but it was too late. Zac's vision turned white, and his muscles stopped listening to his commands as a sea of lightning bolts swept through him and continued for another five-hundred meters. The agony continued for a whole minute before relenting, at which point Zac was left panting as he angrily glared at an inconspicuous mound in the distance.

"Not a fan of that one," Zac grunted.

"Really? I feel all loosened up," Kruta grinned, cracking his neck. "Wait 'til you see some of the things waiting for us further in. Good thing both of us are meaty, 'cause we'll lose a few layers of skin before we're through."

"That's just great," Zac wryly smiled, but he swirled around upon sensing a powerful energy fluctuation shooting toward them.

"Bad things rarely come alone here," Kruta grunted as he took out his twin swords. "What's a Red Cap doing this close to the entrance? This place is really going out of control."