

The Fall 1026

[Chapter 1026 - Red Caps](#)

Zac looked at the creature rushing at them at a speed Zac couldn't match without using [Earthstrider]. It appeared eerily similar to the Hero Souls, except this puppet was clearly fully corporeal. The full-body armor was similar in design, except it seemed to be made out of a light black ceramic alloy with a red helmet.

Red Caps were the weakest puppets, named after their blood-red heads. They were the equivalent of Early Hegemons, though their durability was one grade higher. Above them were the Blue Cloaks, and then came the White Sigils. White Sigils were solidly in Middle D-grade and almost impossible to destroy.

Finally, there were the very rare Golden Champions. If you saw one of those puppets, you were better off running for your life than fighting it. Even a coalition would have trouble taking down one of those things. By the descriptions, Zac wasn't the least confident in his ability to tangle with those things, even if he went all-out.

"Let me deal with this one. I'll show you how it's done," Kruta said with excitement written all over his face.

The two swords in Kruta's hands hummed with the Dao of Conflict, and they started to absorb the ambient Dao in the air. The weapons looked like a mix of messer swords and butcher's cleavers. They were barely a meter long and had a width of around two hands. They were single-edged, and a thick line of runes ran along the back of the blade.

As ambient Dao pored into the swords, the first rune by the handle lit up, prompting the swords' auras to rise marginally. Kruta had some orcish heritage, but his gear was far more exquisite than what he saw from his brethren in the Big Axe Coliseum. The swords were a rare dual Spirit Tool of extreme quality, and Zac suspected they had an equivalent or even greater spirituality than [Verun's Bite].

A spectral projection appeared behind Kruta's back as he readied himself for battle. It was only a bit larger than Kruta himself and even looked similar except for a noticeably stronger orcish blood. It was the ancestral soul whisp Kruta the Second had been born with—the original Kruta. He emitted a heart-palpitating aura that reminded Zac of the Hero Souls. Zac felt like he looked upon an old monster like Be'Zi, but the projection's actual aura was only at Kruta's level.

The barbarian shot forward, forgoing finesse as he crashed into the puppet. A shockwave turned the already scorched grass in the surrounding area to shreds. The ripple was immediately followed by dangerous waves that would rip apart any F-grade cultivator. Even Zac was forced to take a few steps back to avoid getting cut. Kruta had become a violent hurricane as he launched an unceasing barrage of strikes on the Red Cap.

As he moved, so did the avatar on his back. It almost looked like Kruta had grown a second set of arms, and two translucent fists grabbed at the weapons in Kruta's hands. The sword shuddered as two spectral projections appeared, turning two swords into four. Zac wryly smiled, remembering thinking the barbarian's style was full of odd holes when they first met.

Much of that could be explained by the fact that Kruta couldn't rely on his signature technique in a martial duel. In the real world, Kruta never fought alone. He had his ancestor, Kruta the Great, to aid him. They were two halves of a whole; one couldn't exhibit his true strength without the other. It was like fighting with one arm behind his back for the barbarian.

The imperfections in Kruta's blueprint were the real deal, though, an unavoidable side effect of the man being a bit of a fighting idiot. Then again, Zac's accomplishments in that arena would have been even worse if he hadn't stumbled onto a lake's worth of liquified comprehension. However, those gaps were mostly fixed by now, largely thanks to almost monthly duels with Zac.

Cracks started to appear on the puppet's ceramic armor from Kruta's no-holds offensive, but it was no slouch. It seemed to possess almost a bestial instinct, and its sword was a blur as it fended off the constant swirl of attacks. It couldn't be considered fighting at the level of the Integration stage, but its movements were based on a powerful set technique without any clear weaknesses.

There were probably no more than ten people back home who could deal with the Red Cap in a martial duel, even if the puppet's attributes were restricted to its opponent's level. It was only at the peak of the Formation Stage, but it made no mistakes as far as Zac could see. Every attack, evasion, block, and dodge was incredibly efficient. Meanwhile, its incredible durability allowed it to fight aggressively, trading blows for blows and coming out on top.

Zac was perhaps even more impressed by this than Kruta's dominant display. Just how skilled had the puppeteer been to create something like this? To create tens of thousands of them, even?

If Kruta had only fought with two arms, the two would likely have been locked in a stalemate. However, cracks appeared one after another across the puppet after just seconds of fighting. Meanwhile, Zac noticed matching runes had started lighting up on the spectral warrior and Kruta. They matched those on the swords and seemed to imbue him with further strength, and his swings grew increasingly ferocious.

The skills, the Dao, the combat style, and the weapons. They were all connected and in perfect harmony. The weapons were likely forged for Kruta specifically, taking into account his path and talents. That was one aspect where Zac couldn't compare to established factions. Hopefully, he'd get there by the end of Hegemony.

A pang of danger warned Zac the Red Cap wouldn't give up without a fight, and a huge blast of cutting blades erupted before Zac could warn his companion. The storm was similar to his [Nature's Edge] though far more condensed. Most Peak E-grade cultivators would be ripped to shreds if caught in such a domain, but Kruta only roared.

The scream was empowered by Cosmic Energy and Dao, but Zac wasn't sure it was a skill. A pure wall of power crushed the cutting blades and allowed him to continue dismantling the puppet. However, a third party joined the fray just as Kruta cut off one of the Red Cap's arms—four Hero Souls who had already drawn their weapons.

"They're feral!" Kruta swore, but Zac didn't need the warning.

These new arrivals were different than the ones they'd encountered before. They carried intense amounts of resentment, making their armors look mottled with blood. Rather than heroic warriors, they felt like vengeful ghosts.

"You deal with the puppet," Zac said as [Verun's Bite] appeared in his hand. "I wanted to test these guys in either case."

"Let's compete who's finished first," Kruta grinned.

"How is that fair?" Zac laughed as he moved between Kruta and the Hero Souls. "Your guy is halfway done already."

The lingering effect of the lightning field was gone, and his muscles had long since stopped spasming. Four vines shot out from his back, forming wide arcs that targeted the Hero Souls from the side. He essentially created a funnel herding them toward himself, making sure none of them targeted Kruta.

"Remember to use our Dao of Conflict," Kruta reminded from behind, just as the puppet began gathering energy again. "Ah, this bastard has another domain?"

The Hero Souls were only fifty meters away by that point, their swords turning into bloody arcs as they ripped apart Vivi's vines without stopping. New vines grew to replace what was lost with the help of the Branch of the Kalpataru, each ferociously digging at the vengeful memories. A few vines soon managed to sneak past the ghosts' defenses, but Zac noted the effect was only decent. Imbuing your attacks with Dao was usually enough to deal with intangible beings like elementals and ghosts, but the Hero Souls were a bit special.

A few of Vivi's lashes slammed into the Hero Souls with full power, and they reacted as a normal cultivator would. They either blocked or had to bear the brunt of the attack using their armor. Other attacks passed right through their bodies like the warriors were nothing but projections. It even looked like the Hero Souls knew, or perhaps even controlled, when they were corporeal and when they were just memories.

Imbuing the vines with his Dao of Life only had minimal impact, just like the missives explained. You couldn't damage them when intangible, but you disturbed whatever held the memories together. It would quicken their disintegration if you just kept at it. A few Daos were more effective than others, such as the Daos of Time and Emotions, but the most effective was the Dao of Conflict. The Dao of Conflict didn't disrupt the Hero Souls; it locked them in and forced them to stay corporeal.

Zac stepped forward, his perception shifting as he quickly became one with his path. The ancient battlefield was no longer just the ruins of an ancient struggle. It had become a lesson in the fundamental laws of the universe.

The Hero Souls were filled with resentment, but they moved like veteran soldiers rather than beings who had lost their rationality to bloodlust. They tried to flank Zac and surround him, but Zac was an army of one. [Verun's Bite] sang, empowered by the law of evolutionary progress and the soothing breath of the world. Attacks were averted, and defenses were breached.

The Hero Souls were like hyenas trying to nip at the heels of a far greater predator. Zac worked methodically to disrupt their cooperation and damage their forms. Zac felt like a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders as he moved and attacked in accordance with his Evolutionary Stance.

The past years had been spent under the yoke of hostile and opposing Daos. His technique and convictions had been under constant attack by truths that were often far more refined than his own. Now that the encouraging winds of Conflict had replaced the suppression, he felt like he'd been reborn.

There was a fluidity to his motions he hadn't felt before, a deeper connection to his technique. The years of suffering had brought a reward beyond treasures and Mana. Being exposed to so many concepts had refined him. A rough gemstone had been polished, just like how endless tribulations had refined his blueprint in the simulation array.

Swirling winds of war formed a small arena around Zac and the Hero Souls as he tried to break through the iron wall of swords and shields. It was slightly disruptive, fighting with beings that weren't fully tangible. A scream of danger accompanied a failed block, where the Hero Soul's sword passed right through [Verun's Bite] to strike at Zac's neck.

Simultaneously, another warrior stabbed at him from the left, blocking off his path of escape. Zac didn't mind. Instead of dodging or backing down, he pushed forward. A hand imbued with the Branch of the War Axe ripped out a chunk of mottled armor while Zac cut off the attacker's hand. Meanwhile, Vivi formed a web of death, stabbing at the slits in the Hero Souls' helmets and forcing them to back down.

It didn't change the situation much. The severed hand regrew, only costing the Hero Soul some of its accumulated energy. And they had a lot of energy—it would take over a minute to exhaust the Hero Souls in this manner. Of course, this was while Zac only fought according to his Dao without using it. Zac would have liked to experiment with his techniques and Daos some more, but he knew he couldn't mess around in the Stand.

The group from before was a poignant reminder of that.

The axe-wielding Dao Apparition was already teeming with vigor because of the environment, and it released a dense stream of Dao that coursed into [Verun's Bite]. Meanwhile, a dense Dao Field empowered by [Spiritual Void] covered the combatants, making the Hero Souls suddenly look like mortal men. The memories could no longer phase through his attacks, and each collision destroyed significant amounts of energy.

The previously ferocious spirits flickered precariously in just ten seconds, and the battle was over in another five. These Hero Souls were ultimately not a match to Zac's technique, even when he restrained himself to hide his most recent gains. Of course, just like the Red Cap, these were just the lowest forms of souls wandering the Stand.

"Impressive," Kruta nodded, a pile of scrap already lying by his feet. "Your axe is doing almost as much work as my four swords. I'll have to ask my elders if they can help me reach that state when I return."

"And you're sure we can't collect the puppets?" Zac asked.

"They're only alive thanks to the unique environment," Kruta said with a shake of his head. "Their arrays fail, and the armor turns more brittle than mortal material after you bring them out."

"Then let's go before that scrap heap reforms," Zac sighed.

Kruta nodded, and the two set off again. It was just in time. The battle had lasted less than a minute, yet Zac could feel how the Dao of Conflict had grown agitated in the area, concentrating on their location. If they stayed, problems would soon follow.

The sky rumbled as they ran, and a gout of lava erupted in the distance. It felt like disaster could wait around any corner, and there was a palpable sense of things bubbling under the surface. It was not just because of the increasingly thick Dao of Conflict, either. Fate was gathering at the heart of the realm. In a place like that, gathering fate meant danger. But it also meant opportunity, and Zac felt a smile creep up his lips.

"Like I said, you have the madness," Kruta laughed as he looked over. "But don't get cocky; these guys were just the weakest of the bunch. Soon, we'll have to use our skills to deal with our enemies, creating a far nastier response. I've almost been sent off to my ancestors a few times in here already."

"I know," Zac nodded. "It just feels nice to be in a place resonating with you."

"So why do you keep taking those suicidal missions in places that don't welcome you?"

"We all have our methods to progress," Zac shrugged.

The two continued for another two hours without encountering any large issues. Kruta spotted a cultivator far in the distance, but he was moving toward the entrance. He flashed away when he was spotted, and the two ignored him. Zac got better and better at fusing his Dao field with the environment, but they were still attacked by puppets, towers, and Hero Souls every ten minutes or so. Kruta already had a constipated look on his face after having one attempt at communication after another rebuffed by the Hero Souls.

Eventually, they reached the edge of the grassy plains, where a xeric tundra replaced it. The region looked far less hospitable than the ethereal grass, but it provided much more coverage in the form of hills, escarpments, and tor formations as large as skyscrapers. Of course, there was a good chance that many of those boulders hid lethal formations, but they made it a lot harder to get spotted from a distance.

"This is the entrance to the real battlefield," Kruta commented as he pointed at a 20-man Hero Soul squad flying in the distance.

In its lead rode a warrior atop something like a twin-tailed tiger. The captain was clearly much stronger than their subjects, and Zac guessed it was the equivalent of a Blue Cloak Puppet.

"From here on out, we might meet stronger enemies, and the fortifications can actually hurt us. You, anyway."

"You do have pretty thick skin," Zac nodded. "Didn't even flinch when you ambushed the Hero Souls while talking about how you admired them."

"Bah, those things were all long gone. My ancestor hasn't been able to connect to a single one," Kruta said with a roll of his eyes before looking at Zac expectantly. "So, are we finally done skulking around? I bet we'll encounter more people now that we've left the starting zone."

"Fine, let's swap," Zac agreed after some final deliberations.

Soon, Zac stood in his original form without trying to hide it. Kruta followed suit, somehow extracting all the scales across his body with the same bone as before.

"And if we meet any people?" the barbarian asked.

"Rob or kill, depending on their actions," Zac confirmed.

"Good!"

The two entered the tundra following Kruta's map, doing their best to avoid the larger squads. It was still impossible to avoid the random stragglers, and it always felt like they were one step away from disaster. They'd barely managed to avoid an even squad of Hero Souls than the one they saw before while dismantling a trio of Red Caps.

But the scene was nothing compared to what they stumbled onto after traveling for two hours. Puppets, hundreds of them, pouring out from two spatial gates. Most were the Red Caps, but they also spotted almost a dozen Blue Cloaks. There was even a White Sigil leading them, and Zac shuddered at the baleful aura it emitted. They formed orderly squads as they marched toward the depths of the Stand.

Against this army, there was only escape. Even if they managed to destroy all these things, it would be after exhausting all their skills and attracting half the Stand to their location.

"Wow," Zac whispered from within the emergency isolation array Kruta had prepared as they slowly backed away to hide behind a rock formation.

"Well, I haven't seen that before," Kruta agreed. "I wonder where they are coming from."

"So what should we—" Zac said, but he stopped upon feeling a weak ripple.

It was so minute it could just have been a small fluctuation brought by the disturbance massive army, but Zac's guts told him otherwise. More importantly, the sense of danger that had haunted him for weeks had flared up.

This was no coincidence. His enemies had found him.