

## The Fall 1032

### [Chapter 1032 - Plunge](#)

The White Sigils were true killing machines, but even the high-quality versions were ultimately not his match, at least not when empowered by [Arcadian Crusade]. He'd already crippled one of the two through sheer attribute advantage and skill, but dozens of Blue Cloaks were ready to take his place.

Arrows so fast they were invisible forced Zac to constantly bob and weave, yet he already had two sticking out of his body. Even [Arcadian Crusade] couldn't hide the fact he was pushing the boundaries of what his constitution could bear, and he felt himself slowly drowning under the onslaught. The ground shook, and Zac inwardly groaned upon sensing the army rushing closer. Just like Kruta warned, there were hundreds of Red Caps.

Fifteen seconds left on [Arcadian Crusade].

Zac hatefully looked at Valsa. They were only separated by thirty meters—a single leap for an E-grade cultivator—yet there might as well be an unbridgeable chasm between them. He was filled with reluctance, but he released a burst of [Nature's Edge] to create a small window to flash over to Kruta's side.

"Let's go," Zac whispered, feeling like he'd been fed garbage.

Still, Zac was full of gratitude as he looked at his half-orc companion. He knew it wasn't easy for Kruta to go out of his way to antagonize an imperial. It was one thing for Zac, who lived in a remote corner of the universe on a planet protected by the System. Besides, he was already fated to butt heads with people like the imperials over Ultom, but Kruta wasn't.

Kruta eagerly nodded, and he grabbed Zac's shoulder while snapping a bone with the other. The surroundings shifted, and Zac swore as he found himself right in front of a Red Cap. Behind it were dozens more, including two Blue Cloaks.

"What!" Kruta exclaimed as he kicked the puppet away from them. "Why from this direction?! This region should be safe!"

"To the river!" Zac urged as he ate a handful of Soldier- and Satiety Pills for his almost depleted Vigor.

Kruta nodded, and the world shifted again. The two found themselves at the edge of the haze, with an endless river filling up their vision. It was too wide to spot the other side. Zac would even have guessed it an ocean if not for the powerful current that created frothing waves.

"Damn, what a mess. The path we took here is blocked," Kruta sighed after confirming there were no puppets on their tail. "Is it the Golden Champion? Maybe they can summon puppets from far away."

"Maybe," Zac nodded. "For now, let's—"

Zac said, but a pang of danger made him drag Kruta dozens of meters away with [Earthstrider]. It barely allowed him to avoid a torrent of light that pierced a hole into the Edge. From the haze, Valsa appeared, her armor a mess, but her wounds fully mended. Valsa retained four Soul Lamps and had lost yet another gem on her crown. Was it to throw off the Golden Champion?

Seeing her appear made Zac's battle lust surge, but he only had five seconds remaining on [Arcadian Crusade]. Worse, Valsa was still channeling those rivers of light, and they were getting closer. He didn't have the energy to counter it with [Primal Edict].

There was just no way.

"Do you trust me?" Zac whispered while he took out a Void Core.

"No!" Kruta groaned.

"Well, too bad!" Zac said as he grabbed Kruta and jumped. "Hold onto me and I'll get us through this!"

"No! We'll—" Kruta screamed, but his words were swallowed as they plunged into the frothing waters.

Of course, it wasn't water, but rather what looked like liquid mercury that was so full of energy it veritably vibrated. Zac groaned as thousands of invisible blades dug into his back. It felt like burning maggots were trying to burrow into the wounds, and the agony was enough to drive one mad. Then, the pain disappeared as Zac activated [Void Zone]. The waters around them stilled, but Zac felt his Void Energy get drained at a worrying pace.

Zac sighed before cramming the Void Core into his mouth, chewing at the rock-like resource to shave off energy-rich filaments to swallow. A storm of unstable energy soon coursed through his body, turning his insides into yet another battlefield. Most of it was unusable before [Void Heart]'s purification, but some could be immediately extracted and used for himself.

It wasn't enough to recover his stores, but it slowed down the loss considerably. A weak warning of danger made Zac look up just in time to see the surface getting pelted by thousands of projectiles. Unfortunately for Valsa, the daggers were almost instantly ripped apart by the dense energies in the river. The few that barely reached Zac were nullified and erased. The powerful current had soon dragged Zac hundreds of meters, and no more attacks came from Valsa's side.

Zac prayed it was because the Golden Champion had tracked her down.

Kruta didn't dare so much as blink out of fear he'd break whatever Zac was doing, so Zac had Vivi fasten the orc to his back while he scanned the river's edge with his Soul Sense. It only took a few seconds before spotting what he was looking for; a small outlet that veered right. Zac urged his harried body to drag them into the channel, after which he let the current do its thing.

Their journey met an abrupt end ten seconds later as the two slammed into a stone wall. Zac knew that was their cue, and he carefully dragged himself and Kruta to the surface. They were in luck. He had expected the channel to lead them to the moat he'd spotted outside Saeward's Castle, but they'd been ferried into the castle proper. By the looks of it, they'd been deposited at the bottom of a well.

"What? Wh—" Kruta blubbered as he looked around with wide eyes. "What?"

"Want me to slap you to wake you up?" Zac offered as he glanced at well's mouth. "Well, shit."

Zac couldn't see what was happening within the castle, but the open well provided a perfect vantage of the night sky.

The huge Edict of Candor was still floating in the air. Just how long would that thing last? Would he have to leave the Stand of Saeward to free himself of its effect? He tried breaking the seal again but was rebuffed like his previous attempts. Not a great situation when you'd accidentally infiltrated a haunted castle full of Hero Souls.

Zac was absolutely wrung dry, and his ultimate skills would be on cooldown for a few more hours. He hadn't noticed, but even his pathways had been damaged. Part of it was probably courtesy of the river and eating a Void Core, while the rest was because of the Dao infused into Valsa's attacks.

Even worse, he never got a surge of Kill Energy after they jumped into the river. Her lanterns should have run out already, yet Valsa had survived. That had to mean the large puppet army hadn't managed to catch up to her. Was she returning to the Teleportation Array, or was she still lurking in the region?

Perhaps she even had a backup squad ready to go.

For now, he could only deal with things as they came. Zac indicated Kruta to be silent before having Vivi inch her way to the mouth. There was no response after a minute, so Zac had the Spirit Plant slowly drag himself and Kruta upward. They couldn't stay much longer this close to the lethal waters. He was plumb out of Void Energy, and even hovering above the calm waters of the well felt like a steel bath.

He tried to sense any activity through his various senses, but he could find nothing except an incredibly energy-rich environment. Kruta shook his head slightly, confirming he couldn't sense anything either. The two peered over the edge and discovered the well was situated in a remote corner of a flourishing garden.

There was a garden in the middle of an ancient battlefield?

It clearly wasn't some wild plants having found a footing thanks to the energy-rich environment. The flowers and shrubbery, all of which emitted strong auras of Conflict, seemed to be carefully planted to create a good ambiance. The scenery made Zac's depleted cells loudly complain with hunger, but he stilled himself as he looked for threats.

As far as he could tell, there were none. There were no puppets, Hero Souls, or any other people for that matter. Neither could they spot any suspicious energy patterns indicating a hidden array. The only arrays they could find were a set of arrays that covered the flowerbeds, which helped gather energy and infuse it into the plants.

Zac shrugged at Kruta's inquiring look, and the two crawled out of the well and moved into a hidden corner where they erected a set of arrays. Only after ten minutes did they breathe out in relief and move about. It really looked like they'd managed to break into the castle unseen. Had all the Hero Souls inside already been forced onto the battlefield? It was impossible to tell; the garden had to be covered in an isolation array since they couldn't hear a peep.

With no outside threats around, Zac turned his sight inward. [Purity of the Void] and [Void Heart] were already fast at work expelling the foreign Daos of Valsa and the puppets. [Immutability of Eoz] was still trying to expel the shield, but Zac managed to redirect its attention after a few tries. Thankfully, it looked like no curses or marks were left on him during the battle.

His body was still teeming with the Kill Energy from the deathsworn, and he activated [Surging vitality] while cramming food, real food, down his gullet. Satiety Pills were a lot like Soldier Pills. Those pills only provided a hollow energy boost; it couldn't be compared to normal recovery and a good meal.

"You're pretty relaxed after almost getting yourself killed," Kruta commented, but he still followed suit as he took out a large box filled with grilled meat.

"I'm pretty used to it," Zac sighed before looking at Kruta's stump. "Your leg..."

"Ah?" Kruta said, glancing down. "Oh, don't worry about it. This bone's a specialty of my tribe's shamans. It'll help me grow a new foot in a week. In a month, it'll be back to my old strength."

"Impressive," Zac nodded.

"Can't have our warriors get crippled after every little dismemberment," Kruta laughed, but his grin slowly turned into a grimace.

Suddenly, he stood up and bowed deeply. "I'm sorry! I talked so big about helping fight off your enemies, but I ran at first sight of trouble! I failed you!"

"You didn't fail me," Zac assured as he tore into another strip of dried Beast King. "You brought the puppets and protected me at a critical moment. That's more than I could ever ask for. I didn't expect my enemies to have such a troublesome background."

"But you almost did them all in yourself. If I helped from the beginning, you wouldn't be as cut up as a practice dummy," Kruta said with a shamefaced expression. "It's just... That was Valsa Planur from the first of the Seven Heavens. Our people's tribes rely on the Fourth Heaven. I froze."

"Fourth Heaven? What's that?" Zac asked curiously. "Another Immemorial Realm?"

Zac had already heard some mentions of the Seven Heavens of the Ancient Imperials, but he'd never gotten the details. Few were willing to gossip about the top factions, and none would be so bold as to sell information packets on peak factions in Vastness City.

"What? You don't know about the imperials?" Kruta said. "Then why was she so mad at you?"

"It's complicated," Zac shrugged. "I've told you before; I'm from the Frontier."

"Right," Kruta slowly nodded. "Do you know about the Imperials?"

"Well, the short of it," Zac nodded. "Pretty powerful people. But I'm not sure why you'd be reliant on them? Is your tribe a subsidiary force?"

"No, not really. Each Imperial Clan formed a powerful Empire, and we live closest to the Han'Bazor Empire. We are not a subsidiary to them, but we still can't defy them because they control the Fourth Heaven."

"So what's a Heaven?"

"It's a special universe," Kruta sighed. "You could consider it something beyond the classifications of Mystic Realms. They are frankly amazing. You can 'ascend' from almost anywhere if you have access,

even outside the Han'Bazor Empire. You'll pop up out of nowhere inside the Heaven. Higher-grade permits can even allow you just to send in your consciousness or part of it.

"Imagine the ramifications; people across dozens of regions able to suddenly appear right next to each other after paying the entrance fee. Thanks to the Heavens, they've become extremely important for trade, alliances... And breakthroughs.

"Breakthroughs?" Zac said with raised brows.

"The Dao is clearer in the Heavens, denser. It almost feels like you've been transported to the beginning of the era when the Dao was wild and abundant. Thanks to that, it's one of the best places to Defend your Dao, and the Imperials are selling slots in return for contribution," Kruta grimaced. "But if we go against them..."

"You'll lose the opportunity to nurture Autarchs," Zac sighed. "I get it."

"That's an important reason why the Imperials are standing strong to this day. Their networks are so vast because of the opportunities they can provide. And, of course, they have an excessive number of Autarchs and Monarchs among their ranks.

"They don't even need to lift a finger. They can just remove your access to the Heavens, and you'll slowly see your faction die out while your enemies get your opportunities. People have tried to figure out what the Heavens are or if there's more of them, but none have solved the mystery."

"Even a rich environment can't have endless energy, right?" Zac frowned, remembering how even Draugr Clans had to carefully plan who to give a shot at Autarchy and when. The costs involved were simply so huge. "How can they afford to let outsiders defend their Dao in their backyard?"

"That's..." Kruta said, looking at Zac askance. "They borrow it from other places..."

Zac's eyes widened in comprehension. He'd heard of this before; ancient factions draining the Frontier to improve their environments. These imperials were real thieves, one and all.

"Well, that's how things stand," Kruta shrugged. "Now, can you explain where we are and why we're alive?"

"The first question is simple," Zac said. "We're inside Saeward's Castle."

"WH—" Kruta roared, but he quickly stopped and changed his voice to a whisper. "What?!"

"I noticed that the castle's moat was made up of the weird liquid of the Edge, and the river was running in this direction. I figured they were connected," Zac explained. "So I jumped in, and here we are."

"That's... That's... So stupid," Kruta said, his eyes as wide as saucers. "What if only a small offshoot led to the moat while the rest led us to some deadly region beyond what we're supposed to explore? What if the path here was protected by a grate?"

"I mean, staying behind would have been a death sentence, so I figured we'd take a chance," Zac smiled. "And now, we get to look for treasure."

"Madness... Madness," Kruta said as he blankly looked to the sky. "Making enemies of the First Heaven and still finding time to sneak into the heart of the zone. I'm not sure I can bear your fate."

"Now, don't be like that. Though I guess I should tell you now that things have come to this. I'm technically an enemy with all the Heavens, not just the first," Zac coughed, which made Kruta's face crumble.

"Fine, whatever!" Kruta grunted as he ripped into his dinner. "The rice is already cooked, and that little witch will do whatever her kin will do. I guess I'll just have to follow you to the end of this fever dream. I can't die more than once."

"That's the spirit," Zac nodded.

"By the way, I marked her with some bone dust when I brought the puppets. She won't be able to ambush us again when we return," Kruta grinned. "Well, unless she cleans her shoes, I guess."

"That's good," Zac nodded.

"Anyway, you want to explain why we're alive or why I felt my connection to the Dao suddenly getting cut off?" Kruta commented with a raised brow.

"That one's a bit more complicated," Zac said. "I'd appreciate it if you forgot about it, honestly."

"Forget I asked," Kruta nodded. "You know what? If I get out of this alive, I'm heading right into seclusion. I've had enough excitement and war for a while. I miss my tribe. I miss the song of the grass."

"We'll see," Zac laughed. "I think you'll come back for more adventures soon enough."

Kruta just snorted and continued to eat. Both spent the next three hours doing field repairs on their bodies and recovering energy. It wasn't nearly enough time to return to peak fighting condition, but it was enough to deal with some Hero Souls if they ran into them. Hopefully, enough to leave this place in one piece. The two planned on staying another hour, but Kruta's eyes suddenly snapped open as he turned toward the castle wall.

"I can sense her! She's coming!" Kruta said with shock. "How is she moving through the army?"

Zac was just as surprised at Kruta. Valsa obviously knew they were alive from the lack of Kill Energy, but she actually dared to follow them into the castle? That was almost as surprising as her being able to do it. He'd seen that battlefield himself. Unless something had drastically changed, there was no way to pass through that chaos unscathed.

Then again, did the why and how matter? She wasn't the only one unwilling to let bygones be bygones, and Zac refused to believe she had recovered to a perfect state after that battle. Plans were already brewing in Zac's mind as he got to his feet, and Kruta blanched when their eyes met.

"You're not..."

"Of course I am. Let's get ready to welcome her."