

## The Fall 1034

### [Chapter 1034 - Puppet](#)

It turned out that the central section of the warfront castle was a large atrium with a diameter of over three hundred meters. The whole square was covered in dense scripts, and intense fluctuations of Conflict were released from the glowing lines. At first, Zac thought the whole array was illuminated and running, but he soon noticed that wasn't the case.

There was a small section, no larger than a bedroom, which was still inactive. It was yet dim, but Zac could feel how powerful pulses of energy continuously pushed against the edges, leaving small motes of energy behind. It shouldn't be more than an hour before the array was filled in.

There were also at least one hundred rune-covered pillars the height of a man with floating orbs hovering above. They were clearly man-made, a mix between orange glass and purple steel. Inside, Zac could vaguely see small fires burning. Looking at the setup, the pillars were no doubt the inner array flags to the formation that spanned the whole castle.

And in the heart of the array was a large dais, reminiscent of the altar Zac had seen in the Twilight Chasm. Atop it sat a five-meter puppet.

It actually looked like the thing was meditating. The complex array provided dense streams of Cosmic Energy and Dao, and a terrifying cloud of resentment swirled around it. Even Zac wouldn't dare enter that cloud out of fear of losing his mind, yet the puppet somehow felt tranquil. Untouched.

The puppet was completely different than the ones fighting outside. First of all, it was far larger than any of its brethren. Even the Golden Champions were no more than half a meter taller than Zac, but this one would tower over him even when he used [Arbiter of the Abyss].

Its quality was also on a completely different level. The puppet was made from the same purple metal as the floating orbs, and it was so vividly detailed that it looked more like a statue than a puppet. Its back was faced toward them, but Zac could confirm it had human features. It even had a set of hair made of black wires, neatly held in a bun. Clothes fashioned from alloy were draped across its body, with both 'skin' and garments covered in runes that made Zac's mind tremble.

It didn't emit a speck of energy, yet Zac's mind warned of certain death if they attracted the ire of this goliath.

Kruta nudged him, and the two slowly inched back from the doorway, careful not to make a peep. They closed the door, yet they didn't feel safe even after moving to another section of the castle. It felt like they were trapped in a cell with a monster.

"What's going on?" Kruta eventually whispered. "I don't know much, but I know that wasn't a War Array. It gave me an extremely creepy feeling. And that puppet..."

"That orange glass, was that Damchi Glass? And the fires inside..." Zac asked.

"Aye, that was Damchi glass and the flames of Ancestral Moss," Kruta confirmed, his eyes thinning. "You've been studying these patterns since we entered the castle. You know what's going on."

"I can't be certain, but I think that was Saeward," Zac sighed.

"The puppet?"

Zac nodded. "The materials were meant to deal with possession, but not in the way we guessed. I think Saeward was trying to transfer his soul and Inner World into the puppet. Or perhaps, he still is."

"What?" Kruta said, his eyes widening in realization. "Then the puppets outside..."

"I don't think there were two sides to this 'last stand.' I think it was all Saeward."

"Why would Saeward send puppets to slaughter his own—" Kruta said, but he quickly caught on. "Conflict breeds Conflict."

"Exactly. This whole castle is gathering... I don't know exactly what, but something like the essence of war. There are hints of the Dao of Impetus hidden within as well. I think he used the resentment and desperation of his men to elevate his Dao and fuel a breakthrough."

"Sacrificial cultivation," Kruta spat. "So he's probably the one who arranged the Hero Souls to reappear after the war was lost. What a bastard! Using the deaths of his subordinates over and over to further himself."

Zac sighed as he glanced in the direction of the puppet. Yet another reminder of the length some people went to in the pursuit of power. Be it Valsa or this Saeward. They didn't even consider their subordinates as faceless cogs of their faction. They were reduced to cultivation resources, probably to pass some bottleneck that had kept Saeward trapped for a while.

The revelation brought back memories of The Great Redeemer, a threat that loomed over him to this day. There was still no news of Vordis A'Heliophos' capture or death, even with the Allbright Empire and the Kavriel Province looking for him high and low. Zac didn't even know if his mad plan to enter Monarchy had succeeded. He'd simply disappeared from the face of the earth after the events in the Mystic Realm.

"He probably got stuck one way or another," Zac grunted. "Perhaps his original body had limited potential, and the solution he came up with was to transfer his cultivation into a supreme-quality puppet. I have no idea how this is related to the array or the sacrifices, though."

"If what you said is true, then Saeward has succumbed to the unorthodox path. Even transferring your true self into a puppet is skirting Heaven's path."

Zac nodded in agreement.

"What a mess," Kruta grimaced. "There's no way a bastard like this would leave an inheritance for future generations. And a natural trove formed from the inner world of such a twisted mind? Way too dangerous."

Zac was of the same mind but suddenly had a tempting thought. "The puppet!"

"What?"

"Saeward had to be a Monarch. So the puppet should be made from extremely valuable materials."

"You want to dismantle that guy?!" Kruta shivered. "We don't even know if his spirit lingers inside."

"Do we even have a choice?" Zac countered. "The energies are rising, and did you see the array within the room? Only a small corner within the room isn't lit up yet. I think all hell will break loose when the array has finished accumulating, and we're trapped within this building. What are we supposed to do? Hide within the well?"

Kruta looked conflicted, his eyes turning to his left arm where his guide bangle was. "That little jerk on my arm only tells me to do my best. I guess this still is considered part of the Red Zone. There should be a way to deal with this mess. The Ruthless Heavens wouldn't permit a situation of certain death in its trials."

Zac nodded, and the two quickly brainstormed a plan. They were running out of time, no matter if it was the array or Valsa's imminent arrival. Furthermore, Zac suspected the war outside would end when Saeward awoke or collapsed. Both puppets and Hero Souls had accumulated large amounts of resentment and Dao of Conflict. If he were Saeward, he would have prepared a method to collect all that energy at a critical time.

If Valsa didn't have a way to enter before, she would have at that time.

The two came to a decision. They began running through the corridors, leaving explosive arrays at certain junctures. Zac didn't expect the array lines to blow up altogether, considering how sturdy the rocks were. It was more about disrupting the energy flow.

Soon they reached the main hallway, where the intense storm of Conflict still raged.

"See that spot where six lines intersect?" Zac whispered.

"Got it," Kruta said, and the two swords appeared in his hands.

Zac nodded and entered the grand hallway, pushing against the wall as he made his way closer to the closed atrium gates. He felt a raking pain as the clouds brushed against his legs, but he silently endured. Hopefully, it wouldn't be long.

Right before the door was a second intersection of array lines, controlling a second set of runes. The array was way too complicated, and time was much too short for Zac to figure out a sure-fire array-breaking method. They were only left with the plan to hit the pressure points fast and hard and pray that something broke.

A fractal blade appeared before [Verun's Bite], and he looked over at the barbarian. Kruta was ready, the two swords already humming with destruction, so Zac began a countdown with his fingers.

Three, two, one.

The fractal leaf released two gusts of Life and Death as it crashed toward the intersection. Simultaneously, Zac infused his will into a small Array Disk, and the whole castle shuddered as over twenty explosions rocked its very foundations. The light radiating from the array lines flickered, and Zac could tell the array had grown unstable.

It worked.

The delimitation between the Abyss and Arcadia dug into the ground, carving a scar over two meters deep. It was even better than he'd hoped, and the attack had utterly destroyed the runic lines he'd

targeted and a few more. A grin spread across lips, but it quickly turned crooked as a storm of wild energies empowered by Conflict flooded out of the gash.

Zac was thrown into the wall, and new lacerations joined the angry marks from his barely healed wounds. It was a small price to pay to accomplish his goal. Kruta had also been successful, and a large cross had been carved into the ground. The first step was complete, but Zac didn't feel this was enough.

The main array inside was still intact, and Zac could feel how Dao and Energy were still dragged over in huge quantities. If anything, the energies inside the atrium were rapidly rising. If they wanted to really throw a wrench into Saeward's plans, they needed to do the same inside.

The wild fluctuations within the atrium made the closed gates creak, and Zac pushed himself to his feet. A scream of danger made Zac throw out a set of defensive talismans, but their hastily erected barriers all crumbled by a pulse released from within. Before Zac could even take one step toward the atrium, he was thrown out of the castle.

Zac felt like his bones had been rearranged as he slammed into the courtyard stones, and a vitriolic curse confirmed Kruta had been deposited not far away. A second warning of danger made Zac jump back to his feet, barely in time to avoid a spectral arrow aimed at his head. There were dozens of Hero Souls in the courtyard, and there was no hesitation as the unwitting cultivation cauldrons rushed toward them.

The ancestral avatar had already appeared behind Kruta's back, and Zac released a stream of fractal leaves, each digging into the incoming soldiers. But he almost lost his composure as he felt an incomprehensibly large surge of energy outside the outer walls. Resentment and pent-up Conflict rose like a tide, creating a wave hundreds of meters high. It almost blocked out the sky, and Zac's hair stood on end as he felt the pull from behind.

He'd been right. Saeward was calling his soldiers home. If this immense wave of energy was allowed to reach the puppet...

Zac glanced at the castle, hesitant about what to do. The Hero Souls were almost upon them, and new ones kept spawning.

"I'll deal with this! Go!" Kruta urged as he took a defensive position in front of the entrance.

Zac nodded and activated [Earthstrider] to flash back toward the atrium. Kruta didn't have the ability to detect weak spots in the huge tapestry of the central array. Meanwhile, Zac would hopefully be able to figure something out, as he had with so many blueprints.

Another surge was followed by a pang of danger, but Zac was prepared this time. He rushed toward a pillar, but he didn't hide behind it. Instead, he put it behind his back while Vivi wound herself around it. The pulse pushed through the corridor the next moment. Zac groaned as rampant Conflict dug into his body, but he didn't get thrown out of the castle this time.

The pulse had passed, and Zac used the relative calm in its wake to kick open the door. The cyclone of resentment that greeted him almost drove him mad, but the opening step of the [Void Varja Sublimation] allowed Zac to center his mind long enough to activate [Void Zone]. But ultimately, the Bloodline Talent was just an E-grade skill, and the storm easily eclipsed what it could nullify.

One good piece of news was that the puppet remained unmoving atop the dais, and Zac still couldn't feel any energy within. It had either not yet awakened, or it was unable to move in the middle of the ritual. That meant the plan was still on, and Zac wildly looked across the atrium. Their previous actions had clearly agitated the central array. And while it still ran, the energy wasn't flowing nearly as smoothly.

The situation was surprisingly reminiscent of the simulation array back in his manor. The array blueprint on the floor was being tested by an outside pressure, which exposed some things you'd normally not notice. Zac's eyes soon stopped at a certain spot, and a small fractal leaf formed on his axe.

It wasn't much larger than Verun's axehead, but it was immensely condensed and filled with the Evolutionary Dao of his Dao Mold. Zac released the blade, and it shot forward like a bullet. The raging resentment tried to corrupt the blade, but it was like a blazing beacon in the darkness. Tore through the chaos and carved a line into the imperfection. Damaging one section exposed new weaknesses, and Zac's arm was like a cannon as he shot out one fractal leaf after another.

Zac had soon damaged over a dozen loopholes and destroyed four array pillars, but he was increasingly filled with misgivings. Why didn't it work? The energy was still building, and the blank spot was being filled in with speed visible to the naked eye. His eyes turned to the puppet, or rather the elevated stage it sat upon.

It had to be the dais. It somehow maintained operations like a backup generator. The first streams of the energy tsunami outside had already started to pour into it, and Zac was no longer sure it would help even if he ripped apart the whole array. Were they too late? Had the inner array already been completed to such an extent it could perform whatever it needed to do?

Zac wracked his brain for solutions, but the dais felt like an impregnable fortress. Its energy emanations were stable like a mountain; there were no weaknesses. Not to mention the terrifying puppet that sat atop it like a silent guardian. What if it woke up when someone invaded its personal space?

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Zac gritted his teeth as he shot forward. If there were no weaknesses, he'd just have to create one.

[Verun's Bite] was deposited into Zac's spatial ring as two energy streams entered his shoulders. Meanwhile, small motes of unfettered potential were extracted from Zac's cells, joining the two streams that continued from his shoulders into his arms. A glistening light of possibilities appeared between his hands. Destroying the array hadn't worked as he'd hoped, so Zac switched up his tactics.

If he couldn't stop the process, he'd corrupt it.

The [Origin Mark] greedily swallowed the immense energies in the surroundings, quickly growing to the size of a cantaloupe. Zac felt himself rapidly losing control, but that was fine. With a few steps, he appeared in front of the dais, the opalescent blob between his hands having paved a path through the storm. There was no time to look for an optimal spot, so Zac urgently pushed the [Origin Mark] into a random rune in front of him.

And he was immediately filled with a sense of doom as the sky darkened above him. Zac's heart hammered as he glanced up, horrified to see a huge metallic face expressionlessly gaze down upon him.

Zac tried to flash away with [Earthstrider], but it was like time had stopped. The puppet didn't seem to move quickly, but Zac had no time to react before hit suddenly pointed at him.

A scream of mortal peril forced Zac's body to move on its own, and he furiously leaned to the side. Blinding agony followed, and Zac howled with pain as his left arm and shoulder were shredded.

The puppet had just tapped the air lightly, but the force was enough to launch Zac like a cannon. He slammed into the atrium walls and felt his vision close in. Then, there was just darkness.

An itching fire forced the darkness away, and Zac's eyes shot wide open. Zac's mind was mush, and he looked around with confusion. Kruta was there. The barbarian held a small vial containing some extremely pungent liquid under his nose, which had probably forced him awake.

"Wh—" Zac groaned.

"The spirits outside disintegrated and were dragged here," Kruta whispered, but he didn't look the least relieved. "Did it work?"

Zac blearily turned toward the dais while trying to sense the mark he'd left.

"I don't—" Zac stammered but was interrupted by the whole platform exploding. "Uh..."

Kruta and Zac blankly looked on as the puppet collapsed on the ground. Meanwhile, energy flooded out of the ground and shot toward the sky as though a pressure valve had broken. Zac could barely believe it had worked, but joy turned to horror as the puppet slowly stood up despite the array's apparent collapse.

"Run!" Zac screamed, but it was too late.

Not because Saeward's coming alive but because a new player had entered the fray. The sky rumbled, and the world seemed to have ground to a halt. An ancient and boundless wrath suppressed the air of resentment and bloodlust. The Dao shied away, leaving an exposed puppet staring at the sky.

The Heavens had descended, and it was out for blood.