

## The Fall 1035

### [Chapter 1035 - Imperfections and Tribulations](#)

The sky roiled, and the world was filled with an intense purple light that almost veered into a bloody red. The tribulation lightning was reflected in the puppet's eyes, and Zac sensed something stirring awake inside.

The intensity of the tribulation was far beyond what Zac had felt during his own, and his hair stood on end upon sensing the boundless energy inside arcs of lightning that gathered above his head. Even an errant streak would maim and possibly kill him, and he was way too close to the puppet for comfort.

Luckily, the puppet, or Saeward, was too busy preparing for his tribulation to bother with the two intruders at the atrium's edge. It was calling all the Red Zone's energy home, and the cyclone of resentment formed a dense barrier around it. A barrier full of imperfections.

Zac finally understood what their previous sabotage had accomplished. There were over a dozen small holes in the barrier, matching the number and locations Zac had attacked before. Furthermore, there was a larger gap in the shield, likely because the tribulation was summoned before the array could finish forming.

A barrier was only as strong as its weakest spots. Even if the loopholes were filled in by the nigh-endless amounts of energy in the atrium, so what? Those sections would still crumble under the tribulation lightning. Zac guessed he'd accidentally made Saeward's breakthrough far more dangerous. What if he found out?

Zac tried to move, but the pressure was overwhelming. [Void Zone] was no good either. The nullification zone was ripped apart, and some of that boundless wrath targeted him momentarily before returning to the puppet. Zac felt like he'd just had a brush with death. Did the Heavens take offense to him trying to rid a region of all Dao?

"What do we do?" Zac said through grit teeth, arduously turning to Kruta, who also found himself stuck against the wall.

The barbarian actually didn't look too worried, which alleviated some of Zac's own misgivings.

"It's wrong," Kruta said with a hoarse voice. "The tribulation is far from what it should be."

Zac understood what the Kruta meant. The crackling lightning was terrifying, but he was just an E-grade cultivator. He'd seen a few examples of a Monarch's might, and this light was far from reaching that level. Was the Perennial Vastness blocking out the ancient Heavens? Or had it somehow modified the tribulation to create a scenario more suited for guests?

"We should be fine as long as we don't do anything stupid," Kruta added, giving Zac a pointed look. "Don't try to mess with the tribulation. The tribulation will only target the puppet. Saeward isn't defending his Dao, so it should be a Two-cycle tribulation that targets his inner world. The fallout shouldn't affect us. However, if we interfere, we'll be dragged into the tribulation."

"What if the puppet targets us?" Zac countered. "It blasted off my arm with a simple gesture."

"Well..." Kruta coughed before smiling helplessly. "Everyone's journey has to end one way or another."

"That's just—" Zac said, but his words were interrupted by a deafening rumble as the world turned purple.

A scream of danger warned him, in no uncertain terms, that they weren't quite as safe as Kruta indicated, and he urgently activated [Empyrean Aegis]. A golden shimmer enclosed him and Kruta, and Zac was relieved to sense that the five pillars had been conjured outside the atrium. Kruta added another layer of defense by summoning a bone bulwark, and it rose before them just in time to block out a tremendous shockwave chock-full of conflict and resentment.

The bone wall was quickly shredded, but it had absorbed most of the initial blast. Zac and Kruta only suffered some lacerations from the condensed Dao, but Zac barely noticed it as he looked at the scene ahead. A solid pillar of lightning seemed frozen in the air, cutting his vision in two. It contained boundless energy and that ancient punishing will.

The lightning pillar didn't quite reach all the way to the ground. Rather, it stopped just above Saeward's head, where a steely portal swirled. Looking at it filled Zac with immense pressure, and it felt as though the overflowing energy in the atrium was just a small candle to the raging sun hiding within.

"That gate leads to Saeward's inner world," Kruta whispered. "The aura is wrong, just like the tribulation, but he should already have entered the middle stage going by the clues."

"Then why the tribulation?" Zac whispered.

"Probably because of how he tries to break through," Kruta commented. "He's not doing so well. He didn't actually manage to prevent the first bolt from breaking in. Is he so confident in the stability of his foundations that he wants to refine his world?"

Zac wasn't so sure. He'd heard a few things of tribulations among Monarchs. It wasn't much different from previous ones, except that it was the Inner World that was mainly targeted. Like with other tribulations, one could hide from or defy the Heavens. By fully taking on the tribulation lightning, you could temper and expand your Inner World. Of course, that was incredibly dangerous.

Only the most daring and powerful scions would dare do something like that. Someone who had chosen such a cruel and desperate method to progress was unlikely to have great foundations. Zac's gaze shifted between the destroyed barrier and the broken shards of the crumbled dais, his eyes filled with suspicion.

The Tribulation Lightning had descended the second the dais crumbled. He'd already guessed he ruined Saeward's outer defense against the tribulation lightning. Had he also destroyed Saeward's method to delay and weaken his punishment? It was no wonder he was in a bad way.

The first bolt dissipated, yet it remained burned into Zac's vision. Smoke rose from the puppet, and the engraved garments were covered in tatters. Whatever was going on inside Saeward's inner world had to be even crazier. Zac could tell the lightning within was weakening, and the barrier quickly reformed.

But the Heavens had already regrouped.

A second blast followed the first, this one carrying even greater force. A loud crash erupted next to Zac, and he shuddered upon seeing a piece of rubble from the dais had just barely missed him. Kruta was

right; the lightning didn't reach them. Of course, the force involved in the strikes was problem enough. But looking at Saeward, Zac guessed they wouldn't have to endure much longer.

The protective garment had been reduced to ash, and crackling fissures covered the puppet beneath. One of its arms was gone, and the spirituality it contained seemed to be on the verge of collapse. It had been pushed to the ground by the second blast, looking ready to throw in the towel. Yet it got back onto its feet, preparing to meet the next tribulation. It didn't have to wait long.

The world shook as a bolt twice the size of the previous ones swallowed Saeward whole. Zac couldn't see anything but felt a powerful impression of unwillingness from within. Saeward wasn't able to hold on, but he was also unable to let go. Of course, the Heavens didn't care about the will and opinions of cultivators, and a deep rumble reached the depths of Zac's soul. The light faded soon after, displaying a fully scorched puppet lying prone on the ground.

The black hair was gone, and the purple alloy was now a mottled black that still released smoke. There was not a speck of spirituality left within the puppet or even the ground around it—it almost felt like the Heavens had created a persistent [Void Zone]. Only a few lingering arcs of lightning remained, and the clouds started to disperse.

Zac sighed as he looked at the desolate scene. He felt no pity for Seward. If anything, he was happy he'd played an important role in his fall. But his demise was a stark reminder of the stakes involved when defying the Heavens. That was doubly true for someone like him, who'd have to withstand tribulation lightning every step of the way.

"Whew," Kruta exhaled as he ate a healing pill. "Three out of six. Thank the ancestors, he didn't manage to enter the second cycle. Those blasts would have been tough to deal with."

"Uh huh," Zac hummed as he looked at the fading arcs of lightning.

"What are you looking at?" Kruta asked, but Zac didn't answer.

Instead, he shot forward, stopping within a few meters of the fallen puppet. There were no signs of life even at this distance, yet Zac didn't dare stay long. He grabbed a couple of arcs with his remaining arm before flashing back. The Tribulation Lightning didn't seem to mind—it was happy to continue its mission of extinction. Unfortunately, it had encountered its match in [Void Heart].

Had it been the main lightning bolts, Zac wouldn't have dared. But some lingering sparks now that the Heavens had left? He'd have to be crazy not to let his Hidden Node swallow some of that.

"You're stealing Tribulation Lightning?" Kruta said with wide eyes.

"They're pretty good for tempering yourself," Zac nodded.

Kruta was about to answer, but his and Zac's eyes suddenly shot toward the hallway.

"She's here."

"Damn, she tricked me," Kruta swore. "She erased the tracking mark at the last second."

Zac's heart thumped, and he urged the Creation Energy in his body to conjure another arm. It cost a chunk of lifespan, but he couldn't hold back at this junction. What was with her aura? If there was one

thing Zac was confident in, then it was his recovery ability. Yet Valsa somehow seemed stronger than when they fought.

Truthfully, Zac had expected that Valsa's source of confidence had come from being able to control Hero Souls. It would have explained why she could pass through the battlefield, and why she dared attack without her underlings. But Kruta had a trick that would have immobilized the Hero Souls for a second—enough to turn the tables on Valsa and end things in one go.

Zac had felt even more confident after seeing Saeward extract all that energy from the battlefield. With Valsa's War Array gone and Kruta fighting for real, he'd felt confident they'd be able to finish the job. It turned out they'd made a massive miscalculation. Valsa's confidence didn't come from outside aid but from her own power.

The princess stormed the castle with the force and momentum of a primordial beast. It'd be lucky enough if they withstood her opening salvo. Had she cracked another one of the gemstones on her crown? Or had she activated another Berserking treasure? If so, she was really risking everything. Even Zac had a hard time using two such items in a row, and his constitution was beyond sturdy.

There was no time, so Zac gritted his teeth and activated his available skills; [Ancestral Woods] and [Primal Edict]. Unfortunately, both [Arcadian Crusade] and [Arcadia's Judgment] were still on cooldown, and Zac knew they were in trouble. He hadn't expected to be caught in a tribulation and wasn't ready to meet her head-on.

"Can you buy me a few seconds?" Zac frowned.

Kruta had a serious expression as he nodded and rushed to the hallway's entrance. The gate had already been blasted off its hinges, and the array on the ground had grown dim. Valsa had just passed through the outer gates, and her aura felt like a beacon to Zac's senses. Thankfully, she was alone, but there were no Hero Souls to impede her path.

Kruta wasted no time as he stabbed his two swords into the ground. The castle shook as a storm of blades emerged from the rocks, turning the long hallway into a deadly gauntlet. It looked like the maw of a primordial beast, filled with rows and rows of teeth. Together, they formed a powerful domain; even Zac would have to be careful to enter that place.

A few Ancestral Trees prevented Valsa from simply jumping through, and the sword array was joined by the ferocious vines of [Primal Edict]. Few guests could get through the hallway in one piece, but Zac knew it wasn't enough to keep Valsa at bay. He only needed a little bit of time.

Zac threw out an isolation and illusion array by the exit before enacting part two of his plan. Streaks of nothingness began pouring out from his Dao Spirals; the purified Oblivion Energy extracted from the remnant prison. Even then, Zac didn't feel too confident. He'd planned on using his final ace to deal with Valsa since the beginning, but he hadn't expected such a stark difference in power.

He would have to play it by ear.

Zac didn't even get the chance to begin before a blast of light poured out of the gateway. It was like a solid block of destruction that carved a straight line through the atrium, even engulfing the puppet

before it was finally stopped at the opposite wall hundreds of meters away. The overbearing power in the pillar almost destabilized Zac's skills, but he barely managed to retain their effect.

A deep roar erupted from within the beam, and a bloodied Kruta crawled out under the protection of his ancestor. He only managed to give Zac an apologetic look before falling unconscious in a pool of his blood. His idea was a wash. Zac hadn't even managed to begin conjuring an [Annihilation Sphere], and he could already hear Valsa's running steps in the hallway. She wasn't planning to give him any more time to prepare.

Out of options, Zac took out a large seed and crammed it in his mouth. It was a [Rageroot Oak Seed] that he'd harvested shortly before leaving for the Perennial Vastness. The Rageroot Oak had, like most local overlords on Earth, already entered the D-grade. It hadn't been quite ready to bear new seeds just yet, but an array had allowed him to extract a half-ready seed—a powerful Pseudo D-grade Berserking Treasure.

Unfortunately, it was not nearly as good as [Arcadian Crusade], and the effect was limited since his body was so overdrawn already. It would have to do. Zac was immediately filled with delirious urges for blood and glory, but his Void Heart allowed him to stay clear-headed. However, a sudden spark of inspiration was born from reaching the heights of hubris, and he was unable to let it go.

The primordial roars of [Verun's Bite] were replaced by the abyssal rattle of [Black Death]. A fractal leaf appeared in front of the axe blade, and Zac swung it toward Valsa in an overhead attack the moment she appeared around the corner.

Valsa sneered, and her armor blazed with imperial might as her sword rose to meet the attack. Simultaneously, her free hand pointed toward Zac's chest, and Zac could tell she was channeling enough energy to blow a hole through the sky. Zac didn't care, and his eyes gleamed with madness as he redirected the Streams of Dao and Oblivion energy into his Dao Mold.

All or nothing.

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The winds of victory pushed her forward as she ran through the ruined hallway, and Valsa could almost feel how her river of fate grew wider as the gate drew closer. Her gambit was successful, and it was time to collect. She pushed more energy into [Lance of Judgment] as she glanced at the energy signature to the left of the entrance but was careful not to overdo it. The [Transpanted Fate Array] would work on a corpse, but the effect would be limited.

Crippled but alive was the way to go.

No one could say she didn't give him a chance. This bastard could have tried to escape upon sensing Valsa's approach. There was no way the Undead Empire hadn't provided him with some form of escape measure. Those things carried risks, but it would have been better than staying in this cage and waiting for death. If he'd succeeded, then Valsa would have truly lost.

Perhaps she would have been able to find something inside the castle that could mend her Core Nucleus, but that was a long shot. Saeward's futile attempt at reincarnation was highly unlikely to have

used resources that'd mesh with her path. There was also no way she'd be able to steal the foundation of a Monarch, even if it only remained as a discarnate soul.

Valsa knew Arcaz Umbri'Zi had likely reached the same conclusion as she. He'd felt she would be helpless without the War Array—that he and his wretched companion could overturn the Heavens. But he failed to realize the critical difference between the two. She had spent years investigating and preparing. Six potential battlegrounds had been arranged, and every possible variable analyzed.

She had admittedly underestimated her opponent's strength to some degree, and the powerful domain skill was a surprise. However, she knew the cooldown of his berserking skill down to the minutes, and their previous battle had already filled in the missing links in her understanding. He should have understood she wouldn't have forced her way through the puppet army unless she was confident in victory.

She could clearly see it through that low-tier array. His recovery was almost miraculous, but it wasn't enough. Whatever Berserking Treasure he'd swallow only provided half the strength compared to his skill, while she was more powerful than ever.

It was game over. Valsa rounded the corner, her sword rising to block the ambush while she made sure her War Regalia was primed to block out his leaf explosions. The fractal leaf descended, but it couldn't even shake the might of her crumbling Core Nucleus.

His bloodline talent wouldn't be able to change anything. Its ability to quench Dao and suppress energy was shocking, but it was still within the bounds of the Law of Balance. It hadn't been able to disintegrate her Fateward Clones, and it wouldn't be able to fully suppress the amount of energy she currently carried.

He didn't actually use it. Valsa effortlessly eviscerated the overhead strike, but the slippery bastard narrowly avoided the lance. She'd still managed to carve a large gash in his side, and his aura fluctuated precariously. Yet he came back for more with madness burning in his eyes.

It was odd. Why was he so confident that he dared fight her in a melee? Valsa knew he wasn't a fool. Was it because of some misguided attempt to protect his companion, or did he actually think he could defeat her? Valsa was aware she lacked in true life- and death experience compared to her enemy, but she wouldn't allow the billowing waves of murderous aura to plant a seed of doubt in her heart.

Another clash resulted in another grievous wound, but the annoying chains of his weapon prevented her from landing a crippling blow. Blood poured out of a new gash on his throat, but there was no pause as he moved for a third attack, this one too aimed at Valsa's head in a seeming attempt at mutual destruction.

Then, she realized the problem. It had barely been visible before, but something was off with the small golden cracks on his face. She'd assumed it was the result of being trapped within Saeward's tribulation or a side-effect of his berserking treasure. But there was a weak hint of an unfamiliar energy that reeked of danger. And why was he using that axe?

Something was wrong.

Only with her enemy dead could she be sure there weren't any more unwelcome surprises. However, lack of information had almost cost her life before. She needed to disengage. She needed to—

Thoughts and plans withered and died as the fractal leaf collapsed unto itself. Replacing it was a blade of utter nothingness, of extermination. Mortal peril screamed at her to run, to dodge. To do anything that would take her away from that executioner's edge. Yet it felt like time had ground to a halt as it drew closer.

A primordial sense of preservation cracked the Fategem of Peril, and a flood of relief filled Valsa as she felt herself be summoned away. But relief turned to horror as the light was extinguished, her very being erased. She only needed to endure a little more, just a little...

Then there was only darkness.