

## The Fall 1045

### [Chapter 1045 - Glorious Return](#)

A small needlepoint of green lit up in the distance, and Kruta sighed in relief upon realizing the journey was finally coming to an end. Traveling inside the Perennial Vastness token's claustrophobic bubble hadn't been any better this time around. It felt like a coffin, and the oppressive darkness of the Void didn't make things any better.

So Kruta's heart sang as he saw the emerald vortex grow larger, and he could almost smell the rustling grass of home. He was finally back, and a grin spread across his face from the anticipation. He could picture his grandma's shocked look when he told her about the Left Imperial Palace and how he'd heroically seized a slot, bringing honor and glory to the ancestors.

Even the old shamans hidden in the depths of the Ancestral Valley would probably emerge when they heard the news. Being invited to the elder's council was almost a foregone conclusion.

"Wait..." Kruta muttered, his eyes gleaming.

What if something happened to him? He was such fine stock, yet he would soon enter an incredibly dangerous threat without an heir carrying his blood. Perhaps he should petition the elders to move up some of his marriages... It was only right.

Kruta shot through the gate, and he groaned with contentment as he felt the soil's pulse beneath his feet. He was finally whole again and smiled upon feeling the spirit thread's gentle caress. Kruta pitied those who couldn't hear the voice of the world. The people he'd met in the Perennial Vastness would never understand the beauty of the steppes, where the ground itself was filled with the forefathers' love.

The token had dropped him off right where he set off, in front of his grandmother's tent. He stood unmoving for a minute, taking in the sounds, smells, and sights of the tribe. It had been so long. Before spending nine years in the Perennial Vastness, he'd never left the steppes for more than a few weeks at a time.

Part of Kruta wanted to make the rounds and visit all the people he hadn't seen for almost a decade. But it would have to wait. The news he brought home was too explosive; they couldn't wait. Kruta stepped into the tent but was surprised to find a barrier blocking his entry. Since when did his grandmother keep her door closed?

Kruta hesitated a few seconds before walking up to the small drum beside the entrance. He infused his full cultivation base into his fist and slammed it with all the force he could muster. The hide didn't release so much as a whimper, but a gong would alert his grandma of an urgent issue.

Even then, nothing happened after minutes of waiting. Kruta's brows scrunched together. There was no way she hadn't noticed his return. He was bringing back earthshattering information, yet Balka Greenleaf couldn't be bothered to see him? A few more minutes passed, and the veins on Kruta's forehead twisted as the grand tale he'd woven of his exploits were stuck in his throat.

It was unbearable, and one punch after crashed into the drum, the attacks fueled by fate and frustration.

"What's the ruckus?!" an infuriated roar shook the sky.

Kruta's expression fell at the outburst. Was Grandma in a foul mood? Was the Dancing Blade Tribe causing trouble again? Shouldn't be. It had only been eleven months on the outside since he left. It was also impossible she'd entered seclusion; Balka would have removed the drum if that were the case. Kruta was no longer in any mood to enter, and the open flaps to the tents suddenly seemed like a ferocious beast.

He didn't get the chance to retreat before someone emerged, and Kruta frowned at seeing the stranger. The dense swirl of ancestral will around him proved he was of the tribe, but Kruta had never seen him before in his life. Of course, that wasn't anything odd considering the vast domain they controlled, but he had come out of Balka's private tent.

"Oh, it's you?" the buff man grunted as he emerged. "You're back already?"

"Who're you?" Kruta grunted.

"Fiesty brat," the man grinned. "I'm Udoro, but you can call me grandpa."

"You're one of grandma's husbands?" Kruta ventured, getting an affirmative nod.

"Been guarding the Mystra Destolates the past couple of centuries. Just got back last week," Udoro grunted. "Heard the missus adopted a kid while I was gone. Well, she heard you loud and clear. Go on in."

"Wait," Kruta said, his eyes widening in comprehension as he saw the bleeding scratches on Udoro's chest and the mix of annoyance and relief in his eyes. "I'll just come back later. Uh, have fun."

"You little shit, you're trying to ruin your gammy's good time and then just run off?" a rough voice echoed from within the tent. "Come, let me take a look at you."

"Good luck," Udoro grinned as he took out a flagon of spirits.

Kruta inwardly cried, but he didn't dare ignore the order. The last time he'd interrupted his adoptive grandmother's time with one of her husbands, he'd been sent to oversee the mating season of their Warthog hordes. Kruta shuddered at the memory—the squeals still haunted his dreams. Then again, trying to hide from Balka another time had led to him being sent into the Kussak Dreadmines for a month.

So Kruta took a deep breath and stepped inside. The surroundings blurred, and he found himself inside the huge trophy valley of Balka Redleaf's world tent. Everything looked the same. The towering peaks of the surrounding mountain range greeted his arrival. Of course, they were the remains of the Primordial Beast Balka slew to claim her seat as one of the seven Grand Elders at the Tribal Council.

The latent pressure of the sacrificial bones crashed into him, and he groaned as his vision started swimming. Vast amounts of energy poured into his body, but he was relieved to feel his channels easily withstand the pressure. The first time he had almost gotten killed; now, it was just a bit painful. Kruta felt his grandmother pull him over, placing him in front of a roaring bonfire.

Not far away sat Balka, looking the same as always; a heroic warrior in the prime of her life, with her huge broadsword lying to the side. If not for the monstrous killing intent roiling off her body, you could have thought she was one of the young blade masters of Kruta's generation.

"Not bad," Balka nodded after a while. "In fact, pretty good. I can feel how your connection with my great-grandfather has grown much deeper. You are nurturing each other in a way I haven't seen before. There's no way you'd manage to figure that out on your own; I guess that place deserves its reputation."

"It's all thanks to Grandmother giving me the token," Kruta quickly nodded, remembering the steel in her voice before.

It didn't help.

"Still, that's no reason to bang on the gong so loudly," Balka glared. "I haven't seen my Udoro for almost a century. Ruining our sweet reunion deserves some innovative punish—"

"News!" Kruta shouted, the squeals of rutting hogs burned into his mind urging him on. "I have super important news, earthshattering news! I couldn't wait."

"Oh?" Balka said with a raised brow. "Then let's hear it."

Kruta took a deep breath and recounted his experiences inside the Perennial Vastness. Seeing her impatient look, Kruta, unfortunately, had to skip the prepared parts detailing his accomplishments before meeting Zac. He'd save those tales for his little wives.

"You fool! You killed an imperial?!" Balka wheezed when Kruta reached the point with Valsa. "Do you want to bring a calamity onto our heads? How can you betray the ancestors like this?!"

"Well, it was kind of my buddy who finished the job," Kruta coughed. "I got knocked out within seconds. I just put my finger on the scales a bit."

The excuse didn't help him much. Waves of power crashed into him from Balka's glare, and Kruta felt like his body was about to disintegrate. What did the improved constitution of a Hegemon matter when faced with an Autarch's wrath?

"Vastermal was rebuffed by the Perennial Vastness, and the confidentiality of the realm will keep my identity safe," Kruta croaked. "That guy I mentioned even went and had all imperials killed. No one even knows I was involved."

"What do you know? Nothing is absolute in this world. There is no such thing as a perfect seal and no secrets that can't be excavated. Not even the Heavens are infallible." Balka snorted, but she soon relented. "Well, it does seem like there's nothing wrong with you, and I can't find anything inside your body. But remember, don't mention this to a single soul. You never know who'll use that information for their own gain."

Kruta quickly nodded.

"What audacity," Balka sighed. "No wonder you wanted to see me immediately. We'll have to keep our eyes out, but I think we are safe."

"No, that wasn't the important part," Kruta said, his heart shuddering when the bonfire was almost extinguished from a burst of his grandmother's killing intent.

"You better have some honey with that spice," Balka said with a murderous smile. "I don't think my heart can handle much more bad news."

Kruta jumped into the next part of the story, adding some embellishments to protect his hide. No, to paint a clearer picture for his dear grandmother! Who's to say there won't be treasures that could become the tribe's hidden reserves inside the Left Imperial Palace?

"Good, good, good!" Balka soon laughed, her demeanor completely different from before. "Bold and ambitious! That's how my grandchild should act. Go, go! Get gammy something nice."

"About the princess..." Kruta ventured.

"Who cares? It doesn't matter! What, some junior got herself killed inside a trial? Things like that happen every day," Balka said with a lazy wave. "That old goat Vastermal has working hips and over fifty wives. He'll make new ones. So, what happened next?"

Seeing how well things were going, Kruta decided to add some more honey. It wasn't about avoiding punishment, it was about having a positive outlook. And it wasn't really a lie to say that friendship could blossom between him and the Tayn successor thanks to Zac. After all, Kruta was handsome and great company.

Why wouldn't Iz Tayn want to become his friend?

"Friendship with the young princess of the Tayns?" Balka said, her smile growing even wider. "If you can pull that off, forget about the inheritance. Who'd dare mess with us when people learn we have such a backer? Even the Luaris Dynasty would have to treat us with respect. I knew I was right in adopting you. I really have an eye for things."

Unfortunately, Balka barely had time to finish her sentence before a deep rumble shook the whole world tent. It felt like a Primordial God was using the steppes themselves as a drum, and Kruta's eyes widened with horror. This wasn't the sound of the audience drum he'd hit before. This was the Ancestral Wardrum crafted by the founding chieftain himself. A drum Kruta hoped he'd never have to hear in his lifetime.

"A Tribal Calamity?" Balka wheezed, angrily pointing at Kruta with fires burning in her eyes. "You troublemaker!"

"I— You said," Kruta stuttered, but he got no further before he found his mouth sealed.

"I said nothing!" Balka glared as the two disappeared.

The next moment, the two floated far above the tribe. Kruta could see the citadel stretch out across the horizon, where one powerful aura after another rose to the sky. But what did it matter? Kruta could see the fear in his grandmother's eyes as she looked up at the intruder. The steppes shivered at their mere presence, and the ancestral threads had dug deep into the ground.

The whole sky had been replaced by fire, stretching as far as Kruta could see. Their citadel held the families of over 20 million elite warriors, but it felt like a speck in front of this burning curtain. Inside the

inferno were thousands of anguished faces, each the size of a city. They were indistinct and made from fire as well, but a darker, almost purple fire filled with resentment and despair. It looked like they were trying to break out of the flames but were soon pushed back in.

A flash of light made Kruta look to his side, where he found two newcomers. One was the warchief of the whole tribe. The second was another of the Grand Elders and the chief earthly shaman, Prata Redleaf. The warchief looked up at the burning sky, his back giving off a desolate aura. There was no fight in his eyes, only defeat and sorrow.

"Is this the end of our tribe?" he sighed. "I have failed the ancestors."

"Don't worry, I have a solution!" Balka said, looking up at the hellscape with a heroic expression as her hair danced in the wind.

"You absolutely cannot attack!" the ancient shaman screamed in horror, going so far as to summon four ancestors to hold Balka back. "You fool, look at those flames! They are ratified by the Emypyrean Throne! That's the Thousandflame Galley. We might be able to save some of our tribe through diplomacy, but not if we anger the esteemed one inside."

"Don't you think I know that?" Balka huffed, pushing the ancestral guardians toward the ground.

"I— Uh," Kruta stuttered, his mind muddled with confusion.

How did they know? He'd just returned, and they hadn't even sent out the message, yet one of Kolsara Tayn's disciples stood knocking at the door. Had Zac somehow sent words back? No, that was impossible. He was still inside the Perennial Vastness. The Tayns must have figured things out some other way. Was it because of the seal he'd picked up?

Either case, it saved a lot of time and lessened the odds of his tribe's involvement in this matter being exposed. At most, it would seem like he stumbled into a lucky opportunity but was captured before the tribe could report it to the Heavens. Not even the Imperial Dynasty could fault them for that, and the horrible reputation of the Tayns should keep the tribe safe.

Who'd dare target the family of someone the Tayns had "recruited"? There was no way the Heavens wanted that mess on their hands, especially not when an Eternal Heritage was up for grabs. They had enough enemies without adding that band of lunatics to the mix.

But why did it have to be her?

Only three direct disciples of the Emypyrean Throne remained since she hadn't taken any new pupils since the Extinction. All three were Supremacies and absolutely insane. Even Mohzius' unhinged followers seemed measured in comparison.

The Thousandflame Eccentric had hunted her master's enemies for over a million years after the Extinction. Anything Thousandflame Tayn felt responsible for her master's predicament was targeted with utmost prejudice. Clans were eradicated down to the chickens and dogs, and their allies were decimated. The lands they had once ruled were incinerated. Even today, whole sectors remained impassable deathtraps because of her Emypyrean Sinflames.

Not even those with terrifying backers were spared. Anyone shielding her targets became targets themselves, and even Supremacies had sacrificed whole branches of their line to keep the calamity at bay. Everyone who fought back was killed and stuffed into the terrifying warship above.

The rumors said that a thousand Autarchs had been killed to create the hull of the Thousandflame Galley. That was likely an exaggeration, but at least a few hundred had been thrown into the inferno. More terrifying were the Heavenly Territories of three Supremacies that had become the core of this warship.

The Multiverse had collectively breathed out in relief when the three scourges of the Empyrean Throne finally ran out of targets to kill. Since then, they hadn't been seen very often, presumably having returned to the Empyrean Quadrant to cultivate or whatever old monsters did with their free time. Yet they still lived on in the collective psyche of the cosmos, an unseen threat hiding in the dark. And now one of them was here.

Kruta shook like a leaf after looking up at the sky. It felt like the thousands of faces were looking straight at him, boring into his soul. Why had he listened to that troublemaker? He should have rejected him outright! He should have said, 'No, thank you! I don't need a ride; I will see you inside the inheritance!'

Now it was too late.

Kruta looked at his grandmother with imploring eyes and found that she looked back at him with an extremely suspicious smile.

"My sweet Kruta, I've been thinking. Staying inside the safety of the tribe will harm your future. A true chieftain isn't raised inside a tent; he is forged under the harsh sun of struggle! It's time for you to make a name for yourself, just like I did in my youth," she said as she put her hand on his shoulder.

Kruta was about to plead for mercy, but he found himself unable to speak or move as Balka covered him in a layer of impenetrable energy. She leaned over, a tearful look in her eyes looked into his.

"Remember, if anyone asks, You're Kruta the Great from the Dancing Blade Tribe, alright?"

Kruta wailed as he shot toward the sky like an arrow released from a bow. From the ground, he heard the final parting words of his grandmother.

"All yours, great mistress!" followed by a much lower. "Hurry, you old toad, activate the barriers!"

"You old crone," Kruta swore upon realizing he'd become a sacrificial offering. "I'll remember this when I rule the steppes! Permanent hog duty! No, I'll— AAAI!"

Kruta's complaints turned into a high-pitch shriek as one of the faces descended with impossible speed to gobble him up.