

## The Fall 1053

### [Chapter 1053 - Fated](#)

Kruta ripped his sword out of the hunter's chest, the jerking motion making him grunt with pain. The man's eyes were still filled with fire and desperation as his corpse joined the others on the ground. Two of them were already burning from the heat rising from below. Kruta shook his head, briefly wondering if these souls would enter the lands like his ancestors did. For their sake, he hoped not.

Embers and ash filled the sky, casting the world in darkness. A few streaks of light falling from above were the only source of light; deadly meteors that would incinerate everything where they landed. A few shouts in the distance indicated the others weren't far away. He needed to get going.

The festering wounds had reopened from the struggle, and he was running dangerously low on Cosmic Energy. Flying would have been impossible even if the ability hadn't been sealed, and urging his harried legs into a run felt like trying to get an elderly Greenox to move. But a wall of deeper black rose toward the sky, and the flatlands had given way to a steep incline. He was almost there.

So Kruta stuffed more of the acrid roots that'd kept him alive and tormented for so long into his mouth. He extracted what little spirituality they had left as he willed his feet to keep moving. His vision was distorted from the toxins within, but his extended abuse had at least given him partial immunity. The dead attackers were soon left behind and forgotten, replaced by the constant worry that had filled him since being spat out in this hellscape.

Things hadn't played out at all as he'd imagined. The young princess of the Tayns was nowhere to be found inside the Thousandflame Galley, or any other Tayn representative for that matter. Kruta didn't even know if he was inside the warship, or if he'd been transported somewhere else during his two weeks in burning limbo.

This broken world was some sort of prison colony, where descendants of those who had angered Thousandflames Eccentric toiled away in ashen suffering. He still didn't know how the Tayns had exposed their plans, but it was clear they didn't approve. Every day, Kruta prayed he was the only one from the tribe who had been punished for their arrogance, and the fact that he still hadn't ran into any of his tribesmen was his greatest source of comfort.

As for the treacherous whispers in the back of his mind that the tribe had been incinerated instead of captured? Kruta refused to listen. He held onto his faith, and the carrot dangled before him.

Kruta hadn't encountered much trouble the first day, even if his mind had been a confused mess. He had been trying to make sense of the situation, and the fact that his Spatial Treasures were sealed didn't help. It was in that state a trio of foragers had stumbled upon him. They had been wary of this stranger but eventually took pity on him and shared some of their knowledge.

The three eked out a living by digging through the ashes for spiritual roots. The ambient energy was abundant but filled with fire that would consume you from within if you imbibed too much. Besides, it was impossible for most to completely forgo normal sustenance. But in this kind of broken world, food was extremely scarce. Kruta had followed the three for five days, and everything had been fine until something suddenly changed.

All three had tried to murder him in his sleep, going so far as to sacrifice limbs and longevity to accomplish their goal. Kruta had already been prepared for a possible attack, and his superior training allowed him to pull through even without his weapons. At first, he'd thought they simply attacked him to rob his corpse, but questioning them had exposed the truth.

The foragers had heard a voice just before attacking, and it had a simple message for the whole realm—freedom for death. Kill Kruta the Great before he crosses the Worldfall Ridge, and the sins of your ancestors will be forgiven. The foragers hadn't hesitated to risk it all for a chance to escape their burning prison.

Since then, Kruta had become an enemy of the world, where every single native did everything in their power to kill him. Those who could survive this purgatory weren't weak, and there were even Peak Hegemons in this world. Their training was subpar, and their equipment was garbage, but their numerical advantage wasn't something you could just overcome with grit and skill.

But he had survived. Days had turned to months, and months had turned to years as Kruta advanced toward the Worldfall Ridge. He had lost count of the times he'd narrowly escaped death, either by avoiding traps or narrowly eking out a victory against powerful and desperate foes. His only shot at survival was to win the cruel game set up by the Thousandflame Eccentric.

Yet Kruta didn't mind. He cherished the opportunity, which had turned into his mental support. The Tayns loved to test fates. It still wasn't certain his suffering was solely meant as a punishment. He'd never received any message, but it was possible he would be let go if he survived. He had already missed the opportunity to join his buddy in the Left Imperial Palace, but he didn't care so long as his people weren't hurt.

And he was almost there. He could hear the voices draw closer and summoned strength he didn't know he had as he kept climbing. His body was drained beyond a breaking point, his pathways looking like charred strings. His ancestor had nothing more to give, and Kruta had been forced to seal the spirit inside his mind to prevent it from collapsing. Yet his legs kept moving, fueled by desire and iron will. He resisted the suppression, and the peak was soon in view.

Then there was nothing more to ascend. The winding path turned into sheer wall, a black rock so hot that smoke created a curtain that hid his presence. His feet felt like lead, and they wouldn't move again now that they had stopped. So he threw away his commandeered balsawood swords and grabbed the wall.

Sizzling sounds and searing pain tried to make him give in, but Kruta wouldn't break. He sacrificed a layer of skin for each step as he continued his journey. Did seconds pass, or did hours? Was he alive, or was he dead? Kruta didn't know.

Then, darkness turned to light as he pushed through the smoke and dust. Seeing a blue sky was almost enough to make him pass out, but he summoned a final burst of energy to drag himself up from the edge and crawl onto a flat surface. A smile of contentment spread across his face as the flickering flame of his being finally winked out.

He had done it. He'd beaten the game, and his tribe would be safe.

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Burning flames shattered the darkness, and Kruta released a pent-up roar of fury. He was already dead, so why couldn't they leave him be? He had done what was asked of him! This treatment was excessive. He didn't care. He'd give these bastards a good punch even if his ancestral soul were incinerated.

Wait, why did he have hands?

"Ah? What's going on?" Kruta muttered, blankly looking down at his very much corporeal hands.

Only then did he realize he was no longer atop the Worldend Ridge. The pain and sickness that had followed him for years was gone, and his pathways had changed from burnt-out twigs to threads of steel. The ancestor had stabilized, and his aura was incredibly vigorous, though he still slept inside Kruta's Soul Aperture.

The situation inside his body looked good, but the scenery around him quashed Kruta's excitement. He'd been placed in the middle of what looked like a coliseum, and he could sense brutal auras from behind the steel gates. His heart shuddered, and his will almost collapsed from a terrifying premonition. Had the Thousandflame Eccentric brought him back to life only to have him play another game?

Kruta roused his spirit as he turned toward the closest gate. He wouldn't give in. He would fight to the bitter end.

"Fiesty. Not bad."

The voice came from every direction, and it felt like the roar of a thousand suns.

"G-greetings, great mistress," Kruta stuttered, his budding momentum instantly gone.

It was one thing to fight to the death with beasts or prisoners, but there was only one thing to do when facing one of the Three Scourges. Even Supremacies were wary of these lunatics, so a bit of groveling wouldn't shame the ancestors. Kruta wasn't afraid; he was just being smart.

"I- ah. I'm very sorry if we've offended you and the esteemed Tayns."

"Esteemed Tayns, huh? That wasn't what you said back then?" the eccentric laughed as a screen appeared in the middle of the arena.

Kruta felt his vision close in as he saw himself appear, surrounded by withered roots and corpses of the First Heaven. He heard himself talk with Zac, discussing their options.

'Don't say it, you bastard!' Kruta inwardly cried, wanting nothing more than to go back in time and punch himself in his big mouth.

"Pretty famous? That's the understatement of the century," his projection guffawed. "Those lunat—"

The scene didn't continue from there, and Kruta found himself alone in the arena again. A storm raged in Kruta's mind, where part of him was cursing that flaky Realm Spirit. It acted so high and mighty, saying his seals were impregnable. But what did that matter if he gave in when faced with true monsters? Kruta couldn't believe that the old bastard had spied on the chat of two juniors and then shared it with the Tayns.

Another part of his mind was trying to devise a road to survival, but he could only see one path forward.

"It was my mistake! I am willing to bear all punishment for my actions, so I beg your eminence to spare the Greenleaf Tribe," Kruta shouted as he slammed to his knees.

"Your tribe? They are fine. We left the Ralphi continent right after you came aboard," the voice scoffed. "You think I'm so bored I'd go around bullying a bunch of juniors? I can't believe this. I'm gone for a few hundred thousand years, and the family's reputation is in the gutter when I return. Those brats back home really need a talking to."

Kruta almost cried in relief upon hearing the tribe was fine, but joy was followed by sorrow when realizing he wasn't out of the woods. This unreasonable elder was one of the main reasons for the Tayns' wretched reputation, yet she wanted to blame it on the younger generations? His mouth opened and closed a few times, but no words came out.

He was afraid to say the wrong thing, something that would trigger this lunatic. What if she turned the ship around or sent him back to that purgatory for a second round of torture?

"You stumbled onto an opportunity and created a string of fate that shouldn't exist," Mistress Thousandflame said. "You should know, our family's learned to be quite attentive to fate. So I asked that old goat Sendor why a Karmic Thread had emerged from his realm and latched onto my little niece. What if one of our old enemies had returned? I figured I would deal with this mess on my way back."

Sweat poured down Kruta's back from the realization that he had really been targeted by the Thousandflame Eccentric, almost resulting in him being made another example. The fact that he and his clan hadn't been turned to fertilizer for the Thousandflame Galley should be proof she'd learned he didn't have any evil designs on Iz Tayn. But it couldn't hurt to make sure.

"Kruta bears no ill will! I was told the young princess might be willing to help, and I agreed to contact her. That's it, I promise!"

"Relax, will you?" the voice said with exasperation. "The way you're acting makes me feel like I'm some old evildoer. I told you I'm not burning you or your little tribe."

The Thousandflame Eccentric was deeply in denial, but Kruta would die before he pointed that out. Instead, he went with the flow, standing up as he tried to look grateful and impressed. Kruta felt those who said orcs were inflexible and crude would have to swallow their words after seeing his performance.

"Who would have thought such exciting events would take place just as I returned to the Integrated Territories?" the Eccentric sighed. "My little niece is clearly meant for greatness. The boy you met inside that delusional old spirit's realm isn't half-bad, either. As for you... Eh. You're okay, I guess?"

Veins bulged on Kruta's forehead, but he narrowly held back a spicy response. He even managed to look thankful for the backhanded comment, though it felt more taxing than climbing that scalding wall.

"So you want our help to reach the Frontier," the Thousandflame Eccentric continued. "That way, you can continue to hang onto this thread of borrowed fate. A bit shameless, wouldn't you say?"

The rational part of his mind urged caution. He was almost there. But years of torment refused to be pushed down any longer. He would be shaming the ancestors if he kept his back bowed any further. Besides, no one liked a coward. Kruta sensed it was time to risk it all for a chance at glory.

"Kruta borrowed nothing! I earned this opportunity by risking my life, standing by my friends, and even going against the Seven Heavens!"

His voice echoed across the arena, possibly representing his final burst of defiance before his life winked out. Kruta steeled his heart for no matter what came next. Life or death, he'd stand tall. However, no flame descended to consume him.

"So you finally found your courage," Thousandflames laughed. "Good! I was starting to wonder if the primal flame in your soul had been extinguished."

Kruta knew his guess had been right. The Tayns were battle maniacs, and being too obsequious could result in having your fate tested. Kruta wracked his brain to figure out what to do next, but his thoughts scattered when the most beautiful orc he'd ever seen appeared before him.

Her muscles were refined beyond perfection, her bushy eyebrows capturing the deadly beauty of a raging fire across grassy seas. Fiery runes covered her sanguine skin, containing the deepest truths of the true fire of the universe. Her eyes were striking green, reminding Kruta of home, the plains, and of war.

She held no weapons in her hands, but why should she need any? She was already a weapon refined beyond perfection. The faces of his fiancées rapidly faded as Kruta took in the true expression of deadly grace. Kruta couldn't think of what to say, so he simply gaped at her appearance.

Come to think of it, he'd never heard what kind of background the Three Scourges had. He'd assumed they were some unique mythological beings born from the cosmos, like their master, or part of the Tainn lineage.

"Surprised?" the orc laughed. "You shouldn't be. Would I have treated you so gently if not for our shared ancestry? It's not so easy to grab onto the coattails of the Emyrean Throne without getting burnt."

Kruta's expression collapsed. Years of suffering, desperate battles, and breathing ash and smoke was considered gentle treatment?

"Why look so glum?" the fiery orc snickered. "I never said I wouldn't help."

"Kruta appreciates the offer, but the event has already passed," Kruta sighed, unwilling to spend even one more second with this lunatic. Beauty or not, Kruta knew he couldn't withstand much more of her attention. "If the ancestor can drop me off somewhere convenient, I would be most grateful."

"What are you talking about? It's over three years before the event for the juniors begin."

"Ah?" Kruta said, his eyes blank before he understood. "Time Dilation?"

Then why hadn't he noticed? The Heavens were almost completely drowned out by the endless flames, but he was certain the Dao hadn't been twisted by temporal distortion. He was even close to evolving his Branch of the Layered Blade to late mastery. How had Mistress Thousandflames accomplished something like that? Was this the benefit of holding a Throne?

"No. I'm saying you've been on board my ship for a couple of months. Since when did it become years?"

"Huh?"

"Seems you got turned around by eating all those roots. I thought you realized they were poisonous when you spent two full days emptying your bowls in the bushes, but I guess you're a bit of an idiot," the orc sighed. "Well, that's fine. It's not the smartest guys who walk out of a battlefield in one piece. It's the strongest one."

Kruta was flushed with joy. He hadn't missed it. He'd thought the old eccentric had prevented him from being sent to the Left Imperial Palace when three years had passed in his mind. So it turned out he was out of his mind. Thank the ancestors! However, the frowning expression on Thousandflames' face made Kruta rein in his jubilation, and he looked at her attentively.

"But what's the deal with your aura? Your fire's soft and gentle like a courtesan's, even after tempering yourself a bit in the penal colonies. What good are you to my niece in your current state?"

"Uh," Kruta hesitated, not sure what she was talking about. "I don't know. I'll work on it?"

"Fine," Thousandflames relented, her eyes suddenly lighting up with excitement. "You're too soft, but you're still a kid. How about this? My little niece is undergoing some training herself. She should emerge in two years or so. Until then, I'll toughen you up a bit. Whether I bring you or not depends on your performance."

The thought of being tormented for two years was too much to bear. Not even the Left Imperial Palace was worth that. He'd just be happy with his part-finished seal and see if it was enough to bring him over in three years. But how did you turn down the discipleship of a crazy Supremacy without getting toasted?

"Well?" Thousandflames said, her voice feeling like a thousand roaring flames again.

You didn't. Kruta was trapped; he could see it in her eyes. There was no room for rejection.

"Disciple greets master," Kruta said, feeling something wet pour down his cheeks.

Sweat from the heat, no doubt. He surely wasn't crying.

"Disciple..." Thousandflames said, a radiant smile spreading across her face. "Would you believe that I've never actually had a disciple?"

Kruta's mind was a mess after being repeatedly dragged between joy and despair. But Kruta roused himself. Maybe it wasn't so bad? Maybe things were finally lining up for ol' Kruta. Even being an in-name disciple of a Supremacy came with benefits most could only dream of. Being the sole disciple of one?

An opportunity like that was almost at the same level as the trial in the Left Imperial Palace. However, his new master's next words threw him right back into the pit of despair.

"Well, never one that was fated, anyway."