

The Fall 1027

[Chapter 1027 - Hunter and Prey](#)

The ripple was gone as quickly as it came, giving no hint of where it came from. Judging by Kruta's expression, he hadn't noticed it at all.

"What is it?" the barbarian said with a raised brow. "Surely, some parading puppets isn't enough for you to lose your composure?"

"It's not that," Zac grimaced as he tried to pinpoint the source of the ripple. "Remember what I said before?"

"Your enemies?" Kruta said with a low voice, his eyes darting back and forth.

"I'm afraid so. This might be the time we split up."

"And let you hog all the fun?" Kruta scoffed. "I don't know you well, but I can feel you'll be the key to this event. I'm not letting you sneak off alone now."

"You might come to regret it."

"What regret? Getting a few more people to fight? More fun for Kruta," the barbarian guffawed.

"Besides, if things get out of hand, I'll just flee. I won't say I'm invincible, but pinning me down in this place is almost impossible."

Zac looked at Kruta for a few seconds before slowly nodding. "Thank you. I'll do what I can to take on the heat, but don't overdo it."

"No need for all that mushiness. What do you want to do? I guess you have a plan in place."

"Well, not really," Zac said, scratching his chin.

"What?"

"I mean, a wise man once told me, 'What's the use of calculating and thinking when you're an idiot?'" Zac coughed. "So, I just figured I'd drag them into the heart of the zone and deal with it there. The more chaotic, the better. That way, it'll become a brawl, and I'm pretty good at those."

Kruta blankly looked at Zac for a second before he started laughing. "Good advice! I like it!"

Zac nodded before thoughtfully looking in the direction of the puppet army. "What about those guys? Will they create a problem?"

"Our old path isn't reliable if those soulless things can suddenly pop out of nowhere," Kruta hummed as he took out the map and made some adjustments. "Well, we could take a bit of a detour. Should be some empty pockets now that they are gathering. "

Zac nodded. "How much time would that add?"

"The Stand is not that big, as far as zones go. We'll reach the center in two days, provided we don't get caught up in this mess. Detours shouldn't add more than half a day. Or..."

"Or what?" Zac asked.

"Or we stalk the puppets from a distance," Kruta shrugged. "White Sigils have very strong perception. If we get attacked by your enemies, they'll probably get pulled over. If not, we can drag the fight to the puppets. The puppets should also act as a magnet for the Hero Souls, and they're heading right where we need to go."

Zac nodded in agreement. "Sounds good. How do we avoid getting discovered by the puppets, though? Can't they sense our energy?"

"Uh," Kruta said, blankly looking ahead. "Well, we'll just be careful and work hard on harmonizing with the environment?"

"Alright, whatever," Zac shrugged. "We'll just have to run if they start swarming us."

The two opted to keep a ten-minute distance from the puppet army as they ran along a ridge. The puppets followed a straight path, which was quite easy to follow. After a few hours, Zac and Kruta even opted to run ahead to avoid any nasty surprises. Occasionally, the White Sigil sent out scouts in their direction, but Kruta was quite sensitive to the changes on the battlefield. Every time danger approached, they got out of the way in time.

Others weren't as lucky. A sudden eruption of energy made the two stop and nudged closer to the Puppet Army, where they spotted a trio surrounded by frenzied puppets. Over a dozen broken puppets lay on the ground, but the cultivators were still in desperate straits. They tried to break out, but the Blue Cloak puppets had created a barrier. On top of that, dozens of Red Caps were in the way.

Suddenly, a shroud of mist was released from the White Sigil's helmet, and space veritably exploded as it flashed forward. The cultivator tried to move out of the way, but the puppet was too quick. The commander pierced straight through the guest's hastily erected defense before goring her with its lance.

A spectral hand appeared beneath one of the two remaining cultivators, dragging him into a mysterious portal that looked like a small pond. The final man tried something similar, but the White Sigil was already upon him. A Dao-empowered stab forcibly interrupted the escape treasure, and the poor man died a moment later. Had this been a Green Zone, he could have called on his guide to send him out of the Perennial Vastness.

But this was a Red Zone, following the law of the jungle you'd see in the wild. There were no safety nets; you'd have to get out on your own.

"Let's go," Kruta sighed as the two inched back to avoid being dragged into the misfortune of others.

A storm of Hero Souls had already hit the flank of the puppet army, though Zac could tell the puppets were far superior. Luckily, the White Sigil hadn't noticed them. Or at least it hadn't bothered pursuing. It focused on the incoming Hero Souls, and the army began moving ten minutes later. By that point, the broken puppets had already mended enough for them to walk on their own.

The two avoided getting hounded by the puppets, but their journey wasn't without headaches. The puppet army was like a beacon for the Hero Souls, just like Kruta suspected. Some ran straight to their deaths, but other squads changed course upon discovering Zac and Kruta. The two were constantly forced into fights, turning them into unwilling meat shields for the puppet army.

Zac was constantly on edge, feeling targeted from every direction. After the first ripple, he hadn't seen a hint of the enemies hiding in the shadows. That didn't mean there wasn't anyone looking or following him. An assassin or scout who could reach the Perennial Vastness wouldn't have much difficulty avoiding Zac's scans. Even the steady Dao Heart he'd tempered through endless struggle started to get frayed from the uncertainty.

Knowing he'd been exposed put him under a lot of pressure, and he was afraid to display the limits of his attributes or his technique. The few times he was forced to use skills, he even opted to delay the activation or integrate the skills with his infighting in a sub-optimal way. It left him with a few wounds, but it was worth it if his floundering could create some openings down the road.

Kruta didn't share Zac's misgivings. The barbarian had a grand time fighting and constantly chattered about the treasures waiting for him at the end of the rainbow. By the time a few hours had passed, Zac had heard over thirty theories. Some were quite normal, like them finding the corpse of Saeward along with his spatial rings. Others were more out there, such as Kruta's suggestion the whole event was a coronation trial. Whoever reached Saeward's resting place would become the king of the empire Saeward once ruled, gaining endless riches and vast armies.

Another one who enjoyed herself was Vivi. The increasingly powerful Hero Souls had already cut off or shredded miles' worth of vines, but she wasn't deterred. She even seemed to enjoy the challenge, though she was a bit miffed the Hero Souls had no bodies to consume. It was almost as though she'd returned to her youth since absorbing the energies inside the Gate of Life. She hit harder and faster, and her vines regrew quicker.

It was like the vines had gone through a full Cosmic Cycle and improved a stage, yet Zac found it hard to be enthused by the transformation. Her powerup wasn't the result of a real breakthrough. It was more like all the nutrients he'd provided allowed her to return to her former glory. But that came at the cost of her lifespan. Vivi was essentially pushing herself beyond her limits, hastening her demise.

When Zac got her, Heda said she'd live for another century, two if lucky. But her life force was like a flickering flame, and Zac doubted Vivi had more than a few decades remaining. It filled him with a sense of powerlessness, as there was nothing he could do. He had hoped to prove Heda wrong through his Luck and fortuitous encounters. To change Vivi's destiny as he had Verun's. It had proven futile. The treasures he'd provided only gave temporary reprieve and the strength to keep going at her current pace.

Not only that, but Vivi transmitted most of the nutrients to Haro.

The Heavenrender Seed, in contrast, was a seed no longer. Haro had finally transformed him into a dual-affinity sapling after absorbing Zac's Daos of Life and Conflict for over a decade, along with enough treasures to bankrupt a D-grade Clan. It only reached his knees inside the Worldring and couldn't yet utilize the vast amounts of energy stored in its body. Still, it emitted an incredibly fierce aura. Even now, it happily gobbled the Dao in the environment, showing no signs of being satiated.

A full day passed in this manner, and things reached a point where Zac wished someone would just attack him and get it over with. Had he overestimated his attractiveness as bait? Were they really planning to target him on his return, only sending some scouts to track his movements and report back?

An hour later, there were finally some developments, but not how he'd hoped. First, they found a second puppet army to their left, sandwiching them between two squads. When they decided to break away from the puppets that had trailed them for the past day, they realized these two armies weren't the only ones. There were over five armies in front of them, one of which was over three times the size of the other ones they'd spotted so far.

"And there's another one," Kruta whistled twenty minutes later as they observed an eighth puppet army walking through a canyon in the distance. "We might be able to pass them by, but we're in trouble if we get discovered. The squads are too bunched-up. I fear they might be able to communicate."

"Even if we pass this squad, there's probably another one waiting beyond," Zac sighed. "Probably not worth it."

"I wonder how many squads there are," Kruta muttered. "If the whole Stand is spawning them like this, we're talking about an army in the tens of thousands."

"More importantly, we're getting boxed in," Zac commented. "We need to make a decision, or we might end up in the middle of a hostile legion."

Kruta nodded and took out his map. "If we head to the right of the original group, we'll enter the minefields after two hours. I doubt there'll be puppet armies in there. Their energies would trigger one pillar after another. We should avoid that if possible. However, going left would put us closer to the Edge. We wouldn't be boxed in by puppets there, but we'd end up with our backs against the wall."

The Edge wasn't an actual cliff but a vast river that could be considered one end of the Stand. The river itself was made from liquid metal and contained shocking amounts of deadly eruptions of the Dao of Conflict. There were even dangerous beasts hiding in the depths. As far as E-grade cultivators were concerned, it might as well be the underworld river since crossing it meant death.

The only reason the Edge wasn't considered the fourth danger was that it was static, and cultivators could just avoid it. There hadn't been any reports of surges or creatures emerging from the waters, so you could walk along its shores without issue. It was simply the edge of the Stand, hence its name.

Most Red Zones had these limiters, and the general consensus was that they were intended to keep the guest out of the far more dangerous sections of the Perennial Vastness. For example, the true dangers of the Calamity were far beyond what even Hegemons could withstand.

"I have fished for treasures in the calm banks. Let me tell you, that water is no joke. In the inner regions, we won't last more than a few seconds if we're forced inside."

"The Minefield isn't much better," Zac muttered. "Especially now that the region is waking up."

"I think our safest bet is to slow down for an hour or two and let all these squads merge," Kruta offered. "Then we can follow their tail."

Zac grunted as he looked at the empty horizon behind them. They were roughly one hour ahead of the first Puppet Army, using them to shore up their rear. To stop and let them pass... was perhaps the most dangerous option of all. He could feel it. The main fate of the region was gathering ahead, but a dangerous wind of uncertainty was coming at him from behind.

"Stopping is not an option, and the minefield is too unpredictable," Zac said. "We'll move toward the edge."

"If you say so," Kruta nodded.

They traveled diagonally toward the river for the next four hours, narrowly dodging one squad after another. There really were thousands on the move, all of them heading toward the heart of the zone. One wrong step would result in a cascade of deadly disasters. The two had tried to get a glimpse of what they were walking toward, but turbulent winds shrouded the central Stand.

Oddly enough, they met fewer and fewer Hero Souls as they progressed. Their best guess was that all the memories in the region had been dragged toward the center, possibly to stave off the puppet attack. Zac could only imagine what kind of war raged beyond the horizon. It felt as though they were walking through a memory where the ancient battle was being re-enacted.

Knowing the Edge was nearby filled Zac with a small sense of safety, and they sped up on their way to the center. Eventually, they reached the obscuring shroud, and the two looked at each other hesitantly.

"That's it?" Zac asked. "Didn't you say it was almost impossible to reach the inner reaches of the Stand? We just strolled here."

"I... I don't know," Kruta said. "I expected things to get worse, not better. Something in the center must be siphoning all the energy. I bet things are very different on the other side."

"Can you deal with it?" Zac asked.

"Look who you're talking to!" Kruta scoffed. "I am a future warchief. How could I lose my mind on the battlefield?"

"Fine, should we check things out?"

"What about your enemies?"

"Looks like they're not coming," Zac hesitated as he looked back.

Still nothing.

"Then let's fish in the muddy waters and deal with the rest later," Kruta nodded eagerly.

The storm wasn't deadly like what Zac had encountered in the Calamity, but it was still extremely unsettling. Vision was only a hundred meters, and energy signals were completely muted. It felt like they could run into a troupe of puppets at any moment. The barbarian eventually slowed down and looked around hesitantly.

"This is Warhaze Array," Kruta frowned as he took out a bone. "Stay close or we'll get split up."

The two continued for another hour, at which point the ground started rumbling. The vibrations were slight and erratic, and Zac could picture the source; powerful attacks colliding, making the whole world tremble.

"War," Kruta muttered, a mix of excitement and trepidation on his face.

After another ten minutes, the haze started to give way. A sudden pang of danger made Zac drag Kruta out of the way, just in time to avoid a massive pillar of flames. It was over ten meters across and contained enough force to incinerate a Hegemon. The two shared a look before continuing.

The energy was like a punch to the face, and Zac was forced to stop and enter a Void State. The killing intent alone was enough to drive one mad, yet it paled by the storm of Conflict that filled the air. A few steps later, the world came into focus, and even Kruta couldn't help but gasp.

The world had gone mad, with hundreds of massive eruptions going off every second. There were tens of thousands of puppets storming a far larger army of Hero Souls, and the battleline stretched further than Zac could see. Both sides were empowered by the environment, constantly unleashing powerful attacks that could pass as skills. Floating above the sea of puppets were hundreds of White Sigils, and Zac's heart lurched upon spotting no less than ten Golden Champions.

Even then, the Hero Souls weren't overwhelmed. The puppets had their champions, but so did the ghosts. Their battles shook the skies, and Zac realized the fallout from one of those duels had almost incinerated them just now. And the Hero Souls were constantly getting reinforcements from an enormous moated castle behind their lines.

There was no doubt about it; that was the command center. A cloud of conflict so pure Zac couldn't even look at it hovered above its towers. The energy in the castle was so dense it looked like a solid pillar. But how did that help them? Zac sighed and looked at the impenetrable wall of destruction between them and their goal. There was no muddy water to fish in here. There was only death.

Battlements roared and space itself cried, unable to withstand the unending fury. It felt like the dimension itself was barely hanging on.

Was this how a war between Hegemons looked?

"What should we do?" Kruta whispered as they backed away. "That's not a conflict we can get involved with."

The Warhaze Array muted the deafening clamor, and the previously ominous shroud now provided a sense of safety. However, that only lasted a second before Zac's eyes widened in alarm. If they couldn't sense such a massive war through the haze, then didn't that mean...

"Wait," Zac whispered. "We're—"

The world shuddered as a huge pillar of light slammed down, sealing the two into a cage 200 meters across.

"Trapped," Zac sighed.