

The Fall 1033

[Chapter 1033 - Disappearing Act](#)

Valsa ground her teeth as she slowly inched backward. Another attempt foiled by the shift in the battlefield. Two Blue Cloaks struck at her, but she deftly blocked them while infusing a command into the Master Medallion. Ten Hero Souls immediately rushed over, heedlessly attacking the surrounding puppets to give Valsa a chance to disentangle herself.

It wouldn't have been hard to destroy those two pieces of junk, and she was more than willing to after the previous encounter. But she couldn't. If she made any big moves, her plan would fail. She didn't dare activate any skills or even rotate her energy, what with the dozen Golden Champions hovering above.

The surroundings soon stabilized, and the usually mindless Hero Souls formed a small island halfway through the battlefield. Unfortunately, there were not enough nearby captains to call over, so she could only wait. These miscreations were just too stupid. They would long since have routed the puppets had they retained some of their brains after their deaths.

The protective circle wasn't absolute. One errant attack after another crashed into her armor, eliciting another wave of fury as she was forced to mutely take it. She'd known someone picked by Ultom would be a tough opponent, but she still couldn't believe things had gone so awry. They'd planned and surveyed for over a year, yet it all collapsed within minutes.

And that barbarian. She wouldn't have been in this mess if he hadn't meddled in her business and brought that golden puppet. She prayed she'd retain enough memories to track him and his faction down. She intoned the names and backgrounds of the two responsible parties every time a mark was left on her armor. Perhaps the royal uncles could fish the words out of her consciousness upon her return.

Anything to strike at those bastards.

Valsa grimaced as she felt the dense waves of energy coursing through her body—leakage from the damaged Core Nucleus. The [Planur Core] by her spine picked it up and converted it to enough raw power to destroy mountains, but she could only release it while stuck in the middle of the battlefield. The boost eclipsed even that of her War Array, but at what cost? Years of preparations were being undone in front of her eyes.

The Golden Champion must have intentionally chosen to target her that way. A strike meant to cripple, to create desperation and struggle. To set a deadline before your cultivation collapsed. Only then would the most impetus be extracted to fuel the undertaking. Valsa only had six hours before the nucleus would break altogether; her remedies hadn't been enough to deal with such damage.

Saeward, ruthless indeed.

Furthermore, four of her Natal Fategems were sacrificed for some short-term gains. It would take a Fourth-step Autarch to remold them and relink them to her cosmic pulse. Who among her ancestral uncles and aunts would bother if she returned in her current state? Defeated, humiliated, and crippled, shaming the First Heaven and their name. Valsa felt like the floor had been ripped out from under her feet.

Thank the Gods that bastard was still alive.

Valsa stroked the Spatial Ring on her finger, where the [Transplanted Fate Array] waited. It solidly entered the unorthodox, but so what? Her ancestral father had already shielded the Heavens; it would block out the backlash. And it wasn't like her family hadn't done the same before.

Initially, the thought of stealing someone's foundations to power her path felt disgusting—it would sully her pristine heritage. But she was left with no choice. The Core Nucleus would already have collapsed by the time she reached the exit of this experiment realm. It would take at least three years to regain her current accumulations, considering she'd used up most of her Contribution for this plan.

By then, it would be too late. The struggle for the Left Imperial Palace would be over, and she would have lost the window of opportunity to catch up. Even if the First Heaven somehow managed to get a foot through the door, it wouldn't be her who'd lead the way. She'd be sent off to become a cauldron for another family's heir or even gifted to an ally. All while her old competitors laughed at her fate.

But now, she felt empowered, and she could see the silver lining to her failure. That man's bloodline was simply too overbearing, forcing the stars of Planur into submission. It had completely upended her plan, but it was only a delay of the inevitable. She'd seen his state, and she knew what it meant to enter the River of Steel. The bloodline might have allowed him to enter Saeward's altar somehow, but he should be at death's door. Exhausted, wounded, and still sealed by the stars.

If she succeeded, she'd accomplish all her goals in one fell swoop. Use his foundations to repair and elevate her Core Nucleus. Seize his fate and gain a ticket to the Left Imperial Palace. And if she managed to transplant that man's Bloodline Talent into her own? Between being a Flamebearer and that, she was sure to become the Holy Daughter of the First Heaven.

The battlefield shifted again, and Valsa's eyes lit up. She ordered a charge, and a riding captain came to their aid. Another fifty meters progressed while her private army had grown even greater. Not much longer now.

Knowing Valsa was making her way over left both Zac and Kruta restless. Neither was in any mood to continue recovering and got to their feet.

"Can you tell you when she'll get here?"

"It's not that precise," Kruta said with a shake of his head. "I didn't dare leave any obvious mark. I can only sense she's entered my range. I'm not exactly sure where we are in the castle, but that should mean she's entered the large-scale battlefield. I should sense it better if she gets within a few hundred meters."

Zac nodded as he surveyed the garden. The dust wasn't perfect, but it was much better than no warning.

"What do you think? That one?" Zac said, pointing to a smaller door that seemed to be leading toward the innards of the castle.

"Looks like a servant's passage," Kruta said. "That big gate feels like trouble."

"Agreed," Zac said and the two set out, working hard to harmonize with the surroundings.

Zac only stopped when they reached a flowerbed filled with D-grade flowers infused with Pure Conflict. They were quite good specimens...

"Don't even think about it," Kruta growled from behind, clearly understanding what Zac was thinking.

"Maybe on the way back," Zac sheepishly smiled.

The barbarian was right. The arrays under the flowerbeds looked benign, but Zac couldn't tell if the plants were monitored. Their best guess since finding themselves in the garden was that a particularly powerful Hero Soul maintained this place. Perhaps Saeward himself or his right-hand man. Such a powerful memory fragment might contain enough memories and personality to maintain their hobbies.

It would be a disaster if they accidentally called them over because of some decent Natural Treasures.

The two crept over to the side entrance, which thankfully opened without blaring any alarms triggering traps. As expected, they found themselves in a servant's passage. Investigating the nearby rooms didn't attract any Hero Souls. The castle felt very incongruent that way. It was flooded with so much Dao and Energy that even Zac had some trouble coping, yet no Hero Soul seemed to form within the walls.

The wing consisted of simple sleeping quarters, a large kitchen, an indoor greenhouse, and two offices. There were some ledgers in the larger office, but Zac frowned as he picked one up. It was filled to the brim with notes, but Zac couldn't make heads or tails of it. It either was written in code, or someone had just written random words for thousands and thousands of pages.

Had the office owner become a Hero Soul and continued writing reports without understanding what he was doing?

"Look at this," Kruta said, and Zac walked over.

The tome Kruta held looked much older and wasn't filled with random gibberish like the others. Instead, it contained detailed reports of operation. Most of it wasn't useful, such as detailing the expenditure to procure foodstuffs, cleaning schedules, and notes on the garden and greenhouse.

"This Saeward lived pretty good for someone staying in a battlefield fortress," Kruta commented as he flipped through the pages.

"Looks that way," Zac nodded. "Doesn't really mesh with someone having a desperate final stand."

"All kinds of weirdoes out there," Kruta shrugged. "There's a Warchief of a rival tribe back home who always brings his wives to fight alongside him, even those multiple grades lower than him. He's already had over a thousand marriages to replace those he lost. We've accepted hundreds of beautiful refugees—young flowers afraid they'll get selected next."

"Pretty messed up, but it doesn't look like you're complaining," Zac said, noticing the grin tugging at Kruta's lips. "Did some of those beauties find the great Kruta a better match?"

"Who wouldn't?!" Kruta laughed. "I've already have six fiancés, though they have to become Late Hegemons before marrying me, and I a Monarch."

Zac smiled as he kept turning pages of the tally. Suddenly, he found something odd.

"Hey, so how's things going with that black-eyed lass of yours?" Kruta grinned. "Not my style, but I can see the— what?"

"Look at this," Zac said, and Kruta leaned over. "It mentions Saeward's disappearance. Not even the staff knows what happened. 'Master has disappeared at stretches before, but never at a time like this. I fear...'"

"Last entry two weeks later," Kruta muttered. "The steward tried using his procurement channel to source medicines and supplies. They must have succumbed soon after?"

"Or perhaps abandoned this fortress," Zac offered. "This castle doesn't look like it's withstood a siege."

"It's odd," Kruta agreed. "Hey, look at this."

Zac looked at a procurement tally from one week before Saeward's disappearance. At a cursory glance, it didn't feel special—just six lines with simple annotations of quality. But looking closer, it was very different from the previous entries, both the products and the quantities.

"What the hell," Zac muttered. "What's this? Do you recognize any of these materials?"

"Two," Kruta nodded. "Tasstir Lichen. We call it Ancestral Moss, and our Shamans use it for spirit journeys. The other I know is the Damchi Glass. It's a type of glass made from Damchi Sand... Odd."

"What?" Zac asked.

"Damchi Glass has many uses, but seeing the Ancestral Moss... The glass can be used to create various soul-stabilizing items. Such as a Soul Mirror."

"A what?" Zac asked.

"Possessing a body is full of risks. One of them is remnant soul rejection. Shards of the previous owner's soul can be trapped in the body, and it'll make the body reject its new owner. A Soul Mirror can help fuse the two and minimize the side effects."

"You said your shamans use that moss to take a spirit walk. Do you think it can be used to drive a soul, or pieces of one, out of the body?"

"That's what I'm thinking," Kruta nodded.

"Someone possessed Saeward and had his people procure the materials to stabilize the takeover. When he'd stabilized, he left, leaving Saeward's army to fend for itself?" Zac muttered. "Ruthless..."

"Let's hope that's not the case," Kruta sighed.

"Why?"

"Because then, 'Saeward' is long gone, and there's no trove to retrieve."

"Oh," Zac grimaced.

"It wouldn't explain why the energy is rising, though. It also wouldn't explain the war outside," Kruta countered. "Let's keep investigating. That lass is still some ways off."

"Sure," Zac agreed. "But let's look for good spots for an ambush."

Kruta nodded, and the two left the servant's quarters. The rest of the castle was quite sparse. There were just endless corridors and stairs, with walls covered in lines and patterns. It wasn't hard to figure out what was going on.

"This is an array," Zac said.

"Sure," Kruta agreed. "Battlefield fortresses usually are. Communication, protection, offensive. They can have all sorts of functions. From what I gathered, Saeward controlled a War Array to empower his soldiers from here."

"Hmm," Zac hummed as he looked around.

"What?" Kruta asked.

"Don't these patterns feel odd to you?" Zac said.

"No. Then again, I have no talent for stuff like this," Kruta shrugged. "What are you thinking?"

"I don't know yet..." Zac muttered. "Let's keep going."

The two skulked through the castle for another ten minutes, at which point they'd almost made a full circle around the whole thing. Still, not a Hero Soul in sight. Or a treasury, for that matter. The castle was essentially mirrored, with two gardens and quarters to the sides. However, while one wing was meant for the servants, stewards, and chefs, the other was reserved for officers.

They found a set of reports in their rooms, but they didn't add much they didn't already know. The generals were shocked at their commander's disappearance and the loss of the War Array's boost. They desperately tried to keep morale up and turn the tides, but the reports grew increasingly bleak.

'The soldiers are tired, exhausted. Our blood has turned the earth red. Yet they stand. Yet they fight. Honorable men and women, not breaking under the impossible pressure. A general couldn't ask for better fighters. Better brothers and sisters.

WHERE IS HE?'

It was the final notation in the report, written two days before the steward's last entry. The papers bled fury and despair, and it permeated the whole room. The two soon left, afraid the intense resentment would conjure the fallen general. Someone like that would have to be the equivalent of a Golden Champion; definitely not something they wanted to deal with when an unhinged princess was on her way.

The rest of the outer section was essentially bare. They'd tried to locate Saeward's living quarters or cultivation chambers, but they'd come up with nothing. As far as they could tell, the castle was a four-storied circular complex almost entirely comprised of these array corridors.

One side had the servant's quarters, another the officer's lounge. A third held a courtyard leading into a main hallway. Thick array lines covered the tiled pathway, leading from the castle's sealed-off innards to the courtyard and beyond. The two hadn't dared enter that particular hallway. For one, it contained dense enough energies that the floor was mostly covered by a haze that felt even scarier than the metallic water.

Secondly, they'd finally spotted some Hero Souls within the castle. The courtyard outside seemed to be a spawning point, and an almost constant stream of warriors was conjured there. They only waited until a full company had been formed, after which they set out through the outer gates. Endlessly.

It was possibly a good location to ambush Valsa, but he and Kruta had misgivings. Valsa still hadn't reached them, but she seemed to be somewhere in the middle of the battlefield. As far as they could figure, that only had two explanations. Either she was invisible or had something which allowed her to control the Hero Souls.

The puppets clearly didn't care about Valsa's pedigree, but the stronger Hero Souls could be reasoned with or tricked. If she could utilize the soldiers on the squads, their previous tactic of using the Stand of Saeward's locals to their advantage might backfire. So they slunk back, going back the way they came.

They'd expected to find Seward's quarters in the final quadrant, opposite the entrance. Unfortunately, all they found were more corridors. However, it wasn't hard to tell there were rooms they couldn't access. After going up and down the confusing maze of paths for a few minutes, they could vaguely map out a hidden section that was even bigger than the servant's quarters.

Breaking in proved futile. The castle was made out of incredibly tough stones and then further augmented by eons of channeling huge amounts of Dao and energy. They barely managed to leave a scar on the walls. They might be able to open a path if they went all-out and used skills, but they feared creating a ruckus like that would backfire spectacularly.

The only other thing that set the fourth section apart was a large gate that should lead to the inner section. Perhaps a back door for the servants. Neither the officer's lounge nor the servant's quarters had something like this. Having explored the rest of the castle, the two stopped before the entrance.

Zac had almost mapped out the whole array in his mind, and he'd dealt enough with patterns based on Conflict to find a few clues. One thing was for sure; things weren't as they seemed. Something odd was mixed in, and the engravings didn't match the use cases Kruta described.

First of all, the patterns felt more like a Gathering Array than something for defenses or a War Array. It would explain the cloud above the castle's center and the extremely dense Dao that permeated the walls. But that wasn't also quite right. It felt more like an exchange. Much of the energy gathered by the castle went into forming new Hero Souls. But something was also taken back from the memories.

Zac frowned, slowly starting to form a hypothesis. However, there was no way for them to confirm while skirting the edges of the castle. If they wanted answers, they'd have to enter the heart. That's where they felt the energy churn, and that's where the Stand of Saeward's upheavals originated.

"You ready?" Zac said, and Kruta tersely nodded.

They carefully pushed open the gates, immensely thankful it didn't creak. However, both froze when faced with the scene inside the large hall on the other side.

A puppet?