

## The Fall 581

### Chapter 581: Hunger

"What's with you lately?" Zac asked as he looked over at Thea with confusion. "I can't go five meters without you popping out of nowhere."

"Do you not want me around?" Thea asked with a frown.

"No, I appreciate your company," Zac sighed. "You just seem... Angry. Is everything okay?"

"Well, I am a bit annoyed that you apparently went ahead and put a sector-wide bulls-eye on our planet when you went off-planet," Thea said with a glare, but she soon deflated. "But I'm angrier with myself. The Inheritance... Was a wake-up call. I've been playing it too safe, never going all out to push myself further."

"Yet I've been complaining about the fact that the disparity in power between us just keeps growing. I already wasted my time while you did all the hard work, and I need to grasp every opportunity that I can now. I can feel it. If I don't increase my momentum, I might not even make it past E-Grade. My class rarity won't allow it."

Zac looked at Thea with wide eyes. He wasn't sure if he had ever heard her speak that much in one go, and Zac also noticed that Joanna had moved far away at some unknown time. It looked like she had already thought things over, and what she said made sense. You could never relent on the path of cultivation. He had gathered a huge advantage during his time in the F-Grade, but he needed to keep at it if he wanted to stay relevant.

His titles and attributes would slowly lose their value as others gained more powerful cultivation manuals and improved their Dao Control. According to his sister, the ability to braid two Dao Seeds into one attack essentially had the same effect as boosting both seeds one stage. The sum became greater than its parts.

He could only imagine that Dao Arrays were even more powerful, and he would be left in the dust unless he came up with his own strengths. It was good that Thea also had come to understand this fundamental truth. That insight alone might be worth more than anything else she gained from that Inheritance.

"Well, that's fine... But don't overextend yourself," Zac eventually said as he scratched his chin. "I only act like I do because I have layers and layers of defensive measures. I'm not really someone to take after."

"No, I've seen how you fight," Thea snorted. "I'm more interested in taking after your guts than your battle techniques."

"I'm sure you'd make an excellent axe-warrior," Zac smiled before he turned to Billy who was standing not far away with a contrite look. "What's wrong with you?"

"Billy made a mistake," Billy sighed with a blush. "Billy is so smart, but for some reason the door was harder."

“Well, it’s bad luck you didn’t get any credentials to open it the normal way,” Zac said, though he wasn’t so sure.

The more he thought about it, the more sense it made. If Billy’s titanic bloodline came from this place, then it made sense that he wouldn’t be able to move about freely. What kind of security system would hand out clearance to research subjects?

If he really was correct on this, then it might even explain why he didn’t get any credentials either, and why Ogras got one so effortlessly. He already knew that clan Azh’Rezak didn’t possess any hereditary bloodlines, and Ogras hadn’t acquired a synthetic one either unless his fusion with a shadow creature could count.

The only hole in the theory was the fact that Kenzie got access while he didn’t, unless he considered the very real possibility that Kenzie wasn’t the only child that Leandra experimented on. She gave Jeeves to Kenzie, but she might have infused him with a bloodline instead for two separate experiments.

“Stupid door realized Billy was too powerful, tried to keep Billy away. But we’ll see,” Billy muttered, but he shrank back a bit after getting an even look from Thea.

“Don’t thwunk any more doors,” she said simply, but Billy still nodded hurriedly in agreement.

“Well, let’s go,” Zac shrugged as they set out.

“I’m coming as well!” a youthful voice shouted, and Zac grimaced when he saw Emily run toward them.

“What happened to your face?” Zac asked with a frown, noticing the new scar that just barely missed her eye.

“My face? What about your head? Have you become addicted to being bald?” Emily said with a glare.

“No scouting parties dared to take me with them because of you, so I’ve been fighting on Mystic Island to gain levels. Come on, let me come with you. I swear I’ll be careful. And look, this!”

Cosmic Energy in her body suddenly surged as a five-meter-tall Totem Pole appeared in front of her.

“I’ve reached level 50 already, and this is my new skill,” she said with a proud smile. “Not bad right?”

“It looks good, but what does it-” Zac muttered, but he stopped when he felt the Cosmic Energy churn in the area.

Not only that, but it almost felt like he had turned into a cultivator as the Cosmic Energy seemed to be actively burrowing into his body.

“That’s not all!” Emily smiled as a fiery axe appeared in her hand.

She didn’t use the buffing skill on Zac though, but rather threw it straight at the Totem Pole. This led to a startling transformation as the Totem almost grew twice in size while its design changed. If the earlier version looked like something that a bit like something you could find in Incan ruins to worship one’s ancestors, then the new one was something made to worship a sun god.

Fiery energies radiated from the pillar, and a large flame radiated at its top.

"My Strength has increased," Thea exclaimed with surprise, while Billy almost drooled as he looked at the Totem Pole.

"It buffs everyone in an area this way?" Zac said with surprise, but he suddenly noticed something different compared to getting directly buffed by the axe.

It only gave half of the amount it normally did.

Still, a 5% area boost was huge if this thing was placed on a battlefield, and that number might even grow as the skill's proficiency increased. Coupled with the increased energy restoration it could even turn the tides of a war.

"I don't get any buff when using it like this. But I can even detonate this thing in case an enemy tries to take it down," Emily whispered so that only Zac could hear. "Its explosion should hurt anyone that's not crazy durable like you."

"Alright, you can come with us," Zac eventually nodded. "Let's go see what's on the other side of that door."

It looked like Emily's face was about to split in two judging by her grin, but she quickly composed herself after getting stared down.

"This is a serious mission. No messing around," Zac said. "And if things look dangerous on that other side of the door you need to back down immediately while I try to keep you safe. Understand?"

"I understand," Emily quickly nodded with a serious expression. "You can count on me. I'm not some kid any longer."

She put her hands to her hips and pushed out her chest to underscore her point, but the power-pose didn't really inspire a lot of confidence. She still looked like a cosplaying child due to the combination of her oversized furs and diminutive frame. Even Thea could barely contain her smile, whereas Billy openly snickered.

"Where's the demon?" Thea suddenly asked as she looked around. "That guy is like bad weather, always appearing to ruin a good day."

"He's busy elsewhere," Zac smiled. "It's just us."

Zac considered bringing some more people, but these three and Joanna were enough. The rest would need to stay and guard the fort while he was away. Getting to the end of the map would take the better part of a day even if they didn't take any detours, so they immediately set out as to not waste any time.

However, they only managed to get to the security door before Zac had to stop the group.

"Wait," Zac said as he took out a massive slab of grilled meat, digging into it like a voracious animal.

"What? You're hungry?" Emily asked with confusion. "You had grease on your face when you left your compound as well. Are you a pig or something?"

Thea looked on with confusion as well, whereas Billy's reaction was much more straightforward. He sat down himself and produced an even bigger slab of meat, happily joining Zac for a travel snack.

"I was forced to use a Berserking Item yesterday," Zac sighed after he had devoured another few kilos of meat. "It turns out that it left my body starving for nutrients. We might need to take a few extra pitstops."

"Should we cancel this mission?" Thea asked, and Joanna seemed to agree. "Someone told me that I shouldn't overextend myself earlier, I think that advice can apply to you as well."

"I'm fine," Zac said. "I'm already a lot better than I was yesterday. I'm sure I'll be back to normal by the time we reach that gate you mentioned."

It was true. Between his sleep and the E-Grade meat he felt a lot better. He was still feeling a bit drained, but he would be able to fight just fine, especially if he had time to digest some more energy-dense food over the following hours. Thea and Joanna eventually relented and they set off again, though this time with a slightly slower speed to allow Zac to recuperate and restore his reserves.

His new skill, [Surging Vitality] unfortunately didn't work at all against something like this either. The nourishing storm that swept through his body helped with the countless small wounds left from his battle with the Golem Blacksmith, but they weren't the real problem right now.

Emily also tried imbuing him with her Earthen axe that improved Endurance and Vitality, but it didn't really help either, so Zac simply kept walking while almost constantly nibbling on something or another. The endless identical tunnels quickly turned into a blur, but having Emily and Billy around kept the atmosphere light. They quickly reached the inner part of the outer band, at which point they veered east.

They actually did pass a few corridors leading further inside, but they were blocked by spatial storms without exception. Not only that, the spatial tears were placed a lot more densely in these traps, and Zac's danger sense seemed to think these pathways were a lot more dangerous than the first one he encountered.

He wasn't really confident in breaking through a normal spatial blockade, let alone these empowered versions.

"It's a bit odd," Thea eventually said after Zac had backed away from the third pathway that might lead out of the Outer Ring. "Have you looked at the layout on the other side of these storms? I'm not actually sure they are leading to the inner reaches. These corridors seem to end in large empty rooms. There might not actually be any physical path leading further inside, which seems like a crazy design choice."

"Ogras and I guessed that these corridors might be an enormous array or something, forming massive fractals. Perhaps they wanted that stuff separate from the inner sections," Zac said, though he agreed with Thea's sentiment. "Those rooms on the other side might be teleportation rooms as well. The Technocrats have real teleporters that don't use Cosmic Energy. I saw something like that in the Tower of Eternity."

Of course, Zac wasn't really sure he would dare to use one of the ancient teleporters left behind by his mother's family. The research base had been abandoned for god knows how long, and it was now infected by a powerful Spatial Treasure. Using an unknown teleporter sounded like a surefire way to get ripped apart by spatial anomalies.

"Do you think it's worth for me to go to the Tower of Eternity as well?" Thea suddenly asked, dragging Zac out of his thoughts.

"Absolutely," Zac said without hesitation. "My power almost doubled over there. It was the only reason I could take down the Undead Incursion in one go. Why, have you got your hands on a token?"

"Both Billy and I have, we have been thinking about going as soon as this Mystic Realm is dealt with," Thea said, and Zac noticed some hesitation on her face. "I think I owe you an apology. I was furious when you disappeared. But I only considered things from my perspective. It was unfair of me to demand of you to risk your life before you felt confident in success."

"Well, my sister seems to believe I have problems communicating clearly, so I think I'm partly to blame as well," Zac said with a wry smile.

The two kept moving forward where Zac detailed most of his experiences in the Base Town and Tower of Eternity, sharing the lessons he learned the hard way. Thea in turn tried to teach him how to braid Daos to empower skills even further, though things quickly became a bit embarrassing as Zac couldn't even finish the first step.

"So I guess I haven't completely fallen behind," Thea said with a small smile when Zac eventually had to give up.

Zac only laughed in response as he went back to surveying the surroundings. It felt nice, almost when the two traveled together during the Hunt. A lot of the pressures of command could be put aside for a while, allowing Zac to just be himself. However, the journey eventually had to end.

It took them thirteen hours to reach their target; an enormous gate that reached over thirty meters into the air. In fact, even the tunnels were extra supersized the last kilometer or so, meaning that this area probably was more spacious than the usual tunnels even before the spatial expansion began.

That fact alone made Zac believe they had finally reached something of value after running around in empty hallways for almost a week. Zac's heart beat rapidly as he walked up to the console to the side. His axe was already in his hand, while the others prepared themselves in case of battle.

"Here I go," Zac muttered as he activated the gate mechanism.