

## The Fall 880

### Chapter 880: Stranded

"I've already destroyed that seal and the energies have mostly been expelled," Zac shrugged as he took out his dried meat, inwardly praising the efficacy of Ryan's and his associate's creations.

Every mouthful felt as filling as stuffing his face with a couple of kilos of meat, saving him a lot of effort and time. He had been hungry for hours by this point, and the last fight had pushed it to the point it felt like his ribs were digging into his stomach. It was a somewhat annoying side-effect of [Adamance of Eoz], but it was worth it.

In a heated battle like this, the node increased the durability of his Cosmic Energy by over 20%, which allowed [Empyrean Aegis] to withstand that treasure sword. Looking a bit silly and gluttonous was a small price to pay for such a boost.

"What are you- No, you can't just-" Vai said as she scurried closer with a set of unfamiliar gadgets in her hands. "That blood curse had been nurtured by a Hegemon. There is no way you can just remove it yourself."

"Not so fast," Zac grunted as he levied [Verun's Bite] at Vai while he continued eating.

"Please, let me check on you! The longer you wait, the worse it will get," Vai said, tears once more pooling in her eyes from anxiety.

"Not before you tell me your real identity and why you know about blood curses for some reason," Zac countered. "You are hiding something – you might even be another traitor like that friend of yours. Unless you can dispel my fears, we'll be parting here."

"No, I'm not! I- I- You," Vai sputtered, her brain seemingly short-circuiting from trying to both defend herself and urging Zac to let her treat him.

Eventually, her eyes shone with determination as she took out a small crystalline sphere from her Spatial Ring. It looked like a little ball, but it emitted spatial energies that contained a level of Dao that was far beyond anything Zac had seen before in the Void Star, even from the cortex. It was crammed full of energy as well, and it felt like a hundred [Void Balls] had been pushed together into one terrifying megabomb.

"What's that?" Zac frowned as he flashed over fifty meters away with [Earthstrider].

Thankfully, Vai didn't throw the thing at him. Instead, she infused a bit of Cosmic Energy into the ball, prompting a dense spatial wall to spring up around her. It looked extremely sturdy, almost like it had created a pocket dimension completely separate from this layer of space. It reminded Zac a lot of the methods the Orom used to create nigh-impenetrable barriers.

"I'm really part of the Void Gate," Vai said after she deactivated the bubble. "This is how I survived the chaos. It's a sphere that holds a finite amount of a Monarch's energy."

Zac slowly nodded at her to continue, inwardly realizing he had forgotten an important danger in the Multiverse. Most of his excursions were controlled by the System. The Tower of Eternity, the Twilight

Ocean, the Sovereignty-quests – they all had restrictions on the equipment trial takers could bring, while the Orom World had its own set of rules that were even more stringent.

This was the outside where anything could happen. Zac still remembered how he'd almost died to Salvation long ago because he had an amulet with a wisp of The Great Redeemer's soul. That weird blood curse just now could also be considered that kind of outside tool that wouldn't necessarily be limited to the level of his enemy. Going forward, he needed to be more careful about these kinds of things.

Certainly, these self-contained items generally required time and effort to create – a Monarch would have to cut off a piece of their soul to keep that massive amount of energy in check. They wouldn't do something like that just to make a little bit of money, but they might leave something for a promising descendant.

"I'm not a descendant of a Monarch, I came from the outside," Vai explained when she saw Zac's expression. "When I was accepted by the Void Gate, my only blood relative – my sister – was moved to one of the mortal worlds of the Void Gate instead. She had no talent for cultivation, unfortunately, and she passed away just sixty years later."

"Her constitution didn't even have the capacity to reach E-grade," Vai sighed. "The same was true for her children and grandchildren. When they passed, I distanced myself from my mortal descendants. It was too painful to see one generation after another die."

Zac inwardly sighed as he heard her story. This was the fate of cultivators, and a reason so many at the top became detached. They stopped looking at the young of their clans as individuals because they couldn't deal with the constant deaths. Ninety percent of those they saw on the streets would die during a single retreat of secluded cultivation. One day he, too, would possibly reach a point where he barely recognized any of his subordinates.

Learning about Vai's origin was interesting, and it explained why she had been so angry when she thought he was planning on stealing donations to the public schools. However, it didn't explain why she was running around with an extremely powerful treasure ball that only the most treasured scions would get to use.

"Much later, a distant descendant of my sister was born, and she had far greater talents than I. When she was born, thousands of spatial creatures came to greet her, and she was immediately adopted into the Void Monastery. Today, her name is Leyara Lioress."

"What?" Zac exclaimed. "You're lying."

Vai quickly shook her head as she took out another item, this one an information crystal. However, there weren't words recorded, but pictures. In the first picture, Vai and a young girl were sitting in a garden. The girl seemed to be around ten years old, but Zac could still make out some familiar features.

One image after another followed the first, all of them showing Vai and Leyara as the latter gradually grew into the stunning beauty he met in the Tower of Eternity. Zac looked at the transition with marvel. The long lifespans of cultivators made for some odd imagery. The first picture made it seem like Vai was the big sister or perhaps even a young mother, but the last image made it look like Vai was the younger sibling. She was a constant while Leyara kept changing.

Of course, that was just a small fleeting observation drowned out by the surprise of them having a common acquaintance.

The world was truly full of coincidences. Zac had chosen to avoid contacting Leyara out of security concerns since he had no way to contact her without exposing his identity, and he had feared he would be killed long before his message ever reached her. But now, it turned out he'd been traveling with Leyara's great aunt for months?

"I didn't even know she existed, but she first visited me around two decades ago," Vai said with a smile as she carefully stowed away the communication crystal. "She was a bit lonely, I think, so the Void Monastery sent her to me. So, when little Lara heard I was entering the Void Star, she sent me some things to keep me safe. That sphere was made by the Void Priestess herself."

"If you had such a backer, why did the others treat you almost like a secretary?" Zac asked with confusion, remembering how Vai seemed to be solidly in the lowest social rung among the small group of researchers.

"I didn't talk about it with my colleagues," Vai weakly smiled, before her eyes once more widened in alarm. "Ah, the curse! Please let me help you. You cannot imagine how damaging a blood curse is."

"What about the blood curse? Why do you know about that?" Zac asked, ignoring her panicky and urgent expression.

"Three years ago, our chapter was sent a large number of tomes on various sacrificial rituals and curses," Vai said with helplessness, her face scrunching up with disgust. "We didn't understand why – our research was focused on the Void Star. But we figured some unorthodox cult was causing trouble in the region, and we needed to figure out how to expose cultists and help those who had been cursed."

"How did it go?" Zac asked.

"Well, the research is still in progress, so I can't break the curse with an array breaker," Vai said with worry. "That's why we need to try and blast it into a spatial tear. Now please, let me help you."

"Alright, alright," Zac finally relented with a smile. "See if you can find something."

After having seen the pictures, Zac was almost certain that Vai was neither a traitor nor a spy. Her story meshed with his gut instinct as well, except he'd thought she was a descendant rather than an ancestor of a Void Gate bigshot.

Seeing that Zac finally gave the go-ahead, Vai eagerly ran over with a circular glass pane in her hands. She infused some Cosmic Energy into it, prompting a blue rune to light up in its center. Zac looked on curiously as she placed it in front of his navel, but nothing happened to the tool even after ten seconds and multiple energy infusions.

"Huh?" Vai slowly muttered with a frown as she moved the glass disk all over Zac's body. "What's going on? Where is it?"

"I told you, I destroyed it," Zac shrugged as took out Uzu's Spatial Ring. "More importantly, can you check this thing if there are any more traps on it?"

It didn't look like Vai even heard him as she kept muttering about permutations as she took out one tool after another, trying to find the already-extinguished brand.

"Did you really destroy the Blood Curse with your own energy?" Vai eventually asked with skepticism after having exhausted all her investigative trinkets.

"I ground it down with my Daos," Zac nodded.

"That's impossible. Those things are designed to be extremely resilient against that – even Middle Branches wouldn't be powerful enough to break the brand before it settled in your body," Vai muttered as she looked at Zac like he was pulling her leg.

"Well, I have some other means as well," Zac shrugged as he waved the ring. "Now, the ring?"

Still, Vai didn't make any moves to scan the spatial treasure, as she wordlessly looked into Zac's eyes. "You showcased at least two Peak-quality skills and Two Dao Branches just now, along with a strength that was almost double that of before. You are not Gaun Sorom."

"I guess I'm not," Zac smiled, making no effort to hide it.

Even if Vai was a bit ditzy and inexperienced, she wasn't a fool. There were too many differences to simply handwave away with a vague explanation of having found a trove. Even showcasing one Dao Branch and Vivi was pushing it, yet that was just the tip of the iceberg.

"Why are you hiding your real identity?" she continued.

"I got into a conflict with a scion of a powerful C-grade clan. He died, which enraged the elders. Now, I have a big bounty on my head," Zac said. "Even if I don't think the Void Gate would care, I couldn't be sure how individual Hegemons would react."

Of course, that was just part of the reason, but it was good enough of an excuse.

"A bounty?" Vai exclaimed. "What clan? Maybe Lala can help."

"Tsarun," Zac shrugged.

"Those people are no good," Vai muttered. "A lot of the research materials had been confiscated from a research base believed to be theirs."

"The Tsarun is working with the invaders?" Zac exclaimed.

"No, not that we know of," Vai said. "Those materials were confiscated thousands of years ago, and we simply used them as a reference for the methods of these new curses and sacrifices. What happened to the real Gaun Sorom?"

Zac wasn't sure why Vai cared about the real Gaun, but there was no need for him to hide the truth.

"We made a deal. I borrow his identity, and he got a Teleportation Token from me."

"And you're really not part of these traitors?" Vai continued.

"No, that doesn't have anything to do with me," Zac said with a shake of his head. "I don't have any grudges with the Void Gate. I'm just here looking for a few things."

“Alright,” Vai nodded. “I believe you.”

“Just like that?” Zac said with raised brows.

“If you wanted me dead, I would have died already,” Vai said with a small smile. “I trust you. Can you tell me your real name?”

“You can call me Zac,” Zac eventually said after some hesitation. “Zac Atwood.”

The more they talked, the more Zac had realized the jig was up. He simply couldn't figure out a way to accomplish his goals and get out of this place without using his real identity. The cortex had blown up and most of the members were no doubt dead – the moment he stepped out of the Void Star he'd be captured and questioned unless he somehow managed to escape.

So since his identity would be exposed sooner or later, there was not much point in keeping it a secret from Vai.

“Atwood?” Vai slowly said as her brows furrowed together. “Why does that sound a bit familiar? Are you part of the families of Salosar?”

“Something like that,” Zac coughed with a crooked smile, feeling a bit embarrassed.

He had expected an exaggerated reaction to the grand reveal that he was Zachary Atwood – the Deviant Asura who had reached the ninth floor of the Tower of Eternity and brought the Stele of Conflict to Zecia. But the little researcher obviously had no idea who he was, judging by her confused expression. Perhaps she had heard Leyara mention his name sometime but promptly forgot it after.

So much for fame and notoriety.

“Alright, so I'm a bit stronger than I openly displayed, and you have a wealthy descendant. Until we manage to leave this place, I'll stay on as Gaun, alright?” Zac coughed, eager to change the subject.

“Okay,” Vai nodded. “I will help you keep your secret, and I will talk with my niece. She knows a lot of people who might be able to help!”

“I'll rely on you then,” Zac smiled. “More importantly, the situation is still a bit of a mess. Do you know where we are?”

“No,” Vai said as she fearfully looked around, seemingly just now remembering they were in a foreign mystic realm shrouded in darkness. “But I think we've been transported deeper, where the more dangerous realms are.”

“Perfect,” Zac muttered. So much for the second piece he sensed being at the surface as well. “With the cortex blowing up like that, are we stuck here?”

“The cortexes do not control the gates between realms,” Vai said. “They simply help stabilize the system. A few realms might have been pushed out of place because of the explosion, but it will take much longer for the network to collapse altogether.”

“Was Uzu's explanation true?” Zac asked curiously. “Are we actually not inside the Void Star right now?”

“Well... Yes and no,” Vai said after some thought. “Both the official model and Uzu’s explanations are true. The Mystic Realms are both here and in various corners of Zecia. Space is split, duplicated in a sense. It’s hard to explain without some understanding of layered realities.”

“But we aren’t stealing Mystic Realms!” Vai quickly added when she saw Zac frown, clearly mistaking what he was worried about. “The realms we connect and harmonize with the Void Star are hidden far from the main dimensions. Most of them would probably never appear in Zecia.”

“So all those beasts in the breachers might come from the Million Gates Territory, or even from the other sector?”

“It’s possible,” Vai conceded. “But it doesn’t make sense. We have always stayed away from that region because of the turbulence. We knew that connecting the Void Star with such a chaotic patch of space would wreak havoc on this system. Something must have gone wrong for these kinds of bridges to form.”

Zac thoughtfully nodded, but he inwardly wondered if things were that simple. Certainly, the region had seen a fair share of spatial turbulence lately, which was the reason the Space Gate to the other sector had appeared in the first place. But it felt too coincidental. Were the Void Gate perhaps advancing their positions to deal with the invaders, but it had backfired?

Or was it related to the Left Imperial Palace?

Had the Void Priestess perhaps finally found the clues she was looking for somewhere inside the Million Gates territory? Was that where the piece of rubble he found came from, along with the invaders and beasts? It made sense – for a prize like the Left Imperial Palace, the Void Priestess was probably willing to risk anything, including the Void Star and perhaps even Zecia as a whole.

“I guess it doesn’t matter why the Void Star and the Million Gates Territory are connected,” Zac eventually said. “Why would the invaders want to blow up the Spatial Cortex?”

“I think... If it’s an invasion, they want to reform the Void Star,” Vai hesitated. “Normally, the only entrance and exit are where we came from, but something has gone wrong. The invaders have found a way to enter the system from the Million Gates Territory. I think they want to destabilize the Void Star and open new exits across Zecia.”

“Is that possible?” Zac frowned.

“Yes, the Void Gate has occasionally done it when we need to move a large number of people a long distance – it’s expensive, but a lot quicker than using transport vessels,” Vai nodded. “You need to pick a Mystic Realm that is not too far from the surface though, and have the tools to force open a channel.”

“But if they succeed, swarms of invaders could essentially pop up anywhere in the Zecia sector?” Zac grimaced.

“I think so?” Vai slowly nodded.

“Well, that’s just great.”