

The Fall 881

Chapter 881: Worldeaters

The thought of hordes of unorthodox cultivators popping out of nowhere among unsuspecting citizens was extremely troubling. These kinds of cultivators didn't have any scruples, and whole worlds risked getting sacrificed for their rites.

"I'm sure the Void Priestess will stop it when she finds out," Vai quickly said when she saw Zac's frown. "She is immensely powerful, and she understands the Void Star better than anyone. This might even be a trap and she's planning a counter-strike against the invaders."

Zac nodded in agreement. Given the Void Gate's strength, they should be able to quickly deal with these infiltrators – and perhaps even use them to find the Space Gate hidden in the depths of the Million Gates Territory. If not, they should at least be able to thwart their plans before things escalated.

Ultimately, it was out of Zac's paygrade. He'd try to take out any infiltrators he could and hopefully rack up some merit, but he wouldn't delve into the depths of the Void Star and risk his life to destroy the pathway they used. He had enough on his plate as is, and the Void Gate didn't lack powerful warriors who should be dealing with this mess already.

"Do you have any way to contact your niece? Or at least any armies or squads that are in this area?" Zac eventually asked. "They might not know all the details we have."

"That's..." Vai hesitated, looking a bit conflicted.

"We're well past secrets by this point," Zac snorted.

"Well, normally we would be able to send for aid at the waystation," the researcher relented. "But there is a problem. It doesn't work."

"Sabotage?" Zac asked.

"Probably," Vai nodded. "Remember when you asked me what was going on after we entered the second Mystic Realm? The battle scene? The leaders realized that something was wrong with the communication arrays back then. I think they first guessed the communicators had broken down during that fight, but that wasn't the case. I saw them fail to contact other waystations multiple times since then."

Zac frowned, but he almost felt it was for the best they couldn't communicate with the other squads. After all, the next piece of the seal might be in some restricted area, and it was better to ask for forgiveness than for permission.

"Alright, so we'll leave notes at every waystation we visit," Zac shrugged. "That way we might be able to help combat the invaders."

"Do you think we'll be fine?" Vai asked with worry.

"Well, the invaders can't send any real dangerous people through the Space Gate so far, from what I've heard. Early Hegemons at the worst, so it should be fine," Zac said after some consideration. "This is even an opportunity to rack up some contribution."

“Not that,” Vai whispered. “What if they really have someone like the Eveningtide Asura? That man killed so many people, and the elites of the sectors were almost helpless against him.”

“Well, that’s for the bigshots to worry about,” Zac hesitated. “I’m sure they’ve prepared some measures since the Asura appeared last time, right?”

“And the others, do you think they’re alive?” Vai asked as she looked up at the sky.

“Maybe?” Zac ventured. “Teo was a defensive Hegemon, and he might have been given some special items as a leader of the squad. He might have managed to lead some to safety. You saw how Uzu destroyed the entrance behind him – they might have been hot on his heels.”

“You’re right!” Vai nodded, her eyes lighting up. “I’m sure they are fine!”

Zac nodded, but truthfully, he wasn’t too convinced of his theory. Uzu seemed to only care about himself, and he wouldn’t be surprised if he destabilized space to kill or trap Ilka rather than escape his pursuers.

“Alright, we should move. Nothing is gained by staying here,” Zac said as he turned toward the dense bushes in the distance. “Besides, I don’t think they’ll allow us to just sit around here.”

“Wh-“ Vai said, but her words got caught in her mouth as dozens of grotesque creatures came running out through the bushes.

They were bipedal creatures that were essentially just two legs and an oversized mouth, followed by a feathery tail that stretched out twice their length. They didn’t have any eyes, but they clearly knew where Zac and Vai were. Zac picked up the researcher with one of Vivi’s vines while he unleashed a barrage of Dao-infused leaves in the direction of the beast.

Zac didn’t even look to see the result of the attack as he rushed in the direction before rushing into the general direction he saw the Ferric Voidwyrms fly toward. However, he soon slowed down as he peered into the darkness with confusion. Zac had expected a drawn-out hunt, but he was surprised to see the beasts stopping almost immediately.

A few of the creatures had been killed by [Nature’s Edge], and the remaining beasts had immediately given up on their pursuit to instead feed on their fallen brothers. So much for camaraderie in this place. Was prey that scarce in this world that they even fed on their own?

The beasts weren’t stronger than Middle E-grade on average, but Zac had no reason to stay on and kill them all. If these things had been attracted, it might mean that nastier things were on the way as well. So he let the beasts feed on the carcasses as he disappeared into the darkness, each step taking him and Vai hundreds of meters away.

Only a couple of minutes later did Zac slow down after having almost fallen into a tar pit. There was something about that bubbling darkness that made Zac’s hair stand on end, and he quickly created some distance. Still, the visibility was an issue. It was almost impossible to see in the darkness, and even [Cosmic Gaze] was suppressed. The next thing they might run into could be a powerful Beast King instead of some tar.

Zac kept moving until he found a secluded spot, at which point he stopped and threw out an illusion array that covered the two.

"This place is a bit troublesome, and I'm not too good at scouting. Do you have any way to spot dangers?" Zac asked.

Vai's head immediately bobbed as she took out a glass bowl that somehow held shimmering lights within. "This treasure can spot energy signatures around us, even those that are hidden."

"Another present from your niece?" Zac asked with a smile.

"In case I got lost," Vai admitted with a small blush.

"It looks pretty useful. Can it detect all kinds of signatures?" Zac curiously asked as he looked at the lights within. "Including treasures?"

"Ah? Yes, well," Vai hesitated. "I think so? But it's difficult to discern what every signal represents. It's usually a powerful beast, plant, or natural formation."

"Perfect," Zac said. "I'll carry you with Vivi while you keep watch. If you see me running toward something dangerous, stop me, alright?"

"I'm not very..." Vai hesitated as she looked around.

"You'll do fine. Adventuring is just like researching. Except with more blood, I guess," Zac said.

"A- Well, if you say so," Vai hesitated, though her expression said she wasn't too convinced. Still, there was determination in her eyes as she nodded. "I'll do my best!"

"Alright, first thing's first," Zac said. "Can you check this ring now? It might explain why Uzu chose this realm. I don't want to stumble into a hidden base crawling with infiltrators."

"Of course," Vai nodded before taking out a few of her tools again. "There doesn't seem to be any arrays or self-destruct functions on the item."

"Move back a bit, just in case," Zac said.

A moment later, Zac infused a wisp of spiritual energy into the Spatial Ring. There weren't any traps, but his face still scrunched up into an annoyed grimace. Clearly, there was one thing Uzu hadn't lied about – the man was flat broke. Apart from the Longevity Pearl, there was barely anything inside the ring.

Just some daily wares, a few dozen cheap pills, a small stack of High-quality Nexus Crystals, and a single Cosmic Crystal that seemed to be mostly exhausted already. Zac poured all the random items onto the ground and started rummaging through them in hopes of finding at least one useful thing.

At first, there was simply nothing, but suddenly he felt something was wrong with one of the robes. A moment later, he dragged out a stack of documents hidden within the lining. The bottommost document was made from a different material than the others, and Zac curiously took it out to inspect.

There was nothing on it, except fifty-odd paintings of different runes. Zac didn't recognize them at all – as far as he could tell, some didn't even follow the basic rules the Apostate of Order's patterns were

based on. However, Zac froze when he saw one of the runes listed among the others on the bottom half of the parchment.

The seal of the Left Imperial Palace.

Having seen the real thing in his vision, Zac could tell it wasn't perfect. There were some errors in the way it was drawn, which somehow made it lose all of its inherent meaning. Even then, there was no mistaking it. It was at least 80% identical to the real thing. Why was something like this un Uzu's possession?

"This is likely written by the Invaders," Vai said with a low volume as looked at the parchment with interest. "The characteristics in the penmanship and the type of ink are the same as in the manuals we researched. But it doesn't seem to be anything – the runes do not form a system, and neither are they a message. Do you recognize this script?"

"No idea," Zac muttered as he stowed away the parchment in his spatial ring.

In reality, he had a worrying hunch; he might not be the only one looking for the seal. The parchment almost looked like a bounty – Uzu's contact had probably given it to him with orders to report back if he found anything of the sort. As for the other signs, Zac guessed they were either decoys or perhaps related runes that might lead to the real thing.

But how was that possible? Had someone among the invaders managed to get the quest as well? Was the Left Imperial Palace hedging its bets? Or was it the System that was arranging some sort of Battle of Fates? There was no way to tell, but it was a good early warning. Seeing this parchment, Zac knew the odds of him running into invaders had suddenly gone up.

Zac turned his attention to the stack of papers for more clues, but he quickly realized the two weren't related. The notes were a bit disorganized, and the parchments were covered in spatters of blood. Most of them seemed to be blueprints, with some sections having dozens of iterations. At first, Zac thought they were Uzu's research into forming a blueprint for his core, but it didn't look like it.

"Can you tell what's going on?" Zac asked before handing Vai the documents.

"Uzu wanted to break the blood curse," Vai said as she looked at the diagrams. "But his foundational knowledge was too shallow. His idea was to form an array in his pathways that would automatically be powered by his Cosmic Energy. It would slowly destroy the brand on his core. But internal arrays are extremely complex, and the blood curse would have erupted long before he managed to break it."

Apart from that, there wasn't much else in the spatial ring, including any clues as to why Uzu had chosen this place. Had he simply followed Vai to silence her, perhaps? It was no way to tell, and Zac ultimately burned, purified, and erased all the items and the ring itself with the help of a [Void Ball], much to the confusion of Vai.

"Just a precaution," Zac smiled. "Can't be too careful out here."

"A-okay... I have looked at my token, the closest waystation is in that direction," Vai said as she pointed to their left. "But I cannot tell whether it leads outward or further inside."

"We'll head there soon," Zac nodded. "But first, first, I need to find a Ferric Worldeater."

“A Ferric Worldeater?” Vai said with confusion. “Why?”

“Ironically, to fight the outsiders.”

“Fighting the outsiders?” Vai muttered before her eyes suddenly widened in realization. “You are building a Cosmic Vessel!”

“How’d you know?” Zac exclaimed with surprise.

“The only useful thing on Worldeaters are their Cores,” Vai slowly said. “As far as I know, they are mainly used for three things; Array Cores for local Teleportation Arrays, a few types of Spirit Tools, and Cosmic Vessels. The first is useless for fighting locals, and you wouldn’t use the kind of tools you can create with them. That means you are building a Cosmic Vessel.”

“Quite the researcher,” Zac smiled.

“You should give up,” Vai urged. “The models that use beast cores as part are sometimes called Living Ships – vessels that almost have an intellect of their own.”

“Like Tool Spirits?” Zac asked curiously.

“There likely are Spirit Tool Cosmic Vessels as well, but those are not the vessels I am talking about,” Vai said with a shake of its head. “It’s more of a passive consciousness that makes controlling the vessel much easier. These ships don’t require highly skilled pilots who can control the complex arrays that make the ships work. You can control them with simplified arrays and thoughts alone.

“In return, they are much more expensive and difficult to build. Therefore, few are made – it’s much easier to train pilots.”

“Oh,” Zac nodded. “Well, do have any way to pick out a Worldeater in that bowl of yours?”

“You..!” Vai stuttered before she sighed with resignation. “No, but I think I can attract one. I can build an array that copies the energy signature of a Spatial Natural Treasure. It might attract other space-attuned beasts as well though.”

“So we should be somewhat close to a Worldeater’s domain,” Zac nodded. “I saw a few Voidwyrms earlier, so there should be some adults around as well.”

Fifteen days later, two figures sat hidden in an igloo made from what Zac hoped was mud, waiting for their prey to take the bait. One had a calm expression, while the other was holding onto a bellyful of grievances. The mud was something the two stumbled onto the second day in the Mystic Realm. It stank to high heavens, but it somehow blocked out both their auras and smells without the energy fluctuations of an isolation array, making it the perfect portable hiding tool.

For Zac, this was nothing – he was more than accustomed to being covered with all kinds of disgusting things. And compared to the [Celestial Clay], this mud smelled like the sweetest perfume. Vai, on the other hand, had a far harder time acclimatizing to the less glamorous parts of adventuring, and there were two dark circles under her eyes as she occasionally looked at Zac with reproach.

“This is the last one, I swear. If this one is useless as well, I’ll settle with it and we move on,” Zac smiled. “Besides, you were the one who taught me about the ridges.”

One hundred meters away from them, a shimmering ball hovered in the air, emitting enticing pulses of Spatial Dao. It was the bait that Vai had set up, though it wasn't the first one. This was the sixth time they were trying to attract a Ferric Worldeater. It wasn't that Vai's method didn't work – except for two accidental stampedes that left the two running for their lives, the other four hunts had attracted the right target.

However, after Zac was flush with excitement after catching the first one, Vai had informed him that he had essentially caught the dumbest possible specimen. The way she could tell was that it only had one ridge inside its maw. It wasn't an exact science, but more ridges generally meant greater potential and a more powerful soul.

Settling for a common Worldeater without spatial affinity was already a compromise for Zac, so he refused to create his tailored Cosmic Vessel with subpar materials. In the end, he had dragged Vai all across the whole Mystic Realm and through various packs of starved nightmarish beasts in search of a better specimen.

Unfortunately, beasts were just like cultivators in that most of them were relatively untalented, with only the occasional genius emerging.

"Okay, last one," Vai sighed with relief as she applied some more fragrant salve under her nose. "Though you said that last time as well."

"Well," Zac coughed. "How does it look?"

"Nothing yet," Vai muttered as she looked into the bowl. "We might have found them all. Worldeaters are not that common. It takes both talent and a lot of energy for them to be born."

"Let's wait a while longer," Zac sighed.

Another hour passed where the only visitors were the occasional F- or E-grade beast that Zac scared away with a burst of killing intent. But finally, Zac saw how a brighter star appeared in the bowl.

"A Beast King is closing in," Vai confirmed. "It's coming from that mountain – I think it's a worldeater."

"Alright," Zac nodded as [Verun's Bite] appeared in his hand. "Same tactic as before. Don't worry if it doesn't work."

"I- I'll seal it this time," Vai said with a mix of determination and fear.

A few minutes later, Zac could see it – something that looked like an enormous river was floating toward them in the sky. It was the Ferric Worldeater who had finally been lured out from within its burrow where it fed on a Nexus Vein. It drew closer and closer, and Zac got ready to jump out.

These beasts weren't stupid, and the Worldeater would soon realize that Vei's array wasn't actually a recently-born Spatial Treasure.

"Wait!" Vai suddenly exclaimed. "A second one is- ah it's so fast! It's already here!"