

## The Fall 888

### Chapter 888: Pincer

Zac and Vai were unscathed from the surprise strike that had come out of nowhere, but Zac could already sense the swarm below closing in on them.

“Hold on!” Zac growled as he furiously pushed back toward the surface, the Cosmic Energy in his body churning as he readied a counter-attack.

Judging by the power of the sword strike, the ambusher was no doubt a Hegemon. But no matter how dangerous the situation above-water was, they had no choice but to go up. Their position was locked on to by hundreds of powerful auras, of which at least a dozen belonged to Middle Stage Beast Kings. Even one of those ancient monstrosities was enough to threaten their lives – being pincered by ten of them was a death sentence.

They had been pushed over a hundred meters into the depths by the force, but in an instant, they were approaching the surface again. This time, Zac unleashed a barrage of strikes in every direction as he swam, hoping to cause some chaos and confusion above with his fractal leaves.

However, the whole sky grew dark just as they were about to breach the surface, except for one enormous rune that contained an immense weight. Zac recognized the thing immediately – it was actually a Seal Mountain similar to the one he saw the day he entered the Orom World. This one was obviously far inferior to the Pseudo C-grade treasure back then, but it still unleashed a pressure far greater than a conventional gravity array.

“Let me,” Vai whispered as she put her hand on Zac’s shoulder.

Zac nodded, and space shuddered from Vai activating her own movement skill. Space twisted, and the next moment Zac found himself falling down, having appeared more than one hundred meters above the surface. The next moment, the Seal Mountain slammed into the water, causing a huge indent in the water. If there were any beasts that hadn’t woken up from the commotion before, they were definitely up now.

A cough from the side made Zac look over with worry. The teleportation was a reminder of just how hard it was to corner true Spatial Cultivators like Vai, but forcing her way through the domain of the Seal Mountain had come at a cost. Blood was running down her ears and nose, and her aura was a bit unstable.

The scene angered an already infuriated Zac even further, and his gaze swept the area to find the culprits that needed a good chop while blasting the aura of a Half-Step D-grade cultivator. Suddenly appearing in the sky thankfully provided a perfect vantage of what was going on. There was a pocket of air that reached roughly three hundred meters above the water surface across the whole basin, but there was only one stretch of actual land; a five hundred-meter-wide plateau that was located almost right above the tunnel they arrived in.

On the platform, Zac also saw his targets. There were six of them, two of which emitted the auras of Hegemons while the other four were either elite E-grade or Half-step cultivators. Zac breathed out in

relief when he saw the bastards who had attacked them. No wonder they had relied on an ambush and then tried to use the beasts to finish the job. They weren't that powerful a troupe.

However, their gear was a cause for concern.

"Templars!" Vai exclaimed with relief, but Zac pretended not to hear her as he turned his eyes toward the waters, where an enormous face had already breached the surface.

Zac was mentally prepared to fight a desperate three-way battle, but he was surprised to see the ceiling of the whole basin lit up with powerful blue runes that drenched the whole underwater pocket in a hazy glimmer. Zac activated [Earthstrider] to expel their falling momentum while moving away from the lights, but he was a bit confused about exactly what kind of array they were dealing with.

He couldn't feel anything change or suppression, and his Danger Sense was quiet as well. But the enormous fish that reeked of toxicity hurriedly dipped beneath the surface again, where it stayed. The same was true for the rest of the beasts – ten huge forms had gathered around the platform, but not a single one dared to actually appear above the surface.

The scene was both unnerving and reassuring. Even if they were all aquatic lifeforms, they were ultimately Beast Kings. With their level of cultivation, they could even fly through the sky if they so wanted, though aquatic beasts generally were much weaker above-water compared to their natural habitat. Yet they all stayed put, indicating those runes weren't just there for show.

It might mean something terrifying was about to happen, but Zac leaned toward the possibility it was some defensive measure the Void Gate had put in place just for this kind of situation. He didn't have time to ponder on the what or why right now. As long as it meant one less threat to worry about, he was content. It allowed him to fully focus on these supposed Templars below.

Just like Vai exclaimed, two of the warriors donned the traditional armors of the Void Gate while the other four wore an assortment of gear that indicated their background as wandering cultivators. They looked just like unaffiliated members of a task squad similar to their own, but Zac felt the whole situation was off.

Why only six of them? And why were four of them wandering cultivators, including one of the Hegemons? He had read the reports and seen how things worked first-hand – until the sudden betrayal of Uzu and Ilka, two-thirds of the losses in the squad had been wandering cultivators. Furthermore, why were they here of all places? There was no way a squad with this kind of composition would be sent to a realm as dangerous as this.

They were extremely suspicious, but even if they weren't infiltrators, it was an undeniable fact that they had struck first with the intent to kill. There was no way Zac would allow them to shrug that off even if they turned out to be actual members of the Void Gate. [Earthstrider] took them close to the platform in another step, and Zac threw a shrieking Vai toward the safest spot by the wall before charging the group of cultivators himself.

A huge fractal leaf formed across his axe the next moment before two clouds simultaneously shot out. The blue glimmer in the area was overwhelmed by gold and black as [Rapturous Divide] descended on the group, each half of the opposite empowered by a Dao Branch and Zac's furious vengeance.

“Wait! We’re from the Void Gate too,” Vai shouted, but it was much too late for that.

The group clearly hadn’t expected such a powerful opening gambit after sensing Zac’s aura belonged to a Half-Step cultivator, which was exactly why he had unleashed it as though he had been angered to the point he lost control. The spatial divide effortlessly ripped apart some of the erected defenses, and two of the weakest cultivators were instantly killed.

Unfortunately, things ended there as the two Hegemons worked together to deal with his strike. The unaffiliated Hegemon was the sword wielder, and he unleashed a rapid-fire-swing that reminded Zac of the [Ocean Tide] skill he had in his Dao Repository back home. The swings weren’t overly powerful, but they were endless, and each attack exhausted some of the energy and momentum in [Rapturous Divide].

Meanwhile, the Templar Hegemon had already summoned the enormous seal back to his side. When it struck out toward the spatial divide, it was empowered by the power of the stars. A moment later, the skill was torn apart, allowing the two E-grade cultivators to breathe out in relief.

Even with them being prepared for an attack, they didn’t walk away from [Rapturous Divide] completely unscathed. The clash left the surviving warriors with numerous scars when Zac’s skill collapsed, which was exactly what Zac had hoped for. After feeling the power in that Seal Mountain, Zac knew he wouldn’t be able to kill the group in one attack, but it was enough to find the answers he was looking for.

Zac grimaced in disgust when he saw the odd pulsating veins appearing in the wounds of the living, and any lingering doubt was gone the next moment as a bloody tangle jumped out from one of the corpses. Its tendrils shot out in every direction, just like how it had looked when Uzu died. But this time, Zac was actually in the best position, with four targets closer to the tangle than he.

Suddenly, the sword-wielding cultivator slapped the E-grade templar next to him, and the poor man was pushed straight into the tangle. Zac didn’t think it was a matter of sudden change of allegiances like with Uzu and Ilka – the Hegemon was rather afraid of being infected and used the closest E-grade warrior as a sacrificial pawn.

With the tangle already having found its target, Zac heedlessly pushed forward in the wake of his attack as a primordial forest appeared all around him. A third of the trees were immediately ripped apart as they appeared beneath the waters, and the two Hegemons destroyed another chunk in their efforts to keep him away.

However, Zac stepped into one of the surviving trees before it was destroyed, and the next moment he appeared right behind the two Hegemons, his axe already moving in for a kill. The Seal Wielder sluggishly turned around in surprise, but it was too late. [Verun’s Bite] infused with two Dao Branches and using three of its own skill fractals cut right through the man’s armor and destroyed his cultivator’s core.

The strike was followed up by a swing at the man’s head, and Zac was surprised to see a hint of relief in the man’s eyes just before he died. He was obviously the stronger Hegemon, yet he had fallen so easily. Had he intentionally let Zac kill him? There was no time to find out as a pang of danger made Zac shift his body.

But it was too late. An agonizing pain erupted in his chest as he was impaled by a sword. Zac hadn't forgotten about the sword wielder, he had used Vivi's vines to target his head and heart to delay him a moment. However, the madman had actually sacrificed one of his eyes to deliver a counter-strike of his own, and Zac groaned as the wound in his chest was flooded with a mix of rampant Sword Dao and poison.

By this point, the whole bloody tangle had crawled into the second templar's body. Thick squirming veins covered every part of exposed skin, and his eyes gained a reddish tint as he roared like a beast.

It was like he had swallowed a berserking treasure that made one lose his mind, to the point he seemed to have lost all rationality. Was this the result of having two curses in one body? Did they overload the host's body to give him a surge of power? If true, the invaders were extremely ruthless, even to their own people.

Thankfully, Zac didn't need to worry about another tangle appearing on top of all his other problems. The blood curses were dangerous, but it wasn't without limitations. He had seen how nothing came forth from one of the two E-grade cultivators, and Zac immediately realized what was going on – [Rapturous Divide] had destroyed that man's midriff.

The blood curse seemed to attach to people's cores, so if you destroyed the area around the core you also destroyed the core of the curse.

The sword wound was agonizing, but Zac felt his Hidden Nodes were already hard at work dealing with the invading energies. Meanwhile, he swung his axe in a wide arc that forced the swordsman back, which removed the sword from his chest. A bestial howl echoed through the remains of the primal forest the next second as Verun appeared.

Zac had his hands full with the Hegemon who was already swinging his sword with wild abandon, and he was worried about Vai. The Tool Spirit gleefully pounced on the Berserking templar, and the man roared in return as he fought like a lunatic. Zac had thought it would be a one-sided slaughter, but he grimaced when he sensed a familiar energy fluctuation.

The templar was heedlessly burning Life-force to augment his power even further. He was just like the cyborg, sacrificing everything for a final blaze of glory.

Still, with all the tempering and priceless materials, Verun wasn't to be outdone, and the primordial hyena was methodically breaking its target down. Unfortunately, that left the final E-grade warrior unattended. And between Vai, Zac, and Verun, the warrior unsurprisingly rushed toward Vai.

"Watch out!" Zac screamed, but the brief lapse of concentration allowed the swordsman to activate a skill.

Ten swords suddenly appeared around them, forming a perfect circle. Zac swore when he recognized the configuration – it was a cage just like [Profane Seal], and a D-grade skill at that. Even if it was probably just a Low- or Middle-quality skill, it wasn't something he could break in an instant. Instead, he turned his full attention on the Hegemon – killing his enemy would be quicker than dealing with his skill.

Zac could only pray that the lessons he had tried to instill into Vai over the past months would be enough to keep her safe a while longer. He calmed the chaotic ripples in his heart and entered a perfect

state of unity between his Dao and his technique to unleash a furious assault. The change threw the Hegemon off-balance and stopped him from activating any more skills.

Unfortunately, it looked like a few short sparring sessions and some adventuring was insufficient to completely undo millennia of tranquility and research, especially when met with this kind of brutal melee. Vai looked like her soul had left her body as she saw the burly cultivator rush toward her with a ruthless expression.

But just as he was about to catch her by the throat and claim a hostage, a glimmering belt of condensed space appeared around Vai, cutting the man in two. He could only mutely look at Vai with incomprehension as he collapsed on the ground. Even Zac was surprised – [Ancestral Woods] was still active, and he had barely noticed anything.

Vai must have slowly charged that skill since the moment they appeared above the waters for such a powerful skill to suddenly appear like that. She had even noticed Zac's strategy to aim for the core, allowing her to destroy the bloody tangle. It was a huge weight off his shoulders, and it allowed him to fight the increasingly desperate swordsman without any worries.

From there, the battle concluded soon enough. Verun eventually ripped apart the crazy templar, blood curse and all, while Zac methodically whittled down the Hegemon without giving him a chance to turn the tides. With everything dealt with, Zac looted all the corpses before walking over to Vai who stared down at the corpse with hollow eyes.

"Not bad," Zac said, which dragged Vai out of her trance-like state.

"I- I know I look a bit weak and timid. I always get bossed around because of it," Vai said with a weak smile. "I figured I would use it to my advantage."

"Smart," Zac nodded, but he frowned when he saw how her hands were still shaking. "Are you okay?"

"He is the first one... I killed," Vai said as she looked down at the body. "He might have been forced because of those blood curses, yet I-"

"It was you or them. Such is the law of cultivation," Zac sighed.

"That only makes it worse," Vai said with sorrow. "Zecia is already so hectic, and it will only get worse. So many people will die."

"Well, that's why people like me need people like you," Zac said after some thought. "If you can figure out a way to deal with these curses, we might be able to free and save a lot of people from a similar fate."

"That's right!" Vai said, her downcast expression lighting up. "If I can study these-"

"Well, not right now," Zac coughed as he pointedly looked at the sky, where the shimmering runes had started to fade. "I think we need to figure out a solution before those beasts come crawling over."

"Solution?" Vai muttered with confusion before her gaze followed his, at which point they widened in horror.

"These guys must have had some solution if they dared attack us," Zac said as he scanned the wall.

“Those scripts were definitely created by the Chapter of Emptiness,” Vai muttered. “There should be a cloister here.”

The next moment, the researcher took out an array disk that started emitting odd soundless pulses. Zac walked over to ask what she was doing, but he was surprised to suddenly feel all sounds disappear except for those coming from his own body.

“What’s that?” Zac asked curiously.

Vai looked at Zac with surprise for a second before she pointed at the wall. Zac followed her finger, and he nodded in relief when a part of the wall had started to become transparent. It made sense – if the Void Gate had bothered to set up a massive array that covered the whole basin, they would definitely have prepared some emergency cave in case someone found themselves stuck here.

“Behind me,” Zac whispered, and Vai wordlessly nodded as the two entered the hidden pathway that closed behind them.

Thankfully, there weren’t any more infiltrators hiding within the inner chamber, which proved to be quite roomy. There was a large common area, cultivation chambers, laboratories, and even a couple of small fields with plants growing. Most of it had recently been rifled through judging by some clues, indicating that the group they just fought had definitely known about this place.

Most likely, they had stayed on the platform for the sole purpose of making sure no one else would reach this place. Unfortunately for them, they had bit off more than they could chew, and this place had instead turned into a sanctuary for him and Vai. As far as doomsday bunkers went, this place was pretty nice. And between the enraged beasts and the toxic clouds, it was highly unlikely anyone would show up before the danger passed.

“I’ll see if there are any records of what’s going on in this Mystic Realm,” Vai ventured.

“Between the poisons and the beasts, I’d say we’re stuck here for a while,” Zac sighed as he spread some ointment on the still-bleeding wound on his chest. “Well, I guess we could use the break.”

Of course, Zac had no plans of simply wasting his time. The next piece of the Left Imperial Seal was probably two or three realms away, and it was high time he started to prepare for when he reached it. He had originally planned on locating the seal before entering seclusion, but this worked as well.

The bout of inspiration from the Ramsi Wall had helped deepen his understanding of the Void, but that wasn’t enough. Zac felt there were a lot of uncertainties that needed to be ironed out before he subjected himself to the unimaginable burst of mechanical knowledge of the universe. He needed some practical understanding of both the [Boundless Vajra Sublimation] and the direction he wanted to take it in.

It was time to do some research of his own.