

The Fall 893

Chapter 893: Weight

Zac and Vai had spent a month preparing for this exact moment, so there was nothing else to do. They left just a minute later, leaving only a single clue behind – a communication crystal Vai recorded, containing a warning about the infiltrators and pieces of the intelligence gathered by the Templar Hegemon. Zac doubted it would reach the right hands in time to make a difference, but he wouldn't begrudge Vai's attempts to help her people avoid unnecessary deaths.

The two donned their aura-hiding measures as they stepped onto the platform a moment later. The two only got a couple of steps before they stopped, with Vai's face alternating between green and white. There was an overwhelming stench of blood in the basin, and hundreds of maimed carcasses were floating on the water's surface.

Zac wasn't surprised. The beasts had crammed together out of necessity and survival over the past month. But with an array of opportunities waiting outside, the beasts had rekindled their ferocious nature the moment the danger passed.

Eventually, Zac had to lift the reluctant Vai with Vivi's vines and drag her into the sanguine waters, where he was immediately beset by a pang of danger the moment they passed through the oily film of putrid blood. But [Verun's Bite] had already appeared in his hands, and the ferocious crablike creature that tried to ambush him was cleanly cut in two.

The Peak E-grade beast had hung from the cliff as it fed on the carcasses of the fallen, and it wasn't alone. There were thousands of beasts feasting on the remains of yesterday's melee. Even then, Zac wasn't worried as he sunk even deeper. These beasts were so weak they had completely given up on the opportunities outside and had instead settled for at least filling their stomachs. There was no way they could pose a threat to them.

They entered the tunnel they came from, where the wall of shimmering quicksilver greeted them. If anything, Vai looked relieved to enter the odd compound, while Zac was far more ambivalent. He remembered all-too-well what waited on the other side the last time he swam through this path.

His heartbeat sped up as they finally pushed through the final film and emerged in the volcano's cauldron, but there were no toxins in sight. Instead, they were greeted by a refreshing aura that reminded Zac of the herbal atmosphere inside the Zethaya Pill House.

"Two sides of the same coin, huh," Zac muttered as he looked around.

"I told you," Vai said triumphantly. "There is no way the Void Gate would deal in poisons."

"Alright, alright," Zac smiled. "Get your bowl out. We don't only have beasts to worry about any longer. If we ran into one group of infiltrators, there are bound to be more of them."

Vai nodded, and the two started to swim in the general direction the waystation should be. The Undrusian Spring had knocked them slightly off-course, but the realm wasn't too big, so Vai soon found the signal leading toward their destination.

Swimming through the Undrusian Sea in the wake of the seasonal purge was an eerie experience. It simultaneously felt like a world filled with and void of life, and they barely saw any beasts over the next two days. The few who had survived the purge and the following gauntlet had seemingly hidden deeply to recuperate and absorb whatever treasures they'd gotten their hands on.

Meanwhile, the previously dangerous plant life wasn't nearly as poisonous since the tide had drained them of their toxic compounds. This made the Undrusian sea the safest region they had traversed over the past few Mystic Realms. But nothing good ever lasts forever.

"Stop," Vai suddenly whispered, and Zac quickly hid behind a boulder and erected a set of arrays.

It had been their standard method of survival when passing through realms full of existences who could easily kill them. 'Stop' meant to hide and assess, while 'back' meant to run for your life.

"What's wrong?" Zac asked after the isolation array had activated.

"Three Hegemons and over fifty E-grade cultivators," Vai said as she looked at the bowl. "The party looks almost as strong as the one led by Captain Kastella. They are on the move, but they are not moving in this direction. What should we do?"

"Let's just wait," Zac said.

"What if they're templars?"

"Can you tell with your treasure?" Zac asked.

"No..." Vai sighed.

"Well, then we can't easily approach them. Neither of us has any good stealth or observation skills. We'd be exposed before we could figure out which side they belong to. If they're templars, that's fine, but I'm not sure I could deal with such a large party," Zac said, and Vai could only agree.

The two stayed in their makeshift hideout for an hour, at which point the group was finally out of the range of Vai's bowl. They waited for another hour before moving out again, just in case they had hidden scouts roaming about. Like that, they continued another day until they found the waystation.

Zac hesitated as he looked at the tunnel from their hidden vantage. Should they enter? Apart from that first group, Vai also discovered three smaller ones over the past day. Not only that, but it looked like all of them came from this waystation. Who knew what waited inside? A whole army full of cursed cultivators?

Eventually, the two opted to wait, and it was lucky too. Just ten minutes later, another group emerged from the tunnel, this squad consisting of six members. Zac held onto his axe tightly, but the team thankfully just swam away, hurrying toward the other side of the Undrusian Sea.

Zac waited for another five minutes, at which point he couldn't take it any longer. "Let's go before anyone else arrives. Stay behind me just in case."

Vai nodded, and the two rushed into the waystation. Moments later, both breathed out in relief upon seeing the place was empty. They still made a beeline for the gate room, but their haste proved futile as they sensed a familiar spatial fluctuation upon entering.

“It’s activating!” Vai panicked, and Zac instantly dragged her to a corner out of sight from the spatial gate and activated an isolation array.

Just a few seconds later, one warrior after another passed through, none of them wearing the equipment of the Void Gate. Altogether, eighteen cultivators entered, two of which were Hegemons. At first, Zac thought they would make it because they immediately out toward the exit, but his heart froze when he saw one of the warriors scan the room with shimmering eyes on the way out.

He only stopped for a fraction of a second upon looking at their corner, but that was all Zac needed to know the truth; they were spotted.

There wasn’t any time for hesitation as Zac flashed forward after whispering ‘bubble,’ and his axe had embedded itself into the head of one of the two Hegemons before the scout even had a chance to raise a warning. His ambush was followed by a burst of carnage from [Nature’s Edge]. At this proximity, each warrior was almost instantly hit by over a dozen fractal leaves infused with two branches and empowered by both [Spiritual Void] and [Adamance of Eoz].

Even if the warriors realized they were under attack and managed to erect some early defenses, there was no way for these ordinary E-grade cultivators to survive such a strike. Even a basic attack like the upgraded version of [Chop] contained an almost incomprehensible power level when leveraged by all of Zac’s unique advantages.

Only two E-grade cultivators survived by having the foresight to back away rather than defend themselves, but they might have been better off dying. It was almost impossible to perfectly avoid getting hit by the leaves in this enclosed space, and the two infiltrators who backed away were no exception. The two slumped onto the ground a moment later, alive, but grievously wounded.

Zac felt like he was being stabbed all over as over ten tendrils of blood curses burrowed into his body, unleashing a ferocious assault from within. The surviving Hegemon was shocked to see his whole squad get annihilated out of nowhere, but his first instinct was neither fight nor flight. Before anything, the Hegemon took out a talisman and pressed it against his chest.

Only then did the Hegemon breathe out in relief before he looked at Zac with a sneer. Zac pretended to be overcome by the blood curses as he hunched over with a grimace, but the reality was actually the opposite. [Void Heart] had already woken up, and each beat ripped off a piece of the curses and swallowed them. Soon enough, they would be torn apart entirely and turned into cultivation fodder.

The Hegemon’s sneer turned into shock as Zac tackled him to the ground with enough force to cause the whole room to shake. He managed to pierce Zac’s side with his sword, and a soul-wrenching pain wracked Zac as he felt the blade grind against his spine. But before he could cause any more damage, Verun had already bit into the leader’s forehead, cutting his head in two.

Initially, Zac planned to target the man’s Cultivator Core to destroy his blood curse, but at the last minute, he changed his mind. Instead, Zac snatched the black-inked talisman from the man’s chest and placed it on his own as he backed away a bit. Just as he infused some of his energy into the talisman, the bloody tangle burst out from the man’s stomach.

The thing lunged at Zac as though it was a real living being, but Zac looked on with interest when the tendrils stopped half a meter away from him. They never continued past that point and instead spread

all around him, searching for another target. A smile spread out across Zac's face upon seeing one of the two survivors being targeted instead, and he looked appreciatively at the talisman on his chest.

He wasn't happy the dying man's woes had just turned even worse, but rather that his suspicions had been correct. The Hegemon had been entirely too calm for someone standing next to a pressure cooker filled with ten blood curses. It looked like the curses weren't as indiscriminate in their search for a new host as they earlier believed – some people, likely those with enough status or wealth, had the tools to ward them off.

There was no point in letting the two stragglers suffer any longer, and Zac flashed over and finished the job, leaving the chamber a bloody mess. As he looked at the destruction, he couldn't help but feel some annoyance. Between his recently-adopted habit of going for the head and the gristly exit of the blood curses, it would turn into a chore to turn these invaders into Revenants.

Since sending back the batch of procured bodies from Twilight Harbor, the Einherjar had seen no significant growth. Certainly, some native undead children were born, but they were essentially feral little devils until they gained sapience. It would be decades before these native undead citizens could step into society either as non-combat or combat classes.

He had hoped that this war would provide an opportunity to bolster his ranks surreptitiously. After all, who would notice if a few hundred thousand thousand bodies went missing in a war involving trillions? But seeing the maimed corpses, Zac wondered if it was even possible without wasting Creation Energy to fix the wounds. That might be worth it for some elites, but definitely not for random foot soldiers. It was time to raise some Liches who could create proper Corpse Lords.

With all the infiltrators dealt with, Zac turned to Vai, who had ensconced herself in the spatial bubble she used to survive the destruction of the cortex.

"Stay inside a bit longer," Zac said as he hurried across the room and stowed away all the bodies and equipment.

The next moment, a torrent of churning waters washed the whole room clean, including Zac himself. There was inevitably some damage to the walls and floor from his fractal leaves, but it was better than leaving piles of bodies and mountains of clues behind. Next, Zac spread some karma-breaking dust over the spot where everyone had died, after which he used a Vacuum Treasure to drag everything in the room into a Cosmos Sack.

"Alright," Zac nodded. "Let's go before anyone else arrives."

Vai nodded and deactivated her defensive treasure, but she didn't immediately head over to activate the doors to the neighboring Mystic Realms. Instead, she looked at where most of the infiltrators had been killed just a few seconds ago.

"You-" Vai hesitated. "Do they weigh on you? The eighteen lives cut short just now."

"Is this about that guy who ambushed you?" Zac asked, getting a noncommittal shrug in response.

"Honestly? Not really," Zac eventually said after some thought. "If I let that affect me, I would have gotten myself killed long ago. This is the reality of cultivation for most people. The moment you go

against the Heavens in pursuit of power, you enter a social contract where it's kill or be killed. Only those at the very peak have the luxury of benevolence."

"I know that," Vai said as she checked the array for damage. "I'm not sure if that makes things better."

"I know," Zac sighed. "I don't really have any answers for you. Things kept happening when I started cultivating, and the moment I had the breathing room to stop and reflect on what was going on, there were already thousands and thousands of corpses in my wake. Since then, it's only gotten worse. The old me would probably not recognize what I've become."

Zac found Vai was silently looking at him with an inscrutable expression, and he calmly looked back. "Even then, I don't regret anything. I've done what I had to do to protect myself and those important to me. If anything, I'd be willing to go even further. I guess you have to ask yourself how far you are willing to go to stay alive. To protect the Void Gate. To accomplish your goals."

Vai didn't immediately answer, and the two stood in silence for ten seconds until she nodded. "... Thank you. There are two connections. Should I open both?"

"One at a time," Zac said. "There might be more of them on the other side."

Vai nodded, and space split apart as the gate opened and displayed an empty room on the other side. Zac stepped through and was met with a weaker pulse in response. The next Mystic Realm was thankfully not only empty as well, but also closer to the seal. Even then, Zac felt it was slightly odd.

The pulse was more potent than the one he got when stepping into the Undrusian Sea, but it was still not at the level of the random burst he received beneath the surface. Zac had hoped he would get a better picture of the situation with the seal after entering another Mystic Realm, but it looked like he would just have to keep going.

Having found the correct place, the two wasted no time as they rushed out of the waystation before running into any more infiltrators. Thankfully, the entrance to the station was hidden in a complex mountain range that Vai said contained a slew of natural spatial formations, making it easy to avoid being spotted until they had created some distance.

Finally, they stopped to orient themselves, and Zac had to admit this place looked pretty odd even by Mystic Realm standards. Vai even called it a failed realm since it hadn't quite managed to reach the state of a stable realm, and the dimensional layer was surprisingly thin. Zac could actually create small spatial tears with his bare hands if he infused them with his Daos, something that would be impossible on Earth or another ordinary world.

At the same time, it was a bit too energy-dense to become a random piece of rubble in the Void, so it ended up in this lifeless state. With a black sky and an almost complete lack of oxygen, it felt like a mountain hurtling through space. It wasn't exactly like a random meteor, though. For one, the sky was fractured like a broken mirror.

Vai found the realm fascinating, but Zac wasn't as enthused. The pulse had proven he was still in contention for the next piece of the seal, and he couldn't wait to set out again. Everything was ready, only the piece of the seal was missing. It didn't matter how many infiltrator squads they encountered on the way. He'd go to war if he had to.

Then again, fighting against some hostile invaders to get his hands on the next part of the seal was easy. The problem was the other choices that might have to be made. Seeing just how dangerous things had gotten lately, Zac couldn't help but glance at his companion. It was not just a matter of danger either. The Void Gate was clearly connected to the Left Imperial Palace somehow.

For his goals, for his path, just how much was he willing to sacrifice?