

The Fall 895

Chapter 895: Second Piece

Zac looked down at the bloody carcasses with interest. It wasn't often you ran into humanoid beasts, and this was the first ones he'd seen since the Twinruin Bloodstalker he fought in the Big Axe Coliseum. These guys seemed to have a deeper bloodline than the bloodstalker, but ultimately, they were only E-grade beasts.

They looked like black-furred yeti with builds almost a match to Billy's, but that didn't affect their impressive speed. Their primary attack method was their long claws, but Zac sensed an odd discrepancy between the group. Three of them emitted vague hints of nature-aspected Dao, while the other three leaned toward earth. This was a divergence from common beasts, where a whole race generally learned the same Dao.

Were these guys perhaps moving toward Atavism and becoming actual cultivators? It was doubtful; their bestial nature was far too pronounced.

"Do you recognize them?" Zac asked the researcher, who shook her head.

"I never heard of Humanoid Beasts inside the Void Star," Vai said.

"Well, let's hope there aren't too many Beast Kings amongst these guys. Those things might be pretty dangerous."

The two performed a cursory inspection of the beasts, but there didn't seem to be anything of value on their bodies. Zac still stowed them away, much to the confusion of Vai. He figured that while their claws or meat might be worthless, the bodies might serve a purpose. Could Humanoid Beasts be turned into Revenants?

He knew that it was impossible with beasts. You had to use their parts for Corpse Lords, though mixing flesh of cultivators and beasts would generally cause severe rejection. You'd have to be an incredibly skilled Lich to get away with those modifications unless you were okay with the Corpse Lord having a limited future.

The alternative to body repurposing was to turn them into undead beasts and enter contracts with them. Apparently, more than a few clans in the Undead Empire went this route since you could consider it a branch of Soul Cultivation. However, beast taming wasn't very popular among the Divine Races since they had their own heritages.

All those rules and restrictions might not apply to a Humanoid Beast. But they were so rare that the subject had never come up when he traveled with Catheya. If he could turn these durable guys into proper soldiers, he would have a terrifying army to add to his repertoire for the upcoming war.

Therefore, Zac was quite careful with the bodies of the beasts they encountered over the following days, and there was more than one. At first, Zac had been worried it would be hard to find more of them, but that worry turned out to be unfounded. They were all over the forest, and they were beyond aggressive.

Anytime the beasts spotted them, there was no hesitation. They immediately went in for the kill, and they didn't care in the slightest when their companions got killed. Zac's only options were complete

annihilation or escape, and if not for his idea, he would quickly have started to avoid them altogether. They were too big of a nuisance and a constant cause of headache during their journey.

Other than that, the forest was relatively safe. There was the occasional plant that looked a bit dangerous, but it was nothing compared to the realms they passed over the past months. The real problem was how big this place was.

After ten days had passed, Zac started to feel like he was stuck in an illusion array. The forest was without end, and Zac wondered just how big this place was. Compared to the previous Mystic Realms, they would have long since reached the other side with how fast they were moving.

"I didn't even know we had such big Mystic Realms in the Void Star," Vai agreed when Zac inquired. "Generally, realms of this size have too powerful spatial properties, and it creates problems in the star."

"It might be a recent addition," Zac muttered. "And it might be why the infiltrators can enter the Void Star. Is it possible to manually detach a realm from the Void Star?"

Zac did feel that this whole invasion was above his paygrade, but if he could stop the invaders from using the Void Star as a springboard, he was willing to give it a go if an opportunity presented itself. Not only would it help keep a lot of people safe, but it might even give him some Contribution Points for the war.

"Ah, I'm not sure..." Vai hesitated. "I've heard the Monarchs are powerful enough to move the realms with the help of certain treasures manually, but that method is impossible for us. If this place collapsed, it might cause enough of a strong enough spatial ripple to cut the connection with the Million Gates Territory."

"So, blow it up?" Zac nodded. "Sounds like a plan."

"B-Blow it up?" Vai stuttered. "How would you blow up a whole Mystic Realm?"

"Well, it's just an idea. But in my experience, things are more liable to blow up than people think," Zac shrugged.

"That-That's crazy," Vai said with wide eyes. "Actions have repercussions. Who knows how our karma will be affected by destroying a world?"

"Well, with how big this place is, we have time to brainstorm something better," Zac smiled.

Finally, after four weeks of constant travel, the topography changed. According to Vai, it seemed as though this realm was a 'Chimeral Realm' as she called it, the combination of multiple dimensional fragments. The mountain range that stretched out across the horizon had come from another world.

Hearing the explanation made Zac immediately think of the System, but this was a natural occurrence that sometimes happened when a powerful realm was surrounded by smaller satellites. Eventually, the main domain gobbled the smaller ones up, adding them to their bulk. Vai was still confused, as the topography somewhat messed with her understanding of the process.

She tried to explain the interrelation between space, geography, and leylines, but Zac quickly grew bored and confused. How this place had been created wasn't as important as the fact that he felt a weak

but continuous signal since he stepped onto the mountain, just like when he had closed in on the first piece on Hako Lake.

The second piece of the seal shouldn't be more than a week's travel from here.

They still hadn't encountered the squad from the Void Gate, or any other cultivators for that matter, but Zac knew this place wasn't completely unpopulated. They had spotted a few marks that were likely left from cultivators killing those beasts. For instance, Vai had found a boulder that had been pierced straight through, along with the skeleton of one of those beasts.

Someone had ambushed the thing by striking straight through the rock, either with a spear or arrow, proving the two weren't alone in this place. And with them closing in on the seal, Zac had Vai continuously keep track with the bowl again as he carried her into the mountains. Even then, the only enemies they encountered were more of those beasts.

Zac couldn't believe how many of them were. He had killed close to a thousand through their month-long trek through the forest, but it quickly became apparent those roving packs were just the few who had gone off on their own. In an hour's worth of travel in the mountain range, Zac added another 200 humanoid beasts to his growing pile of corpses.

Going by how many yetis they saw in this place, the mountain range had to be their home base. There had to be tens of millions of them if they had spread out through the whole region. And so far, the weakest ones he'd encountered were Middle E-grade, which probably meant they naturally reached E-grade upon reaching adulthood.

Not any random place could support such a vast population, yet Zac couldn't sense anything special about this place. If anything, the energy density was worse than in the forest. So why did they stay here? Were there riches underground?

With so many yetis in the vicinity, Zac and Vai soon found it hard to progress as freely as before. The cliffs carried even the smallest of sounds far and wide, and every battle attracted all the beasts in the area. If they kept going like this, they'd never reach the seal. It was not just a matter of dealing with the beasts either, but it also risked warning other parties of their presence.

So the two carefully changed their tactic to avoid the yeti as best they could as they used stealth to creep forward, even if Zac burned with impatience. With the help of Vivi's vines, the two climbed further and further into the heart of the mountain, generally avoiding the paths on the ground altogether.

A few more days passed like this until they saw a massive crater in the distance. Zac's heart thumped since he recognized its odd shape – it seemed to be almost completely spherical. But in contrast to the small cave holding the piece of rubble, this thing was a few kilometers across. It might look a bit different, but there was no doubt in Zac's mind.

After months, they had finally reached the second piece of the seal.

"That's odd," Vai muttered as she followed Zac's gaze. "Never seen a valley like that before. It doesn't seem like a natural formation."

"Let's go," Zac said as he started moving again, advancing even more deliberately to make sure they weren't discovered.

Twenty minutes later, they found a good spot to investigate what was going on at the bottom of the valley, and Zac's brows furrowed with incomprehension. He didn't know what he had expected, but it wasn't an ancient temple with tens of thousands of yeti sitting in silent meditation outside.

The valley wasn't perfectly spherical either – there was a tiled square outside the temple that had somehow avoided getting disintegrated. It was on this square the yeti was sitting.

"Are they praying?" Vai whispered with shock. "Have they actually formed a society? And what's that temple? I don't recognize it at all. Do you know?"

Zac didn't immediately answer but tried to understand the situation better first. There were no two ways about it; the next seal was inside the temple. The scene was a bit confusing, though. After seeing the spherical cave with the piece of rubble, it was clear as day to Zac that the whole valley had been disintegrated by one of those terrifying pulses. The layer of dust on the ground was proof of this.

So how had the temple and the square survived? Was it a part of the Left Imperial Palace? It shouldn't be – even if the place were mostly in ruins, Zac could tell the design didn't seem very similar to either the small pagoda in the Ultom Court or the Left Imperial Palace.

"I'm not quite sure either, but I know the item I need is inside," Zac eventually said.

"I wonder why the yetis are staying outside," Vai mused.

"If they enter, they'll turn to ash. See the pile of dust at the temple gates? Those are probably former yetis," Zac sighed.

"What!" Vai said with fear. "Then how will we enter?"

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to wait outside," Zac said, and he held up a hand when he saw Vai looked ready to argue. "There's nothing I can do. From what I can tell, everyone who hasn't been chosen will be annihilated when getting close. Do you remember that scout, Ceru? He turned to dust right in front of my eyes when I picked up the last piece."

"... Alright then," Vai reluctantly nodded. "I didn't expect to be stopped at the goal line, but I'm not ready to die to study those ruins. So, what will you do?"

"It seems straightforward enough," Zac shrugged. "I'll just rush straight through the beasts and enter the gate. If they dare follow, they'll be in for a world of hurt."

"But what if you—" Vai hesitated, not finishing her sentence.

"If it turns out I've overestimated my fate and get myself killed, you'll have to leave without me. Try to find your people. Luckily, this realm doesn't seem too dangerous apart from these mountains."

"I... Alright," Vai eventually acceded. "But I'm sure you'll be fine."

"Well, I am pretty lucky, all things considered," Zac smiled.

For the next hour, the two looked around until they found a good hiding spot not too far away from the valley, where they set up a series of illusion arrays. It was a cave that was both hard to reach and hard to

spot from the ground, and the likelihood of the yetis climbing up here was almost nil according to what they'd seen so far.

Zac spent the next hour stabilizing his state and going over everything. There were always things that could go sideways, but he felt he had prepared as much as possible. As long as Zac seized the epiphany, he had something to steer it toward. He had even gone over his Daos and the direction he wanted to take them, just in case the nature of the second epiphany was different.

"I'm going. Here, take this," Zac said and threw over a Cosmos Sack.

"What's this?" Vai asked.

"Offensive Talismans, Escape Talismans, provisions, and various things you need when adventuring. There is also an information crystal on how to get in touch with my people if I get myself killed," Zac smiled. "I'm sorry I dragged you to such a dangerous place to complete my mission."

"Don't say such inauspicious things," Vai pouted. "Just go get that item. I'll be right here."

"Alright, I'm off," Zac nodded before flashing away.

He appeared hundreds of meters away after having activated [Earthstrider], and with a few more steps, he'd crossed half a mountain. He didn't bother using Vivi's vines now that he was alone and instead used the mountain walls occasionally to reset his movement skill as he blazed a path through the sky. It was pretty costly to use his movement skill in this manner, but he couldn't wait for a second longer.

Like this, the mountain range turned into a blur until he once more found himself at the valley's edge. He pushed out, and four steps to the air allowed him to reach the edge of the yetis in almost an instant. Another step took him deep into their ranks, but he failed to take his sixth and final step as a tremendous bloody aura prevented him from activating the skill again.

Zac had expected as much, and he slammed into the middle of the pack like a meteor. A swarm of fractal leaves ripped apart the closest beast as he rushed forward. No longer did he care about maintaining the state of their bodies. He was only thinking of efficiency, of getting to the temple as quickly as possible.

He entered his Evolutionary Stance, and suddenly he was an apex predator in a flock of sheep. Two enormous waves of Dao and Killing intent formed a spatial divide that stretched almost two hundred meters. Yetis died by the hundreds as Zac carved a bloody path, and for the first time since entering this place, he saw some of them run away with fear.

That didn't hold for the Beast Kings and their followers, though. They had formed a defensive line in front of the temple when Zac appeared. Judging by the energy churning through their bodies, they had been planning a response for a while now. The result was immediate, and Zac frowned when thousands of spikes blotted out the sky. At the same time, even more spikes formed a circle around him, and it felt like he had been entered the maw of a terrifying beast.

The only relief was that no spikes popped up through the ground, but the Beast Kings had essentially created a deadly dome that was closing in on him. Zac was shocked at the scene. Since when were beasts this quick-witted and coordinated? Going by the slightly different auras in the spikes, this was actually a combination attack where each Beast King conjured roughly a hundred spikes each.

It was shocking to think they were so clever. Or had they known he was coming and prepared this trap for a long time? It was still impressive, but not as much as naturally forming battle formations. When had he been exposed? When they spied on the valley before? Even earlier? Or was he not the first one to try and seize the thing inside the temple?

Zac grunted with annoyance as he infused [Arcadian Crusade] with energy. So much for simply rushing through this pack. If he ever found out someone else had raised the awareness of these yeti, they would be in for the beating of a lifetime.