

The Fall 902

Chapter 902: Shameless

There were a million things Zac needed to catch up the demon on, but Ogras was right. They had let Vai wait long enough. With the pillar still acting like a beacon, Zac didn't want to stick around in this place, especially not now that there were two of them who were connected to Ultom and its related structures.

"Alright, we're about to reach the little guide of yours," Ogras said. "She's currently pretending to be unconscious. What does she know?"

"Nothing about our opportunities. I only said I had a quest and needed to find something," Zac said. "We have been tracking the signal of the temple across over ten Mystic Realms until now, though, so she probably knows it's something big."

"Like the netherblasted pillar behind us isn't clue enough," Ogras snorted. "What about your identity?"

"Well," Zac coughed with some embarrassment before his face started to transform again. "I told her who I am once, but she didn't recognize my name. So, for now, I'm Gaun Sorom, a wandering cultivator."

Ogras snickered as he looked at Zac with a raised brow. "Didn't know you, eh? Must have been a blow to the second coming of the Eveningtide Asura."

"Well, whatever," Zac smiled, somewhat happy Ogras still didn't know about his unfortunate nickname in the sector. "We need her help if we're to get out of here. We're deep in the restricted territory of the Void Star in the middle of an invasion, and I have... borrowed some strategic resources of the Void Gate."

"Figures," Ogras nodded, not even phased. "How can that lass help us with that, though? No offense, but she didn't put up much of a fight."

"Well, she's a researcher rather than a fighter," Zac explained. "More importantly, she's the great aunt of Leyara Lioress."

"That girl from the Base Town? The nun with the cleavage?" Ogras said, his eyes almost burning. "She's here?"

"It's that bad?" Zac laughed.

"You try being locked in this place with only a mountain of muscles and a ghost goblin for companions for ten years. If you arrived any later, I might have shaved one of those black-furred humanoids and made it my woman," Ogras grunted.

"Well, I'm not sure if Leyara's here, but we managed to enter this Mystic Realm by using a gate left by other Void Gate members. I think it might be a special unit with how deep they've pushed into Void Star," Zac explained. "My best idea is to find them and have them take us out. Depending on how things pan out, I might have to expose my true identity."

“That’s pretty risky,” Ogras frowned. “Even if they don’t make any connection between us and that place, we’re bound to raise suspicion.”

“That’s why I’m hoping we can use Vai to get in contact with her niece to help us out,” Zac said with some helplessness. “We don’t have a lot of options.”

“Why not just return the way you came from?” Ogras asked.

“For one, the gate that took us into this particular Mystic Realm was one-directional. But even if we get out, I’m not sure it’s possible to return that way,” Zac said as he briefly explained the situation with the Kan’Tanu infiltrators and how the cortex broke the connections in the Void Star.

“So, we’re surrounded by heart-curse-infested lunatics and stuck deep in some unstable Mystic Realm Potpourri,” Ogras groaned. “Never a good clean adventure with you, is there?”

“This is nothing,” Zac laughed. “You should have seen when I ran into the real Eveningtide Asura a few years back, and a C-grade capital exploded. Now, that was hectic.”

“You WHAT?!” Ogras screamed, but Zac had already continued forward toward where Vai was being kept.

This close-by, Zac could already sense Vai’s aura. He flashed over, but he stopped in confusion when he saw six specters standing guard over Vai’s unmoving body. Her eyes were closed, but Zac could somewhat tell she was awake from how her energy circulated. Apart from her captivity, she looked unscathed apart from a big bump on her head. Zac almost laughed from how familiar the scene was to his encounter with Zakarith, the little mercantile demoness back in Port Atwood.

The ghosts guarding Vai turned into black streams that poured out from the cave when Zac appeared, leaving the two alone. Zac curiously glanced at the energy streams, wondering just what these things were. Judging by their strange aura, they shouldn’t be one of Ogras’ skills. Neither were they proper ghosts, like Triv or the Raun Spectrals.

Instead, their aura seemed to stem from the Lost Plane Ogras briefly mentioned before, which probably meant Ogras had found some method to control the denizens brought to this dimension. Cultivators who controlled beings from other planes were generally called Warlocks, and they were extremely rare. Perhaps even rarer than Karmic Cultivators.

Not only did you need a powerful soul to control a being like that, but you also needed to find the creatures to bind. It was a lot easier for Beast Tamers; the multiverse was literally crawling with them. But to find a weakness in the dimensional layers and forming a bridge required luck, skill, and resources.

The difficulty of becoming a warlock was only one aspect of the archetype’s rarity – the other was the danger. There was a high risk of getting your mind invaded, or at least influenced, by the alien entities. It also bordered on the unorthodox since many of the methods of forming contracts involved sacrifice.

He would have to keep an eye on Ogras, just in case, to confirm he still was in control of the situation. Thankfully, Zac had managed to infer some positive signs. Those talismans Ogras used to seal that sinister flag of his were freshly made with Yeti hide and blood. If Zac had to guess, Ogras might have used Ultom’s state of clarity to devise techniques to deal with the danger.

A second after the ghosts dissipated, Vai hesitantly opened her eyes to find Zac standing right in front of her.

"You're here," Vai cried with tears pooling in her eyes as she ran over to Zac.

"I'm here," Zac smiled as he hugged the little researcher. "Everything's okay. Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine; I was worr-" Vai said before her eyes widened in alarm. "Behind you!"

It was obviously Ogras who had walked into view with a crooked smile.

"Oh, don't worry about him; he's not an infiltrator," Zac said as he glanced back. "This is all a big misunderstanding. We actually know each other from before."

"I'm sorry, little lass," Ogras grinned. "I didn't know you were this guy's wife. I guess that's my luck. Stuck here for ten years, and when a little cutie finally shows up, she's already taken by an old buddy."

"I'm- I'm not his wife," Vai stuttered as she embarrassedly took a step away from Zac.

"Does that mean you're single?" Ogras asked with a grin that made him look like a starving ghost.

"Rein it in, man," Zac snorted as Vai took another step back with a mix of disgust and fear.

"Are you really friends with this bad guy?" Vai whispered.

"We've known each other for a long time," Zac nodded. "He's not as bad as he looks. Long ago, he got swallowed by a spatial tear when saving someone's life, and it turns out he ended up in this Mystic Realm long before it entered the Void Star."

"You're the first person I've seen in ten years," Ogras added, and Zac's eyes widened when he saw the demon take out Vai's protective treasure. "I was hoping to find out where you came from and how to get out of this place. I didn't even know the sector was at war, let alone anything about the infiltrators. I'm a righteous and upstanding citizen of Zecia."

Vai snatched back the ball before once more taking a few steps back. "W-What righteous person would appear in my shadows, almost knocks me out, and then robs me before asking any questions?"

"A righteous person who wants to live a long life," Ogras offered after some thought.

"Shameless," Vai muttered before looking at Zac askance. "He really is your friend. Two peas in a pod."

"That's rude. To both of us, I think," Ogras laughed.

"Anyway, we're sorry you got hurt because of this," Zac said as she handed her a bottle of Pseudo D-grade healing salve. "For your head."

"Rich guy," Ogras said as he stared at the shimmering liquid inside. "Got any more?"

Zac snorted and threw over one of his spare Spatial Rings that had a kit of Crystals, pills, talismans, and other necessities in case something happened with his main ring.

"Rich indeed," Ogras said with shimmering eyes.

"A-Are you okay as well?" Vai hesitantly asked with a low volume. "I saw the pillar while the bad guy carried me away. What was that? Are you really planning to destroy this Mystic Realm?"

"You're blowing up this place?" Ogras said as he looked up from the ring in his hand. "As much as I'd love to see this realm get blasted to the underworld, I think King Billy would object."

"I'm not planning on blowing anything up. I don't know why that pillar appeared. I thought only a breach would open," Zac explained before turning to Ogras with a raised brow. "King Billy? What's going on?"

"Well, apart from befriending that annoying crystal, he also subjugated a tribe of aboriginals and formed the Kingdom of Bonk Mountain," Ogras snickered.

"W-what's going on?" Vai asked with confusion.

"More people have been stuck in this realm," Zac explained. "I know one of them. We need to pick him up as well before we leave. Do you have any way to contact your people? This realm is even bigger than we expected. It would be almost impossible to find them if we just searched by foot."

"I-" Vai hesitated as she glanced at Ogras, who rolled his eyes and walked further away. She spoke up with a low voice, and she actually looked a bit shamefaced. "I have a distress beacon, but it's designed for the normal Mystic Realms in the Void Star. It only stretches for two weeks' travel, I think. I... activated it in the forest a few times... I'm sorry."

"Well, that's fine," Zac shrugged. "But that probably means your people have moved either toward the heart of the realm or the other side. I'm sure we'll find them eventually if we send out a signal now and then."

"We don't need to bother with any of that," Ogras said from a distance, clearly listening in to the conversation. "We can just ask Billy's pet when we get there. In fact, that brute might already have captured or thwoned those people. You never know with that guy."

"Pet?" Vai said with confusion.

"Billy has befriended the Realm Spirit of this Mystic Realm," Zac explained, remembering how Qi'Sar had spied on him as he traveled through the Twilight Ocean. "It should be able to easily locate any other people in this place, including your fellow templars."

"A sapient realm spirit!" Vai exclaimed with excitement, the uniqueness of a Realm Spirit overcoming her wariness from Ogras. "That is extremely rare! I've only read about it in ancient texts. There's so much we can learn from such a being."

"You are bound to be disappointed if you go in expecting any wisdom from that thing," Ogras muttered from the side, prompting Zac to look over with confusion.

"Let's just say Billy is the brains of that duo, and he's taught the thing everything he knows," Ogras grimaced.

Zac tried to imagine a Realm Spirit raised by Billy for a moment before firmly putting the matter aside. As long as it could help them out, it didn't matter. "Alright, there's no time to waste. I want to get away from the pillar anyway."

The traveling duo became a trio as they set out, though Vai was not too enthused by the arrangement. Zac could understand her sentiment after being kidnapped himself. It wasn't something you just moved past. She occasionally shot the demon aggrieved looks, which gave Zac a bit of a headache.

Even if Vai didn't know any of his biggest secrets, he still saw her as a friend and an ally, and hoped things wouldn't go south because of this. Thankfully, Ogras understood the problem as well, so he started a relentless campaign against the poor girl. He swapped between peppering her with various questions, telling jokes, and sharing some of his exploits in this Mystic Realm, most of them clearly made-up.

Like this, a few days passed until they could see the edge of the Mountain Range. Most of the Yeti had gone into hiding below-ground, and with Ogras' illusory domain, they could walk right by the stragglers who remained on the mountain paths.

They had exited in another direction than the one they came from, and instead of an endless forest, they spotted huge shimmering lakes stretching out across a mostly flat landscape. There was no lack of vegetation either, but it looked more like the Twilight Chasm's coral forest than a normal one.

"Welcome to the Badlands," Ogras said with an expansive wave. "Some of the lakes are saltwater. Others are pure acid. They all have nasty bastards hiding in the depths, and there are even more nasty critters above-ground. This place has been the cause of many headaches over the years."

"The beasts? They're aggressive?" Zac asked.

"It's not too bad," Ogras said. "The real problem is the furry humanoids in the mountains. Since they arrived, the Badlands have been their main hunting ground. Sometimes, thousands of those black-furred bastards descend the mountains like locusts. Their actions have kicked up tides of beasts that fled straight toward the Kingdom of Bonk. It's become Billy's new Ratlight, one that has lasted for years."

"Alright, let's head inside," Zac said as he looked back at the pillar behind them.

Since yesterday, it had finally started to shrink. Going by the rate it was thinning, it would probably be gone within the week. The thing hadn't caused any problems, but it was still a huge relief to see it go. No matter if you considered the tremendous amounts of power it contained or the madness instilled into the energy, it wasn't even a two-edged sword – it was an uncontrollable calamity if it was unleashed on this realm.

"Wait, people are coming! Almost two hundred cultivators!" Vai suddenly exclaimed as she stared into her bowl. "Six, no seven Hegemons! We need to hide quickly."

"Where?" Ogras said with confusion as he looked around.

"They're still an hour's travel away," Vai explained.

"Pretty nifty, that thing," Ogras said as he looked at the bowl with interest.

"I-It's not for sale. It's mine," Vai said with determination in her eyes.

"I was just looking," Ogras said with helplessness as he held up his hands in defeat.

“Two hundred,” Zac muttered. “The Void Gate encampment we saw couldn’t hold that many people. Should be invaders.”

“What do you think?” Ogras asked as the illusive domain around them condensed even further.

“Keep one or two alive for questioning?” Zac said after some consideration.

“Good,” Ogras grinned as the air around them started to shimmer. “Finally some change after years of fighting those beasts.”

“Y-you two!” Vai exclaimed. “Going by the strength of the lights, one of the hegemon is either an elite or approaching Middle D-grade.”

“Compared to Captain Teo, who’s stronger?” Zac asked.

“Teo, definitely,” Vai said without hesitation.

“Then we’ll be fine. Can you see where they will enter the mountains?” Zac asked.

Twenty minutes later, the group arrived at a spot Ogras knew. It was a small basin no more than two hundred meters across – small enough to restrict such a big group, while Zac’s skills could still cover the whole thing. It was the perfect spot for an ambush.

Vai had retreated even further and was safely hidden in a nearby cave, while Zac and Ogras hung from a sheer mountain wall inside an illusion array further augmented by Ogras’ skills. After sensing just how hard to spot Ogras had become, Zac wasn’t worried they’d be exposed unless the enemies had a Hegemon scout.

They had essentially become flies on the wall, silently waiting until they finally saw some movement. Two scouts moved with impressive speed, one on the ground and one jumping between mountain peaks using a blood-based movement skill as they headed deeper into the mountain range. Their auras were almost as indistinct as Ogras’, but Zac would definitely have spotted them even if he wasn’t prepared.

“The others shouldn’t be far off,” Ogras whispered when the two had passed.

“Can you drop me off in the middle of the army?” Zac asked. “As close to the hegemon as possible? Or will that mess with your skills?”

“No worries,” Ogras smiled. “Just do your thing and soak up their attention – I will support you from the outside. Like the good old days.”

“Like the good old days,” Zac nodded as he handed the demon the curse-warding talisman he’d picked up before. “Remember, don’t stay close to those guys when they die, or you’ll get infected. Take this thing just in case.”

“What about you?” Ogras said as he put the talisman on his robes.

“I’m immune,” Zac shrugged.

“Braggart,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes.

Another thirty minutes later, Zac saw the whole mountain path light up with [Cosmic Gaze] from the powerful auras in the army. They were moving fast and would enter the basin in just a few seconds, so Zac immediately activated [Arcadian Crusade]. With seven Hegemons holding the fort, including a powerful one, he would need to thin out the numbers quickly.

“Alright,” Ogras whispered as he placed his hand on Zac’s shoulder, prompting the world to turn grey. “I can’t wait to see what kind of monster you’ve become over the past decade.”

Zac only scoffed, but he was actually a bit excited himself. Most of his Skills had seen upgrades in the temple, and an opportunity to try them out had already presented itself.