

The Fall 894

Chapter 894: Hidden Pockets

After having encountered two parties of infiltrators in such a short span, Zac and Vai's nerves were on edge as they made their way through the mountain. Luckily, the lifeless mountains of the failed realms were filled with deep crags and confusing natural formations, while the stone itself contained a chaotic mix of energies that would help hide their presence. It provided them with secluded pathways as they made their way forward, and its value quickly became apparent.

Over the next day, Vai discovered not one but seven parties in the distance, each one of them heading in the same direction – toward the waystation they just left. Seven was not many, but it was not few either, especially when you considered Zac and Vai kept to the edge of the realm.

Who knew how many parties there were in total, counting those who cut straight through the middle of this failed realm rather than followed the edges? A hundred? Even more? Not only that, but the parties were getting bigger as well, with two having over a hundred members. Seeing such bustling activity, Vai had a theory – they were getting close to the path the invaders used to infiltrate the Void Star.

Seeing the activity left Zac confused. How could the Void Gate allow these people to act so wantonly? Even if Hegemons didn't grow on trees, there had to be more than enough Templars to go around. Why hadn't they sent a proper army down to the depths of the Void Star? Why not cut the problem off at the roots?

These smaller realms had inherent limits where too large skirmishes or too powerful warriors could cause spatial instability or even collapse, but roving groups of elite templars could do a lot of damage to hamper the progress of the infiltrators. Vai seemed quite confused as well, leaving Zac with only one theory.

The infiltrators had managed to cause enough trouble to cut off this entire region of the Void Star.

The situation was extremely worrying, even if they hadn't run into anyone overly powerful so far. Not only did the situation put their escape route in jeopardy, but it might mean there were enemy bases with actual arrays and traps set up in the area. Zac could probably deal with a scouting party if it came down to it, but a whole base was asking too much.

Vai understood the issue all-too-well, and her eyes almost never left the bowl in her hands. She continuously infused it with her Dao to broaden its reach, and if not for Zac providing her with Soul Crystals to recover Mental Energy, she would quickly have toppled over.

The days passed like this, where they continuously stayed on edge as they passed one party after another. More than once, they were forced to backtrack and find a proper hiding spot to avoid colliding with parties. Zac felt doubly lucky he had Vai by his side in this kind of environment. Zac would have long since been exposed without her help, just like how that dour scout had outsmarted him before.

And that was especially true on the third day as her head suddenly snapped up from the bowl as she gazed toward the edge of the realm. Zac frowned as he followed her gaze, but there was nothing – only an actual edge where this patch of the mountain simply ended.

"There's a manmade spatial pocket there," Vai whispered. "It's definitely created by the Void Gate. We might finally have found some allies!"

"Spatial Pocket? Like an Illusion Array?" Zac asked.

"Its function is similar, but it's a more powerful version. You cannot see through it with any observation skills since it's not an actual illusion. The only way to find it is to know the signature or have an extremely deep understanding of the Dao of Space," Vai explained.

Zac slowly nodded, not completely understanding how it worked.

"Can we enter and see if anyone's there?" Vai asked with big puppy-dog eyes.

"Sure," Zac said after some hesitation, "if you know how to get inside."

"No problem," Vai said and took out an Array Disk. "Little Lara gave me a master key that should give us access."

"Your niece is..." Zac coughed, but he simply followed her to an empty patch of land.

Zac was just about to ask how it worked, but their surroundings suddenly shuddered, and they found themselves standing in the middle of a campsite that was almost a hundred meters across.

"This," Zac muttered as he looked around with surprise, but his eyes immediately honed in on a silver arch standing right at the edge of the realm. Was that a hidden Space Gate?

"This is really ours!" Vai said with excitement. "Some of our Array Masters have been here."

"Is that a gate?" Zac asked curiously as he pointed at the silvery doorway.

"A portable one," Vai nodded as they walked over toward it. "Usually, we don't use them because they're so expensive to make. This one even seems to have a lot of extra features added. I wonder what's different about it."

"Can you see when it was placed here?" Zac asked after some thought, suddenly having a theory.

What would happen if a new pathway was suddenly opened? Could that be the source of the previous pulse? The Void Gate might just have done him a huge favor and set him up with a shortcut to where he needed to go. That would explain the reason the pulse had gotten stronger, and it was a far preferable theory to the piece of the seal being taken or on the move.

"It should be pretty recent, a few weeks at the maximum judging by the residual energy," Vai said after taking some measurements.

Zac breathed out in relief, a weight suddenly lifted from his shoulders. It really looked like there was a lot of merit to his theory. If true, then this was a lucky break of monumental proportions. Especially considering how crowded their route was getting. Even if he was willing to fight the infiltrators for the seal, this way was a lot better.

Who knew how many infiltrators he would have been forced to fight if he followed the original route toward the next waystation. Of course, this all hinged on his theory being right, that this indeed was a shortcut.

“Can you activate it?” Zac asked, which dragged Vai out of her thoughts.

“Give me a minute,” Vai nodded. “It has a few inscriptions I haven’t seen in this context, perhaps to stop traitors from activating it? I somewhat recognize the method; I just need to think things over for a bit, so I don’t accidentally trigger it to self-destruct or something.”

“Take your time,” Zac nodded and stepped aside to let her work on the gate. “How safe is this spot? Can people simply stumble into it?”

“Impossible,” Vai smiled as she pointed between the two edges of the hidden encampment. “Those two sides are a connected space. If someone walks into one of the walls, they will appear on the other side for us as though they teleported. For the one on the outside, they will not notice anything since the width of this area is essentially zero.”

“That’s amazing,” Zac muttered. “How big can you make these bubbles? Can you hide a whole planet inside one?”

“Well, I think you technically can,” Vai said after some thought. “But it gets more difficult the more stable the space is. You’ve seen how fragile it is in this place, which makes any manipulation a lot easier. You should understand that we’re not placed in a lower dimension like how it works with Mystic Realms or Spatial Treasures. We are hidden inside the same layer of space we entered from.

“A Spatial Pocket placed in the main dimension would require an enormous source of energy. I’d venture this small pocket is drawing large amounts of energy from this whole mountain range. To hide a whole planet would be an enormous undertaking. It would be cheaper to simply find and move a Mystic Realm than do something like this.”

“Alright,” Zac sighed.

Seeing such an amazing solution, the first thing Zac thought of was Earth and potentially hiding the whole thing with this kind of array. But it looked like he would have to find some other method to hide the planet from the universe in 90 years.

The hours passed as Zac rested up while Vai went over the Control Array. She had been exhausted by the time they found this place, but seeing the unique design had invigorated her. Of course, the fact that Zac had crushed a couple of Soul Crystals and taken out the [Mind’s Eye Agate] had helped both her focus and recuperation.

Zac also explored the campsite in search of clues, but there was not much to go by. The camp was clearly meant as a temporary rest stop, though it was a bit curious the tents were all left behind. Even then, the only thing of interest was that the ground in one of the tents was covered in blood. There even was even a slightly ominous aura here, which made Zac wonder just what had transpired. Execution? Torture?

Since there was nothing else to this place, Zac soon went back to Vai’s side to watch her work.

“I’ve figured it out,” Vai eventually said with a slight flush on her cheeks. “I wonder who made this—it might even be someone from the Void Monastery itself. The methods are not extremely complex, but it combines so many theories and concepts from various subordinate convents. It has essentially combined five different arrays and methods into one.”

Zac could see how excited she was, but he couldn't wait to hear the verdict, so he coughed a bit before she went off on a tangent.

"Ah, don't worry, I can activate it," Vai added.

"Great," Zac said. "Let's do it."

"Do you think our people, ah, my people, are on the other side?" Vai asked hopefully.

"Maybe," Zac slowly nodded. "Though this place might have been set up by some elites who are heading deep into enemy territory. If weeks have passed since this camp was set up, they might have moved on already."

"Right," Vai said, her eyes dimming a bit.

"Don't worry. I think what I'm looking for is in the next realm. After that, we'll immediately start looking for the members of the Void Gate, alright?" Zac said, which made the little researcher perk up again.

Until recently, Zac hadn't been sure what to do after getting his hands on the second piece. He had caught onto its tail by chance, and there were no guarantees he'd find another piece even if he spent another year inside the Void Star. By the looks of things, they had reached the deepest parts of the Void Star by now, and there had never been any conflicting signals that said he could head in two different directions.

And with how the region was suddenly crawling with infiltrators, every additional day they stayed behind might lead to a disaster. For now, Zac felt the best solution was to start looking for a way out the moment he picked up the second piece of the seal. If he happened to stumble onto another signal on the way out, great. If not, he would have to search other regions for clues, just like these infiltrators were doing now.

As far as he could tell, the piece of rubble Zac got had appeared somewhat recently. And with the infiltrators knowing about them as well, there was one extremely promising region – The Million Gates Territory. That place was a hotbed of weird spatial anomalies. It wouldn't be a surprise if a path leading to the Left Imperial Palace appeared somewhere around there.

From there, the Void Star had swallowed up some pieces of rubble, either by accident or design. Using a Creator Cosmic Vessel to search the region while looking for Ogras and Billy and racking up war contributions would kill three birds with one stone.

A minute later, the gate hummed to life, but both Zac and Vai frowned when they didn't see anything on the other side of the gate. It was just an opalescent wall that released slight spatial fluctuations.

"Does it work?" Zac hesitated as he looked at the opaque screen.

"I- Ah... I think so?" Vai hesitated.

A spear appeared in Zac's hand, and he stabbed it inside the spatial gate to make sure. A moment later, he took it back, and it looked perfectly fine. If the Void had been on the other side, the spear would have almost been destroyed by an attempt like that.

"Alright," Zac nodded. "Let me scout-"

He didn't get any further as both the screen and the whole spatial bubble shuddered ominously, making Zac look around with alarm.

"It's running out of energy! This failed realm cannot sustain it!" Vai said with shock. "It will collapse soon."

Zac only hesitated for a fraction of a second before he made his decision. "Go!"

The next moment, he had already appeared in a different world, and his heart lurched when he found himself falling. It turned out they had been dropped off in the air just like when they first entered the Void Star. Thankfully, it was only a couple of hundred meters above ground this time, and there were no dangerous birds in sight.

The ground was drawing closer quickly, but Zac still managed to catch a glimpse of a seemingly boundless forest before he crashed through a couple of tree crowns. A powerful pulse from the Left Imperial Palace greeted him when he landed with a thud, and a smile spread across his face. It was a success, and he had even been able to sense what direction to go.

However, his smile gradually faded as he looked around with confusion. Vai landed next to him a moment later, and she didn't share his initial ebullience at all. Instead, she looked confused and frazzled.

"This is wrong," Vai exclaimed as she took out her bowl and almost put her whole face inside it. "This is all wrong. "Why were we sent out here? Where is the other half of the array? Without it, we can't return. Wh- Hello? Are you alright?"

Zac knew Vai was talking to him, and he understood that them being thrown out like this wasn't great. However, Zac didn't immediately answer as his mind churned. First of all, the next piece of the seal was definitely located in this realm judging by the power of the pulse. But that wasn't what filled him with uncertainty.

Why did this place feel so familiar?

He was almost positive he had never been to this place before, yet it filled him with an odd sense of déjà vu. Was it because the surroundings looked like a common forest you might see back on Earth, a refreshing break after all kinds of alien environments he had traversed the past months? Or was it simply the pieces of the seal harmonizing with each other?

"Sorry," Zac eventually said. "It's probably nothing. I'm guessing that's not how those gates are supposed to work?"

"No," Vai sighed. "Another one should be placed on the other side after passing through. That way, the gate is stabilized."

"Well, it might be because the other side was too energy-starved," Zac mused. "No wonder they left their camp behind. They probably had to jump through like we did."

"What should we do now?" Vai asked with worry as her gaze flitted between the bowl and the forest.

She had clearly hoped to run into her people here, but Zac was relieved that wasn't the case. With the seal being so close, he didn't need any further complications. And thankfully, this place seemed pretty

harmless. The energy was even denser than Earth, but there weren't the tell-tale incessant calls of the wild that often indicated a danger zone.

"Can you see anything?" Zac asked. "Either man or beast."

"No," Vai sighed. "I don't understand how it would come to this..."

"Well, they might have been dropped off elsewhere. Or moved further inside," Zac shrugged. "We might as well move out if we want to figure out what's happened here."

"You don't want to find my people," Vai said, and it was a statement rather than a question.

"Well, not until I accomplish what I came here for," Zac smiled. "I doubt they'd let me run off on my own. But after I've accomplished my goal, it's probably a good idea to find the templars who set up this gate. They might be our best bet on getting out of here."

"What will you do if the ones we're looking for are after the same thing as you?" Vai asked.

"Then I'll probably knock them out and then steal it," Zac said after some thought. "Can't have that thing falling into the wrong hands, you know?"

"Wrong hands?" Vai said with confusion.

"Anyone's but mine," Zac nodded.

"You..! Shameless," Vai exclaimed, but she shook her head and smiled a moment later. "Fine, let's go. Do you know the way?"

"Follow me," Zac nodded, and the two set off.

For the first ten minutes, they didn't encounter a single threat. The only beasts they saw were some F-grade critters scuttling about in the tree crown or between the bushels. They came in all shapes and sizes, but they had one thing in common; all of them seemed absolutely terrified of him and Vai.

At first, Zac didn't understand what brought on that kind of powerful reaction. Most F-grade beasts were pretty stupid and aggressive, and he would have expected to get the occasional attack. Finally, there was a change as Vai spotted six Peak E-grade signatures in her bowl, and they were even heading straight toward them.

For the first time, Vai couldn't give a clear answer whether they were dealing with beasts or cultivators, so Zac simply had Vai stand behind him as he waited for their new friends. Thirty seconds later, six hulking humanoid figures came rushing out of the forest, all of them covered in thick black fur and reeking of bloodlust.

No wonder the critters in the forest were so terrified upon seeing humans. There were actually humanoid beasts in this place.