

The Fall 623

Chapter 623: Benevolent Shepherd

Seeing a moat of land just like the one he was standing on falling apart filled Zac with a sense of urgency, and he jumped down to his sister who looked a lot better by this point. It was the same with himself. The sense of exhaustion and hollowness was quickly passing, and the soldiers all around them were gradually coming to as well, with groans and mutterings breaking the silence.

"Do you have any ideas?" Zac asked after briefly recounting the situation.

"It's weird, I thought that the Spatial Energy would increase exponentially after the Dimensional Seed awakened, but it's just the opposite. The surroundings are almost completely drained," Kenzie muttered with a shamefaced expression. "I'm sorry, the calculations we ran were completely wrong. A lot of people are in danger now because of it."

"It's not your fault," Zac said. "We would have entered this place no matter what. We just need to figure out our next step. Is it possible to use the Spatial Drill to get out of here in case of emergency?"

"It's doubtful," Kenzie sighed. "We don't have any localization-abilities right now. It's like we would be randomly drilling for oil without any geological surveys. The chance of hitting the jackpot is minuscule. Perhaps if we could get to the same spot where the Spatial Tunnel is located, but is that even possible now?"

"Honestly, I doubt it," Zac sighed as he stood up. "I didn't see any bridge between our island and the one on the other side of the glasshouse. I'll check things out to see if we can cross through the void. Or make bridges or something."

He entered the glasshouse, relieved to see that the door actually opened without issue when he tapped the console that was now just a meter above the ground. However, the situation on the other side of the gate was even worse than he had expected. It looked like the Mystic Realm had cracked almost right along the wall to the Lunar Forest, and less than twenty meters of the corridor remained before it cut off into the void.

The next island looked to be over a hundred meters away with a vast expanse of the Void separating them. The protective film seemed to be cutting off right at the edge of the island as well, meaning that there was no atmosphere in the gap. If one wanted to pass through to the island next over, they would have to really enter the Void.

That might sound simple, but Zac knew it was anything but. The Void wasn't like outer space. He had survived in space for a few minutes after blowing up the Little Bean, but he wasn't as confident about this venture. The Void was a subdimension, a fold between realities, and it was something else different a simple vacuum from what he had gathered.

The Void Creatures had unique constitutions to live inside the void, but the moment they entered a normal dimension like the research base, their bodies started to be rejected by the surroundings. Zac was afraid the same would happen to him and his people if they tried to jump across to the neighboring island.

Another surprise was that the short stretch of corridor wasn't actually empty. There were over thirty soldiers who had huddled against the gate, and they almost fell onto Zac the moment he activated the console.

"Thank you!" they gasped as they ran into the glasshouse.

"Did anyone see what happened to the people further inside?" Zac asked a soldier that he vaguely recognized as a warrior of Port Atwood.

"I'm afraid not," a human cultivator said after looking around at the others. "We were running back toward this place after you appeared, but the world suddenly turned crazy. I woke up a minute ago, my body just a few meters from that edge."

"Join the others, we might need to move out soon," Zac said as he took out a Cosmos Sack. "Help me distribute healing pills and some Nexus Crystals among all the people."

Zac himself didn't immediately return to Kenzie's side, but he rather walked over to the edge of the realm. He only dared to do so after securing his body with the help of the chains of [Love's Bond] though. The mysterious film was just a decimeter away from the abrupt end of the corridor, looking like a soap bubble.

There was nothing outside, just vast darkness far more oppressive than any starry sky. He took out a random spear from his Spatial Ring, pushing it through the barrier that let him pass without any resistance. It wasn't just morbid curiosity, he needed to see the effect of the Void if he was to lead his people between these precipitous islands.

Something was wrong though. The spear didn't appear at all on the other side of the barrier. Zac curiously pulled it back after a second, and he could confirm that it was mostly intact, albeit barely. It seemed pretty run-down, having lost its sheen while large spots of rust had appeared on its surface. It still maintained its structural integrity, but it looked like something that had been discarded in the wild for decades after just a second of exposure.

Zac took a deep breath and reached out his hand, gingerly touching the barrier. His hand passed through a second later, and he immediately felt a sharp pain in his hand that quickly forced him to drag it back. It had taken less than a second, but his fingers looked like all moisture had been sucked out of them.

The experiment's conclusions were pretty evident, and they confirmed his suspicions. You could fall through the edge of the platforms, and if you did, you were probably screwed. Just a few seconds in that kind of atmosphere would be enough to kill most people. It even appeared that something weird was going on with the dimension, from how nothing appeared on the other side. Space in the void might be bent, or perhaps even following some dimensional rules he couldn't understand.

Trying to jump to another platform seemed impossible in other words, though he would have to test by throwing some items or corpses to make sure.

A sudden sharp jab of danger shook his mind, and he immediately had his chains drag him backward. It was just in time too as a massive claw pushed through the barrier in an attempt to snatch him up, the claw looking a lot like the one he encountered with Leviala a while ago.

Zac already had his axe in hand, but he didn't make any moves as he looked at the situation. A frown slowly crept across his face as he realized there was a clear difference between this claw and the one he saw before. This one was distorting a lot slower. Eventually, it looked like the owner of the claw couldn't deal with the spatial distortions any longer and it hurriedly drew it back, but over ten seconds had passed by that point.

Zac didn't know exactly what to draw from that lesson, but it was a clear possibility that the difference between the Void and this fragmented realm was slowly decreasing, allowing the Void Creatures to stay inside longer. If that was the case they were in serious trouble, as even the smallest and weakest Void Creatures seemed to be quite powerful. What if a bunch of eldritch horrors like the Collector suddenly appeared?

They needed to get moving.

As to where, he wasn't sure, but he felt that the closer they got to the mountain the safer they would be. The protective sphere around the mountain was so thick that he could discern even from here, while it was just a thin film in this outer plateau.

He was soon back at Kenzie's side, and all of the leaders had gathered together by this point.

"Warmaster, what do you recommend?" Rhubat asked as dozens of eyes were trained on him.

"I thi-" Zac said, but he was interrupted by a prompt appearing in front of him.

"A quest!" someone shouted and judging by the commotion it was something everyone had received.

Zac looked at the wall of text in front of him, his frown deepening the more he read.

[Special Dynamic Scenario activated]

[As interlopers of a crumbling Taboo Undertaking there is just one road to salvation. Set out on a pilgrimage of redemption and claim a Spatial Seal. Only those marked will be saved upon the collapse of the dimension.]

[NOTE: Each person can only possess one Spatial Seal. A spatial seal can be gained by extracting it from the Taboo Mountain or killing a seal owner. Only those branded will be teleported out when the dimension collapses. Teleportation will take place upon dimensional collapse.]

[Struggle for Survival]

A sigh escaped from Zac's lips after having read through the quest, or rather the 'dynamic scenario'. It looked like the System really wasn't all-too-jazzed about people exploring a Technocrat research base, considering that it didn't even provide any rewards. The reward was that you got to live another day.

There were unfortunately a lot of questions left even after having seen the rules. For example, how rare were these seals, and what was required to get them? If they littered the mountain, then great, but Zac guessed that they wouldn't be so lucky considering how there were mentions of killing seal owners.

With all factions congregating on the same spot, everyone grasping for a shot at survival, this was going to turn into a bloodbath. The bloodshed would only be exacerbated by the fact that there was no timer

either, and no one could really tell when this place would fall apart. The conflict would only keep escalating until everyone had a seal or the realm collapsed.

“Survival,” Rhubat rumbled as their muscles tensed.

“You’ve seen the quest,” Zac sighed as he turned to Joanna who had walked over. “We need to move out. Our starting position is working against us, the other factions are probably closer to the mountains. Get everyone ready.”

“I’ll see to it,” she said before she started barking orders to the soldiers.

Zac knew he would be able to get read to the mountain quickly by himself, but it didn’t look like that was an option right now. The reason was simple; the others had gotten one prompt, but he had received two.

Benevolent Shepherd (Training (7/9)): Lead your followers to the Taboo Mountain and provide at least 3000 with Spatial Seals. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/3000).

[NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of rewards.]

He had finally “passed” his training regimen, but it looked like he still needed to complete all the steps to receive a reward. His personal quest also gave him some insight into the odds of survival. A quick survey indicated that there were around five thousand people gathered together in the fort.

To save over three thousand meant the seals couldn’t be all-too-rare, to the point that only a few would be able to get out. The question was only how large a share of the total amount of seals the System expected him to snatch. The higher a share the more bloody the quest would become.

Zac even had a hunch about the true purpose of this quest. Did the System want him to take out the native factions in his efforts to gather the seals, preventing them from rejoining the Zecia Sector? These unfortunate prisoners had obviously not come here voluntarily, but that might not matter in the eyes of the System.

It just believed they were heretics dabbling with the Dao of Technology.

“What about those stationed at the base?” Joanna asked.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Zac sighed. “We’re cut off from them. Hopefully, we can meet up with them on the way to the mountain.”

Of course, Zac had a sinking feeling that those left behind at the portal might be beyond salvation. The further out they were, the fewer protections the platforms seemed to have. Their base was on the very edge of the Mystic Realm, and it wasn’t impossible that section didn’t even survive the cataclysmic events just now.

“AH! WHO MOVED BILLY TO THIS SCARY PLACE?!” a shout suddenly reverberated out across the fort, making Zac look over at the source of the voice.

Billy had woken up again it seemed and he was standing on top of the wall with eyes as wide as saucers.

"Billy," Zac said as he flashed over. "Thank you for your help before."

"Ah, it's you!" Billy said with a wide smile. "No problem, Billy just helped thwunk the bad guys. What is happening?"

"We need to get to the mountain to get out of here," Zac said.

"No problem, Billy is great with directions. Billy will lead the way," Billy sagely nodded.

"Can you help our people first? Make everyone get ready to travel," Zac smiled.

The giant nodded and jumped back down the wall, seemingly full of vigor again. Zac turned just in time to see his sister appearing next to him. She immediately released a stream of drones that flew hundreds of meters into the air, forming a massive surveillance matrix.

"I'll map out a route for us. Not all the platforms seem to have bridges, while others are like crossroads with multiple options. Some islands might collapse as well, so we need to-," Kenzie said, but she stopped herself as she looked down at her tablet. "Ah? People?"

"What's going on?" Zac asked.

"It must be the remaining people of the Cartava Clan," Kenzie said with a slight frown. "They're already on the move."