

The Fall 636

Chapter 636: Shortage

The soldiers were still exhausted after the mad dash over the last hours and subsequent battle, but no one complained when Zac gave the order to set out. Some had already got their hands on a seal through the battle, but it was mostly the Anointed, demons, and Tal-Eladar who were safe by this point thanks to their higher killing efficiency.

Everyone understood the situation; if they didn't start hunting for Spatial Seals they'd be dead in a few days.

"Did you get your seals from the mountain or killing?" Zac asked Thea as they walked at the front of the army, keeping a brisk pace.

"We found them somewhat quickly some ways up the mountain," Thea answered. "I don't think they spawn at the foot. The cultists took a long route between the bridges, and they even sent squads of a few hundred up the mountain for two hours at a time while the others worked on destroying the islands."

"Wouldn't be surprised that the further up the mountain you go, the more seals will appear," Ogras added from the side. "Especially since the lunatics almost picked the lower layers clean."

"Alright," Zac said as he changed course, leading the army up the mountain as they walked around it.

The goal was to essentially travel to the opposite side of the mountain in search of the traitor Zhix, but there was no point to stay at the foot. Not only would it mean missing out on extracting seals, but it would also increase the time it would take to reach the area controlled by the gemlings. In fact, with how big the mountain was, it would take way too much time that way. The foot was extremely wide, and only by taking the shortest route would they get there in time to deal with the traitor before the realm collapsed.

"Did you find anything else?" Zac asked as they made their way up the mountain.

The Memorysteel mountain had a lot of normal-looking features, like cliffs, ravines, and steep mountain walls. But it also had a distinctly spiraled form, and they made their way up one of the major spirals.

"We only spent half an hour exploring before those lunatics started blowing up islands. We rushed toward them the moment we realized what they were up to," Ogras slowly said. "But we did learn some things. These seals only last for a short while. If no one snatches them within a minute or so they would disappear, and it wouldn't reappear even after we waited for a few more minutes. Things might get chaotic."

"Shit," Zac sighed and Thea nodded in agreement.

Both of them had clearly come to the same conclusion; it would be impossible to impose any sort of order on who got the seals. Zac and the other leaders had already discussed setting up an order by lottery for the general population, and Kenzie had even prepared everything in her tablets. But how would it be possible to enforce something like that when the seals appeared and disappeared at random?

They were strapped for time as is, so they couldn't wait around god knows how long for every Spatial Seal. It would go to whoever was closest, and if multiple people found themselves equidistant to a Seal, problems were bound to occur. After all, those seals were the difference between life and death, and who knew how people would act when pushed to the limits.

"There," Ogras suddenly pointed toward a crack in the Memorysteel a few hundred meters away. "We both found our seals in a cave that looked a lot like that. I think they migh-

Zac grabbed his sister who walked just behind them with her head in her tablet and flashed away before the demon had a chance to even finish his sentence. Of course, he was heading straight for the cave mouth.

"Hey!" Kenzie exclaimed as she glared at him with annoyance, but Zac didn't stop moving.

People might be thinking he was playing favorites, and he definitely was. But Zac didn't care. They all would be dead already if not for his sister, and he wouldn't be able to completely focus on the task at hand until her safety was secured. A few steps with [Loamwalker] later he reached the entrance, but they only reached a few meters inside before they stopped from surprise.

The cave didn't exactly look like he had expected.

It was actually a small plot of land, with around a hundred trees sitting on a patch of soil. Of course, the trees were definitely not in their natural habitat. The crowns of the larger trees were broken or pressed right into the roof of the cave, and over a dozen trees had simply fallen over. Their root systems were ripped apart, and it seemed like only a small part of the soil had been moved to this place. The rest might have remained on one of the islands or stuck somewhere else on the mountain.

"It looks like a piece of a biodome that has been preserved," Kenzie said with interest as she looked around.

Zac was a bit surprised that whole sections had survived getting pulled into the mountain like this. But for now, he was more interested in finding a Spatial Seal for his sister. And it didn't take long before he could spot a slight fluctuation with [Cosmic Gaze].

"Come," Zac said and flashed forward, arriving in front of a normal-looking rock in the middle of the transplanted forest.

The fluctuations were slowly getting stronger, and suddenly there was a small shimmering brand on it, identical to the one on Zac's hand.

"Why did it appear on this specific stone?" Kenzie muttered as she hunched down next to Zac. "It seems to be a completely normal rock, there were millions just like this in the Lunar Forest."

"Try taking it for now," Zac urged with some anxiety. "Every Seal we miss means one person dying."

Kenzie nodded and gingerly touched the rock, but both were surprised when nothing happened.

"You need to crush it," Ogras said from behind as he suddenly appeared, and Kenzie quickly followed his instructions as the seal was already flickering like it was about to dissipate.

The stone turned to gravel after Kenzie exerted some pressure on it, and the seal immediately jumped onto her hand. Zac felt a wave of relief as he stood up again, only now having the peace of mind to analyze the situation.

"Did you encounter more places like this? With proper patches of land from the base?" Zac asked.

"There are some," Ogras nodded. "Both intact Technocrat rooms and patches of dirt like this one. I'm a bit surprised this cave is fine though. The cultists seemed intent to torch everything since they deemed this place cursed. After taking any Spatial Seals, that is. Guess they missed this one."

"Do you think it's possible to leave some people here and let them farm the seed one by one?" Zac ventured. "Or do you think that they won't regrow?"

"Hard to say," Ogras shrugged.

"I don't think new ones will regrow. The energy readings in this place are a lot lower compared to before I took it. It's like the seal was formed by remnant Spatial Energy left in these trees or the soil. I guess the seals are not stable, so they will jump back and forth in the area until someone picks it up. These trees will definitely not regenerate new Spatial Energy though, so there shouldn't be any more seals appearing in this place," Kenzie said. "Besides, the Spatial Energy might drift away to other parts of the mountain."

"So if we find spots with higher Spatial Energy we'll probably find Spatial Seals?" Zac mused.

"I'm not able to actually see it," Kenzie said, and Zac sighed when he realized that it was the same for him. He only spotted the seal when it was actually starting to form.

"With how many we need, we're probably better off spreading along the whole mountain instead," Ogras said. "The stronger will form a line and trawl the mountain further up, and the weaker ones will stay at the lower layers. That way the strong warriors won't take the easy-to-snatch seals."

"Some might hide away as soon as they find a seal if we spread out though," Kenzie hesitantly ventured. "A lot of people are shellshocked. If they find a seal in a hidden cave like this, they might just sit down and wait out the time until the mystic realm falls apart."

"Can you monitor things with your drones?" Zac asked.

"Sure," Kenzie said after some thought as started walking back toward the army. "A bit big-brotherly, but whatever."

It was a bit ruthless to force people to keep going, but they still had a lot of enemies in this place. He both needed more hands to fight, and it wasn't like there was any guarantee that staying behind was any safer than going with the group.

Zac quickly explained Ogras' findings and their plan to the leaders of the respective factions, and everyone in the army was soon informed of the situation. The weaker warriors and the few non-combat cultivators looked especially relieved upon hearing that they wouldn't have to compete with the powerhouses for Spatial Seals.

The group kept ascending for another two hours, at which point the pressure from the mountain was starting to cause some issues for the weaker people. Zac was obviously not even slowed down this far

down the mountain, but after walking around for a while he had to say that Thea's earlier estimation might actually be a bit optimistic.

He doubted most people would even make it halfway up the mountain.

Zac was almost certain that it was the System that had arranged the pervasive pressure that covered the mountain. It had created extremely precise layers where the pressure was pretty much identical. Each band was extremely wide, and with the incline, you needed to climb roughly an hour before reaching the next segment.

Of course, Zac would be able to go a lot faster than that, though he would probably be slowed down closer to the peak.

The moment you stepped into the next band, the pressure drastically and instantly increased. Furthermore, the pressure seemed to be somewhat exponential. They had entered the first band after ascending for roughly 10 minutes, and Zac estimated it required around 30 Strength to forcibly endure. Of course, you could use spells, Dao, or other means to block out the pressure if you weren't a Strength-based cultivator.

The second band seemed to require 70 Strength to nullify, and the third roughly 120. It wasn't too hard to see that there were exactly 18 layers to the mountain, provided that each layer was equally high. If the difficulty kept increasing at this pace, you'd need the equivalent of 600 Strength to withstand the pressure at the halfway point.

And that was just withstanding it. To actually travel with that kind of weight on your shoulders would quickly drain and exhaust most people. Zac guessed that most people would be forced to stay in the third and fourth layers, with just a few entering the fifth to ninth layers to search for Seals. Going higher than that would quickly exhaust your energy, and only a handful would be able to reach the peak.

Zac wasn't too worried for himself. Even a pressure equivalent of 2000 Strength at the peak would only slow him down a bit, but he hoped that this was just a test arranged by the System that wouldn't follow into the sphere in the sky. He really didn't want to fight Void's Disciple while carrying this kind of weight on his shoulders.

The long train of Port Atwood's soldiers soon turned into a wide human chain that moved further and further up the mountain. It took a few hours for everyone to find their suitable altitude, at which point they stopped ascending and instead only moved clockwise around the mountain.

Zac kept constant watch as well, but he had to admit it was slim pickings for seals even after they spread themselves out like this. His quest barely updated once per minute, and most of those who gained seals were those the furthest up at the chain. This obviously didn't go unnoticed among people, and people tried to forcibly endure the higher layers in hopes of finding a Seal.

But the pressure was simply too pervasive. Anyone who walked further up than they could handle quickly found themselves unable to keep up with the high pace of the group, and falling behind meant they definitely wouldn't get their hands on a seal.

Zac and the elites who had already gotten their seals walked in step with the army, partly to keep order and partly to explore the large number of caves they encountered. Almost all of the caves at the first

four layers were unfortunately looted and burned to a crisp already, but it was clear that the Church of Everlasting Dao had only performed cursory sweeps further up than that.

They had already found some loot from a dozen caves, but they had also found themselves face-to-face with hundreds of battlebots hiding like spiders in a few others.

It looked like the cultists had set out in blitzes where they rushed the first six layers or so, snatching the easy-to-spot seals at the highest layers while ransacking the lower ones. Large swathes above the fifth layers were completely untouched though, and some caves that required some time to cut open the entrance were ignored as well.

Still, it was an undeniable issue that the weaker soldiers were getting too few Seals. As things stood after six hours, the strongest warriors would all be safe as long as they kept going for a day or so, but not even a week would be enough for the weaker cultivators. The cultists had been too thorough, and they had an almost 15-hour headstart on Zac's group.

They had probably cleaned out the lower layers of at least a third of the mountain, and those easily-attained seals had already fallen into the hands of his own elites by now. The other factions who had made it to the mountain were probably frantically looting the lower layers as well, leaving just those impossible-to-attain Seals behind.

It really looked like they would have to fight and kill for Seals no matter if you were talking about completing his quest or finding a path of survival for his people.