

The Fall 862

Chapter 862: Tasks

Zac was startled awake from his almost trance-like state, surprised to find a diminutive nun standing in front of him with a scowl on her face. She was mostly human, but just like Gaun, she seemed to have some sort of alien blood in her heritage, with small ridges forming in her head where a demon would have grown horns.

However, her skin was without the scale-like pattern of demons and her hands and feet looked human. All-in-all, she reminded Zac of Zakarith a bit with her short stature and large eyes, though the little merchant demoness back on Port Atwood would never dare look at him with such a fierce expression. Then again, Zakarith wasn't a Peak E-grade cultivator like this nun.

"I'm sorry, miss?" Zac asked hesitantly.

"Is there something wrong? You have been eyeing the donations for a while now," the nun said, and there was no mistaking what she was insinuating from her tone.

"Do I look that bad off?" Zac wryly smiled, showcasing the slightly oversized canines of his newly acquired orcish heritage.

"Then what were you doing?" she said with suspicion.

"I was just thinking back to those days," Zac lied since he honestly didn't quite know himself why he had stopped.

He felt he had touched upon some sort of inspiration or understanding, but it had already slipped through his fingers. However, it was an important reminder that the Dao was everywhere – it wasn't only discovered in the heat of battle. The Dao was not just a tool of war, it was everything. The more he would experience the more he would get in contact with it.

"Time is truly unrelenting. In the blink of an eye, centuries have passed and new generations are standing where I once stood," Zac continued with a sigh since the nun's scowl hadn't eased up. "The cycle continues."

"A- I see," the Nun said, looking a bit embarrassed. "I thought- nevermind."

"I doubt you'd see any Wandering Cultivators steal from the hands of those children," Zac said as he pointedly looked at the small pile of Cosmos Sacks that had been placed on the table next to the gift bags. "No one understands the need and the desire better than us. Hopefully, one day a child will truly break the fetters of fate, proving our path is not a lie."

"Thank you for your guidance," the young nun said with a small bow, her expression softening. "This is the first time I've gone outside since... I appreciate the viewpoint. Please, come inside."

Zac slightly nodded before walking toward the shimmering barrier that ran was right behind the gate. Being an official member of the Void Gate, she could be considered an elite of the younger generation of Zecia, even if she wasn't at the level of the peak talents. She had probably heard all kinds of things about wandering cultivators since growing up, and it was no surprise she was suspicious. Thankfully, she

wasn't some sort of overbearing elitist who refused to back down. It would have been pretty annoying to make an enemy the moment he arrived.

The surroundings twisted as Zac stepped through the shrouding array, and he found himself on a massive street that was at least a hundred meters wide. There was a constant stream of cultivators entering to his left and right, tens of thousands of warriors who all would be considered top experts back on Earth. Judging by the crowds outside, this scene would probably continue for over a day, where the number of mercenaries in this batch alone would be counted in the hundreds of thousands.

On the opposite side of the street waited a series of newly built restaurants, hotels, and training squares. There were even a couple of bars, and Zac could hear the occasional raucous laugh all the way here.

"Never seen a recruitment station like this," Zac muttered.

"The Void Gate will not force anyone willing to help us out to take certain tasks. Therefore, it takes some time to gather enough people for some missions," the nun who had led him inside explained. "With the need for secrecy, all outsiders will have to stay within this area before we take you into the Void Gate's domain."

Zac nodded, finally understanding why he had to wait five days to enter this place. It was probably at capacity due to manning a previous batch of missions.

"Earlier was my mistake, so don't hesitate to ask me anything," the nun said. "What level and type of mission are you planning on joining?"

"Before I answer, can I ask something?" Zac countered, getting an earnest nod in return. "Apart from the mission rewards, will we be allowed to keep the beasts and their materials for ourselves?"

"You want the beast carcasses? They're not very- ahem, yes. You can keep them. Usually," the nun nodded. "If you kill or capture it, then it's yours. For the things you don't need yourself, you can sell them at resource depots. I should tell you though, most of the beasts we're dealing with are not worth a lot.

"Even if you fill your Cosmic Bags to the brim, their value will be far worse than the compensation of the Void Gate. However, there are a few species that are considered strategic resources of ours. Taking them or their bodies out of our domain is disallowed."

"In return, we will pay very well in case you encounter these rare beasts," the nun continued as she took out a small tome. "Their features are in this booklet, make sure you memorize them. This version has more detailed descriptions and images compared to the ones you can pick up at the mission hub – a small apology for casting aspersions."

"Thank you," Zac smiled. "So some of the species have bounties apart from the missions?"

"You could say so," the nun nodded. "While most animals are barely serviceable for sustenance, capturing a few of these valuable specimens can be even more lucrative than completing a difficult mission."

"That's amazing," Zac whistled, but he looked at the nun suspiciously. "Then I guess they're dangerous?"

“All of them have pure bloodlines,” the nun nodded. “However, the real reason for their high bounty is their scarcity.”

Zac nodded before turning his attention toward the small book. Each page only had a couple of illustrations, but each image contained a book’s worth of information when infusing his Mental Energy into them. For example, a simple image of a flower contained the details of a whole family of herbs, thousands of them neatly arranged in an easy-to-search manner.

It was essentially an encyclopedia on the local flora and fauna, a pretty nifty gift to get right off the bat.

It didn’t take him long to find detailed descriptions of both [Ferric Worldeaters] and [Ferric Voidwyrms], the larvae-stage of the species. Seeing the vivid images and detailed descriptions, it felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders – there really were Worldeaters inside the Void Gate.

According to the missive, the Voidwyrms were between two to ten meters large and up to a Peak E-grade beasts. Becoming a Beast King turned them into World-eaters, where the smallest specimen would reach one hundred meters. Luckily, Zac had already prepared a beast pouch that would be able to fit a beast up to a thousand meters. Any larger than that would be an issue. Of course, Worldeaters surpassing a kilometer’s length would also be too powerful for him to deal with, so it was a moot point.

As for their affinities, they normally had insights into gravity. However, a few of them actually managed to grasp the Dao of Space, and it was obviously one of these rare talents that he needed to get if he wanted to get the best Cosmic Vessel possible. However, he immediately saw a problem – spatial worldeaters were considered a strategic resource with a sizeable bounty.

Zac wouldn’t be surprised if the Void Gate wanted them for the same reason as he – as core components for spatial arrays. He would have to look into the possibility of smuggling one out later. If it was impossible, he would have to settle for a normal one. For now, it was great news getting confirmation on his target. However, the more Zac read in the missive, the weirder he felt the situation.

“There are a lot of wild herbs and other materials with bounties here as well, but where would we even run into wild herbs?” Zac frowned. “Are we not fighting close to any settlements? Just where is this beast tide located?”

Beast Tides were only called as such when a horde of monsters set their gazes on a city, either due to some powerful alpha or as a tribulation sent by the System. In other words, a beat tide was a siege, where you whittled down the innumerable monsters through using ranged attacks or raiding their lines.

In such a situation, there obviously wouldn’t be any opportunities to pick Spiritual Herbs – those only grew deep in the wilderness or inside wild Mystic Realms. Even if you pushed the tide back, you’d only find the cultivated surroundings of the cities. As such, the bounties in the encyclopedia read more like a hunt or exploratory trip into an unclaimed Mystic Realm.

But if that was the case, where the Void Gate needed people to explore some recently-discovered subdimension, there was no need to lie. Mystic Realms popped up left and right, especially so in the past decade according to Calrin. Something about the spatial turbulence of the invaders made all kinds of hidden realms appear.

"I cannot divulge the details, but the Void Gate essentially controls an unusual number of Mystic Realms. Due to some unforeseen events, these Mystic Realms are now being invaded, meaning we are fighting on hundreds of battlefronts in very varied situations," the nun sighed.

"Mystic Realms can be invaded? How could a bunch of beasts sneak inside if you control the entrances?" Zac asked with a raised brow, not even needing to feign ignorance.

"It's complicated. You will find more details as you peruse the recruitment stations inside," the nun said with a small bow. "However, I recommend you not overthink some things – the Void Gate values their secrets."

"Alright, thank you, young miss," Zac nodded. "This booklet might be a lifesaver."

"I'm nothing," the nun smiled. "I am Vai Salas. You can ask for me at the administrative building if you need assistance. Of course, I'm setting out on a mission soon as well."

"Thank you," Zac nodded. "I'm Gaun Sorom."

With that, Zac blended with the stream of mercenaries, following the signs past the rows of restaurants and temporary residences until he reached a square with twenty-five rows of hovering signs, each one looking a bit like the System's quest screens. Close by, a templar was handing out booklets that looked a lot like the one he just got, and Zac picked one up before he curiously walked over to check the closest screen.

[Task #208]

Rebuff horde of Ka'Sotrov Shades. Task includes performing a sweep for hidden nests.

Estimated Duration: 5 months.

Mission Level: High E-grade.

Danger: High.

Reward: 1,000 – 10,000 E-grade Nexus Coins dependent on the state of facilities and personal contribution.

Prioritized Recruitment: Mentalists, Geomancers.

Localized Rare materials: Ka'Sotrov Godstone, Lunar Creeproots, Fekrian Jade, Fluatide.

[Slots: 408/1,250]

Following that was a description of the shades, including their appearance and common skills. The Ka'Sotrov Shades was one of the intangible beasts mentioned in Calrin's missives, and just like the Sky Gnome had guessed, they weren't undead. They were rather special rocks that utilized some sort of spiritual projections sounding like the ultimate version of [Thousand Lights Avatar].

Zac wouldn't be surprised if they one day managed to transform into beings akin to Ubo back in the Orom World. But for now, they were a highly aggressive pest who moved by having their spectral projections carry their physical bodies around until they found fertile soil. At that point, they hid their true bodies deep underground, where they started siphoning off the energy from the surroundings.

Meanwhile, their projections killed and destroyed everything that competed with them for resources. Having appeared in a Mystic Realm used as a garden for herbs, they had become a calamity that threatened to destroy a yield of high-value crops.

“Excuse me, how do you define high risk?” Zac asked the templar handing out booklets.

“Thirty percent casualty rate for warriors at the mission level. The details are listed in the brochure you’re holding,” the templar said.

“Thank you,” Zac nodded before walking away.

Zac slowly browsed the screen as he scanned his two booklets. The second one he just picked up lacked a lot of detail on all the species in the Void Gate. It mostly focused on the strategic resources, and Zac guessed most mercenaries would simply have to take anything else they picked up to a store to get them valued.

The public booklet did however contain a lot of general information geared at outsiders, including the risk assessment. Just like the templar said, High Danger meant a 30% casualty rate, where casualty was defined as losing combat ability for over three years. Simply put, death or grievous wounds.

Furthermore, that estimate was based on their average templar strength. Wandering cultivators, whose equipment was worse and whose heritage was incomplete, probably ran an even higher risk in these missions. Apart from high danger missions, there were low, moderate, and extreme danger. Finally, there was a separate set of safe missions with an expected casualty rate of 0%.

Looking around the square with missions, it quickly became apparent that safe missions were exclusively non-combat tasks – it was mostly grunt-work, to be honest. There were things like extracting as many minerals as possible from a mine before the enemy beasts arrived, or assisting the local smithies in the massive foundries.

None of the quests were actually for craftsmen though, and Zac guessed the Void Gate either hired them through other channels or had enough skilled workers on their own.

The pay for those missions was just one percent of the generous sum the hard missions provided, and the odds of finding one of the bounty materials were apparently very low. Conversely – the few impossible tasks could pay out almost half a D-grade Nexus Coin for three months of work for a Half-Step D-grade Hegemon.

That was extremely generous judging by the discussions among the other wandering cultivators, especially considering you’d make decent money from beast cores and harvesting other items. Seeing the excitement on their faces, Zac realized he had probably overpaid Gaun. The wandering cultivator would probably have been happy with a tenth of what he was offered considering these rewards.

However, you could repeatedly earn money in this place – nothing was stopping you from taking multiple quests in a row provided you survived. That was so little leaked about the events in the Void Gate. Some had long since completed their first, and sometimes even second, task. Some were recuperating in the superior facilities of the Void Gate, while others had already set out again.

Of course, quite a few had already fallen in search of wealth in this place. An extreme danger mission had a lethality rate surpassing 50%, so only those with nothing to lose would take on a mission like that.

Unfortunately, you couldn't just keep it safe and take on missions of lower grades. Some hegemons might be tempted to take a bunch of E-grade extermination quests to earn money quickly and easily, but the Void Gate had put a stop to that.

The reason was clear just by looking around – the Void Gate lacked people for the higher-grade missions. Zac saw how one cultivator after another infused a wisp of energy into the lower-grade tasks, prompting the slots to rapidly fill up. Meanwhile, the only ones who read the D-grade missions seemed to be curious onlookers.

Even after walking around for over an hour, Zac only saw one Hegemon come over and choose a quest – and it was a low danger mission. The only exception to the rule was where higher-grade cultivators could join low-grade missions that had failed to fill its slot in a certain amount of time. However, if not even the lower-grade cultivators wanted the quest, it was probably one of the worse ones.

Conversely, anyone could sign up for a mission up to one grade above their own, which meant Zac could choose an Early D-grade quest if he wanted. That was perfect for him since he wanted to hunt an early D-grade Beast King. It was probably added to provide the elites with a greater challenge, and to fill up the D-grade missions faster with the help of large numbers of Half-Step Cultivators.

Soon enough, Zac found not one but two missions with good potential. The first was task #385, a Half-Step mission with a medium danger assessment. It was a proper beast tide mission where you needed to protect a settlement for a minimum of 3 months. Included in the list of beasts were the voidwyrms, and the quest mentioned there were multiple Beast Kings in the tide.

The second quest was task #1,032, a high danger Early D-grade quest. This was a quest where the group was tasked to guard a group of nuns acolytes who needed to investigate some sort of spatial anomaly that attracted beasts. Zac guessed it was some sort of treasure that had attracted a beast tide.

Just like the other task, voidwyrms were mentioned, and with the task being a proper D-grade mission with higher danger assessment, the odds of running into proper worldeaters were a lot higher. However, while task #385 called for over 5,000 cultivators, task #1032 needed only 50. Not only that, but it specifically noted it would test the strength of every Half-Step cultivator who applied.

Zac had only seen that kind of comment on a handful of missions, and all of them seemed like tasks of strategic importance which couldn't fail. The odds of getting exposed in such a small unit were a lot higher, not to mention the risk of true danger. After all, if Beast Kings could appear in Half-Step missions, then Middle Stage Beast Kings might appear in task #1,032.

There would be squad captains present to deal with that kind of threat, but wars were always unpredictable. Zac was confident in dealing with most early Beast Kings by now, but the Middle-Stage was another thing altogether. They had properly benefited from the huge boost of attributes a higher grade provided, and their energy reserves were reportedly five to ten times that of an early-stage beast.

Furthermore, the simple fact the beasts had progressed to Middle D-grade meant their bloodline was out of the norm – just like with cultivators, more than 99% of beasts were forever stuck at the start of the grade, their cores unable to progress. Thus, their combat ability would be higher than the average beasts as well, and Zac wasn't confident he'd be able to deal with these kinds of things even if he unleashed an Annihilation Sphere.

Even then, Zac hesitated only for a couple of minutes before picking task #1,032, becoming the 37th member to apply. No matter if it was for the search of Ogras in the Million Gates Territory, the Sector-wide War, or Zac's plans beyond, he would need the best vessel he could get his hands on.

It was time to go big or go home.