

The Fall 865

Chapter 865: Zenith Vigil

This was the second Decree-quest Zac had gotten, with the first being the one he was saddled with by the Eveningtide Asura. This one was straightforward, where he either had to guard his ward for the duration of the mission, or for 178 days. In a perfect world, he wouldn't have to spend six months in the Void Gate, but it wasn't too bad all things considered. Besides, the mission would be over the moment they stabilized that anomaly, so there was a small chance he'd be out of here in just a month or two.

The employment contract was pretty long-winded, but it was essentially the same type of agreement he signed with Catheya before the Twilight Harbor, though he would be paid an additional 100,000 E-grade Nexus Coins for a century-long confidentiality clause that covered any secrets of the Void Gate. In addition to that, there was a rule of not actively going against the Void Gate's interest within their domains.

The fuzzy wording, along with a couple of other phrases left Zac a bit stumped. While the contract was much more comprehensive compared to the one he signed upon entering the recruitment station, it was surprisingly vague in a lot of places. For example, 'actively act against one's interests' was much too imprecise to avoid being exploited.

Conversely, in the contract Catheya had him sign, there were all kinds of clauses added to that section, including various scenarios. But here, it was left open-ended. It would stop Zac from destroying their buildings or attacking their people, but it was too fuzzy for the System to intercede in most other cases.

For example, him picking up any valuable he could find wasn't directly working against the interest of the Void Gate, even if it was a strategic resource. It was just working on his cultivation. Neither would it be considered to be actively working against the Void Gate if he saw something untoward and decided to keep it to himself. It would be considered passively working against them at worst.

"No need to look so suspicious," Teo snorted when he saw Zac's frown. "It's a matter of cost reduction. Salosar is only one of our recruitment stations, we sign tens of thousands of these every day. The more stringent the clauses, the more we have to pay for them to be ratified. The Void Gate has money, but nothing is without limits. With our operating costs increasing recently, and with the beast tide hampering our revenue sources, we can't waste a fortune on every single mission."

Hearing Teo's explanation, Zac suddenly felt he had understood something – why they went through all this trouble at all. Could it be because of the war? With beasts occupying all these Mystic Realms, their supply lines had to have been thrown into chaos, which was absolutely not what you wanted to see when stocking up before a massive conflict.

Normally, they might have been able to deal with these beasts themselves. But with the deadline, they were forced to look for outside help to expedite the process.

"Alright then," Zac nodded as he accepted both the contract and quest.

A small smile spread across the face of the Marshal as he nodded with satisfaction. "Well, Gaun Sorom, welcome aboard."

"Glad to be here," Zac nodded.

Looking at the Hegemon's smile Zac wondered for a moment if there was something nefarious at play, but he eventually put those thoughts aside. He could somewhat feel how he had started getting bogged down by paranoia since taking this disguise. Being security-minded was good, but when you saw enemies in every shadow around you, you were bound to drive yourself mad.

Obviously, a faction would have its hidden motives and goals, but that didn't mean they were nefarious or targeting him specifically. He just needed to keep his head down and stay alert, and deal with things as they came.

The Templar suddenly waved one of his hands, prompting one of Vivi's cut-off vines to float over. "An extraordinary specimen, but your control is a bit crude. You're only controlling three of the vines properly."

"It's my limit, for now," Zac grimaced. "It's as you say. I might be able to control one more if I give it my all, but I've found more success when controlling three vines while releasing a large set of diversionary vines."

"This species, I don't recognize it. Where did you acquire it?"

"That's..." Zac said. "I'm sorry."

"Fine," Teo nodded. "Are you willing to part for it for the right price?"

"It's my greatest defensive measure for now," Zac said. "And I wouldn't dare trick lord Hegemon. While this plant is mighty, it is dying. I conferred with an expert who said that it's well past its pollination stage, and it will die in a century or so. It will not be of much use for an established faction."

"That's a shame," the Hegemon sighed. "Would you allow our researchers to investigate as well? They might find something your acquaintance did not. If we manage to clone it, we would be willing to give you a great commission."

"Of course," Zac eagerly nodded, though he knew it was a fool's hope on this man's part. If Heda said it couldn't be done, then no Void Gate researcher would be able to fare any better. Still, as a wandering cultivator desperately needing resources, he obviously wouldn't turn down a deal like this. "It would be my pleasure to assist in any way that I can. However, with its life being so brittle, I hope we can postpone until the threat of the beast tide is dealt with. In case something happens..."

"Of course, there is no rush," Teo shrugged.

'Good luck finding me after the beast tide is dealt with,' Zac inwardly laughed, but he simply nodded in agreement.

"Five more have applied for the task since you did, but I only expect two to pass," the Hegemon continued. "Then again, I might be surprised once more. In either case, I expect it will be a week before we set out. For now, stay within the compound and make your final preparations. We will provide you with some talismans and other useful items when we embark, but the rest is up to you. Any questions?"

"Can you tell me a bit more about the environment we will visit?" Zac asked. "The quests didn't quite specify."

"I am only allowed to share exact details of where we're going after the mission has started," Teo said. "But I can tell you that we will be within a powerful spatial energy field. That will attract certain spatial beasts, so I suggest a few extra space-sealing items. These kinds of talismans generally don't last long inside the Void Gate, but they can be surprisingly effective."

"Understood," Zac nodded, guessing it was a bit like when he used [Rapturous Divide] inside the Twilight Ocean. The ambient energy back there had supercharged the skill, making it both uncontrollable and deadly.

With that, they were done, and Zac left to prepare while Teo walked toward another sparring chamber. Zac spent the next couple of days in the research base waiting for his token to buzz. Most of the time was spent trying to delve deeper into the [Book of Duality]. He had reached a method Kalo called divergence, and Zac suspected the theories within were the foundation for, or at least related to, [Rapturous Divide].

It detailed how forcibly keeping two opposing forces separate could create a powerful field in-between, like how magnets would create a magnetic field. With the right techniques, this field could be condensed and manipulated in all kinds of ways. This trivia was more interesting than useful, but Zac did wonder if this concept could be somehow used for a life-death core.

It was a bit similar to the marks he had left on the trial wheel in Yrial's inheritance. The energies of his two attacks had fused back then, which had caused the energies to instantly go haywire and the disk to break apart. But if he kept the two sides separate, would his creation be stabler? Problem was, could you use the theories of a gap or a chasm as a basis for a Cultivator's Core? Would that leave you with a hollow core? A core with two halves, like a brain?

It seemed possible, but doing so would essentially halve the power it could exhibit, considering he'd only be able to use half the core at any given time. And what would happen if he had a pure miasmic half while staying in his human form? Zac remembered the nauseating feeling of absorbing just a couple of wisps of miasma from a crystal. With a proper core, would he continuously be poisoning himself? Would his Hidden Nodes even let the core stay intact?

Zac eventually shook his head and continued deciphering the characters. The greater the theoretical base he formed, the more options would present themselves.

Apart from his studies, he spent a couple of hours a day walking around, occasionally striking up conversations with the other wandering cultivators. He didn't find out much else of import, but he did hear one Late E-grade cultivator mention seeing a Half-Step Hegemon in his group teleporting away the moment the quest was done.

Most people were rather ferried back to Salosar on the Void Gate's dime to save on costs, but it was good to know there were available teleportation arrays inside the Void Gate as well. Zac also purchased a couple of space-sealing items from a store set up by the Void Gate themselves, along with an escape Talisman meant to be used in areas with strong Spatial Fields.

After three days, the recruitment station had grown a lot less crowded as squads set out one by one through teleporters, even though there was a constant stream of new arrivals. A second massive batch arrived on day five, and Zac's token buzzed three days later. It was finally time to go.

Zac immediately made a beeline for a building next to the administrative center – the mission command and teleportation room. Soon enough, he stood with a diverse group of cultivators in a private hall. All of them were emitting their auras, and it wasn't hard to tell that almost all of them were Half-Step cultivators. The only exceptions were four who emitted the especially condensed auras of Hegemons.

It went to show just how scarce even early Hegemons were on the frontier, especially among wandering cultivators. Facing the group of unaffiliated warriors was Teo and another three Hegemons standing behind him. There were two women and a man, all of them templars going by their similar sets engraved of armor.

There were also six hooded cultivators standing by their side, all of them emitting very weak pressure, meaning they were probably the researchers.

"Welcome, everyone," Teo said as he looked at the group of elites. "The Void Gate appreciates you braving the dangers to help us out. We will do our best to reciprocate your trust. For those of you who haven't met me, I am Teo Kastella, and I will be running point during this mission. With me are Kalo Taosa and Tyla Vesass, who will command one squad each. Finally, Havasa Yrvis, leader of the second-string defenders."

Zac glanced at Havasa, one of the two female templars. From the looks of it, she was at the peak of early Hegemony. But different from Teo's mountainlike aura, she gave off a fierce and bloody impression. Zac guessed she was an offensive warrior focusing on Strength like himself. She was probably the one responsible for executing any troublesome beasts who made it past the defensive perimeter, while the second-string cultivators kept the monsters restrained.

"There's only us?" a burly warrior asked with some confusion.

"The others are waiting for us inside the Void Gate," Teo explained. "If we brought all the members to this station, we would have been forced to climb on each other to move around. Now, this is your last chance to back down. The moment the mission starts, we will not abide deserters."

Zac glanced around, but not a single one raised any objections. He guessed any flaky people had been filtered out before this stage. Then again, the fine for breaking the contract early was pretty steep, and failing quests should be avoided when possible. Even if a quest didn't have any failure conditions, messing up a mission would lower your importance in the System's eyes, which could have all kinds of negative impacts.

"Alright then. We will make a jump into the Void Gate where we will have proper briefings and join up with our task members," Teo said, and the large teleporter behind him activated a moment later.

One by one, the wandering cultivators stepped inside, with the four early-stage Hegemons taking the lead. Zac recognized three of them from various intelligence packets, but the fourth one, a graceful woman with a dangerous gleam in her eyes, was completely unknown to him. Two of the others were famous wandering cultivators who had millennia of experience.

The final Hegemon was called Uzu Huso, and he had only broken through five years ago, which had caused some waves on Salosar Eight where he came from. After the Hegemons, the Half-Step cultivators entered, where an unofficial hierarchy formed pretty much automatically based on their auras.

This was a common occurrence among unaffiliated cultivators. They didn't have heritage or background to compare, so they kept it simple by comparing power and feats. In this scenario, the power level Zac had set for himself barely landed him in the top twenty. However, Zac could easily tell that if he went all out, only the experienced Hegemons would be able to put up a real fight.

Apart from his Titles, it boiled down to Dao. These Half-Step Hegemons had spent centuries, millennia even, squeezing out as much potential they could from their current level. But even then, it was obvious that they were just like the Real Gaun, stuck with Dao Fragments, with many not even having evolved them to Peak Mastery. There were just two Zac suspected to actually possess Dao Branches.

Still, a few of these warriors emitted respectable energy levels for a wandering cultivator, meaning they had probably encountered their fair share of opportunities during their lifetimes.

Zac stepped onto the teleporter when his turn came, and after a brief stint of darkness, he emerged in what looked like a balcony. However, on second look it was clear it was rather a viewing gallery inside some sort of enormous stone structure, where the outer wall had been replaced by a transparent array.

The others had already walked over to the edge to take in the view, and Zac flashed over as well.

"Holy crap," Zac muttered, not needing to pretend at all, even after having visited places like the Twilight Harbor.

The object that took up most of his field of vision was a large sun with a bluish hue. Judging by its proximity, Zac guessed the shielding array had some sort of dampening effects to prevent people from being blinded. Even then, Zac could both sense and see extremely powerful spatial fluctuations coming from within the star.

It almost looked like a heart that beat with spatial pulses, and Zac suddenly remembered the note left along with Leyara's 'gift', where she wanted to talk fashion and the future under the light of the Void Star.

Was this it?

However, while the star was impressive, it still paled in comparison to the rest of the view. It quickly became clear they weren't actually on some planet with a very close trajectory to the blue sun. Spaceships, ranging from monstrous leviathans over ten thousand meters long to thousands of smaller skippers that flashed back and forth in the void, filled his view.

If not for the distinct arrays and the archaic designs, Zac would have thought he had been teleported to a Technocrat base rather than some space fortress of a Zecia faction. As for himself and his squad, they hadn't appeared in a Cosmic Vessel like those that flicked about. Rather, they were standing in a tower of a mind-bogglingly huge construct.

To his sides, he saw five more towers like the one they stood in, each one reaching tens of thousands of meters into the air. They almost looked like beehives with gates the smaller vessels flew into, while the larger motherships were docked outside.

The towers were connected horizontally to an unfathomably large oblong structure far below, almost looking like chimneys of a steamboat. Was it actually a ship? Could it even be considered one at this

size? The scene was pretty shocking, considering this enormous construct wasn't the only one – Zac saw three more just like it far in the distance.

"Now this is a real faction," the warrior next to Zac muttered with wide eyes, his eyes glued to the scene. "Just being able to witness this was worth the trip."

"So many vessels, and each one is worth a fortune," another wandering cultivator added. "No wonder the Void Gate has the means to pay such generous bounties."

One by one, the wandering cultivators joined Zac and the others at the edge of the room, silently looking at the scene. Even the Hegemons looked gobsmacked at the means of the Void Gate, and Zac wasn't surprised. The resources of a proper C-grade force simply couldn't be compared to a D-grade one. Building a ship of this size would probably bankrupt the Salosar Cluster a couple of times over.

"Welcome to Zenith Vigil, one of our supply depots," Teo smiled.