

The Fall 866

Chapter 866: My Heart Belongs to the Dao

"This is just a supply depot?" a woman exclaimed. "Not a Core Ship?"

"The Void Gate doesn't employ Core Ships – we don't actually live in space," Teo smiled, clearly satisfied with the reactions of the crowd. "Zenith Vigil is mostly used as a relay station for the warriors of the Void Gate. I'm sure you've noticed the star over there. That's our target."

"I know various rumors and theories are floating about back at Salsosar," the captain continued. "But here's the truth. That there is the Void Star, and it's a central part of our heritage. In truth, it's not just a celestial object – it is something much more interesting. It's a gateway."

"All those mystic realms," a cultivator muttered.

"Exactly," the Marshal nodded. "This Void Star is not an entrance to one Mystic Realm – it holds thousands of realms. It is a unique object that superimposes innumerable dimensions. But now, something has gone awry. The realms the Void Star holds are being flooded with beasts, and some fundamental rules to travel between the realities within have become capricious."

"Most missions are pretty simple – to exterminate the beasts that have invaded and restore order. In our case, we are here to study, and hopefully repair, a node that is causing trouble. Meanwhile, the leaders are trying to investigate the source of the anomalies and the beasts."

"The spatial fields around the Void Star are too powerful for teleportation. Zenith Vigil is placed as close to our destination as possible, but we will have to go by ship the last stretch. When we enter the Void Star, we expect it will take two weeks to a month to reach the anomaly," one of the squad leaders added.

"For now, let's head to our vessel," Teo added. "The star is a lot further than it looks because of the dense spatial field around it. It will take three weeks before we reach it. While we travel, we will go over all the pertinent details of what you should expect inside."

"I heard previous squads had the opportunity to peruse the wares and public techniques at the Supply Depot before setting out?" Uzu, the wandering Hegemon, ventured.

"Unfortunately, it took too long to fill this squad. We are already late. You will have a chance to trade after we return instead," Teo said. "Now, let's go."

Zac reluctantly looked away from the breathtaking scenery and exited through a gate to the side with the others. They didn't need to go very far to reach their destination – one of the hangars was right next door, and it held a bulky vessel roughly the size of a soccer field. Its design was a lot rougher compared to the vessels the Creators had shown him, but that didn't diminish the strong impression it left.

Standing in front of it, Zac felt like an ant, and he almost salivated at the thought that his own ship would be at least three times the size of this monstrosity. The docking yard had normal gravity, yet the ship was silently floating in the air without releasing as much as a ripple, and the group embarked with the help of floating platforms that took them into the vessel.

“What kind of ship is this?” another wandering cultivator ventured when they had all boarded, finding themselves in what looked like a cargo hold.

“It’s nothing special,” Teo shrugged. “It’s a Templar transporter. Its only good feature is its resilience and shielding. Even Middle-stage Hegemons will find it difficult to break its defenses.”

“Should we expect an attack en route?” another cultivator asked.

“Normally, no,” Kalo, one of the seconds-in-command, said. “But when spatial anomalies are involved, you never know what can happen.”

“Everyone has a designated room matching the sigil on your tokens,” Teo continued as a map appeared above his head. “For now, feel free to walk around or get to know your squadmates. Your companions from the Void Gate have already boarded, you should be able to find most of them in the sparring chambers or the mess. We will start the first briefing in five hours in the communal area.”

The interiors of the unnamed vessel were quite simple – a third were sealed chambers that held the arrays for propulsion and defense, and another third were private compartments. That left some room for the cargo hold they found themselves in right now, two viewing decks, a couple of sparring rooms, the bridge, and a large multipurpose room that included social areas, including the mess hall.

With that, the four Hegemons left in the direction of the bridge, leaving the fifty wandering cultivators to their own devices. Some stayed on inside the cargo hold, discussing the Void Gate and Zenith Vigil in low volumes, while others went to explore.

Some walked in the direction of the sparring rooms with determined expressions, and it wasn’t hard to understand they wanted to fight with the templars. Others sauntered toward the mess hall. As for Zac and a few others, they made their way toward the viewing decks, not having seen enough of the view outside.

Zac chose the deck at the rear of the vessel since he was more interested in the Vigil Station than the Void Star – he would have more than enough time to study that thing over the coming weeks. There were already a couple of templars standing there, but they didn’t pay the wandering cultivators much heed. Zac greeted them with a small bow and got curt nods in return from roughly half of the warriors.

“We’re already moving,” one of the warriors next to Zac commented, and they hurriedly walked over to the window just in time to see their vessel soundlessly float out of the hangar.

There hadn’t been any recoil or force when the ship set off, and Zac hadn’t even sensed any energies from within the ship. The arrays that propelled the system had to be protected by a pretty powerful seal to not leak out a hint of energy.

Only a minute later did Zac finally see how the vessel moved – the ship was generating spatial pulses at the back of the ship. Every few seconds, they released a pulse, and it looked a lot like a stone dropped in a calm lake for a second before space stabilized again.

“It’s a localized spatial displacement configuration,” a voice next to Zac explained. “The ambient spatial energy in front of the vessel is absorbed, amplified, and released behind us, creating a smooth and mostly self-perpetuating momentum. The engine is very efficient and inexpensive to create, but these vessels only work in the vicinity of the Void Star.”

Zac turned over with interest, feeling the voice was a bit familiar. However, it wasn't Teo or one of the other leaders who had spoken, but rather another familiar figure.

"It's you?" Zac blurted with surprise.

Standing next to him was Vai Salas, the little nun who had suspected him of shoplifting when entering the recruitment station. She was wearing one of the hooded cloaks of the researchers who had wordlessly teleported over with the others, but she had taken off the hood hiding her facial features.

"We meet again," Vai said and performed a small bow. "It is quite the coincidence."

"Is it really?" Zac asked with a raised brow.

Had she followed him here? And if so, why? Had she noticed something amiss with him before?

"Ah, well," the nun hesitated. "I did not expect to encounter you again after our previous encounter. But when I saw your name in the mission manifest, it almost felt like fate."

"Don't go falling in love with me," Zac smiled at the timid nun. "My heart belongs to the Dao."

"That's- no," Vai said with a panicky expression as she bowed. "I'm sorry, I am not looking for a relationship. I have taken a vow with the covenant, and as such, I can't enter any relationships before reaching Hegemony."

"Stop, stop," Zac grimaced. "I was just joking."

"Oh," Vai said with a small blush. "I'm sorry, I am not used to talking with strangers. But I guess we will get to know each other better over the following months. What I meant to say earlier was that when I saw your name on the manifest, I asked the captain to assign you to me as my guardian. It felt like a sign from the Heavens encountering you twice, and I chose to listen to the will of the cosmos."

"So it was like that," Zac nodded. "I'll do my best. But uh, try not to get yourself in trouble, alright?"

"Of course," Vai smiled. "And don't worry. I am not one of the non-combat researchers. I can defend myself as well, or at least run away and buy you some time."

"So you're not a researcher?" Zac asked curiously.

"I am, in a sense," Vai said. "I reached an impasse early in my cultivation. So 1,200 years ago, I joined a special division researching the Void Star in hopes of finding some inspiration for my path. I didn't succeed, but I did find the work very rewarding."

"You're that ol- ahem, experienced?" Zac exclaimed, somewhat course-correcting upon seeing the pout on the nun's face. "Sorry, I am just surprised considering you mentioned it was your first time leaving home. With your strong aura, I thought you part of the young elites of your faction."

"I've spent most of my life in the monastery, and I haven't had much reason to lea-

"Ms. Salas, the Adjunct is waiting for us," another researcher interrupted as he walked over, his aura indicating he was a non-combat researcher.

"I am Gaun Sorom, it is nice to meet you," Zac said with a nod.

“Hm,” the man said before turning and walking away.

“I’m sorry,” Vai said with a weak smile. “The captain told me we ought to coordinate with our guardians, so I hope we can set up a sparring session during our journey?”

“Of course,” Zac nodded.

Zac wryly smiled as he saw the two walk away. The rumors certainly were true; some of these Void Gate cultivators really looked down their noses at the wandering cultivators. Then again, it wasn’t Zac’s problem. He wouldn’t explode in a fit of righteous indignation just from being disregarded, as some hotheads did. If anything, the less attention these people gave him, the better.

He wasn’t in any rush, so he kept looking at the enormous space station for a few more minutes, seeing how one vessel after another emerged or docked. Going by the size of the station’s main body and the constant traffic, Zac guessed millions of people had to come and go every week. Zac wondered how the Void Gate made that work.

The Orom had been forced to continuously hunt people and use their materials to maintain the ambient energy. Were the templars doing the same – were they forced to burn millions of Nexus Crystals every day to maintain the environment? Or were they able to make use of the Void Star somehow? Or were there perhaps arrays that could copy the process of World Cores, dragging energy from the cosmos?

Was that the meaning of the Core Ships that the woman mentioned earlier?

As marvelous as the view was, there were other things Zac needed to do – the first of which was to get to know the players in this squad. He might need the help of the Hegemons to complete his private mission, so he needed to start networking. He first made a quick trip to check out his compartment and found it was pretty decent. It was split up into two rooms with the outer room being a multipurpose room with a sofa set and a desk where a few books were placed. Zac looked them over, finding one contained information on the beasts of the Void Star.

The other one actually contained information on space. It was not really a treatise on the Dao, but it rather contained useful information that would help one understand what various types of ripples meant. The book was no doubt left there to prepare the outsiders for the environment of the Void Star and to avoid any preventable accidents.

After that, Zac made his way to the mess hall, where roughly sixty people had already gathered. It was pretty clear that camps had formed not only between the outsiders and the templars, but also within the wandering cultivators. Zac inwardly smiled, feeling his situation was a bit like being the transfer kid at a school cafeteria as he walked toward a table with ten wandering cultivators.

“Is this seat taken?” Zac asked, looking at a handsome man with two swirls of flames circulating above his head.

While most of the others had restrained their auras by now, Uzu made no attempts to hide his ascent into Hegemony – it was almost like he was afraid that someone would miss it. To his side, the dangerous-looking woman sat, silently sipping on some sort of hot brew that emitted dense waves of Cosmic Energy.

“Make yourself at home,” Uzu waved with a wide grin. “I’m Uzu, and this here is Lady Ilka, an experienced expert from Tanlovi.”

“Lord Uzu, Lady Ilka,” Zac nodded before looking at Ilka with genuine surprise. The Tanlovi Triumvirate was quite far from Salsosar, which meant she had to have come here with the help of the Space Gate Guild. “I’m Gaun Sorom, second string.”

“Gaun Sorom, think I heard about you,” a dour man on the other side of the table suddenly said just as Zac sat down. “Heard a rumor you got your hands on a trove at the level of a supreme treasure.”

“I wish,” Zac said with a wry smile, silently memorizing the features of the man causing trouble. “If I had supreme treasure, would I be taking on this kind of mission?”

“Now ain’t that the truth?” Uzu laughed. “I’m flat broke after barely breaking through. If not for the rewards, why would I take this mission instead of the simple beast-killing tasks?”

A few grunts of agreement echoed around the table.

“But I think we made the right choice,” the Hegemon added. “Analyzing the tasks with what we’ve learned so far, I think we’re heading for one of the higher-grade realms hidden within that celestial object. I believe the odds of us discovering bounty materials are pretty good. Might be a fate-changing opportunity, even.”

Zac nodded with some longing on his face, an expression that was mirrored among some of the others. The chances of these people stepping into Hegemony were almost nil, but it was clear they had not given up just yet. The others rather had a greedy glint in their eyes, probably hoping for the treasure so that they could finally retire to a life of luxury back on Salosar.

“Have any of you ever heard of these sorts of transforming realms?” another man asked.

This man looked a lot like a dwarf with his stocky frame and bushy beard, except he had more than a head on Billy. While the others sat on chairs, this man sat straight on the ground, yet he was level with the others. Going by his extremely leathery skin, Zac guessed there might be some ogre in his bloodline.

“Never,” Uzu said, and the others shook their heads as well soon enough.

There were some similarities between the Void Star and the Twilight Ascent, but they were ultimately different. For one, the Twilight Ascent was a system trial, and it was the System that had forcibly divided one Mystic Realm into three identical versions. This place rather felt much more complicated.

Eventually, everyone’s gazes turned to Ilka, the only other Hegemon at the table.

“It is definitely not a common occurrence,” Ilka slowly said. “If I had to guess, this is the only place in our sector with this kind of layered Mystic Realm. The Dravorak Dynasty has the Hundred Fates, but those Mystic Realms are simply serried rather than superimposed.”

“I cannot remember reading about anything like this in the archives either,” a scholarly-looking old man said. “It should be worth studying – it might be related to their strength.”

“Ka-Lu over there worked the gates of the Drix Archives for seven centuries, he’s probably one of the most well-read outsiders on this ship,” Uz nodded.

“You think it’s the source of their spatial heritage, rather than the other way around?” Zac asked curiously.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Ka-Lu smiled. “But it brings up some interesting questions, wouldn’t you say? A powerful heritage, a mysterious celestial object, and a faction that’s desperately gathering ancient remnants throughout the region.”

“You think it’s related to the Limitless Empire?” Uzu said, his voice reduced to a whisper.

“The Limitless Empire was powerful beyond our understanding. Creating something as marvelous as this stellar object should have been child’s play to them. Perhaps the Void Gate found a heritage of theirs somehow, but they cannot freely control it or excavate its deepest secrets. So they’re looking for clues among the ruins of Zecia.”

Zac looked at the old man with surprise, wondering if he really was onto something. He remembered how Leyara had stopped at nothing to purchase some random vase back in the Tower of Eternity, just because of its connection to the Limitless Empire. Ka-Lu’s suppositions also tracked with his own guesses about the Void Gate’s connection to his heritage and Emperor Limitless.

Come to think of it, there was one more factor which indicated Zecia might have more of a connection to the Limitless Empire than one should expect from a frontier sector. After all, it was here Leandra’s family had set up a research base looking into bloodlines. And it was here Leandra fled when their experiments failed – indicating the actual experiments might not have taken place too far away.

In theory, the Limitless Empire’s domains should have been the first thing to get integrated when the System awoke, but what if something happened, where certain parts of the empire were disconnected? Or even moved away for some reason?

“Remnants of the Limitless Empire? We better hope not,” the dour man muttered.

“Really? You’re not interested in the remains of the most powerful Empire in history?” Uzu asked with a raised brow.

“I’m interested in staying alive. Any realm or Heritage connected to the Limitless Empire, no matter how depreciated, would be a core secret of a faction – something even the powerful factions above Zecia would desire. If we’re exposed to such secrets, the odds of us making it out in one piece is almost nil, contract or no,” he shrugged. “The less we see, the better.”

The man’s words put a damper on the discussion, but his words weren’t without reason. They were ultimately just outsiders without powerful backing. Most factions would do whatever it took to protect their core secret – killing a couple of wandering cultivators was nothing. But Zac’s heart actually started to beat with anticipation rather than worry.

What if there really were clues to his heritage in this place?