

The Fall 869

Chapter 869: Landing

Having cleansed the compartment of any hints of his outburst, Zac made his way toward the cargo hold. By this point, more than half the cultivators had already arrived, and they wore a mix of somber and excited expressions. Vai was already there, and she scurried over to his side when she saw Zac emerge from one of the hallways.

"I heard something happened, are you alright?" Vai asked with worry in her eyes.

"Nothing to worry about," Zac smiled. "Just a little mishap, but I'm all better now."

"Just stay close to me after we disembark," she said with a low volume. "I can somewhat stabilize space around us until you're recovered."

"Thank you," Zac nodded. "I'll rely on you then."

It wasn't really necessary, but why turn down a kind gesture?

The minutes passed until the cargo hold was almost filled to capacity. Between support staff, researchers, outside hires, and Void Gate warriors, the squad had a total of 118 members, and they were all accounted for. Only the two pilots were missing, as they would take the vessel back to Zenith Vigil after dropping their squad off.

"Alright, people," Teo said as a helmet closed over his head and his Spirit Tools appeared in his hands. "Ready yourselves. You read the reports – the layer we're about to enter is controlled by beasts – we might be attacked the moment we arrive. From this moment forward, we are at high alert."

Zac cracked his neck as his backup axe appeared in his hand – a pseudo-D-grade mundane weapon he'd commissioned from Calrin. It didn't possess a Tool Spirit, but it had simple repair and sharpening arrays engraved. And with it containing over 10% D-grade metals, it was both heavy and sturdy enough to take the role of [Verun's Bite] for a short stint.

Even then, Zac had noticed the true value of Spirit Tools, apart from how they were noticeably stronger than their mundane counterparts. Both energy and Dao entered a spiritual weapon effortlessly. With Verun, every infusion felt like an extension of his body, whereas there was a noticeable resistance with the metal axe in his hand, even if it was expertly crafted.

It only meant a small delay in activating skills or infusing his weapon, but that could make all the difference in a heated battle. Still, it shouldn't matter much in this mission, considering the level of enemies he would get sent his way.

Two vines emerged from the tube on Zac's back, snaking around Vai's waist as she nervously fidgeted with her own Spirit Tool. The other second-string guards prepared similarly, though most of them used spiritual ropes that would prevent spatial fluctuations from separating them from their wards upon disembarking.

"It'll be fine," Zac smiled at Vai, and he got a weak smile in return. Zac wasn't too worried, but he wasn't surprised the little researcher was stressed out about what would come next.

As everyone prepared, the hatch at the bottom of the Cosmic Vessel soundlessly opened, and a wave of heat and spatial turbulence pushed into the ship. A blue inferno was visible below, a raging sea of fire. It was easy to forget as you read the reports of all the different worlds inside, but the Void Star was a real star apart from a container from all those Mystic Realms.

Normally, there would be floating platforms with stabilized Teleportation Arrays right at the edge of the celestial object that would take you into the Mystic Realms, just like how it worked back on Earth. However, with the erratic spatial fluctuations the Void Star had started releasing over the past years, it had become too risky to use those things.

Instead, the Void Gate used a more straightforward solution – to jump straight into the sun. It sounded insane, but it was actually a lot safer than using arrays at the moment. Apparently, the outer layers of Mystic Realms could be accessed simply by entering the corona, so you didn't have to withstand the heat for long.

And thankfully, the Void Gate were well versed in minimizing the danger by now, and Zac felt extremely powerful arrays hum to life inside the vessel. The next moment, a pillar of light descended unto the sun, quenching the fires that rose to lick the hull of the Cosmic Vessel. Zac's eyes widened in surprise, as the array exposed an opalescent bubble within.

Was that the barrier to the Mystic Realm?

"Gather up the moment you land," Teo said as he walked toward the hatch. "The mission officially starts now."

With that, the templar simply jumped down. From his body, a tremendous Dao Field burst forth, almost giving Zac the impression it was a whole mountain falling toward the barrier over a thousand meters below rather than a cultivator. It wasn't vanity that made him release his Dao Field like that though.

He was acting as an icebreaker. The ship's array had pushed away the flames, but it wasn't able to remove the continuous waves of Spatial Energy the Void Star exuded. But Teo's condensed aura pushed at least some of it away, making the passage safer for the rest of them. The first batch of soldiers followed immediately followed in the Templar's wake, after which the second captain repeated Teo's action to cleanse the area with their Dao.

Zac was part of the third batch, but he suddenly felt a huge wave of danger, a feeling that was soon confirmed by a blaring siren.

"EVERYBODY JUMP," Havasa immediately roared while the second co-captain of the first string threw out over fifty people in a go by generating a gust.

Zac was already on the move before Havasa had finished her sentence, his Danger Sense urging him to get out of there. Vai was dragged along screaming in fear, and the next moment they were falling toward the star below. Even then, Zac didn't feel safe, so he released a continuous series of bursts of energy to accelerate even further.

And it was lucky – just ten seconds later Void Star spat out a beam of blue flames with such speed that it almost looked like a laser. It contained so much energy that Zac couldn't even look at it straight, forcing Zac to close his eyes just as the pillar swallowed the ship whole.

Zac knew it was over for the transporter the moment he sensed the terrifying fluctuations within the spear of flames. Teo had mentioned the vessel could easily withstand the attacks of a Middle Hegemon, but that power was at the level of Monarchs. He could only urge himself further on as he dragged Vai into an embrace, just before a shockwave caused his insides to shift.

“Eat a healing pill,” Zac coughed as he looked at the little researcher who had essentially curled up into a ball before glancing up at the sky.

As expected, the Cosmic Vessel was mostly gone, partly scorched beyond recognition while other sections were simply gone, probably ripped into nothingness. That eruption had contained the Spatial Energy of at least a thousand [Void Balls], there was no coming back from that.

Thankfully, it looked like everyone had gotten out of the ship in time, with almost fifty people falling toward the Void Star above him. There was also burning shrapnel falling all around them, but that wasn’t enough to become a threat to Half-Step Hegemons. They simply slapped any burning debris out of the way in case it flew close.

“Don’t get distracted! We’re passing through,” Havasa’s voice echoed out in his ears, and Zac turned toward the opalescent barrier that was constantly flickering. “Synchronize now.”

There was no time to curse their bad luck or mourn the death of the two pilots who had ferried them here. Zac shook his ward to wake her up from her stupor, and they both activated the spatial talismans they’d been given. A flickering barrier enclosed him as a result, with thousands of foreign scripts forming dancing around.

Similar scenes took place around Vai, Havasa, and the other nearby cultivators as they fell toward the final barrier of the Void Star. Thankfully, the shockwave had pushed them close enough to the barrier that most of the flames hadn’t had time to return. The little that remained, was dealt with by the Hegemons unleashing their auras, which once more exposed the barrier within.

At this proximity, Zac could see that the flickering barrier wasn’t just random bursts of energy – the barrier was more akin to a fractured mirror, where each shard showed glimpses of a different world. There was everything from apocalyptic worlds where the air itself was on fire to underwater domains just like the Twilight Ocean.

Forests, fields, cities. There were even alien biotopes of all kinds that Zac had never seen before. One shard showed what seemed to be a pulsating spiral that almost seemed alive, with hundreds of thousands of beasts floating around it. However, each image only lasted a moment before it was replaced by another.

Soon enough, the barrier was right in front of him, and Zac’s heart hammered as he braced himself for another vision. Thankfully, he only felt a slight discomfort as he passed through. And the varied visions had suddenly been replaced by dense shimmering clouds that somehow stopped even [Cosmic Gaze] from working more than a few meters.

His pores opened wide as they were met with a mix of medicinal aroma and dense attuned energies that were a mix of Life and Nature. The ground beneath still wasn’t visible, but it felt like they had broken into paradise. However, that feeling only lasted a moment before his mind screamed of danger once more, and a huge claw appeared through the haze, aimed straight at him.

The talons of the claw were more than one meter long each, giving a clear indication of the size of the beast that hid within the mists. Still, there was no hesitation as a large leaf appeared in front of his axe, and he unleashed a lightning-quick attack on the incoming swipe. A grating sound echoed out the area as talon and fractal blade collided, and Zac frowned when the expected scene of the talon being cut off didn't happen.

His swing only left a surface wound, but it did push him and Vai further away from the beast. But even with such a powerful collision, the haze wasn't pushed away, and Zac still couldn't make out what had attacked them.

"Damn, it's a convergence!" Havasa's voice echoed through the clouds, now a lot more distant compared to before. "Everyone, you only need to hold on for a minute! The Spatial layers are weaker up here. As long as we pass through the clouds, you will be safe! If your Talismans run out of energy, use the backups or you might be lost to the other side!"

A despairing scream echoed out within the clouds the next moment, proving it was easier said than done to get through this second gauntlet. Zac sighed. With his track record, he should have figured out that things wouldn't go smoothly, but this was beyond what even he could have expected.

A convergence was when two Mystic Realms became superimposed. Normally, things like this didn't happen inside Mystic Realms as they were spatially protected bubbles hidden in the void. But with thousands of Mystic Realms stacked on top of each other, things apparently got messy, especially at the edges of the realms.

This time around, it looked they were unlucky, where their destination realm had superimposed with another one – one filled with aggressive birds, by the looks of it. Honestly, the loss of the Cosmic Vessel and the convergence were most likely related. Too much Spatial Energy had built up in this area, resulting in both the spatially infused solar flare and the convergence.

Thankfully, Zac could tell the beast that had attacked him was one of the weaker Beast Kings, and it shouldn't be a problem to keep it at bay. However, just as a huge beak ripped the clouds apart on its way to peck Zac to death, the whole beast suddenly rippled and disappeared.

Zac breathed out in relief as he turned to Vai who had once more entered her turtle stance with a small barrier protecting her. "Are you okay?"

"I'm ok- AAH TO THE LEFT," she shrieked, but Zac was already on the move.

Just as one beast disappeared in a puff of spatial confusion, another one had taken its place. Now, a weird-looking and almost completely translucent floating eel were swimming toward them, leaving ripples in its wake. Zac growled as a shimmering axe appeared inside a halo behind him.

Zac swung his axe, and a ruthless wave infused with his Branch of the War Axe parted the clouds, almost cutting the eel in two. It didn't die, but it was grievously wounded, and immediately turned tail and disappeared among the clouds.

It was [Conformation of Supremacy], a skill that Zac had somewhat phased out of his repertoire as of late since it wasn't a great fit with his stances. But now that he couldn't use his Branch of the Kalpataru,

it had found some use again, and he was thankful he had the foresight to push the skill to Late Proficiency during his stay in the Orom World.

The upgrade hadn't added any new abilities to the skill, but it had increased its power and reach noticeably. And with a Dao Branch fueling the image of the Heavenfall Autarch's unadorned axe, its strikes weren't anything to scoff at. It wasn't nearly as good at dealing with crowds as the explosion of blades [Nature's Edge] could release, but its lethality was close to half of [Rapturous Divide]'s while still being a repeatable attack.

The bird and the eel were dealt with, but Zac didn't release the avatar of the axe behind him as he looked around for new targets. Screams and roars filled the air, and with visibility being almost zero, the mental pressure was extreme. He even sensed auras that were well into Hegemony for a few short moments, but it looked like the more terrifying the beast, the shorter their visit to this layer was.

Even then, it felt like a terrifying Beast King could appear and strike at them at any moment, and Zac's Danger Sense could only predict so much. It could warn him when a beast was close or trying to attack, but it didn't warn him when a beast was about to phase into their dimension.

Over a minute passed as Zac fought off one beast after another while Vai tried to help by spotting spatial fluctuations around them. Finally, the shimmering haze around them was replaced by a burst of light as they pushed through the clouds. Below, they saw the first-string cultivators descending toward a seemingly endless field thousands of meters below.

They looked like little meteors, surrounded by those blue scripts that kept them locked to this current dimension until they reached the surface. Teo was still maintaining the lead, but the other captains were nowhere to be seen. Judging by the outbursts he had sensed within the clouds, he guessed they were trying to save as many people as possible within the convergence.

There were thousands of beasts gliding through the air, but Zac could sense that almost all of them were just E-grade. With the bloody aura of almost a hundred Half-Step cultivators and above, the flying beasts native to this dimension kept a wide berth around them.

Another three minutes passed as the ground grew ever closer, and Zac felt like his sense of perception had been all wrong. What had looked like fields of spiritual herbs was actually a jungle of massive proportions where each plant was either hundreds of meters tall or commanded an area of a whole village.

"So big," Zac muttered.

"It's the arrays," Vai explained from the side with a hoarse voice, finally having unfurled from her ball.

"This whole realm has been modified for hundreds of thousands of years, and there are growth and gathering arrays installed deep into the ground. But without Array Masters, Arborists, and harvesters to maintain the realm, it has grown out of control."

"They are big, but they're worthless," Vai sighed. "They are the equivalent of a cultivator whose levels are completely propped up by pills – full of toxicity and bereft of potential."

"That's a shame," Zac muttered before he looked at the researcher. "Some start, huh?"

“Thank you for saving my life,” Vai said as she looked crestfallen. “I can’t believe we ran into trouble so quickly. The Void Star must be more unstable than we expected for it to suddenly release spatial flares like that. What about the rest of the journey?”

“Well, this realm looks like we expected at least, right? We might be safe now that we’re properly inside the Mystic Realms,” Zac said, but he honestly shared Vai’s worries.

From the looks of it, the problems with the Void Star had suddenly ramped up beyond what the Void Gate had expected, and he couldn’t help but wonder if it was related to him and the vision he saw. And if that was the case, would he keep attracting trouble for himself and those around him?

But Zac perked up as he saw energy gathering around Teo, and he pushed those troublesome questions to the back of his mind. “Ready yourself. We’re about to land. I’m sure the captain knows what to do.”