

## The Fall 872

### Chapter 872: Waystation

Zac ignored the second-string captain's unlucky wording as he inspected the edge of the Mystic Realm. It looked a bit like the opalescent film they had passed to enter this realm, but it somehow seemed far more solid and gave no hint of what was on the other side. It was the dimensional bubble that, in theory, kept this realm apart from the Main Universe.

In a normal Mystic Realm, this kind of barrier was extremely sturdy, and pushing through it was much harder than phasing between dimensions with a Cosmic Vessel. It contained extremely powerful Spatial Energies that would rip most people apart if they tried. It was half of the reason Mystic Realms were so difficult to invade, with the other half being the difficulty of actually locating them in the Void, with distances and directions working differently there.

Here in the Void Star, those rules were far more malleable, but they still couldn't just pass through these inner walls with the help of a talisman. They needed to open a gate, which was why the waystations had been erected. Zac curiously followed the templars into a hidden cave protected by multiple layers of still-working arrays.

They went deeper and deeper into the depths of the Mystic Realm, but thanks to the illumination arrays and generous dimensions, the tunnel didn't feel oppressive at all. Eventually, they reached a large cave that would be able to house thousands of people if they squeezed together. Now, it was empty, with most of the waystations being unmanned for the past years.

There were dozens of doors to the sides, but Teo led them straight ahead toward a large gate on the opposite side from the entrance. But before stepping through, he stopped at one of the array consoles that lined the walls.

"We mentioned these waystations in the briefings – this is one of five stations in this Mystic Realm. If you for some reason get separated from the squad, your best bet to survive is to find one of these. Your token will grant access through the arrays," Teo Explained as he activated the console behind him.

Soon, a huge map appeared that looked like just over a hundred circles of varying sizes. A smaller circle at the top was blue whereas the others were green, indicating their current location. Within the blue circle, there was a small red dot, which no doubt indicated the waystation they found themselves in. Connected to the station, there were four lines, three of which led to other circles deeper in the map, while one led to another one at the outermost layer.

"This is the local chart, and it will tell you your options to leave or catch up to the rest of us. The exit arrays are clearly noted," Teo said as he pointed at Mystic Realm two circles over which had the mark of a teleportation array in the middle. "Of course, your best bet might be to simply stay put until another squad passes through. If the realm is overrun, these waystations might be the safest spots around."

"How do we find these waystations?" a wandering cultivator asked. "I saw no markers on the way here."

"Your tokens have a weak array installed that can pick up the signals from these stations. Just infuse some energy occasionally and pray that the signal isn't blocked out by turbulence. If that's the case, you can only search by foot by wandering the edge of the Mystic Realm," Teo explained.

“Don’t bother memorizing the chart,” Havasa added when she saw the wandering cultivators studying the map. “It will keep changing as the realms move and rotate. For example, this waystation is generally pointed toward the depths of the Void Star today, but in a month it will point toward the outer edge, making it useless.”

“Why can’t we use waystations to leave?” another warrior asked. “If it points toward the edge...”

“Look at the Void Star as a large balloon with multiple smaller balloons inside. It’s not enough to break through the barrier of the smaller balloon,” a researcher explained after getting a glance from Teo.

“That would only result in you entering an extremely chaotic void within the Void Star. To leave, one needs to find the few spots where outer and inner barriers merge, allowing us to break through everything at once.”

“That’s why we landed where we did, rather than just arriving right in front of this waystation,” Teo added. “There are a limited set of options when coming and going, with teleportation not working at the moment.”

After having showcased the console, Teo opened the huge gate. Within, they actually saw the shimmering wall of the Mystic Realm, with three stone gates installed right at the edge of it. They weren’t active right now, but Zac guessed they could be tuned to connect this realm with whichever one of those four neighboring realms you wanted.

However, something was clearly wrong with this place. The inner chamber was marred with splotches of blood and scars on the ground. There were a few consoles to the side, but most of them had been destroyed as well. There were even cracks on one of the three gates, and Zac really hoped that wasn’t the one they needed to use.

“Around a month ago?” Havasa muttered with a frown as kneeled over a spot of dried blood. “But who? I don’t remember any squads slated to use this station in this timeframe.”

“Probably a squad on the way out with extensive losses, forced to take an alternative route,” Teo grimly muttered as he took out another token. “The array is functional, but they didn’t turn it off? No status report was inscribed either. Both captain and vice-captains were likely to have fallen. Perhaps a battle over some treasure erupted now that they were approaching the exit.”

The outsiders stood and watched on in silence as the templar walked over to a pane hanging open and swapped out four exhausted Low-grade Cosmic Crystals and a Spatial Crystal. Hearing the conversation, Zac felt a bit troubled, but since none of the templars seemed too bothered about the apparent breach of protocol, there wasn’t anything he could say or do.

Some peacetime protocols might simply have fallen through because of the chaotic situation within the star. Still, this scene was a clear indication of just how strained the situation was, and Zac was inwardly relieved he had brought all of the Spatial Crystals he had in his possession. That way, he’d be able to operate these gates even if he ran into a situation similar to this one.

Teo walked over to a console next, and the left gate shuddered to life without any issue. It seemed to function a lot like the spatial portal Kenzie had opened up with the drill back in the Mystic Realm, where it essentially looked like a doorway. On the other side, there was an identical room to the one they stood in, though it was in much better shape.

“Let’s go,” Teo said and stepped inside himself, passing through.

The wandering cultivators hesitated for just a moment, before following suit. This time around, there were no surprises, and one after another they walked into the neighboring dimension. Zac was one of the last to pass through, and he braced himself just in case as he walked forward, where he kept his bloodline and aura tightly sealed.

And it was lucky he did, since the moment he stepped onto the ground of the other world, a pulse passed through his body to welcome him. It was still that solemn aura of antiquity, hinting at boundless possibilities. In fact, the pulse this time was even stronger than the last, more palpable and corporeal.

It really felt like he was actually moving closer to whatever emitted this signal. Thankfully, Zac had learned his lesson from the previous time this happened, and he barely managed to restrain himself before he accidentally activated [Void Zone] again. Even then, he found Vai looking at him with confusion, and he realized he had frozen in place mid-step, right in front of the spatial gate.

“That simple?” Zac coughed as he walked over. “We passed between Mystic Realms just like that?”

“It’s not always this simple,” Vai explained. “Some realms are not as closely connected, where we have to walk through a space tunnel. Those can be a bit dangerous from what I’ve read. And like we saw before, there might be convergences that force us to fight our way into the waystations.”

Zac nodded as he looked around the room. It might look identical, but there was no mistaking this was another world going by the completely different ambient energy. For one, the room felt like an oven with sweltering heat. There were fire-attuned energies in the air as well, indicating what kind of world they had reached. However, something was a bit off.

“The ambient energy seems kind of low?” Zac asked.

The ambient energy was equivalent to an E-grade world rather than a D-grade, and not even a peak planet at that. No matter if it was beasts or treasures, there couldn’t be much of value here unless it had been teleported in.

“The energy will be higher in the center of the world, but you’re right. Not all the Mystic Realms are useful,” Vai nodded. “Some are mostly used as bridges. This one should be much safer than the last, unless something unexpected happens.”

“What if the waystations or the gates break?” another warrior asked as the spatial gate closed behind them. “Would we be stuck?”

“These waystations are equipped with spatial stabilization much stronger than the talismans we used,” Kalo, the first-string vice-captain, grunted. “They are designed to withstand a convergence. But if some sort of spatial turbulence has made them impassable, you can use talismans to swap over to the other realm. Sometimes.”

“Will be a bit of a gamble which of the connected realms you enter though,” Havasa grinned to the side. “So you’ll have to decide whether to take a leap of faith or make your way to the next waystation. Most realms have more than one.”

“But what if...” another cultivator hesitated.

“I know we encountered some setbacks at the start, but the situation is not that dire,” Teo said. “And any layer we enter will have at least one working station, no? If the gate on the other side is broken, we wouldn’t be able to enter that layer at all. If all else fails, your final chance at survival is to make use of the breaches. Most of them lead to other layers in the Void Star rather than into the unknown.”

The wandering cultivators grimaced at that, but they didn’t argue the point. Ultimately, they knew what they had signed up for – any mission had a very real chance of dying.

As for the breaches, they were the reason for the chaos in the Void Star. They took all kinds of forms, from huge tears opening out of nowhere to stable gateways that shouldn’t exist with how the Void Star worked. Of course, convergences could be counted to this as well, though they were rather an old occurrence.

It was through these breaches that the alien beasts came pouring out, wreaking havoc on the Void Star and the Void Gate’s arrangements. The unknown Teo mentioned was the original source all these beasts originated from as they spread through the thousands of Mystic Realms. The outsiders had never gotten a clear answer exactly where that was, and from what little the wandering cultivators had managed to squeeze out of the templars and researchers, neither did they.

“We’ll rest here for two hours,” Teo said as he glanced at his vice-captains.

Zac and the others simply sat down and recuperated while the captains left to discuss some things by themselves.

“What’s going on?” Zac asked with a low voice when he saw Vai look at the three hegemony with a frown.

“It’s...” Vai hesitated.

“Ms. Salas,” another researcher coughed.

“Ah, nothing,” Vai said and quickly closed her eyes.

Zac frowned in thought, but he simply closed his eyes. Was there something else to the bloody scene in the other waiting room? Or some issue Teo had noticed through that command token of his? But soon enough the leaders returned, their expressions calm as though nothing was wrong. Two hours later they departed, and Zac finally got to take in the second Mystic Realm in the Void Star.

There were no expansive vistas to speak of, only an oppressive path that almost felt like a tunnel with the sky being dark red. There was no sun either, and most of the light actually came from small creeks of superheated water that glowed with a radiant orange. At least Zac presumed it was water, since it definitely wasn’t lava.

To the sides were some sort of extremely dense thorns reaching tens of meters into the air, and Zac couldn’t be certain if they were alive or dead calcified plants. They emitted a weak hint of life, but that was overwhelmed by a raging fire attunement that ran through the thorny branches. There were no signs of wildlife in the area either, either on the ground or in the air.

Zac still kept his eyes peeled as the group entered the pathway that had clearly been cut through the thorns, acting as though some terrifying beast could jump through the brambles at any moment. It was

not only him. After the unexpected losses in the outer layer, where they only expected some minor resistance according to the missive, everyone was waiting for the next disaster to arrive.

Thankfully, half a day passed with only the occasional attack of Middle or Late E-grade beasts until they reached an enormous lake that was almost blinding from the amount of light it released. It seemed to be both the destination and the source of the endless creeks and rivers of glowing waters, and Zac walked over and dipped his hand into it. It was slightly viscous like oil, but otherwise it wasn't too different from fire-attuned water.

"This is the Hako Lake. It will take us around four days to traverse it," Teo said as three massive barges appeared in front of him. "There are quite a few beasts within, but there is only a handful of Beast Kings in the whole lake. Between our auras and the arrays on these barges, attacks are quite rare. This is also the first location where you are free to explore – some precious metals and fire-attuned plants can be harvested here."

"We're still doing exploration after the initial losses?" Uzu exclaimed to the side.

"Of course," Teo nodded. "We will have to be a bit more restrictive with how many set out at a time, but otherwise the rules are the same."

This was one of the perks of joining the missions. Some layers were so dangerous that everyone needed to stay together, while others had some safer regions that could be explored by the wandering cultivators. Of course, safety was always relative in the Mystic Realms, and a third of the projected casualties came from these solitary excursions.

It was not from blind generosity the Void Gate hired more people than they needed and then allowed them to look for treasures in their Mystic Realms. With most of the Void Star unsecured at the moment, their normal harvesting methods didn't work. This way, the Void Gate could harvest some of the strategic resources they needed without losing any of their own warriors.

And if a couple of wandering warriors died to make it happen, it only meant they saved money.

"But remember, this lake has some Beast Kings even in normal conditions, so if you're not confident, don't stray too far from the barges," Havasa added. "And if you sense any powerful spatial fluctuations, immediately return. It is probably a breach opening."

With that, the squads set out, with one Hegemon placed at both the stern and the bow of each barge to make sure no beasts dared swim close. Even then, there was more than one creature that swam close by to see what was going on. At first, Zac wasn't interested in looking for some materials at the bottom of the oily lake, and it looked like quite a few of the wandering cultivators were of a similar mind after the experiences in the previous layer.

However, after half a day Zac's eyes shot open. It was here.

It was the aura of his visions, there was no doubt about it. It was weaker than the pulses, but it was pervasive. It could only mean one thing; there was something at the bottom of Hako Lake. Something related to either the enormous castle or the hidden courtyard. It beckoned him like a siren's call from the depths.

It looked like he would get his answers sooner than he'd expected.

