

The Fall 876

Chapter 876: Negative Spiral

Zac, like most of the other cultivators, released a pent-up sigh of relief as he stepped through the dimensional gate to the third Mystic Realm. They had already been somewhat safe after reaching the waystation, but the way those frenzied cockroaches seemed able to absorb energy, he believed it was just a matter of time before the defensive arrays failed.

He felt a bit apologetic that they had been hounded for days without reprieve, but at least everyone was alive. Of course, if the others found out he was the reason that two-thirds of the squad members had painful bite marks across their whole bodies, they would probably pummel him to death.

Only the Hegemons and the strongest Half-Step Cultivators were spared, which was saying something considering most of the critters weren't even E-grade. But when there were billions of them forming a swarm that blotted out the sky, even F-grade roaches could take you out.

It was a tide in the true sense of the word. Every critter would exhaust a small amount of your energy, and they were endless. Eventually, you would be exhausted, at which point the stronger roaches would breach your defenses and start ripping you open. This was a type of tide that many feared even more than Beast Kings, and Zac remembered Ogras telling him how a rat tide had taken out a whole capital on his home planet.

At least that was over with since there was no way the roaches would be able to hound them across layers. Unfortunately, the relief didn't last long. Even if his mind was preoccupied with the churning sea of energy-feeding roaches, he still remembered to brace himself for another pulse. But even after waiting for half a minute, not so much as a whiff of that ancient aura greeted him.

There was only the ambient energy a slight electric charge. A world of thunderstorms, perhaps? Of course, Zac didn't really care what kind of Mystic Realm they had arrived in. He was far more worried about the lack of guidance from the ancient remnants of the Left Imperial Palace. What now?

Seeing as the piece of rubble could guide him through multiple Mystic Realms, he'd assume he would get another pulse leading him toward the next, especially now that he even got a related quest. That had been too optimistic. Was there really only one piece inside the Void Star? Or was the next piece of rubble too far, forcing him to explore more realms?

"We won't pass by the realm where those buggers came from, right?" a cultivator hesitantly asked after everyone had taken a breather.

"No, and we'll not pass through this realm on the way back" Teo grunted, clearly a bit annoyed.

Zac could understand the sentiment. Things kept going sideways for the poor captain. He had also been forced to continuously use his defensive skills for days to protect the group, and he was visibly pale from the energy expenditure.

"With our dash, we're ahead of schedule. We'll rest here for half a day before continuing," the leader continued before taking over a corner to rest.

Zac inwardly breathed out in relief as he sat down. It looked like the death of the dour scout had been pinned on the beast tide rather than him, with no one making any trouble. Teo had simply asked everyone who had been in the waters during the breach if they'd seen Kuru, to which everyone shook their heads.

The relief didn't only come from his activities not being found out – he needed the rest. His energy reserves were shocking for his level, but he was ultimately just an E-grade warrior. Without a core, he couldn't compare to even Half-Step Hegemon in energy reserves. And since he was one of the warriors, he had been forced to protect the researchers who only needed to keep running.

With his free hand, Zac took out the [Book of Duality] and started to read through the first four chapters again. He quickly found there wasn't any need – after his epiphany, it was like the ideas and concepts were imprinted into his brain. There was no need to digest what he'd read.

Instead, Zac started to go over the last three chapters. He didn't bother trying to comprehend the truths hidden inside. As long as he memorized every page, he would be able to decipher them in case he suddenly ran into another part of the seal. The hours passed, and by the time it was time to go, the pages were memorized and his energy was mostly restored.

Everyone else looked a lot better as well, with the bite marks covering their faces healed, but the atmosphere was still a bit subdued as they set out again. Thankfully, they only needed to worry about the weather in the third realm, with the occasional thunderbolt striking down at them. However, their force was nothing compared to real tribulation lightning, and they were easily dealt with.

After its initial hiccups, things started to return to normalcy – for a high-danger mission into a weird multi-dimensional star, that is. Days turned to weeks, and Zac's worries quickly became reality as not a single one of the realms they traversed contained any remnants of or clues to the Left Imperial Palace.

The same was true for the naturally-appearing breaches they encountered on the way. Zac had been hoping to at least get some confirmation more pieces existed through the breaches, even if he wasn't planning on jumping through. Unfortunately, the only thing pouring out of those spatial tears were more beasts.

Over the next eight Mystic Realms they crossed, they encountered huge spatial tears in three, and while none were as bad as the insect tide, they all contained shocking numbers of agitated animals. Zac felt it very odd – why were there always animals on the other side? It wasn't like every Mystic Realm contained huge numbers of animals, only the wild ones did.

So why didn't any tears open up, only for them to lead to some dead Mystic Realm? Neither was there any indication that these beasts were brought by the System – when it did, it always awarded the defenders quests. Was there something about these seemingly overpopulated realms that led to the breaches? Zac had no idea, and the Templars didn't seem interested in sharing their theories either.

Apart from the breaches, the squad also encountered a tremendous spatial ripple that left a vast convergence in its wake. It covered half the Mystic Realm, forcing them into a day-long and extremely confusing battle where beasts kept popping up out of nowhere and disappearing a moment later.

Even with all this chaos around them, Zac spent most of his time going over the [Void Vajra Sublimation] in his mind. In contrast to the chapters of the [Book of Duality], the epiphany had only illuminated the

path for this idea. Actually creating a working method was terrifyingly complex. It would probably require another epiphany, but he wanted to solve some pieces of the puzzle before that.

It was just like eating a Dao Treasure – the more he managed to sort out beforehand, the more he could make of the opportunity. The more Zac thought about the idea, the more sure he was that this was the right way to go. It was not only about protecting his path either. Incorporating the concept of the void into the method should drastically reduce the risk of the method clashing with his Bloodline.

That was the biggest risk apart from having his path broken, but this idea would essentially turn the high-compatibility method into a Body Tempering Manual uniquely suited for only him. Unfortunately, he couldn't try out his theories during the mission, so he could only run simulations in his mind.

Others weren't so free that they could turn their sight inward and ponder on their path. The environment grew increasingly hostile as they progressed deeper into the Void Star. The first casualties, apart from Kuru's unfortunate disappearance, since the initial convergence came when they encountered the second breach. An endless number of beasts, both flying and landlocked, came flooding out, including dozens of Beast Kings. Not even Teo and his vice-captains were able to completely control the avalanche.

There were simply too many beasts, and they hadn't managed to force their way out from the encirclement even after furiously fighting for hours. The first-string cultivators were overwhelmed, and more and more beasts had to be let through their outer perimeter to be dealt with by the second-string cultivators.

Because of this, a dying Beast King managed to kill one of the defenders with its last breath before Havasa had the chance to take it out. Its final attack even ripped the arm of the researcher the templar was protecting. One of the first-string cultivators fell half an hour later, and by the time they managed to escape, another two had such grievous wounds they would be unable to fight for weeks even with Kantomir's ministrations.

Like that, Zac got a second ward; the nun whose arm had been ripped off. Zac was pretty much the most powerful second-string cultivator, so he had to take on a slightly greater burden. It wasn't that he had revealed more of his power – it was simply a result of having a Dao Branch. His Branch of the War Axe drastically increased his lethality, allowing him to kill most beasts in a single swing while others required multiple attacks to kill the sturdy beasts.

More than one wandering cultivator had approached him during their travels, hoping to glean some sort of insight from how he'd managed to finally form a Dao Branch after centuries of being stalled out. Unfortunately, they could only leave in disappointment after Zac said he'd found a natural treasure that both increased his affinity and forced a breakthrough.

Five more members of the squad, four warriors and one researcher, had died by the time they closed in on their destination, and another three were so wounded they had to be carried. In other words, they had essentially reached a casualty rate of 20% already, after less than half the mission was completed. From here, they would need to guard the Spatial Anomaly for up to a month and then return to the surface.

As things stood, Zac doubted they would be able to make it out within the advertised 30% casualty rate. With fewer and fewer warriors being fit to fight, the pressure on the others would increase, creating a negative spiral.

Thankfully, not every Mystic Realm they passed were dangerous. One was completely void of enemies, while another had been cleared out by one of the large roving armies just two weeks ago. It was a shame they had already moved on. If not for the mission taking so long to fill up, they would have been able to add to their roster from the massive army. But with their squad already running a bit late, they couldn't spare the time to move two realms over and fetch new members.

Finally, after close to a month of traversing inhospitable realms, endless bloodshed, and weird spatial events, the squad finally reached their destination realm. Like a dozen times before, Zac prepared himself for a pulse as he stepped through the Spatial Gate, but just like every time since the events at Hako Lake, there was nothing.

By now, Zac's disappointment had started to taper down, and he had somewhat guessed he would have to look for the other pieces of the seal elsewhere. Instead, he turned his attention to the bangle on his arm, and the news was a lot better there.

As the squad had moved deeper and deeper into the Void Star, the ambient spatial energies had grown denser. By now, it could be sensed on top of the ambient energy no matter where you went, and the environment had a startling effect on the escape treasure he got from the System.

Since Zac pushed a mote of Chaos into it, the bangle had been in an unresponsive state. Turbulent energies still lingered within, though they had degraded from pure chaos to all kinds of other concepts. Luckily, the bangle wasn't some random item he'd picked up at an auction. It was provided by the System itself as part of a top-grade evaluation of his performance during the Integration.

After two months of dormancy, it was finally showing signs of recovery, and the spatial energies in the atmosphere were speeding up the process. As things looked right now, Zac wouldn't need to find some artificer to repair it. It was just a matter of time before he could use it again.

That was great news for him since the [Flashfire Flourish] was essentially only a superior version of an escape talisman. It put an enormous distance between you and your pursuers, but after that, you were on your own. Any pursuer that could force him to run for his life also had a decent chance of seeing through the obscuring effects of the item given enough time.

But as long as the escape bangle was up and running, that problem would be solved. The feature that would instantly return him to Earth was still on cooldown for another decade, but he would be able to take out a Teleportation Array and go anywhere he wanted. By the time his pursuers managed to catch up, he'd be long gone.

There were still some ways before the bangle reached a level where Zac would dare use it, but perhaps spending some time next to a spatial anomaly would speed up the process even further. Judging by the atmosphere, they'd be drenched in spatial energies for the next foreseeable future.

"Alright," Teo said after the spatial gate closed behind them, while Havasa took out a large box. "Good job getting here, everyone. We will stay in this realm for a while, and there are some things you need to know. There normally aren't too many dangers in the form of beasts in this realm, but there are some

other things you need to be wary of. The spatial energies are quite strong, especially close to the anomaly, which leads to some odd phenomena.”

Next, the Templar captain took out a metal bracer from the box showing it to the warriors before he attached it to his wrist. “These are Space Anchors, and they’ll be your best friend in this Mystic Realm. We didn’t distribute them before since they’re frankly quite expensive, and we need all of them back after the mission is completed.

“They have two uses. First, it has an array that works a lot like stabilization talismans we used to enter the Void Star. In case the weather gets bad, these things will protect you.”

“The weather?” a warrior asked with confusion.

“Spatial storms,” Teo clarified. “Waves of rampant Spatial Energies that can send part of your legs to the Void, your head to another Mystic Realm, while leaving your torso untouched. These things will make sure you guys are not split up. Literally.”

“However, some storms are too powerful, and they can whisk your whole body away,” Havasa added as she equipped one of the anchors herself. “So if it suddenly looks like the whole world around you starts to twist and distort, immediately activate the array on these things.”

A shimmering blue band of energy shot out from a gem the next moment, stretching across the whole waiting room before slamming into... nothing. Five meters from the wall, spatial cracks appeared in the air while a deep energy barb had dug into the cracks. It really looked like an anchor, though it seemed to rather have the functionality of an ice pick.

“This will hopefully keep you in place until the storm passes,” Havasa said before shaking her hand, prompting the anchor to dissipate.

After learning of the possibility of one’s body getting disassembled by a gust of wind, the warriors didn’t need to be told twice to put one of the bracers on. After activating it, Zac felt a thin film of spatial energy ensconce him. It didn’t cost him a lot of energy either, since it seemed to draw power from the surroundings.

Most people, Zac included, also activated the anchor function to make sure they hadn’t been given a dud. After that, they all set out, but they didn’t get far before they stopped to take in this new Mystic Realm they’d entered.

“What the-“ Zac muttered as he looked at the chaotic scene.

It felt like he had entered a theme park’s house of mirrors, with dozens of disjointed vistas filling up his vision. Most of them depicted a magical forest with blue leaves and undergrowth, but they were disjointed. It looked like he was shown fifty different parts of the forest at once, along with some surrounding bushland.

“The world isn’t actually fractured,” Teo said as he started walking forward. “It’s an illusion brought by the Spatial Anomaly and the dense Spatial Energies in the atmosphere. You don’t need to worry that a wrong step will teleport you away. You’ll know when an actual fracture appears by its powerful fluctuations.”

It was pretty nauseating to have your surroundings continuously twist and distort, but otherwise, the realm wasn't that bad. They encountered three spatial storms over the next few days, but the Space Anchors worked wonders, allowing them to effortlessly tide them over. If anything, the bracers grew stronger in the middle of the storm as they absorbed the dense energies within.

There weren't a lot of creatures in this weird world either, mostly some spectral-like flying beasts that didn't seem interested in attacking the group. Still, this was the layer where he might run into his target – the Ferric Worldeaters, so Zac kept his eyes peeled. But eventually, they crossed a large ridge, and when Zac saw a weird object far in the distance, he knew he'd have to go hunt for one during his days off.

Because they had reached the Spatial Anomaly.