

The Fall 877

Chapter 877: Spatial Cortex

When the mission mentioned a spatial anomaly, Zac had envisioned something like a permanent spatial tear or perhaps one of those bubbles that he'd seen inside the Technocrat Mystic Realm. Only now did he realize that his imagination was lacking. Then again, the description of the task along with the Templars' comments were laughably downplayed, and judging by the scrunched-up faces of some of the other freelancers, they carried similar sentiments.

The first thing they saw were four rings of pure spatial turbulence, like the rings of Saturn except they rotated at different degrees and distances from the anomaly itself. They were crackling with barely constrained power, which created a both harrowing and beautiful scene where they kept seeing flashes of distant worlds.

Apart from the glimpses into the beyond, they presented a different danger – they kept spitting out condensed balls of space storms at their surroundings like an automated defense. It made Zac infuse a bit of energy into his Space Anchor just to confirm it was still operational – he wouldn't want to enter that area without it.

Within the rings, the anomaly itself hovered in the air on full display, and it was unlike any phenomena Zac had seen before. It consisted of thousands of strings that together formed a spherical intricate mesh that hovered in the air. At least Zac thought it was spherical. The strings kept moving to reform the ball, but Zac felt like he was looking at one of those images with impossible shapes.

It kept twisting in on itself with impossible angles, almost making Zac's brain short-circuit. Zac was by no means an expert in physics or the like, but he guessed that the anomaly was not a three-dimensional item. It worked in dimensions that at least Zac had no method to process – perhaps you needed to be a Spatial Cultivator to understand what was going on.

Apart from the seemingly impossible shapes, the anomaly reminded Zac of the synapses in a brain, and there were even powerful spatial currents running through the threads like the electric pulses in a brain. Or perhaps it could be likened to a star chart, where each bulbous node at intersections represented worlds or Mystic Realms.

But what was it? A natural formation? An energy construct? A plantlike being? A beast? Zac honestly had no way to tell, no matter he tried to suss out the materials it was made from or its purpose. But at least it didn't look manmade, considering no runes or arrays were covering the threads.

"This is called a Spatial Cortex," Teo explained when he saw the confused faces of the group.

"Essentially, they are natural formations born from the Void Star, and they play an essential role in our ability to control and traverse its layers. This one has been acting up lately, and we're here to deploy a gap measure to stabilize it."

"Gap measure?" Uzu asked from the side with trepidation in his eyes.

Zac could understand the sentiment. No matter if you considered the eruption he caused in Hako Lake or the subsequent breaches they'd encountered, they had become all-too-familiar with the terrifying

power of space. And now they were supposed to muck around inside this weird, complex, and terrifyingly energy-dense space brain?

That sounded like a recipe for disaster.

“The Formation is perfect as it is, but with the Void Star releasing unusual amounts of energy, there are risks it will be overloaded. So, we will install a series of shunts that will divert excess energy into the void, which should help stabilize the thing until the higher-ups have figured out the root cause of all these changes,” Teo explained.

“We understand your worries, but these are not some hastily thought-up solutions,” a somber man said as he stepped forward.

It was Rakosta Kau, the chief researcher on this mission. He was a Hegemon himself, and Havasa had personally protected him during most of the trip, proving his status and value to the Void Gate.

“These measures were invented and deployed hundreds of thousands of years ago when we faced a similar issue, and they have been even further improved since,” Rakosta continued. “Of course, you are not expected to assist with the modifications either. This is the third installation I oversee, and this cortex seems to be quite stable still.”

“So what’s our job?” another cultivator asked as she looked around at the empty fields. “Not much to do here.”

It was true. There was not a beast in sight, which wasn’t a surprise with those spatial rings. The local wildlife had probably figured out that this area came with a lot of danger and little rewards long ago.

“Our modifications will produce temporary bursts in energy, resulting in several temporary rifts,” Rakosta explained. “Essentially, we will find ourselves under siege. Of course, we have trained in this procedure to keep dangerous periods to a minimum, and we know beforehand when these fluctuations are expected to peak. Still, until the whole array of shunts is installed, the cortex will be a bit erratic, so we always need to be alert.”

“We’re setting up an outer perimeter around the cortex in the safe-zone inside the rings,” Teo added. “Our task is not only to protect our experts, but also the cortex itself. It is quite resilient, and the native beasts normally don’t approach it, but that’s no guarantee. They can still be attracted by the smell of blood from the invading beasts we kill.”

“If everything goes according to plan, the process will take just over a month, with three checkpoints where we can temporarily stabilize the cortex for a few days. However, this process requires on-the-spot modifications. Depending on how the cortex reacts to its changes, we might need to perform further modifications.”

With that, they went to work, and the anchors quickly proved their worth. Calling the stretch between the rotating cortex and the rivers a safe-zone was giving it too much credit, and it was continuously hit by the space storms. Conversely, if you released too much energy too close to the cortex, you’d risk a resonance where you got zapped by a tremendous wave of energy.

Thankfully, as long as you didn’t release your aura or too much energy, you were essentially safe beneath the floating construct. Apart from a constant hum being released from above, it made for a

pretty good campsite – especially for Zac’s escape bangle which continuously drew on the bountiful energies around them.

Of course, it was probably far better for a Spatial Cultivator. Any time Zac looked up at the rotating and continuously transforming cortex, he felt some part of the Dao of Space was on display within those movements. That didn’t help him though, and he soon joined the others at the outer perimeter while the researchers went to work.

Zac was shocked to see them actually climb into the cortex, jumping from string to string like nimble little monkeys. Seeing people inside the construct somewhat confirmed his hunch it didn’t exist in three dimensions. The researchers’ positions kept changing as their forms were twisted and distorted.

The templars and the warriors formed two lines of defense like before, where the first-string cultivators formed a defensive line with one person every 100 meters or so. The second-string cultivators stood a bit behind, ready to immediately back up whichever side was attacked. And it didn’t take long for them to see some action.

“Ready!” a shout from within the cortex echoed out, and the cortex released a pulse a moment later.

Zac felt his surroundings twist and bend, and he urgently activated the anchor in his bracelet to stabilize himself – just in time to see a large spatial tear appearing a few hundred meters away. Out of it, a pack of red-furred bearlike beasts emerged, each one of them emitting a both fiery and immensely heavy aura.

The bears almost felt like mobile gravity arrays, while their swipes seared space itself. Their numbers weren’t too great, but they all emitted the aura of Beast Kings. Thankfully, the tear didn’t last too long, and it closed after letting seven of the hulking beasts through – cutting the eighth one in half.

The invasion looked pretty troublesome, but Zac still moved forward with the other second-string cultivators while first-string warriors joined in from the flanks. It even looked like the cortex itself was helping out as well as spatial storm shot straight toward the pack. But Zac’s eyes dimmed when he saw two of the bears open their mouth to release a cascade of blue flames at the incoming storm, tearing it apart.

By that time, Teo, Uzu, and Ilka had appeared, while the other Hegemons maintained the other flanks. A furious melee followed suit, where Teo Restrained while the others piled on attacks on the extremely durable bears, led by the two unattached Hegemons. Ilka used a soft sword as a weapon, and it moved like a snake among the beasts.

It was an extremely nasty weapon that could bend and extend at will – Zac had seen her stab the forehead of a Beast King from hundreds of meters away. Her actual skills were related to poison and water though, prompting others to often give her a wide berth. Uzu was a lot simpler – using a hefty broadsword and a sword-based Dao to launch somewhat slow but devastating strikes.

The attacks of the bears were extremely powerful, and their hides felt like steel plates, but thanks to Teo they were greatly restrained, so five minutes later, they had all fallen while only leaving some of the warriors slightly burnt. During the fight, another tear had already opened up, but the situation was kept under control by a group of warriors led by Havasa.

“Remove the corpses before they attract the natives,” Teo said before returning to his position, and the carcasses were quickly collected as three templars spread some sort of dust over the bloody patches.

Zac could only helplessly look on as the blood and pieces of flesh and hide rapidly faded away. The battle was over too quickly, and the stench hadn’t lured over any Worldeaters. Thankfully, Zac did have quite a bit of valuable blood in his Cosmic Ring because of Verun. He could use this method later when his free day came around to see if he could catch at least one of the common Worldeater younglings.

From there, he’d try to upgrade to a space-attributed specimen, but he wasn’t holding his breath.

However, as the days passed, Zac started to wonder if he would ever get that chance. The researchers had to work around the clock, as the longer the process took, the more the energies inside the cortex would stabilize. That also meant there had to be warriors guarding the perimeter around the clock, and it seldom took more than five minutes before new beasts popped up.

The warriors worked and rested in shifts, but more than once, those off the clock would have to enter the fray when too many beasts appeared at once. Let alone a day off, Zac started to wonder if he’d even manage to get five hours during the downtime. Thankfully, the first checkpoint was coming up in a few days, which hopefully meant some would get to explore.

Another two days passed, and the intensity of breaches increased. The warriors were stretched thinner and thinner, and most were forced to keep crystals in their hands all the time to not get completely drained of energy. People’s eyes were almost glazed over as they mowed down the beasts with dull expressions.

It was at this point that disaster struck.

“You!” an enraged roar echoed out as a huge shockwave of energy erupted at the other side of the Cortex.

Zac got a bad feeling, and he exerted some extra strength to instantly clean out the beasts around him before turning toward the source of the commotion – just in time to see Teo claw through the air, somehow dragging Ilka, the wandering cultivator Hegemon, to his position. She didn’t even have a chance to react before she was cut down by a furious swipe that created a scar that stretched for thousands of meters.

Had Teo gone mad? No, Zac immediately saw what had happened. One by one, corpses started to fall out from the Cortex, including Rakosta. Each one had a hole right through their foreheads, and most of them didn’t even seem to have realized they had died. Zac’s heart was gripped with panic as he saw the one-armed nun among the dead, but he inwardly breathed out in relief when Vai wasn’t among the fallen.

Instead, she jumped out with the other survivors, her face pale as a sheet as she ran over to the dead. The aggressor was cut in two, barely clinging on to life by the looks of it, but Zac still smelled trouble. He attached a recording crystal to his belt as he looked around for other threats, and he quickly spotted a problem. Something was wrong with the cortex.

“She destroyed some of the nodes!” one of the researchers shouted with a fearful face. “If we don’t do something, it will destabilize!”

The poor man only had time to give his warning before his head was pierced as well, and Zac looked on with shock as one of the corpses transformed into Ilka while the dying Ilka turned out to be a dying researcher looking up at Teo with confusion and pain. And while all this confusion took place, things quickly turned from bad to worse.

Ilka suddenly released a tremendous wave of energy, clearly unheeding of the effect it would have on the cortex. She threw something into the heart of the Cortex, disappearing just before Teo could reach her. The other Hegemons were already moving to intercept as well, but Zac couldn't believe his eyes when Uzu's aura exploded with ferocity as he hacked at Tyla with his massive sword, suddenly showcasing more power than ever before.

The vice-captain was quick to react, probably having expected that if there was one traitor, there might be two. She blocked the ferocious swing, but Zac was shocked to see that recently-evolved Uzu's power was slightly greater than the templar's. Tyla's head suddenly jerked to the side, barely avoiding a poisoned blade from Ilka who had appeared not far away.

But she was already dealing with two attackers, and she couldn't deal with a third – a lance of light that punched a hole right through her stomach where her core should be. And from all places, it came from another dead researcher who had been lying below the cortex. Zac recognized the man well – it was the man who had refused to greet him on board the Cosmic Vessel on the first day.

He should just be a Half-Step Cultivator, yet he had just released the power of a true Hegemon. Seeing the researcher attack one of his own was even more shocking than some outsiders rebelling. Just what was going on? Were they spies from another faction? But why attack this place, and why now?

Zac couldn't fathom what these three possibly had to gain from this attack. Even if they succeeded, they'd be stuck in the heart of the Void Star. Were they planning on killing all witnesses before returning? That couldn't be. The Void Star wasn't stupid – how could they not get suspicious when not a single one of their templars survived a mission?

And even if the trio was stronger than expected, Havasa, Kalo Taosa, and Teo had already descended on them like vengeful spirits, furiously trying to tear the traitors apart. Zac, along with most of the others, hesitantly stood rooted in place, unsure what to do. His first instinct was that the uprising would be quelled soon enough thanks to Teo's presence, but was that true?

Would they really choose to strike at this moment if they didn't have some confidence in dealing with this situation?

It was not just a matter of which side would win either – there was the cortex to worry about. Rakosta, along with most of the experienced researchers, were dead, and the energy fluctuations kept getting more and more ominous.

"Stabilize!" Teo roared, and the remaining templars hurriedly took out one massive spike each and slammed it into the ground.

Attached to their tips were some sort of ropes that they threw into the cortex. It looked like they were trying to tie the whole thing down, and the rapidly spinning strings were starting to slow down. However, Zac remembered the scene of Ilka throwing something into the core of the cortex just seconds ago, and he wasn't too convinced this would be enough.

Should he run? Should he expose his true strength and help Teo and the others take down the traitors? Or should he just wait?

Suddenly, Uzu was hit by a ferocious attack from Havasa that almost ripped him in two. At the same time, Teo and his vice-captain joined hands to restrain the researcher who reminded Zac of the werewolf Cervantes, swapping between light and corporeal as he fought. The sudden turn of the tides helped most of the wandering cultivators make their choice and they started rushing toward the besieged traitors.

Zac wasn't convinced and his eyes turned to Vai who still stood beneath the cortex with incomprehension in her eyes. These people could fight it out while they moved to safety. Two of Vivi's vines shot over to pick her up, but his mind suddenly screamed of danger. He activated [Earthstrider] to speed things along, but there was no time.

The enormous cortex suddenly imploded, condensing into a shining bead of light in an instant. It was no bigger than an egg, but it emitted terrifying levels of energy that pushed Zac down on his knees. He was unable to so much as breathe, and he could only look up with helplessness, knowing the traitors had won.

The egg cracked and it took the world with it.