

The Fall 878

Chapter 878: In-between

As the egg broke, it only sounded like the snap of a broken twig, yet Zac felt like he'd just witnessed the opening of Pandora's box.

"Run!" Zac screamed in the direction of Vai while trying to follow his own advice. But it was hopeless.

Zac's surroundings shattered and were swallowed by an unfettered maelstrom of rampant space which was no longer contained by the Spatial Cortex, and he almost puked from the nauseating blur. It felt like his mind was being twisted and bent just like his surroundings were, but Zac still managed to activate the bracelet on his wrist. The energy-anchor shot out, but Zac grimaced when it was ripped apart in an instant.

A moment later, the bracer on his arm completely cracked, the surrounding onslaught absolutely overloading what it was designed to withstand. Waves of agony came crashing down on him in an instant, but Zac couldn't hear his pained scream in the heart of the storm. The collapse of a Mystic Realm was deafening, and there was nothing to carry his voice.

He didn't have the luxury to worry about others, and neither could he hold on to his secrets or identity – Zac knew he wouldn't even last a second being buffeted by this storm. An aura of antiquity surrounded him as he activated [Void Zone], which kept the mayhem at bay. Some spatial energies still made it through after being eroded, but channeling [Innate Ward] with Void Energy was barely enough to withstand the weakened spatial storm.

Even then, he was continuously covered in shallow wounds that left behind dense bursts of Spatial Dao, proving he probably would have died if he didn't also have the added durability he'd inherited from his Draugr Side, along with [Adamance of Eoz] which synergized well with defensive skills like [Innate Ward].

His Void Heart was already fast at work swallowing the spatial energies as well, giving him a small breather. Unfortunately, it was just a temporary reprieve. Zac was still stuck in the middle of it, like a leaf caught in a hurricane. The surroundings were a confusing blur that continuously changed, trapping Zac in a psychedelic kaleidoscope that was being furiously spun.

The camp was gone – the whole area was gone. Even the ground had been swept away, leaving Zac floating in what he assumed were the broken remnants of the Mystic Realm. Vai was nowhere in sight, and neither was anyone else of the squad, traitor or no. He didn't want to think about it right now, but he knew it was likely they had all fallen already.

Even he wouldn't last more than a moment in this chaos without [Void Zone]. The Templars might have something to deal with this kind of terrifying environment, but no way something like that was standard issue. Perhaps Teo and the vice-captains had a shot at survival, but everyone else...

Zac shook his head to clear his thoughts. He needed to focus on his survival, and he looked around for clues. The storm seemed to be in a stable state of constant flux – it was neither growing more powerful nor petering out. The most ominous thing was the white lines. They were the only unmovable fixtures in the whole realm, silently forming hundreds of horizontal strings that stretched toward eternity.

It was thanks to them that Zac knew he was standing in place rather than being tossed about. Even then, the lines filled him with dread. His instincts told him that if he touched one of those lines, he'd be in for a world of hurt. They emitted a hint of finality, perhaps representative of the death of the Mystic Realm they were in.

And new lines kept appearing.

He needed to get out of here, and quick. Zac hesitated whether he should use [Flashfire Flourish] or one of his escape talismans, but he ultimately decided against it. Space was too damaged around him, there was no telling what would happen if he used that kind of item. Most likely, he would be ripped apart during the transportation, especially if he was dragged through one of the lines.

As he considered his options, Zac infused some Void Energy into his spatial ring to take out a peak-quality Pseudo D-grade Soldier Pill and a Healing Pill of similar quality. A surge of warmth and power coursed through his body, recovering some of the exhaustion he'd accumulated over the past days. He was desperately hungry as well because of [Adamance of Eoz], so he crammed some dried Beast King meat into his mouth as well. What to do?

A gleaming leaf appeared in front of the edge of his axe, but Zac didn't even get the chance to launch it before it was ripped apart by the storm. Hundreds of leaves shot out from Zac's body the next moment as he activated the area attack of [Nature's Edge], but the result was the same. His skill couldn't affect, let alone break apart, the storm around him.

Zac considered trying [Arcadia's Judgement] as well, but he was pretty certain the hand would be destroyed before he could even finish his strike. Worse, they might conjure more of those white lines. Neither did [Earthstrider] work. It couldn't be activated in this weird pocket of space by the looks of it. For lack of better options, he could only try the same method he used in outer space or the void.

He deactivated [Void Zone], and the storm came crashing toward him in an instant. Zac released an explosive burst of Cosmic Energy from his hands, and he felt a surge of victory as he was propelled backward. He reactivated his nullification zone the moment he had gained a bit of momentum, but he was still left with a couple of nasty lacerations to join the previous wounds.

The surroundings didn't change at all from his jump, but Zac did notice something interesting – the storm around him was slightly weaker than before, especially in one particular direction. He didn't believe it was thanks to him moving further away from the explosion – he'd found an outlet.

This was exactly what Zac hoped for. A massive eruption like this should have created some sort of tears in space, be they breaches, convergences, or good old-fashioned spatial tears. That was his best chance of getting out of this place alive, even if he got captured by a space fish the last time he tried something similar.

Five jumps and a new cross-section of painful cuts later, Zac found it. It was a jagged tear that ran for around fifty meters, and it almost looked like it was pulsating as it swallowed one mouthful of spatial energies after another. It looked stable, but he knew how spatial tears could suddenly disappear without warning.

So Zac only looked back in hesitation for a moment before jumping into the tear. In an instant, the roaring chorus of broken space was replaced by a deafening silence that felt like music to his ears. It didn't look like he had entered the void either, but rather a region that partly looked like outer space.

There were dozens of glistening spheres floating around him, creating dizzying patterns as they swam about. But they weren't planets – they weren't that far away from him. Zac could vaguely see all kinds of familiar scenes from the bubbles as well, landscapes that looked a lot like the ones in the opalescent barrier when they entered the Void Star.

The spheres were Mystic Realms, or at least windows into them.

Lights of pure spatial energies stretched between the realms, but Zac frowned when he saw how some of them flickered. Suddenly, one beam was extinguished, at which point one of the windows dissipated into nothingness while the others continued their dance. Seeing the lights and the spheres, Zac's thoughts were immediately drawn to the Spatial Cortex with its nodes and strings.

Was this another facet of the Spatial Cortex, where this web of Mystic Realms was the planes it connected? More importantly, what would happen if these lights were all dimmed out? Would he be stuck in this no-man's-land between realms? As the thought struck him, another pillar dimmed, which disconnected yet another realm from the shrinking network.

Zac didn't want to stay and find out what would happen if he overstayed his welcome, so he flew toward the closest Mystic Realm. Even if these realms were to be disconnected, it was better to be stuck in a stable Mystic Realm than here. The bubble grew closer and closer, and Zac inwardly nodded when he saw a lush forest within. That realm seemed good enough to camp out in.

But just as he was about to jump into the window, he urgently stopped his momentum as his gaze shifted to another realm in the distance. He could feel it – the call of the Left Imperial Palace. There was no hesitation as Zac made a beeline toward that other Mystic Realm, even if it looked pretty ominous. It was barely visible in the darkness of space like it was a world without a sun.

Suddenly, a wide smile spread across his face, and Zac once again thanked the lucky stars for his massive pool of Luck. Not much was visible through the lens, but he was almost certain he'd seen a Ferric Voidwurm fly past his vantage before disappearing out of view. If this was not a sign he was on the right track, then nothing was.

A spatial talisman appeared in Zac's hand, and a set of blue runes lit up around him as he pierced into the realm. There was no resistance as he entered the sphere, and after a brief bout of vertigo, he found himself falling toward the ground again. Zac looked around, and there it was – a dozen Ferric Voidwurms in the distance.

He couldn't see where they were going, and a moment later they had been swallowed by the darkness that spread out like a blanket across this Mystic Realm. Even then, Zac didn't try to catch up to the beasts. He was wounded and exhausted, and he needed to recuperate before he tried to hunt any Beast Kings.

A minute later, he slammed into the ground, thankful there weren't any beasts nearby. There was actually some vegetation in this sun-deprived plane, and he had landed in a sparsely forested grassland.

A sudden pulse welcomed his arrival, and Zac looked at the sky with a heavy heart. He had finally caught onto a clue again, but it had cost him a lot.

He wasn't close to anyone in the squad except Vai, but most of the fallen were good people who only wanted to get by. Yet they had died in such a horrific way, all because of that act of madness. Shaking his head, Zac walked over to a crooked tree nearby and sat down with a grunt as a few of the wounds opened up again.

Luckily, Zac had a good chunk of kill energy left in his body after defending the Spatial Cortex for days, and his wounds started to rapidly close as he activated [Surging Vitality]. While letting the skill do its job, Zac also took a massive slab of meat and a Cosmic Crystal. He ferociously scarfed down the energy-dense meat as he tried to recover energy as quickly as he could.

The ambient energy of this dour Mystic Realm was almost as high as Earth's, meaning the place could be crawling with Beast Kings even if he hadn't spotted any from up above. However, he only managed to get a minute of peace and quiet before he looked up at the sky with mute incomprehension.

A few moments later, a pale Vai landed right next to where he did, and her eyes lit up when she saw Zac sitting not far away. Zac wordlessly stared at the researcher, so surprised he forgot to eat the massive club in his hand. How was this possible? Vai was even closer than him to the detonation, yet she was in even better condition than him.

Apart from some light wounds, she seemed to be in good spirits, at least physically. That alone was enough for Zac to become cautious. How had she made it through that terrifying storm? Without his [Void Zone], he would have died within a second or two. And why had she appeared here, hot on his heels? He had chosen this place because of the signal – why had she?

"You're alive," Zac slowly said as he stood up, the crystal in his hand once more replaced by an axe.

"Who are you?"

"What?" Vai said, her eyes wide with alarm and confusion. "It's me. Vai."

"That explosion was enough to take out almost anyone in our squad," Zac said. "I only survived by dumb luck. Yet you, an E-grade cultivator is fine? And how can you appear here, of all places?"

"Well... It's not a coincidence..." Vai hesitated. "I- I followed you."

"How?" Zac frowned, the grip on his axe tightening.

"Your token," Vai said with a pleading look as she pointed at the token attached to his belt. "I-"

She didn't get any further before the sky rippled again before it spat out another familiar figure – a bloodied and battered Uzu. The air around him was lit up by several odd barriers – most likely the reason he was still alive. The moment he passed through, he threw something into the air behind him which caused the area to shatter like a mirror before space congealed again. Zac guessed he had destroyed the window.

"Come," Zac said with a low voice, and Vai scurried behind the tree as Zac cracked his neck.

Zac didn't see it as a problem that a potentially hostile Hegemon came falling from the sky – he saw it as pretty good luck. It was an opportunity to get some answers, so Zac took a small step forward, making

sure to release some of his aura. Uzu obviously sensed him, and he landed a few meters away soon after with a smile on his face.

“What a coincidence,” Uzu grinned as his eyes traveled between Zac and Vai. “Both guardian and ward, in one piece. I’m quite impressed.”

“Why?” Zac asked with a somber and slightly fearful expression.

There was something odd about Vai, but Zac’s gut told him that she wasn’t a traitor to the Void Gate. He rather felt her identity might not be exactly what she let on. Still, he took a few steps away from Vai and the tree just in case.

“Does it matter?” the Hegemon said with a bloody grin as he ate a Healing Pill.

“You’ve sabotaged a mission of the Void Gate. Of course it matters. An enmity with them will cause trouble wherever you go,” Zac said with grit teeth. “And now we might be stuck here. Even if we make it back to the surface, then what? You’ll be caught, and I will probably be implicated as well because I’m unattached.”

“Who said I’m leaving that way?” Uzu snorted. “Did you really think that’s how the Void Star works? What balloon with smaller balloons inside? It’s a network that lets these people steal the opportunities of a whole sector. Besides, they’ll have their hands full sooner or later. War is coming, and they won’t have time to bother about little people like you or me.”

“War?” Zac slowly said, before his eyes widened in genuine shock. “You’ve sided with the invaders? How? They should still be stuck in-“

“I’m surprised you know about the outsiders,” Uzu smiled. “As for how, it’s not complicated. Like I said, these realmthieves have stretched their greedy hands all over Zecia, including the Million Gates Territory. But they overestimated themselves.”

Zac had expected all kinds of justifications for Uzu’s betrayal, but they all were based on the Hegemon working as a spy for some other peak factions of Zecia who wanted to harm the Void Gate. But to think he actually worked with the invaders, who everyone still thought was stuck in the deeper regions of the Million Gates Territory.

What if they were wrong? By the sounds of it, some sort of pathways connected the Void Star and the Million Gates Territory. His thoughts turned back to the bloody teleportation room back when they first entered the Void Star. Had infiltrators already appeared in the Void Gates, even in Salosar?

It seemed likely there already were invaders in Salosar, where else would Uzu have made contact? As far as Zac knew, this was the Hegemon’s first mission, which meant he must have changed his allegiances earlier. It was either that or during the month-long trip onboard the Cosmic Vessel. But how could someone convince a Hegemon to take such a risk in that kind of situation?

No matter what the truth was, Zac got a sinking feeling. For the invaders to have infiltrated a faction like the Void Gate this quickly their methods had to be incredible. Even worse, it seemed unlikely they stumbled into the Void Star by accident. They had a goal and a plan.

Until now, the invasion had felt abstract and distant. But suddenly, it felt all-too-real.

