

The Fall 870

Chapter 870: Lucky Day

The ground was rapidly growing closer, and Zac's brows furrowed a bit when he saw how a huge pack of wolves had gathered right beneath them. Judging by the excited howls, it looked like the beasts believed meat was literally falling from the sky. Thankfully, the Templar Captain was already on the move.

Space around him had been twisting for a while as torrential amounts of energy coursed through his body, quantities that would cause an E-grade cultivator to explode within seconds. Finally, a titanic figure appeared above Teo, its one hundred-meter tall frame blocking much of Zac's vision. He couldn't see what the avatar looked like from behind, except it had four humanoid hands that emitted extremely heavy pressure.

Zac could tell the Avatar was instilled with at least a Middle Branch as well, and the air itself cracked as the Templar Captain infused more and more energy into his skill. Finally, the avatar moved as it pushed its hands toward the ground, and it felt like an atmospheric bomb had detonated just below Teo. Zac's stomach churned from the cascading waves of rampant energies that had been unleashed, but it was nothing compared to what happened below.

A deep groaning rumble echoed through the area as the earth itself cried from the pressure. Everything within a thousand meters was utterly crushed by the pressure, and a manmade earthquake continued to ripple for thousands of meters. Thousands of Peak E-grade wolves were turned to mush in an instant as plants and the ground itself were compacted into a vast crater. In an instant, a huge pack of beasts had been crushed, leaving not a single intact corpse.

Zac's heart beat like a drum as he mutely looked at the carnage, shocked by the destructive capability of Teo's skill. This was the first time Zac had seen the Middle D-grade Templar unleash his true might, and it was an eye-opening experience. That attack alone would immediately annihilate his elite armies back home unless they managed to erect some sort of fortification beforehand.

Even Zac himself would probably be grievously wounded, even if the attack was a large-scale strike with its force spread out. It was night and day compared to the might an Early Hegemon could exhibit, and any lingering notion of targeting a Middle D-grade Worldeater Beast King was firmly discarded.

The direct impact had created both cleared out any nearby threats while creating a large, albeit bloody, landing site for the party. However, most of the members of the task force had seen their fair share of blood, and getting their shoes slightly wet from beast blood didn't faze them as they slammed into the ground one after another.

Most simply used their body to withstand the collision velocity, though some used various movement skills to land softly. Zac was part of the former group as he slammed into the ground, leaving deep cracks for tens of meters around him. Vai used some sort of Spatial movement skill that expended her momentum, allowing her to softly land on the ground right next to him at a spot void of any minced wolf. Most of the researchers used this method, either through their own skill or through talismans.

Zac was about to stand up, but a sudden surge made his mind blank out. It came from everywhere and nowhere at once – a mix of antiquity and providence. It was overbearing and elusive, an enigma and a paradox. Solving it would allow you to grasp the Dao itself, conquering time and spa-

Panic and dread threatened to consume him, but Zac managed to force his way out of the fugue state through sheer force of will, only to realize he had unknowingly activated [Void Zone] with a horrified Vai within it. Zac immediately retracted the restrictive bloodline domain, which made Vai stumble and yelp with a pale complexion.

“What’s wrong?” Havasa asked as she flashed over, and Zac was eternally thankful that [Void Zone] emitted no energy signature and left no clues behind.

“I- ah, sorry...” Vai stammered. “The descent, and all this blood... I think I blacked out for a moment.”

“This is intentional – you need to get used to these smells and this fell atmosphere,” Havasa sighed. “Let your guardian know if you need any assistance.”

With that, she flashed away again, heading over to Teo who grimly looked up at the sky. A quick scan of the surroundings indicated Zac had only lost his mind for less than a second, but he still couldn’t tell if Vai had figured out what had just happened. She looked extremely frazzled as she looked around, her eyes darting back and forth.

“Are you really okay?” Zac slowly asked.

“I- I’m fine... I just felt something odd just now,” she said with a low volume. “It was probably nothing.”

“Alright, let me know if you need me to carry you,” Zac smiled. “I should be able to fight with you on my back just fine.”

“N-No,” Vai hurriedly said with a flustered look. “I’m fine, really.”

Zac nodded, but he was inwardly just as flustered as Vai looked. He couldn’t discern the truth. Had Vai noticed his activation of [Void Zone], an unprecedented ability that could completely obscure the Heavens? If that was the case, she had lied to a Hegemon of her faction to protect him. Or was she just waiting to speak with them without him present? And had she sensed the same aura he did?

For that matter, what did the pulse mean? It had been like a fleeting fragrance just wafting by, but it had completely consumed his mind for a moment. Its origin was quite apparent – it contained the same ancient aura as the enormous castle in the vision. It proved that it wasn’t a fluke he had seen that thing when entering the Void Star, and it was his first clue that he was on the right path.

But did the impression mean there was a connection between this specific Mystic Realm and the castle, or was the aura something that had ingrained the whole beehive of dimensional layers? Zac’s thoughts churned, but he kept his face impassive as he turned his gaze upward at the last members of the expedition.

One by one, they slammed into the ground around them, some bloodied and some unscathed. The scene was impressive, but Zac still had a small frown on his face when he saw the state of their unit. The original 118 members, of which 18 were researchers and supportive staff, had been reduced to 109. Less than ten minutes had passed since the task started, and they had lost almost a tenth of their squad to the solar flare and the ferocious birds.

It wasn’t a great start to a mission that was supposed to last months.

“We were beset by bad luck, but such is Heavenly Law. We knew there would be obstacles on the way, and this was one of them,” Teo eventually said when everyone had gathered up. “But the mission will continue. At least the spatial turbulence didn’t kick us off course, and we should reach the next jump-point within five days. Hegemons, stay grounded – there are quite a few beasts in this dimension. We will have our hands full without luring a bunch of them over. Scouts, set out.”

With that, the Templar took the lead as he ran at a pace that would feel like a brisk jog for even Late E-grade cultivators. Most of the first-string cultivators kept an exact pace to his sides, while another squad led by Tyla Vesass brought up the rear. The second-string cultivators stayed close to their researchers in the middle, and a shimmering barrier that hid their auras appeared above their heads.

Meanwhile, three scouts rushed ahead and completely disappeared among the trees.

“Don’t get complacent from the barrier. It has no defensive capabilities – it will just make most beasts overlook those in the middle and attack the people on the outside,” Havasa reminded those around her. “This used to be an agricultural realm, but it has been continuously flooded with beasts over the past three years.

“The army left this layer over two months ago, so we don’t expect an uneventful journey to the waystation. And remember, we need to keep moving. The window is closing, so don’t exhaust yourselves. If you’re running low on Cosmic Energy, let me know.”

Zac and the others nodded as they kept their eyes peeled at the surroundings. There had been quite a few briefings on the Void Star over the past weeks, and while Zac still didn’t have any idea of how this spatial anomaly actually worked, he did somewhat understand the rules that governed it.

The Void Star could be considered a maze where each Mystic Realm was a room. Some of these chambers were hidden in the depths of the Void Star, whereas others were right at the surface. To reach the realm you wanted to visit, you had to pass through a certain set of Mystic Realms, making use of weak spots in the dimensional layers.

Problem was that the maze wasn’t static. The Mystic Realms kept shifting following some sort of extremely complex set of rules, moving and disconnecting from each other. Some Mystic Realms were only reachable for short stints every century, or millennia even. Others, like the one they found themselves in right now, were almost always at the surface layer of the Void Star.

The reason they had been forced to set out the moment they reached Zenith Vigil was that the path that had been plotted out for them would only last for another month or so. If they took too long to reach their destination, they would have to take an alternative route that would cost them over two months.

With the Void Star being invaded, each additional Mystic Realm they had to pass through would significantly increase the risk of something going wrong. Their brush with death within the clouds was a poignant reminder of that.

Nothing happened for the first couple of hours, and they made steady progress toward the edge of the realm. There were the occasional packs whose domains they crossed, but it barely slowed them down. Some of the beasts knew better than to attack such a dangerous-looking group, while the rest was quickly dealt with by the first-string cultivators.

However, while they likely were the strongest force in this outer Mystic Realm, they couldn't move about with wanton disregard for the wildlife. Just like in most beast tides, the animals were in an agitated bloodthirsty state where most attacked even if outmatched. And the bigger the commotion they caused, the more beasts they would attract.

Now and then, Teo would make a sudden turn or stop altogether for a few minutes. It was a result of the reports the captain continuously got from the scouts running ahead. Sometimes it was a particularly nasty beast or beast pack they avoided, and sometimes they had to stop to let a horde migrate past them.

With things progressing smoothly like this, there wasn't much the second-string cultivators needed to do except maintain a lookout for ambushes. With Zac's honed Danger Sense and instincts, he would instinctively know if any beast had managed to get close, so his mind was mostly occupied with Ultom.

Even after six hours had passed, there hadn't been a second burst of that ancient aura. Even then, Zac's nerves were getting increasingly frayed from a constant worry he'd accidentally expose his bloodline again. But the more time passed, the more it looked like it was a one-time thing. It happened the moment he landed, so was it connected to the Realm Core? He had a few more guesses, but he would have to journey deeper into the Void Star to make sure.

Suddenly, Teo stopped at the front of the squad as he threw out a series of talismans. It looked like trouble had come knocking though, no matter how careful they were.

"Battle positions," Teo's voice echoed out, which confirmed a real battle was on their hands.

Just thirty seconds later, a piercing screech leveled the trees in the area. The talismans Teo had thrown out lit up and blocked the shockwave altogether, but they were still surrounded by a wasteland in an instant. From the distance, a discordant mix of beasts lumbered closer, their numbers in the tens of thousands.

At the heart of the chaos, an odd beast looking a bit like a nettle jellyfish floated, and it was no doubt it was the leader of the beast tide going by its aura. It was mostly translucent with blue streaks, and its long tendrils seemed to reach hundreds of meters behind it. Inside its body were hundreds of shimmering orbs that released mighty spiritual ripples, indicating it was a beast with an unusually powerful soul.

This was not a beast that had just evolved – it was well on its way toward the next stage of Hegemony. That beast looked troublesome on its own, and there were no less than thirty auras of weaker Beast Kings within the tide. But what really made Zac's hair stand on end was seeing the rotting bodies of some of the animals.

They weren't dead, Zac could tell with a single glance. But they weren't alive either. It was parasitic mind control.

From the noses, eyes, and mouths of the beasts, one could see small tendrils swaying around, looking just like miniatures of the appendages of the enormous jellyfish. For others, their whole skulls had been cracked, and a small jellyfish sat right on their brains. Some poor animals even seemed to be receptacles for dozens of parasites, arduously stuttering forward with bloated bodies.

There was no telling if the big guy was a parasite as well, or if it didn't need to hijack other animals after having reached D-grade. In either case, it was a grotesque scene, and Zac could guess why it hadn't avoided the powerful auras of the advance guard – the big jellyfish wanted more bodies for its descendants.

“Standard battle array. It's a swarm of Mindsiphon Parasites. Destroy both host and parasites,” Teo said with a calm expression. “Don't worry, they're not as dangerous as they look.”

“Why the faces? You bastards should be happy,” Havasa grinned after seeing the hesitant expressions on many of the wandering cultivators. “Aren't you all here for money? Have you forgotten the booklets? That right there is a bounty animal. This is a stroke of good luck to balance the bad.”

The simple mention of a 'bounty' drastically improved morale, but they didn't get the chance to celebrate before the enormous Mindsiphon King made its move. Ripples spread across the bulbous head of the Beast King, and Zac felt a sense of danger as mental energy started gathering. There was no time to prepare any concerted response – just a moment later, a chaotic shockwave burst forth, ripping toward the front lines.

It was an instant attack so it didn't contain the full force of a Beast King, but Zac could tell that any cultivator with a weak soul or subpar defenses would find their soul grievously wounded from that attack. Lucky for them, Teo was already on the move as the complex arrays on his War Regalia lit up. A group of eight templars channeled a War Array behind him, and he took a defensive position with his shield.

Soothing waves spread out from his shield, giving Zac the impression of waves hitting against a rocky shore. They immediately covered the whole frontline before they spread toward the incoming mental attack. There was no collision and subsequent shockwave. It was rather as though the Beast King's attack had entered a quagmire as it was gradually slowed and whittled down.

By the time it reached the frontlines, only a fraction of its strength remained. Even someone who hadn't cultivated their soul would effortlessly shrug off an attack of that level, and the warriors immediately regained their confidence upon seeing that the attack had been easily thwarted by their captain.

“Advance. Avoid the tendrils of the leader. Continuously channel your Daos to avoid getting infiltrated,” Teo simply said as he swung his sword, unleashing a simple blade attack toward the ranks of animals.

Almost one hundred possessed beasts were ripped apart in an instant, their bodies so mangled that the parasites couldn't possibly have survived either. That attack was the starting signal of the fight, and the Beast Tide released a deafening cacophony of roars as they rushed forward. In return, the front-line warriors unleashed a barrage of attacks, turning the whole forest into an apocalyptic hellscape.

As for Zac and the second-string cultivators, their time hadn't come just yet. And Zac simply enjoyed the first-row seat for the fight. This was what he needed to see – how a squad of veteran warriors of an established faction fought. Anything he learned today could be applied to his army back home, so Zac looked on with rapt attention.

Havasa was right, even if Zac didn't care about the bounty. Clues to an ancient opportunity and a free lesson in army tactics? This really was a lucky day.

