

The Fall 871

Chapter 871: Professional Unit

Fiery waves of destruction fought for space with blade storms, lances of ice, and all sorts of diverse techniques as the wandering cultivators unleashed their ranged skills at the incoming tidal wave of rotting beasts. The little plantlife that remained standing after the Mindsiphon King's opening salvo was reduced to nothingness while the ground itself opened up to swallow and crush whole swathes of beasts into a pulp.

But it was as though beasts were completely oblivious to the danger, heedlessly rushing toward the defensive line. Mounds of carcasses piled up in seconds, yet the beasts just kept crawling over their fallen brethren. Some of the smaller Mindsiphon Parasites survived and either tried to latch onto the warriors or scurry back to safety.

Thankfully, these smaller jellyfish didn't seem able to unleash mental attacks, and with their flying speed being quite slow, they were easily dealt with. The second wave of beasts was a lot more powerful, and they either dodged or countered the skills as they pushed forward. Zac guessed their parasites either had higher levels or more purified bloodlines judging by their deft control of their hosts.

They were also led by a number of Beast Kings who unleashed their bloodline skills to protect the beasts around them, drastically reducing the effectiveness of the cultivator's random attacks. And among it all, hundreds of thick tendrils were slithering forward – the appendages of the giant jellyfish king.

Beasts were superior when it came to numbers and constitutions, cultivators had some advantages of their own. Teo had already pushed into the swarm of beasts like a god of war, destroying everything that came close. His War Regalia was continuously unleashing pulses of destruction, killing any E-grade beast that came within a dozen meters without the Templar as much as lifting a finger.

That was the benefit of Hegemony. With a sea of energy at your fingertips, you could just continuously use both defensive and offensive arrays without issue, something that would be impossible for most E-grade cultivators. A middle D-grade Hegemon like Teo could probably keep his War Regalia running for days without a problem.

Even the Half-Step Beast Kings and the actual Beast Kings were leery of approaching the man, giving him the space to unleash his skills. First, the avatar from before started to appear again, but it was actually disrupted and destroyed by Mindsiphon King as it frenetically stabbed it with hundreds of appendages.

Teo wasn't discouraged, and the energy from the avatar suddenly turned into shining manacles that instantly bound the tendrils of the beast. At the same time, one of his vice-captains conjured what looked like a miniature galaxy that exerted a tremendous pull. A few unlucky beasts were dragged inside, reduced to nothingness in an instant.

The Templar Captain pushed his hand down, and a rope of starlight connected the manacles with the galaxy. It was the first time Zac had actually seen two different people combining their skills like that, and he looked on with interest as the Mindsiphon King found over 80% of its tendrils locked in place. It was powerful enough to resist the pull, but not powerful enough to break free.

The Templars weren't done there as more and more manacles appeared, locking down one Beast King after another across the whole battlefield. This time, the second vice-captain made a move as well, and dozens of small mountains appeared among the beasts. A similar scene followed, where Teo's fetters connected with the mountains, essentially trapping the leaders of the tide in place.

Altogether, it had only taken the three Templar Hegemons to lock down more than two-thirds of the elites of the Beast Tides, drastically lessening the pressure the rest of the squad faced. Zac could tell that these measures wouldn't last for very long, but they didn't really need to.

Teo had never stopped moving as he sealed everything around him, and he was already in front of the Mindsiphon King by that point. The energy in the whole area surged as an inscribed mountain appeared above his head, looking like an evolved version of what his vice-captain used. It emitted an unquestionable weight and dominance, far surpassing the concepts of heaviness that Zac had integrated into his Dao of the Axe.

It was like the mountain contained the weight of a world as it pushed down on the Mindsiphon King. Hundreds of beasts couldn't withstand its unseen pressure and simply collapsed into goops of blood. Even the leader was pushed closer to the ground, but the shining spheres inside its body released tremendous waves of energy as the remaining tendrils soon rose to meet the mountain. The tendrils and spheres started to resonate, which generated a domain of their own that mostly canceled the mountain's pressure.

Like that, the Mindsiphon's tendrils were all occupied, at which point Teo rose into the air and started to unleash a steady barrage of heavy swings. However, even with its tendrils locked down, the Mindsiphon still retained a lot of its power. Those weird balls inside its body were shining like small suns by this point, and even Zac found it a bit painful to look at the waves of mental destruction that surrounded the Templar.

The leaders of the two sides had essentially taken each other out of the equation, but it was clear Teo was the stronger party since he simultaneously kept more than 20 Beast Kings locked down as well. Meanwhile, the Array Masters and defensive cultivators had created a set of fortifications and channels on the spot, expertly funneling the tide of beasts into kill zones where the offensive warriors waited.

Of course, Zac and the others couldn't just sit by and watch while the first-string cultivators did all the work. The first-string warriors were slowly moving backward in a controlled retreat, leaving a trail of carcasses behind. Even then, the pressure was unrelenting, and one by one, the trapped Beast Kings broke free and madly rushed into the fray.

The first-string cultivators couldn't deal with everything alone, but they didn't have to. By controlling the flow of beasts, pathways opened up in the defensive perimeter that led to Zac and the other second-string cultivators. One by one, the maimed and the weaker beasts were let through, where Zac and the others were waiting to finish the job.

The axe of the Heavenfall Autarch appeared behind Zac once more as a rotting boar missing half its head rushed over. Before it had a chance to even get close, it was cloven in two with one swift swing. The first swing was followed up by a second that annihilated the two small parasites who lived inside its body. A small smile spread across Zac's face as he felt the surge of energy entering his body.

The boar was only Peak E-grade, but it was still a huge improvement compared to the beasts he had spent years killing inside the Orom World. Those animals were mostly Early E-grade to match his restrained attributes, and they only awarded a trickle of kill energy compared to these animals.

With him being level 145, it would still take quite a bit of carnage to gain the energy required for a level, but he was undeniably making progress on his levels through kills for the first time in five years. Even better, both the boar and the little jellyfish counted as kills. It wasn't that hard to deal with the parasites either, even if the E-grade animals were only as large as a fist and almost completely invisible. While their physical form was hard to spot, they lit up like little beacons to his [Cosmic Gaze], while the semi-dead hosts had lost most of their own aura.

A moment later, Zac actually got to end the life of a grievously wounded Beast King that had been let through the perimeter, and a massive surge of energy entered his body. It had required him to essentially kill-steal another wandering cultivator, but swordsman didn't mind in the slightest. After all, he was bottlenecked in Half-Step D-grade.

Killing a Beast King only meant risk and no reward for him. The wiry little man even gave Zac a thumbs up as he returned to his position with [Earthstrider], and Zac only grinned as he kept killing. Two minutes passed as the squad methodically dismantled the beast tide, until Zac suddenly heard Teo's voice in his head.

'Everyone, activate mental defenses,' The templar captain said as the energies in the distance reached a crescendo.

By this point, the unit had added more than a kilometer's distance to the Mindsiphon Parasite floating in the air, but more than half of the Wandering Cultivators activated various mental defense talismans or items. Zac felt confident that [Soul Guardian] was more than enough at this point, but he had a talisman ready just in case.

An infuriated wail echoed throughout the area the next moment as the enormous jellyfish in the sky fell toward the ground, bleeding heavily from a gruesome wound that had almost cut its head in two. However, it was barely hanging on by a thread, and Zac could sense a familiar buildup inside its body – it was planning to self-detonate.

One of the radiant spheres inside its body suddenly cracked, unleashing a tremendous ripple of hatred and pain that crossed the battlefield in an instant. However, before the beast had a chance to detonate its other pearls or Beast Core, Teo had already leveled a second strike that seemed to have finished the job. The beast's wails were cut short, and it slammed into the ground a moment later.

With the early warning, the mental wave passed through the ranks without causing any trouble. And without the support of the Alpha, Teo was free to run roughshod through the remaining beasts. With him attacking from the rear, the remnants of the beast tide were caught in a deadly pincer. After just a minute, all the remaining beasts had either fled or been exterminated.

"We're resting for 20 minutes before heading out," Teo said before simply sitting down and closing his eyes with a Low-grade Cosmic Crystal in his hands.

"Won't all the blood lure other beasts over?" another warrior muttered with a frown as he looked around with worry.

“Not with the body of a Mindsiphon King here,” Havasa said with a shake of her head. “This is just an outer layer, there shouldn’t be more than a hundred Beast Kings in the whole realm after the previous purge. This bastard probably found its way here by chance and enslaved all the Beast Kings it could get its hands on. The few who managed to avoid it wouldn’t go anywhere near here.”

“Do we really get a part of the bounty even if the captain did most of the work?” another wandering cultivator asked as he looked at the fallen Mindsiphon King with gleaming eyes.

“Those are the rules for group battles,” Havasa nodded. “But the captain killed it and did most of the work – half of the bounty will go to him. Another ten percent will go to Kalo and Tyla each for locking down its tendrils and the other Beast Kings, while the final 30% will be spread out among the rest of us.”

Zac took out his booklet out of curiosity, and he had to admit the Void Temple was quite generous. The Beast core of a Mindsiphon King was valued at 1 D-grade Nexus Coin, and the remaining spheres would fetch 100,000 E-grade Nexus Coins each. Seeing how it could unleash powerful mental attacks, Zac guessed the items could be used in crafting tools or arrays for Mentalists.

Even if the cultivators would only see a fraction of that bounty, it was still roughly 4,000 E-grade Nexus Coins per man for a few minutes of work. If this scenario happened a couple of times over the next months, the accumulated bounties might end up being worth more than the mission reward.

Zac looked at the large carcass of the Mindsiphon Beast King in the distance for a second before he turned to look at the warriors who scurried around looking for anything of value on the battlefield, while Kantomir went from warrior to warrior to make sure none of the Mindsiphons had managed to sneak on board, so to speak.

It was a novel experience being part of a proper professional unit. The closest he’d come before was the early stages of the Twilight Ocean under the lead of Catheya, but back then everyone had roughly the same power, which would never be the case in an open-world conflict. So seeing how Teo controlled the battle was a good learning experience.

The Templar was obviously a genius since he had reached Middle D-grade, but he wasn’t a monstrous talent that could deal with any threat by himself. His biggest weakness was his somewhat lacking lethality, considering it had taken him a couple of minutes to kill the Mindsiphon King. But even then, there was not a single casualty in the squad.

There were a lot of bruises and scrapes, but the worst wound was a wandering cultivator who had been gored by a large claw of one of the beast kings. Seeing as his aura was stable as he sat down in meditation, Zac could tell it wasn’t a wound that would be a big problem.

And that was all thanks to Teo. It almost felt like the Templar must have had eyes in his neck going by how he had controlled the events in a way that the pressure was evenly spread across his force. Since Zac hadn’t been too pressured from the battle, he had enough leeway to observe the movements of Teo and his two vice-captains.

It was obvious that the trapped Beast Kings didn’t break out randomly. Any time there was a lull at a certain section of the defensive perimeter, a nearby Beast King broke free from the mountain suppressing it, and delivered itself and a group of followers to the slaughter. That way, they made use of all their strength while keeping the risk at a minimum.

In a way, the smooth control felt akin to his own combat stances in how they were meant to maximize his efficiency when fighting, but the theory was rather applied to the whole battlefield.

This was exactly the kind of expertise Zac needed for the upcoming war. It wasn't enough that he was powerful – he couldn't be everywhere at once to protect his people. There would no doubt be battles that he couldn't join, where someone like Ilvere or Joanna would lead instead. They would be like Teo in that case – powerful, but not a one-man army.

But they lacked his skill in terms of tactics, and also the supportive function of the Templar Order's Array Masters and vice-captains. But how would one learn something like this? Zac didn't have this kind of heritage. There was obviously learning by doing, but learning the ropes in the middle of a raging war would lead to mass casualties.

"What are you thinking about?" Vai asked curiously as she walked over.

"Nothing," Zac smiled. "I just thought that it's impressive we didn't see a single warrior fall with such a powerful enemy. Being unattached comes with a great degree of freedom, but it precludes you from certain opportunities."

"Like you have a choice in the matter," a nearby Templar snorted, but Zac didn't bother with him.

Vai glared at the warrior in Zac's stead, but her pout didn't have much of an effect as the warrior simply closed his eyes to focus on recuperation. Zac had no interest in arguing with some random warrior he could snap in half if he so wanted, and instead turned back to Vai.

"You were really impressive," the researcher said, clearly trying to recover the atmosphere. "It felt like you were everywhere."

"I haven't been out much over the past decade," Zac nodded as he sat down to rest. "I need some exercise to get back into optimal condition before we get to the deeper parts of this weird place."

"Alright," Vai nodded. "Sorry, I won't bother you while you recuperate."

Zac nodded and closed his eyes, as he took out a High-Grade Nexus Crystal. It felt pretty unsatisfactory since he was used to using Peak-quality Crystals by now, but those things were quite rare in the Zecia sector. Taking them out after a minor scuffle like this would raise some brows, so he would have to make do.

Thankfully, he hadn't expended much of his vast energy reserves, so he spent most of the rest going over the general flow of the battle, trying to distill it into something that would be useful for his followers back home. Soon enough, twenty minutes had passed, and the group set out once more. Some had managed to line their pockets a bit by pocketing some valuable parts of the zombified beasts, but the bounty was the true prize of the encounter.

Like this, three days passed, where the squad only stopped to rest for an hour each night at safe-houses that had survived the invasion. They were forced into a couple of more battles against massive Beast Tides, but Havasa's words proved to be true. None of the horde leaders they encountered were anywhere close to the level of the enormous jellyfish, and dealing with the enraged beasts was just a matter of time.

Finally, the squad could see the edge of the Mystic Realm in the distance, which meant they would soon reach the waystation that would take them to the next realm.

“One down, eleven to go,” Havasa grinned to the side. “Let’s see what the Void has in store for us next.”