

The Fall 569

Chapter 569: Rifts

"Are you ready?" Ogras asked as he stopped next to the console. "You'll have to deal with any eventual threat by yourself, you know?"

"I'm fine," Zac nodded as a swirl of emerald leaves surrounded him. "Open it."

Ogras nodded and touched the panel, and he immediately melded with the shadows as the door slid open. A fractal edge had already appeared on [Verun's Bite], but Zac could quickly breathe out in relief as there was nothing on the other side. Ogras soon reappeared from Zac's shadows as well, though his eyes were fixed at the corridor outside, confusion evident in his eyes.

Zac was just as baffled, as the scenery definitely didn't match what he had pictured in his mind. Ogras had described the dilapidated state of the inner sectors in great detail for his report, but everything seemed to look the same as in their own private area. The hallway was devoid of life or activity, but it was clean and without damage. The fractals that ran along the wall shone with bright luster, and there was no dried blood to talk about.

"How is this possible?" Ogras muttered from behind as he looked around in confusion.

Zac wouldn't immediately trust his eyes though, and he carefully entered the inner sector, readying himself in case what they saw was an illusion. But if it was one, then it had to be a damn good one as Zac couldn't feel anything amiss.

"Is the layout the same as before?" Zac asked after some thought.

"It should be," Ogras nodded after looking back and forth for some time. "The missing pieces have been replaced, but the general layout is the same."

Zac nodded in relief. He was afraid for a second that the Mystic Realm was able to move its corridors to rearrange its layout. That would have made it almost impossible to map the place out, and any progress would be random.

"I guess it's the arrays?" Zac ventured. "The walls slowly heal themselves, so there are probably even more maintenance functions. There might be repair-puppets or machines running around and replacing broken things or something. Pretty convenient for the natives if the materials they scavenge actually get replaced somehow."

"That might explain why our sector is untouched," Ogras muttered. "No point in breaking past this door if they can keep mining their old tunnels. Perhaps they have already broken through to our place before, only to find the same empty corridors and barracks as us."

"Or they've already taken everything of value," Zac noted with a grimace. "We passed a lot of empty rooms back there."

"The simplest way to find out what's going on is by catching another native. The last one I took hostage actually went and died before I got a hold of anything interesting," Ogras spat as he looked around.

Zac nodded in agreement. It was a shame how things panned out with Ogras' captive. He had only managed to confirm that the beastkin truly was a real-life werewolf and that they were of rival factions. A short time later the human had shuddered and died, likely from suicide as to not divulge any critical information. Perhaps he was afraid of leading a new unknown force to his faction's gates.

"So, where do you want to go?" the demon asked.

"Let's head in the direction where you saw those two fighting. Perhaps we can find some clues where the natives stay," Zac said after some thoughts. "No point in looking for the core areas at this stage."

"It's this way... I think," Ogras said as he led the way.

It was quite a distance between the door and the scene of the battle, and Zac only got increasingly baffled as they walked. He just couldn't make sense of the mental map of the compound. He understood that the Technocrats might not have the same sort of budgetary constraints as earthlings did, needing to make the most out of every square meter, but the winding pathways felt extremely sub-optimized. It almost felt like this place was built just for the sake of it, and that they didn't really fill any objective.

"What do you think the purpose of these endless hallways is?" Zac finally asked after a while. "It would be one thing if there were a bunch of laboratories or office space, but the rooms we've looked into are just empty storerooms. Most of the space between these corridors doesn't even seem accessible."

"I guess millions worked in this place if this really was a research base," Ogras slowly said. "That is the same as a decent-sized clan. Any organization of that size would need a vast number of supportive functions. Perhaps this area is some sort of ancillary area, and arrays that run this place are hidden within the walls. These corridors might just be for array masters to make their way between the arrays."

"So service corridors," Zac nodded in agreement. "That might be it."

"It's also possible it's intentional," Ogras mused. "That these pathways form some sort of array themselves. Just think of those lines in the sky over the fields. They are not random, but rather form some sort of pattern."

"An array as large as a small country," Zac muttered. "It should be extremely powerful."

"We can't guess what's in the mind of some Technocrats," Ogras spat. "They're all insane. No offense."

Zac snorted, but he kept mapping the surroundings in his mind. It was a shame that the magical map that the Zhix owned couldn't be transferred over here as it would have been a huge help. He had already checked his [Automatic Map] as well, but it didn't possess an indoor function. There was just one dot on the parchment, which called the base [SGR-03].

He guessed it was the abbreviation for the base, but he didn't know if it was the name given by Leandra's force or something decided by the force who took over after the technocrats left.

"So, while we're on the subject. Care to explain how the token from your mom could turn you into a Council Inspector?" Ogras said as he threw Zac a sideways glance.

"I don't know," Zac shrugged, and it was the truth. "I only found out about the credentials inside the Tower of Eternity, I didn't lie about that. Personally, I don't think it's real. I think it's something she

prepared as some sort of Technocrat Array Breaker, something that would allow her to go where she pleased without divulging her real identity."

"You know what that means, right?" Ogras said with a calculating look. "You would have to be a real bigshot to accomplish something like that. I can't imagine what kind of person would be able to create something that could bypass all the defenses of the Azh'Kir'Khat Horde. We would be killed long ago by the Beastmaster or some other enemy if it was that easy."

"Well, I'm still trying to figure out the truth as well. I'm hoping we'll be able to find more inside this place,"

"You... Don't think she's here right?" Ogras hesitated, a flash of fear appearing in his eyes. "That could prove deadly."

"What are you worried about?" Zac snorted. "If she really is a big-shot she wouldn't be bothered with some E-Grade people."

"Maybe she isn't happy about cultivators hanging around her Technocrat children and decides to purge us all," Ogras muttered.

"Well, I'm pretty sure she's isn't here," Zac eventually said. "I'm almost positive she left earth to heal and avoid pursuit."

"That would be for the best," Ogras muttered as he kept leading Zac down the hallways.

Ogras had no trouble remembering the path, provided that the sector truly hadn't changed, and it wasn't that far either according to the demon. But Zac suddenly felt a sharp spike of danger after they had walked for ten minutes. He immediately drew his weapon before he jumped back, not forgetting to drag the weakened demon along as well.

"What's going on?" the demon asked with confusion as he looked around for any threats. "I didn't sense anything."

"I suddenly felt a pang of danger," Zac said with a bit of confusion, as the surroundings were still the same sterile walls of metal.

"Well, go forward and test things out," Ogras said after a brief pause.

"You're really taking advantage of your wounds right now," Zac muttered, but he still went along with the arrangement.

"Well, it should work like this even if I was back in top condition. If I get hit by something in here I might die, whereas you will get a flesh wound that might hurt for a couple of hours," Ogras said with an uncaring shrug. "If there's a trap it's better you fall in it than me."

"Well, whatever," Zac snorted as he transformed [Love's Bond] to its shield form.

He also activated both [Nature's Barrier] and [Hatchetman's Spirit], the latter mostly to gain a better sense of the surroundings. However, nothing much changed. It was still an empty corridor in the middle of nowhere. Just what was it that made his mind scream of danger?

However, he only needed to take ten steps forward to find the answer.

The previously innocent-looking corridor transformed in an instant, and Zac found himself on a collision course with a spatial tear. There wasn't even any time for him to retreat, and his eyes looked on with horror as his coffin-shield hit the tear head-on. This was something he had been deadly afraid would happen, that his Spirit Tool, or rather Alea would be damaged from something that it couldn't block.

However, the spatial tear didn't actually cut the thick black lid apart like it would with almost everything else. The coffin somehow managed to push back at it, destabilizing it enough to disappear. The clash did leave a mark on the lid, but something like that would heal by itself quickly enough, just like the chains that had cracked during his fight with Void's Disciple.

The scene was a huge source of relief, as not only were spatial tears one of the few things that could still cut him apart if he wasn't careful, but it was also something that Void's Disciple used when fighting. Seeing that [Love's Bond] was this durable gave him a lot more confidence for their next fight.

Seeing as how limited the damage essentially meant he could push his way out of the trap, but he didn't leave just yet. He instead swapped over to his Draugr-form, and the fractal shield of [Immutable Bulwark] infused with the Fragment of the Coffin appeared in front of the lid.

The mainstay defensive skill of his undead side was, unfortunately, suffering from the same fate as [Chop], where the skill couldn't quite keep up with his recent growth. The strength of the shield was based on the quality of his shield and his Endurance, but the increase in its durability had clearly not been linear lately. He would have to upgrade it to an E-Grade skill for it to maintain its usefulness going forward.

However, while the skill wasn't able to completely block the spatial tears that came close, it did still manage to weaken them before they slammed into [Love's Bond]. It lessened the strain on his physical shield significantly, and Zac only needed to keep infusing more Miasma and Mental Energy into the skill to restore it.

Zac took one step after another as the buzzing sounds of void tears disintegrating echoed through the hallways. However, he didn't move back toward Ogras, but he rather kept going straight ahead.

A hidden spatial minefield had for some reason appeared to block their path, and Zac wanted to see if he could push through. Perhaps the anomaly only lasted for a few meters, allowing people to skip through if they were careful and skilled enough. Conversely, the whole area in this direction might be compromised, which would be valuable intelligence as well.

However, Zac didn't get far before new tears appeared out of nowhere, almost doubling the density of threats around him. Zac knew he was approaching his limits as new cracks were forming almost as quickly on his shield as they healed up again. But he kept pushing forward until there finally was a change to his surroundings.

A red barrier suddenly appeared five meters ahead, and Zac's eyes widened in recognition. It looked a lot like the barrier that Jeeves had conjured when he first met Kenzie in the border town. However, it was almost as though it was infected, with tinges of some unknown energy floating about within the shield. And it was from these corruptions that spatial tears kept spewing out one after another.

Some of the tears stayed put and hovered in front of the barrier, while others drifted about, some even disappearing out of sight. However, Zac's Danger Sense told him that they didn't actually disappear, but rather that they turned invisible somehow. However, just as Zac noticed the barrier, it was as though the barrier noticed Zac. A spatial storm rippled out from the corruptions, pushing the previously static spatial tears in the tunnel toward him while simultaneously spewing out an endless number of new ones.

This time there was no hesitation as Zac fled for his life, not even trying to break that barrier. He would be long dead before his attack landed. He spotted the demon in the distance looking in his direction with a slight frown, but his face suddenly turned into a mask of terror as Zac closed in on him.

"Lunatic! Did you cause a crack in this dimension?!" Ogras shrieked in horror as he started running, but he only got a few steps before he was wrapped up by a chain as Zac flashed past him like some sort of nightmare spider.

There was no way for Zac to return to his human form without getting ripped apart by the spatial storm, so he had to use the chains of [Love's Bond] to drag himself and Ogras away. He tried to hamper the progress of the rapidly approaching storm by erecting one fractal bulwark after another, but they were cut apart without slowing the tears by more than a second.

"What's wrong with this place?!" Ogras screamed, tightly wrapped by a chain, and Zac couldn't help but agree.

It was one hell of a place his ancestors had built.