

## The Fall 597

### Chapter 597: The Collector

Zac felt like his brain was about to short-circuit when he saw what he was dealing with. It was one thing to see the distorting claw of the Void Creature before, but just what kind of eldritch horror would have these kinds of appendages? The sinister aura of this thing was far beyond the earlier creature as well, and Zac believed the only reason he could even stand was that the being was greatly restrained when entering the dimension of the Mystic Realm.

But there was no time to ponder what he was dealing with as the ropes made of hands were extremely quick and nimble. He desperately activated [Loamwalker] to flash out of the way of one of the two appendages, but he could immediately see that the demon wouldn't be able to do the same.

The ground cracked under Zac's feet as he hurriedly changed direction, forcibly tackling the demon from behind. The demon coughed up a mouthful of blood and the Valkyrie's wounds seemed to worsen, but the push was enough to throw the two away, allowing them to avoid the first grab.

The demon's face was pallid, but he understood what was at stake. He grit his teeth as he got up to his feet, and Cosmic Energy surged through his body as he sprinted toward the red barrier. This was Zac's only hope; that the Base would block this thing as a security measure. He had already learned from Leviala that the barriers worked just like normal defensive arrays; usually just blocking passage from one direction. But hopefully it would detect the Void Creature passing through the barrier, and move to intercept it.

Zac activated [Loamwalker] once more to follow in the demon's footsteps, but horror gripped his heart when his skill was forcibly deactivated mid-step. One of the appendages had managed to grab hold to one of the unconscious scouts hanging from one of [Love's Bond's] chains, and Zac shuddered when he realized that the hands could actually move like normal as they grabbed the scout's legs and arms.

Desperation welled in his heart as Zac tried to drag him free only to find himself completely unable to match the power of the being still hidden in the void. He quickly found himself being lifted off the ground, utterly incapable of resisting. Guilt welled up in Zac's heart, but he could only release the scout before it was too late, and dropping toward the ground barely allowed him to dodge the second appendage.

The poor unconscious scout was quickly being hoisted into the darkness as the hands passed him along, but Zac resolutely looked forward as he activated [Loamwalker] again. The demon had already managed to escape through the barrier with one of the Valkyries, and the appendages completely ignored him after that.

The scene somewhat confirmed Zac's guess, and not having to worry about the demon gave Zac at least some reprieve. If he only could make it through the barrier he would be safe as well.

However, Zac was gripped by despair when a third rope of hands suddenly descended from the sky, barring Zac's escape. He was forced to immediately stop, as another step with his movement skill would put him right in range of the outreached hands. He frantically ran in a different direction as he started charging up his most powerful remaining skill, [Deforestation]. If he couldn't run out, then he would need to fight his way out.

The brief pause caused by the appearance of a third appendage was all that the eldritch horror needed though, and it effortlessly snatched up a second scout. This time it simply yanked him free, causing cracks to spread all over the links of [Love's Bond]. The body of the scout obviously couldn't withstand such force either, and just the upper body of the poor man was taken away while his legs fell on the floor.

The only consolation was that the scout was already severely wounded before, and losing both his legs was just too much to endure. The shock immediately killed him, sparing him from being alive for whatever the Void Creature had in store.

Sweat beads streamed down Zac's face as he desperately dodged the lightning-quick vines as he prepared his Hail Mary attempt to get out of the Relay Station. He definitely feared for his life, but now there was yet another reason for him to worry; his training quest still hadn't been completed.

Two people were lost to the horrifying appendages in an instant. Losing a third one meant failure to his quest, and he couldn't let that happen no matter what. He moved the Valkyrie under his arm into one of his chains to free up his movement, and he kept the three scouts tight on his back to avoid another snatching.

But whatever the thing on the other side of the Void still didn't seem satiated as the three vines reached for him as he dodged back and forth in the refitted warehouse in an attempt to find an opening. Zac could even sense a palpable hunger coming from the void even if he couldn't see the main body of the creature.

[Deforestation] was finally charged up though, and the woodsman's axe emerged before it released a wave of destruction toward the sky. Zac didn't even pause to see the result as he rushed for the exit, but he immediately found himself blocked again. The vines were only pushed back a bit from the strike as shallow wounds that looked like spatial tears appeared on the hands, but they were still able to move around freely in the room.

An odd undulation rocked Zac's mind for an instant, but he shook his head and immediately followed up with the second swing. The Axe of Felling had not really hurt the creature, but it had at least stopped it for a second. Perhaps an opening would show itself if he kept pushing, so Zac unhesitantly unleashed a fiery wave of Axe-infused destruction toward the void.

The flames were unfortunately restrained as the air was almost non-existent in the chamber by this point, and it didn't seem like this creature was weak to fire either like one could have hoped. The cutting fire glommed onto the vines like napalm, but it was as though the hands absorbed their energy, quickly extinguishing them before they shot out toward Zac again.

However, Zac didn't completely give up hope as he saw that the appendages had started distorting just like the claw from before. It seemed like his attacks had increased the pace at which the Void Creature was expelled from the Mystic Realm, and if he could cause enough damage he might be able to flee. Luckily, there was one final card up Zac's sleeve, and the ominous Axe of Desolation made its entry.

A wave of darkness almost completely filled the Relay Station, engulfing all three appendages in a darkness that seemed a shade blacker than even the Void itself. A series of powerful implosions could be heard within, and Zac's eyes lit up as he started rushing for the exit again. However, a scream of

danger made him stop in his tracks, allowing him to barely dodge a badly mangled hand that grabbed for his throat.

An instant later the full tentacle emerged through the desolation, proving that even his strongest strike had failed to take out the tentacles.

The hands on the appendage had turned completely pitch-black from the attack though, and a large number of them had seen their finger turn into ash that drifted toward the void. Its form was rapidly distorting back and forth as well, and it was clearly about to be booted out of this space. However, a weird rune suddenly lit up on the back of all the hands, and the tentacle flashed forward with unprecedented speed, immediately snatching up Zac by his waist.

A crushing pressure threatened to grind his pelvic bone to dust, but Zac ignored the pain as he desperately cut into the hands with everything he had. The sanguine glow of the first rune on [Verun's Bite] had already been activated again, quickly burning through the small amount of E-Grade blood he had managed to gather since the battle with the Lunar Wolves.

Every swing contained enough force to turn a Middle E-Grade Warrior into paste, but the only effect was small scars like the earlier ones appearing across the hands. But the barrage also increased the speed the appendage destabilized, and Zac suddenly found his axe striking air as the appendage disappeared with a pop, just like the Void Bubble from before.

The implosion made Zac helplessly hover in the air for a short moment before a huge force exploded outward, slamming Zac into the Memorysteel wall. However, luck was on Zac's side one final time as he had been thrown right next to the gate. He quickly crawled through the barrier while dragging the chains with him.

It was just in time as well since the last two tentacles finally managed to break through the cloud of desolation just as Zac passed through the red barrier. His whole body was hurting, but he arduously got up to his feet in case the hands tried to force their way through the gate. He didn't want to use it, but he still had the second skill of [Love's Bond] to block the path in case that happened.

But the tentacles stopped right outside the barrier before they started to retreat into the void again.

A surge of relief almost made Zac pass out, but his eyes suddenly widened in shock when he saw that none of the three scouts he had carried on his chains was moving. Blood was streaming down his mouth because of internal injuries, but he ignored his own state as he frantically reached for the people on the ground.

Thankfully it turned out that none of them were dead, but they had rather been rendered unconscious some time during the battle. It was no wonder considering the speed Zac had moved around to avoid the grasping hands. Just the g-force alone would probably have been enough to kill a normal human.

Add to that the scout's conditions, the sparse oxygen, and intense pressure from the Void Creature and it was almost a miracle they were still alive. The demon and the Valkyrie he carried outside were sitting just a few meters away, and he was blankly staring at the Void through the barrier like his soul had left his body.

Zac threw a Cosmos Sack full of first-aid items to the demon, dragging him out of his blank state before he quickly fed all the unconscious scouts healing pills himself. Their complexions quickly improved, and a few of them even started stir like they were about to wake up. A prompt appeared the next moment, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief.

He had passed the quest, albeit barely.

It seemed like the Void Creature really didn't dare pass through the red barrier for some reason. Of course, the terrifying tentacles were on their last legs because of the Axe of Desolation, and it was possible that the creature simply didn't want to lose two more appendages and cut its losses.

Seeing that he had escaped death once more Zac simply slumped down on the ground, a wave of exhaustion hitting him like a punch to the face. However, he knew that he still was at the edge of the Wasteland, and a new horror could appear at moment's notice, quest or no quest. He quickly took out a healing pill and two D-Grade Nexus Crystals to restore his energy as quickly as possible.

The first of the unconscious scouts roused themselves a few minutes later, prompting Zac to open his eyes again. It was the man who had spoken up just before the Void Creature appeared. He blankly looked around like he was surprised to be alive for a few seconds before he spotted Zac seated against the wall.

"I- Ah, I'm Jonas, Jonas Marshall," the man said with a hoarse voice. "Thank you for saving us, from the wolves and that... thing. I didn't mean to order you about earlier, I-"

"It's fine," Zac shrugged, his voice equally hoarse. "I simply sensed something was wrong."

Of course, that was only part of the story. Another reason for the scathing glare was the fear this guy had put him in harm's way. He thought the training quest finished at that point and was afraid that the call for revenge would trigger the third part of his training regimen.

But no prompt had appeared as a result of the man's words, which was a huge relief.

The next logical step would have been to enter the Wastelands, and Zac was in no mood to risk his life against spatial storms and Void Creatures. He knew the System's preferences, and he wouldn't have been surprised if it kept escalating the conflict through quests until he had eradicated the whole Lunar Tribe before it turned him toward the Core Sector.

"And we can't follow those werewolves as we are, even if that monster wasn't around," Zac added as he got to his feet with a grunt. "A place called the Wasteland is in that direction and we don't have the equipment or understanding to cross it. It's apparently full of the things we just encountered."

The others visibly paled at that as they threw a few fearful glances toward the barrier. The horrifying appendages were gone for now, but that didn't mean there were even more of them waiting in the darkness.

"Let's go," Zac said. "We can't stay here any longer. We're returning to our base camp."

The scouts were more than willing to comply and they immediately got themselves ready to travel even in their pitiable states. The demon wordlessly kept carrying one of the unconscious scouts on his back, while Zac carried another two on his chains. The last 2 managed to walk by themselves, albeit barely.

None of them were in any mood to talk, and neither was Zac. This encounter had been much too close for comfort. Worse yet, this was just the second of ten quests. He didn't even dare to think what fresh hell the System would put him through next. So it was in an oppressive silence the group scurried away from the Relay Station, following the same route that Zac took on the way in.

They quickly reached the alcove where Zac had left Leviaia, and the Cartava Scion was still sitting there, fretfully peering around the corner. When she saw Zac's and the others' states her eyes widened in shock as she got up to her feet.

"What happened?" Leviaia hesitantly asked as her eyes peered at the group behind Zac.

"I managed to catch them off-guard and things worked out against the werewolves. A weird Dimensional Creature made from thousands of hands popped up though, and we lost two of our people," Zac sighed as he formed the chain-chair again. "Let's go."

However, Leviaia didn't move, but simply looked at Zac with horror.

"Thousands of hands? You met the Collector?" Leviaia said, her voice barely a whisper.

"What? The Collector? I don't know. It had tentacles made from thousands of hands sewn together. I managed to destroy one of the tentacles, allowing us to escape," Zac said.

"YOU HARMED IT?!" Leviaia shrieked as she scrambled onto the chair. "We need to go! NOW!"