

The Fall 598

Chapter 598: The Hero's Burden

The Hero's Burden (Training (3/10)): Avoid the Collector while leading your followers to safety. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1)

[NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of two random skills and 5 levels.]

Zac barely had time to take in Leviala's exaggerated reaction before the prompt in front of him appeared. Zac quickly scanned the quest with some exhaustion. He wasn't completely wrung dry just yet, but he was also far from an optimal condition. But the quest acted as a warning of sorts, and Zac knew there wasn't anything he could do except keep going.

The quest didn't have a timer, and neither didn't have any restrictions. But that might actually not be a good thing, since it might mean that a single death would result in failure. The punishment for failing had decreased once more at least, though the punishment was still far too rich for Zac's tastes.

"Let's keep moving. If you're unable to move any longer, tell me and I'll carry you," Zac said before he turned to Leviala who was already sitting on her chair. "Is it safe to talk?"

"It can't hear us, but it can sense us," Leviala whispered with fear in her eyes as she gazed at the cracks in the ceiling. "It'll pounce if we stop for just a moment."

Zac nodded in understanding as he set out, keeping as high a pace as he dared in this chaotic place.

"What do you know about that thing?" Zac asked.

"The Collector is said to be the second greatest source of deaths during the Cataclysm, only lacking compared to the spatial storms themselves. It's not necessarily the strongest Void Creature, but it's definitely one of the weirdest. But more importantly, it's unusually resilient to our dimension. You saw the claw before. It deformed by itself in seconds. But the Collector's hands can stay for hours as long as they're not attacked," Leviala said.

"The Collector is also extremely crafty, and it's even able to enter the research base through Spatial Tears. There have been reports of people being snatched all over the base, even in sectors thought to be safe," she said as she held her hands against her chest. "But I don't understand. It's been gone for thousands of years. It left a few centuries after the Cataclysm, and there have been no sightings since."

"Well, I guess it came back now that the treasure is maturing," Zac sighed. "Why do you call it the Collector? Does it actually collect hands?"

"That's our guess, at least. We think it somehow attaches them to itself to better withstand this dimension. That's why it's so dangerous to attack it. It really treasures its collection, and it will hunt you down if you harm the hands," Leviala said, looking almost ready to cry. "And now we're in a sector full of breaches."

"Uh, well," Zac muttered, but he didn't get any further before a sense of dread filled him. "RUN!"

The others didn't hesitate at all as Cosmic Energy surged in their bodies as they rushed down the corridor. It was just in time as well, as a tentacle suddenly rushed out of a crack in the ceiling just behind them.

"It's really the Collector," Leviala said ai. "We're doomed. We're doomed. It's either the Collector or getting bisected by Spatial Tears."

"Shut up or I'll use you as a shield," Zac growled as he kept running.

Another sense of danger filled his mind the next moment, and he stopped just in time to avoid running straight into a Spatial Tear. A piece of his robes was cut apart though, telling just how close he had come to getting split open like a melon. The others quickly stopped in their tracks as well, barely avoiding the spatial storm that emerged from the void the next second.

Zac's nerves were taut as a bowstring, but there was no way to force himself through the storm. But waiting for the spatial storm to pass was obviously not an option either with the Collector in pursuit.

"Left!" Leviala screamed, and Zac immediately turned down another corridor, the others desperately following in tow.

The hands were too close though, and the slower Valkyrie was about to get snatched up.

"Shit!" Zac growled as he stopped in his tracks before he shot forward like a cannonball as his free chains slammed into the memory steel in the opposite direction.

A barrage of five-meter fractal edges slammed into the hands of the Collector the next second, each carrying a tremendous force. Small scars appeared on the hands, but Zac's normal F-Grade [Chop] could barely slow the tentacle down as it grasped for the deathly pale Valkyrie. Zac saw no option but to go in himself, and he appeared right behind his follower just as the hand was about to grasp her neck.

A tremendous shockwave caused cracks to spread across the whole corridor as [Verun's Bite] collided with the palm of the slightly larger hand at the end of the tentacle. A weird scar appeared on the skin as the fingers on the closest hands spasmed and bent in impossible angles, perhaps an indication of pain.

Zac wasn't much better off though, a weird sinister energy had entered his body the moment the two opposites clashed. Zac felt his vision blur for a second, but a thud from his chest woke him right up, just in time to avoid getting snatched up by a second grab. Whatever energy had entered his body just now, his [Void Heart] had swallowed it. If that was a good or a bad thing, only time could tell.

The all-out Axe-Infused swing had only left a flesh wound but Zac didn't care as he fled, dragged away by two of the chains he had embedded in the wall before rushing back. The collision had fulfilled its purpose as the Valkyrie had already moved a hundred meters away, and Zac sighed in relief when he saw the Collector retracting its appendage.

Those things were only so long, so if Zac could obstruct it a second or two he would be able to keep his people safe.

"Argh!" the demon suddenly screamed from the vanguard, immediately proving Zac wrong.

The group had kept running while Zac stalled the Tentacle, and this time they didn't have Zac's Luck to keep them safe from the spatial tear.

A huge wound had opened up in the Demon's side, and blood already pooled on the floor beneath him.

"Eat this," Zac said as he threw out one of his top-quality private healing pills.

"Thank you," the Demon said as he swallowed the pill, but Zac's eyes widened when a flame appeared in his hands.

However, the Demon wasn't targeting him or anyone else, but rather used a fireball spell to quickly cauterize the wound, leaving a nasty burn instead.

"I can keep going," the demon said with a ragged breath, but Zac saw that his whole body shook.

Zac nodded, but he still took the unconscious Valkyrie the Demon had been carrying. The demon actually stretched out his hand to take her back, but he reluctantly stopped himself after looking down at his wound.

"You can carry her when the pill has restored you a bit more," Zac said as he started running.

"Thank you... Jana is... my wife," the demon said. "Save her first if it comes down to that."

Zac's brows rose, but now wasn't the time to ask for details. The group kept running down the unknown corridor, led by Leviala's expertise and guesswork. It was clear their speed wasn't enough to avoid detection though, as the tentacles of the Collector kept appearing through the cracks in the walls or ceilings. It felt like they were one bad turn away from disaster at every moment.

They thankfully weren't all that far from the gate though, and Zac knew that he would only need to keep it up for another 15 minutes if they kept this pace. He could do it.

However, disaster finally struck after they had been forced down yet another unknown corridor by the emergence of another tentacle. What should have been a normal pathway had turned into a dead-end because of a collapsed wall some distance in, with a massive number of spatial anomalies making it impossible to climb across the rubble.

The Collector's tentacle was actually still around as well, like it knew that they were trapped.

"It's over," Leviala said as tears streamed down her face, her eyes slowly turning toward the spatial tears. "Better the tears..."

"I told you to stop talking like that," Zac muttered as a terrifying aura exploded out from his body, and he felt how a series of black fractals appeared across his face.

He was out of options, so he could only blast his way out. And the only card he had that could deal with this monstrosity was his Annihilation Sphere. A surge of destruction coursed through his body as the energy of Oblivion seeped out of his soul like steam on a cold day. His avatar had stopped fighting as well, and instead stretched out its two hands in front of it as a surging river of Dao was released from it.

The coffin was the same, releasing a small amount of Coffin-Dao that blended with the energy of the Splinter of Oblivion, though the amount it released was somewhat lower because of the infusion of Oblivion. The streams entered his pathways and Zac started to feel his mind blur, but he couldn't let himself go into a trance in a place like this, against an enemy like this.

He desperately held on to his sanity as he pushed his two hands forward meeting the outreached hands of the Collector head-on.

The world froze for an instant before the tip of the tentacle simply disappeared, taking dozens of hands with it. A half-meter sphere of nothingness replaced the tip, and Zac looked at it with wonder as he was thrown back. He didn't know why, but that small ball of Annihilation was infinitely beautiful, like it contained the ultimate truth of the universe.

The sphere only existed for a fraction of a second though before it disappeared, leaving a frozen and maimed tentacle behind. However, the tentacle didn't remain unmoving for long as a series of shudders spread through its hands. One implosion after another erupted next as the whole tentacle seemed to fall apart.

A single Annihilation Sphere had done more harm to the creature than all of [Deforestation's] swings combined, and the thing immediately lost its ability to stay in this dimension. Leviala looked at Zac with blank incomprehension, and the others in the group weren't any better. Even the Valkyries looked at Zac with a mix of awe and horror, like Zac suddenly had become even more terrifying than the eldritch horror hunting them.

"Are you okay," one of the Valkyries asked, but she didn't dare to walk over.

"I'm fine," Zac coughed as he got back to his feet with some difficulty.

It wasn't completely true though. Using the Annihilation Sphere so soon after having gone through a heated battle had put an immense strain on his mind, and he was barely holding on to his consciousness. He could also feel that the cracks that ran down his neck had worsened this time around, making Zac feel some helplessness.

The cracks had never really healed since the last time he used his Annihilation sphere. His flesh had mended, but the odd energies had stayed on like hidden tendrils lodged in his body. Not even the lava bath had managed to expel them like the rest of his impurities, and neither was his [Void Heart] able to gobble them up.

He had no idea what the long-term ramification was of using the bronze flash over and over, and he could only pray that he would find some solution sooner rather than later. Because it wasn't like he could stop using the remnants even if he wanted to. They were his final card when everything was hopeless, when it was either do or die.

"Wh-" Leviala wheezed, seemingly struggling to form a coherent sentence.

"Looks like I had to go all-out again," Zac wryly smiled in response as he started running back the path they came from now that the tentacle was gone.

"What kind of-" the Cartava scion stuttered, but she was interrupted as a massive earthquake rocked the whole corridor with such force that she fell out of her chair.

Zac's tried to make his mind focus up as he turned around, but he immediately realized that he wouldn't be able to do anything against what was coming, even if he was in perfect condition.

At least twenty tentacles had forced their way out of the rubble of the collapsed corridor, and they madly pushed toward them, destroying everything in their path. The Memorysteel walls were ripped apart and deformed, exposing a series of worn-down tubes and contraptions hidden inside the walls.

It looked like a tide of hands were coming for them, no longer caring about playing it safe.

No orders were needed this time around as the group ran for their lives, not caring about anything but moving as quickly as possible. But the tentacles were too quick, especially since they didn't bother taking the same winding path as Zac's group. They rather just crushed the walls in the way, forming a new path for themselves.

Zac was out of ideas. He was exhausted and out of aces. He still had [Love's Bond], but he didn't believe for a second that his Spirit Tool's skill would be able to block the Collector's path. It would probably just end with his Spirit Tool getting damaged and Alea's soul getting wounded even further.

But a radiant light suddenly filled the corridor as the decrepit scripts on the walls flared into life. An endless series of clanking sounds echoed from within the walls the next moment, like someone had turned on the machines inside. Dozens of red barriers sprung up next, the closest one right in front of Zac's group.

Zac and the others passed through effortlessly though, allowing them to breathe out in a collective sigh of relief. Of course, one single barrier wasn't enough for Zac to feel safe considering that the sounds of destruction from behind hadn't abated at all. The group kept running through one barrier after another, barely maintaining their footing.

"The Administrator is intervening!" Leviala suddenly cried with joy.

A huge surge of power made Zac's hair stand on end the next moment, and he quickly looked back to see what was going on. He could quickly determine there was no immediate threat, but what he saw still made him want to run for the hills.

Was this the true form of Collector?