

The Fall 599

Chapter 599: Horror

Seeing the scene behind them almost made Zac forget the primal fear the tide of hands had elicited just a few seconds ago. The whole base had simply disappeared just a hundred meters behind them, replaced by a Void that stretched into infinity. It looked like the series of red barriers had been erected to maintain atmospheric pressure to the base.

There were no stars or nebulae in the Void, yet it wasn't completely dark. A thin strand of light stretched across the horizon, like a beam of light that had squeezed through a crack. Zac had no idea what that crack was, but he figured that it perhaps was a path to a real spacetime rather than the void between dimensions.

The scene was pretty shocking, but it was nothing compared to the appearance of the Collector.

The disgusting hand-tentacles were horrifying enough, but its main body easily topped it. Zac had imagined some sort of Lovecraftian horror after seeing the tentacles, but he wasn't sure whether the real Collector was better or worse. It almost looked like an ashy-gray blob of yarn floating in space, but the more he looked the more horrific it became.

Its form was a slightly uneven sphere that spanned thousands of meters across, making it a creature far larger than anything Zac had ever encountered before. He initially thought it was covered with coarse skin or short-haired fur, but a second glance actually revealed that they were just more body-parts sewn onto its real form. However, it wasn't just hands on its main body, but everything from legs to whole torsos and heads.

Worse yet, the bodyparts moved in everything from lackluster swaying to frantic clawing. Zac even spotted a head-and-handless torso desperately clawing at its midriff with its two stumps, probably trying to rip itself off from the Collector's body. The scene made him gape in horror, and an intrusive thought pushed away everything else.

Were the collected bodies still alive?

There weren't only humans attached to the body either, but Zac quickly spotted hundreds of werewolves as well. But that wasn't the extent of it as he could easily discern at least thirty different races in short order. It looked like the Research Base wasn't the Collector's only hunting ground, which would explain why it had disappeared for so long.

As for the tentacles, there were hundreds, most of them randomly swaying about in the void like strands that had come loose from the ball of yarn. Only a few of them actually had bodyparts covering them though, with the rest appearing to be made from something that looked like an oily liquid. Om fact, there were large patches of bare parts on the main body as well, meaning that the Collector wasn't done with its horrifying undertaking.

The Collector only had one additional feature, a weird hole in the middle of its body that seemed endless, like it led into a dimension of its own. Just looking into the depths made Zac's soul shudder, immediately forcing him to look away. He had actually felt a pull on his soul, like the maw of the Collector had some sort of spiritual pull.

A clanking sound dragged Zac out of his muddled state though as a series of enormous metal rings floated out in the void. There were over a hundred of them, each covered in dense scripts and thrumming with power. Zac quickly realized that the rings were made out of Memorysteel, and it was likely this 'Administrator' who had chosen to completely transform a section of the base to defend against the Collector's attacks.

The rings were of varying sizes, with the smallest ones being just ten meters in diameter with the largest ones being at least a few hundred meters across. The rings moved themselves to form a series of uneven tubes aimed at the creature before they started spinning with increasing velocity. The rings had turned into a blur in almost an instant, easily having reached tens of thousands of rpm.

Radiant motes of light soon appeared out of nowhere in the center of the tubes, likely somehow generated by the spinning. It was hard to tell whether the lights were made from extremely condensed energy or if they were an actual liquid, and it made Zac think of the experiments on plasma he had read about years ago.

However, this definitely wasn't something that would have been possible to create in some Earth lab, but rather some high-tiered energy that definitely exceeded anything he had seen aboard the Little Bean. Zac knew that he would instantly be turned to ash if he even got close to those things, and he kept backing away as he gazed at the accumulating lights with trepidation.

Suddenly one of the blobs of light turned into a ten-meter wide streak, hitting the Collector's main body like the discharge of a rail gun. Cascading lights illuminated the Void, and Zac felt a series of small wounds appearing on his soul from just looking at the spectacle. The Collector shuddered from the collision, but it clearly wasn't dead as dozens of tentacles shot toward the still-accumulating energy weapons.

"Run! Just being witness to a fight like this is a death sentence," Leviala screamed, blood streaming down her nose.

Zac wordlessly nodded, no longer daring to stay on to watch the result of the clash between Void Creature and the base itself. He snatched up the scouts who had all fallen unconscious as he rushed back where they came from, barely keeping himself upright after a series of shockwaves that meant that the battle had started in earnest.

The base was at least occupying the Collector's attention now, allowing Zac to only worry about the spatial tears as he ran for his life. However, that was easier said than done since the epic struggle was causing serious damage to the already weakened section. It looked like the whole place could collapse at moment's notice, with pieces of wall and ceiling falling all around them.

The spatial tears constantly poured through the cracks, and Zac was forced to jump back and forth like a monkey to avoid getting himself and his people cut into ribbons. On top of that, there was the constant threat that the Collector would return full of vengeance after having been blasted by the base's energy weapons.

Zac's heart was beating like a drum when they finally reached the inconspicuous part of the wall that led back to the forest, and he quickly took out the tablet, his shaky hands barely able to maintain a grip on it.

The gate she was conjured same way as last time, with Leviala being much too distracted to even care about how he did it. She kept a constant vigil to their back in case the tentacles returned, and she only turned back when she heard the sound of the gate sliding open. Zac didn't wait for even a second as he rushed out.

Seeing the lush forest felt like a stay of execution, and he unceremoniously fell down in a heap on the grass as he dumped his followers on the ground. He didn't know why, but it felt like the enormous wall would be able to keep the monster at bay, and the System apparently agreed as he suddenly got a prompt that he had completed the third part of his training regimen.

A wave of exhaustion hit him the second he saw the prompt, but he barely managed to keep himself from falling unconscious. His pumping adrenaline had kept him going even after unleashing the power of Oblivion, but his debts had come back to haunt him as a searing pain spread from his head down to his shoulders.

He quickly ate a series of pills, ranging from soul-mending to fasting pills to provide nutrients, and he took out both a Soul Crystal and a D-Grade Nexus Crystal to start restoring his condition. The scouts started to come to one after another as well, and they quickly sat down and focused on recuperation as well after having taken in their surroundings.

Three hours passed before Zac sighed and opened his eyes again, having barely reached a combat-ready state. New flesh had once more covered the cracks formed from unleashing the Annihilation sphere, and his mind didn't feel like it was full of cotton any longer. However, he knew that he was spreading himself too thin at the moment, and he wasn't sure how many more training quests he had in him.

It felt like the difficulty had taken a sharp spike after the first one, but he didn't know if that was just because he was unlucky enough to run into the Collector. It was hard to tell whether the System created its quest as things progressed, or whether it had foreseen everything that would happen. If it was the former, then he could only blame his bad luck and pray that his hardships would be taken into account when he finished the quest chain.

If it was the latter, he could only once chalk it up to the System being a real asshole.

He suddenly heard some shuffling next to him, and he looked over to see Leviala getting to her feet to stretch. It looked like she finally had regained some of her strength after using her Taboo Bloodline Skill.

"I don't know whether to call you lucky or unlucky," she muttered as she glanced at Zac with a complicated look. "Getting attacked by two different Void Creatures is some misfortune, they're not that common. But we still managed to survive somehow, even being saved by the base itself."

"Well, I often find myself asking that as well. Luck and misfortune seem to be two sides of the same coin in the multiverse," Zac said with a wry smile.

"What happened there at the end, though?" Leviala asked with a frown. "Why did the Collector become so angry that it directly attacked the base. Did you do something? I must have blacked out for a second."

"I just damaged one of its tentacles a bit again," Zac shrugged. "Perhaps it got angry because it happened for a second time."

"Hmm," Leviala said, suspicion written all over her face.

Actually, Zac wasn't surprised at her reaction. He had learned something peculiar from talking with Thea some time ago. She was actually unable to remember exactly what Zac did when he killed Harbinger back during the Zhix war. She only remembered him stretching out his arms, then seeing the Zhix lying destroyed on the ground. Everything in between was just a blank.

It turned out that his Annihilation Sphere actually messed with the minds of others, somehow deleting or destroying the memories of witnessing it. He didn't know if it was because of the System's meddling, or rather if it was because normal people couldn't withstand that kind of high-tiered concept.

Zac was actually leaning toward the latter as the oddity reminded him of him seeing the Chaos Pattern during his battle with the dragon. He could still somewhat remember a sense of complete understanding of the universe for an instant, just like how he had felt when seeing his Annihilation Sphere just now.

But any actual understanding had gradually disappeared, and he couldn't remember a single feature of the Chaos Pattern by the time he left the Tower of Eternity. This weird phenomenon was partly why he dared to use the Annihilation Sphere in front of others. He even believed that the only thing awaiting Leviala if she used her Bloodline Skill to see what happened would be a shocking backlash, especially considering the Collector was involved as well.

"Well, now what?" Leviala asked, making Zac freeze in fear.

But it looked like the System was giving him a breather this time around, with no new prompt appearing.

"None of us are in great shape," Zac eventually said as he took out the backpacks of the werewolves. "Let's rest a bit longer before we get going."

He had only managed to snatch one Cosmos Sack and two backpacks back at the Relay Station, but all three belonged to squad leaders, meaning they should hold the best stuff. Now was as good a time as any to see if there actually were any returns from almost getting killed a dozen times over.

However, Zac's face scrunched up when he noticed the sacks were mostly full of food and first-aid items, along with some gadgets that mostly looked like more of the same as what he had looted off of Hevastes. He noted with interest that there was not a single pill or Nexus Crystal among their possessions, and it was the same with Hevastes' bag.

Instead, there were a few vials of a milky liquid that had healing properties according to Leviala, but the effect was a lot worse compared to his healing pills. That wasn't to say that his mother's family was unable to create proper remedies. The problem was rather that these vials essentially contained run-off of the real thing, siphoned off the base by the natives.

Seeing there was not much of interest he turned his attention to the gadgets. There were two charges similar to the one he looted from Hevastes, but they both were not only smaller, but they also looked homemade. His best guess was that Hevastes' charger was looted somewhere on the base while the other two were created in its likeness to the best of the werewolves' abilities.

Still, it was an impressive feat to reverse-engineer a piece of equipment like this, and it proved that the natives weren't simply scavengers in this place.

There were also two tablets identical to the one in his possession, and Zac simply put them aside as he honed in on a tablet that looked a bit different compared to the others.

“What’s this?” Zac asked as he turned to the Cartava Scion.

“A mapper,” Leviala said as she leaned over, and Zac could see some desire in her good eye. “It’s used to record safe paths. You can also add comments about security measures, spatial traps in it, creating detailed maps.”

Zac’s eyes lit up as he looked down at the smaller tablet in his hands. Wasn't this exactly what he needed right now?