

## The Fall 611

### Chapter 611: Lab 16

The group immediately set out, keeping a rapid pace on their way toward Inner Lab 16. They were making good time thanks to the complementary competencies of Kenzie and Laviala, but Zac was still filled with anxiety. The only thing giving him some peace of mind was Kenzie's ability to almost freely contact their forces back at the forest, allowing him to stay up to date on the situation.

The army had finished preparations for the outermost layer of defense around the base, but they doubled down on their preparations after hearing about a possible attack. They also increased the number of scouts keeping watch in all sectors under their control in case the Cartava Clan appeared somewhere other than through the gate.

An evacuation was already underway as well, with almost all non-essential personnel already having been transferred out of the Mystic Realm. Only some non-combat cultivators would stay inside the Research Base after the Dimensional Seed matured, with a skeleton crew to maintain the base while the rest set out to assist the Zhix on their crusade.

Eventually, Zac didn't have time to worry about his people though, as just passing through the corridors on the way to the Inner Layer demanded all his attention. Just as Laviala had warned, the increasingly common Spatial tears was just one of the problems facing them.

"Wait," Kenzie suddenly said, and the group hid against a wall as they activated a series of cloaking methods.

No one still dared as much as breathe loudly as they waited steeped in silence. Half a minute later clattering sounds echoed out through the corridors as a patrol unit consisting of two spider balls and six drones moved past them. This was the sixth squad they had to hide from in just 20 minutes, a stark contrast to the abandoned outer reaches.

It wasn't that Zac didn't want to simply force his way through, and the small squads weren't a threat to his group. But getting discovered or destroying the sentries resulted in a lockdown, which would cause way more of a headache than it was worth.

"Okay, we're good," Kenzie eventually nodded and the group set out again.

"Just how are you discovering these sentries?" Laviala asked with a frown. "We have tried for centuries to discover their signals."

"I told you, we got our hands on some Technocrat technology on the outside. We didn't enter this place blindly," Zac snorted from ahead, getting a bit annoyed at Laviala's attempts to delve into his sister's secrets.

Of course, he knew that his go-to excuse was pretty weak, but Kenzie was forced to display her abilities if they wanted to get back in time. Thea was clearly also curious about what was going on, but she had never asked about it over the past weeks even after Kenzie displayed an uncharacteristic level of competence for a 20-year old without a science background.

They finally reached the spot the Werewolves had marked after slowly and methodically making progress through the minefield of guards and traps. They were getting close to the Inner Layer now, and the Spatial Expansion was getting more and more pronounced. Zac guessed the surroundings had increased around 25 times in size, making him feel like a citizen of Lilliput.

This massive transformation was what provided Zac's group with a new route. The section they had just reached was designed remarkably different compared to the much simpler corridors in the Outer Ring. The walls were still made from Memorysteel, but the design was of a lot higher quality and there were a lot of windows to the rooms inside.

Leviala explained that this section had once been the place of residence of the middle-tier workers of the base. The corridor itself reminded Zac of the living quarters of Little Bean, as it was roughly twice as wide compared to the outer hallways, and filled with lounge areas and what looked like zen gardens. There were a lot more doors as well, each of them leading to an apartment ranging from 50 to hundreds of square meters in size.

Clan Cartava had long looted these quarters of everything that wasn't destroyed during the spatial storms of the Cataclysm, with only the stronger people continuing into the Inner Layers when the base shut down for maintenance. Their group still headed into one of the larger apartments though, a living quarter that probably once had belonged to some chief scientist.

What set this place apart compared to most other rooms was that it had its own small-scale laboratory, which unsurprisingly had grown enormous along with everything else. This was what provided them with a route to the inner lab, and they reached a wall socket hidden behind a table. The socket was covered by a lid, and a gust of stale air hit their group when Zac pushed it open.

On the other side was a metallic tubing around 180 centimeters in height, just a bit too low to walk upright. Not even Leviala was sure, but they guessed it was a special tube meant to transport some sort of gas or plasma to this home lab, which was why none of the other apartments had something like this.

"And we are sure this pipe won't suddenly be filled with some Technocrat poison?" Thea hesitantly muttered as she looked into the vent.

"Uh... No?" Kenzie hesitantly said. "But I think we should at least have noticed some remnants having leaked into this room if that was the case? That lid wasn't exactly a perfect fit after the expansion."

"I'll go first and block up the tunnel as long as I can in case something comes crashing down on us. But hopefully it won't come to that," Zac said before he turned to Leviala. "Can you walk on your own from here?"

"I'll make do. My wounds are a bit better by now," Leviala said. "I should be able to walk the last stretch."

Zac nodded as he entered the pipe, and the group kept walking for another hour until Kenzie told them to stop. The Werewolf maps stopped soon after the pipe entrance, but Leviala had provided them with a complimentary map. The spot Kenzie they had reached should be just a few meters from the gate leading to the Lab, and they had decided to cut their way out of the wall instead of trying to break into the Lab.

There were all kinds of alarms in the laboratories according to Leviala, so if they had to cut their way out, it was better if it was here. A few minutes later they were out, with Zac having done most of the work to get them out. Their activities had drawn the ire of the base though, and they were forced to back away for another twenty minutes before they could approach the gate.

"Let me," Kenzie said as she floated up to the terminal in the gate, and they all breathed out in relief when the door opened without issue.

They walked inside after confirming no guards were waiting for them, but Zac quickly stopped as the world lurched for an instant. The insides had looked normal before, but Zac was shocked to realize that everything was normal-sized.

"How is this possible?" Ogras muttered as he looked around with wide eyes, confirming that Zac wasn't the only one whose perception had shifted.

"The space is normal here?" Leviala exclaimed with surprise. "How weird. Even our outer labs have grown a bit over the past months."

"It has to be an effect of the Dao of Space," Thea said with gleaming eyes. "Space has become relative."

"Well, it should be a good thing. It means the lab is fully functional, right? Our chances of finding something useful has increased," Zac said as he looked around the beautifully crafted work areas as he walked into the Laboratory, if it could even be called that.

It rather felt like he had entered the headquarters of some IT start-up that had way too much money to spend, with everything from manicured miniature gardens to what looked like an extremely high-end restaurant where every table was placed on a small moat in an indoor lake. It almost made Zac wonder if they had come to the right place.

"This is a recreational area for the scientists," Leviala said with a dour expression as she looked at the opulent surroundings. "I guess they needed to relax a bit after experimenting on us like we were beasts."

"Nevermind that," Ogras muttered. "Where are the good things stored, girl? We need to get back before your family does something stupid."

"This way," the Cartava scion sighed as she led the group through the series of gardens.

Zac was wordlessly following along, but he did shoot an imperceptible glance at his sister who nodded in return as she summoned a couple of drones. They still needed Leviala to save time, but it was undeniable that a divide had been erected between them after learning what her clan was up to. So Zac had his sister and Ogras keeping constant watch over Leviala to make sure she didn't try something.

After all, no matter what her personal belief about who was right and wrong, there was no way that Leviala would side with Port Atwood if it came down to it, especially if the Zhix started killing her clansmen. They needed to double-check and triple-check everything she said and did, to make sure she wasn't leading them into a trap of some sort.

Hopefully, Kenzie would be able to spot anything of technological nature, while Ogras was perennially suspicious of everything around him. Any odd movement from the native would immediately be caught by him.

They soon reached a sliding door made from the same reinforced glass as the glasshouse, and it automatically opened up when they approached, letting them enter a small containment chamber. A second sliding door opened a minute later, and the group entered a spotless laboratory. There were around thirty tables in the main hall, a room of about 300 square meters, and each of them was connected to a series of expensive-looking machines.

Most of the tables were empty, but the remaining ones quickly drew their attention. A number of different items were hovering in the air, some of them looking complete and a few others seemingly mid-production with the help of several mechanical arms. More importantly, spatial tears were either hovering next to the machines like they were locked in place, or fused into the machines themselves.

There seemed to be a few adjoining labs as well, the layout reminiscent of the glasshouse's side-rooms. While the others looked around with curiosity Zac's attention was drawn by something else; the fact that his old quest had been completed.

It felt like he had caught a lucky break this time as the only threat turned out to be the sentry robots, as the Cartava troupe couldn't really be considered a formidable enemy. Now the question was why the System wanted to bring him here.

There were no natural treasures in sight, and nothing else that Zac felt was of immediate value. There were these weird machines hovering above the table, but Zac wasn't so confident that the System wanted him to take a bunch of Technocrat items considering its disdain for the Dao of Technology.

"What is this room?" Zac asked Leviala, hoping to find some clues.

"It seems this place has been turned into a mechanical lab," Leviala sighed. "It is honestly one of the worse ones."

"Oh?" Ogras asked, his eyes thinning. "How so?"

"These kinds of labs usually house various sorts of advanced machinery, which isn't really useful to cultivators. Sometimes we've found things that are valuable to Datamancers and our mechanical troops, but neither of those professions will remain in the outer world," Leviala sighed.

"So there's nothing?" Ogras muttered as they walked among the tables.

"The side chambers usually contain raw materials and natural treasures stockpiled for experiments. One can still find good items there. Valuable metals, race boosting treasures, pure ener-" Leviala said but stopped in surprise when Ogras turned into a gust of shadows, appearing in front of the closest door leading to a side chamber.

Zac glanced over and wryly smiled, but the smile froze on his face when he was blasted away by a shockwave of tremendous force without warning. He slammed into a table, but his momentum kept him going until he knocked into a wall on the other side of the lab. The shockwave also contained some sort of high-pitch sound that made him nauseated, but he quickly got up to his feet to reorient himself.

Only to see Leviala speeding toward the exit with one of the Spatial Machines in her arms.