The Fall 621

Chapter 621: Ripples

Zac sighed as he looked down at Leviala as her body collapsed in the drone chair. He hadn't touched her, but it wasn't hard to tell that she died. It looked a bit like she committed suicide, but Zac soon realized that was not really the case. One glance with [Comic Gaze] exposed rampant energies that ripped through her innards. It looked like her body was full of what Zac assumed to be temporal cracks, and there was even a hint of something all-too-familiar; the aura of the purple Heavenly Lightning.

It felt quite diluted, or perhaps it was more apt to say it was hollow. Still, it felt like ample proof that her messing with time really came with grave consequences, especially when she didn't have any means to protect herself like Zac with his [Void Heart]. The sinister cracks that were only visible to his special sight stemmed from her two cursed eyes, spreading throughout her body.

His best guess was that she had somehow contained or managed to delay the effect, but she simply gave up just now, letting the curse end her life. Zac had run through the corridors with righteous indignation before, a towering fury building over the betrayal and assault on his people. He had meted out justice, or at least vengeance, but there was no sense of closure at this moment.

Looking down at Leviala Zac just felt... cheated. The Cartava Clan definitely deserved what was coming to them, but that didn't change much.

"Poor child," the middle-aged man next to the drone chair said with a sigh.

Zac's eyes turned to the man, taking in the intricate machinery that covered his Technocrat-suit and the helmet lying to the side. He was definitely a Datamancer, probably one of the leaders and main controllers of the battlebot swarm.

"I guess you're her uncle, the Datamancer?" Zac slowly said. "Where is the Spatial Drill?"

"Why should I tell you that?" the man said with a desolate smile. "My niece is dead, as is my own family. We have lost our elders, our mechanical armies, and most of our elites. Clan Cartava has fallen, this place finally did us in. Just kill me and get it over with."

"Many have died, but even more should still be alive," Zac said, steeling his heart as he pointed toward the direction of the gate to the Cartava Clan. "This is just a part of your people. There should still be thousands of civilians relying on your protection. What kind of future they will lead will depend on your answers. Or I can go there and settle things myself, leaving no lingering threat behind."

Honestly, Zac didn't want anything to do with the Cartava civilians. He almost hoped they would hide away in some corner of the Mystic Realm, out of sight and out of mind until he had dealt with his real goals in this place. But he had already confirmed that the quest was just at (1/2) in completion, meaning the drill was still unaccounted for. He needed answers, even if he had to use the rest of the Cartava Clan as leverage.

Zac was about to continue pressuring the Datamancer, but a pulse suddenly rippled through the air. It didn't come from the middle-aged man though, but rather seemed to come from the inner parts of the Mystic Realm.

"Wh-" Zac said as he took a steadying step, but he didn't even have time to react before a second pulse arrived.

He suddenly found himself standing over fifty meters away from the Datamancer, displaced by some mysterious means. He hadn't even felt himself move. The Datamancer had essentially jumped onto the drone chair of Leviala, and he stared at the direction of the core, his miserable demeanor replaced with a calculating look.

Zac could easily understand what he was thinking; was the Dimensional Seed Awakening?

Suddenly a huge sphere made from spatial tears and the same type of shielding as the base used sprung up around the Datamancer. Zac immediately realized something was wrong, and he rushed forward, his axe already shining with a sanguine light as he activated the first fractal on its handle.

The Datamancer only glanced at Zac before he bent over Leviala's corpse, and Zac felt his blood freeze when he saw what he was doing. He was digging out her eyes with his own bare hands before he transferred them to a special vial he had taken out from a Cosmos Sack. After that, he took out a crystal sphere, a ball filled with something that looked like a black hole.

Zac still couldn't figure out what the Datamancer was up to, but his instincts told him that he had to stop it. The shield was thankfully only so strong, and it soon crumbled under Zac's all-out onslaught. One more swing and the Datamancer would be dead.

"Stop right now or I'll turn you into mincemeat," Zac growled as he walked closer, only keeping him alive because he needed answers.

The Datamancer frowned as he looked over at Zac before he seemed to come to a decision.

"You asked about the Spatial Drill, didn't you?" the man said as he warily looked at Zac. "Well, here it is."

The Spatial Drill appeared in his free hand the next moment, making Zac's heart lurch. He would instantly fail his quest if the Datamancer destroyed it, but that wasn't the real issue. Zac's instincts told had that it would cause untold problems down the line if Zac didn't get his hands on that tool. He expected it to be hidden or in the hands of one of the elders, but it turned out that they had handed it over to their chief Datamancer.

"Don't do anything stupid," Zac warned, cosmic energy already coursing through his body.

"The Heavens have a sense of humor. Just as I was resigned to death, it provided a path of survival. I thought I was ready to pass on, but I guess not. I am but 180 years old, I can still start over as long as I get out of here," the Datamancer muttered, but Zac wasn't sure whether the man was talking to himself or to him.

"We can make a deal," Zac said as he took out a teleportation token from his Spatial Ring. "I have dozens of teleportation tokens that can take you almost anywhere in the Zecia Sector. Give me the Spatial Drill and help me reach the core and I'll give you one along with enough Nexus Coins to activate it."

The middle-aged man looked at the token with hesitation and greed, but a third ripple suddenly appeared out of nowhere, this one causing them both suddenly to appear five meters into the air. The two landed onto the ground without any issue, but Zac got a sinking feeling when the Datamancer's eyes had calmed down after the spatial displacement.

"The world is ending, and you're still thinking of the treasure?" the middle-aged man smiled. "I hope you'll find it in your heart to leave a path for my clansmen. Here, catch."

Zac was about to try to convince him once more while simultaneously having one of his chains move toward the man below the ground. But his eyes widened in horror when the Datamancer suddenly threw the Spatial Drill out with great force as a series of new barriers appeared around him.

Confusion clouded Zac's mind, and he didn't know what he should do. What did the System want from him? The quest told him to get the Spatial Drill, but the drill had led him to one of the topmost Datamancers in the Mystic Realm. Besides, the Drill was a Technocrat tool, shouldn't it survive some roughhousing, especially with Kenzie there to make some field repairs?

But a sudden realization hit him. Why did he care about what the System might or might not want him to do? Ogras' story about Divine Guidance had planted a seed of hesitation, but was there any point to second-guessing himself? He just needed to follow his instincts, and they told him to go for the machine.

Getting the drill was far more important than capturing a Datamancer.

He flashed forward with the help of [Loamwalker], but a fourth ripple caused reality to bend for an instant before it was restored. This one was far more powerful than the previous anomalies and Zac quickly realized that something was wrong. It almost felt like he was in one of those nightmares where he tried to run but he couldn't move from his current spot. His legs moved forward just fine though, and he could quickly confirm that it wasn't some sort of illusion.

It was space itself that had started to unravel.

Hundreds of meters had been compressed into what appeared to be a hundredth of the distance. Each step with his movement skill pushed him forward, but it looked like Zac moved less than a meter. Thankfully the same odd situation seemed to affect the Spatial Drill, and it looked like it moved in slow motion on its descent toward the ground.

It felt like time had stopped as he desperately tried to make himself run faster. Zac spared a glance at the Datamancer after a few seconds, and his brows rose in shock as he saw what he was doing. He had already thrown Leviala's corpse to the ground, and it looked like he had extracted something from the machine.

Another contraption held the weird ball that looked like a black hole, and the two together looked like some kind of doomsday device. The Datamancer was slowly moving to insert another item into the contraption, something that clearly was an energy source full of Base Power. The sphere was already radiating tremendous spatial waves, and Zac didn't even want to think what would happen when the device would get a busload of Base Power.

Another odd pulse hit Zac, and he suddenly found himself moving forward with dizzying velocity. He barely had time to refocus on the task at hand, and he stopped just in time to snatch the Spatial Drill out

of the air, immediately putting it in his Spatial Ring for safekeeping. He immediately turned back toward the Datamancer to capture him, but he soon realized that he was too late.

A huge Void Sphere was born where the doomsday device hovered a second ago. It was more than twice as big as the Void Spheres he had seen until now, but that wasn't the only odd thing. The Datamancer had done something to modify it. It almost looked like it had an arched doorframe that held back the outer layer of spatial turbulence. Zac immediately started running, but the distance was too great. The Datamancer passed through the arch before Zac made it halfway back.

But it was clear that he was struggling.

Layers after layers of shielding appeared around his body, but they were destroyed almost as quickly as they were formed. But he didn't care as he had almost reached his goal; the core of the Void Sphere. This one didn't show a distant star or the void of outer space, but rather land. It, thankfully, wasn't Earth though as the sky was yellow while the ground was covered by some weird bone-like trees.

It looked like the Datamancer had already prepared a final escape plan for his clan, or perhaps for just himself. Seeing how he had dug out Leviala's eyes before discarding her body like it was trash, Zac guessed it was the latter. Something had changed after the first ripple had arrived, something that the Datamancer believed had given him a shot at survival.

Even worse, Zac felt that the Cartava elite really believed the world was ending, and Zac's own conviction that the natives were wrong was honestly starting to become poisoned with doubt. But the thought of jumping into the Void Sphere as well didn't even cross his mind.

He couldn't even entertain the thought that the Mystic Realm was falling apart. Even if he managed to escape alive through that spatial bubble, then what? His sister, all his friends, all his subordinates would still be stuck in a collapsing realm, facing death all alone. He was better off fighting for a chance of survival in this place, and the Spatial Drill might be the key to the puzzle.

Zac still kept running toward the Void Sphere, but he eventually stopped a hundred meters away. The Sphere was starting to suck in everything in its surroundings, and Zac was afraid that he would be dragged inside if he came closer or tried to snatch the Datamancer with his chains.

Eventually, Zac simply stopped to observe. Part of him wanted to send out a fractal blade as some sort of retribution for how he had treated his niece's body. Something unconscionable like that shouldn't go unpunished. But he reined in his bubbling anger, more concerned about what he was trying to do.

Space in the mystic realm was becoming weird and unstable, and he and his people might soon need to use similar means to escape. If Zac could learn what to do and what to avoid by observing this attempt it might save lives further down the road.

Most of the Technocrat shields had already collapsed around the middle-aged man, and his right arm was suddenly cut clean off as he pushed through the inner spatial tears. He looked like a mangled corpse from over a dozen deep lacerations, but Zac could sense that he was still alive as he finally managed to push through the spatial folds, falling into the core of the Void Sphere. His body twisted and distorted, making him look like a blob.

Both the Datamancers and the Void Sphere disappeared a second later, leaving Zac wondering if he actually made it or not. One thing was clear though; Leviala hadn't been lying about the dangers of those things. Jumping into a Void Sphere was fraught with danger, and even someone with ample preparations had been pushed to the brink of death in his escape attempt.

Yet another ripple caused space to bend into an u-shape, and Zac's heart lurched when he suddenly saw treetops from the Lunar Forest point down toward him. Honestly, Zac wasn't sure whether he or the half-dead Datamancer had the best odds of survival at the moment.