

The Fall 657

Chapter 657: Barter

The whole world was fast collapsing judging by the tumultuous Memorysteel Fragments crashing into each other and getting lost to the Void. A glance around also proved there was no one else in the area. It was just himself, his sister, and the unmoving body of Cervantes. Of course, there was also the Dimensional Seed.

Zac didn't need to be a genius to understand that messing with the Dimensional Seed would be extremely dangerous. His body wasn't in any state to tack on another round of punishment, let alone absorb a C-Grade Treasure. But the timer on the quest screen blinked with an urgency that forced Zac to look at it.

Thirty seconds.

Everything had led toward this moment, and it looked like the System was treating the supreme spatial treasure the reward for following its Divine Guidance to the end. But that thing had swallowed not only Ogras, but also Billy and Rhubat from the looks of it, and Zac felt more hatred than desire when he looked at it. But the System seemed to think it possible to snatch that thing, and he might forever regret it if he backed away now.

He gritted his teeth and put his sister down on the ground before he shot toward the pedestal. The spatial fluctuations quickly became painful, so Zac started to circulate his Daos to at least somewhat shield him from the rampant bursts. But the Dao Field surrounding the treasure was too powerful, and it felt like he was trying to fight a Dao Fragment with a recently acquired Dao Seed.

A shuddering pulse rippled through the Memorysteel platform he stood on, and Zac looked down with a frown before he turned back to the treasure that now was only a hundred meters away. The quest had told him to brand the Dimensional Seed with his Mark of Creation, which Zac could only assume was the System's name for his Pink Flash that remained untested.

Zac was just about to start activating the skill and follow the instructions, but he suddenly froze for a moment. A sense of reluctance gripped his heart now that he was so close to the treasure. The situation felt exactly like when he was placed in front of the Shard of Creation, where his own fate wasn't in his hands any longer.

Exactly why did the System want him to gobble up yet another item that was far beyond his strength and capabilities? He already had the two Remnants that were causing a headache, was there really a need to add another one? If the treasure in front of him had been something related to his path like the Stele of Conflict, then he would have jumped at the opportunity. But now?

His cells hadn't reacted at all to the treasure since first seeing it in the hidden realm, and standing this close didn't change that at all. More importantly, was a life where he was being led down an unknown path by the System really what he wanted? One second after another passed as Zac stood frozen with indecision, greed struggling against his convictions and his path.

Another ripple spread through the ground, and Zac suddenly felt like his mind was clear; he wasn't Adcarkas, a Dimensional Seed wasn't something he required for his path. In fact, it might muddy things even further.

More to the point, there was a creeping sense of unease growing in the back of his mind.

He had come this far trusting his gut, and he wouldn't change now. The fluctuations around the Dimensional Seal were rapidly growing more condensed like it was finishing up its preparations, and the Quest Screen had once more appeared right in front of him, its timer now glaringly red. But Zac still shot in the opposite direction with all the speed he could muster in his harried body.

Simultaneously, four chains shot toward the massive pillar of [Realm Locus], and a snap echoed out as they ripped the pillar off the ground and dragged them back to Zac who threw the pillar into his Spatial Ring. Losing the crystal pillar didn't affect the Dimensional Seed overly much since it was hovering on its own, but it did release a powerful ripple that managed to knock him over. Zac quickly got back on his feet and resumed his sprint.

He still wasn't aiming for the treasure, but rather his sister.

That sense of wrongness and being led by the nose, coupled with those small energy pulses in the ground, was all he needed to change course. The quest screen suddenly appeared right in front of him, this time showing that just twelve seconds remained. But he punched right through it, completely ignoring its incessant blinking.

His sister was still lying unconscious where he left her, but Zac's eyes widened in alarm when he saw a man wrought from Memorysteel emerge from the plateau. It looked exactly like before, except its needles and body weren't made from the golden metal but rather the normal alloy that made up most of the base.

This was what the ripples had warned him off. The Administrator hadn't died with the collapse of the hidden realm, and it clearly hadn't given up on Kenzie.

Zac's mind frantically searched for a solution, and two streams of Dao entered the energy conduits on his shoulders. Something magical was suddenly building in his chest, and he felt his exhausted and overtaxed body suddenly being given a new lease on life from the accumulation. His very cells greedily tried to swallow the energies in of the Pink Flash, to the point that Zac actively had to defend the skill.

This was his best solution. The Pink Flash had worked wonders on the Little Bean, and perhaps it would be able to destroy the Administrator as well. But reality often didn't match one's plans. Zac suddenly found himself unable to move ten meters away from the Administrator, just when he was about to jump up and slam the still-congealing energy ball into the robot's chest.

The Administrator didn't even bother to look in Zac's direction as his gaze was trained on Kenzie, or perhaps rather on Jeeves inside her head. A ball of pinkish-white light soon appeared between Zac's hands, and Zac found himself in another predicament as the Skill kept going even when he was immobilized. He needed to get rid of it, but how?

"Wait!" Zac suddenly screamed, making the Administrator look over.

[You bear the bloodline, but the Token you hold is counterfeit. I have no obligation to follow your commands.]

“You’re searching for life, aren’t you? And you believe the key lies in Dao?” Zac quickly said as he desperately tried to slow down the accumulation of Creation-energy between his hands. “That’s why you let the natives cultivate, that’s why you studied the Dimensional Seed, and that’s why you’ve created those needles of yours.”

The Administrator didn’t answer. But it did seem its attention was trained on him, or rather the ball between his hands. By now some faint runes had appeared in its depths, and Zac almost got lost when he looked at them. It felt like the markings were full of hidden meaning, like understanding just one would allow him to take huge leaps forward in his cultivation.

But he quickly refocused his wandering mind to make his gambit.

“The thing in Kenzie’s head is just a machine just like you. I have something better,” Zac said with grit teeth, barely able to control the sphere by this point. Three-quarters of his accumulated Creation Energy had already gone into the sphere, far more than he had originally hoped to use. “Pure Creation. If you want a real shot at becoming a living being, this is your best chance. So, take this and let my sister go.”

[Class-3 but with a Class-5 Source... Creation... The precursor to Life,] the Administrator mused as Zac felt his hands starting to twist and mutate.

One second they were covered in feathers, only for them to become scaled claws the next. A moment later they were just pure green energy, like a ghost wrought from Nature-Attuned Cosmic Energy instead of Miasma.

[Agreed,] the machine said, and it was like it teleported as it instantly appeared straight in front of Zac.

The swirl of needles instantly surrounded the sphere, and Zac felt his connection to it getting cut off. He silently siphoned off a small amount of the energy as he shouted for his arms to return to normal just before the Administrator took charge of the sphere.

The Administrator actually pushed the ball of energy straight into its own chest, and the effect was immediate. The whole plateau rumbled as the avatar started to undergo huge changes. One second it looked like a humongous human, and another a werewolf. But a moment later it turned into an extremely complex pattern that made Zac dizzy just looking at it.

It also released greater and greater waves of creation, affecting a larger and larger area around it. Not only that, but it was like the Dimensional Seed was triggered by the emanations, and it exploded with vigor. Zac sighed when he saw his quest disappear three seconds ahead of time, but there was nothing to do about it. He might have lost the chance to finish the quest and seize the Dimensional Seed, but there was no regret.

The AI seemed completely preoccupied with the absorption of the Mark of Creation, which allowed Zac to rush forward and snatch up his sister in his arms. He looked down at her with a frown on his face, before his eyes glanced toward the sky as moved away from the Administrator's still-changing form.

The System had successively nurtured a dependence in Zac during his stay in the Mystic Realm. By the end of the quest-chain, he had completely looked to the Training Quests for guidance on what to do

next. Yet, if he had actually followed through by the end without hesitation, then Kenzie would definitely have been taken by the Administrator.

Did the System really want to kill his sister, but for some reason was forced to do it in a roundabout manner? Or was it really just a coincidence that the System was so eager for him to use up the one ace that allowed him to barter for her life? And would it even work if he slammed the Mark of Creation into the Dimensional seed, or was it a trap to take both siblings out?

The idea that the System was actively gunning against Kenzie, or rather Jeeves, was a terrifying concept, but there were more pressing things to deal with. The Administrator had disappeared by turning into a huge cloud of dust, and a terrifying storm seemed to brew within. Meanwhile, the Dimensional Seed was acting more and more erratic in response to the new threat.

Just standing on the core platform felt lethal, and Zac knew it was time to go. One chain shot off to the side and snatched up the body of Cervantes, and it soon entered his Corpse Sack. As for Zac, he rushed toward the closest edge of the Memorysteel platform with his sister in his arms. The chaos was growing more and more severe, and Kenzie soon started to stir from the immense fluctuations.

"Ogras! Wha-" Kenzie screamed as she woke up, but she stopped herself as she looked around at the surroundings with confusion. "What's happening?"

"The Seed swallowed the whole world," Zac said as he transferred his sister to one of his chains to free up his arms. "Ogras was swallowed along with everyone else."

"We need to save him!" Kenzie said, and she immediately spotted the raging Dimensional Seed in the distance. "There!"

"Save him?" Zac said as he looked away. "He's..."

"He's not dead!" Kenzie screamed. "The treasure has formed an internal world, just like a C-Grade Monarch! I bet he's inside that world, the same place we were inside just now."

Zac was about to answer, but the Memorysteel platform suddenly collapsed as it turned into a block of blood for an instant before reverting. However, the whole platform, and the few hundred closest to them, were all bent up and or destroyed by that point.

It looked like they had entered a twisted fever-dream as the Memorysteel kept changing around them. Suddenly tens of thousands of screaming faces were created from the metal fragments, only for them to explode into the same odd pattern as before.

Zac found himself desperately grabbing at any fragments that maintained at least some structural integrity with his chains, thanking the gods that the gravity was pretty weak in this place. Soon the frantic transformation stopped, but the chaotic energies of Creation still suffused the area, telling Zac that the Administrator hadn't absorbed the thing just yet.

It wasn't like Zac trusted the rogue AI to honor its agreement to leave Kenzie alone. After all, why would it be content with just the Creation Sphere when it could study Kenzie as well? Zac's idea was simply to stall, and hopefully, they would be teleported out before it stabilized and resumed its pursuit. At that point, it would hopefully be killed by the whole realm collapsing.

“What’s going on?!” Kenzie exclaimed in horror as the two found themselves on a hundred-meter-wide fragment.

“The Administrator,” Zac snorted. “I made a trade with him, I’m not sure if he’s regretting it by now.”

“These energies,” Kenzie muttered with wide eyes before she looked at Zac.

“Don’t worry about it,” Zac said. “Our job now is to get away from here.”

“But...” Kenzie said as she once more glanced at the Dimensional Seed which was now hovering in the air, the energy radiating from it now even stronger than back in the hidden realm.

A swarm of drones shot out from her Cosmos Sack the next moment, all of them making a beeline for the spatial treasure. But it was hopeless. A good number of them were turned into all kinds of weird things from the Creation Ripples, and the ones who managed to get close to the seed were ground into stardust from the energy emanations.

They weren’t even sucked inside, they were just destroyed to particles.

“You see? We can’t get close,” Zac said with a shake of his head as he jumped toward another Memorysteel fragment, trying to get closer to the mountain below. “I think the treasure has completely matured. Anything I do will fa- HOLY SHIT!”

Any lingering thoughts of trying some more methods to snatch the Dimensional Seed were thrown out of Zac’s mind as the sky suddenly was shrouded by tentacles, thousands of them. The Collector had come out in full force, and Zac could even glimpse its enormous main body in the distance, inching closer like it wanted to swallow the whole broken planet.

Yet another titan had entered the fray.