

The Fall 499

Chapter 499: Pillars and Beams

The whole array of black runes lit up in an instant, but the runes around Zac's group were still dim thanks to Kenzie's efforts. However, explosions erupted in every direction as the Array Flags burnt out in quick succession. Thankfully the barrier couldn't hold it any longer, and it suddenly shattered as the maw of the fiery skull closed with a snap.

A massive crack provided an ingress for the group and they heedlessly braved the flames as they rushed inside, protected by the still-running War Array of the six Valkyries. A victorious roar sent a fiery discharge in each direction before the skull crumbled to white ash. Zac immediately summoned [Nature's Barrier] and blocked out the fallout, but the zombies on the other side of the array weren't so lucky.

Hundreds of them were incinerated in one fell swoop, and the shield had already mended itself before any new unliving could take their place. It looked like these pitiful creatures really weren't considered part of the Undead Empire just yet, as they were utterly incapable of following Zac and the others through the intangible barrier.

Zac knew that an advanced force like the Undead Empire would be able to erect arrays that could discern friend and foe, especially when there was such a striking difference between the living and the dead. But it looked like the Lich King had elected to keep even his own outside the core area. Perhaps too many zombies would be a drain on the limited Miasma in the atmosphere or something.

Of course, it wasn't like there weren't any zombies on the other side of the enclosure.

Large mobs of the undead were already rushing toward them from the distance, while Zac spotted clumps of Corpse Golems guarding the Unholy Beacons. These ones were the real deal as well, the crafty and ruthless elite zombies that probably were on the precipice of evolving into sapient Revenants.

Zac flashed away and gripped one of the zombies who shrieked as he tried to dig his rotting teeth into Zac's arm. Its assault was obviously futile with Zac's 2000 plus Endurance though. Zac shook the undead man for a bit to make him release his grip before he flung him toward the defensive array.

The nearby zombies roared in anger as they tried to mob Zac in retaliation, but they were immediately dismembered by a few lazy swings of his axe. The projectile zombie flew straight through the array, confirming Zac's guess. It worked like his own [Town Defense Array], only keeping people out in one direction. It was valuable information in case they were forced to flee later on.

"Let's go," Zac said. "They definitely know we're here by now."

The squad immediately started running toward the shining Incursion Pillar that was barely discernible in the distance through the thick miasmatic haze. However, they barely had time to move a few hundred meters before the sky changed, and one azure fractal after another started appearing.

These runes were clearly not the realignment array, but rather something meant to deal with intruders.

"Uynala, you were right," Ogras groaned. "It's not worth it."

"What?" Kenzie asked with a frown from the side.

Zac ignored the two as he activated [Cosmic Gaze] and turned it toward the sky. The arrays were obviously made from miasma, but Zac frowned when he saw that they contained something that could best be described as condensed death, and this weird energy was quickly accumulating more power. It was like the array was taking the death-attuned Cosmic Energy and taking away the energy itself, leaving just the concept behind.

He didn't know what use that stuff was, but it felt extremely dangerous. He needed to stop them from activating.

"Destroy the Unholy Beacons," Zac said as a massive fractal edge grew out from [Verun's Bite].

He activated [Loamwalker] the next second, and within moments he found himself in front of the closest beacon. It was more than three times the size of the mobile pillars he had seen so far during the two invasions of his island, and the hair on his arms stood on end from the extremely condensed miasma surrounding it.

A fractal blade grew from his axe and a wide arc swept through the guarding golems, causing them to fall apart into stale clumps of meat. A small amount of energy entered his body, but Zac frowned when he realized that it didn't target any specific node in his body like he would have assumed. It instead started to spread out across his limbs, until it finally started to dissipate.

Did he need to direct the energy himself?

Zac quickly took hold of the energy and condensed it into a ball, and it was thankfully an easy process to figure out the next step. He quickly pushed the ball of energy through his pathways until he felt some pliability from a node in his left leg. But he barely had time to push the small amount of energy inside the node before almost a hundred translucent green balls poured out of the massive brazier at the top of the beacon.

They caused an extremely uncomfortable weight to descend on him, and it felt like a mix of mental and physical pressure. However, Zac's Wisdom had shot all the way up to 800 over the past days, a number that even most early E-Grade mentalist would be hard-pressed to match. Combine that with a soul that had been forced to endure the continuous pressure from the Splinter of Oblivion for months, and he was starting to truly shore up his old weakness.

He didn't even need to infuse [Mental Fortress] with the Fragment of the Bodhi to effortlessly shrug off the mental pressure, and a few quick swings caused the tower to crumble. However, his mind warned him of danger the moment the beacon started to collapse, and he hurriedly flashed away.

It was just in time as well, as a chain of explosions turned the whole area around the beacon into a frozen hellscape. At least half of the odd spheres had been filled with ice-attuned energies it seemed, and while their individual destructiveness wasn't too threatening they still were a cause for concern when there were almost a hundred of them balled together.

Zac glanced at the sky and was relieved to see that a handful of the newly appeared fractals had dissipated, but most were still going strong as they condensed their energies. One of them suddenly activated, and a wave of darkness shot down at Ogras and Kenzie who were whittling down another one of the beacons.

Ogras had already taken out the Corpse golems and was working on the tower, whereas Kenzie waved her staff to conjure dozens of fireballs in an instant that shot out at an incoming wave of zombies. The flames seemed to have a life of their own as they hopped from target to target and caused an extremely impressive amount of destruction for how little energy she seemed to have consumed.

However, there was no time to admire his sister's growth as the wave from the sky was almost upon them.

"Watch out!" Zac shouted at the demon, who immediately was swallowed whole by a shroud of shadows.

Another ball of shadows started to rise around Kenzie, but she had already flickered away in a gust of wind, narrowly avoiding the darkness. The demon wasn't as lucky, as he was actually forced out of the shadows a few meters away from his earlier position as the wave swallowed him whole. The area turned back to normal the next moment, but Zac knew something was wrong when he saw how pale the demon was.

He instantly flashed over and immediately sensed an overwhelming death-attuned aura coming from the demon. It was like he was being forcibly converted into a Revenant in front of his eyes, and the process looked extremely painful. Zac quickly grabbed the demon's shoulder and flooded him with the Fragment of the Bodhi as he gobbled up the large amounts of death-attuned energies for himself.

He felt a bit queasy from the incompatible energy, but his [Void Heart] would deal with it soon enough.

"Urh," the demon groaned as he spat a ball of black phlegm. "Zombifying beams. Just great. Thanks, by the way."

"No problem," Zac smiled. "Thank you for protecting Kenzie."

"What protecting, just making a fool of myself," Ogras grunted as he shakily got back to his feet.

The next moment he disappeared and reappeared next to the Unholy Beacon once more. A storm of strikes slammed into the base as a forest of shadow spears rose to meet the falling balls, piercing all of them with expert accuracy. The beacon toppled the next moment, but the demon was obviously out for blood, or at least unwilling to let the arrays in the sky keep shooting at them.

The demon didn't even stop to loot the potentially valuable pillar as he shot toward the next one, repeating the process. However, the arrays in the sky were all starting to power up by now, and they clearly didn't only rely on the closest Unholy Beacons for power. Staying around and taking out the pillars was a waste of time, and the group instead started rushing toward the core.

Wave after wave of elite zombies appeared to impede their path, but Zac's group was like a grindstone that turned anything that came too close into shreds. Zac was occasionally shooting out a fractal blade or flashed away to take out another beacon, but he mainly relied on the others to break open a path so that he could reserve his strength.

It was rather Kenzie and Joanna that did the heavy lifting. The Chief Valkyrie seemed to have gained a repeatable area strike upon reaching level 50, and she was using it freely at the moment. It was a pretty odd one as well. She kept conjuring a silver ball in the air in front of her, but the moment it appeared she attacked it with a powerful stab with her spear.

The ball immediately cracked like a broken mirror, and sharp shards reminiscent of all kinds of crude weapons shot into the zombie horde with even greater momentum than her strike had. Some of the shards were shaped like speartips, and they punched gruesome holes into the undead. Others were bladed weapons like swords or axes, and these shards cleanly cut limbs or heads off any zombie they passed.

Zac shot a surprised glance at Joanna, feeling that she was walking down an interesting path. It made him think of the War Stele and the Dao of War, one of the possible upgrade-paths of the various Weapon-based Daos. If Joanna managed to walk down that road she would have a chance to become as powerful as the great general in the vision.

Kenzie's side was an ever-changing scene as well, where the undying got incinerated one second and flash-frozen the next. She had also summoned a mysterious wheel that hovered above her head, and every time it turned 90 degrees a devastating blast from one of the four elements was launched.

It reminded Zac of a drone as it kept pace with Kenzie, but he could quickly confirm that it was a construct made from Attuned Energies with the help of [Cosmic Gaze]. Zac didn't understand what kind of skill it was, but it felt a bit like the massive demonic angel that Iz Tayn had summoned. Was the wheel some sort of companion, but perhaps more akin to a golem than an Elemental?

However, while the recent improvements of the two were impressive, their low levels was an undeniable weakness. Each strike could only kill so many of the unthinking rabble, but there was an unending stream of them that kept trying to tire them out before they reached the core. At least that was what Zac thought the undead were trying to do.

They were beset by an endless number of elite zombies as they ran, but they had not encountered a single revenant or another elite unit of the undead Empire since taking down the Unholy Beacons. Worse yet, the group was constantly bombarded by waves of death from above, and they often had to interrupt their strike to desperately scramble out of the way.

Kenzie was already panting from the exertion, but she insisted that she could keep going. Zac didn't say anything as he knew they tried to help as much as they could while allowing him to save his strength. Because these waves of unliving were just the appetizer, whereas the main course was finally coming into vision in just ahead.

A massive black fortress, reaching toward the sky with a backdrop consisting of an azure pillar that pierced the miasmic haze.

This was the first structure Zac's group had encountered inside the Dead Zone, aside from the endless ruins of the countries it had gobbled up. But Zac guessed that this monstrous structure would have no problem housing every single elite that was brought over from the Undead Kingdom of the Zecia sector, along with tens of thousands of the best zombies who were 'recruited' here on earth.

It might even be more apt to call it a city than a castle if it wasn't for the fact that it really seemed to be one cohesive structure. It's pitch-black wall rose almost twenty meters into the air, wrought from some stone that Zac didn't recognize. It was covered in both azure fractals and intricate carvings reminiscent of European Gothic architecture.

Dozens of towers protruded from within the walls as well, each of them well over a hundred meters tall. They all seemed to house terrifyingly powerful Unholy Beacons at the top, probably responsible for providing energy for the whole building. They almost looked like fountains as dense clouds of Miasma billowed down along their lengths as though it was liquid.

They could vaguely spot the roof of many more sections, but the towering wall made it hard to make out any real impression of the layout inside. However, finding their way inside was the least of their concern at the moment, as they first needed to break through the army waiting at the wall walk.

Thousands of Revenants, Golems, and Corpse Lords stood at the front, their killing intent palpable as they looked down at their small squad from above.

“Super-Brother Man, or should I say Zachary Atwood?” a decrepit voice full of power flowed down from up high, which helped Zac spot an all-too-familiar hooded being. “You came after all, not that you had much choice. But you’ll find the Undead Empire a completely different target than the invaders you’ve fought until now.”

Fury surged in Zac’s chest as he looked at the man at the wall.

It was him. The Lich King.