

The Fall 751

Chapter 751: Pillar of Desolation

The rampaging Twilight Energy was putting even Zac at a disadvantage as he felt dangerous amounts storming into his body even with the latent protection he had gained inside the valley. Thankfully, simply using his new-and-improved Dao Field lessened the pressure significantly, which allowed him to finish charging his new skill without having to turn to his Void Energy.

He had figured that a supreme-quality skill would be pretty energy-hungry, but he was shocked to find that it required 60% of his energy to finally form, meaning it was actually impossible to activate solely with his hidden energy reserve. That alone was crazy considering how massive an energy pool his attributes and Draugr heritage provided, but even more shocking was the fact that a small amount of distilled energy of Oblivion was dragged into the skill fractal.

Zac had no time to worry about that though as the skill was finally ready, and it was just in time. The eight puppets seemed to have realized that he wasn't exploding from energy overload, and their auras started to accumulate as they no doubt readied themselves to strike. However, they were too late as the whole area rumbled as it was rapidly being swallowed by endless darkness.

He himself was no exception, and he felt himself meld with the nothingness around him. He was suddenly one with the domain, and Zac felt he would be able to appear wherever he wished. He could also stay and let his skill do the work for him, which he opted to do. Unsurprisingly, the eight puppets instantly stopped in their tracks as they tried to find their way in the darkness.

From that darkness, a sole pillar suddenly rose from the ground, and even Zac was shocked at the grotesque monument of suffering even if he was the one who had conjured it. It looked a bit like a totem pole reaching fifty meters into the air, and it was completely constituted from statues and reliefs of hundreds of people locked in agony.

Some missed arms or other limbs, while others were maimed to the point of entrails spilling down on their neighbors. A few even held their decapitated heads in an embrace as they were pinned to the pole by thick chains that formed an intricate mesh from top to bottom.

Their wounds were carved with excruciating detail, yet their facial features were indistinct, creating a sense of discordance. But as Zac looked at the figures, the unreadable faces suddenly became all-too-familiar. It was the faces of those who he had killed on his journey. Thankfully, the effect only lasted an instant before the statues turned back to their previous form.

A few seemed to be struggling against the fetters that bound them while an even smaller group was lost in a fugue of abject hopelessness. However, most of the depicted warriors, especially those placed toward the top, seemed to be struggling to climb higher. To reach the orb above them.

At the top, a sphere of utmost darkness hovered, an anti-sun radiating true death. Zac could feel that not even an undead would be safe if entering that thing, since there ultimately was an uncrossable line between undeath and true death.

And in the heart of the orb - nothingness. Oblivion.

It was just a small seed, but it was enough to bring true finality to death. Yet, for some reason, the wretched beings seemed desperate to enter the orb, even though they were frozen in place. You could perhaps say that the totem pole represented limbo, whereas the orb represented release.

However, try as they might, they would never reach that spot, bound as they were by thick fetters of desolation. The orb hovered untouched, drenching the area in its immense aura.

The dark domain it had created was different from the darkness that spread from skills like [Deathmark] or Varo's obfuscation skills. It was a sealed domain with no escape, and Zac looked with interest as the remaining runes of the pillar cracked, making sure that no other puppets would be teleported to the area.

At the edge of the domain, a river of darkness created a towering wall as impassable as the River Styx itself. Certainly, people could enter if they so wished, but doing so would put them in Zac's kingdom. Here he was sovereign ruler, the arbiter of fate. Not even Twilight held sway in here, and it was severely weakened by the combination of his Dao Domain and the orb exuding supremacy at top of the totem pole.

The zombified warriors worked as one, unsurprisingly deducing that the pillar presented a huge threat. Each of them conjured massive waves of energy as they launched their strikes at the base. Some of the attacks were elemental in nature, like the blast of twilight-touched lightning from the first cultivator to appear.

Others were just chaotic mixes of energy, condensed into a lethal storm that tried to tear apart everything it touched. However, not one of them used any skill, and Zac was starting to suspect they weren't able to. Whatever was done to these people had fused them with the Twilight Ocean, probably at the cost of their original cultivation methods.

Zac sent out a mental command, and eight of the ethereal chains on the totem pole shot out, each of them targeting a puppet. They entered the chaotic storm of twilight like spears of death, but they were swallowed in the tide as the barrage slammed into the totem pole with enough power to almost destroy space itself.

However, the core of [Pillar of Desolation] only received superficial damage even from such a terrifying strike. Some of the statues had cracks running across their bodies while a few of the chains shattered. The chains that Zac had sent out were momentarily dispelled into puffs of darkness, but they had actually reformed after less than a second and were already closer to their targets than they were before.

The puppets finally displayed some semblance of sapience as they spread out, with four shooting toward the pillar whereas the others tried to break out from the domain. Those who went of the offense were struck down first, and Zac felt a surge of Miasma entering his body as the first of the puppets was caught while the other three desperately dodged.

Just like the old skill [Profane Seal], the chains immediately started draining their captives of energy, becoming fodder for Zac to keep fighting. The tattooed warrior furiously struggled as it released one strike after another, but the moment the chain had actually ensnared him, it was like it had transformed from an intangible manifestation of darkness into a physical object.

Suddenly, it was as durable as the totem pole itself, and it barely received a scratch as it dragged the man closer and closer to the pillar. In fact, it was a few of the statues that were pulling on the chain, and Zac almost felt like he could sense a hint of schadenfreude in their blank eyes as they pulled the captive closer and closer.

A second one of the zombies was caught soon after, and then a third. They were pretty agile even without access to skills, but many of their advantages were nullified here. Some of their energy-gathering ability was blocked out by the layers of domains, but more importantly, the whole area was under tremendous pressure from the orb in the air.

The old [Profane Seal] had a massive fractal that doubled as a gravity array, and that effect was retained in an even more powerful form from the glowing anti-sun. These puppets had tried to take the pillar down, but the closer they got, the more affected they were by the restriction. Soon enough, they became too slow to avoid the chains.

Zac sensed that he could actually activate [Blighted Cut] any time he wanted after having caught the first set of puppets, but he wanted to unearth the full effect of the skill now that he had activated it for the first time. Everything had been so clear when he formed the thousands of patterns that made up this terrifying ability, but it had all become blurred and confused even before he completed the process.

Now, things were slowly coming back to him, and he looked with rapt attention as the first of the puppets were finally dragged onto the pillar by the nearby statues. It struggled and fought, but it was all in vain as the statues enclosed the man in an embrace as the fetters wound them all tighter and tighter.

A pained wail echoed out from the puppet, and Zac could see some emotion in its eyes for the first time – fear. It only lasted for a fraction of a second though before the enormous sphere of death on the top of the pole released a pulse, prompting a wave of darkness to cascade down along the length of the pillar. It passed the spot where the warrior was being held, continuing out through the other chains to deliver a painful surge to the other captives.

The darkness passed, and the puppet bound to the pillar was gone, replaced with yet another statue locked in an eternal struggle. Meanwhile, it looked like the totem pole had grown a bit taller, and the sphere at the top had grown slightly more oppressive.

The other half of the puppets were still trying to break out from the prison Zac had conjured, but the river swirling at the edge of the cage was as impassable as his old skill, or rather even more so. Zac could feel how their monumental attacks were disrupting the churning waters, but it wasn't enough. It was an everchanging blockage, and Zac sensed how the cracks in his skill were swiftly moved away, replaced by other sections of the river.

Breaking out was possible, but you would either need to be able to unleash a terrifying strike to split apart the river in one go, sort of like Billy's titanic smashes that could break apart almost any array. If that wasn't an option, you'd need extremely keen senses or good scouting skills, so that you could keep track of the damage you caused.

The second option was easier said than done even if you had the capability, since [Pillar of Desolation] wasn't the only skill Zac would have going in a situation like this. Activating another skill would force him

out of hiding, but Zac didn't care as he silently appeared at the edge of the cage, far away from his targets.

One spectral wraith after another appeared as Zac activated [Deathmark], and he smiled with satisfaction as he saw the wraiths looking more corporeal than usual. It was no doubt thanks to the orb of budding Oblivion shining down on the area. While it suppressed the interlopers in this domain, it also looked like it helped Zac's summons.

He didn't feel any boost to himself, but that was perhaps because he wasn't a conjuration of death like the axe-wielding wraiths. In either case, they looked slightly more corporeal, and while they didn't seem much stronger, they would last longer and be able to withstand more punishment before dissipating.

Soon enough three more puppets were caught by the chains of death. Two of them were inexorably dragged toward the pole, but one managed to resist. It was an extremely bulky warrior who probably had Strength as his main attribute that managed to resist the pull. He had dug his feet into the ground, and his limbs bulged as he released a torrent of energy to withstand the pull of the fetters and even topple the pillar itself.

However, the stalemate only lasted a second before a wraith flashed over, its axe separating the man's head from his torso with an emotionless swing imbued with the Branch of the War Axe. Soon enough he was dragged along with the others, joining the statues on the pole.

Zac finally felt a pang of danger as the two surviving warriors shot toward him, their auras rising to unprecedented levels. Zac had been in this very situation more than once before, and the small skeletal warriors of [Profane Exponents] appeared behind him, just in time to form a thick barrier to seal him off.

The next moment, the cage wildly shuddered as the two puppets self-detonated, creating a terrifying explosion of Twilight Energy in the area. The barriers Zac had hastily erected were only enough to block the destruction for a second, but that was enough for Zac to activate and flash away with [Abyssal Phase].

The rumbling soon subsided, and Zac deactivated all his skills. The real Twilight Ocean soon came crashing back, no longer held back by his deathly river, and Zac looked at the desolation around him with a satisfied smile. Two deep craters had been left in the ground after the puppets self-destructed, but Zac was more interested in the small spot frayed space that lingered at the area where the core of the anti-sun had once been.

It was a crackling black glob that shuddered as it was rooted in place, looking a bit similar to a spatial tear yet decidedly different. It almost felt like a frayed thread on a sweater, and if Zac pulled on the thread it would lead into the true Abyss. Zac obviously wouldn't do such a thing, instead opting to immediately set off after confirming that he had progressed the quest and that there was no loot to pick up.

The lack of Spatial Treasures was disappointing, but the quest progress was higher than expected. In fact, it had reached (9/729). It mostly confirmed that it was those odd Havarok cultivators who were considered the jammers in the quest, rather than the array pillar itself. There were probably a lot of them lurking around the rim of the Chasm, and what he'd seen so far didn't give Zac reason to believe finishing the quest to be overly difficult.

The preparations of the Havarok might have been enough to thwart most people since most would be lucky if they could even stay alive in front of the energy density the puppets conjured. Zac even guessed that only he and Uona would have the ability to trash those things as they came.

Even then, Zac didn't start swimming along the edge of the array in search of the next pillar, and neither did he wait for another batch of puppets to come looking for him. He kept going straight ahead instead, moving further and further away from the chasm. Destroying the pillar was simply a precaution, a way for him to display some progress in case the Eveningtide Asura really had some hidden traps in case he completely disregarded the quest.

But there was no way he was actually going to keep breaking open those jammers.

A [Perennial Vastness Token] was nice and all, but you needed to be alive to enjoy it. This was a Decree quest, and he would have to physically head over to the Eveningtide Asura or an assigned representative to cash in on the quest. The chance of him surviving such an exchange was worse than slim.

Getting a decree quest would normally be a dream come true for most wandering cultivators, since getting one was the quickest way to add a Teleportation Array to your private teleportation system. Just being able to travel back and forth between Twilight Harbor and some other world in the Zervereth Sector would allow you to make a decent living as a porter.

But that was for normal cultivators, and for normal times. It wasn't even a given that the Twilight Harbor would exist in a few decades if Alvod Jondir had his way, so what good was teleportation access? And even the harbor survived, would Zac dare return to this place after the ruckus he had caused?

So why make an enemy of the Havarok Empire for a reward that you'd never get to enjoy? If anything, the more of the jammers that stayed intact, the better. That way the Eveningtide Asura was more likely to have his hands full while Zac fled back to the Zecia sector in his human form, never to be seen again.

Zac even wished he was a bit more talented like his sister. If he was, he might have figured out a way to seal up the chasm even better. But for now, creating some chaos would have to do.