

The Fall 771

Chapter 771: Madness Made Real

Zac's eyes turned back and forth, his mind blanking out by the surprising scene. The building hadn't given off any signals at all from the outside. If not for his high Luck giving him a hint of danger, and the fact that he could sense the splinter thanks to his other remnants, he would have thought this place yet another empty building along with the dozens of others. Yet it was bustling with activity.

Well over a hundred crystals hovered in the air, the outermost half forming small circles of between five and nine crystals each. Within, the remaining crystals formed a star-shaped pattern that connected the outer circle with one larger circle at the core. These crystals felt a lot like Soul Crystals, but they were as large as a man and emitted far stronger mental fluctuations.

Furthermore, there was an undeniable hint of death in these crystals rather than simply Mental Energy, like how Miasma Crystals were to Nexus Crystals. Small aquamarine shrouds circled them all, resembling small nebulas surrounding a black hole. The crystals were a treasure, but they clearly already had an owner.

Why had the Eidolon gotten themselves mixed up with the splinter?

This was the first time Zac had seen this race in person, but he had both heard and read the descriptions already. The Eidolon didn't have any set shape like normal Spectral Cultivators since they never had any physical bodies that formed the basis of their sense of self. Instead, they took whatever shape they wanted, shapes they simply liked or felt resonated with their path.

There were over a dozen that looked like pale-blue skulls, each of them having a sinister flame in their eyes. Another group looked a lot like the gemstones that hovered in the area, though they were intangible. Many were complex patterns that made Zac think of Skill Fractals, and [Primal Polyglot] indicated that these shapes were somehow related to Soul Cultivation.

Most ultimately looked like humanoids, which partly was a matter of convenience for these beings. The other undead races were humanoid, though Zac had heard murmurs the mysterious race of 'Founders' were a bit different, so the Eidolon usually took on these shapes as well. It didn't impact their cultivation at all from what he had been told, and they felt it worth it if it meant not getting ostracized.

Even the ones who preferred an abstract shape would normally swap over to a humanoid avatar when meeting the other undead races. However, even if they had taken the general shapes of spectral cultivators, it was clear they were not. They were a lot like the Rahm back in the Creator Shipyard, in the sense they didn't have any facial features.

Instead, a large fractal covered their otherwise blank faces. The fractal was the insignia of their clan, or rather their Hive. Every single one of the Eidolon had one of these marks somewhere, no matter what shape they took. Even the eidolon who were just intangible clouds had the rune hovering in the heart of the dust.

Their Hive was a central part of their identity, and the Eidolon were a lot more close-knit than most other races. Zac didn't exactly understand it, but it seemed as though the line between individual and collective was somewhat blurred for this race. The closest thing he could think of was the AI Hiveminds

he'd seen in science fiction movies back then, though the Eidolon definitely possessed individual minds and cultivations.

One Eidolon was hovering inside every outer circle of crystals, and five of them sitting in the innermost circle. These five in the center all emitted extremely strong energy fluctuations, to the point that the screaming shard in his mind was somewhat subdued by the Mental Fluctuations they radiated.

Especially powerful was one Eidolon, in particular, this one having a humanoid shape. In contrast to the others, this spectral cultivator's form was so dense that it almost looked corporeal, and they even wore robes created with extreme attention to detail. Just by their terrifying alone, it was clear that this one was the leader - Aia Ouro.

Aia Ouro had not made any big moves since entering the Twilight Ascent, yet they had maintained a top ten position without breaking a sweat. And it was no surprise to Zac. While their aura wasn't quite at the stage of Uona's it was extremely condensed. Not only was the leader at the peak of the E-grade with heavy accumulations, but Zac was pretty certain they also possessed a Middle-Stage Dao Branch, possibly with subsidiary Daos to empower it.

And at the heart of the circle of radiant crystals controlled by Aia was a hovering gem of absolute darkness. Below it, a Blood Thrall that was either dead or dying sat, his body covered in multiple layers of dense restrictions. The thrall was completely locked in place by the looks of it, but Zac wasn't sure he was even cognizant of his surroundings, as his eyes were blankly staring up at the splinter.

Above the Splinter, a massive being sat. It reached over ten meters in the air, an avatar with six arms like a Buddhist Asura. It even had the boundless murderous intent of an asura, dwarfing even Zac's own killing intent. It was no surprise though, considering murderous intent kept streaming up from the ground and into the crystal before it was infused into the avatar.

The huge thing sat in a meditative pose, where the upper set of arms formed a mudra that generated a sphere that had an extremely strong aura of death. The bottom set of arms was the opposite, where a sphere of pure life hovered. It was so powerful that the Eidolon had added a layer of protection around it, as to not get affected by it.

In the middle, pure condensed Twilight Energy swirled, forming a coherent trinity. However, the Twilight Energy was somewhat different in nature from what he had encountered inside the secluded valley in the chasm. It contained terrifying amounts of killing intent, and it released spiritual fluctuations as well.

Zac immediately knew that this was the construct the Eidolon planned on using to supplant the Realm Spirit. He couldn't be certain, but it seemed like the Eidolon Divine Monarch cultivated some sort of Dao of Slaughter, and they wanted to instill this path into the Twilight Ocean through this Avatar, perhaps to improve the odds of succeeding in the ascension.

"Lord Black, welcome," an androgenous voice echoed out from every direction, yet Zac somehow knew it was Aia Ouro who was speaking. "May we ask why you have interrupted our work?"

"I have no interest in what's going on here," Zac slowly said as he tried to figure what was going on. "I have no designs on the Realm Spirit, and no master outside who wants to snatch this opportunity. But I need the Splinter of Oblivion."

"The corrupted remnant?" the Eidolon exclaimed with surprise before it shuddered and fiercely turned in the direction of the building with the blood orb. "That scheming little..."

"Give it to me, and I can even help you out against Uona," Zac said with a shuddering breath as stepped into the chamber, his eyes glued to the remnant. "I know you are headed toward a collision course."

It was so close, and he felt a liquid run down his nose as his whole Soul Aperture was plunged into chaos. The two remnants in the cage had been quiet for a long time, cracks were already spreading across the fractals as the two remnants were going out of control. With another splinter so close-by, the splinter no longer tried to guard the exit.

Instead, it was acting completely unhinged, swapping between attacking the shard and attacking the cage. The splinter in the middle of the massive array had sensed its sibling as well, and it shuddered as waves of oblivion were expelled. However, the array the Eidolon had set up was surprisingly powerful, swallowing the energy and infusing it into the avatar.

"Lord Black, please stay your hand," the voice said with some urgency. "We are happy to give you the splinter as soon as the Realm Avatar has been successfully formed. But for now, the remnant is integral to our array. Removing it will damage the avatar and make us lose much of the intent we have collected. It will make us fail the mission. Just give us five hours to complete the process."

"Move out of the way," Zac growled, his eyes wide with hunger.

Waiting just one hour, let alone five, was completely out of the question. He'd either be dead or insane by then going by how rapidly things were deteriorating in his mind. And even if he was willing to sit around until they were finished, how could he trust the words of some stranger? What if their process absorbed or damaged the splinter?

More importantly, would Uona just sit around and wait as well?

"Don't force our hand, Draugr," Aia said, and a bone-chilling sharpness had appeared their voice, to the point that the whole building shook. "We have recording arrays running all across this compound. Acting against us will harm the empire's chances of gaining another Autarch. We are well within our rights to kill."

Zac could barely hear the Eidolon by this point, the voices in his head reaching a crescendo. However, he could make out that they wouldn't relinquish what he needed. Uona or Aia Ouro, it didn't matter. Anyone that barred his path was someone who was trying to get him killed, who stalled his return to Port Atwood.

Prevented him from feasting.

"Then you can all die!" Zac roared as his whole torso opened up to display a massive maw of overlapping fangs in a bout of madness made real by the Creation in his body.

"Lunatic! Abomination!" the voice of the Eidolon leader screamed with fury as a dozen massive gemstones cracked under the pressure of Zac's aura.

The world darkened the next moment as Zac disappeared, replaced by a torrential river that encompassed the whole array and the twenty-odd spectral cultivators within. The ghastly totem pole of [Pillar of Desolation] slowly rose, though this time it didn't appear in the middle of the cage.

Instead, it had commandeered the left half of the cage, whereas the intricate formation of gemstones held their own at the right. A few of them had broken apart, but the rest of the hundred-odd crystals had lit up with a deathly cold light that made Zac's soul shudder.

"Contain the Avatar and form up!" Aia Ouro shouted as their body entered one of the crystals, and a rapid change quickly followed.

It was like reality flickered between two states, where the array and huge six-armed Avatar existed in one, and an enormous skull in the other. The flickering stopped after less than a second, with only the skull remaining. As to where the array had gone, Zac had no idea, but there wasn't any time to solve this particular mystery.

The skull emitted a terrifying aura, putting pressure on not only Zac's soul as he hid in the darkness, but even on his body. The scene was a reminder of the terrifying natural ability of the Eidolon; the hivemind. Eidolon Hives could link their very existences due to their peculiar nature, forming a natural War Arrays that far outshone anything Zac and his armies had access to.

The gain thankfully wasn't at a level where one plus one made two, but the combined projection of the group of Eidolon felt like it could match the towering aura Uona had released when she had gone all-out in the chasm. They were not an easy opponent, but Zac didn't have much of an option but to fight.

He had been hoping to stalk closer to the splinter and snatch it under the shroud of darkness, but the damn skull had actually swallowed the Blood Thrall and the remnant, hiding them within its body. Even worse, Zac felt that the projection was able to see him clearly, even though the activation of [Pillar of Desolation] allowed him to perfectly blend into the darkness.

Zac wasn't about to be outdone, and the orb of Oblivion radiated a terrifying splendor as over twenty chains shot toward the skill. Zac silently breathed out in relief as he unleashed one skill after another. It looked like his skills considered the hivemind multiple entities even after they had fused, which would make both [Pillar of Desolation] and [Deathmark] far more effective in this fight.

But the ghastly skeleton suddenly opened its mouth and released an earthshattering shriek that seemed to come from the deepest level of hell. It contained a sea of anguish that ripped at the very fabric of space, containing both a terrifying amount of Mental Energy and Miasma.

The five spectral axemen that had formed turned to dust in an instant, and the shroud of [Field of Desolation] was ripped apart. Next came the chains of his cage, but not even they could withstand the might of that abyssal shriek. They fluctuated between tangible and spiritual as they continuously tried to reform themselves, but the wail seemed to harm the links even in their untouchable state.

Cracks started to appear on the statues grasping the tower itself, and Zac felt the deathly river containing the battlefield starting to lose its coherence. Even the black orb at the top of the totem pole flickered like a candle in the wind. Zac could feel how the skill would fail at any moment, and this was clearly just the opening salvo of the skull.

There was no way.

There was simply no way that he could defeat the Eidolon's War Array unless he went all out. He had hoped avoiding this, especially with this particular skill, but he grit his teeth as the hidden node in his mind opened wide, releasing a storm of Dao into his Soul Aperture. The surge from [Spiritual Void] raged in his mind as it shot toward the Dao Avatar of the Fragment of the Bodhi, and it was like a magnet for the dangerously dense Creation in his mind.

Another thick stream of Mental Energy emerged from his Soul Core, and this tremendously unstable mix of Dao and Creation rushed into the skill fractal, and from there entered the massive cage around him. The result was immediate, and Zac gaped in shock as the ghastly totem pole started to fall apart, whole statues starting to fragment, prompting shards of stone to fall like rain.

Suddenly, the black orb at the top dissipated, but the absence of darkness was soon replaced by a radiant opalescent light. The next moment, a shudder went through the crumbling tower, before it exploded with such force that it broke apart the attack of the skill. However, the tower hadn't broken apart - it had been reborn.

Gothic black had been replaced by alabaster white, but the hundreds of captured souls were still clawing their way up toward the orb at the top. However, while it had felt like the statues struggled to be erased in the original version of the skill, it now rather seemed as though the statues wanted to reach the shimmering orb at the top to be reborn anew.

The few that were closest to the top couldn't withstand its splendor, and they rapidly started mutating by the chaotic waves of creation the orb emitted. Meanwhile, the surging river around them had been replaced by a confusing and everchanging haze, making it seem like they had been trapped in a collapsed dimension.

Golden links shot toward the ghost, which immediately released another salvo of its own. However, these links of Creation and Bodhi weren't so easily rebuffed, and they withstood the terrifying wave of destruction as they slammed into the huge avatar. Just the touch of the links was like corrosive poison to the construct, and it started to bubble and release sizzling sounds.

Not only that, but the links started to slowly drag the group of Eidolon toward the tower, where they would be recreated into whatever the erratic orb at the top desired.

"What!" a scream echoed from within the War Array. "This is taboo! This is sacrilege!"

Zac wasn't in any state to respond, as his situation wasn't as optimistic as it looked. [Pillar of Desolation] was an exceedingly complex skill, to the point he didn't understand the skill fractal at all after having created it during his epiphany. Now, he had completely subverted the core of the skill by infusing it with Life and Creation, creating some sort of mirrored version in a frantic attempt to counter the deathly attack of the ghost.

But how could such a creation be stable? Let alone using life in a Death-attuned skill that ran on miasma, it was filled with Creation as well. It shouldn't be possible at all, but it was forced together with the help of the shard and Zac's iron will. But the shard was the concept of continuous change taken physical form, and it resisted being forced to stay the same and power the skill.

It felt like his mind was breaking apart, but Zac forcibly held on as the golden chains dragged the struggling skull closer. A wave of blue fire containing a blistering cold shot out from its eyes, and they contained such power that Zac felt cracks appear on his Soul Core from just standing in its vicinity. If it actually hit him, he felt his soul might shatter altogether, even with [Indomitable] and his refined soul providing him with great mental protections.

A dozen talismans appeared in his hands as two treasure rings on his hands snapped, prompting over a dozen layers of soulwarding barriers to emerge around him. It stopped his soul from being wounded, but it didn't solve his current predicament. The hivemind was too powerful, and his skill would collapse before he managed to drag them to the terrifying golden orb on top of the pillar.

He would have to take a risk if he wanted to end the battle in one go. Zac's eyes burned with madness as he rushed forward, deciding to put it all on the line.