

The Fall 925

Chapter 925: Holding On

The Goblin seemed agitated from being locked up far from its lake, but not overly worried. Zac wasn't surprised. This creature was far more powerful than any enemies he'd fought until now, to the point Zac wasn't confident he'd even be able to trap it for the whole minute required. However, he had no choice but to fight, no choice but to keep this guy here long enough for Iz and Ogras to deal with the gateway.

So Zac steeled his heart as he kept infusing energy into [Pillar of Desolation]. Behind his back, the familiar tower rose through a black pool, like it had been dragged out from the deepest recesses of the Abyss. Its overall appearance was mostly the same since reaching middle mastery, but like all skills, it had received some improvements.

The statues bound to the pillars were even more lifelike, almost like their twisted faces were moving in agony. It was a surreal experience, and Zac almost felt he could hear distant wails when he glanced in the tower's direction. Besides being crafted with a more skilled hand, the chains draped around its length were thicker and more durable.

The pillar had also gained 20 meters, now reaching 70 meters into the air and allowing it to tower above even the Qriz'Ul King. In addition, the pitch-black anti-sun hovering at its top had grown a bit while also emitting a more powerful aura. Finally, Zac could feel that its effect on his other skills had also grown a bit stronger.

The absolute darkness from [Pillar of Desolation] meshed even better with his other two domains, and Zac could feel how the ethereal chain that connected him and the Goblin's face grew sturdier. It was just in time as the Goblin suddenly made a break for it, trying to break down the deathly river before it had a chance to stabilize.

But a tug on the spectral chain made the Goblin make a 180 and instead head straight toward the pillar. Surprisingly, the chain of [Arbiter of the Abyss] had turned completely invisible with Zac, and not even using his taunt exposed his location. The Goblin tried to break out a few more times, but each time it was redirected toward the center of the cage.

"Em... pty," the Goblin growled as its head swung back and forth, seemingly at a loss where Zac had gone or what was happening.

Zac's eyes lit up at the scene, and he stopped the statues from throwing out any chains toward his enemy. As far as he was concerned, this guy could just stay like that for a minute while Iz dealt with the lake and the Kan'Tanu. He couldn't see what was going on outside even if the anti-sun didn't blind him, but he could sense Iz's monstrous aura and vast swathes of fiery Dao.

She was no doubt laying waste to the shorelines, rapidly vaporizing his precious water.

But nothing good ever lasts. After five seconds of fruitless searching, Zac started to sense a tremendous buildup of energy from the 50-meter-tall Goblin. Zac didn't know exactly what it was planning, but if it was anything like the rain of Nightmare Tears, it could completely destroy his deathly river if unlucky. He would have to use himself as bait to keep this thing distracted.

Miasma flooded into multiple Skill Fractals as Zac rushed forward, all while desperately pulling on the spectral chain to distract the Goblin. Meanwhile, chains finally shot out from the pillar behind him. The Goblin ignored the chains, because Zac activating his skills had exposed his location.

By that point, Zac had already closed most of the distance, and a short burst of Void Energy guaranteed he would have the creature's undivided attention. Its maw opened impossibly wide, and the churning corruption within felt like a Pandora's Box that absolutely couldn't be allowed to open.

The ball of corruption wasn't as unfathomable as what was released by its core when threatened, but there was simply too much energy. The short accumulation had already gathered more than half of Zac's total energy reserves. Even more than the cost of [Pillar of Desolation]. The skill would most likely collapse if the Qriz'Ul King launched the blob at the river or the pillar itself.

Thankfully, Zac had acted decisively and just in time. Just as the Goblin was about to spit out its ball of madness, three invisible cuts dismantled the Qriz'Ul King's whole head. Simultaneously, a black storm swallowed the suddenly exposed corruption ball. Even a Late-Stage [Profane Exponents] was insufficient to move the ball out of harm's way, but it managed to realign its budding momentum downward.

Following up, Zac pulled on the ethereal chain to push his taunting domain to the limits, using the last second on the skill to repulse the Goblin's attack. The three skills used in conjunction were barely enough to seize control from the Qriz'Ul, even if its head was already reforming.

The ball of corruption fell onto the ground right beneath the Qriz'Ul, like an egg that cracked. Billowing waves of condensed corruption spread throughout the cage with the Goblin as an epicenter, and Zac immediately found himself submerged as well. An exquisite coffin quickly sprung up to protect him, and it was thankfully able to block out the unfocused blast of the D-grade creature.

Like the previous upgrade, the [Profane Exponents] had received a general upgrade from reaching Late Mastery. Their auras had grown deeper while their tools, from coffin to lantern, looked more exquisite.

The wave of corruption passed around him like a river being blocked by a stone. Most of it was blocked by the coursing river, almost like two oils that refused to mix. However, the collision itself left a lot of damage behind, while some of the corruption managed to infiltrate Zac's skill, starting its unrelenting push toward mutation. The rebuffed energy instead formed a layer of taint covering the ground, and even Zac found himself submerged to his knees after the initial wave passed.

The corruption clung to him and tried to burrow inside. Circulating his Daos helped a bit, but it was ultimately impossible to completely block it without [Void Zone]. But between his previous usage and expending Void Energy to activate a couple of skills, Zac couldn't use his domain willy-nilly any longer.

It was easier to let it invade his body while [Void Heart] and [Purity of the Void] still had enough capacity to deal with it. It meant being harassed by intrusive whispers, but it was still within what he could deal with.

Only the tower itself was unscathed, somehow rejecting the shallow waters of corruption with its oppressive aura. But doing so was not only putting a strain on the skill itself but also a constant drain on his Miasma. Zac inwardly sighed at the scene. Just one failed attack was causing so much trouble due to the sheer volume of energy.

Meanwhile, the Goblin had already reformed after Zac expending [Blighted Cut], and its energy reserves had only dropped a couple of percents. Even worse, Zac could feel how the missing unit was being recovered. It really looked like the Qriz'UI King could still draw energy from its connection to the gateway, even when trapped inside [Pillar of Desolation].

One thing was certain; Zac couldn't follow his most basic strategy – to outlast the opposition with his endless energy reserves. This Goblin had shown him what it truly meant to be tireless. Instead, Zac needed to be smarter, more efficient, as he stalled and detained the Qriz'UI King. Luckily, that was exactly what the Inexorable Stance excelled at, and with his latest skills and upgrades, Zac had even more tools available to him.

Six intangible arms were already grasping toward him since the Qriz'UI had reformed, but Zac's heart was calm as he went to work. He had to maintain constant pressure while preventing any real buildups of energy. Chains rushed toward the sneering visage of the Qriz'UI King as another jagged edge appeared in front of his axe.

Zac was currently towering over four meters into the air after having activated [Arbiter of the Abyss], and the huge blade of [Gorehew] was no longer comically oversized. Instead, it became a serviceable tool to rip apart the Qriz'UI's appendages while [Blighted Cut] was on cooldown.

Suddenly, Zac sensed an accumulation of corruption, and he instantly pushed off the ground as the chains of [Love's Bond] rattled. Two of the chains once more dug at the cracked core on the Goblin's forehead, while another formed a step for Zac to readjust his trajectory mid-air. In an instant, Zac found himself right in front of the Goblin face, their sizes now roughly the same.

The air screamed as the jagged blade of bloody death clove the air in a huge overhand arc aimed at the Goblin's mouth. However, the chains meant to force a realignment of the Goblin's head failed to create the opening Zac had planned. That powerful barrier had appeared again, allowing the Qriz'UI to completely ignore any strikes targeting its only apparent weak spot.

The Goblin once more displayed its surprising deftness by parrying Zac's swing with its chin before lunging to swallow Zac whole. Initially, Zac planned to back away and try anew, but he suddenly had an idea. Jagged teeth closed around him, but just as Zac was about to be bit, he activated [Void Zone].

Corruption fought with nothingness, and nothingness won out. The second ball of taint dimmed down and collapsed before it had a chance to form, while the runes that made up the Goblin's head started to lose their structural cohesiveness. Zac wanted to use the opportunity to see if he could destroy the core, but his eyes widened in alarm when he felt a pull.

The D-grade monstrosity was actually siphoning his Void Energy, dragging it toward its cracked sphere. It felt like his very essence was being robbed, and a primal fear surged in his heart as he kicked up a storm of carnage with his axe. Runes were disintegrated all around him, but his domain couldn't prevent the Goblin from recovering.

Meanwhile, it quickly became apparent that [Void Zone] didn't work against the barrier around the core. Zac still couldn't tell exactly what the shield was, but it almost felt like the space within the barrier was in another dimension. Could it actually have phased over its core to the Lost Plane for safekeeping?

And all the while, a deluge of corruption was released from the Qriz'Ul, rapidly draining Zac of energy. A few more strikes confirmed nothing had changed; whether it was chains or axe, he simply couldn't break through that barrier. Staying inside its incorporeal body like this was futile, so Zac disappeared in a puff of smoke before appearing twenty meters away.

"VOID! VOID!" the Goblin roared as it lunged for him, but by that point, the chains of [Pillar of Desolation] had already caught up.

The closest one inexorably wound around the supernatural creature and started pulling it toward the pillar in the distance. Zac used the opportunity to suddenly activate his taunting domain again, and the Goblin was dragged over 50 meters in an instant, closer to the tower. Closer to Oblivion. But while the creature was twisted beyond recognition by the taint, it wasn't a mindless creature. It clearly understood the shimmering orb of Desolation was dangerous, or perhaps rather the core of Oblivion at its heart.

It started to push back while freely releasing waves of corruption. Soon enough, the chain of [Pillar of Desolation] broke apart, its improved durability not sufficient to withstand the corroding effect of the Lost Plane. A second chain replaced the first while Zac used his taunt to a maximum. But the Qriz'Ul was relentless, and it kept struggling against its chains.

The chains never stopped coming, be it from Love's Bond or [Pillar of Desolation], so the Qriz'Ul soon changed tactic. It started releasing a barrage of Nightmare Tears at the tower, smaller projectiles it needed no time to generate. Even then, each one contained enough force to create actual spatial tears in their wake, and Zac was forced to deal with them one way or another.

Zac soon found himself in a passive position where he furiously contained the Qriz'Ul's rampage. Tears were either outright blocked with [Gorehew] and [Profane Exponent]'s barriers, or rerouted with the reversed taunt of [Arbiter of the Abyss]. He moved with purpose, not wasting a second while skillfully managing his array of skills to bring about maximum pressure and efficiency.

Chains danced, wraiths came and went, leaving rapidly disintegrating corrosive marks in their wake. All while, the [Pillar of Desolation] pulled and pulled. The rerouted Nightmare Tears crashed into the deathly river, leaving hidden wounds in the cage that wouldn't recover. Others joined the rising tide of corruption.

[Fields of Despair] was the first skill to collapse from the infiltration of the Lost Plane. The loss of nigh-omniscience didn't matter, but losing the restrictive properties of the domain was a huge blow. After all, the deathly haze had restrained 10% of the Goblin's attributes, and the creature's boost pushed Zac even closer to the edge.

It was not just a matter of pressure either. Zac was already running low on Miasma, to the point he was forced to use Void Energy to maintain some of his skills. Meanwhile, the level of corruption in the cage had already reached the level of the lake, and he was forced to continuously maintain [Void Zone] to retain his mental state.

But the corruption kept increasing.

It wasn't enough, no matter how much Zac cut and whittled down. Most of his work was nullified by the mysterious link between the creature and gateway. It was constantly being bolstered by more energy, to

the point it still had over 90% of its strength intact. At least time was passing. Each second felt like an hour, but he kept swinging his axe, kept interrupting the creature's attempts to form more powerful outbursts. Zac was like glue, constantly sticking to his much-bigger foe.

Eventually, Zac knew he would soon fail, at which point he unleashed [Desperation's End]. The spatial spheres weren't enough to seal the Qriz'UI, but with the additional help from [Pillar of Desolation] and [Arbiter of the Abyss], it was barely enough. The Qriz'UI was cleanly cut in two, yet even his ultimate skill failed to damage the core.

And Zac could only look on with helplessness as the collapsed form of the Qriz'UI started to reform just seconds after it was torn to shreds. At least, it had reset the battle and given Zac enough of a breather to eat a handful of pills to recuperate. But soon enough, the cycle started anew.

Zac lost any conception of time as he fused with his path. He became death, relentlessly advancing. One wound after another was left on his body as he gave up on dealing with non-lethal strikes. What were some scars to the unrelenting pull of the Abyss? It was just a feeble expression of defiance that all beings exhibited, a delay of the inevitable.

[Deathmark] collapsed next, followed by [Arbiter of the Abyss]. Soon, not even [Gorehew] could be used, and not because of overuse. Not even [Void Zone] could completely shut out all corruption any longer, and too much had entered his body. The taint had then followed the strongest surges of Miasma and glommed onto the Skill Fractal. Only [Pillar of Desolation] held on, desperately defended by layers of his Dao.

Still, Zac fought, tooth and nail, using everything to delay the inevitable. He still had a few cards left, but the longer he could keep the Goblin contained on his own, the better the chances were he'd succeed. But it was too much. Cracks already covered most of the pillar behind him, and more and more Nightmare Tears passed his guard now that he'd lost most of his tools.

The Qriz'UI was relentless, and it almost felt it gained strength as its surroundings became increasingly corrupted. It was like the unawakened Revenants back on earth – mobile Unholy Beacons that naturally terraformed their surroundings to one more suited for their existence. The longer you fought, the worse your position would get.

Just as Zac was about to activate his next line of defense to buy a few more seconds, the Qriz'UI suddenly froze. The gem on its forehead suddenly radiated a blinding purple light that forced Zac to look away. Just a glance had pushed the voices in his head to a crescendo, and Zac could feel how the distilled corruption around suddenly was joined by actual lake water.

At the same time, a lone voice joined the discordant cacophony in Zac's mind.

'Shit! The gateway just disappeared when I closed in on it!' a frazzled voice echoed in Zac's head, startling him to the point that he failed to perfectly angle a swing. 'Ack, this netherblasted corruption!'

The nightmare tear cut just under his arm, but a last-minute adjustment allowed him to avoid any grievous harm. Still, the pain helped him clear his muddled mind, and he was horrified by what he saw. The core on the Goblin's forehead had detached from it, but the creature was still very much alive. It was now hovering right in front of its forehead, releasing a deluge of tainted water.

Not only was the amount of energy terrifying, but the sheer volume of water was also a huge problem. A liquid armor had already covered the Qriz'Ul King, and the cage would be completely submerged in seconds if nothing changed. Not that it would last that long, considering the pillar failed to keep the waters at bay.

The only good news was that the Goblin's aura had started to become unstable. Was it damaging itself by summoning the gateway? Did it matter in this situation?

'It's been dragged here. I'll deal with it,' Zac said in his mind as the waters passed his shoulders. 'Hold on a little bit in case it returns.'

The Goblin shrieked with rage and fear upon sensing the coruscating waves of Oblivion coursing through Zac's body and into his right arm. It redoubled its efforts to break free, desperately pulling in the direction of the real lake in the distance. Did it need to return to its original spot to recover its core? Zac wouldn't let it. The three pygmy skeletons reluctantly collapsed, leaving Zac with only a crumbling tower for assistance.

A tower and a coffin.

"Alea, I need your help," Zac sighed as he infused some of his waning Miasma into the coffin lid.

'I'm here for you,' Alea's voice echoed in his mind as the coffin lid creaked open. 'Forever and always.'

[Death's Embrace] was gone with Alea's Evolution, replaced by a new skill yet untested. However, [Fate's Obduracy] remained, reforged and more potent than ever. Hopefully, it would be enough.

"Seal this bastard," Zac growled as he felt the pitch-black runes of Oblivion carve a network across his face.