

## The Fall 807

### Chapter 807: Adamance

The accumulated stress and inspiration filled Zac with an overflowing momentum that urged him to rush out and start whaling on the poor beasts in the area. It almost felt like when the Splinter of Oblivion had messed with his mind, though Zac kept himself in check a bit longer as he tried to get used to the changes in his body. His attributes had already been adjusted, and he now had over 1,900 Strength.

He felt more in tune with himself even if his attributes had become skewed again, and the energy coursed through his body more naturally. Zac tried activating [Gorehew], and this time the prison brand didn't prevent anything. A large jagged edge appeared in front of his weapon a moment later, and it looked almost identical to when he had used it in the Twilight Ocean.

But its strength was hollow.

Conjuring the blade cost as much Miasma as it used to, but the brand on his hand siphoned off more than 80% of the energy, leaving a husk of a skill compared to its original strength. He had seen the same phenomenon during the fights in the coliseum, though their skills had probably been drained of more than 95% of their energy.

Apart from its weakened state, Zac felt there was something different about the skill, and he curiously rapped his knuckles against the large blade. The jagged edge shuddered a bit before a powerful rebound rippled back into his hand. It was hard to be certain since he was still unaccustomed to using skills in his limited form, but Zac believed that the blade was a bit sturdier than it should be.

Was this the effect of his Draugr Node, [Adamance of Eoz]?

The node had made his energy more congealed somehow. Did that effect extend to skills? But what did 'adamance' refer to? Zac looked at the blade for a few seconds before he dispersed the skill. He had plenty of time to figure out how things worked. Besides, he had always been a practical learner.

He was tired of just standing around, and he finally stepped out from his hidden spot. A small ripple around him meant he was no longer hidden from the surroundings, and he could immediately spot a few bright blobs of life closing in on him.

There were nine gates in total that led into the wilderness, each one of them working the same way. They would send you to a random location in the first band of the wilderness, and you would be protected until you took a few steps from the starting position.

Just like the Orom World, there were various attunements in the bands, though the energies weren't nearly as palpable as in the cultivation zones. It was just about enough to create some different environments while accommodating more types of beasts, and Zac had chosen the gate that currently led to an area that bordered fire and nature.

At the edge of the savannah, he could barely make out a mountain range that flying lizards, golemoid species, and hundreds of other beasts made their home. There were miasmic zones as well up to the fifth band, but Zac wasn't looking to find inspiration from death-attuned beasts at the moment.

There were nine bands in total, where the first four were safe zones, which meant you weren't allowed to clash with other cultivators. But further in, more than half of each zone was lawless, and you could even rob other prisoners. The only safety net was that you would be teleported back rather than killed upon receiving a lethal attack, at the cost of some Purchase Points, of course.

It was just like PvE and PvP zones in an online game, but Zac had no intentions of heading that deep. In general, you'd need to have the skill equivalent of a Middle to Late Hegemon to avoid becoming helpless prey in the fifth band. If you managed to cross the ninth and reach the edge of the wilderness, you would essentially have pushed your path of slaughter to the point you should be able to confirm your Dao.

Going by what he had heard, Zac wasn't confident he'd be able to make it that far even if he relied on his Void Energy and its unrestrained attacks.

For now, Zac was content with staying in the first and perhaps the second band, and he cracked his neck as the pack of animals closed in on him. After thirty seconds, he could spot the beasts even without his Draugr sight, and he realized it was four beasts that looked a bit like warthogs. Apart from being three meters long, they were also a bit leaner, and their green fur almost looked like long swaying stalks of grass.

Their tusks were also noticeably bigger than the species on Earth, and the two larger specimens even sprouted small horns.

The pitch-black coffin of his replacement weapon appeared on his back, and four black-and-green chains slithered out like snakes as Zac calmly walked toward the animals. Suddenly, the four beasts flickered, and Zac's whistled with surprise when they appeared just fifty meters away from him, having gained a huge surge of speed as they barreled toward him.

At the same time, Zac felt a tightness around his feet, and he glanced down to see the knee-high grass twine around his ankles. These beasts actually possessed skills? Having skills at the early E-grade meant they had a decent heritage, but Zac still wasn't too worried.

The grass had been empowered, but it still wasn't able to withstand the two chains that lashed out, each one of them dripping corrosive liquid after being empowered by [Blighted Cut]. Simultaneously, the remaining chains shot forward as a shroud of darkness spread out from Zac's body. The warthogs had almost completely blended with the swaying grass by this point, but their strong life signatures couldn't stay hidden from Zac's Draugr gaze.

He swung his axe to the side, striking the beast that tried to flank him. It seemed shocked about being exposed so easily, but its reflexes were extremely quick. It tilted its head to block the attack with its tusk, and it clearly planned to use its hefty body to crush him.

Zac's initial instinct was to forcibly throw the beast away, but he found himself physically overwhelmed. Being physically overpowered by some random pig would take some getting used to, but Zac quickly adapted. Instead, he fluidly shifted his position, avoiding the brunt of the leap while delivering a ruthless punch in the hog's side as it passed him by.

At the same time, his chains aimed for the eyes of the remaining beasts, which made them scream in fear and forcibly change course. A pang of danger blared in the back of his head, but the three small

skeletons had already appeared by this point. A spectral coffin rose to protect his back, and a smattering sound echoed across the area as thousands of stalks of grass failed to pierce the barrier.

It looked like these hogs could control the grass more freely than Zac had expected.

Thankfully, Zac's reinforcements started to appear by this point as [Deathmark] had already covered the area for a while now. Three of the wraiths were instantly destroyed by ferocious headbutts or vicious bites, but it gave Zac an opportunity to launch some strikes of his own. Meanwhile, one of the smaller warthogs rammed straight into the final axe wraith, but Zac's brows rose in surprise when it actually blocked the rush with its axe.

Certainly, cracks appeared on the spectral axe upon being hit by one of the tusks, but it held long enough for the wraith to counter with a slice that opened up a shallow wound on the beast's haunch. The warthog wailed as the corrosive mist started entering its body, but Zac was more interested in the wraith that had started dissipating.

It was just like he had experienced before with [Gorehew]. Judging by how much his skills had been restrained, the specter shouldn't have been able to withstand the hit. An E-grade beast with an average of 2,000 attributes should have crushed it with such a direct attack. But the specter had become more durable, allowing it to survive just long enough to unleash a counter.

Not only that, but the empowering effect seemed to be greater than when he summoned the jagged edge by the entrance. One time might have been a miscalculation, but two times pretty much confirmed it. [Adamance of Eoz] didn't seem to directly improve his offense or defense, but it made his energy and energy constructs sturdier.

Various uses flashed through his mind, from withstanding powerful Daos to wasting less energy conjuring defensive barriers. However, Zac still couldn't figure out exactly how to control it and the hogs weren't willing to let him ponder on it as they tried to pincer him.

Zac soon found himself hounded from every direction, with thousands of razor-sharp blades of grass adding insult to injury. He almost found himself overwhelmed, and if not for the powerful defensive ability of [Profane Exponents] and the improved durability of his wraiths, he would have racked up some nasty wounds already.

There was no time to ponder on his nodes or improve his Inexorable Stance. Simply staying afloat was a struggle, and he furiously struck with all weapons in his arsenal in an effort to seize the tempo. Thankfully this was just the beginning of the first band, and the hogs only had so many tricks up their proverbial sleeves.

As he grew more accustomed to the current state of his body, Zac could gradually switch from avoiding attacks to going on the offensive. He soon figured out that it was the smaller hogs that controlled the grass, while the horned ones rather focused on physical attacks. Soon enough, he managed to separate the two groups, and he ended the two magehogs in an instant with a ferocious swing of [Gorehew] empowered by his Dao Branch.

Same as with the skills, he found most of his Mental Energy and Dao entering the prison brand, making Zac swear with annoyance. Was it perhaps the warriors in the wilderness that contributed the energy and Dao needed to keep the Orom World running?

With only two hogs and no grass attacks to deal with, Zac immediately managed to capture the third one with his chains. Its fur had already become mottled by the corrosion all around them, but its suffering was over in an instant as Zac activated the finishing strike of [Blighted Cut] to unleash three shockingly sharp strikes in an instant.

From there, it was just a matter of time before the final hog was killed as well, leaving just a panting Zac in a large ring of corroded grass. The beasts hadn't managed to leave any big wounds, but he was covered in small cuts that stung. Zac ate a common healing pill, surprised at how much resistance some random beasts at the first band could put up. These kinds of beasts were the ones that Zac usually slaughtered by the thousands without breaking a sweat.

Then again, their cooperation had been decent at best, full of flaws to exploit. Meanwhile, their attacks had been choreographed and their grass control was more annoying than lethal. Their short-lived advantage almost exclusively came from their superior attribute pool, but that alone had been enough to cause a headache, even with his peak-quality skills helping out.

Was this what it was like fighting him? Having more skill and talent but being roughhoused by raw attributes.

Zac shook his head and moved on, not bothering with the carcasses. They were ultimately just early E-grade beasts, their bodies not worth anything. The amount of kill energy they provided was beyond pitiful, and Zac knew he would have to fight for years to gather the energy required for breaking open a single node.

Of course, he hadn't come here for levels. He had come here to explore his new node and to work on his quest. If possible, he also wanted to work on his skills and stances. There were both free and rentable facilities for evolving skills in the Orom World, but there was no rush. He wanted to first gather more inspiration. Meanwhile, Zac had encountered an issue upon opening his quest screen.

[Desperation's End (Class): Extinguish one million souls. Reward: Desperation's End. (0/1,000,000)]

He had just killed four beasts, yet the progress was still zero. Zac was certain that the beasts were real, rather than some sort of constructs or illusions. He had even sensed the beasts' souls dissipating soon after he killed them. Even his Draugr-vision couldn't see souls, but his empowered soul had given him a more refined sensitivity toward Mental Energy.

Those hogs had souls, Zac was certain of it. He was way too far gone down the road of slaughter to reflect upon the moral implications of this discovery, and he was more curious about what he needed to do to progress the quest. Luckily, the savannah wasn't lacking beasts, and he spotted a huge furry centipede slither toward him through the grass.

A few minutes later, five bloody sections of the insect were strewn across the floor, with the remaining part of the centipede feebly struggling against the Dao-empowered chains. After failing to unload a salvo of poison it succumbed to its grievous wounds, and Zac closed his eyes as he sensed the weak fluctuations by its head.

The air screamed as Zac's axe ripped through the empty space where he had felt the weak mental fluctuations, but it didn't make a difference. The feeling was gone, and his progress remained at zero.

Just how was he supposed to extinguish a soul? Did he need to learn a soul-killing mentalist skill to progress?

He certainly had some free spots in his pathways, but Zac was reluctant to fill them with random junk. Besides, he was almost certain that there was some trick to it.

Zac kept going, and he soon found himself in a pitched battle with two green panthers. He kept trying to restrain and catch them, but they refused to be sucked into the momentum of his Inexorable Stance. Their Dexterity had to be at least three times his own, he barely saw their forms as they flashed by, leaving small wounds or a destroyed specter in their wake.

The Inexorable Stance he had been so proud of while traveling the Twilight Ocean utterly failed to restrain them. Death might be inexorable, but his stance clearly hadn't captured the essence of that fact just yet. As he tried to force an opening with his chains and axe, he thought back to Pavina, and how she had ruthlessly and dismantled the defenses of her enemy in the arena.

She walked the path of death just as he did, yet her lethality was so much greater than his, even with Zac's all accumulated advantages. It wasn't that her class was so different from his either. She had used a ghastly avatar that controlled ropes of darkness and she had used pure death as a poison, similar to his [Blighted Cut] or [Deathmark].

Pavina hadn't used any pure offensive skills like [Gorehew] or [Nature's Edge] at all, but she had almost made it seem that way. It was like she had become death incarnate as she pushed forward. Why would death need to wait for its victims? She was the ender of all, destroyer of life. As much as the warrior had struggled, she was the one who adjudicated his fate.

Zac felt that was the key, a missing ingredient in his stance. Even if he had managed to partly incorporate his path into his combat style, allowing him to restrain his enemies and control the momentum, he could definitely improve his lethality. Why should the spider hide at the edge of the net, watching its prey slowly tire itself out?

Even if the prey was too powerful to take out in one bite, Inexorable Stance should not only welcome them into the arms of eternity, it should push them into the Abyss. He needed to become the master of death with the help of his axe.

His attacks gradually grew quicker as Zac as one scene after another from the coliseum flashed through his mind. Zac let death guide him, and as his attacks grew quicker and more condensed, so did their restraining efficacy improve. The more complete his stance grew, the more preoccupied the panthers became with simply staving off death and staying alive.

Their hesitation was the nail in the coffin. With a wet gurgling yowl, one of the two panthers were impaled by a chain, its wound sizzling from the corrosive acid that dripped from the links. Seeing its mate getting skewered pushed the surviving panther into a frenzied rage, and it lunged straight toward him with such speed that Zac was pushed on the ground, though he managed to unleash a swing that ripped open the belly of the beast.

Zac was drenched in a flood of blood and viscera, but he still kept his cool, conjuring a barrier just before a set of razor-sharp teeth dug into his throat. A growl escaped his lips as he pushed the beast away, and two streams of Mental Energy entered his axe, each one soon flooded with Zac bloodlust and Dao.

The beast was already on death's door after losing most of its innards, but death didn't wait around as a slash split it clean in two from nose to tail. A small sputtering of kill energy entered his body, but Zac ignored it as he opened the quest screen once more. As he had hoped, the screen actually showed (1/1,000,000).

He had felt it upon delivering that final strike. His Dao-braided strike had crashed into the panther's skull, destroying its soul before it had a chance to dissipate. A moment later, some minute flakes had disappeared into his body, though Zac couldn't see where they went. Perhaps, it was an offering to the formation of [Desperation's End], or perhaps it was just some soul fragment that flew in his direction by chance.

In either case, he had found the solution. It was a bit gristly, but he would have to crack a whole lot of skulls to unlock his new skill. Thankfully, the wilderness was clearly not lacking in targets judging by the incessant cries, and he was awash with ideas on how to improve his two stances. He had nothing better to do until he had gathered enough Oblivion Energy, so Zac shook off the blood that covered him from head to toe before he walked deeper into the wild.

It was time to get back to basics; one man and his axe against the world.