

## The Fall 808

### Chapter 808: Cat and Mouse

“Never have I seen such a flighty bastard,” K’Rav swore. “You’ve been reading that thing for months now. Strength comes from pushing forward and seizing what’s yours, not cowering in a corner.”

The goblin was sitting on a sofa in the study, opened books strewn all around him. It was the fifth time this day it had complained, but Ogras didn’t care.

“You think I’m like you bastards, ready to jump straight into the abyss?” Ogras snorted. “There is no way I am going to blindly cultivate some method made by you lunatics. I need to understand it better before making a decision. Besides, I have still not completely healed from those cursed energies I had to endure from your so-called safe path.”

“Cultivating the Spiritlock Physique would greatly alleviate that problem,” K’Rav said. “And then we could get on with the important business.”

Ogras only rolled his eyes before he turned back to the scroll in front of him. It was true, the goblin elder called Rasata had created a terrifying technique that would give you a constitution called the Spiritlock Physique. For every stage you mastered, you would be able to seal one more spirit in your body and gain part of its strength.

There were a few problems with the technique though, apart from how it was recorded. Rasata posited that the limit would be nine spirits in total, but she had only managed to infuse five of them into her body. She had also deduced the sixth layer of the [Spiritlock Technique], but it was unproven and, according to her “a bit risky.”

Coming from these lunatics, that was saying something.

He had stayed in the central tower for months now, and the more he read about the history of the Ra’Lashar Goblins, the more horrified he became. He had thought he understood just how far people would go for power, but he had never heard of a civilization as crazed as these people. If they had been part of integrated space, the Ruthless Heavens would probably just have blasted their whole planet to preemptively avert disaster.

Conjuring the Qriz’UI spirits from the Lower Plane had been the main cultivation method of these goblins, but inviting that madness into their lives had only scratched the surface. The elders, the powerful families, even the netherblasted beggars on the street had delved into crazy and unorthodox methods to strengthen themselves even further. Not one of them had any respect for their lives, and few ever died of old age.

Some experiments were a success, such as Rasata’s [Spiritlock Technique]. Others had devastating consequences, and the Qriz’UI uprising was simply the calamity that finally did them in. There had been similar incidents in the past. And even if the cursed beings of the Lower Plane had failed, something else would have killed these madmen soon enough.

Then again, Ogras would never admit it to the annoying ghost, but he was thoroughly impressed by what those long-snouted goblins had accomplished. Their civilization had only started down the road of

cultivation 16,000 years before their demise, yet they had raised over twenty Monarchs, though only half were still alive by the uprising. And that was without the assistance of the Ruthless Heavens.

The whole tower was filled with taboo techniques and weird experiences of these mad scientists, techniques that would cause a storm on the outside. Figuring out which techniques were madness and which ones were inspired genius was the hard part. Certainly, those methods requiring taboo practices such as large-scale sacrifice were easy to avoid, as were the techniques that had terrifying side effects.

For example, one of the Warlocks Elders had managed to turn himself into a conduit for some sort of eldritch horror, gaining a huge amount of power. However, anyone below a Monarch who came within 100 miles of him was assaulted by whispers that gradually turned them into murderous lunatics. The elder couldn't even join the final battle since he caused more damage to his own people than the enemy.

These blasted goblins also didn't have any proper system for recording their techniques, and they were like children, constantly looking for the next thing. Few bothered fixing the imperfections of their creations. They simply kept pushing further down the road until they exploded or turned insane.

Thankfully, Rasata was one of the few who had worked to perfect her [Spiritlock Technique]. Certainly, the reason for that wasn't benign or anything. Rasata had been madly in love with the Grand Warlock, Hosokat'rov. However, he had spurned her advances, citing her nose being too small to marry someone of his standing. Love had turned into hatred, and she had escaped into her research.

Her ultimate goal was to perfect the [Spiritlock Technique], and have it supplant Hosokat'rov's spirit-controlling technique as the premier cultivation method of the Ra'Lashar goblins. Unfortunately, that hate-induced drive had turned her cultivation manual into a weird mix of angry poems, a list of pranks and failed assassination attempts on the Grand Warlock, and the actual methods to cultivate the Spiritlock Constitution.

"Why don't you go lure some more critters into the trap if you're bored? I still haven't completed the final brand required to enter this place the above-board way," Ogras muttered as he felt the incessant stare of the ghost.

"You want even more free labor?" K'rov snorted. "How about you hold up your end of the bargain, instead? That would solve both our problems."

"Give me a break," Ogras said. "I haven't even finished going over these mad ramblings, and you want me to sink my teeth into that thing? That might take over a year."

"A year?" K'rov guffawed. "Even if you studied for a century, you'd only be able to grab at the edge of the miracle we created. As long as you finish that thing..."

"I know, I know," Ogras responded with a lazy wave. "When that thing is completed, the clouds will part and phoenixes and dragons will dance to celebrate our glory."

"Keep pretending," K'rov spat. "I saw you almost drown in your own drool when you looked through the notes."

"Your flag is a bit impressive, but I'm not in any hurry," Ogras shrugged as he kept reading.

The goblin only snorted in dissatisfaction as he turned toward the windows overlooking the ruins of his former empire. Ogras glanced at the ghost before he kept reading, though his mind was only partly occupied with the Spiritlock Physique. The ancient bastard said he was brought back by the System, but after having witnessed the weird methods stored in this tower, Ogras wasn't so sure.

He hadn't found any damning evidence over the past year, but that didn't matter. Ogras trusted his guts, and they were telling him that this warlock who refused to leave for the underworld was up to no good. And even if he was wrong, so what? He'd rather kill a thousand innocent ghosts than risk his little life.

Ogras was even hesitant to finish the sixth and final key to this place and reap the rewards, afraid that unlocking the tower would also unlock the ghost's power. K'Rav seemed to understand his misgivings, but he pretended to be oblivious. He had even insinuated that he would be happy to pass on as long as the mission was completed, but that only made Ogras more unwilling.

So they played their game of cat and mouse, each one pushing their agenda. Parts of him screamed to simply take his winnings and leave while he was still ahead. But even if he had gained a lot from this place, there was still more to go. He had already decided to take the gamble, even if he was betting with his life.

That thing was really something, but it couldn't be finished without K'Rav's help.

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The silvery leaves ripped through the air, causing a swirl of frozen air as they shot toward the two four-armed yeti who kept harassing him from a distance. The storm pelted against his skin, but his [Innate Ward] empowered by the Fragment of the Bodhi and improved durability from [Adamance of Eoz] was enough to withstand the brunt of it.

It was lucky as well, as he had his hands full when dealing with the ice pangolin that kept launching extremely sharp scales at him under the guise of the storm. Its control was sublime, reminding Zac of Travo Raso's sword array that he had suffered inside multiple times over the last months.

However, while the Radiant Temple employee's array adhered to his fusion of the Dao of the Stars and the Dao of the Sword, this pangolin had rather instilled it with ice and wind, perhaps forming something akin to a Fragment of the Storm. Speed, ferocity, and destructive capabilities, it had it all.

And the two damn yeti underlings magnified the danger.

Yet Zac pushed on. These beasts represented a threshold, being one of the strongest groups at the edge of the second band. Being able to defeat these guys without relying on his Void Energy would mean that he had reached a level where he could match most early Hegemons in this place. And the Orom World didn't bring in any useless people.

Barely being able to fight his way through the first two bands of the wilderness in eight months didn't seem too impressive to Zac, but it was apparently quite shocking. Most of the Hegemons he had sparred against had become a lot more courteous after seeing his rapid progress, almost treating him like an equal. According to them, it usually took well over a century of slowly polishing one's technique to reach this level.

It felt like some sort of vindication. He was a mortal, unable to cultivate or absorb energy nearly as quickly as others. His Dao Control was adequate at best, and that was only thanks to his soul cultivation. Without it, Zac would be beyond awful due to his zero affinities.

But he was a rarely seen genius when it came to combat, showcasing a marvelous ability to integrate his Dao insights into his technique. He still hadn't managed to break his losing streak at the coliseum with either of his two races, but that was mostly because he wanted to fight people who could inspire further breakthroughs with his skills and stances. And those kinds of people weren't weak.

Zac weaved through the storm that raged around him, his steps as inscrutable and chaotic as the unlimited possibilities of life. The pangolin repeatedly failed to trap him or exploit his patterns, because there was no pattern to the Evolutionary Stance. Suddenly, he made his move, taking advantage of the two yeti being preoccupied with his Dao-infused attacks.

They had conjured a wall of ice to protect themselves, but that had forced them to split their attention, prompting the raging storm to weaken. Hundreds of engraved trees rose from the ground, and their vibrant lifeforce pushed the blistering cold of the tundra away. Zac disappeared a moment later, fusing with the tree that had appeared right next to him.

A moment later, the tree was ripped apart by the pangolin's scale array, but Zac had already been transported to another tree right by that point. Teleporting through the trees of [Ancestral Woods] barely produced a ripple, and it was hidden among the constant burst of life the other trees expelled.

The tree behind him started to rapidly wither after having fulfilled its purpose, but Zac was already moving in on the two targets. Only when two clouds closed in on them did the yeti realize their target wasn't trapped in the storm any longer, and they immediately spun around to meet the attack.

A small golden palace appeared in the sky as hymns of Arcadia drenched the surroundings in life. Meanwhile, a bottomless ravine appeared beneath, almost sucking Zac's soul inside as he looked at it. The space between the two visions was just a hairline, but that thin line was an uncrossable divide that shot toward the two beasts.

A ferocious storm slammed into the peak proficiency [Rapturous Divide], but Zac was full of purpose now that he was so close to reaching his goal. The boost of [Adamance of Eoz] rose to match his desire, allowing his skill to withstand the hailstorm long enough to break apart the defensive runes and grievously wound the two.

The beasts were thrown into their own fortifications from the attack, but they were still alive. However, Zac appeared right by them, and the keening cry of his axe was amplified by the ice as he cut straight through the neck of one of the yeti. A pang of danger made him flash away, and he heard two sharp explosions ripple out in quick succession.

It was some sort of icy ball that had burst out from the dying beast and almost instantly exploded into a thousand razor-sharp spikes. The spikes simply melted when they hit the second yeti, but Zac found himself punctured full of wounds even after dodging with [Earthstrider].

The skin around his wounds turned blue for a moment as he was flooded with chilly Dao, but [Adamance of Eoz] was preventing it from spreading and sealing his mobility. The pangolin was already rushing

toward him, and Zac flashed forward again, unleashing a furious barrage at the remaining yeti before he was pincered again.

The beast was desperately defending itself by conjuring one skill after another, but with every clash Zac's technique subtly changed, evolving toward something that could kill the beast. A sharp pain flared up in his side as a scale swiped him, but Zac endured the agony as he finished off the second mage by cleaving its head in two with an Axe-Bodhi fusion.

With only the pangolin to worry about, Zac entered a ferocious melee where he only relied on [Nature's Edge], [Earthstrider], and [Innate Ward] to fight the beast who averaged 2,500 attributes and possessed and powerful control abilities. He had mostly stayed in his Draugr form the past months, but he had still made great strides with his Evolutionary Stance as well.

Each movement was a rebirth, each swing a new creation. One wound after another appeared on the Pangolin's body as its scales kept getting destroyed. The leader of the tundra ferociously fought back, but it kept getting pushed further into a disadvantage. If not for the berserking brand on its body, it would have fled already.

Eventually, the beast fell after Zac managed to strike its head twice, breaking into its skull and instantly killing it.

Two of the three beasts had their brains destroyed, the inadvertent result of grinding his Draugr quest for months on end. He was no stranger to gory scenes after all he had done since the integration, but the gruesome scene was starting to get to him a bit. He had even considered giving up on the class quest and acquire a finisher somewhere else.

But after discussing the task with Travo Raso, Zac had come to better understand the purpose of such a quest. It was to prepare him for the future.

The further you walked on the road of cultivation, the harder it would become to kill your enemies. First of all, those who didn't possess the means and instincts to survive in the Multiverse died before reaching any great heights. Those who survived possessed all kinds of methods to escape with their lives intact, even when overwhelmed by a superior foe.

Using teleportation talismans was just the most common method, and it had a lot of limitations. There were also skills, clone methods, illusions, and all kinds of other things. Some late Hegemons could even survive by hiding their soul in a drop of blood while their body was destroyed. This wasn't a huge issue for Zac's human side where he struck hard and fast, leaving nothing behind.

But it was different for his Fetters of Desolation-class.

Whittling down one's enemy was an effective method to win, but it meant that some of your targets were bound to escape. The real world wasn't like the wilderness, where every beast was unable to back down from a fight. However, there was one surefire remedy to prevent any escape method; destroy one's soul.

Only extremely rare techniques like Aia Ouro's Thousand Lights Avatar could survive something like that, and not without paying a price. In a true life-and-death battle, most warriors would therefore try to

strike the soul first, and the core second. Destroying a Cosmic Core would cripple a cultivator, which was the second-best thing to actually killing an enemy. But that would still leave you exposed to retaliation.

It was this mindset that the System had been trying to instill into Zac and his Inexorable Stance, one kill at a time. Now, that fighting style had spilled over to his human side. He had been a bit worried about the moral implications, but Travo Raso and his friend had laughed for a good minute when he raised his concerns about preventing people from reincarnating or entering the afterlife.

Since then, the two had called him Little Lord, short for Little Lord of the Underworld, for his presumed ability to dictate life after death. In truth, not even Divine Monarchs possessed the power to utterly annihilate a soul to the point reincarnation or resurrection was prevented.

Zac was exhausted, but he still started running away from the battlefield. He had proved himself already, and there was no time to linger around until some other apex predator of the second band arrived. A huge grilled flank appeared in his hand as he ran, and he started devouring the meat like a starving ghost.

The benefits his most recent Hidden Node provided were amazing, improving his strength in so many ways. However, it was very draining, and he still hadn't found a way to turn it off. He could somewhat strengthen or weaken the effect by altering his mental state, but emotions were not so easily controlled. He still hadn't found the limits of what it could provide, since it was impossible for him to enter a true life-and-death struggle in the Orom World.

Fighting for a few hours now left him winded in a way that he had never felt since becoming a cultivator, and absorbing Cosmic Energy or Miasma didn't help. The only thing he had found to alleviate the exhaustion was devouring high-grade food, forcing him to constantly run around with mountains of easily-held dishes. Sometimes when the beasts refused to relent, he had been forced to fight while stuffing his face with his free hand.

Zac kept running for another ten minutes until space rippled around him. He had finally reached the third band, which meant he would be able to skip the first two bands next time he came here. Of course, Zac prayed that wouldn't be necessary. One year had passed since he evolved his soul and last used his Oblivion Energy.

He still hadn't reached the limits of what he could store, but he was getting close. It was time to make his final preparations before he broke out of this place.