

The Fall 816

Chapter 816: Shadewar

The swarm of elemental constructs was being whittled down as the ravenous army of cursed shadows pushed forward. Hidden among the glaciers, Ogras' eyes shimmered as he looked for the leader of these wretched things. Finally, he spotted it; a patch of frigid Dao more condensed than its surroundings.

The world turned monochrome as he phased into the Grey World, and he crossed the chaotic battlefield, ignoring the shadow puppets around him. In the grey world, his army looked different. Rather than the intangible forms that methodically decimated the ice beasts in the real world, they maintained their real forms here.

Wretched goblins whose eyes and mouths were covered with talismans emanating purple flames, their whole spectral bodies covered in runes.

'Alas', a sorrowful sigh echoed out in his mind, but Ogras ignored it as usual. He had bigger fish to fry than dealing with some maudlin warlock.

Besides, the sneaky bastard had no one to blame but himself. If not for K'Rav's schemes, would Ogras have bothered gathering thousands of errant souls of his citizens, forcibly binding them to his Shadow Flag? Well, he probably would have, but he would have been more polite about it. After all, he needed someone to house and enslave the malignant Qriz'Ur entities.

Such was the climb to the peak. Eat or be eaten. The warlock had tried possessing him at the critical moment of crafting the flag. He had used misdirection, the Voidbrand on his arm, and the ancient arts of his civilization as bait to lure Ogras down a path of no return. Ogras, in turn, had schemed against the warlock since the moment he popped up unannounced.

Even then, he had only survived by the hair.

Having reached the first stage of the [Spiritlock Physique] had not only given him a great boost to his Shadow Affinities and attributes, but it had also given him an inherited ability of the Ka'Zur Plainswalker that was once his familiar. The ability to split his consciousness and send off part of his mind on a journey through the shadows without anyone noticing.

He could even swap positions with this doppelganger at any time, making him even harder to kill. But Ogras had not once let the Goblin Warlock get a hint of this ability, even though he had used it almost constantly since successfully cultivating Rasata's Body Tempering Technique. With his doppelganger, he had scoured the huge tower for hidden knowledge that could help him out.

A lot of places were sealed, but the tower was extremely old. Some places had deteriorated to the point that a shadow could squeeze through a crack. Ogras had found whole repositories left behind by the masters of the fallen goblin empire, things K'Rav had never wanted him to discover. It was thanks to two techniques, in particular, he managed to break through the goblin's schemes.

First, it was a Soul Strengthening Method unlike anything Ogras had ever seen before called [Delirigoria]. Its benefits to the soul were almost nonexistent, but it was quick to train and it provided one unique benefit; it turned one's Soul Aperture into a virulent wasteland for any foreign entity, making your body and mind naturally resistant to attempts at possession.

The method was crafted by one of the councilors of the Ra'Lashar Kingdom because way too many of their citizens went mad from the Qriz'Ul twisting their minds. Unfortunately, the method was only finished by the end of the war, and Ogras' research indicated that K'Rav had fallen even before the method was completed and announced.

The second method was a technique with the unfortunate name [Bagaboom]. While its name was dumb even for an insane Goblin scientist, it proved to be exactly what Ogras needed; a single-use offensive sigil formed in one's mind. It took Ogras a full year of constantly infusing Mental Energy into this hidden brand in his Soul Aperture, but it was a lifesaver when K'Rav finally made his move.

Thanks to these two defenses, K'Rav had the tables turned on him, forcing the goblin ghost to give up on his attempt of possession even if his soul was far superior to Ogras'. Unfortunately, it wasn't a perfect victory, and that old bastard managed to survive by turning himself into the Tool Spirit of his flag.

Preferably, Ogras wanted to erase that bastard to avoid any danger down the road, but the ghost had perfectly planned its contingency. If he killed K'Rav, the flag would turn into a fancy ornament. Reforming the flag was impossible as well. The two had spent over a year on its formation, and all those efforts were just the finishing touches upon an almost completed weapon. Even if Ogras had the skills to start over from scratch, it would probably take decades, centuries even, to create something like this.

It was a weapon invented for the war with the Qriz'Ul, and its birth had required not only the fell karma accumulated by the whole kingdom. It also required the unique arrays that Ogras was forced to leave behind when the tower crumbled as a final act of revenge from K'Rav. Thus, the spectral goblin would keep growing stronger as new shades were crammed into the flag.

Even worse, the warlock kept complaining in the back of his mind, a broken record railing against his unjust treatment as though his attempt at possession was fair play. K'Rav's soul was simply too powerful, and Ogras was unable to shut out his quibbling. Sometimes, Ogras wondered if the trade-off was worth it. The sounds of heated battle behind him immediately answered his question.

Of course it was.

K'Rav could complain all day as long as he provided the strength needed for Ogras to keep pushing forward. The [Shadewar Flag] was a terrifying treasure, way more powerful even than his old Clan's defining treasure; the [Spear of Ar'Amak]. And that was while the flag was still in its infant state.

The army of spectral goblins had proven extremely useful, no matter if it was for large-scale combat like now, or forming War Arrays from within the safety of the flag itself. He had even managed to kill a Beast King by overwhelming it with these almost unkillable little buggers, allowing him to land a killing blow without even being in danger.

Besides, the fact that K'Rav kept scheming had its benefits as well. That meant the game was still going and some pieces weren't expended. It was a looming threat, but one that could bring unexpected benefits. When the tower collapsed, most of the knowledge of the Ra'Lashar was lost, except for the things Ogras managed to memorize and the things locked in the Tool Spirit's mind.

There was some core knowledge that hadn't been written down or perhaps intentionally erased by K'Rav or some of the other leaders. For example, the brand that was still on his arm was supposed to bring him some benefits, considering that it was a reward from a quest of the Ruthless Heavens.

However, it had only become a weakness for the warlock to exploit, almost costing Ogras his life. Even now, its benefits were out of his reach. Unfortunately, Ogras currently had no way to extract that intelligence from the ensconced Tool Spirit. But as long as the game kept going, an opportunity would eventually present itself.

For now, Ogras was content maintaining the status quo. He had spent far more time in the ruins of the Ra'Lashar Kingdom than he had planned. While the odds of anything as valuable appearing in the other corners of the Mystic Realm were low, Ogras still wanted to explore as much as possible before outsiders came pouring in.

The monochrome surroundings were infused with blue and white as Ogras left the Grey World just a few meters away from the concentrated spot of icy Dao, and a lance of darkness shot forward with monstrous momentum. The wall of ice surrounding the Ice Spirit was utterly destroyed, forcing it to flee through the glacier.

Most people would have a hard time keeping up, but Ogras wasn't most people. The shadowlance shot forward, stabbing into the ancient ice and causing hairline cracks to spread deep into the icy mountain with almost instantaneous speed. The attack didn't harm the spirit, but it created innumerable small mirrors through the ice.

A skill fractal flashed and the Dao rippled, and fake became real while real became fake.

A storm of shadows turned ice into shreds around him as Ogras swapped places with one of his mirror images, appearing right in front of the Spirit. He could kill it then and there, but that wasn't why he had made the detour. Two crude talismans flew out, and Ogras rapidly started performing seals with his hands.

The Spirit desperately struggled against the talisman, and Ogras was instantly covered in a layer of frost. However, he persevered. Eventually, a shimmering shard of ice hovered in the air, two talismans tightly wrapped around it. Ogras smiled with glee, his first true spirit capture a success.

This technique was part of the [Spiritlock Physique], an improved version of the method most of the goblins had used to capture spirits. Mastering this method was integral if he wanted to proceed to the next stage of his physique, since the smallest error in the seal would mean death or madness when sealing more spirit's in his body down the road.

'Any young acolyte back home would be able to catch a little Ice Spirit who had yet formed a true consciousness', K'Ravsnorted in his mind.

"Yet I am standing here today, while they all became devilfood," Ogras grinned. "Perhaps your acolytes should have studied moderation instead of capturing spirits."

'Greatness always comes at a risk and a cost,' the warlock snickered in response. 'I know of the one whose shadow you're chasing. I saw him the short moment we shared a mind. You'll have to work harder than this if you want to achieve your goals.'

"No need for a wretched Tool Spirit to worry about my matters," Ogras snorted as he stowed away the sealed spirit.

He didn't have any plans of integrating this thing into his body. First of all, what K'Rav said was true. This spirit wasn't some supreme creature, and Ogras needed top-quality spirits to get the most out of his physique. It would be easier to integrate low-quality spirits, but Rasata had posited that would lead to a weak foundation where you would get stuck long before reaching the peak of the method.

True to the goblin kingdom's core mentality, the [Spiritlock Technique] was a technique that could offer greatness as long as you were willing to take the risk. The deadlier the abominations you gobbled up, the greater the effect.

Besides, with his unique Race, he had no choice but to exclusively look for shadow-based creatures to infuse. Unfortunately, those things were both extremely rare and hard to spot, creeping in the seams of reality. Perhaps that bastard who called himself the Umbra had more creatures in stock, provided Ogras ever got out of this place and managed to return to Earth.

He had ultimately caught this little spirit because it was very rare, and rare meant valuable.

Ogras took a step forward, melding with a mirror image of himself. Something as marvelous as this didn't even require the activation of any skill thanks to fusing the Peak Fragment of Mirage with his Doppelganger ability, and he soon stood atop the glacier once more. Having lost their source of power and spirituality, the ice creatures had turned into unmoving statues, leaving the shades without an enemy to unleash their frustration and rage upon.

A grin spread across Ogras' mouth as he snickered, the sound immediately amplified by the towering cliffs around him. He swung his flag, returning his unwilling followers into the cursed maelstrom inside the flag. From there, he flashed a few times, rushing through the icy world with amazing speed.

The days blended together in this lifeless vista, but Ogras kept going deeper, his eyes constantly scanning the horizon. Suddenly, he stopped, his eyes wide with excitement. The notes were true!

In the distance, he finally saw what he was looking for. A mysterious glimmer, this one different from the constant and almost blinding radiance of sun-blasted ice. A moment later the glimmer was gone, but Ogras found himself trapped in a bubble of light. Explosions erupted all around him as ice was melted or ripped apart.

But Ogras wasn't worried. He was elated; the notes said this would happen.

The notes said he was trapped and he would have to survive the attack, but he still tried to get out of the 50-meter-wide trap. A barrier barred his escape, and his body was suddenly covered in wounds from the piercing lights as he failed to enter the Grey World. He was forced to weave back and forth, avoiding the blue streaks hidden among the other lights as he took out a crystal and a parchment.

The information crystal immediately exploded, and Ogras grimaced as he started scribbling down his findings. His memories were already fading. His preparations proved completely ineffectual, but he staunchly held to the scene of that glimmer as he frantically jotted down his findings while narrowly avoiding death.

He had lost the trail twice already. Hopefully, he'd be able to leave behind some additional information this time. A minute later, Ogras looked around with confusion before his eyes turned to the parchment in his hand. A troubled frown marred his face.

It had happened again.

A few minutes were lost, and he was surrounded by destruction. Ogras pushed down his misgivings as he ate a healing pill before heading in the direction the notes indicated. A snicker echoed in his mind, but Ogras ignored it. He knew what K'Rav was getting at.

Perhaps, he really had gone mad during his visit to the goblin tower or from practicing taboo methods. Why else would he be following notes he left himself while in a state of delirium? Ogras had no idea what the hell he was talking about when talking about 'natural phenomena' and 'illusory glimmers in the sky', but he had already decided to follow the clues.

If the notes could be trusted, it might be a unique treasure hidden in this glacier that would help him perfect his Path. If the notes were false, what did it matter? It would mean he had gone crazy in this place, so he might as well follow the clues until he lost the last vestiges of his sanity.

Ogras kept going deeper into the endless world of ice, his thoughts occupied by the Dao. Reality and illusion become one, truths and falsehoods interwoven into an indecipherable patchwork. Being everywhere and nowhere, a surveyor from the shadows who controlled life, death, and fate itself.

The Path of the Illusory Shade.

"Little Chain defeated Olgoth two weeks ago, I should have guessed you would arrive sooner or later," Traprandar said with a small smile as he played with the golden hoop that never left his hand.

"That is unrelated," Zac shrugged, though his brows furrowed like he was annoyed.

Annoyed that the masked undead warrior had managed to defeat a Bronze Attendant before him.

"Is it now?" Traprandar pointedly smiled at the four vines that wound themselves around Zac's arms and midriff in a hug.

Zac had made some waves in the coliseum twenty months ago when he appeared with the spatial tube on his back, suddenly wielding four powerful vines in combat. Luckily, [Link of Demeter] used up a free spot in his pathways on the right side of his back, which had allowed him to easily form a connection with Vivi.

He hadn't been met with any resistance at all, only a vague sense of hunger and excitement that only increased after he killed the first beast in the wilderness. Buying the skill had completely emptied his last savings though. He even had to push his levels to 140 just to afford the skill and get the loose change needed to use the teleporters.

Thankfully, his intermittent sessions of Soul Strengthening provided impressive amounts of Contribution Points, and pushing the skills in his two classes toward peak mastery helped along as well. In the end, he had passed the 3-year evaluation with over 40,000 Contribution Points, and just enough points to enact his plan in the arena.

It was a far cry from the record-holder's 118,000 Points, but still well beyond the norm for his grade. Besides, Zac would easily have passed 50,000 if he hadn't focused most of his time on reforming his two stances. However, not everyone was so lucky as to effortlessly pass the first relegation.

Travo Raso, the Temple Fixer and Zac's first friend in this prison, was one of those who didn't make it.