

The Fall 924

Chapter 924: Qriz'Ul King

Life was rapidly being supplanted by death as Zac activated his Specialty Core. Still, he was cutting it close. Even outside its natural habitat, the Qriz'Ul King was incredibly quick, and it looked like a floating river as it closed the gap between them. Zac thought the thing would try to swallow him, but it suddenly spat out a purple blade while runic tendrils followed in its wake.

The edge was over ten meters across and emitted a dense amount of corruption. It was the first time Zac saw the 'Nightmare Tears' as Ogras called them, and he felt an uncomfortable pressure even at a distance. He could hear the nefarious whispers of the Lost Plane from within the tear, but the epiphanies were conspicuously absent.

Zac felt as though his body was shackled during the transformation, but the constraints soon broke, and a storm of Miasma was unleashed. [Love's Bond] had already taken its proper form, and [Black Death] replaced [Verun's Bite]. A sinister jagged edge stretching almost four meters appeared in front of the chained axe in his hand, and Zac unleashed a herculean swing at the incoming projectile.

Two edges collided, and if not for Alea's chains, he would have been thrown away like a ragdoll again. Instead, they had latched on to the Goblin's diffuse appendages, and a struggle for poisonous supremacy quickly ensued. The chains were empowered by [Blighted Cut] and the unrelenting death of the Pale Seal, while the appendages were made from the ancient madness of the Lost Plane.

Unfamiliar runes lost their luster and fell apart, but it wasn't a clean-cut victory. The mere touch of the Qriz'Ul was rapidly eroding the viscous coating of [Blighted Cut], and Zac could sense that not even the reinforced links beneath were immune to the corrupting nature of the Lost Plane.

Zac himself wasn't much better off. It felt like his right arm would break from holding back the Nightmare Tear, and the black edge rapidly started to decay, even with the Branches of the Pale Seal and War Axe bolstering it. In contrast, the tear seemed to contain almost limitless force, and Zac knew there was no way he'd whittle that thing down.

A pull from the chains dragged him upward and closer to the face of the Goblin, and Zac used the final lifespan of [Gorehew] to push the Nightmare Tear downward with everything he had, prompting it to fall toward a group of infiltrators below. A quick glance at the situation below confirmed something he'd sensed while being thrown into the air. Iz had really joined the fray, and she was waging a one-woman war against the cultists.

The scene was mesmerizing. Iz Tayn looked just like the first time Zac saw her, standing on a burning orb like a goddess of the sun, with a demonic angel raining death and destruction on her enemies. Last time, it had been a scene of mortal danger. This time it was one of comfort. Without her, Zac wouldn't know what to do. He and Ogras alone wouldn't cut it when this big goblin was added to the calculation.

Of course, some things had changed with Iz's display. The flames had drastically improved since she was an F-grade cultivator. They were powered by at least two Dao Branches related to fire, but there was also a sense of antiquity to them, like they were flames that heralded from the birth of the era.

Antiquity like what his Void Energy emitted. Was this not something unique to him but rather the mark of ancient, powerful bloodlines?

The rattling sounds of Alea's chains brought him back to the present, and he conjured another jagged axe as he flew toward the Qriz'Ul King's head. Its reaction was instantaneous, and its maws opened to swallow Zac whole. However, a light rap on one of his chains made it slam into another, prompting a chain reaction where a length of links appeared right in front of his feet.

Zac used the chain to push off, narrowly allowing him to avoid both the sharp chin and the oversized nose. The blade of [Gorehew] was humming with killing intent and twinned daos, and the air itself cried as the edge fell toward the pitch-black core atop its forehead. But a dark-purple barrier appeared just above its surface, and Zac suddenly felt like he was looking at the gateway to the Lost Plane again.

It was weak and muted, but even a weak mimicry of that aura was terrifying, especially when it was accompanied by a deluge of corruption far more condensed than the lake water. The blade of [Gorehew] instantly disintegrated, and Zac urgently commanded [Love's Bond] to drag him out of harm's way.

A huge mouth suddenly filled his vision, but a third jagged edge crashed against the sharp chin. Zac used the bony hook to launch him toward the ground, and an enormous cloud was released in his wake like a smoke curtain of pure death. Simultaneously, Zac had all of Alea's chains detach from the huge creature and return to his side.

Their first clash ended with the Goblin essentially unscathed, but Zac still considered it a success. He hadn't been sure whether he would be able to block these seemingly intangible attacks, but the Nightmare Tear had been stopped in its tracks by Zac's counter swing. The same was true for his chains, which meant his other skills should also work against this creature.

Another piece of good news was that its aura had weakened even further since leaving the lake. It seemed to have emitted an energy signature at the limits of Hegemony for a moment when it moved to seize the black hole, but the spatial bomb had crippled it and reduced it to Late D-grade. From there, Zac had added to the chaos with his bombs and attacks. By now, it was somewhere at the edge between Early and Middle D-grade.

However, its foundations were still those of a peak being, and it was clearly more powerful than a normal Hegemon. Zac wasn't sure if the Qriz'Ul King was using any Daos, yet the Goblin's very existence corrupted all of his attacks and even his equipment. And that barrier... A normal attack wouldn't get past that thing. Meanwhile, his attacks hadn't exhausted the Goblin at all by the looks of it.

Its enormous body was a massive congregation of energy, and its stores would undoubtedly put most Beast Kings to shame. And between an almost grotesque amount of energy and the core that kept feeding it more, Zac knew this guy would be hard to lock down, let alone kill. First thing's first, though; he needed to fight on the ground.

His undead form had many advantages, but aerial battles were not one of them.

Zac's thoughts whirred, and he was already formulating an approach as he fell toward the shores. Ogras said the Qriz'Ul had a core rune that needed to be hit, but in this case, it had to be the stone on its forehead. He needed to create an opportunity and blast it with everything he got. It would be even

better if he could somehow break its connection to the gateway. That way, its shield might not work at all.

Shortly after, Zac slammed into the ground, and a second layer of death descended on the area around him as Zac activated [Deathmark] as well. Unfortunately, the Goblin itself didn't immediately follow in his wake, making it difficult for Zac to strike back. His only real ranged skill was [Desperation's End], but it was much too early to use his most powerful strike.

Besides, the Goblin wasn't the only thing to worry about right now.

The shroud of [Fields of Despair] revealed over 100 cultists in his direct vicinity, three of whom were Hegemons. However, something was very off about them. In his current form, he should have seen powerful fluctuations of life from these people, especially from the D-grades with lifespans surpassing ten thousand years.

Yet they felt like weak candles flickering in the wind, where a simple push would topple them. If they didn't emit such intense auras, Zac would have thought they were at death's door. Just as Zac suspected, the lake had done something to them, turning them into something neither living nor dead.

A few silent specters appeared by the cultists, hooded executioners wielding pitch-black axes. [Deathmark] had seen an upgrade inside the temple as well, where their axes looked even more deadly. Not only that, but their auras had grown indistinct, like they had fused with the darkness of the skill's domain. It was like they suddenly possessed an item like his energy-hiding bracelet, making them far harder to spot without a honed Danger Sense.

As expected, less than half of the cultivators noticed the incoming swing, but Zac swore with surprise when the situation suddenly changed. Sturdy barriers made from the purple lake water and bolstered with bloody tendrils enclosed all the cultivators at once. It was like when one of them saw the danger, all of them did, and they reacted together. Even those who weren't targeted by specters were shielded.

None of them had spoken a word, and the response was instantaneous. They had to be mentally linked for such a coordinated response. Zac grimaced in annoyance, especially after seeing that his skill didn't work on the water-based shields. The green runes of [Deathmark] briefly appeared on the barriers, but they crumbled long before they could drag any significant amount of Zac's own corruption into the shields.

A sudden pang of danger made him look up, just in time to see hundreds of purple scars shooting toward him like a nightmarish meteor shower. Each of the scars had the power to turn an average E-grade cultivator to mush, and a few fused and grew even larger as they descended.

"Holy-!" Zac yelled as he urgently activated [Abyssal Phase].

Zac turned into a puff of abyssal dust and flickered away, moving almost a thousand meters in an instant with his movement skill. It was the first time he used the skill since it got upgraded to Peak Mastery. Some skills gained new features, but the boon of [Abyssal Phase] was simple – speed.

It allowed Zac to move almost 50% faster than before, and he guessed only speed-focused Hegemons would be able to catch up with him in his current form. It also allowed him to avoid the hailstorm, though the Kan'Tanu cultivators weren't so lucky. The whole area was ripped apart, and not even the

three Hegemons managed to avoid the barrage, especially not after the Qriz'UI King itself slammed into the ground like a comet.

So much for camaraderie through turpitude.

The whole area heaved from the collision, and Zac swore when he saw the Qriz'UI absorb an Olympic Pool's worth of water. It wasn't just an issue of the thing stealing his cultivation resources; it used the water to recover the large amount of energy it had just expended with its nightmare rain.

The Qriz'UI King seemed startled by Zac's sudden disappearance, but it soon caught his scent.

"Empty... EMPTY!" the Qriz'UI roared as it lunged for him.

But a golden rune suddenly appeared above its head, and thousands of burning sigils sealed off the Goblin. The whole region shuddered as the Goblin slammed chin-first into the golden barrier, but it failed to break out in one go. It was obviously the work of Iz Tavn, but not even Iz would be able to keep this thing for long.

A tenth of the burning runes had winked out from the collision, and the golden film had weakened in turn. But it had given Zac a bit of a breather, so he looked curiously in her direction. Their eyes met, and Zac heard her voice in his mind.

'Are you okay? What happened?' Iz's smooth voice echoed in his mind, a welcome change of pace after the Goblin's demented roars.

'Ah, you can hear me?' another startled voice echoed out, and Zac's gaze turned to another section of the battlefield.

Ogras had already been forced to use his [Shadewar Flag], and a mix of spectral beings and ghosts that looked a lot like the Qriz'UI themselves were already battling the armies of mindless cultists. Progress was slow, though. Those water barriers were incredibly durable, even if the Qriz'UI King had made them look like paper.

'Telepathic skill?' Zac said with surprise.

'Something like that,' Iz said. 'Is the gate closed? And what is that thing you're fighting?'

'I didn't manage to close it completely,' Zac grimaced. 'This guy was guarding the pathway and absorbed most of the damage.'

'That's its strength AFTER eating a black hole?' the demon exclaimed. 'Wouldn't want to see how it was before.'

'I think it's still connected to the gateway,' Zac added, thinking back to the impregnable barrier shielding its core. 'I think it will keep drawing strength from the Lost Plane until the pathway is properly closed; I'm not sure I can kill it like this. And I don't think I can deal with the gateway while also stalling this thing.'

'... Alright, I'll figure something out with the miss,' Ogras groaned. 'Just keep the big guy occupied for now. If it's really connected, it might sense us targeting the gateway.'

'Do you have any solutions? I threw pretty much all I had at the gate,' Zac asked. 'There were Qriz'UI inside the lake, but most of them should have died because of this big guy.'

The air shuddered as another hurricane of corruption erupted within the barrier, and Zac saw how runes rapidly started to wink out.

'I am still hesitant about entering the waters. Besides, I need to keep these cultists in check. They are a lot stronger than I anticipated. I do have something that should work, but Mr. Azh'Rezak will have to deliver it. Just place it next to the gateway and infuse some energy. Just be careful; the item is a bit dangerous.'

Upon hearing Iz's words, it felt like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Zac didn't know what had changed since he entered the lake, but it looked like Iz had fully joined their cause. Perhaps his speech was a lot more convincing than he'd thought? In either case, an item someone like Iz Tayn called dangerous was bound to be something absolutely terrifying.

And with just a corner of the gateway remaining, it should be more than enough.

'Great, sounds like a marvelous time, but I'm still not confident in reaching the bottom in one piece, creatures or no,' Ogras complained.

'Then keep attacking these creatures, but don't kill all of them. They are powering their shields with the lake,' Iz countered. 'The lake's depth had already decreased by twenty meters, and the leader swallowed a lot more just now. A minute longer, and you should be able to survive the journey.'

Zac's glanced past the raging Qriz'UI King. It was just like Iz said; the shores had grown, and a band of wetness indicated that just over twenty meters of lake water had disappeared. The scene made Zac's heart clench with pain, and he furiously glared at the Goblin still making a ruckus.

All because of this bastard. If not for him, Zac could have closed the gateway before snatching the whole lake, turning it into a tonic that would help him shore up his foundations. Now, they had to sacrifice it to accomplish their goals. Just the thought of it made Zac furious.

'Alright, I'll deal with this guy. But, uh, please try not to destroy too much water,' Zac urged. 'Turns out it's pretty useful for my cultivation.'

'Of course it is. I wouldn't want to see the kind of wretched refuse that not even you would use for advancement,' an annoyed scoff echoed through his mind, and a laugh from Iz Tayn probably meant she shared the sentiment.

'Whatever, just save me some water,' Zac snorted as the burning cage broke apart.

The Goblin King seemed hesitant to go for Zac, who stood over a thousand meters from the lake, or for Iz probably emitted a far more palpable threat. Soon, it turned toward Iz, and Zac knew he had to do something. Even if he flashed over to intercept, the Goblin would still be precariously close to the lake.

Whether it was creating an opportunity for Ogras or preventing it from swallowing any more water, he had to force it over. Suddenly, Zac had an idea, and he released a wave of Void Energy into the air around him. The Qriz'UI King's head instantly snapped around, confirming Zac's guess. There was something about his Void Energy that attracted it.

The creature had emitted an intense hunger the first time Zac activated his domain skill beneath the depths, and every time he used Void Energy during the fight, the monster entered a frenzied state. The Goblin hesitated a moment, but it still took the bait. It condensed into a stream as it shot toward Zac, and ancient ruins were reduced to rubble by the Goblin's advance.

Four chains shot forward, each targeting the cracked sphere on the creature's forehead from various angles. Meanwhile, Miasma churned throughout Zac's body as his bones creaked. Zac even used some Void Energy to keep the Qriz'Ul's attention while speeding up the activation of [Arbiter of the Abyss].

The Qriz'Ul was incredibly agile for its size, bobbing and weaving to avoid the chains while barely losing speed. But Zac's web wasn't spun randomly, and a hidden chain suddenly appeared in the shadows of one that just missed, a chain unlike the others. It didn't move very quickly, but the Qriz'Ul was out of options. It had unknowingly moved closer and closer to the ground to avoid the chains, and now it couldn't dip any further.

A tap on its forehead resulted in a spectral chain being born, and a smile spread across Zac's face. He didn't activate the taunting effect and instead released some more Void Energy into the air. The Qriz'Ul King had initially stopped to swipe at the spectral chain, but the Void Energy made it move again.

And just as it came within 250 meters of Zac, a pillar rose from the ground. A monument to despair and inexorability. Ogras would need another minute before he could dip down and close the gate, which hopefully would weaken the creature even further. But seeing the billowing waves of corruption trapped within the ethereal body of the Goblin, Zac couldn't help but ask.

Could he even stall this big guy that long?