

The Fall 903

Chapter 903: Choosing Death

The world twisted, and Zac suddenly sensed hundreds of powerful auras all around him. Ogras had done exactly what he'd asked – teleported him into the middle of the infiltrator squad. The demon had even left behind a shroud of haze that would give him a slight edge in the ambush, and Zac wasted no time as he swung his axe.

The grey world around him lit up with sanguine luster as he activated not only the skills of [Verun's Bite], but also a few of his own. The Dao-infused axe slammed into the head of one of the nearby Hegemons before he had a chance to respond. To add insult to injury, the body was cut apart by a storm of fractal leaves as Zac unleashed his area attack of [Nature's Edge] that covered a good portion of the basin.

Zac was disappointed that he didn't feel any stronger with the upgraded version of [Arcadian Crusade], and it still provided a 35% boost. Instead, the golden runes on his body had grown denser, and he could feel how his energy circulation had been improved by another level. That was pretty decent as well.

Mastering his techniques had taught him the importance of small advantages, and being able to activate skills 50% faster was huge since it meant you didn't need to create as large an opening to strike. Now, it had allowed Zac to launch a surprise strike before the Kan'Tanu Cultivators had even figured out where he stood, and over fifty streams of energy immediately entered his body from the fallen E-grade cultivators.

But Zac didn't stop there. The trees of [Ancestral Woods] had already appeared by that point, and Zac leaped into a tree next to him just as dozens of terrifying attacks landed on his position. Ten of his trees were disintegrated in the area he stood, but the attacks also destroyed most of the ownerless blood curses around him.

These soldiers weren't fools. Even if they didn't know the exact effect of the primordial forest, they knew enough to destroy it. Most of his skill had been dismantled instantly, but the sudden appearance of a forest provided an excellent opportunity for the dagger in the dark to make his move. As Zac appeared from another of the trees, he saw a whole flank of the army descend into madness.

Some warriors struck their allies like they were trying to cut down the trees of [Ancestral Woods]. Others were gored by shadowy spears. Some were even killed by those spectral creatures Zac had seen before. Another 50 warriors had been taken out in an instant, showcasing just how powerful Ogras had become.

These people were not just random F-grade fodder; the warriors were all High E-grade at the least, with most of them being Peak E-grade. There had to be a significant power discrepancy to effortlessly cull their numbers like this. And not even the Hegemons were safe from Ogras' all-out assault. A highly condensed shadow-lance struck a Hegemon from behind.

The man had just received a bloody gash from one of Zac's fractal leaves, and Ogras' strike was launched with perfect timing. The warrior just barely managed to block it in time with a defensive skill, but the attack had created a huge opening. This was exactly what Zac needed. Most of the Hegemons were still standing, and it was they who were the real threat. Less than a second had passed since the two descended on the infiltrators, and Zac wanted to take out at least two more leaders before they organized a response.

One of the blood curses had already found his trail, but he ignored the stabbing pain on his back as he activated [Earthstrider]. A step took him right next to his target, and Zac was elated to sense how sturdy his movement skill had become. It didn't seem quicker than before, but he could tell that it was able to forcibly contract space to a higher degree.

That was especially important in battlefields where chaotic energies and Dao Fields were always present. Typically, it felt like pushing through quicksand, but the effect was greatly subdued as he plowed right into the condensed Dao field of the scimitar-wielding Hegemon. The warrior emitted a murderous aura, but something like that wasn't enough to give pause to Zac as he slammed into the Hegemon like a ferocious bear.

The push was the straw that broke the camel's back, and the interlocked layer of rocky scales the warrior had summoned crumbled. [Verun's Bite] followed right in tow as it bit into the forehead of the man, ending him in an instant. It was quick and clean, and showcased the indomitability of an apex predator.

A scream in his mind alerted him of imminent danger. He narrowly dodged a colossal beam of shrieking madness that destroyed everything in its path, including at least a dozen E-grade infiltrators. It had been released by the leader, a weird hunched-over human whose mouth was bereft of both lips and teeth. His face was locked in a grotesque mask of pain as he looked right at Zac, somehow seeing straight through Ogras' shadowy domain.

Zac had barely managed to move out of harm's way, but it looked like he left an opening just like the scimitar-wielding Hegemon. In reality, Vivi's vines were acting like a counterweight, and his situation was nowhere near as precarious as it seemed. Since he had reached the Integration Stage of his Evolutionary Stance, it required a lot more effort to push him off-balance than a surprise attack.

But the ruse had accomplished its goal as another of the Hegemons appeared right behind him with a brutal cudgel in his hand. It emitted smoldering heat like a falling meteor as the Hegemon swung it toward his head. Zac was about to strike, but a spear appeared out of nowhere and pierced the head of the bulky warrior.

It was Ogras who had appeared out of nowhere and struck like lightning, using some means Zac couldn't decipher in the heat of the battle. The scene was almost incomprehensible as Zac could clearly see the demon fighting against a group of cultivators within his and the cudgel-wielding Hegemon's sight.

The demon was gone as quickly as he had appeared, and three of the e-grade warriors fell to the supposed illusion at the same time. Since his own target was dead, Zac furiously circulated his Dao and Cosmic Energy, and two clouds shot toward a fourth Hegemon. Simultaneously, a feral snarl echoed through the area as Verun appeared from his axe, and the Tool Spirit pounced on another Hegemon who was charging up a powerful skill judging by the energy undulations.

Space was parted into an unbridgeable chasm as the hymns of Arcadia and the deafening silence of the Abyss drowned out the pained cries of the warriors. A ferocious swing of the Hegemon parried the manufactured spatial tear, but it was clear this warrior wasn't up to the task. He couldn't withstand a Peak-Mastery skill like [Rapturous Divide] that was empowered by [Spiritual Void], [Adamance of Eoz], and two Dao Branches.

His attack was broken apart, and the spatial divide carved a huge gash into his chest. Unfortunately, he barely managed to expend the final energy of Zac's skill before gutting being cut apart, but Zac had already appeared in the wake of his skill. A swift swing of his axe finished the job, but an extreme danger gripped him by that time.

An enormous face had appeared in the sky that radiated an intensely evil aura. Like the one who summoned the skill, the face had no lips or teeth. The avatar didn't have eyes either, or it was rather more apt to say it had lost them since two huge engraved spikes had pushed into its eye sockets.

Zac urgently activated [Empyrean Aegis], and two golden bubbles appeared, one around himself and one around what Zac hoped was the real Ogras. At the same time, three pillars rose behind his back, indicating the durability of the skill had gone up another tier. It was just in time, as the grotesque avatar unleashed a tremendous wail that tore apart space itself.

The scream was deafening, and not even his recently upgraded defensive skill could completely block out its effects. The huge avatar's wail threw Zac's mind into chaos as bleeding gashes appeared all over his body. Ogras wasn't much better off. He tried to disappear into the shadows, but space had become too fractured for movement skills, and he was immediately thrown out.

Gristly gashes appeared across the demon's body, and bad turned to worse as one of the surviving Hegemons took advantage of the overtaxed golden bubble and punched a nasty hole in Ogras' side with a mighty javelin throw. The last vestiges of [Ancestral Forest] crumbled as well, and Zac saw how one of the Hegemons was rushing toward him with murder in his eyes.

The only good news was that Zac and his companion weren't the only ones in trouble. The evil god's wail didn't discern friend from foe, and its skill covered the whole basin. It even bounced off the wall to create a dangerous superimposed effect. The surviving Hegemons had barely withstood the attack by activating defensive talismans, but the E-grade warriors didn't have that kind of luxury.

Whether it was defensive skills or E-grade talismans, it all broke apart in front of the grotesque avatar. Only Zac, Ogras, and the Hegemons remained standing a second later, along with Verun who didn't seem affected by the sound wave. The problem was that the wail was unrelenting, and one of the pillars had already crumbled.

Cosmic Energy surged into Zac's right arm as four thick Vines empowered with the Branch of the Kalpataru shot out. They unleashed an all-out offense at the incoming Hegemon, continuously breaking apart and regrowing under the seemingly tireless screech from above. A shimmering swirl rose around the warrior as well, and Zac was elated to see the Hegemon turn and run in the wrong direction.

He quickly broke Ogras' illusion, but the brief pause had been enough for Zac to finish charging the Skill Fractal on his arm. Space broke apart as the enormous hand of [Arcadia's Judgement] emerged. The hand and its axe had grown even larger since the upgrade, gaining roughly five meters in length.

That was not the only change, as a familiar feature had returned. A massive sigil had formed in the sky, towering over even the enormous avatar. It covered the whole basin, and Zac was amazed to see the avatar was pushed down toward the ground from the pressure. The weaker Hegemons weren't much better off as Zac's domain overloaded their already strained defensive talismans, and they suddenly found themselves under attack from not one but two skills.

Only two people were left unscathed – the powerful Hegemon who withstood the pressure with the help of an odd shuddering domain, and Ogras who didn't seem to be affected at all. It wasn't thanks to the demon's own skill, though. An unmistakable resonance in the golden barrier around him indicated a synergy between his two skills – those shielded by [Empyrean Aegis] were exempt from [Arcadia's Judgement].

The final pillar of [Empyrean Aegis] was already showing cracks, but it was barely enough. The axe descended with unprecedented force, and the whole mountain range shook. The leader knew his skill was in trouble, and four clattering skulls appeared to intercept the axe. However, before they could soak up some of the momentum, a tremendous lance of shadow swallowed them whole.

It was a bloodied Ogras, now sporting four sets of shadowy wings, who had released the skill, paving the way for Zac to do maximum damage. The other Hegemons could barely withstand the two skills, so they couldn't help either. The axe bit into the head of the evil god a moment later, and it was immediately pushed the final distance to the ground.

The first half of the strike destroyed the avatar in one go, and even one of the Hegemons was turned into mincemeat. A moment later, it was like the world itself unleashed its anger on them as thousands of spikes shot up through the ground. In the chaos, yet another Hegemon fell under the combined onslaught of Verun and Ogras.

That left the only one enemy standing – the lipless leader of the army. Unfortunately, he had withstood both the first and second half of the skill. He wasn't unscathed as one of his arms hung limply to the side while he was covered in cuts and bruises, but Zac frowned when he felt the man's aura was still rock-solid.

It was a bit risky leaving the leader for last, but it was the strategy he and Ogras had settled on. They only knew this person was powerful before the army appeared, and there was no way to tell if Ogras could even get close enough to him for Zac to launch a surprise strike. Instead, they had opted to take out as many Hegemons as possible in a blitz and then focus on the leader.

Even if things had gone mostly according to plan, Zac had hoped he'd reach this point without having expended both [Rapturous Divide] and [Arcadia's Judgement]. His berserking skill had run its course by now, indicating the time it lasted hadn't changed. Instead, the backlash had been drastically lessened, and Zac only felt a wave of exhaustion instead of losing half his combat strength.

It was not a coincidence, but rather design. Zac had aimed for this when he reforged the skill; more power instead of more time, and a smaller backlash upon upgrade instead of an increased time frame. Right now, he somewhat regretted that direction as another 10 seconds on the clock would have been nice, especially as Zac saw the leader's flesh twist and turn until he was remade anew like a fleshy puppet.

It definitely wasn't the unfettered possibility of Creation who had made it possible, nor was it a healing skill. It was the blood curse in his body. Zac had seen those tendrils twist and pulse in the wounds. Not only that, but he could actually feel a sense of danger from the curse, even at this distance.

There were no two ways about it – this guy was more powerful than Zac had expected.

Since the Hegemon wasn't circulating any energy, Zac didn't immediately make his move either. Zac needed the break more than the infiltrator, so he swallowed a Healing Pill to alleviate some of the exhaustion. Ogras had already disappeared again, probably waiting for a time to strike. For a few seconds, no one said anything, until the Hegemon released a wheezing laugh.

"So this untested Sector has some warriors with mettle, after all," the leader said, his voice a ghastly lisp. "I'm guessing you're the candidate who created the pillar?"

Zac frowned as he looked at the warrior. He didn't seem ruffled at all upon seeing his army collapsing. Was the infiltrator that confident in his own strength? And was it just a guess that the Hegemon had pegged him as a candidate of Ultom, or did he have some way to confirm it?

"You have proven yourself, so I will give you an option besides death," the toothless man continued. "Return with me to the Kan'Tanu Sector and loyally assist whatever faction we sell you to."

"Sell me?" Zac frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Zac obviously wasn't about to take this man up on his offer, but anything he could glean from him was valuable information.

"This is a greater opportunity than you can imagine. The exalted forces are looking for candidates. If you don't sell yourself, you will be hunted down without fail," the man continued. "In return, you will become a member of some of the mightiest forces in existence, something Frontier Cultivators like us can only dream of."

"Not interested, sorry," Zac grunted as the medicinal efficacy of the Healing Pill was exhausted.

"So you choose death," the Hegemon said. "You leave me no choice."

"You're talking like your whole army isn't lying dead around you," Zac snorted.

"Army? These warslaves?" the man laughed. "They are not my companions. They are my nourishment."

Hundreds of bodies exploded the next moment, and a red haze covered the whole basin. Simultaneously, the Hegemon's aura exploded to an unprecedented degree, clearly entering the levels of a Middle Hegemon. Zac felt an enormous evil coming from within the leader that was rapidly being covered in pulsating tendrils.

This was far beyond what he'd seen from any other infiltrators. There was only one answer – this man carried a curse far more potent than the others, and this was his true state. Space itself shuddered around him like it was finding it hard to contain his aura, and Zac almost felt like he was facing the insanely powerful cyborg again.

A barrage of fractal leaves shot toward the man, but the shallow cuts they left on the fleshy armor healed almost instantly. Seeing such a display, Zac knew that this wasn't something he could deal with in his current state. There was no other option – he needed to activate the backup plan.

"Shroud!" Zac shouted, and it was like a dozen smoke bombs had erupted at once, covering the basin and the surrounding mountains in thick isolating shadows.

Death filled his being as his surroundings changed hue. Chains rattled as a coffin appeared on its back, the swirl on its lid looking like a gateway to the underworld itself. In his hand, [Black Death] appeared as his other tool spirit returned into [Verun's Bite] before being stowed away. This was the ultimate card in his repertoire, finally made possible by Ogras illusory skills.

"I choose Death?" Zac said as his body started to grow. "You have no idea."