

The Fall 904

Chapter 904: Arbiter

The fleshy armor around the lipless infiltrator writhed and pulsated like a stygian horror. Even then, he looked at Zac like he was the monstrosity as Zac completed a transformation of his own. Muscles and bones creaked and groaned until Zac was almost four meters tall. This feature didn't strengthen him, but he kept it since it had proven useful when he fought Uona.

However, no one who had seen [Vanguard of Undeath] would recognize the skill even if he had become supersized. The thick plating that radiated the cold aquamarine of death from within was mostly gone. Instead, Zac found himself donning a mantle of utter darkness that covered most of his features.

He still gained a dark scaled breastplate with dense inscriptions, but his helmet was replaced by a hood and the rest of his plating with dark robes that continuously released the black tendrils of the abyss. To an earthling, he probably resembled a grim reaper equipped with a coffin and axe instead of a scythe.

[Love's Bond] and [Black Death] looked mostly the same, except the links had grown a shade darker as they had been imbued with the abyssal aura of his Draugr heritage. Of course, they had also grown in size to match Zac's own, but the axe retained its shape instead of being reformed into a bardiche.

This was intentional. Even if Zac could fight mostly unencumbered with almost any type of axe thanks to his mastery, there would be a sense of imbalance when he used his Inexorable Stance. The bardiche had been pretty good before since he neither had any proper technique nor an axe for his undead side. But now that he had the perfect weapon, it would weaken the skill if it transformed his weapon.

There were two more additions to his new look – the first was a swirling darkness that formed a terrifying backdrop behind him. It was actually the vortex on Alea's coffin lid that had grown in size. It probably looked like a gateway to the abyss, one even more palpable than the darkness of [Rapturous Divide]. The swirl was now roughly the size of his torso, and it created a profane halo effect.

And from its depths, the final part of the ensemble emerged; a thick scarred chain that wound itself around his left forearm, essentially forming a thick impregnable bracer. Just looking at the scars caused his soul to shudder, and it felt like they had been left by some monstrous devil whose aura still lingered.

The chain didn't come from inside [Love's Bond] but rather from the skill itself, though there was some relation. The stronger Alea grew, the stronger this chain would become, just like how the power of his shield had partly determined the protective qualities of [Immutable Bulwark].

"You!" the Hegemon exclaimed. "What manner of monstrosity are you!"

"That's coming from you?" Zac countered with a raspy voice that sounded like it was summoned from the depths of hell.

The lipless Hegemon's transformation was complete, and it looked extremely disgusting. In his chest was a huge hole from which the tendrils of his Heart Curse had emerged. In its center was a beating mass that emitted an exceedingly evil aura. Bloody veins had wound themselves around almost every part of his body to form a living armor.

They still rippled a bit, but they had mostly thinned down to a manageable size that shouldn't restrict his movements. Zac could sense dozens of familiar auras from within those tendrils – the auras of those he and Ogras had just killed. It created an extremely discordant appearance, which was only furthered by the fact the Hegemon now exuded two auras of his own.

The Hegemon and his Heart Curse were one, yet they weren't. Their auras were entwined, empowering each other like a Dao Braid. Zac knew it wasn't so simple, though. Unless this curse was utterly different from how the other curses functioned, it shouldn't have any energy of its own. It was ultimately a parasite that acted a bit like a specialty core where it provided power at the expense of lifeforce or energy expenditure.

Even if the Hegemon had seemingly absorbed a massive amount of blood and energy from the corpses of his so-called warslaves, there had to be a cost to gaining power this way. No matter how the transformation worked, the leader was definitely stronger than they had expected, and most likely a different tier of warrior than any invader he'd run into until now.

From Vai's analysis, this man was supposed to be just above Uzu's true strength, but he was inching in on the strength of a proper Middle Stage Hegemon with the activation of the Heart Curse. Zac hadn't expected such a tough fight out of nowhere, but there was nothing to do. This man couldn't be allowed to leave alive, whether it was because of his secrets or his connection to Ultom.

"Get away," Zac whispered into the shadows, hoping Ogras could hear him.

One thing hadn't changed since he and Ogras met last; he still couldn't completely shield the living from the effect of his skills. The next moment, a shroud of darkness descended on the basin, forming a core of unrelenting darkness in the shadow realm Ogras had erected. [Deathmark], [Fields of Despair], and [Blighted Cut] were activated at once. Zac even considered using [Pillar of Desolation] from the get-go, but he ultimately decided against it.

The infiltrator had immediately recovered from getting hit by the second blast of [Arcadia's Judgement] empowered by [Arcadian Crusade], and that was before he had absorbed the bodies of over two hundred warriors, including a half-dozen Hegemons. Zac couldn't waste his Supreme Pathbound Skill right away until he better understood what he was dealing with and the limits of his recovery.

Hopefully, he wouldn't have to use it at all.

"I don't know how you suddenly turned into an undead monstrosity, but it doesn't matter," the Hegemon growled. "I'll rip you apart just the same."

The next moment, another grotesque avatar appeared behind the lipless warrior's back. It was three faces fused into one, with lumps of tumors and writhing flesh creating a nightmarish scene. They were locked in a silent scream, and Zac frowned from within his hood. Zac wouldn't have allowed the Hegemon to activate any skills in a perfect world, but it was impossible to avoid.

Even after his race-transforming skill was upgraded, his swap took a little bit to finish up. And since they had left Kan'Tanu Sound Cultivator for last, he had been given a window to complete his own preparations.

“I’ve never met an undead before; I heard they existed in this sector,” the Hegemon continued, his voice amplified and repeated by the enormous heads behind him. Zac felt his soul shudder from the effect – just speaking had become an attack in the Hegemon’s current form. “I will offer your cursed eyes as a gift to the general. I know he would be interested in such a unique specimen.”

Zac briefly wondered if the man didn’t actually know about Draugr, but he guessed it didn’t really matter. Zac didn’t immediately strike and instead opted to wait and observe for a moment. This man was far too powerful just to throw out his whole repertoire at once and possibly waste the effect of his skills.

Luckily, Zac had minions who could test the waters for him. An axe-wielding wraith of [Deathmark] appeared out of nowhere behind the Hegemon’s back, and it swung its axe in a ruthless arc aimed at his neck. With its latest upgrade, the specter had become even more congealed, and its weapon no longer looked like it had been picked up from an ancient battlefield.

Its speed and intelligence had both improved, but Zac inwardly sighed when it was all for naught. The phantom only managed to start up its swing before it crumbled. Some sort of domain surrounded the Hegemon. Not only that, but ten spikes shot out from the fleshy armor that covered the man and ripped the already collapsing specter apart. It looked like an autonomous action, which wasn’t surprising considering even the lower Heart Curses had some basic instincts.

Just after the wraith crumbled, Zac was beset by a sharp pang of danger. Not wanting to take any risks, he turned into a stream of Miasma that flew toward his target. In his previous position, space tore apart as a sound wave so powerful it could be seen with the naked eye spread out in every direction.

It was the enormous avatar in the air that was responsible. One of its mouths had opened in a wordless scream, and it somehow transferred its wail into a singular spot. By the time the attack caught up with Zac, it had been somewhat diminished. But Zac’s vision was still distorted, and it felt like sharp spikes were stabbing into his ears.

The shockwave forcibly deactivated [Abyssal Phase], and a dozen flesh spikes shot out from the Hegemon to take advantage of the opening. They narrowly missed as they pierced empty air around Zac, allowing him to regain his footing. It wasn’t a clumsy mistake but rather an effect of [Arbiter of the Abyss]. Even if he had been affected by the soundwave, his new skill was still running.

And its domain was incredibly powerful.

When Zac formed the skill, reconfiguring the taunting function of [Vanguard of Undeath] had taken up most of his efforts. It was now responsible not only for control but even part of the defenses. The strength of his taunt had been greatly improved, and he could now rebuff just like he could attract.

A hit that would narrowly hit would now miss, and a lethal strike would get demoted to a flesh wound as it was rebuffed, drastically lessening the pressure on himself and [Profane Exponents] when he fought. Any skilled enemy would be able to correct for the control domain soon enough, but he could just switch the direction when that happened, forcing the enemy to readjust continuously.

In other words, it not only helped with defenses while retaining its ability to drag unwilling enemies toward him. It was an effective way to ruin someone’s momentum and rhythm. Being able to push his enemies and their attacks into any direction would have been even better, but that was beyond him and

his skill. It would require absolute control within your sphere of influence, rather than the more straightforward push away and drag over functionality.

Using the domain felt as natural as breathing, so Zac immediately launched a real offensive of his own since waiting around was fruitless. The corrosive atmosphere of [Deathmark] wasn't able to leave any real damage on the fleshy armor even in its upgraded state, and it looked like the specters would have to stack corrosive marks to have any effect.

The lipless Aural Cultivator was still full of certainty and overconfidence after triggering his Heart Curse, and Zac wanted to seize the momentum before he realized he wasn't as infallible as he believed. Chains oozing with corrosive death rattled as they shot toward the Hegemon while Zac himself followed in their wake.

He could sense the chains being assaulted by invisible ripples, but it wasn't enough to damage them. Alea's chains were already nigh-unbreakable for an Early Hegemon while still an F-grade Spirit Tool, and her recent breakthrough had pushed her three full tiers into Late E-grade. Zac doubted even an all-out strike was enough to cause cracks in the fetters by this point.

Another pang of danger made Zac control one of the chains to push him out of the way, just in time to avoid a second smaller explosion of sound. It felt like a concussion grenade had been thrown out right next to him, but he had already plugged up his ears with Miasma and the Branch of the Pale Seal. It wasn't enough to completely block out the noise, but it helped deal with the worst of it.

Another lash of a chain propelled Zac right toward the Hegemon, and the colossal axe of [Arbiter of the Abyss] fell toward the Hegemon's head. There was no worry in the man's murky eyes as he took out an odd-looking staff. It was made of metal and had dozens of trinkets hanging from links that were embedded along its length, from mottled bones to exquisitely crafted bells.

He swept the staff upward, and the miasmic clouds around them churned as the two weapons collided. Zac wasn't holding back, and his force was enough to crumble mountains. And yet, the Hegemon was only pushed half a step back as he blocked the strike. The chains of [Love's Bond] were already aiming for vitals to restrict the cultist's options and begin Zac's inexorable dance of death, but a confusing cacophony of discordant sounds slammed into Zac's head with just as tangible an effect as a punch.

Sharp pain bloomed in his side as flesh and ichor flew in every direction. It wasn't a projectile that had ripped out a piece of his gut but rather a Dao-infused whistle from the Hegemon himself. How the hell someone could whistle without lips was the least of Zac's concerns right now – the fact that he could feel a surprisingly powerful Dao in his wound was a much greater cause for concern.

It would probably have been game over for an average person by getting such a wound, but his Hidden Nodes were like startled beasts whose domains had been infringed upon by an interloper. They went on a ferocious offensive, allowing Zac to contain the damage as he continued to fight.

It had been some time since he used his Inexorable Stance. Still, he seamlessly slid into the familiar patterns as his axe and chains formed an inescapable net that would only inevitably lead to Death. Knowing what to look for, Zac focused on the Hegemon's mouth, lungs, and throat to interrupt his aural skills, and he activated [Profane Exponents] to protect against further surprise whistles.

Three silhouettes appeared behind him, and a spectral coffin appeared and blocked the jab in the nick of time. The three pygmies hadn't grown any taller since the upgrade, and neither had a fourth one joined them. But their auras were deeper, and their equipment looked a lot more powerful, indicating the skill had been given an all-around boost instead of new features.

Even if he had been taught some decent staff technique, the Hegemon was clearly not an adroit infighter. But between a Dao- and Attribute advantage, his autonomously attacking armor, and the avatar in the sky, which kept unleashing localized bursts of utter destruction, he somewhat kept up. Even then, Zac was steadily dragging the fight into his favor.

Huge festering gashes kept appearing across the grotesque armor, and whole chunks of flesh kept slouching off the Hegemon's body. The lipless cultivator managed to release a few barbs of his own, or rather his armor did. More than ten shallow wounds had been punched into Zac's body by the flesh tendrils, but most of the wounds were intentional blunders on Zac's part.

Zac didn't know exactly what the Hegemon was planning, but it almost felt like the cultivator was leaving behind small bombs in Zac's body. They were parts of a Heart Curse that looked incomplete on the surface, but they still filled Zac with a vague sense of danger. Zac guessed they just needed a trigger to start causing havoc.

Unfortunately for the Hegemon, the seeds were destroyed and swallowed by [Void Heart] and [Purity of the Void] as quickly as they appeared. The two hidden nodes weren't able to deal with the puncture wound in his gut, so they instead had turned their attention to the seeds. The Dao from whistle was a lot more troublesome, but it wouldn't be able to cause any real damage in the short run.

Zac had already realized that slowly whittling down this man wouldn't work. Between being an Elite Hegemon and having the stolen vitality of 200 warriors, he just had too much ability to regenerate. No matter how much flesh Zac destroyed, new veins would regrow with a pace that put even Vivi to shame.

He would have to finish it in one go, and Zac sensed the opportunity was about to present itself.

Suddenly, a deafening crash of jumbled sounds made Zac's head spin as most of the trinkets on the Hegemon's staff exploded. Each one released a sharp burst of sound, and together they formed a tremendous Aural attack. Even if Zac was prepared and had already turned on the active state of [Indomitable], he still found his mind a mess.

"Join us," the Hegemon sneered, his voice turning into a confusing rattle in Zac's head.

At the same time, an incredibly thick fleshy spike shot out from the hole in his chest. It almost looked like an arm had grown out of the hole in the Hegemon's chest as it shot toward Zac's gut wound. Zac's mind was still a confusing jumble from the audible overload, but the coffin-wielding pygmy skeleton came to the rescue. The shield held even against the Heart Curse's empowered strike, but Zac blanched when he saw why.

It almost looked like a water cannon had hit his barrier when the bloody arm slammed into it. The curse split up into dozens of thinner tendrils that wound around the coffin before reforming on the other side. There was still a chance he could avoid the incoming attack by pushing the domain of [Arbiter of the Abyss] to its limit, but Zac actually did the opposite.

He could feel an enormous amount of energy hidden inside the tendril, but he would still let it hit him. He was sure this was the catalyst for the supposed triggers left all over his body, and he wanted to give the Hegemon a false sense of victory. However, Zac didn't want the tendril to mix with the powerful Dao left behind by the whistle. The taunting domain of [Arbiter of the Abyss] once more came in clutch as it pulled the tendril toward his other side while Zac pretended to stumble a bit.

Meanwhile, he prepared a move of his own. The chains of [Love's Bond] were already striking at the Hegemon since before, and the cultivator was forced to divert some of his attention to avoid getting blinded. Seeing his opportunity, Zac said a silent prayer as his left arm rose, and the abyssal chain around his forearm uncoiled and shot forward.

It was even slower than his other chains, and it didn't even try to intercept the bloody tendril that was almost upon him. Instead, it flew toward the Hegemon. Zac felt a gut-wrenching pain in his side a moment later as the bloody arm punched straight through his breastplate and dug into his body.

Zac saw the Hegemon's eyes light up as Zac's body was filled with the evil energy of the evolved Heart Curse. But nothing happened since the seeds were long gone, and Zac grinned at the confused and alarmed look of the Hegemon. A moment later, his chain lightly tapped against the chest of the Hegemon, and Zac knew it was over at that point.

"Caught you."