

## The Fall 905

### Chapter 905: Pressure

"You're immune!" the lipless cultivator screamed with shock and confusion written all over his face.

Zac didn't bother answering; his attention rather focused on a surprising shift in one of his skills. The next moment, three sharp twangs echoed out as deep wounds were carved into the Hegemon. It was the finishing blow of [Blighted Cut] that had suddenly become available thanks to [Arbiter of the Abyss]. It allowed for instant judgment, and the Hegemon was almost dismembered into four chunks.

Unfortunately, the durability of the fleshy armor was too great. Even with its upgraded lethality from reaching Late Proficiency, [Blighted Cut] didn't manage to cut him all the way through. Its force was expended after digging half the way, and thick tendrils immediately shot out from within his innards to keep his body together.

Not even the corrosive cascade of [Blighted Cut] failing was enough to finish the job. The tendrils of the heart curse broke apart, but new ones replaced the old in an endless cycle until the attack was expended. A tremendous shockwave threw Zac back the next moment as the colossal Avatar in the sky exploded. The Hegemon had sacrificed his supportive attack skill to gain some breathing room, and his reaction was immediate.

He fled.

Between Zac's apparent immunity to the Heart Curse and almost getting killed, it was clear the previous confidence of the Hegemon was long gone. Unfortunately for him, it was already too late. Being able to suddenly activate [Blighted Cut] was just a happy surprise, and not what Zac had planned to rely on.

The moment the sound wave threw him back, the one chain emerging from the abyssal halo had turned into two. The first was the original one that had returned to his arm after being rebuffed. The second was a spectral chain that was still very much attached to the Hegemon's chest. It didn't have the usual cold turquoise of Miasma, but it was instead a matte black that reeked of pure death.

The Kan'Tanu tried to destroy the ethereal chain with another weaponized whistle, but the only result was the Hegemon stumbling, falling back to the ground when he was rearing to fly away. It wasn't so easy to deal with this chain. The infiltrator had been fettered by [Arbiter of the Abyss], and he would only be released after receiving judgment. Trying to break free would just result in a spiritual backlash.

The Hegemon gave up attacking the chain and opted to simply fly into the sky. But that wouldn't save him either, and Zac didn't even bother locking up the area with [Pillar of Desolation]. Instead, a storm of energy entered the skill fractal of [Desperation's End], just as the Hegemon suddenly turned 180 degrees and flew straight toward Zac.

His face was filled with confusion as he turned back, but the same thing happened twice in quick succession. By that point, it was too late for regrets. Zac wasn't taking any chances, and his activation time had been cut down to a third with the help of Void Energy. Two massive wings had already appeared behind Zac's back while [Arbiter of the Abyss] had turned the Hegemon around, and a scarred skull was now flying toward the man.

The lipless cultivator readied his staff as a last-ditch effort, but he urgently swung it to his side as another [Deathmark]-wraith had finally appeared to strike him down. A second flourish rebuffed one of the chains of [Love's Bond] that had followed him into the sky, before he finally swung his staff down toward the blade the skull of [Desperation's End] had unleashed.

But the swing turned crooked by a tug from the spectral chain. A swirl of darkness from the third pygmy of [Profane Exponents] moved the Hegemon even further off-kilter at the last moment, pushing both arms and staff entirely out of the way.

The lipless leader roared in defiance and his armor rippled as his energy churned, but it was too late. Two balls had appeared next to him already, and space sealed as the aspects of [Desperation's End] converged. It managed to restrain even a thrashing Hegemon long enough to complete the strike, and he could only look on with desperation as he met his end.

A silent swish of a solitary blade, followed by a muted thud as the Hegemon's head fell on the ground. One of Alea's chains drilled into the severed head the moment it landed, and a surge of energy confirmed that not even the evolved Heart Curse would be able to drag him back from death's door any longer.

The body fell onto the ground a moment later as Zac deactivated [Arbiter of the Abyss], and Zac backed away even further when he saw the curse emerging from the chest. Its aura was extremely sinister, and even Zac wasn't willing to take that thing on unless he had to, especially now that it gave off a sense of terminal hunger.

The curse withered away a few seconds later, and Zac believed he could even sense a wave of intense reluctance as it died out. There wasn't any second burst of energy though, which probably meant the System still didn't consider that thing a proper entity. But it was definitely more alive than the weaker curses, and Zac briefly wondered if there were curses that had actually gained a semblance of life.

There were Tool Spirits, World Spirits, and even Array Spirits, so why not Curse Spirits?

Stabbing pain in his side reminded him of the trouble at hand, and Zac expended all his [Undying Mark] charges to restore most of the physical wounds. The healing skill's efficacy was better than before, but it ultimately was only a Middle-Quality skill he'd bought from The Sharva'Zi Dao Repository. It didn't help with the Dao that was still inside his body.

Still, Zac was pretty satisfied as he deactivated his various skills and turned back to his human form. The process was swift, and Zac threw out dozens of Attuned Crystals and offensive talismans, which created a storm of rampant energy throughout the basin. It didn't completely disperse the lingering deathly atmosphere, but it was now just one among many. And some death was expected on a battlefield.

Zac was elated to see that [Arbiter of the Abyss] worked just as he'd planned. The taunting domain was helpful in all kinds of ways, though he wanted to test its rhythm-breaking capabilities against a more technically skilled opponent. More importantly, the spectral chain was extremely useful.

His original idea was to create two stages of the taunt. The first was the large domain that would work against a large number of enemies. The ghost chain could only be used once, but it would strengthen the pulling component of the domain significantly. Escaping after being tagged was both difficult and dangerous.

First of all, it should be able to block and deactivate most types of movement skills, including teleportation and various phase shifts. And no matter if the marked target destroyed the links with a powerful attack or stretched them until they broke, they'd receive an intense backlash. Just damaging the links with a whistle had been enough to knock the Hegemon on his ass. Completely destroying it might even have made him black out for a moment.

The only downside of the spectral chain was that it only lasted around 10 seconds, though the other parts of the skill wouldn't deactivate even after using it. As long as the target could avoid judgment for that long, the chain would disperse. But that was easier said than done when Zac could almost control those he caught like puppets for that duration, and it turned out he could even activate the finisher of [Blighted Cut] through the link.

Zac looked at the headless corpse in the distance, feeling the fight went pretty well, all things considered. These Kan'Tanu infiltrators were too confident in their Heart Curses, and when they turned out useless against him, their whole combat style came apart. Still, the Aural skills were pretty hard to deal with. The battle would have looked very different if the Hegemon had focused on creating opportunities to use his skills rather than infecting him with the curse.

The two dreadful Avatars the lipless cultivator had released were a good reminder that Zac still was at a disadvantage in that regard. Sure, neither of the two skills could compare with the destructive power of his finishing blows, but even Zac didn't dare take those space-rending wails head-on. And they could be continuously launched as though the avatars were mobile turrets, probably for tens of minutes if need be.

He'd have to be careful if he encountered a proper elite like the 'general' the lipless cultivator mentioned. Especially if he was supported by an actual army and was allowed to release all his skills from the back lines.

Then again, it wasn't a big problem against most Hegemons one encountered. You got even fewer freebies from the System at the D-grade, and most weaker Hegemons were stuck with just two-three D-grade skills for a long time. Eventually, they'd scrounge up enough money for new ones, but they also needed the money to get a War Regalia.

You could upgrade your old skills, but that was easier said than done. It required comprehensive skill and understanding to upgrade your old skills to the vastly more complex D-grade versions that would be able to take advantage of a Cultivator's Core. Perhaps these things weren't an issue in the more developed sectors of the Multiverse. But on the Frontier, the lack of resources acted as a safeguard for Zac.

Of course, even Frontier Factions would have adequately decked out talents, and Zac would sooner or later run into someone with a War Regalia and proper sets of skills. Those were the ones to look out for – the regalia would protect them while they activated the energy-hungry D-grade skills with extreme power.

The wound in his side still felt like it was on fire, and Zac slumped down on the ground with a grunt as he ate a Healing Pill. Most of the Hegemon's Dao remained, as were the stubborn will of the evolved curse. His [Purity of the Void] and [Void Heart] were still trying to deal with it, but progress was slow and arduous.

It looked like his E-grade Nodes weren't without limits, even if the Dao wasn't completely out of Zac's scope. He suspected it was a Middle Dao Branch that had been amplified through some method, yet it was so difficult to deal with. Even with its owner dead, it refused to simply be gobbled up.

If anything, it almost felt like it had grown more stubborn, like an actual curse from the beyond. It would possibly take a week even for his Hidden Node to deal with such powerful foreign energies, and Zac didn't have time for that. But that didn't mean he didn't have options.

If the damage couldn't be healed, it could still be corrupted.

Zac steadied his breath before taking out a Longevity Pearl. After that, he roused some Creation Energy. An endless stream of unfettered possibilities poured into the wound, and Zac grunted with pain as he felt his flesh twist and reform. The same was happening to the imbued intent. Gradually, their meaning shifted under the influence until they completely lost their cohesiveness.

They had just become unclaimed energies at that moment, and his Hidden Nodes pounced with redoubled ferocity. A moment later, his flesh turned back to normal as Zac took charge of the Creation Energy. After another minute, the wounds were gone entirely, as were the lingering intents. The shadowy haze started to disperse by that point, leaving Zac panting in a broken valley.

"Monster," a disbelieving voice said from behind. "Are you even killable any longer?"

"You're okay?" Zac asked with surprise as he turned around to see Ogras standing some distance away from him. "I saw you get gored as well."

"Unlike a monster like you, I can't just get stabbed left and right and walk it off," Ogras snorted. "Me getting stabbed was an illusion so they'd turn their attention back to you. So, you're still playing around with that cursed energy in your body? How are your murderous impulses nowadays?"

"I've been cultivating my soul over the past decade, and I don't get murderous any longer. And like you're one to talk," Zac scoffed as he waved at the flag in Ogras' hand.

"Well, I guess people like us have to take whatever benefits we can get our hands on, even if they have annoying side effects," the demon shrugged.

"It's amazing how much you've improved in this place," Zac said.

"Not much else to do here except cultivate," Ogras said with a grimace. "My grandpa would have bound me up and thrown me into that black hole himself if he knew I'd train so hard in this place. And it's not as impressive as it looked. Most of what I did would have been impossible without a bellowing Barghest soaking up all the attention."

"You're welcome," Zac said with a roll of his eyes.

He knew that what the demon said was true, though. His kills had been ambushes that struck fast and hard with the help of his elusive Daos. However, there were limits to such a method. For example, Zac had sensed the danger and blocked it when Ogras tried to ambush him. Most real elites would probably be able to discern such a strike and deal with it, or at least have treasures to protect them.

After that, the element of surprise would be gone, and hiding from an enemy who was aware of you was a lot harder.

"Well, all things considered, things turned out pretty swell. That toothless lad must have been an elite of theirs, and you still took him down," Ogras grinned as he took a swig of the liquor he had pilfered from Zac 1 minute into their journey. "By the way, I dealt with the loose ends while you fought the leader."

"Loose ends?" Zac asked with confusion.

"The two scouts," Ogras shrugged. "They were hiding just a few mountains over. I think they didn't dare flee without their boss. I tried to capture them, but their chests just erupted when they were caught in my shadows. I didn't get anything useful, I'm afraid."

"Should've guessed they had some safeguards against capture," Zac sighed. "What about Vai?"

"I had a ghost monitor her. She never left the cave," the demon reported. "She kept looking at the bowl, though. I'm not sure if she can see affinities in that thing?"

"Shouldn't be," Zac said. "I've used it a few times; it only shows the location and approximate strength."

"Then we should be fine," Ogras muttered as he walked over next to him. "A whole sector full of unorthodox cultivators. This is going to spell trouble."

"We already gained some things from that guy blabbering," Zac shrugged.

"Wasn't good news, though, was it?" Ogras sighed. "If those ancient factions with their noses in the air come looking for our opportunity, how will we survive? Let alone meat, we won't even get soup."

"We need some answers," Zac nodded. "I'll see if there's anything on his body."

"Be careful to not get ambushed by a Heart Curse," Ogras grunted. "How are you immune to them, by the way? Care to share the method?"

"That'd be pretty hard," Zac laughed as he walked toward the headless body. "It's my bloodline that turns them into nourishment."

"Of course it does," Ogras muttered from behind. "Why wouldn't it?"

Zac found a Spatial Ring on the leader's body while Ogras fished out some more from the ground where the other Hegemons had fallen. Zac felt something was off when he looked at it, and he didn't dare activate it for the time being.

"Trapped?" Ogras ventured when he saw Zac's frown.

"It might be," Zac hesitated. "Let's pick up Vai and move away, for now. Who knows if there are more squads en route."

The two spread a bunch of karma-breaking powder across the basin before leaving, and they found Vai standing at the mouth of her cave with worry in her eyes.

"You're fine!" Vai said with relief upon seeing the two before she froze in shock. "Eh? You're fine? How is that possible?"

"It's the power of friendship," Ogras snickered to the side.

Vai ignored the demon and instead turned to Zac inquisitively.

“We’re fine. They weren’t as strong as we feared,” Zac nodded. “The infiltrators are dealt with, but we should still leave this area.”

Neither he nor Ogras needed to rest up. The battle lasted less than three minutes, and Zac had more than half his energy remaining. So the group immediately left the area and set out into the vast plains as quickly as possible. However, they only ran for half an hour before Ogras slowed down.

“Well, that can’t be good,” Ogras muttered with a slight frown as he looked up at the sky.

“What’s that?” Zac asked, failing to see anything amiss. “Did you sense something? More invaders?”

“No, it’s the energy. I’ve lived here for ten years, and I’m pretty familiar with it by now. Something is changing with it. It’s weak, but the air feels... stale. Sick, even,” Ogras muttered as he glanced at Zac askance. “I think you might actually have killed Billy’s pet.”