

The Fall 883

Chapter 883: Double the Trouble

Zac didn't have time to react to Vai's exclamation of a second target before the first one pushed through the darkness, its true form finally becoming visible. As expected, it was another Ferric Worldeater – a monstrous mix between a flying lobster, and a worm.

This specimen was almost two hundred meters long, making it the size of a Cosmic Vessel. Its face was mostly a large maw made from six flaps that almost looked like a disgusting fleshy flower bud when opening, an image that was only reinforced when you saw that its mouth was filled with thousands of odd tendrils that looked like pistils.

Ferric Worldeaters didn't actually have any teeth at all. Instead, those tendrils had the ability to extract almost any energy from materials it swallowed before it passed mundane rubble from the other side. Everything from World Cores to Cosmic Crystals and sturdy metals was drained and turned into useless scrap in no time.

Just behind its maw, four claws were attached, reaching roughly twenty meters ahead of its mouth. Two of them were designed for digging and looked like an excavator bucket and a long spike, while the other pair was more like traditional lobster claws. The claws looked a bit odd and misplaced, but Zac had felt first-hand just how quick and lethal those things were.

Thick plates that looked a lot like rusty iron covered their whole body, which was where the "ferric" part in the name came from. In reality, the plates were more like extremely sturdy clay than metal. They had very powerful defensive capabilities, but their real use was the extraordinary isolation effect they provided.

It was these plates that allowed the Worldeaters to slowly dig their way into the center of a planet and withstand the pressure, heat, and powerful energies as they slowly fed on the planet's core. But in contrast to what Calrin's report had said or what their name implied, they didn't solely feed on World Cores.

They were happy to eat any powerful source of energy, and they more commonly fed on Nexus Veins, slowly draining and destroying them. Of course, the odds of actually turning into a Beast King without access to a World Core were extremely slim, and they had to replace quality with quantity. Their ever-voracious nature made them a headache, and if not for the useability of their Beast Cores, they would be hunted and eradicated like an invasive species.

Then again, they were quite difficult to get rid of altogether. With the unique isolation capabilities of their plates, they could survive in the Void for years. Not only that, but they actually possessed a Bloodline Ability that would allow them to dig open a hole into the Void, where they would hide until the danger had passed. Furthermore, their young were often nurtured inside their own bodies where they received part of the energy their parents extracted, making them hard to target.

This ability for survival was the reason there couldn't be any hesitation – two of the previous Worldeaters had managed to flee into the void before Zac could incapacitate them. This time, the situation was even more complicated, with a second Beast King looming in the shadows. Odd thing was, even with Vai's early warning, Zac couldn't locate the beast at all.

That didn't mean Vai was wrong – Zac's instincts told him something else was lurking nearby as well. Thankfully, years of fighting against all kinds of beasts in the Orom World had given him a wealth of experience, and he had already adjusted his battle plan as he shot into the sky with a herculean leap.

He was still some distance from the Worldeater, which had stopped in hesitation from Zac's sudden appearance. The Worldeaters were somewhat skittish, but they would not immediately flee upon the appearance of a human, especially not one with multiple aura-hiding measures in place. Between his aura-hiding bracer and [Spiritual Void] swallowing his Dao emanations, he should look like a mortal who somehow gained the ability of flight.

This charade wouldn't trick anyone for long, but it didn't need to. A short hesitation was all Zac needed as a storm of fractal leaves shot out from his body, each one of them imbued with large amounts of Mental Energy and his Branch of the War Axe. The innumerable blades raked through the air, forming an inescapable net that stretched for hundreds of meters in every direction.

The forest below was reduced to splinters, and the mud hut was destroyed as well. Even then, Zac wasn't worried – Vai had moved out of harm's way the moment he jumped into the air. Not only that, but a new forest rose to replace the one that had been destroyed – a primordial forest conjured with his [Ancestral Woods].

The upgraded version of [Hatchetman's Spirit] had its limitation when fighting in the sky – for example, its teleportation abilities were landlocked. Still, the trees provided him with a series of other advantages, from the attribute boost to the damage-soaking capabilities and improved vision.

A rattling sound echoed through the air as dozens of blades slammed into the thick plates of the Worldeater, and it screeched in anger at the assault. Shallow marks were left on the surface of the rusty scales, but [Nature's Edge] was far from able to cut through the plates. Zac didn't care in the slightest – the attack had already accomplished its goal.

Six deep thuds echoed out the next moment, sounding almost like underwater explosions. The sound came from a set of array flags Zac had thrown out during the chaos, which had then been activated by Vai. Each of the flags created an odd swirl in space that together formed a large cage of destabilized space. It didn't target the worldeater though, but rather an empty patch of space.

Part of the reason Zac had activated [Nature's Edge] and infused it with his Dao was to hide the Array Flags. The Worldeaters were quite sensitive to spatial energies. Without a diversion, they would probably have noticed something was wrong. There was a second reason as well though; to sound out the hidden threat.

The hundreds of fractal leaves hadn't managed to actually hit the invisible target, but between the omniscience of [Ancestral Woods] and the feedback from the blades, he had still managed to find what he looked for. It was around this area Zac had thrown out his trap, and the results were almost immediate. With space destabilizing, the hidden beast had been forced to the surface – and it was another Worldeater.

It was only 120 meters long, a far cry from its brother. Even then, it looked quite impressive. For one, its shells were a mottled dark blue, reminding Zac of a night sky. Instead of stars, there were small runic

patterns that seemed to be natural expressions of the Dao of Space. Finally, it had a fifty-meter-long tuft of steel-like hair on its head that swayed in the wind like it was unaffected by gravity.

A Space-attuned Worldeater.

This was exactly what Zac had hoped for, but he stilled his surging heart as he proceeded with his plan. A high-pitched shriek was emitted by the trapped Worldeater, and Zac could tell that the array wouldn't hold for more than a couple of seconds. Hopefully, that would be enough.

Golden runes spread across Zac's skin, and his aura rose to unprecedented degrees as he activated [Arcadian Crusade] for the first time in years. The fires of war coursed in his veins, and Zac was suddenly filled with a holy vengeance. Every muscle shuddered with barely contained explosive power, and his rapid heartbeat was a drum calling him to battle.

A huge wooden hand filled with an aura of antiquity appeared out of nowhere, with not so much as a whiff of Cosmic Energy to warn of its arrival. Both the hand and the axe it gripped were covered in golden runes of Arcadia, and its blade descended toward its target – the common Worldeater that was furiously flying to save its brother.

The beast didn't so much as flinch from the incoming strike, even if it had come out of nowhere. Its attention was fully on the trapped Worldeater, and Zac wasn't surprised. The Space-attuned Worldeaters were not only valuable to cultivators, but also to Worldeaters themselves. They could lead swarms of Worldeaters through the vast emptiness of space, finding planets to feed on.

They were the shepherds of their race, almost holy existences according to Vai's booklet. The Worldeaters would do anything in their power to protect these beings, so Zac needed to quickly get the guardian out of the way before he captured the space-attuned one. That's why he was going all-out from the start, even using Void Energy to speed up and hide the activation of [Arcadia's Judgement].

The huge axe descended, empowered by his Dao Braid of War Axe and Kalpataru, his [Spiritual Void], and [Arcadian Crusade]. It was the most powerful strike Zac was able to unleash without using something like his Annihilation Sphere. If this couldn't deal with the beast, nothing in his repertoire could.

One of the Worldeater's claws rose to intercept the incoming swing. The plated crusher was even bigger than the axe, but the Beast King had overestimated its defenses after millennia of being impervious if it thought that was enough. Edge and claw collided, and a loud snap echoed out as the axe cut straight through the pincer almost unimpeded.

That was the weakness of Worldeater plating. It perfectly withstood damage to a certain degree, almost completely nullifying both Dao and energy. But the moment its threshold was surpassed, the plating cracked and lost most of its insulating capabilities. Now, the Worldeater had realized its mistake, but the axe of [Arcadia's Judgement] was already descending toward its head like a headsman's execution.

A series of runes lit up across its plates, showering the area in a bronze hue that somehow managed to impede the axe's descent. Zac inwardly swore upon seeing that the Beast King had learned a defensive bloodline talent. Not all Beast Kings awoke the same Heritage Skills, and only one other Ferric Worldeater had used this talent until now.

With all the power in his swing, Zac believed he'd be able to push through the repulsing domain, but he wasn't confident that the skill would retain enough momentum to kill the beast in one go. Meanwhile, two flags restraining the space-attuned specimen had already cracked. He was running out of time.

Zac grit his teeth and flashed forward, using one of his aerial steps with [Earthstrider] to close in on the Worldeater while the huge axe was still pushing down. A pang of danger immediately prompted him to desperately swing his axe to the side, narrowly avoiding being skewered by one of the Worldeater's pincers.

A throbbing pain indicated his arm had been wounded by the clash, and he was being thrown away from the Beast King from the backlash. But Zac took two consecutive steps through the air, urgently squeezing through the narrow opening he'd forced by cutting off one claw and pushing back another. Suddenly, he was right on top of the Beast King's head, with his own attack bearing down on him.

There was such a thing as friendly fire with skills, and Zac felt a sense of impending doom as the axe of his own making hung over his head. Still, he didn't have any plan to cancel the skill. Instead, he activated [Void Zone], and his surroundings suddenly grew dim as the runes on the Beast King's plates were extinguished. Unfortunately, the domain only disrupted the skill locally – the rest of the beast king was still illuminated.

Zac prayed that would be enough.

Just an instant later, the axehead was upon the worldeater since the resistance was suddenly gone. Zac quickly deactivated Void Zone and pushed away with [Earthstrider], narrowly avoiding the strike. A tremendous eruption of energy threw him out of the distorted space of his movement skill, and Zac grunted with pain.

A groaning sound followed as more than a dozen ancestral trees withered from soaking up the damage he had been forced to endure. A second shockwave followed the first, subjecting Zac to even more agony as he was thrown away like a ragdoll. The damage-averting capabilities of [Ancestral Woods] could only do so much. Zac's mouth tasted like iron and a couple of his ribs had been broken judging by the stabbing agony in his side.

Even then, a smile adorned Zac's face as he crashed to the ground. A torrential current of energy had already entered his body, proving that his gambit had worked. The defensive ability of the Ferric Worldeater hadn't managed to recover in time, allowing the axe of [Arcadia's Judgement] to destroy its whole head and kill it in one fell swoop.

A tremendous earthquake followed a moment later as the dead Worldeater fell onto the ground. Zac wanted to just close his eyes and activate [Surging Vitality] now that the Beast King was dealt with, but there was no time. After seeing its kin getting killed in an instant, there was no way the space-attuned Worldeater would stick around.

Spatial tears were already appearing around it as the Beast King tried to force open a pathway into the Void. Through his unique vision from [Ancestral Woods], Zac also saw a pale-faced Vai desperately holding on to the array control crystal with blood running down her nose. That was the reason he'd even dared to use his bloodline abilities in the first place. The researcher already had her hands full maintaining the seal.

With [Void Zone] not giving off any aura at all, it should be nigh impossible for Vai to figure out what had happened.

Another array flag snapped as Zac scrambled up to his feet, and he knew time was running out. Luckily, [Earthstrider] had reset by his landing, and there was still plenty of time on his berserking skill. So even if his body groaned in objection, Zac swallowed a Soldier Pill and leaped into one of the ancestral trees, which instantly teleported him to a tree crown right beneath his real target.

With a push, Zac shot into the air, this time with a golden laurel adorning his head. In his wake, a golden domain rose toward the struggling Worldeater, like a cape made from divinity itself. Facing him was an increasingly turbulent patch of space, which finally descended into total chaos as the Worldeater finally destroyed the cage.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm when he saw the Worldeater starting to phase out again, and he urgently threw out a D-grade talisman. Forcibly activating even an Early D-grade talisman at his level cost him almost 70% of his Cosmic Energy, but space congealed the next moment. It was one of the talismans he'd bought from the Void Gate before setting off, and it solidified space in an instant.

That kind of talisman had all kinds of uses in a turbulent region like the Void Star, from stabilizing Convergences to suppressing spatial beasts. In this case, it was the latter, and Zac breathed out in relief upon seeing the Worldeater fail to phase away. Still, a single talisman wasn't a match for a determined Beast King, and Zac saw the new seal rapidly deteriorate.

Thankfully, Zac was already upon the beast by that point, and a series of Dao-infused fractal edges rained down on the carapace. The bluish plates didn't lack defensive capabilities compared to the normal ones, but it didn't matter. Zac was doing everything in his power to infuse and cover the beast in his Dao, which would hopefully make it harder for the beast to teleport away.

Together with Vivi's vines, which had already looped around the beast, and the Arcadian Domain of [Empyrean Aegis], it left the Worldeater unable to open a proper channel to escape. Still, it pelted the surroundings with thousands of spatial tears, and Zac felt extremely grateful for his new defensive skill.

With him being able to form up to nine strings of Mental Energy by now, he had long since conquered his limitation of only infusing one skill at a time with his Dao. Thanks to that, the golden barrier managed to withstand every tear that slammed into it, though the two pillars down on the ground were rapidly being whittled down.

Between the initial blitz and activating the talisman, Zac was running dangerously low on Cosmic Energy even after swallowing a Soldier Pill, but he had no plans of slowing down. This was the best way to deal with Beast Kings – utterly overwhelm them before their almost endless stores of Cosmic Energy could whittle him down.

Not that he had an option. Zac's heart hammered as he landed on top of the beat's head, just by the large tuft of hair. He could feel how enormous amounts of Spatial Energy churned within the beast, and the forest below him was starting to twist and distort. All his measures weren't enough – the beast was about to jump away.

Still, Zac stayed on, and a meter-long leaf appeared next to the edge of [Verun's Bite]. The next moment, dense runes covered the leaf as it was infused by [Rapturous divide]. Just like last time, Zac flashed his [Void Zone] for a moment to rebuff any energies inside the Beast King, after which he unleashed his skill.

Since learning to form his crude Dao Braids, Zac no longer needed to swing twice to activate his skill. Instead, gold and black instantly converged and formed the impassable divide, cutting deep into the head of the Ferric Worldeater as Zac used all the power he had available. The result was a clean incision that exposed both the Beast Core and a good deal of brain matter.

[Arcadia's Judgement] had both destroyed the brain and extinguished the soul of the first Worldeater, but this was more of a surgical cut. It had almost completely severed the head and its pathways without killing it. The Beast spasmodically started to thrash as it fell toward the ground, the damage making it temporarily unable to draw energy from its core. Zac saw the ground rapidly draw closer, but he knew his job wasn't done.

One huge spike after another appeared in his hand, and he pushed aside his disgust as he inserted them deep into the brain of the beast. It was like the spikes had a life of their own, and they burrowed deeper into the massive head of the Worldeater after getting infused by a burst of Cosmic Energy.

The two were almost at the ground now, but Zac's full attention was on successfully attaching a red crystal to the Beast Core. A subtle shudder spread from the core, and Zac breathed out in relief. A moment later the beast simply disappeared, and Zac landed on the ground with a grunt. A quick look into his Beast Pouch confirmed that the bluish space-attuned Worldeater was lying next to the other one he caught last week, proving the capture was successful.

As usual, things had refused to follow the script, but he had finally managed to get the last component for his quest – and a Space Attuned Worldeater at that.