

The Fall 906

Chapter 906: Collapse

“Killed Billy’s pet?” Zac said with confusion. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“The pillar, genius,” Ogras snorted. “What else would cause a whole world to suddenly get sick?”

Zac froze before glancing toward the mountain range in the distance. By now, the pillar was barely discernible, but he still remembered the madness barely held in check by the nine sigils. He also remembered how the pillar not only pierced the sky but had also dug into the depths of the earth.

Where a World Core would typically be.

Had his actions really damaged the Dimensional Seed? Zac blanched at the thought. Even if he disregarded that he was standing inside the Mystic Realm, it was a horrible thought. The Dimensional Seed had helped him open up his [Purity of the Void]-node. Not only that, if it hadn’t been there to draw the attention and avarice of the Collector, the Great Redeemer, and the Administrator, Zac wasn’t so sure he would have survived the Mystic Realm back then.

Zac turned to Vai hopefully, praying the researcher could disprove the demon’s theory. “What do you think? Is it possible?”

“I can somewhat understand what the bad guy is getting at,” Vai hesitated as she took out a few measuring tools. “But the Realm Spirit is unlikely to have died already. If that were the case, we wouldn’t just have sensed a small corruption of the ambient energy. Space itself would start to collapse.”

Zac nodded in thanks, but he was still worried. Just because the Dimensional Seed hadn’t died, it didn’t mean it was fine. He couldn’t sense anything off in the atmosphere, but Zac wasn’t too sensitive to small shifts in energy. If his [Cosmic Gaze] couldn’t see it, it might as well not exist to him.

“The World Core might be damaged,” Zac ventured. “Or do these places even have proper cores?”

“Mystic Realms need to have cores if they pass a certain size. Smaller realms only need a strong enough energy density to form a spatial field. Even a powerful lingering intent can suffice as a core for a Mystic Realm, but those are extremely rare Inheritance Realms,” Vai explained. “All realms above Mystic need to have cores as well, at least that’s what I’ve read.”

“So what would happen if this place’s core was being corrupted?”

“Well,” Vai hesitated. “World Cores are pretty resilient. They can slowly refine energy, which hopefully means things will gradually return to normal after the pillar is gone.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Ogras asked with a frown.

“Then... We’d probably want to leave,” Vai said as she fearfully looked at the sky. “A World Core breaking on a normal planet just means it will become a dead world. Mystic Realms are different – they are hidden in pockets within the Void, and the realm will lose its ability to hold the Void back if the core breaks. Its ambient energy will gradually be drained to rebuff the collapse until it reaches a tipping point. And even if we survive the collapse, we could be thrown deep into the Void.”

"That's just great," Ogras grunted as he glanced at Zac. "Maybe I should just tie myself to your back right now to secure my little life."

Vai looked at the demon with confusion while Zac rolled his eyes. "If you barely can sense something amiss, it can't be too bad. The Ambient Energy is as strong as ever, so we aren't at that point yet. Let's just hurry to Billy; he might have more answers. The real problem is that the invaders might look for him and the Realm Spirit as well. Can he withstand an attack?"

"No idea. Haven't been back to the Kingdom of Billy since I left," Ogras said. "It wasn't too impressive back then, but he's had a lot of time to fortify. And honestly, he improved quicker than me in this place. I've never seen something so disgusting as forming a Dao Branch while sleeping. So he should be fine."

"How long have you been out of contact?" Zac asked.

"Who knows," Ogras shrugged. "I haven't kept track of the days in this prison. But perhaps five or six years?"

"That long?" Zac exclaimed as his eyes thinned with suspicion. "Did you have a falling-out? What did you do?"

"I'm innocent here, alright?" Ogras smiled. "Living in such close proximity can strain any relationship. But I was mostly curious about all the pocket realms the Dimensional Seed swallowed. I was planning on returning around this time, but I got derailed by all the excitement in the mountain range."

"Bad guy, I bet you just wanted to steal all the treasures in this place," Vai huffed from the side, getting a nod of agreement from Zac.

"What a waste," Vai continued as she looked around with sorrow. "This might be the first Dimensional Seed to appear in the Zecia Sector in millions of years, and its spirit is even sapient. It would be a huge loss if it collapsed before we got a chance to learn from it."

"Well, it's not over just yet. We might be overthinking things," Zac said before he curiously looked over at the demon. "Found anything good?"

Zac had already heard some of it from what the demon shared about the Ra'Lashar Kingdom and the Lost Plane, but he wouldn't be surprised if that was just the tip of the iceberg. Some exciting things were bound to have cropped up with the Dimensional Seed gobbling up a bunch of smaller Mystic Realms and drowning the area with Origin Dao and Cosmic Energy.

"A few interesting knick-knacks," Ogras said with a lazy voice before glancing at Vai. "Nothing that a vaunted force like the exalted Void Gate would be interested in, right? And I did loot them before this place got swallowed up in your ladder or whatever."

"Do you think we're scoundrels like you?" Vai muttered, but her lips curved up a bit.

"Alright, let's just push straight through this place," Zac said as he looked out across the alien landscape. "I don't feel good about Billy being all alone when the invaders have already made their way into this place."

"And let's pray those two fools haven't done something stupid already," Ogras added with a shudder. "Knowing them, our chances aren't great."

Billy walked in circles around Gemmy with worry in his eyes. He didn't know what to do. Gemmy was sick, and nothing Billy had tried worked. And it had gotten a lot worse over the past week.

"Owie, owie, owie," Gemmy cried from within the fire.

"Ah, ah," Billy muttered as he looked around for solutions. Finally, he saw the pile of Dao Stones to the side. They always made Billy so feel better, so perhaps they were medicine?

Into the fire they went.

"Oooh, pretty," Gemmy hummed as her colors sparkled inside the blazing furnace. "Nope. Owie, owie, owie. Perhaps burn another blanket?"

"Billy is out of blankets," Billy sighed. "Out of beds too. They are already in the fire."

Why didn't it work? Mama always said that good rest and heat would make you feel better. Billy had first put Gemmy in his bed to heat her up, but it didn't work, not even with three blankets. Not even putting Gemmie inside the fire was enough, even after the fire became so big it almost reached the clouds.

For once, Billy missed Horny Guy. He was a liar and a cheat, but he knew many things. Perhaps he knew how to make Gemmy better. But Gemmy couldn't see him any longer. Not since he went to the nasty place.

"Maybe Billy should go?" Gemmy hesitantly said from within the fire. "If Gemmy can't help Billy, the bad guys..."

"Stop," Billy said with a scrunched-up face. "Billy is not leaving Gemmy. Billy will take a nap and figure it out. Billy always has ideas after sleeping."

With that, Billy lay down on the ground, and the warm fire helped Billy quickly sleep even without a blanket.

"Ah! Billy remembers!" Billy exclaimed when he woke up in the familiar world. The hidden world that only Billy could see.

Well, Billy and Statue-Man.

"Statue-man, Gemmy is still sick. If you don't help Gemmy, then Billy will not come back here again, no matter how much you teach Billy," Billy said with determination.

"Troublesome child," Statue-man sighed. "As I said, it's no longer up to you. For years now, you have resisted reality. But it is coming to an end today. The link of blood between us is all-but-expended. Any more, and my forceful connection will destroy you. This is the last time you will enter this realm."

"Another lie?" Billy hesitated.

"Believe what you will," Statue Man snorted. "But I have a final proposal for you."

"Billy won't create that Array," Billy staunchly said. "There are already a lot of Bad Guys in Gemmy's world. Billy can't risk more things going wrong now."

"Do you remember what Gemmy is?" Statue Man asked.

"Of course Billy knows," Billy said with a roll of his eyes. "Gemmy is the Land Ghost."

"Right," Statue Man said. "Gemmy's problem is she swallowed something she shouldn't have. Something dangerous. Nothing you do to Gemmy herself will save her as long as the links to that cursed plane remain. But I have a solution."

"A better solution than fire?" Billy hesitated.

"Yes," Statue-Man groaned. "A better solution than fire."

Billy was hesitant. Statue-Man was a trickster and a bit stupid, but he had helped Billy more than once over the past years. Statue Man might really have a cure for Gemmy if he said he did.

"A simple trade," Statue-Man continued. "I will give you a solution that will allow Gemmy to reform her world into a pocket realm – reform it without the pieces that make Gemmy sick. It will hurt and weaken Gemmy, but she will survive. And as long as she survives, she can recover her strength."

"What price?" Billy simply said, knowing Statue-Man wouldn't give him something so good for free. Normally, he forced Billy to do silly dances until he was dead tired, but Billy knew this was different.

"If you accept my help, you have to create the portal when you leave this Mystic Realm. You have to step through it and enter our subsidiary mountain. Work hard and get stronger until you reach the Eastern Mountain where my true body resides," Statue-Man said. "And you can absolutely not get involved with Ultom."

Billy didn't care about the later part. Billy didn't even know what Ultom was, so why would he want to get involved with it? Statue-Man was stupid as usual. But the real price was very expensive.

"So if Statue Man helps Billy now, then Billy has to go help Statue man later?" Billy frowned. "I don't want to leave Gemmy."

"If you follow my solution, you will not only save Gemmy, but she will be able to follow you wherever you go," Statue Man said. "Without it, she will be stuck in the little Mystic Realm forever. This is actually a solution I've been preparing for years since I knew you would want to take her with you. I just had to modify it a bit now that she was sick."

"... Alright," Billy eventually said with a determined expression. "If Statue-Man's idea works, Billy will make the array and step through. But only if it works. If it fails, Billy will find Eastern Mountain and thwunk it until it becomes Eastern Pit."

"Finally," Statue-man said with a sigh. "Ancestors have mercy on us both."

"Ah... But... Billy is smart, but Billy is not good with complicated things," Billy hesitated. "Can Billy really complete this alone?"

“Well, I’ve simplified it as much as possible, but the plan is a bit involved,” Statue-Man said. “But as luck would have it, you have some competent helpers in your dungeons. I’m sure they’ll help you in return for being freed. Especially if you say you’re from Eastern Mountain.”

“Billy isn’t from Eastern Mountain. Billy is from Billyville,” Billy scoffed.

“Whatever you say,” Statue-Man said. “This is the last time we speak here. I hope to see you again, even if you are the most stubborn Titan I’ve ever seen. I will imprint the plan into your head so you never forget it. Good luck.”

A moment later, a storm of ideas entered Billy’s mind, and it felt like he was being thwonked over and over. When it stopped, he found himself lying next to Gemmy’s fire. But this time, Billy remembered. Billy remembered it all, and he would save Gemmy.

Now Billy just had to make those sneaky sneaks work for him. Easy.

“Report,” Lozo Ul said the moment the two Untested shuffled into the command center.

“That’s... Ah,” the Spacemelder stuttered, his face pale as his eyes were glued to the ground.

“What have you done?” Lozo asked with a calm voice.

“N-Nothing! We have done nothing,” the old woman next to him urgently said. “But... The accumulation is lost. We were unable to reverse it.”

“Months of efforts suddenly undone, just like that, and you have done nothing?” Lozo said with a calm voice, but a storm was raging beneath.

KILL. THEM. EAT. THEM.

Lozo took a shuddering breath as he pushed down the madness. There were no two ways around it; he was losing control.

He remembered the relief when he stepped out of the forest where the souls of his 999 brothers and sisters would forever stay. His hands were dripping with blood, and his body was covered in wounds. But something remarkable was brewing within. Something powerful. From an Untested to a Remoulded of Kan’Tanu, a rebirth of both fate and potential.

Why couldn’t he have been content with his lot?

Three wives and an enviable placement after he had served his term. If he had played his cards right, he could have used his uncle’s connections to be stationed at Darasko V as a Lord. But no, he had seen the palaces of the Reincarnators and the power they wielded; both political and actual power. He wanted that for himself, for his family who had never nurtured a twice reborn Cultivator.

So he struggled and fought. Desperately. Endlessly. Until one day, he entered that cursed mountain range that reeked of death. And he emerged, once more, with blood dripping from his hands while his body was covered in wounds. But this time, it wasn’t greatness and glory brewing within.

It was horror and madness.

Since then, Lozo's nightmare had begun. How could a sprawling palace and a harem provide any solace when you spent every single moment fighting for your very soul? Only after reaching the limits of the Kan'Tanu lower hierarchy did he understand that those twice reborn weren't reborn equal. Those like him, without any backing, found themselves in an endless cycle of dangerous missions for the empire's glory.

They had no choice. It was the only way for them to get their hands on the nutrients they needed to stave off the hunger of their dark passengers, lest their sanity became the nutrients. The Reincarnators the general populace saw, those who lived the blessed lives in the capitals, had generations of wealth and connections to rely on. They had underlings to sacrifice and send into war to exchange for the nutrients.

Some had even been elevated in the Gate of Rebirth and firmly seized control of their Heart Patterns.

For decades, Lozo thought this would be his life; to endlessly struggle just to keep himself above water and the madness at bay. But finally, the Heavens took pity on his lot, and an opportunity presented itself. An opportunity to not only get the contribution he needed to never worry about the madness again.

An opportunity to become an Elevated Reincarnator.

He had been at the right place at the right time. As one of the Reincarnators sent into this Zecia sector to oversee the advance forces, Lozo was already gaining ample contribution. But as luck would have it, this Mystic Realm and its contents were exposed. At first, this had nothing to do with him, but fate is a fickle mistress.

The realm was sucked into this Stellar Ladder, and space collapsed on the base where the connected Reincarnators were staying. Suddenly, he was the Reincarnator closest to the breach, and he was urgently ordered to follow in its wake.

A year later, their plans were at the cusp of fruition. If they succeeded, Lozo wouldn't need to lift a single finger for the rest of the war. He and his family would be excluded from the draft, and he would even get a chance to pass through the gates that every Remoulded and Reincarnator dreamt of. He could fully focus on shoring up his foundations and continuing his cultivation.

But just as he could almost taste victory, everything went wrong. These Spacemelders better have an answer.

"Give me a proper explanation, Untested," Lozo said hoarsely. "Or I will find new Spacemelders who can."

"N-Nothing went wrong on our end," the male Untested quickly said. "The arrays the Exalted Halls prepared for us were working as planned, gradually rekindling the withered pathway. But a sudden outside shock to the system caused the pathway to splinter, and a lot of the accumulated energy was wasted."

"Outside shock?" Lozo growled. "The Void Gate? Or are there saboteurs in our midst?"

"We have yet to pinpoint the exact location of the interference, but we know it is not from here," the other Spacemelder said. "The energy streamed to the west."

“The west?” Lozo muttered, his seething rage gradually subsiding. “Have someone make a jump and contact Quol for an update.”

“That’s...” the Untested said, sweat streaming down his face. “We had that idea as well... But we just got word his plaque has withered.”

Lozo swore in annoyance. Quol was one of the strongest warriors who he had managed to take through the Stellar Ladder. That was why he was sent to inspect that signal months ago. But now he was dead, just a few days after things went wrong? Someone was moving against them.

“Send another unit, one focused on speed and stealth. We need to know what we’re dealing with. Have them warped as close as possible to save time,” Lozo said to the Remoulder Captain standing at the side.

“There is a 60% Mortality Rate at such a jump,” one of the Spacemelders hesitated.

“Then send more to make up the numbers,” Lozo said. “How do we get back on track?”

“Ah, well,” the female Spacemelder said. “The outburst set us back, but we have been slowly closing the leak over the past days. Even then, I am afraid... with the resistance, completing on time will be impossible.”

“The resistance?” Lozo mused as he looked at the large map in the middle of the room. “Relay my order. Activate the second, third, and fourth armies and strike at the native stronghold immediately. Find out how they are influencing this Mystic Realm, and put an end to it. We must complete this mission before the pathways reopen.”