

The Fall 941

Chapter 941: Emerald Eye

Emerald Eye was the name given to one of Earth's four new moons and the one that looked the most like an actual planet. The name came from the fact that large parts of its surface were green, but there was a large dark spot looking almost like an eye on it. After Port Atwood had gotten better scanners and repurposed some of Old Earth's telescopes, they realized the eye was a huge inland sea.

Meanwhile, much of the greenery was forests, though there also seemed to be a lot of green minerals making the moon look a bit more verdant than it actually was. Still, the Starflash's scanners clearly indicated there were lots of life on the moon, which was roughly 50% larger than Old Earth in circumference. As to whether that life was plants, beasts, or even intelligent species, the destroyer couldn't tell.

The ship's scanners weren't meant for galactic exploration. Thankfully, they were still advanced to the point Zac could confirm that Emerald Eye had a World Core, considering it generated Cosmic Energy. The moon was at the top of Early E-grade, judging by the measurements. However, that was not the whole story when it came to moons.

Being in such close proximity to Earth, it did benefit from the vastly superior environment nearby. Planets continuously lost some of their energy to space, and moons having Planetary Cores naturally attracted a good chunk of it. Thanks to that, the actual Environment on Emerald Eye was much better than if it was just another planet, though it might be forced into cycles of decay if it had an elliptical trajectory.

If you were ready to pay the price, you could create a similar effect with moons lacking any natural ability to generate or absorb Cosmic Energy. A few powerful Gathering Arrays, some terraforming work, and a desolate rock would turn into a private world full of life. Of course, a planet only had so much energy run-off, and you couldn't catch it all. Eventually, you'd run out of energy to siphon off.

The ship changed course, and the Cosmic Vessel created a parabolic arc as it started to make its way around the planet. Huge patches of churning oceans passed by below, with storm formations larger than whole pre-integration continents raging across the seas. Even from this distance, Zac could vaguely sense the energies of Life and Death hidden in those outbursts.

It was easy to forget how large New Earth's oceans were, with Teleportation Arrays making all his intra-planet travels instantaneous. But their current view was just a huge ball of blue, where they only could see the shores of Elysium and Pangea as borders on the sides. Not even half of the planet was land, just like pre-integration.

Still, the diverse biotopes of Pangea eventually came to view as the ship moved further away from the planet.

"Is the ship easy to control?" Zac asked after he'd had his fill of measurements and readouts.

"What control?" Ogras sighed with disappointment. "This thing doesn't allow me to steer. It's more like I tell it where I want to go, and the ship plots a course on its own."

"Can't you manually override that function?" Zac asked.

“Not with just the two of us. Like that golem said, without a crew, you can’t really get the most out of this girl. We need to start training personnel immediately,” the demon grunted.

“We already have a list of candidates picked out. Now that you have a more practical understanding of this thing, it should be pretty quick to assemble a crew,” Zac nodded.

The two spent the next hour trying out the various features of the ship as the green dot of Emerald Eye grew closer in the distance. The biggest takeaway was that they really needed to nurture more people focusing on Intelligence if they wanted to create a proper Space Navy.

Whether it was the energy weapons, the drones, navigation, or the other subsystems, they all relied on the controller’s simultaneous capacity and ability to make rapid calculations based on a mountain of data. For example, Zac only managed to control nine Drones at a time thanks to his Soul Cultivation, but even their movements were stilted and predictable.

If not for the [Nine Reincarnations Manual], he probably would only have managed to control one at a time. Ogras did a little better, but even he only managed to control 15 drones before he reached his limits. Zac couldn’t even imagine controlling the storm of drones that another of his models, the Wingstorm, used to fight. That thing held over ten thousand drones of various models and makes.

The two agreed to immediately allocate more resources to Intelligence-based cultivation in the Atwood Academy.

Until now, it had been a school that wasn’t very popular in the Atwood Empire, or for the whole of Zecia, for that matter. Taking the path of a Mage was simply harder than a warrior during the earlier stages of cultivation. Blasting enemies with fireballs from a safe distance sounded good on paper, but neither beasts nor enemy cultivators were complete dummies that would sit around and eat the attacks.

Mages generally had weak bodies because of their attribute allocation, and before reaching D-grade, they didn’t have the Cosmic Energy capacity to create powerful and permanent defensive layers. When starting out on the path of cultivation, most people would get hit because of mistakes or lack of experience. That’s where the free points in Endurance warriors got proved to be much more effective for survival.

That simple fact had created a noticeable skew during the Integration. In reality, many people had picked mage classes early on, just like Zac had been tempted to do. But most of those who went in that direction either got themselves killed or had their progress stalled out because they lacked the support system needed to advance. Even his sister had somewhat faced this problem until she joined Port Atwood.

Zac’s own path had also influenced the direction of his faction. With him being a pure meathead, many cultivators in the Atwood Academy also chose a pure martial path. But with their faction maturing and the types of roles they needed to fill growing more diverse, they had to put more effort into nurturing other kinds of experts.

That was the only way to evolve as a faction. If they didn’t, the Atwood Empire would stagnate, much like the Azh’Rezak clan that could only sell themselves as mercenaries to eke out a living. So by the time they reached Emerald Eye two hours later, the two had drawn up a series of ideas, some of which were already being implemented back on Earth.

The two could finally get a better look at the moon's surface in this close proximity. There weren't any oceans on Emerald Eye, but that didn't mean there was a lack of water. The huge lake was the source of thousands of rivers, some of them almost reaching all the way around the moon. Of course, this also meant that the surface was covered with innumerable much-smaller lakes naturally formed along the river paths.

The Starflash gently sank into the atmosphere of Emerald Eye, and a set of arrays automatically and effortlessly diffused the heat and friction that normally would appear from entering with their great velocity. The only sign they had entered the atmosphere was a deep groan that Zac almost felt made his Soul Cores vibrate in resonance.

Soon, the vessel drifted at a leisurely pace at an altitude of around a thousand meters above ground, and the two moved over to a viewing deck at the bottom of the ship as the ship itself continued on autopilot. Zac's strongest impression of Emerald Eye was the humidity. Everything looked wet and sticky, and the forests reminded him of the rainforests on Earth.

Still, the vegetation didn't seem similar to either Earth or any of the three other planets it got fused to. There had been some theories that Emerald Eye was made from the leftovers of the planets since none of the species recognized the moon, but it didn't look like that was the case. These trees simply had a different flavor, for the lack of a better word.

As for the green minerals...

"It's moss," Ogras yelled as they flew past a mid-sized mountain. "All the way to the peak. How tenacious."

It turned out the stones and minerals weren't actually green, but rather that they were completely covered in a layer of lichen. Not only that, but it looked like the large swathes of green haze they had seen from Earth were, in fact, spores released by the moss, though some of it had mixed with the clouds created by the high humidity.

"Did you see? Even the trees are covered in it," Zac nodded. "Is it really not toxic?"

"According to the readouts, the moss can barely be considered F-grade," Ogras said. "And that dust is not considered hazardous. I'm telling you, this place is as safe as can be."

"Famous last words," Zac snorted, but he had to admit that the nearby console's readouts indicated it looked safe below. "It's kind of weird that there are no beasts."

"It's not too uncommon for worlds to evolve onto a path with only plant life," Ogras shrugged. "There might be some nasty Spiritual Plants hiding in the forests, though. Or creatures living in the rivers."

"Alright, let's just check it out for a bit," Zac sighed when he saw Ogras' expectant look.

His recent breakthrough had fixed up his foundations even further, and his pathways were long since repaired. With the huge boost of attributes and his elevated Dao, Zac felt he was almost as strong as his previous peak condition. And with Ogras on his side, an Early E-grade moon shouldn't pose much danger.

“Good to see you haven’t completely lost your sense of adventure,” the demon laughed, and the two flew the Starflash to an empty field not too far from a lake.

“Here,” Zac said as he threw over a necklace.

“What’s this?” Ogras asked.

“Pretty decent environmental protection talisman,” Zac said as he put on an identical one.

Environmental protection talismans took on the role of space suits in the Multiverse. Zac hadn’t needed anything like it in the Void Star, but the Void Gate already vetted those realms. There were tons of planets out there with toxic environments or worlds without breathable oxygen. These talismans helped weaker cultivators explore these places, while stronger warriors could brute force it relying on their constitutions and stores of Cosmic Energy.

“Looks like you had planned on some exploration right from the start,” Ogras laughed.

“I made sure the army started stocking up on these things as soon as you guys decided to set out into the Million Gates Territory,” Zac smiled. “My body can deal with most things, but normal people don’t have that luxury. And even I wouldn’t dare claim my body immune to any poison or environment.”

“Better safe than sorry,” Ogras agreed, and the air around him shimmered as the necklace activated.

The same scene took place around Zac, and Ogras teleported the two down to the ground a moment later. The Starflash stayed fifty meters above ground, and a shield enveloped it in case there were some hidden threats on the planet.

Just as they reappeared, Zac heard the deep groan again, the same as when the ship broke through the atmosphere. It pulsed through the whole field, moving through his legs and into his soul. It felt like the world tilted for a moment as an undulating whistle followed the groan. But the next moment, it was gone, and only a hum from the ship and the slight crinkling of compressed lichen under his feet could be heard.

“What is that?” Zac muttered as he looked around.

“What’s what?” Ogras said with confusion. “The buzz from the ship?”

“I-” Zac said with a frown before shaking his head and looking down at the moss. “Nothing. This thing is deeper than I thought.”

“Over two meters,” Ogras whistled after sending his shadows through the nooks and cracks. “Imagine if we can find some valuable livestock that can feed on this stuff. We could just drop off a handful of beasts, and they’d keep multiplying with endless food and no predators.”

“No predators we can see,” Zac snorted.

“Well, let’s see if there’s anything valuable around,” Ogras shrugged as dozens of shadows spread in every direction.

“The waters are completely dead,” Ogras sighed after a moment. “The moss has even covered the lakebed. Let’s check out the forest instead. Might be some valuable herbs hidden among the trees, at least.”

Zac nodded, and the two soon entered the nearby forest in search of something more exciting than the endless supply of F-grade moss. But even after walking for ten minutes, they hadn’t encountered anything. Zac’s [Hatchetman’s Spirit] might as well have been turned off from how he got no impressions from it.

Neither his nose for opportunity nor danger was nudging his mind, making their stroll feel somewhat dull. It came to the point it almost felt like the lack of excitement was wearing on Zac’s nerves. The muted rustling of the leaves in the tree crowns felt jarring, and even the gentle rays peeking through the foliage seemed glaring and amplified.

Was he that bad? Had the past years made him so tuned for danger and struggle that his mind was going into overdrive when it failed to show up?

Zac felt he needed to do something, anything, to shake his mind back into a normal state, so he walked over to a nearby tree. Like the others, it was draped in a decimeter-thick layer of lichen that covered every inch of its trunk. An invasive species had essentially drowned it, yet the tree was clearly alive, judging by the verdant leaves swaying in the wind above.

Zac cut a hole in the moss and put his hand against the trunk, infusing it with his Branch of the Kalpataru.

“Hmm, I think I have something,” Zac eventually muttered, but there was no response.

Ogras was staring into the depths of the forest with a thoughtful expression, the green sheen of the moss around them giving him almost a sickly appearance.

“What’s wrong?” Zac said, his voice a little louder this time.

“Ah?” Ogras said with a start. “Nothing, I just felt it odd there is nothing valuable, not even some Spiritual Grass. I thought it’d spontaneously spring up with this much ambient energy.”

“That’s what I was about to say,” Zac said. “These trees. They’re moss.”

“What?” Ogras said uncomprehendingly before swiping at a nearby tree, cutting it in half in a perfect vertical line. The two sides fell to the ground, displaying the greenish wood inside. “Doesn’t look like it.”

“I mean, these things are still trees, but they are not really alive,” Zac said. “They don’t have a unique Life Signature. It’s like the moss has invaded their roots and systems and sucked out all spirituality. But instead of killing the trees, they have integrated them into their mesh. They’ve become one life living in symbiosis.”

“So the moss is stealing spirituality? Where does it all go? Might be a treasure somewhere,” Ogras said with gleaming eyes.

“Unless it’s just spread out across the mountains and fields, turning ordinary moss into slightly better moss,” Zac said with a grimace.

“What a nasty thing,” Ogras muttered and stabbed into the ground.

“I’m not sure if-” Zac began, but he suddenly froze into place.

The surroundings had changed, with him now standing at a lichen-covered hill, overlooking a large emerald vista. His instincts told him this wasn’t an illusion – this was real and true. This wasn’t some dreamscape. He had been moved here from the woods without him even noticing anything.

Zac’s hair stood on end from the sudden transition, and [Verun’s Bite] appeared in his hand as he looked for threats.

“Sure if what?” a familiar voice eventually answered, but the tranquility of Ogras’ voice was extremely jarring. Zac swirled around and spotted the demon leaning against a rock, looking at the sunset.

“What just happened?” Zac frowned. “Are you okay?”

Simultaneously, he sprung to action as he threw out a dozen different talismans, from purifiers to defensive barriers that sprung up around them. [Soul Guardian] was already running at maximum capacity, and Zac even activated [Empyrean Aegis] as a precaution.

“You know, this moss might have eaten all the good things in this world, but this place isn’t all bad,” Ogras muttered, seemingly oblivious to Zac’s actions. “Nothing to fight for, no one to fight with. It’s all... blank. No stakes, no threats.”

“That’s not what I-” Zac said, but a piercing cacophony in his mind cut through any conscious thought.

When he regained his senses, he found himself in the middle of a lichen-covered field, and Ogras was nowhere in sight. Zac knew he was in trouble, and he infused his will into the hidden seal on his body – the control override mechanism of the Starflash and all future vessels of the Atwood Empire.

Zac didn’t understand what was happening in this weird place, and his defenses seemed utterly incapable of stopping it. He could only pray that the Starflash’s barriers would be able to protect him. But before the ship could catch up to him, he was once more overwhelmed by a series of sounds.

Groans like tectonic plates grinding against each other, piercing screams of dimensions being ripped apart, churning roars of endless storms. It was unending and overwhelming, threatening to drive Zac mad. Then it stopped.

‘You...’ an otherworldly voice echoed in his mind as the deafening chaos subsided.

It sounded both impossibly distant and uncomfortably close, and it was decidedly unnatural. It was like millions of small discordant sounds had combined into words, forcibly instilling them with an excessive amount of meaning. That short ‘you’ almost made Zac pass out as he was blanketed by a rapid-fire series of impressions.

He saw endless darkness. He saw stars flashing into being. He saw an incomprehensible dance of innumerable wavelengths. He saw discordance and repeating patterns. There was balance in this everchanging conflux, moving toward unity. Then he saw... himself.

‘You can... Hear me..’

“Who’s there?!” Zac growled, not without a small amount of trepidation in his heart.

‘You... will fade... You will fade...’