

The Fall 942

Chapter 942: Fading Lights

“Who are you?!” Zac growled as he wildly looked around, and [Verun’s Bite] had already appeared in his hand.

‘Being... being... I...’ the voice answered, and Zac almost felt like he could sense a hint of confusion.

But that impression was soon drowned by an ocean of images that rose and sank like a breath. The rustle of the wind in the trees. A tropical storm raging above. An endless cycle, a natural progression. Trillions of lines forming a whole – a sphere.

“You’re this world,” Zac said with alarm. “Realm Spirit?”

‘World...’ the voice sighed. ‘I am – I am.’

By the words used, it sounded like the voice confirmed Zac’s guess, yet the meaning crammed into the words rejected them. Or rather, it was like it didn’t fully understand the distinction between self and others. But it was hard to make for certain with the confusing jumble of pictures. Especially when it felt like Zac’s mind would explode from the impression overload.

Zac could tell that the only reason he could hold onto his thoughts was thanks to the unique composition of his soul. The Outer Cores dancing in their trajectories of life and death acted as dampeners, protecting the true core in the middle. They became akin to tuning forks that were forcibly altered to hum at the entity’s frequency, while his final core safeguarded his sanity. Unfortunately, judging by the blackouts, this protection wasn’t perfect.

Yet what could Zac do but continue talking? Now that he knew that some sort of entity was responsible for the odd occurrences on Emerald Eye, he was even hesitant to call over the Starflash. A simple string of words pushed Zac’s Soul Aperture to its limits – what if it screamed at him in anger? There was nothing in the spec sheet for the Starflash about protections against mental attacks.

Still, he instructed the Cosmic Vessel to inch closer just in case. In a perfect world, it would have been possible for Zac to instruct it to go pick up Ogras on the way, wherever he was. Unfortunately, this was a Cosmic Vessel, not a Technocrat Spaceship controlled by an AI. The Starflash wasn’t meant to be used by one person; it was already pretty good that he could command it like this with his override seal.

There was a small crinkling sound beneath his feet as Zac repositioned himself as he tried to secretly look around for clues, but that sound made him freeze and look down with shock and comprehension.

“Stealing spirituality, one large network,” Zac muttered before he out across the endless green vista. Suddenly he remembered the impressions crammed into the entity’s words. “You’re... The moss?”

The deep groan came back, accompanied by a confusing mix of sounds. Zac’s Soul Cores groaned ominously, and he felt his vision swim. He’d have to be a fool not to understand the sound came from the entity by now rather than the Cosmic Vessel. Was it thinking? Was this the result of it trying to process his question?

In either case, it had to stop. Zac felt his outer cores were unable to fully absorb the resonance, prompting his consciousness to slip again. Who knew how many times he could blank out before until

he never woke up again? So, Zac did the only thing he could think of as he visualized his knowledge of moss as best as he could, together with the things he had seen since stepping onto Emerald Eye.

“Moss!” Zac shouted while instilling the pictures the best as he could into his Outer Cores, hoping to use them to broadcast his meaning.

Thankfully, the deep groan soon subsided, and Zac took a shuddering breath in relief.

‘Moss... I am moss...’ the voice said after a while, and there almost seemed to be a sense of satisfaction in its voice. ‘Moss.’

The final word came with a string of images, these ones clearer and more cohesive than any before it. A small spiritual flicker in a patch of green undergrowth. On its own, it was nothing, but it managed to use that flicker to grow. Soon, one glimmer became two, and two became four. At this stage, it was still not yet cognizant of itself or anything else. But with every cycle, it became more than it was.

And so it continued, over mountains, through forests. Into the rivers, across vast plains. Tens of thousands of miles, hundreds of trillions of plants connected into one mesh, both simple and terrifyingly complex. It might have started as a singular spiritual flicker, but repeated and amplified nigh-endlessly, consciousness had been born.

Zac nodded, but he could still barely believe his theory was correct. No wonder he was blanking out – he was standing on top of a planet-sized brain. A brain that grew, that consumed and absorbed anything it came across. He had no idea how powerful something like this was – it might even be impossible to accurately grade this huge network of plant-based synapses.

Even world-spanning Spiritual Plants like Heavenrender Vines had some similarities to cultivators and beasts. They had a core, a central network. The vines themselves were just like expendable appendages, while the critical center of their being was no larger than a skyscraper. In contrast, this moss entity didn’t seem to have a core, and it really didn’t seem to be any stronger than ‘barely F-grade’ from an energy standpoint.

But one thing was for sure – the amount of Mental Power this thing wielded possibly exceeded that of any cultivator in Zecia. Judging by the vision, its voice and presence right now was the result of only a slight contraction surrounding Zac, while the rest was still spread across the whole surface of Emerald Eye.

That was the only reason he was still alive – the moss didn’t know how to condense its will much further, or saw no need to. Judging by the scenes that had flashed past during its attempts to communicate, it was probably usually in a state where it was essentially dormant, no different from a non-spiritual patch of moss.

The groan and the pressure most likely came from its attempts to think or communicate. That by itself raised another question. Had the moss been trying to contact him since the moment they entered the atmosphere? Why?

“Why are you doing this? We were just visiting. We meant you no harm,” Zac said, trying to convey images of harmony and friendship through his Outer Cores.

While sealing any more destructive schemes deep into his heart, praying the entity couldn’t sense them.

‘Lights are born. Weak, lonely, short. They fade. Lights join us. Join Moss. Provide, be provided for. Help.’

An array of memories and concepts accompanied the words like before, growing clearer by the moment. That alone was problematic. The moss almost felt like a blank slate, but it was adapting shockingly fast during their conversation. Before, its words had contained a jarring juxtaposition of incomprehensible waves and fragmented images. Now, Zac found himself looking at a starry sky with billions of shimmering lights.

At its center, all lights were in harmony, stably shining at a unified frequency. Together, they only made up a small corner of the universe, and even their combined luster was weaker than some of the other lights. But while some of the lights were blindingly bright, most were so weak and flickering they could barely be seen. Some of them even winked out, unable to sustain their forms.

Certainly, new ones were born to take their place, but they weren’t any better than the ones before. It was imperfect. Gradually, the harmonious light spread, adding one star after another into its mesh. Eventually, half of the night sky was one, and the sum was greater than its parts.

Zac could see that barely any new lights were born where harmony spread its influence. As Zac saw it, the moss entity had spread to the point it had destroyed most of the biodiversity on the planet, and there was very little remaining room for expansion. But this didn’t matter. The moss didn’t desire expansion or hegemony. It was simply living, following the natural order of things.

It wasn’t absorbing everything out of greed. It could be considered evolution, where one lifeform’s method of survival and propagation was vastly superior to anything else’s. It didn’t feel threatened even when he and Ogras appeared on the world. It was just two weak and short-lived lights that would eventually join the mesh.

It was certainly good news that the strange events weren’t a result of them being specifically targeted, though Zac guessed his confused state and blackouts were a result of the moss entity trying to find a way to convey its words. Still, that didn’t mean he or Ogras were out of the woods. After all, Zac doubted this alien creature came calling just because it was bored.

As expected, the voice soon continued. ‘Your light is... different. Similar. Like Rain... Like rain...’

Another burst of images, depicting eons of stability and steady growth. Things were hazy, but there was contentment. Then one day, the waves started to grow stronger. It was like a nourishing rain was falling across its body, powerful yet invisible. Thanks to its magical effects, the haziness began to thicken, to focus. A sense of being was born.

And the rain made the colony propagate with unprecedented speed. Soon, the balance was broken, and even the powerful lights joined the unity. In the blink of an eye, the whole night sky had become one, and it felt... perfect. But just as the unity started to get accustomed to this new state of existence, another change occurred.

The invisible rain changed.

The rain suddenly brought something bad along with the good, and it split into two. One nurtured even more, but to the point it created an imbalance. The harmony was disrupted as sections almost broke free and out of control. Calming the waves was exhausting. The other rain was just as bad. Rise and

decay were natural and needed to maintain a healthy form. Yet this rain hastened the decline to an unsustainable level. Offsetting it was just as exhausting.

So far, the rain was manageable, but the entity was worried. It even wondered if 'waking up' was a good thing because it had never felt these things before the rain came. And it didn't know what to do.

But now, new lights had suddenly appeared out of nowhere, lights unlike any it had seen before. One light even reminded the entity of the rain, even though it was not. It could even sense that the two new lights interfaced with waves while staying separate. So it tried to do the same, to interface while staying separate. For answers.

Zac sighed as he finally understood what was going on. The moss entity was clearly extremely old, but it wasn't even a spiritual being before. It was just a huge colony with tendrils of energy running through its endless root systems. But the Integration had flooded Emerald Eye with energy, which shocked the entity awake while allowing it to cover the whole moon.

However, not much later, Earth became Life and- Death Attuned. In the beginning, it wouldn't affect Emerald Eye because it was barely noticeable even on Earth. But every day, the attunement grew more pronounced, to the point that attuned energies were now being released into space.

But what the hell was Zac supposed to do about that?

Zac's thoughts furiously spun as he tried to figure out a way to extricate himself from this mess without getting turned into fertilizer. He was suddenly extremely relieved he hadn't managed to attempt an escape before figuring out the situation. The moss entity's consciousness had both sensed him and nudged his mind at the atmosphere's edge.

Its reach was clearly not limited to the surface, and who knew what it'd do if it saw the "light with the answers" attempt to leave?

He had to mix truths and lies and pray that it would work.

"I know where the rain comes from. I am from there," Zac said as he pushed a picture of Earth, of how it was tens of times bigger than Emerald Eye, with incredibly powerful waves. "Many lights live on it and grow from the rain. We don't like the change either, but it's too powerful. I cannot stop it. No one can."

'You... Rain...' the entity said, clearly dissatisfied with the answer, and Zac felt like his Soul Aperture had been thrown into a Gravity Array.

"I have an idea," Zac said hoarsely while nicking himself with [Verun's Bite] to stay awake. "A filter to soak up the bad from the rain before it reaches you."

He pictured a large cloud covering Emerald Eye, siphoning off the life-attuned energies while leaving the unattuned energies to reach the surface.

'How?'

"First, you cannot let our lights fade here," Zac hurriedly said.

'You do not wish to join?' the voice asked with genuine surprise.

"No. My light is weak, but it is mine," Zac said. "This is the only way we can help you. But we are too weak right now. You need to endure the bad a bit longer while we grow under the rain. Then we can make the filter."

'When?'

"I-" Zac hesitated, unsure whether to give a short or long answer.

Obviously, he had no real intention to improve the habitat of this scary thing. He just wanted to make some empty promises and get the hell out of here. But he was afraid that the wrong answer would result in him being integrated as the entity searched for answers within his body instead.

'When? WHEN?' the voice repeated, and Zac felt a tremendous pressure build up in his mind again.

"One decade," Zac said with grit teeth as he tried to impart the period from when the rain started to now. "That's the absolute quickest, and it shouldn't be long for someone like you. It's the best-"

Blankness.

Zac woke up with a start on a shady patch of moss, and he hurriedly got back to his feet. He had once more moved or been moved, yet this time he recognized where he was. It was the same field where he first set foot on Emerald Eye. And a glance up confirmed the shade wasn't due to a cloud, but rather the Starflash hovering right above his head.

Had the moss accepted his offer? Just like that? Thank God for guileless cosmic beings.

Zac wanted to thank his lucky stars and run for his life, but he suddenly saw Ogras lying not far away, blankly staring up at the sky.

"Are you okay?" Zac asked as he ran over.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Ogras muttered, his eyes unfocused. "I'm just a bit tired, going to rest here a bit. You keep looking for treasures. With your luck, it shouldn't be difficult."

Zac didn't bother answering and simply hoisted the demon up on his shoulder. Ogras didn't resist at all, and he seemed happy to just hang there.

"I'm going," Zac said, yet there was no answer.

Zac was frozen with indecision for a few seconds, but he eventually activated the teleportation beam, unwilling to spend a second more on top of this eldritch horror. As soon as he was back on the bridge, Zac instructed the ship to set course for Earth, and the ship started to rise through the air.

'Half. Half a decade. Then you remove the bad,' the voice suddenly echoed in his mind just as he was about to break out of the atmosphere.

"What?" Zac exclaimed.

'I help your light grow,' the voice said, ignoring his interjection. 'Half a decade. Must return.'

"Of course," Zac lied. He was already on the ship and heading for Earth. Why not give the guy a better deal?

But Zac suddenly found his perception rocked.

‘I help your light. Half a decade.’

Following that was a final burst of imagery. Of how a couple of small crystals had formed at the very bottom of the huge lake on Emerald Eye. Terrifying pressure and eons of time had instilled them with tremendous amounts of Mental Energy. As the moss grew more intelligent after the Integration, it realized how useful those things were.

So it slowly started moving them across its body, using the rivers, the rain, and its neverending network of plant life. That way, they were spread across the whole planet and became incredibly powerful synapses and mental amplifiers. These crystals were as much the reason for its burgeoning intelligence as the infusion of Cosmic Energy.

But now, one such crystal had somehow been placed in Zac’s Soul Aperture, drip-feeding him with raw power for his Soul Cores. Yet that crystal might as well have been an Atomic Bomb going by how much energy it contained. It was orders of magnitude more than his own Soul Cores held. And the imagery indicated in no uncertain terms that tampering with the crystal or not following up on his promise would result in the crystal erupting.

So much for the thing being guileless.