

The Fall 943

Chapter 943: Contingencies

Had the moss entity managed to sense Zac wasn't sincere, even if he had tried to control his thoughts? And how had it known how to feed Zac a poisonous pill like this? As far as Zac could tell, he was the first sapient being to come in contact with the entity. It really shouldn't be that clever.

Zac tried calling the creature with some bogus matters a few times, but it all fell on deaf ears. Neither could Zac sense the pressure from the vast consciousness any longer. As expected, its consciousness didn't spread that far from the moon, which was at least one piece of good news in this mess. Eventually, ten minutes had passed, at which point Zac finally dared relax his mind and focus on solving the issue.

Honestly, Zac felt pretty good about things as the Starflash sailed further away from Emerald Eye. At first, he'd believed himself trapped by the scheme of a vastly more powerful being, just like with the Eveningtide Asura. But the more he thought about it, the more Zac realized the situation wasn't like that. This was actually an opportunity.

He could already feel how both his Outer Cores and Inner Core were being doused in a gentle shower of pure Mental Energy. It even felt like how the entity had described the Cosmic Energy – like rain. The energy was completely unattuned, and that actually helped him with [Spiritual Void]. The Hidden Node wasn't interested in feeding on this raw force, so it all went into nurturing his soul.

The fully-formed Outer Cores didn't want any either, so all of it was shared between the still-growing Life- and Death Cores and his main core. This was a huge timesaver. Zac would have to provide the actual attunement with the [Nine Reincarnations Manual] later, but that process could be sped up with attuned treasures.

The goal of the current layer of his Soul Strengthening Method was to form two sets of nine outer cores, half attuned with life and the other half with death. That would finish the first step of the current reincarnation. When he reached this stage, the soul-strengthening process would run at maximum capacity, rapidly nurturing his main core.

This crystal would not only allow him to create these auxiliary cores far quicker, but his main core was already benefiting. He had thought it would take decades to upgrade his soul after seeing how much time it took to form each Outer Core. But looking at the gentle haze already suffusing his Soul Aperture, the next breakthrough was suddenly much closer than Zac had thought possible.

As for the implied threat that came with the opportunity, Zac wasn't overly worried either. He had to admit he'd been outwitted by the moon moss, which honestly was a bit embarrassing. But the entity ultimately lacked a lot of critical information and understanding of cultivation. It didn't even seem to possess any Dao.

Furthermore, Zac had already left its sphere of control. It wasn't like inside the Twilight Ocean, where he was at Alvod's mercy. Neither could the crystal be compared to the remnants still locked in their prison. Those things contained shreds of undying will from incredibly powerful beings. Meanwhile, the Moss Crystal, as Zac decided to call it, was almost pure spiritual energy.

There seemed to be a lingering piece of consciousness locked in its depth to maintain its function. But without access to the moss network, its thought processes were most likely limited. Zac didn't believe for a second he couldn't figure out a counter-play over the next five years.

The easiest method was quickening the energy extraction and absorbing it all before the deadline. The bomb couldn't go off if Zac ate all the fuel. With his manuals and Void Emperor bloodline, Zac believed it was doable. He might even be able to use the thing as a battery during his core formation down the road. And when that time came... well, he did have some experience in blowing things up. Destroying a moon couldn't be too hard.

It might not be fair, and the moss entity wasn't exactly hostile. But that thing was way too dangerous to have floating right next to Earth unchecked. It had consumed the whole planet in less than a decade after being infused with Cosmic Energy. How powerful would it get if left unattended for too long? He either needed to destroy it or push the whole moon out of orbit, preferably into a wormhole leading toward the Kan'Tanu armies.

Having come to a preliminary decision, Zac turned to his companion, who was still slumped in the captain's chair with a vacant expression. Zac frowned at the scene. Ogras was still trapped in this fugue state?

At least it shouldn't be a case of possession. That wasn't how the moss entity's consciousness worked. It needed the vast network to form thoughts, and any piece of consciousness cut off from the network should quickly dissipate unless powered by a Moss Crystal. And Zac somewhat doubted Ogras had been implanted with one unless the Moss Creature lied with its final vision.

Those crystals were extraordinarily rare, and it seemed to only have six or seven of them. Sacrificing one for a chance at dealing with the attunement was already an incredibly high price, and Zac doubted it would be willing to part with two of them.

Zac guessed Ogras' state was more a result of having been submerged in a slow-moving ocean of consciousness. Like Zac's Outer Cores, the demon's whole consciousness had been gradually forced to harmonize with the moss, which apparently resulted in a semi-comatose state for sapient beings.

But sapience was not that easily erased. Since Ogras' soul was unharmed, one simply needed to shock his consciousness awake.

"Hey, wake up," Zac said as he started shaking the demon, which only resulted in an annoyed groan.

"One more hour," Ogras muttered as he nestled deeper into the chair. "Let me sleep in just one more hour."

"Well, don't blame me," Zac sighed as he took out one of his spare body-tempering-vats and a heating array.

A moment later, the water he'd poured inside had reached a boiling point, at which point Zac emptied a small jar of grey dust into the waters.

"In you go," Zac said, a smile tugging at his lips as he pushed the demon into the scalding waters.

The demon didn't resist. In fact, he seemed to enjoy the heated bath, and a content smile spread across his face after the initial reluctance at being dragged out of his comfortable chair. However, a frown soon crept up on his face as the grey dust burrowed into his skin. Then, his eyes snapped open in a horrified expression.

"Ah shit!" a shrill voice screamed as Ogras veritably exploded out from the bubbling water. "Shit, my bones! What in the- "

"You wouldn't wake up, so I had you try out some [Bone-forging Dust]," Zac smiled as Ogras reformed next to him. "Seemed more effective than coffee."

"This is the stuff you used to temper your body back in the day? Monster. Masochist," Ogras grimaced, his whole body still twitching from the body-tempering paste that had entered his body. "Bastard, don't fall asleep in front of me in the future."

Zac was about to explain himself, but Ogras soon realized something as he looked around with confusion. "Wait, what in the world is going on? When did we get back onto the ship?"

"What do you remember?" Zac sighed.

"We entered the forest to look for treasures," Ogras said as his brows scrunched together in a frown. "Then... nothing."

"Figures, you looked pretty wonky already by that point," Zac muttered as he retold what he had experienced since they set foot on the planet.

"An aberrant lifeform?" Ogras said as he fearfully looked at the glistening emerald moon on the screen. "We need to kill that thing right away. Who knows what something like that might turn into."

"About that," Zac grimaced as he shared the final gift of the moss entity.

"That thing implanted you with a safeguard?" Ogras frowned and closed his eyes but soon breathed out in relief. "Nothing. I guess I wasn't worth blackmailing, thank the Heavens. So, what do you want to do?"

Zac broadly recounted his plans, assuring the demon it wasn't a problem.

"Of course you'd be able to turn a profit from a calamity like that," Ogras muttered as he took a swig of liquor to counteract the body tempering paste. "Well, if we have to keep the thing around for a few years, we might be able to figure out something better than just killing the thing. Why blow up the moon if we can control it? That way, we can both harvest more of those crystals while having a living weapon to guard the home base."

"Sounds pretty optimistic, but it might be possible," Zac nodded. "Perhaps if we launch arrays that disrupt the thing from gathering its consciousness? If it can't think, it can't act against us."

"Well, there's a plan, but we're better off leaving this to the brainiacs at the academy," Ogras shrugged. "Shame that little nun didn't want to join us; she would have been quite useful here. Maybe you should contact her when we've return- wait, what's going on?"

"What's that?" Zac said as he looked around.

“How is the ship moving on its own?” Ogras frowned as the command sphere appeared in his hand. “What? Override?”

“How odd,” Zac hummed as the Starflash continued flying toward Earth.

“You? It’s you?” Ogras scowled. “You can just take over control of my girl like that? Wait, that tattoo!”

“Of course, I can,” Zac laughed. “You might be the captain, but I’m the admiral. You’re welcome to buy the Starflash from me if you think it’s unfair. For you, only 20,000 D-grade Nexus Coins.”

“Bah, no sense of camaraderie,” Ogras muttered.

“Hey, I could have left you on that moon, you know?” Zac smiled.

“Then who would solve all your little headaches?” Ogras snorted as he sank back into his chair. “I can’t believe you’ve used that paste for hours. One little dip, and I feel like a twelve-legged Barghest King has been stomping on my spine.”

“Well, thankfully, I’ve moved past that stage of my cultivation,” Zac smiled, though the smile turned crooked upon remembering the painful body tempering sessions that would begin as soon as he was fully healed.

The two continued for another twenty minutes, during which both Zac and Ogras mostly sat in silent meditation, scanning themselves to make sure there weren’t any other surprises hidden within their bodies. Thankfully, no matter how much they looked, the only souvenir from Emerald Eye was the Moss Crystal floating around in Zac’s Soul Aperture.

In fact, Zac noticed something odd – his body was in noticeably better shape now than before visiting the moon. At first, Zac thought the verdant atmosphere on Emerald Eye might have restorative powers, but he soon found the true reason.

“Holy crap,” Zac swore, prompting Ogras to look over with confusion. “We were on Emerald Eye for ten days. I thought it was no more than a couple of hours.”

“A ten-day vacation, yet I feel exhausted,” Ogras muttered.

Not much later, they entered the communication range of Earth, at which point both Zac’s and Ogras’ communicators started to buzz frenziedly. Obviously, it would create some panic when the two most powerful people on Earth suddenly up and disappeared without warning. The only reason there weren’t ships zipping around looking for them was that the Creator Shipyard was fully sealed off and guarded by barriers.

Two hours later, Zac thumped down onto the prayer mat with a grunt after placing Yrial’s statue and the [Mind’s Eye Agate] in their slots neighboring his seat. He had just spent thirty minutes being scanned by every conceivable tool and purified by multiple types of Healers. Yet none had found anything, hopefully proving there weren’t any more lingering threats from Emerald Eye.

Contrary to Zac’s expectation, Ogras’ near-death experience had done nothing to curtail his passion for space exploration. By this point, he was already gathering a preliminary squad to man the Starflash. One moon was kind of a dud, but Zac guessed the demon would spend the next couple of weeks looking for treasure on the neighboring planets instead.

Zac wasn't worried about missing out, nor was he eager to explore another planet right now. Between Emerald Eye and the Void Star, he had seen enough weird and dangerous places for a while. Besides, both he and Ogras had already reached a point where they needed very specific types of treasures to make any breakthroughs, so they were rarely in competition for resources.

If the demon found something that might help Zac with his cultivation, Ogras would just trade it for something in Zac's possession. That, in a sense, was the fundamental reason powerful warriors started factions in the first place. Let others gather resources for you while you focus on your cultivation.

And like the old masters hidden behind most powerful factions, he needed to cultivate.

Zac spent the next couple of hours repairing and reinforcing his frayed skeletal framework of [Thousand Lights Avatar]. He still hadn't given up on cultivating this unique technique, even after much of his preparatory work had been undone by the ravages of Creation and Oblivion. First of all, who wouldn't want to have a second life in case your soul got destroyed in battle or from some other mishap?

Secondly, Zac felt like a network of condensed Mental Energy spread through his body could benefit him far beyond the original use of the Eidolon technique. After all, weren't the Mental Energy pathways of [Thousand Lights Avatar] very similar to the ones he used to form Dao Braids? But what if those temporary channels were not only made permanent, but sturdier and of higher quality?

It might be the key to taking his Dao Braids to greater heights.

Unfortunately, his current braids were only at the level of what decently talented F-grade cultivators could form. In the future, they wouldn't be enough. In the battle for Ultom, he would come face to face with people like Iz, cultivators with God-given affinities and used extremely powerful Dao Arrays when fighting.

The same was true during the war. There were no guarantees he'd only face people around his own level, even if it were a System-sanctioned event, and upgrading his Dao Braids was one way for him to better match up to experienced Hegemons.

Unfortunately, Zac wasn't confident in reaching the required level of control over his Soul even if he evolved his Soul twice over. Some Dao Arrays were even more complicated than Skill Fractals, and Zac could barely twine together a couple of simple strings right now. So he needed to find an alternative, at least in the short run.

The idea with the greatest potential was to form a series of pre-created Dao Arrays in his Soul Aperture. For example, he could have one Evolutionary Array and one Inexorable Array. When he needed to activate them, he would just fill them with his Dao and channel the output into his Skill Fractals.

Zac first needed to actually form the Actual avatar before he started refitting it into a full-body Dao Funnel. Only when it was fully formed would it be able to survive on its own, and destroying it would be as difficult as destroying his soul. Neither attacks nor rampaging waves of Creation or Oblivion should be enough to destroy it by that point.

Luckily, it looked like the Moss Crystal could even help in this regard. Directly controlling the energy that was being released by the crystal seemed impossible, but doing it indirectly actually worked. Cultivating

the early stages of [Thousand Lights Avatar] was mostly sending waves of Mental Energy through his body over and over, with each wave leaving a little bit behind.

As long as he made those waves pass right by the Moss Crystal before leaving his Soul Aperture, some of the moss energy would tag along. A preliminary session indicated that his cultivation speed had more than doubled, though the framework only improved when he actively cultivated the method. Conversely, his Soul Cores were being nurtured around the clock in what almost felt like force-feeding.

Soon enough, Zac opened his eyes with a satisfied expression. Looking back at it, that eldritch horror wasn't all bad. Maybe he should really figure out a way to keep it around. But for now, he had lake water to absorb. It was finally time to start working toward his Cultivator's Core in earnest.