

The Fall 425

Chapter 425: The Enlightened Three

The splinter was once again active, but it thankfully hadn't shown any change in its behavior. It just extended its tendrils to touch the miasmic fractals for a bit before it calmed down and started to emit that mysterious energy into his mind just like before.

The fact that the Splinter was once again active meant that he might boil over again, and Zac didn't want another mess like the Zethaya situation on his hands. That time only his enemies got killed, but what if he turned berserk in the middle of Port Atwood next time? He'd end up like Anzonil's disciple, forced to live far away from people.

If he could strengthen and purify his soul he would hopefully be able to increase his resistance to the mood swings brought on by the splinter. Not only that, but the power of the Dao also came from the soul, and having a greater soul no doubt came with all kinds of benefits to his connection with his Dao Fragments.

"Have these enlightened three been bathing in the pool themselves?" Zac suddenly probed, realizing a problem with the situation.

"Of course," the ent laughed, causing the leaves in his crown to flutter. "Some say that their family wanted to keep the Pool of Tranquility for themselves, but they had to provide this opportunity to the younger generations due to pressure from the surrounding forces. Why else would they be so kind as to share their precious dew?"

Zac snorted and agreed with the sentiment. There was no such thing as a free lunch, no one was so 'enlightened' that they would readily hand out their resources to outsiders. It also made Zac curious just what kind of reception the reluctant hosts had prepared for them.

The two kept walking for over an hour, and the ent was happy to share his experience from living in the area. The forest they stood in was apparently beyond massive, and even an E-Grade warrior would require months of travel to exit it. Thelim had never left it at all, but had rather stayed in the area controlled by his clan most of his life.

Zac had already heard that Earth could be considered a very small planet even after having grown by a huge degree due to the merging of planets. But it was pretty much as small as a D-Graded planet could be, where the larger ones could have a surface area that was hundreds of times larger.

As for C-Graded worlds, the whole area of Earth would barely be considered a clan's fiefdom, a small corner of a single kingdom. Those kinds of worlds were exceedingly rare though, and according to Galau there were just three such planets in the whole Allbright Empire. Seventy percent of all C-grade forces in the Allbright Empire lived on the Allbright World, with the rest divided on the two slightly inferior planets.

Thelim's life in the forest was pretty tranquil, with the various forest races having pretty close ties. This wasn't because there was some sort of harmonious camaraderie brought on by their connection to nature, but rather a need to band together to defend from outside threats. The forest contained all kinds of Spiritual Herbs, and outside forces often wanted to seize parts of the forest for themselves.

That kind of conflict was pretty far from where Zac had ended up though as they were deep in the heart of the forest. Any dangerous beasts had long been culled in the area, and the only sounds were those of birds chirping and the rustling of the leaves. It was as though the peaceful atmosphere seeped into Zac's bones and he suddenly stopped and took a deep breath.

"What's wrong?" Thelim asked with piqued interest when he saw that Zac stood still as though he was in a trance.

"I just had a small improvement from walking in this forest," Zac said with a smile after a few seconds.

"You truly are a kindred spirit. The breath of nature is dense on you, you should consider staying here for a while. It is an amazing place to come closer to our origin," the ent nodded and resumed walking.

It had mentioned that they were brethren because it had sensed the Seed of Trees on Zac. Ents were one of those races that were extremely specialized, the opposite of humans who essentially were talentless jack-of-all-trades. Thelim had noticed Zac's nature attunement the second he saw him, but the ent didn't seem to notice the other Daos in Zac's body.

Zac wryly smiled as he resumed walking next to the living tree. He wondered if the ent would feel as close to him if he knew that Zac's class was called Hatchetman and that he possessed skills such as [Chop] and [Deforestation].

It was perhaps even luckier that he didn't arrive at the floor in his Draugr-form. The stench of death might have prompted Thelim to immediately attack him rather than initiate a conversation. Zac would easily have defeated him, but he would have missed out on the information he provided.

As for the small improvement, it wasn't a lie. Zac had suddenly sensed a stronger connection with nature around him and had stopped to properly savor the feeling. Unfortunately it wasn't an epiphany or anything of the sort, but rather an improvement to [Forester's Constitution].

The passive skill had finally evolved to late proficiency, increasing the boost to Vitality and Endurance by a full 2% each when the effect was doubled. Zac guessed that meant that the skill would provide a 15% boost at peak mastery, which was nothing to scoff at.

Zac wasn't too surprised that the skill finally had evolved, as he had traveled through all kinds of forests during the past 50-odd levels, including topographies he would never encounter on earth. It was perfect timing as well, as just ten minutes later they reached their destination.

The wild forest gave way to a meticulously cultivated one, where each tree or bush was a work of art. They took the shapes of people, animals, and even landscapes, though they were not sapient plants like Thelim. It also didn't look like they had been pruned, but that they rather had grown into such a shape naturally.

"We're here," Thelim said as he looked around in appreciation. "The trees are slowly formed to grow into these shapes over centuries. It is a popular form of meditation here."

Zac nodded in understanding as he looked at the living sculptures all around them. It sounded crazy to him to spend hundreds of years on shaping a tree, but with lifespans running into the tens of thousands there were probably all kinds of weird time-consuming hobbies out there. The garden was only a few hundred meters deep though so they reached their destination.

A large hedge reaching at least fifty meters into the air surrounded the massive compound where the Enlightened Three and their clan lived, and its gate was guarded by odd humanoids that looked like a mix of trees and humans. Their hair was green and looked like cascading grass, but they had normal skin with a pinkish hue.

“Dryads?” Zac asked with interest as his mind grasped for similar beings from Earth's mythology.

“Just so,” the ent rumbled in confirmation. “As I mentioned earlier, the ‘Enlightened Three’ are three grandchildren of the Perenne Family’s Matriarch. They are dryads.”

“How strong is this force?” Zac asked curiously as they approached the gate.

Going by the somewhat sparse Cosmic Energy in the area and circuitously questioning the ent it became apparent that there shouldn’t be any D-Grade warriors in this world. But there might still be complications if the floor guardian was in the middle of their clan.

“I’ve heard that the matriarch has passed level 90,” the ent whispered. “She is one of the strongest warriors in the sector.”

Zac nodded, but not without some confusion. The matriarch was barely strong enough to be a challenge for him, so what about the ‘Enlightened Three’? Zac had assumed that they were both the quest target and the floor guardians, but it felt pretty unlikely if the matriarch was only at that level.

“What about the Enlightened three then?” Zac asked.

“They’re all Peak F-Grade,” the ent said. “But do not look down on them. Rumors are that they could evolve over two decades ago, but they chose to keep refining their souls as they pondered on their Daos. Their insight is extremely high. In fact, don't let the levels of any dryads fool you. They are the blessed children of nature and they have a terrifying affinity with nature-aspected Daos.”

“I understand,” Zac commented as they passed through the gates.

Zac's appearance drew some interested glances among the forest beings but no one barred his entry, especially since Thelim seemed to have some renown. Zac himself was thinking of a back-up plan to the quest and only threw a cursory glance at the people around him.

His best guess right now was that the matriarch was the floor guardian, but the situation was a bit complicated. The expansive mansion wasn’t mobbed, but there would be over ten allied forces and a bunch of loose cultivators in attendance. Many leaders would be here to escort their young, each of them a match to the Perenne Matriarch.

Could he really attack the matriarch in such a situation?

Everyone was here for the Pond and its soul-strengthening effects, and Zac might end up mobbed if he did something hastily. Helping kill an outsider was a pretty small price to pay for gaining access to the Pool of Tranquility. Perhaps he would have to waste a couple of days until the event was over in case he lost the Dao Discourse, and find an opportunity to strike then.

But that was if all else failed since he didn't have the time to wait around like that.

Zac and Thelim were led to a huge glade where a banquet was held. People walked around to mingle and network, but Zac was completely disinterested in the proceedings. What was the point in getting to know a bunch of people that he would never encounter again? He only did the bare minimum as he tried to gather information about his targets.

It was only an hour later that the members of the Perenne Clan arrived, led by a beautiful forest dryad who appeared to be around Zac's age. She had delicate features and her eyes were slightly larger compared to a human's, giving her a very cute appearance. But Zac already knew that she was actually an old cultivator approaching 800 years.

It was obviously the matriarch of the Perenne clan. Her grasslike hair cascaded almost all the way down to the ground, but Zac had already learned that it wasn't completely ornamental. The thick stalks were her weapon as well, and she could grow them over a hundred meters in an instant according to rumors.

Behind her walked a group of cultivators of various races, each of them radiating a respectable aura. They were formerly loose cultivators who had chosen to stay behind after previous gatherings like this one according to Thelim, and it was this very reason that the Perenne family also allowed loose cultivators to join in on the fun.

Finally, there were the 'Enlightened Three'. The three were like younger copies of their grandmother, two youths and a girl. Going by appearance Zac would have guessed they were the same age as Emily, but they were closing in on 100 years. Reaching peak F-Grade in this world was a slow and arduous process due to the sparse energy, but it also gave them ample time to work on their Daos.

"Thank you all for coming to our humble home," the matriarch said with a cherubic voice. "We are delighted to host both honored friends and new acquaintances visiting from afar."

"Our family has been blessed with the Pool of Tranquility, and it is our joy to share the gift of nature with the fated ones," the matriarch continued. "But the dew is limited, and only a select few can enjoy its effect every decade. The mandate of the Heavens is that power is needed to seize one's fortune, and the precious opportunities cannot be wasted on the subpar."

The matriarch waved her hand the next moment, and an earthquake spread through the area. Zac frowned and got ready for a fight as the ground shook and heaved, with thick roots sprouting from the ground. Zac was about to take out his axe and get to chopping, but the ent placed a massive hand on his shoulder.

"Wait, my friend," the ent said from his side. "Just watch."

Zac hesitantly nodded and held off on taking any action, and he breathed out in relief a few seconds later as he witnessed the miraculous skill of a true arborist. The enormous roots weren't an attack, but the matriarch was actually growing a massive stadium out of the ground.