

The Fall 523

Chapter 523: Jungle

It turned out that on the other side of the expansive mountain range was a basin, a vast depression in the landscape. It looked like something left behind by a meteor millions of years ago and it almost felt like he had entered a different climate zone as warm winds wafted onto his face. The humidity had gained a huge spike on this side of the mountains as well, like all the moisture was trapped in the basin.

That wasn't surprising though as massive waterfalls could be spotted to the west, no doubt stemming from the inland sea Julia mentioned before. He would have turned completely clammy in seconds if it wasn't for his improved constitution. Judging by how healthy the enormous plantlife looked there was no doubt a lot of rain as well, perhaps as the clouds would get stopped by the mountains.

Zac still couldn't spot any Incursion pillar yet, but he had a good feeling about this place. First of all, the energy was quite dense in the area. The second reason was simple as well; there were a lot of fire-attuned energies in the air even though there was so much humidity. Zac first thought there might be a fire-crystal mine beneath the ground, but he soon found the real source of the energies.

He could barely discern a volcano in the distance, standing roughly in the middle of the basin. It was pretty far away, and he guessed that it would take half a day getting there on foot even if he kept a high pace. Smoke rose from the top, proving it was active, and it looked like it was continuously releasing energies out into the forest around it.

It really looked like a pretty good starting spot for a force like the Church of the Everlasting Dao. A volcano in an energy-dense valley was probably a treasure trove for a fire-based force. Better yet, the humidity had created a large amount of low-hanging clouds that limited his vision. It wasn't nearly as dense as the clouds of miasma in the Dead Zone, but it would do just fine in hiding an Incursion pillar if you were far away.

Especially if the cultists helped improve the effect somehow.

The volcano spread small amounts of fire-energies across the whole jungle, but when Zac activated [Cosmic Gaze] there was an odd sight. The whole jungle lit up in a dim red glow from his special sight, but the volcano itself was utterly devoid of energy. Something close to the volcano was either hiding the energies or absorbing them.

The clammy haze thankfully allowed Zac some protection as he took out his flying treasure once more. He honestly would have preferred to travel by foot, but he had a mission to complete. His desire wasn't about safety or stealth though, but something more primal. It felt like the forest was calling out to him somehow.

It wasn't as strong as when he had come close to great natural treasures like the Cherry or the Tree of Ascension, but the feeling was similar. It felt like the forest itself had gained a semblance of spirituality that resonated with his body, or perhaps more accurately his class. He felt like he would be able to progress both his nature-based skills and his Dao in this place a lot more efficiently than even staying in his cultivation cave.

Progressing skills wasn't necessarily about energy density, but rather about opportunity and insight. So secluded cultivation might be good to improve some aspects of his strength, but skills were not one of them. A few of his skills, like [Forester's Constitution] and [Loamwalker] were still stuck at Late Proficiency, and this might be a good place to practice those skills.

However, Zac knew that would have to wait until he dealt with the cultists, so he set off on top of his flying treasure, heading straight for the volcano.

He kept a much lower altitude than normal this time, staying close to the treetops in hopes to blend in with the enormous leaves of the tree crowns. A roar suddenly echoed out across the area as a five-meter panther jumped up straight at him, but Zac killed it with one swift swing. Its carcass joined the mountain of high-grade meat in his Cosmos Sack before even a second had passed as Zac whizzed past the area.

It was no wonder that the desolate mountain range could support so many birds, the jungle below was simply littered with beasts. Everything from ten-meter snakes to insects as large as dogs tried to strike at him as Zac whizzed through their domains, and the area was drenched in a constant clamor of thousands of different animal calls.

The beasts unfortunately weren't very powerful even though many of them were quite large. The birds might have already hunted anything that could be a threat to them, or perhaps it was the cultists' doing if this indeed was their hidden base of operations. It was even possible that the stronger beasts were smart enough to figure out that he wasn't some tasty morsel drifting around on a wayward leaf.

A streak of flames suddenly shot toward him out of nowhere, forcing Zac to quickly swivel out of the way. It pushed past him toward the skies and only ran out of steam after having flown hundreds of meters. Zac first thought there was some beast spewing fire at him, but he quickly spotted an inconspicuous tower among the tall palms, colored so that it would blend in with the surroundings.

Another fireball soared just past him, and Zac felt the familiar aura of the zealots from the golden flames. Zac shot out a [Chop] and the tower crumbled, its defensive shield utterly incapable of withstanding a middle-grade fragment. He was quite happy that he had probably found the right place, but it would take him half an hour before he reached the volcano even if he pushed the leaf to its limits.

There was no way he would be able to launch a surprise strike at the cultists any longer, but there was only so much you could prepare in thirty minutes. They should still be unable to utilize any teleportation arrays, making it impossible for them to recall any forces from the Mystic Realm. Unless their Incursion spawned right on top of one of the entrances they wouldn't be able to return in time.

Zac quickly scoured the surroundings, and he soon realized there actually was a neat perimeter of similar towers forming a circle around the volcano. However, Zac felt that these things weren't meant to deal with cultivators, but rather to scare off the flocks of birds. They would be almost useless to deal with forces on the ground with the thick foliage blocking their fireballs.

If that was the case it might still take some time before they realized something was wrong, but Zac wouldn't hold his breath. The cultists were crazy, but not stupid. They should be fully aware that he was coming for them sooner or later, as they were the last invaders remaining on Earth.

Deep thuds echoed out from his chest as his heart started beating rapidly in anticipation of the upcoming battle, but Zac took a few calming breaths to steady himself as he started to fly toward the volcano again. He quickly realized that the various sounds of the jungle were steadily growing few and far in between, like the beasts knew better than to stay close to the mountain in the middle of the jungle.

Zac kept his eye peeled for any hints of the Incursion, and his eyes lit up when he saw a shimmering glow as he started to make his way around the volcano. He had figured that the pillar would either have to be inside the volcano itself or hidden behind it, and it looked like it was the latter.

A minute later the whole pillar was on full display, rising into the clouds right behind the plumes of smoke coming from the volcano. The cultists were full-fledged lunatics, but Zac had to admit they had a flair for architecture. The back of the mountain was lit up with splashes of gold and red, and grand temples and mansions built from the pristine white stones seemed to compete with each other in how elaborate their designs were.

The Incursion Pillar itself started right at the foot of the mountain, while the town itself was comprised of an ascending series of tiered structures ran halfway up the volcano. It did look a bit odd, as the most important structure was essentially located furthest out, while it was the temples that took the best spots at the highest positions of the mountain.

However, the buildings only reached halfway up the volcano, after which they abruptly stopped. Above that was only one thing; a gargantuan rune of three lines. The three simple wavy lines were the insignia of the Church of Everlasting Dao, and the huge rune emitted a pressure that even Zac could feel from the distance. The lines apparently represented The Heavens, The System, and The Dao; their concept of divinity.

The scene reminded Zac of the consecrated mountain that Abbot Everlasting Peace lived on, where prayer and conviction had brought forth a true power. It was a reminder of how contradictory a force the Church of Everlasting Dao was. Triv had talked about them at great length over the past week, seemingly taking real pleasure in causing trouble the enemies of the Undead Empire.

It was more correct to call the Church of Everlasting Dao two entwined forces rather than one single unit, with one being the fanatics and the other the body-merchants.

Some considered the fanatics as just a front, but the massive rune was a stark reminder that there were quite a few members who wholeheartedly believed in the Divinity of the System. Mount Everlasting Peace had been consecrated over a thousand years to gain spirituality upon the integration, but this mountain was coming close to emitting the same holiness after just a year.

The confusing layout of the town itself made Zac a bit unsure of how to proceed though. Normally he would bash through a wall and defeat the armies, and finally corral the remaining enemies toward the Incursion pillar. But the Nexus Hub was already within his reach unless the open-aired temple surrounding the red-and-gold pillar contained some hidden safeguards.

It felt a bit too simple. Abby had already explained the rules of taking over towns, and it worked the same with Incursions. If he walked over and claimed the Nexus Hub a quest would start where the

invaders had a short time window to rebuff him before their invasion ended by default. That was why the Incursion Leaders seldom left their base of operations.

But seeing the pillar unguarded like this made him feel there was some sort of trap, which was only reinforced by the fact that he still hadn't spotted a single person so far. The whole town looked abandoned, like they already had fled before he arrived. However, there was no way that a force like the Church of the Everlasting Dao would simply pack up and leave without a fight.

Besides, there was no prompt from the system that the Incursion had failed, which meant that the Head Priest was still around somewhere. Zac activated [Cosmic Gaze] to see if any suspicious energy movements surrounded the Nexus Hub, but the pillar itself drowned out any potential clues. It almost blinded him from how much energies it contained, and he was immediately forced to look away.

Indecision gnawed at him for a few seconds, but he eventually made his decision and instead shot toward the largest temple, a resplendent structure placed right beneath the enormous rune. It was a massive construction with spires well over a hundred meters high, each of them holding a radiant fire.

In fact, every single building had a golden fire burning at the roof, though the ones at the main temple were quite a bit larger than the others. Zac chose to target the temple because those spires reminded him of the array towers at the undead fortress. He could always claim the Nexus Hub after destroying the temples and the gargantuan rune, which would hopefully preempt any booby traps the cultists had left for him.

The leaf made a detour around the pillar before it made a beeline for the temple, and there was finally some activity from the cultists' side. A hundred warriors streamed out of the gates of the temple, seemingly rearing for battle. Just a hundred warriors wouldn't even slow Zac for more than a few seconds, but he still activated [Nature's Barrier].

Zac felt that there was no way that this was all these guys had prepared, and his suspicions were quickly proven right as hundreds of fiery globes moved to intercept him. It was the braziers on top of the houses all along the mountainside that rose into the air, creating a beautiful spectacle.

The air screamed as Zac whizzed back and forth, dodging the incendiary attacks. But there were just too many of them. One projectile after another slammed into the leaves he had conjured, setting them on fire. It quickly turned Zac's whole vision into a golden inferno. He lost a steady stream of energy just to keep the initial salvo at bay.

The emerald shield surrounding the flying treasure was still holding on just fine, but Zac knew it was just a matter of time before a breach happened. The emerald leaf didn't seem to be made for anything but travel. There were no offensive arrays, but just decent set defensive options. It wouldn't hold for too long against a barrage of this magnitude.

Zac infused the leaf with the Fragment of the Bohdi, and it blasted toward the town with regained momentum. The intensity of the barrage just increased as he closed in on the temple, but he finally was close enough for his purposes. A hundred-meter fractal blade reached toward the sky as Zac raised [Verun's Bite], preparing for a vertical swing.

Two streams of opposing forces crawled up along the blade, reinforcing it and allowing it to grow another fifty percent as it was colored in gold and black. The flying treasure stopped in its tracks a few

hundred meters away from the temple, and Zac pushed as much of his Fragment of the Coffin as he could into the towering blade.

It felt like the world split apart as the blade swung down, unleashing a wave of unadulterated darkness toward the temple and the top of the volcano itself. The attack passed through the barrage of golden flames like they weren't even there before it covered the radiant temple in a desolate gloom.

It was time to send these cultists to a true paradise.