

The Fall 533

Chapter 533: Non-lethal Lethality

A keening cry echoed out across the jungle as Zac swung his axe in one lightning-quick motion, his abyssal eyes keeping track of the streams of life inside the target. However, the massive boar didn't fall apart into two gory slabs from the swing as one might expect, but it rather just seemed enraged.

A deep cut had appeared on its flank, and while it was freely bleeding down on the forest floor it was far from a grievous wound. With the high Vitality of an E-Grade beast the wound would soon enough heal by itself without any intervention.

"Kill through a non-lethal cut," Zac muttered as he dodged the boar's charge.

He had been walking around the jungles surrounding the former volcano over the past five days, fighting for a couple of hours while spending the rest on cultivation in his cave. He knew that any potential progress before the Mystic Realm closed its doors was limited, and he tried to make the most of it until Kenzie managed to crack open the tunnel.

The most obvious solution he could think of was gaining [Blighted Cut], a skill that would hopefully improve his offensive capabilities in his undead form. He needed a mainstay skill in the vein of [Chop], and this might just be it. Walking around in nature like this would also allow him to bond with nature for lack of a better word, trying to incorporate the lessons he learned from visiting David.

But completing the quest was proving more difficult than expected, though he was making decent inroads. The wound in the boar's side had already turned into a sickly dark color, and the beast shook from the pain.

This effect solely came about from infusing his blade with the Fragment of the Coffin, as this was the only method he could think of to complete the quest. He had already tried killing an evolved beast the same way he killed Vul, the Barghest alpha, all those months ago. He had inflicted a shallow wound that blinded a panther before tricking it into impaling itself on a sharpened log that he had prepared.

He had technically killed it with a single non-lethal cut that time, but the System wasn't impressed. That meant that his initial guess was more likely, that he needed to use his Dao to kill the beast. Considering his class the most likely suspect was obviously Fragment of the Coffin, and the boar was just the latest experiment.

The wound had already been inflicted, so he didn't swing again. Zac strained his mind to connect to the wound instead, trying to impose his will upon it. It actually worked, and the wound kept getting worse instead of closing itself.

This was a method he had devised after discussing the Dao with his sister. He had already come to terms with the fact that his control over the Dao was pretty bad, and he probably wasn't going to form any Dao Arrays like those Catheya described anytime soon. But he had also realized that there were more ways to make the most of your mental energy than just using fine control.

Kenzie had told him of the various ways she used her Dao infusion when fighting. Jeeves had taught her various ways that she could maximize the efficiency of her Cosmic Energy and Dao, doing as much

damage as possible for as low a cost as possible. For example, when she shot the fireballs that seemed to bounce from head to head between her targets, it wasn't the skill's work.

Her skill was just a normal fireball, as basic as they came, but it changed with the help of her Seed of Tinder. It only managed to bounce around like that because she controlled her Seed of Tinder to move toward the next target from a distance, and the skill kind of just followed along if she controlled things just right.

Zac never used the Dao like that when it came to [Chop] for example. He just crammed a bunch of Mental Energy into the fractal edge before he launched it at his enemies. But he understood now that he didn't actually need to disconnect his soul from the strike immediately, though it did free up his concentration for other things.

That was what he was doing now with the strike against the boar. He was trying to use the corrosive elements of the Fragment of the Coffin to worsen the condition of the beast, turning a non-lethal strike lethal. He urged his mental energies festering in the wound to spread toward its heart, to enter the bloodstream, to fight off the natural resistance of the animal. Anything that could kill it.

But he suddenly felt a pang in his mind, and the connection was broken. It was the natural resistance of an evolved being that booted the foreign intruder, and Zac knew that the wound would start to close if he didn't do anything.

The attempt was a failure, but Zac still didn't feel disappointed.

He had managed to hold the connection longer than his last attempt, and at a greater distance as well. He was quickly understanding that it wasn't really a matter of control or skill, but it was more akin to learning to use a limb you didn't know you had. A bit more and he would get there.

Then again, Zac understood that maintaining the Dao inside his enemy was only part of the requirements to complete the quest for [Blighted Cut]. There was also the issue of causing enough damage, which was as much an issue of understanding his Dao and his target as it was about maintaining its effectiveness.

His first attempt had simply been to keep the wound festering as long as possible in hopes that the beast would succumb that way. However, he quickly learned that maintaining a status quo wasn't enough, and it was a losing battle. The mental energy infused into his strike was only so strong, and it would be slowly whittled down by the natural defenses of his target.

So he couldn't just run out the clock, but he needed to proactively push his skill forward. This was where his own limitations came in, as he simply wasn't able to turn the Dao into fine strands that burrowed toward his intended targets like some sort of designer poison. He could only push it in the general direction, just like he pushed the massive clouds of energy forward during his Dao Discourse.

But Zac was surprised how big an impact this simple action had. The previously shallow cut had quickly turned into serious festering wounds that would ail the beasts even after his mental energy had been routed.

The boar roared in pain and anger as it charged Zac once more, but a chain shot out from his back and punched a large hole in its forehead. There was not much point in practicing at the same target over and over, as the beasts quickly learned to resist his attempts.

But that was fine as there was no lack of beasts in the enormous forest, and Zac guessed that hundreds broke through to E-Grade every day right now. With the cultists gone and the defensive towers destroyed, the only threat to the beasts was the flock of birds from the mountains.

It felt like Earth in general was fast reaching a tipping point, where millions of peak F-Grade beasts finally broke the shackles of their inferior bloodlines and took the next step on the path of cultivation. The beasts had always been a step ahead of the cultivators since the integration, and the humans were fast approaching peak F-Grade as well.

That was great news for Zac, though killing level 76 beasts weren't all that beneficial for his cultivation either. However, it did provide him with a seemingly endless supply of targets to practice both his Dao and his control over [Love's Bond].

Any Spirit Tool created by the [Divine Investiture Array] was supposed to be a perfect fit for his needs and something that would be able to follow him in his cultivation until the end. He needed to become better at using it, and not only relying on his axe.

Doing so would not only improve his overall strength, as using both his spirit tools at the same time wasn't a problem, but it might even give him a greater understanding of both his classes and his cultivation path.

It was probably the best he could do for Alea as well. Just hanging around his neck day after day wouldn't challenge her spirit. Spirit Tools grew and were refined through battle, and only through being used could they bring out their full potential.

The boar fell to the ground with a thud, but Zac didn't bother harvesting the meat since it was tainted by him. He only extracted the two tusks as they might be of use for the craftsmen on Port Atwood, before he shot out a chain that latched onto a tree in the distance. The beast was left where it was, its meat turning into a feast for the other beasts in the region.

The trees flashed past Zac with a dizzying blur as the chains pulled him forward with extreme momentum. He almost felt like a certain superhero as he flew through the forest toward the domain of the next E-Grade beast he had marked for target practice.

Using the chains as a mode of transportation was something he had already dabbled with since fighting the dragon, and he was quickly becoming more accustomed to it. With [Love's Bond] he could also use real and extremely sturdy chains rather than the flimsy spectral ones that the Cultist Bishop effortlessly had cut apart with his flames.

He still wasn't fast as when he walked with the help of [Loamwalker], but it was still a huge improvement for his Draugr side, which was previously a slow-moving tank. It looked a bit embarrassing though, like he was being dragged around through the jungle like a ragdoll. Then again, he had long discarded any semblance of cultivator's dignity in favor of pragmatism, so this was nothing to him.

Zac kept working on his coordination and his strikes like this over the next two days, slowly making progress in how much damage he was causing with a 'non-lethal' strike. Better yet, he would no doubt be able to apply these insights to his other Daos and his other class in the future.

Most of his time was still spent in the Cultivation Cave though, sitting inside his Soul Strengthening Arrays while going over his insights. The array pretty much ran on its own by now with how used Zac was getting to the feeling, and he could both ponder on the Dao and work on repairing his pathways while cycling his Mental Energy.

It was a bit like working while being severely sleep-deprived though since the array was siphoning his mental energy. He made quite a few mistakes and was forced to redraw the pathways many times, though it was still a lot more efficient to multitask than just sit around waiting for the array to finish.

Another interesting thing he had learned about the array was that he was actually making better progress when swapping his race in the middle. However, the benefits only appeared when he sat as a Draugr in the life-attuned side and as a human in the death-attuned.

It was like the stark contrasts helped reinforce the effect of the array, which resulted in a larger number of clashes and his soul getting strengthened and purified to a higher degree. One full cultivation procedure still took around 10 hours even when using E-Grade Crystals to power the array, but the improvement he saw while swapping his races was double a normal circulation.

That meant that he was almost three times as efficient compared to his first try, getting 28 hours' worth of cultivation done in just ten hours. There were probably even greater gains to be had in the future as well, though Zac guessed any future improvements wouldn't come quite as easily.

He had ordered a couple of D-Grade attuned crystals from the Sky Gnome to see the effect, but the cost of that was a bit extravagant even for him. It would have to provide a huge benefit to motivate spending over a hundred million Nexus Coins every day. For now, he made do with just E-Grade crystals as he was still mostly focusing on short-term benefits and upgrading his skills.

Zac was currently fighting some sort of mutated cat that was as big as a rhino. It looked extremely cute even with its size, with two enormous eyes that stared straight into his. The beast suddenly turned into a blur, and Zac barely had time to block a furious swipe toward his throat by using the flat side of his axe.

The beast unsurprisingly excelled at Dexterity, and Zac tried multiple times to inflict it with a wound without success. It was like trying to hit a cloud, where the cat was just a blur. It was almost as bad as when he fought Faceless 9 back in the tower, though the cat didn't have that man's lethality.

It wouldn't have been hard to kill the thing with the help of [Deathwish], but that wasn't his goal. He instead activated [Vanguard of Undeath] and grew to a towering behemoth almost reaching four meters. The transformation added around half a meter to his height after reaching middle proficiency, while also increasing the thickness of the plating of his miasmic armor.

More importantly, it increased the power of his taunting effect, and the cat suddenly rammed straight into him by mistake when it tried to pass him by. Zac took the opportunity and delivered a shallow cut in its side, eliciting a pained yowl from the beast. It scrambled out of the way as Zac stood rooted to the ground, keeping his focus on the skill.

Zac instantly pushed the mental energy further into its body, like an army performing a blitz to attack its enemy unaware. The natural defenses of the beast were quickly roused, but Zac was like a steamroller as he pushed his energy toward its organs.

This was the one.