

The Fall 551

Chapter 551: Connectedness

The atmosphere of this unusual forest was fascinating, but the ambient energy was even more interesting. Zac was currently flying toward the center of the marshland at a leisurely pace that pretty much matched a speed that he would be able to keep on land as well. He hadn't noticed anything weird in the beginning, but he could now confirm that the energy density had increased a bit since he entered this place.

With this pace it would only take him two days at the most to reach the core, but Zac eventually decided to land on top of a massive root that had grown over ten meters wide. The waters quickly turned chaotic as a group of oversized salamanders swam toward him, but they quickly fled for their lives when Zac unleashed a bit of his aura.

He took a deep breath, surprised that the smell was fresh and earthy rather than the expected foul odor of brackish water. Zac started walking along the roots toward the depths of the marshland, occasionally jumping up to instead use a bridge made from branches, following a somewhat meandering path.

Of course, he could always jump between trees in a straight line instead of using such a slow method of travel, but that would destroy the whole purpose why he landed. He wanted to get a feel of the forest, to walk on top of the trees as he followed the natural paths formed by nature itself.

Zac had initially planned on using the primordial jungle as a means to evolving his nature-aspected skills. But large sections of the jungle were utterly ruined because of the battle against the cultists, or rather their emblem, and he had mainly tried to focus on gaining Blighted Cut during that week of recuperation. It had prevented him from working on his other class as much as he wanted.

But now was a perfect opportunity. It was just him and a boundless wilderness that had never been tread by man from the looks of things. Zac kept emitting some of his latent killing intent, which essentially worked as not only a bug-repellant but also a deterrent for any of the stronger beasts lurking in the depths of the wide rivers.

He occasionally stopped and sensed the various trees and gargantuan flowers in his path, trying to understand their role and path to survival in this place. The world of cultivation was a cut-throat place, but nature had always been just as competitive even before the Integration. Everything needed a method to survive, along with the ability to adapt now that the atmosphere was chock-full of magic.

Some of the more massive trees simply dominated their domain with size alone, stealing the sunlight for themselves. Other trees formed symbiotic relationships with other plants defending them in return for somewhere to grow. It wasn't all too different compared to before the integration, honestly, though it did feel like evolution was sped up by a huge degree.

Then again, there were quite a few new oddities that didn't exist before. He had been attacked no less than twenty times by the plantlife itself after having just traveled for two hours. One tree moved its branches with surprising speed in an effort to spear him on a sharp point. Others tried to entangle him with their roots.

He had actually let one do it to see what would happen, and he was slowly dragged underwater where he could see a bunch of rotting beast carcasses provide nutrients to the tree. Some plants had even formed hunting teams with the beasts. A huge flower had suddenly released a bunch of pollen in his face, and Zac immediately felt some restrictions on his movement.

Not more than ten seconds passed before a swarm of mosquitoes appeared, hoping to bleed him dry while he was incapacitated. The pollen was only immobilizing, so the two groups had teamed up where the mosquitoes got the blood while the plant got the corpse.

It was both horrifying and extremely intriguing to see the hundreds of paths to survival, and Zac felt something click into place after walking along for half a day. He was delighted to see that [Forester's Constitution] finally reached peak mastery. The upgrade had boosted his attribute bonus to 15% as expected.

But more importantly, he felt a sense of connectedness with the nature around him.

It wasn't like when he was using [Hatchetman's Spirit] and he essentially became omniscient within his conjured forest, but rather an innate sixth sense about the forest itself. It was like an inborn intuition had been implanted into his subconscious. He tried to make sense of the feeling, but he only found a use for it ten minutes later when he felt something attracted him from within a dense bush.

Zac decided to follow the hunch, and he pushed his way inside, his massive Endurance enough to avoid getting cut into ribbons by the extremely sharp barbs. He had expected the interior of the bush to be pretty dark, but there was actually a source of light inside; a small set of stalks that gave off a gentle green light.

He immediately understood that this was some sort of Spiritual Herb hiding within the thorny bush, and his eyes lit up when he realized the use of Peak Mastery of the skill. His hunch had actually led him to a hidden treasure that he never would have spotted before. He had essentially turned into a truffle-seeking pig that could find the hidden treasures of the forest.

It wasn't exactly that he could sense treasures though, but rather that he had been given an instinctive understanding of the forests. He just felt that the brambles looked like a place that could contain some good things, and this feeling was in turn boosted by his massive pool of Luck.

Zac also noticed that his honed instincts worked with dangers as well within a few minutes. He somehow had a far better understanding of what parts of the rivers would hold aggressive beasts or which types of foliage could hide something lying in wait. This part of the skill wasn't as useful to someone like him who already had his danger sense, but it would probably have been a huge boon for a normal cultivator who spent a lot of time in the forests.

Staying alive was the most important thing on the path of cultivation, after all.

The best thing was that the skill was passive too, meaning he could freely make use of his upgraded instincts without any ramifications. It allowed him to pick up one Spiritual Root after another as he walked through the marshes, each of them giving off impressive spiritual energy. However, he quickly realized that good herbs weren't like weeds, growing everywhere.

Less than a tenth of the spots his instincts told him about was actually home to something interesting, the rest were simply empty. However, he actually didn't need to dig or inspect every single one. As long as he got close enough he would get a sense from his Luck as well, and he tried to understand this Treasure Sense just as well as he understood his Danger Sense.

This sense wasn't something new. He could always tell whether something he found in a Cosmos Sack was useless or something valuable by instinct, just like he could somewhat get a sense of the quality of Spiritual Tools. Part of it came from sensing the aura of the items, but part of it was simply instincts brought by his Luck. However, this sense hadn't really proven too useful while actually searching for treasures until now.

Zac soon concluded that his Luck was quite precise as long as he got within 7 meters or so. He could tell there was something there with some certainty at such close proximity. The actual range was a bit odd though, but he guessed that he might have been given 1 meter of detection range per effective 100 Luck.

Sometimes he could get a vague hint even further away than that though, but it was to the point that Zac had a hard time discerning whether it was just his "gut" telling him something that might be completely fabricated, or if it was actually some supernatural phenomenon helping him out. In either case, it wasn't something he could put too much faith in.

A Treasure Sense of seven meters wasn't bad, but it wasn't life-changing either. It allowed him to pick up the occasional baubles that were strewn along his way, but it was a far cry from the examples Ogras had listed before. He didn't get any strong urge to suddenly make a turn only to find a divine treasure a few kilometers away or anything magical like that.

But it was far superior to what the general cultivator could enjoy. The forest didn't look like it was full of treasures to the untrained eye, but [Forester's Constitution] had opened Zac up to the truth. His Luck then helped him make the best of the knowledge, which turned him into a moneymaking machine compared to most adventurers.

The number of plants Zac harvested as he explored was nothing compared to the vast fields his people grew back at Verdant Hills, but farmed Spirit Plants and wild ones couldn't be compared with each other. It was mainly weaker plants that could be freely farmed, whereas the more valuable ones resisted domestication.

There was also the issue of energy consumption. Most of the high-quality plants required quite a bit of energy, making it impossible to grow them in larger numbers. They needed a territory of their own, just like many beasts did. So a lot of spiritual roots and plants did not have a constant supply, which massively increased their value in case they were needed for popular pill recipes.

That was one of the main fields of research for most Alchemy clans too. Any clan that managed to improve a recipe by changing a wild-grown plant with a farmed one stood to gain a massive amount of wealth. They could undercut the market while still maintaining massive profit margins thanks to using cheaper resources.

Zac had no idea if the roots, grasses, and flowers he picked up were anything valuable in high demand, but he still took a detour every time he sensed something in the vicinity. It wasn't like he was strapped

for cash, but it went against every fiber in his body to leave money lying on the floor. He also wanted to nurture his instincts this way.

And who knew, some of the plants might be really effective in improving his Draugr-race. He was willing to do almost anything to swap out that terrifying dust to something less painful to use.

Constantly harvesting the low-grade Spiritual Plants gave him some insights as well. Spiritual Plants were essentially the equivalent of plants that had started on the path of cultivation, and it felt like exploring them helped him gain insight into his own nature-aspected Dao Fragment. He felt it might be even more conducive to his cultivation to travel through forests like this rather than sitting in his cultivation cave.

Zac kept going deeper and deeper into the massive swamp over the following day, and his newfound intuition helped him avoid a lot of trouble. However, the energy in the atmosphere kept increasing, and the beasts both grew more numerous and more powerful. Most of them were just late or peak F-Grade though, with E-Grade animals being very rare.

He would probably have to reach the core before he got an opportunity to see the real kings of the marshes.

Zac finally decided to stop for the day after having taken out a group of humongous E-grade crocodiles, each of them more than twenty meters long. It felt like going up against prehistoric dinosaurs when fighting them, but they were still ultimately just early E-Grade. Just a minute was needed to take out the whole pack, and he suddenly had 8 more carcasses in his Cosmos Sack.

The stench of blood filled the air as the river ran red, so Zac quickly moved some distance away. The crocodiles should be the local hegemony of this small section of the river, but the other animals could probably figure out that the blood meant there might be an opportunity for a sneak attack or even free food.

He soon found an enormous tree with a hollow large enough that he could rest for the day, perhaps the former resting place of some mutated squirrel. Zac blocked out the entrance with one of his spare tower shields before he sat down and calmed his mind. The reason he moved away from the battle wasn't that he was worried that he would become embroiled in another battle, but it was rather that he didn't want a bunch of beasts interrupting him while redrawing his pathways.

He quickly changed to his Draugr form and once more started performing the arduous task.

The physical wound from breaking open the Node was pretty much healed, though he had barely begun fixing the pathways. He estimated that his undead form was weakened roughly 30% or so, and even his human side wasn't in top shape even though he looked fine on paper.

Zac guessed that the broken pathways in his inactive form counted like some sort of hidden wound even when he fought as a human, though the effect was limited. In either case, it meant he needed to work quickly so that the pathways were fixed before the war in 8 days. He might need everything in his arsenal in case the remaining two showed up.

He kept working on the pathways for a few hours before he swapped back to his human form, at which point he simply closed his eyes and tried to sense the nature around him. He would normally have wanted to practice his Soul Strengthening Manual as well, but it was impossible while on the move.

Setting up a teleportation array through his [Spatial Gate Array] was technically possible, but they were temporary one-time consumables, so he wouldn't be able to return.

Going without the arrays for a few days wasn't a problem though, and it freed up a lot of time to focus on other things, such as his Dao. It almost felt like the whole swamp was one enormous entity, and he tried to find some inspiration for the Fragment of the Bodhi by connecting to it. He spent the rest of the night in that sort of reverie before he once more set out at the break of dawn.

Today he would explore the core of the wetlands.