

## The Fall 552

### Chapter 552: River

Zac had spent close to two days in the marshes already, and he would definitely reach what could be considered the core zone today. Of course, that wasn't saying much as the core of such a massive forest was large enough that he could wander around for weeks without seeing the same tree twice.

As for what Zac considered the core area, it was where Cosmic Energy was the densest. The Nexus Vein covered his whole island and then some back home, and he guessed it was a similar situation here in the forest. The core Zone was equivalent to Port Atwood, and this was where the strongest beasts would reside, along with the most valuable herbs and minerals.

His hunch was quickly proven right over the following hours as the number of E-Grade beasts he encountered kept increasing. He even spotted a massive swarm of E-Grade hornets far in the distance, each one of them as large as a labrador. Even Zac felt a bit intimidated by the swarm, so he actually chose to hide inside the river to not draw their attention.

Beasts were weaker than cultivators in general, but they made up for it in numbers. He wasn't in any mood to be besieged by thousands of murderous hornets for no real return. Even if he emerged victoriously it would still be a pitched battle, and the risk didn't weigh up for the rewards. There was no point in messing with a swarm like that unless they were guarding some great treasure.

He did fight the occasional E-Grade beast though, mostly overgrown bugs or river-creatures. There was a large number of alien amphibians that looked like predatory catfish. Their maws were wide enough to swallow Zac in one bite, and there were over five rows of jagged teeth hiding within. They even had short stubby legs like salamanders, and they could break into a surprisingly quick sprint on the ground.

Zac fought and harvested intermittently as he scoped the core zone, and his Cosmos Sack was gradually filling up with valuables. He didn't recognize the herbs he was picking at all, but each beast carcass was worth between 10 000 and 100 000 Nexus Coins depending on species and level.

The bountiful harvest went on for a few hours until there was a startling change in the atmosphere; it had become quiet.

The sounds of nature had always been a bit subdued in this swamp, but it had suddenly become completely silent after Zac passed an unseen threshold. He had never encountered this before, but it could only mean a few things. There were no beasts here, meaning they either had all been killed or scared away by something. Zac immediately started to look around for clues, but there wasn't much to go by.

This section of the wetlands looked pretty much the same as the rest, with the exception that the river he was following along was a bit wider than the rest. It was over five kilometers across, which would have allowed it to compete with massive rivers like the Amazon River before the Integration. Now it was just a tributary from some much larger source of water.

Zac's first instinct was to avoid this place just like the hornets earlier, but he eventually chose to stay. He was here for training and treasures, after all, and this felt like a place that could provide both. He kept

going along the shoreline, but he concealed as much of his aura as he could. However, he only walked a few hundred meters before there was a change in his body.

His cells had all woken up and were screaming at him that there was something delicious nearby. This wasn't something coming from his recently upgraded [Forester's Constitution], but rather the general feelings of desire that great treasures like the Fruit of Ascension elicited. Zac immediately started to look for any special energy signatures with [Cosmic Gaze], though not without some hesitation.

There was something odd about the feeling, though he couldn't exactly place it.

It quickly became apparent that the treasure could be found on a small island in the middle of the river. There was a constant swirl of haze surrounding it though, making it impossible for Zac to guess what was going on inside. He could only see the edges of the island sticking out, but he could at least make some deductions of what kind of situation might be waiting for him over there.

The island just had a diameter of 100 meters or so, so the valuable item shouldn't be something huge like a Crystal Mine. It was also unlikely that there was some sort of hive with a huge number of beasts like a hornet hive or an ant's nest waiting on the other side of the fog. The island was too small, so there could either be just one big guy guarding the treasure, or a pack of medium-sized beasts.

As for the treasure, it was probably some sort of plant with a powerful energy signature.

However, Zac didn't immediately rush over to take the item. There was a constant buzz in the back of his head, alerting him of danger. It wasn't an acute sense of dread, but rather a pervasive sense of wrongness. He couldn't make heads or tails about the feeling, but he knew to take extra precautions.

Perhaps the feeling was simply because his subconscious believed a life and death struggle waited for him on the island. The most powerful animals always erected their lairs next to valuable herbs as the aura the treasures released could help refine their bloodlines. There was no way that this island wasn't occupied since Zac's cells were screaming at him to eat whatever was hiding within the mists.

With the sheer amount of hidden cards and advantages he had stacked up over the past year, Zac didn't feel all too worried about whatever was waiting for him though. He was confident in dealing with pretty much anything Earth was able to throw at him this early into the integration. However, Zac still wanted to deal with this situation like a normal cultivator.

He needed to come up with a plan that would allow him to minimize the danger. He wouldn't always stay on Earth where there were no real surprises. Cultivation on Earth was too orderly as everyone began at the same time, and it provided him a false sense of security that wouldn't hold up out in the multiverse. Even the Mystic Realm would contain unknown dangers that could threaten his life by all accounts.

He needed to learn to do things the right way, or he would sooner or later be killed because he encountered something that couldn't be solved by swinging his axe extra hard.

His class and Dao thankfully enabled Zac to blend in with the surroundings, allowing him to spy on the island from his vantage hidden in a tree crown by the shore. However, Zac frowned when there was no change even after four hours. The mists didn't dissipate, and there were never any sounds that came

from the island. No beast ever left the moat to hunt either, leaving Zac wondering if he was just being paranoid.

Was there actually no beast living there?

There was only so much time he had to spare, and he eventually decided to just go for it. He figured that he could either swap to his Draugr form and walk along the bottom of the river, or use his leaf as a boat. He eventually decided to move upstream a bit before he placed the leaf on the river. He infused himself with the Fragment of the Bodhi and simply allowed his flying treasure to drift toward the island like a normal piece of debris.

Zac didn't move in the slightest and [Verun's Bite] was already in his hand in case of an ambush, but he drifted through the haze without issue until his flying treasure hit land. He immediately disembarked and stowed away the treasure before he looked around the island with some confusion and desire. He had smelt an extremely enticing aroma since he entered the fog, and he couldn't wait to snatch whatever was the source.

The haze was actually not that thick on the island, one quick scan confirmed that there were no guarding beasts around. Not that they could fit with the tree that grew from the center of the island. The tree wasn't overly tall, just reaching twenty meters into the sky. However, it was shockingly wide, its trunk taking up the better part of the whole island.

Even the massive redwoods back then couldn't compete with this weird monstrosity in terms of girth.

However, Zac wasn't interested in the tree trunk, but rather the bulbous branches that spread out at its crown. There were only 6 branches in total on the whole tree, and each of them looked like a shrub with an enormous flower growing on it. It was no doubt these flowers who were the source of the smell, and Zac could sense how most of the energy gathered by the tree was infused into these six treasures.

The fact that there were no beasts around only made Zac more apprehensive as he stayed on the edge of the island though. It was a bit disconcerting that he couldn't find the source of danger or wrongness, but he also couldn't just stand around doing nothing. He had already made his move, and delaying would just increase the danger he was in.

His spirit tool necklace transformed, and a chain shot out from his back and snaked around one of the stubby branches, and Zac shot toward it as he dragged himself up. The sudden movement was just in time as five sharp spikes punched through the ground and stabbed his previous location with enough force to make the air crackle. Zac immediately looked back and saw that it was a group of roots, but they receded beneath the ground after they missed.

The scene wasn't very surprising to Zac. If there were no beast guardian around in this place, then it was most likely that the tree itself was a dangerous predator. And since there were no branches on this fatty tree, then it most likely had nimble roots to deal with its prey. A trunk of this width should be able to grow a massive root system, after all.

Zac wasted no time as he didn't believe for a second that this probing attack was all the tree could muster, considering that the whole area was cleansed of animals. He moved to cut off the closest flower, but a weird shield actually appeared around it. Zac grunted in annoyance as he swung his axe down at the emerald barrier, and the collision made the whole tree shudder.

The shaking didn't subside, though, and Zac's eyes widened when the whole river exploded as thousands of roots, each one hundreds of meters long, rose into the sky. Zac had expected more roots to be waiting, but not to the point that the sky itself was almost blocked out. He hurriedly launched a barrage of strikes at the stalk connecting the flower to the branch, and the shield finally cracked.

But there was just enough time to harvest the one flower before his mind screamed of danger for real. Hundreds of roots shot toward him with a speed and agility that far surpassed any other plant he had encountered thus far, and he barely managed to dodge the strikes by moving over to the top of the trunk with [Loamwalker].

The roots actually emitted a powerful killing intent as they froze in the air. However, they only wiggled in the air for a second before the tree seemed to have located him once more. Zac immediately flashed toward the next flower as he cut apart roots by the scores, but his eyes suddenly widened in alarm.

Two chains slammed into the top of the massive trunk the next moment, dragging Zac right back where he came from.

It was just in time as well as the flower released what looked like a plume of pollen that created a yellow haze that lingered just for an instant before it started spreading through the air. Zac thankfully evaded most of it, but some of it definitely made its way to him. A huge surge of desire and killing intent welled up in his heart, and his breaths started to become ragged as he looked at the remaining flowers.

His hunch had been right; that pollen was definitely not normal.

The other four flowers quickly followed suit and released their own clouds of pollen, and Zac was soon surrounded from all sides as he kept dancing back and forth while cutting off any incoming roots. He was only buying time though as the roots regrew within seconds and rejoined the battle.

However, there was nothing else he could do until those clouds of pollen dissipated enough for him to snatch the flowers. He was already in a bad state from just taking a whiff, and he might actually go insane if he stayed inside the clouds too long. It was a very weird feeling as two conflicting impulses fought inside his mind. One of the voices was telling him to stay away as the increasingly large cloud of pollen was dangerous, while the other was screaming at him to jump into the cloud and push his face into the flower.

Was the thing a lure?

Roars suddenly echoed out across the area, as though in direct response to his hunch. Zac also saw a large number of Cosmic Energy clusters moving closer with the help of [Cosmic Gaze], which probably meant that hundreds of beasts were pushing toward his location with their utmost speed. The quickest animals were all in E-Grade, and the strongest ones actually managed to push through the forest of deadly roots to arrive at the small island.

The area had been void of life just a minute ago, but it suddenly looked as though a beast tide was forming all around him, madly fighting against the countless roots in the river. Something was clearly wrong with the animals though as many of them were frothing at the mouth as their eyes shone with madness.

They cared for nothing except their desire to reach the island. The water had already turned red, but the island had similarly grown to twice its original size thanks to the hundreds of snaking roots that had been cut or ripped off by Zac and the beasts. This was definitely the tree's doing.

It was orchestrating a bloodbath.