

The Fall 553

Chapter 553: Roots

The chaotic scene made Zac's eyes widen with shock, but he quickly found his bearings as he started to prepare. A spectral forest rose up on the small island, using the fallen roots as soil. He also summoned the unique blade of [Chop] and had it circle around him, which helped tremendously in dealing with the incessant attacks from roots.

The fat tree seemed infuriated that a bunch of other plants had sprung up in its private domain and the water churned as even more roots rose to rip them apart. But how could normal roots destroy an incorporeal forest? They harmlessly passed straight through, which only angered the tree further. It was the drugged beasts that were forced to take the brunt of the tree's wrath in the end though as Zac was proving a tough nut to crack.

A slight vibration in the air was all the warning Zac got before he was suddenly attacked by a small bird who flashed past him with such speed that it might as well have been a beam of light. Not even the additional sight afforded him by [Hatchetman's Spirit] was enough to avoid the strike. A small wound appeared on his right arm, but the small beast was thankfully not powerful enough to cause any more damage than that.

However, it seemed as though the bloodthirsty little swallow wasn't done there, and it veered in a wide arc around the tree before it shot toward him once more.

The emerald leaves of [Nature's Barrier] appeared to create a nigh-impenetrable wall against the assailant, but it was like a blur completely unfettered by gravity or its own momentum as it made seemingly impossible turns around the leaves and roots alike. Another bloody line was cut open on Zac's cheek, and he swore in annoyance when the autonomous fractal edge missed the bird for the second time.

The bird gave up on the kill after it realized Zac was barely affected at all. It instead shot toward one of the five remaining flowers, but Zac's eyes widened when swallow suddenly just up and exploded just as it landed on the pistil. Was it the pollen or something else?

Zac was unsure what to do in either case. He wanted to loot the flowers without destroying the tree as that would allow him to come back for more treasures in the future. But it looked extremely dangerous to get close. Zac eventually decided to test things out a bit and he threw one of his beast carcasses at the closest branch.

The massive beast shot forward like a wrecking ball and ripped through multiple layers of roots that tried to stop its advance. It only got within a few meters of the flower before three extremely powerful roots appeared though. They were pitch-black compared to the others who were dark brown, and it looked like naturally formed fractals covered their length.

These were the real killing weapons of the tree.

The special roots effortlessly intercepted the carcass that weighed well over a tonne, and it was gored and flung away in an instant. However, Zac noted that the body didn't show any inclination to explode, meaning that the pollen probably only worked on living creatures. He tested things further and shot a

few fractal blades at the special roots, but his eyes widened when he couldn't even cut them apart when he imbued [Chop] with Fragment of the Axe.

The three roots disappeared the next moment as they blended in with the thousands of normal roots, but Zac wouldn't be tricked now that he knew they existed. It might be hard to spot them with his normal sight, but the roots were almost lit up like beacons to his [Cosmic Gaze]. The normal roots contained a respectable amount of Nature-aspected energy, but the three killing roots contained some sort of intense fiery power as well.

The vision of [Hatchetman's Spirit] also allowed him to keep track of the three roots, and it almost seemed as though the roots were observing him from the distance. However, danger screamed in his mind the next moment as one of the three shot straight toward him. The leaves of [Nature's Barrier] superimposed to create an extremely thick layer of protection, and Zac activated the first defensive charge of [Hatchetman's Spirit] for good measure.

A rippling shockwave spread out the next moment as the root slammed into his defenses with the force of a runaway train. Scores of roots around Zac were ripped apart from the chaotic swirls of energies, and his own defenses didn't fare much better. Over a dozen layers of leaves were ripped apart, and the emerald shield cracked as well.

The shield managed to absorb most of the remaining momentum from the strike, but Zac was still hurled hundreds of meters away from the impact. He groaned in pain from the punch as he fell into the river, but his brows furrowed when he saw a dark-brown sticky substance covered his chest where the root hit him. Only then did he somewhat realize that the tip of the root had been covered in some unknown compound.

Were the special roots venomous like actual snakes?

Thankfully his defenses were powerful enough to prevent the root from drawing blood, which barely prevented Zac from being injected with this unknown liquid. He was filled with both dread and marvel as he looked at the three roots that acted just like beasts. It was amazing that a plant could evolve to such a degree in one short year. Or was this perhaps something that the System had rather planted here as a hidden opportunity?

In either case, it wasn't enough to deter him, and he swam back toward the island, slaughtering any beast that tried to get in his way. It was time to bring out the big guns. He didn't want to use his hidden cards for this fight, but that didn't mean that he couldn't even use his skills. A massive woodcutter's axe appeared the next moment as Zac ran back toward the tree on top of floating carcasses.

Activating [Deforestation] was essentially effortless by now, and an extremely sharp wave of destruction rippled out the next moment.

Hundreds of roots were cut off and destroyed by that one swing, which once more exposed the bulbous tree within. The three special roots survived though, which didn't really surprise Zac. But cleaning out the normal roots had fulfilled the purpose of the Axe of Felling, and Zac quickly threw out a fat stack of papers the moment he set his foot on the real part of the island.

The whole river shook and a conflagration consumed the tree crown a second later, with a plume of flames rising over fifty meters into the air. The explosions came from a stack of over a hundred low-

tiered fire talismans he activated as one, and it was Zac's best idea to disperse the barely visible pollen that had spread all over the area.

He figured that the flames would be able to clear out the toxin in the air, but he was worried that his Infernal Axe would not only destroy the pollen but even the tree itself. A bunch of low-tiered talismans shouldn't be able to harm a tree with this strong vitality though, making them a better tool for this purpose. And if the tree was destroyed by something like this, it couldn't have been anything precious anyway.

Nothing ventured nothing gained. That was what passed through his mind as Zac swallowed a handful of soul-soothing and general antidote pills. He shot toward the closest flower the next moment, and he could breathe out in relief when he didn't sense anything odd even after appearing right in front of it. Either the dangers of the pollen had been dealt with, or his body was simply strong enough to withstand it.

A few furious swings later a second flower had entered his Cosmos Sack, and he was already moving toward the next. The Axe of Felling had contained a large amount of his Fragment of the Axe, and he could still feel how it still was impacting the roots he cut earlier. The surging vitality of the tree tried to forcibly regrow the roots, but Zac was actively resisting using his latest insights into Dao Control. His head hurt, but he refused to let his mental energy be dispersed.

It gave him enough breathing room to continue with his harvest. However, he only managed to pluck the third flower before a weird scene took place. The three special roots actually assaulted the remaining flowers themselves, stabbing straight into their cores before they absorbed the flower's essence. Only a second passed before the flowers looked withered like they had been left to dry in the sun for weeks.

Cannibalism? Zac thought with wide eyes, and his eyes only got even wider when the roots suddenly doubled in size as their auras exploded with ferocity. He barely had time to think before he was slammed with a force that even exceeded that of the massive Anointed, but Zac wasn't even allowed to be thrown away in peace before he was attacked again.

The three roots had gained a massive spike in power from absorbing the three flowers, but the tree itself looked a bit wan. The normal roots didn't bother him any longer either, but they rather went after the huge number of beasts and dragged them underwater. It looked like it desperately needed some nourishment after losing all six of its treasures in one go.

But Zac was in no state to worry about the tree's situation as he was being harried by those three roots. He had already gotten his hands on the treasure so there was no point in staying here, but the three roots refused to let him leave. They were even a lot faster than he was since they grew in size, and he could just saunter away.

His axe was a blur as he desperately countered the barrage of strikes, but he rapidly gained one wound after another even with his still active [Nature's Barrier] picking up some of the slack. This couldn't go on. His Endurance and Vitality was monstrous for an E-Grade human, but how could it compare to that of a tree monster? It thankfully lacked the power to unleash a killing blow, but it was still a hassle to deal with.

It was a shame, but Zac saw no recourse but to launch the second strike of [Deforestation], Infernal Axe, and hope that he didn't accidentally burn up his treasure tree.

The second defensive charge of [Hatchetman's Spirit] provided enough time to activate the second swing, and a furious wave of cutting flames spread out across the river. It contained the fury of mother nature itself, and the attack incinerated everything from island to shore. Even the special roots were unable to resist the fiery wrath of Zac's ultimate skill, and they slunk away before they were ripped apart like everything else.

Zac saw his opportunity and flashed away, barely avoiding a large spurt of that odd liquid the roots were covered in. That final gout of venom had actually come from the tree trunk itself like it had opened a valve to shoot out a beam of poison at him. But Zac had already taken out his flying treasure at that point, and he was much too quick to be caught by now.

He found himself on the shore a second later and he became one with the forest the next moment. Zac was certain he could feel the fury of that bloodthirsty tree in the distance, but Zac didn't care as he moved further away. The fight wasn't really finished, but there was no point to kill the goose that lay the golden eggs.

Three flowers were reabsorbed by the tree itself, but getting at least half of them was decent enough. Better yet, he had managed to do so without permanently harming the tree and without using any of his cheats. Zac marked down the spot on his private map before he moved on, looking for other opportunities in the core region of the Swamps.

Zac found a lot of precious herbs, but he also found himself in a constant struggle. He was actually assaulted by the hornets twice over the following day, and Zac finally couldn't take it any longer. He spent half a day looking for their hive before he mounted an assault on the small mountain. After thirty minutes of all-out carnage did he find himself in the depths of the hive.

There was a shocking monstrosity in the heart of the cave, a queen whose only job was to birth more soldiers. But it seemed as though the queen was unable to defend herself apart from a mental attack that couldn't harm Zac in the slightest. It reminded him of the queen he fought during the undead level at the tower, though this hornet queen was a lot less evolved for war.

It allowed him to completely ignore the beast and ransack the place for treasures, but the only thing he found was lots of extremely energy-dense honey. Hornets shouldn't actually be producing honey as far as Zac knew, but perhaps these things were rather bees that had mutated into predators from the Integration. In either case, the stuff was chock-full of Cosmic Energy, especially the Royal Jelly he found next to the queen.

It contained far more energy than even E-Grade Nexus Crystals, and Zac actually gained a level in his human form just from eating a fifth of the Royal Jelly. It pushed him to level 83 in his human shape as well, catching up to his Draugr side. He quickly put the ten free points into Dexterity, just like he had with all other free points in the E-Grade, before he moved on.

But he didn't find another real treasure like the fatty tree and its flowers even after spending a total of six days in the vast forests. He still felt like the past week was well spent as he made a lot of progress on

his meditation, while even upgrading one of his skills. He had even gotten a better understanding of his Luck and how to make the most of it. But it was time to head home.

Zac eventually found a secluded cave and erected a teleportation array. It was a bit wasteful to burn almost 100 million Nexus Coins on a single-use array, but he didn't want to waste a whole day flying back to the settlement at the edge of the Swamp. There were no messages waiting for him when returning, so he immediately headed over to Calrin's place to get an estimate on his gains.

"You're back," Calrin said with curiosity as Zac sat down on a chair in the private meeting room of the Thayer Consortia. "Did you find anything interesting?"

"You tell me," Zac said as he took out one of the enormous flowers.