

The Fall 588

Chapter 588: Lunar Forest

Zac had considered his next step on his way back, and he decided to take a tour of this place, taking advantage of the fact that his axe had somehow given him a carte blanche of the forest. He had already sensed that there was a lot of valuable herbs in this forest, and only he could pass through these parts without becoming food for the wolves.

Everything pointed toward this place being created for bloodline research, so any plant that grew in this place might be useful for exactly that. Opening his second Hidden Node had been an unexpected gain, but it also cost him one of his two bloodline treasures, leaving him only with the [Bloodline Nucleus] he gained during the Tower Climb. It would be best if he could find some plants to make up for the loss.

The Dimensional Treasure wouldn't wake up for a few days in either case, and his sister seemed to believe that the spatial obstructions would be in place until it did. Now was his last chance to break open his nodes and do some simple exploration. He guessed there would be no time for that afterward.

He also wanted to set out on his own for a bit to get a better understanding of the changes in his body and to get accustomed to his new skills.

"So you're setting off alone again?" Thea asked with a frown.

"Bringing these guys was a test," Zac said as he pointed down at the unconscious wolves. "I can somewhat move among the wolves because I'm connected to my axe, but it looks like that protection doesn't extend to others. However, I still need your help."

"What are you thinking?" Thea asked, her brows relaxing a bit.

"A squad needs to find the entrances to the inner reaches of the Mystic Realm. I tried instructing the wolves to stay away from these parts, which hopefully will allow you to move along the wall toward the center. It might still be extremely dangerous even without the wolves though," Zac said. "I'll take a look at the other side to see if there's another structure like this one over there."

"We'll go back and update the main group and bring Emily to a safer place to recuperate. Should we bring your sister back here?" Thea said before she gave Zac a pointed look. "She's the only other one who can open these doors. It's a bit odd that only the two of you managed to get Tier-4 clearance, by the way."

"I got my clearance through the Tower of Eternity. Kenzie might just be lucky. There can only be one chief caretaker after all. Have Joanna stay in the glasshouse to open the gate for you instead. My sister has enough on her plate," Zac said after some thought before he looked down at the wolves. "Someone needs to look after these guys as well."

Billy and Zac carried the unconscious wolves into the oversized stalls next, and Zac was relieved to see that a barrier automatically sprung up, trapping them inside. Not only that, but water was also dispensed and a few light bulbs started to emit the same lunar light as the moons outside. It saved Zac a lot of headache, allowing him to immediately prepare to open his nodes.

It was over an hour since he gained the energy by this point, and he had already lost a third of the energy he gained from the battle. More and more energy seeped through the cracks of his energy trap, and if he didn't use the energy soon it would all be lost.

"I need to break open a node. Give me an hour," Zac said as he sat walked toward one of the adjoining rooms.

"What? Break open? Are you crazy?" Thea blurted as she grabbed his arm. "I read that doing so is extremely harmful. It can even kill you!"

"I don't have a lot of options as a mortal," Zac explained with a grimace. "But I'm pretty sturdy. I'll be fine."

Thea reluctantly let him go, and Zac sat down as soon as the sliding doors closed. The next node was in his leg just like most of the previous ones, though it was a bit further up. It was just below his knee this time, forcing Zac to be extremely careful. He became a little bit more skilled every time he opened a node, but getting wounded was inevitable.

The only thing he could hope to accomplish was to try to avoid letting anything important get destroyed and rather sacrifice his muscles. It hurt just as much that way, but muscles seemed to be the easiest part to restore with healing pills and his Dao. So it was with extreme caution that he pushed more and more of his excess energy into the node, until a surging force erupted twenty minutes later.

A stabbing pain almost made Zac black out, but he clenched his fist with enough force to draw blood from his palms to stay awake. His left leg had almost been blown clean off this time even with how careful he was, and it almost looked like one of the wolves from before had ripped out a part of his calf.

Blood drenched the whole floor, and some had even splattered on the glass walls, and Zac quickly ate a healing pill as he activated [Surging Vitality]. For a few seconds there was no effect, but the maimed muscles on his legs started to wiggle and writhe a moment later, almost looking like a pack of snakes as they twisted about.

The pain intensified over twofold, but Zac held on, ignoring both the sweat that streamed down his leg and the large amount of Cosmic Energy that was drained. It turned out that [Surging Vitality] could actually utilize the energy he gathered from kills, and one stream after another entered the skill fractal by his Specialty Core.

The energy wasn't transformed into life-attuned energy or something nature aspected like his Dao though, but it rather reminded Zac of his [Bone-Forging Dust]. The energy was unattuned, or perhaps flesh-attuned if there was such a thing. The energy entered his mangled leg, and it boosted the natural healing ability of his body rather than traditional life-attuned healing. That was why his muscles were wriggling so much; they were being forcibly regrown.

Such a process was excruciating though, a far cry from the warm and soothing streams of healing pills or the curing skills of people like Sui. It also only worked on his flesh physical body and not his pathways, though that wasn't a surprise.

What was a bit surprising was how much energy it cost. Using the skill for just fifteen minutes had cost him almost as much Cosmic Energy as the pitched battle before, and it had cost him over half of the

accumulated kill energy. The remaining energy was barely enough for him to push his human side to level 84 and start working on his next node.

But on the bright side, it was very effective. Newly grown flesh had replaced the broken mess, and a process that would take even someone like Zac days had been shortened to fifteen minutes. His new muscles still felt a bit stiff and weakened, but he would no doubt get used to it soon enough.

This efficacy alone was reason enough to ditch [True Strike]. He would save so much time with the help of the skill in the future. The fact that the healing cost him around half a level was regrettable, but someone like Zac would always be fighting powerful enemies that provided huge amounts of energy.

Mending his flesh was quick, but his pathways were far harder to deal with. He spent another hour making basic repairs after his flesh was fixed, which should allow him to use his Cosmic Energy as long as he didn't use over 50% of his power. Any more than that and he would probably overtax himself like he did during the Undead Incursion. Falling unconscious was fine next to his sister and the Valkyries, but doing so in a foreign forest was another thing altogether.

He slowly got to his feet, causing a series of crackling and popping sounds as the dried blood that covered him started falling off. He saw Thea waiting just outside the transparent walls staring at him with shock.

"How are you still standing? That room looks like something from a horror movie!" Thea exclaimed, her face completely pale as she looked at Zac with worry.

"Well, I'm used to it by now," Zac shrugged.

"Is this what you have to do every time to level up?" Thea said, her eyes fixed on the pool of blood on the floor. "I've read about it, but I had no idea..."

"Well, it's not like this when I use pills or treasures to gain levels," Zac said. "Sorry for making you worry."

"I..." Thea mumbled, but she eventually only shook her head with a sigh. "I can't join the squad you mentioned earlier. I need to rest, after all. Should I get the demon instead? He's crafty enough."

"He should be back by now," Zac agreed. "Have him come over. I'll head out now."

Thea seemed inclined to stop him, but she eventually just walked next to Zac as he stepped out of the glasshouse again.

"The spatial tunnels might close while you're out. Anything you need to relay to the outside world?" Thea finally asked just as he was about to leave.

"I won't be that long. A day or two tops," Zac said. "Just let my sister and the other leaders know I'm okay."

"Okay," Thea nodded. "Stay safe. There's no guarantee the wolves are the only threat in this place."

Zac immediately set off, cutting a straight path through the enormous forest. His leg was hurting a bit, but he could maintain a good pace even with a slight limp. Only five minutes passed before he met a

small family of wolves, but they quickly backed off when Zac waved Verun in their direction. It somewhat proved that they hadn't just forgotten about his Tool Spirit, at least not yet.

Thea's final warning echoed in his mind, but he eventually realized something odd after half an hour had passed. She seemed to be wrong about there being other threats than the wolves, almost impossibly wrong. He didn't encounter a single living being in this vast forest even after running for over an hour, except the occasional spotting of lunar wolves. Confusion marred his face as he looked back and forth, but he couldn't make sense of the situation.

Didn't these wolves need to eat?

He knew that it was possible to sustain yourself solely on Cosmic Energy further down the road, but that went for D-Grade warriors and above. They still ate in general though, as high-quality food could provide some benefits. But it wasn't necessary to survive. However, E-Grade beings shouldn't have evolved to that point just yet.

Were these wolves perhaps an exception? Or were they rather vegetarians? They definitely didn't look like animals that lived only on fruits or stalks of grass, so he was more inclined to believe they were able to find sustenance from energy alone. Perhaps that was the true purpose of those artificial moons in the sky, and even the reason why the wolves were brought here.

The solitude gave him a chance to try some things out though, and he stopped in a secluded valley after having traveled for another hour. The aftermath of [Hatchetman's Rage] was completely gone by this point, and the halo of [Conformation of Supremacy] appeared behind his body once more. However, this time the avatar didn't depict the unadorned axe of the axe-man, but rather the insanely powerful shield of the Grand Protector who appeared in the Dao Vision for his second class.

A surge of power filled his body, and Zac could almost feel his mind connect with the ancient cultivator who had sacrificed his life to save his world. However, no fractal barrier appeared to protect his front as he swung [Verun's Bite]. He rather found his strikes gain a tremendous weight, like each of them carried the weight of a world. His attacks were heavy enough to cause scars in the air, but the damage to the ground looked completely different than the long scars before.

This time it almost looked like a small meteor had hit the ground when he swung his axe, with a crater no more than 5 meters wide appearing. It was deep though, reaching twice as far down as it was wide, and Zac accidentally fell into it when it appeared. A slight pain bloomed up when he faceplanted on the ground, but a ten-meter drop couldn't hurt him any longer.

He was more interested in the soil itself. It had become almost impossibly dense, and it took some force for him to dig into it with his hands. It was as though the area had been subjected to a terrifying amount of gravity, packing the soil to the point that it had almost turned into solid matter. Zac jumped out of the pit before he looked back at his new skill with mixed emotions.

The effect of using the shield as a basis for the skill instead of the woodsman's axe was impressive, and it was perhaps a better avatar for a duel, but Zac was disappointed to find that it didn't work as he'd hoped. In his fight with the wolves, he used a weapon as an avatar, which increased his might. He had hoped that using a defensive treasure with [Conformation of Supremacy] would instead create some sort of defensive effect.

But his new skill was true to its nature as a pure Strength-based skill, and it looked like it just took the weight and power of the shield to use it as a bludgeon. It still opened a few new avenues of how he could use it, but it clearly wasn't a one-size-fits-all-type situation where he could use it as everything from a defensive to a movement skill.

The limitation was a bit of a let-down, but not overly so. Partly because Zac somewhat expected such a situation, but mostly because he felt that he finally could use his Dao again.

His new Hidden Node had finally stabilized, and it was time to see what it could do.