

The Fall 405

Chapter 405: Floor Guardian

The bandits quickly understood that the trees sprouting up everywhere were bad news, and various attacks soared out to destroy them. But the projectiles harmlessly shot straight through, hitting the mountain or sailing far out into the air.

It had taken Zac a while to understand the skill as well, but he eventually figured it out. The trees were mostly projections, a way for his spirit to change the surroundings to suit him better. It created an effect similar to a Dao Field, where he was at his optimal state while his interlopers were somewhat weakened.

The only 'real' tree was the tree behind him that provided a direct buff to his Strength and Vitality, providing 10% each without any downsides like [Hatchetman's Rage]. Zac also guessed that the skill counted as being inside a forest, which renewed the boost he got from [Forester's Constitution].

Attacking that tree would work, and cutting it down would cancel the skill. But the tree wasn't just helpless. Each rope on the tree represented one defensive charge that could be used to protect itself or Zac, allowing it to stand long enough for Zac to come and protect it if needed.

The skill even worked as a detection skill as the trees essentially were his eyes and ears. Anything within his forest was within his purview, and it would take a pretty good stealth skill to move about unnoticed.

All in all, it provided a little bit of everything, helping Zac round out his Hatchetman Class. It wasn't as flashy as Ogras' equivalent where he turned into a shadowy angel with his 5-meter wings, but it was a skill that he could always use to gain an edge during battle. Zac also guessed it would be useful in the battle against the undead, as the golden tree emitted an intense amount of life which might counteract the miasma.

Its functions did overlap a bit with the general skills [Mental Fortress] and [Nature's Barrier] he had bought for himself, but no one would say no to having multiple layers of defense.

When the bandits noticed that their attacks didn't have any effect they instead focused their attacks on Zac, but it was extremely hard for them to hit him. He was in his own forest now and being one with the surroundings pushed the efficiency of [Loamwalker] to new heights, making him seem like a forest spirit that flitted back and forth amongst the illusory trees.

He reached the gate without getting hit once and one swing of his axe cracked the shield and gained him entry.

"Another bounty hunter?" a gruff voice sounded the moment he entered the fortress. "But my head is not so easily claimed."

Zac immediately sensed some danger and jumped forward, but he was still caught inside a massive explosion. The bandit had used an offensive array like a mine. A snap could be heard from behind as one of the ropes fell from the tree, and a green wind rose simultaneously to protect Zac from the flames.

Zac was a bit surprised a floor guardian would fight dirty like that, but he soon found his bearings as he spotted his target. It was a humanoid who stood almost three meters tall, and the humanoid most closely resembled an ogre, though his skin was dark grey.

There was no hair on his head, and there were four large tusks in his mouth that created a bestial image for the bandit. He was a mix of fat and muscular, with a big belly but arms thick enough to look like trees.

Zac actually felt that [Verun's Bite] might be more suited for a being like this, or better yet Billy's massive club. But the guardian was unarmed, perhaps only relying on his massive and meaty fists. He wore thick bracers to protect his forearms though, and a couple of knives almost as large as swords could be seen dangling from his belt.

He was also accompanied by a dozen or so bandits who all were of the same race, though they were almost a meter shorter than their boss. The bandit lord tried to slap one of the trees with his massive palm in annoyance and growled when it passed straight through.

"I don't know why you play with these dumb illusions. It won't save you," he said before he stomped the ground, seemingly in frustration.

The area rumbled for a second before a dozen spikes shot up at Zac. Each of the spikes was imbued with some sort of Dao, though only an early seed and Zac was taken a bit by surprise once again. He had thought that the ogre would be a similar class as himself going by his attire, but it looked that he was rather some sort of geomancer.

A large fractal blade grew out in front of the edge of [Verun's Bite], and it soon enough detached as Zac instructed it to hunt down the bandits while he focused on the big boss. The illusory trees even moved about, forming what looked like an arena that enclosed the two of them.

It was nothing like the cage of his other class, and the bandits could simply walk straight through the enclosure if they wanted to. But it still had its uses. Zac had noted that a higher concentration of trees around him increased his control over the area, making him sense the tiniest fluctuations of Daos or Cosmic Energy. Perhaps getting boxed in like that also negatively impacted the mental states of his enemies, making them feel trapped.

But the bandit didn't seem bothered by getting "trapped" inside the ring of trees at all, and his beady eyes glared straight at Zac as he summoned a large boulder to chuck at him. It contained the same Dao energy as before, but Zac simply turned the boulder to gravel with a punch.

The floor guardian of the first floor might be the first peak F-Grade warrior he had encountered since entering the tower, but the ogre was far from being a match to someone like himself. Zac only decided to battle because he wanted to take a look at his skill once more, and now that he could confirm [Hatchetman's Spirit] worked as usual again he saw no need to prolong the fight.

One step brought him in front of the Ogre, but the huge bandit was prepared. A chain of explosions erupted, swallowing the two in an inferno. Zac had multiple ways to defend against such a surprise attack, but since he had his new skill up and running he might as well use it.

Another snap from behind allowed him to be enclosed in nature's embrace once more, and after a brief hesitation he also imbued his body with the Fragment of the Coffin to make sure he avoided his wound opening up again. The flames raged all around him for over ten seconds, making Zac look around in confusion.

Had the bandit lord decided to blow himself up?

But the flames eventually abated, and Zac could once again see the ogre in front of him. He was covered in a layer of rock, and Zac had seen the earth-mages among the demons perform the same trick. The Ogre had found an interesting fighting method that took advantage of the high durability of a geomancer, but how could his Endurance match up to a monster like Zac? He would need a far larger bomb to break through his defenses.

"How are you ali-?" the bandit roared, but he didn't get any further as space split from a swing of Zac's axe.

The body of the bandit lord fell apart into two neatly separated pieces, and a small surge of cosmic energy entered his body before it dissipated once more. The underlings had already been decimated by his Fractal Blade, and it returned to hover around him once more.

Zac released [Hatchetman's Spirit], and his two companions joined in short order. Neither of them looked too surprised that the battle took less than a minute, and they stepped into the teleportation array that had appeared in the courtyard of the fortress.

But this time Zac wasn't transported to a new world to explore, but he rather found himself in the black space that might as well be the System's waiting room. As expected a prompt appeared soon after.

[First Floor Complete. Rewarding Title.]

[Choose Reward: Weapon, Skill Crystal, Nexus Coins]

Zac looked over the three options and chose Skill Crystal after just a second of deliberation. It was just the first floor, so none of the options were likely to be anything amazing. A Skill Crystal might benefit someone back home though, or it could at least be put in the Merit Exchange.

The darkness disappeared and Zac found himself on the deck of a boat sailing on a turquoise ocean. Apelike humanoids scurried around all over the ship, and all of them wore the same type of livery indicating they came from the same force.

A crystal had appeared in his hand and he infused some of his energy into it to see if it was something he could use immediately.

[Frozen Enclosure – Create a sphere of ice that surrounds you. The strength of the shield increases with Intelligence.]

Zac sighed and put the crystal away. He had no affinity with Ice, like all other elements, and it was obviously a mage's skill. It would probably have a terrible efficiency if he learned it, so he didn't bother. His sister might find it useful though as she was an Elementalist. There were only so many skills a Class gave, and this might be a nice addition.

Galau appeared a second later, and Ogras came last after half a minute. Neither of them had very excited expressions, meaning they hadn't made any huge hauls either.

"Didn't think that you would immediately get the title," Zac commented as he opened his Title screen.

The New title had appeared, and just as expected it was a Permanent Title, rather than a Limited one.

[Tower of Eternity – 1st Floor. Strength +5, Endurance +5, Vitality +5]

"I think it's to lessen the need for a second run," Galau said. "It's still worth it to come back here if you make large gains, or if you were unlucky during the first climb. But the things you gain inside the Tower generally won't warrant another tower run."

"I got five points in three attributes, is it the same three attributes for everyone?" Zac asked.

"No," Galau said with a shake of his head. "It boosts the three attributes you focus the most on."

It made sense. Zac would have preferred some Dexterity or wisdom to shore up his weaknesses, but he knew that the third floor at least provided all attributes. And the fact he got the title immediately worked in his favor. There was no way he would be able to return to this place, and getting the titles directly meant that he would have an even better chance of reaching a higher floor.

"What did you think about the boss?" Ogras smiled.

"The weakest a peak F-Grade warrior could possibly be," Zac said. "I can't believe anyone who arrives here wouldn't be able to defeat him."

"Failing is exceedingly rare, but now and then someone messes up horribly or underestimates the challenge," Galau said. "But failing on the first floor is generally pretty shameful. Not something you'd share with others."

"Things will quickly get harder though," Ogras warned. "Of course, it won't be too bad while we're still on the second floor. But don't get lax."

Zac nodded as he closed his eyes to rest. Even if a couple of days had passed he still felt some lingering pangs from the wound in his side, though he could use most of his strength if the situation called for it. If it wasn't for the pill he got from the Zethaya he would no doubt still be bedridden, and that fact alone made Zac mostly forgive Boje's actions.

The ship soon anchored outside a solitary island, and the tree found out the quest was to look for clues to a hidden inheritance of an 'Ascendant', which was what these apemen called a D-Grade powerhouse after some probing.

"Can we take the inheritance for ourselves?" Zac asked, feeling they had hit the jackpot.

"Quit dreaming," Ogras snorted.

"Some quests task you with finding clues to extremely valuable items, such as divine treasures or long-lost inheritances like this one. But those are almost always fake. It is a huge gamble to try to snatch such a thing," Galau started to explain.

"First of all, the inheritance is likely not on this island. We would have to set sail with these apemen for weeks rather than continuing on to the next floors," Ogras continued. "And when we finally arrive we'll most likely just find another teleporter to the next level."

"But it is possible for it to be real?" Zac asked.

"There have been some reports of such things turning out to be true, but the odds are extremely low, even worse than with treasures. It's only really worth trying for such a thing if you find yourself stuck, unable to climb any further," Galau answered.

"That's one of the reasons why people keep pushing themselves to climb even if they know they won't beat the floor guardian they're at. Their title won't improve from climbing another few levels, but they might find an opportunity like this," the demon added.