

## The Fall 415

### Chapter 415: Hidden Rules

Things were pretty hectic in the next world as well, where they were thrown into a canyon full of rabid beasts. But one piece of good news was that the [Voidfire Array] wasn't actually gone or replaced with underwear. The System had been kind enough to place the core and array flags into Zac's Spatial Ring during the transfer.

The mission of the 30th level was to find and save a young master who was being pursued by some rival faction. The target was unfortunately extremely paranoid, and it ended up with the three of them having to find, corner, and kidnap him to complete the mission.

They did stay on for a bit longer than necessary though, as the canyon was filled with E-Grade monster boars that had particularly tasty meat. They spent a few hours stocking up for the climb, as it had turned out that Galau was a pretty decent chef. Only when they had made Galau cook enough food for almost a year did they proceed on to the next level.

The new world they found themselves was an endless desert under a yellow sky with four suns. The monochromatic tone of the surroundings made everything blur together into one big canvas of beige, and the blistering heat didn't help with the discomfort.

And just like in the previous levels they found themselves in the thick of it the moment they arrived. A group of desert warriors was assaulting a merchant's caravan, and it looked like they had taken the role of the last survivors. Bodies and mounts littered the area, most of them seemed to be on the side of the merchants.

Zac immediately went to work, as this felt refreshingly straightforward. One bandit after another got bisected by his fractal blades or skewered by snaking shadow spears. The remaining bandits quickly realized that they had met a tough opponent and started to flee, using sand-attuned skills to meld into the endless dunes.

"Shit, where are the bodies?" Ogras suddenly growled as he looked around. "Or at least their Cosmos Sacks."

Zac looked around to see what the demon meant, and he was shocked to discover that the dozens of corpses that had littered the area were gone, not even leaving a drop of blood as evidence that anything had ever been there.

"Was it a mirage?" Zac muttered, but even he didn't believe his own words.

The demon immediately started to kick away the sand where some of the merchants had fallen, but he found nothing even after digging a few meters down into the sand.

"I think the bandits brought the bodies with them as they fled," Galau guessed. "They had sand-attuned classes, they can probably move about underground as freely as walking on top of it."

"What good are you, looking on while they stole my loot," Ogras muttered as he glared at Galau.

"I'm sorry, I only realized it too late, I thought the shifting of the sand simply covered the corpses," the youth sheepishly said.

"It's fine," Zac shrugged. "Let's get moving."

They hadn't immediately gotten a prompt upon arriving, so they ascended one of the larger dunes in the area to get a better vantage of the situation. A screen appeared as soon they reached the peak, and Zac carefully read the instructions.

[Gain employment with the Desert Eye Caravan and Secure the Transportation Route out of the Heart of Sand]

"Desert eye Caravan?" Zac mumbled as he read the quest. "It's not the guys who just died, right?"

"We can probably find the answers over there, no?" Ogras said and pointed in the distance.

Zac looked in the direction Ogras indicated and he could vaguely make out some sort of settlement between the dunes. The three immediately set out and found that the place Ogras spotted was a small town set at the bank of a beautiful oasis.

The town itself wasn't anything special, and it could house a couple of thousand people at best. Security also seemed to be a bit lax as there were no walls and no guards that intercepted them when they entered the town. Only a few of the locals, who looked a bit like a mix of a gnome and armadillos, looked up when they entered the city.

It was also clear that it wasn't a permanent settlement for the majority of those walking the streets, but rather a waystation for people traversing the desert. Almost half the buildings were either hotels, bars, or other places for travelers to spend their money, and a large section of the town was meant to house the various mounts people used to travel.

If Cosmos Sacks didn't exist, then there would also no doubt be dozens, if not hundreds, of wagons parked somewhere, filled with goods. But all the goods were likely secured inside a string of Cosmos Sack on the merchants, or on their strongest bodyguards.

"Hold on to your Sacks," Ogras muttered. "Places like this are breeding grounds for pickpockets."

Zac nodded in agreement and made sure that none of his spatial tools were easily snatched. What the demon said was extremely true. Successfully snatching a small purse might essentially set you up for life in a place like this, provided that you managed to abscond with the wealth.

A Cosmos Sack was generally bound to an owner as long as he was alive, but there were no absolutes in this world. Anything from contracts to item bindings could no doubt be broken if the party was strong and motivated enough.

Trades were also taking place all over, and the loud clamor of heated bargaining could be heard from almost every corner. Almost all of the trade seemed to take place between traveling merchants as well, while the locals simply ran the town establishments. The traders likely came from different countries, and it was easier to trade their wares in the middle in a place like this rather than crossing the entire desert to trade at the opposite side.

The profit margins might become thinner in a place like this, but they also saved a lot on time and provisions, not to mention reducing the risk of getting killed on the road.

"Can you do me a favor?" Galau suddenly said as they inspected the town.

“What’s that?” Zac asked.

“Kill the bandits for me rather than escort the caravan,” the youth said.

“Why?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

Completing the quest generally resulted in more ample rewards, and it wasn't like the aspiring merchant to say no to free money.

“Are you planning on staying here?” Ogras asked.

“Yes,” Galau succinctly said as he looked around.

“We did promise you to take you to the 32nd level, you know,” Zac reminded. “We’re still one level short.”

“This level is fine,” Galau said. “It’s a merchant-related floor. Caravans from various distant locations will come to this small oasis town to resupply. It is a good opportunity for me to work on my business acumen.”

“There are also no vixens trying to string you up in the rafters,” the demon smiled.

“... That too,” Galau coughed. “Finding a place like this on the fourth floor is my good fortune. It might backfire if we keep going.”

“That’s fine,” Zac agreed, as killing some bandit lord seemed a lot easier and quicker than leading some slow caravan out from the desert anyway.

From there on out things proceeded quite smoothly. It only took Ogras three hours to sniff out one of the lookouts from the bandits skulking around in the town, and with some ‘enhanced interrogation tactics’ they soon found out where the bandits hid.

The bandits had found some mysterious ruins long ago, hidden in a natural cave-system far beneath the sandy surface. The bandits not only gained a decent incomplete heritage related to the Desert there, but also a great hidden base.

Many of the natives actually knew about this all along, but they never bothered to do anything about it as the bandits only targeted the caravans, and then sold the stolen goods to the locals at a discount. It was a thriving eco-system of a both black and white economy.

Even some merchants knew of this, but there wasn’t much they could do as this area was truly a no man’s land. Would they spend their money on an expensive excursion where they hired a mercenary squad to come all the way into the desert and fight the bandits?

It was cheaper to bear the risk of getting robbed and losing your money than being guaranteed to lose all your money on such an expensive endeavor.

They also found the Desert Eye Caravan, and they learned that they would be leaving the town within the day, and completing the quest would likely take around three days. That was unacceptable to both Zac and Ogras, so the tree immediately headed to the hidden passageway that the captured bandit used to head back to their base unnoticed.

What ensued was a messy battle between over a hundred bandits and Zac. Ogras assisted by assassinating one target after another, whereas Zac went for widespread destruction. It was a pretty annoying battle as the enemies had an obvious home-field advantage.

The bandits kept blending into the sands in the area, making it almost impossible to pinpoint the targets. Zac eventually got tired of the guesswork and unleashed [Nature's Punishment] to drown the whole area in a massive deluge. Running around inside the sand suddenly became a lot harder when it turned to dense mud, and they finally managed to catch and execute the Bandit Leader and most of the remaining bandits.

Ogras immediately went on a looting spree, while Zac sat down to go over the battle. He felt that his skill was somewhat restricted in the desert, something he hadn't really encountered before. He could only guess that it was because there was so little water in the area. However, that possibly meant that the skill didn't bring stuff from other dimensions, but rather took them from the area.

Did that mean that [Nature's Punishment] would be useless if he fought in space?

Ogras returned with a sour face half an hour later. It looked like the System didn't want to provide a bunch of loot when they skipped the mission, and it looked like the bandits didn't keep any wealth on their persons. Most of it was converted to Nexus Coins in the town, which the System kept for itself when they died.

A teleporter had appeared inside the ruins the moment the bandit lord died, and the three gathered in front of it after everything was dealt with.

"Good luck, you two. I hope you both can conquer the fourth-floor guardian," Galau said with some wistfulness as he transferred the agreed-upon fees to Ogras and Zac.

"Thank you. Wait what?" Zac asked with a frown.

"Well, you no doubt know that if you cannot travel together beyond this floor?" Galau said, looking confused.

Zac's brain froze for a second before he looked over at Ogras who looked like he had just eaten a pile of shit.

"...What?" was all the demon managed to spit out through grit teeth.

"The System wouldn't allow any carries beyond the 4th floor. After all, breaking through the 4th floor is the watermark of an elite. It doesn't only give you a percentage-based boost, but it also conjures an Apparition."

"So we can't even fight the floor guardian together?" Zac confirmed.

"You can, but only the one the System deserves the most credit will get the title and reward. It's based contribution and potential, I've gathered," Galau explained. "And splitting up later doesn't help either."

"So if I enter the final level of this floor with this monstrosity I'm shit out of luck?" Ogras shouted as he waved his spear at Zac.

"Well... Lord Piker is one in a millennium genius. I am afraid the odds of the apparition and titles going to you would be slim," Galau coughed, looking a bit embarrassed.

"We won't even be able to travel together either for the normal levels?" Zac asked.

"Well, you can, but it is practically unheard of. The restrictions for traveling in groups get even worse from here on out, and only one person gets the benefits. Who would travel in groups in such an environment?" Galau said.

The three stood in a suffocating silence for almost a minute until Ogras finally spoke up.

"Just give me the beacon arrays and a couple of defensive treasures!" the demon spat.

"Wha-?" Galau sputtered, but he still took out the beacon array he had used since the third floor.

"This is on you for not telling your employees! You screwed me over royally here by adding difficulty for my tower trial. The least you can do is provide some compensation," Ogras said as he snatched the array.

"But... The three billion..." Galau weakly countered.

"Nevermind that," Ogras growled. "Defensive treasure!"

"I guess this might be my oversight? This is a [Radiant Intervention] talisman from Talovor Trappings," Galau said with a pained expression as he took out a small box containing a golden talisman. "It would normally block a single strike, but it might not be able to completely counter the Floor Guardian. It will also release a blinding light upon impact, which might allow you to turn the tides."

"Good," Ogras said as he quickly snatched the treasure, his facial expressions making a 180-turn. "With this we can barely be considered even."

"Stay safe," Zac added to Galau. "And remember, try to stay for the full duration. You might also want to prepare to run the moment we exit. I will do my best to shoulder fallout, but I have no idea what the situation is like outside."

"I am sure that you will create a grand feat that will turn enmities into friendships," Galau said, though his smile was somewhat hollow. "Before I forget, I want you to have this."

The youth took out another box, and inside was a token that was reminiscent of the Tower Token. However, instead of the intricate fractals covering its surface there was only the insignia of the Beroria Family, the clan that Galau Belonged to.

"This is...?" Zac asked, but his heart started to beat faster in excitement.

"A teleportation token to Nal Avadar City, the seat of my family. It's in the Grand Dream Sector of the Allbright Empire."