

The Fall 423

Chapter 423: Cosmic Gaze

The next level placed him in an odd world where it felt like the colors were inverted, and he walked in a forest with white trunks and black leaves under a purple sky. The System wasn't as generous on the second world, and it took him over a day to figure out who the guardian was and to trap the wily beast.

Things were pretty much the same from there on out as Zac bashed his way from one level to another. His resolve to finish the quests fell apart after just three days when he found himself utterly unable to finish a single one of the first three levels of the 5th floor.

In the end he only managed to complete two quests on the whole floor, one assassination and one quest to locate a treasure. The assassination was done as sloppily as was humanly possible. Zac simply stormed the mansion of the target and killed him before he had the chance to run away, destroying half a city-block while completing the mission. He would have been fired on the spot from any decent assassin organization after such a shameful display.

As for the treasure quest, he simply was lucky. He accidentally overheard a few clues from an old drunk outside a tavern, and he almost stumbled onto the right spot just a few hours later. Perhaps his Luck was finally reaching the point where treasures almost jumped straight into his hands out of their own volition?

But even with his Luck and his decision to kill the guardians most of the time, it still took him 13 days to complete the eight levels of the 5th floor. That was pretty much what it took to climb the first three floors altogether, although they didn't rush through those levels.

He did however spend some time to master [Bulwark Mastery], and as expected he had been shown several visions related to cultivators focusing on their shields. There had been some differences between the various cultivators, but the similarities were far greater between the visions related to shields compared to those he got from [Axe Mastery].

Essentially all of them were related to defending, though it happened in different ways. Some were like Zac's class, warriors who stood at the forefront of armies, soaking up the damage and the hate so that his companions would be safe.

Others were mages or array masters who were able to erect massive defenses with their shields acting as the core. Only a few were also offensively geared, but Zac immediately felt that using a shield for attacking was suboptimal and nothing that he was interested in delving deeper into.

None of the visions really resonated with him, and it made him wonder just what he should do when evolving. He had spent most of the 5th floor in his Draugr-form, and he had to say that he was loath to fight without activating [Vanguard of Undeath] now.

Just getting a miasmic axe made Zac feel a much greater connection to the class, and he knew he needed to reduce the reliance on shields for his skills going forward. If that would happen immediately when evolving, then great. If not he'd simply have to take it step by step and gradually move toward a more axe-focused fighting style in his Draugr form as well.

The delay caused by working on his skills only added one extra day, so some worry about the higher floors started to sprout, and Zac began to wonder if his problem would be running out of time rather than a lack of power. How frustrating would it be if the time ran out just as he was about to defeat a floor guardian?

At least the floor guardian wasn't anything to write home about. It was a massive golem that would be able to keep the Fire Golem Leader in a pocket as it towered an impressive 30 meters into the air. It was like fighting a moving skyscraper, a massive construct of stone and crystal.

The golem had once been a guardian construct of a long-gone force, and for some reason it had awakened from its sealed chambers to wreak havoc on the area. Judging by the situation it might have gone the same way as Brazla, its artificial mind slowly getting twisted over the lonely eons.

Zac adopted a straightforward approach to the construct who used a mix of shockwaves and earth-based attacks, apart from its punches who were powerful enough to crush mountains. With the help of [Chop] and the Fragment of the Axe he managed to dismantle the giant piece by piece over an hour, all while dodging its attacks with the help of [Loamwalker].

It was a bit hard to compare the strength between the golem and the demon cultivator, but he estimated that the golem was only around 20% stronger than the demon. He would likely have been able to finish it off with either [Nature's Punishment] or [Deforestation], but Zac wanted to gain some experience in fighting against larger targets.

He knew that the reason for the small difference in strength was because the penalty was gone, and he reminded himself to not get complacent as he ripped out a huge inscribed crystal that had been in the chest of the golem.

Zac knew nothing about constructs, but he felt that the thing in his hands should be the equivalent to an array core, and it might be possible to repurpose somehow if he could keep it. He left the rest of the giant where it lay, as it was essentially scrap metal without the core, especially after Zac had launched hundreds of attacks on it.

[Fifth Floor Complete. Upgrading Title.]

[Choose Reward: Offensive Skill, Defensive Skill, Support Skill. NOTE: All skills will have 80% compatibility or higher.]

Zac quickly took a gander at his title, and he could confirm that nothing unexpected had happened with it.

[Tower of Eternity - 5th Floor: Reach the 46th level of the Tower of Eternity. Reward: All stats +10. Strength +5%, Endurance +5%, Vitality +5%, All Stats +5%.]

It simply gave an additional +5% to all attributes, which had officially turned it into the title providing the most amount of attributes by now. It had pushed his Strength one step further, placing it at 927 with the help of the Peak Grade Strength Fruit he consumed the moment he had the chance.

The title did also pushed his Luck to 204, but it seemed that there was no upgraded version of his Ambidextrous title. Perhaps something related to luck would appear at 250 points, but he didn't hold his breath for it. Zac had long realized that it was getting harder and harder to get his hands on new titles.

Stocking up on two more Limited titles wouldn't be too hard, but he needed to find a Mystic Realm or trial that fit.

That was a later headache though, and Zac instead focused on the three rewards, a bit hesitant as to what to choose. The System guaranteed a good fit with his pathways, but the trouble was choosing what would help him the most.

There was also the issue of which class the System would provide the skill for, but he guessed that his human form was more likely. It was still his 'true' race, and also the form he was in when defeating the floor guardian. But he still kept his mind open in case he was proven wrong.

Offensive skills were the first thing Zac discarded. His Offensive capabilities weren't lacking in either of his classes, especially with his two Dao Fragment to help. That left defensive and support skills on the table.

He felt he was somewhat lacking a Defensive skill in his current form, as his [Mental Fortress] skill was of middling quality at best. It also had no connection to his Daos, making a Dao infusion impossible. Physical defenses wasn't an issue though, with [Nature's Barrier] and [Hatchetman's Spirit] providing extra layers of protection on top of his huge pool of Endurance.

And he didn't even need to mention the defensive capabilities of his other class.

Eventually, Zac chose to go with a Support Skill. There was no guarantee that he would get a skill to replace [Mental Fortress] with even if he picked the Defensive Skill, while support skills could help him in all kinds of ways.

A blinding pain immediately erupted in his head, and the world turned white as it felt like someone was pouring acid in his eyes. Even Zac wasn't immune to the soul-rending pain, and he found himself on the floor writhing in agony for god know how long until the pain finally subsided.

Sweat rolled down his head as he blearily looked around, and he realized that he had already been thrown into a new world, one of endless darkness and glaciers. The cold would have turned a mortal into a popsicle in a second, but Zac barely noticed it as he looked inward after having made sure there were no enemies nearby.

He wasn't surprised to learn that the skill he had just gained was ocular, as the pain he had just felt in his eyes was all too familiar. It was the agony he felt when he had been forced to redraw his crude pathways into the proper ones provided by his class.

It was like inscribing something on his soul, where he first had to erase his old skill only to inscribe a new one. He had hoped that the pain would be less pronounced, like when he drew the pathways for the class in his Draugr-form, but there was no such luck. It made him a bit worried about his evolution, but Zac knew that was a later problem as he focused on his new skill.

[Cosmic Gaze – See through the veil of the universe. Upgradeable.]

The flavor text was a bit similar to his old skill, [Inquisitive Eye], though it felt a lot more impressive to see through the veil of the universe than to see through their secrets. The skill was also connected to his pathways and it had a great fit, which was a step up from the disconnected fractals that had simply hovered in his eyes before.

Zac looked around for a target to try the skill out on, but the area was truly desolate. That by itself was a problem though, so Zac started to move away from where he appeared. Safety was an illusion this far up the tower, and he couldn't stay around in what was probably a trap. However, he still wanted to see what his new skill did, and he eventually tried to activate it on a pristine-white tree nearby.

The world suddenly changed, as the dour landscape turned into a vibrant tapestry that shimmered in silver, blue, and white. Zac almost fell down from the rapid change in his surroundings, and it felt just like when he was drowning in Origin Dao from the Dao funnel.

The half-dead tree was suddenly a network of blue energy that surged from its roots beneath the snow up into its trunk. It was depending on the energy of the earth rather than photosynthesis to live.

But Zac barely had time to marvel at the beautiful scene before a formless blob of energy rose from the ground and globbed onto him, and Zac was shocked to notice there were already a couple of blobs sticking to his legs and his back when he looked down. Small motes of lights were slowly leaving his body and entering the little blobs, meaning they stole something from him without him noticing.

The first thing that came to mind was leeches. Were these little things slowly sucking him dry of Cosmic Energy? He quickly tried to brush the things away, but his hands passed right through. However, he thankfully found that they weren't immune to his Dao Fragment, and they quickly disintegrated after a few Dao-infused swings of his hand.

[Help the expedition team find the ice-attuned crystal mine.]

The quest appeared just as he destroyed the pack of energy balls, and Zac suddenly found himself holding a disk that was pretty similar to the beacon array that Galau had used before. He quickly put the array away as he set out to complete the quest.

It took Zac over six hours in the freezing winds to find the place he was looking for, a nondescript snow-covered hill that only reached fifty meters into the air. It certainly wasn't the kind of mountain where you'd expect to find a Nexus Crystal mine, as the energies were barely elevated above the norm in the area.

But thanks to [Cosmic Gaze] he could see that a cold blue light was slowly seeping out from the hill at a few spots, and after he cleared the area he saw that the lights emerged from a couple of cracks. The lights only grew brighter as Zac cut his way down a couple of meters, and he could quickly confirm he had found his target as the stone started to become studded with white-blue crystals.

He didn't immediately activate the beacon though, but he instead extracted a few dozen Ice-Attuned Nexus Crystals. He only looted right around the entrance before he activated the beacon though, as he felt that cleaning house would be a mistake.

The disc suddenly enlarged and a group of humanoids stepped through, led by an ice-blue troll that was just skin and bone. He held a staff in his hand, and the whole area turned a few degrees colder when he appeared.

The troll only threw Zac a glance before he looked down into the mine, and nodded with satisfaction. He did release a snort when he saw the holes in the walls, but he didn't comment on Zac snatching a little bit for himself.

“Pay him,” the shaman said with a raspy voice, and another troll stepped forward and handed Zac a box.

Zac accepted the box and immediately put it away before he stepped onto the Teleportation Array that had been created from the Array Disk. This was what he had expected. Looting the mine would have given him a couple of ice attuned Nexus Crystals, which were pretty much useless for him. But properly completing a quest usually brought rewards, and Zac gambled that the reward would be better than the crystals.

His new skill proved extremely helpful over the following levels, as various secrets that would have passed him right by were displayed as clear as day from his magical vision.

The skill wasn’t some sort of universal key though as Zac quickly realized that the lights he saw through [Cosmic Gaze] were attuned energies, and most energies simply weren’t attuned. Since attunement was slightly related to the Dao it did however vaguely provide a hint when skills got infused by the Dao, but it was nowhere as clear as the lights emitted from things such as attuned crystals.

More importantly, he realized that no one noticed when he used the skill on them, which was what had essentially made his old ocular skill useless. Now he would be able to glean clues from his enemies without them noticing, and Zac knew it might be just what he needed when he saw the quest for the final level of the 6th floor.

[Defeat the Enlightened Three in a Dao Discourse]