

## The Fall 424

### Chapter 424: Thelim

Zac found himself standing on a gravel road in the middle of a tranquil forest the moment he appeared at the final level of the 6th floor, and the quest to defeat the Enlightened Three in a Dao Discourse had appeared immediately upon arrival.

If Zac had been tasked with something like this a few weeks ago he would have thought the quest meant he was supposed to expound on the Dao, proving his deeper understanding compared to these three enlightened cultivators. It would be like a theological debate between a couple of monks.

But Galau had mentioned Dao Discourses in passing, which saved Zac the embarrassment. As it turned out, a Dao Discourse wasn't something as civil as a debate in the traditional sense. There were no podiums and no moderator keeping score of good arguments. It was actually more like a battle.

However, the difference between a Dao Discourse and a normal fight was that the battle only utilized the Dao and nothing else. To make this possible there was an array simply called [Dao Discourse Array]. The fight wouldn't take place between the combatants personally, since things like Attributes and Skills would influence the results.

The way Galau described how it worked made it sound like a Dao Discourse was like a mix of Chess and a mock battle. You infused your Daos into the array, and it would conjure various phenomena or avatars that you would use to fight. For example, his Fragment of the Axe would probably be able to conjure axe warriors, or perhaps spiritual axes that flew around in the air. But it obviously wouldn't be able to summon an ice golem.

It was a battle where you benefited from creativity and tactics, but the Dao was still the focus. The stronger your Daos were, the stronger your avatars would be. Similarly, the greater control you had over them, the better you would be able to fight. You claimed victory by destroying the enemy's avatars or forced them to concede.

Zac hadn't understood why anyone would just give up, but it turned out that one's soul was connected to the array. Every time an avatar was destroyed your soul took a hit. This meant that the risk of death was pretty low, but you stood the risk to seriously harm your soul if you didn't know when to give up.

These types of mock battles were a popular means of both working on your control of the Dao and settling disputes in larger sects, but it was a pretty hard item to get. Why some random force in the middle of the forest had an array like this was beyond Zac's understanding, but he supposed it was simply put there by the System to create a new type of challenge.

When it came to the strength of his Daos Zac felt pretty confident. Two Dao Fragments should by all means be pretty strong even compared to the Floor Guardian of the 6th floor. The problem was his control, or rather lack thereof. His amateurish finesse was already all too apparent from his inability to learn [Cyclic Strike], but that wasn't the real problem.

He was still utterly incapable of infusing multiple Daos into a single skill or attack, which was the hallmark of a skilled cultivator. His sister was able to do it since long ago, and Ilvere was getting close as

far as Zac could tell. He couldn't be sure, but he also believed Thea mastered that technique going by their time traveling in the hunt.

That was the greatest risk to him failing the quest as he saw it. Infusing two Daos into a skill might not double its might, but it would still increase it by a noticeable degree. The same applied to a Dao Discourse, where using multiple Daos would result in both more versatile and powerful avatars.

He knew that he wouldn't be able to beat some enlightened cultivators through finesse, and there was no chance of him suddenly becoming a masterful Dao controller in an instant. He would have to rely on brute force and hope that his Daos and mental strength along with some creative tactics were enough to force his enemies to give in.

At least he had [Cosmic Gaze] now to help him understand what his enemies would be doing. Daos weren't as obvious as skills, as its natural form was invisible and formless. But with his ocular skill he might be able to figure out what Daos the opponents were using and their plans, allowing him to gain the upper hand.

There were limits to that strategy though as [Cosmic Gaze] wasn't some patch that solved everything that Zac currently lacked.

The new skill only elevated Zac from a bumbling idiot to a somewhat capable adventurer thanks to showing him a larger picture of the truth, but it was just a small aid in the end. The levels of the 6th floor had still taken longer and longer to complete for example, even with the help of [Cosmic Gaze].

For example, climbing the eight levels of the 6th floor had cost him a full 16 days. Things got more complicated at every level, and the ocular skill only helped resolve certain issues. Still, Zac judged that he saved almost 5 days thanks to [Cosmic Gaze], but it was distinctly possible that the 7th floor would take over 20 days as things looked right now.

One saving grace was that the System had actually been kind enough to swap out his ocular skill in both his classes. He had thought that [Inquisitive Eye] would remain in his Draugr-form, but he had been happy to be proven wrong the first time he swapped during the climb. His pitch-black eyes in his undead form were pretty amazing now, both being able to discern life force and the Daos.

Losing his old skill completely didn't bother Zac in the slightest as it didn't serve much of a purpose any longer. Losing the ability to inspect beasts was a bit of an annoyance, but there were no doubt items that could serve a similar purpose in the multiverse. Perhaps whatever the fractal version of AR goggles was?

He had tried learning [True Strike] in his undead form as well, but his picky pathways hadn't accepted the crystal. The eyes alone was a great asset when fighting the series of guardians though. The guardians were all well into the E-Grade already, and after the 3rd level they were all at least as strong as the battleroach king if you excluded the Technocrat's modifications.

Of course, they didn't all excel at defense the same way as the massive roach did. One of them was a lightning-attuned thief, and Zac couldn't even catch his robes in his human form. Hundreds of fractal blades were shot out in his attempts to take down the ratman, but the blades only managed to destroy the ancient ruins they fought inside.

Zac was eventually forced to swap classes mid-battle, relying on the defensive charges of his robes and one of Rasuliel's defensive treasures to not get skewered while transitioning. The moment he unleashed the combination of [Profane Seal] and [Vanguard of Undeath] the fight was essentially over, as his Undying Bulwark class was truly the nemesis of all Dexterity-based classes.

He was thankfully still able to defeat the guardians just fine without being forced to resort to [Hatchetman's Rage] or using any of his ultimate skills, which was a relief. He still used his stronger skills now and then, but it was mostly to expedite his climb. If he had been forced to go all out against the normal guardians, then what would he do against the true floor guardian?

The increasing strength of the guardians also came with a constantly increasing risk of real injuries. He hadn't been wounded so far apart from a few minor flesh wounds, but that would probably change starting on the next floor. One mistake and he would be out of commission for a couple of days, and those types of delays could prove extremely costly.

He still had a large number of arrays and other treasures in his Cosmos Sack collecting dust. He hadn't encountered a situation that called for a [Void Ball] so far, not mentioning the even stronger arrays that he had found in Rasuliel's Spatial Tool. Perhaps they would prove to be the key to speed up the fights and reduce the time he had to spend healing up.

At the end of the day there wasn't much he could do about the lack of time, he could only keep his head down and complete the quest he was given. He could always just run in axe swinging, but he truly wanted to succeed in the Dao Discourse if possible. The last floor guardian had been related to learning a skill, and he had found a Skill Crystal.

This quest was directly related to the Dao, and the implication was clear. If he could encounter an opportunity to improve his Daos he had to grab it. It was pretty much the only venue for him to power up without evolving, and improving any of his Daos by one step would increase his power by a noticeable degree.

"Excuse me," a deep voice suddenly rumbled behind him, and Zac turned around only to find himself face-to-face with a walking tree, its face seemingly carved right into the trunk.

It rose almost four meters into the air, where almost half of it was a tree crown that kind of looked like a set of hair for the face that was placed on its trunk.

"Ah?" Zac was only able to answer, his mind a bit on the fritz since he couldn't believe he had neither sensed nor heard a living tree sneaking right up behind him.

"You are blocking the path young man," the tree kindly reminded.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Zac said as he stepped to the side of the road as if by instinct.

"Are you perchance participating in the Dao Discourse as well?" the ent asked as it curiously looked at him, the movement causing its thick trunk to creak in protest.

Zac hesitated for a moment before he nodded in confirmation.

"As I thought," the ent nodded. "How about we go together? I am trying my hand as well, though I do not hold much hope for my chances. My name is Thelim, by the way."

Zac readily agreed as he felt that this large being didn't contain any malicious intentions, and his danger sense was completely quiet as well. The tree could rather be a source of information about the scenario of the level, an opportunity to glean whether there was some Dao-related opportunity hiding somewhere.

And if the ent decided to sneak an attack, then Zac would simply turn him into firewood.

"I am just passing through the area, and I just heard about the Enlightened Three by chance. I heard there was a great opportunity waiting for anyone who could defeat them, do you know anything more?" Zac probed.

"So you're a traveler?" the ent mumbled with a thoughtful nod. "That's why I couldn't place you. Well, it makes sense that you came here."

Zac slowly nodded, not sure what the ent was talking about.

"The opportunity you heard about is the chance to enter the Pool of Tranquility. It's a pond of spiritual dew that has formed a natural formation over countless millennia," Thelim said, the leaves on his head shaking with excitement.

"What does it to?" Zac said as his heart started to beat a bit faster.

The name reminded Zac of something Ogras had mentioned offhandedly. His family apparently possessed a magical pond themselves, which was created with the help of a huge amount of treasures and a powerful array. It was actually a trial ground that could award a Limited Title. The elites of the clan could dive into it, and the further down they managed to go, the better the title the System awarded.

The demon had wanted Zac to buy something similar from the Town Shop, but there was nothing of the sort available. What if this pond was the same? He still had two empty slots for Limited Title, so no matter how good or bad it was, it would still be a pure upgrade.

And even if it didn't give a limited title, then it was still probably related to the Dao. Was drinking the Dew the equivalent of eating a Dao Treasure? The effect of Dao Treasures was pretty muted inside the Tower, but this was a free opportunity. He might even be able to take away some of the water to drink it outside.

But the next words from the ent dashed Zac's hopes.

"Every day a few drops are added to the pool at sunrise, each droplet infused with the spirituality of daybreak and empowered by the spirit of the forest. If my kind enters our bloodlines will be purified, but there are some benefits for normal people as well," Thelim explained.

"What kinds of benefits?" Zac probed.

"It purifies and strengthens souls."

Zac once again got excited when he heard the effect of the pool. It wasn't exactly what he had hoped for, but it still sounded like something he could benefit immensely from. His soul getting corroded by the splinter was a constant worry, especially since the past few days.

Because the Splinter of Oblivion had finally woken up from its slumber again.

