

The Fall 406

Chapter 406: Penalties

The trio soon joined the monkeys in scouring the island, and with the help of Galau's superior investigative skill they found an odd fluctuation beneath a lake. They could have explored it themselves and risked falling out with the simian sailors, but they instead called for the captain who awarded them each with a small sack of E-Grade Nexus Crystals as thanks.

Most of the crystals would most likely turn to dust the moment they exited the Tower, but they would work just fine while they were still inside. So all of happily took the reward as it meant they would save on their own stock.

The following floors went quite smoothly as well, as the difficulty could be easily managed by anyone of them. Zac did however note that the setting of the quests started to subtly change. The quests first floor had all taken place in civilized areas such as towns or established countries, with the exception of the floor guardian hiding on a mountain top.

But that changed with the second floor. The surroundings they found themselves in were more wild and untamed. The first level of the second floor took place on the tropical island, and the seventh was on an island as well. The third level took place in a fallen kingdom where order was rapidly crumbling.

They were tasked with escorting one of the surviving children of a once-great noble house to an ally waiting outside the town, and were ambushed by both rebels and random bandits who saw how richly decked the lordling was. But a blast of Zac's massive and blood-drenched aura was all it took to force them all to run for the hills, allowing them to complete the quest without lifting a finger.

Zac felt he learned a lot from their quests, and he more and more understood the crazy gambit of the Lotus Emperor. He had split himself into 10 000 incarnations to live a multitude of lives. If this method ever came to fruition and he could fuse his incarnations back into one being, just how deep would his knowledge of the universe become?

The final level of the second floor was a simple quest to save a faltering town bordering a massive forest from a dangerous beast in the area. After asking around they learned it was some sort of recently evolved reptile and that it possessed shocking speed.

"It's usually like this," Ogras explained. "The final level of a floor almost always requires a proof of strength to conquer. You can't just luck into a quest that suits your skillset. Strength is ultimately the true language of the multiverse."

"The 9th level of a floor requires you to defeat a floor guardian 95% of the time, with the final 5% requiring proof of Strength in other ways," Galau nodded in agreement. "And be careful, the strength will sharply rise compared to the things you've fought so far."

"It's only the second floor though," Zac said, but he still took out his axe just in case.

"That's true, but the attributes of the beasts are around 40% higher because there's three of us," Galau said.

"That much?" Zac said with surprise. "What would happen if I brought 10 people to carry?"

"Nine is the limit, and the floors would be almost three times as hard," Galau said. "Most carries only bring one or two people. Taking too many might negatively impact your own climb."

"Wait, will we still be penalized after leaving you on the 32nd level?" Zac asked with a frown.

A 40% boost in attributes wasn't a problem now, but what if it stayed when he assaulted the 5th and 6th-floor guardians? That would be a pretty huge handicap, and he wasn't so sure that 3 billion Nexus Coins were worth it.

"Any floor one enters together with others will be adjusted accordingly, even if some people drop out early," Galau answered before a hesitant expression entered his face. "I didn't mention it because I was sure you knew."

"So we'll be only be penalized on the fourth floor?" Zac mused. "That's not too bad."

He had high confidence in defeating a floor guardian of the fourth floor even if it had a 40% attribute boost, and afterward the penalty would decrease, making it not too difficult bringing Ogras compared to going at it alone.

The benefit Ogras would bring would no doubt supersede a 20% bump in the enemies' strength.

"Any idea of how to find the beast?" Zac asked after they had walked in the forest for two hours.

"I thought it would show itself since we've restrained our auras," Ogras muttered before he turned to Galau. "You should have something to solve the situation."

"Ahem... The person providing the Tower Carry generally includes all the materials for the climb itself in the price," the merchant said. "But I do have some items for sale that might help. Best prices in the forest, heh."

Both Ogras and Zac stopped when they heard the mention of money, and another standoff commenced.

"But then again it's just a small trinket," Galau stammered, clearly feeling the pressure. "Here. Simply place this in an open space. If the beast is near-by it will no doubt come."

Galau handed Zac a small ball with a stench that made his nose-hair curl up. It smelled like thing contained a mix of old diapers and rancid meat, all pressed together into a ball of unholy horrors. The stench was so unbearable it made him question life, and the only reason he didn't throw it away was that he was afraid it would break into pieces making the smell even more unbearable.

"What the-" Ogras groaned, looking about ready to hurl. "I'll keep watch from the trees."

The next moment he disappeared, no doubt to escape the smell. Galau was already running as well, leaving Zac with the hot potato still in his hand. He didn't want to spend one more second than necessary with that cursed object in his hand, so he simply left it on a stone and jumped into some bushes that were just outside of the smell.

At least the ball turned out to be pretty effective, and their target arrived just 30 minutes later.

The beast was actually a large snake rather than a reptile, and his hair stood on its end when he looked at it. He still was a bit emotionally scarred after his desperate battle with a mutated snake during the

first week of the integration. He had been way too close to death at that time, and there was still some lingering fear deep in his heart.

The snake was at least not as big as Slither, Verana's pet, as it only reached a bit over ten meters in length. It was a deep brown with green spots on its back, and for such a large snake it was pretty slim. It slithered between the trees with surprising agility, and it reached the puke-ball in the blink of an eye.

An enraged hiss emerged from the snake's maw when it realized that it was just bait rather than whatever the ball pretended to be, but at that point Zac was already running toward it with his axe at the ready. However, the snake turned its head with shocking speed and spat out a green mist that immediately covered a hundred meters in front of it.

Zac's brows rose in shock and he hastily infused his body with the Dao of the Coffin as he held his breath. The mist was clearly poisonous, and Zac frowned in consternation when he realized the mist burrowed itself into his pores even after having activated his defensive Dao.

He was just about to switch to the Seed of Trees to start purifying the invading poison, but he noticed a startling change that made him stop. The Dao of the Coffin might have failed in keeping the poison out of his body, but that apparently didn't mean it was helpless against it. It was actually refining it instead.

The mental energy that was spread throughout Zac's body was attacking the poison like white blood cells, and turning it into normal Cosmic Energy that seeped into his body. In other words, the Snake's attack was restoring Zac's energy rather than harming him.

Was this the effect brought on from the Dao of Rot? He had already discovered the properties that were akin to those of Hardness, but now he also witnessed the Rot. His thoughts briefly went to the lotus locked inside the coffin in his vision, the basis of his Dao Fragment. Corruption locked in a hard exterior.

So what if the hard shell let poison seep through? The interior was meant as a prison for such things anyway.

The Snake hadn't realized that its wide-scale attack was ineffective though, and it immediately went in for the kill when it noticed that Zac had stopped moving. But a flash of light was all it saw before its massive head was removed from its body. The beast was still too weak to prove a worthwhile opponent for him to hone his skills, so he didn't want to waste any time on it. He was more interested in observing the changes inside his body.

Zac sat down in the middle of the poison haze, and he slowly tried to understand what the Dao Fragment did, and if there were some other benefits it could bring. Unfortunately, he didn't find out anything else, but it was an interesting topic to keep looking into. Galau and Ogras arrived soon after the poisonous clouds dissipated, and the demon immediately headed for the carcass.

"Do you need an antidote pill?" Galau asked as he reached for his cosmos sack.

"No need," Zac said with a shake of his head. "A poison of this level won't affect me."

Galau nodded in understanding, not seeming too surprised by the fact that Zac was fine. Having some means to handle poison was a basic precaution for any wandering warrior, so Galau probably thought he had some skill or treasure that protected him. But there still was some hesitation as he looked at Zac.

“What?” Zac asked.

“Why aren’t you using your shield? You paid so much for it but I’ve only seen you take it out to play with a few times,” the merchant asked. “Are you thinking of repurposing the material after all? I could buy it off your hands, but you would make a small loss.”

Zac blankly looked back at Galau for a second, realizing what he meant. It must truly look a bit odd for him to pay through the nose for the shield only to not use it at all.

“Why bother defending against weaklings like this? Might as well directly kill them to get things over with. Would almost be a dishonor to such a nice shield to waste it on some large worm,” the demon said from the side as he extracted a large sack from the head of the snake.

“The gall bladder?” Zac asked curiously. “Do you know how to make antidotes?”

“What antidotes?” the demon snorted. “I want it for my liquor.”

“You can do that as well?” Zac asked with interest. “Does it have any benefits?”

“It might have some benefits if the wine is good enough,” the demon said after some deliberation. “But I mostly want it for the taste. Haven’t been able to drink any good snake wine for a while. Besides, it better than just stowing it away and hoping the gallbladder is real.”

Zac nodded, understanding that this might go under the ‘eat anything you can while still inside the tower’-umbrella, and left the demon to his devices.

Galau helped Zac extract the fangs and poison sack. The poison wasn’t very strong, but who knew if it would come useful in the future. An array had already appeared in the clearing not far away, and Zac started to walk toward it.

“Wait,” Galau suddenly said, and Zac noted that the demon hadn’t moved either.

“What?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Take a look at this,” Galau said as he took out a small array disk.

He placed a Nexus Crystal inside the disk, and it lit up and fired a projectile straight into the air a second later like a firework. It looked a lot like one of those flare guns that you kept on a boat in case you got stuck at sea, and it illuminated the whole area in a blue luster for almost a minute before it dimmed.

“What’s that for?” Zac asked.

“For us to find him,” Ogras explained.

“The change of the third floor is that we will no longer emerge at the same position,” Galau explained.

“We will be placed in the same area, but there will usually be some sort of barriers between us. Beasts or cultivators, for example. But it can also be arrays or other things.”

“So you’ll shoot off one of these when we arrive at a new level, and we’ll come to pick you up?” Zac asked.

“Exactly. Blue means no danger, red means I’m in danger. So, uh, if you see a red light please hurry,” Galau said.

“Was this how you did it as well?” Zac asked.

“Pretty much. The guy who helped me had a mother-daughter array that allowed him to find me, and I simply hid in the shadows until he showed up,” the demon nodded.

“Fine, let’s go,” Zac said with some anticipation as he walked toward the array. “Perhaps we can finally find some decent sparring partners on the next floor.”

Galau didn't say anything, but rather just looked at Zac like he was a lunatic.