

The Fall 420

Chapter 420: Erudite Master

It was both liberating and jarring to start a trial alone. It wasn't that Zac was worried he'd fail, but he realized how much he had relied on Galau's and Ogras' experience and knowledge as they ascended one level after another. It was mostly them who figured out a plan, while he had eventually been reduced to a simple enforcer.

While it was nothing wrong with that, he still felt he was missing the point of the Tower, and he vowed to do his best in completing the quests rather than steamrolling through the following floors. And it was almost as though the System wanted to help him with his goal, as it had provided him with a final challenge that wasn't related to defeating the floor guardian.

But Zac still felt some dismay as he knew that the final trial of the 4th floor might actually turn out to be impossible.

[Learn the skill of the Erudite Master]

Zac wryly looked at the quest he got, before his eyes trailed the winding path leading up the massive mountain in front of him. This was one of the simpler quests on the surface level. The Erudite Master was both the quest target and the floor guardian, meaning that Zac could either learn his skill or simply beat him up.

Unfortunately, he had proven himself to be hopelessly bad at learning skills without the assistance of Skill Crystals. Ilvere easily learned the skill that had eluded him for months, and he did not doubt that people like his sister or Thea Marshall would only need hours to master it.

But it was a welcome challenge as well, and Zac started to ascend the mountain with determination to make the best of it. He still wasn't completely sure what the rules of his odd body were. Yrial said he had zero affinities with all Daos, yet he hadn't encountered any bottlenecks, even when forming his fragments.

He had already learned from Galau that just forming a Dao Fragment while still at F-Grade was a sign of great talent, yet he had breezed through that without any issues. Twice.

In fact, he could be said to be pretty talented in the field of Dao, though many of his insights admittedly came from Dao Treasures. But not even the one-in-a-million genius Thea Marshall or his AI-assisted Sister could match up to his insights, proving that things weren't as simple as they seemed.

But the 0 affinities might be related to using the Daos rather than learning them, and if that was the case it would likely become a problem in the future. Everything was based on the Dao in the end, including the very core of all skills. What if he suddenly was unable to improve his skills? Would he be running around with F-Graded skills even after he had formed his Cosmic Core?

A pang of danger suddenly erupted in his mind, and he flashed to the side with the help of his movement skill only to see an arrow whizz past him where his head was just a second ago. He quickly looked around and spotted what looked like a mix of a frog and a dwarf holding a crossbow.

The frogdwarf, and Zac only guessed the gender based on the thin black mustache that ran along its extremely wide mouth, looked quite surprised to see his sneak attack failing. But Zac didn't even have a chance to capture the odd cultivator as he suddenly turned into a stone.

It looked like one of the escape skills he had seen before, and Zac looked around in an attempt to find the frog's new location. But it was in vain as the mountainous forest was completely still.

The tranquility of the forest did not last for long though as Zac was assaulted by one warrior after another who all seemed to be heading for the summit. It looked like it was a free-for-all between cultivators who wanted to meet the Erudite Master, and it felt like they all competed to complete the quest.

Zac had already asked about the possibility of meeting other climbers during a trail but as far as Ogras, or the even more knowledgeable Galau, knew there was no such thing as floors where climbers were pitted against each other.

It was not like Zac had encountered any frog dwarves outside the tower either, so meeting dozens of them would be a bit odd if they were real. Since the frogmen were natives Zac chose to only cripple them a little bit rather than killing them.

Since they went out of their way to attack him he was pretty sure they were fair game, but he still didn't want to mess up his climb due to some old monster popping out of nowhere. Besides, he was already at the end of the fourth floor. It was worth remembering what Galau said.

Nothing was black and white, and all actions have consequences. What if the old master was one of the frogmen as well, and he got enraged by seeing his people getting slaughtered by Zac? Of course, it could also swing the other way, where the frogdwarves were the enemies of the master, and the lenient treatment by Zac was seen as a sign of a weak Dao Heart.

One could go crazy going back and forth what might create the best outcome, but this was just like real life; there was no way to control all small details. He could just follow his conscience as he kept going forward.

It only took him a few hours to reach the summit of the mountain that would give Mount Everest a run for its money. He had initially planned on taking on the floor guardian in his undead form, but after having seen the quest he decided to stay human.

The likelihood of the old master being undead was pretty slim considering the surroundings, and the pathways of his Draugr-class were a lot pickier than his human side. If he wanted a shot at learning the skill he would have to do it as a human.

The peak of the mountain was mostly flat and it had the area of a couple of baseball fields. There was a small pond with a few fishes lazily swimming about, and a solitary tree that looked extremely ancient was providing some shade next to it.

Apart from that there wasn't much to see, and there wasn't even a house to stay in. Confusion entered Zac's heart as he looked around for any erudite master. Had he ascended the wrong mountain?

"Let me have a look at you, lad," a decrepit voice echoed from the distance as an old warrior who had been hidden by the tree stood up.

Zac sighed in relief as he took a good look at the 'Erudite Master'. It was not one of the frogmen, but rather an ancient-looking demon. He wasn't the same kind as either Ogras or abyssal demons though. This one was a pale blue, with golden horns speckled with red.

His build was pretty much the same as a human's apart from the taloned feet and indistinct scale pattern covering his skin. He would probably have been almost two meters in his prime, but time had made him lose at least two decimeters in height.

The Erudite Master was obviously nearing the end of his lifespan judging by how old he looked. Zac still wasn't an expert, but he guessed the old master had a couple of months to a year at best.

The old demon inspected Zac just as how Zac was inspecting him.

"If you want to learn my skill, put that axe away. I am a pugilist, and you will never learn it while wielding a weapon. If you just want to test your strength, you're welcome to do so as well," the demon said with equanimity.

Zac frowned when asked to disarm, but he eventually put his axe away. He didn't feel any animosity from the old demon, and he was curious about what kind of skills he had. Most of all he felt this was a good opportunity to train against a skilled enemy, and he would ruin it if he launched [Hatchetman's Rage] and [Nature's Punishment] to level the whole mountain top in one all-out move.

"Good," the demon said before his muddy eyes suddenly turned extremely sharp as his aura rose by a shocking degree.

It was still well within what Zac could handle, but he felt the pressure was even greater compared to some of the Invasion generals he had fought recently. That was saying something considering the old man in front of him was still in F-Grade.

The fact that the old demon hadn't evolved didn't dampen Zac's mood. On the contrary, it made his blood pump from excitement. Calrin had once told him that the ones to look out for were those looking very young or those looking very old.

The extremely young were the geniuses who kept pushing forward, breaking through bottlenecks without any trouble. The very old ones were those who had been stuck at their current level for centuries, and this generally led to one of two outcomes.

Either they gave up on the martial path and focused on some side interests, becoming merchants or simply enjoying retirement. Others kept at it to the very end, polishing their skills and power to the limit in hopes of finally finding the spark to break through their bottleneck.

The old man in front of him was obviously the latter type.

Zac didn't know why a man with such a dense aura as the one in front of him was stuck on F-Grade, but right now it didn't matter as the demon emitted a sharp battle intent. The master suddenly pushed forward straight across the pond, and his movements sounded like the roars of beasts.

The demon was almost immediately in front of him, and his right hand formed a fist that shuddered with power. Zac immediately turned to absorb the punch with his left arm, which would allow him to counter with a right-hook of his own.

But shifting his body like that had actually opened him up for the old demon to knee him right in the gut, and Zac was thrown away so far that he almost fell off the mountain top. He wasn't hurt though as the old demon only had used the strength of his body in the opening salvo, and not empowered his strikes with neither skills nor Dao.

Zac flashed back with the help of [Loamwalker] in an instant, and a rapid exchange of punches and kicks commenced. Unfortunately, the exchange generally consisted of Zac punching air while being barraged by attacks from all directions.

The old demon's strikes were extremely unpredictable, and no matter how Zac tried to counter the strikes it seemed to somehow backfire. Initially he had tried to limit the strength he used to match the old demon, but he was already using at least 20% more Dexterity while still getting his ass kicked.

"There is a battle raging," the demon said as he once again punched Zac square in his face. "One in your mind."

Zac's brows rose in shock, wondering if the old man had somehow sensed the splinter.

"There is the instinct of the beast brewing deep inside of you, wanting to break out. But you are fighting it, attempting to maintain the heart of the warrior, defeating technique with technique," the old man explained.

"Find a balance and prepare yourself!" the demon roared as his aura suddenly started to rise once more.

The massive roar caused a storm around them, and Zac was almost forced to close his eyes. The old man was obviously up to something, and his danger sense told him it wasn't something minor. His first instinct was to fight fire with fire, beating the demon down before he could unleash his strike.

However, Zac also believed it was best to be cautious. He was on the fourth floor after all, and it was also a boosted floor due to multiple people joining. The challenge was almost on par with what he would face when meeting the guardian of the fifth floor.

A golden halo surrounded the demon, and the air around him crackled as he pushed his hand forward like a spear. The demon was clearly using a skill this time, though Zac still couldn't sense any Dao.

The power in the attack was palpable, and Zac's hand immediately rose to counter the strike aimed at his gut. But mid-motion Zac noticed that the man's hand changed direction, likely targeting his more vulnerable throat.

He quickly adjusted by putting both his arms in front of his throat, while preparing to counter after blocking the stab. But a burning sensation in his side was like a wake-up call, and he looked down at his bleeding side with confusion.

Had the demon changed the trajectory of his attack again? But why didn't he notice? Or was the small change in muscle or stance just a feint from the start, meant to confuse him? Luckily the demon had stopped his strike after just piercing his flesh, so he wasn't really wounded.

"Having the heart of the beast and the courage to brave any danger is commendable. Having a cool and calculating heart will allow you to turn a losing battle into victory. But your heart cannot encompass everything," the demon said as he backed away, his hand dripping with blood.

“Who are you in the end?”