

The Fall 243

Chapter 243: Gold and Bones

Zac was about to walk out of his hiding spot, but he suddenly realized something. He was almost completely naked. His brows rose in surprise, but as he looked at the ground he understood what had happened.

Scraps from his former robes lay around him, corroded and discolored. It almost looked like he had molted a layer of skin, and Zac couldn't help but frown in disgust. He had expected the robes to have repaired themselves while he meditated, but he was dead wrong on that point.

The rat vomit must have overtaxed the robes and destroyed the inscriptions. It was regrettable since it was a very convenient item, but Zac wasn't overly saddened by it. The clothes had lost their usefulness to a large degree already. The shields it could summon simply weren't strong enough to protect him against threats anymore.

Besides, he had gained a huge amount of Endurance since he got his second class. In fact, he had more than doubled his Endurance in just a few short weeks. It was to the point that he hadn't really acclimatized to the huge improvements and he still avoided strikes that wouldn't be unable to hurt him.

It became readily apparent during his fight with the rats. He had taken thousands of strikes from the frenzied beasts but he walked away from the battle with only surface wounds that had bled a bit. If he had taken those kinds of strikes during the beast waves he would have been out of commission in no time.

So the loss of the defensive option wasn't really an issue, but Zac would miss the fact that he never needed to change or clean the clothes. It seemed that he would have to go back to his old style of wearing whatever, and he started scouring the mountains of loot in his cosmic sack for anything serviceable.

Finally, he decked himself in the gaudy robes of Tyrbat Medhin, the royal he killed during the first day of the hunt. The robe hadn't displayed any real defensive properties during the fight, but Zac chose it for another reason.

He had decapitated the former owner, drenching the robes in blood, but when he found it in his Cosmos Sack it was completely spotless. This could only mean that it had the cleaning-feature since Zac sure as hell hadn't done a wash during the hunt. Judging by how the man fought, having multiple rings with impressive defensive properties, that also wasn't the only benefit of the robes.

A warm sensation spread through his body the moment he put it on, and he was surprised to see that grime that had set in his hair was turning into steam. In just a minute he was completely spotless like he had taken a proper bath.

The effect was amazing, and the inscriptions must have been designed by a neat-freak. But Zac still didn't like the overly gaudy design, and he felt like Brazla while wearing the clothes. He chose to don a dark brown cloak that covered most of the gold, and since he was dressed he could finally leave his hiding spot.

Zac was filled with anticipation as he walked over toward where he hid the crimson crystal containing [Verun's Bite]. He first scanned the vicinity, but thankfully nothing had changed while he was busy with his vision. There was only a sea of rat carcasses all around him.

He also realized that the miasmic field that he generated with [Fields of Despair] was completely gone from the rat den, and not a smidgeon of miasma remained in the atmosphere. It looked like the skill's effects were temporary, meaning that he couldn't use it to terraform his surroundings to become death-attuned.

A full six hours had passed since he hid the crystal, but when he moved the carcasses blocking it not much had changed. The only difference was that the crystal now was almost completely opaque. Zac barely managed to make out the silhouette of something inside, but he couldn't tell if anything had changed about the axe.

Zac was a bit stumped when he gazed at the huge crystal. It still emanated no energy fluctuations, and it might just as well be a large rock if he didn't know what it contained. But he had no idea what to do with it now. The time on his hands was limited, and he had no idea how long it would take for his weapon to finish its evolution.

He had hoped that it would be done by the time Zac had gained his Dao seeds, but he had no such luck. He also wasn't comfortable putting the crystal into his Cosmos Sack, since he had no idea whether that would somehow interrupt or affect the evolution.

Quite some time passed as Zac stared at the crystal, his frown deepening by the minutes. Finally, after staring intently at the crystal for almost half an hour he gave up and instead took out his shield. He didn't dare to destroy the crystal, so he would have to occupy himself with something else. He had only checked on one of the benefits from finishing his quest, and this was as good a time as any to check out the other.

The shield looked a bit worse for wear, but it wasn't beyond redemption. But it would need to be worked by a blacksmith as soon as he got back to Port Atwood. The first thing he did after equipping the shield was to imbue it with the Dao of Hardness.

He would have thought some change would take place after the infusion, like how his fractal blades changed colors by which Dao they were infused with, but the shield looked just the same. There were no extra layers of protection forming above it either, and if Zac wasn't the one pushing the energies into the shield he wouldn't know it was there.

But he still knew that the Dao worked, since he could feel how it reinforced the whole shield from within. He tried slamming the shield with his fist to test the effect, and there was a clear improvement. He couldn't even leave a dent in the shield after using over half his force, showing just how powerful the middle stage Dao Seed was. Of course, he still knew that he could break the shield if he truly exerted his full force.

But that didn't mean that the Dao of Hardness was sub-par, but rather that the shield wasn't anything special apart from being a high-quality product. It wasn't a Spiritual Treasure like [Verun's Bite], but something along the lines of the robes he just lost.

He also tried to infuse the shield with the Dao of Sanctuary, but the Dao wouldn't enter it, just like how his Dao of Trees initially wouldn't enter his axe. He also tried to infuse his body and his clothes, but nothing worked.

For now, it looked like the second Dao Seed would have to be a passive attribute boost since he couldn't figure out a way to use it in battle. Then again, the power of an early-stage Seed was limited, and not something he would bring out in a battle with his current power.

Next, he started up [Bulwark Mastery], and as he expected there was a guidance system showing him how to work the shield. He had already found out that this type of skill was extremely common, and most classes had a similar one. The difference was that both his mastery skills also provided Dao Visions, whereas the equivalent skills for lower-grade classes just provided the guidance system.

Interestingly enough this guidance system didn't only show him the illuminated paths on how to move his shield, but it also simulated attackers who he had to block.

With Zac's ample combat experience he had no problem to quickly learn the basic steps and movements. It also showed some offensive moves, such as bashing the shield forward, ramming, and pinning down opponents. It even showed how to punch forward and use the lower edge of the shield as a weapon.

Since the skill only was at early mastery it didn't incorporate any of his Daos, and Zac soon stopped training with the skill. He knew that he would be able to advance [Bulwark Mastery] with just a day or so of training since the only thing required to advance the mastery to middle was to fully learn all the moves.

But now was not the time for that. Almost a whole day had passed between the battle and his meditation, leaving just 9 more days to reclaim his placements. His position on the hunter ladder had improved quite a bit, but he knew that it would likely get harder and harder to keep gaining positions.

He returned to the side of [Verun's Bite], but nothing had changed since his last check. Finally, he took out some ropes from his sack and started fastening them around the crystal. He decided that he would simply bring the thing on his back as he explored the tunnels.

However, he only managed to walk fifty meters in the direction of the exit before he could hear ominous crackling sounds from the crystal, and he hurriedly put it down. He noticed a large crack running all along the thing, and he wanted to slap himself for his impatience.

The cracks only got worse and spread all over the thing, and Zac could only look on in dismay. But the moment the whole thing shattered a massive aura exploded out from the crystal, forcing Zac a few steps back. Zac's hopes reignited as he looked at the scene from afar.

A large projection suddenly appeared where the crystal once was, reaching over five meters in height. It was Verun, but its appearance had changed a bit. The most obvious change was the increase in size, with its wither height increasing from roughly 1.5 meters to its current size.

Its maw was still an oversized vortex of gristly fangs, making its head just enormous by now. But its body was more proportional, and it rippled with sleek muscles. It felt like a true predator and was felt far more nimble than the stocky barghest, but far more powerful than the agile Gwyllgi.

A shockingly powerful roar emitted out from the specter, and suddenly all the carcasses of the largest rats burst open and blood streamed toward it from all directions. Meanwhile, the actual axe rose from the ground, but before Zac could get a proper look it was covered by the incoming blood.

Thankfully it didn't form yet another crystal though, and after just a few seconds the blood was gone. Verun slowly dissipated, turning into motes of light that entered the axe as it fell down on the ground.

As Zac walked over to the axe he still felt some power undulations from it, but it had mostly calmed down by now. There were some noticeable changes to the axe, the foremost being the head. It was made by some dark metal before, but now it looked greyish-white and seemed to be actually created from an enormous tooth.

Its edge was still curved, but it was slightly larger compared to before, almost reaching half a meter by now. Its edge was a bit uneven as well, and his thoughts still went to Orc Chieftains when he looked at [Verun's Bite].

Zac hesitantly dragged his finger along the edge and he immediately felt a sharp pain as blood started to flow freely from his finger. Even after he imbued his hand with the Dao of Hardness it took a bit of strength to once again cut through his skin, which made it very telling just how sharp the edge was.

There were still a few smaller teeth fastened to the back of the head, but now there was one that was far larger than the others. It almost formed a counterweight and formed a sharp spike that pushed out from the back of the axe-head. Its needlepoint looked extremely sharp, and Zac knew that it should have extreme piercing power if he needed it.

The handle was still wrought of some wood, though it looked a bit more greyish compared to before. But more interestingly five fractals ran all along the handle. The one closest to the end of the haft was glistening with a crimson red, whereas the others were pitch black.

Zac couldn't be sure, but he felt as though there was a meaning to the colors. He had fed the axe enormous amounts of blood to help it evolve, and the first fractal shone with that very same color. Perhaps he would need to keep feeding it even more blood to light up the other fractals as well.

However, the changed appearance was not the only thing different about it. It also emitted a brutal and unrestrained aura and looking at it felt like staring at a prehistoric beast. Zac couldn't be sure, but it felt that this aura would be even stronger in battle, and it might even possess the ability to suppress his enemies.

The final difference became apparent when he gripped the wooden handle. The moment he touched the haft he immediately sensed another presence in his mind. However, it wasn't at all like the intrusion of the specters he had felt earlier.

It was like he shared a mental connection with another being, and he immediately understood that the connection was to Verun itself. The link even allowed him to communicate in a way, though Verun wasn't sapient like Brazla, at least not yet.

The moment the link was established Zac felt a rapid stream of emotions. Exultation and pride. Recognition and kinship. Tiredness. Not long after the link weakened, and no more emotions were

transmitted. However, Zac understood that the link wasn't just a temporary thing, but it was rather temporarily weakened due to Verun being tired out from the evolution.

Finally, he was done with the cave, and Zac effortlessly threw away the carcasses blocking the exit. He took one last look at the cavern that had provided him with so many benefits before entering the tunnel with newfound confidence.