

The Fall 334

Chapter 334: Hidden Wealth

"You wanted to see me, sir?" the young woman said with a shaky voice, clearly afraid to enter the large room where Zac had been training with his shield the past day. "I'm Emma."

Zac looked over with some confusion, not recognizing the girl by the entrance. But he quickly realized who it was, and stowed away his shield.

"Are you the scout I asked for?" Zac asked, trying to not sound threatening.

"Y-Yes. I was in charge of a scout team looking for valuable veins within the Unio- ahem, Lord Atwood's domain," Emma hastily explained, keeping her eyes at the ground.

"Great. Come with me for a bit," Zac said, leaving the training room and the group of Valkyries who had been his sparring partners.

The councilors from the Underworld Council left yesterday along with a group of ambassadors led by Tylia and Joanna, taking the impatient Emily with them. Zac himself had decided to follow up on the idea he had while waiting for things to get sorted out, and called for the person who had written it up, which was the girl currently following him.

Unfortunately she had been out on a mission and it looked like she only returned just now. So since Zac had some time to spare he decided to work on some of his undead skills. All of them were still at the Early Stage, and he hoped that one way to improve his battlefield impact if he upgraded them.

[Bulwark Mastery] was the easiest, as it only required him to learn and incorporate the movements with the shield. It took him less than an hour to upgrade the skill to Middle mastery, and another 10 hours to reach late mastery. But just like with [Axe Mastery] he found that there were something missing to push it toward peak mastery, so he could only stop there.

Upgrading [Bulwark Mastery] did not improve his attributes or allowed him to unleash some new power, but it did help a lot in utilizing his shield, and the fractal equivalent in [Immutable Bulwark]. It even showed him how to properly fight with a weapon in one hand and shield in the other.

Until now he had been a bit clumsy and limited in that department, but he quickly learned how to use both his weaponry to their full potential. The shield was not only a large plank to block out damage, but it was a tool that would also create the opening for him to finish his enemies with his weapon. His other skills, unfortunately, weren't as easy to level up, but he didn't despair. Hopefully he would be able to push some of them forward in the following weeks.

"Don't worry, you're not in trouble or anything like that. I have read some of your reports. You were the one who wrote this, correct?" Zac wanted to confirm after the two entered his office, handing Emma the report he found the other day.

He could understand Emma's nervousness. She had worked in the department under one of the leaders who were found guilty of human trafficking just this morning. Almost two-thirds of the leaders of the Union had been found complicit to the slave trade, and they were executed as punishment. It wasn't unthinkable that the minions would suffer for the sins of their boss as well.

“Wha- Oh? Yes!” she stammered after glancing over the first page. “I was the one who wrote it. I am the only survivor from that excursion.”

“Large vein deposit. Unknown resource. Quality - Highest. Danger level – Highest,” Zac said, listing the main points from his memory. “Infested by, and I quote you, an insane number of mutated bugs. But no location?”

“Leonard, the department head, did not want us to write the location in the reports of very valuable things. He was afraid competing departments was spying on him. I only told him in person,” the scout said.

“Tell me about this place,” Zac said.

“The vein is three day’s travel from a remote outpost, hidden in a huge cave system at the bottom of a lake. We found it by accident when looking for valuable resources underwater. When we entered we realized there was some odd crystal that was emitting a really mysterious light, but we didn’t have time to excavate even one before we were overrun.”

“By what?” Zac asked.

“Insects, each about as large as a large dog. But they were so strong! We barely managed to harm them, but they slaughtered everyone in seconds. I only managed to use my identification skill once before I fled. The insect was level 68. That was one month ago,” the scout said with horror in her eyes.

“Have you seen anything like that before?” Zac probed.

“No, there are really some strong insects down here in the Underworld, but they are usually solitary. We saw thousands of peak F-Rank beasts, and we didn’t even really enter the vein. I’m sure it’s teeming with E-Grade beasts further down, especially now that so much time has passed,” she said.

“How did you survive?” Zac asked with some suspicion. “You’re only level 42, and I am sure you were lower at that point.”

“I have a good movement skill,” she said, “and the beasts stopped when I jumped into the water to get back to the surface.”

Zac slowly nodded. He wasn’t disappointed when he heard how dangerous the mysterious cavern was, but rather the opposite. A place crawling with extremely strong beasts was exactly what he needed.

His plan was simple. He wanted to throw himself into the thick of it, and with the help of [Deathwish] and [Fields of Despair] grind all the way to level 60. Normally such a thing might have taken over a month, mainly because beasts strong enough to provide a nice boost of energy were few and far between.

But this cavern was for some reason overflowing with powerful beasts that would each be able to control their own region on Mystic Island, turning the cave into a cultivator’s paradise as long as one was strong enough to survive. Not even the rabid beasts in the hunt would be able to compare to the massive amounts of beasts in there.

Depending on how much stronger the beasts had become in the past weeks it would only take a week or two to get to level 60. If the skill he got at that point would allow him to confidently fight the invaders in

his undead form without risking the lives of his people, great. If not, then he would turn into his human form to fight, even if that would result in a loss of cosmic energy.

Besides, there was undoubtedly something interesting in that cave if it had turned its inhabitants so powerful.

“Why do you think the insects are so strong at that place?” Zac asked.

“I don’t know... But if I had to guess? I think it’s those rocks somehow evolving the insects,” she said with some hesitation.

Zac nodded and asked some follow-up questions about anything that might be useful in his expedition. When he felt confident in finding the place he excused the scout after having her sign a temporary contract of confidentiality.

Personally, Zac believed there was another possibility to the one Emma provided. There might be a great natural treasure at the bottom of the cave, which was the source of both the mysterious crystals and the powerful beasts. He already knew that the planet was given a handful of great treasures by the System, items that normally shouldn’t appear. His Tree of Ascension was such an example, and the Abbot’s lotus was another.

Each such item could bring a great boost to the one who managed to seize it, but so far Zac had only gotten one even though he was so far ahead of the others of earth. The odd place in the report might be his chance at a second one.

Since he had everything he needed he didn’t waste any time. He immediately set out after informing Mr. Trang about his decision. Zac knew this somewhat messed with the quest the Valkyries received, but he needed to focus on his own development at this point. He needed to improve as quickly as possible to be able to match the Dominators.

He immediately teleported over to the small town cave that the scout mentioned and immediately rushed out into the open Underworld. The scout had mentioned three days of travel, but Zac didn’t want to waste almost a week on travel for the round trip.

Instead, Zac changed into his human form for the first time in a while and rushed across the subterranean landscape with [Loamwalker], and he found himself at the lakefront in less than a day. The fact that he didn’t have to skirt around the domain of powerful beasts saved him one day, while his movement skill saved him another.

When he stood by the shore of the crystal clear lake he once again changed his race with the help of his transformation skill and quietly entered the depths when his change to his Draugr form was complete. Remembering the scout’s description he swam down twenty meters and ripped apart some moss at the wall to expose the entrance to the cavern.

He swam in the pitch-black water-filled tunnel for almost five minutes before finally finding air, and he couldn’t believe that the scouting party dared to enter a scary place like this. Even with his massive pool of Endurance he felt it was a bit unsettling, like a beast of the depths could crop up at any moment to swallow him whole. But he managed to exit the tunnel without any problem, finding himself in a massive cave system.

The cave itself was a large and open area illuminated in green, but not by the usual luminescent moss and fungi. It was rather some crystals embedded in the walls that seemed to have green fireflies fluttering around inside. Zac immediately understood those crystals were what Emma was referring to, but he couldn't sense any special energy from them.

Zac wanted to excavate one of the crystals to take a closer look, but incessant clattering echoing in the cave stopped him in his tracks. It looked like he was getting the same reception as the scouts, as a tidal wave of insects frenziedly rushed toward him.

All of the insects looked the same, though they were of slightly varying sizes. They most closely resembled a giant Weta or cricket, with three pairs of legs where the hindmost set was extra long. But they also possessed enormous mandibles that looked strong enough to bite a human in two. Finally they had a pointy stinger at the back, though the scout didn't know if these things possessed any venom or not as she had to immediately flee.

Their bodies were covered in layered shell, but they looked much thinner compared to the Ayr ants that he fought during the best waves. But in return they were much quicker, jumping toward him with greater speed than a charging Barghest.

Each one of them looked like a decent foe for any cultivator, with their combination of natural weapons and a pretty high speed. But what was truly intimidating was the wave of killing intent that pushed toward him upon their approach. Zac quickly used his eye skill before things got too hectic.

[Lower Crust Battleroach – Insect – Level 73 - Strength]

The result of [Inquisitive Eye] proved that the beasts had improved a couple of levels in the short month since the scout was here, making Zac even more confident there was something in the cave that pushed these things to evolve.

However, there was no time to do an in-depth analysis as the tidal wave of insects was upon him. He took out [Verun's Bite] as the miasmic haze from [Fields of Despair] spread through the cave. The change in energy made a few of the insects stop in confusion, but they were quickly overrun by frenzied brethren.

A fractal shield materialized behind Zac as his axe turned into a blur. Green liquid splattered in all directions as Zac felt a steady stream of energy enter his body, both through [Fields of Despair] and the quick kills from his swings.

The shells of the insects barely hindered the upgraded [Verun's Bite], and even [Deathwish] steadily killed one insect after another as they threw themselves at him from every direction. Specters kept popping up around him to retaliate any strike against him, his shield, or the fractal bulwark protecting his rear.

Mists of miasma rose from the air as the corpses started to transform into fuel for the fight, and Zac started to slowly push forward as to not get buried in insect corpses. His whole body was already covered in green goop, but he didn't care as he saw every disgusting insect as a burst of energy to progress his levels.

Zac resolutely kept moving downward in the cave, and between the increasingly thick haze of miasma and the constantly appearing specters, it looked like an Undying Legion was trying to break into the underworld. And in the middle of the carnage a system prompt appeared, telling him he had received a quest.