

The Fall 336

Chapter 336: Refined Skills

As Zac once again started up his slaughter he shot a glance at his surroundings. The second floor looked mostly the same, though slightly larger. The same green crystals studded the walls, and the same frenzied critters were already charging him. He even noticed the same type of hole leading to the next floor on the other side of the cave. It almost felt like he was in an illusion world because of the similarity, but the fact that he kept gaining energy was undeniable.

The miasmic haze once again spread out as Zac methodically killed one battleroach after another. He had three days to complete the quest, and he believed the easiest method was to simply rush down and kill the Roach King. But he had no idea how strong it was so he wanted to gain as many levels as possible before confronting it.

He also had no idea how many floors this place had, but if he started to run out of time he would skip killing the beasts and jump down one floor after another until he reached the bottom. Worst case he would have to fight a bunch of extra battleroaches along with their boss if they jumped after him, but better than getting locked in this cave for a year.

As he kept fighting Zac started to enter a rhythm, almost a dance based on the moves he had recently learned from [Bulwark Mastery]. His feet moved across the cavern following a precise pattern as he weaved a trail of carnage with his axe. His shield was quickly becoming an extension of his body, allowing him to control where and when he was attacked by the rabid beasts.

Order was quickly being forced upon the chaotic swarm of battleroaches and Zac realized that he was steadily decreasing his Miasma consumption without lessening the pace that the insects died. As he started to incorporate the teachings of his skill in battle he also started to more actively work with [Deathwish].

It was possible to simply keep the skill running, but Zac realized his way of using it had been too wasteful. Not every strike against him warranted a retaliation, as the reflected attack would sometimes bring fewer benefits than the cost of Miasma warranted. So he started to control which strikes to counter, and which one to simply endure. It reduced the number of specters appearing around him by half, but the number of kills was almost the same.

Efficiency was something that Zac once excelled at, something forced upon him due to overindulging on cosmic water before he knew any better. But as his powers grew he had slowly forgotten this important lesson, instead opting to fight like a brute because of his massive pool of attributes.

But Zac realized that such a mindset stifled growth, and stopped him from pushing himself to the limits. It also wasted a lot of time. Perhaps not through the battle itself, but most of his time on the last floor had been spent recuperating his expended Miasma. He was not a Cultivator who could rapidly restore his reserves, so he needed to make use of every smidgeon of Miasma in his body.

He slowly got the hang of splitting his attention between striking the weak spots with his axe and manually controlling [Deathwish]. But he felt his work still wasn't done. He started to change the way he moved slightly, forcibly stopping the impulses to avoid getting hit in certain spots. Slowly the attacks from the battleroaches started to center on his belly or his head more and more.

Zac's idea was simple. The spectral projections from [Deathwish] assaulted the attacker in roughly the same area that Zac was attacked in. That meant if he made sure to get hit in the areas that were weak spots of the roaches the lethality of the projections would increase without any increase in Miasma consumption. It did require more precision though. He needed to make sure his thick skull was hit rather than his vulnerable throat or eyes for example.

More wounds dripping ichor soon adorned Zac's body, but he was slowly getting hang of it. And his efforts were quickly rewarded as a prompt told him that [Deathwish] just reached Middle mastery. The effect was immediately obvious, as the continuously appearing spectral projections turned slightly grade more corporeal, and hazy fractals adorned their bodies.

They had also become stronger, noticeably so. Zac had already measured that the power of the specters from [Deathwish] was roughly around 10%-15% of the original strike's power, meaning that it usually took a couple of tries until they managed to kill or grievously wound their enemies. Zac couldn't be sure exactly how strong the specters were now, but after using the skill for a few minutes he felt that the power had increased by at least 50%.

But that wasn't the most interesting change in the skill. After upgrading [Deathwish] he realized that he suddenly had limited control of the specters as they appeared. Each time a ghost was summoned he felt as though he had grown a new appendage, and with some effort he managed to manipulate the specter.

The effect was extremely limited at the moment though. He only managed to slightly alternate the trajectory of their retaliatory strike. But that slight adjustment could be the difference by hitting a thick chitinous plate or a weak joint, and if Zac could learn to naturally control the specters as they popped up he would truly increase the lethality of the skill by a notch.

Flush with success Zac immediately started to investigate means to improve his other skills as he whittled down the number of battleroaches in the cave. But finding other quick upgrades didn't come as easy. He didn't have any control over [Fields of Despair], so he couldn't figure out any means that might help him move to a higher mastery.

The same went for [Indomitable] that he kept running just in case something down here could use mental attacks. That only left [Immutable Bulwark], the fractal wall he currently used to block out all attacks from behind. He knew that he wasn't using it to its full potential since currently it only worked as a blockade, rather than utilizing the large spikes that covered its front.

During his rampage in the caverns beneath the Eastern Trigram Sect he had used the bulwark like a bulldozer, putting it in front of his body as he rushed forward. The more vulnerable of the beasts had been crushed into meat paste from his charge, turning the skill into a competent offensive Skill.

But after a few tries he had to give up on that approach against the battleroaches. While the shells of the insects weren't as sturdy as some other species, they were still quite durable. That's why [Deathwish] rarely finished its enemies in one swing, and why he had to utilize [Verun's Bite] to properly cut the critters apart.

The large bulwark slowly swirled to Zac's front, and with a grunt he started running forward. The roaches screeched in rage as the large shield slammed into them, and nothing they did could stop his

progress. Dull thuds started echoing through the caves as the roaches slammed themselves into the incoming wall.

Sadly the collisions of [Immutable Bulwark] proved insufficient, and only a scant few of the insects actually died on the spikes. The rest bounced off the shield to the sides, immediately getting back up on their feet to assault Zac from the sides. But Zac suddenly got a burst of energy when he rammed straight into a wall, crushing all the roaches between the bulwark and the cave into a wet mess.

But even when he used the bulwark as a meat press the speed that he killed the beasts was worse when utilizing the combination of his axe and [Deathwish]. Zac soon gave up on that tactic, even if it might be the key to upgrading the skill, and once again returned to methodically decimating the roach population with the combination of [Deathwish], and his axe. His bulwark was once again relegated to stay behind his back to block any strikes from the rear.

But Zac suddenly had an idea, and the wide fractal wall rose into the air as it started to turn until the spikes were pointing at the ground. Since there was no longer anything blocking the roaches that tried to attack Zac from behind they immediately flooded toward his back to claw at his neck and legs. The moment Zac felt a painful swipe on his back the bulwark fell down like a trap roof in an old movie.

He had gotten the idea after witnessing how easily the bugs were crushed against the wall. Since he had control over the fractal shield he could move it around in any direction as long as it wasn't too far from his current position. That gave him the idea to use the large thing as a hammer, crushing everything dumb enough to walk beneath it.

Unfortunately, the bulwark shared an annoying similarity with the movies. The falling bulwark was too slow, to the point that most of the frenzied roaches managed to scuttle out of the way just before they were crushed.

Zac glanced at the large fractal wall with some reluctance, and it once again rose into the air. This time it started emitting a mighty pressure, to the point that the air around it shuddered. Zac had imbued it with his peak stage Seed of Heaviness. The Bulwark once again slammed into the ground, this time with almost three times the speed.

The whole cave shuddered from the impact and the unlucky roaches that were caught beneath were turned into a paste in an instant. Zac was elated with the result and started to move the shield up and down as he focused on the enemies in the front. Loud thumps started to echo through the cave every 5 seconds, making it sound like an industrial press was constantly running.

Using [Immutable Bulwark] like a huge hammer was a bit stupid, and it certainly wouldn't work against an intelligent opponent, but it did increase his killing speed while only consuming some mental energy. Another downside was that some quick roaches occasionally reached his unguarded back to attack his neck.

Luckily he had enough control of the situation in the front to give him the freedom to avoid most attacks from the rear any time his danger sense warned him. But wounds still started to accumulate at a higher speed, making the layers of green goop on his back get intermixed with black ichor.

Soon enough the fighting abated, and Zac stood amongst the sea of destroyed battleroaches. A quick inspection showed that the crystals that studded the walls were no better than the ones on the floor above, so Zac immediately sat down to absorb Miasma as he went over the results of the battle.

The second floor had housed roughly 20% more battleroaches compared to the first, yet he had taken less than ten minutes longer to completely decimate everything. This was a decidedly better grinding speed, especially considering that he had spent quite some time adjusting to his more refined fighting style and experimenting with [Immutable Bulwark].

He had also reached level 57, meaning that he had already gained three levels in one short day. Even his optimistic calculations had him taking at least a week to reach level 60, but as it looked now it might only take two days unless he ran out of battleroaches to kill.

But the most exciting difference in clearing out the second floor was that he had consumed even less miasma than the floor above. This was even though he both utilized [Immutable Bulwark] more actively and killed a lot more roaches. It was a testament to the fact that he had wasted too much energy the way he originally fought.

The restoration took a bit over four hours, at which point his mental energy had completely restored itself as well. He had spent over 10 hours in the cave already, so Zac immediately headed down to the next floor.

The sounds of battle kept echoing as Zac turned into a stoic killing machine, knowing no retreat or surrender. He kept working on perfecting his battle coordination, constantly trying to kill the roaches faster and faster without wasting any unnecessary energy.

The roaches on the third floor were a bit larger than the second, with many proving to be level 75, true peak F-Grade beasts. But apart from a decent boost in power and speed they didn't have any new abilities, so Zac kept fighting as usual. Soon enough the third floor was cleansed, and he only kept going resting as short a time as possible between fights.

After completely decimating the sixth floor Zac realized had been constantly fighting for over 30 hours, and the results were astounding. He had already reached level 60, and as expected he received his next Class Quest.