

## The Fall 343

### Chapter 343: Priorities

Just a few meters away the gem-studded wall was flickering in and out of existence, intermittently displaying a well-lit tunnel leading into the distance. Zac wasn't too surprised the alien was able to create a back entrance. If the technocrats possessed the capability to drill through the fortified rock in the Underworld all the way to the surface, then this was a cakewalk.

The alien that Zac killed had been one of the researchers for the Incursion, responsible for finding and identifying valuable resources. The two drones he commanded were likely able to get the job done.

Parts of Zac just wanted to rush through the tunnel into Technocrat territory, killing everything in sight. But he knew he had to act smarter, so he instead sat down to replenish his once again depleted reserves. He wasn't too worried about being interrupted by another Technocrat since what the alien had done down here was a private experiment he hoped would pad his own pocket.

While Zac slowly absorbed the death-attuned energies from the crystals he tried to go over the battle with the battleroach. It had truly pushed him to his limits, and he hoped that he would be able to use the battle to push his insights forward.

But any time he tried to ponder on the Dao the splitting headache only got worse, and he had to give up any idea of improving his Seeds for the time being. Zac wasn't too disappointed though as there would be time for meditation later. Besides, there were other gains to go over.

The battle with the battleroach king had awarded him another three full levels, pushing him all the way to level 65. It felt a bit crazy, but he would have possessed both the first and second spots on the Power Ladder if it listed both his classes.

There was no comparing his own leveling speed with that of the average cultivator by now. Each battleroach in the cave would have been able to push most rankers to their limits, but Zac had killed them by the thousands, gaining more in a few hours than most would in a month.

But Zac knew that the final ten levels would be tough. He had gotten most of the final levels for free through the hunt last time, but this time around he would have to grind them out himself. Luckily he would face a lot of high-leveled enemies soon enough.

Most notably there were the caves teeming with battleroaches above that would give him a good start.

Zac opened his status screen and allocated all his free points into strength. He also checked the quest screen for any changes, but it was now empty of any tasks. After that there was nothing for him to do apart from calming his mind while restored his energy. He still felt some of the effect of the splinter as it had acted up a bit during his last two battles again, but by now it was fully under control.

Five hours later half his Miasma had been restored while all the wounds in his body apart from the one in his sides were completely healed. His head was still pounding a bit, and he knew he would have to avoid using his Dao for a day or two. But it wouldn't be needed for what he was about to do, and Zac didn't want to sit around any longer.

He got up on his feet with a groan and started walking toward the tunnel he came from, leaving the passage the technocrat used where it was. Zac had no idea what waited for him if he entered that path of the unknown, and he feared there would be some hidden surveillance in the cave.

Zac even considered using his [Void Ball] to destroy the passage, but he decided against it in the end. There was not much to gain from doing so, and he was afraid that the spatial chaos would destroy the whole cave with him inside.

Instead, he chose to go back the same way he came from in order to return to New London. But before he left he extracted the most radiant crystals of the final cave. It didn't take long as he only needed to rip them out of the wall after slightly boosting his strength with [Unholy Strike].

[Verun's Bite] once again shuddered and woke up when presented with the radiant crystals, but Zac realized something was wrong after half a minute. Verun hovered between hunger and confusion as Zac held a crystal to the axe head, but the Tool Spirit eventually gave up on absorbing it.

It looked pretty odd, making Zac unsure whether Spirit Tools were unsure themselves what they needed to evolve. Or perhaps Verun had confused itself with an actual beast, believing that the crystal would help improve its bloodline just like it helped the battleroaches. Zac could only stash away the crystal and refocus on farming the best two hundred or so crystals.

As for the less precious gems, he would figure something out later depending on their value. For now he left them where they were as he slowly climbed up toward the 10th floor. He knew he would have to waste some precious time fighting his way out, but it was better than using the trap door who might lead in the wrong direction. But Zac started to frown as he climbed through the hole in the roof.

It was way too silent.

There had always been a constant clatter of the battleroaches during his time in this cave system, often intermingled with aggressive screeches. But now there was a dead silence, where the only sounds came from Zac himself. After dragging himself up to the crest of the tunnel he quickly saw the reason. A sea of corpses littered the whole floor. The carapaces of over a thousand battleroaches were dismantled and destroyed almost beyond recognition.

Zac quickly crawled up on the floor, readying himself for another battle. But he breathed out in relief when he saw that the wounds weren't caused by any energy weapons or the like, but it rather looked like they had been caused by the other battleroaches. The only explanation that Zac could find was that the roaches had whipped themselves up in a frenzy for some reason, entering an all-out melee.

Perhaps they could sense the death of the battlerroach king and immediately started to fight for the role of the new alpha. Or perhaps they had never been a pack species and were only kept in check by the much superior roach on the bottom floor. In any case, it saved Zac a lot of time, though he sighed in disappointment in the missed opportunity. The corpses on this floor alone would probably have given him another level.

A sudden clattering in the distance drew Zac's attention, and he spotted a wounded E-Grade battlerroach getting to its feet. It was far larger than any battlerroach he had spotted on his descent, making Zac unsure what was going on. Had it grown almost to twice its size simply by killing the competition?

Unfortunately there time to ponder before the beast was upon him. It frenziedly tried to grab Zac with its mandibles and rip him to pieces, but Zac effortlessly slammed its head to the side with a swing of his shield.

After fighting the battleroach king in a pitched melee for almost half an hour it felt like a joke to fight against this large, but ultimately common, battleroach. Its carapace had become a lot sturdier, but after a few well-aimed strikes the beast lay dead with brain leaking out from a deep cut.

However, just as he downed the supersized battleroach a few more rose as well, each of them sporting various degrees of wounds. Zac realized they probably were playing dead to recuperate, but perhaps felt forced into action from Zac's arrival. Altogether there were 8 more of them, all of them E-Grade.

During the fight Zac had ample time to use [Inquisitive Eye], and he found out that the beasts were only around level 79, which was perhaps one or two levels higher than they were before. So it seemed that the increase in size hadn't come from levels, but rather a purified bloodline.

It took less than a minute before the 8 battleroaches lay dead on the ground, their heads either broken or missing. Zac quickly stowed away the enlarged bodies before heading toward the next floor. The carapaces were nowhere near as good as the emerald shells of the king, but Zac thought they might be worth keeping since they were definitely a step above the Ayr Hivebeast shells.

The same scene played out in the next couple of floors where there were a few surviving battleroaches, each of them substantially larger than they were before. Zac made short work of them all, which wasn't too hard as all of them were pretty wounded. Some of them were even at death's door already, requiring only a simple swing from Zac to end their lives.

Unfortunately their ragged state also meant that they only gave a small part of their original energy, but Zac didn't care in the slightest as he rushed up the floor at the highest possible speed. Fighting his way to the bottom almost took him two days, but getting back up required less than half an hour.

The shimmering barrier was gone as expected, allowing Zac to effortlessly swim through the pitch-black water and resurface in the secluded lake. He was back in New London a day later, once again donning his signature mask. He had dug down the box just outside the small outpost he teleported from, giving him some peace of mind.

Zac's initial instinct was to head back to Port Atwood before rushing the Technocrat Incursion, but he quickly realized that he might need help. So instead of teleporting away again he rushed over to the former Union Headquarters and went to the secluded chambers that Ogras had made his own.

The demon had kept his identity secret all this time as well, always donning a large hood and obscuring his features with a shroud of shadows. But Zac hadn't made any effort of hiding his arrival, so the demon hadn't bothered with his disguise when Zac entered his quarters.

"Good, you're back early. There's a problem," Ogras said the moment Zac entered his office.

"I was just about to say," Zac sighed as he sat down opposite the demon. "What's going on?"

"We've lost contact with the Port Atwood army," Ogras said.

"What?" Zac said with shock. "They're dead?!"

"No, calm down," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. "They're probably alive. But two days ago the whole sector of the Dead Zone where our army was stationed went dark. All the teleportation arrays in the area, including the one where our war outpost was, have been disconnected from the network."

"How is this possible? Is someone targeting us?" Zac said, scrambling to get a grip on the situation.

Zac had been keyed up to launch a scorched-earth assault on the Technocrats as soon as he got back, but it seemed that the universe had once again thrown a wrench into his plans.

"No, I think it is the Undead Empire that's finally rearing its fangs," Ogras said with a sigh. "We have underestimated them. The resources needed to do something like this is unimaginable. I think they are making a statement because three of their generals have already fallen."

"Can Thea's people help us?" Zac asked with a frown.

"They have their hands full, the Zombies are pushing hard, and they are too far apart to send scouts," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "Besides, all neighboring arrays that we know of have gone dark as well."

"Do you have any ideas?" Zac asked.

"You have the flying disk. We can use it to scout a much broader area than running on foot, so we should be able to find them within a week or two if we leave immediately. It only seats a few people, but the two of us are enough to handle most things," Ogras said.

"One or two weeks..." Zac muttered, blankly staring ahead.

Spending one or two weeks to scour the wilderness for his people would mean that the Technocrat incursion would manage to reach the surface. From the way the alien made it sound they would send out some drones that moved with extreme speed at that time, and those drones would scour the whole planet with their scanners. It would be too late to stop them at that point.

It meant that he would have to choose. Either let the Technocrats dig to the surface, which would have unknown consequences. Or ignore the plight of his people until he could close the Incursion.

Kenzie or Port Atwood.

"I... I can't go," Zac sighed, unable to meet Ogras' incredulous stare.