

The Fall 404

Chapter 404: Remuneration

Zac understood what the demon was inferring. Was his uncommonly high Luck Attribute finally starting to bring him some fortuitous encounters? So far his Luck had mainly been helping him stay alive from ambushes, but he had long known that the attribute could also increase the chance of lucky encounters.

His Luck had increased from 149 to 182 after gaining his two Fragments, which wasn't a small boost. It meant that he also had passed the old attribute limit of the F-Grade, 175 points. Perhaps that came with some new boosts as well? Zac couldn't tell, and there seemed to be no one that knew how it worked in his surroundings either. Even Alyn only had a hazy knowledge of the subject, and his attempts at getting information packets on the subject had failed. So Zac could only speculate, apart from the fundamental knowledge that higher numbers were better.

It didn't take a lot of effort for the trio to learn of the location of the so-called Fungal Hollow. It was a region a few hours north of the town where a river caused a large section of brackish water. A mid-sized mountain rose out of the ocean in the middle of the delta, and that mountain contained the Fungal Hollow.

The group wasted no time as they pushed north, using the moonlight for sight as they ran along the coast. They passed a few fisherman's villages immediately after exiting the town, but soon enough the coastal line turned completely desolate. It was probably due to people not daring to live neighbors with aggressive crab beasts who could emerge from the depths at moment's notice.

The moon and its luster reflecting on the ocean waves were the only sources of light until they finally saw a few large braziers burning in the distance. The flames came from the fortress that the kingdom had built to keep a watch on the river inlet and to both counter the crustaceans and to stop any enterprising pirates from sailing inland.

The moment they saw the flames Zac knew they were close, but they didn't continue to the settlement ahead. Zac instead took out one of his Creator Vessels from his Cosmos Sack, and they immediately set sail. Galau seemed to be a bit confused by ship, as the Creators had actually put the insignias of the Allbright Empire on them to mask their true origin. But he didn't bring it up, and Zac didn't bother to come up with some excuse.

Zac hadn't expected to use the boat for its intended purpose, but he had rather been inspired by Alea's tactics. The Creator ships had blown up half a town with the help of their offensive arrays in the battle with the undead, making them a great offensive tool. Their hulls were also extremely sturdy to survive the beasts of the sea, making them good shelter in a bind.

But now it came in handy as it allowed them to reach the mountain reaching up through the muddy water without giving away their actions to the royal army. Infiltrating the mountain didn't prove much trouble either, and they smoothly proceeded further and further down into the depths of the mountain hidden by Ogras' shadows.

The interiors of the mountain reminded Zac a bit of a miniature version of the Underworld, as there was a mix of tunnels and caves large enough to house small villages. But instead of molemen the caves were half-submerged in water and crawling with crabs that were up to three meters tall. But Zac could see

that the beasts were even weaker compared to the mercenaries, though there were far more crabs than beastmen. Only a couple of swings of [Verun's Bite] would be needed to decimate a whole cave.

But they didn't want to start a battle because that might alert scouts hiding on the mountain, so Ogras led them through a confusing maze of tunnels in their descent. Now and then they were unable to proceed without walking perilously close to the crabs, but with the help of Ogras and their array disks they could slip past without raising any alarms.

It only took them half an hour to reach the bottom, which was an enormous cave that seemed to lead out to the ocean. There was a shallow and crystal-clear lake covering most of the area, and the three immediately spotted their target. Quite a few crabs were walking about, and they noticed that the largest crabs were actually eating the clams, shell and all.

Perhaps the clams and their precious pearls could help the crabs to evolve, or at least level up?

But the so-called crab king was nowhere to be seen, and Ogras soundlessly killed the few dozen crabs in the cave before they sealed the exits with sound-proofing arrays. After that they had free rein to loot pearls to their heart's content.

Even Galau seemed to finally get over his despondency due to his life plan going awry as he cracked open one clam after another to look for a pearl. There was an almost manic gleam in his eyes as he arduously forced open the shells and it made Zac think of Calrin. He had to admit the squirrely young man had the right temperament for a merchant.

Unfortunately for Galau, he traveled with two people far stronger than him. He had the will but not the power to loot the treasures in front of him. It took him almost twenty seconds to force open one of the sturdy clams, but Zac simply crushed them with a twist to extract the pearl within.

Ogras wasn't as strong, but he managed to poke holes in the shells with pinpoint accuracy, allowing him to take out the pearls without even forcing open the shells. In the end, it was Zac who came out a winner, claiming almost half of the pearls, with Galau barely getting a fifth of them.

The moment the last pearl was extracted a prompt sounded out and a teleportation array appeared by a bank of the subterranean lake. Seeing how easily they completed the floor Zac better understood that things weren't quite equal for everyone who entered. Getting a suitable floor quest could both make and break someone's climb. If it was Zac climbing alone the second level would have played out pretty differently.

He would have no doubt been spotted soon after entering the mountain, and then he would have been forced to fight his way down to the treasures in the depths. Perhaps even the kingdom on the other shore would be alerted, turning the situation extremely chaotic.

Considering they were still only on the first floor Zac would no doubt have been able to blast through all resistance without breaking a sweat, but it might play out differently on the later floors. He could only pray that his high Luck would overpower the animosity the System seemed to have toward him, giving them suitable challenges at the end of their climb.

The following levels went quite smoothly where they completed one quest after another without encountering any real trouble. They didn't rush at all, but it still only took them 3 days to reach the 9th

level. Galau's mood had gotten noticeably better as time went, and by this time he had mostly recovered from the shock.

He even seemed to be a bit excited about the prospect of having befriended a future powerhouse, often reminding Zac to come to him in case he wanted to sell loot from mystic realms or the like in the future.

The ninth level placed them at the foot of a mountain, and the quest was to defeat the Bandit Lord who had made the peak his home. It was the first time the quest directly told them to do battle. The other 8 quests had been possible to complete with only minimal battle, with the option of finding the floor guardian to kill instead.

In fact, they had barely fought at all during the first eight levels. Only a few unlucky sentries had been taken out so that they could complete the quest the intended way.

Climbing the first floor had given Zac a good grasp of how things worked, and he realized that it was always better to complete the quest than killing the floor guardian. Following the quest almost always taught a valuable lesson or led to some sort of treasure, whereas killing the guardian would make you miss that opportunity.

The treasures might turn out to be fake in the end, but the gained knowledge was real, and Zac vowed to only kill his way out of a level if he really couldn't figure out the quest.

"I can take charge of this one," Galau suddenly said as they ascended the mountain, showing unusual proactivity.

"What's going on? Have you accidentally eaten some stimulants?" Ogras said as he shot the merchant a suspicious stare. "What if you faint again and get yourself killed?"

Galau deflated a bit, but he mustered his courage as he stuck out his chest.

"You have done most of the work, so I should contribute a bit as well," Galau said.

Zac smiled a bit, somewhat understanding Galau's thoughts. He was no doubt a bit cowardly, but he did have a good heart. He wanted to help out and prove his worth during the climb, but he knew that they soon enough would encounter challenges that might prove too dangerous. So he wanted to knock out a few floor guardians early to shore up his contribution.

"That's nice of you, but that's okay," Zac smiled. "Days have passed without me fighting, and I could use the exercise. I get a bit antsy if I don't fight for too long."

"Unless you want to see him rampage again due to lack of bloodshed? You missed most of it last time," Ogras snorted. "It's quite spectacular."

Galau paled as he looked at Zac like he was a dangerous animal before he restrained himself.

"Well, I will simply stay back and support then. It is good to exercise a bit as you're recuperating. But remember, moderation is important," Galau coughed.

Ogras only rolled his eyes as they continued up the mountain.

"But that brings us to another topic," Galau said, looking a bit uncomfortable.

“What’s that?” Zac asked as he looked around for hidden traps.

“Our original agreement was for you to help me reach the thirtieth floor so that I could convince my elders to let me start a business. But now that your extraordinary might have been put on open display, that has ruined any chance of that happening. In other words, shouldn’t we revisit the issue of... remuneration,” Galau said, his voice getting lower and lower as he saw Zac and Ogras stop and direct emotionless stares at him.

“I agree,” Ogras eventually said, getting a surprised glance from Zac. “The price you quoted was for a carry by two unknown cultivators. But now you are hiring one of the most famous youths in the sector. How can 3 billion be enough?”

“Wh-“ Galau stammered. “I- I just realized it would be bad form to change the terms mid-climb. I apologize for bringing the matter up.”

“If you say so,” Ogras snorted.

The three reached the peak soon enough and found a weathered fort take up a large part of it. There was only one way to enter unless you climbed up the sheer wall, but that would no doubt leave you exposed to bandits staying in the base.

“You guys stay here,” Zac said as he openly walked toward the closed gate.

What he said earlier was partly true, there were a few things he needed to confirm. First of all, he was simply curious about the power of a floor guardian. He wanted to personally fight all of them so that he would be able to give helpful pointers to the people of Port Atwood. As far as he knew he was the only one who had a token so far, but as people started to reach level 50 more would no doubt get the chance to come here.

And even if no one from Port Atwood got a token there were still Thea and Billy, both of whom should qualify for this place as far as Zac was concerned.

But the part about needing to fight to avoid losing control was a lie. The splinter in his mind had been completely silent since his outburst in the Pill House, and it didn’t even release a smidgeon of the odd energy that usually seeped into his mind.

He was rather worried about something having happened to his skill after having seen the black trees surrounding him as he woke up from his stupor in the rubble of the Pill House. Zac had his guesses what was going on, but he needed to confirm them.

Energy surged around him as he walked forward, and a red array sprung up around the fortress, signaling that he had been spotted. That was just fine for Zac, as he released [Hatchetman’s Spirit]. The scenery of the mountain top started to drastically change as one tree after another started to grow.

The trees quickly rose to over fifty meters in height, and some even started to grow from the wall of the fortress, making it seem that the place had been deserted for hundreds of years. The trees themselves were of a traditional leafy variant with green leaves and brown trunks with bark.

There was one exception though, a singular stout tree that appeared just behind Zac. Its trunk was still light brown, but its leaves shone with a golden luster. Around the tree four white ropes were tied, each

of them full of intricate knots. Hanging from the ropes were some unknown talismans, but Zac couldn't recognize the script on them.

It looked like something that fit in an old temple, and it did emit a dense aura of life. Zac's cells swelled to life as he felt one with Nature. It was like he was strolling through his own garden rather than toward some Bandit's lair. Zac looked around and sighed in relief.

It looked like the Splinter hadn't corrupted his skill fractals after all.