

The Fall 639

Chapter 639: To Eat

Carl rushed into the cave with glee, not forgetting to flip off that god-damn demoness who had stolen two caves right in front of him over the last hours by using her earth-attuned movement skills to get ahead. It felt like his legs were about to buckle under him up here at the tenth layer, and all his organs hurt like he was getting constantly punched. But the lower layers were just too cramped.

He'd be lucky to get one cave every two to three hours at the seventh layer, and few of them held any life-changing opportunities. Up here there were just around a hundred people to compete with, which wasn't too bad considering how wide each layer was. Still, there were a few who had the same idea as himself; run right at the edge of the ninth layer, while scanning for opportunities in the tenth.

That way you would avoid the terrifying increase in pressure from passing the halfway point most of the time, while still enjoying the benefits that came from the upper half of the mountain. The items from there were clearly better, and Carl had made more money over the past ten hours compared to the past six months.

Not only that, he had gotten his hands on some rare treasures, which couldn't really be measured in Nexus Coins. They would allow him to trade for similarly rare items he needed for his cultivation.

He was extremely lucky to have broken through mid-battle against those deranged lizard people, pushing his Seed of Lightness to High stage. It seemed that this particular seed was extra effective at combatting this pressure as well, since Logan had similar attributes and a High Seed, but he was still unable to properly hunt any higher than the 8th layer.

Carl quickly activated [Energy Trace], and breathed out when there was nothing that could match his own energy signature in the cave. Of course, that didn't mean it was safe, but his odds were pretty good since there was a distinct medicinal smell coming from within. It was doubtful any of those killer machines were hiding inside.

A high base salary, clear advancement opportunities, and access to unique encounters. That was how he was suckered into the employ of the world's scariest boss and conscripted to enter this hellhole. But he had to admit; Void Beasts, werewolves, and collapsing space islands could definitely be classified as 'unique encounters'. Carl bet Zachary Atwood loved every moment of it.

A shame he had to drag the rest of them into the madness though.

Carl had somehow made it all this way in one piece, and he breathed out in relief when he saw a small tree with six delectable-looking fruits standing in the cave. This was definitely good news; the fewer of something, the better it probably was. A singular tree with just a handful of fruits? Jackpot.

Another win for the good guys.

A massive and sudden explosion coming from somewhere above threw Carl off his feet, and he immediately got a bad feeling. What trouble had his crazy boss attracted this time? He knew he would soon be called to arms for some insane battle he had neither the desire nor qualifications to participate in, but at least he could die with six delicious-looking fruits in his belly.

Carl scrambled back to his feet and rushed toward the tree, but a primordial scream of exasperation erupted from his chest when he saw his final reward being somehow drained and turned into sand in front of his very eyes. What the hell was going on?!

Was it that white-haired succubus who kept appearing around him? Had she done this somehow? Did those demons have a complaint department? He doubted it. It would probably be some trial-by-combat thing where he would swiftly and publicly get his ass handed to him.

But no, this had the mark of his boss all over him. First an explosion then this?

"Are you planning on hiding in here?" a teasing voice drifted into the cave from the outside, making Carl's hair stand on end. "Want me to call the insect enforcers for a motivational speech?"

"Shit," Carl muttered and started running out, donning the practiced determined expression of a career hero. "Where are the enemies?!"

"It's the Lord," the demoness said, but it wasn't like her explanation was necessary.

"Of course it is," Carl muttered, his practiced warrior-face quickly becoming strained.

It looked like the end of the world one layer above their current location. A massive crater hundreds of meters across had appeared out of nowhere, like a terrifying giant had taken a bite out of the Memorysteel.

But of course, there was no mythological creature who had decided he needed more iron in his diet before moving on. It was something much more terrifying; it was their boss who was up to something again.

He hovered in the sky, arms and legs spread wide like some sort of lunatic possessed by a creature of the night. He was even emitting an extremely eerie deep humming sound, but that might be the thing behind his back. A huge vortex slowly rotated like a halo, and it somehow looked even darker than the Void outside the mountain.

It was like everything could be sucked inside, and Carl even felt his mind shudder as he looked into it, like his soul was about to be ripped out of his body. Streams of Memorysteel were dragged from the mountain, entering the terrifying vortex that seemed completely insatiable. Even the energy in the atmosphere was being drained, and Carl had already seen what Lord Atwood did to his poor treasure tree.

Who knew how many treasures had been turned into trash by this point?

But at least it didn't look like their boss was going to gobble them up as well. That shifty sidekick of his stood much closer to the boss and he was fine, as was the golden-haired giant. The boss did swallow quite a few of those drones his sister owned, but he seemed mostly focused on draining the Memorysteel and its hidden riches.

"Looks like he's trying to eat the mountain," the demoness commented when it looked like they were safe and didn't need to ready themselves for battle.

"Of course he is."

The meteor hurtled through the vast cosmos once more, taking Zac and the mysterious predecessor on their journey. Zac didn't know whether this scene was taking place before or after the previous two visions, but it was clear that it wasn't directly connected in time with them.

The part of space looked completely different as Zac looked around, and there were no suns or stars no matter where he looked. Instead, there were endless rivers of lightning streaking across the darkness like elemental dragons. Zac's first instinct was that they were the tribulation lightning or something wrought by the system, but he quickly discarded that thought. While these lightning rivers were vast beyond comprehension, they didn't have any sense of a will like the purple Tribulation Lightning did.

They were just pure energy.

Some of them just looked like thin streaks, but going by the shockingly large beam right next to them they were most likely just extremely far away. There were massive continents with their own atmospheres far in the distance, using the endlessly wide lightning river as a source of warmth and energy. As for the ancestor, he seemed to be studying it for inspiration.

Small streams of lightning swirled about in his hands, but he seemed to be having problems. The small beams seemed powerful enough to turn a hegemon into ash, but the mysterious man's control over them seemed somewhat lacking. The arcs were wild and untamed, and it looked like he was trying to impose order on them.

Time passed and the hooded man eventually waved and dissipated the small lightning bolts. He didn't seem ready to give up though, but rather made a pulling motion toward the endlessly vast river of lightning, and a small thread of extremely pure lightning was dragged out from its depths.

Just like with the sun, the mysterious man took the lightning into his body, and crackling arcs powerful enough to turn Zac to nothingness lit up the surroundings for a while until the chaos subsided. It looked like it had been quite arduous for the man to absorb the high-grade lightning, but he eventually stirred and once more summoned the small arcs in his hands.

Zac didn't understand what he was up to, but he realized something. Weren't the bolts moving a bit smoother compared to before?

The two kept soaring through the lightning-infested part of the cosmos and the man kept up a cycle of rest, absorption, and experimentation, slowly improving his control over the small arcs. But a sudden thump made the vision just freeze before it slowly distorted.

Zac's own heart beat an extra time out of worry, as this looked very different from when the visions upon opening his hidden nodes ended. Space shuddered like it tried to resist what was happening, but it soon cracked into a million pieces like a mirror.

To eat was to live.

The taste of the ten-legged critter was rancid and it gave him the runs, but Karz looked at it like it was a treasure. He pushed his thumb into the soft spot right beneath its head, and it stopped moving after a short frantic struggle. Karz took a deep breath and started munching away, only occasionally stopping to keep himself from throwing up.

Energy-rich critters like these were rare, and he couldn't waste a speck of it if he wanted a chance to ever get out of this place. Karz sat under the cover of what probably was once some sort of vessel as he gazed up at the sky, the only sound of him forcibly biting through the shell and sinewy meat.

One day he would get up there.

A huge mountain floated in the sky, surrounded by an everchanging shroud of mysterious ether. Sometimes grand vessels would emerge from it for a few seconds before they turned into streaks of light. Just looking at it made every part of Karz's body twitch with hunger for some reason, like it held the most delicious things in the world.

Old Vek said it was a sect, a place where important people went to become stronger. Karz didn't understand the allure at first, but apparently, your life got better the stronger you were. You didn't have to eat things that almost made you puke or that made you see terrifying visions at night, and you didn't have to fear getting swept up in the refinement light like Old Vek finally was a year ago.

In fact, the treasure land he and the others scavenged for sustenance was actually just a garbage pile according to Old Vek, and everything he ate was just discarded scraps. So, Karz needed to eat to get stronger, so that one day he could live up there. His stomach was cramping up from the poisonous beetle, but it wasn't nearly as bad as the first ones he ate.

More importantly, that odd warmth spread all over his body, the warmth that Old Vek believed to be related to those in the sky. The ability to cultivate. Neither of them could know for sure, but it looked like not everyone had that gift since no one else in this garbage mountain ever seemed to understand what he was talking about.

The bug was a good first catch of the day, but he couldn't stop here. Today was the great cleanse, and nothing new would arrive for days. He scurried between the already searched mounds as he rushed toward the center. It was a risk, but the competition wasn't as fierce in there since the cleanse could always start early.

A weak shimmering suddenly caught his eye, and Karz's eyes lit up as he rushed forward. It was definitely a cultivator stone, this one shining in an alluring red. It was broken and had lost almost all of its light, but it was still better than most things that could be found in this place.

Karz quickly took out a bowl and pestle from his backpack, and he quickly started hitting the crystal, turning it into red crystalline sand. A wave of heat spread in the area, and Karz quickly took off his shirt, knowing that the effect would soon dissipate. His thin torso was covered in sores and scars, but Karz wasn't worried. Most people died from illness after getting these kinds of sores, but Karz got better extremely fast.

Old Vek had always believed it was because he had a blessed body, one meant for cultivation. What were some mortal afflictions to such a marvelous thing? Karz poured a bit of refiltered oil into the bowl, turning the sand into a paste that he spread all over his body. Smearing the compound into his wound hurt extremely bad, but Karz gritted his teeth as he covered his whole body in a thin layer.

A small flame of heat swept through his limbs after a few minutes, and the compound eventually dried and turned into clay that fell off his body. Karz nodded in satisfaction and put on his clothes again and resumed his search. He soon found another treasure whose energy was absorbed as well, and he kept

going from mound to mound, using over a dozen methods to absorb all kinds of things, each method perfected after tens of painful experiments.

Karz didn't know if the garbage piles were getting better or if he was getting luckier, but he was finding more and more good things as of late. One day of scavenging almost provided as much loot as a whole week before. Part of it was definitely because his body was becoming stronger from the constant absorption, but strength was almost only useful in this place when used to fight off competitors.

And when running for one's life.

A fluctuation in the air told Karz it was time to go, and he sped back toward the edge of the garbage-filled platform as quickly as his feet could carry him. He spotted both treasures and critters on his way back, but he followed Old Vek's old scavenger rules and ignored them all.

He finally reached the edge of the platform and jumped off, his lungs working like bellows by this point. However, he didn't immediately return to his burrow, but he rather stayed for a few minutes until the weird signs on the platform lit up, and the whole garbage heap turned into a sea of mesmerizing fire.

This was the power of the 'Cultivators'. They were not only able to make the garbage appear out of nowhere, but they were also able to incinerate kilometers of it in an instant. In a few days, there would only be ash left behind, which would be collected by the stonemen and used where the Cultivators grew their high-quality food.

Karz looked at the spectacle for a while longer before he started his trek back. The trip took an hour until he reached the inconspicuous stones in the middle of the forest, and he made three rounds to make sure no one had come close. Only then did he open the hidden hatch beneath one of the smaller stones and crawled inside.

The world turned pitch-black as Karz closed the entrance to his sanctuary. He grasped around in the darkness for a few seconds until he found what he was looking for, a small crystal ball with a small crack on its bottom. It was the greatest item that Old Vek had found over his long 40 years of scavenging, and he had bequeathed it to Karz when he saw his potential.

Karz concentrated for a few seconds, and the ball suddenly lit up. It provided even more warmth and red light today, no doubt thanks to the cultivator stone he found before. Old Vek had said that only those who could make the ball light up had a chance to be accepted in the sect, but the more light it gave off the better ones' chances were.

The light right now was barely enough to illuminate the small shell, a far cry from the burning sun that Karz imagined himself releasing when he one day finally climbed up to that mountain. But it was also a lot better compared to just a few months ago.

The more he ate, the more perfect he would become.