

The Fall 685

Chapter 685: Old Friend

Nala had taken them to a medium-sized disk with millions of elegant spires reaching toward the stars. There were also whole towns and enormous settlements erected on platforms between some of the larger spires, forming a multi-layered society that stretched thousands of meters into the air. It looked like a normal metropolis for people of mixed heritage, rather than something belonging to a singular force.

Interestingly enough, the disk had structures built both on the top and on bottom surfaces, and it had a far greater slant compared to most disks to allow both sides to be angled toward the Twilight Ocean. On the bottom, there were even more towers that were reminiscent of stalactites. There were some hanging cities as well, though Nala flew toward a particular tower that looked like a hanging garden basking in the radiance of Twilight.

"This is Gaun's Escape, a mixed disk controlled by a consortium of 12 Undead Factions, six local and six foreign. That's a rule set by the Twilight Lord. Foreign factions are only allowed to control a third of the disks, but they can have control of up to half ownership on another third. That way the power balance between local and foreign is evenly divided," Nala explained, after which she lowered her voice. "Of course, if it comes down to it, the foreign factions are more powerful, and there are many hidden alliances."

Zac nodded, not being too surprised. There was the saying that even a dragon can't suppress the local snake, but Zac didn't feel it to be true. If those Imperial clans really wanted this place they would long have seized it, but the benefits likely didn't match the costs.

"I'll wait outside, young master," Nala said as she stopped in front of the grand entrance to the Incensary.

"Come with us," Zac said with a shake of his head. "How will you explain the situation in this place from out here."

"Ah, but this establishment," Nala hesitated as she glanced at a plaque.

Zac looked over and he immediately understood what she was talking about. Just a balcony cost 100 E-grade Nexus Coins, and ordering some Spiritual Incense was even more. A short visit to this place would eclipse Nala's whole salary.

It looked like a Metropolis really had Metropolis prices.

"I'll pay of course," Zac said as he walked inside.

His appearance caused some waves, and the regular waitress was immediately recalled as to let a head waiter lead Zac to a beautiful private balcony at the edge of the plateau. It was over a hundred square meters and furnished to look like a celestial garden full of white and black flowers Zac had never seen before. Zac and Vilari sat down at a table close to the edge, where they could overlook the Twilight Ocean and the ships sailing by on the hundreds of rivers.

Zac exchanged a few words with the waiter, and he came with a packet a minute later and carefully started a small fire on a stove in the middle of the table. An azure flame lit up from the brazier, and Zac felt a soothing sensation spread throughout his body as he was inundated in a herbal haze.

The undead had truly mastered the art of incense after being locked out of most other vices until later stages. The herb mixture he had ordered did not only smell amazing, but it also had impressive medical properties. It felt like his cells were covered in a soothing stream, allowing them to calm down and stabilize after the extremely long teleportation.

Nala didn't seem as calm, and Zac had to exhort her to sit down at the table.

"So, give me a rundown of the major factions in this place," Zac said after having enjoyed the smoke and the view for a few minutes.

"Yes, certainly. As I mentioned, The Twilight Lord is the supposed leader of Twilight Harbor, but he does not control a real faction. He has a few thousand 'brothers' as he calls it, various wandering cultivators who run errands for him. However, even the weakest of among them is an elite E-Grade cultivator.

"But the actual controlling organ is the Twilight Council, an executive branch made up of thirteen native clans. They are in charge of security, tax collection, and so on, though they are officially under the Twilight Lord himself.

"These thirteen clans are all C-Grade forces with 5 undead factions, 6 living factions, and two aberrant factions. The aberrants are the necromancy council and the Rox'At Elementals. The members of the Necromancer's Guild are technically living, but they naturally lean toward our side. The elementals are their own type of lifeforms and could be considered neutral.

"How many C-Grade forces are in this place?" Zac asked with a small frown.

"Around 50, with the council members being the strongest. Of course, that's just officially. There are both wandering Monarchs living here temporarily and hidden Monarchs among the foreign factions as well," Nala explained.

"We Imperials should be putting some pressure on the living even if we are outsiders. There should be a counterforce to our presence here," Zac said. "Who is it?"

"You're exactly right," Nala nodded. "There are two forces actually. One is the Radiant Temple, and the other is the Havarok Empire. Both are B-grade factions with their headquarters in more prosperous sections of the multiverse. Their presence here is actually a bit greater than the Undead Empire's, but they are not of one mind and have some internal disagreements."

"But if the Empire makes a move, these two will band together to resist us," Zac muttered, receiving an affirmative nod.

"Just what's so alluring about this place?" Zac eventually asked. "Why do these factions waste that sort of effort?"

"Well, one reason is that Twilight Harbor has become a major trading hub of the frontier sectors. All sorts of interesting items pop up as The Boundless Heavens integrates the uncharted reaches, and many of them make their way here. It's a convenient place for those above to extract the true treasures of

these Sectors without having to travel all over the frontier,” Nala said. “The second reason is the Twilight Ocean.”

“Isn’t it just another Mystic Realm Trial Ground?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Well, it does present a good opportunity for people like the young master to temper themselves, along with the opportunity to gain a high-quality Limited Title,” Nala said. “But the Mystic Realm also has some rarely-seen properties that attract cultivators from far and wide.”

“Does it have to do with how it expels both Miasma and Cosmic Energy?” Zac asked.

“Just so,” Nala said as she looked down at the glowing orb. “Many believe that the Twilight Ocean was created by two enormous Mystic Realms colliding, one life-attuned and one death-attuned. It resulted in the twilight Ocean.

“That by itself is a miracle, but more interestingly it created new energy; Twilight Energy. It is a mix of life and death,” the guide continued.

“Is that really possible?!” Zac asked, barely able to contain his excitement.

“Perhaps only the Monarchs know how it is possible,” Nala said. “But the Twilight Energy can’t leave the Mystic Realm. The moment it escapes the spatial tunnel it splits up to normal energy, which is what enriches this area. The energy is then funneled to the various platforms through the Twilight Rivers.”

“The Twilight Energy has given birth to various treasures that are useful for both the living and undead,” the guide explained. “Most notable are the Twilight Fruits.”

“What’s their effect?” Zac asked curiously.

“They are used as an ancillary product for pill- and incense-making. They contain the odd reconciliatory effect of Twilight Energy, and they are extremely useful in helping fuse incompatible materials,” Nala said. “They can both make impossible recipes possible, or increase the success rate of recipes with high failure rates. They are a favorite among Alchemists in the inner sectors.”

Zac’s eyes widened when he heard about the properties of Twilight Fruits. Having that kind of effect was amazing, and he could understand how it was so sought-after. It might not matter much for random healing pills, but supreme pills often had extremely high failure rates. Add to that the cost of materials, and you could save a fortune by using these fruits.

“What grade are the fruits?” Zac asked.

“The Twilight Ocean has been grade restricted by The Boundless Heavens, and the Twilight Fruits match the grade. And the grade of the fruit has to match the grade of the pill. The most precious fruits are therefore the C-Grade Twilight Fruits, but they rarely appear on the market,” Nala said.

“What does an E-Grade Twilight Fruit go for?” Zac asked.

“Around 100 E-grade Nexus Coins after a Twilight Ascent,” Nala said, and Zac’s interest was quickly extinguished. “But the price can rise to almost 300 if it has been long since the last opening.”

It was a lot of money, but it would barely make a dent in Zac's finances. Nala seemed to understand his thoughts and she quickly continued.

"The use of E-Grade Fruits is limited because there is no lack of D-Grade Alchemists who can concoct even difficult E-Grade pills with high success rate. The value of D-Grade fruits is exponentially higher. However, there is another reason to pluck the fruits," she added.

"What?" Zac asked curiously.

"The council and the large mercantile unions all want to make sure that as many fruits as possible are extracted on every opening. So, they have something called the 'Fate-Plucking Ladder'. The more fruits you pluck the higher your placement. As is customary, there are also extremely valuable rewards for those who perform well," the guide explained.

"Can you kill others for fruits inside the Mystic Realm?" Zac asked.

"Yes, there are no limitations except the grades. Weaker cultivators usually stay closer to the entrance. There are fewer fruits and other treasures, but the odds of running into a powerhouse is a lot lower," Nala said. "In fact, I have prepared a crystal here with the information my father has prepared as part of my services."

"Oh?" Zac said as he accepted the information crystal.

He briefly scanned the crystal and saw that it contained all kinds of tips and tricks for the Twilight Ascent, and he felt that her somewhat high price might actually be pretty cheap when it came down to it. There were even old ladders provided, and Zac a bit surprised to see that you needed to gather over ten thousand fruits to make it into the top ten of the E-Grade ladder.

That by itself was over a D-grade Nexus Coin, a massive fortune for most E-Grade warriors. Of course, those who managed to gather that many fruits were definitely extremely powerful cultivators at the peak of E-Grade, just one step away from evolving. For them, the real reward would probably be the items from the event itself.

Vilari and Nala sat in silence as Zac perused the crystal, but he didn't manage to get far before he frowned and quickly put on his mask again.

"I'm sad. I heard an old friend had come to this corner of the universe, yet he chose to go to this place instead of visiting me," an all-too-familiar voice suddenly emerged from the entrance to the balcony, causing Zac's hair to stand on end as he looked up from the crystal.

It looked like some things really couldn't be avoided.

Zac looked over toward the door to his balcony, and it truly was Catheya Sharva'Zi who had appeared out of nowhere, with Varo silently standing behind her. This time she was also accompanied by a female Revenant that looked bulkier than most Corpselords. She even had a foot on Billy, and Zac suspected that she might actually be a turned pureblood Titan.

The muscular cultivator was definitely not in the D-Grade, but she should be at the very precipice with great accumulations. Even Zac didn't feel confident in a contest of pure strength against her, though that was just one of his advantages.

That wasn't the only surprise as both Catheya's and Varo's auras had taken a drastic turn. They might not be at the peak of E-Grade, but they had to be at High E-grade from what he could tell. Zac could only inwardly lament at the difference it made to have a C-grade master. He had no doubt prepared some sort of course for his disciple to rapidly push her and her follower through the early stages of the grade.

After all, that was how most elites did it from how Zac understood things. Levels were easy to gain in the early grades and they helped increase survivability in Mystic Realms. So people rushed through levels to gain the class quests and attributes, then slowing down to work on their Daos and cultivation path.

The only detriment to that tactic was that some lost their momentum while working on their Dao, but elite cultivators had enough discipline for that to not become a real issue.

"Nala, could you give us a moment," Zac said as he looked over at his guide.

Nala already seemed to want to shrink through the floor upon being stared at by Catheya and her followers. She quickly nodded and scurried out of the balcony, only stopping to give a deep bow toward Catheya before hurrying out. Catheya only glanced at her as she waited for Nala to leave the area.

Only then did Catheya walk forward and sat down. She did give Vilari a curious glance, but she soon turned her focus to Zac.

"I expected to find a human named Zac Piker resting here, yet I've run into two undead. Tell me, who are you?" Catheya said with a slight smile as looked Zac up and down, but there was a dangerous glint in her pitch-black eyes. "And don't play dumb. The dust left off from the token is still all over you."

Zac sighed as he took off his mask, exposing his abyssal eyes and a finely sculpted pearl-white face. It had almost perfect proportions, a mix of masculinity and grace. Zac had aimed for 'warrior elf' when he crafted his current face with [Million Faces], forming a more believable appearance with the help of Triv. He was also almost a decimeter taller than his real stature, which was the limit he could change without feeling it affect his combat strength.

It turned out that Zac's normal appearance was simply too ugly to pass off as a proper pureblood Draugr, even after having pushed his human race to D-Grade and enjoying the slight natural boost to his appearance. Real Draugr wasn't really at the level of Vampires in the movies, but they definitely wouldn't be described as "average-looking."

Zac had eventually landed on a particular look that was distinct from his human face. He was completely clean-shaven since Draugr apparently didn't have beards, and he had changed his hair color to slightly dark grey which was held back in a warrior's knot. It made him slightly different compared to the bright silver of Be'Zi and Catheya.

His transformation skill physically altered his bone structure and skin, so there was no risk for his real appearance to be exposed. At most, someone might figure out his appearance was modified without spotting the original. And Zac had practiced giving himself this particular face hundreds of times to make it his own.

He felt confident that not even the members of Port Atwood would be able to pick him out looking like this, let alone Catheya.

"I suppose you are Catheya Sharva'Zi, the one who assisted my Junior Brother?" Zac said with a sigh. "We should have guessed you branded the token."

In fact, Zac had seen it as a distinct possibility that they would do something exactly like that, which was why he had changed his appearance and come up with a lie in advance. Of course, he had also believed that if he was marked, he would have been visited by some of Catheya's followers rather than Catheya herself.

There was always a small chance of Catheya actually being here, but he figured that someone like her wouldn't visit the same place in a frontier sector twice. But he should have guessed she would pop up here after learning about the Twilight Ascent.

Meeting her as his undead persona would complicate things, but there was not much to do about it. He needed to come to Twilight Harbor as an undead because he needed resources, and it was definitely the right call after seeing how segregated the Twilight Harbor was.

"Pureblood," the Titan Revenant muttered with surprise before she glanced speculatively at her master.

"Who are you? I can't recognize your aura at all. There's no way you're part of those half-blood clans in the Zecia sector," Catheya said with a frown. "But I don't remember any heritage from back home giving off the same scent as you either."

"Well, I'm not part of the Empire, so I'm not surprised," Zac smiled, but he was surprised at how strong a reaction Catheya and her followers had. "And you can call me Arcaz Black."

"Impossible!" Catheya spat. "You're a true pureblood, nothing like these unattached half-blood clans. How do you not have the mark of the Primo?!"

Zac knew he would have been exposed in no time if he pretended to be part of the Undead Empire since his knowledge was just at surface level. He figured it wouldn't be a big deal considering there were Draugr-clans native to the Twilight Harbor. But it looked like there was a stark difference between pure-blood and half-blood clans.

In either case, there was no stopping now, so Zac could just brush it aside.

"Well, my background is a bit complicated, I see no reason to go into detail. What brings you here?" Zac shrugged.

"Where is Zac Piker?" Catheya asked in return.

"Busy cultivating I assume," Zac said, trying to appear laid-back.

"Well, that's a disappointment, but it was just a spur-of-the-moment thing anyway," Catheya muttered thoughtfully before she looked at Zac with a spurious smile.

"So, why shouldn't I turn you over to some enforcers of the Empire?" Catheya asked with a smile. "A pureblood Draugr of unknown heritage running around without any connection to his roots. Who knows what kind of trouble that might bring?"