

The Fall 688

Chapter 688: Stocking Up

"They probed our souls with some sort of treasure," Vilari muttered a few moments after the trio had left the balcony. "I wasn't able to block it out."

"They did?" Zac exclaimed. "I didn't notice anything."

"Young master's soul is strong, but you ultimately aren't a Soul Cultivator," Vilari said with a slight smile.

"What's your take on the situation?" Zac asked.

"Her soul was stable throughout. I think she was mostly truthful in her words," Vilari slowly said. "The large one was threatening, but it would be the small one you would have to worry about. I sensed wild fluctuations in his soul every time you were disrespectful to the Draugr."

"A real mess," Zac sighed. "Well, no point in staying here. Are you feeling better?"

"Much better, thank you," Vilari nodded.

"Alright, let's go," Zac grunted as he stood up. "The place Catheya is putting us up in doesn't sound too bad."

The two left the incensary a moment later and found a subdued Nala waiting outside. He needed to consider his next step, and he had Nala take them to the high-quality hotel on a disk partly owned by Clan Sharva'Zi. There was no point in avoiding that place now that he had already been spotted, and it truly was a luxurious place.

The hotel was actually a vast forest, where each room was a mansion surrounded by wilderness. The forests were not the deathly and seemingly haunted forestry of the Dead Zone back on Earth either, but rather beautiful trees with silvery leaves and white trunks. There were also similarly-colored bushes that made up some of the undergrowth, and they grew what looked like metallic pinecones which sounded like chimes when they were rustled by the wind.

They didn't have to slog through the forest, but an attendant rather handed them unique teleportation tokens that took them to a small square outside the walled courtyard leading to his mansion. He sent the attendant away after having him provide Nala with a token as well. He sent Nala away as well, though asked her to come back in twelve hours before he and Vilari went inside the mansion.

Catheya suddenly appearing had put him a bit on the spot even if he had prepared a bit beforehand. He had been forced to make some decisions quickly, but he felt things worked out for the best. The deal she offered was really fair as far as he could tell. Catheya's party would get the first three Life-Death Pearls they found as payment for providing the path and method to push away the restriction of the Twilight Ocean.

After the first three, the group would draw lots and then distribute the following pearls thereafter. Furthermore, the group would consist of 8 members at most. Seeing as there were up to 100 pearls to gather, which usually grew in the same area according to Catheya, he might get his hands on more than ten Life-Death Pearls. These kinds of items generally lost their efficacy after a few uses, so it would probably be more than enough for him.

Still, the mission would mean traveling with both Catheya and strangers for months. Not only were there risks of betrayal, but also of his real identity being exposed. It didn't look like Catheya managed to find anything out during their meeting, but that didn't mean she bought his spiel hook, line, and sinker.

Thankfully, they had only come to a verbal agreement, and Zac would only have to sign a proper contract before getting the VIP-skill.

Before then, he needed to figure out his plan. One of the main goals for this trip had been to find some basic methods and treasures for himself and the Einherjar. The second goal was to search for opportunities to strengthen himself. The return of Leandra had driven home just how weak he was, and visiting this magical metropolis only reinforced that realization.

But joining Catheya to visit the depths of the Twilight Ocean... Was perhaps more than he had bargained for. The lethality in there was definitely high, but the risk of exposure weighed even heavier on his shoulders. Going at it alone was no doubt a much safer option, as he could stay closer to the entrance if he found the challenge too great.

However, Zac soon found his resolve. The whole reason to set out was to get stronger, and those pearls seemed almost tailor-made to push at least two of his Dao Fragments to the next level. With his odd constitution progressing in Dao would require rarer and rarer treasures, so he couldn't just back away when an opportunity presented itself.

Still, going in blind and dumb was out of the question. There were still two months before the Twilight Ascent started, and he needed to make the most of it. Catheya had thankfully set aside a slot for him, which allowed him to avoid the qualifier which seemed like a huge timesink. A quick scan of the crystal Nala provided mentioned the qualifier.

There was no lack of E-Grade cultivators in a place like this. In fact, they could be counted in the billions. The qualifiers lasted one hundred rounds where you would be matched with random warriors, and each victory awarded one point. Finally, the ten million people with the highest points would get to enter the Twilight Ascent, along with the one million seeded warriors.

Each warrior would fight five battles a day, with one day of rest in between every fight-day. That meant it would take forty days to just get a spot. He didn't have time for that, he needed to focus on his cultivation instead.

The question was what he should do with Vilari.

"Are you interested in the Twilight Ascent?" Zac asked as he turned to his follower who had sat silently as Zac mulled things over.

"No," Vilari said after some thought. "It would require me to break through within two months, and it is simply too short a time. I am not ready to harm my foundations for this trial, and I feel that I would be a hindrance to you even if I evolved."

"Alright," Zac nodded. "But staying in this place after I leave..."

"How about you send me back before you enter the Trial? I can bring any items you procure back for Port Atwood," Vilari ventured. "It will give me time to shore up my foundations before you return."

“Sounds good,” Zac nodded, and the two went over everything they had encountered so far and set up a plan for the coming two months.

He might have decided to tie himself to Catheya’s chariot, but her umbrella of protection would also allow him to act with less restraint over the next months. This was a huge opportunity for him and Port Atwood. His pockets were filled with money and there were so many things to spend it on. He didn’t have access to any place as flourishing as Twilight Harbor back home. In fact, he wasn’t sure if one even existed.

Vilari had a far better understanding of not only his undead forces, but even his living ones after spending ten days with Joanna. She helped him put together a shopping list, after which Zac started reading the information missive on the Twilight Ocean with greater scrutiny.

He had been at a disadvantage during the negotiations just now since he didn’t really understand all the details of the Twilight Ascent, and he needed to shore up that weakness before he ran into Catheya again.

After reading the whole missive twice he could conclude that Catheya had essentially spoken the truth. The Life-Death Pearls were well-documented high-quality treasures of the Twilight Ocean, and they were just as rare as she indicated, perhaps even more so. Finding them was largely dependent on dumb luck according to the missive.

Of course, that didn’t mean Catheya was lying about her plan. The Twilight Ocean had been around for millions of years, and it opened up once every thousand years or so. That meant that the ancient factions had sent their members into the Mystic Realm thousands of times. There was no way they hadn’t figured out some hidden methods that weren’t detailed in the public missives.

Zac had also found out why Catheya wanted to enlist his help. He was pretty confident in his strength, but it was suspicious that she was ready to fork out so many resources just to get him to join her party. Part of it was definitely his connection to her Ancestor, but Zac had found that he did have some unique benefits in the Mystic Realm.

Catheya had mentioned an array to weaken the pervasive pressure inside the Twilight Ocean, but she hadn’t completely explained what a detriment it was. She had made it sound like the only reason people didn’t go to the depths was the risk of running into enemies, but that wasn’t the case at all.

Most of the people simply wouldn’t survive in the depths of the Mystic Realm.

Rather than a restriction, it would be more apt to call the invasive energy a poison. The undead were poisoned by the life-attributed components in the atmosphere, and the living the opposite. Everyone was able to filter out the unwanted parts to some degree, but they were ultimately weakened by the environment.

There were thankfully various ways to counter this effect. First of all, there were the pills that helped filter Twilight Energy. There were also arrays and some skills that could weaken it. But ultimately, the deciding factor on how deep you could go was your own body. The Twilight Ocean was a System-controlled Mystic Realm, and as such, it had probably been modified for it to have its current effect.

The higher level you had, the more the Twilight Energy tried to burrow into your body, essentially turning the whole thing into a level-based trial. That meant people with greater accomplishments would get further. Even better, soul strength helped as well. It didn't really mean all Mentalists had an advantage though since their bodies were usually weaker than normal cultivators and therefore less resistant to the corrosion of the Twilight Ocean.

But Zac was probably the perfect member for them. He couldn't be certain, but between his high Efficiency and unusually powerful soul, he should be among the best at resisting the poison. Meanwhile, he wasn't so powerful that they felt him capable of taking them all out.

What Catheya didn't know was that Zac probably was in an even better position than she assumed. The weird muddled energies of the Twilight Ocean might be a troublesome poison to her, but to him, it was just food for his [Void Heart]. Furthermore, if the accumulated life-attuned energies ever got too much, he could simply swap races. It was like he was entering the Mystic Realm with cheat codes.

There was only one caveat to this though; this advantage wasn't as pronounced compared to other elites who could resist the effect almost as well as he did. So the kind of elites Catheya mentioned, running around with Dao Branches and high Efficiency, would still be a big threat to him.

Still, that risk wasn't enough to dampen Zac's excitement. The Life-Death Pearls was just one of the innumerable valuables that waited in the Twilight Ocean. He'd definitely regret it if he didn't go, so it was with extreme vigor he and Vilari set out the next day.

"Which is the best pill house in this place?" immediately asked when they found Nala already waiting outside their courtyard.

"The Karabas Clan," Nala said without hesitation. "They are just a local faction of Spectrals, but rumors are they are backed by an Imperial Eidolon-clan. Their heritage in the Dao of Alchemy is extremely deep, and their wares have low toxicity."

"Hm," Zac nodded. "Take me there."

There wasn't actually any rush in buying pills or other necessities, but Zac wanted to fill his Spatial Treasures with necessary items as quickly as humanly possible. You never knew if Catheya's master or one of her elders would suddenly appear, forcing him to immediately activate his escape bracelet.

The trip took three hours even with the spatial manipulation that ran along the Twilight Rivers, but they eventually reached a death-attuned platform with a decent position to the Twilight Ocean. This one was actually covered by a dense haze, making it impossible to guess at its interiors.

The miasmic wall was pretty unwelcoming, but Zac simply indicated Nala to shoot straight through, and a vast metropolis soon appeared on the other side. There were tens of thousands of crystalline towers covering the surface, and they made Zac think of the onyx pillars that surrounded the Splinter of Oblivion during the hunt.

Did ghosts prefer to stay inside these types of crystals rather than proper houses?

There was one building that looked different though, a twenty-kilometer wide complex that was surrounded by medicinal clouds rather than a miasmic haze.

"Young Master, I cannot enter this place, so I will wait outside," Nala said as she landed. "This time, I think young master's attendant..."

"That's fine, you two stay here," Zac nodded as he got off the small vessel, and a dense deathly aura started to swirl around him.

It was just like how Catheya and her Titan follower acted, using a small hint of their aura to act as some sort of proof of their standing. Most people could glean all kinds of things from the aura, most importantly how condensed it was.

For example, Catheya and her follower's auras were almost as powerful as each other, but Catheya's was far more condensed. That meant that Catheya was at a lower level than her follower, yet had the same combat strength. What did this signify? That she was an elite, that she had powerful backing. It was pretty easy to mask this phenomenon, but very hard to mimic.

Catheya gave a clear aura of an elite, but even the Draugr scion's aura was a lot less condensed than Zac's when he didn't mask it. It was almost like space around him congealed with his Dao as he stepped off the vessel, and Nala released an audible gasp from behind. He appeared in front of a huge arch a second later, where a ghost already waited for him.

She looked like a beautiful Revenant, her form far more corporeal and defined than Triv's or any of the other ghosts that had appeared on Earth.

"Does Young Master have a Membership Token?" the ghost asked.

"I just arrived in this Sector," Zac said with a small shake of his head, trying to emulate the aura of someone with a formidable background.

"Of course," the attendant smiled as a black crystalline token appeared out of nowhere. "Please accept this Token, it will make Young Master's future purchasing experiences easier."

Zac nodded and took the token before he entered the luxurious complex that even eclipsed the Big Axe Coliseum. Just like that, he was a VIP customer, simply by flashing his face. He had come a long way since having to force his way through the commoner's entrance over at the Zethaya Pill House.

Zac was met by an enthusiastic clerk and immediately taken to a private room. There was a lot of undead wandering around looking at displays or perusing the store's inventory recorded on crystals, but being a pureblood Draugr clearly had its advantages.

"My name is Yilian. What can we assist young master with today?" the clerk, another spectral who took the form of some elf-like humanoid, asked as she handed one of the inventory crystals to Zac.

"I am partaking in the Twilight Ascent and wanted to see if your store has some items that could be of use," Zac said.

"Our stock definitely can't match that of the grand establishments of the Heartlands, but it is at the level of a Kingdom's medium-tier establishments, housing up to Peak D-Graded pills and compounds thanks to a certain patronage," Yilian smiled, clearly with some pride.

Zac slightly nodded, actually a bit surprised. To boast a stock that could match a B-grade Kingdom's mid-tier Pill House was quite a statement for a shop in a remote sector like this. Zac had already asked Nala

to make sure, but the Sector housing the Twilight Harbor, the Zervereth Sector, was just C-Grade. It seemed a lot more powerful than Zecia, but it was ultimately just a slightly more bustling frontier sector.

Zac doubted the Zethaya Clan would dare to make such a proclamation and compare itself to stores in a B-Grade Human Empire, and it made him look at the inventory crystal with even greater enthusiasm. Of course, he tried to play it cool at the surface as he scanned the endless rows of products.

“Perhaps you could make some suggestions,” Zac eventually said after a few minutes. “I am bringing a few followers, so I need a few sets of Healing, Soul-mending, soldier pills, and perhaps berserking pills. Top quality, of course.”

Zac obviously wasn’t bringing any followers, but would a vaunted pure-blood Draugr hailing from a proper Kingdom need to buy his pills in a store here? Wouldn’t his clan provide? So, he rather made a fib about followers. He needed a large number of pills in either case since there was no telling when he would get access to buy items for his undead side after leaving the Twilight Harbor anyways.

“The Twilight Ascent is a Heaven-controlled event, and the E-Grade Ascent has a limit of quasi D-Grade pills,” the clerk said. “Our top pill line is called the Dawn-series, and it is available both as Peak E-Grade pill and quasi D-Grade. The line has everything you require, except berserking pills. We currently sell special kits at discounted prices if the young master is interested.”

Zac blankly looked at the attendant for a few seconds, trying to hide his confusion. Quasi D-grade? What the hell was that?