

The Fall 691

Chapter 691: Suspicions and Auctions

The skills in the public section of the repository were mostly Middle-stage, which meant the equivalent of a skill you'd get from an Uncommon Class, though slightly weakened from the transcription. A few skills were high-grade, but most of them were either out of stock or had some sort of drawbacks that made them less popular.

The Eldritch Archivals were in the same situation as most other merchants in the Twilight Harbor; a lot of high-end stock geared toward E-grade warriors had been sold out long before Zac arrived. After all, the Twilight Ascent only opened so often, and many would be dead or long past the E-Grade by the next time it opened.

Everyone wanted some final upgrades before entering since it would increase their survivability rate and the potential returns they could get.

Zac walked through the stores for an hour, and he ultimately settled on just two more skills for himself. The first was called [Gorehew], and it was a pure Strength-based Medium E-Grade skill meant for axes, two-handed swords, polearms, and other larger bladed weapons. It was meant as an upgrade for [Unholy Strike] since Zac had essentially given up on that skill by now.

It was pretty suited to his constitution, but Zac ultimately had to prioritize using his skill fusions on transforming his other skills into ones that suited his path better. [Unholy Strike] worked fine, but charging up his muscles with enough miasma to make a difference at his current level took way too much time. [Force of the Void] didn't work on that skill either, perhaps because the skill worked by gradually expanding his muscles.

[Gorehew] was a skill he could use repeatedly in battle, just like [Nature's Edge]. It obviously wasn't at the level of his own skill, but it did have a good feature. As he slaughtered enemies with the skill, the attack would gain a temporary boost in power and area of effect. Furthermore, the boost was stackable to a degree. It was a decent skill to clear out a large number of weak enemies at a low cost, when using his tactic of whittling down enemies was a waste of time.

Zac didn't have any plans on using it in the future. It was simply a temporary skill that would serve him well until he reached the D-Grade.

The second skill was called [Undying Mark], and it was a healing skill. The skill allowed you to continuously infuse Miasma until you formed a mark on your body. That mark was essentially like a stored healing spell. At low proficiency, you'd be able to create three marks and at peak proficiency five of them. Of course, the healing effect would also increase with every increase in proficiency.

Its strong point was that the healing skill could actually be used in battle for an almost instantaneous regeneration. The downsides were that it took hours to form the marks and that the effect wasn't anything special. Zac still figured it was better than nothing, and he added it to his repertoire. Vilari had a better haul, and she actually got three skills for herself, two of which she even felt were usable as a base for skill fusions.

Zac was about to exit the Repository, but he stopped when he saw Catheya waiting by the gates. It was the first time he had seen her since their initial meeting, and Zac once more put his guard up.

"I heard you've made your choice. Be careful. [Abyssal Phase] was a skill an external elder of my clan learned around eighty thousand years ago. He was killed by a lightning-quick strike before he had a chance to activate the evolved version of the skill," Catheya smiled. "It's quite lopsided, with both immense strengths and demerits."

"I have other defenses to rely on," Zac smiled back. "Is everything arranged?"

"You're so business-minded, just like your... junior brother. He kept asking me one question after another, like his time was gold," Catheya laughed. "But yes, everything is arranged. My master was quite impressed with you, and he's signed off on you. As for the auction, I'll come pick you up tomorrow."

"Your master has checked up on me?" Zac said with surprise, his heart almost jumping up into his throat. "He's free enough to spy on an E-grade cultivator?"

Zac had been alert all the time while traveling through the Twilight Harbor, but he hadn't felt a single thing. His bracer usually warmed up when someone was trying to inspect him, but the few times it had happened he had always managed to find the source. It was usually curious onlookers who hung outside the shops, perhaps looking for marks to scam or just gathering intelligence.

But nothing had warned him of a probe from a hidden C-Grade Monarch. It was an important reminder. If some of those old monsters wanted him dead, then it was over. He wouldn't even have a chance to start generating an annihilation sphere or his defensive bangle before he was turned into atoms.

"He worries considering he can't enter that place. More than one promising Imperial has fallen inside the Twilight Ocean over the years," Catheya shrugged before he gave him a deep look. "Besides, he was curious about the one who has some sort of connection to my ancestor. He could confirm that you are pureblood Draugr just like we thought, but not even slightly related to Ancestor Be'Zi... Just where did you pop up from?"

"The universe is full of little mysteries. You'll go crazy if you try to understand everything," Zac smiled.

"For a while I guessed you were a progenitor just like Zac Piker, perhaps even from the same planet," Catheya mused, ignoring Zac's comment. "After all, some unintegrated worlds hold the uninitiated unliving. An undead forming alliance with the living against the Undead Empire? What a scandal that would be."

"But now you've changed your opinion?" Zac said with a raised brow.

"I can't confirm any exact numbers, but I would say that you have spent over 3,000 D-grade Nexus Coins over the past week. Even if you sold 10 recently integrated planets in a place like Zecia you wouldn't reach such a net worth. That kind of wealth can't be found on a progenitor, it needs millennia to be accumulated. You must have a very powerful master, probably at peak C-grade. Perhaps even a Divine Monarch," Catheya said with a slightly victorious smile.

"You've been keeping track of my purchases?" Zac asked with a frown.

“Of course I have,” Catheya snorted. “But more importantly, word of a mysterious pureblood Draugr spending a prodigal amount of wealth on all kinds of basic necessities have spread all across the Harbor in certain circles. Mind telling me what you’re up to?”

“I’ve just recently started gathering some followers of my own,” Zac shrugged. “I took the opportunity to buy some basic items for them.”

Zac kept his face impassive, more than happy to let Catheya form a misguided hypothesis of his origin. In fact, that had even been part of the consideration when going on such a wanton shopping spree. Catheya had participated in an integration herself, and she should be clear about the potential gains that came with it. Zac himself was good for just over 100 Billion F-grade Nexus Coins before Leandra threw money at him, and most of that was dividends his sister had generated.

As for Divine Monarchs, he had heard something about it before. Apparently, it was a stage a bit similar to a Half-Step D-grade cultivator. But while Half-Step D-grade essentially signified failure, a Divine Monarch was the opposite. Each grade evolution was a larger step than the one before, and there were some preparations needed to even attempt reaching B-grade.

Zac didn’t know the details, but if you managed to become a Divine Monarch you essentially had the base qualifications to attempt a breakthrough. Of course, there were no doubt a bunch of other requirements to become an actual Autarch, considering none appeared over millions and millions of years in the frontier sectors.

“I am starting to believe your story. You might actually be a real disciple of Ancestor or her partner,” Catheya muttered. “I still can’t understand the connection between you and Zac Piker though... But I will figure it out sooner or later.”

“Best of luck,” Zac said, trying his best to hide his discomfort. “If there’s nothing else, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“What a bore,” Catheya sighed. “I’ll pick you up at your place.”

Zac quickly returned to his compound with the help of Nala, feeling like a thousand eyes were peeping at him all the while. He knew that he was playing with fire getting along with Catheya, but he had already started reaping the rewards. He held a lot of expectations for [Abyssal Phase], and his other skills weren’t too shabby either.

Besides, it looked like his mother hadn’t lied to him down when it came to the array. It looked like Catheya’s master couldn’t find anything wrong with him, which meant that not a single person in the whole Zecia sector should be able to spot his perfected Duplicity Core. At least he worked under that assumption. He would probably have been caught by now if his human ancestry or real identity was exposed.

Zac shrugged off any errant thoughts as he started walking toward his courtyard, but a cough from behind stopped him in his tracks.

“This, ah, young master... This is the last day I was hired,” Nala hesitantly said.

“Oh, right,” Zac thoughtfully nodded. “If you’re available, I’d like to hire you until the Twilight Ascent starts. Same rate.”

“Ah? Really?” Nala exclaimed, her eyes lighting up. “Absolutely. I will work hard to help out. I’ll talk with my father if he has some more information he can share.”

“That’s fine,” Zac nodded, though he honestly didn’t hold much hope for him divulging some high-value secrets. “You don’t need to come tomorrow though, I’ll be busy.”

He and Vilari entered the courtyard, and the two entered their own cultivation chambers to go over their new skills. Zac immediately took out the mysterious crystal he got from “Lord Book”, who Zac guessed was a Peak D-grade or even a C-grade Tool Spirit.

Activating an inheritance crystal was pretty similar to a normal Skill Crystal, but when Zac infused the crystal with energy a flood of memories and impressions also assailed him. It wasn’t as real as Dao Visions, but rather discordant snippets of the life of the External Elder of the Sharva’Zi clan. It was almost like when he saw fragments of Alea’s life flash by.

The elder who left behind the skill was not a Strength-based fighter like Zac, but rather a poison master who had a hybrid fighting style. Part of it was based around daggers for close combat, with the other being the traditional large-scale poison attacks. His attributes had focused on Vitality and Dexterity.

He had not gotten [Abyssal Phase] from his class, but rather gained it as a reward in an extremely deadly Mystic Realm. The elder had sometimes used it defensively, but he had mostly used the skill as a tool for an ambush.

The idea was for the skill to allow you to get into the heart of an army, unleash an avalanche of carnage, and then slink away in the chaos unscathed. The detriment was obviously the activation time and massive energy consumption considering that it almost cost as much energy as a finishing strike.

Zac saw the elder use it hundreds of times in different situations. Fleeing, attacking, ambushing. The skill had clear drawbacks, but the elder had almost become a virtuoso in controlling the rhythm of a battle to the point that he could activate the skill if needed. His fighting style was wholly different compared to Zac’s own, but he was still a cultivator who had walked much further than Zac himself.

The scenes provided ample inspiration, and he only opened his eyes a few hours later.

[E] Abyssal Phase - Proficiency: Middle. Become the Abyss. Bring them into your embrace. Upgradeable.

Zac looked at the results with elation. He had actually managed to push the skill to middle proficiency in one go, effectively catching up with most of his old E-grade skills. It also felt like he personally had used the skill dozens of times, and he knew it wouldn’t take long to properly integrate the ability into his personal combat style.

It didn’t even feel like he needed to try it out since it was almost one with him, so he instead turned his attention to the other two skills. Most of the night was spent charging the three Healing Brands, which appeared along the upper part of his spine. He also practiced using [Gorehew] for an hour in his courtyard, but it was hard to get a proper feeling for the skill without any enemies.

Finally, morning came, and Catheya came and picked him up while Vilari stayed behind. Catheya’s vessel was completely different compared to Nala’s; it screamed of luxury. It was either made from some sort of spiritual ice or a pristine crystal, and it was covered in dense fractals. It was obviously a leisure vessel and not something you’d use in battle or mystic realms.

Even then, its speed was over ten times greater than Nala's low-quality vessel, and the surroundings flashed by as they sailed on the Twilight rivers. An hour later they appeared on another plateau close to the Twilight Ocean itself, this one far more hectic than anyone he'd visited before.

Hundreds of thousands moved as a stream toward the enormous auction house and more and more kept appearing through the island's teleporters or flying vessels. Most were unsurprisingly E-grade considering the upcoming trial, but Zac could spot hundreds of hegemons flying toward their own entrance as well.

Zac wasn't surprised about that considering this was a high-grade event. He was more surprised about the hundreds of people who lit up the surroundings with their undeniable life force.

"The living comes here?" Zac exclaimed with some surprise. "They don't have their own auctions?"

"Well, they do," Catheya shrugged. "But some items are useful for both the living and the undead. Besides, in a place like this, there are quite a few of the cultivators who walk the many paths of Death. Might as well join the Empire if you plan on going down that road if you ask me, but most seem reluctant to truly awaken."

"What's is the point of cultivation if you lose your sense of self," Zac muttered. "That might even be scarier than death to them."

"Perhaps," Catheya said with a lazy voice, clearly not very interested in the living necromancers or other death-attuned cultivators, before she turned to Zac with inquisitive eyes. "So what are you looking for in this place? You've already bought everything from pills to armors, enough to form a whole D-grade force. What else is there for you to buy?"

"Who knows. Some for me, some for the followers I've raised," Zac said.

"Well, nothing beats the followers you've awakened yourself," Catheya agreed. "But why haven't you visited the Helman Bodyworks if you are starting up a force?"

Zac knew of the place Catheya mentioned. It was a corpse store, dealing with both wholesale corpses and holding auctions for top-quality bodies.

"I've only awakened enemies I feel worthy to follow me so far," Zac said.

"Well that's stupid," Catheya said as she flashed a token at a guard that immediately let them inside the Auction house. "You need grunts as well to manage the minutia. Buying a squad from a proper mortician saves you a lot of effort in cleansing and improving the bodies. Besides, in this place, the bodies won't come with the... attachments that might be problematic for you."

"Why are you so helpful all of a sudden?" Zac asked with suspicion.

"Partly boredom," Catheya shrugged. "I've been stuck cultivating for twelve years since I left the Tower of Eternity."

"Twelve years?" Zac asked, his eyes flashing with realization. "You entered a time chamber after the Tower of Eternity?"

"Of course," Catheya nodded. "The Twilight Ascent is a good opportunity even for me, but if I cultivated in real time I would have reached the late stages of middle E-grade at best. This way I'll be able to accomplish more."

"But the Dao," Zac said.

"Well, I just spent one year in the time chamber, and the other two in normal time," Catheya said. "It's a worthy trade-off. Of course, in a perfect world, I'd have another decade or two to perfect my foundations and Dao before the event."

Zac nodded in agreement. If he had the opportunity he would have definitely wanted to do something similar. Losing one year of Dao meditation for ten years' worth of node-breaking was definitely a worthy trade if you were planning on entering a specific trial. It also explained why Catheya had gained so much power since they met last.

He had almost thought she had been provided with some divine treasure by her master, but it seemed the truth was a lot more straightforward. Still, operating a time chamber for a whole year was definitely expensive and not something anyone could do afford. Diligently cultivating for ten straight years was also pretty extremely demanding one's mental strength, and it made Zac somewhat see Catheya in a different light.

The group was soon led to their seats by an attendant. It was a balcony overlooking a sea of participants and a grand stage in the distance. It was one of the lower balconies though, and powerful auras leaked from many of those in the top. All of them were from Hegemons as far as he could tell. Of course, it was likely that there were Monarchs present as well, just that they hid their energy.

"The first section will be aimed toward us," Catheya explained as she produced a stick of expensive-looking incense. "Weapons, natural treasures, pills, high-grade talismans. Things that will be useful during the Twilight Ascent. The second section will be much shorter, and it mainly targets the big shots."

"We won't be thrown out for the second part, right?" Zac asked, wanting to see the kinds of treasures that even Monarchs might want for themselves.

"Of course not," Catheya said. "But be careful bidding against those old monsters or you might find your soul suddenly crushed while walking the streets. I definitely won't avenge you if you get yourself killed over a treasure."

"Well, whatever," Zac snorted at the laughing Catheya.