

## The Fall 693

### Chapter 693: Bumpy Ride

Zac's abyssal eyes moved back and forth. Back and forth between the necklace being presented on the scene, its core shimmering with mysterious lights that called to the very depths of his soul. And to the congenial smile of his companion, which seemed like a sword of Damocles over his head.

"What do you want?" Zac sighed, feeling like he was making a deal with the devil.

"We don't need much," Catheya smiled. "One request from each of us. I have a secondary mission in the Twilight Ocean, one that might put us in the crosshairs of some dangerous people among the living. I was planning on doing that with just my followers to help out, but I think things would go smoother with your help."

"How long?" Zac asked with a frown.

"It will be completed by the time we reach the Life-Death Pearls, but there will probably be some heated battles."

"I won't fight to the death," Zac said without hesitation, but Catheya's mouth only quirked up.

"Agreed, but you need to put in some real effort," Catheya countered.

"And your master?" Zac asked as he glanced at the scene, and he saw the announcer stare back at him. He waved at him to wait for a bit before he turned back to Catheya.

"He has a personal task for you. I don't know its contents, but he said it was simple enough," she said.

Zac wasn't relishing the thought of 'owing one' to a Peak C-grade Monarch, but did he have a choice? He and Kenzie had searched high and low for an item like the [Stone of Hope] all over the Zecia sector over the past three years, but they hadn't even heard of an item that came close to this.

This was probably his only shot since he'd return back to Zecia after the Twilight Ascent.

"Agreed," Zac sighed as he activated the auction crystal just before the auctioneer was about to close on the item. "Fifteen thousand. I apologize to the esteemed Monarch, but I am adamant about getting this item."

A snort echoed through the whole venue a moment later, causing the whole room to vibrate ominously. But she didn't lash out or try to pressure him, leading Zac to believe Catheya's master had already interceded.

A few minutes passed, and Zac eventually looked down at the intricate box in his hands with mixed emotions. Not even Catheya seemed unaffected by the amount of wealth its contents represented. Hopefully, the effect of the [Stone of Hope] was as great as it was proclaimed since the Veilplume Monarch had only backed down after running up the price to 40,000 D-Grade Nexus Coins.

According to Catheya, the Veilplume Monarch had already come to an agreement with her master, but she couldn't simply back down from an E-grade brat without 'punishing' him a bit for his impudence.

That's why Zac found himself overpaying by almost ten times what the treasure was normally worth. Of course, it was always hard to gauge the value of these kinds of once-in-a-lifetime treasures.

But suffice to say, an item that could only help up to the Peak E-grade definitely wasn't worth 40,000 D-grade Nexus Coins to most people or factions. A clan could nurture millions of warriors with that kind of wealth, and some of those people might reach Hegemony. To use it to help a Mortal? Unthinkable, even if it was infinitely reusable, which Zac very much doubted it was.

Of course, it was another story if the recipient bought the item for himself. Let alone 40,000, Zac would have paid over 100,000 D-grade Nexus Coins for something that would allow him to safely make his way through the High E-grade where node-breaking was synonymous with suicide for someone with as powerful a foundation as him.

The intense bidding had caused some ripples among the spectators, but the auction soon continued again. It was a real eye-opener, and Zac looked on as one amazing item after another appeared on the stage. A few of them were even at the level of the [Eye of Har'Theriam] he got from Yrial, and they caused multiple Monarchs to fiercely bid for them.

However, other items didn't get a single bid, and the auctioneer eventually took them away after a minute. One of the items that garnered such tepid reception was a natural treasure that looked a bit like a heart wrought from dark-green crystal. It was completely still, yet Zac's senses were tricked to think it was beating somehow.

Its name was [Cardinal Kernel], and it was a powerful bloodline treasure that was reputed to be effective in evolving and to a small degree purifying bloodlines. Its pricetag was somewhat shocking though for an E-grade bloodline-boosting treasure; 2,500 D-grade Nexus Coins. It was just a fraction of the price of his [Stone of Hope], but similar items had been sold during the first half where the price tag was rather set in E-grade Nexus Coins.

"What's going on? Why is no one buying this thing?" Zac asked as he looked down at the crystalline heart. "It's expensive, but its efficacy is extremely high."

"It's definitely a good item, though a bit overpriced," Catheya nodded. "I guess a large part of the price comes from the excessive rarity, I have never heard of this thing before. I guess none of the old masters here feels it worth the investment. Besides, far from all bloodlines provide direct combat capabilities that would help in the trial."

"Still, it shouldn't be too much money for a Monarch to buy this thing?" Zac asked.

"Well, not really. But you have to look at it from their perspective. The kind of treasures they need might require them to scrounge and risk their lives for tens of thousands of years. Furthermore, just maintaining their inner worlds and keeping them from shrinking is a constant drain on their resources, to the point of bankruptcy for some. Meanwhile, new generations in their clans appear every thousand years. Why would they spend their hard-earned money on their 86th-generation grandson they might not even have met?" Catheya said.

"If they did that for a few talents every generation they'd ruin their own cultivation. They'd only purchase an item like this for a direct disciple they have really high hopes for, and if it would provide

huge benefits,” she continued. “I guess there’s no one here who both has a disciple that needs the item and who can properly extract enough value for it.”

“So, I could buy this thing without drawing anyone’s ire?” Zac asked with gleaming eyes.

“Sure, I guess. But possessing too much wealth can be seen as a sin. And I’m not sure it will work on our Draugr bloodline,” Catheya said with a shake of her head. “Or do you have some odd mutation? Or is it for our friend again?”

That Comment revealed something interesting that Zac already suspected; that Draugr all had a common bloodline. However, he was more focused on whether he should go for it, if he should buy this item. 2,500 D-grade Nexus Coins was just a fraction of his wealth, but it might put him in the crosshairs of greedy opportunists.

Catheya’s master had only agreed to defend him against the Veilplume Monarch, not against the billions of greedy people in the Twilight Harbor.

But his Bloodline was still just F-grade, and he hadn’t made any real progress over the past three years. His Bloodline Method, [Bloodline Resonance], only allowed him to gain basic control over his bloodline Talent, but it did nothing to actually improve it. The Shard of Creation had helped him make some improvements to the storage capacity of [Force of the Void],

However, Zac wasn’t sure if his actual bloodline was making any progress. Eating half a mountain was how he awakened the Bloodline, so Zac felt pretty confident that eating some more would keep progressing it. The [Cardinal Kernel] might not be enough to evolve the bloodline in one go, but it would be a first step in the right direction. Risk and reward... Zac struggled with the two as the auctioneer desperately tried to get someone to buy the thing.

But there was really no one interested. The auctioneer eventually gave up and turned toward an assistant to take the item away, forcing Zac to make a decision.

“2500, I’ll take it,” Zac said as he placed his bid.

He had already flaunted his wealth. He might as well snatch a few more items and hide under Catheya’s protective umbrella on the way back, as long as it didn’t directly garner him any direct new enemies.

Unfortunately, most of the items that would be useful to Zac were useful to others as well, and the bloodline item was the only one he managed to buy. Eventually, the items put up for auction switched from treasures meant for juniors to items meant for the bigshots themselves. The true part of the second part of the Auction.

Zac wasn’t planning on buying anything in this part, but he did actually encounter an interesting item early on. It was a frozen organ that had fallen out from a spatial tear. It contained some spatial fluctuations along with other chaotic energies in the mix. There wasn’t any real interest in this Peak D-grade body part among the cultivators, but Zac’s eyes lit up when he saw it.

It was definitely a piece from a high-grade Void Beast, one perhaps as powerful as the Collector itself. It was just an organ as large as a steel drum, so it wouldn’t hold a Beast Core. But the energy it contained was still much greater compared to the Beast Cores he had extracted from the smaller Void Beasts.

Those cores were still the best resource he had for quickly restoring his [Force of the Void] and nurturing the [Void Heart], so he spent 1,000 D-grade Nexus Coins to buy the arm as well while Catheya looked at Zac like he was a fool. It might be useful to help evolve his Hidden Node, or at least serve as a source to rapidly fill up his reserves while inside the Mystic Realm.

Eventually, the final items appeared, and Zac was surprised to see that the top item was a piece of bark with some markings on it. Of course, Zac knew it was something good since he got a splitting headache just from looking at the runes, but he was shocked to hear the frantic bidding. It eventually went for the obscene price of 18,300 C-grade Nexus Coins, a stark reminder he was just a financial paper tiger.

The bombastic ending had closed the auction on a high note, and heated discussions spread through the hall as people started to leave.

"Alright, let's go back?" Zac asked as he saw people streaming out from the enormous hall.

"Are you crazy?" Catheya laughed. "I'm not letting you onto my vessel. Who am I, your Dao Guard? Sort out this mess yourself."

"What the hell?" Zac said with a mix of exasperation and worry, realizing his plan of hiding behind her skirt-tails had long been exposed.

"I told you to be careful, but you had to spend enough to make a Late-Stage Hegemon Green with envy," Catheya said with a roll of her eyes.

"Didn't we have a deal? Protection for favors?" Zac ventured.

"Master made the Veilplume Monarch back down, and she won't act against you during your stay. But there are other people out there, no?" Catheya explained.

"Well, shit," Zac muttered. "Can you ask your master for me?"

"He said that strength is required to hold onto your treasures. Prove yourself worthy," Catheya grinned.

The adrenaline rush of his reckless spending was fast wearing off, his face sicklied over with the pale cast of thought. Of course, every purchase was for something he needed, the necklace in particular. But his Spatial Ring had now turned into a hot potato, and he even had some thoughts of telling Vilari to return home as he activated his escape bracelet.

He had got his hands on everything he needed to purchase already, so leaving right now wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. Still, Catheya didn't seem too worried, and her master seemed to need his assistance with something. Perhaps he was overthinking things.

"Any recommendations?" Zac probed.

"Well, you'll be safe in your courtyard. Our clan is guaranteeing the safety of all guests, and there is a Monarch standing guard of the whole disk. People also know my master is around," Catheya smiled as she took out a miniature vessel that looked a lot like a small luxurious skipper. "I'll lend you a spare vessel."

"Thank you, I guess," Zac sighed.

"Don't look so glum," Catheya laughed. "This is just a precaution. You're still Draugr, only a fool would dare attack you."

"Thanks for putting up the flags," Zac grunted, which earned him a confused look in return.

Zac's stature started to shrink the next moment, and he soon had a short but bulky build where his right arm was almost twice as thick as his left. His back had also become hunched over, and when Zac put on a grotesque mask he had already prepared, the transformation was complete.

"Not bad," Catheya nodded appreciatively. "Well, have fun."

She walked out of the room the next moment, quickly blending in with the crowd. Zac waited for another minute before he shuffled out as well, and he quickly jumped on the lent vessel and flew away.

His eyes were peeled in every direction, but he forcibly shuttled off at a pace that wouldn't raise any brows. He reached the area meant to take off without causing any waves, and he soon left the venue among thousands of different vessels shuttling to and fro. He kept vigil over the closest vessels, and he was relieved to see them doing the same.

He already knew that these auctions sometimes turned into bloody affairs this close to a Twilight Ascent. There was no difference between risking your life here and inside the Twilight Ocean for a chance to be reborn for some people, and everyone was on edge. Nothing happened for a full hour, but that didn't lessen Zac's worries. He had reached the vast space between two plateaus, and the risk for attack here was the highest.

Some things couldn't be avoided, and Zac soon sensed some killing intent heading his way. He turned over to see a group of five Late E-grade cultivators who had jumped off from a neighboring vessel, heading straight for him. Had he been exposed? Or was it because his vessel looked expensive?

Four sinister chains shot out with almost blinding speed, and two of them were wrapped around a cultivator each before the attackers even had a chance to react. Another one of the chains had punched straight through a Corpselord's chest, and he had instantly been turned into a gristly ornament to Zac's weapon. Only one managed to activate a movement skill in time to dodge in time, but the chain was unrelenting.

Zac himself had already taken out a spare shield, and he almost instantly grew to five meters as he activated his peak mastery [Vanguard of Undeath]. There were still two free cultivators, one of which clearly a Dexterity-based assassin, while the other one was a straightforward warrior. It was the assassin who kept dodging the chain, but he suddenly found himself right in front of Zac.

The massive bardiche was already right next to the assassin's throat and a sinister black swirl caused it to emit a terrifying aura. The assassin tried to flash away, but it was much too late; he was within Zac's domain now. His head was lobbed clean off, and a torrent of black ichor soon turned into a frozen flower as it fell into the Twilight River.

Some of the ichor didn't actually float out into the emptiness of space, but it rather entered the black swirl to cause its aura to increase to even greater heights. Zac didn't pause to celebrate the kill, but he rather shot toward the warrior who still was running free. The man had already realized his group had

hit an iron plate, but he looked around in confusion as he was rooted in place while trying to flee through the void.

This was one of the benefits of pushing [Vanguard of Undeath] to peak mastery. Its taunting effect was still effective even at this stage, though it only lasted a second or two before most could overcome it. But that was enough for Zac to catch up, and a five-meter jagged scar of pitch-black ichor hacked into the warrior's defensive barrier, instantly cutting it in two.

Another hack with [Gorehew] ended the man's life, and the last two attackers were firmly caught by this point, one of them locked into a morbid embrace with their impaled companion. Zac was pleasantly surprised by his new skill. It wasn't fancy or had a lot of functions, but it could fully scale with even his attributes and its edge was extremely sharp.

Besides, the skill had already grown another meter in length after the second kill, indicating that the jagged edge could become a real terror in the middle of a packed horde of enemies.

"Please!" one of the two captives shrieked as Zac dragged the two captives toward him, but Zac only released a sinister chuckle from behind his mask as his grotesquely oversized right arm cut her and her companion in two, ending the fight.

It had taken less than three seconds since Zac shot out his chains, but all five attackers were already dead. Their body parts joined the Twilight River one by one as Zac jumped back onto his vessel and sailed away as though nothing had happened, confident that his disguise hadn't been broken. However, Zac didn't feel any relief even when the neighboring vessels gave a slightly wider berth to his vessel as he continued his journey.

His trip home was bound to become a bumpy one.