

The Fall 697

Chapter 697: Coming Alive

Zac had accomplished everything he set out to do with some time to spare, which left him and his follower with over a month of free time.

"How about we visit a restaurant to celebrate your success?" Vilari suggested.

"My body is only partly awake," Zac smiled. "I still need to reach Peak E-grade for my organs to be like the living's. But it should be possible for me to eat and drink by now."

The ability to eat and drink was obviously not as exciting for Zac as it was for the real undead, but he was still a bit curious. So he took out one of the bottles of spiritual wine in his Spatial Ring to test the waters. He took a swig, and he was happy to feel the burn in his throat and a very weak buzz.

However, he blanched when he felt the taste, which could best be described as diaper-left-in-sun. Zac spat out the wine before he looked at the bottle with a mix of confusion and disgust. It was brewed with F-grade grapes grown on the main island of Port Atwood, and it was bottled just a year ago. Had it already gone bad?

"I read that tastes are quite different between the living and undead, even after our senses awaken," Vilari said with a slight smile as she took out a crystal decanter with a light blue wine. "I prepared this for this very occasion, have a taste."

Zac spat a few more times and rinsed his mouth with some water before he gratefully took the decanter and a glass. When he poured it up it gave off an earthy fragrance which made Zac think of the forest after rain. He took a sip, and he had to admit it tasted great. Zac guessed it had to have been brewed with some fruits with Death Attuned energies since he felt a slight surge spread through his body.

"Delicious," Zac sighed as he leaned back and looked up at the entrance to the Twilight Ocean.

Innumerable ships scuttled back and forth through the void, and that was just a fraction of the activity happening on the various platforms. Hundreds of billions of life held together by the Twilight Rivers and a Mystic Realm. Life and death intermingling. Zac looked up at the spectacle as a warm buzz from the wine spread through his body.

It all felt very beautiful, and Zac actually felt himself almost choke up a bit at the thought, prompting him to look down at the liquor with confusion.

"It's not really the wine that's affecting your mental state," Vilari laughed, and the scene actually made Zac's heart beat an extra time. "It's your being coming alive."

Zac immediately understood what was going on, and he took a calming breath as he stabilized his mind. It felt like his senses were enhanced, or perhaps rather magnified, and the same was true for his moods. His emotions had always been a bit muted in his undead form, but they now felt clearer than ever.

This wasn't actually anything unique to him, he just hadn't noticed anything different until the wine had pushed the effect a bit further. He already knew that most undead had some trouble adjusting to this new state of being, which sometimes resulted in unwanted physical responses. After all, low-tier undead were essentially energy beings that used an unliving body as a receptacle for their souls and ichor. Zac

had simply figured that this period of acclimatization wouldn't happen to him since he was more used to having a living breathing body than not.

Still, the effect wasn't overly powerful, and Zac got used to the difference in no time. Still, he was a bit embarrassed since Vilari had no doubt sensed the fluctuations in his soul when he looked over in her direction.

"What do you think of this place?" Zac asked to change the subject. "Do you think this is the direction our home will take?"

"I hope not," Vilari answered after some thought.

"Oh?" Zac said with surprise.

"This place is ultimately no different compared to the Zecia sector. It's just Living Factions and Undead Factions living in the same area. They only tolerate each other's existence because of the uniqueness of the Twilight Ocean. I pray that our world will not turn into this. I hope that our people one day can integrate with the others," Vilari explained.

Zac sighed and nodded, though he didn't know if that was even possible. Then again, that fusion was the very thing his own cultivation path required, and the direction in which Earth's World Core was heading. Then again, Be'Zi had found a husband among the living, so it wasn't a completely ridiculous concept.

"Don't mind my rambling," Vilari added as she turned to Zac. "I understand the problems you and our planet are facing. It's impossible for the Einherjar to walk in the light right now. But I hope that one day young master reaches such a height that you can follow your own wishes, rather than having to worry about what outsiders think. I don't feel there is any shame in being undead, and I don't feel that anything is stopping the living and dead from working together."

"You're right," Zac agreed. "I'll try my best."

The two sat and enjoyed the view for another hour before Zac felt his body stabilized enough to go out.

With his two Hegemon guards wearing the livery of the Twilight Lord himself he was safer than ever, especially among those who knew who he actually was. That spear of ice had been visible through half of Twilight Harbor, and Hegemons and Monarchs alike knew the power it represented. Even in a place like this, there would probably be fewer than five Peak Monarchs, all of them outsiders from the B-grade empires.

Catheya's master hadn't mentioned anything about continuously protecting him, but Zac still felt he probably would keep an eye out since Zac still carried that weird egg-like item in his Spatial Ring.

Seeing as it would take the courier a while to complete her tasks, Zac spent the next few days taking in the sights with Vilari. The first place they visited was an orchestra of Musical Cultivators, and Zac was blown away by the performance. It almost felt like he had an epiphany as he listened to the haunting melodies, and they conjured all kinds of imagery in his mind.

They also visited a few restaurants, though only Zac could eat while Vilari just kept him company. Having food prepared solely with spiritual materials, from the vegetables to the meat to the spices, and then having it all prepared by skilled chefs was an almost otherworldly experience.

Zac had always somewhat looked down on those who gave up on their cultivation after reaching a certain stage, but was this kind of life really so bad? As long as you got powerful enough you could enjoy this kind of transcendent lifestyle for millennia. Of course, that life was ultimately not for him. He had too many people depending on him for him to retire early.

Besides, he felt that these kinds of experiences paled compared to the feeling of pushing his cultivation and insights forward. To evolve his Dao was to become more in tune with the universe, and to gain a level was to take a step toward perfection. How could good food and entertainment rival those sensations?

The Hexmaster returned after three days with every single item on the list accounted for, which meant that everything was prepared before the Twilight Ascent. There were still 50 days until the trial started, and Zac only had to meet up with Catheya once apart from focusing on his cultivation. He could probably evolve his Fragment of the Axe at any time with the help of one or two of his Dao Fruits, but he held off on it.

The System-sanctioned trial was related to the Dao, and it would be a bit stupid if he evolved his fragment prematurely only to find out that the task was to make as many breakthroughs as possible. Instead, he focused on improving his combat style when he wasn't touring the city. There was only so much he could do right now though, since swinging his axe into thin air or even sparring with the Hegemon captains was just mimicry of real battle.

He needed some spark of inspiration to improve further.

Luckily, there was one place that might provide just that, and Zac had the captains escort him and Vilari to a massive coliseum on a platform pretty close to the center of the Twilight Harbor. It was there that the qualifiers to the Twilight Ascent were being held, and a thousand battles raged at any given moment.

It would normally be impossible to see the battles clearly from the stands, but the coliseum was equipped with a pretty magical illusion array. Any battle that Zac focused on was somehow enlarged so that he could see it clearly even if it was kilometers away.

There were all kinds of battles to spectate. Undead fought against undead, living against living, and the two sides often clashed as well. All the battles were frantic as winning might mean getting a ticket to the greatest opportunity in a millennium, but the battles between the living and the dead were extraordinarily ruthless.

You were not allowed to kill someone who had given up, and the judges tried to save lives when it was clear the battle was over. But how often did people get the opportunity to throw in the towel when you were going all out to seize victory? Life and death happened in the blink of an eye. Battles kept resulting in fatalities, much to the excitement of the crowd.

The qualifiers were not only a way to get an entrance token for E-grade cultivators, but it was also a showcase of strength between the living and the dead. After all, while this might be a grey zone, there were definitely some tensions running beneath the surface. It was just like Vilari said, the living and dead weren't really living in harmony. They were just tolerating each other to reap the benefits of the Twilight Ocean.

Zac himself didn't care about any of that but seeing so many battles gave him some inspiration. And he had to admit that he had underestimated the young elites of the Multiverse. Many of the true talents of the Twilight Harbor weren't even participating in these qualifiers thanks to their reserved spots, but Zac still saw quite a few shocking battles over the two weeks he visited the coliseum with Vilari.

There were tens of thousands of cultivators he felt would push him extremely hard to come out ahead, and over a hundred he had absolutely no confidence winning against unless he managed to hit them with an Annihilation Sphere. The latter group was obviously made up of peak E-grade cultivators who had accumulated for over a century, but that fact didn't help in a battle of life and death.

Six particular elites even pressured Zac almost as much as Iz Tayn did, the terrifying flame cultivator he encountered during the Battle of Fates. Against her, Zac hadn't even dared fight. Only escape had been on his mind when he faced that lunatic. Of course, these six definitely had a significant level advantage against him, but their auras were still extremely condensed, far surpassing Catheya's.

There was only so much you could gain from watching strangers battle, and Zac eventually grew bored of looking at the endless carnage. He did however place an order for an intelligence missive on the top 10,000 contenders. It wouldn't hurt to memorize the names and faces of some of the individuals he needed to be careful around in the trial.

Since there still were a few days before the meeting with Catheya, he decided to visit set off to the mortician that she had recommended. It was at the outer edge of the Twilight Harbor, and it almost looked like he was visiting a military fortress rather than a business. There extremely powerful barriers protecting the area, and there were miasmic towers that radiated a power that made Zac's hair stand on end.

He knew that if he was blasted with the attacks stored in those things, not even ashes would remain.

"What's with the defenses?" Zac asked curiously as he turned to the Revenant captain.

"Bodies are a contentious subject in the Twilight Harbor," the captain smiled. "Some corpses put up for sale have once been members of the living clans. The Morticians modify the appearances of the unawakened, but their previous identities are sometimes exposed. This place suffers attacks almost every decade."

Zac nodded in understanding as they passed through the barriers. The Twilight Harbor probably got a steady supply of bodies from all over, but sourcing locally was ultimately the easiest. As demand for new followers was unending among the unliving clans, there would always be people desecrating graves or even killing youths to sell their corpses.

The Mortician had unfortunately already held a huge auction a month before Zac arrived to Twilight Harbor, leaving the stock a bit bare. but he still managed to buy ten thousand mid-quality E-grade corpses with no connection to the Undead Empire. He also bought 10 peak-quality corpses, each of them once belonging to a peak cultivator. The bodies were also all cleansed of any Karma and slightly enhanced with various means, especially the peak corpses.

Hopefully, they would have been turned into a promising troupe by the time he returned to Port Atwood.

Eventually, the day he was supposed to meet up with Catheya arrived, but there was one more thing he needed to do before heading over to the Eldritch Archivals. The Twilight Ascent started in two weeks, so it was time to send Vilari back to Earth.

He had the enforcers take them to the teleportation platform, where he transferred the funds necessary to teleport back, along with another 500 D-grade Nexus Coins to be added to the town coffers just in case. He also gave her the eight enormous Spatial Rings containing all the resources he didn't need for himself.

"I'll leave the Einherjar in your hands," Zac said as they stood outside one of the teleporters. "Don't tell anyone that I'll be stuck in the Mystic Realm for up to three years. I don't want people to get any foolish ideas while I'm gone. Give Joanna the rings meant for the... others. For the Einherjar, I leave it up to you. My only request, make them prove themselves if they want the resources."

"I'll get it done," Vilari said with a nod. "Don't worry about Por... home. You have nurtured many talents who will keep everything running smoothly. Good luck in there."

Zac nodded, and he watched on as the Mentalist disappeared in a flash of light, starting her two-week journey through the void. Only a few minutes later did he leave, heading straight for the Clan Sharva'Zi's Dao Repository. He was a bit early, yet he found Catheya waiting outside the gates, dressed completely different from what he had seen before.

She usually donned cultivation dresses in darker overtones but was now clad in something a courtesan might wear. The dress was both snug and low cut, and her hair was held up with a few pins that gave her a very seductive aura. The ensemble was even more suggestive than what the sultry Revenant guide wore, and her appearance kept turning heads as customers walked back and forth. Of course, no one dared to get close as three Hegemon guards glared at anyone who looked her way.

The captains set down the vessels and waited outside as Zac walked over toward his employer with a slightly confused frown.

"I see your cultivation session went well," Catheya said with an impish smile as she slightly bent forward, showcasing an impressive amount of cleavage. "So, what do you think?"

Zac blankly looked at her with a mix of confusion and suspicion, wondering why she was suddenly trying to seduce him. Had his ability to escape the Hegemon been that dashing? And was undead courtship always this... blatant?

Their gazes were locked for a few seconds until Catheya's expression started to sour as she looked at Zac up and down.

"About what?" Zac eventually asked.

"Nothing," Catheya snorted with annoyance as her daring dress morphed into one that looked more like her normal attire before she started walking toward the closest entrance. "Cultivation moron."

Only then did Zac realize what was going on. He had already felt the side effects of his body awakening. Catheya had probably figured out that he had bought the [Fruit of Awakening] for himself, considering that it shouldn't have been hard for her master to glean his body was still unawakened.

Was she hoping to make him blush or accidentally pop a boner like a hormonal teenager? Too bad for her he had already gone through puberty over two decades ago.

"And it's not possible that you're simply not as mesmerizing as you believe?" Zac said with a small smile as he followed her into the building.

"Absolutely impossible," Catheya said with a shake of her head. "Varo couldn't look in my direction for a month after evolving."

"Well, some have deviant tastes," Zac shrugged, which awarded him with another baleful glare.

Of course, Zac knew that Catheya would be considered a beauty among Draugr. Unfortunately for her, Zac still mostly considered himself human. Looking into those abyssal orbs for eyes quenched any sort of desire instantly.

"Well, whatever," Catheya snorted as the two entered a chamber where five people already were waiting. "The others are already here. Come introduce yourself."