

The Fall 845

Chapter 845: Baron of Conquest

The Mavai Warchief's eyes were so passionate when looking at the Information Crystal that Zac wondered if he needed to take it away before the demon tried to do something untoward to it. Then again, Ra'Klid wasn't the only one, with the natives being locked in place with expressions ranging from incredulity to fervent desire.

The contents of the crystals were actually quite simple. The first part contained an introduction to the Atwood Empire, some basic rules, and an explanation of how contribution worked. The second part was simply a massive list of cultivation resources, a short description of each, and their respective cost in contribution points – essentially a simpler version of the store in the Orom World.

"Most of these resources are the lowest-tier items in our stockpile, items that are immediately available for purchase in return for Atwood Empire Contribution Points," Zac said, his voice directed not only at Ra'Klid, but all the elites present. "We have far more valuable treasures as well, but you need to rank up to gain access to those. But as you can see, we have left some special treasures for those who rack up points quickly. Oh, and I'll be adding a whole load of new resources soon enough. I have collected a lot of good things during my travels."

"Ensulus never had any native citizens, and many things remain unknown and uncharted to us, especially after the upheavals" Vilari added with a smile. "To quickly set the foundations for this planet and get your civilizations used to the ways of the Atwood Empire, we have added some incentives. Both the factions and the individuals who contribute the most over the next few years will see rich rewards far beyond what is listed in this missive."

"Does that include access to the high-grade cultivation methods and skills you mentioned?" The shaman ventured, his golden eyes almost burning with desire.

"No," Vilari said with a shake of her head, surprising Zac a bit. "The Atwood Empire is fully focused on nurturing talents that can rise to the peak of the Zecia sector. The top performers will not be awarded the chance to purchase these methods – the methods will be directly provided, along with treasures worth multiple D-grade Nexus Coins. You have all helped erect the Merit Exchange over the past few days, and you can already collect your citizenship tokens there. Remember, even gaining levels and Dao breakthroughs will award contribution points in the Atwood Empire, so work hard on your cultivation."

The ghosts and demons glanced at each other, clearly deliberating whether they should wait for the orders of their superiors or make a run for it. As for the leaders themselves, they simply gave a few hurried pledges of loyalty before flashing away, leaving their warriors in the dust in their hurry to get the contribution tokens.

A few seconds later, four disorderly queues had formed where the elite warriors of the Ensulus World impatiently waited to get their hands on the tokens that would give them access to the vast fortunes of the Atwood Empire. Only a few shamefaced delegates of each side remained, but even they quickly excused themselves when Zac said that today's events were over.

The representatives of the Mavai Tribes and the Kingdom of Raun probably knew this was all a scheme to have them compete against each other, thus lessening the risk of them joining hands against their

new rulers. But what did that understanding matter in the face of unique treasures that could speed up their cultivation and improve their foundations?

It felt a bit odd to end such a momentous occasion like this, but Zac didn't mind. The more the elites got used to the Merit Exchange, the more integrated and dependent they would get. So he looked on at the spectacle for a minute, before he turned to Vilari.

"Come with me," he said as he turned toward the fort, and the two walked away while the others dealt with the exchange.

With his part essentially dealt with, he once more turned his attention to his titles. Normal increases to attributes had long since reached a level of diminishing returns, but any free boost to his attributes was obviously welcome. And seeing as the two titles gave increased attributes rather than flat, they would be a boost for the rest of his life. With this, he was just one or two titles away from an increase by 100% in every single attribute, something which had to warrant some sort of boon. Perhaps even a high-grade title.

Unfortunately, seeing the new titles was also proof of how easily elite factions could boost the strength of some of their scions. It was no wonder Catheya had been given an incursion when she was just seventeen. It was not just to provide the Origin Energy, but also to get her a couple of titles. Considering how good these things were at the E-grade, Zac bet Catheya had even better titles to her name.

And while the System generally had its rules that titles had to be earned, Zac was sure that peak factions could easily bend them. It shouldn't be too hard for someone like Iz Tayn to have her nobility pushed well beyond Barony, gaining any follow-up titles that came with it.

That made him think of something else, and he looked over at the mentalist with curiosity. "Did you get any titles as well?"

"I got three, apart from my private quest as an Incursion General," Vilari nodded. "'Connate Conqueror', 'Planetary Invader', and a title for having reached 25 Titles while in E-grade."

"You already have 25 titles?" Zac exclaimed with surprise, realizing that two of Vilaris's new titles were alternate versions of the ones he got in F-grade.

"I managed to get the Apex Hunter title here on Ensolus," Vilari smiled. "I found a Beast king with extraordinarily weak mental defenses. That alone provided two titles. With the titles for forming, fusing, and creating skills, I have gotten a total of 9 titles on Ensolus. Unfortunately, many of them are the diminished versions of the ones you can gain in F-grade."

"Still, amazing work," Zac nodded before opening his status screen as well, where things were mostly the same.

Except for one interesting change – his alignment.

Alignment [Zecia] Atwood Empire – Baron of Conquest

Almost everything in the line had changed. The mention of Earth had turned into Zecia, and Port Atwood had turned into Atwood Empire. Finally, Planetary Lord had changed into Baron of Conquest, which was the biggest surprise. There were different kinds of Barons?

Zac would have to get a missive on the subject from Calrin, but the biggest takeaway had to be that the System had officially accepted the Atwood Empire as a real thing. He already suspected as much after the quest rewards for the incursion, but with this it was official. Once more, he turned to his general to compare, and Vilari simply shared her screen.

As expected, it looked just like his, except for Vilari having the title of a Subordinate Lord, which was somewhat of a surprise to Zac.

"As I mentioned, I had a private quest to finish the incursion," Vilari explained. "One of the rewards was lordships, the other one is dependent on grade and will be received when I get to a Nexus Node."

"Can you see your mark?" Zac asked with some curiosity, remembering just how amazing the rewards from those kinds of quests could be.

"B-grade, which is better than I expected considering how things ended," Vilari said.

"Not bad," Zac nodded. "The System probably takes into account how quickly you routed all the other invaders. Hopefully, it'll help you set the foundation for Hegemony."

"It might be a while," Vilari smiled. "Even if the soul strengthening method I got from Master is quite suited for me, I expect it will take at least a decade unless I encounter some opportunity."

"Have you undergone the inheritance trial in the E-grade yet?" Zac asked.

"No," Vilari said. "I haven't been able to leave Ensolus since the Incursion started. If I returned to Earth, the Incursion would immediately end, since the general leaving would count as forfeiture."

"Oh yeah," Zac said. "I'm heading back now. Are you joining me?"

"There is no hurry," Vilari said. "I will stay until the delegates and their armies returned. Tonight, we're having a banquet, and after that I expect them to leave."

"A banquet," Zac frowned, a bit reluctant to squeeze that into his schedule.

"Yes, but it's best if you do not come," Vilari said, but she quickly continued when she saw Zac's eyes widen. "It's not that we do not want you here! With your identities, it will become too complicated. For such a festival, why would Zachary Atwood appear but Arcaz Black not make an appearance? Or the opposite?"

Zac grimaced, understanding the issue. It was fine for his real name to be exposed to the wider world, but he was still leery about letting his dual races be made public knowledge. It was one thing if some Autarch far away in the Empire Heartlands learned of him being an Edgewalker, but the risk of it having negative ramifications was far greater in a remote place like Zecia.

"For now, the less you appear in public, the better. If you become too approachable, people will eventually start asking questions, like why you're never seen together," Vilari explained.

"Yeah, I don't think it would look very convincing if I kept going to the bathroom to swap races," Zac said with a wry smile.

“Thankfully, you have always been focused on cultivation, rarely appearing in public. It has helped curtail the spread of rumors immensely,” Vilari smiled. “If possible, perhaps you can find some sort of cloning technique that will at least allow you to make some joint appearances? Until then, we’ll simply say you’re busy cultivating or putting out fires elsewhere.”

“I’ll look into it,” Zac nodded.

A minute later, they reached the secluded courtyard in the middle of the fort. The incursion pillar was gone, but the Nexus Hub remained. Eventually, the hub would be moved to some heavily guarded structure that would act as the off-world Teleportation Station of Ensolus, but for now, it was still for private use only. Just as he was about to teleport away, Zac stopped and turned to Vilari who looked back at him curiously.

“You have done great work here on Ensolus,” Zac said. “Honestly, knowing you were the one in charge of the incursion saved me from going mad with worry, and allowed me to focus on breaking out. I’m really proud of you.”

A radiant smile bloomed on Vilari’s face. “Thank you. It means a lot.”

A moment later, Zac appeared at the Nexus Hub by Azh’Rodum, which was now surrounded by heavy fortifications. However, he was surprised to find over a hundred soldiers standing guard, with multiple nasty arrays humming with power. However, when they saw it was him who had appeared, the soldiers immediately relaxed.

“I’m sorry Lord Atwood,” the captain said, and it turned out to be Harvath, the demon soldier who had partaken in his first excursion to the underworld. “The pillar suddenly disappeared, so we set up a perimeter just in case, even if we heard you had returned.”

“All is fine. Ensolus is conquered, and there shouldn’t be any more wars over there in the short run,” Zac nodded as he turned toward the closest teleportation array.

“Ah, my Lord,” the demon coughed. “I happen to have found myself looking for a change in scenery...”

“Speak with Ilvere on the subject,” Zac smiled. “There will be a large number of job openings coming up over the next weeks. There are a lot of resources in that world that need to be extracted and refined. For now, I have to deal with a few other matters.”

“Of course, of course,” the demon hurriedly said as he stepped to the side. “I am sorry for holding you up.”

“That’s fine. It’s good to see you again,” Zac nodded before flashing away.

A moment later he stepped out from the teleporter in his compound, and he immediately set course for Port Atwood. He could have teleported to the city’s teleportation terminal instead, but it felt like a hassle. This way, he got to visit Port Atwood without drawing any attention. However, Zac couldn’t believe his bad luck when his desire for anonymity backfired on him.

“Still not coming to pay your respects?” a sudden snort echoed through his private forest as thousands of radiant lights almost blinded him. “Nothing can escape the gaze of the great sage.”

“Alright, alright,” Zac groaned as he changed course. “I’m coming, ease up with the blasters.”

Thankfully, the blinding lights that contained their telltale lack of any sort of Dao abated as Zac made his way to the Dao Repository. A few minutes later, Zac inwardly groaned when he saw that not only had Brazla's private garden more than doubled in size, but it had also gained an outer wall, a small lake, and a bunch of songbirds that definitely weren't native to Earth.

"Enter, mortal," a grand voice echoed through the garden, and Zac sighed as he flashed over to the gates that swung open infuriatingly slowly.

"It's good to see you again, Brazla," Zac said as he donned a strained smile when he finally managed to squeeze into the Towers of Myriad Dao. "You look quite dashing, as always."

The Tool Spirit looked the same, in the sense that he looked gaudy and pampered. This time, he used had the sage-like persona, it looked like, with golden robes and a golden fan.

"And you look slightly less wretched," Brazla snorted.

"All thanks to your teachings," Zac nodded, deciding he might as well deal with things while he was here. "On that topic, I was coming to see you after dealing with a quick errand. I wanted to see if I can undergo the second inheritance trial?"

"You mortals, always in a hurry," Brazla snorted, but he did close his eyes seemingly in thought.

Yrial had told him to wait ten years, which hadn't quite passed yet. However, Zac since then added both energy gathering and soul-nurturing arrays to the Towers of Myriad Dao, so he hoped his teacher had recovered a bit faster.

A moment later, Brazla opened his eyes again. "It is ready, but I will need to gather energy for a few days to start it up. Of course, an offering of commiserate value and beauty is also required."

"An offering, huh?" Zac sighed as he scanned his spatial ring.

Eventually, he took out a series of statues depicting powerful warriors full of authority. He had found them in one of the Spatial Rings he pilfered in the Void, and Zac guessed they might have been gate-guarding statues for some upstart Twilight Harbor Clan. They had quite a few arrays inside, but more importantly, their design screamed of excess.

Each statue was around four meters tall and simply covered in gems, arrays, and intricate talismans hanging from their clothes and fingers. If slotted with a Nexus Crystal, they even emitted a mysterious smoke.

"I picked these valiant guardians up at great personal expense," Zac sighed. "I was planning to use them as central ornaments outside my government building, but I guess they are better suited to adorn and protect your gardens instead."

Obviously, that was a lie. He would die of shame if he placed something as overly extravagant as these things outside his offices.

"I guess this will suffice as an initial offering," Brazla snorted. "But don't think the great sage is so easily bought off."

“Of course,” Zac nodded, though he was inwardly rolling his eyes. “I’m sorry, I know I just arrived, but I need to prepare for the inheritance trial.”

“Alright then, off you go,” Brazla sniffed as he glanced at the six statues. “Remember to bring a better offering when undergoing the trial. Otherwise I might be led to believe your obeisance isn’t sincere.”

Thankfully, Adran had people visit Brazla almost daily to butter him up while Zac was gone, saving Zac from being held hostage by a lonely Tool Spirit. Soon enough he was back on track, making his way toward the inner gate in the distance. By now, the inner wall leading to his compound had been moved three times, and it took him almost ten minutes to reach the closest gate.

It wasn’t all because of Brazla’s gathering arrays though. As warriors became stronger and their means more varied, the leaders of Port Atwood had decided to add more layers of security to his compound. Now, there was a no-mans-land between Brazla’s gardens and the inner wall with layers and layers of defensive and illusion barriers, almost turning his private forest and beachhead into a separate dimension. From the outside, one would only be able to see forests and the Towers of Myriad Dao, the latter at Brazla’s insistence.

Zac passed through the gate, nodding at two extremely startled guards before donning the presence-hiding cloak he got from Catheya. There were no structures immediately on the other side of the wall either, except for the occasional guardhouse. However, the area wasn’t empty like the other side.

Instead, there was a band of beautiful gardens, squares, fountains, and small rivers running for almost a kilometer meters along the wall. It was not only a leisure walk for the citizens of Port Atwood, even if Zac saw many families and couples stroll through the idyllic surroundings. Beneath the ground were carefully constructed defensive measures that could add another layer of defenses in case his compound was under attack. The environment was also carefully designed to not block out too much vision, and reaching the wall unnoticed was essentially impossible.

Beyond the band, there was a row of beautiful mansions, not one structure identical to the others. Port Atwood had become a bit like the Base Town in make-up, in the sense that it had become a symbol of status to live close to the inner park and his compound. Some of the Valkyries, Demons, and other core members of Port Atwood had secured residences there.

It wasn’t only about status though. The environment was unmatched, as were the energy density in this area was unparalleled, except for some spots up on the mountain. And with all the defensive measures hidden below-ground, it was also exceedingly safe, giving the owners peace of mind while they were off-world fighting.

Beyond the inner district, the towering skyscrapers reached toward the sky, their number having increased more than tenfold now that the Nexus Vein beneath could support far more cultivators. It was hard to believe that Earth had been met with an extinction event just ten years ago, where almost 90% of humanity died.

Zac had never seen a city as prosperous as Port Atwood before the integration. Back when the expansion of Port Atwood had started in earnest, Zac had simply said he wanted to avoid a sterile city. The city planners were more than adhering to the wishes he had laid out – they had far surpassed his imagination.

There were gardens, parks, and public cultivation grounds everywhere, bringing lushness and breathing room to the city. some massive platforms had even been erected between skyscrapers, and Zac saw them holding lush greenery as well, along with hanging gardens, artificial lakes, and wide streets that were generally paved with well-tended grass. It was a mix of solarpunk and magic, and Zac could barely look away.

With its careful planning and vast resources available to be spent on public resources, Port Atwood was fast growing into a proper capital that could hold its head high even when compared to established factions in the Zecia sector.