

## The Fall 849

### Chapter 849: The Atwood Empire

“Wait, you’re Late E-grade?” Zac exclaimed, but Alea was already gone and there was no answer forthcoming from within his mind.

It really looked like she was unable to communicate freely just yet.

Zac couldn’t sense her presence at all in his mind, except for that intangible bond he had with his other Spirit Tools. But even if she had disappeared as she had after their previous short conversations, Zac wasn’t worried anymore. Like Alea said, she was healed, and she was even making progress on her cultivation.

And truthfully, as much as Zac loved to hear her voice again, he was somewhat relieved that Alea wasn’t able to freely speak in his head. It was not that he had a bunch of secrets that he needed to keep from her – they were way beyond that point by now.

It was rather about the feeling of having his mind invaded, even if Alea obviously wouldn’t be a hostile presence in his mind like Heda’s seed. That was why both Vilari and Triv’s skills rather worked like telephone calls. They had to nudge his mind, and he had to accept their attempt to communicate.

With Alea gone, Zac swapped over to his Draugr form before spending the next few minutes getting acquainted with his upgraded weapon. The fact that she had managed to leapfrog all the way from Peak F-grade to Late E-grade was huge, but Zac figured he shouldn’t be too surprised.

With the things [Love’s Bond] had swallowed since its formation, Zac wouldn’t even have been surprised if it became a D-grade Spirit Tool.

At first, Zac had been worried that the chain attached to the haft of his new axe would become a hindrance, even if it was thinner than the other ones he used to attack. However, he was relieved to find that the chain seemed to have a mind of its own, never getting in his way or hitting his hip.

In fact, it could even be considered a strength rather than a weakness.

First of all, the chain constantly danced in the air next to the handle, acting a bit like a crossguard. It probably wouldn’t be able to block out an all-out strike, but having some metal in the way of a surprise strike targeting his weapon-holding hand was obviously a good thing.

Secondly, the chain essentially turned the axe into a throwing weapon. He suddenly hurled the weapon at a tree on the other side of the courtyard, and the axe shot forward like an arrow. At the last second, Zac slightly nudged the outstretched chain, prompting the axe to make a sharp turn before drawing an arc that cut down a neighboring tree instead.

It was a fusion between his understanding of axes and armaments, allowing him to control his axe as both. This type of manipulation of the chain was the simplest form of control, but it hinted at all kinds of possibilities down the road.

Just a moment later, the axe was back in his hand as the chain retracted with such speed that it almost looked like teleportation. A Dexterity-based elite might be able to grab hold of the axe on its return, but would they even dare to?

“Triv,” Zac said as he walked out from the isolation array and threw over his axe to the startled butler. “Try to drag the chain away from me.”

“Ah, young master, these types of feats are not my strong suit,” Triv hesitated.

“Well, there’s only you around,” Zac shrugged. “Don’t worry, just do your best.”

“Alright,” Triv reluctantly agreed, and some sort of semi-tangible lasso formed around the axe as he started to pull away.

However, as try as they might, the coffin effortlessly dragged the ghost closer and closer. Zac grabbed the chain himself, and he could feel that Triv utilized the equivalent of around 3,000 Strength to resist the pull. That wasn’t close to the coffin’s limits by the looks of it, but Zac would have to find someone stronger to test it out properly.

“Alright, thank you. You don’t need to wait around here,” Zac said.

“Then I will take my leave,” Triv said, throwing an appreciative glance at the axe in their grip before fluttering away.

Left alone in his courtyard, sat down on a prayer mat as he thoughtfully looked at the axe that had once more returned to his hand. With Alea having created a perfect axe for his undead form, it looked like one of his issues had been dealt with. He had been struggling to decide what to do with [Verun’s Bite] – to infuse the weapon with Death to balance out the life it had absorbed, or to let it stay as it were.

Now, Alea had made the choice for him, and the more he thought about it, the more suitable he found it. There was some logic to the argument that using only one weapon would help push one’s technique to its limit, but there were practical ramifications to only using [Verun’s Bite] as well. For one, the Undead generally didn’t use primal-series weaponry because of the very affinity clash Verun exhibited.

Secondly, if he wanted to keep his two sides separate in the eyes of outsiders, he couldn’t be running around with [Verun’s Bite] both as undead and human. It had already become an issue in Twilight Harbor, where he had been forced to get a substitute to avoid getting found out by Catheya. But using a lower-quality substitute to his real weapons was a deadly gambit, one which could cost him dearly in case he suddenly ran into a powerful enemy.

Now, all those issues were solved, with him having full kits for both his sides; [Verun’s Bite] and Vivi when fighting as a human, and [Love’s Bond] taking both those roles in his undead form.

Over the next few hours, he made a couple of other discoveries. The most obvious one was that the Spirit Tool had actually lost its shield form. Now, [Love’s Bond] could only take on its backpack and necklace forms.

In return, the main chains of the coffin had become disgustingly sturdy, and Zac wasn’t sure if even a Middle D-grade cultivator would be able to damage the links. Along with a massive boost in durability, they had also become more pliable, responding far quicker to his mental commands. This had drastically improved the defensive capabilities of the links and essentially removed the need for a shield.

In return, it cost a lot more Miasma to manipulate the chains, but that wasn’t surprising. And with his stockpiles, he would be able to use them continuously for a whole day before running out of energy.

Finally, he discovered that [Blighted Cut], his base skill that had been somewhat underutilized lately, had almost been reborn with a proper weapon. With [Blighted Cut] activated, both his axe and the chain attached to turned even darker than black, and the gleaming edge of the axe started releasing such potent toxins that even Zac was appalled.

If [Gorehew] was good at taking out weaker enemies, then [Blighted Cut] had become a terror for infighting, which was perfect for Zac who had spent years working on his technique. Part of the effect came from his improved Dao, but it was also obvious that his Spirit Tool amplified the corrosive effect of the skill.

In a perfect world, Zac would have wanted to spend a couple of months getting properly reacquainted with [Love's Bond] after having used [Chainbox] for years, but a buzz from a communication crystal forced him back to reality and its many duties.

"Lord Baron, it's an honor," the Stargazer said with visible glee as Zac stepped into her office twenty minutes later.

"Don't you look chipper," Zac commented.

"It's all thanks to you," Abby bobbed. "I am the administrator of a progenitor who managed to become a Baron in ten short years – a miracle. I have received a promotion, plus administrating a sanctioned Empire has more than doubled my cultivation speed."

"Well, glad I can help," Zac snorted.

"If you open your management screen, you can now also hire more administrators such as I. As a Baron, you can add one additional administrator per world, for a fee of course," Abby added.

"Why would I want to do that, though?" Zac asked. "Port Atwood has already nurtured many competent administrators. Why bring in more Stargazers?"

"Well, for one, you don't have to choose Stargazers," Abby muttered. "But it's also a matter of convenience. We have access to some functionality that others don't. We are also neutral, only beholden to you, and limited in our actions by the System. Having outside administrators at the heart of your government, even if we don't have any de-facto control, will prevent corruption to a certain degree."

"Alright, I'll look at candidates later. But no funny business. Don't think I've forgotten your white little lies," Zac smiled, waving away the Stargazer's explanations. "More importantly, have you received the information about the quest I completed on Ensolus?"

"About what to do with their planet?" Abby asked. "I got it."

"What's your opinion on it?" Zac asked curiously.

"All have their merits," Abby said. "I think evolving this planet is most beneficial in the long-term, but it is a bit dangerous to have such a potent miniature world. Those kinds of planets are often highly contested; they are perfect for private residential worlds. I'm not sure you will be powerful enough to defend such a planet, even with your power."

"Alright," Zac nodded. "I guess I'm going with option three then. Can I pick a location right now?"

“One second,” Abby said as the stardust in her eye started swirling faster. Only half a minute did she speak up again. “You cannot choose a location right now. You will be able to choose a spot in 40 years at the earliest, and 85 at the latest. You also need to have visited the spot you have in mind, and it cannot be directly controlled by another empire.”

“No problem,” Zac slowly nodded. “I haven’t figured out where to put us anyway. So, why did you call me over?”

“You have a problem with the local factions. When the Atwood Empire became a sanctioned empire, the incursion world was not the only one affected. Everyone on Earth has had their Affiliation changed, and we have received dozens of requests for clarification,” the Stargazer explained. “We haven’t dared provide any clear answers before you had weighed in on the matter.”

“I’ll deal with it,” Zac groaned, and he left Abby’s offices twenty minutes later armed with stacks of reports and a travel schedule.

And so, spent the next few days visiting the strongest factions of Earth, where Abby and his other subordinates made sure his appearances were well-publicized. Part of the reason was to explain what was going on, while part of it was to show the world he was back and as powerful as ever – quelling any thoughts of rebellion.

Thankfully, the pushback from the factions wasn’t too big, considering his rule over Earth was all-but-official before in either case. There were some grumblings over the new taxation rates, but those grumblings quickly died out after the Contribution Tokens started to be rolled out just like on Ensolus.

With the number of official citizens of his faction going from millions to billions in just one week, Zac was forced to adjust the contribution rules to a slightly less generous model. Luckily enough, Vilari had already expected such a change, so the missives on Ensolus had said that the exact rewards were still being calculated to adapt to the new situation.

It was still easier to gain contribution points in the Atwood Empire compared to most established factions, though fewer would benefit from it. Zac had, under the suggestions from Abby and the golem at the exchange, eventually changed the model to one that mainly targeted elites.

Now, you either had to contribute resources to gain other resources, or perform uncommon feats.

For example, you could still get contribution points from gaining levels, but only if you progressed at a certain pace. It was meant to push people harder, where they perhaps needed to take some risks against beasts or the wilderness to keep up. If they succeeded, they’d both be tempered and gain contribution. If they failed, they might be hurt or even die.

It was harsh, but the Zecia Sector was about to enter a war that would last god-knows-how-long. Zac suspected that it would be decades at the least, and if his people didn’t squeeze out all the potential they had, they’d only become fodder at the battlefield. Better suffer a little now than suffer a lot later.

It only took him three days to deal with the local factions, but Zac kept touring Earth for a while longer. Seeing Earth’s transformation, he marveled over how similar Earth and Ensolus had become. Elysium, the previously desolate desert continent, was now at least 80% death-attuned, with small pockets of surprisingly condensed life.

It really had become a paradise for his undead forces, and his rapidly growing population of undead civilians. He had left a lot of his ichor with Vilari, and a few more generations of zombies had successfully been turned into Revenants. With the population booming, there was finally enough manpower to expand beyond just having an army.

Proper towns had now appeared next to the military bases, which held as many non-combat classes as warriors. The first generation of natural-born undead children had appeared on Elysium over the last year as well, with the first set of Revenants having managed to reach late E-grade. Even then, his undead cities were still quite small and limited in scope, a far cry from Port Atwood.

Finally, Zac toured his archipelago, and just like the missives said, his island kingdom had become the seam between Elysium and Pangea, with almost half of the islands having turned Death-attuned. It was a bit inconvenient for his faction which had spread to almost all islands by now, but there wasn't much of a loss in the long run.

Thankfully, Hive Kundevi had avoided getting their island impacted, and Zac decided to make a short visit to meet with his old allies. Ibtep was still in the underworld, but he was soon led to the inner chambers where Nonet waited. The former Anointed was still almost three meters tall, but their aura didn't feel nearly as imposing as the first time they met.

It turned out that the spiritual leader of the small hive had already encountered a bottleneck at the middle E-grade, with their remaining nodes being too weak to open either through cultivation or force. In other words, the chances of Nonet ever reaching the peak of the grade were essentially nil.

It was an unwelcome reminder of the reality of a cultivator – for every grade you passed, you would leave most of your companions behind.

Each grade was a watershed that would keep a vast majority of cultivators, and that would become especially apparent now that Earth had lost its Origin Dao and integration-related opportunities. Nonet was the first such person he encountered, but there would surely be more.

“Don't mourn for me,” Nonet smiled upon seeing Zac's expression. “The fact that I am able to live past the crusade is already a blessing. When it is my time, it will be weakness leaving the Hive. But I hope you can help our future generations adapt to this new reality as we are finding it difficult on our own.”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with some confusion.

“The Hives are unable to nurture the kind of warriors needed to meet the challenges of this wider world. We are a communal race, where the Hive is all. However, the pursuit of the Dao is ultimately a personal journey of discovery, which is putting us at a disadvantage,” Nonet sighed.

Zac immediately understood what Nonet was talking about. The thinking of the average Zhix warrior was extremely rigid, and Zhix like Ibtep and Rhubat were extremely rare. If cultivation didn't require insights into the Dao, they would probably have left the humans on earth far behind with their one-tracked mentality, but now they rather found themselves stuck.

Without the boost of the Origin Dao, how many of them would even be able to form Dao Seeds and make it past the F-grade?

“Your subordinates have graciously accepted warriors into your institutions, but we can see that their performance is not very impressive. We have tried setting up warrior camps both here and in the underworld as well, with the goal of nurturing combat-based Daos,” Nonet continued. “But it seems we are missing something.”

“I wonder... if the Zhix are doomed to be left in the dust in this new environment, a weakness leaving this world.”

“No need to give up just yet,” Zac said after some thought. “And there’s no need to compare yourselves to humans. We’re known to be one of the most adaptable races in the multiverse. The Zhix might simply need another generation or two to get used to the changes. Besides, I know that there are extremely formidable insectoid races in the multiverse. The problem might be that our training methods don’t suit your people.”

“I’ll ask my people to look for solutions. Our sector doesn’t have any large insectoid empires as far as I know, but there should be some factions around. But even if we can’t find anything, don’t worry. Just like you adapted to meet the threat of the Dominators, you will eventually adapt to meet the requirements of the Multiverse.”

Even if Zac tried to sound positive, he still felt downcast as he flew back toward his island, opting to take the scenic route rather than teleport to clear his head. With Nonet failing to even evolve their race, they would be gone in a few hundred years. Right now, that still seemed really far off, but Zac already felt how his perception of time had started shifting.

He had already spent months in seclusion at a time, the passage of time barely noticeable as he focused on his soul or techniques. Soon enough, these months would turn to years as he became increasingly disconnected from the mortal world. It meant losing part of what made you human, where you got strength and longevity in return.

But soon enough, Zac recovered his state of mind. Ultimately, everyone had their own road to walk. The lives of lower-grade people might be far shorter than those aiming for the peak of cultivation, but that didn’t mean their lives were unfulfilling or insignificant. Life was what you made of it.

The forested edge of his island appeared on the horizon an hour later, and the moment he got in reach, he once more felt Triv’s spiritual nudge.

‘The Master of the Dao Repository has asked for you,’ the ghost butler conveyed, the message almost completely dispelling the clouds in his mind.

Twenty minutes later Zac passed through the gates of the Towers of Myriad Dao, his eyes immediately turning to his master – The Lord of Cycles.