

The Fall 936

Chapter 936: Gates of Rebirth

"How about it? Should we take a look around ourselves?" Ogras asked as he and Zac made their way toward the edge of the Ensolus Ruins.

"My body is still all kinds of messed up," Zac said with a helpless shake of his head. "You can go ahead if you want to, though."

"Without your supercharged fate to keep me safe?" Ogras scoffed. "Alright, I guess there's no real urgency. It's not like any outsiders can access this place in the short run. But we should perform a proper sweep before the war starts. Who knows what kind of good stuff this place holds? After all, no one did war better than the Limitless Empire."

"Agreed," Zac nodded before adding. "Janos might still be in here, though."

"Honestly, if he's been trapped in the equivalent of one of those temples we visited in the Void Star, there's not much we can do about it," Ogras said. "We'd just get disintegrated if we tried barging in. And if his disappearance isn't related to the Left Imperial Palace..."

Zac sighed with a nod.

"Well, those three will scour this place with new information over the next months, and they know about Janos. If they find something promising, they'll let us know," Ogras said. "Of course, if you can investigate with your luck, it would be even better."

"I'll take a look just in case after I've fully healed up," Zac nodded.

"Perfect, thank you," Ogras said. "You might want to set up your trial while we're here. Most of them have limits on how many can undergo it a day. With four years remaining, you want to cycle as many people through the gauntlet as possible."

"Oh, right," Zac said. "We'll place it close to Zelphi Watch on the way back."

The Ensolus Ruins being related to Ultom had thrown Zac for a loop, but he ultimately felt it didn't affect his long-term plans for the planet. It could still serve as a front-facing world to trade with neighboring empires like Salosar or Havenfort World. After all, there were almost 100 years until the Assimilation.

By then, the first stage of Ultom's inheritance was bound to be over and the ruins thoroughly searched. If not, they'd have to keep the world closed-off for another generation or two until things cooled down. They could even dismantle the whole Ensolus Ruins to avoid any unwanted attention.

As for rumors spreading, Zac wasn't worried. There were millions and millions of places with old ruins in Zecia. That alone wasn't enough to cause any waves without knowing its relation to Ultom. And that was limited to the five people currently in the ruins, and possibly Calrin. And any lingering clue of the connection was already being quietly scrubbed clean by the Valkyries and his core personnel.

As for Zelphi's Watch, it was one of the frontier forts on the continent, one that had previously belonged to a pretty weak incursion force. It was far from any critical architecture or resources, and surrounded

by inhospitable mountains. Meanwhile, there was still room for an enormous trade city in case their plans worked out, which made it the perfect site for the trial.

“By the way, what do you think about the Zhix?” Zac asked as they walked. “I’m thinking of giving Rhubat the same opportunity as the other three.”

It was a while since he’d visited the leader of the Zhix, but he had read in the reports that the Zhix was still struggling with finding a proper path that would take them beyond the initial steps of cultivation. If humanity had been hit by the loss of Origin Dao in the atmosphere, the effect on the Zhix was magnified fivefold.

Rhubat and the other Anointed had looked for solutions that would allow their conformist society to embark on the road of cultivation, a journey that generally required more personal introspection than the Zhix was interested in. But even after years of searching, they were not much closer than when they started.

However, getting access to the epiphanies of the Left Imperial Palace and the Outer Courts might be what would allow Rhubat to perfect the homebrewed cultivation system of the Zhix. Or at least push it to a level that would allow a larger number of common warriors to form their Dao Seeds and step into the E-grade.

“Those guys?” Ogras said. “Well, he’s capable enough, but he’s not really part of your faction.”

Zac nodded in agreement. That was the crux of the matter and why he hadn’t invited Rhubat to the war meeting the other week. It didn’t really matter that the status screens of the Zhix Hives said they belonged to the Atwood Empire. The Zhix were Zhix, beholden only to their own. Even if he had a good relationship with the insectoids, there was an insurmountable divide between them.

Even today, ten years after the integration, the Zhix barely interacted with the other races on earth. The occasional representative appeared in Port Atwood to deal with various matters, and explorers sometimes ran into Zhix hunting squads in the wild. But that was about it.

Everything was fine today, but who knew how things would look in 100 years? In ten thousand? Strengthening the Zhix would help in the short run with the war, but it might lead to unexpected consequences. Just give it a few generations, and the leaders of the Zhix might not feel it fair for them to play second fiddle to the Atwood Empire.

And by that point, he would possibly be long gone, headed for the Six Profundity Empire or other opportunities in the Multiverse.

“Well, we still have some time to find a solution,” Ogras shrugged. “And I don’t think even you can just point at people and fill their spirits with divine providence. Who knows how the Left Imperial Palace chooses its candidates? We can figure out what to do with those crazy insectoids after these three have been looking around these ruins for a while.”

Zac nodded in agreement. This endeavor was ultimately just a long shot, even if he had gained a quest from it. Still, Zac hoped that Vilari, Rhuger, and Joanna’s fates would align more with the Left Imperial Palace by walking through the Ensolus Ruins for a month or two. That might be what allowed them to sense the seals when heading into the Million Gates Territory.

“More importantly, how about we invite those Mavai for the inauguration?” Ogras said with a familiar gleam in his eyes.

“Still?” Zac snorted.

“I’m just curious to see these life-attuned demons,” Ogras grinned. “But now that you mention it... tribal women...”

Zac could only helplessly shake his head. “We’ll invite representatives from both sides to Zelphi’s Watch.”

The two passed through the shroud at the edge of the ruins a while later and immediately set course for the border fort. Thankfully, most of the preparations were already complete, and they could teleport straight there after flying to the closest teleportation array. It didn’t take long for two groups of representatives to arrive, each one led by the actual leaders of the respective factions.

“Lord Atwood, I heard you had returned; it is good to see you,” Ra’Klid, the young Mavai Chieftain, said as he curiously looked at Ogras. “This is?”

“Ogras Azh’Rezak,” Ogras nodded as he looked curiously at the warriors. “Very interesting. You’re really a new form of demonkin not registered within the horde.”

“So we heard,” Ra’Klid said with a smile. “Lord Azh’Rezak, we have heard of your great exploits from your followers and would love to have you visit our tribes at your convenience. The Mavai could gain a lot from your experience.”

“Of course,” Ogras nodded.

“Lord Atwood,” Aouvi, one of the two remaining Ghost Kings of the Raun, nodded as he floated over. “May I ask why you have called us here?”

“Part of it is to update you on some important matters,” Zac said. “Secondly, it is time to finally open the Limited Trial I’ve mentioned before.”

“The opportunity that will provide Limited Titles?” Ra’Klid said with excitement. “Can we undergo the trial? How many slots are there?”

“No idea,” Zac smiled. “I won’t know much until I receive the reward. I just know it should be a pretty good one.”

There was not much else to say, so they walked over to the edge of the large basin, far away from the small settlement that acted as a placeholder for the future city that would be built here. At that point, Zac finally accepted the quest reward that had been waiting for him for almost a decade.

The effect was immediate, and the whole valley started to heave. A few seconds later, the ground cracked as a massive wall in gold and black rose from below. Seeing the colors, Zac’s eyes lit up with interest, and his guess was soon confirmed as powerful waves of life and death started to radiate from the wall.

Soon enough, the shaking stopped, but a structure reaching over five hundred meters into the air had already appeared. It didn't look like a proper building, though. It more resembled a huge coin that had been pushed halfway into the ground. It was as wide as it was tall but no thicker than ten meters.

By the looks of it, the wall was constructed with two types of metals that had failed to mix properly. Chaotic and unpredictable patterns of gold and black covered its surface.

At its center, two gates stood next to each other, each one roughly ten meters tall. One was golden and radiated powerful waves of life; the other was black and filled with death. But oddly enough, Zac could sense hints of death from the golden gate and the opposite from the black one.

Above the gates, two lines were carved, each stroke instilled with a deep understanding of the two opposing Daos. Zac felt like the words contained the same level of comprehension as the scars on the Big Boss' Big Wall back at the Big Axe Coliseum. But in contrast, the meaning was somehow sealed into the letters, preventing Zac from actually gaining anything from them. Still, the words gave a clear hint of what was going on.

"Gate of Life and Gate of Death, huh?" Ogras muttered as he glanced at the two groups of natives. "How fitting."

Zac didn't immediately answer as he reviewed a short burst of information he'd just received. The natives looked at the two doors with desire before turning to Zac.

"Give me a second," Zac said. "Can you check out the surroundings, meanwhile?"

The groups nodded and started to look around, except for actually entering the structure, of course.

"Behind!" a startled Ra'Klid soon exclaimed.

Zac and Ogras flashed over, but they stopped in confusion upon seeing what was hidden behind the huge metallic half-circle. Having just visited the overgrown Ensolus Ruins, Zac was filled with a sense of *deja vu*. But instead of an ancient city being overtaken by plant life, it was rather a dour graveyard.

Pitch-black crypts and coffins covered the area behind the trial. They were covered in vibrant roots, some of them as thick as a full-grown man. However, in contrast to the Ensolus Ruins, the graveyard was in pristine condition. There was not a single blemish on the coffins, and they exuded stable waves of death.

"How odd," Aouvi muttered.

"Alright," Zac eventually nodded. "I don't know exactly what waits inside, but I have some preliminary information. This trial is called the Gates of Rebirth. Right now, one hundred people can pass through each gate daily, meaning 1,400 warriors can receive a title every week. You can only pass through the gates once. There are six levels to the trial, and passing each level will improve the title you receive."

"What about the attunements?" Ogras frowned. "Can only the undead enter the door of death?"

"It didn't explicitly say, but it seems that life- and death cultivators have an advantage for this trial," Zac nodded. "You'd have to be pretty damn strong to reach the top floor without cultivating either of those two paths."

“Well, isn’t that great,” Ogras scowled, looking like he wanted to stab the enormous wall.

“Even the fifth-layer-reward should be pretty good compared to most publically available trials,” Zac smiled.

It was true. This was a reward for his S-grading on his Sovereignty quest chain. He figured that the title had to be at least comparable to the top-tier titles like the one he got in the Big Axe Coliseum.

“Few opportunities come without risk. Lord Atwood, can you estimate difficulties and casualty rates?” one of the shamans of the Mavai asked.

“No idea,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “But you can only leave after completing each of the six layers. Using pills like [Coward’s Escape] might send you out, but there are no guarantees. And even if it works, you’d definitely not get a title. So overestimating your strength might cost you your opportunity at best, or even get you killed.”

“That is natural,” the chieftain said, and the spectrals nodded in agreement.

“So, does anyone want to give it a go?” Zac smiled. “Scouting out the Gates of Rebirth to sound out the challenges and opportunities would provide Contribution Points as well.”

“You’re not going first?” Ra’Klid said with surprise.

“All my Limited Title slots are filled already, and I’m in no rush. I’ll see how the rewards look first,” Zac said.

Of course, Zac could always reject a Limited Title if it was worse than the ones he already had. The real reason was the state he was in. Going inside now would be a waste of an opportunity, especially considering he hadn’t even forged his life-attuned constitution yet. There was time to revisit this place after he made some inroads into the [Void Vajra Sublimation].

“I’ll go!” the young chieftain immediately said with excitement all over his face.

“Wait,” one of the old advisors said. “Let one of us old bones step through the gates first to test the waters. We don’t know what to expect, and we can’t have you dying at this critical juncture.”

“A chieftain can’t be afraid of death,” Ra’Klid said with annoyance, but he did relent. “Alright, which one of you want to go?”

“I’ll do it,” an old axe-wielder Zac recognized from the peace summit said.

The man was at the peak of the E-grade, and he exuded both the aura of a warrior and of one cultivating the Dao of Life, making him a perfect candidate. Similarly, a spectral warrior stepped forward to enter the Gate of Death.

The group walked over to the front of the Gates of Rebirth, and the gates soundlessly swung open as they approached. On the other side were just two swirls, but the golden gate actually held a shimmering swirl made from death-attuned energy. The opposite was true for the Gate of Death.

“The Gate of Life is made from Miasma?” Ogras muttered with confusion. “And a Gate of Death filled with life?”

“Uh,” Zac said as the others looked at him with inquiring glances. “I have no idea.”

“Fighting against death is part of life,” the seasoned Mavai warrior eventually said. “I’ll still enter the Gate of Life.”

“I shall follow suit and enter the Gate of Death,” the spectral warrior added.

“Even if the element is wrong, you should at least pass the first layer of the trial,” Zac slowly said. “Just go out instead of overdoing it if it’s the wrong path.”

The two nodded and were swallowed by the swirls a moment later.

“How long will this take?” Ogras asked.

“Six hours,” Zac said. “The burst of information was very clear on that point, at least.”

The group soon set up a table to wait for the two to emerge, and Zac took the opportunity to update the Mavai and Raun on the situation with the war. The Raun also hesitantly asked about the problem with them betraying the Undead Empire. Zac answered that Arcaz would meet up with his allies from the Empire soon enough and that he’d have a definite answer in a couple of months.

The subject of the Kingdom of Raun really was something Zac planned on discussing with Catheya, and he didn’t believe the Undead Empire would cause a stink over a small tribe of ghosts at the edge of the Multiverse. Eventually, the six hours had passed, but Zac frowned when the gates showed no sign of reopening.

“I felt a ripple from the graveyard,” Aouvi suddenly said.

“Let’s go,” Zac nodded and flashed away.

By the time they reached the backside of the trial area, they could immediately spot signs of activity.

“What in the...” Ra’Klid muttered as he saw the Mavai warrior push open the lid of a coffin and crawl outside.

Similarly, a thick bulbous plant was cut apart, allowing the ghost to emerge from within. Zac breathed out with relief upon seeing the two were mostly fine, though the Mavai warrior sported some pretty nasty wounds. Zac had no idea why the trial would send out people like this, but it was fine as long as they were alive.

“How was it?” Zac asked as the group walked over.

“It was...” the warrior said before he froze. “Huh? Why can’t I remember?”