

The Fall 937

Chapter 937: Life through Death

"You can't remember?" Ra'Klid frowned. "This is no time for jokes."

"I... can't remember anything either," the spectral warrior hesitated as he floated over.

"Nothing? Nothing at all?" Zac said with confusion.

"Well, that's not completely true," the Mavai warrior slowly said. "First of all, I remember being in a marvelous state after completing the challenge. I can't properly remember it, but I can feel it. It felt like I was in the womb, full of life. I've made some progress on my Dao Fragment."

"I was in a similar state," the ghost nodded. "It felt like my soul had been taken through the cycle of reincarnation, visiting the other side. I, too, have made some progress on my Dao."

"A Limited Trial providing insight?" Ogras muttered. "Sounds quite rare."

"You still got an insight into life even through the entrance itself reeked of death?" Zac asked.

"That's right," the demon nodded.

"Life through death," Zac muttered as he looked at the two warriors.

Small hints of death lingered on the body of the Mavai warrior, and streaks of Life-attuned energies ran through the incorporeal body of the Raun spectral. But was that from their encounters inside or a result of the way the Gates of Rebirth sent them out?

"What level did you two reach?" Zac asked.

"That's the second thing I remember. I reached the Fourth Layer," the Mavai elder said as he shared his newly acquired Title.

[Gate of Life – Fourth Layer: Reach the Fourth Layer of the Gates of Rebirth. Reward: Strength, Vitality +4%.]

"Even you only reached the fourth layer, and barely so by the looks of your wounds?" Ra'Klid frowned. "Didn't your Dao Fragment reach Late Mastery recently thanks to the resources of the Atwood Empire?"

"I-" the Mavai Warrior hesitated, unsure what to say.

Zac could understand the problem. He was most likely one of the most skilled warriors of the Mavai, yet he barely scraped by to get an above-average result. Even if he wasn't someone like Zac, he was still a Progenitor who had not only shored up his foundations for over a century before the integration, but also enjoyed a series of opportunities when the System arrived.

It was worth remembering this wasn't the Tower of Eternity, which was legendarily difficult to ascend. It was just a local limited trial. Zac still remembered the tens of thousands of memorial tablets and trinkets left behind at the bottom of the Havenfort Chasm. Similarly, seeing someone become a proper Big Axe Gladiator was an exciting event, but it was by no means unheard of. People who passed all five levels of the challenge didn't necessarily appear yearly, but they were not that rare.

At the same time, the warrior had a hard time defending himself or explaining since he didn't remember a thing. He could only look at his warchief with resignation and confusion, clearly not too happy with his own performance either.

"What about you?" Zac asked as he turned to the Raun Warrior.

"I also reached the fourth layer," the ghost nodded, and another screen appeared as the ghost ate a soulmending pill Zac recognized. It was part of the wares he'd brought back from Twilight Harbor.

[Gate of Death – Fourth Layer: Reach the Fourth Layer of the Gates of Reincarnation. Reward: Wisdom, Endurance +4%.]

"Completely different attributes," Zac muttered. "How are they related to your builds?"

"Strength is my main attribute," the warrior said, not to anyone's surprise considering the man's arms were even thicker than Zac's. "I also have some Vitality due to my Dao, but not from my class. It is my third highest Attribute."

"I focus on Wisdom and Dexterity," the ghost added. "Endurance is not an attribute I focus on; I just gain some of it from my Dao Fragment."

"Does Endurance even work on ghosts?" Ogras asked curiously.

"It does," Aouvi nodded. "It strengthens our bodies just like it would yours. It helps us resist Dao-infused attacks better, though many of us focus on defenses through other venues than taking direct hits."

"Your soul is wounded?" Zac asked as he turned away from the Title Screen.

"It is," the spectral sighed. "It's not a grievous wound, though. I will recover in two weeks. I am afraid I can't remember what hurt me, but the wounds contain a hint of life. That might be a clue?"

Zac slowly nodded as he went over the information. By the looks of it, the difficulty of the trial was somewhat serious, but it did provide a burst of insight in addition to just a Limited Title. Say that these two warriors managed to pass one additional level thanks to cultivating the right Dao, then most elite warriors of Port Atwood should be able to get a third-level title.

Three percent in two attributes wasn't too impressive, but it wasn't bad for the average warrior, especially considering almost no one on Earth had any Limited Titles. In addition, you got a second opportunity in the form of enlightenment. That might be what allowed some of his followers to break through a bottlenecked Dao Seed or Dao Fragment. Unfortunately, this part of the trial was more useful for the natives of Ensolus than Earth's citizens.

Even if Earth's attunement was becoming more apparent by the day, there were still few life- or death cultivators among the ranks of the Earthlings. Most of Port Atwood's elites had been there for the integration, enjoying the Origin Dao and unique opportunities back then. More and more new cultivators chose paths related to life and death, so this trial would become increasingly useful as the years passed.

And Zac, who had visited the Havenfort Chasm with the hidden Equanimity title, couldn't help but wonder if something special would happen upon passing the final level of the trial. Would you get an even better title? Or would your Dao-related opportunity become better?

In either case, the trial seemed to be a top-tiered one, at least for a region like Zecia. The unfortunate part was that the two warriors didn't remember anything about what they encountered, making it difficult to prepare future trial takers for the dangers within properly.

"It's a decent first set of data, but we need more people to pass through the gates if we need to figure out the hidden rules of this place," Ogras muttered, echoing Zac's thoughts. "Even if people get their minds wiped, we can still extrapolate important information over time."

"We'll start bringing more people over," Zac agreed as the group walked back toward the settlement.

However, soon after they passed the wall, Ra'Klid exclaimed after glancing back. "Look!"

"A ladder?" Zac muttered as his eyes followed where the demon pointed.

To the left of the Golden gate, a singular name had appeared at the top of an engraved plaque large enough to contain quite a few names.

[1. Gorund Shatterstone. 4th level, 4:32:21]

Similarly, a second plaque had been engraved to the right of the Gate of Death.

[1. Souva Telosir. 4th level, 4:18:44]

"Just over one hour per level," Ra'Klid muttered. "But why..."

"Why were they sent out at six hours on the dot?" Ogras continued with a nod. "Should be the Dao opportunity?"

"So the quicker you pass the trials, the more time you'll have to enjoy the Dao Enlightenment," Zac hummed. "Alright, we'll set up a series of experiments."

Zac wasn't in any real hurry to go back, so he stayed on to oversee the groups of elite warriors who were sent through the gates just an hour later. The first batch was made up of an equal split of Mavai, Raun, Einherjar, and Port Atwood Elites. And in their wake were thousands of workers who started expanding the settlement with speed visible to the naked eye.

Over the next few days, a steady stream of warriors entered the Gates of Rebirth, and every batch brought a new set of findings. They first noticed that no one managed to leave with their memories intact. It was the same for everyone; they remembered which floor they reached, and that was about it.

Secondly, they found that the big ladders only showed 100 warriors at a time, but you could see more names if you touched them. Since there were only six layers, the rankings were mostly based on time since all top ten results had only reached the fourth layer. Everyone always emerged after 6 hours at the dot, but some finished their run after just one or two hours.

By the second day, it was all but confirmed that a quicker run resulted in more time to enjoy the Dao Enlightenment. However, this only applied to those who cultivated life or death. Anyone could enter, but only those with either a Pure or mixed-meaning Dao related to life or death would gain any comprehension.

It also seemed that reaching a higher tier resulted in a better burst of Dao, which meant that stopping at a low layer to spend more time focusing on the Dao wouldn't work. Just after three days, there had already been a couple of breakthroughs, and all those came from those who had reached the third or fourth level.

You could also leave whatever name you wanted behind, and a Port Atwood soldier had left behind the name 'Banana Man' for some reason when asked to see if he could modify the name he left behind. You could also skip leaving behind your name altogether, but it looked like you'd lose access to the Dao Enlightenment if you did.

As for benefits, it didn't look like there were any to leaving your name behind on the ladder, except for the bragging rights. But that was more than enough for some of the competitive cultivators, and each faction of the Atwood Empire tried to keep as many top spots as possible.

They also confirmed that you didn't need to be undead to enter the Door of Death, and Revenants wouldn't get killed by trying out the Life-attuned challenge. However, the undead were clearly disadvantaged when entering the Gate of Life. Similarly, the Mavai was punished for entering the Gate of Death, though the effect wasn't as pronounced. As for unattuned beings like normal humans, it didn't matter which gate they chose.

The most sobering realization was that [Coward's Escape] did not seem to work in this trial. Everyone would be sent out alive with a title or as a corpse. No one ever left the trial early. So the trial was not without risks, even if you could opt out after each stage. Altogether, the death rate was only 5%, but that was still ten of the Atwood Empire's elites that would die every day as long as they kept filling the slots.

Furthermore, the people they sent through the gauntlet at this point were all handpicked for both their talent and survivability. Zac wouldn't be surprised if the mortality rate increased even further as the months passed and the more common talents had their turn. Still, Zac saw no reason to seal off the opportunity.

Like the shaman said before, risk and reward came hand in hand. However, he knew he couldn't make it mandatory for his soldiers with the mortality rate. Instead, they would list it as a limited resource that would normally cost Contribution Points to enjoy but would be free for the upcoming years. That should make enough people want to pass through the gauntlet.

Soon a week had passed, and Zac stood at the edge of the graveyard with a few envoys to his side. The next batch of trial takers was about to emerge, and everyone kept their eyes peeled on the large golden flowers and the crypts. Everyone had soon figured out that the better your performance, the nicer item you'd emerge from.

The first two warriors had emerged from an inlaid stone coffin and a sturdy root, but not everyone was so lucky. A few had been forced to crawl out from beneath the ground, covered in maggots and smelling like death. Yet no one had emerged from any of the crypts or golden bulbs yet, meaning they were reserved for those who reached the highest layers of the trial.

Soon enough, dozens of roots started to wiggle while coffins shuddered. But there were no bursts of energy or activity from the top-tiered exits.

“Still not enough,” Ra’Klid sighed. “Just how difficult is this trial?”

“There’s no rush,” Zac said. “Sooner or later, someone will pass the fourth level, and we’ll have our answers if anything’s changed.”

“You’re still not..?” the chieftain hesitated.

“No,” Zac said. “Everything is running smoothly here now. I can’t waste any more time here; I’m going back to cultivate.”

“I understand,” Ra’Klid nodded before nodding to the others to give them some space. “Before you go. I’ve heard rumors. Rumors of an expedition into the Million Gates Territory.”

“You want to go?” Zac asked with surprise. “What about the Mavai?”

“The council can manage the daily affairs. I need to follow in your footsteps to gain the strength to protect my people. A civilization without an ancestor to keep the ship stable will soon capsize,” Ra’Klid said.

“I’m not involved in this incursion, so I’m not involved in the final decision of personnel,” Zac slowly said. “But I’ll mention your request when I go back. They’ll set off in a few months, so prepare yourself.”

“Thank you,” Ra’Klid said with a bow. “I will.”

Zac nodded before flashing away, heading toward the Teleportation Array. A few jumps later, he was back in his cultivation cave. From here on out, his administrators would figure out a system to extract as much value as possible from the Gates of Rebirth over the next four years. The nitty-gritty was for others to figure out – Zac was more interested in continuing his recovery and cultivation.

He was still months from being in perfect condition. Still, he was approaching the point where he could continue with his training regimen, and Zac immediately had Triv prepare another nurturing bath. A week later, Zac sat alone in the center of his cave, and the energies of life and death clashed all around him. However, Zac’s attention was fully on a shimmering crystal in his hand – a Dao Stone he’d gotten from Ogras.

There were more of them waiting in his Spatial Ring as well, more than enough for his purposes. It was finally time to upgrade his Branch of the War Axe. Zac first evolved his Fragment of the Axe into the Branch of the War Axe in the hidden valley of the Twilight Chasm, where he witnessed the super-condensed Daos of Life and Death clash.

All the while, the mysterious egg he got from Va Tapek had purified and released more and more energy, almost pushing him into a state of hysterical madness. He had unknowingly found his answer in that environment, where he rejected Twilight’s unity of Life and Death, and instead confirmed his own Path.

Many things had happened since then, and his experiences had long since made up for his rushed breakthrough. Most important of which, he had spent years inside the Orom, completely reforging his understanding of combat and technique. Then the events in the Void Star followed, where his techniques and strength were tested to their limits.

He had fought, bled, and struggled to the point that his understanding of conflict was more than enough to upgrade his Dao again. If his constitution had been normal, he would already have taken that step naturally. But now, it was just a matter of ingesting treasures while holding onto his vision.

Upgrading one's Dao wasn't dangerous or taxing, but Zac still surveyed his soul to ensure it was in decent enough shape to avoid any surprises and mishaps. The rotating cores in his Soul Aperture still showed some hairline cracks after his battle with the Qriz'Ul Goblin and being drowned in both Creation and Oblivion, but they had already stabilized.

The damage was on the mend, and the remnant energies would be fully purged in a month or so. It was good enough. Zac focused on the crystal in his hand and tried to drag out the Origin Dao it contained. These crystals of Pure comprehension would become the fuel, allowing him to make a breakthrough without any interference by external inspiration.

But nothing happened.

Zac looked down at the crystal with confusion. It wasn't defective – he could sense the pure truths trapped within. It was like a diluted version of that white light that had upgraded his Dao the last time – the Primal Dao. Or perhaps it was more apt to liken it to an untainted version of the energy released by Salvation's Dao Funnel.

Yet it refused to listen to his command, as though the crystal casing was an impassable barrier. It felt a lot like the Cosmic Energy around him, which simply refused to listen to his call when he tried using Cultivation Manuals as a mortal. Zac looked at the stone for a few seconds before sighing in defeat. Some things never changed.

With a lack of better options, Zac put the crystal in his mouth and bit down, prompting a shattering sound to echo through the chamber.