

The Fall 973

[Chapter 973 - Gate of Life](#)

Soon enough, Zac appeared in Rebirth City. Today, it was a sprawling settlement only dwarfed by Port Atwood and a few other cities on Earth. It was the de-facto capital of Ensolus even if Sandy, the second Stargazer recruited to administrate, and the Nexus Hub were still located over at Fort Atwood.

It was a natural consequence of its proximity to the Gates of Rebirth and the result of a strategic decision to keep Fort Atwood separate from the trial and commercial ventures. Even Hegemons would require days to reach Fort Atwood from Rebirth City, giving his people ample time to prepare in case someone wanted to try something.

Not that some random Hegemon could take over Fort Atwood. Not even a Late Hegemon could break inside in short order with the immense resources put into its defenses. By the time the assimilation came around, Zac wanted to have protective measures prepared even for Monarchs.

The streets were quite empty for what one could expect from a city of this size. There was certainly foot traffic, but few of the pedestrians had a powerful aura. It was mostly F-grade civilians heading to work or getting some tasks done, with E-grade auras being incredibly rare. It wasn't a unique scene for the City of Rebirth. The same thing could be observed all across Ensolus and Earth.

The clock was ticking, and the Atwood Empire War Machine was running on all cylinders. Dozens of war games and exercises were happening all across the two planets. In forests, in cities, in the ocean, in the underworld. The Flotilla of Atwood Empire ships had grown to over 100 vessels, an absolutely shocking number for what essentially was an Early D-grade force.

The bombardment of the Creator Vessels alone could blow up a planet or dismantle a Middle D-grade force in a matter of minutes. Even a Late Hegemon would be turned into mincemeat if he let himself get caught in the crossfire.

By now, those willing to fight for the empire had already joined the army, either as temporary or permanent fighters. Those who had the means but lacked the will weren't allowed to slink away from the upcoming threat. After a year of waiting, they'd been conscripted whether they liked it or not, losing out on the best resources available at the training camps.

The forceful approach had created some uproars, especially among the Humans on Earth, but they had been forcefully quashed. Zac knew some considered him a tyrant by this point, but he didn't care. His people needed to be whipped into shape. Still, it had created an oppressive atmosphere in his empire, which only exacerbated his mood as he walked toward the huge half-circle in the distance.

"Lord Atwood," the guards outside the trial said with a bow.

"Are there any slots remaining?" Zac asked.

"Following procedure, there are ten remaining of today's allotment," the guard replied, clearly looking expectant.

"Alright, I'm going in. Keep one open on the other side as well, just in case," Zac said.

"Of course," the guard nodded, and Zac stepped into the Gate of Life.

Zac didn't know what he'd expected when entering the Gates of Rebirth, but it wasn't the dark and blisteringly cold tundra that stretched out in every direction. The ground was covered in a sheet of black ice, and Zac felt tendrils of death trying to burrow into his bare feet and steal his strength. This was just the first layer, though, and Zac's Void Vajra Constitution was more than enough to rebuff the effect.

The cold tendrils couldn't withstand the raging vortex of life that always lived inside his cells, and Zac started to walk down the sole path in the whole realm. He didn't know how he knew, but there was a gate at the end of the road. Passing through meant passing the first layer of the trial. Each step infused his feet with another burst of cold, but Zac kept speeding up.

He only had six hours for the whole trial, and Zac had no idea whether time worked differently inside. Besides, the quicker he passed the whole thing, the more time he would have in that state of epiphany the previous trial-takers mentioned.

It soon became clear there was some dilation at play as there was no end in sight, even after rushing for over two hours while using [Earthstrider]. The endless tundra looked the same, and there were no real markers that could confirm he was moving at all. The only thing that changed during the journey was that the cold grew more intense and deadlier.

Still, it was far from enough to hamper Zac's progress, and he made an impressive time by relying on Supreme Nexus Crystals to activate his movement skill continuously. Experiments had long since confirmed that people could use items inside, and Zac's Spatial Rings were stocked with enough supplies to keep fighting for decades if need be.

Eventually, there was a change as Zac started spotting figures in the distance. There were humans, beastkin, and all kinds of races, slowly shuffling about. They were all stark naked, their bodies covered in cold sores and frozen blood. They seemed to be mindlessly stumbling in the same direction as Zac. But when approached, they turned their heads toward him, their arms reaching out to grab him.

Zac hesitated only for a moment before taking out a club. He had already realized where this place was; it was Naraka, one of the Hell Realms depicted in Buddhist mythology. It was essentially purgatory and the lowest of the six paths of reincarnation. Zac didn't know if the trial was actually Buddhist or if its challenges were just modeled after their beliefs.

Perhaps it was unavoidable for a trial of this nature. According to his conversations with the Undead Empire, the Dao of Samsara was one of the main branches of the Sangha. It was their method to harness the Daos of Life and Death, bringing them away from the Dao of Chaos and toward the Dao of Order. Imposing a cycle of reincarnation, making random chance predictable.

In fact, that was one of the reasons the Undead Empire chose to side with the Blood Clan all those years ago. The Primo already had reasons to target the Sangha because of their claim on the Dao of Death. Something was going on at the peak, where the cultivators asserted some control over the Grand Dao itself.

For example, if the Eveningtide Asura ever reached the very limits of cultivation, like the Apostates, he might actually impact Zac's Daos. According to Alvod, Life was not life, and Death was not death. How could that mesh with Zac's path of purity? And with Alvod reaching the limits of cultivation, the Dao would slightly shift in his image.

That was what had happened with the Elemental Daos and the Apostate of Mercy, and it was a source of constant conflict among the factions at the top.

In either case, the fact the first layer of the Gates of Rebirth was modeled after Naraka provided Zac with some clues about the trial. First, it meant these people were tormented sinners who were slowly walking toward a chance at rebirth. They would have to suffer for a nigh-eternity before expunging karma and moving on to the upper realms.

Cutting them apart with [Verun's Bite] felt too ruthless, especially since they were pretty weak. Any Peak E-grade cultivator could easily force his way through the gauntlet of icebitten damned. A light tap with a club was enough to throw them away. And Zac was moving far quicker than these people were, making it impossible for them to catch up.

The hours passed until there finally was a change in the scenery. Zac could vaguely make out that the darkness deepened in the distance. Ten minutes later, he realized it was a towering mountain of black ice. By the time he reached it, roughly seven hours had passed, and Zac suspected it wouldn't be much longer.

The whole mountain was covered in damned souls, their bodies completely disfigured from the cold. All of them were climbing toward the peak, a scene reminding Zac of his [Pillar of Desolation]. Zac followed suit, each jump taking him tens of meters further up. Eventually, he passed through a thick cloud of extreme cold, which placed him on the peak.

A swirling gate filled with the warmth of life waited for him there, and Zac passed through it after taking a final look at the world around him. Entering didn't immediately move him to the next trial. Instead, Zac found himself in a comforting world of gold. Hundreds of life-giving streams gently caressed him, and he was filled with a sense of warmth and tranquility.

It was the sensation most trial-takers described after emerging. It was impossible to tell whether he was floating inside an ocean or in space. All was Life. Zac didn't get a chance to enjoy the environment for long before a screen appeared in front of him.

[Gate of Hell passed. 5:38 remaining. Continue?]

Just over eight hours had passed in the first trial, yet only 22 minutes had passed in real-time. Zac guessed that each hour outside meant one day inside the trial, though there were no guarantees the subsequent trials would be the same. Not wanting to waste a second, Zac chose to continue.

If he'd chosen no, he would most likely have gotten to spend the rest of the time inside this golden womb. It wasn't bad, but the intensity of the environment simply wasn't at the level where it could allow him to make any significant gains to his Branch of the Kalpataru. Zac felt it more at the level of the threshold between a Dao Seed and a Dao Fragment.

It may have sounded extremely weak, but it was worth remembering that most cultivators entered the E-grade with an Early Dao Seed rather than an Early Dao Fragment. By the time these cultivators reached Peak E-grade, if they ever did, this first layer may have been useful to push their Daos further.

The moment Zac made the decision, he felt a powerful tug and was dragged into a black vortex. The surroundings shifted, and Zac found himself standing on another road. Looking around, Zac saw he'd

arrived in some sort of ancient ruins, with most buildings being so run-down that only the foundation remained.

A haze covered the surroundings, making it impossible to see further than a hundred meters. Like last time, Zac instinctively knew where he needed to go. He started running down the sole path toward the next gate. Another road, another journey toward rebirth.

The hazy mist contained a bit of deathly drain, but Zac was surprised to find it wasn't even at the level of the ice of the previous realm. It didn't take much longer before Zac was met with the real challenge of the trial. A prickling pain flared up on his left arm, and a noticeable drain of energy followed.

Looking down at the spot, Zac couldn't see a thing, yet he knew something had latched onto him like a leech. His club would do him no good here, but circulating his Branch of the Kalpataru had an immediate effect. Zac vaguely heard a pained wail, and the drain disappeared. As expected, a hungry ghost of the second realm of reincarnation.

Only a minute passed before Zac felt another tug. This time, Zac used his Branch of the Pale Seal instead. The result was similar, but it took a bit more Dao to rebuff the invisible ghost. His Branch of the War Axe was just as effective as his Branch of the Kalpataru, but that was probably because it was a stage higher.

The hours passed as Zac ran through the ruins, where an increasing number of ghosts assaulted him. Eventually, he had to circulate his Dao Branch continuously, but it barely cost him any Mental Energy thanks to the [Thousand Lights Avatar]. Zac estimated most people would be fine in this kind of environment as long as they had a somewhat tempered mind and a Dao Fragment or two. Those who just had Dao seeds would likely find themselves under strain, and reaching the end would be challenging.

There was a second challenge to the trial as well. The second path of the cycle of reincarnation was the Preta, and it was filled with people who had given in to desires. Occasionally, Zac would get a whiff of something alluring in the distance, like powerful natural treasures. It seemed as though he could get all kinds of benefits if he just took a small detour.

It wasn't enough to move Zac's heart, and he refused to step off the path. He had a strong feeling that while leaving the path was easy, stepping back onto it would be far more difficult. Even if he found the treasures, he would have wasted a bunch of time. And most likely, the treasures weren't even real.

The second layer took almost exactly as much time as the first. It was even a few minutes faster since it was easier to walk on gravel than the ice of the first layer. Zac wasn't exhausted, either. He had used a good chunk of Mental Energy because he opted to simply rotate his Dao continuously rather than only when bitten. It was a bit wasteful, but he had mountains of Soul Crystals.

Thanks to that, he was fully topped off when passing through the gate. Zac found himself in the golden ocean of life once more. It had grown slightly more condensed, but it wasn't enough for his purposes, so he continued on.

The third layer placed him in a sweltering jungle, and he was beset by an almost deafening clamor of millions of different beasts. After the previous realms, Zac didn't expect such a lush environment, but he soon got an answer as a tiger came lumbering over. It seemed like a living creature but emitted a

palpable aura of sinister rot. Getting hit by that thing would be noticeably worse compared to the draining ghosts.

With a thunderous roar, it lunged for Zac, its claws veritably oozing killing intent as though it were poison. A deep thud was followed by a pained yowl, and the beast was flung into the bushes by a lazy punch. Zac frowned as he looked at his hand, seeing a dark haze swirl around it. So even hitting these guys left some sinister energy on your body.

Like before, Zac was easily overqualified for the level, and a bit of Dao was enough to cleanse his hand. The trusty club made its second appearance, and Zac set out, leaving a path of clobbered beasts in his wake. The tiger was just the first of many, and Zac made a few discoveries along the way.

The more you wounded the beasts, the more of their fell aura you had to deal with. But if you tapped them too lightly, they'd be back for more in no time. They weren't cowed by killing intent and a domineering aura either; they were as aggressive and stupid as beasts came.

Ultimately, it took Zac just over 9 hours to reach the end, the few scrapes and bruises he'd accumulated mostly healed already. That was the benefit of having a Life-attuned constitution at the peak of the second layer.

The breakthrough had only increased the base attributes by a factor of ten, which meant 50 Base Attributes, 100 points in Vitality, and 50 points in Endurance. That was barely noticeable for Zac, whose defensive attributes far eclipsed 10,000 already. But the recovery factor was a separate impressive boost.

The whirlpools in his cells were more than two-thirds gold by this point, and the flakes helped his body naturally heal almost thirty percent faster than before. He saw similar results when Healers of the Atwood Army used Life-Attuned blessings or healing skills on him. They simply worked better on his constitution.

Zac really looked forward to reaching the Minor Sublimation of the [Void Vajra Sublimation]. He suspected it would give an even greater boost to these features since his body would officially become Life-Attuned.

Having passed through the realm of animals, and thus all of the three lower realms of the sixth paths, the golden world had grown noticeably stronger. Yet it wasn't enough. Zac wasn't just aiming for the upper realm. Joanna's plight still echoed in his heart, and the first three layers had been far from enough to alleviate the stuffy feeling in his heart.

Be it the challenge of Humans, Asuras, or Devas— they wouldn't be enough. Even the Devas were ultimately chained down by the bhavacakra. Only by snapping the chains of fate and leaving the cycle would he get rid of this feeling.

He needed to break into Nirvana.