

The Fall 974

[Chapter 974 - Breaking the Wheel](#)

Zac continued through the Gate of Life like a bulldozer. As expected, the fourth trial was the realm of man. He was met with innumerable familiar faces on his road toward the next gate. Friends who tried to slow him down, enemies who tried to impede his path. A million voices clamored for his attention, each trying to siphon some of his speed and Life.

It was like an illusion and combat trial mixed into one, but Zac crushed anything in his path. His heart had been tempered by the remnants and later his [Void Vajra Sublimation]. Even when he found himself standing in front of Thea and Kenzie by the end, he passed them by without a ripple in his heart.

The fifth layer, the layer of the furious Asuras, was more straightforward. Each step had to be taken over a corpse. The club was no longer enough, and Zac was forced to take out [Verun's Bite]. The axe keened with excitement upon finally tasting flesh, and the roars of supremacy echoed through the endless battlefield of the fifth layer.

It was also a good opportunity for Zac to shake off some of his rust. The fifth layer was the final challenge of most elites of his faction, where they were forced to go all out to reach the end. For Zac, it wasn't that desperate, but he found himself forced to fight seriously.

The six-armed Asuras fought with both ferocity and skill, using all kinds of techniques aimed at killing or at least maiming. Zac, in turn, opted to counter with his Evolutionary Stance. It was good practice, and Zac quickly realized his combat style, which was partly based on the Dao of Life, was quite effective at dealing with these demonic beings. He became one with his path; each swing was a birth that ended in the death of an opponent. He was unmatched, creating a path of carnage that echoed with Life and Conflict.

Zac hadn't specifically trained in techniques that much since secluding himself six years ago, but that didn't mean he hadn't improved. Simply filling his body with his soul had made it easier to enter that illusory state of one-ness that he first encountered when being pushed by Kaldor inside the Orom World. Now, he didn't even need to be in a desperate fight to become one with his path.

It came naturally as his Daos were allowed to circulate through his spiritual body. His study of patterns had also elevated his skill and refined his technique. Everything was connected. The patterns he'd drawn when trying to figure out his Cosmic Core were echoes of his path, just like his Evolutionary Stance.

As his patterns grew more exquisite while removing imperfections, it didn't only mean he was getting closer to a working blueprint. It meant gaining a deeper understanding of himself, of his Dao, and how it all fit together. Vivi's vines were a web of carnage, seemingly everywhere at once while [Verun's Bite] delivered death.

Zac could actually see it, the shadows of his core manifest in his attacks. He had somewhat sensed it while sparring with Emily and Joanna, but it wasn't as palpable as it was right now. Some things could only be figured out on an actual battlefield, and Zac was awash with inspiration as he progressed.

His speed of advancement gradually slowed down, but Zac didn't care. There was a risk of him not remembering this when emerging, but he didn't care about that either. He was consumed by the feeling

of rebirth through struggle, and his Evolutionary Stance shifted by the second, moving closer to the truth.

Even Vivi seemed to feel something change, and Zac sensed how she started to absorb more and more energy from the World Ring she and Haro resided in. Zac was shocked but delighted at the scene. The matter of Vivi's waning lifeforce was always a matter of regret in the back of his head. If possible, he really wanted to accomplish what Heda had thought impossible; to allow Vivi to break through.

At least once more would be enough. It would allow Vivi to live for tens of thousands of years longer. Allow her to see Haro, who had essentially become Vivi's daughter after years of nurturing, grow from a small sapling into a great Plant King. To that end, Zac had tried all kinds of things, from providing longevity treasures to burying energy-dense Beast Cores and Natural Treasures in the ground around her.

But nothing had worked— until now.

For some reason, Vivi was gaining inspiration as he were, from her vines following the true and perfected paths of Life and Conflict. He was like a guiding hand, leading Vivi toward the Grand Dao. And since she finally showed an appetite after a decade of barely eating, Zac was happy to oblige. The huge energy catchers around the moon provided him with an almost endless source of Divine Crystals, and mountains of them entered his World Ring while he continued with his carnage.

The hours passed as Zac's technique shed its weakness and was reborn stronger. Zac barely registered his surroundings, only vaguely ensuring he didn't step off the path as he advanced. But eventually, Zac realized there were no more enemies to fight. He already stood in front of the gate with an endless trail of corpses strewn in his wake.

Zac didn't immediately pass through, instead content to slowly absorb what he'd experienced. Only a few hours later did he open his eyes. By that point, Vivi had stopped absorbing energy. Zac could tell she was still unable to evolve into Hegemony, but she felt more vibrant than even when he got her from Heda.

As for himself, Zac knew he'd passed a threshold sometime during the journey. He'd entered the Middle Mastery of the Integration stage, mostly thanks to Ultom's impartment. It had perfected the patterns on his blueprints, which in turn had elevated his technique. And it wasn't a case of barely breaking through either.

Zac could tell his foundations were still incredibly solid. He only lacked the fundamental understanding of his Daos required to push his Techniques further. As long as he upgraded his Branch of the Kalpataru and continued gaining experience, he had a decent chance of evolving his technique again before the trial for Ultom began.

That might also be the key to evolving Vivi, which would be a huge victory. Haro was still far from strong enough to be used as a weapon. Meanwhile, Vivi was a top-quality Spiritual Plant. If she evolved into D-grade, she should be able to match up to War Regalias in might.

Since the breakthrough was done with, Zac stepped through the gate for the fifth time.

[Gate of Asura passed: 3:32 remaining. Continue?]

The Path of Asura had taken over an hour of real-time, almost as much as the previous four trials combined. Still, Zac felt the reward was worth it. You could never be sure inspiration would strike so clearly again if he suppressed the feeling until he was outside the trial. And there was only a single trial remaining. As long as he could rush through it, he'd have over three hours of inspiration.

Zac entered the next trial, finding himself in a celestial realm of purple clouds, with the occasional mountain peak breaking through the rippling curtain. It was the highest realm of the six paths, the final obstacle of Nirvana. There was a golden road leading through the realm. Zac set out, [Verun's Bite] already in his hand.

It didn't take long for him to encounter his first enemy. It was a humanoid decked in jewelry who floated over, a halo behind its elephantine head radiating a strong aura of providence. In its hands, it held a partisan spear, and it stabbed it against Zac the moment it was close enough.

Zac dodged the somewhat simple strike effortlessly, but he was surprised to find himself nicked at his shoulders. The strike should have missed, yet something went wrong. Stepping aside to reorient himself, Zac almost stepped out off the edge of the road.

He almost felt drunk even if he had full clarity, but Zac knew it was something more tricky. It was Karma. It wasn't as palpable as the Karmic cultivator Zac fought inside the Tower of Eternity, but it was there. It was almost like the humanoid Deva radiated an aura of luck, or misfortune, depending on whose perspective you looked at it from.

Zac had no way to rouse or target his own Luck, but just understanding the situation seemed to help. A vicious strike and the Deva fell into the clouds, never to be seen again. But new figures were already floating toward him, their auras seemingly superimposing to create an even stronger effect.

The Devas were the beings closest to attaining Nirvana, each carrying immense Karma. Zac guessed their will impacted the river of fate, bending it to their advantage. Unfortunately for them, Zac was like an unmovable rock thanks to his huge amount of Luck. Their providence failed to contain him and keep them safe from his counter-attacks.

This effect seemed to be further augmented by his Branch of the Kalpataru since it siphoned some of the good fortunes of the realm for Zac's use. Zac sped up, a Life-attuned Dao Field covering his surroundings while he launched fractal leaves at any Deva who dared get close.

Zac felt the resistance of fate all the time, but it only managed to deviate his blades slightly. Ultimately, it didn't matter if a 3-meter fractal leaf was pushed a few hands to the side. The various demi-gods who got close got cut down all the same. For Zac, the sixth realm was actually easier than the fifth, where you could only fight fire with fire. And together with the fact he used his skills this time, Zac veritably flew through the paradisial world made from clouds.

Twelve hours was all it took until Zac stood at the final checkpoint of the Gate of Life. Zac wasn't surprised none had reach this point until now, even if they'd dared attempt it after the gauntlet of Asuras. Fighting against the Devas was almost like fighting against fate. If you didn't have a huge amount of Luck like he, you'd instead have to absolutely overpower the Devas to the point their luck couldn't save them.

The number of deities he'd left in his wake was shocking. If this were the real world, he would probably have accumulated enough fell Karma for ten lifetimes for killing so many creatures with such positive Karma. Luckily, this was just a trial ground, and there was no way these creatures were real.

Either case, it was over with, and Zac was ready to collect his reward. He passed through the gate, entering a supercharged swirl of pure Life. By this point, even Zac could feel there were noticeable benefits from staying inside the swirls of Life. It was akin to an impartment, much like the Life-Death Pearls of the Twilight Ocean. Using this kind of energy would allow Zac to quickly work toward the next stage of his Dao Branch.

Zac didn't even get the chance to enter a state of revelation before something changed.

[Gate of Deva passed: 3:01 remaining. Continue?]

Continue? Zac blankly looked at the line, wondering what was going on. The System had clearly told him the Gates of Rebirth had six layers when he received it as a reward, and they perfectly matched the six realms of rebirth. Yet there was another one? Was it actually Nirvana? Or a hidden level? Something awarded because he'd passed the trial with more than half of the time remaining?

The reasons didn't matter. What mattered was whether he should accept or not. Looking around at the vibrant swirls of life, Zac made his decision.

It wasn't enough. Zac could tell that while he'd make improvements in the current environment, it wasn't enough to crystallize the insights he was lacking to form a Middle-stage Dao Branch of the Kalpataru. But the fact that the energy was already useful made Zac hopeful for the next stage, and he chose to continue into the hidden trial.

This time, the environment was different. There was no world stretching to the horizons. It rather looked like he stood at the edge of the universe, gazing upon golden gates hundreds of meters tall. To its sides, a wall stretched toward infinity in each direction. Had he really been taken to Paradise? Were these the pearly gates leading into Heaven?

There was nowhere to go but through the doorway, and staying wasn't an option either. The universe was draining him, stealing his Vigor faster than any of his Hidden Nodes did. After he ran out of that, he'd probably start losing Life Force. Zac ran toward the huge gates, but he stopped in place with shock just a moment later. The moment he'd started circulating his Branch of the Kalpataru as usual, the drain had more than doubled.

Zac urgently changed Dao and was both relieved and confused to find that his Branch of the Pale Seal noticeably stemmed the loss. Meanwhile, the Branch of the War Axe neither helped nor hampered him. Why was it the opposite?

For each of the previous tiers, Life had helped resist the challenges of the gates in various ways. But here, it became a liability while Death saved his bacon. Zac only hesitated a moment before swapping over to his Draugr form, and he breathed in relief upon feeling the loss lessening even further. Between his Death-attuned branch and his Death-attuned body, the drain was negligible.

As long as he kept eating to replenish his Vigor, he'd be able to last a good while in this environment before running into trouble. Of course, that was only so long as the drain didn't get too bad deeper into the trial.

Surviving to the end probably meant you'd get sent out with a title of the previous tier but no epiphany, but Zac couldn't be sure. Besides, his goal in this place was less about the Limited Title and more about the insight waiting at the end. There was no point loitering at the entrance after having solved the danger. Zac rushed into the enormous complex, and it almost felt like passing through the gates of heaven.

The feeling didn't last long. There was no paradise on the other side. Instead, it was a long golden hallway with paths veering both to the left and right. Some pathways even started a couple of meters into the air, proving the structure had at least two layers. The scene reminded Zac a bit of the research base Mystic Realm, though there was no ceiling.

A maze?

Just standing at the entrance left Zac a bit light-headed, and not just because of the dozen paths he had already spotted. Every inch of the golden walls was covered in black scripts, forming a dizzying array of patterns stretching as far as Zac could see. Having worked on a blueprint for years, Zac immediately recognized many of the overarching themes.

These were patterns related to the Dao of Death, there was no doubt about it. However, Zac only recognized snippets, where most patterns were mostly foreign to him. Zac could only tell they had the same 'flavor' as his own Dao, meaning they were probably different aspects of the Dao of Death. Just observing them filled him with some inspiration.

Zac took a few hesitant steps forward while chewing on a strip of dried meat of an undead Beast King, but he soon stopped again. Just how should he deal with this place? If this was a maze, there had to be some sort of clue on how to pass it. He'd seen just how massive this place was from the outside. He could run around this place for months without finding the exit if he didn't have a plan.

Zac took a calming breath, not letting the unexpected scene impact his heart as he looked around for solutions. It was a trial, not a trap. First things first. Zac turned into an abyssal wraith, shooting toward the sky a few hundred meters above. However, no matter how many thousands of meters he moved, the edge of the maze grew no closer.

There was an array that prevented cheating. Zac had expected as much, but he had to make sure. He landed back on the ground, instead turning to the walls and paths around him. The key had to be the scripts and the Dao of Death. First, Zac tried to figure out if some paths were false or imperfect, but it didn't look like it.

All sixteen paths he could pick from the initial entrance seemed equally perfect. None had any obvious flaws Zac could discern. But his eyes gradually turned to the third path. There were hints of his Branch of the Pale Seal in all of the paths except five, but runes that resonated with his path were denser in the third.

Was that it? Pick the one that fit you the best? Zac had no better option, so he entered the path. It continued for almost a kilometer, with a few paths veering to the sides. But all of them had a smaller

concentration of his Dao, so he ignored them. Eventually, he found a path that looked a bit better and entered it.

Having to constantly observe and analyze the endless runes around him was taxing, but also illuminating. Most of the patterns weren't directly related to him, but they were related to the Dao he practiced. There were all kinds of connections and relationships he'd never seen before. And while he couldn't utilize any of it right now, he felt they might come in handy in the future.

Zac even suspected this wasn't the originally intended way to pass the trial. The runes emitted a very weak energy, and Zac suspected a normal cultivator would be able to resonate with the runes that matched their affinity. Zac was essentially brute-forcing it with his brain filled with patterns thanks to Ultom and his inordinately powerful soul.

Thank the Heavens he hadn't given in to his curiosity back then and entered the Gates of Rebirth early, instead opting to save the opportunity for when he'd accumulated insights after his years of cultivation. Without a proper theoretical foundation, he wouldn't have been able to move nearly as fast as he was.

Zac continued this way, running through the winding maze, constantly feasting on meat to keep his Vigor topped up. The hours passed this way, and Zac started to realize it wasn't just the inscriptions on the walls that formed complex patterns. The paths themselves formed enormous runes, creating a shockingly vast array.

He was running inside the Tapestry of Death.