

## The Fall 975

### [Chapter 975 - Death from Life](#)

Zac remembered some of his breakthroughs, where he'd seen the endless tapestries of the Grand Dao and tried to grasp some corners that resonated with him. This was essentially the same, with the only difference being he'd been physically placed in the middle of the vast emblem. The realization didn't change much, but it filled Zac with greater confidence he was on the right path, even if the drain on him kept increasing.

At first, he could only see a few percent of his path being reflected on the walls. After an hour, more than 10% contained pieces of his Dao. By the time Zac had run five hours, more than half of the patterns reflected his own. It felt a lot like when he walked through the spiral after returning from absorbing Ultom's light. The only difference was that he was now retracing the steps of Dao comprehension instead.

But the drain was becoming a problem. He was quickly losing energy, and no amount of food was enough to stem the loss. Zac suspected he had at most four hours before running out of Vigor entirely. Yet he continued without looking back. As the drain grew more palpable, so did the aura of Death from the runes around him.

He felt he had entered a semi-enlightened state where the repeating patterns engraved themselves in his heart.

Eventually, his constitution failed him. He felt like a hollow husk, with not an ounce of life left in it. He only wanted to lie down and sleep, to shut out the unbearable hunger that threatened to consume him. But he couldn't stop now. The walls were 90% filled in with his path, and he was so close he could taste it.

Zac continued with pure willpower, forcing his legs to keep moving and the turbid ichor in his veins to keep flowing. He felt his life slipping out from his body, but a Longevity Treasure allowed him to mostly spend an external source. But the drain grew stronger, and external treasures soon weren't enough to stem the loss.

Days lost turned to weeks and soon months. But Zac didn't care. He was walking in a perfect representation of his Branch of the Pale Seal. Until he suddenly wasn't. The pathway he'd stumbled through suddenly ended in a small room no larger than ten meters across. There was a simple well in the middle, and Zac heard the sloshing of water from within.

But it couldn't be normal water. A golden radiance spread out from the reservoir, drowning out the intense darkness of the runes. Zac walked inside with wonder, barely noticing the drain had reached a fever pitch. In the heart of Death, there was Life. Zac's mind was fuzzy, but he knew what he needed to do.

He stumbled over to the well and simply tipped over. Staying any longer in the maze environment would be his end, and he felt a powerful calling from the depths. The well was surprisingly deep, but it gave time to send an exhausted nudge into his Specialty Core, prompting it to transform him back into his human form.

Death receded, both within his body and in his surroundings. A storm of life jolted Zac's drained mind wide awake a few seconds later, and he felt how torrential amounts of energy were entering his body while the truths of Life were laid bare all around him. No matter if it was the density or depth, it was on a whole other level compared to the sixth checkpoint.

His utterly drained Vigor was rapidly being replenished, the bone-piercing exhaustion replaced with exuberance. The Dao of Life around him was so clear and intimate, like a long-lost friend caressing you in an embrace. Was it because he'd walked down the corridors of Death for half a day, like how you were blinded by even the weakest of lights after having stayed in darkness for a while?

This was it. This was the one. Death from Life, and Life from Death.

No screen was forthcoming this time, though Zac wasn't sure he'd notice it even if one appeared. He was fully consumed by the Branch of the Kalpataru, swept away by his path. It had been years since he had felt his Dao so close and palpable. Ultimately, the lake water of the Lost Plane, or even the divine light of Ultom, was bereft of Dao.

Their inspiration could break anything apart and show you the mechanical underpinnings of the Dao and its absence, but it could not elevate Zac's understanding of Life. But now, practical understanding and spiritual comprehension became entwined as Zac gazed at the fundamental nature of Life.

There was nothing that Zac needed to change with his understanding of the Kalpataru. He just needed to continue down the path, just like he had through the tapestry of Death. Life was the motor of change, the breaker of fate. It was progress manifest through the evolutionary dance of his Technique.

The truths he'd grasped onto while inside the Orom World grew more condensed and robust, and Zac lost any sense of anything but the warmth of Life. But suddenly, Zac felt something amiss, and his eyes shot open as he warily looked around. It took him a moment to realize what was happening, and he scoffed before closing his eyes again.

There were no threats, at least not in the corporeal sense. The trouble Zac sensed was a few insights that tried to sneak into his Dao, hinting at the fusion between Life and Death by adding a set of concepts to create a working microcosm. The first steps toward Samsara. As expected from a Trial of a Buddhist nature.

Luckily, Zac had tempered his heart in the Void for years already, and he effortlessly rejected those thoughts while greedily taking what he needed from the storm around him. But since Zac rejected a chunk of the truths around him, the energy entering his body also decreased. That could barely be considered a problem. A white box appeared in his hand, and Zac swallowed the golden peach before stowing away the container.

It was a top-tier Life Attuned Dao Treasure that helped Zac make up the loss and speed up his breakthrough. It joined the external streams of truth, flowing into the floating tree in his Soul Aperture. The Kalpataru didn't grow any larger, but the branches grasping for the heavens did. The golden leaves also grew more radiant, while the movements of the dancing vines became more capricious.

The tree shone like a small sun inside his aperture, annealing the golden Outer Cores with Life of a higher order. And just like that, it was done. Another Dao Branch pushed to Middle Mastery. Zac warily

opened his eyes and peered around, both relieved and disappointed no angry clouds were gathering above him.

Ultimately, the Old Heavens didn't care about minor breakthroughs like evolving Dao Branches, and it wouldn't come down at him with Tribulation Lightning until he formed an Earthly Dao. However, from that point, each step would draw a tribulation as long as he stayed on the Boundless Path. That was a worry for later, and Zac opened his Dao Screen to see the results.

[Branch of the Kalpataru (Middle): All attributes +50, Dexterity +750, Endurance +1500, Vitality +4750, Intelligence +50, Wisdom +450, Effectiveness of Vitality +25%]

Having accomplished what he set out for, Zac blocked out the golden light around him. He had taken what he needed. Any more, and he might find his path deviate. This place really was a Buddhist heritage, trying to sneak in some insights moving his Dao toward Samsara. Looking back, it seemed like a deliberate action with the maze of Death leading to a well of Life.

Instead, Zac turned his attention to his upgraded Dao branch. He hadn't been certain he'd be able to upgrade the Dao with the help of this trial, even if he had made huge strides since the Orom World, both in the Void Gate and during his years of study of the Dao of Life. And his worry had been warranted. If not for the secret seventh layer, he wouldn't have reached all the way.

A Middle Stage Dao Branch wasn't required for him to form his Cosmic Core—it would only be a prerequisite for upgrading his Cosmic Core to Middle Stage. But even if it weren't a must-have for the Perennial Vastness, it would certainly help. The better the balance between Conflict and Life, the easier it would be to forcibly form and contain the sections of his core.

Besides, the upgrade had provided him with over 8,500 attribute points—more than a 10% boost to his attribute pool. If he could do the same with his Branch of the Pale Seal, he'd be far better prepared for any conflict inside the Perennial Vastness. Because one thing was for sure, no matter where you went in the Multiverse, there'd be a struggle for resources and to get ahead.

As for the attributes, there weren't any real surprises. Zac was happy to see that Dexterity had gone from +300 to +750, an increase of 150% rather than a simple doubling. That came at the cost of no extra Intelligence and reduced gain in Wisdom and Endurance. As far as Zac was concerned, it was a worthy trade.

His Wisdom was starting to fall behind a bit, though, so he might have to put some points into it after reaching Hegemony. His soul was incredibly powerful, but it could not be fully utilized without the Wisdom to run it.

Zac closed down the screen, looking around. There was no timer, but he could somewhat sense time was almost up. The golden streams around him had grown dim, having been robbed of a good chunk of their truths. Actually, the theft was still happening, and Zac was happy to see a steady stream enter his World Ring. He'd been too swept up in his own breakthrough to notice before.

Being a product of Heda, Vivi was obviously Life Attuned. Haro was not. However, between Zac's nurturing and Haro's closeness to Vivi, Haro had started to absorb more and more Life-attuned energy. Zac hoped he could have it diverge from the norm and become a Life-attuned Heavenrender Vine, just like Ogras had accidentally diverged into a Shadow-aspected Demon.

The minutes passed as Zac waited for the trial to conclude and to see what kind of title the seventh layer of the Gate of Life awarded. The normal trials provided 1% of your main attribute and either Vitality or Endurance, depending on which trial you chose, per layer. Would the seventh layer push the attributes to 7%, or would the title change as it did with the Havenfort Chasm?

Finally, the trial ended, but Zac felt no pull or any sensation that he was about to be placed inside one of those flowers outside. Instead, another prompt appeared.

[Trial Ended. Continue into the Gate of Death?]

Zac didn't give it a second thought as he accepted. This was exactly what he'd hoped for; the chance to enjoy the other half of his trial. Hopefully, there would be a second hidden level waiting for him on the other side, giving him the inspiration needed to evolve his final Dao Branch.

But as Zac accepted, he felt an uncomfortable pull. Like part of him was being held back in this sea of life. He tried to hold on as best as he could, but it still slipped between his fingers. It was his memories being purged of his experiences in this place. Zac had held onto a small hope he'd be able to retain his memories, either through his powerful soul or because he conquered the whole thing.

It looked like he was wrong, but that didn't mean Zac was willing to give up without a fight. Ultimately, Zac only managed to hold onto a few key pieces by furiously rotating his Soul Cores. The maze, the timer, and his Technique. A familiar gate appeared beneath him, and Zac had a final thought before it was whisked away.

What happened with the title?

A moment later, Zac found himself standing on a path of molten ground, filled with a conflicting sense of loss and gain. He looked around, trying to make sense of a confusing hole in his mind. He had been purged just like the others, but he remembered what he was doing here. He had fully passed the Gate of Life and evolved his Dao Branch, and it was time to climb the second half.

The hellscape of fiery life around him filled Zac with an odd sense of déjà vu. He guessed the previous trial was the same, except there had been Death within the flames rather than life. The same odd burning sensation came up through his soles, but he soon realized the Branch of the Pale Seal was effective at stemming the invasion.

As expected. Going by his current form, Zac had clearly completed the previous trial as a human, and this one was best dealt with in his Draugr form. Between the hazy memories and instinctual knowledge of what he needed to do, the level was completed in less than six hours thanks to [Abyssal Phase]. He passed through the gate and found himself in a sea of endless black.

If not for the visions of the Abyssal Lake, Zac would have thought this was how a real lake of Death felt like. Now, it seemed like a cheap mimicry of the real thing, almost like the Towers of Myriad Dao in the face of the Tower of Eternity. Of course, this was still just the first level. As the days passed and Zac knocked out one layer after another, the sea got increasingly filled with meaning.

Each level he passed also unlocked a bit more of his memory. He felt himself walking in his own footsteps, his experiences mirroring each other. By the time he reached the fourth layer, he could

almost see himself running in step. Zac sensed it wasn't a case of finding meaning where there was none. This felt intentional, like the trial showed him two sides of the same coin.

Unfortunately for the creator of this place, it wasn't for Zac. This kind of fusion the Gates of Rebirth was trying to nudge him toward was probably an expression of the Dao of Samsara. He had his own path to tread, and his heart was stable enough to ignore the pull. He would take what he needed from this place and discard the rest.

Soon enough, Zac reached the fifth layer, and a smile spread across his face as [Black Death] appeared in his hand.

'It's been a while,' a content hum echoed in his mind. 'Are we going out again?'

"We're heading to the Perennial Vastness soon," Zac smiled. "Hopefully, we can find a way to upgrade you there. For now, I'm going to evolve my Technique. See if you can feel anything from my control."

'I'll follow your lead,' Alea answered before her consciousness receded into the depths of the coffin.

It was a shame that short conversations were all Alea could manage, even after being fully healed and stabilized from her series of breakthroughs. It took a lot of effort to condense her consciousness to the point it worked like a person's. Its natural form was more of a passive state spread through the coffin, much like Mossy's normal conscious state.

Alea didn't have the monstrous reserves of Mental Energy that Mossy did, either. So while the moon could speak how much it wanted, Alea could not. Zac hoped that would change by the time she became a D-grade Spirit tool, and her soul evolved along with it. And perhaps, this would be the first step in that regard.

Death and Conflict filled Zac's body, propelling him down the road of carnage. The Asuras were teeming with seemingly unquenchable life, each of their attacks trying to leave part of it in Zac's body behind. But it was more accurate to call it a virus the way it acted. If Zac had been in his living form, it would have sought out his life and poisoned it.

But the effect was stifled by his Draugr heritage and his Dao, allowing Zac to fully focus on his Technique. Zac felt the echoes of himself even more poignantly as he advanced, his chains and his axe weaving an inescapable net of Death. The hours turned to a blur until he found himself standing in front of the swirling gate leading toward the sixth and final realm.

Or wait, was it really the final level? Something felt off.

Half a day later, Zac stood in front of a black gate with a tremendous wall stretching toward infinity. It looked like the entrance to the underworld, yet a smile spread across Zac's face as he swapped over to his human form. It had finally come back to him, all the memories of his previous trial.

One final journey into the Tapestry of Life to find the answers to Death.