

The Fall 575

Chapter 575: Tempering

Zac was elated to see that another one of his skills had evolved. It had become increasingly hard to push them forward lately, partly because of his lack of good targets to practice on. [Deathwish] was a mainstay of his class too, a skill that was a constant drain on his enemy and the bane of any Dexterity-based classes.

However, Zac knew that he couldn't expect too much from the skill in this fight, even if it had just reached Late Proficiency. The spectral blacksmith's attack did cause a slight dent, but the golem immediately regained its footing. The small stumble did give Zac the opportunity to launch another barrage of axe swings before the tongs came for him though, which was exactly what he needed.

He tried to repeat his earlier successes and block the pincers next, but he had underestimated the golem as Zac suddenly had a meaty leg slam into his shield as the tong disappeared from sight. Zac was thrown away once more as pain wracked his body. He had made some improvements to his fighting style just now, but it was too little too late. This couldn't go on.

He was getting better, but the golem was also slowly adapting, and Zac would bleed out before he managed to completely dismantle that thing if he didn't change things up a bit. He eventually made a decision as [Love's Bond] turned into its offensive form, its four free chains hovering in the air around him like venomous snakes. Droplets of corrosive liquid fell down on the burning tiles beneath, causing a constant sizzling sound around him.

The fractal shield of [Immutable Bulwark] disappeared as he no longer had a shield to base it on, but that was easily solved as Zac took out one of his back-up shields. It wasn't anything special, but it was enough to conjure his defensive skills. The defensive capabilities of the skills were considerably worse when based on a normal shield, but it wasn't like Zac dared to take a direct hit in any case.

He rushed back to repeat the process, and the golem met his approach with a wide vertical arc of the hammer again. Zac had already expected this, and a new fractal bulwark had already appeared to divert the hammer. He quickly took a diagonal step as the four chains shot forward. Two of them moved to intercept the golem's left hand as the other two tried to poke holes in the golem's legs like spears.

Zac himself was in hot pursuit, though not without his own difficulties. His left arm hurt like hell as the provisional shield had been turned to scrap metal that dug into his arm. Even blocking a portion of the hammer had completely destroyed both the fractal bulwark and the shield beneath. Zac could only throw the twisted shield to the ground and summon a new one from his Spatial Ring as he reached the golem's legs.

Metal clashed against metal, but the crisp sounds were slowly turning dull as the metal was steadily being deteriorated. Zac almost decided to go all-in then and there, but he quickly shook his head as he backed away. He had almost let his success go to his head, allowing the seed to take control once more.

But the two-meter wide hammer was still a deadly threat. One hit and it would be game over. Zac couldn't help but briefly think of Ogras while he walked a tightrope, moving back and forth to whittle down the golem while narrowly avoiding taking a lethal blow. Cold sweat would no doubt be running

down his face and back if he was in his human form right now. Was this how fighting felt like for Dexterity-based cultivators, walking hand in hand with death?

It was just terrifying.

However, while the golem was mighty, but it was ultimately not a sapient cultivator. It had some sort of battle-algorithm that improved over the course of the fight, but Zac was able to figure the preferred trajectories and fighting patterns soon enough. The swings that had felt life-threatening a few minutes ago no longer felt as dangerous as Zac and his chains swirled about.

The golem's attacks still contained the same power as before, but Zac was well aware of its reach and speed by now. He didn't take as much damage from his blocks either, as he slowly managed to lessen the force he forcibly had to block every time. In the beginning, he was taking on up to 30% before he managed to divert the strike, but after just a few minutes that number should have decreased to 20%.

His back-up-shields now managed to withstand two strikes before breaking apart, and his arm wasn't hurt every time either.

The chains of [Love's Bond] kept slamming into the scars with extreme force, and the ground was littered with metal plates and molten puddles from the disposable shields. It was like the chains lived their own lives as they targeted the weaknesses of the golem, and Zac could almost exclusively focus on creating as much damage as he could.

The golem, or rather its components, finally couldn't take it any longer after another five minutes of intense battering. It took a step toward Zac to launch its next swing, but a snap echoed out as its left leg shattered like it was made from brittle glass. The ceaseless attacks of [Blighted Cut] had finally permeated the whole leg, and Zac's eyes lit up as he saw his opportunity.

He immediately stomped into the ground while the golem toppled over, and the cage of [Profane Seal] sprung up around them. The lava lake just outside the cage immediately started to wear down the skill, but Zac didn't care about that as he ordered the 20 spectral chains to shoot toward his prey. The four available chains of [Love's Bond] were even quicker as they wrapped around the golem multiple times before they slammed into the ground to pin it down, especially focusing on keeping the hammer-wielding arm in check.

The golem desperately tried to pry itself free with its tongs, but Zac was already upon the golem with his axe, and a frenzied series of swings destroyed the arm before the spectral chains had even reached him. Soon enough the golem was barely visible beneath over a dozen chains, but Zac still felt a pang of danger as the whole golem burst into searing-hot flames.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm, knowing that his spectral chains wouldn't be able to last more than a second or two in this state. But he still didn't back down. If the golem managed to break out then it was over. He was running dangerously low on Miasma already, and just summoning [Profane Seal] had been a risk.

A bit more and his Specialty Core would activate by itself, and a 3-second phase of weakness was enough for him to be turned into paste. The fires spread from the golem to the point that the pile of chains looked like a bonfire, and even Zac's armor had been ignited.

The golem was seemingly trying to bring Zac down with it to hell as it exuded more and more flames, but Zac ignored the scorching pain across his body as the fire danced in his eyes. He was waiting, each moment feeling like an eternity, but suddenly there was a change in the skill fractal on his arm.

The real strike of [Blighted Cut] was finally ready.

Zac didn't hesitate, knowing his time was limited. The moment felt the change in [Blighted Cut] he immediately seized the opportunity. This was what he had worked so hard for, and he needed to make it count. Three black waves appeared around the golem and they shot into its bulky frame in an instant, cutting through the flames like they weren't even there.

It was like the strike was both corporeal and a projection as it passed straight through the chains that held the golem in place, and the waves disappeared into the golem's torso, each of them aiming for the same spot. The robot blacksmith frenetically struggled for another few seconds, but it was futile. A subdued crack could be heard from within, and Zac breathed out in relief, knowing that the golem's core had been cut apart.

Without that, it was just a big hunk of metal, and it unsurprisingly stopped moving just a second later. There was no surge of energy entering his body to confirm the kill, but that was always the case with beings without sapience. The blacksmith was ultimately a puppet rather than a true golem cultivator like the Creators, and destroying it didn't award any Cosmic Energy at all.

It was as though the air left Zac's body after golem stopped moving, and he barely managed to escape the flames before he helplessly fell down on the ground from exhaustion. He still felt the effects of the seed coursing through his body, but he knew his body wasn't in any state to take advantage of it any longer. Activating the final and ultimate strike of [Blighted Cut] had drained him of his last Miasma as well, and his Duplicity Core had already begun reverting him back to a human.

He would normally hold off on turning back to human considering the state his body was in, but Zac didn't have much choice at the moment. He could only prepare the [Serene Flesh Pill] and he popped it into his mouth the instant the transformation was complete. A surge of pain wracked his body the moment he came alive, but it was thankfully quickly soothed by the High-Quality Zethaya pill.

His body was still drained of energy though, and he was content lying on the ground gasping for air a while longer.

"What a disgraceful display," a disgusted voice snorted, and Zac turned his bleary eyes toward the Tool Spirit who had appeared next to him at an unknown time. "I knew you were talentless, but this was beyond the pale. What kind of craven backwater planet was I sent to if you're the best of the best?"

"Well, the golem is down, which means I passed, right?" Zac sighed, his voice barely recognizable.

"Luckily for you, my creator didn't add any base requirement of skill or grace, so you barely passed," the Tool Spirit said with a shake of his head. "As specified, you will be provided with a round of tempering for being the one to open the second floor of the Dao Repository. Considering your level you would be given the full 30 minutes, but I'll go ahead and deduct 10 minutes for cheating by using a Berserking Item."

“What tempering? And wait, I got a reduction for using the seed?! You never mentioned anything like this before,” Zac said with a frown as he dragged himself up to his feet. “You said it was okay using things like that!”

The fact that he had missed out on some rewards because the Tool Spirit wasn’t doing his job was infuriating, and anger overcame his caution as he glared at Brazla.

“Well, you never asked,” Brazla laughed, clearly delighted by Zac’s anger. “Besides, The Great Sage only said that you were allowed to use it. I never said that it wouldn’t affect your grading.”

Zac wanted to argue that it clearly making things difficult for him, but his head was just a mush after the fight. He could only point at the Tool Spirit in righteous indignation, which only seemed to delight Brazla even further.

"Can't be wearing those rags during the tempering though," Brazla muttered, and Zac found himself floating in front of the Tool Spirit the next moment.

"Wai-" Zac screamed, but it was to no avail as everything from his robes to his spatial ring was dragged off his body, leaving him stark naked.

“Now, off you go.”

Zac’s eyes widened in alarm, but the Tool Spirit was impossibly fast as its golden hammer turned into a blur. He wasn’t even able to consider a response before the Tool Spirit had already attacked him. Zac was already exhausted from the battle, but he inwardly knew that he wouldn’t have been able to block that strike even in peak condition. It was just on a completely different level than even the golem just now.

Thankfully there was no painful sensation from being hit by the golden hammer, but alarm bells still went off in his head when he was launched into the air. Worse yet, he found himself completely restrained as his body became covered in dense golden fractals. He couldn't circulate his Cosmic Energy at all, and his mental connection to his Spirit Tools was severed as well.

He was utterly helpless, and he could only look on with trepidation as he flew closer and closer to the enormous anvil in the middle of the plateau. The battle before had caused massive shockwaves and fires to spread across the whole area, but the massive slab of metal still stood there completely unscathed.

Zac's flight got an abrupt end as Zac slammed into the anvil’s side face first, and the blinding pain almost made him pass out. He wanted to get away, or at least reset his broken nose, but he still couldn't move because of the runes covering his body.

So he could only mentally curse the tool spirit one last time as he started sliding down toward the pool of magma below.