

## The Fall 604

### Chapter 604: Anchor

Completing a cycle was normally just time-consuming rather than exhausting, but adding his Dao had completely changed the pressure he felt. His brows furrowed in concentration, and his hands were even shaking a bit by the time the siphoning of the first cycle finished. The added difficulty was thankfully rewarded when his mental energy came surging back. The mental energy was seeped in death, far beyond what a normal cycle usually accomplished. It was almost like he had completed three of the nine cycles in one go.

That wasn't the only thing either as his avatar also received a surge of death-attuned energies that burrowed into his [Spiritual Void]. The amount was more than twice what Zac would naturally supply during the same duration, and Zac immediately realized the implication. He could actually use the array to charge his Hidden Node, allowing him to use the node to an even greater degree during battles.

Zac couldn't wait to see the effect of completing a whole session with his Dao so it was with great gusto he started the second cycle. However, sweat was already streaming down his face by the point he had reached the end of the cycle, and it was just barely he managed to complete the rotation without falling unconscious.

The gain was similar to the first round though, but Zac had to actively stop any more of his Dao from escaping the coffin as he started the third of the nine revolutions. There was no way he would be able to complete a third Dao-Empowered rotation, and he needed to finish all nine cycles to gain any benefit from the session.

He tried to understand what caused the additional strain to alleviate it, but he couldn't discern anything. Zac could just chalk it up to there being some mental strain from using 'attuned' mental energy compared to just empty energy like normal. The next cycles were very much the same as normal, allowing Zac to revert to his autopilot cultivation while focusing on other things.

The most important point was fixing his pathways after bursting open the node before setting out toward the core of the Mystic Realm.

He had continuously worked on the pathways both while traveling and harvesting plants, but also during every break while waiting for his wounds to heal. But the fight against the werewolf, the collector, and the subsequent escape had caused his patchwork repairs to worsen a bit, and he couldn't keep it like that if he wanted to go all out in the future.

Zac's progress was slow as he mended his pathways, especially after having exhausted his mind more than usual when infusing the array with his Dao. The exhaustion resulted in mistake after mistake, forcing him to redraw the same fractals over and over before it was correct. [Primal Polyglot] did help a bit though, giving him an instinctual sense of how fractals should look to work.

But a sudden spark of inspiration made him think of another skill that he hadn't found a reason to use just yet, one of the E-Grade Ancillary skills he had learned in the Dao Repository. It was called [Spiritual Anchor], and it could tentatively be considered a defensive skill.

However, the skill didn't actually protect against attacks, but it rather allowed you to create an anchor-point for yourself. The anchor was pretty much a back-up point that made an image of your body, your soul, your skill fractals, and pathways. The main use of the skill was to discover if you had been marked, possessed, or otherwise tampered with in some unknown way.

For example, the brands that his lava bath exposed had most likely been hidden as nondescript fractals attached somewhere on his body, and it was hard to spot something like that among the millions of fractals that constituted his pathways. With [Spiritual Anchor] he could create an anchor point every time before going off-world in the future, making sure he wasn't inadvertently bringing trouble back home to Earth.

Zac had unhesitantly learned the skill when he saw its use, eager to gain some protection after having seen six different marks getting expelled from his body just minutes earlier. Of course, he had proceeded to make his first anchor-point the moment his body was back in good condition, creating a baseline before he properly set out into the Mystic Realm.

The skill had a weakness though; if Zac already carried hidden threats when making the anchor-point, then he would pretty much never notice it since it would be part of the stored image in his mind. Still, it was an extremely valuable tool for someone like Zac who didn't have elders who could scan him with their superior mental acuity.

The current situation with his broken pathways made him think of another use for the skill though; it was a proper reference-map for his whole pathway system. His pathways were branded in his mind already, which was what allowed him to redraw them after breaking open a node, but [Spiritual Anchor] would perhaps make things even easier for him.

Zac quickly activated the skill, and his eyes lit up when he saw the result. It worked just as he hoped, with the anchor superimposing itself over his pathways, including the broken parts. His progress suddenly sped up significantly as he started redrawing the pathways, and the number of mistakes lessened drastically as well.

Using his new skill significantly decreased the difficulty of his work. It was like he was tracing a series of lines rather than drawing something from memory. He wasn't improving his understanding of fractals when doing things this way, but this wasn't the time to worry about that; he had bigger fish to fry.

The following hours passed without anything else surprising taking place, with one cycle after another being completed as Zac made rapid progress on his pathways. Zac stopped working on the pathways during the ninth cycle though, instead turning his sight to his mind to see the end-result of the first half of his improved Soul Cultivation-method.

There were no two ways about it; the result was far superior. The deathly energies in his mind were extremely dense, and if he quantified it the result was somewhere between 40 to 50% greater compared to before, all thanks to the first two rotations being infused with the Fragment of the Coffin.

Zac's mind was still throbbing even hours later though, but he could only bear with it, knowing he had to do the same thing on his life-attuned side. He would have to empower two revolutions again to bring his soul back to equilibrium after all. So he quickly swapped over to his Draugr side and started the process once more, preparing himself to push through the first two revolutions by hook or crook.

He could quickly confirm that the shimmering golden energies from the bodhi tree joined the mental stream, but the enormous strain he had anticipated never arrived. Certainly, the difficulty was much harder than normal, but it wasn't any worse compared to the first cycle on the Death-attuned side.

Was this a limitation of his Dao-Apparitions, perhaps? Each apparition was limited in the amount of energy it could exude, causing the strain to steadily increase as the drain continued. However, swapping to a different Dao would reset the difficulty since the other Apparition was still full of vigor.

This was great news to Zac since it meant that he would be able to go all out with both the arrays in the future without worrying that he would overextend himself during the first half. A great surge returned half an hour later, causing a series of frantic collisions as life fought with death in his mind.

Zac felt his vision double for a second from the shocks to his soul, but he breathed out in relief after confirming that the increased intensity was still manageable. The second cycle started up a few seconds later, and Zac let the shimmering golden haze join in that time as well. An even greater series of clashes followed when the cycle ended, causing small cracks to spread across his soul.

Blood started running down Zac's nose as his eyes were completely bloodshot, but he ate a soul-mending pill as he kept going, this time stopping any more Dao from entering. He was only able to resume work on his pathways on the fifth revolution because of nausea from the collisions.

The session finally ended after roughly ten hours, confirming that Dao infusion improved the gains of the array, but not how quickly it ran. Still, the results were impressive, especially considering he had only infused two out of the nine revolutions. He felt that a lot more impurities had been expelled from the Life-Death explosions in his mind than normal, almost exactly matching the additional attunement he had measured.

That meant the efficiency of his Soul Strengthening-array had increased almost 40% simply from forming his Dao-Apparitions.

Better yet, Zac was almost certain this wasn't the limits of his gains. For example; what if his Dao Fragments evolved to the next stage? The power of the Dao that entered the Array would become greater, which in turn should result in a bigger boost. And his soul would keep getting stronger over time, which would hopefully increase the number of revolutions that he could empower.

As long as he kept working on it the improvements would be huge, potentially saving him centuries of cultivation down the road. After all, Soul Cultivation was powerful for a variety of reasons, but people still didn't do it because of the huge time investment. But it felt like Zac had found the key to staying ahead of the remnants locked in his mind this time around.

Just like the progress on his soul was great, so was the work on his pathways thanks to [Spiritual Anchor]. He couldn't help but curse himself for not thinking of it sooner. To be fair, nothing like this was mentioned in the information missive on the skill, perhaps since Brazla hadn't expected his E-Grade descendants to be mortals.

His pathways were almost completely fixed thanks to the improved speed. Just a few more hours of dedicated redrawing and he would be back to normal. Part of Zac just wanted to stay in this place and swap between sleeping and cultivating, but he knew that was simply impossible.

So he went over his provisions and talismans before he stood up and walked out toward where he left the demon. Ogras was still sitting at the same spot as before, for once in meditation rather than drinking and cajoling.

"You're ready to set out?" Ogras asked as he opened his eyes.

"Let's go," Zac nodded. "We just need to fetch Kenzie."

"What? Why?" Ogras said with a scrunched-up face.

"She's the best when it comes to Technocrat Technology. I don't want to completely rely on that Cartava Clan Member," Zac shrugged. "Besides, there are sometimes opportunities you can't take away in the labs, I don't want her to miss out. Billy and Thea are coming as well."

Ogras grumbled a bit as he got to his feet, and he donned a hooded robe to mask his changing complexion. The two walked over to the buildings that Kenzie controlled, a mix of workshops and warehouses to store everything from gathered Memorysteel to inactive drone swarms.

"I'll wait outside," Ogras said, and Zac shrugged with some confusion before walking inside by himself.

"You're back!" Kenzie exclaimed with relief before her smile turned into a scowl. "What's the matter with you men? I had to find out you set out alone from Thea? And that you had returned in one piece, half a day ago, from the guards? Do none of you have communication crystals?!"

"Uh," Zac only said, but his sister was obviously not done.

"Also! You told Thea that I couldn't go visit that forest, and now I'm essentially on house arrest! You need to be careful with what you say."

"Well, I guess that's my bad?" Zac grimaced.

"Well, fine," Kenzie muttered. "Have you seen Ogras? I can't contact him either."

"He's right outside, we're ready to set out again," Zac said and hurriedly added when he saw her scowl deepening. "I'm here to see if you are free to go with us to the inner parts of the base. We could use your skill set."

"You mean you need Jeeves?" Kenzie muttered, but her mood had clearly turned for the better as she started packing things.

The two updated each other of what was had happened lately while she prepared, but not much had changed on Kenzie's side. She had tried all sorts of things to interface with the base, but the systems were highly modular according to Jeeves. Connecting to one terminal only provided access to that area and nothing else, which meant that she wouldn't be able to assist him remotely.

Zac really didn't want to bring his sister into the depths of the Mystic Realm, especially after seeing just how dangerous the base could be. But he also knew that he couldn't rely on himself pressing random boxes on the Datamancer tablet either. Neither did he feel comfortable with relying too much on Leviala or her Clan.

He could only pray that the dangers of his Man Versus Technology-quest weren't as lethal as what he had encountered thus far.