

The Fall 586

Chapter 586: Delayed Gratification

The Bodhi had stood like a beacon in the arid badlands for centuries, its vitality in a constant struggle against the desolation around it. With each turn of the seasons it was buffeted by the anguish of a dying world, but the onslaught only served to temper the purity of its conviction. The inscriptions on the golden leaves contained deeper truths every year, and its intention was clear; to bring life to this sea of suffering.

Another century passed before a wind picked up pace among the lifeless glaciers in the far east, and it met no resistance by the flat steppes as it pushed forward. The leaves of the Bodhi was once again dancing with delight from the ethereal caress, and a song of nature echoed throughout the badlands. The proclamation of the Holy Sangha was hidden among the leaves, constantly consecrating its surroundings.

The world had been on the brink of death for untold ages, but life always finds a way. A stalk of grass pushed through parched dirt, heralding the new era.

A hundred hooded beings walked forward between the Fallen Hills, each step bringing forth the rattling of chains and clattering of bones. The sun was high in the sky, blasting an uncomfortable warmth that was rapidly dispelling the soothing haze. Now and then a protector would emerge from his grave and charge at the procession, but their oath kept them bound them to their graves. They finally reached their target, the Nameless Mountain.

The hooded beings knelt in obeisance, keeping in check their desire to gaze upon the Holy Coffin. The coffin in question was the only interment on the whole mountain, as nothing could encroach on its domain. One day the black coffin had simply appeared there, and to this day no one had been able to figure out its origin. They didn't even know who, or what was inside.

But they knew it was powerful, akin to a god.

A thud echoed out from the coffin, a thud that made the whole clergy shake with excitement. The coffin had answered their call, meaning that their plight was over. A small crack opened in the chained-up coffin, and an endless tide of darkness and pestilence surged toward the sky to meet the punishing rays of the sun.

The whole world was covered in darkness a second later, and the land was once more at peace. The clergymen once more performed the rites of obeisance before they rose to their feet. The junior acolyte finally couldn't help himself as they started making their way out of the holy hills, and the skeleton snuck a glance at the peak of the mountain.

The coffin silently hung from its chains from the branch of a pitch-black tree, behind it a faltering sun; That was the last thing the novice Necromancer ever saw.

Zac finally remembered himself after being awash in the two visions, but his spiritual journey wasn't over there. He was shown one scene after another, not all of them from his own memories.

Many of the visions were all-too-familiar, each bringing with them a painful memory. They showcased his struggles and desperate battles, from the barghest who had found his campsite to the wolves who

had surrendered just seconds ago. There were also visions of strange lands, of weird objects containing terrifying amounts of wild energies. They all beckoned to Zac, urging him to conquer the opposition and claim them as his price.

The visions were so quick that they almost turned to a blur, but he did notice one odd detail. In every single scene there was one constant; the Stele of Conflict he had conjured during his climb. Sometimes it was placed right next to the action, and other times it was discretely placed in the background.

But it was always there.

Zac tried to make sense of the scenes, but something was just out of his grasp. He was instead swept up by the heat of the battles he witnessed, and it almost felt like he had eaten another berserking treasure as he saw one scene of bloodshed after another. Something was growing inside him. Each kill was another building block, each battle setting the foundation. He was building a bridge toward the Heavens with the corpses of his enemies.

The scenes were suddenly ripped apart by a shocking flash of blue lightning, throwing him into one final vision.

A cracked dome floated in space, an impossibly large structure broken and scorched beyond repair. An infant's cry echoed out toward the vast beyond, but it was overpowered by the roar of an endless sea of lightning. It should have ended then and there, but a hand pushed through Heaven's Wrath and brought him away, ignoring the sizzling sounds of molten flesh and metal.

Darkness.

Only a then did Zac find himself back in his own body, and he took a ragged breath as he opened his eyes. Most of the wolves were gone, but a few new carcasses were strewn around him as Verun stood in vigil next to him. The streams of blood around its feet were mostly gone by this point though, meaning that the Tool Spirit was running out of time.

However, Zac sensed that he would be able to keep Verun around for a few minutes longer as long as it didn't need to expend a bunch of energy fighting. Seeing that he was safe for the moment Zac breathed out in relief before his mind turned to the scenes he had just witnessed. The last thing he remembered was the stream of power rushing straight for his mind, and then he was swept up in a series of visions.

He was curious about his status screen, but the state of his body took precedence. Zac had seen how his skill was attacked earlier by the initial stream of energy, and he definitely felt that something was different compared to before, prompting him to turn his sight inward. The moment he activated his spiritual sight Zac realized that drastic changes had taken place, though he couldn't understand what the significance of the change was.

First of all, all three Skill Fractals that came with a Dao Vision had changed, not only [Axe Mastery]. The other two skills, [Forester's Constitution] and [Bulwark Mastery] were transformed as well. Their fractals had looked like an axe, a tree, and a shield respectively, but they had now looked like abstract skill fractals just like all the others.

Intuition fueled by [Primal Polyglot] told Zac that it wasn't an upgrade, but neither was it a devolution. The change probably came from the second difference that Zac spotted a second later. He could make out three objects in the middle of his soul.

His soul had looked like a slightly murky glass ball in his mind until now, with scars and lines crossing its surface. The cage for the remnants was hidden in a subspace of its own so it wasn't directly visible, but now actual objects were moving about in his mind.

In the absolute middle of his mind Zac actually saw himself, or a rather a small spiritual avatar in his likeness. He was holding [Verun's Bite] in his hand and he kept swinging it as he dodged and pivoted in place. It looked like the small spirit-copy was fighting an endless number of invisible enemies, and the constant battle was generating some sort of power that Zac could sense hidden within the avatar.

Pure streams of the Dao from the surroundings were steadily entering the avatar's body as well, like his miniature self was a black hole.

The energies didn't come from his soul though, but rather the two other objects that were slowly orbiting his avatar. The first of them was the chained coffin hovering from the branch of a dead tree with a dying sun serving as its backdrop. The scene looked almost exactly like his vision earlier, and half of the energy that his avatar was absorbing was the deathly haze that escaped from within the coffin.

The final addition was unsurprisingly the Bodhi Tree that he had witnessed in two Dao Visions by now. Its canopy formed an almost perfect circle, and the leaves continuously radiated golden energy that slowly drifted toward avatar Zac. The energies of the two apparitions continuously clashed as they formed a black-and-gold nebula that swiveled around the avatar until they were swallowed.

It was obviously his three Dao Fragments given form, and Zac started to understand what was going on as he looked upon the scene. This was an actual embryonic representation of his cultivation path where the "core" of his Daos had moved from Skill fractals to his Soul. It seemed a lot more logical compared to before, though he didn't know if there were any real benefits of the change.

The odd thing was that neither Ogras nor anyone else on Port Atwood had never mentioned anything like this. Zac had even asked if problems could arise when upgrading the skills or his Daos, but Ogras seemed to be of the understanding that it didn't matter. The fractal would upgrade to a better form that could keep housing the Dao according to the demon.

The first reason for the change Zac could think of was the fact that he had taken the first steps toward a proper path worthy of an Arcane Class. It wouldn't be too surprising if Ogras didn't know about that change, as Arcane classes simply didn't exist on his homeworld. Zac figured that the change could only be good if that was the case.

There might be hidden benefits of changing things up this way or even hidden pitfalls of keeping one's Daos inside the Skill fractals.

However, what confused Zac a bit was where those energies were going. All three apparitions were steadily generating pure Dao, but it was all swallowed by the avatar. Zac tried to magnify the scene as much as he could until he suddenly froze in shock. He didn't hesitate this time as he took out what looked like a piece of coal, and he crammed it into his mouth like he was starving.

A prickling sensation spread through his body the next moment, like every cell in his body was undergoing some sort of acupuncture. A comfortable heat was also starting to accumulate in his spine. He was neither undergoing another round of tempering or acupuncture though, but he had rather eaten the [Bloodline Marrow] because of what he sensed inside his avatar.

It was his second Hidden Node, nestled in the head of his spiritual avatar.

Zac had spotted this node a few times by now, but the latest burst of energy had almost completely opened it. He could feel that it was just on the verge of breaking open, but the burst from before wasn't quite enough to get the job done, causing it to slowly close again. The Dao Energies were trying to keep it open, but it was a losing battle.

He had saved the marrow all this time in hopes of using it to awaken his bloodline, but he couldn't give up on this opportunity. Breaking open Hidden Nodes were far more difficult than nurturing one's bloodline, and if his marrow could take him the final stretch it would definitely be worth it. Zac thought of eating the spiritual [Four Gates Pill] as well, but he soon decided against it.

There was nothing that actually indicated that the pill would be able to help with Hidden Nodes, and his body was already chock-full of Cosmic Energy thanks to Verun's onslaught. Besides, he had already decided to eat it before reaching the core for a burst of levels in case he still hadn't gained enough power-ups by then.

This was no time to get distracted though, and he stopped the energy from the marrow from burrowing into his bones, instead directing it toward his mind. He guessed that the [Bloodline Marrow] was trying to activate his bloodline, but he didn't change his mind as he staunchly pushed all of the energy into his spiritual avatar instead.

More and more power was crammed into the node hidden within his spiritual self until a ripple spread out from his glabella. It was his second Hidden Node that had properly been broken open, and Zac felt his mental energy surge and spread out like never before. For a moment he felt connected with everything in the universe, where he was one with the Dao. But he lost the fantastical feeling as soon as he gained it, and Zac's mind was once again whisked away to yet another vision.

He was once more sitting next to his mysterious ancestor, hurtling through the vast space on top of a meteor.