

## The Fall 369

### Chapter 369: Heat

"Finally out of the tunnels. We'll arrive in another eight hours or so," the Council liaison said as he walked next to Zac with quick steps.

His name was Murk, and he was one of the molemen who also possessed a ranger class. He was in charge of showing Zac's army the correct path in the underworld, as the roads leading to the Flame Golems were pretty confusing. The incursion itself was in a sense placed in the open underworld, but to get to that sector you first needed to pass a bunch of confusing tunnels.

There was no way that Zac would place the fate of his people in the hands of the Council Though, and the Tal-Eladar had over a hundred beasts scouting ahead for them as well. He personally didn't think that the council had any reason to betray him, but people were unpredictable.

"Come, let's train!" another voice piped up from the side, and Zac looked over at Emily who glared at him with some grievance in her eyes.

They had been traveling for over three days, as all settlements in the near vicinity of the Flame Golems had long been destroyed. The teenager wanted to make the most of the time, so she had insisted that the two would train with their axes. Zac knew part of it was to get her mind off the fact that her brother had passed away, and he happily obliged.

She was someone he had invested heavily in, and he wanted to make sure she'd get strong enough to protect herself.

"I'll get you this time," she muttered stubbornly.

"That's great," Zac smiled as he hoisted her up and flashed away with [Loamwalker].

He kept running for a couple of minutes until he found a secluded spot ahead of the army.

"We have 20 minutes or so before they catch up," Zac said as he let the teenager down.

Emily didn't hesitate to take out her two tomahawks from her cosmos sack, and they both started to radiate with chaotic energies. It was a continuation of her elemental axeman-archetype, and a new skill she got at level 35. This one wasn't a support skill like the earlier one, but rather a pure offensive skill.

Zac smiled as he took out his billy club and a spare shield, and waved at her to start. She immediately disappeared, leaving a scorching mark on the ground, and the next moment she appeared behind him. One of her tomahawks were already in mid-swing, and it lit up with infernal fire.

Her new skill [Elemental Fury] looked confusingly similar to her elemental axes, apart from the fact that she needed to use a physical axe for the skill. She could essentially imbue her axes with an element of her choice, and the different elements would have varying effects. The skill allowed her to have a flexible and unpredictable fighting style, and Zac felt it was a good match to her chaotic and aggressive fighting style.

The flame-infusion would imbue her strikes to erupt into large explosions, causing widespread damage in the direction of her swings. There were also earth, lightning, ice, wind, each with their own effects.

The only weakness was that she couldn't use the same attack twice in a row, at least not while the skill was in middle mastery.

Zac already knew about the effects of the strikes from their earlier sparring sessions, and he smoothly moved his shield forward to block the swing mid-way. It didn't interrupt the skill, but it caused the gout of fire to spread in all directions, effectively blocking Emily's sight as Zac repositioned himself as he clubbed her on the back.

The teenager stumbled forward, but she smoothly turned the stumble into a confusing set of steps as she once again tried to take him down, this time using the freezing effect of her ice axe to rob him of his mobility. Zac played along and slightly slowed his speed, but she still couldn't manage to land a hit as his shield always got in the way.

The fighting reached a stalemate lasting a few minutes, until Zac suddenly emitted a spike of killing intent toward her the moment she launched her attack. Emily's face turned deathly pale and she quickly jumped five meters back, and she angrily stomped her foot in the ground as she waved her tomahawks in Zac's direction.

"That's cheating! You said you wouldn't bully me with your levels. How is that not using your levels?" Emily sputtered.

"I had much denser killing intent than that by the time I was your level," Zac laughed. "I know you wanted to quickly improve, so you've used a couple of E-Grade crystals while down here. But doing so has left you lacking in combat experience."

"I've still gone fighting against Barghest every day until recently, and I've even fought against the beast on Mystic Island," Emily countered with a sullen face.

"I know, but you've had demon guards and Valkyries protecting you," Zac said. "You have not yet gone through a true baptism of life and death. It makes you a bit weak against killing intent. You have honed great battle instincts from training with good teachers, but you do not trust them when faced with a great threat."

"So I should just run straight at someone radiating enough killing intent to blot out the sky?" Emily muttered skeptically. "Sounds like a good way to get killed early."

"It's about instinct and decisiveness," Zac smiled. "You can never hesitate no matter if you decide to fight or flee. The problem was that you froze when I released the murderous aura. Your movement skill is pretty good, and your attributes are very high for your level, so you should have a decent chance to escape even if you meet someone stronger. Staying alive is the most important."

Truthfully Zac was lying to Emily in his explanation. He was emitting a lot more killing intent than what he possessed when he was around level 40. He wanted to inoculate her against dense auras and massive killing intent, which would hopefully allow her to keep her wits about her in case she found herself against a stronger foe.

The teenager slowly nodded in understanding, and she took a deep breath to steady herself. Soon enough she was back at it, and she used everything in her repertoire as she tried to break past Zac's

defenses. She flitted about with surprising speed as she launched everything from fiery blasts up-close to wind blades from surprising angles in the distance.

Zac was extremely happy with her performance, and the only thing that he might feel could use some improvement was the lack of ruthlessness. The fighting felt clean and a bit synthetic, whereas he wished for a more efficient approach like the one that the Valkyries utilized.

They did everything in their power to kill their targets as quickly and efficiently as possible, no matter what they needed to do. They would attack groins or other weak spots, utilize hidden weaponry and the environment to their advantage. Emily still lacked that bit, and that was what he was trying to instill in her.

He had already noticed that she was a bit afraid to get hit in her face, the same as Average, which made him target it even further. Last time he had accidentally knocked her out with a kick, but even before then she often left with a whole number of bruises. Zac felt a bit bad, but he knew that the others on the island, except Alyn perhaps, didn't dare to be ruthless enough against the teenager.

The feral teenager pulled out all the stops, but the results were the same. The army caught up with the two and Verana and Joanna shot amused looks at the swollen face of Emily.

"One of these days," she muttered under her breath. "I'll make your head swell up to the size of a beach ball."

"You'll need to get a lot stronger before you'll have a chance of that," Zac snorted.

It was their last sparring session as they were closing in on the Fire Golems, and the invaders could crop up any time. The army entered heightened alertness, in case of an ambush. But there were no signs of them even though they could see extremely far after exiting the tunnels. The ground was completely silent as well, indicating that there likely no golems hiding beneath them.

Zac had gotten a wealth of intelligence on the Flame Golems from the Council, and the invaders were almost hilariously easy to spot. The smallest golems were over two and a half meters tall, and they all had thick builds. It was like they were made from large black boulders stacked together, and where the stones were bound together by magma.

Their natural heat was enough for goutts of flames to erupt from their bodies at regular intervals, and they were essentially portable firework shows. Stealth was truly not their strong suit, which was why they could only ambush people by silently digging new tunnels until they were right next to you. Luckily the Demons possessed a few Geomancers who were even more skilled than the molemen at detecting changes in the ground.

But there was no surprise attack forthcoming, and they soon enough reached the area of the Flame Golems. It was very different from the general gloom of the underworld, as the moss and dark pools of water were replaced with bubbling lakes of magma.

They were still two hours from the incursion itself but it felt like they were wandering into an active volcano, and the smell of Sulphur lay heavy in the air. The weaker people were already starting to sweat from the scorching heat, and Emily was forced to take off her thick furs with some complaint.

The peak F-Grade warriors were still unaffected by the heat that would make a normal mortal keel over in seconds, but Zac knew that most would be unable to exhibit their full power in the upcoming fight. The golems had truly gotten themselves a home-field advantage. Finally they reached the true core of the incursion, and Zac was shocked at the sight.

"This isn't what you guys described," Zac said with a frown as he turned to Murk.

"I-I don't understand either," the moleman said with wide eyes. "Our latest intelligence is less than two weeks old."

The Flame Golem Incursion was situated inside what could best be described as a gargantuan pillar in the open underworld. It was tremendously wide, and walking around it would take over a week. Due to the environment around the pillar it was posited that the core of it might actually be an active volcano, with a pillar of magma that reached all the way to the surface.

The only way to get to the actual incursions was to enter one of the many tight tunnels and cracks that existed in the pillar.

That was why the Council didn't take the same route as themselves. They started in towns on the opposite sides of the pillar, and they would assault the incursions from multiple directions that way. But there was a problem; the tunnel they were supposed to take was gone, replaced with a huge passage full of engraved pillars.

The new passage was hundreds of meters wide, and it reached even higher into the sky. They were quite some distance from the entrance but they still didn't have any trouble making out the details due to their size.

The pillars looked almost as large as the towering Redwood mountains over at the Cradle of God, and even from the distance they were able to make out large fractals on all of them. Zac couldn't be sure what they were made for, but he couldn't imagine it was anything good.

It felt like the invaders had opened the doors wide open, daring them to enter their meticulously created battlefield. Verana and the other leaders of the army wore troubled faces as well, and Zac finally felt compelled to order a halt. The group of battlefield support quickly set up cooling arrays to ward off the heat, as staying this close would no doubt continuously drain people.

"What do you think?" Zac asked the others. "I know it's a trap, but can you make out any details?"

"It looks like array towers," Verana said. "The Tal-Eladar does not use that sort of fortifications, but they are a popular solution."

Zac nodded, feeling the same way. The towers were reminiscent of a set of buildings that he was able to buy for Port Atwood, though his options were still pretty limited. Each tower was likely an array of its own, and it would be able to launch attacks at anyone close according to some preset instructions.

Such buildings usually had much greater firepower compared to arrays like his own Town Protection array that could attack a far larger area, but it also had a weakness. As long as the tower was destroyed the array would break. So it essentially was extremely lethal in a small area, and somewhat fragile.

But there were over a hundred pillars crammed in that small area as far as Zac could tell, and the army would be blasted from all directions if they entered.

“What should we do?” Joanna asked. “I don’t think we’ll be able to defend against that many towers even if we activate our War Arrays.”

Zac silently stared at the towers for a few seconds before he looked back at his group.

“We’ll wait until 10 minutes until the predetermined time for our joint assault. I’ll handle the towers.”