

The Fall 573

Chapter 573: Ash and Steel

Ash and steel swirled in Zac's eyes as he pushed forward, urged on by the call of battle. His muscles trembled in anticipation and veins were popping out all across his body to accommodate the overflowing Miasma, and there was even a red haze rising from his very pores. It was no doubt weakness leaving his body, a miracle that the Zhix warriors could only dream of achieving.

The trial no longer mattered. The E-Grade skills no longer mattered. The only thing of import was the thrill of the fight, to use this smithy as an opportunity to temper himself in the fires of war. His axe was already salivating corrosive venom across the floor, no doubt anxious to bite into their shrouded enemy.

A third explosion erupted from within the haze, but Zac's anticipation only grew as his arm swelled. His power was already enough to rival the firmament itself, but it wasn't enough. He pushed into the cloud, but he only took two steps before he sharply stepped to the right as his axe fell. The pincer of a massive tong suddenly appeared and barely missed his head, its size enough to grab Zac's whole torso even when he already had turned into his ultimate form that rose over three meters into the air.

Zac only sneered as his bardiche fell toward the exposed hand, his response already planned out. His soul was one with the Dao itself, so how could a paltry sneak attack ever work? However, he screamed in anger when his foe didn't have the decency to lose his hand from the transgression. What should have been a fountain of nurturing blood only turned into a reverberating clang that finally pushed all the dust out of the area, exposing his prey.

And it was big.

The target towered almost three meters above him, but Zac didn't care about the specifics. There were weapons to clash with and limbs to cut, what else was there to know? His first attack had only left a jagged scar on metal and a small festering wound, far from accomplishing his goal. But wasn't that great news? How boring would it be if one swing would have ended the fight? This way he could keep tempering himself, keep reveling in the glory of slaughter.

The massive slab of a hand swiped out at him after being cut, and Zac laughed as he moved his shield to slam it out of the way. A faint voice whispered in the back of his head about a way to empower its defensive capabilities, but he couldn't abide by such cowardice. An intractable force pushed into the core of his being as he was thrown away, and the sweet taste of miasma appeared in his mouth as he slammed into the ground over thirty meters away.

But Zac had eaten the divine seed, making him invulnerable. He could be kicked down a million times, yet he would rise again to tear down his foes. Not even a second had passed before he was almost back at his target, launching a flurry of strikes aimed to maim and brutalize the big bastard in front of him. The tong kept slamming into him and throwing him away, but Zac was more than happy to go along with the cycle of destruction.

Every time he came back he could see a few more scars on his enemy while he was just fine. The wounds were like a beautiful piece of art, and Zac an artisan using his axe as a paintbrush. A bit more and a masterpiece would be born. However, the coward in front of him seemed to finally have realized the futility of catching Zac with its tongs.

Zac was the incarnation of war, his technique and movements the peak of perfection. To catch him unaware was as impossible as catching the wind. The miscreant was clearly on its last legs as it reached for something attached to its back, no doubt another feeble attempt to take him out. Zac laughed uproariously, as he gathered power in his fist to meet whatever his prey had in store. A punch felt like the right decision here.

Violence would be met with violence, and blood would be repaid with blood.

However, a piercing scream of danger finally managed to cut through the madness, and Zac's eyes widened in horror when he saw what was about to hit him. He barely managed to stop in his tracks and move his shield to block, but there was no time to activate [Immutable Bulwark]. He was also unable to completely dispel his accumulated momentum, so Zac was still caught by the edge of the enormous hammer and thrown to the other edge of the platform like a ragdoll.

His whole body hurt, but the pain was still muted and somehow distant thanks to the fierce killing intent still churning in his chest. However, his Danger Sense had allowed him to at least regain most of his rationality, though Zac couldn't be sure. He had felt completely lucid just a second ago as well, and that he had everything under control. But only now did he realize that he had acted like a raving lunatic, and worrying wounds covered his whole body.

Zac had severely overestimated his mental fortitude when planning this fight. He previously believed himself almost immune to the effects of taking a berserking item thanks to his experience dealing with this kind of mental affliction before. But it turned out that not even the Splinter of Oblivion had managed to prepare him for the insidious whispers of the [Rageroot Oak Seed].

Thankfully he wasn't hurt to the point of no return, though it didn't look great. His shield arm was hurting quite a bit, and there were even some cracks in a few bones. He hadn't used his defensive skills at all when he fought like a rabid animal, and his body had paid the price. His internal wounds were too numerous to count, and black ichor leaked from the seams of his black armor. He would probably have to use one of his two remaining [Serene Flesh Pills] to quickly recover from this mess.

At least he still felt power coursing through his body, allowing him to fight far above his normal capability. No matter if it was speed or strength, it had nearly increased by 60% as far as he could tell. Besides, Zac wasn't the only one who had taken damage from his insane offensive, and he looked over at his target who seemed content to maintain its distance.

Only after having woken up from his furor did Zac get a proper look at what he was dealing with. It was indeed a golem, but calling it a robot might be more appropriate going by its appearance. It was a bulky bipedal machine that reminded Zac of a five-meter-tall dwarf. It was roughly the height of the greatest Anointed, but its circumference was a few times wider than even Rhubat's. Its four limbs were short and stocky, with an almost spherical torso that was clad in a steel mesh apron. The apron was mostly in tatters by now though, and Zac distinctly remembered having attacked it multiple times already.

Its head was attached straight on its torso without a neck, and in its right hand was an almost picture-perfect copy of the hammer that Brazla had in his hands earlier. The only difference was that it was wrought from some black metal, and it emitted an extremely heavy aura. The array on its hammer face was a bit different too, and Zac almost got a bit dizzy when tracing the extremely intricate lines. This was the weapon the golem had finally grabbed from its back to deal with him.

The golem still held the same steel tong as before in its left hand, completing the look of a mechanical blacksmith. It looked far more like a proper craftsman when compared to the Creators over at Zac's shipyard. Perhaps it really was one too, an assistant who had helped the original Brazla in his work. That would explain why the hammer emitted such shocking pressure.

Anything that could be used in forging spiritual metals would have to be extremely durable as to not break apart after a few days of hammering. The golem blacksmith was clearly made from some sort of attuned materials, making it exude an aura akin to Zac's own Dao Field. It wasn't quite at the same level, but it spoke volumes about the quality of the materials the golem was crafted with.

This was just further proven by his series of frenzied attacks earlier. Zac had maintained some sort of rationality earlier, or perhaps it would be fairer to call it a beast's instincts. He had primarily focused on cutting off the golem's limbs, and over a dozen strikes empowered by [Blighted Cut] and sometimes also [Unholy Strikes] had reached their mark before he was thrown away. However, the golem clearly had its limbs, and they seemed to be in working order.

However, that wasn't to say that his efforts were completely ineffective. The colors of the metals around the axe scars were decidedly darker than the rest of its body, meaning that Zac had laid the foundation for victory. He was clear on how powerful his new E-Grade skill was, and not even spiritual metals would be able to resist forever.

The golem might even have some problems judging by the fact that it didn't move toward him. It just stood in the distance and stared at him. Zac just needed to keep working on it and it would sooner or later lose its limbs. However, now that he was awake he would hopefully be able to do so without directly trading blows. After all, his body was sturdy, but not as sturdy as spiritual metals.

Zac really wanted to just sit down and rest up a bit first though, but he forcibly pushed those ideas to the back of his mind. The timer had started the moment that he swallowed the berserking seed, and he had no idea how long it would retain its effect. He had turned a bit insane there for a moment, but its potency couldn't be denied.

Its boosting effect was far beyond what [Hatchetman's Rage] provided, a qualitative boost that pushed every aspect of his power to the next tier. Zac knew there was no way for him to break through this golem's defenses without it, especially not if he was suddenly forced to deal with a weakened state.

Calrin's book only described the general properties of the Rageroot Oak and its seeds, but it didn't provide any details. He didn't know exactly how bad the drawbacks were, and when they would kick in. He only knew that it would last longer than a skill, 15 minutes at the minimum. That left ample time, but Zac was afraid that he would slide back into his delusions of being a god of war without notice. He needed to quickly finish this so that he could eat a soul-nurturing pill to calm down a bit.

Besides, the golem had finally started moving when it realized that Zac wasn't rushing back toward it, and it was already lumbering toward him.

Its step was slow and deliberate, and its weight caused tremors in the ground. Part of its slow speed could probably be attributed to the scars that covered its legs, but Zac also felt that the golem should have an attribute spread similar to his own; focusing on Endurance and Strength. It definitely wasn't

something that excelled at speed, which was a shame as his current class was particularly effective against those kinds of targets.

A power-based class was a lot trickier to deal with. That swing before had contained a ruthless finality that had warned him of death and he didn't feel confident in trading a series of blows with the giant in front of him now that it didn't only use the restraining tongs and its fist. Not even with the seed empowering him to unprecedented heights.

But Zac already had experienced dismantling an even bigger golem during the hunt, and he knew how to deal with something like this. Zac released a deep breath as he started to walk back toward the golem, causing a storm of corrosive mists to spread across the whole platform. He didn't really expect the golem to be hurt by [Winds of Decay], but he wanted to turn the battlefield more in his favor.

If some of the corrosive mists managed to enter the dozens of festering scars, then all the better.

The miasmatic mists of [Fields of Despair] soon billowed out as well, but it barely had time to spread out before the golem's chest expanded to the point that it almost doubled in size. A storm of fire spewed out of its mouth the next moment, spreading hundreds of meters in every direction and utterly destroying Zac's efforts in an instant.

Not a shred of his two skills remained, but the flames lingered on the floor, turning the plateau into an inferno as well. Zac stomped down with force, dispelling the flames in his immediate vicinity. But the temperature was definitely out of Zac's comfort zone, and he looked at the stoic golem with some trepidation. It looked like the golem had more abilities than just its physical prowess.

Zac had to admit that he might have taken on a bit more than he could chew this time.