

The Fall 574

Chapter 574: Deathwish

Zac swore in annoyance when he saw the blacksmith effortlessly quash his attempts to putrefy the surroundings.

Turning a battlefield into one that favored you and restrained your enemy was a basic tactic that both his classes possessed. His human side had [Hatchetman's Spirit], while his Draugr side had multiple skills in this category. Zac was hoping to use these methods to counteract the blistering heat, but he was out of luck this time.

There was no time to formulate a plan either as the hammer in the golem's meaty hand suddenly turned into a blur. The distance between the two was still over 200 meters, but that wasn't much to E-Grade beings. Zac immediately conjured a fractal bulwark to meet whatever blow the guardian had prepared, but he frowned in consternation when the hammer slammed into the ground right in front of it rather than launched an attack in his direction.

It obviously wasn't a mistake, and Zac's first guess was that it launched something through the ground, like an earthquake or metal spikes that would rise to stab him. However, Zac had still underestimated the advantage that the golem enjoyed in this place, and he was shocked to see a monstrous pillar of smoldering rocks rising out of the lava lake behind him.

It looked like a fiery dragon jumping out of the sea, and it reached almost a hundred meters in height before it started falling in a parabolic arc. Straight toward Zac. There was no hesitation as Zac started running as quickly as his legs could carry him. He would probably be able to block the pillar as it only held the attunement of the lava sea itself, but doing so would fill no purpose.

The stream of lava slammed into the ground half a second after Zac got out of the way, causing a wave of magma to splatter in every direction. Even its fiery droplets were as large as small boulders, but it was far more manageable for Zac to control and he easily blocked the ones who flew in his direction. However, the attack had left pools of magma across half the plateau, severely limiting Zac's mobility. Just the ambient heat was causing a constant drain on his Miasma, and this only made it worse.

Zac frowned at the scene as he felt that the golem really was cheating. His [Cosmic Gaze] could clearly sense that there seemed to be some connection between the robot and the sea of lava surrounding them, which steadily supplied it with a stream of power. It all surged toward a spot roughly at the same place as his own Duplicity Core, which no doubt was the command core of the golem itself.

Destroying it would instantly end the battle, but it was easier said than done. Those kinds of cores were always the most heavily protected components of a puppet, and this blacksmith was no exception. Zac would have to cut his way through the extremely thick plating of its torso if he wanted to take out the golem that way.

And Zac didn't know if he had the energy to keep fighting that long, especially when the Golem was getting outside help. It was like the Dao Discourse all over again, and Zac was pretty certain that this thing would never run out of steam unless he somehow managed to break that connection.

He briefly considered erecting [Profane Seal] now that the lava pillar had already landed, but he eventually discarded the idea. The golem was still in peak condition, and Zac felt that he would have to wear the thing down a bit before trying to entrap it. He could only use the skill once, and it would be wasted if it immediately got destroyed by that huge hammer or another lava pillar.

First thing first, he needed to sound out the power of this thing, this time while in control of his faculties. Zac made his way toward the robot, the black armor of [Vanguard of Undeath] at least somewhat protecting him from the scorching heat. He still couldn't quite match the golem in bulk even in this form, but the disparity wasn't nearly as bad as without it.

His fractal bulwark repositioned itself to the front of [Love's Bond], superimposing his defenses. Zac didn't have any movement skills to increase his speed, but the plateau was only so big. Each step forward increased his momentum, and he was in front of the golem in just a few seconds, his accumulated force already transferred to a mighty swing aimed to strike down its left leg.

His arm had already swollen up to a size that matched the golem's own as [Unholy Strike] was pushed to its limits once more. He needed to dig deeper and deeper with every swing, further increasing the amount of corrosion that could be left behind. However, the robot blacksmith responded with a speed that belied its stocky frame. Its hammer was somehow instantly moved to its left hand, and it pushed the massive hammerhead down toward the ground to block Zac's swing.

The clang of two metals clashing reverberated across the whole area and the inner walls of the volcano bounced the sound back, making it sound like the tolling of church bells. But Zac had no chance to appreciate the hauntingly beautiful sound as he looked at the hammer for signs of damage, only to come up empty-handed.

The first clash between weapons had ended without a victor.

[Verun's Bite] had reached new heights since its evolution, but the densely inscribed hammer was obviously a lovingly crafted treasure as well. A fractal had lit up on its side, completely protecting it from getting cut into by the furious swing of Zac's axe. He had managed to cause some damage to the metal plating on the golem itself during his earlier rampage, but it seemed that the hammer itself had reached a far greater level of durability. He didn't even have a chance to apply any corrosion with the array blocking the blackish liquid.

However, the power of Zac's swings wasn't anything to scoff at even for a half-step D-Grade golem. It contained layers of empowerment from multiple skills and the [Rageroot Oak Seed]. Its power was far beyond Zac's normal limits, and even the dragon wouldn't have been able to withstand its might. The enormous golem stumbled back a few steps and the hammer was pushed away, exposing its legs once more.

Zac's eyes lit up at the opportunity, but the blacksmith managed to expertly make use of Zac's force to power a counter-swing before Zac had the chance to swing again. The enormous hammerhead moved in a precise arc, with Zac's head at the end of its trajectory.

There was no time to move away, so Zac forcibly stilled the whispers in his mind that told him to fight fire with fire. He instead readied himself to block the swing, moving to intercept it with his shield.

Blocking a direct hit would activate [Deathwish], and the distraction would hopefully create another opening to attack.

The array on the hammer lit up as it approached Zac's barrier, illuminating the pitch-black armor in gold. Zac's aura surged in anticipation of launching a counter of his own, but his abyssal eyes widened in shock when the golem's attack reached [Immutable Bulwark]. A weight that Zac never had felt before hit him, far surpassing any Gravity Array he had ever encountered.

It felt as though he was being crushed in the heart of a black hole as a soul-crushing pressure immediately threatened to break every bone in his body. The furious energy of the [Rageroot Oak Seed] surged within his body to counteract the effect, but even the top-quality berserker item proved insufficient. It only took a fraction of a second to realize that his arm would break if he didn't back down.

He immediately angled the shield to allow the hammer to slide down its side and slam into the ground instead. The shockwave would still wound him at such proximity, but it was far preferable to being brutalized by a direct hit. However, just as Zac was tried to divert the attack, so did the golem try to keep the original trajectory. It somehow seemed to be able to anticipate and match Zac's actions, and small adjustments to its stance was all it required to keep the force pointing toward Zac.

A desperate push thankfully forced the golem a bit off-balance, allowing Zac to take a step to the side as he angled the shield even further. The hammer slid down its surface, the friction causing sparks across the whole coffin lid. But the massive slab of metal slammed into the ground instead of onto Zac's body, allowing him to breathe out in relief.

Zac still felt like he was being punched in the gut by the force from the shockwave, but he grit his teeth and stood his ground knowing he would have taken damage for nothing if he didn't respond in kind. The golem's reaction was quick as it tried to keep Zac at bay with its tongs but he managed to push them aside with a swipe of his axe. However, his mind wasn't exactly on the tongs, but rather another realization.

It was [Deathwish]. He hadn't truly blocked the hammer's strike, but he had still absorbed some of the force from the swing while redirecting most of it. He didn't actually know that was enough to activate the strike, and he quickly took the opportunity to conjure a massive spectral blacksmith that slammed down toward the back of the blacksmith's head.

The huge golem seemed to take the threat of the spectral hammer extremely seriously, perhaps thinking it would do as much damage as its own. It actually swiveled its torso 180 degrees to meet the attack while its legs stood rooted in place. Zac's had no idea that its upper body could spin around like that, but he could spot an opportunity when he saw it.

The massive blacksmith's hammer rose to meet its spectral twin, and the whole ghost was obliterated in an instant as the true hammer ripped through the false one. Zac didn't care about that though as he lunged for the closest leg. One, two, three swings bit into one of the deeper scars as Zac desperately tried to cut off its leg in one go. However, the metal was simply too hard, and Zac was beset by a counterforce almost strong enough to sprain his wrist.

The barrage was enough to deepen the wound at least, and this time even more corrosive liquid empowered by the Fragment of the Coffin was left behind. The golem's response was quick and it kept

spinning its torso clockwise as it kept its hammer swing going. The two-meter wide hammer once more ripped through the air as it moved straight toward Zac, but he was already moving away from the blacksmith.

The hammer ripped through the air just in front of Zac's face, a gust of fiery wind buffeting his face through the slits of his helmet. However, Zac didn't care as it felt as though a new door had opened to him thanks to the latest exchange, and he realized that there was huge room for improvement in how he fought as a Draugr.

Zac had always been extremely confident of his Endurance since getting his second class, certain that he would be able to outlast anyone in a brutal melee. That had made his technique sloppy, where he relied on his body to be able to take the beating. There was no reason to take on unnecessary punishment though; he needed to improve his efficiency.

Rather than blocking 100% of a strike he could block 20% while diverting the rest of the force. This was just how many of the more experienced fighters had acted, like how Void's Disciple had somehow sapped the strength from his strikes. It would result in the same outcome, but with him wasting less Miasma and getting wounded less.

He needed to increase as much damage as possible while taking as little damage as possible. It was such a basic concept, but it was easier said than done to apply it in the heat of battle. The tongs were already coming for his head as the blacksmith advanced on him, but Zac took a step forward while angling his shield once more, allowing the pincers to push right past his head as he came close.

The corrosion from his previous strike along with his Dao was still lodged in the golem's leg, but it was quickly being eroded by a fiery heat emanating from the Puppet Core. He couldn't allow his earlier efforts to go to waste, and he swung twice in quick succession once more before a terrifying swing of the hammer forced him back.

Zac's mind screamed at him to keep going, to stop backing away from the battle, but he refused to give in to the battle lust again. He had already taken too much damage, so he needed to be measured in his approach. The golem kept pushing forward with an intractable momentum, like Zac was just a stubborn block of metal on the anvil.

Zac felt a slight in his arm as he rerouted the hammer toward the ground, and another spectral blacksmith appeared. The golem froze from indecision for an instant, but Zac shook his head when it quickly chose to ignore the ghost.

The spectral hammer slammed into the golem's head with furious velocity, but Zac knew it was just a hollow strike. However, Zac's eyes widened in surprise when the hammer slammed into the golem with enough force to cause it to stumble, and a small but noticeable dent had appeared on its head. There was no earthly reason that his counter-skill could do enough damage for something like this to happen except one.

[Deathwish] had evolved to the next stage.