

## The Fall 649

### Chapter 649: Ember of Glory

Zac was almost in a reverie as he led the group through the forest. Each breath brought new insights, each step was a revelation.

However, the tranquility was suddenly broken as Rhubat roared "Attack!"

Everyone reacted instinctively, and Zac conjured his energy forest and hundreds of leaves even though he couldn't see what Rhubat was talking about. Unfortunately, by the time that the Zhix leader had sensed that something was wrong, it was already too late.

Layers upon layers of flaming barriers sprung up around them, trapping them in a fiery inferno. Altogether a full eighteen barriers were trapping them, with the first one being just a thin film of fire and the outermost being over a meter thick. They towered over a hundred meters into the air as well, so jumping over was probably impossible.

Zac wildly looked around for a way to break out, and he soon spotted the perpetrators through the walls of flames. It was unsurprisingly the cultists, and their cloak had been pretty much perfect. However, the camouflage was shattered the moment they unleashed their trap, and Zac figured the best course of action was to start breaking barriers to reach them.

The ground cracked beneath his feet as Zac pushed forward, slamming straight into the first barrier. A wave of heat grilled his whole body, but the thin film couldn't impede his momentum and immediately cracked. But a huge flower of flames bloomed the moment the shield cracked, engulfing Zac before it continued toward the others.

The Anointed had thankfully already erected thick earthen defenses, which blocked out the incoming flames. However, by this point a small smoldering ember had appeared in the sky in the middle of the entrapment, no larger than an apple. But that small flame made Zac's soul shudder and filled him with a sense of dread. He might be able to survive that thing, but the others wouldn't. Worse, it seemed to be accumulating power.

The small flame definitely couldn't be a skill judging by its power. It had to be some sort of Spiritual Flame, and its grade was probably Half-Step D-Grade judging by the immense spirituality and force it exuded. Zac couldn't imagine the cost of bringing something like that through an Incursion. Was this the ultimate treasure the Church of Everlasting Dao had brought to Earth?

Not even the Anointed would be able to withstand that flame, and Zac exploded his aura to quench the flames covering him as he shot toward the next layer. There was no time to waste. Zac's body was quickly getting covered in blisters and sears as he slammed into one barrier after another, but each of them became increasingly stronger. Meanwhile, the flame in the sky kept growing, and nothing the others did seem to work.

Ogras' shadows, Rhubat's stone attacks, even the laser beams of Kenzie's drones. They all got incinerated long before they reached the growing flame in the sky. But it was also clear that it took a huge effort to control it since a storm of fiery attuned energy swirled around the leaders of the Church

of Everlasting Dao. They were all standing around something on a pedestal, barely even sparing Zac a glance. They seemed to barely be able to control that thing.

The others were quickly forced to give up on destroying the fire in the sky and instead joined Zac in his effort to break out. Ten seals slammed into the thick walls of flames, causing the ground to shake. However, it was getting harder and harder to break through as the barriers got thicker. Not only that, the entrapment array was clearly designed to unleash increasingly powerful waves flames when they broke apart.

Soon, only Zac, Rhubat, and Ogras were able to withstand the fallout from when a barrier broke apart. The others were forced to fight from a distance or rely on the three powerhouses.

Zac had easily withstood the first six barriers just by blocking the flames with [Love's Bond] and enduring the parts that got through, but his sister didn't have his defenses. From the seventh barrier, he had been forced to enclose himself and Kenzie in the defensive charges of [Hatchetman's Spirit].

Two charges out of four had already been expended by this point, but Zac wasn't sure he'd be able to use all four as the golden leaves at the crown of the holy tree of [Hatchetman's Spirit] were already ablaze. The ember was still well over a hundred meters in the air, but just its growing presence was enough to severely damage the core of his skill.

A sense of worry filled Zac's heart when he realized that they wouldn't make it with their current approach. There were ten more barriers to cut through, and there was nowhere to hide inside the trap. The safest spot to avoid the retaliatory waves of flame was right in the middle of the entrapment array, but that would put them in the crosshairs of the even scarier ember above.

They could either stay on course and unleash their ultimate skills to break through the barriers quicker, perhaps even in one go. As long as the others had some ultimate defensive skills, they would probably get out of it in one piece, but doing things this way would expend a huge number of their cards even before they reached their real enemies. After all, these cultists were probably the weakest party in this place.

Alternatively, they could move back and try to defend against that terrifying ball of flames and deal with the barriers and cultists afterward. But were they even able to do that? That miniature sun was already terrifying, and it kept accumulating more power. There would definitely be casualties if they went that way. But Zac suddenly had an idea.

Was there perhaps a third option?

Zac gauged the distance between himself and the cultists, and [Verun's Bite] lit up in a sanguine glow as he launched a furious assault on the next barrier barring his path.

"Keep going, just a bit more!" Zac shouted, and a thick lance of shadows caused the whole barrier to shudder.

With the empowerment of the second rune of his Spirit Tool and the renewed efforts of Ogras the barrier quickly crumbled, drenching the group in yet another shower of torrential heat. However, several floating Memorysteel eggs suddenly appeared and generated a series of barriers, protecting the

group at the cost of their own safety. Molten drones rained down from the sky as the group slammed into the next one.

The luster of Verun's rune was draining fast, but Zac knew they were almost there. One more barrier fell, at which point there were only eight flame walls between them and the cultists. Zac had used his third defensive charge to things over, but [Hatchetman's Spirit] finally crumbled at that point since the whole core tree had been reduced to a ball of flames.

The remaining barriers looked extremely sturdy, but Zac had already accomplished his goal. Breaking that last roadblock had put him squarely within fifty meters of the group of cultists as long as he pushed against the wall of fire. Those fifty meters would be an unbreakable chasm to most, but was that really the case for him?

Could this array really block something coming from the Void?

There was no buildup and no warning as a huge wooden hand exuding a primordial aura appeared out of nowhere just a few meters above the cultists and their altar. It immediately slammed straight down as it gained the empowerment of Zac's Dao, turning it into a terrifying hammer of carnage.

It was naturally [Nature's Punishment] activated with the help of [Force of the Void]. Zac hadn't actually tested this yet, but he was filled with a surge of relief when he saw that his gambit had worked. The barriers couldn't stop him from summoning the skill outside, allowing him to launch a surprise attack.

Judging by how confident the cultists had looked, they clearly believed that the shields would protect them from any attacks. And Zac already knew high-quality barriers and arrays could seal off space to prevent one from circumventing the shields. For example, how effective would Town Protection Arrays be if one could simply conjure ranged attacks inside the protective bubble?

The entrapment array the cultists had set up seemed to possess the same abilities, but his odd Bloodline Talent had completely circumvented it somehow.

The cultists immediately noticed the massive hand appearing above their heads, but [Nature's Punishment] exuded a tremendous pressure. It was enough to completely immobilize middle F-Grade warriors, and even E-Grade cultivators would find themselves toiling under the weight of a mountain, drastically slowing their reaction speed.

Things should have ended with the elites turning into a paste then and there, but the Incursion Leader suddenly snatched something that had been blocked from Zac's view by the thronging cultists. It was a small glass lantern with a weak flame inside. It looked like a small gust of wind could snuff out its flames, but Zac felt a far greater fear when he looked at it compared to that descending ember behind him.

The leader desperately swung the lantern at the descending hand and Zac grit his teeth as he prepared to infuse [Nature's Punishment] with as much Dao and Cosmic Energy as needed to make sure the attack landed.

Pain.

Blinding pain made Zac fall down screaming as the skin on his left hand sizzled like it was boiling. It felt like his whole arm had been dipped in molten lead, and the torment cut all the way to his soul. What was that flame? Zac desperately refocused his mind and pushed down the agony, only to see the

enormous hand full of seemingly endless life-force get reduced to ash in an instant as the small flame spread like a wildfire.

However, the cultists didn't fare well even if their leader had managed to utterly destroy Zac's sneak attack. The weak and isolated flame in the lantern had turned into a terrifying calamity that rained down upon the zealots as the few remaining pieces of woods from Zac's skill had turned into small burning meteors.

Any cultist that was touched by that mysterious fire turned into a human torch and not even a husk remaining after just a second. There were almost over thirty cultists outside the shields, but that number had been reduced to less than ten in an instant. Zac couldn't believe what he was seeing, and he figured that the effect might even be more devastating than if his own attack had landed.

However, the leader himself managed to block the raining flames thanks to a defensive treasure that conjured a shield around him. Most of the other survivors were just lucky and stood far away from the impact zone, but one other seemed to forcibly resist the flames. Zac hadn't seen that man before, but he wore a different set of robes than any other cultist he had met so far.

Perhaps he was the second-in-command to the Incursion Leader, considering his aura was almost as strong as the one of the man Zac had fought in the Dead Zone. In either case, while he had barely survived getting burnt by the flames, he was clearly on his last legs. One of his arms had turned into what looked like a burnt-out log, and similar burns covered most of his torso and half his face.

Zac wasn't sure if even he would survive something like that, and it almost seemed that the poor man was only hanging on through sheer willpower.

"You!" the dying warrior screamed with a guttural voice of pain and rage, but it didn't actually look like Zac was the target of the general's ire.

Zac looked on with incomprehension as the zealot actually took out a golden lance and launched an extremely swift strike at his leader. The Incursion leader had managed to block out the flames, but he had been right beneath the wooden hand and he had taken the brunt of the flames. The shield managed to block out most of it, but the Spiritual Flames had caught on at the hem of his robes.

He was desperately trying to stomp out the appalling flames before he turned into yet another torch, and he didn't even realize something was wrong until after the sharp tip of the golden lance pierced the back of his head. The leader arduously looked back with incredulity, just in time to see the traitor spontaneously combust, not leaving even a scrap behind.

A second later the leader collapsed as well, and the bursts of Cosmic Energy confirmed that they were both dead.

Zac looked at the turn of events with confusion, but he didn't complain. It reminded him a lot of Ogras' back at the Tree of Ascension, though the outcome was mutual destruction this time around. Zac's energy gain wasn't very impressive since the cultists essentially killed each other, but his attack had been the source of the calamitous chain of events so he did at least get some.

The fact that most of the zealots had fallen less than a minute after the battle started didn't mean they were out of the woods just yet. The ember in the center of the array was going haywire with no one to

control it, and the remaining shields didn't show any indication of collapsing any time soon. They seemed to be actual arrays rather than something conjured by the cultists themselves, and there was no time to break through them one by one judging by how quickly the miniature sun destabilized.

There was no time to waste and Zac immediately transformed into his Draugr-form as the anointed desperately started digging a hole to hide in from the impending blast. [Profane Seal] sprung up around them, quickly followed by [Immutable Bulwark] acting as a roof for their bunker as Zac grew into his hulking form through [Vanguard of Undeath].

"It's collapsing, we probably just need to withstand it for a short moment," Zac shouted as he rejoined the group. "Use everything you have!"

The fire in the ember was very similar to the terrifying candle that had snuffed out the lives of most of the cultists, but their chance at survival lay in the fact that it hadn't been completely activated. The cultists had been using that Spiritual Fire as the source through the altar outside, but the ritual had been canceled mid-way.

Layers after layers of protection were put in place, mostly thanks to Kenzie and the Anointed. Zac's miasmic bulwark was reinforced by multiple walls wrought from stone, and Kenzie had actually taken out a small mountain of Memorysteel from her Cosmos Sack, quickly transforming it into a dome that the Anointed placed on top. Billy and Ogras didn't have any skills to help in this situation, so they could only help with the digging efforts.

They kept adding more and more until the time finally ran out.

There was no explosion, but Zac suddenly felt his miasmic cage collapsing without being able to resist at all, and a shocking heat hit them even though they were protected by tens of meters of rock and Memorysteel. The heat quickly grew unbearable, and it was like the heat was even spiritual in nature as Zac felt a searing pain in his soul.

It wasn't only his imagination, unfortunately, and he helplessly watched as one Anointed after another suddenly fell and combusted, their eyes turning into fiery infernos as even their souls were set ablaze.

"Hold on!" Zac could only shout.

There wasn't anything that he could do against some terrifying invisible flame that seemed able to pass through anything. Finally, the last layers of earthen defenses shattered, exposing a sea of flames above them. Only Zac's miasmic Bulwark remained, but it cost shocking amounts of miasma every second.

Thankfully it looked like they barely would be able to tide things over as the flames spread outward after roiling across the bulwark's surface half a minute, exposing the sky once more. No one dared to move for a few minutes, but the squad eventually crawled out of their bunker to look at the aftermath. The shields had unsurprisingly all collapsed, and over a kilometer in each direction had been turned into a wasteland. The forest was gone, replaced by burning husks and storms of ash.

The only thing left of the cultists were the fire-resistant robes of the Incursion Leader and a handful of Spirit Tools. A few of the cultists had survived the fiery fallout from the lantern exploding, but Zac couldn't imagine they had survived the following blast.

It looked like the cultists were finally over and dealt with.

