

The Fall 706

Chapter 706: Opposing Sides

“Are we really doing this?” Alvaries sighed as she looked down at the seemingly ordinary mountain below. “The implications...”

The Holbok Mountains were situated on a remote part of the Dendrian Worlddisk. None of the Twilight Rivers passed anywhere close, and the closest settlement was over ten thousand kilometers away. With its awful communications, it took hours even for Hegemons to reach this spot.

There were no resources worth mentioning growing in this 500 kilometer stretch of peaks and forested ravines. There were a few D-grade Beast Kings, but they were of unimpressive heritage, their ancestors thrown here to form a proper ecosystem. There was a grand harvest every thousand years or so to pluck all the wild herbs that this area was designed for, but the next harvest was over five centuries away.

The occasional E-grade cultivator would find themselves in this area to temper themselves and test their luck in case some non-protected treasure had appeared, but the place was pretty much deserted with the Twilight Ascent going on. So the mountain range felt like a desolate patch of wilderness right now, like those you could find across most real worlds.

Yet, beneath the seemingly calm surface lay a shocking secret.

“What do we care?” Paro snorted. “We have toiled for 40 thousand years for the clan, and what is our reward? The best resources are kept for the main branch, with only scraps being left for external elders. Didn’t we decide back then? We’d earnestly work for the clan after joining, and whether we fulfill our hidden mission would depend on the reception.”

“You’re right,” Alvaries sighed, but her two tails still danced restlessly, each wave causing the air to crackle.

“Things have already reached this point,” Paro added, noticing the hesitation in his wife’s demeanor. “Even if we don’t fulfill our tasks, there are no doubt others who will. When the dust settles, we won’t be able to stay here, no matter which side is successful. We might as well go with the side that has already promised us the resources to take the next step. We... are running out of time.”

Alvaries nodded, and she waved her hand, which moved the spatial bubble they hid inside toward the closest ravine. They kept flying, following the markers on the intricate compass that Paro continuously tinkered with. The two eventually reached a secluded cave that looked no different than thousand others just like it.

There was a tribe of bugbears living inside, their matriarch just at the peak E-grade. The two flew right above their heads without causing a single wave, and they finally reached an unmarked wall. Alvaries couldn’t help her curiosity, and she scanned the whole mountain along with thousands of meters of bedrock below.

There was just rock to her senses. A few Spiritual Metals were strewn about in the depths, but they weren’t worth the effort of excavating them. There really was nothing worth mentioning in the whole mountain, at least according to her [Ripple Feedback]. The wall in front of her was supposedly just a piece of F-grade stone, the same as the rest of the whole mountain range.

“Nothing?” Paro asked, and Alvaries nodded in confirmation. “Marvelous.”

Paro took out a series of seemingly normal low-grade Cosmic Crystals the next moment and placed them in a particular pattern on the wall. Nothing happened for a few seconds, causing the two to frown in consternation. Was the compass wrong? However, their fears were soon alleviated as minute patterns slowly appeared in the depths of the crystals, forming an array on the stone.

The two couldn't even sense a hint of any energy fluctuations, but a door soon emerged right in front of them. Even now, Alvaries was completely unable to sense anything amiss. Her scouting skill was still telling her it was sheer rock in front of her, and that the two were walking through solid bedrock as they descended a set of stairs.

Each step of theirs took them hundreds of meters forward, yet it still took them five minutes before they reached the end of the tunnel; a large cave covered in extremely esoteric engravings. The cave itself looked rough and uneven at first glance, but everything echoed with the Dao. Every stalactite, every outcropping; they all had a purpose in this plan.

It was a nigh-perfect fusion of array and natural formation, and Alvaries felt like she stood inside a supreme Array Disk. Or almost inside it. The true core had to be the mysterious pond in the middle, or rather the three-meter tall crystal hovering above it.

“I wonder which master set this up,” Paro said as he looked around with amazement. “I never heard anything about the Lord being an Inscriptionist, especially not to this degree. Is someone from the outside helping him with all this?”

“Perhaps, I think his network is a lot larger than he lets on,” Alvaries nodded. “Are you confident in completing the task?”

“Don't worry,” Paro said as he smiled at his wife. “I might not be able to completely understand this thing, but completing the objective is child's play.”

The two walked over to the core crystal hovering in the middle of the pool. Paro took out a two-meter-long spike; the array flag they had been provided with so long ago. Sometimes he dipped it in the water, sometimes he used it to draw runes in the air. With each motion, the mysterious pond rippled a bit, and the energies got more and more condensed in the area as the runes covering the ceiling and walls slowly came alive.

But the pattern was wrong. It followed the schematics Paro had worked on by himself in secret.

A wave of desolation gripped Alvaries heart as she saw Paro slowly stab the flag into the water a few more times. She stepped closer as though she wanted to observe, but her right tail suddenly shot forward with impossible speed. On its tip was a perfectly black orb, a true miniature black hole that contained endless potential for destruction.

It slammed into the back of her husband before he had a chance to react, and his whole midsection was instantly turned to nothingness as Pathways and Cultivation Core were disintegrated. There wasn't even an explosion as Paro's life foundation was extinguished, the rampant forces sent to the void to never be seen again.

“You knew?” Paro said with a weak voice after looking down at the massive hole where his core should have been.

“I knew,” Alvaries sighed as she grabbed the grand flag with her second tail before it dropped into the pond.

Paro was the Array Master and the one who was supposed to finish this part of the task. Alvaries was supposed to scout for warriors sent to impede their task and to protect her husband. However, 40,000 years was a long time. Long enough for her to learn the outs and ins of the array that now surrounded them. Perhaps almost as much as her husband.

Her tail elongated and turned into a blur as she lightly stabbed the array flag with expert precision across a series of spots on the pond, causing a dozen ripples to appear. Paro's meddling was erased as the small waves intersected, forming esoteric fractals which submerged into the depths and superimposed on the hidden prearranged pattern below.

The two sets formed a perfect whole, and the pond turned completely tranquil a moment later.

“Well, it was fun while it lasted,” Paro coughed as he slumped down on the ground.

“It really was,” Alvaries said with red-rimmed eyes as she looked down at the paramour with whom she had shared her life for eons.

But the time had already come, and they both had made their decisions and preparations. It was true what Paro said. They were running out of time, and it looked like both had come to the same conclusion. Even if things went their way, there weren't enough resources for both to take the next step.

“Revive me if you reach the peak, will you?” Paro smiled as the life left his eyes.

“Of course,” Alvaries nodded.

Far away, the trajectory of a Twilight River started to slightly adjust, its transformation so minute that it would be mistaken as a natural fluctuation. But in two years, it would become one of the spears launched at the Heavens themselves.

“Persistent bastards,” Abonzo spat as he ate a healing pill before turning toward the leader of their group. “What now?”

Trivorad looked down at the twenty corpses in front of them, natives from both living and undead factions, and then at the vast patch of destruction that stretched almost as far as the eyes could see. The battle had destroyed a fifth of Cork Island, leaving tens of thousands of scorched trees strewn about.

The group of seven could sense a few auras in the distance, but it was obvious those cultivators clearly displayed them to show they weren't an enemy.

“We're done here,” Trivorad eventually said. “The Deacon told us to destroy the source node on this island and install the rerouter, but we still have three other spots to cover. These natives were most likely here to stabilize the hidden weakness. There are also indications they are just one of many factions with similar tasks.”

“Should we split up?” Vinka ventured.

“No,” Trivorad said with a shake of his head. “The Havarok Dynasty has sent over a hundred peak Hegemons into this place according to our intelligence. The Deacon wasn't certain whether their purpose is aligned with our own. The stars were obfuscated, but the patterns leaned toward them working against us. If we split up and encounter their parties, most of us will fall. We were sent here to lend assistance, not to sacrifice ourselves.”

“Incoming!” Vinka suddenly shouted, and the group quickly prepared themselves as a storm of miasma roiled forward with tremendous speed.

A huge section of the island was suddenly shrouded in darkness as a thousand-meter skull peeked out through the thunderstorm.

“Looks like the Radiant Temple has a hand in this game after all,” a jarring voice that sounded like a thousand wails emerged from the skull. “You’ve caused quite the scene.”

“Killing a few miscreants is nothing much,” Abonzo snorted as the air twisted around him.

A moment later, a thousand-meter-tall temple surrounded by a radiant parhelion appeared above their heads. Ethereal chimes echoed from its halls, and the roiling storm of miasma was somewhat pushed back by a glistening starlight.

“Indeed it’s not. So why don’t you enter our little cloud? I’ll properly wake you up and give a miscreant like you a sense of purpose,” another voice laughed from within the storm.

“Enough,” Trivorad said as he turned toward the skull. “You should be a member of Hive Ouro. What is the opinion of the Eidolon on this situation?”

The huge skull was silent for a few seconds, and the group tensed themselves in case of another battle. Even Trivorad was a bit worried after sensing the sinister energies swirling inside the giant head. Hive Ouro alone was not a threat to the Radiant temple, but the Eidolon was a lot more cohesive than the Draugr or the Reavers.

If one Hivemind had vested interests in Twilight Harbor, then it was very possible that one of the four grand hives lent some strength to back them up at a crucial time like this. His souls had been tempered by the Radiant Chapter for 30,000 years, but even he didn’t feel confident against an enemy like this.

“The benefits of an ascension supersede the value of Twilight Harbor,” the voice eventually said. “We can always set up new outposts in the area.”

“So we’re in agreement,” Trivorad said, and the group relaxed as well. “Then we’ll take our leave.”

“Having a similar objective does not mean we belong to the same side,” another voice cackled as two purple suns ignited inside the skull’s eyes. “Your involvement is just an unnecessary complication. The Hive will suffice.”

“War Phalanx,” Trivorad growled as the group all took out a red canister. “It’s either us or them.”

Zac looked at the towering tree in the distance. Even if he wanted to destroy this thing, was it even possible? Its diameter had to be at least five hundred meters, and a spiritual tree like this was no doubt extremely sturdy.

“Some factions might take offense to our task, but the mothertree has been destroyed a few times before,” Catheya shrugged. “It will be back within twenty openings or so.”

“So in twenty thousand years?” Zac asked, really feeling the weight of their actions.

Zac knew it was completely backward, but it somehow felt worse becoming an eco-terrorist and destroying an ancient tree like this, compared to taking out hostile cultivators.

“Wait, it’s not a sapient tree, right?” Zac asked.

“... Not quite?” Catheya eventually said after a much too long pause.

“Great,” Zac muttered. He was about to continue complaining, but he stopped when he saw an enormous fireball slam into a small section of the tree trunk. “Others are attacking it!”

It was a squad of four people who all unleashed one powerful attack after another at the mothertree, and Zac soon spotted more squads just like them. Unfortunately for the four closest cultivators, their efforts didn’t seem very effective. The thick bark on the tree was like impervious armor, and only some small wood chippings fell from the attacks. It would take a lot of work to take down this oversized bastard.

“Looks that way,” Catheya nodded.

“So, do we really need to get involved? Why not let others topple that thing for us?” Zac asked. “Mission complete in either case, right?”

“Well, first of all, I don’t know that. I have a specific array I was told to use. Secondly, why give this opportunity to others?” Catheya snorted as she turned toward the World Tree.

Zac didn’t understand what she was talking about first, but his eyes soon widened when he spotted it; a massive ‘50,000’ hovering above the tree. It should by all rights be covered by the skyscraper-sized leaves, but it looked like these kinds of things couldn’t be blocked.

Fifty thousand contribution points were even more than what you’d get from forming a Peak Dao Fragment, and more than enough for Zac to lose any moral hang-ups about forest preservation. Even if split between three, it was a massive boon. It would take dozens of life-and-death battles to get the equivalent number of points.

“Do you think there are more places like this in the Twilight Ocean?” Zac slowly asked.

“This tree should be one of the top 3 in the early stretches of the ocean, but there are definitely more of them along the way,” Catheya said with a teasing smile. “Not feeling so glum about our mission any longer? Our path will take us to multiple places like this.”

“Well, I’m just happy to help,” Zac nodded.

“A real gentleman,” Catheya laughed. “Come on, let’s go before someone steals our points.”

There might be a small risk of that happening, but Zac wasn't so sure whether the mothertree was the prey or the predator as they moved closer. Over a hundred roots suddenly sprung up from the ground behind the group of cultivators who launched the fireball earlier. Two were immediately turned into paste, while another was grievously wounded as she was slammed into the trunk by a lash.

The final member managed to avoid the ambush through an instantaneous movement skill or escape talisman. Seeing his party getting annihilated before they even managed to break through the bark was clearly more than he had signed up for, and he instantly disappeared into the forest, running for his life.

Still, Zac wasn't overly worried by the tree itself as they snuck closer to the vast trunk. He was currently in his Draugr form, but he was a Hatchetman at heart. Cutting down some branches and roots was something he excelled at. Besides, the putrefying mists from his various skills worked far better on organic things compared to weapons or stone considering they were based on the Seed of Rot.

As for cutting down the tree itself, it was impossible that Catheya didn't have some plan for it.

They made their way toward the mothertree hiding as best as they could, and Zac spotted a total of seven squads on the way. For now, no party seemed interested in fighting with each other. They were all trying different ways to fell the tree and reap the rewards. Of course, if it looked like one party had found a way to cut down the mothertree, then things would probably take a drastic turn.

Eventually, they reached the trunk, and Catheya blanched as the area was suffused in life-attuned energies in addition to the Twilight Energy. The tree almost felt like a Nexus Vein; its energy might not be very profound, but it was seemingly endless. Zac guessed that Catheya's task was to taint this massive reservoir for some reason, and his guess was quickly being confirmed as she took out a two-meter spike that was covered in dense fractals.

It reminded Zac of how he had heard that you could kill a tree simply by driving a copper nail into its trunk, poisoning it from within. Was this something down the same vein? It looked like it, though Catheya clearly wasn't able to simply push it through the thick bark. She had rather erected a circular array around the spike, and it was entering the wood as though it was fusing with it.

But the process was slow, and it clearly didn't go unnoticed as a shudder went through the area. The next moment, Zac heard a humming sound, and this time it was he who blanched after looking up at the distant tree crown.

"Wasps."