

## The Fall 707

### Chapter 707: Mothertree

“How much more?” Zac growled as he was launched into the air by two chains, his axe empowered by a massive jagged edge as he cut apart yet another 2-meter wasp before destroying a large root that aimed for Catheya. “We’ll be overrun sooner or later.”

He wasn’t joking. The only reason there wasn’t a mountain of wasp corpses and destroyed roots around him was the corrosive effect of his domain turning everything to mush. Unfortunately, that meant he was walking around in ankle-deep sludge which was pretty disgusting.

Another wasp was impaled by one of his chains, the corrosive liquid effortlessly digging through its armor plating. There were already five wasps hanging on the chain, forming a grisly warning to the other insects that hovered over their heads. And it actually worked. The domain of [Deathmark] almost worked like insect repellent, and together with his warning, most of the wasps targeted the other groups.

Only three groups remained by this point, the others scared away or eradicated by the residents of the tree along with the tree itself. The situation was somewhat stable, but the roots were never-ending. He had just cut one apart, but Zac was forced to dodge a swift swipe the next moment as a five-meter-thick root ripped through the air.

He had tried cutting one like it apart just a minute ago, only to find his edge incapable of cutting more than half the trunk. The slam had been enough to launch him fifty meters into the air and forced him to expand one of his three healing brands.

Varo did what he could to help, but he wasn’t as useful in a protracted siege like this compared to ambushes. He ultimately took a defensive position behind Zac, cutting apart anything that snuck past his rampaging swings.

“Just a few more minutes,” Catheya said as she threw a wink in his direction. “Keep it up, you’re doing great. Very powerful.”

Zac only snorted in annoyance, but he knew she wasn’t just messing around. Her arms were a constant blur as she formed various sigils that helped push the spike further into the tree, and Zac sensed that she might actually be spending more Miasma than he was. And all this was while taking out an impressive number of wasps with the help of her icicles.

Varo occasionally crushed a Miasma Crystal next to her to alleviate the situation, and Zac eventually made a decision. A vast aura field of death spread out with Zac as the core, swallowing all the corpses and Catheya alike. The atmosphere took a drastic turn, and even the pervasive Twilight Energy was pushed away a bit. Obviously, it was the peak mastery [Field of Despair].

Each upgrade had increased the area it could cover, though Zac only used it for the immediate vicinity at the moment. Reaching late mastery in the skill had allowed him to gain a better sense of everyone within the mists, and this sense was even further improved by reaching peak mastery. The skill now expanded his observation abilities to the point that they almost rivaled the omniscience he gained from [Hatchetman’s Spirit].

The weakening effect was strengthened further as well, now being able to fully remove up to 10% of the attributes up to the limits of E-grade Race, 2,500 attribute points. Even Zac would be noticeably impacted by such a loss.

But the real reason for bringing out [Fields of Despair] was the improved conversion ratio, where each kill resulted in almost double the refund when corpses were drained. Zac immediately felt a surge of Miasma entering his body, and both Catheya and Varo got to enjoy a weakened version of the boost.

"You know [Fields of Despair]? You actually managed to get an Epic F-grade class?" Catheya exclaimed from the side. "I knew my instincts were right when hiring you. [Fields of Despair] is a very sought-after skill among the crusaders, but few can gain it. Any interest in selling it?"

Zac inwardly sighed when he heard Catheya's analysis. This was why he didn't want to show too many of his skills unless necessary. Anytime he exposed something, there was a real risk of divulging even more than he planned.

"And cripple myself for some money?" Zac snorted as he cut off another root before it could slam into the defensive barrier Varo had erected. "No thank you."

"Well, if you change your mind, the Eldritch Archivals are always looking for new Inheritance Crystals," Catheya smiled. "Still, it's pretty odd. That skill is given to commander-archetype classes from what I've heard, a skill to bolster armies. But you don't seem to follow that path at all, you give me the feeling of a surly lone-wolf."

"If you have the energy to chat, why not focus on speeding up that thing?" Zac sighed as he saw another of his spectral henchmen getting ripped apart after destroying a patch of roots. They kept popping up to deal with the wasps, but it was like the mothertree hated them with vigor. It targeted them within seconds of appearing, preventing him from building up a proper army.

"Don't tell me you had a change of heart?" Catheya laughed, ignoring Zac's comment. "No wonder you said you had no ambition to raise an army. Was the burden of command too heavy? Well, being a commander requires you to have faith in the strength of your followers. I think it was the right choice for you, you're the 'I'll do it myself'-kind of guy. That's not bad, mind you. A useless person can't have that mindset and survive."

"For the love of God," Zac muttered as he unleashed his annoyance on the wildlife.

He ignored Catheya's teasing, knowing it was just her latest attempt at trying to extract some more information from him. Unfortunately for her, Zac had lived with a far wilier Demon for over a year, and he was mostly immune to those kinds of attempts by now.

Instead, he focused on his form. The tree was thankfully not really sapient, and it was clearly just lashing out at random in their direction, like someone absentmindedly trying to wave away annoying flies. Gave him enough leeway to try some things out.

Zac pictured himself a harried army defending an outpost, attacked from every direction by ferocious warriors. The attacks were like waves, and the pressure points kept changing, like the army was trying to create a weakness in his defensive line. Zac himself lashed out in retaliatory force, sometimes just defending, sometimes setting out in a raid to clean out problems before they arrived.

He even used his chains to create putrefying traps to stall the enemy lines. He was quickly integrating the various components of his undying toolkit into his path, but he still couldn't find the answer to his envisioned fusion. For now, he could only keep progressing and hope he'd figure something out sooner or later.

The minutes passed, and Zac eventually found a rhythm that lessened his strain significantly. The mothertree was a bit like the golem he fought to open the Dao Repository. It might contain boundless energy, but it didn't use it efficiently. It had a set of actions that it cycled, and Zac only needed to anticipate which it was. As for the wasps, unless a queen made its appearance, they wouldn't be able to change the situation.

A large circular pattern had almost completely formed around the spike, which was over three quarters inserted into the tree by now. Zac estimated it would only take a minute or two before it was completely embedded.

"Stop right now!" a sudden roar echoed out as a large shape appeared among the Cork Trees in the distance.

Zac glanced in the direction of the shout, thinking it was some fool overestimating his own abilities. Their group was the smallest, but there were over 20 cultivators hacking away at the tree. What would this lone warrior do about it? However, when Zac spotted the source, he froze for an instant, almost getting himself gored by a root.

It was a treeman emitting an almost blinding aura. He looked like a king walking among his subjects, as the trees actually bowed slightly in deference where he passed. And it was no wonder. He was definitely cultivating some Dao of Nature, and his accomplishments decidedly eclipsed Zac's Fragment of the Bodhi.

He was roughly three meters tall, and his crown was made up of small green leaves with golden edges. A wheel of living wood hovered behind him, and Zac felt immense spiritual fluctuations from it as well. He guessed it was some sort of Natural Spirit Tool that had an awakened spirit just like [Verun's Bite].

Together with his extremely condensed aura and Dao emissions, it quickly became clear; this was absolutely not some random crab soldier, but a true elite. His estimation was proven right a moment later as a value appeared above his head; 2,500-5,000.

There was no doubt about it, this guy had two peak fragments at the least, possibly even a Dao Branch. Together with his condensed aura, Zac didn't feel very confident about their prospects.

"There's trouble," Zac said as he saw the man close in on them with fury written all over his face. "This guy is the real deal."

The other groups had clearly come to the same decision, and one party after another disengaged and fled toward the forests. No one was making any real headway on the tree, apart from one group who had managed to cut off roughly fifty meters of wood by unleashing thousands of cuts. Why keep risking their lives now that a Heaven's Chosen had entered the picture?

Catheya frowned as she looked over, but she came to a different decision than the other parties. A storm of miasma gathered around her as a large fortress of pure ice sprung up out of nowhere. It fused

with the tree itself to create an impervious barrier radiating a glacial intractability. Four glistening crystals appeared above the ramparts, and Zac was almost blinded by [Cosmic Gaze] after seeing how much energy they contained.

Cathey must have sunk half her Miasma into this defensive layer.

“This defense will crumble when the four crystals are extinguished. Help lessen the burden,” she said with an uncharacteristically serious expression. “We don’t need to defeat him, we only need to delay him.”

Zac nodded as two chains pushed him up to the rampant, and he saw that the treant was quickly growing in size. He soon stood over ten meters tall, and the wheel grew to match his size. He gave Zac no further time to prepare as he grabbed the wheel and threw it at the wall with shocking force.

The three pygmies of [Profane Exponents] had already appeared behind him, and Zac infused the casket-bearing pygmy with massive amounts of Miasma along with the Fragment of the Coffin as a thick shield appeared in front of the wheel. However, Zac immediately understood there was trouble the moment the wheel clashed with the barrier.

Zac felt the miasma comprising the shield quickly erode and crumble as a shocking verdure spread through his skill like a stream of lava cutting through a block of ice. He tried to infuse the barrier with more of his Dao, but the inevitable was barely delayed as the wheel soon shattered the coffin and continued its flight toward the ice wall.

There was no doubt about it; this was the power of a Dao Branch. There was no way a peak Fragment had this kind of overbearing presence.

A growl escaped Zac’s lips as he jumped out to meet the attack himself. He refused to be overpowered by a simple throw, even if it was empowered by a Dao Branch. He shot forward from the rampant as two of his chains lodged themselves in the ground to stabilize his trajectory, and a sinister jagged arc appeared in front of his edge as he swung at the wheel with everything he had.

Axe and wheel collided, and Zac suddenly felt as though he was submerged in an endless river of leaves. Each of the leaves contained a terrifying amount of life force, steadily purifying their surroundings. Or destroying, if you looked at it from the perspective of an undead. Thankfully, a good chunk of the momentum in the throw had already been expended, and Zac managed to push back the force as he landed outside the rampart.

His own form quickly grew to five meters as the pitch-black armor of [Vanguard of Undeath] enclosed him, and he felt a surge of power in his body as his attributes were boosted by almost 10%. Apart from the improvement to his taunting ability, reaching peak mastery had finally boosted the inherent buff as well, pushing it from 10% to 15% to his Base Attributes.

The boost was limited by the skill’s grade though, and it couldn’t keep up with Zac’s exponential attribute growth in the E-grade. Just like Emily’s elemental axes, Zac’s constitution had already passed the limit of what the skill could boost. Hopefully, it would be enough to help slow down this mammoth.

The raging cultivator looked slow and clumsy in his colossal tree-like form, but his actual speed indicated a Dexterity on par with Zac's own. He covered the distance in just a few seconds, and the wheel flew back into his hands just as he entered the domains of [Fields of Despair] and [Deathmark].

The skills did what they were supposed to do, but it almost felt like they only served to enrage the titanic avatar rather than harm him. He could clearly sense his surroundings just fine even when having his vision limited by [Deathmark], and he looked absolutely infuriated as he saw roots and wasps rot and fall apart as an effect of the corrosive atmosphere.

As for the treeman himself, he was covered in a glowing sheen that rebuffed the corrosive domain from actually touching his body.

"You scoundrels! Do you know what you are doing?!" the treant roared. "This mothertree is the lifeblood of the forest! Murder it and you will harm the whole population!"

The next moment the deathly grip on the surrounding area was instantly ripped apart as a fantastical forest sprung up around him. The scene reminded Zac of his own [Hatchetman's Spirit] a bit, but its power was far beyond his own skill. The trees were like unholy beacons, except they radiated the warmth of life.

There were also thousands of small flower-creatures dancing around, each of them emitting a strong sense of life. The corrosive mists of [Deathmark] killed them by the dozens every second, but new ones kept sprouting up from the ground to replace the ones who fell.

Zac felt his [Fields of Despair] deactivate in just a second, unable to withstand the purifying effect of the treeman's own domain. His other skill was thankfully not that easy to get rid of as it was continuously emitted from his body, and the first axe wraith silently appeared behind the attacker.

The leaves and corrosive mists swirled as its axe ripped through the air, cutting straight at one of the giant's legs. Zac sensed life-attuned entering the leg just before the collision, and he wasn't surprised to see the thick bark being able to nullify the attack. He still wasn't disappointed though as a section of sinister green runes appeared on the treeman.

However, Zac's elation was quickly doused as a root shot out from the man's leg, instantly destroying the wraith by flooding it with the Dao. The wood on its leg started to rot with speed visible to the naked eye a moment later, but even Zac could tell that the process was too quick. He hadn't used [Deathmark] too many times, but he knew that the skill wasn't this powerful.

As expected, the section of the leg that was marked by the green runes fell off the treeman's legs a second later, and they were actually replaced by new roots and bark in just a second. Meanwhile, Zac was assailed by the exuberant domain. He felt some of his buff from [Vanguard of Undeath] being nullified by a sense of weakness.

Thankfully the feeling wasn't too strong, since Zac was more resilient to life than normal undead. So what if some life-attuned energy seeped into his body? [Purity of the Void] was already fast at work expelling it, since it was considered toxins in his current form.

Unfortunately, Zac wasn't the only one put under pressure by the fantastical domain as roots started climbing up the icy ramparts, and Zac saw one of the hovering crystals shrink with a speed visible to the naked eye.

Even if Zac wasn't operating under the oppression of the treeman's domain, he still wasn't really a match to the cultivator in front of him. The treeman was clearly of the same opinion as he ignored Zac and instead flashed toward the ice wall. A huge shockwave spread out as he straight up used himself as a battering ram, and two of the ice crystals immediately shattered in response.

An enormous root from the mothertree itself emerged from the ground the next moment, and it actually looked like the treeman was able to communicate with it. He ordered it to slam into the wall as well, destroying yet another icy crystal before Zac even had a chance to react. Less than a fraction had passed, yet three-quarters of Catheya's defenses were already exhausted.

"Keep him away!" a frantic shout came from inside as a glacial tide shot out toward the treant.

Zac grit his teeth as the four chains of [Love's Bond] shot forward and latched around the giant's arms and torso. He instantly grabbed the four chains next and pulled with all the force he could muster. The treant was definitely a Heaven's Chosen with an attribute pool and Dao above Zac's own, but the power contained in Zac's pull couldn't be ignored.

The treeman was lifted off his feet and thrown back a few meters, causing him to look over at Zac with shock.

"You'll have to go through me first, buddy," Zac said as he cracked his neck.

He wasn't as confident as he let on, but Zac was still slowly being filled with expectation as he looked at the hulking powerhouse in front of him. He had discovered his Evolutionary Stance in a pitched battle against the Twinruin Bloodstalker a few months ago.

Wasn't this big guy the perfect target to take the same step in his current form?