

The Fall 708

Chapter 708: Turn of the Seasons

“Why do you insist on profaning nature like this?” the treant asked as he destroyed an axe wraith with a wave, his irate voice sounding like crackling thunder. “Those points will not be enough to change anything.”

“Well, you never know,” Zac said as he stomped down on the ground, causing the familiar cage of [Profane Seal] to spring up and trap them both inside.

“I’ll teach you Draugr to respect nature. She’s your mother as well!” the treant shouted before he raised his arms. “Solstice!”

The enormous wheel once more rose behind the treant’s back, and Zac felt a shudder as it turned 90 degrees. The feeling of exuberant verdure around him was instantly exchanged by sweltering heat where he was being constantly blasted by an angry sun. The trees in the fantastical forest changed, and they started to bear fruits that all turned into 2-meter warriors that radiated the might of strong middle E-grade fighters.

It felt like his sealing fortress had turned into a greenhouse, but the important thing was that it had sealed off the glacial fortifications behind him. Zac noticed that an ice-crystal was already reforming, though its speed was pretty slow. Of course, Zac had seen just how much pure force the treant could exert, and he knew that his F-grade trap wouldn’t last more than a hit or two.

Zac shot toward the treant before he had the chance to unleash any more skills. He needed to turn this into a dogfight and prevent the activation of any finishers. If this guy had some skill like [Arcadia’s Judgement], he’d be able to take out both him and Catheya simultaneously. Twenty thick chains shot toward the treeman as well, desperately trying to bind him in place.

Unfortunately, even the strengthened chains the peak mastery of [Profane Seal] provided weren’t enough to withstand the aura blasting out from the enemy. They were quickly covered in a green moss that made them lose their structural integrity, forcing Zac to spend Miasma to form new ones. Zac immediately changed his command to send most of the chains toward the wood puppets, while only using a few to harass the main target.

A furious war had already erupted inside the cage, with new wraiths and wood puppets appearing every second. [Deathmark] was burning a large amount of energy at the moment, but the same had to be true for the treeman’s skill. Zac was happy to keep wasting energy, and he let the skill run while he fought the treeman.

A herculean jump put Zac in front of the even larger treant, and his bardiche clove through the air with furious momentum as the chains of [Love’s Bond] shot toward the treant’s hand that was grabbing for the Spirit Tool wheel. The titanic treeman was not so easily suppressed though, and he formed a thick layer of bark on his forearm like a protective bracer to block out Zac’s swing.

Simultaneously, he snatched the chains of [Love’s Bond] with lightning-quick motion and hurled Zac away like a piece of garbage. Zac was flung across the cage, but just before hitting the cage walls, he

turned into a puff of smoke. It was [Abyssal Phase] activating in the nick of time, though Zac shortened the cast time by 20% by infusing the final part with [Force of the Void].

He shot back through the arena, ignoring the blistering heat that was even more palpable in his intangible form. Zac was once more in front of the living tree before he even had the chance to take two steps toward Catheya. Four chains shot toward the treant's eyes as a blue fire spread across his left leg.

Both Zac and a recently spawned wraith targeted the burning section, and huge chunks of wood were cut loose as the treant hurriedly avoided the chains threatening to blind him. Zac wanted to follow up with another strike, but dozens of spearlike trees suddenly sprung up around where he stood, forcing him to scramble out of the way.

He realized that it was a few of those weird pixies that had burrowed into the ground and transformed into weaponized trees. He had ignored those things until now, but it looked like they were yet another threat to him. Zac swung his axe back and forth in wide arcs to cut the roots apart, but they were far harder compared to the much larger roots of the mothertree.

Soon enough, Zac found himself bloodied and pushed back over fifty meters by an ever-expanding forest, and the treant was already lumbering toward the edge of the cage again. The wound on the treeman's leg was fast recovering, and he grabbed the wheel in his hand, clearly intent on breaking apart the cage once and for all.

Zac immediately rushed forward to intercept, but he knew that he would have to change his tactics fast. His previous strikes were meant to take him down in a similar fashion he took down the blacksmith golem. Cripple limbs and then take him out. Unfortunately, this treeman was not only extremely powerful, but he also seemed to be a Vitality cultivator.

The good thing was that his attacks weren't overly powerful. The domain he released was sweltering but manageable. The wood puppets were powerful, but they were restrained by [Deathmark] and [Profane Seal]. The wooden spikes had huge potential for large-scale destruction, but they wouldn't be able to take him out.

The biggest risk was the brute force in the treeman's swings along with his hidden cards. As long as he could restrain those, then Zac would at least complete his job. He soon reached the giant once more, but instead of forcibly attacking with a huge swing, he dragged himself to the side with the help of [Love's Bond], letting the other chains trail behind.

Suddenly he was behind the treant, and three chains wound around one of the treeman's feet as Zac stomped down on the ground and pulled. The treeman grunted in annoyance as he swung the massive wheel in a wide arc to smash Zac, but a coffin-formed barrier appeared before the swing even had started, preventing the strike from generating any momentum.

The treeman still managed to break through just a moment later, but Zac had already jumped up and swung his axe at the target's neck by that time. A dozen terrifying branches, each one containing enough power to cause cracks in space, shot out from the treeman's crown to intercept. However, Zac's trajectory had already changed again thanks to his chains pulling him to safety.

Meanwhile, two chains of [Profane seal] interlinked and formed a thick fetter as they slammed into one of the treeman's feet, causing him to stumble a bit. Zac along with his skills and chains were anywhere

and everywhere, like a swarm of flies around a large predator. No strike was aimed to kill. They were rather aimed at ruining tempo and stealing momentum.

The treeman was quickly becoming frustrated, and he forcibly swung the enormous wheel into the ground, causing a tremendous explosion that kicked up a storm inside the cage. Cracks spread across the walls and towers of [Profane Seal], but they slowly started to heal as there was no follow-up. Zac had blocked out the shockwave by jumping into the air and shielding himself with [Profane Exponents], and he was already back on the target before the treant finished his attack.

Zac could feel that he was onto something as his attacks started to slowly transform.

From the moment the first seeds of life appeared in the universe, they started their endless struggle against their surroundings: evolution. But there was one more struggle that was born the very moment life was introduced to the cosmos; the struggle against death itself. Warriors struggled and risked their lives, all for the sake of power, wealth, and longevity.

However, even the supreme beings at the peak of the pyramid had one enemy they couldn't beat the vicissitudes of time.

Aging and its inevitable withering were ever-present and relentless, like a specter looming over the shoulder. No matter whether they fought or fled, it would be there, slowly squeezing the last ember of resistance from their body. The rot would come for even the greatest of Emperors. Eventually, there was nothingness. Finality.

Zac soon looked at the towering treant as a representation of the living trying to delay the inevitable. The special Draugr sight that he barely utilized until now was fast becoming the key that showed how life-force constantly surged through the enemy's body. Combined with his [Cosmic Gaze] he saw everything he needed to see to follow this new path.

Any time the giant tried to empower one of his skill runes, Zac was already there. An axe stabbed into his leg from behind and infused it with a corrosive rune. A chain shot toward a vulnerable spot to force a response. Zac himself unleashing a massive swing that even the treant would have to deal with.

Each little clash would mark the enemy for death and close another avenue of turning things around. This was not some sort of restriction of a skill, it was restriction through tempo. In fact, Zac's actions were gradually slowing down compared to the frantic pace he kept just a few seconds ago. Death never rushed, it was slow and methodical; inescapable.

This was not the ruthless war of the jungle, but the endless war all beings fought against themselves. One represented change, the other was stillness. There was no need to finish the war, as death had all the time in the world. He only needed to keep up the pressure, to douse any hope of resurgence. Zac felt as though he was becoming one with his path once more, but nothing lasted forever.

The treeman was ultimately just too powerful. Had this been a weaker target they would have been locked down and ground down until only a rotten pile remained, but this was a Vitality-based cultivator with access Dao Branch. It was impossible for Zac to whittle him down. Just delaying him for just below a minute without using his Remnants was already a miracle.

But things were coming to an end. The giant was running out of patience, and Zac started to sense some burgeoning killing intent for the first time during the battle. This was something he had realized from the start; this giant was actually quite gentle. He hadn't really launched any true killing blows at Zac, at least not until now. The treeman was taking off the kiddie gloves.

Even worse, it looked like the companions of the treant were catching up since Zac could sense two strong beacons of life force rapidly closing in.

A green 50-meter-tall rune appeared in the air as the treeman roared with frustration, and Zac suddenly felt like he had been hit by a train as he was flung away and slammed into the wall of [Profane Seal] on the other side of the cage. Cracks spread across the whole cage from the immense aura of the rune, and its intensity just kept growing.

Zac tried to rush back, but a sea of roots threatened to swallow him. It was like nature's rage had been unleashed on the area, in an even more palpable way compared to his [Nature's Punishment]. Life was running amok, and Zac did all he could to delay the inevitable. But his cage was like a water balloon filled with a small ocean; it simply couldn't contain this kind of an attack and it soon broke apart.

"I can't hold him, and more are coming!" Zac roared.

The slithering roots looked like a sea of snakes with the treant in the middle, and Zac was forced up on the icy ramparts for protection. A second crystal had regrown while Zac delayed, but it had already been broken apart from the pressure. Suddenly, Zac felt a pang of danger, and a burning orb shot toward the fortifications.

In its heart was the wooden wheel of the treant, but it was like he had turned it into a sun as it blazed with terrifying heat. Zac had already understood that the treeman was cultivating some sort of class and Dao related to the four seasons, and he guessed that each season had its own strength. Spring and Summer were most likely the most efficient season against the undead, while the other two were related to death and decay, making them unsuitable to fight the unliving.

In either case, a raging inferno like the one that was coming their way was definitely enough to smash the fortifications in one go. One coffin barrier after another appeared to block the sun's approach, but they were simply crushed one by one. This time it wasn't just a simple Dao-empowered Spirit Tool. There was an E-grade skill empowering the attack as well.

Zac was soon out of options, and the black shroud of the third pygmy shot forward and enclosed the incoming attack. But it felt like Zac was trying to push a mountain with his bare hands, and he knew that there was simply no way to transport it far away like he did during the last fight. He only managed to adjust the attack's angle, making the wheel slam into the ground just in front of the icy wall.

It was like a bomb had gone off, and both roots and wall were disintegrated as Zac was flung into the trunk of the mothertree, landing just a few meters away from Catheya and her array. The spike was almost completely inserted by now, with less than a foot remaining.

"Seize the moment," Catheya shouted. "Just one more attack and we're done."

She pointed her hand toward the treant next, and a shocking burst of cold blasted out from a blue gem on her bracelet. The smoldering fire that was spreading was quickly quenched, and thousands of incoming roots were chilled and drastically slowed.

Darkness spread across thousands of meters in each direction as a tunnel of destruction shot straight toward the treeman. It was Varo who unleashed a stab that contained tremendous might. It was like he pierced space itself for hundreds of meters, and innumerable roots were ripped apart in an instant.

Even the treant himself was suddenly afflicted with a deep scar as he stumbled backward.

Zac saw the opportunity and he rushed forward with all speed he could muster. Energy surged into his body as two thick streams of Mental energy entwined before they moved to the huge jagged edge that was fast forming. Dao from the hanging coffin in his mind seeped into one of the spirit streams, and his Dao Avatar representing his Fragment of the Axe infused the second.

The black jagged edge of [Gorehew] suddenly transformed a bit, with sharp barbs appearing across the jagged edge. It radiated a terrifying aura as well, a mix of destruction and desolation.

"Watch out!" a scream echoed out from the distance, but it was too late.

The treeman barely had time to slightly tilt his body and erect a few layers of bark before the Dao-braided edge cut into his body, leaving a terrifying wound behind. The scar ran for over two meters from his shoulders down to his midriff, and the wound already reeked of rot. The treant wailed and fell over, but Zac barely had time to register the strike before he was forced away by a blood-colored root.

It was one of the two followers who had almost caught up, and she radiated a shocking killing intent that far eclipsed her companion's. If the original treant was mildly upset about Zac and Catheya messing with the mothertree, then this new arrival was ready to enter a deathmatch. Her whiplike root reeked of blood, and she even eclipsed Zac's own killing intent.

Zac barely managed to avoid the strike with the help of [Love's Bond], the treant had already reached her leader by that time. Luckily for Zac, she seemed more occupied with treating the gristly wound of her companion than dealing with him, and he immediately rushed toward the mothertree. He had a pretty good understanding of the situation.

The powerful treant was probably a talented but sheltered scion, and the two followers were enforcers sent into the trial by his family to help him out. They were clearly ready to kill from the get-go, and they had definitely tasted blood before.

"Time to go," Zac wheezed the moment he reached Catheya who was still forming a series of seals with her hands.

"Not yet," she said as she tried to complete the process. "I just nee--"

She didn't get any further as a coffin-shaped shield slammed into the head of the spike with enough force to cause the whole mothertree to shudder. It was Zac who had turned [Love's Bond] into its defensive form and decisively used it as a hammer to push the spike the rest of the way.

"There, done," Zac grunted. "Time to go."