

The Fall 730

Chapter 730: Upgrades

Zac felt he had accumulated enough to give it another go at upgrading his skills, but rushing things at this juncture would create a lot of extra work down the road. The better the state of his skills were post-evolution, the less effort he'd need to spend on slowly fixing them later on. So he went over every skill fractal fastidiously while more going over his plans, checking and double-checking the missives he had collected before collating everything against his insights into his recently evolved Daos.

The next stop would be the Twilight Chasm itself, a terrifying place where other cultivators were only one of many worries. There were natural death traps and beasts aplenty, and the few cultivators who were traversing the chasm were all peak talents who were at the level of Yanub Mettleleaf or even higher. Running around with mostly F-grade skills in that place was idiotic, even borderline suicidal.

His insights had obviously not reached the peak yet, but they were good enough to perform adequately when upgrading his skills. He would get more and more hands-on experience as well, making the process easier with every attempt. The first target of his upgrade in his human form was carefully chosen for this very reason.

It was [Hatchetman's Rage]. The berserking skill's pattern was even simpler than [Indomitable], and it shouldn't be too hard to upgrade even if he planned on making some minor adjustments. With the lesson learned from this attempt, he would proceed to the more complex patterns.

Still, it took three full days before Zac took out another [Fractal Framework Array], this version slightly different compared to the previous one. Its base function was the same, but this version rather ran on Cosmic Energy and was made to help with life- and nature-related skills. It was one of the items he had made the Hexmaster buy for him after collecting everything for his Draugr cultivation himself.

The array lit up, and Zac gingerly cut off the skill fractal and infused it into the core disk. A hologram appeared once more and he started making adjustments following his plan. The patterns grew denser and more intricate as Zac upgraded one section after another of the fractal. The patterns were slightly different compared to the ones in his undead form, but the difference was simply to accommodate the different types of energy sources. Their fundamental functions were the same.

There was a delicate balance in the skill fractal, an equilibrium between patterns responsible for providing the temporary boost of [Hatchetman's Rage], and patterns that kept the process stable for as long as possible while also minimizing the backlash. The change Zac wanted to enact was simple; more power. The boost provided by [Hatchetman's Rage] didn't need to be a full minute. A battle could be decided in less than a second, as the fight the other day proved.

Besides, his body was unnaturally durable thanks to his extremely high Endurance and Vitality, along with his mother's machinations. The backlash he had to endure was drastically weakened compared to normal cultivators, so making the skill a bit more slanted should work just fine. As long as he didn't go insane like he did after eating the [Rageroot Oak Seeds], the more power it released the better.

However, the skill fractal suddenly started to shake as warning messages appeared next to the hologram, causing Zac to frown with worry. Things were not quite out of control just yet, but it was clear that his adjustments threatened to destroy the skill fractal's balance. The fractal had to be constantly

filled with Cosmic and Mental Energy to stay malleable, and it was this that made the process so precarious since the energy could go wild and ruin the whole fractal.

Zac didn't panic as he rapidly kept going, quickly upgrading the counterforce to the boosting section. But he wasn't fast enough, the fractal was becoming too imbalanced. He had thought he had made enough concessions to keep the process stable even after adding so much force into the skill, but it looked like he still lacked some theoretical foundation.

He thankfully had a solution in mind, and he made a temporary release valve like Catheya once had mentioned, providing an outlet for the energy that was building up to ominous levels. It was a temporary measure, but one that would allow him to work on the main diagram that would naturally contain the power.

Only when it was stable enough did he remove the release valve and patch up the spot with the original patterns that were there before the temporary change. An intervention like that weakened the pattern by a couple of percents, but it was far preferable to just letting the thing blow up.

After that first little hiccup, the process continued without any real surprises. Overall, the result was pretty good, and Zac managed to return a recently evolved skill fractal to its proper position with Mental Energy to spare. The fractal looked somewhat similar to before, except it was obviously lopsided now with a much larger section being reserved for power-boosting.

It was a huge sphere with small additions below, and it made Zac think of a setting sun for some reason. He had expended more than 80% of his mental reserves in the process, forcing him to take a break. That was fine with him though, and he curiously opened his Status Screen to see the result while he started absorbing energy from a Soul Crystal.

[E] Arcadian Crusade - Proficiency: Early. Nothing will deny the vengeance of Arcadia, not even death itself.

Zac's heart beat an extra time as he read the description, but he sighed when he saw that he hadn't actually upgraded his title. That meant the skill was still a high-quality one, but that the adjustments to the skill fractal were large enough that not only the description was changed, but even the name.

Unfortunately, there was still no description of how the skill worked, and curiosity gnawed at Zac as he slowly recovered his Mental Energy. Initially, he planned on immediately moving on to evolve the next skill, but he eventually caved and decided to activate the skill to get some 'practical experience' of the process.

He activated a surveying array to confirm there were no cultivators in the immediate vicinity before arrays before pushing Cosmic Energy into his new skill fractal. Suddenly the world turned white as a tremendous explosion erupted around him, turning the sturdy wood of the mangrove into shredded splinters that were shot hundreds of meters in every direction, creating a huge disturbance in the ocean.

Fury coursed through his veins and the fires of war burned in his eyes as his pathways were expanded to a bursting point. The waters around Zac churned as a white-and-gold set of fractals covered his skin in what looked a bit like a tribal tattoo. Zac could only see it on his hands, but he could feel that both his arms and chest were covered as well.

It was almost a shame that he wouldn't be able to test out this shocking amount of force that rippled through his body.

However, Zac soon cursed his errant thoughts as space bent before spitting out a massive creature that was more maw than body. It had no doubt been attracted by the eruption of energy from the activation, and it swam toward Zac with murder in its eyes. The hideous creature looked a bit like an anglerfish without the antenna, and it was clearly in the early stages of Hegemony.

He hadn't planned on fighting a D-grade beast today, but Zac still shot forward without hesitation. There was no telling how long the boosting effect would last after his change, but it would definitely be shorter compared to before. He needed to settle this quickly.

The Beast King looked enraged to find an E-grade cultivator rather than natural treasure at the source of the energy eruption. A high-pitched shriek echoed among the Greengrove trees, as a water blade spanning hundreds of meters rushed toward Zac, cutting apart trees like they were made from paper.

However, a leaf large enough to look like something plucked from a worldtree appeared in front of Zac, and it cut through the waters with unstoppable force. Blade met leaf, and the whole section of the forest shook from the collision. The Beast King's probing attack was clearly imbued with vast amounts of energy, but it was no match to the ferocity contained in Zac's empowered swing.

It broke apart and turned into a series of chaotic currents, but Zac cut through those as well as he kept going forward. One of the nearby trees was on the verge of collapsing, but Zac managed to reach in time to launch himself forward with the help of [Loamwalker]. It looked like someone had set off a bomb where Zac pushed off for leverage, and the force from his step was the straw that broke the camel's back, breaking the mangrove in the middle.

Space shrunk as Zac flashed forward, but he suddenly found himself severely slowed down as he got within a few hundred meters of the Beast King. The fifty-meter long anglerfish had erected some sort of Domain, but it looked like it was meant to trap rather than to allow it to escape as it still swam straight toward Zac with murder in its eyes.

Its maws opened wide, and Zac almost felt like he was looking into a portal to another dimension as it sped toward him. The momentum of the crusade was still urging Zac on though, and there wasn't any hesitation in his heart as another enormous leaf appeared, this one rapidly gaining a radiant golden hue as it unleashed an enormous haze of pure life that moved to encompass the whole anglerfish.

The deathly fog of the Abyss followed almost instantly behind the radiance of Arcadia, and a storm of unparalleled proportions was unleashed in the direction of the poor Beast King. It immediately realized that it was in trouble, but it was too late as it had almost reached Zac already. It tried to erect a barrier, even a D-grade beast's defenses proved insufficient to deal with [Rapturous Divide] empowered by [Arcadian Crusade] and the ocean itself.

In fact, Zac felt he could boost the effect even further, but he restrained himself for one simple reason; doing so would actually cost him life force. What he had unleashed right now was more than enough, so paying such a steep price on a random beast was overkill.

The delimitation between Arcadia and the Abyss was just as chaotic this time around, perhaps even more so. Space fractured and recovered over and over, and long tendrils of destruction spread in every

direction as the two clouds shrouded the Beast King. It desperately tried to escape using the same sort of spatial displacement as before, but not even a Hegemon could traverse space this fractured.

The anglerfish had no choice but to withstand the chaos that had engulfed it with its skills and the durability of its body. But the madness that Zac had unleashed was not something that a freshly evolved Beast King could withstand. Perhaps that Raksha Shrimp King would have fared better thanks to its thick shell, but the scales on this deep-sea dweller were clearly unable to withstand the spatial cracks.

Enormous lacerations were cut open across its body, and Zac felt a tremendous surge of energy before he even had a chance to follow up his initial salvo with [Judgement of Arcadia]. The waters eventually calmed down, and Zac looked at the mangled remains of the Beast King with some helplessness.

He had expected that his first battle against a Beast King to be an epic contest between man and nature, but it was more like a wanton slaughter. His new skill had added a full 35% power, and it had also sped up the speed he activated his two skills by a large degree thanks to forcibly turning his pathways into superhighways.

The latter wasn't that impressive considering his bloodline, but he wouldn't need to be nearly as careful with this ability compared to [Force of the Void]. But for now, he needed to get out of here. The odds of any other cultivator being in this area were pretty low, but the waves he had caused weren't small.

Zac didn't want to risk it, especially with an impending backlash, and he was actually filled with a sense of impending doom as he hurried away. He had gained enough strength to rip an early Beast King to shreds from his new skill, and the price for such power was likely to be equally impressive.

As expected, he didn't get very far before a searing pain spread throughout his body, and he couldn't stop himself from releasing a weak whimper as he sank to the bottom of the forest. His veins were once more set on fire, but this time in a completely different sense. It felt like he had been poisoned on top of being run through a wringer.

The backlash from [Hatchetman's Rage] had mostly been a wave of weakness that lasted a few hours, but this pain reached into Zac's very soul, even eclipsing what he had been forced to endure when using the [Bone-forging Dust]. He knew that he had to create at least some distance from the scene of the battle, but he could barely swim in his current state.

Without any better options, Zac activated one of his escape talismans, soon finding himself tens of thousands of meters away. Getting forcibly transported like that only worsened his pain, but he activated another three talismans before he was satisfied. Only then did he dig a small burrow beneath a large root of a random mangrove, and he continued to dig until he was nestled over a hundred meters beneath the ocean bed.

Falling asleep right now was risky, but his eyes were refusing to stay open as he descended into a deep slumber.

A nibbling pain startled him awake some time later, and he found himself covered in 40-centimeter long mollusks trying to break through his skin with small pincers. A wave of killing intent made them scurry away into the sand, allowing Zac to check his state in peace. Some surface wounds from the critters aside, he was mostly healed after activating his new skill.

However, he realized that he had actually slept for half a day while recuperating, and so deeply that random beasts actually thought him a corpse at that.

The backlash was pretty bad, but Zac believed it would become more manageable over time as his strength grew and his bloodline kept evolving. If anything, this was exactly what he had been looking to achieve when evolving the skill. The effect was palpable; a boost of roughly 35% was a drastic improvement compared to the 25% of [Hatchetman's Rage].

Besides, his old berserker skill had been unable to completely boost his attributes now that they had outgrown the skill, reducing the actual effect to something like 10%. [Arcadian Crusade] had no such limitations though, providing a massive augmentation that had lasted around 15 seconds from the looks of it.

The duration was even shorter compared to [Hatchetman's Rage] when it was at early mastery, but 15 seconds was more than enough to cause a whole lot of damage.

Even better, [Arcadian Crusade] even allowed him to empower it by expending longevity if his back was really against the wall in the future. It was a bit like the Anointed's unique methods, trading life for power. Zac could actually empower strikes with his life force if he really needed, but doing it through a skill would definitely have a greater effect than using it 'raw'.

The experiment could tentatively be considered a success, but he would probably be a bit more careful in the future after evolving a skill. He was still emboldened by success, and Zac soon dug his way up through the sand before he set out in search of a new cultivation cave. The previous set of defensive arrays to hide his cave had all been destroyed by activating his new skill, but luckily he had over ten identical sets just in case.

Soon enough another canopy had been hollowed out, and another set of illusion, isolation, and defensive arrays hummed to life as Zac started to focus on the next skill to evolve. He still took half a day to analyze his mistake where he almost made [Arcadian Crusade] collapse, and how it applied to the other skills he had planned on upgrading. Only then did he activate the array once more, and the process started up again.

One skill after another was transformed over the next week, all of them successfully elevated to the next tier. Almost every evolution had some twists and turns, but he was definitely satisfied with the result.

[E] Arcadian Crusade - Proficiency: Early. Nothing will deny the vengeance of Arcadia, not even death itself. Upgradeable.

[E] Forester's Constitution - Proficiency: Early. All living beings under the Heavens are one entity. Upgradeable.

[E] Earthstrider - Proficiency: Early. Traverse the boundless worlds, unrestrained and unfettered. Upgradeable.

[E] Piercing Gaze - Proficiency: Early. Unravel their secrets. Upgradeable.

Four upgrades, and only one had been relegated to a lower grade.

