

## The Fall 731

### Chapter 731: Minefield

Three core skills had been directly upgraded to their E-grade equivalent without any major issues, with [Forester's Constitution] mostly staying the same and [Loamwalker] being adjusted to the point that it was given a new name. The former skill was a passive buff that boosted his Endurance and Vitality, with the peak skill adding something like an inborn instinct for the forests, helping him both find opportunities and avoid dangers.

Zac had tried to put more focus on the part that improved his instincts, but it had proved too complicated. He guessed that part of the drew inspiration from the Dao of Nature, and he was currently veering away from that path toward the Dao of Life. The two were pretty closely related, but they were still paths of their own.

Still, his efforts had been enough to slightly change the description to no longer just mention 'Man and Nature' to instead incorporate all living things. It was a step in the right direction, and he hoped it would broaden how the skill could be used. Being so dependant on forests nearby to provide full benefits was a weakness he wanted to move away from somewhat.

He didn't really sense anything different from the skill itself so far, except that his attributes had gained a small boost. That wasn't because the skill provided more points, but rather that it could scale even his massive attribute pools. It now provided 15% Endurance and Vitality as it did before Zac's attributes grew too big.

Perhaps the instinct would work like that as well, providing him with a natural understanding of stronger plants and places as well. After all, Zac doubted [Forester's Constitution] could give many insights to things like D-grade plants before.

The changes to [Loamwalker] were more extensive, where he mainly focused on improving the part that represented his double-jump. Staying inside the ocean had shown how big a weakness it was to always be landlocked. Soon enough he would fight Hegemons who all could fly, so he needed to improve the skill's aerial performance.

It looked like his change was a success, but he would have to test it out after leaving in a bit.

Unfortunately, problems cropped up when he had attempted to evolve [Cosmic Gaze]. Its fractal wasn't too complicated on the surface, but it did contain a few unique patterns that weren't present in his class skills. This had created some hidden connections and unexpected dependencies that made the skill far more complicated to upgrade than Zac had expected.

He was forced to perform one patchwork after another as the skill fractal started to become unstable, and the result was [Piercing Gaze], which Zac estimated was a high-quality sibling to [Cosmic Gaze]. It was a sobering wake-up call that there was still a lot that he didn't know when it came to patterns, and it was also a good reminder that skills from outside sources ultimately weren't as in tune with his understanding as his class skills or skills he would create himself in the future.

Upgrading them would require greater preparation, and some might be doomed to fail because of lacking compatibility.

Zac wasn't all-too-beat up over the loss though. A high-quality E-grade investigative skill was still pretty much equivalent to his old skill at peak mastery. Besides, he still had the original skill in his Draugr form. He would prepare some more before upgrading the skill on his undead side, and hopefully, it would retain its full strength that time. As long as he succeeded, he would reform [Piercing Gaze] and restore it to its former glory on his human form as well.

Making some mistakes was ultimately normal, and something that happened to most people when upgrading their skills. Keeping them at the F-grade, waiting for perfection was a fool's errand, as it would delay his own progression. He was already halfway to late E-grade and he still hadn't completed the step that most finished before even reaching middle E-grade.

Adjusting skill fractals after the initial process was a chore from what he'd gathered, but it was possible. They were like brittle glass, and every change had to be slowly and carefully performed, and fixing one was a slow process that would take a couple of years. Still, it was simply something he could add to his daily cultivation routine, taking a few minutes every day to slowly work on those that needed to be fixed.

The downside was that it was a bit risky to use the skills while doing those kinds of upgrades, so he wouldn't be able to do so inside the Mystic Realm.

So some mistakes were expected, but he still left [Hatchetman's Spirit] alone as he swapped to his Draugr form. That skill was simply too complex, and he wasn't confident in changing it without System-assistance. Repairing mistakes was fine and all, but that was only true up to a point. If he messed up to the point that the skill became unrecognizable, then there was only so much he could do.

This time he meditated a full day before finally activating the array, and the skill fractal of [Fields of Despair] entered the array. The peak quality skills were more intricate compared to the high-quality skills of his old Hatchetman class, but this particular domain skill was one of the three basic skills he gained at level 25. Its effect was great, but the patterns were nowhere near at the complexity of [Profane Seal].

Besides, some of the structures in the skill fractal were surprisingly reminiscent of [Hatchetman's Rage] and [Forester's Constitution]. It was a marvel in a sense. Two opposing concepts with opposite effects, one buffing and one cursing, had such a similar appearance.

Soon enough the process was complete, and a new skill fractal entered his body.

[E] Fields of Despair - Proficiency: Early. A desolate haze, both entrapping and illuminating. Upgradeable.

The upgrade was a success, and Zac had only made some small adjustments. He had given up some of the skill's ability to provide Miasma to other undead warriors, and in turn, expand the omniscience the skill provided from Peak Mastery. Ideally, he would have done away with those parts meant for warfare entirely, but they were an integral part of the fractal.

Cutting them out completely would have caused too big an imbalance, to the point that Zac had no way to upgrade the skill at all. He would have to gently steer the skill in the direction he desired with each upgrade instead, and by the time he became a Monarch, it might be completely in tune with his Path.

Just like with [Hatchetman's Spirit], Zac still didn't dare to touch [Vanguard of Undeath] and [Profane Seal]. There was still reason to celebrate though after this latest boost in power. Just over half a year had passed now since Zac entered the trial, and the improvements he had made were shocking.

His raw attributes had increased by almost 80% since he left for the Havenfort Chasm, and his effective combat strength had increased even further. If he fought that Half-Step Blacksmith Golem today, he would be able to take it out without using any berserking items at all, and the same was probably true for Adcarkas.

Then again, Zac knew that as he got stronger, so would his adversaries.

There was no time to lose, so Zac finally set off again, heading for the stream indicated on the map. He still traveled in his human form, and he finally found a chance to try out [Earthstrider]. He swam between the mangroves, but a patch of grass suddenly appeared around his feet and he disappeared the next moment.

Zac appeared again a few hundred meters away, but he only stayed for a fraction of a second before he disappeared again, this time a few flowers appearing around his feet. He kept going, but suddenly he felt a sense of hollowness in the skill, and he landed on the seabed. The skill was quickly 'recharged' by some unseen force, and he felt he could flash away again any time he wanted.

This was exactly what he had hoped for. He could already create a similar effect with [Hatchetman's Spirit], but this was far more convenient. [Earthstrider] actually created a patch of greenery right by his feet, allowing him to move unencumbered just like his double-jump. However, he only managed to perform five jumps before he was forced to land.

Still, that was a huge improvement, especially considering he didn't even need to start the skill on the ground. The movement capabilities of [Earthstrider] themselves were barely superior compared to [Loamwalker], but Zac didn't care. It already performed great in battles, and it would be even more flexible going forward.

Zac was already close to the edge of the archipelago, after which he once more entered the more open waters. The energy was extremely dense by this point, so the ocean obviously wouldn't be empty. If anything, it was teeming with life by this point, with corals, weeds, and all kinds of plants fighting for space on the seabed.

An endless number of fishes and beasts scuttled between them, most of them mostly harmless even though they emitted energy signatures at E-grade. Zac was only occasionally forced to fight since unleashing his aura was enough to make whole shoals spanning hundreds of meters swim for their lives.

He continued traveling through the verdant ocean for another week until there was a change once more. He had reached an odd stretch of water with ball-like plants covered in beautiful flowers that swayed as the balls slowly bobbed about. They seemed mostly stationary, looking like flourishing miniature planets. Zac still felt a vague sense of danger from them but passing through them seemed risky, if impossible, considering there had to be millions of them.

The waters were filled from the surface all the way down to the seabed, and they were placed so closely that his vision almost looked like a solid wall. His [Ocean Chart] told him to go straight through, but Zac decided to trust his instincts and first try to see if he could pass them.

However, even as he tried to find another route, the bobbing balls were replaced by an endless sea of jellyfish who each had hundreds of tentacles, each one of them over fifty meters long. Zac didn't recognize the balls, but he did know about these jellyfish. They were both venomous and voracious, trying to snatch up any cultivator who passed by.

Ultimately he chose to backtrack to the field of weird planets. He had no desire to tangle with hundreds of thousands of jellyfish, and the one who filled in the [Ocean Chart] must have passed through the minefield of flower-balls since the map went right through the patch they filled up.

Zac prepared some escape talismans just in case, and he used both [Piercing Gaze] and [Forester's Constitution] as he started to make his way through the minefield. A long rattan vine suddenly flew out from the closest ball, and Zac instantly cut it off with his axe. The waters around the cut were suddenly filled with a dark haze, and Zac instantly felt a sharp uptick of Twilight Energy in his body.

It was pretty similar to the Hollowtongues, which allowed Zac to shrug off most of the effect and allow him to swim away. However, a sweet scent attracted his attention, and he saw a small berry sitting alone on the crown of the weird plant. A chain shot forward with lightning-quick speed, snatching the fruit up and dragging it back just in time to avoid dozens of rattans that emerged from the ball a moment later.

It was like the inert ball of green growth had been completely infuriated by the theft, and it raged as it searched for the culprit. Even a few of the neighboring balls were attacked, causing something of a chain reaction of destruction in the area. Zac found himself assailed from every direction, but his evolved [Forester's Constitution] quickly proved its worth.

It was like he instinctively understood how these previously unknown plants would act, and he swam in a pattern that allowed him to dodge most of the vines. The few that were unavoidable were quickly cut apart by a bodhi-infused [Nature's Edge]. Such an attack full of life-attuned aura didn't seem to draw the semi-sapient plants' attention, allowing him to avoid any further retaliation.

Zac barely had time to get out of the danger zone before spotting another ball with a fruit on top of it, and he hesitated only for the fraction of a second before another chain shot forward and ripped the whole bush off the mini-planet. As expected another wave of destruction was unleashed, forcing Zac to continue to bob and weave.

Things continued like this for two days, at which point Zac left the area a bedraggled mess. Wounds covered his body, and he held ominous volumes of toxins in his body. But Zac felt it was worth it. The toxins should be flushed in a few days from a mix of his pills and hidden node, leaving no lasting downsides behind. Meanwhile, he had managed to loot over 200 of those odd fruits.

They weren't listed in any of the compendiums, but considering they were in the depths of the Twilight Ocean they had to be good things. After all, that minefield would probably take out 99% of the cultivators entering. As for their function, Zac actually guessed they were related to body tempering.

The fruits had a slightly bloody aura, and Zac's cells greedily reacted to them very much in the same way as they did when put in front of bloodline treasures like the [Blood Nucleus] or the [Cardinal Kernel]. He stowed them away, happy to see his preparations for his Bloodline Evolution more and more comprehensive.

It didn't take Zac long after passing the minefield to find the stream on the map, and the area was blessedly void of other cultivators. One more week passed, and things thankfully calmed down after he hitched his vessel to the stream. The vessel he currently used was still the one he looted from the Havarok Scion. It was simply the best one he had, no matter if considering base materials or quality of arrays.

He had spotted a few Beast Kings far in the distance, but most minded their own business. Many Beast Kings possessed intelligence equivalent to cultivators, and they probably understood that cultivators who managed to reach these depths of the Twilight Ocean were not someone to mess with.

After all, the life span of Beast Kings was around ten times that of Cultivators, and the oldest ones should have lived through dozens of trials. Of course, others followed their innate bloodlust and tried to attack his vessel, but Zac was long gone before they reached him.

The ship didn't have any purification features installed, and the base design only relied on cultivation arrays to make the insides more bearable. If it was before, this wouldn't have been an issue, but as time passed Zac felt himself increasingly under pressure. Finally, after another week passed, Zac felt his body reach its limit.

Thankfully wasn't the limit of what he could endure, but rather the limit of what his body could passively expel without him lifting a finger. [Void Heart] currently beat once every minute, which seemed to be the limit in these conditions. Zac felt a wave of relief after every beat, but more Twilight Energy entered his body every minute than his Hidden Node swallowed.

Some of the leftovers were dealt with by [Purity of the Void], but it wasn't nearly as effective for this particular purpose. So it came fell to Zac to manually process the leftovers just like all other cultivators had done since entering the trial. He simply expelled a little bit of Cosmic Energy, and his body naturally absorbed the Twilight Energy instead.

It felt like breathing stale air, but his bloodline was thankfully still doing the heavy lifting. The effect on him was currently far less severe than normal cultivators had even at the starting continent. Still, it also meant that he would be more and more restrained as he kept going.

The soul ocean was filling up pretty fast in this place as well, but Zac still felt that he should be able to go for at least two months before his life-attuned ocean reached max capacity. At that point, his resistance against the environment would drop even further, but there was not much he could do about that.

That's why he needed to quickly rid himself of the odd stone and perhaps snatch some treasures before returning to depths he could handle. And finally, Zac saw his journey was coming to an end. The ocean bed simply stopped far in the distance, and it was replaced with endless darkness. The stream took a sharp turn and plunged into the chasm, heading god knows where in the depths of the Mystic Realm.

He had finally reached the Twilight Chasm.