

Hunter 175

Chapter 175: A Journey of the Mind

Jake saw the creature disappear, but instead of attacking, the monster appeared inside the barn below. He wondered what the hell the Minotaur was up to.

His Sense of the Malefic Viper made him aware that his poisons were being quickly eliminated, hinting at the creature having quite a lot of vitality. Not so much toughness based on how easily his dagger penetrated his skin.

He didn't follow right away but stayed up there, inspecting the remnant energies still in his head. Mental magic was some real mind-fuckery, as it basically implanted fake ideas, concepts, or signals. It made him see things that weren't real while masking what was.

But... it didn't work on his sphere or instincts at all. He also could now feel how the energy implanted on his body was slowly being fought off passively, meaning whatever influence the Minotaur used on him was temporary no matter what. This also boded well for the girl he saw, as the energy affecting her should dissipate naturally with time.

The more complex or foreign any manipulation was also made it less effective. Jake felt pissed at the memory of briefly seeing the monster as an ally, even if he swiftly dispelled that idea. It was just too contradictory, and he quickly broke that spell... but he could imagine some fucked up things a real mind mage could make people do if they were significantly stronger than their opponent.

How do I know someone hasn't already infected me? I have met gods... could they have done something that I have no way of feeling?

The thought occurred... and was just as quickly dispelled. It may be hubris or absolute arrogance, but Jake believed that not even the Malefic Viper or any other god in existence could truly fool his instincts. They could fuck up his mind... but they couldn't fuck up his bloodline.

Hell, the only real mental interference I should be scared of in the long run is what is caused by my bloodline... if that can even be called interference. Not that I can change anything about it, but try and be aware.

Jake shook his head as he tried to expel all the distracting thoughts as he kept inspecting the foreign mental energy. It truly moved unobstructed through him, encountering only the natural resistance caused by what he assumed was his willpower stat.

While he could deal with the mental interference pretty well... it was still annoying. The damn monster could make his archery borderline useless, and for some reason, as he needed it to remain in his sphere, he didn't even detect the energy that invaded him during the fight. Likely because it also implanted the idea that the energy wasn't something worth noting... so annoying.

He would get Pride of the Malefic Viper shortly, so that should help. It wasn't going to help him today... but he didn't see himself losing. Sure, the Minotaur was actually the strongest opponent besides the King he had ever met, and without his bloodline, his head would have been smashed in before he even noticed the attack coming.

But he had his bloodline, and the Minotaur's power just sucked against him. It was like the opposite of a Cloud Elemental. Like the path of this stupid monster... his strengths are shortsighted too. Would the mental magic even work on an elemental, or what if he encountered a creature with great mental defenses? Or a human who fights using instincts? Well... lose, I guess.

He had to admit that the monster's strength was... immense. He gazed about and saw a few craters below, with even a few bovines that had died from wayward attacks. It was just the remnant shockwave left by the staff's wide swings, but it was enough to crush nearly anything.

If the Minotaur Mindchief had fought the Thunder Roc, he would have won easily. He was also pretty sure it could handle something like Mystie easily too. In fact, he was happy Mystie hadn't come along but stayed at the fort. He was pretty sure the Mindchief could dominate the mind of the hawk for at least a period, making the battle into a two versus one. And even if he couldn't, he sure as hell could make the bird disorientated enough for him to kill it as Jake was relatively sure Mystie wasn't the most resilient to physical attacks.

Without tarrying any longer, he summoned a bolt of mana and fired it down towards the barn. The roof blew up, leaving a gaping hole as he was able to see inside.

"Took you long enough," he heard a voice say, the friendly tone of the Minotaur back, but with an insidious undertone.

When the dust cleared, Jake saw the interior of the barn. The Minotaur was back on the stage, but he was no longer alone. He was now surrounded by humans who all stood blank-eyed, staring into thin air.

Jake flew down and landed in the middle of the barn, the Minotaur just within the range of his sphere. He also did it to confirm if the humans were actually real or just mental illusions. They were. The bovines in the barn had gone outside, leaving just Jake, the Minotaur, and the human captives behind.

"I must admit, I underestimated you. You are a champion sent by your race to end my ambitions, fighting for the survival of their species. You are without a doubt the pinnacle of their talents... trained to battle me, but in your arrogance, you forgot... I am a King, not a soldier," the Minotaur laughed as suddenly all the humans drew their weapons.

"But I will give you a chance!" the monster said as he waved his hand and summoned a string of rune-like text in the air. Jake saw it and noticed that he somehow understood what he said. It was a... contract.

"This is an auction, after all. So tell me... what would you give to free your fellow man?" the monster spoke as he laughed. "Serve me, and I promise safety for these hairless monkeys and those you wish to keep alive. I am a generous King... I shall allow a sanctuary to keep your race alive and for you to lead them!"

Jake had to admit it sounded like a terrific deal. At least he thought so for a fraction of a second before Jake dispelled the mental energy in his head, at which point it sounded like hot garbage, spewed out by an arrogant asshole who couldn't even keep his own beliefs consistent.

He looked up at the creature as he shook his head. "You are utterly pathetic... and certainly no King. You can only bully those weaker than yourself, taking pleasure in torturing them, while you run away like a scared child before anyone who can challenge you. You can't even stick to your chosen path. Stop embarrassing yourself and at least die with a shred of honor and dignity."

The Minotaur looked at the masked human, confused for a few moments before his face turned to one of rage. "I AM THE ONE IN CHARGE HERE!"

He opened his eyes wide, sending a command to his thralls, as suddenly ten of the around hundred hairless monkeys turned and attacked the person next to them. A single swipe of a sword and ten heads fell to the ground. He had even made sure to include a few of their young. It tended to irk the humans most when he did that.

A suffering - or preferably broken - mind was far easier to intrude and manipulate. Even if the Minotaur couldn't make the human kneel willingly, he could shatter his psyche through killing his kin, whittling down his resolve until finally, he relented. He had done it before... and it was pure ecstasy every time.

"See the result of your actions! Now kneel or-"

He was interrupted by a loud sigh as the human that claimed himself to be a hunter just shook his head again. "I told you... humans are all different."

The Minotaur looked the human in the eye and saw only... indifference and a small spark of rage. Not a single trace of despair or regret. This human does not care for its kin? But it led me outside to avoid killing them?

He had skimmed that thought in their fight earlier. To understand the basic intent of an opponent or read surface thoughts was a fundamental aspect of mental magic. For some reason, he couldn't quite read the human's thoughts in combat, but he could most certainly read his intent. He had avoided fighting in the barn to avoid killing his fellow man... so why not bat an eye when they died now?

Very well. If this human does not break from this... I shall crush him with everything I have. He shall be my thrall... willingly or not.

Because while the Minotaur Mindchief was weak in many aspects, he stood at the pinnacle of mental magic for a monster on his level.

Jake looked with disappointment at the oversized cow. He saw the humans die with a single command, and he felt only his anger grow. It kept perpetuating the needless killing... it didn't do so with a goal. It

wasn't even a hunt. He didn't mourn those who died... he only pitied them. In some ways... they died the moment the Minotaur Mindchief claimed them.

He took a step forward as he appeared right in front of the Minotaur. The monster blocked his blow as if he already knew Jake was attacking. Because it did. But he didn't know where next he would strike... because Jake didn't think about it; he just let his body move where it wanted.

The dagger flew forward, and the Minotaur was cut on his chest once more, the old wounds far from having healed. Jake felt the mental energy invade his mind, worming its way inside. It was looking for something... an opening?

I will have to kill it quickly.

He kept attacking, the creature slowly backing off. The humans around him also all charged at him, but none of them could get close as they all froze up. It was a bit tiring, but he would have to keep them frozen with Gaze of the Apex Hunter for at least a bit.

Jake pushed forward, ducking under another wild swing. He placed his hand on the stomach of the Minotaur, releasing a blast of mana that sent it flying back through the back wall of the barn. Yet, the stream of mental energy kept pouring into him. The Minotaur wasn't doing anything other than reading his movements and whatever the fuck the monster was currently trying.

The wounds on the monster accumulated as the poison seeped deeper into the Minotaur's body, but Jake felt a sense of crisis grow as he began to feel weird. Jake stepped back, teleporting with One Step Mile as he drew his bow and began charging an Infused Powershot.

Human and Minotaur stood just staring at each other, less than ten meters between them. Neither moved as both seemed satisfied with channeling their skills.

After a dozen seconds, Jake released the arrow, and the Minotaur just raised his staff to try and block. He blocked the blow, but the arrow exploded, sending the Minotaur flying back. Jake pelted him with even more arrows and soon a dozen were sticking out of his chest.

The wounds began festering as the Necrotic Poison did its damage, and the Minotaur had visibly weakened. Yet, even as the Minotaur's power waned, Jake felt his sense of crisis only grow. He tried to do as much damage to try and kill the Minotaur, as his sense of danger practically exploded with warning.

The Minotaur looked up at him and smiled. "Behold, the true power of the Mindchief!"

Jake felt a stream of energy unlike anything before smash into his head as five words echoed in his head.

"Wayward Journey of Echoing Reminiscence."

Back at the fort, Silas was sitting in a side room with the psychologist. The girl was still unresponsive like before, but they didn't want to risk anything. Silas wanted to stay close if he could help with anything, and the psychologist just seemed happy to finally feel useful as he apparently wasn't the best at fighting.

The girl began screaming out of nowhere, Silas hurrying to her with a startled expression as he tried to calm her down. He placed his hands on her head and felt the mental energy that was there before was disappearing at a rapid rate.

It didn't appear like it it was dissipating... but returning. The one who had caused it clearly couldn't keep all these effects active any longer. It had to go all out.

The owner... he worried, but he didn't have time as the two men in the room tried to calm the child.

The Minotaur Mindchief felt the confluence of mental energy as the bridge was established, and their minds became one. Together, he and the human would walk a journey. In the realm of the mind – or more accurately the soul - time meant nothing as two figures appeared. One of them was the human in a suppressed state and a silent observer, and the other the Minotaur Mindchief.

He walked forward as he saw the memories one by one – the goal simple. The Minotaur Mindchief believed that every sapient being had a weakness in their mind. A reversed scale that could be exploited to dominate them.

It was hard to hold back a smile as he imagined the human as his thrall. So powerful, and not even D-grade yet. The hunter was the champion put forth by his race, their hope of defeating him. He would turn their cultivated weapon against them and have him be the harbinger of their genocide.

The memories were unnoteworthy, to begin with. The Mindchief needed a trauma, something hidden deeper. He tried to go back, to see what happened when the human was but a child. He had learned that is where most traumas were to be found.

Yet, he was stumped early. The early memories were... what?

Never before had he seen such a... fractured memory - the moments of reminiscence nothing but selected scenes. There were some things, such as the betrayal of a friend or minor scuffles, but nothing the Mindchief found worth exploiting. No memory worth flaring to life to crush the human.

Had another mind mage sealed memories? No, he saw no signs of tampering. Even if the memories were repressed, he should be able to find them, but they appeared just to be... gone. Gone, or sealed somewhere that even a Legendary skill of the highest order couldn't help him find.

But as he went forward... suddenly everything returned to normal. It was only the first years that were so fractured, but everything became usual after that. Did something happen during that time that broke his mind to the level of memories disappearing? Or did someone or something truly seal them away?

He did notice that the human became more... muted. The fragments in the start displayed a human of action, a wild child with neverending energy and disposition of a creature standing at the apex of his species. For some reason, however, that seemed to just... disappear.

The next many years were more tedious, as the human was hard to recognize. It was hard to compare the muted human he saw with the hunter that had nearly ended his life.

The Minotaur was... confused. The memories began to feel faded. Not in that they were hard to see, but everything had a gray aura. The emotions tied to the memories had an underlying sense of apathy and boredom.

Ah... I found it.

The thing to exploit.

The human was far weaker then. From those early years to only a few months back - besides a few sparks here and there - there was not much. No, it would need to find the trigger that made the color return and the world be attractive to the human again.

It didn't take long. In fact, it was the very same day that marked his own ascension that the human found his meaning once more.

But it wasn't right away. The palette changed as the human called Jake entered the vast forest, the world brightening ever so slightly. No, the return came after the sun had set.

At a moment of life and death, the world was flooded with light, as the Minotaur Mindchief felt the human experience what could only be called absolute euphoria. Truly, he had found his meaning once more... and the Minotaur smiled. For he had found the weakness.

If what had awakened inside him that day had brought him meaning... the Mindchief would just have to take that away.

So he dove deeper; he needed to know the exact cause. He tried to move ahead, but some dark spots appeared. The human had entered a dungeon, but that place was full of unnatural voids. Ones the Mindchief had seen before, as it was memories related to things above his station. It was likely the system's way of protecting him that he couldn't see those things.

No... I need to go back to that night

.

He needed to truly discover what the human had experienced. It wasn't as straightforward as just reading his mind; he had to truly find it. Dive deeper and discover the actual source. Discover it, and crush it into smithereens, using that opening to shatter his mind.

And as he dove deeper, he found that the source was... inside the human?

A sudden moment of enlightenment, an idea appearing or a concept understood... finally.

It was typical.

Like the piece of a puzzle, it was all about finding that one piece to complete the entire picture. Without the piece, the human would feel incomplete. It could be so many things dependent on the person. Sometimes they found their soulmate or even a specific item that they placed all their raw emotions into.

That day he had found his light, and today the Mindchief would take that away again. Seal whatever enlightenment or concept deep inside the corners of his mind. Make his world gray again, and his mind open to dominance as he suffered from suddenly losing a large part of himself. It would take the Mindchief months if not years to fully recover from the Wayward Journey of Echoing Reminiscence, and he would lose all other thralls... but it was worth it. Rather than a hundred pawns, he would have someone who could just flip the chessboard.

So he dove deeper into the deepest parts of the human. It was deeper than the Mindchief had ever gone before, and he felt his skill and own mind be pushed to their limit. Yet whenever he found a wall,

he overcame it as he dove deeper. When he overcame the first, he was proud, but at the tenth... he understood.

The human was inviting him inside. Whatever he was looking for wanted to be found, welcoming him to challenge it and attempt to seal it. Truly a foolish human, to dare meet him in a battle in the mental realm found within the soul.

A final mental step later, the Mindchief appeared at the memory.

With expectation, he gazed upon it and saw... a man. The human himself? The one he had sealed that floated behind him in an ethereal shape? No, it was slightly different; it was him and yet not him. A part of him that he had lost and now regained or-

The human turned as the Minotaur Mindchief gazed into his eyes. The human behind him was now gone, merged with the figure before him.

He smiled as the Mindchief screamed.

The man moved – an impossible act. It was meant to be but a memory, a fragment of oneself, nothing but an echo. Yet it noticed the Mindchief, as he couldn't stop screaming. A part of himself that he had suppressed after ascending was screaming at him from the bottom of his soul. It was those instincts inherent to every animal on the planet. That faint primal feeling it would get when confronted with a predator, making the Minotaur Mindchief utterly aware:

He was prey.

Outside in the real world, Jake opened his eyes as he gazed upon the Mindchief that slowly tipped over and fell to the ground, his eyes wide with fright.

*You have slain [Minotaur Mindchief – lvl 114] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level.

'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 96 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points

'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 97 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points

'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 85 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points

'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 98 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points

Jake just shook his head as he went over and looked down on the corpse, contempt in his eyes.

"A fool and a coward to the end."