

Hunter 242

Chapter 242: Righteous Crusade

As with all new skills – or in this case, upgraded skill – it took a bit of experimenting and testing to fully understand his newfound capabilities. It had gone up two entire rarities, with many newly added functionalities. The first he tested was how many marks he could place in total.

Before, it had only been one, and that was quite frankly annoying. It was fine against singular, powerful enemies like the Prima, but it sucked against crowds of Deepdwellers. He would also like to test the subtlety of applying the Mark... but he hadn't found anything that noticed him placing it so far. Maybe the King knew? Though to be fair, back then, the Mark just expired damn fast due to the level disparity.

Anyway, Jake currently stood staring down on the next unsuspecting village of Deepdwellers. He began marking them all from highest to lowest and instantly felt a difference. Every single Mark gave a far more distinct feeling compared to before, and it no longer just made him aware of their position – it even made him aware of how they looked.

It was like a general outline of their bodies appeared in his mind. At least parts of it, as he saw that it was more focused on the center of their body and their heads, while the limbs were barely visible in the outline. It was better than before, but not perfect. Back then, it felt more like he had a small dot on a radar and nothing else.

Next came the number of marks. Jake continued his marking strategy and was surprised when he passed 10. Even more so when he surpassed 20, then 30, and finally 40. Mark 41 and 42 also went through, but he innately felt that it would remove the first one he had put when he tried to use another Mark.

Jake frowned as the number was oddly specific. While 42 was indeed the meaning of life, he doubted it was related to that fact. He knew it was based on perception, and a quick peek at his stats made him quite sure what the explanation was: one Mark per 100 perception.

With a current perception stat at 4290, he was close to getting another mark available. Not that he believed he needed 42... it already felt unnecessary. Or was it? Just as the thought appeared, he began to consider the whole arcane charge aspect. With that, it made a lot more sense, and he already had a tactic for how he would handle the next village.

Overwhelming arcane airstrikes.

Well, it wasn't that different from all the villages prior, but this time he would have extra explosions.

Jake focused as he began conjuring orbs of arcane mana. It had been a small surprise he hadn't been offered a skill related to these orbs, but he assumed they more or less were just off-shoots of Arcane Bolts that Jake had changed a little to focus more on scope rather than potency.

They were just bombs that aimed to destroy the geography and buildings, not to actually harm the Deepdwellers severely. It would help him to better understand the arcane charge thing, though. It was a bit cruel, but this village would become his testing ground. Their deaths would be his test results.

With his eyes closed, he focused as the orbs condensed around him one by one. Each of them crackled with energy as they were made with very unstable arcane mana, which also meant very destructive mana. Once he had summoned 11, he felt himself begin to lose control, so he sent them down.

At the same time, he took out his bow as an explosive arcane arrow appeared in his hand. Due to the faster travel speed of arrows compared to his orbs, everything arrived at once.

Four arcane arrows exploded in different parts of the village, causing a chain reaction as the blasts hit the orbs that had also descended. Once more, the Deepdwellers had been unprepared as a couple of the regular ones took heavy injuries in the first salvo. Additionally, Jake had made sure to aim his initial attacks in an area where nearly all the Deepdwellers were marked, and he instantly saw and felt the effects.

Those with marks now looked far more substantial to him, and even their limbs were lit up. He now realized it was the arcane energies in their body he could see. Jake also felt that at any moment, he could detonate the marks if he so wanted. Of course, it only worked on those who had taken a bit of damage, and the explosions would do little to no harm on most of them... except two.

Two of the Deepdwellers were hurt pretty badly as they had both been hit directly by an arcane arrow each. Jake felt the arcane energy that had invaded and was now nestled within the Mark. Where exactly this Mark was on their bodies, he didn't know... or if it even was on their bodies. He knew there was plenty of metaphysical stuff going on with many energy types. Well, the only way to find out where the energy was to see where it would come from.

With a mental command, he activated one of the arcane charges. A part of him had expected a giant arcane explosion, but what he got instead was way more... subtle. A faint purple-pink light was emanated from every orifice of the Deepdweller as if something had flashed a powerful light within it, and it screamed out in pain. It was only a brief flash that caused no explosion or had any effect on anything outside... but it did a number on the marked target.

It hadn't killed it, but it rolled around on the ground in pain. Jake wasn't entirely clear about what had happened... it didn't look to have taken any physical damage at all from the arcane charge being activated. Yet it sure seemed like it had been heavily hurt.

He turned his attention to the second Deepdweller that had been heavily damaged and activated its Mark, too, focusing more on the process this time. When it activated, Jake felt the arcane energy attack the exact same way the Mark amplified damage... oh shit.

Of course... all the way back in the Badger's Den, Jake had discovered that his Mark of the Ambitious Hunter's amplified damage just functioned as direct damage to the health pool of his foes. The same was true for the upgraded Mark, but Jake hadn't expected the arcane charge to attack the exact same thing.

Back then, Jake didn't know that his Mark actually directly attacked the fourth layer of the soul. It damaged their health points for any vitality-based lifeform, but as it also worked on things like elementals, he assumed it only worked on consuming mana if that is what kept them alive and served as their health pools.

Somehow, his arcane energy could tap into that part of the skill and directly attack the health points of the foe with arcane energy. It was entirely unexpected, and it made him wonder if it was because it was his arcane energy that made it possible or if it was solely the skill. It had many implications for sure...

More experiments are in order, he thought. He even got a few ideas related to alchemy... but those were for later, as in after the dungeon.

Jake continued raining down destruction like he was a western superpower and the Deepdweller village was a poor but oil-rich country. He primarily focused on the marks and how they did their damage, and he even found that his Sense of the Malefic Viper helped a bit when he activated the marks, and Jake could feel his own affinity burning into the health of his foes.

The resident Warlord was an especially great test subject as Jake allowed it to push itself all the way. He even allowed it to absorb the Golden Mushroom to infuse it, as well as absorb plenty of its brethren, for him to keep building up an arcane charge larger than any before.

Because it could heal from most damage fast, the arcane charge just got bigger and bigger, making it easier and easier to feel. As the arcane charge wasn't considered a poison, it didn't count for Jake's Sense of the Malefic Viper, only allowing him to rely on the affinity-sensing part of the skill - a part that was primarily aimed towards identifying affinities in the environment. Luckily for him, he had such insanely high perception he could feel far more than anyone his level usually would.

Full perception builds were truly the best.

Jake kept damaging the Warlord as it tried to kill him, but in its mutated hulking form, it simply had no way to fight back. Shit, it was more of a threat before its transformation due to its speed, while Jake could just casually One Step Mile away now and bombard it.

Another thing he noticed that made him very happy was that the skill worked well with even his stable arcane arrows. Not the piercing of the arrows or the physical damage they caused, but the direct damage inflicted based on range and his perception.

That damage was like that of his Mark, but Jake had never noticed that the damage was actually of his arcane-affinity. At least his new Mark recognized it to be. To say he was pleased to learn that was an understatement as it meant he had just found even more synergy.

The entire fight ended up just being Jake doing damage with different arcane attacks on the helpless Warlord several levels above himself. Jake kited it and kept damaging it slowly until he felt the arcane charge on the Mark begin losing energy. It appeared there was a maximum duration for the stored arcane energy – good to know.

Without further ado, Jake made the charge that had been building up through the entire fight activate. Due to the sheer magnitude of it, he expected something more than what happened with the weaker Deepdwellers.

When it was activated, it was like a flashlight was turned on for less than a quarter of a second within the Warlord before being turned off again. The entire Deepdweller just flashed in a pink-purple light through all its open wounds, making it look like a blinking disco ball of flesh and tumors for a brief moment.

And then... then it just kept attacking. Honestly, it was super underwhelming. Jake felt like the arcane charge had done shitloads of damage... but the Warlord just had an insanely high health pool and healed incredibly fast from any damage taken.

A bit miffed, Jake finished the fight the usual way. Aka by blowing it up with poisoned arrows using Arcane Powershots before moving in with Touch of the Malefic Viper as a finishing touch – pun fully intended.

You have slain [Deepdweller Warlord – lvl 147] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 121 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 114 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points

Jake fished out the now Infused Golden Mushroom from the corpse and tossed it in his inventory as always. Without needing to delay, he moved on to the next village.

He didn't know how many there were, but he honestly hoped a lot. Jake was fully aware that his skillset happened to be incredibly effective against these life-affinity foes. He had powerful poison that was insanely effective at draining health points, his enemies tended to deal with ranged opponents badly, and the general level of perception was low.

There were so many damn weaknesses to exploit for someone like Jake. He could see Neil's party struggling with these foes as they didn't have the burst-damage to nearly instantly finish off the Fungalmancers who could heal others or the poison to inhibit the natural life-affinity skills and natural regeneration of the Deepwellers – especially the variants.

For Jake, however... this dungeon was his ideal hunting ground. So on a hunt he went. The first Deepdweller village was reached around 30 minutes later, around 250 kilometers into the dungeon now.

You have slain [Deepdweller Shroomguard – lvl 145] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

The village fell as easily as all others, and he claimed another mushroom. No level this time, so he moved on swiftly after a brief round of meditation.

You have slain [Deepdweller Shroomguard – lvl 148] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 122 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points

Another village, another Shroomguard, another level. He had finally figured out how to get the Shroomguard to infuse the mushrooms – they could absorb it into their shields and merge with it, making them into turtle-like creatures with tough armor – armor that still couldn't block Touch of the Malefic Viper. 300 kilometers in now.

Next village.

You have slain [Deepdweller Warlord – lvl 149] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 123 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 115 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points

This village had the biggest regiment of Fungalmancers so far, with more than 10 in a single village. Not that Jake complained, the experience was good. He did have to spend quite a while chugging potions and meditating after, though. He even had time to get in a bit of alchemy. One would think the environment made making poisons hard, but it really didn't matter. The Altmar Cauldron of Supreme Simplicity was too impeccably made to be affected by outside atmospheric mana.

Once he was healed up, he moved on. This village had been over 400 kilometers in. The distance between them was growing.

You have slain [Deepdweller Warlord – lvl 150] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

You have slain [Deepdweller Shroomguard – lvl 149] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 124 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points

For the first time, he had encountered a village with two boss-tier variants. This village – or maybe calling it a city was more accurate now - had been a fucking pain, to put it lightly, and had taken nearly half a day to defeat.

It had taken him a while to find it too, as it was over 200 kilometers from the last village, or in other words, 600 kilometers in. It came to a point where he feared he had somehow missed one. He did find a few hunting parties and such around the place, but he had finished all of those off easily as the best only had a single Fungalmancer or Warrior with them.

There had been in excess of 500 Deepdwellers in the village – he decided to just stick with calling it a village for consistency – and they had all been a pain to deal with. For some reason, the entire village only had three Fungalmancers and only a handful of warriors, though, making it easier in that department. It also had two Golden Mushrooms, so that was nice.

From here on out, it would only get tougher... but Jake had no fear at all. He had yet to encounter any creature truly able to make him get serious yet. Shit, the strongest creature he had seen fight so far was

the troll. There was also the Heartwarden he couldn't identify. It was that one Jake was currently banking on finally giving Jake a good fight.

But for now... for now, Jake would clear out any village he came across on his warpath through the dungeon – leaving not a single Deepdweller alive in his wake. For lest we forget, they were evil mushroom-loving monsters.

Thus his righteous crusade continued.