

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 231: Man Cave(s)

"We'll need to build it deeper. There is no way the ceiling of the cellar can take that kind of toxic exposure. Even if we put some serious enchants on the floorboards, they will eventually lose effect as they are slowly corroded, and the stronger you get, the faster we will need to keep reapplying the enchants," Hank explained as he shook his head.

"How deep do you reckon?" Jake asked. "It would be best if we can still keep the lab within the area affected by the Pylon to function as a ward to keep people out if they for some reason try to dig in."

"Oh, that should be easy enough. We just need to put in some good layers between the lab and the rest of the lodge. I would be able to put in some wooden layers that can absorb a lot of the poison and other toxic energies released, but you will have to switch them out or extract the poison from them again occasionally. That, or you could just sell them. They may change into actual items," Hank answered.

"That would be fine; I just don't want my entire valley to turn into a wasteland from my own experiments," Jake responded.

"Great. Anyway, we will dig down to create a second floor to the cellar below the first one. I intend to leave at least five meters between the two floors with the wooden layers placed there. You will still need some magical warding on top of that, I reckon. I am sure Miranda can hook you up with someone, or maybe ask that bird friend of yours," Hank said as he did a rough sketch of his plans on a piece of paper.

Jake just looked on, nodding. Making it be that low also allowed them to make the whole lab a lot bigger and... *wait*.

"Say, could we link it up somehow with the cavern leading to the dungeon? The barrier by the Pylon should help isolate the lodge still and keep any energies from flowing that way, and it would mean easy access for me when I make a garden down there," Jake asked, liking his own idea quite a lot.

"That is a lot of digging, and we would need to place the lab *a lot* lower, most likely... how far down are you comfortable with it being? I would assume the lower it is, the more future proof it will also be, but everything will add to how long it will take to get done. We are talking meters in the triple digits," Hank said after scratching his beard and thinking for a while.

"I am fine with any depth; it doesn't matter much when you can walk on air and make your own staircase at any time, anywhere. Or, you know, just fly. It is more if you think you can do it, and of course, have the time to. I know you're a busy man," Jake smiled.

He really didn't wanna put too much on the father of two. Hank had been in charge of most of the construction in Haven, and the man had barely stopped working ever since Jake met him. Yet he actually looked a bit younger now and full of spirit, even if he still had that vibe of a grizzled old lumberjack.

Jake had heard he was getting close to his profession-evolution. He was actually a bit surprised the man hadn't gotten it yet with how much he worked, but then again, he still wasn't sure exactly what determined why some leveled so much faster than others. In retrospect, his class actually leveled pretty fast. At lightning speed compared to his

profession. 15 levels in a week was kind of insane, even if he had spent nearly every hour of every day fighting monkeys at higher levels than himself.

"Alright. I'll have to bring in quite the crew to get it done properly. Do you want proper ventilation down there too? I know you probably don't need it; it's more of a comfort thing," Hank asked.

"Nah, no need. I already have a plan myself for the future. One that includes really sealing in the flavor," Jake smiled mischievously.

"Sounds like we're making a real man cave here," Hank chuckled. "Do you want us to get started right away?"

"Not today, tomorrow at the earliest," Jake answered.

"When I said right away, I didn't mean here and now... at the earliest we can begin tomorrow afternoon, we need to finish the current project first. Miranda's orders. The whole town is really coming together," Hank answered, a big proud smile on his lips.

"How's Mark and Louise doing?" Jake asked curiously. He hadn't seen the man's kids around much lately, so he was a bit curious.

"Didn't think you'd care," Hank answered honestly, surprised at the question. "Both of them are currently staying and working at the Fort. While we agreed to keep Haven itself small, the same can't be said for the Fort. Sure, it technically counts as Haven, but the flat

plains around the Fort are just perfect for building on. More people already live there than in the entirety of Haven. At least twenty thousand last I heard with more coming... ah, I'm sure you already heard this from Miranda."

Hank scratched his beard again, Jake smiling as he found the builder's embarrassment as he answered. "Yeah, she already gave me the update. I didn't know those kids went there, though."

"Kids," Hank scoffed. "You're barely older than them, are you?"

"Teenagers then," Jake corrected.

"Still incorrect. Mark turned 20 last month; Louise is 22," Hank answered, shaking his head as he chuckled.

"Alright, fully functional adults, geez," Jake finally relented. "Also... back on topic... won't it more end up being an alchemy cave than an alchemy cellar?"

"Yeah. A man cave," Hank answered. Jake was unable to tell if he was serious or just fucking with him.

The two spent a bit more time discussing the details, and Jake got more and more hooked on the idea of making a deep cave beneath the lodge to use as his alchemy lab. Possibly an entire network of sorts. It would also allow them to make a long vertical tunnel leading down to it, and they would be able to seal that off properly.

After Hank left, Jake did exactly as he had said he would avoid and continued making a few more uncommon-rarity Potent Necrotic Poison. While he most certainly knew it would fuck up the spot he used a bit more, he felt like as long as he didn't overdo it, it would fix itself in time.

If not, it wasn't like he couldn't get someone with nature magic or something like that to come by and work on it.

The reason why he was a bit impatient was that he wanted the poison ready for the dungeon. He also made a few batches of fungicide as he guessed he had a high chance of running into mushrooms or other types of fungi down there based on the Indigo Mushroom.

After crafting, he only had one more thing to take care of before heading into the dungeon.

Jake stepped through the plains, each step taking him over a hundred meters forward. His travel speed with One Step Mile was quite frankly insane at this point, and just the short way to the Fort made him increase the range of each step just a little as he got more used to the skill.

He couldn't wait for the day the skill would actually allow him to pass a mile in one step.

The reasons he was going to the Fort were twofold. Firstly was to have a talk with Arnold, the weird guy who liked to make drones and stuff like that, as well as the timed injectors

Jake had used for the Indigo Mushroom. Apparently, the guy needed help from Jake with something, plus he wanted to show off some cool stuff Jake would potentially want.

On the way out of the forest towards the Fort, he noted that the Pylon's area of influence had grown even more. The city of Haven was now technically over 100 kilometers in radius, though it was a bit oval, and the area was directed towards the Fort.

It was a bit insane to imagine that the Fort could eventually come under the influence despite the long distance between the two. Then again, distances seemed to matter far less now, especially when you could travel hundreds of kilometers in less time than his commute to work was before the system. When Miranda reached D-grade, he reckoned it would expand to encompass the Fort.

Anyway, the second thing Jake went there for was because the blacksmiths were there, and Jake needed a second weapon for the dungeon. With Venomfang broken and his Shortsword of Icy Winds subpar, to say the least, he wanted to check out if they had something decent. He didn't even need it to be that good, just at least something he could transmute to improve a bit, though he hoped for a weapon he could just use.

During this 1 month alchemy period, Jake had made time to do one task he knew he would have to at one point. It had hurt him to do... but his old bow needed some change. The old one was fine, but after reaching D-grade, it just didn't cut it.

[Windsoar Bow (Rare)] – A bow made from a tree inhabited by wind elementals. The string is made from the sinew of the beast that dared destroy their home. Now restored to a form made for hunting down the beasts hated by the young elementals. The elementals' spirit and mana have left their mark upon the wood, making it light and flexible. The remnant will of the spirits within blesses any arrow fired.
Enchantments: Windsoar

Requirements: Lvl 50+ in any humanoid race.

Jake had liked the Windsoar enchant a lot. It removed wind resistance and even made the normal arrows fly a bit faster. It even made them a bit more stealthy. He had noticed that after he began using his Arcane Arrows, the enchant's effect had lessened, and by now, he doubted he could even use a fully charged Powershot without the bow breaking or suffering irreparable damage.

So, he had transmuted it with a focus on one thing: stability. He just wanted it to be as tough and durable as possible to support his firepower.

[Windsorrow Bow (Rare)] – A bow made from a tree inhabited by wind elementals, now corrupted beyond recognition by powerful arcane energies. The string is made of the sinew of beasts long forgotten. The blessing of the spirits once laid upon this bow has been devoured and transformed by the arcane energies - their final wishes and will made into nothing more than nourishment. All that they were now serves only one purpose: to make the bow as immutable as possible so that it may remain unchanged or be destroyed in its attempt to do so. Enchantments: Arcane Immutability

Requirements: Lvl 75+ in any humanoid race. Quasi-Soulbound

Now, Jake had a lot to say about the description, mainly about how it really painted him as a bad guy. Seriously, all he had done was to transmute it a bit, and now it made him feel like he had just snuffed out the final legacy of a family of wind elementals.

Anywho, new bow in the bag. It looked the same as before for the most part but did have some subtle pink-purple lines running through it. It was also damn durable now and was overall a better weapon. No wind enchant, though. It was just a tough bow.

When he made it to the Fort, the guards only panicked a little until one of them recognized him and poked his partner in the side, and gave him that look you give to your coworker telling them to just shut the fuck up and act like nothing was wrong.

Jake quickly made his way towards the workshops and was quite impressed by how much the place had changed.

So many houses now filled the plains surrounding the Fort, forcing Jake to take flight and fly over them to reach the inner area where he knew Arnold was. The big room where Jake had first seen him was now exclusively Arnold's to use, and those he invited in there. The man had really set himself apart and was still making new inventions all the time.

Also, while the other crafters had been pushed out, that didn't mean they complained. A huge complex had been constructed immediately around the Fort, and Jake saw that the courtyard that used to be filled with tents was now a bustling market.

He even spotted a few large booths by traders who proudly advertised they were from Sanctdomo. They had some interesting and unique stuff, but nothing Jake cared about. Instead, he went straight for the center fort.

There, he once more encountered two guards at the entrance. They both jumped a bit when he landed a few meters in front of the door, his large black dragon wings perhaps looking a bit unsettling. Luckily, one of the guards was once more an old soldier of the Fort and just made a salute and opened the door. Jake felt a bit weird about that, as he had never been in the military or anything like that. You only salute others in the military, right?

Inside the building itself, he could either go to the left or right or straight ahead. To the left was Arnold's workshop, but the first thing he did was to go straight ahead to look at something else equally interesting: the teleportation circle being built.

Jake walked into a large circular room that had clearly been remodeled. It now had a dome-shaped ceiling with lots of small magic scripts on it, and in the middle was a large magic circle more than 6 meters across.

While in the room, Jake felt the space-affinity from everywhere, and the atmospheric mana was nearly entirely space mana. It actually felt a bit weird to be in the room.

No one was there currently, and Jake could see things were still halfway done. Neil came by often and worked on it when not out with his party. It had actually been active for a time and had a corresponding magic circle back in Haven they used to transport goods, but Neil had moved that outside and begun remodeling the one in here. What they wanted right now was to possibly transport living things.

He had to admit, it all looked very impressive, even if he didn't really understand it. Leaving the room once more, he finally went towards his real target and turned into the hallway towards Arnold's workshop. Even now, he could hear the sounds of what sounded like a welder from in there.

Arnold didn't even notice Jake when he entered, as the man was too busy working. Jake saw him working on what looked like a 4-legged robot hound of some sort. That was at least the only name he could immediately get on.

Besides that, he saw so many other constructs strewn about - different kinds of gun-like weapons, what looked like pieces of armor, a lot of small orbs and balls of sorts, and generally just a huge bunch of small electrical devices. Jake could see he wasn't the only one who would have a real man cave. Or man fort.

In the room, there was one thing more than anything, and that was drones. Jake saw so damn many of them, and clearly... they saw him too.

Five of them took to the air the moment he entered and moved to protect Arnold, it seemed. The only thing it really did was make the man aware of Jake's presence as he turned around.

"Ah, you're here. I need you to help make bombs."

Jake was pretty sure he just got placed on some kind of watch list.

Chapter 232: Nanoblade

Jake was sure Arnold was just joking when he asked Jake to make bombs, especially with the deadpan delivery. It turns out the man was earnest, as he scurried over and picked up a box of tennis ball-sized metal orbs.

He also spotted something on the table he recognized. It was a sword with pink-purple lines running through it, and on closer inspection, it indeed was one of the many swords he had experimented on and had transmuted with Arcane Conductivity.

While he did remember handing some over to Miranda and Lillian for them to maybe break them down for parts again or find some other use, he hadn't known Arnold picked one up. Several, actually, as he saw a few more scattered across many different worktables. One could say a lot about Arnold, but organized sure wasn't one of them.

Arnold walked up to Jake with the box of metal balls as he spoke. "I will need you to infuse that destructive type of mana you used to create the swords into these balls to-

"Now, why would I do that?" Jake asked, raising an eyebrow. Miranda had told him that Arnold needed his help with something and had something he wanted to show Jake, which was why he decided to go. Yet the first response he got was to immediately be told to work without any context.

"Oh," Arnold just said, looking confused. "These orbs are made to more easily absorb and integrate any mana affinity and store it till it is released in the form of an explosion, and of all the mana affinities I have seen, the one in the swords seem to carry the most destructive potential."

"No, I mean, what's in it for me?" Jake clarified, now also looking a bit confused.

"... You can keep some?"

The man scratched his head after putting the box down, clearly not prepared for that question. Jake reckoned the guy had gotten used to just having the things he asked for, and he struck Jake as quite the one-track mind kind of guy. A bit like himself, actually.

It made sense in some ways, as Arnold clearly was one of the most influential people in the Fort, and he had even surpassed Phillip in levels. Not by a little either, as the man was now in the D-grade. Something Jake hadn't seen coming.

[Human – lvl 101]

"Fine, I'll look at it, but I want something else too. Any idea where I can get a good sword or dagger?" Jake answered, only agreeing because he did want to try and mess with the balls a bit.

"Hm, I can make you one?" Arnold said, scratching his head again as he scurried off to one of the shelves and took down a case as he explained.

"Energy-based weapons seem to be the most efficient against most entities, but I have found that sometimes you do need a tool more suited for close combat and dealing with enemies with tough defenses, so I have worked on blades that can be attached."

He opened the case, and inside, Jake saw three approximately 60 centimeters long blades, each black as night and looking incredibly thin. Jake used Identify on the first one and was surprised at the result.

[Carbon Fiber Nanoblade (Uncommon)] – An ultrathin Nanoblade made out of Carbon Fiber, making it both incredibly durable and sharp. The blade itself can cut most materials effortlessly but has little to no effectiveness against magical wards or defenses. Due to the materials used, enchanting this blade is incredibly difficult.

Requirements: lvl 80+ in any humanoid race

The rarity itself was surprising but even more so was that these were just the blades, not the entire weapons. Jake knew from experience that if a good handle were made, it would be possible to make a rare sword... making him realize that Arnold was actually pretty damn talented. If him being D-grade wasn't enough. He couldn't help but ask as he stood there:

"Say, have you been blessed by a god yet?"

"Hmm?" he exclaimed, tilting his head. "Ah, yes, I got one when I evolved my profession last time. Quite frightening those gods, not at all something I want to repeat any time soon."

"So, it's a new thing?" Jake inquired.

"56 days. I did not bother with that perfect evolution thing; I cannot see any value in delaying my work for a few more stats. I did not have any immediate field tests planned, so waiting for my class to evolve simply wasn't worth it," he explained. Quite reasonably, in Jake's opinion.

Arnold clearly cared far more about his profession than his class, even if his class was also at a relatively high level. Jake also realized that Arnold had evolved his profession before Jake had evolved himself, making him feel a bit weird. Though, let's be fair, he could have evolved his class way before anyone on Earth if he didn't care about alchemy.

"I see," Jake answered with a nod. "If you can make a weapon using these blades, I am sure we can figure something out."

"Shouldn't be an issue, I have some handles already, but I will need to modify them a bit. They weren't made for human hands."

"Were you trying to make sword-wielding robots?" Jake couldn't help but a bit jokingly.

"Naturally," he answered with the same somber deadpan expression. "Sword-wielding robots are awesome."

Jake just nodded slowly, having severe issues determining if Arnold was joking or not... because, by all accounts, he looked serious.

"Alright, deal. So, I just need to infuse these orbs with my arcane-affinity and make them into bombs?"

"Arcane-affinity? Not the name I would have given it. But yes, that destructive variant, and please inject it till the pin is fully inserted into the orb and then stop," he explained, showing Jake a small pin with a ring on the end. *This is 100% just a grenade.*

"Got it," he answered as the two of them split up and got to work. Was it an entirely fair trade that Jake would get a weapon for infusing some orbs with mana? Probably not, but Arnold seemed perfectly fine with it.

Jake went over to a table with the box, took one of the orbs up, and observed it.

[Aluabsorbant Metal Sphere (Common)] – A sphere made of a composite metal by an extremely talented craftsman. Due to the materials used, this sphere has incredibly high conductivity and can effortlessly absorb and store most types of mana affinities. Once the orb has absorbed enough mana, the trigger pin will be fully inserted. Pulling the pin will release all the stored mana at once after a slight delay. (Charge: 0%)

He didn't hesitate to begin inserting his destructive arcane mana into the first one. He didn't use Touch of the Malefic Viper as he didn't aim to transmute it and knew doing so would likely ruin the orb or make it Quasi-Soulbound like everything else. Arnold only needed the mana, nothing more.

After half a minute, he was amazed to see that the metal sphere kept absorbing mana. He was already a thousand deep. A minute later, he frowned as he had now infused three thousand mana and was afraid something would go wrong if he kept going. Just as he considered stopping, he heard a click as the pin was now fully inserted.

Jake held up the orb that just looked like a near-perfect round sphere with the pin sticking out the top. It had a bit of a purple tinge now, but otherwise, it looked the same as before. The description had only changed the Charge meter from 0% to 100%.

3800 mana was what it took to charge a single orb. Jake saw dozens of orbs in the box and knew he had a task ahead of him as he got to work - Arnold tinkering in the background.

Jake once more stepped through the plains, a smile on his lips as he thought about the loot. He had hoped for a rare-rarity blade, but that hadn't happened. It wasn't all bad, though, as the weapon was a lot better than before.

[Nanoblade Sword (Uncommon)] – The blade is an ultrathin Nanoblade made out of Carbon Fiber, making it both incredibly durable and sharp. The blade itself can cut most materials effortlessly but has little to no effectiveness against magical wards or defenses. The blade itself has little to no mana conductivity. Infusing mana into the handle will automatically coat the blade's edge in mana. Enchantment: Modelled Coating

Requirements: lvl 100+ in any humanoid race

Now, the description hadn't changed much, but what had changed was the level requirement. The blade was now officially a D-grade weapon, and Arnold had said he gave it one final round of tempering before it was put together. The handle had the same enchant as the one the man had wanted for his robots, so it wasn't that useful to Jake as he already knew how to coat his weapons in mana. He could see it being effective for a robot, though.

Jake was interested in Arnold's class and profession but didn't stay back to ask him about details. He didn't ask what god blessed him either; Arnold just said it was one related to making machines.

He had also gotten 10 of the orbs, only on the promise that he would share their effectiveness when he got back. Jake had spent nearly an entire day at the man's place infusing them, and only getting 10 did sting a bit. Oh, and it wasn't like he took a lot either, as it turned out that Arnold didn't just have one box but six. Yes, Jake went through a lot of mana potions.

The 130 kilometers back to Haven from the Fort were crossed even more swiftly on his return trip. He could take several steps a second easily, though he couldn't make running steps; it was closer to powerwalking. It took quite a bit of concentration to use the skill consecutively like that. Also, he didn't exactly make himself go faster by putting his hands behind his back and trying to look like a mysterious old master either. The skill required one to "walk" when making consecutive steps, though there was some leeway in what exactly counts as walking.

He made it back in less than twenty minutes. Jake could have gone faster for sure, but he found it more important to further improve his familiarity with One Step Mile after reaching D-grade.

Jake took flight when he got close and flew over the city directly to his valley. There, everything looked just as usual, making Jake a bit surprised as Hank should have started doing stuff by now, but as he got closer, his sphere picked up that there were indeed things happening below the lodge.

Hank and four other men were down there and what he saw was just damn weird.

One of the men touched the ground, and a deep hole already being made got deeper before large parts were dragged upwards, and another of the men waved his hand and directed hundreds of kilos if not tons of soil and stone into a weird-looking cross between a bag and a trashcan.

Jake considered if he should go talk to them. Usually, he would avoid it... but he decided not to act as antisocial as he normally would but check in on the construction.

He entered the cellar with a smile – one no one could see as he wore his mask – and greeted them.

"Hello there, how're things going?" he asked in a casual tone, trying to be friendly.

All the men, including Hank, turned around, and a few of them yelped when they saw him. Hank didn't heed it but answered:

"Swimmingly, we are already over a hundred meters down now, and based on our estimates, we can begin forming the cave after thirty more."

"That is a bit further down than expected," Jake admitted as he frowned. "Will the Pylon be able to reach down that far?"

"I had Miranda check it, and there are no issues. In fact, the cavern with the dungeon is already under the influence of the Pylon. The aura it gives off is blocked by solid objects such as soil, but it can enter through that when there is an opening. It doesn't go as far up

or down as sideways, but Miranda said that is largely due to her own actions. She has chosen to focus all her energy on encompassing the Fort as soon as possible. It's a waste they're not getting the Pylon bonuses right now, and Miranda isn't getting anything either from their presence," Hank answered as he explained.

"Hm, thanks for the update," Jake answered and took out a small bag of potions. "Take these and keep up the good work. I am going dungeon diving now."

"Alright, be careful. Hopefully, things will be mostly done by the time you return, depending on how long you take."

"No worries if it isn't, I am not in that much of a rush," Jake said, waving it off. "Oh, final thing. Saw the time tree up there? It would be best if you stationed someone close by to keep an eye on it and pick any banana that ripens and eat it right away. 3 agility per banana eaten. Do make sure it is someone who needs the stats, though."

"Sure?" Hank answered, a bit confused.

"Bananas don't grow on trees?" another worker mumbled, Jake completely ignoring him.

With that done, Jake didn't have anything more on his bucket list as he went down the cave and into the once-a-biodome cavern.

He jumped down the hole and onto the platform as the message appeared:

Dungeon: Undergrowth of the Deepdwellers

Requirements to enter: D-grade

Requirements to enter met

WARNING: Only 5 challengers are allowed per party attempting the dungeon.

Enter Dungeon?

Y/N

Jake only briefly considered that much of the bonus information and warnings in the tutorial days were gone. Well, it was a tutorial, wasn't it?

Without further ado, he accepted and was swept away to his first dungeon since the tutorial.

With a ***whoosh!*** she did a ***whishar!***, and the bad beast was cut into pieces by her awesome blades of wind. They weren't as good as dads, but they were still super-duper strong. Mom didn't do wind as good as her and dad, but she did big beams that went ***BOOM!***, and she made big monsters appear to beat the bad guys. That was also pretty cool.

Sylphie was flying through the forest as she fought the bad guys. They looked a bit like Uncle but had a lot more hair and tails, and they kept jumping around between the trees using their tails or throwing stuff. She wondered how Uncle would look with a tail... she didn't like it. A bit more hair would be okay, though, especially on the head. Hair was a lot fluffier than feathers.

"Scree!" she heard from the side as mom flew over and told her to follow them further into the forest. Sylphie wasn't allowed to beat the bad guys with three tails. Only mom and dad could fight those, so she would just blow away the other ones. Beating those wasn't that hard, even if they were a bit higher level. They were just weak, and her super winds were super strong, and the stupid beasts were too slow ever to hit her when they threw stuff, and their silly heavy-thing didn't work against her Green Shield. Green Shield was super great.

Dad had also told her that Uncle had already been in the area before and killed the boss of the bad guys. Dad kept saying that Uncle was super strong, but Sylphie wasn't sure. Uncle only ever sat on his butt and played with his weird pot, so how could he be super strong? Only his smelly pot was really strong. Maybe he threw the smelly pot at the bad guy boss?

Sylphie did feel that Uncle was a bit strong himself, but compared to mom and dad? Nah, mom and dad were super much stronger. But it was okay because Sylphie could always protect Uncle so he could play with his smelly pot as much as he wanted!

Sylphie was super kind like that.

Chapter 233: Evil Incarnate

You have entered the dungeon: Undergrowth of the Deepdwellers

Objective: Lay your hand upon the Heart of the Undergrowth

Jake came to and opened his eyes just as the message appeared. He quickly skimmed it and frowned. This was the first time he entered a non-challenge dungeon and it didn't tell him just to go kill a big boss. Instead, he had to touch some Heart? He assumed it was a figurative thing, but with magic, he could totally see some massive beating mushroom or plant heart being a thing.

He found himself within a small damp cave, and outside he could see a vast underground cavern sprawl out before him. Walking out of the small cave, he finally saw the landscape – because it was truly a landscape.

The entire cavern looked to have a width of at least ten kilometers and a length that spanned longer than he could even see. A constant damp mist hung everywhere, making even his insane level of perception unable to see all the way to the other end.

Jake found the biome quite interesting. There were many different kinds of mushrooms and fungi and many other types of plants, including some full-on trees that looked like pine trees. It was very densely grown and reminded Jake a bit about the biodome the Indigo Fungus had created, albeit with far more growth.

Sense of the Malefic Viper helped him feel the many different affinities permeating the atmosphereic mana, and he found the life-affinity to be by far the most overpowering. Next up was the water-affinity as the humidity of the entire cavern was at a level where he feared mold growing on his cloak. Besides that, there was plenty of dark-affinity as the cavern didn't have any proper lighting at all.

Besides a few glowing mushrooms or the occasional shifting light in the distance, there was nothing else. Luckily for Jake, he didn't really need natural light to see anymore, and the darkness caused by the dark-affinity wasn't an issue either.

So far, he hadn't seen any living things, and his sphere hadn't picked up any movement, even more than 300 meters in front of him. At least he didn't right away... but soon he saw movement. It was only when he exited the cavern where the door to exit the dungeon still stood that these creatures seemed to be aware he was there.

Yes, there was a door to exit for some reason, even if he had entered through a big metal disc. The system seemed to have taken a liking to old wooden doors, and Jake wasn't going to waste energy trying to find out why.

Focusing on his sphere, he zoned in on the movement and saw what it was. It looked like a crunched-over humanoid figure with long bat-like ears and a mouth full of sharp teeth. It didn't have any eyes but instead had what looked like two oversized nostril holes. It looked pretty bizarre, to be sure.

The entire creature was incredibly skinny and wore a loincloth, and carried a wooden spear. Its movements were fast, and Jake saw the nostrils move as he became certain it knew he was there. Finally, he used Identify on it.

[Deepdweller – lvl 109]

The Deepdweller, as it was called – the dungeon's name now suddenly making a lot more sense – made a weird movement as it raised its head and opened its mouth.

Jake heard an almost inaudible sound that seemed to spread far and wide from the Deepdweller. He felt the mana spread through the air along with the sound, and it didn't take a genius to put together what it had done – it was a call for assistance or perhaps a warning call. In either case, it led to even more movement in the distance.

He cracked his neck from side to side as he prepared. His foes did look partly humanoid, but he didn't feel a very high level of intellect from them. Sure, they could use tools in a very basic way, but so could pre-system chimpanzees when taught. No, more than anything else, he trusted his own intuition – these Deepdwellers were monsters, through and through.

His assessment only proved more true as more began pouring out. Some of them didn't even wear any clothes at all but were entirely naked. This variant was far bulkier and looked a lot stronger. Instead of the rather human-like hands that the first Deepdweller had, this one had four long sharp claws instead of four fingers. As for its level, it was actually lower than the first one.

[Deepdweller – lvl 104]

Not that it mattered as they were all so damn low level, in Jake's opinion. So low he wouldn't even gain any experience by killing them. So he wouldn't unless he felt he needed to.

Jake walked forwards as he let his aura rip. He didn't bother even making an attempt at stealth. Instead, he would move forward till he met something worth fighting. He hoped that the dungeon wasn't made for a level lower than him but that it got more difficult the further in he went.

From talks with Villy, he knew dungeons could come in many forms. Some of them were super short, like the Badger's Den, and others were practically their own small world. This one at least didn't look that small, and he knew that the larger a dungeon was, the larger level disparity there usually was.

The Deepdwellers didn't react well to Jake ignoring them but hissed as he got closer with the brute running straight for him, its sharp claws raised. It had three more comrades now, two with spears and one who wore an old tattered robe. Only the brute was stupid enough to attack.

"You sure you wanna do that, buddy?" Jake asked as he looked at the Deepdweller.

Gaze of the Apex Hunter activated, and the big Deepdweller froze up for a second, stumbled a few more steps, and fell down to the ground with foam frothing at its mouth – knocked unconscious.

Eh, a bit more effective than I anticipated, but I guess it did the job? Jake thought as he saw the three Deepdwellers, who looked at him, bolt away into the undergrowth. He had decided to call the weird mixed biome of mushrooms, trees, and bushes the undergrowth as that is that the dungeon was called.

Just as he was about to run further in, the big Deepdweller sprung up, looking confused around before it saw Jake. It screeched, and he was prepared to kill it if it was stupid enough to attack again. Instead, it ran directly away from him... in the direction he was heading.

With a chuckle, Jake decided to have some fun as he followed, much to the dismay of the Deepdweller.

It kept making hissing and screeching sounds as he followed it, Jake primarily wondering how it even detected him being on its trail. As it didn't have eyes, he assumed it used some other sensory organ. He had already noted the large ears, which made him assume they had excellent hearing, and the nostrils also indicated a great sense of smell. Besides that, he assumed they had some mana sense as most monsters tended to have that.

Jake had learned such a sense had as much to do with sensing enemies and prey as it had with finding natural treasures. It was a part of the basic toolkit for pretty much all monsters, which was likely also why his stealth skill included hiding from mana sense in one of the earliest upgrades.

Anyway, his friendly trip with the scared shitless Deepdweller didn't end up taking that long. They were both fast, so a dozen kilometers had been crossed in a jiffy. Jake didn't know if it was due to the stupidity of the big Deepdweller or not, but it had decided to lead him straight to a village of sorts.

Quite a few of these Deepdwellers, he noted. He counted around a hundred in the village, and he began Identifying them to get a general feel for their levels using his sphere.

104

106

103

110

None of them were worth his time... at least he hadn't thought so till he inspected those in the largest tent. There, four Deepdwellers in robes sat around a goddamn mushroom and looked to be in meditation. Not only that, when he Identified them, he saw true horror.

[Deepdweller Fungalmancer – lvl 131]

[Deepdweller Fungalmancer – lvl 125]

[Deepdweller Fungalmancer – lvl 126]

[Deepdweller Fungalmancer – lvl 134]

Jake was a person who didn't believe in objective moralism. He didn't believe anything was inherently good or evil but knew those were definitions created by society. For those who studied social sciences or read a few too many blogs, good and evil would be referred to as social constructs. This is to say, good or evil were 100% subjective terms.

Yet today, he was swayed in that belief.

Mushrooms were – according to him – evil. Villy liked mushrooms, but at least he liked to *eat* them. But these... Deepdwellers... these monsters. They didn't just eat mushrooms. They didn't only control them as tools... they lived in synergy with them.

The Fungalmancer's cloaks weren't there just to cover their bare skin but cover the many fungi growing all over their bodies. They were living incubators of evil, abominations a mix between Deepdweller and fungus. Jake knew it was his job – nay, responsibility – to purge this objective evil from the world.

Jake would not strike from the darkness this time. No, he would walk in and crush them in his malefic crusade.

Also, it would be a bit hard to sneak in with the panicking Deepdweller storming into the village, making loud screeching sounds, and putting the entire settlement on edge with all its ruckus. The Fungalmancers reacted as they got up from their meditation and began heading outside to see what was going on.

Jake just walked straight in, not caring as the Deepdwellers mobilized themselves. He would have expected more intelligent creatures to set up a perimeter, but these monsters weren't that smart. They just charged out of the village towards Jake. Most of them were of the big clawed variant or the ones with spears, but he did also see a few with slings, wearing cloaks.

It was a bit weird to see D-grades that he still equated with powerful look so primitive. But they were truly D-grade, and he could feel they were strong... just far from strong enough. Before, Jake had wanted to show mercy, but no more. They were mushroom-loving monsters. Also, he reflected that not wanting to kill dungeon creatures didn't make much sense. In the grand scheme of things, it wouldn't matter. All that mattered was if he wanted to kill them or not, and while they wouldn't give him experience, killing them would give him a feeling of having made the world a slightly better place.

A blade appeared in each of his hands - one a scimitar that was already hungering, and the other a thin long blade with a simple sheath. These heathens did not deserve the mercy of his bow. Instead, they would die by the sword.

The first one who reached him was a spear-wielding Deepdweller. It didn't attack right away but seemed hesitant. Jake didn't bother striking it down but instead waited as the second arrival came. This one was one of the big brutes, and it didn't have the same sense of self-preservation.

His scimitar flew up, the edge already covered in a purple sheen of arcane energy. The extended claw aiming for his head was cut in two as the blade dug deep into the flesh of the Deepdweller, nearly cutting it entirely in two.

Not that it mattered as the other blade flew up, mana already coating and extending its edge as he decapitated the D-grade in a swift slash, the Nanoblade cutting through the neck like nothing. The blade was sharp as hell, that's for sure.

The Deepdweller didn't die right away but stumbled a bit, its one remaining claw swiping the air as the headless monster swayed back and forth until it finally fell to the ground, the notification coming a moment later.

****You have slain [Deepdweller – lvl 101]****

Jake hadn't moved, and after the kill, neither did the Deepdwellers. His swift execution of their comrade made even the bigger versions of the Deepdwellers hesitate as they stayed back.

That was until the true harbingers of evil arrived. The four Fungalmancers walked towards Jake. The Deepdwellers ranged in height from around 150 centimeters to the big ones at around two and a half meters. The Fungalmancers were all far bigger than that, towering over everything else at nearly four meters each.

The biggest of them snarled and made a hissing sound, making all the Deepdwellers freeze up. A few of the closest to Jake reluctantly moved forward as four more Deepdwellers charged towards him.

****You have slain [Deepdweller – lvl 105]****

****You have slain [Deepdweller – lvl 107]****

****You have slain [Deepdweller – lvl 109]****

****You have slain [Deepdweller – lvl 105]****

“Stop fucking around,” Jake said after swiftly executing the four of them. They were only about as strong as the monkeys individually, aka far too weak to pose any true threat to him. For him to kill a monster below his own level was just too easy. Unless they had some insane variant race or were a Unique Lifeform, he didn’t see himself losing.

He doubted the Fungalmancers understood his taunt, but they did understand his strength and his unabashed killing intent. Seemingly aware they could no longer hold back, they made their move.

All four of them threw off their cloaks as their disgusting bodies were revealed. Small mushrooms were growing straight out of their flesh, mold, and other types of fungi covered nearly every inch, making them look half-rotten.

One of the Fungalmancers placed its palms on the ground and stuck its fingers in as Jake felt the mana in the area come alive. Another one began sinking into the ground, while a third howled as Jake – with his high perception – saw it exhale millions of small spores all over the area. The final Fungalmancer did the most surprising thing as it took out a small crystal and ate it.

The spores released weren't aimed at Jake but all of the Deepdwellers standing hesitantly back. Jake saw it touch their bodies, and it was as if something awakened within them. Mold began growing on their bodies, and Jake felt their auras spike as an extreme level of life-affinity energy was emitted from every last one of them.

As a single entity, they attacked, and all hesitation was now gone. Mindlessly the Deepdwellers tried to stab him with spears or claw him to death, and even the ones who held slings tossed them aside as they attacked with their bare hands.

Jake couldn't help but smirk as he moved. He completely ignored the over a hundred crazed Deepdwellers but headed straight for the Fungalmancers. Wings appeared on his back as the blood within burned with his first wing-flap, taking him towards the Manipulators of Evil – toxic mist in his wake.

He had aimed his blade at the one who had exhaled earlier, but just as the Nanoblade descended, several vines sprung up to defend it, and a hand nearly the size of Jake's entire upper body moved to block.

Several vines were cut, and the Nanoblade got halfway through the hand as he looked at the creature it had come from. He glanced at the Fungalmancer that had eaten the crystal and was now midway through quite the transformation.

Only its one arm had been affected so far, but massive cancerous growths with mold and fungi growing from them popped up all over its body as it grew in size, adding tens of centimeters every second, making it into a hulking abomination. Jake would expect nothing less from a creature that dared call itself a Fungalmancer.

He was actually a bit glad... he could not only purge the world of evil but possibly also get some good fights out of this dungeon.

Chapter 234: Questionable Choices

Jake bent his back as he avoided a wooden spear trying to impale him from behind, and in a spinning motion, cut the Deepdweller that attacked him in two with his scimitar. The kill didn't even make any of the other Deepdwellers hesitate as they came bearing down on him.

He released a wave of arcane mana with a scoff, pushing back the closest Deepdwellers as he once more turned to kill the Fungalmancers. The hulking abomination Fungalmancer attacked him in response, its figure now nearly eight meters tall with its arms even longer than its entire body was high. They looked more like long vines with hands attached to their ends.

Jake dove under the first swipe and cut into the arm with both his blades as he ran alongside it. The Fungalmancer hissed in response and tried to squash him with its other hand, but the hunter was too fast as he jumped and went straight for the head.

Four large vines sprung up from the ground, but Jake had already seen them coming in his sphere and used Shadow Vault to move forward just a little bit faster to dodge them. It was a skill he didn't use that often, and he quickly remembered why as he felt his mana and stamina drain significantly. It used more based on how strong his body was as far as he could tell, and he even took note that the spores in the air needed to be "faded through," only increasing cost further.

But it got the job done, as Jake was free from interference. He stabbed his sword down towards the forehead of the Fungalmancer. Or, well, at least where he expected the forehead to be. It was so mutated with cancerous growth and fungi it was hard to recognize the hulking form as even remotely humanoid.

The sword penetrated straight into the head of the Fungalmancer, sinking in to the hilt without any issue. Jake frowned as it felt wrong, and the movements of the abomination appeared unaffected, forcing Jake to withdraw his blade and jump back.

On the way, he saw the wound close up at a visible rate. *Is it natural vitality or life magic of some kind?* he questioned himself as he jumped to the side, avoiding another round of attacks. The small army of Deepdwellers was getting a bit annoying, but he would rather just kill the Fungalmancers. Also, it was an enjoyable new experience to fight while at the same time being hounded by a group of weaker enemies. Well, they would die eventually anyway... they bathed in his poison mist even now.

With the hulking monstrosity a bit too annoying to kill, he moved to the three others first. Well, two others, as one had sunk into the ground. Jake did see the guy sitting a good hundred meters below, as he was the one who manipulated all those vines.

The two he could target were the spore-spewer and the one with its hands in the ground - the one who seemed to slowly infuse the ground with life-affinity mana. Was it strengthening them? Some kind of long-term ritual? Well, he would love to find out, so he went for the spore-spewer first.

It had yet to stop spewing them out, and Jake could see why. The entourage of weaker Deepdwellers got stronger by the second as more and more growths appeared on their bodies from the spores. Their plan had likely been for the vine-guy and the big guy to keep Jake occupied while two of them powered up and overwhelmed him with the army.

Sadly for them, they were thoroughly outmatched.

Jake stepped through space and appeared right before the spore-spewer. It was the first time he had used One Step Mile in the fight, taking them all by complete surprise. The Nanoblade was horizontally swept as he cut the Fungalmancer deeply in its abdomen.

Before striking again, he jumped to the side, avoiding an incoming assault of vines, and attacked with the sword. This time he managed to cut off an arm as the Fungalmancer tried to block in vain. The monster spewed out even more spores towards Jake as retaliation, and he felt them invade his entire body and take root on his skin.

He felt the fungi dig into him and begin to consume his blood and the vital energy in his body. It felt unpleasant, and he even felt that the spores carried a slight paralyzing poison – one that naturally didn't have any effect.

Drink up, he smiled as his blood turned toxic. All the spores withered instantly and turned to dust, and the Fungalmancer only had time to flash its nostrils in surprise before Jake landed a finishing blow. His blade burned with dark and arcane mana as he stabbed the monster right in the mouth.

****You have slain [Deepdweller Fungalmancer – lvl 126] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

One down

Jake stepped forward and teleported back as he avoided another attack of vines. He turned his attention to the hulking guy as he didn't want to deal with the one infusing energy into the ground. It was guarded by over a dozen Deepdwellers functioning as living walls, but even then, it would be the easier kill. The issue was... he *really* wanted to see what it was trying to do.

The monstrosity attacked him as he ran for it again, making simple and heavily telegraphed attacks. Each of its blows tore up the ground, and he had to admit that getting hit directly would hurt. If it could hit him.

Once more, he cut into its arm and danced around it, slicing and dicing its body. Each cut was incredibly deep and made pus and blood spew out, yet the hulking Fungalmancer seemed unaffected as the wounds healed at a visible rate. He also noted that the blood and pus that spewed out was coated in spores, meaning even its bodily fluids were now weapons.

Jake did notice how fragile its entire body seemed and frowned a bit at how annoying it was to put down. He decided to get just a tiny bit more serious as he jumped back and summoned a bottle. It contained common-rarity Necrotic Poison that he had made during his practice to make the uncommon-rarity version, which meant it was top-tier. He didn't want to waste his precious uncommon-rarity poison on these Fungalmancers. He had a lot of dungeon to go, after all.

After coating both blades while dodging the Deepdwellers and vine attacks, he moved in to attack the monstrosity once more. All of his sword cuts from before had already healed, but he had a feeling the next wounds wouldn't be fixed as easily.

His blades tore into it, and this time it didn't go as before as it failed to heal. The wounds blackened and decayed as the hulking abomination screamed in pain while the poisoned swords dug into it again and again. Jake could feel the constant fight between his poison and the life energy of the Fungalmancer. It tried to hold on, but Jake went in for the finishing blow.

Dodging yet another round of annoying vines, he stabbed the blades deeply into the abomination and quickly placed both palms on it as Touch of the Malefic Viper activated.

The poison spread from his touch, invading every inch of it and further amplifying the Necrotic Poison. It didn't even have time to move before Jake was done and dodged back again to avoid another vine attack - two dark green handprints remaining behind as it collapsed dead to the ground. Then, with a wave of his hands, the swords flew out of the corpse and into his hands.

With the big guy down, only two remained. The one with its hands on the ground huffed a bit more with its nose holes, and Jake assumed it was stressed or scared. Unfortunately, it was a bit hard to tell as they weren't exactly the most human-looking creatures.

Jake wondered how he should kill the one hiding so deep underground. He didn't have any effective attack that could go down there, except maybe forming beams of arcane mana or something? Could he even do that?

He thought about these things as he elegantly dodged all the Deepdwellers attacking him to keep him busy, not caring that much about them at all. Their weapons of choice were even coated with venom, he had come to learn, making him care even less. The spears and claws were all covered in some mushroom-venom, and while Jake was a bit surprised he hadn't felt it with Sense of the Malefic Viper, he just wrote that up to the venom being parts of their bodies or something.

With little effort, he cut down the Deepdwellers one by one as he waited for the grand finale. He could now feel that the life-affinity in the air had grown to an extreme level, and he felt it was soon time.

Finally, it happened. The Fungalmancer did what he assumed was a cheerful smile as it made one last push.

A green explosion of mana came out of it, washing over all the Deepdwellers and Jake alike. At the same time, he saw the Fungalmancer begin sinking into the ground like its comrade, making him frown for a moment... but he didn't have time to address it here and now.

The green wave wasn't aimed to damage Jake, at least not directly. A bit of mold had grown on his shitty cloak, and he saw the fungi begin to glow green as it absorbed the green energy. The same happened to all the moss-covered Deepdwellers that surrounded him as they all pounced... and for the first time today, Jake felt his sense of danger give a noteworthy response.

Oh... I guess I should have seen that coming? Jake thought as the intensity of the green light they all gave off intensified. He barely had time to save the cloak by burning the fungi off with arcane mana and throw it in his storage before the attack came.

Well, shit, in the final moment, he covered his body in scales and summoned a bubble of arcane mana around him as he knelt down and covered his head with his arms.

Fucking mushrooms.

BOOM!

An entire area of several kilometers in diameter exploded in an intense green light that sought to destroy everything and leveled an entire section of the dungeon – Jake smack in the middle.

Sanctdomo had been busier than ever since the World Congress, and like most other cities and factions, they had begun a push to have as many D-grades as possible available for the Treasure Hunt. Of course, Jacob and the rest of the leaders were fully aware that the strongest participants would obtain the best rewards, but that didn't mean numbers were useless. Especially as the system had dropped hints that the event wouldn't just be a pure death game, but one that could be pulled out of when one's life was in danger.

Jacob sat in his small office and went over some reports of possible prospects and had hundreds of pages flying all around him. Mana control had never come easy for him but had gotten a bit easier after reaching D-grade. It had taken many weeks of practice, but in the end, he had finally gotten a good grasp of it.

The papers were of people determined to have the potential to reach D-grade within the next 2 months to attend the Treasure Hunt. He did this every day as he liked to know the names and identities of the future elite of the city, and sometimes he even got lucky and got a revelation when he saw a specific person.

One of the papers caught his eye – a blacksmith. One he recognized. It was one of many he hadn't talked to in a long time, and the last time they spoke, he had been stuck at level 68, and Jacob had advised him to go into teaching.

Jacob smiled. He had failed to break through back then because he was too stuck in his own old-world ways. With 40 years of experience, he had heavily ingrained habits, and he had his own way of doing things and wasn't that open to change. He thought he was already as good as he could get, and that had held him back. Jacob had thus advised him to give up... so that he could start over.

He evolved his profession a week ago, Jacob could see. When he had given up and gone into teaching, he had seen things he had never even considering doing before, and in his attempt to teach better, he had found inspiration and broken through. His mindset had changed, and his barrier overcome. Now, he was open to improvement, no longer set in his old ways, but still with four decades of experience to pull from. He had transformed from someone who likely wouldn't ever level again in his life to an elite prospect with an assured path to D-grade, if not beyond.

That was one part Jacob disliked about being an Augur - he couldn't just tell people what to do if he wanted the best result. The Records from figuring things out and experiencing enlightenment were worth infinitely more than just being told what one should do. This meant that Jacob sometimes had to be a bit roundabout and couldn't directly tell people... he could only set them on a better path; they would have to walk it independently.

Jacob had done so many times, and he remembered every single one like it was yesterday. It was his calling to lead people towards their most ideal fate, after all.

Of the people he had done it with, some had more sure paths than others, and some he did were borderline pure gambles. One of those examples was a certain space mage he had just seen again for the first time during the World Congress. Neil was his name, and Jacob had sent him and his comrades towards Haven so long ago.

That one had been a bit selfish. As a whole, Jacob and the Holy Church had a strong ambition to establish a teleportation network on Earth quickly so they could unite their many cities and more promptly make diplomatic relations.

Jacob knew Neil was incredibly talented when it came to space magic formations and teleportation back then, so he sent him towards his old friend to make sure he had a space mage in his city. Did Jacob know it would work? No. What could he predict related to Haven? Nothing at all. Jake's mere presence as the City Owner blocked all that.

Yet Jacob had chosen to have faith. Sometimes that was all he could have. Jake himself was a black hole when it came to fate, and he screwed everything he was related to divination-wise. Jacob hadn't even known Neil was in Haven till the World Congress began, though he had heard reports of Haven having a space mage.

In some ways, it was a bit exciting, and in others, absolutely terrifying. Jacob was just glad that Jake was his friend. He knew he was, not due to magic or divination or whatever, but because he trusted his own judgment of character. Sometimes even more than he trusted fate itself.

He still remembered his experience in the tutorial. It had been the most painful and hardest thing he had ever done, and he knew it made him look like the bad guy as he had essentially herded his own comrades towards their deaths while lying to them... but it truly had been the best choice at the time in his mind.

As an Augur, he was to realize fate, and killing William would have gone against that. Jacob realized his choice not to kill him that day had as much to do with him somehow following fate's plan as it had him being merciful. Those two together somehow pushed him over the edge to qualify as an Augur, even if he still wasn't sure if that should really be enough. He had decided to just not think about it...

Back in the tutorial, he had lied to them and given them hope for them to keep pushing themselves. To keep leveling and keep getting race levels for one goal only: reach E-grade before William awakened. And he had succeeded with every single one of them.

The reason for that was simple... that would allow them to “live” longer.

A soul’s absolute maximum lifespan was determined by grade due to the qualitative change a race evolution brought. When a soul was sent to the Holyland, it would exist as a Holy Spirit for the maximum lifespan possible of their grade. Him having gotten them to E-grade had bought all of them hundreds of years worth of lifespan.

Yet he could not tell them that is what he did till the last day. So he had to make them hold onto a false hope to keep them progressing. It had made him feel like shit, but the result was truly the best it could have been. Except perhaps having had Jake interfere... but that fate was not one he had seen or even been aware of then. Perhaps his biggest regret.

While a Holy Spirit did live as a human did – they still had the same form and everything – they did have the fatal flaw of never being able to leave the Holyland. They also could never level. It was just a place to live out their lives.

It was one of the big pulls of the Holy Church. Anyone blessed or even Baptised could go to the Holyland and live out the rest of their maximum lifespan in the Holyland. This was even worth it for those who died a natural death, as the maximum lifespan of a grade was something few races ever reached, save for a few such as the undead – yet another reason the Holy Church didn’t like them.

All in all... Jacob tried his best; he truly did. He wanted what was best for everyone and for people to be the best they can be. He didn't like that sometimes the individual would have to suffer for the masses or the masses suffer for one extraordinary individual, so he tried to go for win-wins whenever possible.

But... sometimes that wasn't possible. This was one reason William had to be left alive... he was too important to kill. His fate was too grand to stomp out just to save the lives of a few dozen humans who would likely never reach D-grade, no matter how harsh that sounds.

Things had worked out this time with the smith, but he couldn't expect it to always go well – like with William - he could only do his best and believe in others. Thus was the fate of an Augur of Hope.

Chapter 235: Golden Mushroom

One can have too much of a good thing. Something that would usually be highly beneficial could become unstable and even destructive in too large amounts or too high a concentration. Life energy was no exception.

The Deepdwellers were infused with so much life their entire bodies couldn't take it anymore, and all had to be released. This resulted in the explosion that infused everything caught in it with so much life it died – only to rise again.

The massive area infected by the explosion suddenly sprung to life once more, with massive plants and mushrooms growing rapidly. The only ones that didn't rise were the Deepdwellers, who had been the cause of the explosion. Their lives had been fuel for growth, as the life energy had to come from somewhere."

Yet this growth would only be temporary. A single cycle before the innate life energy in the entire area was used up, and it would take years for it to return to a stable state once more. It was a sacrifice the Fungalmancers had been willing to make to strike down the invader.

But... once more, they had been under a severe misunderstanding.

The suicide attack was undoubtedly powerful and could kill most early D-grades without any issues. At a minimum, it would leave them crippled from the overflow of life energy and make their own bodies turn against them. An influx of too much vital energy was incredibly dangerous, as Jake had already experienced before during the Challenge Dungeon when he consumed his amalgamation. The energy back then had even been neutral and not actively seeking to harm with. This time he was struck with life mana actively seeking to end him, but such a thing was easier said than done.

In the middle of the huge area that was currently experiencing explosive growth, a single area stood unaffected.

A single figure was kneeling on the ground, covered in dark green scales. Blood flowed from the tiny gaps between the scales as Jake gritted his teeth and stood up. A pink-purple current ran across his body as any small annoying growths were instantly eliminated.

More noteworthy was the blade sticking out of his chest. The scimitar glowed in an almost cheerful red light as it drank the foreign life energy from its owner. Standing up, Jake observed the area in his sphere as he noted the peculiar effects of the explosion.

“Should have learned to focus the effect a bit more,” he chuckled, shaking his head. See, this was why big fancy explosions weren’t always the best way to go. So much life energy is wasted by simply soaking into the ground and leading to growth instead of harming Jake.

Now, if one really wanted the best effect of big explosions, the best way would be to make stuff explode from *within* the target. Jake was certain the King would agree. This entire ordeal was actually a bit reminiscent of back then. It even included the entire contaminated area and stuff like that, except for one big difference – the explosion back then had been even more powerful. How the fuck the King had survived it to keep fighting was a testament to his durability.

Jake had only survived back then because his energy was the source of the explosion, and all he was hit by was the impact and nothing more. That was also after the vast majority had been focused within the King, and the energy back then was also far more focused in the immediate area around the King. He survived the explosion this time because he was simply too durable for such a thing to take him down.

Between his arcane barrier, Scales of the Malefic Viper, and his subsequent application of arcane mana to destroy any mana getting too close, he eliminated the vast majority of energy. What he failed to stop, he had the Scimitar of Cursed Hunger absorb. Granted, stabbing yourself in the gut to absorb overflowing life energy wasn’t the optimal choice, but it was better than dealing with tumors.

Jake hadn’t handled the fight as well as he could, but he believed it was still a valuable experience in the long run. He had just started the dungeon, so learning what enemies he would meet were capable of was beneficial. Also, it was a new experience for sure. While

Jake had tried to be supercharged with life energy before, it had never been by a foreign antagonistic type that held clear intent to kill him.

Now, Jake only had one issue remaining... those fungal-loving fuckers hiding below.

“Either you come up... or I make you come up,” Jake said.

Could he ignore them and lose nearly nothing? Sure, he could. But he wouldn't. Justice had to be carried out, after all.

Jake re-summoned his wings – they had been destroyed in the explosion earlier, as he couldn't adequately protect them – and took to the air. On his way up, he summoned his bow. He didn't fly up very high to keep both Fungalmancers within his sphere.

They were just sitting down there, 100 meters below the ground. Neither of them had even tried to attack, making Jake wonder if they were even able to. Maybe they could no longer see him? Well, they could never see him, but they could still detect him somehow.

Jake summoned an explosive arcane arrow and nocked it. He didn't bother using Powershot but just shot it down and watched it explode. It made a big hole, and a moment later, another arrow fell, followed by another, and this continued as Jake rapid-fired arrows of pure destruction.

Like a jackhammer - or Jakehammer if you will - of arcane destruction, he dug. The two Fungalmancers were still unmoving below. The ground was hard due to mana and the

earth-affinity mana within, making it even more dense and solid, but he would be able to dig all the way down with enough time.

When he was 70 meters down, one of them finally reacted, but not as Jake expected. The one who had entered the ground first began coming up towards the surface in a very unexpected and 100% moronic move. Unless it was forced to come up for some reason?

Either way... it was in for a bad time. Jake aimed his bow, and before the head even had a chance to pop up, it was hit by an explosion of arcane mana. He heard it scream and struggle. It tried to summon vines, but it failed as the ground it was on was no longer under its control.

It turns out that when you use half your mana pool to explode an area with arcane mana, it left a lasting effect. Who would have known? The Fungalmancer sure knew now as it failed to properly do anything before its life was ended.

****You have slain [Deepdweller Fungalmancer – lvl 125] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

Jake didn't do much after that but just waited patiently. After a bit, the last Fungalmancer also began coming up, making him now confident that the hiding skill had a duration of sorts. Maybe it was even dungeon-imposed not to have enemies just hide below ground forever. Either way, the Fungalmancer got absolutely slaughtered once it showed its ugly mushroom-filled head above ground

****You have slain [Deepdweller Fungalmancer – lvl 134] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

With both dead, Jake went to the one place still standing after the green explosion – the large tent the Fungalmancers had come from. Well, the tent wasn't really there anymore, but a smashed-together bubble of rubble remained, making it obvious some kind of barrier existed. The mushroom he had seen them sit and meditate around was still in there.

Jake flew down and landed in front of it. With a wave of his hand, he blew away all the debris and saw a green barrier surround the mushroom. As he didn't feel any sense of danger, he walked closer and found that he could walk through it with no problems.

The barrier was only just a few meters in diameter and was created to protect the mushroom - without a doubt created by the Fungalmancers. Jake used Identify on the mushroom to see what all the fuss was about.

[Infused Golden Mushroom (Unique)] – A golden mushroom grown in the unique environment of the Undergrowth. This mushroom contains energies cultivated over a long period by Fungalmancers of the Undergrowth with the hope of gaining access to the Heart of the Undergrowth. Has been further infused with the life energy released from the Deepdwellers that inhabited the village build to guard it. Collect Golden Mushrooms to open up the Heart of the Undergrowth. WARNING: Golden Mushrooms cannot leave the dungeon. If the dungeon is left with any mushrooms, they will appear at the entrance upon re-entry.

Definitely a quest item, Jake thought as he promptly picked it up and threw it in his spatial storage. It was only the size of his palm, which meant it had only looked all the more ridiculous that the Fungalmancers sat meditating around it.

The item instantly gave him a lot of context to the Undergrowth. First of all, the Heart of the Undergrowth could be opened, yet Jake needed only to touch it to complete the dungeon. What did this mean? That's right, bonus objective for better rewards.

Collecting mushrooms was clearly an important aspect of the dungeon. It even included the fact that one couldn't take the mushrooms out of the dungeon. The fact that you wouldn't lose them permanently meant that one required a specific amount. Jake also assumed there was a limited amount and that you needed as many as possible to open the Heart.

That his first mushroom was Infused wasn't something expected, but he hoped it was a good thing. It had to be. Jake loved when his own stupid recklessness was rewarded - that damn system and its repeated enabling of unhealthy behavior. Sometimes curiosity truly didn't kill the cat but gave it a pleasant surprise instead.

With one mushroom in the bag, Jake began to look for his next target. He hadn't even gained a level yet, but then again, he'd only been in the dungeon for less than an hour. Only the four Fungalmancers and three Deepdwellers had given any experience due to the "downside" of his class.

Jake traveled further into the dungeon, running in a zig-zag pattern to not miss anything. Luckily the dungeon was relatively narrow, but he did notice it opening up more and more. In the beginning, it only had a width of 10 kilometers, but after approximately 30 kilometers it now had a width of around 12. It was a small expansion, but it was there.

Through his exploration, he gathered a bunch of herbs, primarily mushrooms. While he did save some of them, he chose to eat the majority due to something the Golden Mushroom had said - unique environment. Maybe it was just flavor text, but Jake wanted to see if he could somehow glance at what this uniqueness was about by learning from the herbs that inhabited it.

After half an hour and around 50 kilometers total into the Undergrowth, he discovered the next point of interest. This time it wasn't a village but instead, what Jake could only describe as a hunting party... as for what they were hunting? The first instance of Jake seeing any creature that wasn't some variant of Deepdweller.

It was an around 7 meters tall hulking monster with slightly humanoid features. It had massive muscles and long hairs covering parts of its body, with a disproportionately large head with an even larger nose. It carried a massive club that looked to be made of wood and walked on two legs. Jake didn't even really need Identify to know what it was.

That's a troll.

[Undergrowth Cave Troll – lvl 149]

It was a troll.

The Cave Troll – true to its namesake – stood in front of a cave, roaring at a party of around fifty Deepdwellers and two Fungalmancers. The Fungalmancers were level 131 and 135, respectively, and the Deepdwellers were around the same levels as those in the village. Only a handful were above 115, the highest one at 119.

Jake decided to just keep his distance, for now, making use of Expert Stealth to stay hidden. He noticed that the Cave Troll didn't want to leave its cave, while the Deepdwellers stayed back and made noises back in response. Neither party looked like they wanted to attack, and Jake could easily guess why.

He could feel that the troll was far stronger than the Deepdwellers. In a fight, it would no doubt be able to crush the other side effortlessly, but it would have to leave the entrance to its cave. Jake assumed that the troll was guarding the cave because something valuable was in there it didn't want to be stolen – like a Golden Mushroom.

Meanwhile, the Deepdwellers wanted to wait for assistance. Jake guessed the villages only got larger and stronger further into the dungeon, so these Deepdwellers had to have more powerful fighters in their midst.

Jake considered if he should just get the party started but decided to wait...

...

It took nearly half an hour before anything happened. How the hell they could just stand there screaming at each other for half an hour straight was insane, and Jake was *this* close to just blowing up a Fungalmancer more than once.

Anyway, a small group of Deepdwellers came, and Jake saw something surprising.

One Deepdweller walked ahead of the rest, and the two Fungalmancers bowed in respect when it showed up. Why they did so was obvious based on the aura it gave off, and Identify confirmed this was no normal Deepdweller.

[Deepdweller Warlord – lvl 146]

The Warlord was wearing some kind of armor that looked to be made of bones. It carried a weapon that looked like a halberd, with a wooden handle and body with a crystalline edge. It looked almost to be made of diamond. Size-wise it looked just like all the other Deepdwellers.

It had arrived with a small entourage of five other Deepdwellers. They also all wore bone armor and carried more ornate-looking wooden spears compared to those the normal Deepdwellers used. Their levels were also a good deal above anything that wasn't a Fungalmancer.

[Deepdweller Warrior – lvl 137]

[Deepdweller Warrior – lvl 134]

[Deepdweller Warrior – lvl 136]

[Deepdweller Warrior – lvl 133]

[Deepdweller Warrior – lvl 136]

Jake still sat in hiding as he saw the Warlord make some loud noises to its brethren, and the troll responded by screaming back at them. The battle was about to begin, and Jake just couldn't wait to butt in and fuck shit up for all parties involved. Would it be a bit dickish? Oh, for sure, but none of these opponents deserved mercy, and he was morally in the right.

The troll defended a mushroom: Bad guy.

The Deepdwellers practically worshipped mushrooms: Even badder guys.

Jake hated mushrooms: Good guy.

It was just math.

Chapter 236: Deepdwellers vs Cave Troll (feat. Jake)

Jake came to a realization as he stood hidden far up in the air on solidified mana within the Undergrowth and observed the posturing of the Deepdwellers before the troll. As he prepared to watch the show, something was missing, and it took him a few moments to realize what it was...

I miss popcorn.

It felt like an eternity since the last time he had popcorn, and the battle about to unfold before him made him truly understand how much he missed those small poppy corns. He would have to ask Miranda about it when he got back because some chef somewhere must have made it. But, wait, they had unlocked Foodstuff with the system store... yeah, he could just get at least the base ingredients through that.

Actually... this made Jake realize that he wasn't even entirely sure how popcorn was produced. He only ever really had them at the movies or when he made them in the microwave. Were those small kernels actually made of regular corn? They were hard and dry... maybe dried corn?

These were all critical questions that occupied his mind as the impatience he felt from the cowardice of the Deepdwellers only increased with every passing second.

Seriously, Jake had assumed things to get started when the Warlord showed up, but instead, it had just joined in with the yelling. He got that it was lower level than the troll, but they outnumbered it heavily. So even if the weaker Deepdwellers couldn't do much damage, they could still do a bit, right?

The five warriors, the Warlord, and the two Fungamancers should be able to put up a good fight, shouldn't they? So what the hell were they waiting for?

Well, Jake learned that only ten minutes later. More reinforcements.

Three more Fungalmancers and six more Warriors came, all with a level between 128-137, along with nearly forty more of the regular Deepdwellers, most of those below level 110. Jake assumed they could only serve as distractions or perhaps living bombs.

Finally, when the Deepdweller side outnumbered the troll with over a hundred to one, they made their move.

The Warlord took the front as the Fungalmancers channeled magic into empowering both it and the many warriors around it. Eleven warriors and the Warlord charged, Fungalmancers right behind as support, and nearly a hundred regular Deepdwellers were surrounding the troll.

As for the Cave Troll, it backed away towards its own cave, roaring higher than ever before. It smashed its club into the ground to intimidate its attackers, but the Deepdwellers were determined. Fungalmancers then waved their hands, and Jake saw the spears of the many Deepdwellers begin to light up with an ominous green color.

Jake sensed the poison and knew the Fungalmancers had done something to amplify it. The same green glow also appeared on the stones of the Deepdwellers with slings and the claws of the big and bulky Deepdwellers – Jake actually felt a bit for that last group because they were sure as fuck not gonna survive melee combat with the troll.

The first strike came from over fifty spears and about a dozen thrown stones headed straight for the troll, timed with a charge from the Warlord and its comrades. Jake heard the Warlord make a weird noise as a green aura washed out of it and into the warriors around it.

They all began glowing green like their leader and engaged the troll.

The Cave Troll raised its arm and had the many spears and stones hit it like a rain of pebbles and toothpicks. Many of the spears were now sticking out of its arm and stomach, but honestly, this only seemed to make the troll angrier. It roared in anger and swung its club, sending out a massive wave of force that blasted back the three closest warriors and continued into the mass of Deepdwellers.

Jake whistled silently at the power of the troll. That was some strength it had there, and Jake sure as hell had no plans of taking a direct hit from that club. The warriors who had been blasted back looked slightly hurt, but the green aura bathing them seemed to focus on areas with wounds, making them heal rapidly.

A few of the Deepdwellers impacted weren't as lucky as they were blown off more than a kilometer into the distance. Likely still alive, but for sure hurting a lot.

In response, the Warlord closed in and attacked with its halberd. A blue glow emanated from the crystalline edge as it swung, sending a wave of energy towards the troll. Simultaneously, four warriors also moved in close to stab one of the troll's legs.

The wave of energy cut deep into the troll's chest, and the spears penetrated even deeper, making the Cave Troll stumble and scream out in pain. It kicked with the leg that had been stabbed and blasted away one of the warriors, while it once more made a mighty swing with its club, this time trying to smash the Warlord.

With extreme grace that Jake hadn't seen coming, the Deepdweller managed to block the club with the edge of its halberd. The body of the halberd bent, and the Warlord used that momentum to spring over the club and cut into the face of the troll in a quite frankly badass athletic move.

The attack cut off the long nose of the troll, sending green blood splashing everywhere as it made an almost supersonic roar louder than anything ever before, sending out a shockwave blasting the airborne Warlord back to its brethren.

Throughout it all, the troll had been pelted with smaller attacks. Vines grew on its lower body, and mold grew all over its thick hair, and it had dozens of spears sticking out of it. Blood was pooling beneath it. The warriors had also managed to land many deep stabs on one of its legs, and from the looks of it, the troll had trouble standing on it.

Jake didn't feel any need to butt in yet, though. Even with the troll down on one knee and bleeding from its entire body... it by far gave off the most dangerous aura of anything present – besides himself, of course.

He was proven correct not long after. The Deepdweller looked to be in high spirits as they kept up the aggression until finally, the troll looked to have had enough.

Jake felt it before he saw it. From the looks of it, the Fungalmancers felt it too as they made some screaming noises, all but a moment too late.

BOOM!

Giant spikes of rock shot up in a giant area around the Cave Troll, impaling more than a dozen Deepdwellers, killing at least a few. The warriors weren't unscathed either but had to retreat while waiting for their wounds to slowly heal. Jake even saw the

Fungalmancers cast some kind of healing magic, blanketing the Deepdwellers in a shower of healing spores.

On the other side, the Cave Troll wasn't idle either. Jake saw all of its wounds quickly began closing up, and even the cut-off nose began growing back. All of it had happened incredibly quickly, and Jake was amazed by its healing powers. Then again... trolls having high regeneration was a bit of a trope, so it shouldn't really surprise anyone.

The explosion of earth spikes by the troll had created a momentary stalemate as both sides healed up. However, this stalemate was broken by the third-strongest creature present as the Warlord cut through a spike of earth and flew forward, once more cleaving into the troll that was in the middle of regenerating itself.

This marked the resumption of the battle as the troll counterattacked with its big-ass club, but this time it was all slightly different. Earth moved, and the soil beneath them seemed almost liquid as if the entire area several kilometers around the troll had been turned into a swamp.

Jake was far enough away to be unaffected, but only barely. He was also happy he was currently standing on solidified mana and not on the ground as he got flashbacks to the Horde Leader and the Steeltusk Boars. He was sure that the Cave Troll would have felt him if he moved on the ground.

He looked on as the tide slowly began to turn. The troll manipulated the earth and pushed back the Deepdwellers. All the regular ones were utterly useless as they were forced to all retreat, which meant it was just the warriors and Fungalmancers as well as the Warlord against the raging troll.

This was when Jake noticed the Fungalmancers do as Fungalmancers do: underhanded tactics.

Jake saw crystals looking just like he had seen one of them consume to hulk out. Then, five of the warriors retreated back and were handed a crystal each to eat by a Fungalmancer. He saw them hesitate for a moment, but some stern noises from the Fungalmancers made them relent as they consumed them.

All five began transforming only a moment later as they bulked up, and massive cancerous growths appeared all over their bodies. With the hesitation of the warriors and the effect the crystals had, Jake was sure that shit wasn't healthy in the long run. He wouldn't be surprised if consuming a crystal was a one-time thing - pretty much a suicide pill for temporary power.

The five warriors charged the troll, and once more, the tide began turning. Unlike Jake, who could dodge the hulking versions of the Deepdwellers, the troll was too large and slow not to be hit. To then make things even worse for the troll, the Fungalmancers began channeling the same damn ritual they had used to try and kill Jake.

That was where Jake drew the line. It had nothing to do with him just getting too trigger-happy to stay put. While it would be a bit fun to see what else the Fungalmancers, Cave Troll, and Warlord could pull out between them, he would rather be the one on the receiving end than sit back and wait any longer.

Holding out his hand, he began summoning his one-shot arrow, also more popularly known as Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. The arrow that appeared looked pretty regular but was just bigger than usual. Jake felt powerful energy from it, reminding him of necrotic energy, likely to counter the life energy.

Jake decided to double up and coat it in some extra common-rarity poison, and he also prepared a good stock of stable arcane arrows soaked in poison, all while observing the battle in the distance.

The mutated warriors were near-unkillable and healed from any wound near-instantly, but the troll did the same. Its skin also looked to be made of stone now, and he saw the warriors hit it fruitlessly the majority of the time.

A halberd occasionally struck the troll, easily penetrating the stonesskin and cutting off large chunks of flesh. The Warlord did most of the damage, with the warriors creating openings and keeping the Cave Troll distracted.

Everything was looking up for the Deepdwellers. The Warlord was the third strongest creature present, with the troll in second place. As for the strongest? Well, he was just about to enter the scene.

An arrow came out of nowhere, taking a Fungalmancer entirely by surprise. It didn't even have time to turn around as it froze up just as it was hit in the back. A meager scream escaped its mouth as it collapsed to the ground, dead a few moments later.

Another arrow arrived less than a second later and split apart mid-air into three. They landed amid Deepdwellers and caused a massive explosion of arcane mana, completely ruining the ritual being performed by the Fungalmancers.

By now, both the Cave Troll and the Deepdwellers noticed that something was going very wrong on the backline. Well, wrong for the Deepdwellers. One of the non-mutated warriors was distracted and didn't react fast enough as the club descended and smashed it into a pulp.

The troll seemed perfectly content using the momentary confusion of the Deepdwellers to strike back and reclaim the advantage. For a moment, the Warlord appeared confused as its nostrils moved rapidly, and it looked unsure what to do. Finally, it made a screeching sound and got an answer from a Fungalmancer just before said Fungalmancer got hit by an arcane arrow in the back of the head.

Jake happily stood back and bombarded the shit out of them with a mix between Splitting Arrow and Arcane Powershots. Due to the distance, he even got some mileage out of the perception amplifier on his stable arrows and, of course, his Archery of Vast Horizons.

Pinned by the troll ahead and an unknown new threat from behind, the Warlord made a swift decision. It ran past the Cave Troll and straight into the cave it was guarding, much to the dismay of the troll that roared angrily and smashed the ground as a wall of earth shot up.

The Warlord swung its halberd and cut through the wall and entered the cave, the troll running after it, not caring about all the attacks it received from behind. Jake thought it was a bit of a dick move to go claim the treasure before the fight was over, but perhaps he shouldn't be the one judging.

Jake began charging up an Arcane Powershot as he waited. He saw the Warlord exit the tunnel a few seconds later with a Golden Mushroom cradled between its arms. The troll had a chance to attack but hesitated to smash down its club, likely because it feared hitting the mushroom. Instead, it tried to slow down the Warlord with walls of earth and tried to grab it.

All of this gave a certain someone a great opportunity to release a fully charged Arcane Powershot just as the Warlord jumped over a wall of earth.

An explosion in the distance of pure energy that all the blind Deepdwellers felt sent a single arrow piercing through the air straight towards the Warlord as the entire area of the Undergrowth was momentarily bathed in purple light. The powerful Deepdweller actually stepped on the air, preparing to dodge, but Jake was way ahead of it as Gaze of the Apex Hunter activated.

The Warlord got hit right in its chest, sending it flying back hundreds of meters – but more importantly for the troll – it dropped the Golden Mushroom due to the impact. The mushroom was blasted off too, but Jake spotted that he indeed had been right in his assessment that those little golden fuckers weren't that easily destroyed. Not that he had tried on his own as they were important quest items... definitely not.

Everyone scrambled for the Golden Mushroom, with especially the Fungalmancers going crazy for it. Jake didn't much care himself but took the chance to launch even more arrows to kill as many warriors as possible, including the mutated ones. The troll also took the chance to begin slaughtering the many regular Deepdwellers.

While those hulking monsters easily handled regular wounds, they sure hated Necrotic Poison. He also found that the occasional exploding arrow did wonders to blow off large parts of their bodies while they had difficulty healing due to the necrotic energies.

Jake had only been interfering with the battle for less than a minute, and it had already turned to shit with the entire Deepdweller side scrambling. The Warlord was who-knows-where and likely heavily injured, two of the Fungalmancers were dead, several warriors dead or too injured to fight, and a troll was rampaging in their midst.

So yeah, all in all, things were going great.

Chapter 237: The Paragon Option

Jake guessed he had to go get the Golden Mushroom at some point, but quite frankly, it just made everything easier for him currently. Jake just had to shoot in the general direction of the mushroom, and he was sure to hit several targets at once when his arrow went boom.

He had also inadvertently made the troll mad now, properly drawing the lines between the three competing factions. Jake called it competing, but his contributions as a faction were just bombarding them from several kilometers away with arcane death.

Half of the warriors were dead by now, the troll seemed not to heal as fast as before, and the Warlord was still nowhere to be seen after it had been blasted away. So Jake switched his focus to the Fungalmancers to take those down.

One of them tried to avoid Jake by sinking into the ground, but that turned out to be a very bad idea. The troll stomped on the ground, and a block of earth emerged – the Fungalmancer within. With a mighty swing, the entire block was smashed apart, sending rock, soil, blood, guts, and body parts of the Fungalmancer flying.

Right after, another Fungalmancer fell to a barrage of exploding arrows. The third and final one tried to get away but was hit in the leg by an arrow and a club from a troll right after. With no more Fungalmancers, the regular Deepdwellers seemed almost lost. The warriors tried to rally them, but panic had truly taken hold by now.

It all looked to be well and truly over for the Deepdwellers – until their true leader reappeared.

The Warlord walked through the air, blood dripping from a nasty hole in its chest, and most of its bone armor was broken. It had let go of the Golden Mushroom to keep hold of its halberd, which was glowing as intently as before. It sniffed the air and seemed to get a good grasp of the entire battlefield. It even slightly turned towards Jake, once more making it clear it was aware of his exact position.

Jake expected the Warlord to attack either him or the troll, but instead, it headed into the midst of the surviving regular Deepdwellers. For a moment, it looked hesitant, and then it did something Jake hadn't seen coming at all.

It took the halberd, flipped it 180 degrees, and stabbed itself in the chest.

That was the moment Jake's brain made a connection. Crystalline halberd... consuming crystal to hulk out... if that halberd was like those crystals...

Jake felt like a gust of wind appeared behind him, blowing towards the Warlord. He knew it wasn't actual wind but the movement of the mana in the atmosphere. All of the life-affinity mana began being sucked towards the Warlord like it was it a black hole.

The body of the Warlord began glowing green, and the many Deepdwellers ran closer. The Cave Troll tried to make use of the opening to smash the Warlord, but all the remaining warriors got in the troll's way, risking their own lives.

As for Jake? Jake sat back to see what it was doing.

This was when he remembered the Golden Mushroom and saw that one of the Deepdwellers had it – one that was running straight towards the Warlord.

The Warlord began mutating at a rapid pace, but unlike the others that had done so, it didn't just affect itself. Instead, the green aura around it made all the other Deepdwellers also begin to mutate and glow green. Jake at first thought it was some kind of area of effect of the crystal to make them all stronger but was quickly proven wrong.

Once a Deepdweller was sufficiently mutated, it ran towards the Warlord – ran straight into it. Literally. The growing Warlord absorbed the Deepdweller entirely, only adding body mass to its grotesque form.

It was all an extremely bizarre and unsettling sight. The troll seemed to agree as it tried to get closer to smash the Warlord again, but a warrior chose to go on a full-on suicide attack to make the troll stop. It jumped straight into the troll to tackle it as its spear glowed a deep green color. It succeeded in stopping the troll, but in return, it got grabbed and had its entire head bitten off by the troll. It turns out trolls have quite the teeth too.

In the end, the Warlord absorbed over 30 Deepdwellers, and Jake thought it was done until one final Deepdweller chose to join the flesh collective – the one carrying the Golden Mushroom.

The moment it got absorbed, it was as if a pulse went through the entire now nearly 10-meter tall Warlord. Golden veins spread through its body, pulsing with life energy. Jake was a bit shocked that it chose to absorb it, and he feared the mushroom was now gone for good... he could only hope it was still obtainable after the Warlord died.

Heck, maybe this was the key to getting it infused? Because he sure was doing this on hard-mode now.

”ROAR!” The troll smashed the final warrior to death with its club, leaving only three living beings in the battle - Cave Troll vs. Mega-Mutated Warlord vs. Jake.

Jake did feel a bit inferior in the size department – no, not there – as he was battling two hulking monsters, both several times larger than he was.

He also discovered that he was vastly different in another area. The two forgetful monsters charged into each other as if they had completely forgotten the very deadly hunter not far away. Thus, it appeared that while the mutation made the Warlord a lot stronger, it also wholly ruined its mind.

On the other hand, Jake was a smart boy as he decided to do the most brilliant thing – kill the weakest enemy first to fight the stronger one on one. As for which one of them was weaker?

The troll was lifted up and smashed into the ground by the large grotesque hands of the Warlord. It was smashed up and down as the earth quaked and split apart. The troll summoned a few pillars of stone that impaled the Warlord, but it barely made the massive monster flinch.

Earth spikes kept shooting up as the troll tried to strike back with its club but found itself restrained. It roared again in anger, sending out a shockwave that momentarily made the

Warlord stumble. Just long enough for the troll to swing its club into the midsection of the Warlord.

Blood and flesh flew everywhere, as several tons of body mass was smashed off the Warlord, yet it seemed to barely mind as new tumors grew and replaced the now-missing flesh. The troll swung again, blasting off even more meat. It tried to go for a third swing but was punched in the head, making it fly back and impact the wall next to its cave.

The troll stood up, heaving for breath. If the fight had been equal from the start, the troll would have likely beaten the large flesh abomination Warlord – even after all the boosts from consuming its comrade and the Golden Mushroom. But as it was, the troll was spent.

It had taken so many wounds already. Poison from all the spears and all the magic from the Fungalmancers still slowly drained away at its life energy. Sickly green spots covered its body, and many of the wounds it had just received festered as they were infected with fungal spores.

The Warlord struck it again, making it tumble to the side. Jake saw it roar and reach out towards the chest of the Warlord but was just punched again. It tried to make another scream, but it couldn't release any more sonic blasts, so it tried crawling back into its cave. The Warlord smashed the upper parts of the cave, making it fall off and revealing what was within the cave.

Jake had been waiting for his opportunity to strike the troll and finish it off as he saw something he hadn't expected.

Two small figures lay within the cave, in an area where the mushroom looked to have been. Both were bloody and injured but not dead as far as Jake could tell. A sinking feeling appeared in his stomach as he used Identify on them.

[Juvenile Cave Troll – lvl 28]

[Juvenile Cave Troll – lvl 31]

They were injured and unmoving as the troll crawled up to them and tried to cover them with its body. The Warlord walked into the cave to finish the job as-

It froze. A gaze it had felt before penetrated into its soul as the entire monstrosity of flesh quivered. It couldn't move for over a second and couldn't do anything either as it was struck by an arrow from a fully charged Arcane Powershot – one that had been prepared for the troll originally.

The Warlord had a hole blown straight through it, arcane energy burning into its flesh, as well as plenty of necrotic energy devouring its vitality. Yet it was insistent on finishing off the troll, seemingly not caring about the damage it took.

This turned out to be an awful decision by it.

Another three arrows struck it from behind, all of them exploding and blasting off large parts, followed by another Powershot that tore an arm off. The Warlord was stupid now, but it had noticed... the source of the attacks was coming closer. And fast.

It still tried – and failed – to end the troll before what would be its doom arrived.

A new impact hit it from behind, but this time it was no arrow. Instead, it was a human with wings that stabbed two swords into its large back, followed by a web of arcane string that wrapped around it.

”Fuck off,” Jake said as he pulled and threw the entire monstrosity of cancerous growths out of the cave. His entire body burned with energy as he really didn’t feel like holding anything back – Limit Break active at 20%.

When Jake saw the two small trolls and the big troll move to defend them, something just flipped in his mind, and his body moved. He knew he was probably a fucking hypocrite and had flawed as hell logic, but when he saw what the troll did, he chose to help it.

For the Cave Troll, the mushroom had been a natural treasure to help what he assumed was its children. Jake couldn’t fault it for that, as it just wanted to keep assisting them. It was defensive of the cave because the children were in there... he remembered how it hadn’t moved from the cave when the Golden Mushroom was taken. Sure, it tried to get it back, but it never dared move away.

Shit, Jake even knew this was a dungeon. None of these creatures were ever going to leave the Dungeon, as far as he knew, but were stuck in this small pocket dimension forever. Even Villy had mentioned that taking a dungeon creature out of a dungeon under normal circumstances was a pipedream. Yet, he still came to its assistance.

Call it what you may, but Jake had chosen a side.

The Warlord got up from being tossed away, having taken little damage. From the throw, that is. Necrotic poison burned into it with more power than anything Jake had ever inflicted before, and the reason for that was simple – uncommon-rarity Potent Necrotic Poison. He had used one of the precious bottles because fuck the Warlord.

He saw it wobble a bit as it got up. Jake didn't bother giving it any time as he charged again, the rest of the Potent Necrotic Poison coating his blades.

With a single step, he appeared before it, both blades now also shimmering with arcane energy. Then, just as he attacked, dark mana joined the arcane, as he used two Descending Dark Arcane Fangs at once, cutting in a cross-shaped attack.

Both his arms shook from the sheer amount of energy he poured into the attack as veins popped on both of them, making blood spurt out. But it was more than successful. The entire abomination was split into four pieces as the cross-shaped dark arcane blades continued through the air before finally impacting the Dungeon wall and cutting a deep mark into the stone.

Instantly all four pieces sprouted out tendrils and tried to assemble themselves once more, even with the necrotic energy and mana burning into its flesh. However, Jake didn't let it as he swiftly summoned his bow and fired a Splitting Arrow that split into four – one for each body part.

Three pieces were blown entirely apart by the exploding arcane arrows, while the piece where the head was remained whole, albeit heavily damaged. It looked like it tried to regenerate itself still but fast gave up as it switched tactics.

It began emanating a powerful green glow that Jake instantly recognized – the fucker was going to blow itself up.

Fuck you, Jake thought as he stepped over and kicked the mass of flesh with all of his strength, sending it flying away from the cave and himself. After he kicked, he took one more step as he appeared before the broken entrance to the cave and held up both his hands.

An arcane barrier started forming in front of him as he covered his body in scales, and just in time.

The still mid-air lump of flesh exploded in a massive green explosion, not unlike the one he had experienced before. This one was far more powerful, though. Fortunately, it was also a lot further away, meaning that in the end, the explosion that hit him was far weaker.

His arcane barrier held up, and he managed to shield the cave entrance. If the explosion hadn't occurred a couple of kilometers away – Jake kicked hard – it wouldn't have ended as well as it did. Jake would still have been fine, but he couldn't say the same about the three trolls behind him.

The explosion continued to fire out energy for five or so seconds before it stopped. Jake didn't quite dare let the barrier down yet, but he did take the time to check his notifications, focusing on the latest one first.

****You have slain [Deepdweller Warlord – lvl 146] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 116 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 117 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 112 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

While Jake didn't get any experience from foes lower than himself, he was pretty damn confident he got even more than usual from those above. Even then, it wasn't like just the Warlord had given him two class levels. One also had to remember the Fungalmancers he had slain since entering the Dungeon and a good bunch of the warriors too.

Well, he did likely get less experience from the kills this fight due to the troll, but what can you do.

Jake quickly flew over to where the Warlord had exploded, and in his sphere, he quickly spotted the Golden Mushroom. Or should he say Infused Golden Mushroom? Because yep, this one had also been upgraded. The key seemed to be to make Deepdwellers blow themselves up.

He turned around and walked back into the cave. The troll was no longer huddling over the wounded troll children but had managed to stand itself up as it tried to look threateningly at Jake. He knew it was all a façade as he could feel it struggling with poison inwardly still, and its legs were slightly shaking. The troll was in no condition to fight.

“I’m not here to fight you,” Jake said as he walked towards the troll. It made a weak roaring sound, but Jake looked at it and shook his head. “Relax.”

The troll didn’t look like it fully understood his words, but it seemed to get the gist. However, it was still wary as Jake took out a small bottle, tossed it to the troll, and made a drinking motion.

“Drink.”

It hesitated as Jake gave it a stern look.

“Drink.”

The troll didn’t dare disobey as it threw the entire bottle into its mouth and chewed on it. Only a few moments later, its eyes lit up, and Jake could already see its legs stabilizing a bit, and the troll’s natural regeneration kicked in along with the healing potion.

It has to have some skill to more effectively activate health points, Jake mused as he walked over the two small injured Cave trolls.

Once more, the big troll was hesitant, but it didn't stop Jake as he gave each of the two small ones a potion.

Half an hour later, Jake was sitting on the ground, enjoying two small cave trolls that were still the size of himself, poke him with their fingers as he meditated to refill his resources and to stave off the period of weakness from Limit Break.

As for the big troll? It was also just sitting there, relaxing.

Jake knew it wouldn't attack him. As to how he was so sure it wouldn't?

Call it intuition.

Chapter 238: A Distraction

Jake sat regenerating on the ground, observing the trolls in his sphere. He was inside a dungeon, but everything was just like out in the real world. Yet he knew he wasn't... dungeons were special. He knew that he himself could meet the trolls now and befriend them, the next party could kill them, and the one after that could never discover them to begin with.

The same troll could die a thousand times, give the same experience a thousand times, yet when party one thousand and one entered the dungeon, they would still see it. The dungeons were temporal pockets of sorts, so whenever Jake entered it alone, he started another timeline for the dungeon. A new reality. This was common knowledge throughout the multiverse and one of the reasons why dungeons were such valuable natural treasures for monsters and enlightened races alike.

But Jake also knew dungeons wouldn't last forever. One day a natural dungeon would come to an end, and what happened to the monsters then? Where did these dungeon creatures come from, where do they go, where did they come from cotton e-

Anyway.

Were they born there? Had they grown up in the dungeon until one day a door appeared, and invaders came? What about if no one ever entered a dungeon... would time just stand still forever? Jake didn't know the answer to any of these things... but he knew someone who did.

Vilastromoz stood within his realm as he once more tried. The entire realm shook as he mobilized every inch of his power. He put his hands on the obelisk as the runes came alive just like all the other times – his entire mind focused only on this one task.

Usually, he would have his mind split into countless fragments. One could talk to Jake, another theorize some magic, work on a concept, and if he needed something physically done, he could just use his Avatars or, if it was a smaller task that didn't require much power, summon a temporary Incarnation. For him to have hundreds if not thousands of these fragments of his mind up at a time wasn't unusual.

But at this moment, everything was gathered for him to use his full power.

A dark green glow emanated from the entire realm for a few moments before everything faded once more. Blood poured out of the Viper's eyes and mouth as he shook his head. "Failed again..."

It was expected in most ways, but every time inspired an immense feeling of failure and grief. He clenched his hands in anger at himself. It wasn't power... he needed something more, but he didn't know what the fuck it was.

Maybe he should fully return his focus to-

"Sup Villy, just making a phone call to see how you're doing and to shamelessly get advice on things I probably should know to begin with."

The Malefic Viper was stopped in his train of thought as the message came. After Jake's evolution, he could no longer stop them... he could zone them out, but the connection between them had changed. A blessed mortal could not stop the divine message of a god, and now he as a god could not stop the divine message from his own Chosen. It was weird and something he had never encountered before. Yet he appreciated it.

Vilastromoz – or Villy as Jake insisted on calling him – answered with a smirk.

"I'm just dandy, and what studying did my Chosen skip out on this time?" Jake heard Villy's voice say.

The words sounded as usual, but Jake frowned. Villy seemed... down. His tone reminded him of the first time they met in his realm. If someone listened to it, they wouldn't know the difference, but he trusted his instincts, telling him things weren't as they should be.

"Are things alright on your end?" Jake asked with concern.

"Of course, why do you ask?" Villy laughed it off. *"What could possibly bother a god?"*

"I don't know, but something clearly is," Jake answered. "You listen to my ramblings and constant questions, so of course you can do the same thing back. If anything is bothering you, just tell me. Even if you just need someone to listen. I am probably not the best at giving advice to anyone, much less a god. We're friends, man, so unload on me if you feel like it. Keeping things bottled up isn't easy or healthy. Be you mortal or god."

Jake knew he wasn't the most articulate, but he hoped to get the point across anyway. He always felt a bit bad about how he only ever got things from Villy while he didn't give much in return. So if Villy needed anything, he would be there.

"I appreciate the thought, but no. Maybe in the future. Right now, a distraction is all I need, so hit me. What's up?" Villy answered after a delay. One far longer than usual.

“Alright, just poke me anytime if there is anything,” Jake relented as he asked the actual question he wanted to know. “How do living things and dungeons play together? I am talking of those that live in the dungeon.”

“In what way?”

“Is there any way for dungeon monsters to leave the dungeon?” Jake clarified.

“Not under usual circumstances, no. Unless the dungeon has inherent mechanics allowing you to bring out living creatures, don’t expect it to happen. All dungeon creatures are, for all intents and purposes, considered dead in the context of the outside world,” Villy explained.

“What do you mean by considered dead?”

“When a creature enters a dungeon, it becomes a part of the world that dungeon creates. Its Records – everything it is – becomes bound to that dungeon. From there, two things can happen once a natural dungeon reaches the end of its lifespan. One is that it will simply disappear along with all the creatures bound to it. The second thing that can happen is that it merely stops being a dungeon but becomes its own accessible separate space somewhere as part of the real world without any dungeon mechanics. Often a prolonged period will have passed for all the creatures in the dungeon, but no one will ever have entered it. For them, it would just be as if they had been stuck in a confined world for a while. The second one is absurdly rare, which is why it is better just to consider them dead.”

Jake frowned as he considered this. He could see that it would lead to issues if one could simply make creatures leave with them... it also added the issue of possibly being multiple copies of the same creature out in the real world. For example, what would happen if Jake

took the troll out with him, and then Miranda entered and also took the troll out. That would create two copies of the troll in the real world. It was damn complicated, so he asked.

“As I said, sometimes you can bring creatures out. You’re actually lucky, an old mate did many experiments with dungeons, and this isn’t common knowledge as it really isn’t something that can happen often. If, say, you managed to bring a creature out, and someone else brought the exact same one out... the second one would disappear the moment it entered the real world. This is because they have the same Truesoul, and thus only one can exist. Well, there are ways to kind of circumvent this by doing some advanced stuff way above anything you are capable of doing anytime soon.”

“Does that mean I am screwed if I want to bring this nice troll and the small trolls out with me? And that I should just consider them almost virtual creatures that are already dead?” Jake asked, his frown growing even deeper. He was happy the trolls couldn’t understand him, as the two small ones were play-fighting.

“Depends. As a natural dungeon, it may have some ways to bring them out. You can also do it through some very limited exploits of sorts. Pretty much consider the kind of means deployed to get people out of the tutorial. If you kill them and do a true resurrection on the bodies outside, you ‘fooled’ the system. If you make them do some incredibly advanced ritual and bring them outside right as their souls transition between living and undead, you can bring them out.

“Besides that, there are some skills. Changing their races and thus souls in any way often leaves an opening, though this isn’t anything you can do. Trust me on that one. The only other way is to bind their souls to yours and make them be considered almost an extension of your being, but you have no ways of doing that either, as far as I can tell. This usually requires special items or a very special set of skills. In conclusion, your only real bet is to hope the dungeon has a natural way to bring them out. And I do mean really hope for it. The rewards given out by the system can be unpredictable, but there are many cases of them being at least partly based on what the people doing the dungeon needs and wants.”

“Huh... I did theorize that was the case back in the tutorial, but then I got a bunch of light-affinity equipment instead... speaking of which, I still have that book and staff sitting around... I really need to pawn it off...” Jake mumbled, deep in thought at the new information.

“The dungeon rewards tend to be related to what is in it. So, based on the dungeon you are currently in, it will likely give out life-affinity loot,” Villy told him, making Jake nod along.

“Makes sense,” the hunter agreed. “Also, no comments in me slaughtering mushroom-lovers?”

“What do you mean? You are dutifully collecting mushrooms right now. I even saw you eat some. That you hate doing it deep inside is exactly what I would expect of a heretic. That you do it anyway because you want the rewards associated with doing so is just what I want out of my Chosen. So keep it up, Heretic-Chosen.”

“Touche,” Jake grinned. “One final thing... what happens if I leave the dungeon now and come back later? What if I wait a year or something? How does that work with all the time-shenanigans?”

“After you leave, the time in your version of the dungeon will keep going for a short period of time. Usually up to around a day, sometimes shorter, sometimes longer. And I already know that your follow-up questions will be what happens if you just stay in the dungeon forever... well, nothing, really. Time will keep moving inside, but nothing will really happen. Due to how dungeons work, the creatures within cannot level or reproduce above a certain point. They simply don’t have the Records for it. So it will just be very boring. Of course, new herbs or ores or anything in that vein will never regrow either.”

“Hm, so it won’t just randomly implode in on itself while I am in there? Nice,” Jake responded.

“The door may disappear though, and the entrance forever buried, meaning you exit somewhere else after an extremely long time has passed, and you will find yourself in a world all but foreign to you, as your prolonged stay in the dungeon has slowly corroded your mind,” Villy said, shooting back with a half-joke, half-warning.

Jake smiled, glad that Villy now sounded a bit more like his usual self. He knew the old snake god was dealing with something, and Jake had a faint idea of what it was... but wasn’t going to press. He had enough emotional awareness to know some things shouldn’t be pushed but had to come out when the time was right.

“Thanks as always, Villy. Remember, just ping me whenever. The connection is two-way, and as I kind of claimed it a bit, you should also abuse this inescapable bond,” Jake reminded him as he smiled in thanks.

“Yeah... it was good to get my mind off things. As I said, maybe in the future.”

“I’m not in a rush for anything. Besides, when the universe opens up a bit more, we gotta get together. Multiversal beer has to be a thing. So take care of yourself. You may be a big boss snake, but sometimes even a big boss snake needs to sit back and have a cold one with a friend,” Jake said with a smile.

“I may just take you up on that offer... and believe me, there is alcohol even us gods can get smashed on, much less a fragile mortal like you. I’ll be sure to pull out some for when the time comes. See you around, Jake, and you take care too.”

He felt the connection fade away as Jake got up. He felt fine now and ready to move further into the dungeon. The troll, on the other hand, still looked quite weak. Jake had already given it two health potions, but they honestly didn’t do *that* much. It had eliminated all the poison by now, but it was still low on health points as far as he could tell.

Jake theorized that the damn thing had more pure health points than himself tens of times over. This did mean it was incredibly hard to kill in a fight, but also that it would take a long time to heal. Heck, even the small trolls needed more than one potion to be topped up, and they were barely E-grade.

How exactly that worked, he didn’t know. Maybe some skill that made vitality grant more health points, or some massive percentage amplifier or something... either way, it didn’t really matter. The troll couldn’t really join Jake in his quest for the Golden Mushrooms as it had kids at home.

He bid the trolls farewell, and the two small ones wanted to follow but were held back by the parent troll. A good call as Jake was about to get some real good slaughtering on. He felt like he had a good idea of what the Deepdwellers were all about now... which meant it was time to turn up the tempo and get this Deepweller genocide started.

Vilastromoz genuinely smiled as he said his goodbyes. Jake didn’t know it, but he had impeccable timing indeed. He had even picked up that he, a god, wasn’t feeling his best. The mortal had even dared question it and ask him directly. For a moment, Villy had focused on something else than his issues, and with it, his headspace improved.

Duskleaf, the Sisters of the Verdant Lagoon, Snappy... none of them would ever do that. None of them dared to. Even Duskleaf, who seemed so casual, never dared cross the line. He still talked to him formally, and Vilastromoz couldn't remember any time his disciple had ever called him anything else but master.

The sisters and Snappy? They would never dare assume they could do *anything* to help.

"He sure is a heretic... isn't he?" Vilastromoz asked as he looked towards the large obelisk. "The last time someone told me to take care of myself was you, I think. I know I should, but...."

He sighed. Today had been another failure... he would just have to try again later.

Over 80 eras, he had tried.

Trillions of years.

More than 10⁷ million failures.

But the Malefic One still refused to give up.

Chapter 239: Justice From Above

"Yes, that's good. A bit more detail there to the le- yeah, just like that."

Miranda directed the young man before her while he controlled his flames with grace and beauty as he carved the large statue. It depicted three hooded humanoid figures standing on top of a Lagoon with small rune-like symbols inscribed upon it. The details were impeccable, and she had spent many weeks with the sculptor to get the details down to perfection, or at least as close to as mortally possible.

Felix had done wonderful work on all of the statues he had carved and had already made ones for several gods. He was the resident statue-maker of Haven and was so far the only one who had crafted them, always in collaboration with someone blessed by the god in question or someone knowledgeable about said god. As to why it was him every time? For fairness, so there wouldn't be any discussions about better sculptors being allowed to make certain statues.

Well, there was still a bit of light bias as Miranda had waited with the statue of the Sisters of the Verdant Lagoon till after the young man evolved his profession. She thought it was a shame, but the young man had been adamant about only focusing on sculpting and not his class, thus missing out on the Perfect Evolution. She could tell he wasn't confident in fighting at all and began sweating just at the thought of it. Some trauma, she reckoned.

It wasn't anything new. Trauma from certain events still happened now, even if it was a bit less than before the system. People had an easier time overcoming it due to their willpower stat, but one had to truly try and overcome it to make any progress. Doing nothing and expecting things to improve on their own never worked before the system and didn't work now either.

Felix had found a new path that he had thrown his all into. He had, in some ways, turned his trauma into pure focus elsewhere. It had worked well for him as he had evolved his profession at level 100 and would reach D-grade at some point without a doubt. Not before the Treasure Hunt – not that he would join it anyway – but surely he would in the future.

His level of skill was incredible, and he improved by the day. So far, of the over a dozen statues for different gods he had made, nearly half of them belonged to the Holy Church, and one of them was of the Holy Mother herself.

That statue was standing right beside one of Umbra, and the one she had just gotten made would stand even more prominently than both of those. This had earned some criticism, but Miranda didn't care. Some believed a statue like that of the Holy Mother should be in a higher position, but they didn't have any power to change it.

As with the statue of her Patron Gods, the statues didn't actually depict the gods in person, but more often just their symbol or some persona of them. No mortal sculptor dared to truly try and depict a god. At least not one only at E or D-grade.

The reason why someone blessed had to be involved was so they could 'imbue' the statues. It gave them a faint remnant of the god's aura and allowed them to serve certain functions. One could pray to a god or make an offering and such using the statue.

Miranda went up to the newly made statue and placed her hand on it. She made a small prayer and got an almost automatic response as her blessing activated and sent a sliver of energy into the statue. The statue began giving off an aura reminding her of her Patrons, albeit far less intense and completely bearable.

“I will have the statue moved to the temple. Thanks as always Felix, great work again today.”

She had it relocated into the temple, which was a huge wooden structure with large logs used as walls. It was the largest building in all of Haven and was quite frankly massive. It was the kind of building that couldn't possibly be built pre-system, mainly because trees hundreds of meters long didn't exist then.

The entire building was formed like a cross with three sections to it. The left and right sections were primarily for “lesser” gods, while the one straight ahead was for the “greater” gods. Deciding where things should go was actually quite easy, as the auras of the statues semi-clashed, and if a weaker god were in the same room, its aura would be suppressed. An exception to this was if the gods were affiliated. All gods of the Holy Church didn't at all interfere with each other.

Her statue of the Sisters of the Verdant Lagoon was placed in the highest hall straight ahead. Miranda knew that her Patrons weren't at the same level as those like Umbra or The Holy Mother, but she still placed it there, and its aura was more powerful than any others – because none of them had any aura infused yet.

How the hell would Haven have gotten someone blessed by Umbra or the Holy Mother to come? They were just made in case Caleb Thayne or the Augur decided to pay a visit. There were only four statues total with an aura infused, and three of those were from people related to the Holy Church. The last one was an unknown god of trade one of the traders knew of. The fifth one was just added today, with the Sisters.

There was still one statue they hadn't dared make. One that would require the involvement of the god's Chosen himself – the Malefic Viper. A spot at the highest point

was already reserved, and Miranda would rather leave it empty than put anything else there. They only needed Jake now.

He had been gone for four days since he entered the dungeon, and Miranda expected it to last a while longer. She hoped he was making good progress as that would be vital for the Treasure Hunt.

It was just a normal day in the village. The Deepdwellers spent it covering themselves in mushroom spores, praying to mushrooms, infusing energy into mushrooms, tending to mushrooms, talking about mushrooms, and thinking about mushrooms.

Their evil acts had attracted a hero of justice. One who had come to put an end to their villainous ways. Justice would be swift and effective, but more importantly, highly explosive.

It came from above in the form of four arrows that spread out over a large area. They touched down and blew up entire parts of the village, leaving the Deepdwellers scrambling. Their leaders began mobilizing to face the threat, but they hadn't been prepared for the sudden attack.

Not just arrows fell, but orbs of pure crackling arcane mana also descended, creating far larger explosions than any of the arrows. These explosions didn't do even close to as much damage to the Deepdwellers, but they did plenty to destroy the village and the environment and cause widespread panic and chaos.

Fungalmancers began spreading their influence to bring the situation under control, but the first one to step forth had an arrow penetrate it through the top of its head and out its

leg – the arrow having run it all the way through before hitting the ground in a glorious explosion caused by the Arcane Powershot.

It survived for a moment, but the next arrow split into three just before they hit the already lying down Fungalmancer, ending its life. All of its wounds were festering with necrotic energy, making sure even its own healing powers didn't have time to activate.

The swift death of the Fungalmancer caused hesitation, and hesitation created openings. Even more death rained from above before finally, a figure stepped forth that could bring some order to the mess. It was a large bulky Deepdweller around four meters tall, with a large shield that looked like a mushroom cap.

[Deepdweller Shroomguard – lvl 142]

It was a Deepdweller much like the Warlord, except far more defensive. It jumped up and blocked an arrow aimed at a Fungalmancer and barely reacted to the explosion as it stood hidden behind its shield. It was damn tanky, that's for sure.

But it had one issue – it wasn't very fast. Another barrage of arrows fell at the other end of the village, killing or injuring more of the Shroomguard's brethren. It made a screeching noise in anger as it stopped trying to passively defend its village but instead sought to engage the attacker.

A green aura surrounded it as it soared upwards towards the culprit of the village's destruction: a small figure standing on air right at the dungeon's ceiling.

The hunter above was ready as he fired an Arcane Powershot down towards the Shroomguard. Jake then tried to freeze it with Gaze of the Apex Hunter but found that he couldn't - the damn Deepdweller's entire body was hidden behind the mushroom shield, not allowing him to make visual contact.

Just as he fired, the Shroomguard dodged to the side, making Jake miss his shot. Well, he said miss, but it still ended up hitting a Deepdweller Warrior below, heavily injuring it.

The Shroomguard noticed, and this made it even more furious than before. It flew straight for Jake, intending to crush him between the shield and the dungeon wall. Jake had no plans of being turned into a human smoothie and avoided the attack quite easily as the Shroomguard smashed into the wall.

BOOM!

A large crater was created from the impact, sending rock flying everywhere. Jake wondered how the hell a mushroom could be so durable but didn't have time to ponder on mushroom physics as the Shroomguard charged again. Once more, he dodged, two black wings on his back offering him far more mobility than the Shroomguard. The Shroomguard couldn't make tight turns but only move in straight lines or make abrupt direction changes, often at nearly ninety-degree angles.

Meanwhile, Jake dodged gracefully as he fired potshots at the Shroomguard while in the air.

This wasn't his first time facing a Shroomguard. Far from it. They were a lot like Warlords, and there was often only one in every village. Jake had been on the Deepdweller warpath for the last three days since he parted with the troll and had gone further and

further into the dungeon, destroying any village on the way and claiming any Golden Mushroom he came upon.

He had gained a few more levels, killed a lot of stuff, and mostly figured out the Deepdwellers. They tended to be extremely protective of Fungalmancers, making those the best targets. Fungalmancers had a lot of support options, also just making them smart to take out first.

Regular Deepdwellers were just fodder for different spells and rituals or annoyances during combat. Having an army of them gang up on you could be annoying, but they didn't have any skills of note besides their mushroom poison, making them mostly non-threats.

Warriors were the primary combatants. They were a lot like the regular Deepdwellers but far more suited for combat. They had better weapons, higher stats and levels, and he deemed them medium-threats. Being ganged up on them and surrounded could heighten them to a high-level threat, especially if they were with one of three leader types he had encountered so far.

Warlords had extremely good synergy with warriors and even normal Deepdwellers. All of them wielded crystalline weapons that they could stab themselves with to mutate and hulk out by absorbing their comrades. Even without being pushed to do that, they were strong in their own right and buffed up all others around them and made them more organized.

Shroomguards like the one he was currently fighting were highly defensive enemies. Jake had only fought one once before, and it had taken a damn while to kill. Regular Deepdwellers only had high vitality but low toughness, which meant they were easy to hurt but healed the damage incredibly fast. Shroomguards were both tough and had high vitality, making them a pain to take down. Their shields were also just annoying, and worst of all, they were god damn mushroom caps.

The last one of the stronger Deepdwellers he knew of was one he had only seen and not fought. It had been called a Deepdweller Heartwarden and had been the first creature Jake had seen since evolving to D-grade that he couldn't identify. It had been in a group of a dozen Fungalmancers, two Warlords, and two Shroomguards, so Jake had made the wise choice of not engaging them.

They had appeared to be in a rush as they sprinted back from some cave where Jake saw some dead monster within. Jake had followed them till they split up, and the current Shroomguard was the second one from that group he was now killing. It had returned to its village only to be slaughtered along with its brethren.

Shroomguards were durable, but their offensive options were limited. They did have a few annoying attacks, but mostly just charged and tried to hit with their fist or shield. They were not as dangerous as Warlords at all but were more just annoyances that would cause issues because they protected the Fungalmancers and gave them time to cast some of their rituals.

Sadly for it, Jake knew exactly how to finish them quickly. He went on the offensive and dodged the many tendrils it sprouted out of its shield to try and entrap him. Jake kept the battle in the air due to its limited mobility, and he knew it wouldn't disengage as its purpose was to defend the Fungalmancers below.

He danced around it, cutting it with his blades and poisoning it slowly. It fought back, and Jake knew it would take a while to finish it the normal way, which is why he aimed his blade at certain areas. He cut it in places that limited its mobility, making it harder for it to defend itself from behind.

Finally, when he was done cutting it up, he moved in close and gave it a good hug. It flew back and smashed him into the dungeon wall with its body and tried everything to get him off, but he held on as he channeled Touch of the Malefic Viper.

Four minutes later, a corpse fell to the village from above, turning into mush as it impacted the ground. The fact that it had survived for so long while having Touch inflict it continually along with his other poison was a testament to its toughness – even if he had only used common-rarity poison.

****You have slain [Deepdweller Shroomguard – lvl 142] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

With the Shroomguard dead... the rest was just a cleanup. Fungalmancers sucked when they didn't have strong fighters with them, and while the warriors tried to put up a fight, they had the major flaw of being unable to fly. A few had tried to climb the walls during the killing of the Shroomguard but hadn't even made it up to him in time. Others had thrown stuff, but they couldn't hit him.

It didn't take long to finish the job, and as the last Fungalmancer fell, he got a level. He finished cleaning up the rest of the warriors and all the regular ones a few minutes later.

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 120 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

Jake stood in the middle of what had once been a Deepdweller village. Craters and corpses surrounded him, and the entire area still burned with purple veins of arcane mana. Nothing in the whole village lived except for him and one more thing, hidden in an underground chamber.

He stepped over to a collapsed tent and blew off all the debris. With another blast of mana, he removed the upper layer of soil and revealed a mushroom of sorts that Jake knew served as a trapdoor. He assumed there was a way to open it but didn't bother finding out how to as he placed his hand on it and used Touch of the Malefic Viper. It withered in seconds, and he pulled it up to reveal a small underground cave with magically reinforced walls. Inside he found the Golden Mushroom, which he promptly claimed.

Jake didn't leave the chamber right away after that but sat down and began meditating as he reacted to one more system prompt – one he felt like he hadn't seen in oh-so-long.

Avaricious Arcane Hunter class skills available

Chapter 240: To Upgrade Or Not To Upgrade, That Is The Question.

Avaricious Arcane Hunter class skills available

Jake always liked getting new skills. Not just because he got something new and shiny to add to his repertoire, but because the list he got was a testament to his progress. Every single offering was proof of his achievements and a small insight into what kinds of improvements he had made. It felt like a good pat on the back and a high-five for how great he had been. The skills also often gave him good ideas for what he could do himself in the future.

As with every other time, he went in with great vigor. He opened up the list of new skills offered, and as always, was incredibly disappointed with the first skill available. Well, at least it was an expected disappointment.

[Arcane Bolt (Rare)] – Inspired by the simple Mana Bolt, you have taken it to the next level and created the Arcane Bolt. Allows the hunter to summon bolts of arcane mana to defeat your foes. You can summon two kinds of bolts, a stable and a destructive version. The destructive bolts will explode upon impact, and the stable version will be tough and piercing. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Intelligence when using Arcane Bolt.

This was far from the first time he had been offered some kind of “Mana Bolt” variant, and it was a bit funny to have seen it progress from common-rarity with the Dark Bolt back in the day to the rare-rarity Arcane Bolt he was offered now. He was even pretty damn sure he could get offered an epic-rarity version if he kept working on it. Jake liked making Arcane Bolts and firing them, but he didn’t feel like he needed a skill to do so at all. Would it make them stronger? Sure, but he seriously doubted they could ever get as good at his arrows.

Hence he moved to the second option – which was another damn repeat. At least it appeared to be so at first glance.

[Disruptive Arcane Wave (Rare)] – Mobilize the arcane and dispel that which impedes you. Erupt in a torrent of destructive arcane energy, dispelling any spell constructs in your immediate vicinity by overloading them with mana and pushing away anything else in your immediate surroundings. Higher consumption of mana and stamina is required based on the power and stability of the spell constructs or physical impediments. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Wisdom, Intelligence, and Endurance when using Disruptive Arcane Wave.

Not much had changed from that Disruptive Arcane Eruption he was offered at level 90, but upon closer reading, there was a difference; it wasn't a mana eruption at all but an energy eruption. It also used stamina and even now benefitted from endurance. It was now more just a small localized explosion of arcane energy around himself. A simple and probably effective skill that Jake didn't need a skill for at all.

It did give some more inspiration, though. Jake should really work on not just using his arcane-affinity with mana but also with his stamina. This Wave clearly used both mana and stamina, making it even more effective on physical impediments as well as magical ones. Having had something like this skill during his second fight with the Indigo Fungus would have saved him from getting half his body sheared off.

But in the end, Jake had no interest in getting the skill itself. He would rather just work on mimicking the effects with free-range magic. Moving on.

[Barrier of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Epic)] – Stability is a cornerstone of your arcane-affinity, making barriers an obvious application of your arcane. Allows the Avaricious Arcane Hunter to summon a barrier of pure, stable arcane energy in a bubble around you, blocking out any kinds of direct attacks that attempt to pass through – both physical and magical attacks alike. Mana or stamina will be consumed depending on the nature of the blocked attacks. All concepts not deployed by you will be weakened within your barrier. Adds a small bonus to the effects of Wisdom and Endurance when using Arcane Barrier.

Now we're getting somewhere,

Jake thought. It was the first skill with "Avaricious Arcane Hunter" in the name and was epic-rarity right away. As for the skill itself? It felt a bit like something he had done many times before, but also had some new stuff.

First of all, it was a bubble around him and not a wall as he usually made. This one was also once more arcane energy and not only mana, likely making it a lot better against physical attacks. Right now, the arcane barrier he summoned was best against magical attacks, though that hadn't been much of an issue as most ranged attacks he faced were magical.

This was another case of him needing to get off his ass and use stamina as well as mana with his arcane-affinity. He had originally formed the affinity primarily using mana, but he knew affinities didn't just affect mana. He still remembered the Aspiring Blade of Nature back in the tutorial who used a powerful aura of sorts with a nature-affinity.

More food for thought that he would have to sit down and seriously go over, hopefully before the Treasure Hunt.

The second very interesting thing about the skill was that entire thing about concepts. How would that work? It said it would weaken any concepts not deployed by him, which he had no idea what meant. Would that mean things like gravity, space, and time itself would be weakened within his barrier? That sounded ridiculous and not at all how things would work. Jake assumed it was great, though, and likely the reason behind the epic-rarity tag. If not, it was just a robust defensive barrier and nothing else.

If he had to make a slightly educated guess, he would assume the barrier could weaken enemy spells already within the barrier that affected him. For example, if he were poisoned, cursed, or on fire, it would weaken those effects. This was ultimately only a guess, but it made sense. It could also just mean that the barrier couldn't fully block concepts but only weaken them slightly, so if he was hit with some weird spell akin to his own Gaze of the Apex Hunter or some mental skill, it was only a partial defense. Once more, he was just guessing, but it did have some interesting implications – if he isolated himself with arcane energy, he could at least partly suppress outside concepts.

To be fair, Jake would be perfectly fine with selecting this skill but naturally still moved on as he had two more to go. The next one was a *lot* more interesting than anything prior, as it was truly something new.

[Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Ancient)] – Your prey is chosen; the hunt is on. Covertly mark targets, making you aware of their positions at all times until the marks expire or are dispelled. All damage done to marked targets is increased. Arcane damage has its damage amplified further. The extra arcane damage inflicted while the marks are active will be built up in the form of an arcane charge that you can detonate to release all the stored up energy. Additional bonus experience earned for slaying a marked target above your level (this effect remains even if your target dies to the mark detonating or within a short duration of the detonation). Adds a bonus to the damage inflicted, the duration of the marks, the subtlety, and the number of marks available based on Perception.

WARNING: This skill is unlocked by, and will serve as an upgrade to, your existing Mark of the Ambitious Hunter

Jake had never tried to encounter a skill selection that offered to upgrade a skill and not just an entirely new one. Was this something new to D-grade? Did it only include class-specific skills? Did this mean he would get a better version of his Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, too, at some point? That would be rad.

The skill itself was honestly just awesome. Jake really loved Mark of the Ambitious Hunter as it was one of those hidden heroes that just helped him immensely. At this point, he didn't even think about applying it to targets before he killed them for the experience, but this did mean that he hadn't really made much use of the extra damage part outside of against singular, powerful enemies. He couldn't help but pull up the old Mark and compare them directly.

[Mark of the Ambitious Hunter (Rare)] – The prey is chosen, the hunt begins. Covertly mark a target, making you aware of their position at all times until the mark expires or is dispelled. All damage done to the marked target is increased. Additional bonus experience earned for slaying a marked target above your level. Adds a small bonus to the damage inflicted, the mark's duration, and the mark's subtlety based on Perception.

The old description was sure a lot shorter, and it also made the differences obvious. The new one would add the arcane charge mechanic, likely more extra damage than the old mark even without arcane damage; it would allow more than one mark active at a time, and it was likely just better in every single way. Shit, it somehow had even kept the aspect of only benefitting from perception, his highest stat by far.

There was also the entire extra experience part that maybe got improved further. Jake still had no idea how much extra experience he got from his old mark, but he used it on every single kill on enemies above his level anyway. Everything counts, after all. He already had a strong suspicion that his class leveled faster than usual against higher-leveled foes by default, and the mark only improved that aspect.

Jake wanted it a lot, but he was still unsure of a lot of things, primarily how it would affect him in the future. Skills were a limited commodity which is why getting some from the Tutorial Store was so valuable. New skills usually only came from titles and level-ups, and he couldn't just expect them to grow on trees. Choosing to upgrade a skill would mean not getting a new one, which was quite the cost.

On the other hand, was it really that bad? He already had skills he barely used now, so wouldn't it be better to make those he actually does use better? Sure, he could upgrade the old ones, but he hadn't had time to do anything like that yet. Skills could also fuse, like how his Hunter's Sight had merged with Gaze of the Apex Predator to make Gaze of the Apex Hunter, or how Sense Herb and Sense Toxin had formed Sense of the Malefic Viper. Those instances had just been improvements and in no way losses, in his opinion, even if he had lost a skill due to the merging.

There was also the fact that he theorized all of the “of the Malefic Viper” skills being part of a whole and eventually merging into one singular incredibly powerful skill. Sure, he had been offered the Malefic Dragonkin race change, likely as a result of having all the skills at ancient-rarity, but he still believed they could be merged somehow. Would he be angry if two or three of his ancient-rarity skills merged and made a legendary one that retained all effects but stronger? No, of course not. At least not in the short run.

In the end, Jake needed a second opinion, so he asked:

“So, Villy hasn’t been that long, but I called anyway to ask you since I am unable to make decisions myself: is upgrading a skill or picking a new skill best? I know you told me about skills being valuable as you can only get a limited amount, so would upgrading an existing one not just mean that I am “losing” a skill? I could potentially just upgrade it myself at some point, right?” Jake asked out loud into the empty chamber where the mushroom had been.

Within a second, Jake felt the attention of the Malefic Viper upon him and the connection strengthening as he answered, his tone the same as usual. It made Jake happy that his pal hadn’t gone back to moping, and the reason why he asked honestly had as much with having an excuse to hear how Villy was doing as it was to get advice.

“That one came out of the blue... you got a potential skill upgrade for one of your skill options while leveling up, I reckon? Tends to begin happening around D-grade, but most often only if you pick a class or profession closely associated with the one you had before. Also, for once, don’t be ashamed at not knowing this – not that I think you know shame about such things – as this really isn’t common knowledge for most. People tend to hate sharing this kind of information outside of their organizations, and the system hasn’t been giving out much info related to D-grades to your universe yet, as far as I know. Most importantly... you would have had to actually talk to other people to learn about it, something we both know has a very low chance of happening,” Villy answered quite rudely.

“Wow, that’s just mean. Am I not talking to someone else right now who is telling me? Also, I am pretty sure you didn’t actually address any of my questions,” Jake answered back with faux offense.

“You answered most of your questions yourself. Any skill you upgrade is the opportunity of getting a new skill lost. It’s pretty simple. Ultimately, it comes down to how much you value the upgraded skill and the nature of the skill. No two skills are created equal, and some skills can do things that cannot be done with freeform magic. Well, theoretically, everything can be done, but some things are just unrealistic. Also, it isn’t like having fewer skills is always bad. Many skills end up unused or forgotten or perhaps end up having overlap with other better skills. Often there is value in focusing on your most important core skills. Focus on your primary fighting method and improve on that while shoring up weaknesses. You don’t need a skill to do everything, but having skills related to what you do most is highly preferred. The rest can be fixed without the use of skills. All in all, having 100 diverse and mediocre skills is worse than having 10 you all use and synergize with each other. Quality over quantity and all that.”

Jake nodded along as the Viper spoke. It was pretty much as he had thought, and the thing about skills too hard to recreate also struck true. If he wanted to somehow create a skill like Big Game Arcane Hunter, he had no idea where even to start or if it was even possible. Villy said it would be possible to do all that skill did somehow... but Jake just didn’t see how at all. It was a skill that made him stronger against higher leveled foes. Maybe some serious soul magic? He wasn’t sure.

Either way, Jake didn’t feel a need to hold back, so he shared the skill’s details.

“Well, the skill marks targets and increases my damage done and making me aware of their positions at all times. It uses my arcane-affinity too and can build up a charge of arcane energy that I can explode. It didn’t have all the arcane stuff before the upgrade, and it could only be placed on one target at a time. It goes up two rarities, by the way. I do reckon both the damage done and the additional experience will also in-“

“Additional experience?” Villy cut him off.

“Yeah?” Jake answered. “Only against higher-leveled enemies, though.”

“Well, that puts the skill firmly in borderline-impossible-to-recreate-territory. If you want to upgrade one, a skill like this would be optimal. These kinds of signature skills can sometimes do otherwise impossible things. Seriously, creating things like that is hard. I didn’t make a poison that increased experience gain before a long-ass time with research. Though to be fair, increased experience gain isn’t actually that valuable and will, for many, just mean hitting a wall at a faster pace. I reckon this won’t be an issue for you, and that it only works on targets with higher levels is good. Remember, the path to power is not a sprint but a marathon. Skills that increase experience gained honestly aren’t that rare either, and most professions or monsters focused on leadership will have skills to increase the experience gain of those under them. It’s often one of the advantages of living under a powerful noble or Alpha,” Villy explained.

That actually wasn’t that surprising to Jake. The Pylon already increased non-combat experience gained, and that leaders had such skills was to be expected. Jake was sure Jacob had some like that too, and maybe Miranda did too? Phillip maybe? He should probably ask them.

“So, do you think it would be good to upgrade if the experience part isn’t even that valuable? That was in my mind one of the big draws,” Jake asked.

“For borderline everyone else, I would say that the increased experience isn’t worth much if it doesn’t also come with an increased chance of enlightenment or something like that, but for you in particular, it’s great. As a new initiate in a new universe, there are many

advantages associated with having a fast leveling speed, and I also don't think you have to worry about hitting any walls anytime soon... if ever."

"I see... well, I do like the skill quite a bit, even before the upgrade, so making it better would be great..."

Jake would have to decide, but before that, he moved on to the last skill, and just by skimming it, he already knew... he would have even more questions for the Viper.