

## THE PRIMAL HUNTER

### Chapter 241: The Morality of Domination

Jake knew his class was considered good just based on the stats it gave and the – in his opinion – not very restrictive downsides it had. Yet he hadn't expected it to grant him a legendary-rarity skill right at level 120, much less one that would give him such mixed feelings.

*[Domination of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter (Legendary)] – Your avarice knows no bounds, and you claim whatever you decide belongs to you. Allows the Avaricious Arcane Hunter to initiate a Soulbinding Contract with other living beings, forcing them to serve him if they surrender to your desires while making them more inclined to work towards realizing your avaricious goals. Any bound being will serve you for life, and your demise will mean their deaths, while your advancement will give them opportunities to continue serving you. In your arrogance and avarice, you have even become able to force those above your level to serve you. Your ability to dominate a target or not is determined on an individual basis. The number of maximum dominated entities is determined by Willpower and how powerful those dominated are. If those you have dominated are foolish enough to attempt to break free, crush their souls to dust. Naturally, your avarice does not allow any possession of yours to escape your will once bound, and only death shall be their release. Dominating a living being will count as slaying it, rewarding extra experience.*

The description was incredibly long... and hot damn. There was a lot packed in there. This skill appeared to have little to no relation to his arcane-affinity as far as he could tell but was clearly entirely related to the “Avaricious” part of his class.

He had to read it a few times to get it... and he really hoped he misunderstood something. Jake had seen many skills – especially those related to Villy – with some weird-ass descriptions, many of them obviously yelling “I am evil!” but this one took the cake.

Jake barely knew where to start... so he decided just to share the entire damn description with Villy to get a reaction.

*“A domination skill? Good time to get one. Soulbinding a dungeon creature will effectively turn them into your possession and allow you to bring them out. Yours even sounds like a rather powerful version, definitely not an easy one to break out of. It even sounds like it includes a Record and experience-boosting part to make those dominated be useful to you for a longer time. Good skill all around,”* Villy answered, far more casually than Jake expected.

“I guess... but... it’s kind of fucked up, isn’t it?” Jake asked. The entire skill just rubbed him the wrong from here to the moon. It was fucked up, right? Or did he have some skewed perception of things? He didn’t... did he?

*“Well, these kinds of skills do have some drawbacks. For the dominated target to progress much further after being bound is rare. I can’t say if it’s due to the targets having low levels of innate ambition that limit them or if it’s just inherent in these kinds of skills. Having a few Soulbinds can be very beneficial, as they do things you don’t have the time or desire to do yourself while being 100% loyal. They can function as meat shields too..”*

“You know what I mean. Isn’t this essentially just forcing someone into slavery?” Jake asked.

*“So that’s what you’re worried about? What a weird mentality. You are killing so many already, so what’s the difference? Soulbinds are essentially just pieces of equipment that can serve certain functions for you. They may be living entities, but viewing them as anything more than tools is meaningless. Those with such weak mentalities to agree to a Soulbound Contract aren’t worth anything to begin with. And have no doubt, they do need*

*to agree to it. The system has some hard rules related to things like these contracts, and signing one cannot be fully forced. Coerced? Sure, but not forced,” Villy said, his tone still far too casual for Jake to feel comfortable.*

“I think there is quite a big difference between killing someone and forcing them into servitude and manipulating their minds to serve you till the day they die.”

*“I already told you, you cannot force anyone or anything to accept it. They will always have a choice – even if the choice will be between becoming Soulbound or death. It often doesn’t even come to that. Many pathetic individuals choose to become Soulbound by those more powerful or influential than themselves, hoping to improve their own fates that way. Sure, it works for some, but advancing a single more rank or living a more luxurious life than before by giving up control of your own life does not make you any less pathetic,” Villy said, and Jake could practically hear his voice dripping with venom before he continued.*

*“Look beyond your own culture for once. You grew up on a planet with a history where forced servitude has quite the bad connotations – ones I agree with – but for the wrong reasons. Slaves are not to be pitied or seen as victims. They are weak and pathetic individuals who surrendered themselves to fates worse than death. The humans who rose up and died to fight for their own freedom are to be admired, but those who chose to wallow in their own misery deserve no pity or mercy. Tell me, if I came to you here and now and told you to become a slave or die, what would you do?”*

Jake frowned as he listened to the Viper speak. He knew he and Villy had different views on many things, and this was clearly one of them. Perhaps it was because the Malefic Viper was exactly that: a viper, but Jake believed things were a bit more nuanced.

“For me personally, I would tell anyone who came to me and told me to become a slave to fuck off and gladly fight them to the death and die rather than agree. But that is me and the current me at that. It is inherent to human nature to try and stay alive no matter the circumstances, even if it means becoming a slave. The sheer desire to stay alive and the

hope of one day escaping a bad situation is incredibly human. Sometimes all people have is hope, so they choose to hold onto that – because once you're dead, all hope dies with you. There is also the whole family aspect to it and how some chose to become slaves to protect those they love. Oh, and finally, let's not ignore that for some, slavery is all they know. It is their norm. They cannot even imagine the concept of freedom, so to expect them to desire the unknown is unrealistic," Jake answered.

*"You humans always had weird views on slavery, Hypocritical even. Your race – on your planet too – always had a tendency to enslave anything they deem lesser than themselves, yet admonish others for enslaving - a tendency that continued after the system. Before, you could at least excuse your enslavement of other races and calling them pets or whatever with the limited intelligence and lack of sapience for those enslaved, but what now? Fuck, it isn't even a problem with humanity but all enlightened races. You talked about how they knew nothing else... that is how every damn beast feels when they grow up slaves and gain sapience while already forced into it. They never even got the choice as they decided before their level of intelligence was high enough to,"* Villy said, and Jake had already predicted the rant coming.

*"Do you have any idea how many of your race have professions or classes related to "taming," as they call it? Someone who forces beasts or other monsters to serve as slaves are called tamers, while those who force other enlightened races are called slavers. The same human can advocate for making a beast into their "pet" and at the same time admonishing the evilness of a slaver. There is no fucking difference between the two, but the perceived value of the lives of two different sapient beings and the fact that the enlightened one is often in a better position to decide. Fuck, if one had to compare, taming a beast is far worse. It is deciding that the beast will one day evolve into realizing it is a fucking slave or condemning them into never evolving into sapience at all. Either way, it is a fate far worse than death – a fate the beast will never have had the option of making. It would be like holding a toddler to its words for life, not even considering the child could grow up and change their mind.*

*"I have heard all the excuses. "Oh, but I am good to my pets!" "I love my pet like family!". Well, guess the fuck what? It doesn't change shit. You're still a slaver, and you should own up to it and stop making bullshit excuses to make yourself feel better. Ah, but don't get me wrong, I am not saying it is wrong... it is just the pathetic double standard I hate. In fact, I would advise you to pick up the Domination skill. Get a few good slaves or beasts and have them serve as defenders of your city, or maybe just as temporary fighting power. Just don't enslave anything you actually value – that would just be ruining them and nothing else. You*

*can even bring that troll out with you. Slaves are tools, nothing more. Treat them as such, and never become some hypocritical asshole who talks about how you actually value them. If you did, they wouldn't be slaves."*

The Malefic Viper stopped his rant, and Jake heard the undertone of anger in disgust, especially in the middle parts. Throughout it all, Jake frowned as he had to consider many things he had never even thought of before. Was having pets in the old world kind of fucked up? Jake would say no... but having them now would be if they were sapient.

He was damn sure that Villy had a history with slavery. As a beast, the double standard of viewing tamers and slavers as different clearly irked him, and Jake could see growing up in that kind of environment had affected him.

Jake had already come to terms with that he was technically a mass-murdering machine. He knew that many of those he killed were intelligent beings with sapient thought, but he had killed them anyway, only for his own selfish goal of getting stronger. He didn't delude himself into thinking what he was doing was somehow moral; it just is what it is. The way the world functioned like that. Jake was a hunter, so he would hunt.

A part of him hated the thought of ever enslaving anything or anyone or forcing them to do his will. Jake was a firm believer in not doing unto others what he didn't want them to do to him... which was why he was fine fighting and killing. He would be totally fine with a strong foe fighting and killing him in a fight, as that was just how things worked.... but he didn't see any reason for needless cruelty.

Fighting foes far weaker than yourself was just pointless. Likewise, torture was a waste of time that leads to nothing good happening. It was why Jake had hated the Minotaur Mindchief so much. If the Minotaur had had just decided that it would kill all humans and went on some righteous crusade, Jake would call it a moron, but he would at least understand it partially. But torturing people? Fuck that noise.

And what was worse torture than turning someone into a slave? To Jake, it would be the worst kind of existence he could imagine, which was why the concept was so abhorrent in his mind. Jake truly would rather die than be a slave and would rather kill than enslave others. Temporary prisoner? Maybe, if the situation called for it, but the Domination skill was permanent. It was a one-way ticket to – as the Viper said – turn another living being into a possession.

“Yeah, I am not a fan of slavery,” Jake answered incredibly bravely. “I guess you dabbled?” he followed up, already knowing the answer.

*“Once upon a time, yes, but not since I became a god. There simply has been no reason for me to do so. People came to serve me willingly, so why would I force others to? Enslaving someone is also a great way to ruin any future they may have, which is why it’s pretty much never done with anyone of value. Also, you won’t have to fear ever being Soulbound,”* the Malefic Viper said.

“Why not?” Jake asked. Well, Villy likely wouldn’t have it, and the blessing likel-

*“You got a bloodline. Anyone with a bloodline cannot be Soulbound. You can still sign Soul Contracts, but not a full-on Soulbinding. The reason for this is simple... Soulbinding someone is to bind them like an item to your soul, and as you know, you need to meet the requirement to bind an item before you can do so. Due to the nature of bloodlines, this means that no one can ever meet the requirements to bind your soul,”* the Viper explained.

“That’s good to know, I guess,” Jake answered. “Does all this mean there is no way to properly have animal companions or something like that? You know, without making them slaves or forcing them to serve you, but still helping them progress with you?”

*“Your humanoid bias is showing again. That is literally what a party is, Jake. Leader-type professions help you progress with your companions and your level and work together as you progress. There are plenty of such professions or even classes focusing on fighting with companions of other races, not just other humanoids. Alphas, nobles, leaders, or other kinds of leadership-focused paths function to amplify the progress of other enlightened or monsters around them and are found everywhere. You don’t need a contract or some kind of magical connection to be companions. There will never truly be a soul-bond of equals unless you fully bind your soul to another. These kinds of bonds do exist, but they will never be available to you either due to your bloodline. All your Soulbinds will automatically become those of domination.”*

“Not sure if that sucks or not, but I guess it doesn’t truly matter,” Jake finally said. “I don’t like this whole domination business. If I could release people again and just use the skill to bring the trolls out of the dungeon, that would be one thing, but this is just too fucked up. So fuck that.”

*“Up to you. The skill is great, and I would personally have gone for it primarily for the bonus experience and gateway into practicing soul magic it would provide, but don’t do it if you don’t feel like it’s your path. Taking a skill like this will greatly impact your future and your progress from here on out. Picking what is compatible with you in the long run is far more important than just going for some short-term benefits. You don’t need a bond to be companions or friends. It is only for those insecure if the other will betray them or those lacking the confidence to have others serve them willingly. Or the worst part, those too cowardly to battle themselves. Slaves have uses, but any task that a slave can accomplish, a willing servant or companion can do better. All who now serve me don’t do so because I make them, but because they want to. Probably for selfish reasons, the lot of them, but that’s still better than some forced bullshit contract as at least they do it willingly – and reaffirm that they continue to do it willingly every single day by not leaving,” Villy finished off with saying.*

“Yeah, I also prefer the non-slavery form of employment myself. Thanks for the talk, as always, Villy. I have a feeling this topic will come up again. I guess slavery just isn’t my thing, and honestly a bit of a dickish thing to do. Glad you grew out of that behavior,” Jake said snarkily, bidding his goodbyes.

*“Heh, talk to you later. Open to discussions on heavy topics at any time, and I always find them enlightening. Mainly because everyone else I talk to just agrees or refuses to even engage. Good luck and have fun. Oh, by the way, don’t be mad when you come to the Order in the future. Slavery abounds here!”*

The presence of the Viper faded, and while Jake felt like while he could still send a message, there was no need to force it. One didn’t always need to have the last word. Also, he seriously hoped that the last part was a joke... but he feared it wasn’t. He would cross that bridge when the time came.

Jake shook his head, as many thoughts still tumbled around. It had been quite the conversation. Jake had heard another quite foreign perspective to his own, but it hadn’t really changed his mind, just expanded his thoughts a bit. Maybe it was just him being stubborn and had the culture of Earth too deeply ingrained in his personality, but he didn’t like slavery as a concept, and he was too damn stubborn to ever do so. He could see that to others; it maybe wasn’t that big a deal. The multiverse was big, and many different people existed. He was sure that he could find plenty of humans on Earth who thought it would be perfectly normal and moral to bind a beast to themselves with what was essentially a slave contract. Jake just wasn’t one of those people.

It did suck a bit that the first legendary skill he had been offered by either his class or profession was a dud, but he didn’t regret skipping it. It wasn’t him. Instead, he picked the Mark of the Avaricious Hunter as that one was far more aligned with who he was.

**You have chosen to evolve Mark of the Ambitious Hunter to Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter.**

**Accept?**



Y/N

Jake naturally picked yes and felt the knowledge flood into his head for a few moments.

***[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.***

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***[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.***

It honestly didn't come with that much new know-how, just the basics of how to use it. It was a simple skill, just the way Jake used it. No long moral discussions about how fucked it was to mark things or not. It was a skill made for hunting down targets and killing them, just the way he liked it.

Though he had some doubts that the dungeon's resident Deepdwellers would agree.

## Chapter 242: Righteous Crusade

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Overwhelming arcane airstrikes.

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

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

They were just bombs that aimed to destroy the geography and buildings, not to actually harm the Deepdwellers severely. It would help him to better understand the arcane

charge thing, though. It was a bit cruel, but this village would become his testing ground. Their deaths would be his test results.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Somehow, his arcane energy could tap into that part of the skill and directly attack the health points of the foe with arcane energy. It was entirely unexpected, and it made him

wonder if it was because it was *his arcane* energy that made it possible or if it was solely the skill. It had many implications for sure...

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

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

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

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

Full perception builds were truly the best.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Next village.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From here on out, it would only get tougher... but Jake had no fear at all. He had yet to encounter any creature truly able to make him get serious yet. Shit, the strongest creature he had seen fight so far was the troll. There was also the Heartwarden he couldn't Identify. It was that one Jake was currently banking on finally giving Jake a good fight.

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

Thus his righteous crusade continued.

### **Chapter 243: Schemes Of An Old Man**

Jake's skill selection for his class at level 120 had led to many things. A talk about slavery, a new skill for Jake to experiment with, insight into his own progress, and one more significant aspect. The system more or less telling him to start looking into using his arcane-affinity with more than mana.

As he went deeper and deeper into the Undergrowth dungeon, he began doing a bit of practice with it throughout some of his fights. He had quite a few skills that used stamina, and he went with those first instead of trying to free-form stuff. Magic? He wasn't even sure what skill-less manipulation of stamina was called.

That is when he remembered... he already had tried using a mix of stamina and mana before in a skill he had upgraded where he made the energies mix. When he upgraded Splitting Arrow, he did by fusing the two energies to split the arrows. Stamina would function as the physical bodies of the arrows, while the mana would function as the inherent magic of the arrows.

Coupled with the system assistance in upgrading skills once he was on the right track, upgrading it hadn't even taken a day. Yet Jake hadn't kept testing after that. Well, to be perfectly fair, it wasn't like he had many chances to. The World Congress and then his crafting marathon came shortly after the last time he upgraded a skill with stamina. He had just needed a reminder to keep working on it.

Of course, neither of those energies had been arcane-affinity, but his arcane-affinity was closely related to pure mana, after all, so it could serve as a base.

Jake began considering all his skills from one end to the other... and found quite a few he used stamina with. Arcane Powershot was the most obvious one... but how would he integrate his arcane-affinity into the stamina portion of that?

The stamina portion of that skill was the stamina moving inside his body. Enhanced Splitting Arrow, Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter... both used

either arcane energy or mixed mana and stamina outside the body. Finally, Shadow Vault also used a mix, but that one was honestly just too weird for Jake to study in the short term.

Anyway, Arcane Powershot used stamina in his upper body with arcane mana outside of it, enhancing the bow and as currents running over his body. He used stamina inside his body and closest to his skin to make sure his own destructive arcane mana didn't harm him while making his entire upper body stronger as he drew the string and charged the arrow.

Meanwhile, the bow was infused with stable arcane-affinity mana. Which made Jake consider more deeply... what kind of effect would his arcane-affinity even create when used with stamina inside his body? Was it even made to be used inside his body, or was it more suited for using it outside?

The Arcane Barrier was, of course, outside of his body. The Arcane Wave was outside, too, even if it did erupt from within him. But... he didn't truly know if the energy it erupted with would *all* be arcane-affinity. Maybe it was just the mana-part of it that was, as the skill used both mana and stamina.

Jake's arcane-affinity had two parts to it: stability and destruction. Together his affinity was all about stable destruction, with both extremes always carrying a bit of the effect from the other. An explosive arrow needed to be

highly destructive but still stable enough not just to blow up right away, while a stable arrow needed to be extremely tough but still able to deal damage outside of just purely piercing enemies. If it were just purely a physical arrow, it wouldn't really be worthy of the arcane-affinity now, would it?

Mobilizing his arcane-affinity outside the body wasn't that complicated, but so far, all he really did it with was using mana... except for his new Mark. The Mark consumed stamina to use when he placed it on targets. Even the arcane energy that exploded within his foes contained no mana at all but was some other kind of arcane-affinity energy. A part of it was clearly stamina with an arcane-affinity... but all it did was deal damage directly to the health pool of his enemy... and Jake was still unsure if that was something special about his arcane-affinity that it could do that, or if it was just something the Mark made possible through system assistance.

This all led to the ultimate question: was it even possible to use his arcane-affinity to make himself stronger internally? Theoretically, perhaps... but was he really going to risk experimenting?

With normal stamina, Jake had blown off more than one limb with his experimenting... what would happen if he tried to do so with even more potent stamina that had a tendency to go big boom? Sure, he could use the stable version... but would that even be better than normal stamina? No, he would

100% need a mix. Jake felt like now wasn't the time for that quite yet. Instead, he would focus on the arcane-affinity on external attacks for now.

The only issue was... he only really had the Splitting Arrow for that... or maybe his basic weapons skills? No, they weren't really useable. All of this meant that Jake shelved the exploration of stamina mixed with arcane-affinity for now as he instead focused on clearing the Deepdweller dungeon. Hopefully, he could get a skill or some inspiration in the future that could push him further.

He was fully aware that was also one more option for stamina – some kind of aura skill. To mimic the Aspiring Blade of Nature or even the Nest Watcher back in the day, as it seemed to only use physical moves. Once more, he reached the issue that he didn't know how to properly do that. A part of him also believed these auras were just outpouring of energy from inside the body – stamina was also called inner energy for a reason.

*Keep things simple... and take the complications as they come*, Jake thought as he flapped his wings and flew through the Undergrowth, picking up herbs here and there, hunting down the occasional hunting party, and searching for the next village.



Villages fell before him one by one, and he fought more and more variants as he got closer and closer to what he believed was the end of the dungeon – and the Heart of the Undergrowth.

***\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 125 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 116 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 126 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points\****

Since entering the dungeon, more than two weeks had quickly passed – each fight took a while, after all, and his exploration of both the dungeon and his own skills hadn't exactly helped his speed either. After the last village had been turned into a scorching hole of arcane energy, he finally reached something new. Jake had noticed that the dungeon had begun slowly closing in on itself again and became narrower and narrower as he traveled in after about the 500-kilometer mark.

It was at around 1200 kilometers. It suddenly ended in a large wall - a wall that was 100% artificial. It was constructed, and Jake doubted it had been by the Deepdwellers. No, this was some kind of ancient construct made by some other civilization.

The entire wall was more than a kilometer tall and had a width of more than 5 kilometers, cutting off the entire path further into the Undergrowth. Jake tried to lay his hand upon it, and instantly he knew... there was no fucking way he could break it.

He did have one cheat, though. With his Sphere of Perception, he saw that the entire wall was nearly 100 meters thick, but that still meant he could see a couple of hundred meters of the other side. There, he saw what looked like a massive net of vines.. all looking like they congregated towards one area outside his range.

Jake scouted along the length of the wall until he saw an opening – and a single figure sitting in front of it, appearing to be in meditation.

It was a Deepdweller that was around four meters tall, and it carried no visible weapon. Everything about it besides its size made it look rather normal, as it didn't even appear that bulky, but Jake could feel this was the strongest creature he had yet to see in the entire dungeon.

### **[Deepdweller Heartwarden – lvl 162]**

Jake could now Identify it... and its level was 12 levels above the second-strongest entity he had seen – sidenote, Jake with this successful Identify, concluded he could now only see the level of foes with a level 40% above his own since reaching D-grade.

He smiled. The dungeon had been good experience but had been a bit lacking in the excitement department. Maybe the Heartwarden could give him a good fight.

The old man blocked the sword of the young woman effortlessly as she slid across the ground to strike again. Her sword appeared to split into dozens as phantom blades rained down. Yet with a single swipe, all the blades disappeared, and the young woman was knocked flying away, landing on the ground – her hand holding the sword shaking.

“Your blade is restless. What is bothering you, my child?” Miyamoto asked his great grand-daughter.

Her name was Reika, and she was the youngest of the main family clan, meaning she was his youngest direct descendent, which had resulted in quite a bit of doting from all parts of the family. She did have four older siblings, so not much pressure had ever been put on her, meaning she had always pursued her passions over everything else.

Before he had become immobile, she had always come by to watch him practice with his sword and had chosen to pick it up herself. Her family had disapproved at first as it was not something they believed a young girl should spend her time on, but when she had proven her talent, they all relented. That the old patriarch had also liked that she did it sure wasn't a detriment either.

After the system, the young woman – who had turned 25 just a few days ago – had been one of the outstanding surprises of the clan. She had not been in the same tutorial as Miyamoto himself but had instead entered with many university students as she had been to a meeting with her Ph.D. adviser at the time of the integration. Another thing she had been stubborn about, having chosen to study chemistry and not economy or business management as most of her siblings.

In her tutorial, she had completely taken charge and managed to excel above all expectations, and returned to the clan as the second-strongest member of the entire clan. She had helped claim other Pylons but had not entered the World Congress as Miyamoto saw no reason to tip their hand and make everyone aware that the Noboru Clan had so many powerful members. This was also the reason why they didn't bring any other D-grades than him despite having two others at the time.

"I still don't understand... why send me? I am not a negotiator, much less a diplomat. Even if you wish for someone to learn about his alchemical prowess, I do not see how it wouldn't be preferential only to send a small regiment of non-combatants and diplomats. Sending my companions and me could also possibly be interpreted as an unintended show of force and worsen relations," Reika tried to argue.

His great-granddaughter was not only a supremely talented swordsman – she was also their most talented alchemist. Miyamoto regretted not bringing her to the World Congress as he wished he had made her meet the Hunter from Haven.

"This will not solely be political, but a chance for you to learn. Your approach to alchemy is one of modern thought, while Lord Thayne of Haven has knowledge of an entirely different path. One of ancientness handed down from

an entity above our comprehension. I believe he has much to teach you, not only about alchemy,” Miyamoto explained with a fatherly smile.

Her tutorial had included plenty of ways to attain and progress the alchemy profession. Miyamoto couldn't help but find it coincidental that an entire faculty of natural sciences students found themselves in a tutorial with the alchemy profession freely available. Moreover, the tutorial had been sponsored by an alchemy-related god, which was possibly why it was organized.

Reika had gained this profession and had only two weeks ago – a month after the World Congress - gotten it to 99 and evolved it. With it, she had attained her Perfect Evolution and had since then progressed immensely fast in both her class and profession.

“Are we even certain this man will be open to teaching? From the reports, he seems the reclusive type and not one to openly accept someone coming to spar with him and exchange knowledge, much less teach another for nothing. It seems like a needless gamble,” she said, trying to sound respectful while at the same time adamantly disagreeing. Miyamoto found it endearing, as she was one of the very few clan members who dared argue back.

It wasn't even a discussion that was necessarily relevant right now. The distance to Haven was vast and would take even him over a month to pass,

so it would have to wait till after the Treasure Hunt. He knew that she would be accepted as that was one of the terms that the City Lord Miranda had agreed to in order to secure the votes for Herbs and the Treasure Hunt.

The agreement was only to have a delegation or an embassy of sorts from the Noboru Clan. None of it included his great-granddaughter interacting or getting any guaranteed meetings with Lord Thayne, but Miyamoto had a good idea how to get that when the time came.

“A man who strives to stand at the apex does not turn away chances to improve, much less a challenge. If you have the confidence to stand tall before him with your level of skill and power, he will meet you, and he will hear you out,” Miyamoto explained confidently.

“How can you be so certain, patriarch? We know close to nothing about him, and the intelligence team is still working on information on his familial situation and history, a daunting task with the interference from the Court of Shadows. I do not doubt he is as extraordinary as has been claimed, but to know his person is another thing,” Reika disagreed, shaking her head.

Miyamoto saw that she truly struggled to understand his intentions and his certainty. His smile grew as he shook his head and confidently declared:

“You are my great-granddaughter, and you are extraordinary too. Lord Thayne will not be able to resist a challenge and an opportunity to spar with another extraordinary human in the same field he is passionate about.”

“How can you be so sure?” she said, a slight blush on her cheeks from the praise. Her long black hair was barely hiding the flush that even went down her neck. Truly, praise had become too rare a commodity in the clan, but it also meant that each time it happened, the impact was higher.

“Because this old man would be unable to resist.”

Of course, there was one part he didn't need to mention. Something that was perhaps just a small hope an old man had in his heart. Lord Thayne was an extraordinary young man, only a few years older than his great-granddaughter. If something happened and the Thayne family was joined more closely to the clan, it certainly wouldn't be something to complain about.

With the younger brother already taken and the City Lord of Haven not having *that* kind of relationship with Lord Thayne as the rumors suggested, he could only hope for nature to take its course if an extraordinary young man



and woman with similar interests began spending a lot of time together. Even if it led to nothing, a friendship would also be valuable.

Of course... it was all just the schemes of an old man. Hope for what could possibly be. Who knew if any of it was realistic with what upheaval the Treasure Hunt could create, after all?

## Chapter 244: Heartwarden

The Heartwarden looked completely unaware of the hunter that was currently observing it. Yet Jake had a strong feeling it was aware of his presence. So even if it didn't know where he currently was, it should have at least picked up that someone or something was coming.

This was why Jake didn't aim to repeat his opening attack against the Prima. He was certain the Heartwarden had *something* prepared as while the Deepwellers weren't the most intelligent creatures – mushroom worship, case-in-point – they weren't complete idiots.

His Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter had the issue of only working on the intended target, meaning if the Heartwarden had put up some defensive measures, his attack would be completely useless. Jake wasn't entirely sure it had, but he did notice that the area it was in was covered in what looked like four odd magic circles. All of them seemed inert, but that could just be because they didn't get power poured into them at the moment.

However, they did look to be of the same making as the wall. All the circles were placed on black slabs of stone that Jake assumed were made of the same material as the wall.

Jake couldn't see what was inside the wall due to where he stood, but he was 99% sure he couldn't get in there without defeating the Heartwarden first. It would kind of be a shitty dungeon if you could just have your defensive fighter distract the big boss as you went for the loot.

Yes, Jake did believe the Heartwarden was the final boss of the Undergrowth – at least the standard part of it. He hoped there would be more powerful foes deeper within, beyond the wall. However, that would be for after the fight to discover.

Having learned from past mistakes, Jake began summoning his Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. While Jake hadn't fought this particular variant of Deepdweller before, he had fought plenty to get a good enough understanding of them to summon the arrow.

It was an arrow much like the one he summoned against the others. The arrow was black and exuded a faint feeling of death due to its inherent necrotic properties. Jake doubled up by coating it on uncommon-rarity Potent Necrotic Poison, as well as using the same bottle to prepare a stock of stable arcane arrows coated in poison.

Once he was done, he didn't fire the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. The arrow was massive like all others, and more than a meter long, but Jake had a strong feeling it would be a waste to just fire it. Instead, he wrapped it up in arcane strings and put it on his back as he drew a regular poisoned stable arcane arrow and began charging his Arcane Powershot.

Through testing, he knew the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter would remain for at least a while, so as long as he fired it within the next five to ten minutes, things should work out fine. However, he did feel it already begin leaking some of its energy even now, making him aware he was on a timer.

Arcane energy swirled around him as he nocked the arrow, took aim and drew the string. Arcane Powershot powered up as he focused on the sensation of the arcane mana across his skin and into the bow, the feeling of stamina welling in his upper body and allowing him to display strength far above his usual.

Once he felt his body unable to take the build-up of energy anymore before it would begin to take serious damage that could impede him in the fight to come, he released the arrow to an explosion of arcane power.

The condensed mana below his feet he had been standing on unsurprisingly blew up, but his wings were already summoned as they stabilized him. Another arrow was already being drawn as his opening shot arrived, Jake only sparing a moment to freeze the Heartwarden with Gaze of the Apex Hunter as he saw the results of his attack.

When the arcane arrow was 20 meters away from the Heartwarden, a barrier of green energy appeared in mid-air as a green rune lit up on the back of one of its hands.

The arrow impacted the barrier along with all of the energy from the Arcane Powershot. It held up for a moment until it shattered, and the arrow continued down towards the Heartwarden. But it was too late as it had already dodged to the side.

Jake landed his eyes on it again and saw it now had equipment in both hands. In one hand, it wielded a mushroom shield, and in the other, it had a crystal halberd. This was the first clue on what kind of capabilities this creature had.

At the same time, as he observed the Deepdweller, it clearly also regarded him with some magical sense just before it attacked. It cut the air and sent a wave of green energy flying towards him, using a type of attack that Jake felt like every damn creature fighting with melee weapons had.

In Jake's opinion, a feeble attempt at trying to be a ranged fighter as he easily dodged in the air, firing another arrow towards the Heartwarden. The rune on the back of the hand holding the shield lit up as a barrier of green energy appeared before it.

Just as the arrow hit the barrier, it split in four, all of them exploding with destructive energy, burning away the barrier but also flooding the atmosphere in dense arcane mana. Enough for the creature's mana sense not to detect the follow-up attack in time.

It blocked two of the arrows with its shield, but the other two hit it in its shoulder and stomach. Some would argue it had gotten unlucky, but Jake called it luck that one of the arrows that hit it was the "true" arrow - the one dripping with toxic energy.

Poison successfully delivered.

At least Jake thought so for a moment until he saw the shield-holding hand light up again, and a barrier appeared – appeared inside and around the shoulder of the Heartwarden. He frowned as he felt the poison failing to spread through his Sense of the Malefic Viper.

With a quite grueling sound, a cube of flesh was ripped out of the Deepdweller's own body, containing the arcane arrow within as well as all the infected flesh. The cube was tossed to the side, the majority of the poison wasted. As for the wound? A rune on the back of the hand holding the halberd lit up as green energy pulsed across its body, making the wound heal even faster than when Jake consumed a potion.

*Well, that's one way to deal with it*, Jake thought. It honestly wasn't that bad as he made the creature expend a lot of resources to remove the poisoned arrow. He had plenty of poison to give out, after all.

The Heartwarden seemed to know this too as it charged towards him, halberd held high. It was flying a lot like the Shroomguards had, but it also appeared to be able to step in the air like the Warlords, making Jake more certain this creature was a mix of the two.

It attacked with mighty swipes, but Jake simply dodged back, not allowing it ever to pin him down. His wings left a trail of poison gas that forced his enemy to constantly expel it while also landing the occasional shot. The fight was honestly going a lot easier than Jake expected. He did have some issues dealing damage as it blocked most attacks with the shield, and what damage he did do was instantly healed. But he was slowly winning out, forcing the Heartwarden to reveal more of its powers.

This was when Jake learned it didn't only have the powers of the Warlords and Shroomguards, but the Fungalmancers too. The ground below him began churning as vines flew up and grasped for him. It also began spitting out a cloud of spores from its mouth to counter his poison mist.

Jake cared little for the attack but sent out a blast of arcane energy down towards the grasping vines, blowing up a few of them while easily dodging the remaining ones. In fact, the newfound powers didn't change much as Jake still stayed ahead of the Heartwarden at every turn.

Feeling confident, Jake increased his aggressiveness to actually deal some damage. He had failed to land a single poisoned arrow since that first one, with the Heartwarden blocking or dodging every single one after that. To change up the situation a bit, Jake began firing

more arrows, allowing the Heartwarden to get closer than before to decrease the travel distance.

Instantly he began landing far more arrows than before as it failed to block every one of them, but at the same time, Jake also got a few scratches from vines or the green waves of energy it kept sending after him. Nevertheless, it was a trade he was willing to make.

Jake was waiting for a good opportunity to land the dose of death he carried strapped to his back in the form of a giant arrow, but it appeared that the Heartwarden made its move first.

Both the runes on its hands lit up at once as the fungus vines came up from below far faster than before as they gave off a green glow. Barriers also began appearing around him to block off his path of retreat, forcing Jake to either face the rising vines or the Heartwarden directly.

He chose the vines.

Jake fired down an exploding arcane arrow that split into four, sending out a giant blast that destroyed hundreds of meters worth of airspace, taking the vines with it. He fired again and destroyed even more, yet his danger sense spiked – the Heartwarden wasn't done.

That is when he saw them in his sphere. Millions of small splinters floating in the air from the exploded mushroom vines, as it appeared like small fragments of wood had been within. All these splinters gathered in a matter of seconds as spears Jake recognized as those worn by the warriors appeared in mid-air, floating behind the Heartwarden like a giant wall of spikes.

Jake counted over a thousand... all of them now headed straight for him in a rain of wooden spears.

He wanted to dodge away, but the damn barriers appeared around him again as the rune lit up on its shield-hand, and when the halberd-hand lit up, so did the spears as green energy was infused into them.

Scales covered his skin as he summoned a shield of arcane energy in front of him. Simultaneously he flapped his wings and focused on his sphere and danger sense as he allowed his body to move as it wanted – flying straight towards the rain of spears.

This was not a situation he could get unscathed out of, but he could minimize the damage. The rain hit him as he dodged the first few. He was hit in the arm, but he avoided one headed for his shoulder due to that. He took one in the shoulder but avoided one to the chest and took one in the chest to avoid one in the head. Jake felt the poison from the spears invade his body, Palate already eating it up.

He was headed straight for the unprepared Heartwarden that was using all its focus controlling the spears. Jake broke free of the rain, and he saw all the spears turn in air and speed towards his back far faster than he flew... but Jake was ready.

The strings on his back delivered the arrow as he summoned his bow. His gaze landed on the Heartwarden, and it froze. Unfortunately, this would not be enough to stop the rain of spears as only its body was frozen. The Heartwarden seemed to have accepted to be hit by the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter to have Dozens of spears impale Jake.

Sadly for it, Jake had other plans. He needed to break its focus and make it lose control over the spears for just a moment, so he set it off.

The Mark activated, and the entire Heartwarden flashed with purple energy for the blink of an eye as it screamed in pain, the spears behind him becoming disorganized. Jake released his arrow straight towards the Heartwarden that was hit in the chest without even making the slightest attempt to dodge – a new Mark already placed before the arrow hit.

It was blasted back several kilometers and smashed into the giant wall it had guarded. It would have been impaled if Jake's arrow was able to pierce the wall, but he would just have to take the giant bleeding and festering hole in the Heartwarden's chest instead.

Jake easily dodged all the spears, as the projectiles now fell towards his body without direction as their manipulator was busy getting blasted to kingdom come.

The Deepdweller at the wall began glowing in a green light, and both its halberd and shield were absorbed into its body as it fell. Jake saw it start to enter its second phase – but he was already way ahead of it. Limit Break activated at 20% as Jake moved in, not giving it any time to transform as it pleased.

A few quick One Step Miles and he appeared where it would land. As it began mutating, it was unable to move properly, which Jake took full advantage of. He shot poisoned arrows up into the still-falling corpse, delivering poison dose after poison dose.

That is until armor covered its body just like it had covered the Shroomguards when they absorbed a mushroom. Jake smirked as he kept firing where the armor didn't have time to form yet, and when its entire body was covered, he jumped.



The grotesque falling Deepdweller mutated so much it began sending out fleshy tentacles towards Jake, black veins covering its entire body from over 25 poisoned arrows. The tentacles swiped for him, but two blades appeared in his hands as he cut at them.

He sliced and diced and jumped back as the wriggling mass of tumors and flesh began trying to take on a humanoid form. Once more, Jake did not allow it to do as it pleased. This transformation time was a huge opening that he had exploited and would keep exploiting.

His blades were also quickly coated in poison as he moved in closer. The tentacles struggled, the body still forming. Where all the flesh came from, he didn't know, but he saw it glow in a golden color, making him wonder if the damn thing had another Golden Mushroom within it.

The armor covered most of it, but where the tentacles came out, it was pure flesh. Jake cut off a part of a tentacle and used a Descending Dark Fang to puncture a deep hole into the monstrosity of flesh. Jake flipped his wrist as two items appeared in it. One of them was a bottle with Potent Necrotic Poison, and the other was a small sphere pulsing with arcane energy. Jake pulled out the pin and put the sphere and bottle into the wound as he jumped back, landing on the ground and doing a One Step Mile as the explosion came.

**\*BOOM!\***

As the explosion rushed over him, he pulled out another two spheres. It was something he had remembered amid battle and thought that now was the perfect time to test them – the spheres from Arnold.

**[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: 99.8%)**

Jake was surprised by the explosion, and based on the agonizing screams of the Heartwarden, it didn't like them either. The explosion was about the same level of power as one of his explosive arcane arrows, so it wasn't that extreme. It didn't matter, though, as the primary purpose of the sphere was to detonate the poison bottle.

He threw two more spheres to test them some more as he took out his bow and nocked another arrow. Arcane Powershot began charging as another explosion of arcane energy rushed over his body, his scales crackling with energy.

Another explosion of arcane energy exploded out of him as he fired the Powershot before swiftly beginning to draw another. He continued this as he bombarded the form that was still trying to regenerate itself constantly. It summoned barriers he broke, it sent out tentacles he ignored, and it even tried to summon more wooden spears but couldn't concentrate. Every ten seconds, another arrow pierced into it, infecting it with more poison and dealing tremendous damage. Finally... Jake activated the charge. In a final flash, the monstrosity went still.

In the end... the entire Heartwarden fight was another disappointment, even if it did have some interesting aspects to it.

***\*You have slain [Deepdweller Heartwarden – lvl 162] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\****

***\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 127 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 117 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points\****

Jake lowered his bow when the notification came. He had won a battle against a foe so many levels above himself... yet he frowned. Was he just too well-suited against the Deepdwellers or what? They all seemed so easy to beat, even compared to other foes their level. Heck... even the Prima was more difficult to deal with than this Heartwarden. It sure as hell would have been a far harder fight if it was above level 150.

With disappointment, he sighed as he went to check out the corpse. Within, he found another Infused Golden Mushroom, to the surprise of no one.

*There has to be more to this dungeon.*

Jake turned his attention to the wall and the magic circles around the opening leading into it. He quickly went over to one of them, mushroom still in hand. The platform below him lit up with a green light as he stepped on it, and he smiled. He put the mushroom into his storage, and it instantly stopped glowing. He took out another one – this one not infused – and the same light appeared. *Nice.*

The next minute was spent with Jake placing regular Golden Mushrooms on the four platforms, making them all glow. Once he was done, he turned his attention to the wall.

Jake saw a large gate halfway into the wall, and he saw a green shield slowly dissipate that had been right in front of a large gate in there.

Jake walked into the hole and through the fading barrier, inspecting the gate more closely. He saw that it was quite intricate, with many runes on it, and in the center, he saw what looked like an orb, or perhaps... a heart.

He flew up and put his hand upon it as a notification appeared.

**You have laid your hand upon the Heart of the Undergrowth.**

**Your quest is done. The dungeon has been cleared of the Deepdweller explorers that sought entry to the Heart of the Undergrowth. For long, they have prepared, and at their precipice of success, the invader came.**

**Do you wish to complete the dungeon now or seek what the Deepdwellers tried to claim?**

*Easiest choice of my life.*

## Chapter 245: Assessment

Why the hell would he leave a dungeon when he had spent so much time gathering those goddamn mushrooms? He had yet to use more than a handful of them, and he still had more than a dozen of the Infused variant.

When Jake chose to remain in the dungeon, the entire door lit up as the runes sprang to life. He felt some energy enter his body, and he tried to remove his hand but failed. It was like a pulse went through his entire being before entering the door again.

Finally, he could let go, and he retracted his hand as the door began opening.

Jake was shocked at what had happened... it felt like the damn door had scanned him or something. Whatever it did, it appeared wholly unrelated to the Deepdwellers. He looked through the opening of the gate and saw it led into a new chamber. He also saw it in his sphere, but so far, nothing was visible in that either, so Jake decided to just venture further in.

His danger sense was entirely silent still. He frowned as he was confused about what the hell all of this was leading towards.

When he exited the tunnel and reached the other side of the hall, he found himself in an absolutely massive chamber. Before he had even fought the Heartwarden, he had noticed how there were vines in the chamber and that they were all gathering towards one point... and he finally saw what that point was.

In the center of the chamber was what looked like an inert metal sphere with several metal rings around it, all held up by vines that had overgrown on it. The metal itself was completely unscathed, even if it did look like the vines had tried to break through the exterior of the sphere.

Jake could instantly see why... because the inside of that sphere was completely solid. Not with metal but pure fucking energy. He could only see inside with his sphere, and even his Sense of the Malefic Viper didn't react at all, meaning the sphere completely isolated whatever energy was within.

He inspected the rest of the chamber, and he spotted quite a few things, the first of which was a wooden door in a small cave off to the side of the chamber, not leading to anywhere. It didn't take a genius to know it was an exit to the dungeon, and Jake stepped over to investigate. Putting his hand on it, he confirmed it was indeed a way to exit.

Did that mean if he left and re-entered, he would be put back in this chamber? If nothing else, that would confirm dungeons could have different "checkpoints" of sorts. Then again, maybe it truly was just an exit like so many other dungeons, as this chamber would be the last thing to explore.

He at least hadn't seen any other exits or entrances to the chamber than the gate he had entered through.

Another thing he noticed in his sphere was a slew of stone slabs with magic circles on them like those outside. All of them were covered in vines, making Jake believe the Deepdwellers had cleared the ones outside.

*I guess this is what the mushrooms are for*, he thought as he began clearing out the vines. He summoned his bow and fired a few exploding arcane arrows to make all the slabs visible. He could have gone and placed the mushrooms then and there to see what would happen, but instead, he chugged a potion and sat down on his ass, and meditated.

Why would he face whatever was about to come on low resources? The Heartwarden hadn't been that dangerous, but it had still taken plenty of resources. Hence he meditated.

...

Jake got up, fully refueled and ready to face whatever was to come! He was a few potion bottles poorer but in excellent health and in good spirit as he began going around the chamber, placing mushrooms.

He hummed as he did so, excited to see what would happen. As the magic circles lit up, Jake began to see a pattern. All of them had a single line leading into the middle of the chamber, directly below the metal sphere floating above.

It turned out that there was exactly one mushroom for every circle in the dungeon. The last two were sadly not Infused, but Jake still hoped it would be good enough for whatever was to come.

As he placed the last mushroom... everything hummed to life.

A beam of energy fired up from all the magic circles, especially the area right below the sphere, with their destination being that the sphere itself. It greedily absorbed the energy for a while until all the magic circles ran out of power and became inert once more – all the mushrooms now ash.

Everything was just silent for a moment as Jake feared that the two last mushrooms not being infused had made everything fail. He was about to admonish himself as he heard a sound above. It sounded almost like a dynamo starting...

It turns out it did so because it was.

The rings of metal above the sphere above began spinning to life, breaking the vines holding onto them. The rings spun faster and faster until not even Jake could keep up with how fast they went. Somehow they didn't send out any wind. Even if it were just looked at like a fan, the sheer speed would have ripped the entire hall apart, Jake included.

Jake just stood there, confused about what the fuck was happening, his entire body tense. The amount of energy that dynamo was giving off was *not something* that should be in a goddamn D-grade dungeon. The amount of energy was way above that... perhaps even above C-grade. A part of him considered bailing, but his instincts had yet to warn him, making him believe that this dynamo was not any danger to him.

Finally, something happened.



The sphere hanging above projected a blue screen into mid-air with text Jake could actually read.

**Welcome, Human of the**

**The Altmar Empire welcomes you to this assessment. This assessment is an official part of the dungeon and will count towards final system rewards. The assessment will be combat-related.**

**All challengers will be split into groups based on their levels. If all challengers belong to the same group, they may enter together.**

**Group 1: 100-125**

**Group 2: 126-135**

**Group 3: 136-145**

**Group 4: 146-155**

**Group 5: 156-200**

**Challengers detected: 1**

**Challenger level detected: 117. Assigned to Group 1. Solo challenger detected. The difficulty will be adjusted accordingly. True Talent Assessment Program initiated.**

**Please proceed to the teleportation circle for assessment. Rewards will follow upon successful completion of the assessment, dependent on performance.**

Before he could react, the dynamo shot out one of its rings, and it landed right below the floating sphere. It formed a magic circle in less than a fraction of a second, once more showing a level of power that did not belong in a D-grade dungeon. The teleportation circle to the assessment Jake assumed.

Jake didn't move immediately but frowned instead, as he just had a lot thrown at him at once.

First of all, the screen before him was *not* by the system, that was for sure. It was made by the Altmar Empire, as far as Jake could tell. It had a lot of weird text in it, like assuring him it was still a part of the dungeon and how doing this assessment of theirs would count towards system rewards. What was all this grouping nonsense? This was the first time Jake had seen a dungeon that had challenge dungeon-like mechanics within. Well, he hadn't done that many before, but it still seemed out of place.

The whole thing about his assessment made him frown even more. How did they know his level? Did the door scan him? Had they somehow bypassed Shroud of the Primordial to read it?

Shit, he had so many damn questions.

Wasn't the Altmar Empire some big elven faction? How the hell were they in a dungeon? Moreover, why the hell did this thing recognize such? Was this dungeon not a natural one like Villy had said it would be? Who else could have made it... how the hell had an elven empire managed to make a dungeon in a new universe? Jake hated to ask so often, but he had to know.

*"What an interesting coincidence. Those elves are always up to something, I tell ya. Just do it normally; you are still in a natural dungeon. Act like all of it is the flavor text for now, and just do your best,"* Villy answered promptly before cutting off the connection again, clearly amused on his end by Jake's confusion.

Villy didn't help Jake much... but thinking about it, didn't he also have a cauldron offered by the Altmar Empire? Were they just suppliers of cauldrons and dungeons to the system or what? It really didn't make any sense to him what the fuck was happening, so he did the most natural thing to him.

He completely ignored it and went straight for the teleportation circle.

Several kilometers above the dynamo within the Deepdweller Undergrowth, a chamber suddenly lit up. Screens lining the walls began showing images of the chamber below, and many different devices came to life. It happened as the dynamo also hummed to life, and power was restored.

In the center of it all, a hologram-like projection appeared. It was that of a humanoid elven figure. It instantly made a motion, and a small device lowered itself from the ceiling as it began recording everything happening in the room and on the screens.

For a moment, the projection looked like it needed to ground itself after that first - almost pre-programmed - motion to summon the recording device. It looked confused. The projection observed the room until it finally shook its head before it began its work as it spoke in a male voice.

“Deepdweller Dungeon Monitor number 322 reporting. Activation of generator successful. All readings confirming this is a natural dungeon. The Universe the dungeon is located in is... hm, an error. Unknown newly integrated Universe or pocket dimension outside of the 92 main ones. Take special note if this is a code 498 scenario. Moving on to the challengers.

“Only a single challenger present appears to have cleared the dungeon solo based on scans. Assigned to Group 1, level 117, human. True Talent Assessment Program has been initiated. It appears we have a good seed here. Potential divine or factional relations yet to be confirmed. Challenger does not wear any discernable equipment that would indicate faction. All additional readings failed, indicating a skill able to block a full scan, meaning only the dungeon-bound analysis tool succeeded. Blocking skill must be powerful. A smart choice in case you listen in the future, human. Caution is a wis-“

The projection cut itself off as it watched the screen and quickly moved on.

“Challenger unhesitantly entered the teleportation circle for the assessment. May indicate a type 7 personality. Further analysis is required. Beginning vocal transcript of the assessment.”

Jake was teleported through the magic circle and had to admit it felt quite different from the system transferring him. It was actually the first time he had experienced being teleported by non-system means. It was not an instant thing like when he was brought somewhere by the system, and he could actually feel himself move through space.

Not feel it well enough to actually get an understanding of how he was moved or any insight into the concept of space, but it was still an interesting sensation. Even if he couldn't learn anything about how to use the concept, he did get a feeling he could resist it.

Well, not this teleportation circle in particular, as it was too strong. But it appeared that moving people through space like this was resistible to some degree. Good to know, as it would suck if Neil one day got mad at him and teleported Jake a hundred thousand kilometers away from Haven.

Getting home would be a pain.

Just as his considerations of the potential consequences of pissing off space mages appeared in his mind, so did his feet appear on the ground. The first thing he did was observe his surroundings, which were not as expected.

The ground beneath his feet was the borderline indestructible stone that the wall was made of, and he stood on what looked like an open field based on his first assessment with his sphere. Well, besides a perfectly rectangular all-black pillar a few kilometers ahead of him.

Moreover, when he looked to the sides, he did see what looked like walls far off in the distance. Hundreds of kilometers in each direction. When he looked up, he saw a ceiling far above too. It looked he was now within a massive cube of indestructible stone with a large ominous pillar.

This seemed like a perfectly safe and normal situation.

Spoiler warning: it wasn't.

Jake observed the pillar a few kilometers away. He considered getting closer to have it be within his sphere, but his danger sense stopped him. A faint sense of danger from the pillar made him aware that it would be the source of conflict.

Which turned out to be entirely accurate as he saw movement on top of the pillar. A humanoid figure was raised up out of the pillar as it stood atop it. It was human-sized, around 2 meters tall. It was entirely silver, and the body looked entirely human besides having nothing down there, and while it had a regular face, it didn't have any ears or hair.

He used Identify on it to confirm what it was.

**[Altmar Census Golem – lvl 150]**

Right after identifying it, another message appeared – this one from the system itself, showing that this fight indeed was a natural part of the dungeon.

### **New Dungeon Objective: Defeat the Altmar Census Golem**

Jake kept his eyes on the figure as it just stood there, waiting. He knew this was the foe he had to defeat, yet he didn't move right away. Because even now, his danger sense made him acutely aware that the moment he made a move to attack, things would get dangerous.

This golem was no pushover... far from it.

He began preparing. His enemy was entirely metal... so he had no poison to use but his blood that could serve as an all-purpose toxin – albeit a still far less effective one against anything non-biological. Once Jake was done preparing everything, he took out his bow.

His hands were shaking as he took out an arrow and drew the string - his eyes sharp and his demeanor serious.

Jake was not shaking from fear or anxiety. No, it was something far different. Something that stemmed from his desire – no, avarice - for a good challenge:

It was pure anticipation.

## **Chapter 246: Census Taking (Hard Mode)**

As Jake charged his Arcane Powershot, there was one aspect of his usual opening salvo he became a bit doubtful about. Some basic sense of danger seemed to be an inherent ability of most beings in the multiverse, which meant landing powerful opening shots could be problematic if the attacks weren't fast or powerful enough. Even then, some foes could still avoid it. Unless, of course, the attacker had some way to stop their target from evading – like Gaze of the Apex Hunter.

This is where Jake was doubtful... did a Golem have a soul as he understood it? Things like elementals did, but would it have a soul for him to gaze into if this thing was constructed? Only one way to find out.

Jake released the Arcane Powershot as it sent out an explosion of arcane mana around him. The stone beneath his feet still looked untouched besides a few remnants of arcane energy.

At the same time, he tried to activate Gaze of the Apex Hunter. He tried and felt like he couldn't get a proper look at his foe. Like it was hidden behind something. It was not unlike that time with Phillip and his skill that blocked Identify... meaning this enemy had some kind of soul-protecting skill.

Usually, there was no way a level 117 human could pierce this defense and still activate the skill. But Jake was no normal human. He was a human that had thrown the vast majority of his free points into perception, had a bloodline that made the perception stat even better, and was using a legendary skill.

Thus, his piercing gaze shattered the veil that sought to protect it, and just as the golem was about to dodge, it froze.



**\*BOOM!\***

It was hit by a stable arcane arrow, yet an explosion of mana was sent out, not by the arrow, but by what it encountered. Jake saw a faint shimmering barrier running along the golem's exterior – a barrier that had completely blocked the arrow except for a nearly unnoticeable nick in the silver-like metal of the golem.

His opening attack that usually left his foe severely damaged if taken head-on had done barely any damage, but it had allowed him to see that it had a shield of sorts that defended it. Jake was not going to sit around and wait for it to counter-attack but took a step, making him teleport back over a hundred meters as he drew another arrow.

The golem several kilometers away turned his way, and Jake saw two blue mechanical eyes stare back at him. He saw them faintly light up, and his danger sense exploded.

*Oh shit!*

Jake took another step, making him appear not directly behind himself but to the side. This turned out to be a very good choice, as where he had stood just a millisecond earlier was now occupied by a blue laser beam of destruction.

It didn't cause any explosion, but Jake saw a small mark burned into the stone ground from the laser, which was more than he could leave with his own arrows. That eye-beam was packing some serious pow-

He had to dodge to the side again as another laser came his way, forcing him to abandon his strategy of rapidly attacking before the golem could make it to him. Once more, Jake was happy he had his practically precognitive danger sense. If not, he could have likely taken a severe wound from that first laser.

By the way, he called it a laser because it was. It wasn't just a beam of pure mana like the Indigo Mushroom had made, but a concentrated beam of light-affinity mana. The remnants of light mana left in its wake were apparent.

The golem fired off a few more lasers until it became clear it wasn't going to hit. Jake would have happily kept going to have the golem run itself out of mana, which was likely also the reason it stopped – Jake spent far less resources dodging than it spent attacking.

It charged towards him, taking quick steps, but it wasn't overly fast.

Jake finally took this chance to fire another arrow towards the golem. It split into five in mid-air – a new record – shortly before it reached the golem. His foe dodged in between them, but the moment they passed, all five exploded in a massive blast of arcane energy.

The golem came out of it, sizzling with energy but otherwise untouched. When it was around two kilometers away, Jake fired another arrow, and the golem also made a move.

Its foot landed on the ground, and just as it did so, a blast of mana came out of its sole, propelling it forward.

*That's-*

The golem arrived before him in less than a second, one of its arms transforming in mid-air. The metal seemed to fold and bend, forming a large crescent-shaped axeblade. An axeblade it swung with extreme momentum as a small hole opened up as the back of its arm sent out another blast of mana to speed up the swing.

*-A fucking jet engine!?*

Jake bent his back over 90 degrees to avoid the swing, but before he could even retaliate, the axeblade changed direction mid-swing as another jet appeared on the other side of the arm.

This fucking thing was damn fast and strong, but its unpredictable movements were equally as dangerous. Jake was forced to roll awkwardly to the side as the blade smashed down where he had just been. It managed to leave a small scratch on the floor below, sending cold sweat down Jake's back.

Now that the golem was within his sphere, he could inspect it far more closely. Its body was made of shiny silver-like metal as he had first seen, but he had been unable to see the smallest details on it before. Incredibly tiny openings were all over its exterior, with some larger openings placed around its limbs.

It was these small holes it fired blasts of mana out of. Much like how Jake had used mana blasts from his glove enchantment to propel himself and affect his airborne mobility, this golem used jet-like blasts to make incredibly fast and abrupt movements.

He also saw that its hands and feet were both modular of sorts. It wasn't like liquid metal, but clearly, its legs and arms could take many different forms – an axeblade clearly one of those available shapes.

Jake managed to equip his scimitar before the next attack came. He blocked the hit with the flat side of the blade, one hand on the handle and the other at the top of the flat body of the blade. A jet-like blast came out of its arm, making the attack even more potent. He was knocked back hundreds of meters before landing on his feet, only to block yet another attack.

This time he didn't land on the ground but made a small platform making him teleport towards the charging golem. It was taken by surprise, and Jake swung his scimitar with both hands like the weapon was a baseball bat, and the head of the golem was a ball.

It tried to dodge, but Jake froze it with his Gaze for a fraction of a second. A shimmer of arcane energy barely managed to form on the blade before he hit the golem, making it spin in the air from the impact.

*Fuck that hurt*, Jake thought, grinding his teeth from the reverberations going up his arms. It felt like that time he hit a streetlight with a metal pole, except far worse.

The golem flipped a dozen or so times in the air till two mana jets re-stabilized it, and the fucker attacked as if nothing had happened. Unfortunately, his attack hadn't even left a mark as it, too, had been blocked by the mana barrier.

*I need distance.*

Jake stepped forward but teleported back. He repeated this several more times, putting over a kilometer between him and the golem within a few seconds. He summoned his bow and wings both at once and fired an arrow after the golem.

It shot towards him with another jet burst. While it flew towards him, the other arm transformed into a claw-like shape. It reminded Jake of those things used to lift up and crush cars... except far smaller and with razor-sharp edges.

With a flap of his wings, Jake took to the air as he saw the golem dodge his arrow. At the same time, he pumped out poison mist and began summoning two arcane bolts, hoping to accomplish one of two things.

First of all, it was to do a bit of damage. Not to the golem itself, but its mana pool. No being had infinite energy, so Jake had already resigned himself to focusing on slowly depleting his foe's mana pool. He hoped the poison mist that attacked its entire surface would help do that.

Secondly, he wanted to find out more about how it perceived him. If it had some kind of pure mana-sensing skill, he had learned that his poison mist could help disturb that along with the arcane bolts. On the other hand, if it were sight-based, he would have other paths of exploitation.

Either way, the poison mist, and bolts shou-

A pulse passed through him, dispersing the cloud of poison, as well as destroying both arcane bolts mid-way through construction. Jake even felt a prickling pain in his summoned wings as it passed through, but it failed to do anything other than deal insignificant damage.

What it did do was ruin Jake's momentum as the grappling arm extended and shot up towards him. For a moment, Jake thought it was because the golem couldn't fly, but as it tried to grab him, the small jets on its legs activated and took it airborne.

Jake mirrored its trick as he dodged the grab by firing a blast of mana out of one of his gloves as he swung his blade with the other, sending out a prolonged arcane blade down towards the golem. It didn't even react as the stable arcane blade broke on its mana barrier but just continued its charge.

Well, it didn't just continue its charge but looked straight up at him as it did so – its eyes glowing blue.

He barely managed to condense solid mana below his feet to use One Step Mile before the laser came.

The beam of light continued all the way to the other side of the massive cube they were in, making Jake wonder if it even had a max range. He didn't have time to think much about it while dodging the constant attempts to grab him or cut him with the axeblade.

Jake had come to realize that trying to fight it at range wasn't possible right now, so he decided to engage it in melee. While difficult, it was still manageable. Unfortunately, this forced him to do something he had hoped to avoid.

Limit break activated at 10% as he also drew the Nanoblade. Using up his stamina more quickly was a big risk as he essentially aimed to outlast his opponent, but he really didn't feel like he had a choice. Being hit a single time from the axeblade would be a bad time, so he had to somehow keep up, after all.

He moved in, trying to stay rather close to avoid the extending grappling arm. On closer inspection, It reminded him of a certain doctor who used to fight a dude with spider powers in both form and function. The bladeaxe, on the other hand, was just a nightmare all by itself.

Jake couldn't really block it with either of his weapons as the impact was just too powerful, and it moved in absurd ways. Dodging a fast weapon was already hard, but dodging a fast weapon that can change direction mid-swing was just borderline impossible.

A few wounds here and there were unavoidable, but Jake tried to at least make his spilled blood useful – quite literally. All his wounds sent sizzling Blood of the Malefic Viper onto the mana shield of his foe, depleting its resources. It wasn't like he didn't return the favor for every hit either, as he managed to land many attacks too. The issue was that to Jake, it felt like he was hitting a... well, a metal golem.

He knew it wasn't sustainable, so Jake tried to switch up the situation again by also making use of magic. Sending out blasts of arcane mana here and there, as he found his destructive mana quite efficient against the mana shield.

Yet even with Jake's insane perception and bloodline, he could make mistakes.

Jake dodged a fraction of a second too late. One of the claws from the grappling arm managed to barely get around Jake's arm and clamped down with immense strength. It wasn't strong enough to do any damage by itself, but Jake had no way to get it off.

His danger sense screamed, but he could do nothing but see the blue crackle at the end of the golem's arm as the shock came. Blue lightning audibly crackled up the length of its entire arm as it sent a massive amount of energy into Jake's body.

Without even thinking, he managed to condense his scales, and luckily, they didn't give a shit about the claw but still transformed his skin. Jake hadn't used them earlier as they would only be a drain on resources while being highly ineffective against physical attacks.

Even with all that, it wasn't enough. Jake felt the electricity invade his body as he got electrocuted. But he knew he couldn't just do nothing, so he wrapped both hands around the golem's arm as his hands began glowing green. The lightning burned into his hands, and the barrier stopped him, but he kept pushing as another crackling sound came.

Jake clenched his jaw so hard several of his teeth broke, but the pain only made his senses sharpen as he mixed in more of his arcane-affinity into Touch of the Malefic Viper. So far, he only used the stable version with it to transmute items... but now he poured in the purely destructive aspect of his affinity.

The barrier was eroded through, and Jake's hands finally landed on the true body of the Altmar Census Golem. At the exact moment he touched it, the golem swung its arm, smashing him down into the hard stone below. With a whip-like motion, it swung him to



the other side. It repeated this as it smashed him back and forth - the electrocution never stopping.

It only managed to swing five times before it froze mid-swing - this time far longer than other times it had been frozen. Two yellow eyes stared at it from a bloody face as another crack sounded out.

Jake stared at the golem as he poured all he could into Touch the Malefic Viper. Limit Break had also already been pushed up to 20% after the golem had gotten hold of him . The silver metal had become black and cracked, the corrosion now slowly spreading down the extended arm towards the main body of the golem.

The golem appeared to sense something was wrong, but for several seconds failed to move at all. Blood began dripping from Jake's eyes as he pushed Gaze of the Apex Hunter far more than ever before as his danger sense told him the moment he let up... things would end badly.

Two things then happened at once. With a twist, the extended arm was ripped in two, and the eyes of the golem turned towards Jake and fired a laser beam straight for his face - his eyes, more specifically, as it clearly had identified them as a primary threat.

Jake managed to barely roll to the side, dodging the laser. His entire body did small spasms from the electrocution, and he was smoking from his burnt armor and skin. He had marks all over his body from being swung into the unimaginably hard ground, and there were even two bloody imprints where he had been smashed down. In addition, both wings were broken as he had used them to absorb some of the impacts, forcing him to de-summon them.

Yet he stood up again and threw a potion into his mouth. He just ate the entire flask as the vital energy ran through him.

Luckily, the golem was distracted for a moment as it assessed the damage to its arm. It quickly concluded that it would be detrimental to keep the weapon as it detached parts of the arm and then retracted the rest back into itself. This turned out to be the right choice as the detached arm began corroding on the ground after losing access to the main body.

The reformed hand looked damaged with missing parts, and it didn't look like something it could heal quickly.

In the end, the damage it had taken was minimal, but at least it appeared that the hand wouldn't be able to form a new weapon right away. Not that the golem needed it as it charged towards Jake, who now stood tall again

He had lost both his swords throughout the scuffle as he couldn't deposit them in his storage while being electrocuted, so they now lay on the ground nearby. The golem charged the unarmed human that made a motion as something appeared in his hand, its axeblade ready to cleave him in ha-

**\*DONG!\***

The golem had ignored the attack. It had believed the stick of metal to be no threat due to the lack of mana coming from it. This had turned out to be a mistake.

Jake had learned something back when he hit a streetlight with a metal pole – it hadn't only made his arm hurt but also left a good dent in the metal of the streetlight. Far more than some silly knife or sword could ever do.

So... if he was fighting a big metal golem... he should use a big metal pole.

**[Pillar of Encumbrance (Rare)] – A metal rod made of a type of metal with the natural ability to change weight based on the intensity of the mana infused within. Incredibly durable.**

**Requirements: N/A**

The golem was blasted nearly five kilometers away before it stabilized itself. No visible damage had been taken, but the barrier of mana flickered for a fraction of a second upon impact, signifying the drain of mana from that one strike.

Jake stood back with aching arms both from the sheer weight of the metal pole and the impact running up his arms. The golem seemed hesitant for a moment. Jake gave a toothy grin as he retracted his mana from the staff and let it go. It just stayed floating in mid-air as it now was lighter than the air itself.

He took out his bow and fired another Arcane Powershot at the golem, signifying the start of round two.

Against pretty much any other foe, using a blunt weapon wouldn't be even close to as good. It didn't work even with any of Jake's skills. Additionally, it was a bit unwieldy to use for anything except wild swings, and it was far slower to swing. Finally, against most foes, it would deal roughly equal damage anyway. Though he doubted he could even hit most foes.

But the Altmar Census Golem was not most foes.

**\*DONG!\* \*BOOM!\***

He swung again, hitting it in the side, sending it flying away in a glorious explosion of unstable arcane mana. The Pillar of Encumbrance crackled with energy as Jake infused it with his arcane mana – primarily the destructive variant.

The Pillar's metal was so damn durable Jake couldn't even leave a scratch on it, and the constant weight-shifting made it extremely powerful as a weapon even if the system didn't truly recognize it as such.

Jake's control of the Pillar was far better than the inexperienced Minotaur Mindchief that used to own it. This didn't mean Jake hit harder with the staff, far from it. The Minotaur Mindchief honestly had a really fucked up unbalanced build with an insane focus on its mental magic and pure strength. Jake made up for his lacking strength with his mana control and speed.

During the fight earlier, Jake had noticed one thing: the golem didn't actively avoid many attacks but preferred just to tank them. Unless it would take minimal effort to avoid, it chose to take the trade every time, aiming to land a blow in exchange for getting hit itself.

It avoided his arcane arrows due to the low effort required, but dodging the big metal pole was far harder and took way more movement. Jake swung it rather wildly, but every hit was near-perfectly timed as he tried to keep the golem at bay.

He equipped his bow as it was sent flying back and quickly fired a Splitting Arrow that turned into five explosive payloads, blasting the golem back even further. He tried firing a second arrow but had to dodge an eyebeam. Before he could shoot yet again, he was forced to block with his staff. He jumped right before he was hit, made the Pillar weightless, and let himself be blasted into the distance.

In mid-air, he summoned his wings to try and get some more height and distance. Once more, he summoned an arrow to repeatedly do damage to the mana shield of the golem.

He had theorized many ways to get rid of the mana shield, and so far, none seemed to work. At least not in the long term. If he corroded through it and made physical contact, it could not reform the shield where he touched. Jake also considered if a disruptive mana wave could temporarily dispel the shield for him to do damage, but to fire off such a blast would require him to hit it in very close melee range. Far closer than he felt comfortable being for a prolonged period. He had only ever used disruptive mana waves to dispel harmful effects on himself, never offensively, so he was a bit doubtful in its effectiveness. But, theoretically, it should work.

The next thing he considered was some kind of acid. He didn't really have to consider it much, though, as his blood was essentially an acid. The problem there was that the golem had now adapted. Whenever blood hit it, it would shimmer and move its mana shield to make it fall off. Because the mana shield wasn't entirely physical, nothing could really stick on it... nothing besides his arcana mana.

Jake's destructive arcane mana sought to destroy, and whenever it made contact with the golem, the arcane mana burned into its barrier until it ran out of energy and was dispelled. This turned out to be a very Jake-favored exchange, which is why he kept infused the Pillar with destructive arcane mana – also because it was possibly his only piece of equipment that could handle it – and why he kept using explosive arcane arrows.

He had to admit, the fight didn't look good from an outside perspective. The only wounds on the golem were its one hand that looked slightly damaged and two small chips in its otherwise pristine surface.

Meanwhile, Jake was a bloody mess. He had bloodstains running from his eyes from overusing Gaze, blood from his mouth from clenching his teeth too hard, and generally wounds all over. The black veins of burned flesh from the electrocution didn't make him look healthy either.

The health potion had done a lot, but he had taken too much damage for a single one to regenerate his health pool fully. That damn grappling hook had done far too much harm, showing how just a single fuck-up could prove lethal. Yet, it had also demonstrated that he was far from fragile. In fact, he was barely affected by what had happened to him but moved just as fluidly as before.

Actually, if one looked at the battle as a whole... Jake was pulling ahead.

This could naturally all change on a dime, so he had to press his advantage. There was still the looming threat of the currently unusable hand repairing enough to become useful again or for it to pull out some other unexpected trick.

In the meantime, Jake began plotting to take down the primary weapon of the golem – the axeblade.

Due to the purpose of the appendage, it was the only part of the entire golem not covered in the mana shield. Jake assumed it was because it would make the weapon far worse at cutting, making it necessary not to cover it. But this did mean the axeblade was a weakness to exploit.

Well, to call it a weakness was maybe overdoing it. The metal of the golem was still insanely tough, and even after the axeblade smashed into the far tougher Pillar, there was no mark on it whatsoever. But Jake did have one method of damaging the metal significantly: Touch of the Malefic Viper. He had already taken out one of its hands... it was time to go for the other.



"Extreme reaction times, high level of agility, medium strength, high magic capabilities, high durability, phantasmal skills to summon wings and defensive scales, use of at least three different kinds of weapons. An exceptionally balanced build that seems to have its roots in either magic or archery," the Dungeon Monitor said.

"Has used two kinds of unknown affinities. One of poison and the other some kind of destructive energy reminiscent of pure mana. An oddity for sure. Perhaps both these affinities are new as neither have reliable records, which would be an exceptional find? However, it is also possible they are related to gods with no records stored in this particular facility. Potential arcane-affinity cannot be ruled out either, but it is implausible. Further investigation is necessary nonetheless."

The Dungeon Monitor was there only to monitor and record, yet it still had its own thoughts. It had these to make it better at its job and allow it to voice its own subjective understandings and assessments of the one taking the trial.

"Most notable traits observed so far are the extreme lack of hesitation and instant adaptation to changes, as well as divination-level avoidance skills. Seems to possess a skill for spherical perception as well. Note, no observations of the concept of time, fate, or karma, or other such expected readings have been observed. Perception-based build? It is possible based on the ability to pierce the Soulguard of the Census Golem.

"The fight is progressing with the challenger making an extremely admirable attempt. Overall... I believe we have a category 8,1 to 8,3 on our hands. Skilled in air combat also. The golem will soon be able to use its other arm again, which should turn the tide again. Oh? Despite the Mana Disruptive Pulse, the challenger has futilely attempted to... huh?"

The Dungeon Monitor was momentarily confused at what he saw play out on the many screens.

"May need to upgrade the category."

Jake flew upwards, firing arrows down at the golem following him or giving it a good smash to send it flying back down whenever it got too close. The golem did have some ability to adapt. He based this on how it knew when to stop using certain attacks, and Jake made use of that.

Right now, he was instilling the belief that he didn't want it to ever come close to him. This seemed to work wonders as it followed him ruthlessly while he flew further and further up into the air.

As Jake had noted earlier, then they were in a massive cube. This meant it had as much height to it as it had width and breadth... so he would make use of that.

He flew many kilometers up as he kept making use of the airspace. His mind was busy with four things: shooting arrows, smashing tin can golem, flying upwards while avoiding attacks, and finally, preparing his next trick.

On his back, something was being woven that would be used when the time was right.

This continued as Jake got higher and higher. 100 kilometers, 200 kilometers, 300 kilometers. On the way, he had a few close shaves and even had one of his wings cut off at one point, but he swiftly re-stabilized and summoned a new one to keep going up. He had to take the hit to defend what was on his back, as that was his big gamble.

400 kilometers, 500 kilometers.

Jake was nearing the ceiling when he reached 600 kilometers, showing how absolutely massive the cube was. As he neared the top, he prepared himself to make his move.

He did something he rarely did: created a purposeful opening. Jake wasn't big on feints, but sometimes he needed to. He left his right wing entirely open, and he knew the golem wouldn't be able to resist slicing it off. It seemed not to have enjoyed the constant cloud of poison it had to fly through on their way up.

Jake allowed it to strike.

The axeblade cut his side, cleaving into his back and cutting off his wing, but at the same time, Jake also counterattacked.

On his back was an endless spin of thick arcane mana threads. They all sprung to life and bound up the entire lower body and left arm of the golem – the arm that didn't have the axeblade. The other end of the strings wrung themselves around the Pillar of Encumbrance as Jake infused mana into it with a string connected to himself, massively increasing the weight every second.

As the Pillar got heavier, gravity took over.

In a natural response, the golem tried to cut off the strings with the axeblade, but Jake was one moment too fast. While the strings could hold the golem quite well, he didn't believe they could handle being cut.

Jake intercepted the falling axeblade as he allowed it to cleave into parts of his shoulder but stopping the swing. He froze the golem with Gaze, spun around the arm, and pointed the edge of the axeblade away from himself. Finally, he held the arm in a vertical armbar grip.

He had never stopped infusing mana into the Pillar, meaning it just got heavier and heavier. They began being dragged downwards. The golem couldn't move any parts of its body as Jake and his strings had entirely restricted its movements, and their fall only accelerated with every passing second.

With a good grip around the arm, Jake began doing exactly what he came to do: rip out the axeblade. His hands began glowing green as he held onto the back of the axeblade. Touch of the Malefic Viper began burning into the

unprotected metal of the weapon, and this time it would have no way of detaching the arm to stop the Touch from spreading further into its body.

Naturally, the golem had a counter to being bound up by mana strings and held in such a crude armbar. It was a tactic much like the one Jake used whenever magical constructs bound him up: its disruptive mana wave.

The golem exploded in a massive wave of disruptive deep-blue mana, making Jake dispel his one remaining wing from the pain, and he even felt his Touch reduce in energy for a moment. What didn't happen was the strings getting dispelled.

*Bitch please, I've been making strings since I joined this fucking multiverse. All they got is their stability. You think your stupid mana wave can break them?*

Making mana strings was the first thing Jake had ever really done with mana. It had been the cornerstone of much of his mana practice... so to say that his arcane mana strings were incredibly potent for his level was an understatement.

That the disruptive mana wave failed didn't mean that the golem was defenseless. The jets of mana fired up around its body as it began slowly burning away at the strings, and it even opened up those on the arm that Jake held. They tried to burn his skin but were entirely stopped by the scales. In the end, those jets weren't made to attack with, but to give temporary speed boosts.

If its left arm was still functional, it could have done something, but it wasn't. What was functional was its legs. Both began transforming, making Jake panic a bit, until he saw what they transformed into. Both of them transformed into giant laser blasters.

*Was this thing designed to attack like a damn Ion Cannon from above if I couldn't fly?*

The leg-blasters began firing out massive laser beams down towards the Pillar, likely trying to destroy the strings on it to let itself get free. It was a good tactic, except...

Jake pulled with his legs and his mind as he began tightening the strings – bringing the Pillar closer to the body of the golem. This made the initial blasts miss by a tiny margin, and Jake sped up the pulling in of the strings.

Pulling the Pillar all the way in would make it hard for him to keep his armbar hold. Shit, he couldn't pull it all the way either without letting go... so it was sure lucky he could now let go.

**\*CRACK!\***

The entire axeblade cracked, black growth going down the arm of the golem. Jake did one final pull, ripping the entire lower parts of the golem's arm off like it was old and rusted.

He let go, summoned his wings, and tried to stop his own fall as he held unto the strings.

Jake pulled with all his might as he tightened the mana strings, making the entire Pillar now be pressed up against the body of the golem. Once he couldn't tighten it anymore, Jake let go and spread his wings to slow down his fall.



The updraft hurt his wings as he only now truly noticed how fast they had been going. Due to the constant acceleration, they had been falling over 3 kilometers a second. It hadn't even been half a minute since he bound up the golem, but they had still fallen nearly 100 kilometers.

Which meant there was still around 500 kilometers to the ground. The Pillar would stop accelerating as the constant influx of mana was gone, and his strings would also begin weakening, but they should still hold up. Jake estimated the Pillar would keep the same falling speed till the golem reached the ground. Heck, he even saw that the golem had stopped trying to break free after he let go. Perhaps it was just focusing on repairing itself and not waste mana by constantly having its jets activated? The fall itself wouldn't really harm it, so that made sense...

This gave him around two and a half minutes. He couldn't bombard the golem for obvious reasons as it would destroy his own arcane strings – his own destructive arcane mana was incredibly good at destroying his own stable arcane mana – so he had to spend the time more constructively.

So, he began constructing an arrow.

**Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter**

## Chapter 248: Minor Miscalculations

By now, he felt like he understood his foe well enough. He needed an arrow not to hit his foe hard but to do one thing only: disrupt the fuck out of it and drain a shitload of mana. This was his understanding, and the system seemed to recognize it as valid. The skill at least responded as an arrow began being summoned.

Out of everything Jake had ever summoned – besides maybe that soul-destroying arrow versus the Indigo Fungus – this arrow was the most unique. It was made of metal but had angular blue veins running along its body, making it look almost futuristic. The arrowhead was just a round crystalline orb of mana that Jake recognized – his own destructive arcane mana. Jake hadn't known the skill could integrate his affinity like that, but he wasn't complaining.

Jake looked down and saw that the golem was still falling. He had gotten faster at making the arrows, only taking half a minute this time.

Jake *had* focused on doing it as fast as possible, and that seemed to have helped. It was almost too fast... but Jake could use that.

He didn't fire the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter right away but aimed his bow upwards as he got a good idea. Jake couldn't help but hold back a smile as he joked with himself.

*Deploying Time On Target stratagem.*

Jake fired an exploding arcane arrow upwards with barely any force, turned around, and fired another barrage of arrows downwards. This resulted in ten exploding arrows flying down at the same time. He fired off a blast of mana after them, speeding them all up a bit more.

He repeated firing nine more arrows downwards, each of them with differing levels of strength. He had to do a bit of quick maths but mainly went by feel. Jake didn't need it to be perfect; it just needed to be good enough.

Finally, he drew the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter and began charging his Arcane Powershot. Needless to say, Jake went for a full charge, which ended up being nearly 15 seconds. He was fine with taking a bit of damage as he hoped the blow would end up dealing far more damage to the golem than himself.

It was also because he needed to pack a lot more energy than usual into this arrow. He wanted to really make it bring with it a torrent of arcane energy on its way down – the reason for this would become clear shortly.

He released the string as a massive explosion of arcane energy came out. Jake went for full-on scale with the explosion to maximize the energy traveling down with the arrow. This meant the entire airspace in a radius around him became filled with wisps of arcane energy.

But it also meant that the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter that flew downwards with monstrous momentum also carried an equally monstrous torrent of arcane energy with it.

Simultaneously, Jake began flying downwards, pushing his speed as much as he could. While flying, he kept firing arrows, one after another. It would be a while till he reached the ground, but he constantly accelerated on his way down.

After flying for a bit, he heard a huge explosion down below as the Pillar impacted the ground. For the first time, the black stone had been broken. The Pillar had implanted itself only ten or so centimeters into the stone.

While that didn't sound like a lot, it did mean that the golem was essentially tied to an immovable pole. He saw it below begin slowly getting itself free as it now had way more freedom of movement as it wasn't being constantly pulled downwards by an immense force.

Jake had counted on it not being able to free itself right away, and he was right. It would likely take the golem a few minutes to fully free itself. Maybe if it spammed that disruptive wave, it could free itself faster, but it clearly didn't want to waste mana.

Not that it would be a waste... for hell was raining down from above. It would soon arrive, and while the golem seemed aware of it, it hadn't bothered to react yet as it thought it had more time than it actually did. This turned out to be yet another major mistake made by the golem during their fight.

Above, a single arrow finally encountered more than fifty others that were already falling with incredible speed. As it passed, it was like a tsunami of arcane energy passed with it, giving all the other arrows a push, making them fly even faster.

The golem's ETA of the arrow bombardment had just been moved up by over a minute, something it clearly hadn't expected, as it now began trying more desperately to get free.

As for what Jake was doing at this moment? He was weaving.

He conjured a web of strings that he wound around each other, constantly spinning them as a form began taking shape. It looked like a long, thin drill as it spun around while he weaved it. The Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter would hopefully destroy the mana barrier. The other arrows would hopefully damage it and make it unable to reform the shield, while the weapon he was making right now was to serve as the finishing blow.

His two blades were still on the ground somewhere below, so he truly didn't have any other weapon, which is why he chose to construct one.

Below, the golem was just about to get free by repeatedly blasting out disruptive waves, but Jake used Gaze once more. His eyes hurt like hell, and he had a growing massive headache from overusing it, but now was not the time to complain about it. The freeze ended up just buying enough time as the not-quite-an-orbital-strike-but-close hit its target.

Jake saw it before he heard it. First a flash and then a large pink-purple explosion, followed by several dozens of smaller but similar explosions. It looked like someone had dropped a massive bomb, as the explosion had torn up the entire area, making him quite proud of how far he had come.

One could argue if one should be proud of making explosions that could level a smaller city, but he was nevertheless as he stared down at the widespread destruction he had caused. Throughout it all, he never stopped making his drill of strings bigger and bigger.

Jake flew faster than ever before, pushing mana into his wings to accelerate downwards. He had no idea how fast he was going, but it had to be nearing the double digits in kilometers per second. For reference... that was Mach 30. Faster than even the fastest unmanned rocket ever.

This entire box had some very peculiar properties. Mainly in that, it had none at all. All concepts and affinities were so openly deployed and easily detected. Perhaps it was to make whatever the “assessment” part of the test was easier, but it just made everything more... effective.

It was practically a vacuum of affinities in most ways. The concept of “heaviness,” if that was even a thing and not just some kind of gravity-affinity, made the Pillar fall faster as it got heavier. A part of that concept that the staff deployed appeared to be its desire to “fall”. It even made Jake’s poison not naturally disperse. All in all, it effectively made the natural suppression of the environment non-existent besides the bare minimum physical laws.

Ultimately, this didn’t favor either of them. At least it shouldn’t do so on paper. Yet Jake took advantage of this far more. The lack of wind-affinity made air resistance a non-concern, his entire trick with the Pillar, and even his application of arcane strings. None of it would be as effective in a more normal environment. Shit, with the passive, neutral mana all around, his strings weren’t naturally corroded by the environment, making them last far longer.

Long enough for the golem to have been hit by the entire bombardment by Jake.

Yet, he kept accelerating. Despite the explosion, he could clearly see the golem. Not visually, but through his Mark of the Avaricious Hunter. And through that Mark, he knew. The golem had been hit by more than just a few blasts of arcane mana, as it now was practically shining to him, and the arcane charge built up was quite substantial.



The golem appeared like it hadn't managed to stabilize itself at all as the next attack arrived – a nearly two meters long drill of arcane mana coming straight for it with unstoppable momentum.

At the very last moment, as victory seemed assured, the golem's left hand rose.

Jake didn't know what he had expected. But what struck him wasn't that.

The Pillar of Encumbrance was swung up by the golem and smashed into the side of the drill, and Jake only managed to move his right hand at the very last second. His left one wasn't as lucky.

In a single swipe, Jake's entire left arm from the elbow down was utterly obliterated by the Pillar, as well as the entire drill absolutely shattering as wisps of arcane energy filled the air. But it didn't end there... because Jake still had his own momentum to deal with.

He didn't deal with it well.

Jake had resigned himself to not come unscathed out of his descent, but he didn't expect it to end this badly. He smashed into the ground, with his left side first, smashing the rest of the arm and breaking his shoulder and a few left ribs at the least, and the wing was entirely crushed. He was happy that the D-grade evolution had gotten rid of a few pesky organs, as those surely would have been punctured or ruptured too. He only avoided getting his head bashed in by landing on his shoulder and his mask absorbing whatever impact he did receive.

Intense pain went through his entire body as the left side of his body took catastrophic damage, turning him into an even more bloody mess than before. His response to all this was the only natural one – he attacked.

Less than a quarter of a second after hitting the ground, while ignoring all the pain and damage he had taken, he lifted his one leg and sprung forward, reaching out with his right hand. He grabbed the leg of the golem and lifted it up, smashing it into the ground.

This made the golem let go of the Pillar, and Jake sent out a string of mana to grasp it as he swung it and smashed the golem away from him.

“Shit,” he muttered as he fell to his knee, breathing heavily. Moving his chest hurt, and everything was aching. He still had a bit to go till he could use another health potion too. In his arrogance or stupidity, he had forgotten one crucial thing... the Pillar was not recognized as a weapon. Which meant it wasn't bound by his mana. Which meant the golem could use it just as easily as Jake could. It still needed to purge his mana from it, but its constant disruptive waves seemed to have taken care of that. Coupled with him going way too fucking fast to dodge, he had royally fucked up.

Luckily... he wasn't the only one looking like shit.

The golem slowly got up, looking a bit wobbly. The entire right arm was broken from Jake pulling the axeblood off earlier, and its pristine metal body didn't look quite as pristine as before.

Veins of still-glowing pink-purple mana were pulsing on its exterior from the arcane explosions earlier, its right leg didn't look that good, and while its left hand and arm looked mostly fine, it still had taken a bit of damage.

But more importantly... the mana barrier was gone. The golem's eyes weren't glowing as brightly as before either but now emitted a far dimmer blue light.

They stood in front of each other, both heavily damaged and low on resources. Jake still had Limit Break at 20% running, and his stamina was beginning to get very low. It was good that he hadn't used that many skills besides Splitting Arrow, as he could see himself being out if he had. His mana pool was still okay, even if it was down to around a quarter. Without his mask, he could be out of mana.

Jake took a deep breath, and with pure willpower and by mobilizing his stamina to flow into his damaged limbs, he stood up. The Pillar was lying at his side, and he picked it up and saw that the lower portion of it had been slightly flattened.

It had likely happened when it smashed into the ground before. Jake could see where it had been embedded in his sphere and saw the ground all around that area actually quite damaged. It appeared like his bombardment had packed quite the power, enough to cause light damage to the stone at least.

"You're tired too, huh?" Jake asked. He didn't expect an answer and didn't get one either. The golem was within his sphere, and he saw parts of its metal slowly begin to be purged of arcane energies that were still burning into it. He saw no reason to let it do this in peace.

He charged forward, biting through the pain as he swung the Pillar. The golem dodged it, far less willing to take hits now, and counterattacked by trying to kick him with its good leg. Jake didn't let it but instead smashed the Pillar down into the raised leg. He saw the impact make a small crack in the metal and smiled internally.

*Not as tough without the mana shield, eh?*

A smile that quickly disappeared as a jet-blast of mana made its remaining hand fly up and grab the Pillar. Unfortunately, Jake couldn't really maneuver the large staff with only one arm, making him unable to move it out the way.

They both held unto it for a while before the golem sent a charge of electricity through the Pillar, forcing Jake to let go.

He jumped back and retreated – back towards where he had dropped the Nanoblade and the scimitar.

Both were still bound to him so he could feel their general direction. They were nearly 20 kilometers away, and Jake had to dash like a madman while avoiding the swings of the chasing golem. It was faster than him by quite a margin, and Jake felt like he couldn't make it to his swords as it was... so he turned.

With an abrupt movement, Jake did a 180 and ran towards the golem. He summoned a handful of metal spheres – the ones made by Arnold – and with strings pulled out all the pins at once. Once that was done, he blasted them towards the golem as he took a step and teleported towards the swords with One Step Mile.

**\*BOOM!\***

A large arcane explosion sounded out behind him as he kept running for the blades. He felt the golem had slowed down slightly, but not long after, he peeked back and saw it rush towards him. The arcane veins running on its body looked to have found renewed life as they pulsed even more than before.

His trick did buy him enough time to reach his weapons, and with two strings of mana, he pulled them both to him. He threw the Nanoblade in his inventory

and stood ready for the charging golem with the scimitar in his one remaining hand.

*Alright... round three.*

## Chapter 249: Priorities

The third round wasn't like the ones prior. There were no flashy attacks or advanced tactics deployed, no powerful skills used, or anything in that vein. Instead, it was just two opponents duking it out with sloppy blows in a battle of pure endurance and grit.

Jake dodged the wild swings of the golem as he swung his scimitar to try and land hits in return. His blade left shallow cuts on the golem's body while it seemed to want to take him out in a single smash. He was fine with how little happened because he was just waiting as they slowly fought.

He kept dodging back when he could and fired arrows after the golem. It was a bit awkward as he had to hold the bow with arcane strings or his leg, but he made it work. He had switched to the stable version to deal even more damage, even if they didn't hit as hard when he only had one arm. He had noticed that the arrows could leave clearly visible marks on the body of the golem. When he hit it on the shoulder, he even noted how its swing looked slightly off as if he had done some internal damage.

After several minutes of this, Jake felt it. *The cooldown's over.*

He retreated as he took out a health potion. An hour had now passed, and he chugged it down greedily as the warm flow went through his body. He could faintly direct the energy as he focused on healing his internals. Jake quickly felt a lot better within seconds. Well, besides the whole missing an arm part.

The potion had turned the fight from an “I’ll probably win” to “I’ll definitely win” real fast. The golem was running on fumes, and every one of its movements was more sloppy than the one prior. With Jake now filled with renewed energy, he pressed his advantage.

Jake dove in with the goal of disarming his opponent by getting the Pillar away from it. Okay, he had already literally disarmed it once, and while he likely could rip out the other arm, he wasn’t going to risk it. Not when he could rip off something far more important.

He baited the golem into swinging the Pillar in a downward smash, and as it hit the ground, he grabbed it with his hand and kicked the golem. Simultaneously he activated the Arcane Charge within the golem, making its entire body flash for a moment. The flash was so large it looked like a flashbang had gone off, and Jake hoped it would make the golem let go. Unfortunately, that didn’t work, and the golem didn’t even react to the Arcane Charge, even if it did do a lot of damage. Instead, it held on and just sent electricity into the Pillar. His Arcane Charge hurt like fuck when it activated, but if you’re a golem without the ability to feel pain, it apparently didn’t bother you much, much to Jake’s annoyance.

The electricity it pushed into the Pillar was far less powerful than before, and Jake easily powered through as he kicked again, this time with a lot more force as he even made his foot explode in a blast of arcane mana upon impact. That managed to do the trick as the golem let go and was pushed back, staggering as it fell to the ground.

Jake used the staff to smash the golem in the side while it was still lying down, denting its already damaged arm even more. He didn't hit it a second time, instead stepping forward, storing the Pillar, and grabbed the golem's neck.



He pressed down with his hand as it began glowing green. The golem retaliated by punching his arm, but Jake just leaned in closer to take the hits on his back and shoulder. They hurt a bit, but the golem was now far too weak. It tried to electrocute him one last time, and its eyes even glowed as if it tried to fire an eye-beam, but nothing worked.

In the end, the golem's arm fell powerlessly to the ground as Jake tore his hand upwards, ripping the head of the golem off.

***\*You have slain [Altmar Census Golem – lvl 150] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\****

***\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 128 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 129 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 118 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points\****

Jake didn't even have time to go through his notifications before the dungeon reacted. He felt air shift as space mana and the concept of space filled the air, and it seemed to have only one purpose: teleport away the corpse of the Altmar Census Golem.

*Oh no you fucking don't!*

He tried to put it into his inventory, but it failed. Instead, he released a wave of disruptive mana as he thought fast, but that only slowed down the teleportation. In a final gambit, he created an arcane barrier around himself and the corpse he was currently sitting on top of. He even used the steam-like energy coming off him from Limit Break as he tried to make it stronger, remembering his last skill-selection

For a moment, Jake felt like he was in his entirely own world. Cut off from everything. Light dimmed, he felt like gravity got less powerful, but more importantly, he felt the space-affinity in the air weaken. It still activated, but what teleported wasn't the entire golem.

The legs and both arms teleported away, leaving the torso and head of the golem behind. Jake finally was able to put what remained of the golem into his inventory as he fell back on the black stone ground, breathing heavily. With everything done... he could deactivate Limit Break.

Weakness washed over him the moment he did so. He felt like his entire body weighed a ton, so he just closed his eyes and entered meditation as he checked his system message from clearing the dungeon.

***Objective: Defeat the Altmar Census Golem (Completed)***

***Bonus reward for clearing the dungeon solo. Bonus reward for completing additional objectives. Bonus Pioneer reward.***

***Dungeon shutting down in: 23:59:32***

It turned out he had plenty of time, so for now, he just relaxed. He rested as he replayed the fight in his head and went over his fuck-ups. In retrospect, that divebomb move was a terrible idea, but at the time, it seemed smart and kind of cool.

Also... he was pretty sure he just made some kind of Arcane Barrier resembling the offered skill not to have his loot stolen by the dirty dungeon. Well, he doubted it was the dungeon itself, but likely something more related to the Altmar part of this entire scenario.

The Arcane Barrier he had conjured integrated a bit of stamina, as Jake pretty much just mobilized every kind of energy he could. The only time he had ever seen stamina outside of his body was in that mist-like form that covered his skin during Arcane Powershot and when Limit Break was active. *Something to experiment with*, he thought, considered ways to use it in the future.

But for now, he rested, but not before smiling as he spoke.

“I hope you enjoyed the show, mysterious observer.”

“Challenger has defeated the Census Golem. Automatic retrieval system activated, a-“

The Dungeon Monitor paused for a moment as he frowned.

“Challenger has managed to block parts of the teleportation and claimed parts of the golem, including all core components. Inconsequential based on predicted existing relations of the challenger. Challenger has now chosen to rest upon the defeat of the golem and has deactivated all boosting skills. I sh-“

Once more, he had to cut himself off as he practically gaped.

“Challenger is aware of the observations of the Dungeon Monitor despite system-assisted surveillance tools being used. Unknown method of observation... possible divine interference, perhaps? No conclusion for now. Moving on to final assessments before the challenger makes his way here.”

The monitor looked to the active teleportation platform not far away from him and the three system-created lockboxes not far from it. A wooden door had also appeared in the surveillance room, looking quite out of place. The projection's eyes lingered a bit on one of the lockboxes as a smile crept onto the monitor's lips.

“Final conclusion: challenger is reckless but inventive and highly adaptive. Stats put him firmly in the upper echelon for someone his level, but his application of these stats is even more impressive. All kinds of energy control are at an extreme level. High probability of arcane-affinity. High probability of high-level divine blessing. Too many unknowns to give a proper evaluation, but based on current knowledge, I shall heighten the category of the challenger to N. Will confirm upon lockbox opening.

“Class appears to be an archer-archetype making use of magic liberally. No confirmed profession yet. Will ask during the exit interview. Providing additional observations and personal theorizing during the wait for the challenger’s arrival...”

Jake yawned as he sat up, stretching one arm while holding back a desire to scratch where his other one was currently growing out. It always felt weird to have it be all wriggly as it regrew. He did notice that it went a bit faster than when he was in E-grade. He couldn’t wait to be a few grades higher and be able to pop out limbs like green dudes from a planet once blown up by someone with a name related to the refrigeration industry.

Now he only had one issue: how to leave the giant cube? Well, it wasn’t really that big of an issue, as there really only could be one place for the exit to be. The giant obelisk-thing the golem had come out of still stood in the middle of the cube. Looking as ominous as ever. It gave off a certain aura, but there was also something else mixed in. His Sense of the Malefic Viper made him aware that there was space-affinity mana in the direction of the obelisk. Likely a teleportation circle.

He ran over to it, keeping a relaxed speed as his body still wasn’t back to full power after the prolonged use of Limit Break. He felt like he had done a way too long session at the gym the day before and was just sore all over.

It still didn’t take him long to reach the obelisk, and once Jake got close, he truly inspected it for the first time with his sphere. The exterior was just blank black metal, but the inside was entirely different. Jake saw humanoid figures within... a lot of them. Altmar Golems. He wasn’t sure they were the same kind as the Census Golem he had fought, as they didn’t all look exactly like it. Some of them sure got close, though.

Needless to say, Jake would be a dead little hunter if he had to fight hundreds of golems as strong as the Census Golem. Luckily it didn’t seem to even be an option as none of them gave off any response to his Identify, meaning they were just empty shells.

Shaking his head, Jake began running up the vertical length of the obelisk as he inspected its interior. It truly was some kind of golem-storage facility and even had a lot of technical devices within. Repair equipment, perhaps? All of it seemed weird to have in a dungeon, but he assumed there was a reason.

On the top of the obelisk was a magic circle, space-affinity mana coming from it. Seeing no other way out, he walked onto it and felt himself be teleported.

A few seconds later, he found himself back at the giant dynamo-thing. It was still spinning as fast as before, but the moment he appeared, it did something. A beam of light fired upwards from it, searing away the stone of the cave. It kept firing off energy for a few more seconds before it stopped.

Jake just stood there, unsure what that was all about. There was now a big hole above the dynamo, so had it just opened a new path? It seemed like a weird way to do it. Very energy-inefficient.

“Please come up, challenger,” Jake heard a voice say from above. It seemed to echo through the entire chamber, the voice distinctly male.

Seeing no reason not to, he summoned his wings and took a leisurely flight up the big hole. The dynamo sure had done a number on the dungeon ceiling with how long the tunnel was. Then again, this was all a part of the designed “dungeon scenario,” so it wasn’t that out of place. It was basically just a big set piece.

He emerged out into a room filled with screens and weird devices. In the middle of it stood what Jake could only describe as a very realistic-looking hologram. He was certain it was a hologram because it only registered a silhouette of mana in his sphere, and it was slightly see-through. The hologram depicted a man with long ears, wearing a simple robe. It was definitely an elf. But he also saw something even more important.

“Welcome challenger, I must say your performance was exemplary, and I would like to congratulate you. I am the Dungeon Monitor of this place and one of the primary designers of this entire dungeon. I would like to ask of you if you could possibly answer some questions?” the hologram said. How a hologram could talk, Jake didn’t know. Magic holograms and all their secrets.

As for answering questions?

“Can it wait?” he asked, already walking towards his target.

“Pardon?” the hologram asked, looking a bit confused at how Jake was barely paying it any attention.

“Loot first,” the human answered as he Identified the three boxes. He had priorities, after all.

The first was a flat but rather large box with the rare-rarity tag. *Nice.*

The next in line was about the same size, but this one was epic-rarity. *Great.*

And the last box was small but more intricate-looking than any lockbox Jake had ever seen before. It was ancient-rarity. *Awesome.*

He began with the lowest-rarity box first. Funnily enough, he saw the hologram look a bit disappointed as if it wanted him to open the smallest and best box first... but it would have to wait.

Jake opened the box, and inside he found an entire white bundle of cloth. It looked a bit like silk but was far too rough for that. At a closer inspection, Jake saw what looked to be almost scale-like metal fragments within the cloth. Using Identify, he saw that it was a cloak.

***[Altmar Prismatic Cloak (Rare)] – A cloak made out of a strange mix of fabric and metal created by the master craftsmen of the Altmar Empire. This cloak is incredibly resilient to both slashing attacks and will distribute a portion of all kinetic attacks taken throughout the fabric. This type of cloak is usually worn by elite units focusing on stealthily eliminating their foes. The cloak passively aids in making you harder to detect, and when infused with mana, this effect will increase manyfold, allowing the user to become nearly undetectable. If the cloak is damaged, it can repair itself at incredible speeds and make it tougher defensively at the loss of its stealth-functionality for a period of time. Enchantments: Prismatic Veil. Prismatic Reconstruction.***

***Requirements: lvl 110+ in any humanoid race.***

He really wanted to go test the cloak now and put it on, but seeing the hologram just stand there staring at him made it awkward. So he just put it in his inventory and moved on to the next lockbox as the hologram spoke.



“Ah, those cloaks are quite popular in the Empire. The cloth is made by some of our greatest young talented tailors and is a beautiful display of the fusion between technology and more traditional weaving techniques. It’s even popular among those who don’t need the stealth component as it offers great protection against nearly all physical attacks if needed. Additionally, they are also considered quite fashionable, and you can freely change the pattern and colors on the cloak after some practice, and-”

It turned out he didn’t even need to test out the cloak to learn more about it as he apparently had an exposition-hologram readily available.

## Chapter 250: Altmar Signet

Apparently, it was a really great cloak. At least the talkative projection refused to stop speaking about it, overexplaining details of where it came from, even throwing in info about a cousin of his who used to make them. While it was a bit interesting, Jake did notice that despite it saying so much, it didn’t really give out any truly valuable information. Well, besides fashion advice.

Jake tried to ignore it at least a little as he went and opened the epic-rarity box. Within, he found a folded pair of pants. They were made of a very dark green fabric – almost black – and looked slightly worn. The fabric was rather thick as he picked it up, and he had to say the pants were rather heavy. They looked like they could actually provide some solid protection.

Yet the first thing he picked up was the smell. They smelled like... like that smell when it has just rained, and you are walking through greenery in the middle of summer. Yeah, exactly like that. It was a pleasant smell. The reason for the scent was obvious as he could practically feel the life-affinity energy emanating from the pants.

Using Identify, he finally saw the description.

***[Legguards of the Undergrowth (Epic)] – As the first to wander the Undergrowth, the Records of the long-forgotten place has lead to the creation of these legguards, so you can keep a piece of the Undergrowth with you as your path continues. An Immense amount of life-affinity mana has found its way into these pants, and simply wearing them will fill you with vital energy and energy to help you on your travels. The legguards will passively absorb and store life-affinity mana in the atmosphere. This mana can instantly be released as a burst of healing if the wearer is a vitality-based lifeform. Passively emits an aura that encourages growth. Enchantments: + 150 Vitality, +50 Agility, +50 Endurance. Self-Repair. Life Burst. Aura of the Undergrowth.***

***Requirements: lvl 115+ in any humanoid race***

*Goodbye, my dear Badger Pants, you have served me well,* Jake thought as he had to hold back his desire to bind the legguards now and just jump into them. Sadly, he had a curious hologram looking over his shoulder, and it would be a bit awkward to strip in front of it.

While he had just skipped over the cloak to look at it later, he couldn't hold himself back from inspecting the pants a bit closer and consider their properties.

First of all: stats. Great stats. 250 stats. Jake's current Badger Pants gave 25 Agility and 25 Endurance, so he would double up on those alone. On top of that, he would get a massive 150 Vitality and two other effects. He didn't really count Self-Repair as another effect, as while it was great to have, he had just gotten too used to it.

The Life Burst enchantment seemed nice too. Almost like an extra health potion of sorts? He was a bit unsure how it would work as the potions had inherent system-fuckery built into them to make them more effective. It was something to test out for sure.

The last part was that Aura of the Undergrowth. To that, Jake had only one response:

*I swear on my fucking life, if that aura makes mushrooms grow in my house, I'll do something very unpleasant to these damn pants. Stats or not....*

He hoped for the best but feared the worst. Either way, the pants looked nice, and he would surely put them on once he was out of the dungeon and test them.

“The Pioneer, eh? I guess it does make sense as most factions prefer to send their most talented to secure the title and bonus rewards. A bit risky, of course, but risk and growth go hand in hand. I shall not comment on the reward itself, but I hope it will serve you well,” the hologram politely said.

“Thanks, pal,” Jake answered. “So, what makes you so curious about this last box?”

“My curiosity will only hold meaning to you after it’s opened,” it answered back with a smile.

“Oh, okay,” Jake said as he threw the lockbox in his inventory, making a mischievous smirk. “I guess I’ll just open it outside then since it doesn’t matter. See ya!”

“Wait, wait!” the hologram said, surprised. “Alright, the last reward should be a signet of the Altmar Empire for you to wear and serve as proof of your budding relationship with the Empire.”

“So it’s a tracker?” he asked curtly, raising an eyebrow.

The hologram looked a bit flustered before answering. “Yes... but it will be openly shown as one of the enchantments and will also allow you to feel the direction of the nearest teleportation circle attuned to the Empire’s territory.”

“Hm, sounds plausible,” Jake answered, shaking his head. “Anyway, how come an elven empire has managed to create a natural dungeon like this? From what I know, that isn’t how things usually go.”

From talks with the Viper, Jake knew that direct factional connections in natural dungeons were exceedingly rare. Of course, it could happen, but often it contained old and destroyed factions, not ones currently in power, and much less this prominently.

“I guess there are no issues in informing you,” the hologram answered. “This dungeon is part of a larger grand experiment put in motion by the Altmar Empire to create particular areas that can be turned into dungeons. I do not know all the details of how everything is made possible; I am but one of many designers. A talented one, if I do say so myself, at least all my teachers believe so. Anyway, the dungeon itself serves as a test to find talents and create connections to budding experts in faraway worlds as the Empire is rather self-contained. Note that I have done a vocal transcript of everything that has happened so far.

What you speak to currently is a projection of my soul at the time of construction. I do not know the current Realtime, but this particular experiment was started approximately 5.1 billion years after the integration of the 91st universe. Everything we say is being recorded even now, and upon your exit, I will give you that recording to bring back to the Altmar Empire. Only if you have the chance, of course. I promise you will be justly rewarded.”

Jake nodded along as the projection spoke. Honestly, he didn’t need that much information. The projection could just have said “dungeon experiment,” and he would have taken it at that. But, damn, that projection *really liked* to talk.

“What’s your name?” he asked. “I’m Jake.”

“I am Tiarsus Norlynn, C-grade dungeon designer at the time of upload. I reckon my name will hold little meaning dependent on how long time has passed, but perhaps the family is still around.”

As the projection spoke, Jake multi-tasked and dialed up Villy to accomplish two things. Firstly to ask if everything said in there was purely confidential: it was. After he left, the only trace of the conversation would be if he brought out the recording. Once the next challengers entered the dungeon, everything would be reset, after all. Oh, and the second reason he called him up was to have him listen in because he thought it would be fun.

“We’re in the 93rd universe now, been less than a year since the integration,” Jake answered with a big smile. As only he, Villy, and a hologram of an elf would hear everything; he didn’t hold back any information. Villy agreed with his plan and thought it would be hilarious.

“What? Truly? This is a new universe? Absolutely remarkable progress in such a short time. I am certain the Empire will be more than happy to invite you,” it answered, not even trying to hide its shock.

“Thanks, doing my best. Became a Progenitor and all,” he answered with a big grin on his face. “Also, the Norlynn family is doing quite well. Villy told me you even had a god rise in the family a couple of Eras back.”

“We did? You’re what? Wait, who’s Villy?”

“Ah, Villy is my best bud resident god. A Primordial or something, he made me his Chosen to have a beer-buddy. People keep calling him the Malefic Viper or something like that. It’s a bit weird. Wait, maybe he’s just with me because of the bloodline...” Jake snickered, perhaps overdoing it.

At least the hologram seemed to think so as it seemed to calm down and get more serious.

“I guess I should have added humorous to the evaluation,” it said, making a forced chuckle while looking a bit miffed.

“Nothing I said was a lie,” Jake answered, looking deadly serious. “Why hide anything when this is 100% anonymous?”

“It doesn’t matter, does it? This conversation will hold little meaning, as I understand you have no desire to bring out the recording.”

Clearly, the hologram didn't fully believe him. *I guess I did go a bit overboard*, Jake admitted.

"No, I won't. I am not going to bother Villy with getting a play-by-play, and I honestly see no reason to share personal information with the Altmar Empire when I don't even know them," Jake made clear, as he finally moved on to the final box. "Ah, but I will open the box here together with ya. Let's see if I get some cool stuff, shall we?"

Without further ado, he finally opened the last box, the projection completely forgetting its prior mood, and returned to being overly curious. Quite an eccentric projection, that one.

Within the box, Jake saw a very simple-looking ring with a large N-shaped gem placed in it. Without further ado, he Identified it.

***[Altmar N-Signet (Ancient)] – You have been judged by the Altmar Empire and found worthy. This ring is made of unknown metal with an unknown gem embedded in it. This signet is proof of your performance and contains an identifying script designed to only be readable by the Altmar Empire. Yet even if this ring is primarily a display of status, it is far from just a showpiece. For with great status comes great power. The first time the wielder equips the ring, they will become able to distribute the signet's energy into whatever stats they desire. Distributing the stats will make the ring Soulbound. Stats cannot be redistributed once set. Enchantments: +1000 stats (undistributed)***

***Requirements: lvl 100+ in any humanoid race.***

Jake read it over before he closed the description and shook his head.

*Nah, mate, you read it wrong. No way.*

He opened it again.

*Still says a thousand.*

“You truly are from a newly integrated universe! That must be the explanation!” the hologram exclaimed, a bit excited. “Usually, they only reward 750 due to the location-enchanted on the ring, but the system seems to have fully redistributed the Records into simply rewarding pure stats. Without a doubt, due to this being a new closed-off universe. What an interesting interaction.”

“Wait, a level 100 ring seriously gives a thousand fucking stats?” Jake asked, still confused as fuck.

“Yes. Distributable stats are a great way to shore up where you aren’t quite capped yet. I know it likely won’t help you much currently, besides getting some optimization done by making sure you stay capped in your most-used stats,” the projection nonchalantly said.



“Not help me very much, my ass. I get like 500 stats total from all my stuff right now; this is fucking insane,” Jake kept saying as he just kept staring at the ring.

“You... you aren’t joking, are you?”

“No, that would just be a bad joke. Most of my gear is for around level 50 or something. This is a massive upgrade. Seriously, how the hell can you think it isn’t great?” Jake asked, seriously considering if the hologram was damaged somehow.

*“In his defense, being capped in stats from gear is pretty much standard for all elites of the major factions throughout the multiverse. The Order of the Malefic Viper too. Having gear lined up for certain levels isn’t anything new. You don’t even need high-rarity equipment, just equipment suited to your level. Shit, most get an entirely new wardrobe upon reaching D-grade. Of course, the more stats you have from classes, professions, race, and titles, and all that, the higher your cap, so you may need some better gear than most others, but still. You haven’t gotten shit since reaching D-grade. It’s only natural your gear fucking sucks,”* Villy chimed in.

“Truly a category N... you didn’t joke about being a Progenitor either, did you? That explains it... truly spectacular. I must insist that you pay a visit to the Altmar Empire if you can. I am sure your Patron’s faction can help you if you are truly blessed by a Primordial. You don’t even need the recording. The signet alone will be enough,” the hologram insisted.

“Maybe. What does the N stand for?” Jake asked.

“We judge challengers on a scale from 1-10. Most solo combatants who make it to the end of the dungeon while being below the level of 120 tend to be around 7,5-8 based on prior

experiments. Those judged to be above category 10 are categorized with an N, standing for Non-determinable. Needless to say, this category is the highest and is simply an admittance that we cannot truly test you with the tools available in this dungeon. In the end, the system rules are still in place, and it has to be beatable,” the hologram enthusiastically explained.

“And here I thought I was done with exams after uni,” Jake joked as he couldn’t stop admiring the signet. It looked more and more beautiful by the second.

He knew that putting it on now and beginning to distribute stats would be something he could come to regret. Well... a small part of him did want to make it +1000 perception, but that would just be stupid. He would save all the math till when he was out. For now, he would keep chatting with the hologram.

“So... this may sound a bit weird, but I kind of made a friend with one of the dungeon monsters outside. It's the Cave Troll with its two kids. I was just wondering if there was any way to bring them out with me? Some hidden dungeon functionality or something?” Jake asked. He hadn’t forgotten the big fella.

“Bring out some of the dungeon residents? No, not unless you have such means by yourself already. I would advise against trying to make use of dungeon monsters as a fighting force. It is rarely worth it, and their Records tend to be heavily affected, making progress borderline impossible for them,” the projection kindly explained.

“Well, that sucks,” Jake sighed. He had hoped for the dungeon to reward him some rare item to free the troll or something like that.

“One more thing,” the projection began, looking a bit hesitant. “Could you perhaps leave the remains of the golem here? Proprietary technology was used during its construction, and unless you are part of the Altmar Empire, you aren’t allowed to possess it.”

“Nah, it’s mine. Tough luck. Fucker was hard to take down; no way I am letting you keep it. Anyway, do you have any more questions?” Jake asked.

“Seeing as you have no interest in taking the recording out with you, no. After you leave, this hologram will cease to exist, and anything you tell it won’t matter. I would like to still heavily implore you to visit the Altmar Empire. We can do much for you, and I am sure that there is much for you to learn when part of a newly integrated universe. The Altmar Empire has always welcomed young talents from all races,” the hologram finished with a smile.

“I’ll keep it in mind. Thanks for talking, mate,” Jake smiled as he walked over to the out-of-place wooden door leading out of the dungeon. He placed his hand on it as he turned t. “Oh, by the way, remember what I said about someone from your family becoming a god?”

“Yes? Did it truly happen?” the projection asked, quite expectantly. It was funny... it was just a hologram that would remember nothing, yet it still wanted to know so badly.

“Yep, sure did. And I never mentioned the name, did I?”

“No, I don’t believe you did.”

“I heard the dude is called Tiarsus.”

Jake didn't allow the projection to say anything before accepting the prompt, leaving the dungeon - a flabbergasted hologram left behind.