

Hunter 111

Chapter 111: When the curtains fall...

The Malefic Viper stood in his Order as his gaze pierced through the void - the fight between the King and Jake reflected in his eyes.

A fight between a human that had only been part of the system for a mere two months and a being that had lived for a century or more. A unique lifeform that had been born at D-grade. A being that the human should have no right even to approach, much less fight. And yet he fought, and he didn't just fight but had brought the creature to a state of desperation.

But life was often cruel. Unique lifeforms came with abilities that many considered unfair. Often born with magic or skills that would take an enormous investment of time and effort to learn for any other.

They started ahead of the curve and often ended up becoming powerhouses. Possessed inherent Records to become pinnacle creatures of the universe. Stat growth per level surpassing even those with special classes that came with severe limitations. Like Jake's pal, the Augur.

The Viper observed as the mask fell, and the true visage of the King was revealed. He sighed as he saw the wave of mental force fly out - an ability that the Viper had to admit that even he would have fallen to if he was still only an early... or maybe even middle D-grade snake. It was an attack that the god could see directly drained the soul of the being. It would take years for the King to recover after using it.

You did well, Jake. More than anyone could ever have expected.

His mortal friend had, indeed, done well. He had already felt that the King didn't intend to kill Jake, so he would get another chance. In a few days, he would exit the tutorial, still receiving great rewards. That is what his prophecy had shown him... Jake lying there till the end with the King recovering, eliminating all the energies ailing him.

The Viper was about to turn his gaze away as he stopped, his eyes opening wide in genuine astonishment.

The human before him fell backward from the wave of mental energy. The King had felt parts of the soul shatter, his consciousness disperse. The fight was over, and once more, the King reigned supreme. He admonished himself for allowing himself to get to this state, bu-

The human stopped.

His fall paused, his back bent at an impossible angle. Like a whip, the human flew forward towards the King. Fast.

Surprised, the creature didn't manage to react before he was struck in the chest by a fist. Strong.

CRACK

His rotten armor cracked more than before as he was shot backward, reeling from the force as blood poured out of the new deep imprint of a fist on his chest. Confused, disorientated, and in a state of utter disbelief, he gazed at the human before him, now with a broken hand from the attack he had just made.

The King couldn't understand. The mind had been shattered. How did he move? A thought that was interrupted as the human kept attacking.

This time he managed to repel the hunter with a blast of force, allowing him to float backward and create some distance. He didn't even consider attacking the human. He couldn't comprehend what was happening, and his only thought at that time was to get his bearing and understand the situation.

Jake had struggled for only a few moments, but it felt like ages and it was as if his head was on fire. When he was finally starting to get a semblance of control back, he was hit by it. A wave that hit him like nothing else ever before.

He felt everything being shredded as it turned dark. He felt his mind break, and he was no longer able to think or act. He felt himself lose consciousness. And then... he did...

THUMP!

And as his mind faded, that which lay beneath came forth.

THUMP!

A cold, unfeeling thing that held no thoughts, no considerations. Only instincts.

THUMP!

When thoughts disappear, there is no hesitation. No tactics, no strategy, no considerations - there was only action.

THUMP!

Jake was unconscious; this could not be disputed. But his body was very much awake. A part of that which was 'Jake' dwelled deep within. And that part had now taken over as he stopped his fall and attacked the King of the Forest. He didn't need to think about it; he just knew that the King was an enemy.

And enemies had to be killed.

He was faster than before, stronger than before. His fist impacted the King as every bone in his hand shattered. The veins burst as blood came out of countless small holes and ruined veins.

Limit Break had a pretty clear warning. Go above 20%, and there would be unforeseen consequences. Consequences Jake would logically aim to avoid. But in the state he was in now, he didn't consider those consequences.

He needed to be stronger, so he became stronger - his energy within flowing faster and faster as his energy rose. Before he even attacked, it had already gone far beyond anything reasonable.

25%

30%

35%

40%

50%

60%

...

His entire body began breaking down from within as the far too powerful energy ravaged it, but it gave him power far above anything he ever had before. His skin flaked and began breaking off, fissures opening in his flesh as his entire body echoed with power.

Charging again, he was shot back by a wave of force. An inconsequential action from his enemy as he charged again. This time even faster than before. Too fast for the King to react.

Another punch from the already broken hand impacted the same place as before. Blood burst out as his fist was embedded deeply into the creature. The King fell to the ground, hurt more than ever before. But Jake didn't let up.

A blast of mental energy hit the human once more, but it did nothing. There was no mind to attack, only a body moving on pure instinct.

The broken fist descended on the King's exposed face as he tried to push the human away with a blast of force. The creature saw the human be lifted off the ground as he tried to shoot him kilometers away, but he failed.

Thousands of strings of mana came out of the human as they bound up the human and the King both. Tethering them together while at the same time stopping the human's body from breaking apart. Trying to contain the energy.

The King tried time and time again to push the human away as the fists descended. Veins burst all over Jake's body, his already broken body breaking even further. The energy within him rotating faster and faster, showing no signs of stopping as his condition worsened by the second.

If Jake had been lucid, he would understand exactly how dire his situation was. The internal energy was now fully rampant, and even if he tried, he would be unable to stop it. In other words, he would die no matter what.

Like an injured cornered beast that ripped open its wounds to kill the predator that came aiming for its life, he attacked with reckless abandon. Paradoxically he exerted himself so much to survive but ended up dooming himself instead. A fight that wouldn't even result in his death would now be lethal.

Or maybe his instincts knew that the death of the King would mean his survival.

Blood was flying everywhere as the fists that descended could no longer be called fists. The King struggled still, but even his most potent attacks were useless. He couldn't do anything. The face was his weakness, hence the mask that covered it at all times.

Ah... I see, the King thought as he slowly became unable to struggle. He saw the sharp, yet hollow, eye that looked down on him.

Soon, the fists were little more than bloody pulps as the consciousness of the King waivered. His struggle slowly ending as the attacks only got more and more vicious. When Jake's hands could no longer move, he began biting.

I was mistaken...

When his teeth fell out, the human began smashing his head down. All that was in the man's world was to kill the enemy. Beating it down several times, he soon could no longer lift it up. The energies within him spent, his stamina and health both depleted.

I could... lose... I... could...

Everything started fading as the only thing that remained was an innate will to live within both Jake and the King. The deepest parts of their souls were struggling to stay alive. But willpower could only last so long as both their sparks of life began to fade. True death was imminent as the system message came.

...die

In the Order of the Malefic Viper, a hysterical laugh was heard as it echoed throughout the halls. All heard it and knew the source - the patron himself. What could possibly have happened to cause the mood of the Primordial to rise like so?

The Viper himself stood as the final scenes were etched into his mind, a giant grin on his face. "Freaking monster."

Her eyes narrowed as she felt the change. The Hunter chosen by the Viper had succeeded in doing the impossible. The outcome was different; the fate changed. Was this omen good or bad for the future? How would it affect the Augur she had taken under her wings?

The Holy Mother didn't know. She couldn't predict it. Something that rarely happened. Subverting destiny could never be seen as a simple matter, after all.

Feeling the change in karma, the old man gazed through the void. A tutorial had been cleared, and by one he had a karmic connection to. Naturally, he knew who.

Looking at his new disciple, he chuckled to himself. It would indeed be unwise to allow their paths to intersect. It would be a shame to lose his disciple that fast... wouldn't it?

The old undead sat on his throne as he smiled lightly. "I guess I didn't waste my time with that mortal friend of his..."

Jake opened his eyes once more, and he became aware. His mind was a jumble as he tried to collect his memories. The last thing he remembered was getting hit by a wave of energy as his memory turned black. But he felt there was more.

Putting his hands to his head, he noted that there was no pain. His body was fine... more than fine. He felt great physically. The last thing he did was... oh.

He remembered. He remembered losing himself for but the fraction of a second, and then it all just turned so... simple. Easy. All complications were gone as he fought, all considerations of anything but killing his foe disappeared. It was like recalling a perfect dream... it felt almost euphoric.

He fought the King until he could no longer move - until his last shred of will was slowly eroded, and he heard a notification.

And now... he was here. Fully healed and in a better condition than before.

Trying to dispel the feeling, he tried to focus on other things. His environment being one of them.

A quick assessment of the room instantly let him know what had happened. He had won the fight and, in turn, won the tutorial. The quest did say the tutorial would end at the conclusion of either chosen option... I guess this was a conclusion. When brought here, he had been healed by the system, just like when he had first entered the tutorial or after passing a trial in the Challenge Dungeon.

As for the room... it brought back a mix of memories. Completely white with only two chairs and a small table in between. The same room, or perhaps just one identical, to the one Jake had first entered when the initiation came. It felt like a lifetime ago, but it had only been a bit over two months.

He shook his head as he looked back on what had happened towards the end of the tutorial. It was something he wanted never to repeat... if he hadn't been transported here, he would be dead without a doubt. The loss of control was scary on so many levels... yet also liberating.

He was alone in the room, with no other being here. What he did find, however, was a stack of items on the table - very familiar items.

On it was his Windsoar Bow, his Shortsword of Icy Winds, as well as a bunch of other items he had thrown away or lost in the tutorial. It was far from all of them, however. It was only the ones he had actually used. Which meant he had lost the rare heavy sword that he couldn't put mana into. RIP giant sword that doubled as a pickaxe.

Putting the items back in his spatial storage, he stopped as one more was revealed at the bottom. A mask. A very familiar mask. It was identical to the one the King of the Forest had worn. Completely blank, with only a bit of wooden texture on it, as well as two eye-shaped holes for the, well, eyes.

Picking it up, he noticed that it felt oddly warm. Using Identify, it also became pretty clear that this was no simple item.

[Mask of the Fallen King (Legendary)] – A mask born from the Records of the one once known as the King of the Forest; a mighty Unique Lifeform that died just as its path began. The mask is made of a

wood-like material unique to the lifeform it comes from. Does not obstruct vision when worn and regenerates itself from any damage taken. Enchantments: Living Wood. Passively absorbs mana in the atmosphere, increasing mana recovery rate by a large amount. Increases maximum mana by 25%.

Requirements: Soulbound

Needless to say, it was quite good. All of the properties of the item were ones Jake hadn't seen before on anything else. All of them useful. Having more mana regeneration was, of course, a huge boon and one that would help him at all times.

An increase in maximum mana was also a quite self-explanatory benefit. An insane 25% too. It made him wonder if it even worked considering the Malefic Viper's words that said individual stats could only be increased by a maximum of 20%. Then again, mana wasn't a stat...

The part about the Living Wood enchant was also impressive. Focusing on it, he felt that it was in many ways similar to Self-Repair. As the description said, it allowed the mask to regenerate while broken, but that wasn't the only thing. It also made the wood naturally adaptive, making it more easily able to grow with its user.

The last point of interest was that it was Soulbound - his second time encountering it after his necklace. He still wasn't entirely clear on what it meant, but he was by now 99% sure it meant exactly what it said. That the item was bound to his soul.

First of all, he noticed that he didn't even have to channel mana into the mask. It already belonged to him the moment he touched it. A connection was already there, and one deeper than the one between him and his bow for example.

Lifting the mask up to his face, he wondered how to put it on. It didn't have any straps or anything, so he just tried to place it over his face. The moment he did so, it seemed to snap into place as it covered his face entirely, leaving only his two brown eyes visible.

From his point of view, however, he didn't even notice the mask. He couldn't feel it on his face, and he couldn't see it. It was incredibly odd, though equally beneficial. Wearing a mask or helmet would typically adversely affect one's field of view, and while he had his sphere, he also liked being able to see.

He knew he had the mask on, and if he tried to feel for it, he could. Taking it off, he also noticed how it wasn't in any way attached to him. Yet, no matter how he shook his head, it didn't move an inch but stayed in place. Odd, to say the least.

Of course, with the mask on, he also felt its effects. He felt like his mana swelled, and he felt the pool within him absorb mana from the environment faster than before.

With the items gathered and him focusing on his inner self, he felt it. He was more powerful than when he used Limit Break, and not by a small amount either. What the hell?