

Hunter 118

Chapter 118: Second part?

Many different organizations exist in the multiverse. Even if one took only the ones spanning across multiple universes, there were many. These organizations' structures and goals all varied widely - their ideology and vision were all their own.

Those with gods at the helm often had the beliefs of their god placed front and center. Some were more akin to churches and religions, while others were closer to companies. Yet even in those, the members held a deep respect and even faith for their godly leader. It all came down to respecting the powerful, and none were more powerful than the gods.

For anyone to join these organizations, they had to offer something - the most basic, of course, being a place to belong, comrades to rely on, and protection from the myriad dangers of the multiverse. On top of that, they also provided status and social standing, making the high-ranking members respected, even if it wasn't for their own personal power. In other words, it allowed the weak to become strong through association.

Other than that, it gave those less suited to combat a place to pursue their passions and talents. It gave those who fought a backdrop of support for all their needs, allowing them to focus on fighting and improving their own personal strength - a purely symbiotic relationship, allowing strong synergy between the two.

One such organization that mainly had craftsmen was the Order of the Malefic Viper. Primarily an organization comprised of alchemists, one would generally believe it to be weaker on the combat side of things. But to the contrary, it was quite the opposite.

Despite its derelict condition upon initiation of the 93rd universe, none would dare look down on it. Even ignoring the possibility of the Viper himself appearing to defend it, it had a lot of power in itself. Even to the day before the Primordial's reappearance, it still easily recruited powerful experts.

Because what the order offered was one of the other significant benefits of an organization. Classes, and especially with the order, professions. Alchemist of the Malefic Viper was, without a doubt, one of the most sought-after professions in the entirety of the multiverse due to the potent and influential skills it possessed, as well as its endless potential.

Of course, being a member of an order with some of the most talented alchemists to help you also didn't hurt. The association with a Primordial even less so.

Of the desired skills, Palate of the Malefic Viper was front and center. A skill that was rare by default and only grew from there. Its growth path was also well-documented and, once gained, presented a clear way to progress it.

Some skills came with clear paths of progression. Most didn't, but a minority did. For those with a clear path, it is often enough just to reach some kind of threshold of improvement or to familiarize yourself enough with the skill for its rarity to improve.

Those without a clear path require some kind of qualitative change. Needless to say, this was far harder. This isn't to say you cannot change a skill with a clear path, making it diverge, but it is far rarer due to the difficulty.

The skills with a clear path also naturally had an end to that clear path. A point when reached would require a fundamental, qualitative change to upgrade it further. This is where the exact endpoint of the skills' natural progression comes into play.

Gods powerful enough to have skills named after them were precisely that: Powerful. In turn, so were their skills, making them carry strong potential inherently. But even then, it varies a lot. So, few aren't tempted when represented with a vast array of skills associated with the Malefic Viper.

Jake, in his well-justified ignorance, of course, didn't know any of this. He didn't understand many things, and in some ways, that lack of understanding had strength in itself. He wasn't aware of what he could do. Nor what he couldn't or shouldn't be able to.

This leads back to the current Trial of Myriad Poisons.

The first hour was deemed the most crucial for all those who attempted the trial. Except for a few hiccups right at the beginning, Jake passed that stage with flying colors.

At the same time, however, Duskleaf noticed something that shouldn't be.

"Master... what did you do to the concoction?"

"Oh, I just added a little something extra," the Viper answered, a deep smile on his lips. His eyes were fixated on the internal movements of the energies within Jake, and with every passing moment, his smile only got deeper.

Duskleaf looked between the Viper and the barrel for a bit before he realized. "You didn't..."

"I sure did."

When the concoction was made, he had only made one minor change. A single small ingredient was added on top of everything else - a single drop of blood. His own.

"Master, we have to stop this. There is no way he can handle it. I am well aware he is a Progenitor, but the Soulstrain alone will kill him. Even in the best-case scenario, it will do irreparable damage to his soul," Duskleaf said with an anxious look on his face. He had no idea what the hell his Master was thinking.

"Normally, I would agree with you. But I have a feeling it won't be so. Jake's soul is more powerful than you believe. He can handle it."

"If even the tiniest mistake is made..."

"It will be fine. I haven't known Jake for that long, but if there is one thing I have come to learn, it's that he isn't one to back down from a challenge."

"I hope you are right," Duskleaf sighed as he returned to being a silent observer. Either way, it wouldn't matter yet. It was far too early for him to reach the stage of the trial where the blood would be activated. He could only hope that the young human would fail before it reached that stage.

The system was fair yet tough. Like with earning experience and levels, one couldn't simply get a free ride. If one tried to go above their means and forcefully increase their strength, one would more often than not suffer from Soulstrain.

Soulstrain was when one's soul wasn't large enough to hold power put into it. If one used the metaphor Jacob had read, it was like pouring in insane amounts of contaminated water into the pond, hoping for it not to completely ruin the existing water but be absorbed by the pond itself, making it into one's own. In other words, the Records had to be strong enough.

The most normal consequence of this going wrong was death. It was to have one's soul shatter, leaving only the indestructible Truesoul behind for the system to reclaim.

Another consequence was for the soul to simply crack, resulting in lost stats, resources, skills, or even levels. Repairing a damaged soul was insanely demanding and often resulted in irreparable damage anyway.

Duskleaf had thought that the plan was to increase the rarity of Jake's skill all the way to epic-rarity or maybe even ancient-rarity if all went well. To pour in a decent amount of water, but not too much. This wouldn't be a problem at all. It would barely matter compared to the titles the human possessed. But what the Viper attempted meant way more. He was forcefully injecting Records into his soul through his own blood. Records of a Primordial into a weak E-grade mortal.

Which meant he wasn't just pouring a lot of water into the pond but also tossing in a dirty bomb. If his pond weren't currently large and stable enough to absorb the impact, he would be... changed. The structure of the soul altered.

Even if he somehow managed to absorb it into his body, Duskleaf couldn't see it ending well. Yet his Master didn't appear to have the faintest doubt in his mind that the mortal could handle it. What had he missed?

He knew that the mortal carried some secret. The mere fact that his Master had blessed him with a Divine skill to obscure him was enough to prove that. But could that secret really be enough for him to survive? What secret could a mortal that was newly initiated even hold?

Duskleaf had his theories, but it was a fruitless endeavor with the multiverse and endless possibilities. Bloodlines, variant race, special class, or profession, just to mention the more common ones. The fact that the human already had a skill related to time made the old man believe it was maybe related to that concept. Had he somehow managed to attain a deep comprehension of the concept of time already? No, even that didn't make sense, considering his ignorance of the time dilation.

As the old alchemist thought, time marched onward. Soon, an entire day had ticked by. Jake within the barrel hadn't noticed any of this as he simply focused internally. Every shred of focus was on consuming the energy, to the point where he didn't even register anything from his passive sphere.

A day quickly became two, and then three. Every few hours, the runes on the barrel would shine, and more of the poison in the concoction would become active. Every time it did so, Jake would temporarily be attacked from all sides until he managed to stabilize once more. At the same time, he felt both his knowledge and general resistance to all the toxicity grow. He was slowly adapting.

After three and a half days, he heard a small notification but didn't have time to check it. Yet he instantly felt that his Palate of the Malefic Viper had undergone an evolution becoming Epic-rarity. With it also came a big leap in the skills capabilities, and he felt many of the poisons in the barrel now no longer able to hurt but only nourish him.

It was a slight reprieve that was quickly outdone by a wave of assault stronger than any before. Jake's growth didn't mean it would get easier, just that the trial's speed increased to match it. It was a nearly unwinnable trial by design - a fact Jake didn't know, as he only saw it as a difficulty spike for him to yet again overcome.

Four days soon passed. Then five. Six. Until an entire week had gone by with Jake still immersed. Duskleaf was astonished by the young man's fast adaptability and nodded in approval every time he quickly managed to overcome a new wave. His speed was impressive, to say the least - his ability to remain focused even more so. The ability to hold such singular focus was rare...

On the eighth day, something happened that surprised both the Viper and Duskleaf. The unmoving mortal appeared to smirk slightly as his closed lips parted somewhat, inhaling some of the concoction.

Duskleaf opened his eyes in fright while the Viper just began laughing hysterically. It appeared that Jake found the speed of the trial too slow. Something he indeed did.

After the sixth day, he was already assimilating the toxins faster than the difficulty increased. It was starting to get boring. Less challenging. He was a maestro in his internal realm, guiding the energies effortlessly. Every toxic shred of energy that entered him was surrounded and consumed from all sides before it even had time to begin attacking his vital energy.

Which is when he began eliminating what had paralyzed him. Enough to open his mouth slightly, at least. He wanted more. Even if he had to take it by force.

After he directly inhaled the concoction, he felt like his entire stomach was invaded by millions of small worms, all trying to eat him from the inside out. Throughout it all, the pain had never stopped. It wasn't the kind of pain one could simply zone out, but the type of pain that was all-consuming and impossible to ignore.

Yet Jake handled it. Despite his brief grimace when the poison entered his stomach, he didn't lose focus as he began consuming that too. His mana moved in on it, carrying with it a powerful intent to break down and destroy the poison.

What he hadn't noticed yet at this point was minuscule purple sparks appearing on his otherwise colorless mana. It was so unnoticeable that perhaps only the Malefic Viper noticed it. Yet the intent embedded in these sparks was evident, as his mana broke down the poison faster and faster.

His first mouthful was consumed within two hours. The second mouthful an hour and fifty-five minutes. The third an hour and forty-seven minutes. The fourth an hour and thirty-six minutes. He was exhausted from not sleeping, but he kept going, the energy nurturing him constantly and the pain enough to always keep him fully awake.

Nine days passed, ten, eleven, twelve. Barely an hour after the two-week mark, Jake heard the second notification. The growth was instantly apparent, and he felt himself fill with inner energy. Most of the poisons in his body now no longer appeared to affect him, and he even felt much of his mobility return as the paralysis was mostly gone.

He directed a sliver of his attention to the sphere and observed the smiling Viper and the, for some reason, worried Duskleaf. Not long after, Jake heard a voice in his head as the Viper spoke to him telepathically.

"Congratulation for passing the first part of the Trial of Myriad Poisons. Ready for part two?"

Jake opened both his eyes, ignoring the burning sensation in them as he did so. He only managed to see the two for a few moments before his vision turned blurry due to the still-potent toxins digging into his eyes. Yet he clearly saw the shining green eyes of the Viper looking straight at him. The look in his eyes clear. It was a challenge.

He nodded his head as he prepared himself for whatever was to come. His intuition told him this part wouldn't be as easy. Because he frankly did think the first part was easy. Everything outside of the first hour was just too easy as he had managed to familiarize himself with the process.

At his approval, the Viper's smile faded slightly as he turned a bit more serious. Duskleaf looked even more worried. He had heard the telepathic exchange too. He knew there was no part two to the trial. It was already over. No, what was to come was entirely new territory.

The Malefic Viper raised his hand as he pointed towards the barrel. From his finger came a green light that, upon hitting the runes, made them all turn green. At the same time, they twisted and turned, creating a script that Duskleaf had never seen before. One of a far higher level than what was there before.

Right after the runes changed, the liquid in the bowl changed from pure black to a dark green color. Mana in the entire chamber surged as an aura was released from the barrel. The aura of the Malefic Viper.

Within the concoction was a small drop of dark green blood. It hadn't dispersed as a liquid normally would but was still whole. No other toxic substance even dared come near it, as if a divine law kept them away.

The drop stirred with the runes. Activated, it began releasing its aura, affecting the poison around it. Simultaneously, Jake was hit with another assault of toxins, one more powerful than ever before. One

he managed to somehow withstand through sheer willpower and by channeling everything he had learned throughout the last two weeks.

It didn't even take an hour before the assault ended. Jake felt a few seconds of solace as he consumed every last bit of poison, his Sense of the Malefic Viper informing him that there were no more toxic substances in the entire concoction around him. He had won. Or so he thought.

While his Sense of the Malefic Viper didn't pick it up, his danger sense sure did. A single drop of blood was still in the mixture. Before he could react, it flew like a bullet straight towards his chest and, without any resistance, penetrated his skin, sinking deep into his very soul.

That was when the actual second part of the Trial began as Jake felt his consciousness shift.