

## Hunter 119

### Chapter 119: Embracing power

Jake couldn't quite comprehend what had just happened to him as he suddenly felt himself being transported somewhere else. What made it hard to understand was that he could clearly still feel his physical body - the sensation of the now toxic-free liquid on his skin, and the feedback from his Sphere of Perception was somehow... doubled. He could feel both the outside and the inside of where he was now.

He found himself standing on a vast dark field, with only black stone everywhere in sight. A place he would likely never forget. It was the Malefic Viper's realm and where he had first encountered the god that would turn out to be his new buddy.

Trying to focus, he felt his senses of the outside world be suppressed. Intuitively he also managed to move his sphere entirely into this new realm, making him now feel as if he was indeed there, and the disconnected feeling lessened. And just in time.

On the horizon, he saw a figure rise, one also familiar to him. He had seen it only for a brief moment, but one didn't simply forget the sight of the dark green dragon that was coming towards him. Its wings spread wide; they had to be several miles across as it took flight.

Smaller than the Malefic Viper, he thought as it flew towards him. With his sight, he also noticed more differences. The color was slightly off, the spikes on its back not present. Taking a second look, outside of the dark color and overall dragon-shape, there was actually quite a few differences. He didn't have time to feel shame for his inability to distinguish dragons before it was just in front of him.

Landing on the ground, it caused a small earthquake. Jake just stayed there unmoving, weirdly enough, not feeling any sense of alarm or danger despite the massive, powerful form before him.

"At least I didn't lack confidence back then either," the dragon spoke, with a voice Jake always cringed at in recordings. Simultaneously it was enveloped by dark smoke that dispersed just as quickly, leaving a humanoid form behind.

Jake used humanoid rather broadly. The figure was covered in the all too familiar dark green scales, and on his back were two jet-black wings. His feet and hands were a weird mixture between humans and dragons, making them appear suitable for melee combat and using tools alike.

What was most noticeable of it all, however, was his face and eyes. Two green reptilian eyes stared back at him, with a face identical to his own. Even having the same smirk he himself made all the time.

"So, what do you think?" the scaled version of Jake said, spreading out his wings and showing off his body. "Quite the upgrade, eh?"

More than a little confused about the entire scene playing out in front of him, he answered with the first thought that came to mind. "Isn't it hard to hold a bow with those claws?"

In retrospect, perhaps not the most relevant thing to know at the current time. Nevertheless, the clone entertained the question with full seriousness.

"Quite the opposite, actually," scale-Jake answered, pulling out a black bow from some kind of spatial storage. "You see, unlike hands, these can be modified slightly. On top of that, the scales and resilience of the claws actually make them more suitable for archery."

A fact he demonstrated as he took out an arrow from thin air too and nocked it. His claws appeared to slightly warp as he did so, making them better fit around the string and arrowhead. After a brief channel of dark green energy, he fired the arrow into the horizon.

"Not bad, eh?" he said as he turned to the real Jake. Less than a second later, the realm shook once more. In the distance was a large green explosion. Power akin to thousands of nuclear explosions going off at once.

Jake could only stand there, staring in awe at the might on display. Exactly what rank was the scaled Jake in front of him? A casual arrow released held enough power to blow up a damn planet.... It made the King of the Forest appear like a weakling. And yet...

"Why am I here?" he asked himself.

"Always wanting everything explained. Well, I guess that part of me is still the same," scale-Jake laughed. "You are here to catch a glimpse of what we can become. A mere fragment of the power we can obtain through fully embracing the legacy of the Malefic One."

Jake quickly caught something off. He had never referred to the Viper as the Malefic One before. On top of that, the way he said it made his stomach churn. Like watching yourself do something cringeworthy in an old school play.

"Coming off a bit fanatical there, mate. Me. Whatever," human Jake answered, shaking his head.

"Nothing wrong with that, man," his other version answered. "This a Primordial we are talking about. A top-of-the-line badass. Not embracing that kind of power just seems stupid."

"Yeah, but nothing comes for free and all that. So, what's the cost?"

"Define cost. We know enough of the system to know that picking one path cuts others off. I just made a choice. Realized that some existences are above us and that sometimes accepting defeat can be a victory in itself. Besides, you see the results before you," fake Jake said, spreading out his long wings as the air hummed with power around him. His mana was carrying a vivid dark green tinge.

"Class, profession, and even race far more powerful than that of a simple human. Skills more powerful than anything I could have ever imagined. To be honest, I don't see myself NOT becoming a god with this path. To cut off a few other paths is not a high price to pay for that at all."

"Making it sound like I can't become strong without relying on him," Jake answered, sighing at the version of himself in front of him.

"Powerful? From a mortal's standpoint, sure. But a god? Doubtful. We are talented, yes, but we shouldn't waste that talent by scrambling in the dark trying to reinvent the wheel. The path of the Malefic One is tried and tested. It works. With it, perhaps we can even one day be able to stand beside him, having enough strength not to be a worthless bug anymore. Maybe... even his equal."

Jake looked at his dragon version a bit, thinking. He saw the logic; heck, it was his own logic. It made sense. It would be like learning programming and design to create a new complicated accountant system when you can just learn excel to get the job done. Yet...

"Yeah, no thanks."

"Seriously? Are you going to give up on this kind of pow-"

"Yep."

"What the hell is wrong with you? When did I get that stupid?" his scaled version said, a genuinely confused look on his face.

"Oh, we have always been this stupid. We just never had the balls to pursue it before the system. Balls you clearly lack as you pussied out," Jake said with a smirk.

"Do you honestly believe that you can make it on your own? That you can even come close to godhood on your lonesome?" other-Jake said, an exasperated look on his face.

"Who knows? But I will sure as hell try. Besides, I am still not alone. I recognize that I am already well on Malefic Viper's path, and I am not giving that up. But it won't become all I am."

"Seems there is no arguing with you... oh well, if soft methods don't work," dragon-Jake said, pulling out his bow. "We can try it the hard way."

Jake stared at himself as his other version, with a flap of his wings, took to the air. Jake, still standing there, looking up at him.

His scaled version drew his bow as he nocked an arrow. The air cracked as reality itself seemed to shatter and reform around the channeling half-dragon. The mana was on another level. Yet Jake recognized the skill clearly. Infused Powershot. Or, well, a vastly upgraded version of it.

"Final chance. An obvious choice. Choose to walk this path, or be consumed unwillingly."

The voice echoed throughout the realm, yet Jake didn't move or respond. He just looked up at the other version of himself with... pity.

Seeing the look, the other Jake had enough as he released the pent up energy. An arrow filled with unbridled power was fired straight for the weak-looking human below. Its speed too fast to even register, its inherent power enough to destroy everything.

A moment before impact, just before the measly human was annihilated, he raised his hand. Faster than scale-Jake could see, the real Jake... caught the arrow. The pent up energy exploded out in the area around him, leveling an area the size of a smaller country. Yet Jake was unscathed.

"You know... I thought something was off from the beginning," Jake said, as he snapped the arrow between his fingers. "We may have the same roots, but we have diverged already. Do you remember the thought we had when we first saw the Malefic Viper on the mural in the challenge dungeon?"

He didn't get an answer from his clone, who just looked gob-smacked. But he could see that he didn't know. Or perhaps had forgotten.

"Only a single thought permeated my mind at that moment. I wanted to one day be able to fight that dragon. To have the power to. That goal hasn't changed. How do you expect me to in any way surpass that dragon if all I do is follow in its footsteps? Chasing its shadow like some fanatical sheep?"

"Nah, man, that ain't me. Besides, I can see on you that you don't feel it. You are, in the end, just a cheap imitation."

With that, he took a step forward, appearing mid-air right behind his dragon version. He didn't hesitate as he lightly smacked him in the back of the head, making his other version turn around in fright as he flew backward at supersonic speed.

"I would have seen that one coming."

Stepping forward once more, he instantly appeared before the still retreating other-Jake. Raising his fist, he smashed into his back, sending him tumbling towards the ground where he left a vast crater. "That one too."

Jake had enjoyed the philosophical discussion with himself. It was an interesting and valuable learning experience for him - an excellent chance to reaffirm his own goals and convictions. The other version had good arguments, but his mind was already set.

The nail in the coffin, however, was what he felt standing before his clone. He didn't feel a shred of fear or weakness. In front of the Malefic Viper and Duskleaf, he always had a small voice in the back of his head telling him that fighting them would mean certain death. That voice had been silent in front of his other version.

In the end, this entire world wasn't real. It was inside Jake's mind or soul or whatever. Within such a mindscape, the normal rules didn't apply. Jake had felt that too. He didn't use any of his skills, and yet his body was full of energy. He felt like he was in control of everything.

Another step later, and he was in front of his scaled version who was trying to get up.

"You don't have it," he said, staring down at his struggling clone. "You are just a shell of one possible path - one that is pretty damn incomplete. You didn't even replicate our bloodline."

"... Did I choose wrong?" his other version looked up at him with a hollow look in his eyes.

"I wouldn't say that. You just didn't choose what I would. If you had to choose a higher power to swear yourself to, the Malefic Viper does seem like a good choice. Just not my choice. I want to see how long I can go on my own path," Jake said with a comforting smile.

"Are you going to just give up the path of the Malefic Viper just like that? Be content in your gains so far."

"What? Of course not. I am gonna double-dip. Take everything and run with it. As you know, we have always been a bit of a greedy sort. Why should I accept something when I can take everything?"

"You are insane."



"Yep, but my insanity is my own," Jake said with a small laugh. "Now it's goodbye."

He didn't even have to do anything but will it as the body of the scaled version of Jake dispersed into dust. Yet, not everything disappeared.

Left behind, floating in mid-air, was a single droplet of dark green blood. It didn't take long for Jake to recognize its aura. The Malefic Viper. A droplet containing a fragment of his Records, of what he is. It held power beyond anything Jake currently was.

But not what he could be.

The blood simply floated there in the air, radiating power. Jake bathed in its power... and he wanted it. Reaching out his hand, he tried to touch it but found himself unable to. It was like a forcefield surrounded the blood, denying him access.

He wasn't having that. It was just a damn drop of blood. No way he was going to let it get away.

Strings of mana sprung up around his hand. All of them reached for the blood, only to be eroded when they got close. Jake didn't let up, however, but kept up his assault. Ten strings became a hundred, as they surrounded the blood from all sides. Until a single string of mana managed to creep close enough to nearly touch it.

At the same time as this happened, the world around him began to shake. The cold desolate stone began to crack. The sky was slowly swirling into itself as if space itself began to collapse above. The world was breaking down.

He felt that it wasn't actually the blood itself resisting him. It was just its passive aura keeping him away. If it actively had tried to fight him off, he doubted he would be able to do anything. But as it was, he was winning.

The aura around the blood finally gave in as Jake managed to grasp it in his hands. The moment his hand closed, so did the world collapse, and the final thing he saw was a notification.

[True Blood of the Malefic Viper (?)] has been successfully absorbed, strengthening your [True Blessing of the Malefic Viper (Blessing - True)]

[True Blessing of the Malefic Viper (Blessing - True)] – An Alchemist recognized by the Malefic Viper himself. Few throughout the ages have found themselves blessed by the Primordial, despite their desire to be so. You are his Chosen. Now even the true blood of the Malefic Viper himself is found within your very being, only strengthening your bond further. Through your direct karmic and bodily connection, the wisdom, willpower, and vitality of the Malefic Viper empower you. +10% Willpower, +10% Wisdom, +10% Vitality. Grants access to many new paths. Only one blessing can be held at a time