

## Hunter 120

### Chapter 120: Defiance & Gains

Duskleaf nervously observed the young human as he appeared to sleep within the barrel. He knew that he was not in slumber, however. He was deep within his own soul. His Truesoul even. A domain where no outside force could interfere or peer into.

“Relax. Jake is stronger than you know,” the Malefic Viper said to comfort his worried disciple. However, he had to admit that even he had some small doubts. The god believed that he had a good understanding of Jake, but one can never be entirely sure. The fact that he couldn’t provide any guidance or help was also infuriating. He couldn’t even see what was happening in detail.

What Jake was currently experiencing only he and the system would ever know. But whatever it was, it was something that would inevitably lead to change - a choice. What would emerge when he awakened would still be Jake, but the Viper could only hope it was his friend that returned. If he even woke up.

Records carry power. They carry history. To reach above your station and try to grasp power beyond yourself would always lead to issues. It would become a fight between your own Records and the Records of whatever you tried to absorb. It could change your soul, affecting all layers.

After Jake had been immersed for nearly an hour, the Viper felt a slight change. One through his karmic connection with Jake through his blessing. Jake had made a choice; it appeared. However, what the Viper wasn’t aware of was that it wasn’t quite as he had imagined. Something he soon became aware of.

What the Viper had hoped for was for Jake to take inspiration and possibly even absorb a fraction of the Records in the drop of blood, for him to make the choice that would lead him the furthest. He didn’t want Jake to be his follower, but to be his equal. Yet, he didn’t know that Jake’s intent was different.

Defiance would be the only word to describe it honestly. Jake's intention had never been to stand beside him. It was to surpass him. To stand at the pinnacle of wherever the system could take you. Stand at that pinnacle, and then go beyond even that. The Viper could only feel a faint sense of that dream through his karmic connection. It was audacious, arrogant, naïve, and completely nonsensical.

I like it.

He saw that Jake had once more managed to go above and beyond his expectations. He hadn't just absorbed the Records in the drop of blood. He had claimed it. All along, it had been the plan to reabsorb the blood back into himself after the trial, but Jake had now managed to 'steal it.' Partly.

It was within him now. Dormant. In the end, Jake was still only E-grade. For him to absorb the power within the blood was impossible with his current strength. Yet, it was still suppressed, and it would only strengthen their bond for the future.

Two hours after Jake had entered his Truesoul, his eyes opened again. There were no brilliant colors or fanfare; he simply opened his eyes to see the two gods stand before him - one relieved and one grinning.

All mobility had returned to his body after his little adventure of literal soul-searching. Raising his hands, he lifted himself out of the barrel and unto the floor. Without even thinking, he used mana to dry his body in only a few seconds. Truly his mana control had undergone a noticeable change.

"That was quite something," he said jokingly to the two.

“Sure was. So, all good? You don't suddenly feel compelled to fall to your knees and swear yourself to be my eternal servant?” the Malefic Viper said. He was only half-joking. He felt the power of the blessing had increased. The bond had undergone a qualitative growth. He was afraid of what kind of consequences that would have on his mortal friends’ frame of mind.

“Good question. Depends on if I can get an actual bottle of vodka any time soon. Mixing it in with the bathwater kind of ruined the taste,” Jake answered, with an admonishing tone.

“I guess I do owe ya one,” the Viper said with a laugh, as he went forward and gave Jake a slap on his shoulder. “Now get on some damn clothes.”

Jake noticed only now that he was still in his birthday suit. Feeling a bit embarrassed, he quickly summoned his armor and put it on. It didn’t take long before he was back in his nearly all-black leather armor. He didn’t bother to put on the cloak as it was overdoing it a bit. He also noticed at that moment that he had completely forgotten about the mask. Not that it appeared to matter as it was utterly unblemished.

“So, what’s the plan now?” Jake asked the two of them.

“First of all, check your system messages. If all went well, your Palate skill should have reached Ancient-rarity,” the Viper said, Duskleaf nodding along.

Having already wanted to do so, he opened the menu. He had already seen his blessing being improved as the newest message, but that didn’t mean it was the only one, far from it. First of all, on the list were several levels - more than he had expected.

\*'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 58 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\*

...

\*'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 63 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\*

\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 71 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\*

...

\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 73 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\*

Six levels in his profession were gained throughout the trial. He had been told that time dilation had effects on experience, so he quickly asked if perhaps it wasn't a waste to do it here.

"Nah, it doesn't really matter. Time and experience are weird like that. You do time dilation mainly to train skills or meditate on concepts. Experience is never the main goal, to begin with. Also, even if you lose out on a few levels now, it shouldn't matter. You are E-grade man; you got a long way to go."

Accepting the answer – not like he had much cause not to – he moved on down the list. The next few ones were Palate skill upgrading. A few times, actually, not all of them increasing the rarity. The final skill, however, did reach the desired Ancient-rarity.

[Palate of the Malefic Viper (Rare --> Ancient)] – The Malefic Viper has honed its venom by devouring myriad toxins found throughout the multiverse. In the same vein, the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper can consume toxins to learn their effects and properties. Further evolved, you can now also learn properties of herbs, while at the same time enjoying a greater benefit from all potions consumed. Grants immunity or resistance to most poisons. Passively provides 1 Endurance per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. Through consumption, may your power grow; through gluttony, may your Records expand.

The description had gotten longer, and the effects had increased by quite a bit. Immunity and resistance from weak poisons had the 'weak' part removed. Potions were apparently better for Jake now, and he could now also learn about herbs by eating - all-around good stuff.

But the last part was by far the best when it came to immediate gains - bonus stats. Like Scales of the Malefic Viper, this one also provided stats for every level he had in his profession, effectively just making every level even more valuable. He was a bit surprised it gave endurance, but thinking about it, it was strongly related to internal energy. Or perhaps endurance helped with resistance to poisons in ways toughness didn't?

"Does endurance help with resistance to poison?" He couldn't help himself from asking.

"Yes, endurance helps a bit with internal resistance, and internal energy automatically helps fight off harmful energies, though not as well as vital energy. It mainly serves to suppress the effects of the poison," Duskleaf said.

Nodding, he returned his attention to the notifications. Palate had been upgraded as predicted, and it was better than he expected. But it didn't end there. After his little journey in his mindscape, he had unexpectedly gotten another skill upgraded.

[Blood of the Malefic Viper (Epic --> Ancient)] – The blood of the Malefic Viper is a toxin more deadly than most poisons. Allows the Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper to turn their blood poisonous, imitating their Patron. It has been further improved, even carrying traces of the True Blood of the Malefic One within. The blood can be used as an ingredient in alchemy and as a deadly weapon against your foes. The nature of the poison is determined based on the Records of the Alchemist. The blood's toxicity level is based primarily on vitality and wisdom but receives an increase from all physical stats. Passively provides 1 Vitality per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your blood be forever the bane of all that wishes you harm.

Man, those descriptions are just getting longer, was his first thought. His second thought was how the skill hadn't really changed, except for providing even more stats. He was beginning to see a trend with these Malefic Viper skills providing stats upon reaching Ancient-rarity. By design, no doubt. If he didn't have his One Step Mile, he would maybe even suspect that providing stats was a hallmark of all ancient skills.

The extra vitality was, of course, more than welcome. With Jake's upgraded blessing now granting him an additional 10% vitality, the value was just even better. He was now getting a +65% bonus on vitality, even higher than his 60% in perception. The first title he obtained himself, Bloodline Patriarch, giving 10% added with all his others, was now making a difference.

He had actually surpassed 1000 vitality, making it the second stat to do that after perception. Which also meant 10.000 health. It didn't appear to do anything special, but it still felt like he had passed some kind of threshold. Either way, more health couldn't be bad.

It was also interesting how the description recognized the drop of blood he had absorbed. He could still feel that drop. It was inside of him somewhere, not quite physically, but more in a metaphysical way.

Maybe a part of his soul? He wasn't sure. But it appeared to grant quite the benefits. He felt it, and he also felt how it was suppressed.

All in all, the trial had been a significant success in every way. Two skills upgraded, several levels, and all only in a few days. Counting the whole time-warp-thing.

"So, did you get it upgraded?" the Viper asked, interrupting Jake before he could go further down the list.

"Yeah, got it to ancient-rarity. Also managed to upgrade the Blood skill from epic to ancient," Jake answered, closing the menu to focus on the conversation. "That blessing you gave me also upgraded. Gives vitality also now."

"Nice, you got more than I expected. I can feel the blessing has strengthened too," the Viper said, making a faux lecherous smile. "So, how does it feel to have a part of me inside you? Very intimate, eh?"

"... moving on, I have been meaning to ask, why even do the blessings? I get what I benefit from it, but what's in it for you?" Jake said, ignoring the last part of what the god said.

"Well, we gods can progress in other ways than just earning experience. Faith is one of those paths. A blessing is more or less an investment in someone to act as a conduit of your faith. Follow your doctrines and such. At least normally. I blessed you just for the heck of it, and honestly, it has worked out way better than I expected."

"Does that mean I have been hoodwinked into being your preacher when I return to Earth?" Jake asked, fully aware there was no fucking way he was doing that.

"If you want to? I don't really care. I am benefitting enough just from you getting stronger and not dying. But if you want to establish an official order on earth and begin recruiting, it wou-"

"Not gonna happen," Jake interrupted. Again, fuck that.

"Master, I think you have chosen a poor prophet," Duskleaf interjected. His deadpan manner made it incredibly hard for both the Viper and Jake to discern if he was serious or joking.

Choosing to take it as a joke, the Viper agreed. "I must confess I could have done better. Hasn't even done a single mass sacrifice or committed his firstborn yet."

"I am a bit scared to ask, but are you actually interested in both of those?"

"The firstborn? Nah, I would suck as a babysitter, and kids taste funny. As for the sacrifice? Sure, why not."

"This may be a bit late to ask, but what exactly is the doctrine of your church or order or whatever?" Jake asked. A question he should likely have asked way earlier.

Smiling, the Viper answered concretely. "Greed, power, and freedom. You know, all the good stuff. A god's creed is more often than not just a symbol of their personality and personal path to power. My path is one littered with corpses and killing anything in my way; my doctrine is a lot like that. In other words, do whatever the fuck you want, and it is likely according to my doctrine."

“Seems easy enough. What about you, Duskleaf?” Jake asked, turning to the other god.

“Alchemy.”

“And?”

“Just alchemy. No reason to place importance on unimportant things. Anything that can further my progress towards the pinnacle in alchemy is good. I don’t have any followers, though, so it doesn’t matter,” the old alchemist explained.

“A god without faith? Is that fine? No danger of you suddenly disappearing by being forgotten or something like that?” Jake asked with genuine concern.

“What? No, why would I? Where have you gotten such a silly idea from?” Duskleaf asked with apparent puzzlement.

“Eh, I just remember some fiction where gods were a bit like that...” Jake answered, a bit embarrassed. Damn you, inaccurate fictional portrayals of gods.

“Faith isn’t actually that big a part of many gods. I am not particularly into that path either. It isn’t even rare that gods exist without any followers or believers at all. A lot of gods don’t do anything and prefer to be holed up in a secluded alchemy lab or something like that for unspeakable amounts of time,” the Viper said, throwing shade at Duskleaf.

"I don't see what having a bunch of nosy followers does to help me get better at alchemy."

The two of them continued bickering for a bit back and forth. It was clear that despite them being master and disciple, they were also old friends. The type of friendship forged over... how long actually?

"Hey, been thinking, how old are you two?"

"Well, that came out of nowhere," the Viper said after being interrupted. "I have been around since before the first era, so 92 full eras and change. Duskleaf is from the 4th era."

"And how many years is that?"

"Well, each era varies. The 92nd era was around 15 billion years. In other words, the amount of time it took for your universe to go from a seed to what it was just before the initiation. Each era varies in length, the longest being 228 billion years and the shortest being only 7 billion. Do the math."

Computing for a few moments, making full use of his high intelligence stat, he quickly concluded.

"Both a bunch of old farts. Coercing a young man no older than 28 into some weird religion."

“More like: two old studs, disrobing and putting their liquids inside young man.”

“Two old men, bathing with young stud.”

“Or-“

One of these old studs/men stood with a hand on his face in the background, looking in exasperation at his master and the young mortal. Cursing himself for having gotten himself involved in this entire debacle.