

Hunter 270

Chapter 270: Presence

Jake opened up his system menu and went through all the stuff.

He had saved up a stupid amount of Free Points. 220 of them, to be exact. He should have probably just tossed them where they belonged, to begin with, but hey, better late than ever. As to where they belonged?

All to perception!

Heck, if Jake were to do another of those weird Legacy trips from his Path of the Heretic-Chosen, it would be silly not to have as much perception as possible to experience it fully. At least that's what he kept telling himself to justify his questionable decision just to keep throwing everything in perception. He just liked to do it, and his other stats had always been growing nicely, so it wasn't that bad.

"Jake..." Villy's voice sounded out before Jake got side-tracked again.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You know what, for you alone, I will check out my Path of the Heretic Chosen before I pick my level 120 skill. Don't say I never do anything for you!" Jake joked as he shook his head and opened the menu thing. It wasn't really a menu; Jake more just poked the skill and saw if it did anything.

He knew it wasn't a sure thing that he could use the skill and potentially get an upgrade but that he needed to reach some threshold he didn't know about. He assumed he had reached the threshold for Palate nearly solely due to the Trial of Myriad Poisons, but he wasn't sure about any of the other skills.

So he had to be honest; he was actually a bit surprised when the skill responded, and he knew he could activate it. A prompt came up before him.

Do you wish to experience the Legacy of the Malefic Viper? Uses remaining: 2

Jake stared at it for a while as he wondered what skill it could be about. A part of him hoped Sense, but he seriously doubted it, but it was only a faint vain hope. Jake could also use more perception.

“Yep, it works. Two uses too. I guess I’ll give it a go?” Jake said, semi-asking Villy.

“Go for it and tell me what you saw afterward,” the god answered.

Jake nodded as he accepted the prompt as his vision went dark.

The council had convened, and they were ready to pass down judgment. They had attempted to scare off the beast several times, but it always returned. Where it had come from, they were unaware; it had simply one day entered the imperial oligarchy and begun ravaging it.

Yet, it was not like the other beasts. Monsters born in the infinity of space often were simply beasts or unintelligent creatures that only sought to kill and consume. They were often weak for their level, and a single council member could take it down easily.

But... a council member had already fallen to this menace, forcing their hands. Sure, it had been the weakest council member, but it was still significant. It was a rarity they were forced to meet like this to begin with, especially in person.

Every single one of them were early B-grade powerhouses, and each had conquered their respective worlds long ago and founded factions with no rivals besides each other. In the end, an equilibrium had been made, and now the war between their factions was simply a game to nurture new worthwhile fighters. It was also a valuable source of experience for them as respective leaders.

“All agree, we spring the trap at Neonwell once the beast arrives?” the council member asked.

He was the most desperate as the beast was now in his empire. The last empire it had been in, the council member from there had been slain before the beast moved on to find new challenges and to claim all their national treasures. So, naturally, he feared he would be the next to fall without assistance.

“In agreement,” one of the strongest council members said. However, even if none were strong enough to easily slay the others, that didn’t mean they were truly equal. The bribery to make this council member agree first had not been cheap...

“Fine,” another agreed with a nod.

Two more nodded, and the last four also agreed after some hesitation seeing as they didn’t want to be the only ones not participating – once the beast was dead, that would reflect badly on them. The last time a council member had risen to B-grade and joined, he had gotten cocky, and... well, he hadn’t stayed a council member for long. Or alive, for that matter.

“We estimate the beast will reach there within the next two years, so let us prepare our defenses.”

Jake’s vision shifted, and he saw a new planet. One entirely blue and glowing with energy, tens if not hundreds of times larger than even the Sun-sized Earth. It also looked almost crystalline and very otherworldly. He saw all nine council members descend on the planet, and from there, his vision sped up. He saw the planet spin at high speeds as he followed it through space until finally, the fateful day arrived.

A figure approached from far out in space. Wings beat as a shadow seemed to follow the creature, and a miasma marked its path, and death was in its wake. It was a dark green dragon with spikes lining its body and two deep green eyes that observed the planet in the distance.

Jake recognized it as the form he had seen ascend from the planet on the mural back in the Challenge Dungeon. So, the Malefic Viper turned into a dragon at B-grade and left his home planet... Jake realized as he kept observing.

He hadn’t entered that state of extreme observation yet, so he knew this wasn’t the time yet. But he still kept careful watch and took it all in. At worst, it would be an interesting insight into B-grades, and at best, he could learn something from their battle besides what the skill intended.

The Malefic Viper stopped as he observed the planet. He waited a bit and eventually landed on a large asteroid floating through space – the only one large enough for the several hundred meters long beast. The Viper looked towards the planet once more. Did he know? Perhaps... perhaps not. Either way, he would use a true and tested opener.

Opening his maw, the dragon breathed in. Jake felt the mana in the atmosphere be vacuumed in from far and wide, as well as the draconic body humming with energy. A green glow appeared around the mouth as a tiny ball of energy appeared... and then he breathed.

For a second, the world changed color. It flashed green as the Dragon Breath was released. Instinctively, Jake knew... this attack was a concept in itself. The Dragon breath, the signature move of all dragons. He had always thought dragons to be majestic and kinda cool creatures that he totally wanted to hunt down.... but seeing one in action was different.

The breath took the form of a beam of green energy that headed straight for the planet, and Jake could already imagine the effect it would have. It would be like a giant meteor smashing down, scorching much of the surface with pure destruction.

At least it would have if it hit.

Five spots down on the planet began glowing, and a barrier appeared in front of the beam, tens of thousands of kilometers into space. The council members who summoned it seemed to be aware it wouldn't be enough, and soon five more identical ones were layered along with it – each barrier thousands of kilometers in diameter. It was a planetary defense of sorts.

The beam hit the first barrier as a mighty explosion sounded out, and it looked as if space itself collapsed on the impact point. Everything became warped, but the very next moment, Jake could see what was happening again as space had repaired itself.

The first barrier was broken, and the second had already cracked. A second later, it gave out as the breath hit the third. That one only took a few seconds before it slowly eroded away, making it clear the breath held corrosive properties.

Barrier after barrier fell as the Malefic Viper kept using his Dragon's Breath. When it hit the second-to-last, a figure appeared behind the last one. He placed his hand on it, and the entire thing lit up with what looked like a magic circle inscribed upon it.

Just as the second-to-last barrier broke, he poured in energy, and the entire barrier got fired forward with incredible momentum towards the Viper. The breath simply wouldn't have time to erode it in time, and the huge dragon was forced to dodge as the asteroid it had been sitting on was turned to cosmic dust.

Jake felt the impatience of the Viper as he flew forward down towards the planet.

His vision shifted once more, and Jake saw the eight other council members hidden in a weird spatial bubble of sorts behind one of the moons of the planet. All of them were hidden not just in the spatial bubble but also under several arrays. They had been in there for over half a year, just waiting for this day.

Once the dragon got closer to the planet, another set of barriers activated. However, this one was not meant to keep the beast out – it was to keep it in.

At the same time, a third set activated closer to the surface of the planet, effectively making a closed circle of space around the planet. Only ten beings trapped within – the Viper and nine council members.

While Jake couldn't even use Identify on anything, he had a feeling they were all roughly the same level. At least none of the council members looked worried, as Jake assumed they could see the level of the Viper. Unfortunately for them, they were under an assumption... one Jake perfectly understood. One he would have made many times without his instincts telling him otherwise.

These nine council members were absolute geniuses of their worlds. They were the strongest. They had great classes, great professions and had always fought above their own level. A beast of an equal level was just another easy prey to them. Sure, they had met variants and stuff, but out in the real world, they weren't a dime a dozen.

So they went forth with absolute confidence and trapped the dragon within the barrier for a nine versus one battle. But they weren't aware. Jake felt it, though. The Malefic Viper wasn't the one trapped in there with them.

They were trapped in there with him.

All nine moved to attack. Jake saw attacks he couldn't fully understand. Flames that melted colors, winds of space mana that tore up the fabric of reality, and many more types of magic – all of them more useless than the next against the scales of the dragon, as they seemed almost to drink up the magic.

The attackers were taken aback by the lack of effectiveness. Yet hope was not lost. One of their members teleported to be right above the head of the beast and swung down with his hammer, hoping to-

It was blocked as the dragon raised his claws, making it evident it was not only tough versus magic. But surely, the Viper's offensive capabilities besides the signature Dragon's Breath would be-

Mana manifested in mid-air as the Malefic Viper counterattacked with green explosions. Meanwhile, a miasma of poison seeped out from the dragon wings and overtook the area. His claws swung and forced the one with the hammer to retreat with a scratch on his arm.

The exchange was brief, but it had shocked the nine of them. But... that seemed to be enough. A seed was planted. One of doubt. One where death or severe injury was a possibility. Jake knew this because the time had come.

He intimately felt everything, not just what the Viper experienced but also the nine. He knew the Viper had gone all-out from the start, even boosting himself right from the get-go to appear as strong as possible. This was planned.

Jake felt fear.

Anticipation.

Doubt.

Greed.

Anger.

Hesitation

Bloodlust.

But more than anything... he felt pride.

A pride that manifested as an aura – a presence - blanketed the area, the nine council members within as the entire atmosphere seemed to shift.

“Pathetic creatures,” the Viper’s voice echoed through space. “How dare such weaklings think themselves conquerors. Kings. Emperors. You are nothing but prey to fuel my path. Be honored, for that is truly the greatest purpose your lives could have. Take joy as I devour you one by one. Do not fear for all which you have built, for it shall follow you. Embrace desolation, for it is the only end that awaits you and everything you have created. Embrace Death. Embrace your fate. Embrace despair.”

Every word made space vibrate; every syllable tore into the souls of the nine council members. Tore into their wills and their minds. All of it through the presence that affected the entire area. Mana in the presence? Jake rhetorically asked himself as he felt it.

Presences weren’t anything new. Everyone had one; it just came with getting stronger. It could become more prominent in some scenarios, such as when Jake felt a strong sense of bloodlust, then his presence would reflect it. In general, strong emotions would be reflected in your presence to some extent.

However, this was different. This was not that passive presence. This one felt alive. It was filled with the will and pride of the Malefic Viper, as it didn’t simply communicate an emotion but tore into the nine council member’s minds. Even more than that, it contained mana, something a presence normally never would, and to be fair, Jake wasn’t even aware it could.

The battle had barely begun, and it was far from over. Jake estimated the battle would be around equal and hard-fought by both sides, though he did admit he believed the Viper would win... but the nine could at least get away, the majority anyway.

Yet, all of them stood stunned for a moment. Immobilized by the presence of the Viper. Jake felt what they felt... a sense of fear, despair, and hopelessness. Like no matter what they did against the Viper, nothing would work. It was like how Jake felt against the King of the Forest back then... which actually made him think the Unique Lifeform had a similar skill.

It was a spell they would break out of soon enough... but-

The Malefic Viper snapped forward as his neck seemed to extend, and a long fang penetrated straight through the chest of one of the council members as he bit into him, leaving a barrel-sized hole due to the size difference. At the same time, the Viper fired out eight of the long spikes on his body – one for each council member.

Magic also began manifesting around the dragon. It was even more powerful and collected far faster than before as the presence affected not only the other living beings within, but even the Viper himself and the area as a whole. The magic attacks all coalesced and headed for the eight council members together with the spikes.

All attacks hit at once.

All of them were thrown out of their stupor simultaneously.

All of them were now badly poisoned.

In a single moment, the tides had turned. An equal battle became a one-sided one as that sliver of doubt remained. The poison only added to the helplessness.

What transpired after that wasn't a fight but a slaughter. Six council members died, and three ended up fleeing, but Jake was certain they, too, would be hunted down in time.

For the Pride of the Malefic Viper would not allow any of his prey to escape. He had pronounced their deaths, and he would carry out the sentence.

This time was a lot different than the last time he used Path of the Heretic-Chosen. Jake had experienced a far longer span of time and even more emotions than ever before from not only the Viper but also the council members.

Jake had felt it all, and he understood it. He actually questioned why he had never done what the Viper did already. Well, he realized he couldn't have, as it wasn't that easy... unless you experienced doing it first-hand. As long as you got the basic concept, it was simplicity itself.

Perhaps pride was just something Jake had plenty of. Perhaps he was specifically suited to imposing his will upon the world.

It wasn't because the time-rewind aspect of the skill didn't work this time or wasn't there. It just wasn't needed.

Because Jake got it the first time around.

[Pride of the Malefic Viper (Ancient --> Legendary)]

Jake felt his consciousness slowly return to the real world as he saw the dragon head down towards the crystalline planet below. He felt the Viper. He knew the intent. So he was certain.

The planet would turn into just another desolate wasteland.

Just like all those the Malefic Viper had come across before.