

Hunter 36

Chapter 36: A battle of life & death

Before an important exam or test, there are many approaches to prepare oneself. Some studied intensely up to the very last second, in a desperate attempt to obtain as much knowledge as humanly possible.

This approach often leads to overload and stress, and that during the actual examination, one could not perform their very best.

Another way was to seek approval that one's preparations were adequate. Asking fellow students or colleagues, hoping that perhaps they too felt as underprepared as you, indicating that maybe it was merely your own mind tricking you into thinking you were behind the curve. These people would be found camping outside the examination room for hours before it was their time, trying to probe for any and all useful information from those just tested.

A third way was the path of denial. Shutting down in panic, unable to act. The actual performance from these people, however, varied wildly. Some even performed with incredible confidence despite their panic beforehand. These were also the ones who felt the most relieved after the fact.

Some looked for a way to either get out of the exam entirely or avoid a fair examination. Cheating was the go-to for these. Obtaining the answers beforehand or even during the test. Perhaps even attempting to take high risks to peek at the ones beside you, searching their sheet for the correct answers. Performance-enhancing drugs were not even off the table for these. The most nervous and panicked were perhaps this group.

The final ones were the relaxed ones - the ones who simply rested, trying to get their brain in top shape before the test. Perhaps faux confidence led them to this, or maybe said confidence was well-founded. One could only know after the test was over after all.

Jake had, throughout his life, fallen into all these four categories at one point or another. He had studied till he had headaches and sat outside the exam room for hours, asking anyone for tips. Been a nerve-wrack the night before an exam, not getting a wink of sleep. Once, he had even tried to cheat by sneaking in notes not allowed. He hadn't ended up needing them, and he felt like shit afterward, but he had still tried.

But the approach with the most success for him was the last. He would just relax the day before. Read a good book or even play some videogames, perhaps even a trip to the movies. And then finally go early to bed to wake up well-rested for the exam.

This had worked out for him very well. Jake was the kind of person to have high expectations of himself, often leading to panic. During his years of pursuing professional archery, perfection was the only option. He was competing with the best, so he had to be the very best he possibly could.

University had been very different. In archery, one can quickly come to feel like they had all the knowledge required to perform your best. That the only thing he had left to do was perform his very best in the moment.

When one studied theory on strategic business management, as an example, things weren't as straightforward. There was always more to know, more knowledge to seek. If you felt like you knew everything, it meant you simply weren't aware of how much you didn't know. It was complicated, with endless theories formulated and expanded upon for hundreds of years.

The knowledge on alchemy in the small library, albeit still containing around a thousand books, was already far more than Jake could go through during the month he had been here. Even if he had spent every second reading, it wouldn't be enough. Yet he knew what was in the library was only a drop in the bucket.

The knowledge gained only made him more aware as to how complex alchemy was. Ultimately, all professions were a valid path to power in the system and contained near-limitless possibilities. Even a path to godhood, according to the Malefic Viper.

So, with that in mind, Jake just had to accept that he couldn't perfectly prepare. He had done what he could, and it would have to be enough.

The hours of the day ticked by as Jake relaxed. He read books he had set aside prior, books containing historical tales, reading more like a fantasy novel than actual history. Jake thought of his colleagues surviving outside but quickly tried to purge the matter from his mind. He had followed the number of survivors dropping by the day, and with only around a third remaining, he knew it wasn't looking good. Some of them were very likely dead, and he wasn't in any way looking forward to discovering who.

But he did have some time to reflect on his own feelings. The solitude had allowed him a lot of time to think if he liked it or not. He had made some realizations. His crush on Caroline had always been just that, a crush. He didn't actually know her at all but only found her physically attractive.

His impression of Jacob hadn't changed in the least. In his mind, he was still the same beacon of positivity and hope he had always been. He was also the one Jake hoped was fine most of all. It doesn't help thinking about it; he reminded himself. He needed to get in the right mindset for the final push.

For the last eight hours, he slept and meditated, cultivating the plants he had prepared for the concoction was the only thing that could be called work. That concoction would determine his life or death after all.

Time passed, and it was finally time to begin. With only four hours to his potential death, Jake felt oddly serene. He felt prepared.

He began by collecting the moss and mushrooms. Carefully plucking them according to the methods he had studied. The techniques he had become oh so familiar with over the last month as he carried them to the mixing bowl.

Taking out the Bloodletting Dagger, he made a small cut on the palm of his hand as he focused on Blood of the Malefic Viper, as he saw the now green-tinged blood slowly drip into the bowl. After a couple of minutes, it was filled enough. He had to cut his hand two more times during that time, despite the enchantment making the wounds harder to heal. A testament to his high vitality and a good sign for what was to come.

His health and mana slowly regenerated as he started extracting the toxic juices from the Bluebright Mushrooms, carefully adding the slightly shiny blue liquid to the concoction, as he, with extreme caution, guided the process with his mana.

Letting it soak for a while, hearing the small crackling that sounded like electricity as the blood and mushrooms combined, he started grinding up the Aged Green Moss into a fine powder with a mortar. As he heard the sizzling and the cracking calm down, he added the moss-powder, once more seeing a reaction as the entire thing seemed to boil slightly.

Throughout it all, he carefully injected mana. This part was why he had needed so long, as he needed to carefully balance the concoction and guide it to where he wanted it. The necrotic properties were slowly eliminated from the mix as he focused his mana, thus allowing the vital energy found within his blood to prosper.

He could have done it the other way around, amplifying the necrotic properties, as his blood acted as a catalyst that strengthened that property. But now, the necrotic energy served as fuel for the vital energy, however, he had to be careful.

The reason he had extracted the highly condensed juices from the mushrooms and not just added the entire mushroom was because he only needed a very highly concentrated amount of necrotic energy to remain. That small, condensed ball of energy would become the catalyst for the Argentum Vitae Mushrooms, the final ingredient.

He had added a total of 28 mushrooms worth of extracted liquid. He had tested and probed, and based on his Sense of the Malefic Viper, the condensed energy found within should be enough to help empower the vital energy in the silver mushrooms.

The time he injected mana was long, tiring, and, most importantly, very mana-intensive. His pool of 3150 was quickly being drained. He knew this would happen, of course, as he had invested plenty in wisdom to make this possible.

Perception had also shown its value, especially in complicated crafting processes such as this. Small changes in mana flow were unavoidable, but with sufficiently high perception, Jake could detect them before they became an issue. His senses were tense, focused to the limit.

With only twenty minutes remaining, the arduous process was completed. Jake had technically finished the concoction now and would come out as a potent common-rarity poison. Without a doubt, his most powerful yet. But he wasn't done.

Taking out the 10 Argentum Vitae Mushrooms, he hesitated little as he simply threw them all into the bowl. Nothing happened for the first few seconds, as he carefully observed, both hands on the bowl. But

soon, the silvery layer on the mushrooms got eroded, and as soon as a small hole appeared in the first one, the ridiculous vital energy within rushed out like a riptide.

Jake still had around half his mana remaining after quickly chugging his most powerful mana potion before he threw in the silver-shrooms. He had considered not putting the potion-use on cooldown and instead use a healing potion during the consumption, but honestly, if his plan didn't work, a healing potion wouldn't do jack shit.

His remaining mana pool was liberally spent, as he contained the vital energy rushing out. Very soon, the energies of all 10 mushrooms had started affecting the concoction, and this was precisely the moment he had been waiting for. With a small suggestion through his injected mana, he released the condensed ball of necrotic energy as it clashed with the vital energy.

Or perhaps a clash was not the right word. The vital energy absolutely devoured it, and with his guidance, it assimilated the necrotic poison to fuel itself. The minutes ticked by, one by one, as he pushed his mana into the bowl.

When he only had a measly 300 mana remaining, he felt like he was about done. With a final push, spending over 200 mana, he finally heard a small *ding* as he saw the system messages.

*DING! *: [Malefic Viper's Poison] has been activated! The transcendent power of the Malefic Viper has forcefully increased the rarity of your creation to Rare, increasing all effects substantially.

You have successfully crafted [Unstable Amalgamation of Malefic Vitau (Rare)] – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned

'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 44 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points

Quickly inspecting the sludge left in the bowl, he couldn't help but make a weird compromise between grimacing and a smile.

[Unstable Amalgamation of Malefic Vitau (Rare)] – An unstable creation, made by mixing opposing energies, achieving something more potent than the sum of their parts. It contains an immense power of vitality, powerful enough for it to turn into a poison. Not fit for consumption. Incredibly Unstable: Unable to maintain current form in 9:57

It was what he had hoped for. Perhaps more than he had hoped for. He had gotten a whole level from it, as he had just leveled up from the last batch of poisons he made also. He quickly threw the free points into vitality. He would need everything he could get.

He hadn't expected Malefic Viper's Poison to trigger. Truthfully, he wished it hadn't. It had thrown all of his prior calculations off-course... he feared what he had made was too strong. Sadly, he didn't have time to attempt anything else.

Looking at the timer, he prepared himself.

Cured yourself of poison 0/1

Time remaining: 2:38

Two and a half minutes, and the poison would flare up to take his life. At that moment, he would drink the sludge in front of him. He didn't dare touch it but would simply drink it straight from the bowl.

As he just sat there, looking at the timer tick down, he did something he couldn't remember ever doing before. He prayed.

He had never been the religious sort. He never went to church, not even during Christmas. But today, he prayed. Not to the gods of earth, but to the one god he had met.

The Malefic Viper may not have been the most stable being he had ever met, but he was powerful. He had blessed him, allowing him to complete the miracle he had created today. He was the one behind his profession. At least it was based on who he was, or his Records to be more exact.

So, he prayed - his prayer as humble as can be.

"I fucking swear, you stupid snake, if I end up dying from drinking mushroom-juice, I am going to return from the dead and hunt you down."

To his surprise, he felt a response. Just a vague emotion from beyond. A faint encouragement, coupled with a barrage of mockery.

He smiled to himself. He had done what he could, and now it was up to his own willpower and determination.

The timer mercilessly ticked down.

0:28

He looked at the sludge as he put his hands on the side of the bowl.

0:17

He took a deep breath as he thought back to his days here in this dungeon.

0:13

Serenity overtook him as his body relaxed.

0:11

With a quick peek, he confirmed his health pool was full. Good.

0:07

He lifted the bowl and prepared to drink.

0:05

“Here goes nothing,” he said as he lifted up the sludge and gulped it all down.

The taste was a bit sweet, but he barely had time to notice it because of what came next. His entire body and mind were consumed by a wave of pain from everywhere the sludge touched. A source of pain that only a moment later was joined by another

From somewhere around his heart, a massive amount of energy suddenly manifested – one seeking only to destroy every trace of vitality in his body.

His instincts screamed at him, making him fully aware that if the deathly energy spread to his brain, it would mean game over. He would be unable to mobilize his will and energy control to fight.

Luckily the energy couldn't easily spread, meeting significant resistance from his powerful physique. But it was far from enough. He felt himself literally rotting from the inside, not unlike what happened during the second trial and the toxic liquid.

But as the energy crept upwards, it met a force it couldn't conquer. His mouth and upper part of the body had already started growing red as the vital energy overpowered his being, also slowly killing him. Tumors began growing at a visible speed as the vital energy had nowhere to go - nothing to regenerate.

The vital energy was not entirely pure either but mixed with the necrotic properties of the Bluebright Mushrooms. Not that Jake had any of these thoughts at this moment, as he simply lay collapsed on the laboratory floor. Every sliver of his focus on the battle within him.

The two energies sought to destroy each other: two mighty armies, one of death, and one of life. Jake's body the battlefield in which they fought. If Jake had not consumed his concoction, the poison that flared up would have been significantly weaker than it currently was, as the two both sought to destroy, yet also empowered, one another.

With what little will he could muster, with it mainly being his instincts taking charge, he mobilized all the energy he could to protect his head. This was the most dangerous stage, as both energies were at maximum capability, and all he could do was hide away and hunker down.

This didn't mean he only hid away. The two energies fought, but both had failed to recognize the powers already present on the battlefield. Another army rode in from the same place the energy of death had initially come from.

The third source of energy was another source of vitality. But unlike the others, this one was controlled and with purpose. It was Jake's original health points, a massive squadron of vital energy stemming from his second-highest stat; vitality.

It entered the fight, not as a contender, but as a force to control the battlefield. A mediator to make the armies of life and death battle on equal terms, slowly canceling each other out. At the right moment, it would then enter the fray and strike down the vulnerable energy remaining and seize victory.

If one observed from the outside at this moment, they would see a young man lying on the ground. His body was both rotting, but shortly after, regenerating the rotting flesh once more. Other parts were red, as tumor-like growths appeared; however, they quickly got squashed by the energy of death.

Jake couldn't even scream, as his airways also alternated between life and death. At all times, death was a moment away, but it was always crushed by overpowering vitality before it could take hold.

If his vitality or toughness had only been just a few tens of points lower, he would have died by now. But he didn't die. He suffered, he screamed internally, but never once did he wish for the embrace of death. He fought with every fiber of his being to live.

For in the end... what is death, but just another challenge to overcome?