

Hunter 401

Chapter 401 - Dungeon: Order Of The Malefic Viper D-Grade Entrance-Test

Jake had only stood with Draskil for a few minutes while waiting for the last group to arrive, but it had been enough for him to establish himself. He did find the very purposefully built room interesting in that it had clearly defined levels. It was made for people to separate themselves into tiers of power by default, making some stand higher than others.

He decided to go back to Reika and the others for the next part as they all went through yet another teleportation gate. The good thing about these gates was that at least they showed the other side before entering, and there was no feeling of actually being teleported.

They appeared within a new chamber that held a number of discs that reminded Jake a bit of the one below Haven. The demon ushered them all towards one of them as the group silently followed. Jake made sure to inspect the people he was with, and one general mood seemed to dominate: nervousness.

Nervous for what, Jake didn't know. It was potentially the fact they were surrounded by more powerful people, and while walking to the disc in question, Jake also felt many auras. A lot of which he knew would be able to utterly curb-stomp him, as there were several C-grades among them.

"The entire entrance test should take about a day to finish for the fast and up to a week for those on the slower side. As mentioned, you will be allowed entrance no matter the result, but better performance will lead to more benefits upon entry. All other details will follow after the test," the succubus said as they stood in front of the disc.

Jake looked behind her and inspected the disc.

Dungeon: Order of the Malefic Viper D-grade entrance-test

Requirements to enter: D-grade

Requirements to enter met

WARNING: Only 1 challenger per entry

It was indeed a pretty standard dungeon, and Jake was ready to go as someone else spoke up.

“Will this test involve combat or be purely focused on alchemy?” an elf asked.

“Naturally it will,” the demon asked, looking at the elf as if she was an idiot. “It will also involve tests of general energy control and auxiliary skills.”

Jake had to admit, he also found the question a bit silly. Of course there would be combat. After all, it was a dungeon designed by the Order of the Malefic Viper. At least no one was stupid enough to ask if-

“Will it include any real danger of death?” a human asked, and to Jake’s dismay, it was one of the alchemists that had come with him and Reika.

This time not only the demon looked at him like he was an utter moron, but nearly everyone did. He didn't even get an answer as he just tried to make himself smaller as the demon muttered under her breath. "Damn newcomers."

Draskil, who stood at the front of their entire group, suddenly just stepped forward as he walked onto the disc and disappeared. The demon nodded approvingly as others also followed suit as entire groups went onto the disc and entered together. Well, individually, but they went there together. So... together alone?

Jake turned and threw a look at Reika behind him. She nodded, and Jake felt her nervousness. He also knew it wasn't really for herself but those she was with. Jake nodded back as he took a step forward and teleported onto the disc as he disappeared, teleporting for what felt like the hundredth time that day.

Irinixis looked on as the last native disappeared. The last few had been a bit slow, but it wasn't like she could expect too much from natives of new universes. At least not all of them. This batch had quite a few good ones and at least one absolutely outstanding one.

The Order had not seen a Malefic Dragonkin for longer than she could remember, and yet more than a hundred had appeared during the last half a year or so. All because the Malefic One was truly back. She couldn't help but wonder if the dragonkin called Draskil was perhaps the Chosen, but the chances were low. To meet the Chosen of the Malefic Viper was not something she could ever dream of even doing. It seemed as unrealistic as meeting the Lord Protector or the Malefic One himself.

Shaking her head, she went over to one of the transference gates and manipulated her token as she went back to the office.

"Hey Irin, that was quick," she heard a voice say the second she entered.

“Hi, boss,” Irinixis – or Irin for short – greeted her immediate supervisor. “And yes, it went rather smoothly.”

The main office within the Order was a massive complex handling most internal workings of the Order of the Malefic Viper. These offices were all connected, even to the external branches, and usually, each Hall had one main office each. However, since there was only one Hall now, there was only one main office.

“Anyone noteworthy in the batch? Always exciting to get people from far-off places,” her boss asked again. The boss was a succubus like her but had already evolved to C-grade and gotten promoted only a few years ago. They came from the same clan, so they had always had a good working relationship, and both knew they would be colleagues of the same rank in a decade or so.

“A few,” Irin answered as she turned serious. “There was a male Malefic Dragonkin among them. Level 185.”

“Didn’t they only get integrated less than a year ago? Even with special events and Nevermore, that is outstanding,” her boss whistled. “But even so, his foundation may be a bit unstable for the test. Do you think it is possible he is... you know?”

“The reading said he carried a divine Blessing, given by the Patron,” Irin said gravely.

“That... really? Oh... oh my. That was unexpected. Luckily we have a day at minimum to prepare everything. No matter the result, have him placed in the highest level courtyards and make sure the humanoid resources department prepares adequately for him,” Irin’s boss answered.

Irinixis nodded as she hurried on with today's work. She knew being in charge of the administrative work of this group would lead to something big with someone as outstanding as a Malefic Dragonkin carrying a divine Blessing.

Heck, maybe some of the others would also be pleasant surprises.

Jake opened his eyes once more as he found himself within a hall. Before him was a massive and intricate gate with the motif belonging to the Order of the Malefic Viper, and as he looked at it, the expected system message popped up.

You have entered the dungeon: Order of the Malefic Viper D-grade entrance-test

Objective: Complete the entry-test

"Seems easy enough," Jake muttered as he went forward and up to the gate. A handprint matching a human hand appeared on it, and Jake naturally placed his hand on it as he felt energy enter his body. Very familiar energy, once more giving him flashbacks to the Undergrowth and the gate there. But one thing was different. This time, Jake could feel what it did.

The pulse of energy went straight for the area around his heart, and he barely felt it interact with Shroud of the Primordial as it just went straight through and scanned the outer part of his Truesoul. He knew it had just successfully Identified him without Shroud doing anything to block it, and he couldn't help but frown.

It was like the Identify worked on some higher concept than usual. Directly system-done, perhaps due to it being a dungeon?

Either way, he felt the pulse leave his body again as, finally, he could move his hand. The motif on the gate lit up as it slowly started opening, and a figure popped up in front of him. A projection.

It was a vaguely humanoid shape, but as the figure became fully detailed, it was clear it was actually some kind of humanoid lizard, not that different from the Malefic Dragonkin. So probably another type of dragonkin.

"If this test included the ability to hide from Identification skills, you would get top marks there," the projection said first thing as it appeared. "Sadly for you, that isn't the case."

"Damn, that is the one thing I bet on," Jake just shrugged casually. He was a bit surprised at the demeanor of the projection as it seemed too... lax? Or was it just Jake who had gotten too used to uptight officials and a restrictive education system?

"Seems like we're all in for a disappointment then," the projection said. "Now, let's get this started. Follow me."

Jake did as told and followed the projection through the now open gate as it began talking. "This entrance test will test your abilities in areas related to both alchemy and combat, with alchemy being the primary subject. The tests will vary based on your specializations, but some things will be mandatory, such as testing your skill in working with toxic materials. Any questions so far?"

“Nothing related to the Order of the Malefic Viper itself?” Jake asked a bit curiously. He had expected some religious stuff to be there.

“This isn’t a test to be a cultist but an alchemist; why would knowledge related to the Order and the Malefic One matter? Also, most who take the entrance test are new to the Order, and you can’t expect much. Finally, much of the knowledge related to Order is unconfirmable and subjective. This projection was placed here in the second Era, and I am certain much has changed since then,” the projection answered quite concisely.

Jake nodded as the projection took it as a sign to continue.

“Based on your overall performance during all tests, you will be ranked from one to five stars, with each star having ten levels to it. A one-star will be considered a failure, and anything above two stars is considered above average. You can choose which segment you want to do first. Do you want to get the combat portion out the way immediately or start with alchemy and finish off with combat?”

“Any benefits to either option?” Jake asked.

“If you suck at one, you can get it out of the way, though if you suck at alchemy as a human, I have no idea what you are even doing here,” the projection answered curtly.

“Well, let’s hope I don’t then,” Jake said. He also wondered what the many additional presences looking at him were all about. It wasn’t only the projection in front of him observing, but he felt more than a hundred others. It was honestly a weird feeling being under such scrutiny, but he didn’t comment on it aloud.

“So? What first?” the projection asked again.

“I am fine with either,” he shrugged.

“Alchemy first, then.”

They came to another gate that the projection opened with a mental command leading into a large circular room, looking not unlike Jake’s own alchemy lab. The room began shifting and changing as more than a hundred boxes appeared. All of them were sealed up with items inside. Jake could only see the inside due to his sphere, but he believed each held herbs.

“The first task is to test your ability to identify herbs and natural treasures. Note that your Identify skill will be unavailable during this test, not that it would help much. There is a total of one hundred herbs; you have an hour total. Describe each herb by infusing your understanding into this, “ the projection said as a small crystal appeared floating in front of Jake. “Got any questions now?”

Jake naturally asked the only obvious question:

“Can I eat them?”

“Some of them are highly toxic, potentially lethal to mid-tier D-grades,” the projection answered. “But of course you can. Anything else?”

“Nope,” Jake answered, it all seeming relatively straightforward.

“Time begins when you open the first box.”

With that, the projection disappeared, leaving Jake alone in the locked room together with the hundred boxes of herbs.

This seems rather rudimentary for an ancient order? Jake wondered. The test was damn simple, even if it was just one of many, making him consider if there was some hidden objective or something. Then again... maybe it just was this simple? A case of “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” perhaps?

He chose to believe he was right as he cracked his neck and got to work, happy he hadn’t eaten breakfast.

Firstly he gathered all the boxes by sending out mana strings as he stacked them up. Each box was completely black with a small magic circle on top he instinctively knew worked to open it. He also tried to Identify a box by instinct, but the skill didn’t activate.

Jake wondered if the ability to block skill usage was something normal for dungeons. The only other time he had seen it was in the Challenge Dungeon, but maybe it was something they could all do?

Shaking his head, he decided to just get to work. The more than a hundred observers curiously looked on at what he was doing as Jake opened the first box. He only had an hour total, which seemed like a lot, but considering there were a hundred boxes to go through, it means there was only a bit more than half a minute per herb.

When the first box opened, Jake instantly focused all of his Perception on the small root-like herb within.

Water, life, nature, but... some venom? Beast-like. Once part of a lifeform using poisoned roots to attack? Plenty of toxins, but well hidden, Jake instantly thought as Sense of the Malefic Viper and his high Perception got to work.

He began infusing his understanding into the crystal as he put it in his mouth and swallowed it. He then opened the next box as Palate did its thing. Inside the second box was a mushroom of some kind. Entirely purple with spots covering it.

Lightning? But also something else... wait, time energy? Lightning and time? Aggressive energy too. Definitely going to have a spicy taste. Looks like shit and utterly unappetizing, which is unsurprising considering it is a fucking mushroom.

After his initial impression, he tossed it into his mouth and chewed, feeling the sparks of electricity coming out as his hair began standing up. Palate had also done work on the first herb and made him aware of some other interesting nit-bits.

The boxes all looked identical, but the magic circles on top varied in intricacy, and Jake quickly assumed this was to indicate difficulty. Feeling spicy, he went on to one of the hardest ones as he opened it.

Inside was a single small black leaf, and Jake's initial impression was just one thing: Death.

He then picked it up and tossed it into his mouth. The moment it entered, it turned to a mist that bore into Jake's body as his face slowly began eroding and melting. The energy also went into his stomach and began killing his flesh from the inside, as the aggressive energy of the leaf tried to kill him.

Jake activated Scales as his flesh stabilized, and he began healing due to his naturally high Vitality as Palate also fought the energy, and with his mouth only half-regenerated, he muttered:

"Still better than the mushroom."

Chapter 402 - You Win Some, You Lose Some

"Why does he keep commenting on the taste?" one of the projections muttered.

"A better question would be why he wastes his time inserting insults towards every fungus he consumes, most of which aren't even sensical," another chimed in.

"But his speed and accuracy..." a third one said.

"Oh no, definitely a five-star performance so far; I am just saying that having entire rants on mushrooms and comparing the taste of herbs to that of foodstuff none of us are even familiar with doesn't hold much meaning," the first projection said.

"You mean to claim "that green cake they had for sale every Saturday at the local bakery close to work" is not a known type of food?" a new projection said with a laugh.

The projection that had shown Jake around initially due to "winning" the random number generator just leaned back as he looked on as the D-grades methodically went through the boxes one by one. Level 150 human, but he had stats far surpassing the expected, making it clear he was considered genius-tier.

Moreover, his legacy skills were of high rarity, with the assumption that Sense and Palate were both at least ancient. Based on how fast the knowledge was interpreted, it was also possible he had Sagacity, and the Scales were likely at legendary rarity.

But more than anything... his Perception stat had to be through the roof. His senses dove into the essence of every herb right away. He ignored every veil that some plants placed around themselves to hide their true toxicity or purpose, and he even instantly identified those with soul-attacking properties.

"Fifty-four minutes," he said as the others turned to him, all of them also seeing the human was done. Six minutes before the limit did not seem like much, but it was considered outstanding as going through all the herbs in itself would be a challenge.

In the chamber, working as judges were a total of one-hundred and twenty individuals, all of them of various ranks, grades, levels of power, and specializations. They had all left projections there and served as a council to determine the performance of new initiates, a huge honor in itself. Together with system-assisted observation tools available due to it being a dungeon, it was hard to get a better panel.

"Let's move on to the next test," the original projection said as he disappeared.

Jake was happy pooping was no longer a thing after D-grade because he sure as hell would have gotten diarrhea after eating that much weird shit within an hour. The difficulty boxes had totally been a thing, and there had been ten "hard" items, thirty "medium" items, and sixty "easy" ones. The ten hard ones had been the most fun for sure, while the others were a bit simpler.

If he had to guess, then the difficulty was based on rarity, and the easy ones were rare with a few being epic, the medium ones were epic with a few being ancient, and the hard ones were ancient or legendary. He could be completely wrong, but his gut feelings rarely were.

He had no idea how well he had done, though. Jake had just poured his thoughts into that weird crystal thing as he went through everything, not sure what information was deemed necessary and what was just fluff. But he had to have done alright... right?

Just as he thought that, the projection popped up in front of him. "Good performance on the first test. Ready for the next, or will you need a break? Note that there are no penalties associated with breaks in between tests."

Jake just took out a health potion and drank it to restore some health as he spoke: "Nah, I'm good."

He had lost quite a bit of health due to eating extremely deadly plants and herbs. He also had to admit the test had been interesting. Some of the herbs had been quite hard to identify, and some even avoided his Sense of the Malefic Viper nearly entirely.

Others required him to use some of his other senses. Smell was a big one as it also partly stimulated Palate, and hearing even played a role with a single odd tube-like piece of bark that made a sound to mentally affect those hearing it.

So yeah, it had been fun.

"Very well. The next trial will involve knowledge and your ability to apply that knowledge, as well as test your experience as an alchemist and your ability to identify and rectify issues," the projection said as the room began changing again. "What crafting tool do you usually use?"

"Cauldron," Jake answered.

The projection nodded as a cauldron appeared in the center of the room, along with a table. "For this test, your objective is to finish the simulated crafting session fifty times. A failure will merely result in moving onto the next simulated craft until a total of fifty have elapsed. Each crafting session will require you to quickly identify any issues that crop up and apply your knowledge and experience to fix them. Merely imagine how you would do it, and even without additional ingredients, the cauldron will react as if you put them into it."

"What kind of crafts are we talking about?" Jake asked curiously.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" the projection answered with a smirk. "Would kind of ruin the challenge if you knew, wouldn't it? It would just turn into me telling you and you sitting down and studying the entire library you probably carry around with you in your spatial storage for solutions. No, for this test, you need to apply the knowledge and experience you already have."

Jake relented as he nodded, understanding the point. He was pretty good at energy control and was confident in his ability to adapt if things went south during the craft. He had also eaten a lot of stuff throughout time and even crafted a mythical item, so he went in with confidence as he went over to the cauldron.

"There is no time limit, just a total of fifty crafts. There will be a one-minute delay in between each craft for you to collect yourself. The gauntlet starts when you activate the cauldron."

With that, the projection disappeared again, and Jake got to work as he sat on a chair in front of the cauldron. He focused his mind as he put both hands on it and infused mana. The cauldron was a bit like the practice cauldron Villy had given him after the tutorial, so he was already looking forward to this test.

As his mana invaded the cauldron, he felt it come to life as suddenly different types of energy existed within it as if several herbs had just been put into the cauldron. The cauldron made him aware he was crafting some kind of healing item, but a stream of energy went haywire just as he realized this.

Jake tried to get it under control, but it was simply running wild. He considered implementing other herbs to try and control it, but nothing came to mind. It kept getting worse as Jake isolated some of the beneficial energy as he got an idea.

Pure destructive arcane energy entered the cauldron as it surrounded and utterly destroyed the haywire energy. Jake then manipulated the energy he had isolated with stable arcane mana earlier and began fusing that. He even added in a herb that suddenly came to mind, and a minute after, the cauldron made him aware the craft was complete.

It emptied with energy, and Jake breathed out a sigh of relief at succeeding in the first craft. Quite a bit harder than expected, he thought, but it wasn't anything he couldn't handle.

The minute passed as the cauldron filled again, and this time it was some kind of toxin. A few seconds in, Jake realized it was a neurotoxin, but this time some of the energy also didn't seem to fit as Jake felt the entire concoction begin to weaken itself.

Jake didn't have much experience with neurotoxins but applied general knowledge as he once more poured destructive arcane energy in to fight off the energy destroying the creation. At the same time, he pushed the unaffected energy to merge, and less than a minute later, the craft was finished as Jake got another win.

The third and fourth went much the same. The fifth was an utter failure as Jake tried to destroy the energy, but when he did so, everything else just fell apart as it resulted in his first failure. Luckily he refined his approach a bit and got better at isolating and destroying the unwanted energy completely every time.

On the thirty-ninth craft, he bumped into something very familiar. Necrotic Poison. Jake felt the energies mixed, and once more, something cropped up that should not be there. However, this time, Jake had another idea than to isolate and destroy as he instead added in three herbs that came to mind he had used in the past. The overwhelming death energy from the Bluebright Mushrooms and some of his own blood consumed the unwanted energy and only empowered the creation, while he tossed in a third type of mushroom to stabilize the entire thing.

It was a great success as the craft finished.

The next few were back to the same tactic of isolation and destruction. At least where it worked. Jake did get one more at number forty-seven where he got an idea as he bumped into a soul-affecting poison, and he used a similar tactic as he had when he made the poison for the big mushroom that had been down in the biodome.

When he finished craft number fifty, Jake took a tally, seeing he had only failed a total of six out of fifty crafts. It wasn't ideal, but he had completed the craft nearly nine out of ten times, so his overall evaluation had to be quite goo-

"That may be one of the most surprisingly horrendous displays of failure I have ever seen in over ten thousand years of alchemy," the projection said as it appeared.

"Huh?" Jake said, utterly surprised.

"You only had two truly successful crafts, while you just destroyed more than ninety percent of the potency for every other simulation. This is, of course, not counting those you failed completely. This is like me telling you to go weed out a garden, and you set the entire thing on fire while protecting a few of the plants with mana, leaving only those few ones alive together with fire-resistant herbs. Sure, you may have killed all the weeds, but you also destroyed the garden. You performed like someone who has never made more than a dozen different products total throughout all your years of doing alchemy," the projection said, shaking his head as he really piled on.

"I..." Jake said as he processed the words. "That does sound about right?"

"What?" the projection asked, looking at Jake weirdly.

"Around a dozen seems accurate? Mana, health and stamina potions... then I made Hemotoxins and Necrotic Poison and then some soul poison once. I also made some Agility, Vitality, and Perception elixirs. If we count rarities, it isn't that far off," Jake answered.

The projection stood and stared at him for a bit. "So, you are an utter amateur who just has an incredibly high level of mana control and Perception, as well as a high rarity in Palate of the Malefic Viper and Sagacity?"

"Kind of?" Jake answered. "I guess I am more the type that studies what to make a lot beforehand and then go in with a strategy."

"So you bang your head into the wall until your original idea works through sheer force of will?" the projection asked judgmentally.

"I wouldn't phrase it like that..." Jake tried to defend himself.

"Few would, and honestly, your way isn't terrible, but you are an incredibly inexperienced alchemist who only has surface-level knowledge of... well, everything. Having Palate and Sagacity at high rarities does not make you a knowledgeable or experienced alchemist. Only time, effort, and a willingness to diversify will give that, and even if you are highly specialized, then dipping your feet in other areas may lead to inspiration in what you primarily focus on," the projection explained.

Jake nodded, a bit surprised at not just getting a snarky comment but actual advice.

"You are talented, so don't waste it. But as for this test, well, you were shit. Let's move on to one I feel like you will handle better based on what you just did: energy control. Are you ready right away, or do you want a break?"

"Ready as can be," Jake said with a nod.

The projection acknowledged his words as the room began shifting again. Everything disappeared as it became barren before four pylon-like objects appeared, all of them looking a bit cracked and broken. In the middle was also a metal disc only about a meter across. Jake instantly felt each of them held a lot of pure mana within, and he was still inspecting them as the projection explained the third test.

"Your objective in the third test is straightforward. Your aim is to protect the four pylons from foreign energies trying to invade and destroy them while at the same time guiding and directing energies that will aim to repair the Pylons. Throughout, it will change what is beneficial for what Pylon when, and a few more factors will be tossed in to increase difficulty. Throughout the test, you are to remain on the metal platform in the center, and no tools may be used to assist you. This includes potions. The purpose of this test is to evaluate your ability to manipulate the energy of different affinities in a stressful environment. The test ends when all four Pylons are destroyed or fully repaired," the projection explained.

"Got it," Jake said as he went to the disc in the center of the room. The moment he stepped on the disc, a small barrier of sorts covered it. The barrier was one to keep him in and did so he couldn't send anything physical out of it, but pure mana could leave. He also felt that his equipment had somehow been limited. The stats given were still there, and the increased mana regeneration and all that still worked, but he found he couldn't activate the Second Wind enchantment. It appeared this was to stop any gear with skills or anything to help with energy manipulation.

Jake quickly understood this test was about pure mana control and not really about mana application with skills. He assumed the mana around him would be mostly free of intent and thus prone to manipulation, and if energy with intent did appear, he was to use his own mana to overwhelm and control it.

This meant that the trial wouldn't only be one of pure control but also of resilience, focus, and the testee's ability to conserve and efficiently use their energies. Jake could undoubtedly make this entire thing easier by using Pride of the Malefic Viper right off the bat, but all that would do was make himself run dry faster.

"The test will begin in one minute. Good luck," the projection said as it disappeared.

Jake prepared himself as soon after he felt energy enter the chamber from all around him.

Chapter 403 - Elective Tests

It was coming from the walls!

Mana seeped into the chamber passively, as the pylons also began giving off a bit of pure mana. The mana coming from the walls seemed harmless at first and began interacting with what the pylons gave off, mixing with it.

Nothing was absorbed, but Jake exerted his will as he poured some of the mana from the walls into the pylons and saw it be successfully absorbed. He also tried to pour a bit of his own mana in and found that successful. The problem was that by his rough estimates, he would only be able to fill maybe one pylon with his entire mana pool.

He began directing the energy coming from the walls, but a new type soon came. A small stream of dark mana suddenly invaded the room and went straight for one of the pylons. Jake instantly took hold of it and directed it away, as it just floated in the outer parts of the room.

Then came fire, water, and even just pure light mana. Some affinities were difficult for Jake, especially the light mana, but he managed that by encapsulating it in stable arcane mana, really making use of his own affinity. The good thing about his stable mana was that it didn't react with anything, so there was no loss in energy.

At some point, Jake had taken a seat as he entered meditation. Relying on only his Sphere of Perception and Sense of the Malefic Viper, he took charge of the room as more and more changes happened.

One of the pylons turned red as the pure mana around it no longer worked to restore but destroyed it instead. It now needed fire mana as Jake took the streams he had been keeping away and infused them into the pylon.

Another one turned black as it wanted dark mana, another began glowing as it wanted light mana, and the final one turned green as it wanted nature mana. Jake swiftly took charge as every bit of mana within the room remained under his control, but the issue was that more entered than the pylons could absorb, making the density increase for every second.

As time passed, the pylons also shifted between affinities, and more difficult types entered. Soon time affinity mana came, which was tricky as hell to control, space mana seeped in, which Jake found a bit easier, while life and death mana both felt incredibly resilient to all control, almost as if they had a will of their own to resist.

More exotic mana also entered, a lot of which he didn't recognize, but luckily Sagacity and Sense made him aware of at least how they worked. Some he did recognize, like Myst mana, Storm mana, and other merged elements, but some were just out there, like one that seemed to make things lose their color and be weakened and another that kept splitting itself up into smaller streams that then merged and split again without warning.

But... no matter what happened, Jake remained in control. Jake was overqualified with nearly ten thousand Perception and a test no-doubt designed to be based on his level. When it came to applying his Willpower, Jake also wasn't a slouch.

Over an hour in, and Jake felt he was soon done as the difficulty kept climbing. More and more mana came in a constant stream. The entire room looked like a mix of colors, fire, solid boxes of arcane mana, streams of glowing mana running in currents around the perimeter of the chamber, and so much more.

At this point, Jake felt himself begin to be faintly challenged, and remaining in control of all the streams seemed impossible... so he kicked it up a notch. Pride of the Malefic Viper activated as Jake's presence blanketed the entire chamber, and everything came under his vice-grip of will once more.

On a side note, Jake had tried to use Arcane Awakening during the beginning to try and remain in control but found it actually made things harder. It was because of something the platform beneath him did that forced Jake to manually control the skill, making the usual system assistance that trivialized keeping it active disappear. Not that he was certain using it would be a good idea anyway due to the fact that it made all his energy a bit more volatile.

He did use his arcane affinity a lot, though. It was just better pure mana and allowed him to more easily direct the mana where he wanted it to go and isolate energies he wanted to put on hold until needed. In the end, Jake had nearly repaired all the pylons without allowing any noticeable damage to any of them.

As he thought it was about over, he felt a pulse.

From everywhere, a wave of pure destructive energy came, aimed straight for the pylons. It managed to destroy a bit of the mana Jake was controlling as it approached the damn crystals he had worked so hard on repairing.

Oh no, you fucking don't!

Pride activated at full power as his own mana was summoned into the room. Barriers sectioned off all the mana as he sent out a counter-wave of destructive arcane mana, utterly destroying the wave from the room. A second later, a second pulse came, but it barely had time to enter before it too faced destruction.

A few more pulses came, but some of them were of beneficial energy too, which Jake quickly noticed and chose not to destroy. This final phase continued a bit longer, until finally, the last pylon was fully repaired, and all four of them hummed to life.

The projection appeared once more inside the room and waved his hand as all the pylons disappeared.

"I must say, we expected this test to be easy for you, not trivial," the projection said as he shook his head.

Jake looked up at the guy and had to admit... that had been a lot easier than expected? He maybe had a few slip-ups and had a bit of energy unintentionally destroyed here and there, but it wasn't that bad. Overall he wouldn't call it trivial, but it definitely hadn't been overly challenging either. Oh, but it had been kinda fun.

"Your level of energy control is... well, no comment on it really. Whatever you are doing, keep doing that. I do have some questions about the mana you used, though. It was quite an interesting one, so I wonder where you obtained it?" the projection asked.

"It's my arcane affinity," Jake answered.

"An arcane affinity? At D-grade?" the projection frowned.

"Yeah, I got it in E-grade, though," Jake explained.

The projection frowned more. "While it is a simple affinity, the fact it taps into the concepts of-"

He suddenly just stopped as the scalekin's eyes opened wide. A moment passed before the projection focused again and looked at Jake. "Wait here for one moment."

With that, the projection disappeared, leaving Jake alone sitting on the platform.

Jake looked confused but just shrugged. "Did kind of want a break to regenerate anyway."

He took out a potion and chugged it as he entered meditation again, wondering what had happened.

Probably Villy... definitely Villy.

The scalekin projection appeared in the chamber once more as all the other judges regarded him.

"What's the hold-up? Did something happen?" another projection asked.

"By direct order of the Malefic One, we are to not include any in-depth details related to the arcane affinity in the final report, and overall strip the report of all information given by dungeon-assisted tools," the scalekin projection said.

The others looked at him with confusion for a moment before one asked: "Are we to change anything else in the tests?"

"No," the original projection shook his head. "We are to proceed as usual but keep certain elements ambiguous or hidden once done. It will not affect the final score anyway as he got the highest mark on the test."

"What is his relation to the-"

"Enough," the scalekin said. "We have a job, so do that job. Treat him like any other and merely ensure certain things are kept confidential. There are also some other minor edits to be made, but we continue as usual for now."

The scalekin said this as he prepared to head back to the testee, but he couldn't help but wonder what had happened. He had felt the attention of the Malefic One on him. He had been placed in the dungeon since the second Era, and when the Viper's presence descended, the time difference also dawned on him.

More than ninety Eras had passed. It was an unimaginable long time... but not his to ponder on. In the real world, he was already long dead, and no matter how many Eras passed, he would do as ordered. No, the reason why he was a bit shook was due to feeling the presence of the Viper gave him. He had felt it before when he volunteered to leave a projection in the dungeon, and he had interacted with the Malefic One several times before, but the difference between then and now was... intense.

The Viper of the ninety-third Era was far calmer. Collected. Moreover, he had felt genuine interest and even a trace of care from his Patron god. Something the Viper certainly never possessed back then. But

more so than anything, his power had grown to entirely new levels, as he no doubt had become more powerful in every way.

The scalekin did not share his thoughts with the other projections in the council but kept it all to himself. Primarily because his thoughts could be interpreted as heretical, but also because he knew it would impact how the others evaluated the remaining tests.

Also... would they not simply make fun of his theory that the Malefic One saw a D-grade human as someone worthy of emotional investment? The sentiment was preposterous just thinking about it.

Jake opened his eyes as the projection appeared again.

“Hey, still need a bit to regenerate resources,” Jake said as he healed up. He didn’t ask any questions, and the look in the projection’s eyes was the same as before, meaning that even if Jake’s “cover” had been blown, the projection kept his cool.

The projection nodded. “That is fine. While we wait, we can go over the next phase. The following three tests will be voluntarily selected based on your own specializations. Identification of herbs, knowledge of crafting methods and recipes, and energy control are all the fundamental tests, while these three will be more specialized. So tell me, what do you have experience in?”

“Uhm, what kind of specializations? Like transmutation or something?” Jake asked.

“That is indeed one option. Transmutation, arrays, magic circles, potionneering, poison concoction, flasks, elixirs, body augmentation, herb grafting, growing, cultivation, perhaps something within the field of

geology, just to name a few of the more common examples. The subjects in question depend entirely on you,” the projection explained.

Jake considered it a bit. “Any details on the specific tasks? As with other things, my abilities are highly specialized. As an example, I can do some pretty powerful transmutations, but only really do it properly with one affinity... that being my arcane affinity.”

“I cannot give too many details, but both scope and depth in your skills matter. As for the products you craft, it honestly doesn’t matter much as it is more technique and ability we evaluate. You will be required to craft or transmute more than one thing in most tests, so simply being good at making one type of potion or poison won’t be enough.”

“Alright,” Jake said. Honestly, it only came down to the three things Jake even knew how to do. Magic circles? Eh, he was clueless for the most part, even if he had done a bit of studying recently. Elixirs, he kinda knew, but only a few. Anything gardening-related he knew nothing about. Geology? Was that even real alchemy?

“I choose poison concocting, potion brewing, and transmutations,” Jake answered.

“Which one do you wish to start with?” the projection asked.

“Doesn’t matter, honestly,” Jake said, shaking his head.

“Very well. Very standard choices, which is perhaps for the best. Tell me when you are ready, and we will begin with poison concoction,” the projection nodded as the scalekin disappeared again.

Jake just closed his eyes and meditated for a while.

Once he felt ready, he opened them again. "Good to go."

The projection appeared again. The scalekin waved his hand as a cauldron appeared.

"This test is simple and will be in three parts. The first part will last thirty minutes and is for you to simply concoct some poisons as you please. Note that the actual crafting will be significantly sped up, so be on your toes. The second part will include you being given a number of ingredients, and you are to craft as many and as powerful poisons as you can before time runs out. This part will also last half an hour. The final part will involve you being given three poisons to recreate as well as ingredients to recreate them from. This part will also last half an hour."

Jake nodded in understanding.

"The three parts will come gauntlet-style with no resting period in between, and each part will end after thirty minutes elapse, moving onto the next part if you are done or not. Time begins when you infuse mana into the cauldron."

Jake jumped right into it as he began the test. He crafted all his best poisons and did as many as he could. He made Necrotic Poison, Hemotoxin, Fungicide, and even the soul-destroying poison. It wasn't much, but he felt like they were good enough. He did also do some other stuff and made some low-rarity poison he had created before, but nothing worth noting.

For the second part, Jake had been quite worried, but honestly? It had gone a lot better than expected. Jake had just relied on Identify, gut feeling, Sagacity, and Sense to pick out things he believed fit together, mixed in some blood to function as a catalyst to blend it all together, and created quite a few different poisons. All of them were worse than his Necrotic Poison, but some were pretty decent, in his opinion.

In the final part, Jake first inspected the three poisons and then consumed one of them. He absorbed the knowledge and began copying it, but the result wasn't ideal. For the second poison, he only consumed a bit of it and kept the rest at his side as he began concocting. He added in the provided ingredients he was certain were correct and tested a bit to get it right by adding in some more maybes. In the end, he felt like he got it pretty right, but just as he was about to begin to try and recreate the third poison, the projection appeared as the cauldron and poison both disappeared.

"Time's up," the projection said.

Jake deflated a bit as he sat down tired on the floor. "How did I do?"

"Mixed bag. Did fine on the first part, at least in the potency of your poisons, but once more, the scope was disappointing, and it was obvious you were reaching towards the end. The second part went above expectations, but you have some habits that may need working on. Your overreliance on Blood of the Malefic Viper works fine for you, but the problem is that you inherently make poison tied to you by using your blood. It has no impact if you use the poison yourself but may be problematic for others using your products, and it also makes tracing any poison back to you easy. As for the final part... I think we both know it went rather poorly, even if the replication of the second poison went okay. Overall your score would be considered above average, though, so don't fret."

Nodded along, Jake agreed on most but did ask: "Can you explain a bit more of what happens when I use the blood? Why is it worse for others?"

The projection gave Jake a brief look making it clear he should really know this, but he answered anyway.

“All poisons you create with your current method may be incredibly potent if you also use them yourself, but it isn’t so if you sell or give the toxins to others. This is merely a part of the system and is theorized to be due to the Records infused in the creation being bound to you. There are also theories it is due to your Willpower coming into effect when you use self-made products yourself. Either way, reality is that any crafted tool that does damage or prevents damage is simply more potent when used by the creator. Your blood amplifies this effect further as it binds the item to you even more.”

“So... Blood makes system-fuckery worse?” Jake asked.

“Not a phrase I am familiar with, but yes, essentially. From a practical standpoint, it does make sense that a D-grade cannot kill an A-grade simply by being given poison by an S-grade, wouldn’t you say so? Or, to make an easier example, an S-grade cannot make a small explosive device that will kill anyone, but the user once used, allowing D-grades to slaughter anyone below S-grade. Perhaps it is simply the system’s way of achieving balance and not make individuals overly reliant on items. At least not items they didn’t create themselves,” the projection explained.

Jake nodded again. Made sense to him.

“Thanks for the explanation,” Jake said as he took out and chugged a potion. “Ready for the next test.”

The projection smirked. “Let’s do potion brewing next.”

With a wave of his hand, a new cauldron was summoned as the scalekin explained:

“The potion brewing test is similar to the poison concocting one, with only a few changes. As far fewer types of potions exist, there is a larger focus on pure potency rather than diversity. Hence, the second part will not focus as much on how many different potions you can make but how potent they will be. The final part will also not require you to recreate potions but will present to you three lifeforms, and you are to craft potions optimal to them with the provided ingredients. The test begins when you infuse mana into the cauldron.”

There was no fluff or extra information, just the same thing as before. Jake nodded in acknowledgment as the projection disappeared and he got to work.

The first part began as expected, and Jake made all the potions he knew how to... which wasn't a lot. He made health, stamina, and mana potions and then finished off by making a few antidotes he had learned to create a good while ago. He also attempted to make some potions with the ability to soothe the mind and kind of succeeded.

As for the second part, it was just more of the same as Jake experimented with the many products given. He discovered a lot of ingredients with interesting affinities and energies, and it was clear the task was to transform those into potions. Jake already had some experience with making arcane mana potions, so couldn't he also make fire mana potions? Water mana potions? So that is what he did as he created potions of many different affinities, and he even made one able to restore blood energy for vampires. He did have to admit, though... this part didn't go well.

Of the three parts – heck six parts if you count the poison test – the final part of potion brewing was the most interesting. Three lifeforms that looked to be in stasis appeared, and Jake instantly noticed how peculiar they were. One was a dark elemental with some wind affinity mixed in too, the second was a plant-like lifeform that looked like a mass of tentacles of bark, and the final was a Risen, but not a normal Risen. Instead, it was someone who had clearly attuned himself to the death affinity. More than usual undead, at least.

This was when the word “optimal” came into play. All of them could use pure mana if given, but it would not be as effective as a potion pre-attuned to their affinity in question. None of them appeared to have vital energy either, and as far as Jake knew, none had stamina either. The elemental ran on pure mana of the dark and wind affinity, the plant-like lifeform used a vital energy Jake was not familiar with but was clearly closely related to the life-affinity, and the Risen used their unique energies too.

He inspected the three of them thoroughly, not minding the creepy situation that was him studying three naked time-frozen individuals. Once he felt confident, he began crafting, starting with potions for the Risen. He quickly made a death-attuned mana potion and moved on to make mana potions to the two others. Luckily he had a lot of experience with the dark affinity, and the wind affinity also wasn't unfamiliar due to his closeness with Sylphie.

With that, the elemental got a potion he was quite proud of. Jake then correctly identified the plant-like lifeform that just used normal regular affinity-less mana together with the life-energy, even if it didn't have a big pool of it, so he made one of those too. Finally, he returned to the Risen and began working on creating a potion restoring spirit energy – the unique resource of Risen and other undead.

He quickly found the ingredients and worked on making it, but the time ran out as he was about halfway. The cauldron just disappeared from between his hands as the projection appeared again. Jake had now failed to craft everything two tests in a row.

Jake once more slumped down, a bit disappointed in himself. “So, how badly did I do?”

“A very mixed bag. Your ability to create basic potions is respectable, but in every other area, you seem lacking. Tell me, what do you craft potions for? What is the purpose of the products you produce?” the projection asked.

“Well... to drink them?” Jake asked, a bit confused.

“But am I correct to assume that the primary customer of your alchemical creations is yourself? There is a connection between your alchemy shown in all tests so far and how they all seem to focus on personal benefits. You have clearly never crafted a potion explicitly for anyone else but only on making what is useful to you. On the good side, your high Perception and ability to adapt and control energy does allow you to quickly pick up and create new types of potions, but that is no substitute for experience and actual knowledge.”

Jake slowly nodded. Yeah, he did create potions for himself. Same for poisons. While he made some to sell, his motivation for crafting potions wasn't to make highly marketable products but to make something more useful to himself while fighting. Right now, that wasn't a problem as everyone around him were humans and beasts, but he could see it be problematic if he wanted to make something for Casper as an example.

Had he made money from selling potions? Sure, quite a lot. But he could no doubt have made way more if he focused on making money. Perhaps the biggest proof of his selfishness in crafting was how he had never bothered to really learn how to make antidotes. Jake himself had the legendary Palate skill, so why would he?

“Overall, these two tests have shown you have a powerful foundation to build upon, but instead of building a tall tower one floor at a time, you erected a few large pillars you then just keep adding onto without solidifying that foundation. You need to learn to craft a lot more things, not for others, but for yourself.”

“Yeah... I am beginning to realize that,” Jake said. When he picked up any new product, he had to start from the beginning, but if he had experience with similar creations, it became easier to pick up something new and improve quickly.

The projection looked at him and nodded. "Are you ready for the last elective test of transmutation?"

"Just two seconds," Jake said as he chugged a potion. "Should be good now."

He couldn't use potions during the actual tests anyway, so he may as well just use them in between.

"On that note, your consumption of potions is incredibly liberal," the scalekin projection said as he turned a bit more serious. "Just a fair warning: that may become more difficult down the line. The required ingredients will get rarer and more expensive, and while you may have a lot of money to spare on them, it will be wasteful and obtainment difficult."

Jake shrugged. "I have a feeling it will work out. Even if it doesn't, that is something I will face when the time comes."

"I guess that brings me to the next topic splendidly. You are recklessly impatient, a mentality that is not healthy in most alchemical work. You waste a lot by neglecting to reflect on the work you just did but just rush on. So no, you are not ready yet for the next test. Sit the fuck down, meditate, and consider what you screwed up in the prior tests and can improve on. See you in a few hours."

Without giving Jake any chance to respond, the scalekin just disappeared again. Jake stared a bit at where it had been as he took the words in. Was he rushing? Perhaps he was trying to go faster than needed. He had already been told there was no penalty to taking breaks, so maybe he should.

Jake decided to listen to the advice, closed his eyes, and entered meditation. He considered both the tests he had been through as he internalized what he had learned. The tests had allowed him to try out a lot of new ingredients and methods, something he had no chance to normally. It was all made possible by the cauldron and special circumstances offered by the dungeon, so when he thought about it, wasting this test to also learn was just stupid of him in retrospect.

He was at an academy... so it was only right to spend his time learning, right?

“He is the Chosen of the Malefic One?” one of the other projections asked, clearly skeptical to the level of finding the sentiment comical.

“Seems improbable, he is only D-grade and not especially outstanding. The only truly outstanding thing shown so far is the arcane affinity and his Identify-blocking ability. Also, he is human,” another one said, at least thinking about the possibility for a moment.

The scalekin projection appeared among them again, already aware of what had been said. “He is the current Chosen of the Malefic One, I have no doubt about it. As for how outstanding he is, I doubt we will be able to discover through these tests. I do agree that as an alchemist alone, he is nothing outstanding. At least not yet. He hasn’t even done alchemy for more than a year or two, so who is to tell what the future holds?”

“Even so,” another more skeptical projection said. “Those possessing such talents in alchemy must be numerous within the Order. I think everyone present here were as talented back in their heyday as this supposed Chosen is. So while he may be talented, he is not Chosen material, not at all. I am looking forward to the combat portion, though. He must be a powerful mage with his level of energy control.”

The scalekin just sighed. He still couldn’t voice that his belief in the human being the Viper’s Chosen was based on his brief interaction with the Malefic One. Why else would the Malefic One give direct

instructions on not only what they had to hide on the test result itself, but even hide information from the Chosen?

While the notion that he was more likely to be a Chosen because the Viper hid things from him seemed preposterous, to the scalekin, it was not. What other explanation would there be for the Malefic One to hold any noteworthy interest in the human's growth? Genuine, personal interest.

It would all be so much easier if they had the ability to see Blessings, but alas. It had been decided that would not be allowed to not favor those blessed.

But one thing was certain... they were all looking forward to the combat portion. First, the suspected Chosen would have to reflect a bit, though. The Malefic One had not elected to teach his Chosen any actual alchemy so far, which was not for the scalekin to question.

And the Viper had commanded them to treat and evaluate the human as everyone else during the tests, so that was how it would be done. So teaching him a bit should be fine, right? If it wasn't, why would he even enter the academy at all?

A few hours later, Jake opened his eyes as the projection appeared. He had to admit... taking a while to actually reflect on things and think wasn't dumb. Jake also felt more mentally refreshed for the last of the three selected tests too.

The projection observed Jake a bit before it spoke. "The last subject you have chosen is transmutation. As transmutation is such a wide field of alchemy, the test will also be relatively diverse and quite a bit different from those prior."

“Will it be based on transmutation using Touch of the Malefic Viper, though? That is the only transmutation skill I have,” Jake asked, a bit nervous. He already knew he did transmutations in a weird way, so he really wasn’t sure if he could even do this test halfway decently.

“It is indeed one such option, but it isn’t necessary. There are many different ways to transmute, and Touch is merely one of them. Just do your best, and we’ll see,” the projection said.

Jake nodded in understanding as he motioned the scalekin to continue.

“The transmutation test has three parts just like the two prior. The first part relates to your ability to transmute items into desired affinities. Don’t worry; these will only be affinities you actually possess, based on what you have shown in the energy control test. You will be tasked with transmuting as many items into the correct affinity as you can within half an hour. The second part will require you to transmute the provided materials into ones more useable in a presented half-done creation. Note that you can skip any creation you doubt you can do in the trade for a thirty-second penalty. This part also lasts for thirty minutes, or shorter, based on how much you skip. The third and final part will evaluate your ability to transmute weapons or equipment into improved versions through whatever means you desire using the supplied materials. This last one allows you to truly show off what you are most skilled in when it comes to transmutation, as you can merge and mix as much as you want within the thirty-minute limit. Questions?”

“None,” Jake answered, having decided to just see how it would go.

“Time begins when you touch the first item,” the scalekin projection said as he disappeared. At the same time, a gem of some sort appeared on the table, which was clearly the target to transmute. Finally, a screen appeared both in front of Jake as a system notification of sorts and on a large magical screen right above the table.

Earth Affinity -> Fire Affinity

Jake went over to the table and sat down. The instructions were simple, and he took a deep breath as he prepared himself mentally and reached out with both his hands as he grasped the gem and used Touch of the Malefic Viper. The gem quickly changed color, and less than ten seconds later, it disappeared as he was done.

The screen popped up again as a piece of metal appeared this time, telling him to transmute the fire mana into lightning mana. It took him a bit longer as the metal had some innate resistance, but he got it done rather quickly. This continued as the items kept popping up and getting more complicated. Equipment and weapons began appearing, and some even held multiple affinities where he had to change one or both to something else. Jake kept up his focus as he even half-entered meditation, just bringing the items to him with a string of mana so he could focus using the effects of Serene Meditation. Not the Serene Soul part, as there was little gain in doing anything within his Soulspace.

As the first part of the transmutation test approached its end, Jake had thought: I'm actually not shit at transmutation?

Chapter 405 - Angry Transmutation

Jake was pretty sure he was actually shit at transmutation. The first part of the test had passed, and the second one had begun. A half-finished concoction had appeared before him as well as about twenty different ingredients, with his task being to identify the best one of them to transmute and put in the concoction.

There was just one tiny issue.

I have no fucking idea what I'm supposed to do.

Okay, he knew he had to transmute an ingredient to put into the concoction, but he had no idea what to use. He quickly realized it was some mana-destroying poison, and he remembered lightning mana having the ability to “burn” other mana types, so should he add that?

Was he even supposed to transform the energy into a different affinity? He tried to go with his initial thought even if his intuition didn’t make him feel it was right. Which it wasn’t, as the first concoction failed as he put the transmuted herb in.

A new half-finished work popped up, and Jake was just as clueless. He stumbled and tried different things for a while until he just took the time penalty and skipped. A third one appeared, and he once more had to skip.

In the fourth one, Jake managed to somehow transmute some weird liquid by combining two of the items that appeared, and it worked when he put them into the large cauldron with a half-done elixir. That gave him a bit of confidence that was swiftly crushed and utterly stomped all over for the next fifteen minutes or so as the second part of the transmutation test ended with Jake only doing a single thing correctly and way too many skips.

He gritted his teeth and did a mental reset as the final part began. The one where he could do whatever he wanted. As it started, the room changed as more than a hundred weapons, dozens of armor pieces of different kinds, gems, herbs, and a plethora of other ingredients appeared all over the chamber. It was almost overwhelming, making Jake think being decisive enough to even get started was a part of the test.

Jake did not fall into this pitfall but just got started. Strings of mana flew out as Jake furiously dragged a sword he liked the feeling of and several more ingredients straight in front of him. He then picked up the sword and began inspecting it as he cursed a bit to himself over his performance in the last test.

What the fuck kind of test was that with such stringent rules for transmutation anyway? It was like he was expected to just know what fits in where and just magically come up with a solution instantly based on a bunch of bullshit materials he had never even seen before. What the fuck was up with that?

He activated Touch as the blade began cracking and groaning from the pure energy. “Yeah yeah, stop crying,” Jake insulted the sword as he just dragged a spear and an axe to him that looked to be made of the same metal. He forcefully broke them and melted them down, and just pushed the metal to merge. The three weapons resisted the merger, but Jake was having none of it as he just brute-forced his will through.

If the curse within Eternal Hunger had failed to resist being overwhelmed by Jake’s will, then what chance did a few pathetic weapons in this test have?

That is when Jake noticed something else as he scanned the room with his Sense of the Malefic Viper: cursed items.

Get the fuck over here, Jake thought as strings of mana flew out, and Jake gathered about thirty such cursed items and gathered them all in front of him. There were a few pieces of equipment, metals, a single dagger, and just a bunch of random items, some of which looked like household items.

He looked at all of them for a second before he channeled his mana and created an arcane barrier around himself and his victim- eh, ingredients. He then picked up three cursed items and began absorbing the curses out of them as he slowly destroyed the physical item with Alchemical Flame.

The barrier was to keep all the wayward energy in and to amplify the power of Jake’s own Pride as he destroyed the cursed vessels one by one and used himself as a temporary container for the curses. Now, one could argue absorbing thirty curses, none of which Jake even knew what was about, was recklessly

stupid, but on the other hand, Jake was still pissed about the prior part of the transmutation test, so he really didn't give a fuck as his own emotions overpowered whatever the curses tried to do.

He pumped all of this curse energy into the poor sword made by forcefully merging three weapons. It looked like utter shit, and the "sword" barely had any edge or anything as Jake had just mashed metal together, but at least it made the vessel powerful enough to contain the thirty curses.

Now, the curses didn't play well together, so Jake fixed that by just destroying all of them and reducing them to pure curse energy by just reducing it to its base element. He had no idea what the fuck the monstrosity he was creating would actually turn into. He just dominated the curse energies with his own presence and waited to see the result. Touch of the Malefic Viper going ham the entire time, of course.

Time passed, and soon he felt just about done with whatever the fuck he had been doing. The arcane barrier disappeared as all that surrounded him was dust of broken items, and he held a sword of sorts with bulks of metal all over it and no discernable edge. The only thing even a little normal was the handle, and that was only because Jake had been holding it.

When the time expired, the projection appeared as expected and just looked at Jake.

"This test was bullshit," Jake said as he began rambling. "The first part I got. It made sense. But that second part was just a god damn scam. I had no information on what to do and what to put in. It would take way more than half an hour just to figure out what is expected of me. Rather just toss out the entire concoction and start from scratch and make something better."

"But you did do one," the projection pointed out.

“Yeah, because I got lucky, and-“

“No, because you had insight into handling it. Knowledge is a fundamental aspect of alchemy, and you are ignorant to the extreme in most areas. Your sea of knowledge may be deep as a pond but only as wide as a puddle. You need to sit your ass down and study properly for a long time. You have only done alchemy for what, a year or two? Most, even the talented, who reach your level will have taken at least a decade, probably more. True, areas you have dabbled with, you do well in, but it feels like everything else that doesn’t fall into your narrow scope of interest just falls to the wayside,” the projection answered as he sighed. “Also... you talk about the test being unfair? Tough shit. The world isn’t fair, and it is your job to adapt when thrown a curveball. Even if you fail something, just use that time properly for something else or do as you did and experiment. Use it as a learning opportunity, and don’t look at it as a failure. You are still a novice and in many ways a child in the context of the multiverse, and if this is how you react to every setback, then you need a serious adjustment of your mindset.”

Jake stared at the projection a bit and was about to counter but forced himself to calm down. He took a deep breath as he felt his own heartbeat also calm. Closing his eyes for a moment, he breathed out and felt his heartbeat return to normal.

“Sorry... I don’t handle emotions and especially losing very well,” Jake said, genuinely embarrassed. He knew it had been his Bloodline acting up again, and that experience of any kind of loss kind of triggered it. The utter feeling of powerlessness in the second part of the test had just triggered him on a basic level.

The projection looked at him. “Emotions can be both a weapon and a hindrance. In the second part, you proved how much it can be a hindrance if you lose your cool. If you’d simply kept calm, you could’ve probably created at least three or four instead of only getting one.”

“Yeah, I get it. I’m sorry for my rant,” Jake said as he sighed.

“With all that said, powerful emotions can also be a weapon. Simply look at what you created in the last part of the test,” the projection said as he motioned to the monstrosity in Jake’s hand.

He only really inspected it now, and... it wasn’t pretty, that was for sure. But the aura it gave off couldn’t be ignored. Jake tried to use Identify on it but failed as the skill simply didn’t activate. The same as all his other “creations” during this dungeon, as things he made, weren’t actually real.

“So... how badly did I do overall?”

“I feel like I am repeating myself, but it was a mixed bag. The first part went okay even if your methods are crude, the second part we already spoke about, and the third part went... well, rather uniquely,” the scalekin said with a smirk as he also looked at Jake’s fucked up sword.

“Would I even qualify to enter the academy with my performance so far?” Jake asked.

“That is not for me to answer yet, but we both know your actual performance here doesn’t matter for your acceptance,” the scalekin said, shaking his head. “But I can say that your overall evaluation of the transmutation test was high-tier four stars.”

Jake was confused. “Isn’t that a good grade?”

“Yes,” the projection answered, smirking again. “It isn’t like the parts of the test count a third each, and it is an overall evaluation. The reason for your grade is the last transmutation. You dominated thirty-one curses, absorbed them without being affected, and then merged and transformed a weapon to make it compatible with the new curse you forcefully transmuted. All of this results in a product that may look

horrendous, but I am certain a skilled blacksmith could transform it into a deadly tool of destruction. So let me just ask... Bloodline, Transcendence, or both?"

"What?" Jake asked, looking confused.

"The Malefic One has already informed me of some unique circumstances surrounding you, and the entire dungeon is completely sealed off from all prying eyes by the grand array protecting it along with the Malefic One himself. Nothing said or done here leaves the dungeon without the Malefic One's approval," the scalekin explained.

"Why do you think I have either of those anyway?" Jake asked. He kinda already knew the reason, but he wanted confirmation.

"You appear immune to presences, that is why," the projection said, shaking his head. "That you didn't even notice the presence of the merged curse that affected you in your state of high emotions is proof enough you have something special. As items are not allowed during the trial, that means it must be a Transcendent skill or a Bloodline."

Jake just nodded but didn't actually answer. The projection acknowledged and smiled. "Keep your secrets then. Perhaps it is good for you to make it a habit. I shall see you in a few hours, so you have time to calm yourself completely and reach a proper mental state. The seventh test in alchemy will be the toughest of them all for most testees and tests your mentality. Note that this test will also take a long time, at least from your point of view."

With that, the projection disappeared along with everything else in the room, including the fucked up sword he had made.

He took the advice from the projection as he closed his eyes and entered meditation with a single final thought:

Maybe I only halfway suck at transmutation?

Vilastromoz observed the tests as he stood with Duskleaf, who had decided to join him throughout it all. His disciple was curious as to how Jake would perform, and the Viper gladly allowed him to observe with him.

"Jake really is... well... a mixed bag," Duskleaf said.

"Did you expect anything else?" Vilastromoz asked. "He is a novice, as he was told."

"Yes... but I do wonder, what concepts did they say his arcane affinity had traces of?" Duskleaf asked, clearly interested. Perhaps because he couldn't see it himself. Something that was only natural... the Viper had no clue either.

"I don't know," he answered honestly as he grinned at how wonderful that was. "I genuinely have no way to determine it, and even if I have my theories, I can't confirm them. They only knew due to the system-assisted surveillance tools within the dungeon, and once Jake is done, the projections will naturally cease to exist, making the knowledge disappear with them."

Duskleaf frowned, which the Viper understood, so he shook his head as he explained: "The core concepts of the affinity stem from his Bloodline, and thus are naturally quite unique. As for why I don't

want to know and wish to see the knowledge gone? Because Jake doesn't know either. Him being told would be bad, wouldn't it? Better he figures it out himself."

"True," Duskleaf agreed, even if he was curious. He then saw something as he chuckled. "While those old teachers are quite good, they certainly do misread things at times."

The Viper agreed as he observed the internal discussion chamber of the many projections part of Jake's dungeon instance. They were currently discussing the last transmutation item in amazement as they discussed the Bloodline or Transcendence.

However, they also discussed the upcoming test. It was one to test the mentality of alchemists, primarily to see if they had a mind fit for it. The unanimous opinion was that Jake was ill-fit for the test and that he would likely have terrible performance.

Oh, how little did they know? Jake had monstrous talent in many areas, but if there was one thing he was good at above anything else, it was being stupidly focussed on borderline anything he threw himself into. The council of projections all had the understanding Jake was a volatile and impulsive individual, which was perfectly accurate, but the Viper knew this was just one side of the coin.

"Indeed. Even the brightest can misinterpret those too odd to truly understand," the Viper said.

"The combat portion will be even funnier. They are so certain Jake is a mage," Duskleaf then added.

"It sure will be," Vilastromoz agreed.

“How are the other humans doing, by the way?”

Vilastromoz hadn't checked but decided to briefly do so.

“They're all pretty shit,” the Viper said, shaking his head.

“As expected?”

“As expected.”

Chapter 406 - Pretty Easy

Jake opened his eyes as the projection appeared a few hours later. He had fully regenerated himself once more and felt ready for whatever was to come.

The projection observed him as the explanation of the next test began.

“The seventh and final test related to alchemy is designed to evaluate your mentality and your ability to successfully perform certain kinds of tasks. You will be put under an array that will warp time, and three hours will appear as thirty days to you. During these thirty days, you will perform a constant ritual. But do not worry if you can actually do it. This ritual is based on skills you have already shown in prior tests and, in your case, will be to create an unspecified item using a cauldron. This test is not made to be a challenge to your skills or knowledge, but simply how you act during these thirty days. Questions?”

“Seems relatively simple,” Jake said. “So... I just have to sit and craft something for thirty days?”

“Without any interruptions or outside stimuli. Just you, the cauldron, and the ongoing ritual. Minor things will change throughout the craft to force you to stay actively engaged and constantly monitor and infuse small amounts of mana in at all times,” the scalekin explained.

“Alright,” Jake nodded again. “I am as ready as I can get.”

“Very well,” the projection said as the room shifted again, and a magic circle appeared to cover the entire dome-shaped chamber, as a large cauldron even taller than Jake himself appeared in the center. “Remember, thirty days. Ah, and don’t worry about the aftereffects of time-dilation. This dilation is directly system-made.”

Jake nodded again.

“Time starts when you infuse mana into the cauldron. Good luck and stay focused. Do not underestimate this test... out of all of the tests during the initial trial period of these dungeon tests, it had the lowest overall grade,” the scalekin said,

“I won’t,” Jake agreed. Of course, he wouldn’t. He had his ass handed to him more times than he wanted that day already. The concern and warnings from the scalekin were also genuine, so he was in for the hardest test yet.

With that mentality, he went over and placed his hand on the cauldron as time also warped around him. Jake sat himself down as he placed both hands on the cauldron, the scripts coming to life within it as the energy began moving.

It was like a magical puzzle that would continue for thirty entire days without pause as if Jake was crafting a mana potion that just took a month to complete. Jake closed his eyes as he entered Serene Soul Meditation as a mental projection of the cauldron appeared in the Soulrealm with him. Calm as could be, he began the simulated crafting session.

“Entering meditation is a highly risky strategy,” one projection said.

“Perhaps good for the first day to try and stay focussed, but not sure he will last much longer,” a second one chimed in.

“If that,” the scalekin projection agreed. The testee had shown himself to be highly volatile, and even for a test lasting little more than half an hour, he had grown impatient and lost his head. Imagining him doing thirty days of just constantly crafting something quite frankly boring?

There would be no true challenge to the craft. It was like a job where one had to constantly draw a line on a piece of paper following a pattern, with minor changes coming in here and there where you maybe had to switch the marker to another color or maybe even use two markers for a bit.

The only challenging thing was not losing focus and letting your mind wander - not getting mind-numbingly bored and deciding the test was a waste of time. Even if the testee messed up for a bit, they could just jump back in and continue.

Before the dungeon became a dungeon during the trial period, they even had D-grades fall asleep. Some, in fact, many, had tried to speed up the process, which would make the entire craft unstable and

force them to calm it down. Even the most novice alchemist knew speeding it up was a bad thing, and all the judges were happy at least the human didn't try that right away.

"A day does seem like a lot," a female judge said. "Want to place bets?"

"We are projections. We have nothing to bet and will only exist as these incarnations for a few days more at most," another one said.

"Pride is eternal," the female said. "Or are you just scared?"

"Fine... I bet on him lasting three days," the killjoy projection said.

"Two days.

"Twelve hours."

"Two and a half days."

"Thirty days, perfect score," one of them suddenly said, getting all attention on him. It was a bulky-looking beastkin who had been mostly silent throughout the tests so far. He was there primarily to be a judge of the upcoming combat section, so for him to chime in with such a preposterous opinion in the seventh alchemist test was odd.

Others began to make slight jeers, but the scalekin asked. "Why?"

The beastkin looked at the human sitting down there doing alchemy as he just shrugged. "He had the eyes of a predator when he looked upon the cauldron. I feel a fellow hunter in him. As long as the prey is worth hunting down, then no matter how boring the process, no matter how long it takes, the hunter will get his prey."

"That is a bit of a stretch. He is an alchemist first and foremost, with his combat likely being magic-based just going from his arcane affinity and level of mana control displayed," the scalekin said, shaking his head.

"No... he is not," the beastkin said again with a toothy smile. "I know a fellow hunter when I see one... and that one down there makes my hair stand on end."

The others didn't necessarily agree, but neither did they want to argue. In fact, some were slightly swayed, including the scalekin. Out of everyone there, the beastkin was the strongest by far... already towards the peak of S-grade when he placed a projection within.

And as the days passed and the ritual continued perfectly, opinions were shifted one by one.

"Khanac had some sharp senses even back then, huh," Duskleaf commented.

"Always had," Vilastromoz agreed.

“How is he doing these days, by the way?”

“Probably catching up with Snappy after returning to the Order,” the Viper shrugged.

“Ah... last I heard, he got in trouble for killing a Seventh Layer Highgod from the Altmar Empire?” Duskleaf asked.

“He did.”

“It’s good now?”

“Maybe? Didn’t bother asking, but the Autarch hasn’t turned up yet, so maybe?” Vilastromoz shrugged. He did kinda want to see the old pointy-eared bastard again.

“Oh, okay.”

“Yep.”

With that, the two gods stayed to observe Jake a bit longer until Duskleaf left to do something more productive with his time than watch Jake do something incredibly mundane for a month.

Honestly, thirty days wasn't even that long. Time just slowly passed as Jake did as the cauldron wanted. He quickly picked up that trying to alter the process in any way would only create problems, so he naturally avoided that and just did as he was supposed to.

Compared to upgrading Shroud, this was honestly easy. So when the projection appeared and the cauldron disappeared, Jake hadn't even noticed thirty days had already passed, and honestly, he felt like he could have kept going a good while longer without any issues.

The scalekin looked at Jake a bit weirdly before talking. "Needless to say, you get full marks on the seventh alchemy test."

"Really?" Jake asked. He was sure he had missed some hidden secret or something... why the hell had they called this the hardest?

"Naturally... you got a hundred percent completion with not a single slip-up," the projection said, frowning. "That is something we only really see done by those of the automaton race."

"I mean... it wasn't hard? Sure this is the hardest one?" Jake asked again. The guy was pulling his leg, right?

"No. Let me ask you, why was this test easy for you?"

"I just had to follow the scrips and the movement of the energy for thirty days? As I said, it was easy. Probably something most alchemists can easily do," Jake said.

"That is the truth. The task itself is easy, but wasn't it also boring? Unstimulating? Why did you, or could you, stay focused on the test throughout without losing attention for a single moment?" the projection asked, and he looked genuinely confused.

About as confused as Jake was. "Wasn't that the test?"

"It was... but that doesn't mean you can just do it."

"Well, not doing it would mean I failed the test wouldn't it?" Jake asked, trying to understand the situation.

"Naturally."

"So I did it? I mean, not doing it would mean failing, so I had to do it, right? So, sure, it was boring, but I had to beat the test, so what can you do?"

Jake honestly didn't get the big deal as he stared at the projection. The projection stared back for a few moments before just shaking his head. "Alright... good job either way. Now, are you ready to move on right away, or do you need a break?"

“No... I don’t see much to reflect on from that last test, is there?” Jake answered. Also, all of his resources were topped up as he had just been meditating, and his natural regeneration vastly outstripped the expenditure. He wasn’t even mentally tired as it had all been rather relaxing.

Making Eternal Hunger had been way more fun.

“There is indeed not,” the projection agreed. “So, let us move on. With the seventh test, the alchemy portion of the D-grade entrance test is over, so let us move on to the combat portion. Follow me.”

Jake did as asked as he got up and stretched a bit. He didn’t need to physically, but it felt good to do anyway after sitting down for so long. Following the projection down the hall of the dungeon, he got a look into some of the other chambers. The scalekin clearly noticed him looking and volunteered to explain.

“The chambers are based on specializations. Some alchemists have very odd special skills or hyper-focused specializations. Some are only able to craft deep underwater. Others require a large forge and flames of a certain degree, or some just craft with unusual materials. An example would be those who directly manipulate the flesh and bodies of living beings, even to the level of affecting the Soulshape.”

“Manipulate the Soulshape? Like... actually change the real body forcefully?” Jake asked.

The Soulshape was just a fancy way of saying the body’s actual shape – AKA what natural regeneration would return the body to. There were many ways to affect it. Heck, Jake had affected his with the scar on his neck from his duel with the Sword Saint. It was a reminder.

Others would maybe choose to not heal a finger for some reason. The best example Jake knew was Lillian. Her face was still scarred, and Jake was certain she could have it regenerated in a day if she so wished. That she hadn't done so was none of Jake's business, but it was proof of how people had minor control over their Soulshape.

"It is some nasty alchemy for sure," the scalekin answered. "But also powerful. Especially those who create their own abominations and chimeras by combining different living beings to form entirely new creatures. They are rare, though, and it isn't the most popular branch primarily due to the many limitations and high barrier of entry."

Jake nodded along as he made one thing clear: "I know you said to expand my scope, but no fucking way I am doing that."

"Wouldn't expect you to. You could become a god by only focusing on poisons if you wanted. In fact, I would say adopting too many branches of alchemy may also hurt you as there are vast differences. Ah, but I would recommend picking up some aspects of ritual magic, primarily to learn about magic circles and runes, as the general knowledge required in the branch of ritualism is useful near-anywhere."

"Got it," Jake said. He had already picked up a skill for ritualism, so getting told it was a good thing gave Jake a great dose of confirmation bias.

"But let us address the topic at hand," the projection said as they reached the end of the hall. The gate before them opened as it led into a huge dome of sorts. When he said huge, he did mean huge. It was at least five kilometers in diameter, with a completely bare floor.

"The final part of this test is the combat portion. As actual battle power can be hugely varied based on a plethora of factors, you may find this test unfair, but such is life sometimes. Like the alchemy test, the combat test will consist of seven tests maximum. Maximum as you may do fewer based on your own

abilities. Each test will merely be a fight between you and a number of opponents, and if you clear a test, you can elect to move on to the next. Quite simple, really,” the scalekin projection explained.

“Does sound simple,” Jake said. “What was the average number of combat tests passed in this trial period you talked about?”

“The median, four. That is what the trial period was for, to evaluate things like this. Also, during each test, the arena will change to different environments, often some beneficial to the enemies you fight.”

“Will there be ones deep underwater?” Jake asked with a deep frown, already remembering the shitty water level. Would the Order really be so-

“No, the feedback of underwater tests was horrible, and it frankly favored some lifeforms too much and utterly handicapped others. Ifrits and other types of fire demons, as an example, just got screwed. Besides, most can avoid battling deep underwater by just staying away, and if they do find themselves in such an environment, they can just escape,” the projection shook his head.

“Thank Villy,” Jake sighed in relief.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing!” Jake said, having spoken without thinking. “Now, let’s do the test, yeah?”

“Very well. The first test will begin. Ah, one thing, you may hide your level and try to appear to be level 181, but due to how the dungeon works, you will face challenges according to your own level,” the projection said as he tossed Jake a small token.

“Use the token to begin the test and then simply use it to activate subsequent tests too. I wish you luck.”

“Alright,” Jake said as the projection disappeared, and he didn’t hesitate to activate the token.

The environment around him began changing as trees shot up from the ground, the underbrush was formed, and within a second, he found himself within a forest. He also instantly heard the noises of beasts. Jake stood still as he waited, feeling no danger.

Soon enough, the beasts tracked him down as six of them entered the small clearing he was standing in.

[Flamefang Wolf – lvl 141]

[Flamefang Wolf – lvl 143]

[Flamefang Wolf – lvl 144]

[Flamefang Wolf – lvl 141]

[Flamefang Wolf – lvl 140]

[Flamefang Wolf Alpha – lvl 149]

Jake looked at all six of them as he frowned.

“Is this some kind of joke?”

The six wolves just stood there, staring at him. None of them dared to attack him. Jake stared at the Alpha in the front, as finally, whatever compulsion to fight imposed by the dungeon won out over their fear.

They all charged at the same time as Jake didn’t even bother. The first wolf to arrive, Jake let bite down on his hand with gloves he had already infused with arcane mana to strengthen. As it did so, he blew out an explosion of arcane mana as the entire wolf turned into a shower of blood and gore.

The second one he grasped at the jaws and ripped it open. They all kept coming as Jake tore them apart one by one with his bare hands as he felt even more bored than during the seventh alchemy test.

Finally, the Alpha died as Jake bashed its skull in. He didn’t wait as he took out the token and activated it again, hoping for the next one to not be a huge disappointment.

Chapter 407 - Dominating The Test

The combat arena changed once more as the forest was replaced with a mountainous valley. When it was done changing, the environment was bare with a mountain range in the distance, making Jake think the room had also expanded spatially.

Jake considered if he should head there, but instead, he saw movement. From atop one of the mountains came a black mass of flapping insects that would no doubt look like a black cloud to someone with far less Perception. Jake used Identify on a few of them as he inspected.

[Soilwasp Swarmer – lvl 105]

[Soilwasp Swarmer – lvl 107]

[Soilwasp Swarmer – lvl 106]

Each Soilwasp was about the size of a human with a large stinger and, of course, wings. As they got closer, Jake saw them point their stringers upwards towards the air as they all released their attack at once. A rain of small black, almost diamond-like shards rained down upon him as he was attacked by thousands of D-grades at once.

At the same time, Jake felt something not from the sky but from the direct opposite direction. Through his Sphere of Perception, he saw several forms move below him. He had no idea what it actually was, but it looked like some weird insects that managed to dig through the ground.

Describing these insects was difficult. They had long slender bodies and huge claws and mouths that seemed to somehow swallow up the soil as they moved through it. Jake had to be honest; they all looked kinda creepy.

With a casual demeanor, Jake raised one of his hands as arcane energy moved around it. A bubble formed around him, shielding him from attacks coming from below and above. He then turned his gaze towards the many incoming wasps as he smiled.

Through Jake's extensive training to control Shroud of the Primordial, He had become very familiar with his own Soulshape. He had already faintly noticed how he flew a bit better on his way back to Haven, But it was not only his wings that had improved.

In the same vein that understanding a skill, it helped improve it, understanding your own body also made you better at using it. So what happens when a skill is inherently tied to the body? Wings were an example, but one example was even more prominent and relevant for this improvement.

The skills Jake had received related to the Malefic Viper didn't actually alter Jake's physical body or his Soulshape, but instead simply created phantasmal body parts. These were only temporary parts of his Soulshape but It functioned similarly, even if it wasn't exactly the same.

However, one skill had permanently altered Jake's actual physical body. It was the skills that had turned his eyes from their normal brown color to a beastly yellow. It was the first legendary skill Jake had achieved that wasn't done through simply bullshitting with his Bloodline. Well, alright, he had kind of bullshitted it by buying it through a tutorial store, but still.

Jake usually only used his Gaze of the Apex Hunter to freeze foes that were difficult to fight or to simply keep them still for him to land a good blow, but today, he would use the more lethal part of it. With

intense focus, Jake controlled all the energy going towards his eyes, as he almost felt the metaphysical veins going to them.

It wasn't to make the ability more powerful. Instead, it was to shield himself from doing any more damage than necessary using this skill. Was using Gaze necessary, and wouldn't it just be better to bombard them with some arcane attacks? Well, sure, but Jake wanted to use his Gaze, so he did.

He infused his eyes as they glowed yellow, and bar-none Jake released the most powerful Gaze of the Apex Predator he had ever used. The legendary skill truly showed its power as he looked at all the incoming wasps, wishing death upon them.

After a brief sting in his eyes, the sound of wings flapping in the distance suddenly lessened significantly as more than seventy percent of the swarm fell to the ground, lifeless – the remaining ones only surviving by having their bodies covered by their comrades.

Something a second Gaze quickly fixed as the last nearly seven hundred wasps also fell lifelessly to the ground, their souls destroyed by the gaze of an apex hunter.

At the same time, the ground beneath him erupted as seven huge insect-like burrowers tried to consume him. Each of them was as large as a bus with huge maws filled with teeth-like grinders. When they came up, they shot Jake into the air as the arcane bubble around him held up.

Jake let himself float upwards as he gathered mana in his hands. He also identified the newcomers

[Razormaw Rockshooter– lvl 151]

Their names made a lot more sense in the next second when they all shot human-sized shards of rock towards him, but Jake simply dodged to the side as arcane bolts gathered around him. With a mental command, he released them all in a bombardment of pure death as the ground below him exploded.

He kept shooting out dozens of destructive bolts every second as the insects struggled, some of them even trying to re-burrow in the ground. Jake shot that down as he teleported down and grasped one by its tail-like limb and pulled it up again before just giving it a few good punches till it died.

“Still too easy,” Jake muttered. These enemies sucked. Straight up did. They were low-tier creatures, and Jake reckoned that most humans above level 135 or so could kill them. This was also why Gaze so easily killed them all with nearly no backlash... they were just too weak.

Jake once more pulled out the token and activated it. The environment began changing again as he now found himself standing on flat plains with nothing around him in any direction. Far off in the distance, he saw three creatures be summoned too.

They were all tall – about three to four meters - lanky with sharp claws at the end of arms practically dragging across the ground. They had not seen Jake yet from where they stood but were instead curiously inspecting their surroundings as one of them began tearing up the ground for fun.

[Venomclaw Kalamore – lvl 156]

[Venomclaw Kalamore – lvl 155]

[Venomclaw Kalamore – lvl 158]

“Venomclaw, really?” Jake asked, wondering if that wasn’t just bullshit. Jake could clearly see that these beasts were melee-focused, so he decided to meet them head-on. He just ran towards them as he pulled out Eternal Hunger. The blade had been complaining a bit recently about being hungry, so why not feed it a bit?

As he ran over, they also spotted him. They all turned on a dime as they practically flew towards him, surpassing Jake’s own running speed. Jake met them as he stood his ground and swept his blade upwards as he met the claws of the first Kalamore and sent it flying back, its hand now dripping with blood.

Jake turned and blocked a second one as he dodged the third and weaved in between them as he swung his blade and cut one in the back. The third one attacked again, but Jake blocked it with his mana-infused gloves as he forcefully twisted its wrist and made it stab its claws into its own body.

Jake then just let one attack him as it ripped through his back and drew blood, also infusing its venom. Weaksauce venom doing little more than provide him a bit of mana regeneration as Jake decapitated one of the creatures.

The two others fell soon after, having not really managed to accomplish much. Still too damn easy.

He activated the token again as the environment shifted. He suddenly felt like it had gotten very hot as everything turned red. Looking up, he was now within some kind of cave with lava dripping down from the ceiling and pools of hot magma bubbling in deep pits below.

Jake was on a large circular, almost arena-like platform as someone appeared across from him.

[Emberblade Berserker Demon – lvl 155]

And it truly was someone. It at least looked humanoid, but the berserker part of the name proved quite relevant fast, as Jake didn't see much intelligence and awareness in its eyes. It was a large bulky demon wearing tattered plate armor and wielding a two-handed sword more than four meters long.

It saw him instantly and, with a bestial screech, stormed towards him as its large sword began burning and red pulsating veins that seemed to almost burn covered its body. This was the test that marked the average member who did the test back during the trial period, but Jake was far from average.

Jake still only stood with Eternal Hunger as he allowed it to come. He blocked the first blow and found himself tossed airborne as a wave of fire licked across his body. Outmatched in strength, huh? Makes sense.

While still mid-air, Jake stepped down as he teleported forward, appearing right in front of the demon. He didn't give it time to respond as he stabbed his sword into his opponent, also making the blade explode with arcane energy to send the demon reeling back.

The demon flew back and was now bleeding from a hole in its chest, but at the same time, the veins also began glowing more intensely as the wound healed. Without any reprieve, the demon attacked again, slightly faster than before.

Yep, really a stereotypical berserker. Take damage? Do more damage!

However, Jake knew the counter to this. With a swift move, he coated his blade in his own blood to poison it and prepared for slaughter. As the demon was upon him, his body exploded in arcane energy as he released Arcane Awakening at the balanced 30%. He dodged under the first swipe of the heavy sword and cut the demon across the chest. It attacked again, but Jake just dodged and kept cutting it.

It tried to fight back, but Jake didn't let up as he kept cutting and kept stabbing. He was far faster and more agile, not allowing the demon to land a single hit. Even as the berserker grew stronger and faster, Jake just kept dodging. Towards the end, he didn't even bother attacking but re-deposited his blade in his inventory to just dodge the sword blows one after another.

In the end, the demon just fell over as it succumbed to the poison and its own wounds as Jake stood unscathed besides a few burn marks on his cloak. He deactivated Arcane Awakening again as there was no weakness period due to only using it at 30%.

"Well, should get harder now, right?" Jake said to himself and the more than a hundred observers as he activated the token again, not feeling like he needed a break.

Once more, his environment shifted as space expanded obviously enough for even Jake to notice. The cave walls were gone, and he now found himself within an expansive sky, standing on a small cloud. In front of him flew a single creature larger than anything Jake had ever fought before.

[Whisperleech – lvl 174]

It looked like small banners of cloth that extended from a humongous balloon with lightning crackling within. Like a massive sky-jellyfish or something like that, but with just ridiculous proportions. The cloth-like banners extended for more than fifty kilometers out from it as the main body was perhaps a kilometer in diameter.

Jake was amazed a creature of such size could still only be D-grade, much less have such a “low” level. Moreover, how it could feel so... unthreatening? Jake stared at it, and even when it also became aware of him and began attacking, he didn’t feel much danger.

He considered if he should take out his bow and just finish it quickly and decided that yes, that would be a good idea as he really didn’t wanna storm in and try to stab the massive creature. Primarily because he could only begin to imagine whatever goo it would spew when stabbed. He had a strong feeling it would be very disgusting.

Let’s hope the next one is stronger.

The chamber of judges had been quite rowdy for the first few parts of the combat test but had eventually turned quieter. That he easily passed the first test was expected. Practically everyone did, with the only ones struggling being those who were pure alchemists, having likely not even evolved their classes yet, or were of a race with close to no combat abilities.

It was in the second test something changed. It was a test to see how a testee handled being swarmed, but none had expected it to just end. A single glance and a soul attack of incredible power was released that killed nearly all of the wasps, with a second one just ending it outright.

The third fight was a slaughter. The fourth was too... but one thing stood out.

“What exactly is his class?” a projection asked after the fourth test.

“Magic and melee so far, a form of spellsword or magic warrior?” another one proposed.

“That weapon... a Legacy weapon of some sort? I feel incredible power from it,” a third one said.

“Definitely not something a D-grade will usually walk around with. That curse is no joke.... Ah, perhaps that is related to his class? The soul attack also makes this probable.”

The scalekin projection did not chime in but just sat confused more than anything. The testee fought with so many different tools and methods it made little sense, but it quickly became clear he only did so for, well, fun, it appeared. He even commented out loud on the lack of challenge.

Looking over at the beastkin, who was the most powerful among them, the beastkin returned his gaze. “As I said before, he is a hunter. A hunt with unworthy prey is never interesting.”

“Thoughts on his fighting style?” the scalekin asked.

“So far, his high Perception is clear from how he fights. He predicts attacks and goes for weak points. The way he handled the demon was masterful as an evasive fighter. Overall, from what he has displayed, he would be a monstrous melee fighter or mage if he focused on that,” the beastkin explained, everyone else quiet as they listened in.

“If he focused on it?” one of the projections discussed earlier asked.

The beastkin grinned, showing his teeth. "He is a hunter, is he not? A human hunter with a high Perception. There is only one true weapon for such a man."

"A bow?" the scalekin asked, a bit perplexed. "He has not shown any signs he uses one so far."

"Because nothing worthy has appeared yet. A dragon does not bother wasting its Dragon Breath on unworthy foes but merely crushed it with all its other methods."

Just as they spoke, the fifth combat test began.

"A Whisperleech? Annoying creature to deal with as a melee fighter," a projection commented.

The human in the test looked at it a bit and waved his hand as a bow appeared.

"I told you so," the beastkin laughed.

"We do not know if that is his most powerful method. It may merely be a more effective way to use his magi-" a projection began but was swiftly cut off.

The human had drawn the string in the test, and instantly energy surged. He took aim and a few seconds passed before he released the string. The cloud and sky were parted as several appendages of the

Whisperleech were torn apart by the arrow that soon impacted the main body resulting in a massive explosion of destructive energy.

None commented as a second shot came a few seconds later, and without the Whisperleech even being able to fight back, it was killed by only four arrows total. To make it more ridiculous...

Jake saw the huge creature collapse like an ill-engineered airship as he tsked. "Four fully charged Powershots with Arcane Awakening at 30%? Tankier than I thought, huh."

Chapter 408 - Meeting Expectations

Jake quickly took out the token to begin the sixth combat test. The fifth one had honestly been too easy, but then again, the huge thing was incredibly ill-matched against Jake. It just relied on being big and unapproachable, which just made a massive target for Jake.

When he activated the token, the environment shifted again. He once more found solid ground beneath him as he saw structures form all around. Within a moment, he stood within a huge colosseum of some kind more than five hundred meters across and with a magical barrier sealing him in.

A gate at the far end opened as five figures appeared. Jake frowned when he saw them.

It was five humanoids also wearing differing equipment. From what he could tell, it was two women and three men with a scalekin at the lead with a sword in hand. The ones behind were a female elf in a robe holding a staff, a human also wearing a robe, a demon in full plate armor, and a female beastkin with what looked like a rifle. Jake used Identify as he instantly understood.

[Human – lvl 156]

[Elf – lvl 160]

[Scalekin – lvl 162]

[Demon – lvl 159]

[Beastkin – lvl 160]

It was a battle to pit the testee against a full party of fighters - a healer, a tank, and three damage dealers able to strike at both melee and range. As Jake looked at them, they didn't speak or emote at all, but their movements were clearly that of sapient people as the healer began casting some magic that coated them all in a green aura.

Jake decided for once to not take this too casually. He had little to no experience fighting teams despite being a mid-tier D-grade, and this group was clearly one made to test his ability to handle such a group.

Arcane Awakening activated at 30% as he took out his bow right off the bat and released a barrage of explosive arrows, jumping backward. Just as he did so, the demon warrior stepped in the front and took out a shield that summoned a barrier around its edges that expanded and totally blocked the explosions in tandem with the healer's defenses.

While jumping back, Jake began charging Arcane Powershot as he took aim for the healer of the group. The logic of always killing the healer first was a tried and true logic that he would naturally follow. The

enemy gunner also returned fire as the scalekin raised his blade and exploded with some aura that left a faint sheen on the body of everyone present.

The human mage seemed to begin some ritual as a large magic seal was formed right behind him, and Jake heard some kind of chanting. There was a lot to keep track of at once, and Jake wanted to quickly seize the momentum.

He released the Arcane Powershot just before a bullet arrived from the enemy gunner. Jake quickly made a shield with his hand as the bullet impacted it and exploded in a frosty white mist, creating ice on the stable arcane barrier.

His Arcane Powershot shot forward with incredible momentum as the demon warrior once more stepped forward to block. Jake used Gaze on him as the demon froze. Annoyingly so, the scalekin warrior stepped in, and just straight-up took the arrow with his own body as he was blasted back.

It seemed like a good thing for Jake, but the healer quickly reacted as the scalekin began visibly healing. He also noticed something else... the scales on the scalekin weren't the usual kind. They had a dark green color, as Jake instantly recognized Scales of the Malefic Viper.

This was further confirmed when two black draconic wings appeared behind the scalekin as the swordsman flew towards Jake with great speed, even while injured. The demon warrior stayed with the healer, gunner, and mage as Jake only faced the swordsman scalekin in direct melee.

The healer did apply some magic first, and Jake saw the gunner begin charging some attack as the human mage continued his ritual. The demon slammed his shield into the ground as it expanded and created a physical wall between Jake and the ranged fighters. The healer could still cast through the shield, it appeared as Jake dodged away from the scalekin and bombarded the demon's protection.

It quickly became clear breaking down the barrier wouldn't be easy, forcing Jake to engage the scalekin a bit as he took out Eternal Hunger and the Bloodfeast Dagger. Green energy swirled around his opponent's blade as toxic energy belled out of it as the scalekin attacked.

Jake blocked with Eternal Hunger as they found themselves equally matched in strength. The poison from the blade did seep a bit into Jake, but he didn't care. The swordsman moved his blade as he tried to do a feint, but Jake blocked as he moved in and cut with his dagger. The scalekin tried to counter, but Jake dodged under the blade as he himself attacked the swordsman's stomach, sending scales and blood flying.

Slower than me... and compared to the Sword Saint, his swordplay seems simple, Jake thought as he knew there had to be more.

And more there was. The scalekin suddenly exploded in power as he bulked up and grew nearly a meter in height. His muscles bulged as spikes erupted from his back, all pulsing with energy. Jake was still close and attacked his opponent but found himself blocked and slightly repelled by the post-transformation scalekin.

The two of them fought a bit more as Jake still came out on top. His opponent had gotten stronger, but not faster. However, he had also clearly gotten way bulkier and resistant as Jake's weapons didn't cut as deep as before, and the healer was also still constantly helping with healing and who-knows-what.

Ultimately though, the reason things were going as they were was that Jake allowed them to. He wanted to see what his opponents were cooking up. He had no experience fighting fights like this and wanted to take this test as a learning opportunity, as he had been told by the projection to do.

Well, this probably wasn't what the projection had meant, but hey, what can you do? Jake kept brawling with this scalekin for a while longer, occasionally throwing an arcane spell in the direction of the demon's shield until finally, the gunner and mage were ready.

The demon's shield retracted as Jake felt a surge of magic coming from the human mage. The magic seal expanded as Jake suddenly felt invisible attacks coming for him from everywhere. Like invisible chains bound his limbs, he suddenly felt himself be weighed down as he also began taking damage as it was clearly not simply a binding attack. Just then, the gunner was also ready as a giant explosion sounded out and a bullet flew towards him.

At the same time, the scalekin also closed in for an attack, with the demon even charging towards him to follow up. It was all a masterfully planned attack that would no doubt be able to kill most people in mid-tier D-grade.

Most people.

Jake opened his eyes wide as his body exploded with energy, activating Arcane Awakening fully as his stats climbed and he was flooded with power. The first attack to arrive was the scalekin, as Jake dove forward into the blow. He allowed the large swordsman to hit him in the shoulder as Jake, in turn, grasped the scalekin's arm and twisted his body – all of it happening in a moment, not giving the mage with his chains time to respond.

The huge swordsman failed to resist as Jake used the scalekin as a shield against the gunner's powerful attack. It rivaled Jake's own Arcane Powershot, which showed as the scalekin was blasted away. Jake narrowly dodged the large figure as it flew over him and smashed into the wall of the colosseum, barely making a few cracks.

As he ducked, Jake partly lost his footing as the chains dragged him down, the mage able to control them slightly. They dug in deeper as Jake felt his resources be drained, and he gritted his teeth as he was now certain it was a soul attack of some sort. It was binding his soul, not his actual physical body.

Powerful for sure, and it would make most of his level utterly unable to move. Jake, on the other hand, was a bad target. He flooded certain parts of his own Soulshape with destructive arcane energy as he weakened the chains and finally activated Scales, breaking several of the chains altogether.

He then went on the offensive. Pride of the Malefic Viper bellowed out as he used Gaze on the group. The mental attack from Pride made them all falter slightly longer, giving Jake time to draw his bow and fire an Arcane Powershot towards the healer of the group.

Jake followed up with a barrage of explosive bolts just to create chaos as he used One Step Mile forward. The healer was struck by the Arcane Powershot but managed to protect herself with a barrier in the final moment as she was sent flying back.

With two steps, Jake caught up. He had gotten an idea from seeing the scalekin hit the colosseum wall that he would now put into motion. His hand was glowing green as he summoned his wings and flew forward, catching the healer by her face after briefly breaking through her barrier with Touch.

He smashed her head into the wall with Touch of the Malefic Viper going as he dragged her across the wall in a clockwise direction, grinding her skull up against the fortified rock. The mage tried to stop him with the remaining chains, but Jake threw him another glance with Gaze as he kept flying.

The other three tried to come and help too, but Jake was too fast as he made four full revolutions around the arena within a few seconds, leaving a red line of blood around the perimeter wall. Finally, he pushed hard enough to feel the head of the healer squash.

First down,he thought as the notification came. Disappointingly, the notification didn't include class and profession, but what can you do?

Jake turned his attention to the four others, who were all preparing to attack him again.

"Have you guys never played any MMOs? It's a wipe when the healer dies."

The projections looked on as the slaughter of the four remaining members proceeded. It was one-sided from the start, and they had actually been a bit surprised he appeared to struggle in the beginning until it became clear he was just testing them.

"They didn't even have time to deploy more than that one tactic," one of the projections commented.

"In the end, power always wins out," another echoed.

"How many Legacy skills does he possess?" a third one asked.

"Potentially all nine," a fourth one said.

The scalekin listened on as he observed. He didn't have many comments anymore. He didn't truly question if he could beat the seventh test either. No... his question was related to what came after. "What are the chances he can do the elective level?" he asked out loud.

Glances landed on him as the beastskin spoke up. "I am voting for allowing it... I want to see him fight that monster."

Jake sat in meditation after the fight was over, taking in whatever insights he had gained. Not that there was much... in his first real attack, he had killed the healer, so yeah, that was boring. Oh, and speaking of gains: he leveled up.

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 153 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 151 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

He had not expected it, but it was nice. For now, he was just waiting out the brief period of weakness from using Arcane Awakening. He had only used for a few minutes, but even that would take fifteen minutes or so to get back on top form. It was a nasty skill in that way.

Did he need to use it in the fight before? No, but it sure had sped things up.

An hour or so later, Jake opened his eyes as he took out the token. His resources were all replenished as he decided to move onto the seventh and final level.

The environment changed as soon he found himself standing within a mountainous area not unlike one from Earth. He looked around until he saw a creature in the distance. It was a large winged form with red fur all over it. It had the body of what looked like a lion, bat-like wings, a scorpion stinger in its hind, and a face that looked uncannily like a humanoid. Jake did remember a creature like this from somewhere, but he couldn't remember what it was called.

Luckily, he had Identify for that.

[Manticore – lvl 186]

"Oh yeah... Manticore," he muttered as he took out his bow and did something he rarely did. He retreated away from where he was as he dove into a cave not far away, but not before placing a Mark on the beast. The Manticore had clearly not seen him yet with how it flew and him not feeling its eyes upon him.

He went through the cave and out the other side as he kept track of the beast through his Mark. Jake didn't usually do this, but he wanted to get the best result possible in the test, so he didn't play around with the strongest opponent. He knew the best way to start a fight was a good opening shot from an advantageous position, so he would go for just that.

The Manticore landed on the cliff Jake had appeared at originally as it stood still for a good while, allowing Jake to move through a few caves and several kilometers away. The beast began moving again soon after but luckily went in the opposite direction.

He stalked around as he kept track of his prey, his upgraded stealth fully active. The fact that the Manticore had not spotted him already meant that it had low Perception, which was the only reason he was confident doing this.

Soon enough, he was at a good spot as he assumed the Manticore would return to where it had been. If not, he could perhaps bait it with a bit of magic or something to get its attention. He set up shop as he prepared some arrows in his quiver. Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter was not a possibility as this was his first time encountering a Manticore, but perhaps a mid-fight arrow could be deployed?

Jake patiently waited for the Manticore to return, and soon enough, it did. It landed on the same cliff once more, just overlooking the area. Jake had no idea what it was thinking or if it was even fully capable of thought being a weird dungeon boss and all.

With his prey in position, he took a deep breath as he expanded the stealth field made by Arcane Stealth slightly to try and cover up what he was about to do. He nocked a poisoned arrow as he began channeling Arcane Powershot, also using Arcane Awakening with the destructive part embraced as his offensive stats were boosted by 50%.

He was still unnoticed when he ten seconds later released his shot.

Returning to tested tactics, Jake froze the Manticore with Gaze the moment it noticed his arrow, making it unable to respond in time as it was hit in the back. The truck-sized beast was sent flying back as blood spewed all over, but it soon began stabilizing itself.

Just in time for another Arcane Powershot to hit it and blast it back again before it had time to fully get its bearings as Jake didn't hold anything back.

Chapter 409 - Extra Credits Hydra

Manticores were sure interesting creatures. Clearly pretty powerful for their levels based on how well the one Jake fought handled things. They even had mouth magic that impressed Jake as it could both breathe fire and shoot a beam of pure energy.

However, the most impressive was the stinger by far. Anything it hit was instantly petrified and turned to stone, and it could even shoot a weaker version of this effect out as bullets of petrifying poison. Physically it was also monstrously strong, and even if it was a bit slow, it made up for it with its bulky build and ranged attacks.

Overall it was pretty strong. Jake at least looked back at the fight as a good time as he sat in meditation with the half-decayed corpse of the Manticore right behind him. It had taken him a while, but ultimately, it didn't even stand a chance. Jake had dominated from start to end and just kept a distance throughout as he slowly poisoned it to death before finally finishing it off with an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter.

While it had an okay poison resistance, it only seemed to work against its own petrifying poison, so it wasn't really that great. Ultimately Jake could have won even without poisons... even if poison did account for far more than half of his overall damage – with it only increasing the longer a fight goes on.

As Jake sat there in meditation, the projection popped up in front of him.

"Congratulations on passing the combat test with flying colors," the scalekin said with a genuine tone of respect. "I can't remember seeing such a dominant performance for a long time."

"Does that mean I get a good grade?" Jake asked, hopefully. He didn't know what the criteria were, and he did actually feel a bit cheated as he had been unable to truly show what he was capable of. Combined with his alchemy performance, this should result in an okay overall grade. At least he hoped so.

“Naturally,” the projection confirmed.

“Good,” Jake said with a smile. “Because I feel like it wasn’t that hard, you know?”

The scalekin returned his smile. “That brings us to the next topic... with this combat encounter done, the test is technically over. However, due to your performance in the combat portion, there is an eighth elective test you can choose to partake in.”

Jake instantly became alert. “Something even stronger? Wait, does this mean the alchemy portion also had an extra test if I performed well enough there?”

“Yes, but needless to say, your performance in alchemy was not good enough for that. This extra test will be a large step-up from those prior, and as always, you will risk true death if you fail. Are you interested?” the projection asked.

Jake found the question almost insulting. “Of course.”

“Very well. This test will be combat like those prior but last at most a total of one hour. This means that if you are on the losing end, it merely becomes a game of survival, yet at the same time also a test of your ability to deal damage and kill your foe within the allotted time. Trust me, it may seem easy with an hour, but what you will fight is not a simple creature,” the projection said gravely before continuing.

“What you will face will be the incarnation of the Lord Protector himself back when he was only a mid-tier D-grade. A beast of relatively low intelligence back then, but incredible might that swept across his planet as he devoured everything in his path. I am certain you know of the Lord Protector, correct?”

“A little bit, but a refresher would be nice? Been a few eras, and our understandings may vary,” Jake said honestly. Being ignorant was not being a heretic, was it?

“Very well. The Lord Protector was – and still is – a Hydra. I assume you know what a Hydra is?”

Jake nodded in confirmation, assuming it was the same kind of Hydra he knew about.

“Hydras are notoriously survivable and difficult to kill due to certain racial bonuses and a high base health pool and regeneration that amplifies further with every head. As for the Lord Protector? At D-grade, he was merely a two-headed Hydra – the one you will face - but as he grew, so did his power and number of heads, as is customary. A nine-headed Hydra at C-grade, hundred-headed Hydra by B-grade, thousand-headed Hydra at A-grade, and the ten thousand-headed Hydra at S-grade. At godhood? Counting the number of heads once he assumes his true form is meaninglessness incarnate.”

Jake wanted to comment on how a thousand or even worse ten-thousand heads was even possible, but that would certainly be heretic-territory, right? Like... was the main body just a big ball of flesh with heads coming out like hair? Just a big squid thing? Or... was the body just so massive it could facilitate it? No, that would just mean the heads were smaller. Was there even a real body... perhaps the heads did not exist in the physical plane all at once? It was impossible to know, but Jake really wanted to see.

“However... I have one warning. You have just achieved level 151, which means the one you will face will be level 160. The saved copies of the Lord Protector come in ten-level intervals, and as the test does not allow you to face those lower-level... you will have a steep hill to climb. Let me say this now, if you find yourself on the losing end, just buy time and wait it out,” the projection warned with sincere advice. Advice Jake would actually take if it came down to it.

Maybe... who knows? That sounded like a problem he would handle if it ever became pertinent.

"I will keep it in mind," Jake said.

The projection nodded as it summoned a new token. "Use this when you are ready for the final test... and good luck."

"Thanks," Jake said as the scalekin projection disappeared. He closed his eyes again and entered meditation as he thought to himself: Time to see what Villy's mate Snappy was like back in the day.

Vilastromoz went over some notes as he made a selection to be sent to the Humanoid Resources department. Under an alias, of course. They couldn't know it was from him, but he was already smiling at what would soon happen.

"Jake is about to fight Snoarix's Legacy Incarnation within the trial," Duskleaf said, a bit nervous.

"Yep," the Viper answered. "Gonna be fun."

"Thoughts?"

"That it is gonna be fun. Well, only for Jake, Snappy wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed back then despite having multiple heads," Vilastromoz joked.

“But he was powerful... I have seen quite a few reach this stage before, and it nearly always ends with the testee forced to flee to survive or dead. Knowing Jake... he won’t flee, no matter how easy doing so will be for him,” Duskluaif argued.

“Well, I guess he will just have to win then,” the Viper shrugged.

Did Vilastromoz think it would be easy? No, of course not. Snappy was a freaking monster even back then. But then again... so was Jake. Snappy did also have some glaring weaknesses, at least on the offensive front.

There was just one little issue.

“However... it sure is a bad matchup.”

Jake looked at the token a bit, tossing it up and down before he made his decision and activated it. He had fully regenerated and was in the best shape possible, so if there was a time to fight a Hydra, it was now. The environment changed again, just like every other time. The ground beneath him turned mushy as he felt it soften, with the moisture in the air spiking.

A swamp.

Thick gnarly trees sprung up as a bit of water covered the ground everywhere. Jake even saw in his Sphere that the shallow water hid pits here and there. His senses spread, and instantly he picked up on an aura quite a bit away. A powerful one.

Jake once more entered stealth, not fucking around. He was fighting a D-grade nine levels above himself that had become a god, after all. Moreover, it was a Hydra... Hydras were not to be fucked with if mythology had anything to say, even if this one only had two heads.

Sneaking forward, Jake made his way through the deep roots springing up from the trees, the trees themselves lifted and raised so one could hide underneath. He kept low as he followed his senses. Soon, he saw something rise in the distance.

A head.

It rose far above the treetops, making the creature easily fifteen to twenty meters tall. Jake got closer and finally found a spot where he could get an okay-ish look at the Hydra. It had dark gray scales and spiky scales covering its body, feet like a dragon, and two necks far larger than its bulky body. A long tail was behind it, and the heads themselves looked like snakes, except their mouths looked almost too big.

The Hydra was currently digging something out from beneath the ground, ignorant to Jake's presence as it seemed to just swallow up the earth and water to create a large pit, opening its maws like an excavator. Jake finally used Identify to see exactly what he was dealing with.

[Two-Headed Hydra of Perennial Consumption – lvl 160]

That's quite the mouthful, Jake thought, not just speaking of how the Hydra had just chugged down a few tons of soil. Then again, he had a profession with an equally long name, and it wasn't like his class name was short either. As for this particular name... perennial consumption did sound like it was something a high-tier creature would have.

Now, Jake did not know much about Hydras, but he did know a lot about scaled beasts in general, and he truly believed they were similar enough to meet the criteria... which proved true as he began summoning an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter within his quiver.

He stayed hidden as he did this, no energy leaking out. Before activating the token, he had already prepared poisoned arrows in the quiver, so he was good to go. Now he just needed a good vantage point to attack from.

Jake used Mark on the Hydra as he snuck away to the far corner of the swamp. There was no way for the Hydra to detect his Mark as he stealthily made his exit with his high Perception. He went nearly twenty kilometers away over the next ten minutes before he stopped in a nice and open area. Some quick maths confirmed he had a good angle as Jake took out his bow and also took out the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter.

He poisoned it and nocked the huge arrow. It looked more like a black metal spear with a drill-pike head. Certainly looked well-made to penetrate scales. Jake drew his bow as he took aim, closing his eyes meanwhile. Being able to see or not had no advantage here. Instead, he would go solely by instinct.

Jake lifted his bow at a very upwards angle as he breathed in. Arcane Awakening activated with the destructive boost as Arcane Powershot began charging. Everything was ready as Jake opened his eyes and released the string.

He quickly nocked a new arrow as he shot at a slightly different angle after a fast Arcane Powershot to give it good speed. This repeated as Jake fired a dozen or so arrows more, the first eight stable ones and the last four destructive.

When the last arrow was shot, he quickly took out a mana potion to consume as he ran away from his original position to not instantly get found out. Making his way to a new vantage point, Jake felt the first arrow hit right on target as his Mark was suddenly infused with a lot of arcane energy, and Sense of the Malefic Viper made him aware that the Hydra was now poisoned.

His plan now was to find a new spot to fire from, but as he made his way forward, he felt something wrong. After Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter hit, he felt only two more impact on his Mark, despite the Hydra not moving. It blocked it?

No... that also felt wrong. The poison on the arrows was something he could usually feel even at such a distance, but now it was just gone. Destroyed completely. As he wondered, the Hydra finally began moving. It ran towards the direction he had shot from for a moment before it suddenly changed course – headed straight for Jake.

Jake instantly knew the Hydra was aware of his position as it beelined for him. It moved fast, crossing more than two hundred meters every second as Jake took to the air and decided to use the distance to his advantage. He flew upwards for half a kilometer as he looked down and saw trees topple in the distance.

A path of carnage was being carved, and Jake saw the massive Hydra stomp towards him with heavy steps. It was bleeding from its back where Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter had hit, but Jake also saw it already healing.

Two more stable arrows stuck out of its thick scales on one of the necks, with the other arrows gone. Jake nocked an arrow and fired another Arcane Powershot towards his target.

Jake watched as the arrow flew for one of the Hydra heads, as it responded in an unexpected way. It opened its mouth and ate the Arcane Powershot like it was a tasty snack. Its head did recoil a little as it shook it, but it didn't stop running for even a moment.

"So that's where all the other arrows went..." Jake muttered

He had a feeling this wasn't going to be an easy fight. Something that was confirmed as the Hydra opened its mouth towards him. He felt energy gather, but not the energy he had expected. Pink-purple mana came out of the Hydra's maw as a beam of pure destructive force was fired towards Jake.

A beam of arcane mana.

Jake's arcane mana.

Chapter 410 - Beast Vs Man

Jake hastily dodged the arcane beam but was still scratched by it due to its intense destructive power. The remnant energies burned his cloak as Jake felt his left arm singe a little as some of his own damn affinity invaded his body and did damage.

Gritting his teeth, Jake returned fire as he switched it up. The arrow split into five in mid-air as the Hydra only managed to swallow one of them as the four others hit and exploded on its scales. The Hydra roared in anger as it did something Jake had not expected. It stopped and just stared up at Jake, who was flying far above.

Deciding to just shoot again, Jake released another barrage of Splitting Arrow, but this time when the Hydra opened its mouth, something else happened. It was as if space itself distorted when the Hydra breathed in, and all five arrows were swallowed whole as the Hydra didn't even react besides closing its maw and staring back up at him with both heads.

Waiting.

Jake hesitated for a moment, unsure how to proceed. The Hydra looked relatively calm, too, just staring up at him with one head as the other began scavenging the ground. That is when Jake realized something... the one-hour timer wasn't just for Jake's advantage. It was as much for the Hydra, forcing the participant to actually fight.

As it was right now, Jake could just stay up in the air for a good hour and leave the test. The Hydra clearly didn't bother with him more than necessary, and the problem was that Jake couldn't see why it should. This stalemate was only to its advantage, even discounting the timer the Hydra probably wasn't even aware of.

It was just healing as it stood there, and the poison within it was slowly being eliminated. Jake knew he had to do something, so he did. He nocked another arrow as he fired a barrage of stable arrows down. The Hydra swallowed them again with one of its heads, not even bothering to raise the second one from the ground.

Jake shot again as it repeated. For the third shot, the Hydra was just about to swallow as Jake used Gaze of the Apex Hunter, freezing it for a moment. The arrow hit it straight in its mouth, sending blood flying and poison down its throat before it became able to move again.

Finally, he did something to get its undivided attention. Jake shot again, but it swallowed once more. Jake kept going as it now kept swallowed active for longer and used it early too, likely to avoid him repeating the attack. Little did it know Jake would pop his eyes out of his sockets before he could kill the Hydra using Gaze and Powershot or Splitting Arrow.

His current hope was that the Hydra couldn't keep using that swallowing ability infinitely. He even managed to make it swallowed even more regularly when he sent a directed mist of poison from Wings of the Malefic Viper down towards it. His hope was high for a bit as he saw it swallow nearly constantly while still having a tinge of poison infect it.

A hope that died within ten or so minutes as it just kept going doing the same shit. Perhaps he shouldn't have bet on something with Perennial Consumption in its name to become unable to absorb within an hour...

Jake gritted his teeth and cursed under his breath. He had yet to take any real damage at all, yet he felt like he was losing. The damn two-headed lizard was just staring up at him, a bit more mad than before. It at least gave him the attention of both heads now. Sure, it sometimes fired his own damn magic back at him, but that never hit.

It probably could fly, Jake reckoned... all D-grades had the basic energy control to do that. But why would it? Jake was just someone annoyingly firing arrows, and from the looks of it, it tolerated his presence for one reason only:

It liked his mana. After a good barrage of arrows, he saw it smack its mouth in satisfaction, which infuriated him. Jake was just burning his own resources at this point, even if he had been smart to downgrade Arcane Awakening to the balanced 30%.

Sighing, Jake decided to change things up again. He began flying downwards as he landed on a tree in the marsh. The Hydra looked towards him, not even moving to attack as Jake was a few kilometers away from the creature that towered over him.

When ranged fails, one turns to melee.

Jake stepped down as he charged forward with both wings leaving a trail of poison. The Hydra, surprisingly enough, didn't use the swallowed ability. Instead, it attacked simply by snapping forward, trying to gobble him down whole.

He easily dodged it as he took out Eternal Hunger and the Bloodfeast dagger. He flew past the snapping head as he cut the Hydra's long neck with Eternal Hunger, releasing a spurt of blood. The second head then came down on Jake even faster than the first, forcing him to retreat.

Jake quickly poisoned both weapons as he dove in again. The two heads kept snapping forward like two snakes trying to tear him apart, making it difficult to get close. After a minute or so dancing back and forth, Jake got an opening as he used One Step Mile and dove between the creature's legs, cutting it along its belly as he used One Step Mile again just in time. The huge monster slammed down where he had just been, sending water and mud flying everywhere as a few of the marsh trees fell over all around them.

Turning, he tossed a few bolts of mana, but the Hydra swallowed again as it ate both up. By now, Jake was certain... the swallowed ability only worked on mana or at least energy-based attacks. Jake moved forward again as he wanted to press his advantage, but the moment he got close, the Hydra opened one of its maws towards the sky and roared.

For a moment, Jake felt his entire body tense up as he froze in place, just as the second head came down upon him. Jake barely managed to activate Gaze on the Hydra as both of them just stood frozen for less than a second before they both moved again.

Jake dodged away as the Hydra slammed its head down, getting a mouthful of the marsh as Jake went in close again. A clawed foot flew up as it raised a leg to kick him, but Jake was fast and blocked it with the Bloodfeast dagger as he plunged Eternal Hunger into the Hydra's leg.

He was still knocked back due to the sheer difference in size and bulk, but he hadn't taken any damage as he landed on the shallow water. He got a good look at the Hydra and could only frown. He had made a few wounds... but they were just pricks with a toothpick to the large Hydra. The poison did help a little, but he would have to do more.

Even if this wasn't timed, Jake frankly wasn't confident. But all he could do for now was try and mount the pressure, so he attacked once more as he only managed to land a weak blow every few seconds while dodging the snapping maws. This was only with two heads, and Jake could only imagine how fucked it would be to fight one with nine.

Jake was surprised at one thing, though: how few methods the Hydra appeared to have. It was just a massive creature with incredibly high stats and bulk, but nothing really besides its ability to swallow energy and that roar.

Was that really all there was to such a monstrous creature? Then again... did it need more? Probably not, but Jake still felt like there was a small chance for one reason: stacking damage. With every strike of his weapon, he infected it with poison, and with every arcane attack he managed to sneak in, the Arcane Charge from Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter grew.

He even began to use other methods as he got more comfortable. Blood of the Malefic Viper spewed out as he cut himself purposefully, and the mist from his wings also still hung in the air. Occasionally, the Hydra did consume some of it, and it even fired a breath of toxic mist back at him, but Jake easily managed.

Jake got a bit riskier as he pushed himself to inflict more wounds. He had seen the attack patterns and could predict them by now. It was still questionable if he could make it with the timer, but if it went as it did now, it should be manageable. As long as the Hydra didn't change up the game and-

He fucking jinxed it.

The Hydra suddenly changed as it did something Jake had not seen coming. It retreated a bit away, growled, and then slowly began shrinking.

Jake quickly pulled out his bow to attack, seeing a chance, but the Hydra could still use its consume-ability while reducing in size. Instead, he quickly charged in and attacked but was frozen by a roar, followed by a second roar functioning more like a pure shockwave, sending him flying back. Unharmful, but having missed an opening.

When he finally got ready to attack again, the situation had changed. The Hydra had shrunk to only be around four to five meters tall, even with its heads, and its body had turned into a darker gray than before. All wounds were still there, and so were the poison and Arcane Charge. But he still got a bad feeling.

One would think that size was always beneficial in a fight, but not in every case. Like the Thunder Roc – the first D-grade Jake killed besides the King – size could become a demerit. One the Hydra had fixed by reducing itself in size.

Now, if this was all it had done, Jake was still confident. The problem is... it wasn't.

The Hydra charged, its four clunky limbs suddenly seeming nimble and agile. It reached him within moments as a head flew forward. Jake was forced to block as he held up both weapons and was knocked backward.

Way fucking faster, Jake thought as he landed and skid across the ground, both arms hurting. But also physically weaker? Or the same, but just less mass behind every blow?

It charged again, but this time Jake was ready as he sidestepped the first head, only to see himself faced with the second. He blocked it and prepared to attack as the first head twisted around and came for him again. Dodging once more, he barely managed to swing the Bloodfeast Dagger at the neck before the second head attacked again, again.

Jake exploded with arcane mana as he launched himself back to not get entangled by the two snapping heads. Seeing the narrow wound left by the dagger made him frown. Its scales and underneath hide were both way tougher. The Hydra's transformation skill was not merely size control but size compression, so even if it had made it less weighty, its stats appeared to have improved.

It wasn't like reducing to a third its size made the Hydra three times faster and tougher, but it sure wasn't an insignificant improvement. And if he was honest, the scales were close to three times more resilient now than before.

The Hydra attacked once more, and soon Jake was forced to push Arcane Awakening to 60% just to keep up, putting himself on yet another countdown. He gritted his teeth as he tried to figure out patterns, but so far, the only reason he still had his head was due to his precognitive dodging abilities granted by his Bloodline.

One thing was certain... even with all his boosts, Jake was slower, weaker, and less resilient than his opponent, and moreover, his archery was near-nullified. It was frustrating. Jake had even summoned his own scales just to get a bit more physical resistance, but one thing differed significantly between Hydra scales and dragon scales.

If a dragon scale was the bane of all magic, then a hydra scale was the bane of all physical attacks. There was a reason why hydras and dragons were often compared in mythology. Both were absolute monsters and high-tier beings. Snappy in front of him being an apex hydra.

Meanwhile, Jake was just a human. An all-rounder.

For the first time... Jake reconsidered that choice he had made when he evolved to D-grade. The choice of not becoming a Malefic Dragonkin. He did not hold a shadow of doubt in his mind; it would have given him a stronger and more monstrous body. It would have made him half-monster, and Jake was certain monsters had a lot of benefits to make them stronger. He even had a theory their stats counted for more when it came to things like getting health points, and surely toughness made hide and scales tougher than Jake's useless human skin.

What did being a human give him? The claws of the Malefic Dragonkin could still use his bow, and meanwhile, he would also have claws... he would have fangs. Maybe it made sense humans were just worse off in purely bodily strength?

A human could never beat a bear in battle pre-system, right?

In the fight, Jake was once more blasted back as he tried to dodge but was frozen by a roar. His arm got torn up, and he flew several hundred meters through the air before finally hitting a tree and smashing it into pieces, sending large splinters flying into the marsh water.

Jake just felt more and more frustrated. This wasn't like the Sword Saint using some Transcendent skill... it wasn't a master swordsman. It was a dumb beast – no offense to the current Snappy.

As he pushed himself up, his hand caught onto something as he pulled it up. It was a wooden stick that had broken from the tree earlier, giving it a sharp edge. Like that of a spear. Jake looked at it a bit as the Hydra made its way over slowly, not bothering to quickly give chase.

It was just healing rapidly anyway due to being a damn Hydra anyway, right?

Looking at the stick, Jake suddenly had a flashback to his childhood. He didn't know where it came from, but when he looked at the stick and then back at the approaching beast, it just popped into his head.

It was when he was maybe six or seven years old? He remembered going to a museum with his parents and Caleb, looking at things from the ice age. Jake vividly remembered looking at a display of seven hunters standing before a felled mammoth.

Jake remembered asking his dad how the hunters had won. He didn't understand how a few small humans could beat a beast even larger than an elephant. To his young mind, it just didn't make sense. His dad had tried to explain as an attendant had helped to provide an answer that had stuck in Jake's head.

“Humans may not be strong and big like mammoths. We may not have the same natural weapons as they do, but we have something else: the ability to pick up nearly anything and make it into a weapon just as good if not better. So even if humans don’t have fangs or tusks... we can make our weapons. That is why humans are the true apex predators: we always find a way.”

Jake looked at the stick as the Hydra got closer, and he felt an odd response from a skill he had not expected.

Requirments met.

Do you wish to experience the forming of a High-Record Fragment related to the path of the Malefic Viper? Uses remaining: 2

Warning, experiencing a High-Record Fragment will consume 2 charges.

He didn’t even know what skill it was for or if it was only related to one skill related to the Viper, but he had a feeling. Without hesitating, he accepted, disappearing just as the Hydra was about to set upon him.