

Hunter 12

Chapter 12: A splitting provocation

The mood of the conversation shifted, and the smile on Jacob's face was gone. Jake was also working in overdrive, analyzing the situation. Should he take them by surprise and shoot the man? Even if he tried, he had no confidence in landing the shot. And even if it did hit and somehow managed to kill him, chances are it would end badly if the other side retaliated, or more accurately, when they retaliated as he seriously doubted they would just take getting their leader killed lying down.

Caroline was also looking incredibly nervous at this point, hiding a bit behind Bertram, who had a stoic look on his face. The situation was tense, to say the least. She did not look at all like she wanted to respond positively to his... 'invitation'.

Richard looked on as he flashed a light smile, but his eyes were still rather cold. The ones behind him also seemed to have tensed up too and had their hands close to their weapons. He finally started talking again, breaking the silence before they reached a breaking point.

"I'm just going to be honest with you all, healers are scarce in this place. We had one, but he died within an hour of entering the tutorial. Three groups, thirty people, and only one fucking healer," he said as he spat on the ground, clearly frustrated. "So, young lady, I am serious when I say that you would be treated well. We need you far more than you need us."

He turned back to Jacob again, continuing.

"You agreed that we humans are meant to stick together, right? We have no healer. We have only a handful of healing potions. There are no medical supplies, no hospital, no doctors, no nothing. Does she not have a responsibility to help her fellow man? I want to solve this peacefully with everyone walking away happy, but I don't exactly have a choice here. We need a healer, one way or another. We only need the healer. The rest of you are free to choose what you want to do.

“Just know that her joining us is non-negotiable. Not having a healer is just too risky in this place, and I have already lost too many good men and women unnecessarily. If you and your colleagues join us, you will be treated like everyone else. We will make hunting parties based on optimal setups, with the healer joining my own party naturally. I can even promise that if you don’t wish to fight, we offer protection as long as you contribute in other ways. Just think it over carefully.”

Richard seemed to be done talking as he gave them space once more. He had thrown the ball in their court, and now the question was just what to do...

They could try and run, but they were clearly outnumbered, and their levels too low. Jake had a feeling that the majority of the opposing party was at level 5 or above. He said they had run out of healing potions, which indicated that they had done plenty of fighting. Fighting is off the list.

The second option was to join them. Jake did not like that option at all. He got a bad feeling from them. He did not doubt that Caroline would remain unharmed, but what about the rest of them? Would they be used as meat-shields or what? They would clearly not allow them to act autonomously in fear of them leaving with Caroline.

The third option was just to hand her over. They would likely let them go, as while humans were worth hunting, they were far more dangerous than beasts in most cases. Additionally, they would have to try and not antagonize Caroline more than necessary. Jake doubted anyone would want a healer who wanted nothing more than to kill the people she healed. Or worse, refuse to heal at all.

Needless to say, Jake was not a fan of just handing her over. One reason was that they would end up with the same issue that Richard’s group currently had. He was hesitant to voice his thoughts when Theodore started talking.

“Maybe we should just go with them. Imagine not having access to any kind of healing or medicine in this shithole. It would make even the best desperate. We don’t even know them, why are we taking an antagonistic position?” Looking around at the others, quite a few of them nodded, while others stayed silent.

Jake could easily see Richard smiling in the other group, clearly approving of the direction their conversation was currently taking. Theodore did have a good point, though; they were clearly desperate. Who were they to reject helping the other group? Without a healer or health potions, a single bite or claw wound could become infected and fester, making even small scratches and injuries fatal.

Jake also thought back to his own objective. He had decided that he wanted to try and help his colleagues learn how to fend for themselves. If they joined a larger group, they would be significantly safer from the beasts.

According to Richard, Caroline, one of the few people Jake actually cared about, would be safe for sure. He did not doubt the middle-aged man when he guaranteed that he would do anything to protect her. Who would be stupid enough to piss off or kill a walking hospital in a forest filled with dangers?

Jake, however, was not at all open to her going alone. It would leave the other eight without a healer. He also had serious doubts that Caroline would ever agree to leave them behind. Especially not Jacob.

As the discussion continued, Richard and his crew patiently waited, as the decision to join was slowly reached. But there were still reservations. How would they be treated? Would they be considered outsiders? What reason would Richard have to keep them around after already getting his hands on Caroline? The predominant fear being that they would be treated more like hostages than members.

Jake had said nothing so far. He had kept silent, listening, and taking in the conversation. Richard seemed not to care what they thought as long as they joined. No, Jake needed insurance. He needed something that would keep them safe and treated well.

He had no intention of joining either way. He had decided to go his own way last night already. He needed strength, and he needed power. And he did need power. He could feel himself becoming restless from not progressing.

It would be foolish not to grasp an opportunity to rise above what he currently was. More importantly, he also wanted to. He wanted to hunt, fight, and encounter challenges. And he would not be able to do that if he stayed with any group.

Jake thought of his desire to hunt. He thought back to right after he had killed the three attackers the day before, and the feeling of accomplishment and fulfillment - the feeling of power. Basking in the feeling, he channeled his bloodline, as a faux smile of never-ending confidence appeared on his lips.

"Richard, is it? What's your level?" He asked in a calm voice.

Richard looked over at them, truly noticing Jake for the first time. A young inconspicuous man completely covered in the cloak given out to all archers. He found nothing remarkable until he looked at the man's face. His eyes were practically glowing, and he had a confident smile on his face, with a trace of excitement hidden deep beneath. Not a single sign of fear or worry evident, almost as if he wanted a fight to break out.

"I am level 9 in my class, and we have a couple of others in our group at level 7 and above," Richard answered truthfully, not being afraid of sharing it. The ones before him were clearly office workers or something similar before this tutorial. The only odd one out was the archer who gave him a bit of a different feeling.

Either way, they had leveled from entering until now, only resting for a few hours. They had played it safe due to not having a healer, but he doubted a single individual could outmatch them. He also doubted the man was actually strong as his colleagues couldn't hide their confused looks at how he acted. Or did he even have his own allies fooled?

"And who might you be? Your level, too, if you don't mind?"

Jake looked back at him with a small sigh of disappointment. It was not an act either. He had genuinely hoped that the man was stronger. From what he had seen, level 10 seemed to be a power-spike for monsters, and humans may experience something similar.

"Well, that's slightly disappointing, I was hoping for you to be stronger," Jake said. "As for my name and level? I am Mr. eat-shit, and I am level go-fuck-yourself."

Richards smile faded significantly. Jacob, Caroline, and all the others were gobsmacked at what the hell Jake was doing openly provoking the man. Especially how Jake kept up that weird daring demeanor, despite them being outnumbered so badly. Had he gone crazy?

"I thought we were close to reaching an agreement here?" Richard asked, more than a little annoyed at the unexpected development. Who was this archer that he hadn't even bothered noticing before? What gave him confidence?

"Oh, fairly sure they're joining you, but I am not. I have bigger prey to hunt," Jake said, still smiling at the man as he walked closer to Richard and his camp. As he got closer, he felt a prickling sensation making

him aware of the danger lurking behind the man. He distinctly felt three archers who likely had their bows aimed at him in case he tried something.

"I just wanted to make something clear. I will leave my former colleagues to you, so do take proper care of them. Of course, if something happens, we would have issues," Jake said as he was only a single step away from the middle-aged warrior.

Richard was a good ten centimeters taller than Jake, literally looking down on the archer. Yet he was unsure of how to act. He had a weird feeling that the man in front of him was unusual, but he refused to back down and appear weak in front of his men.

"Hoh, issues? What kind of issues would that be?" He said, squinting down at Jake while taking half a step forward to tower over him.

Jake's smile widened. "The kind of issues where I get convenient prey served on a silver platter. Do you believe yourself superior? Do you think those three archers will land their shot before I remove your head? Do you think their arrows have any chance of hitting? Do you honestly think that you are the predator in this scenario?"

Jake said as he opened his arms wide out to the sides, watching Richard tense up as he dropped the smile and turned serious as he looked at the man.

"Because you're not. You can take them, train with them, fight with them, and survive with them. But I will be watching. A single misstep, and I will hunt you and all your pals down one by one. Sweet dreams."

Jake turned around and started walking away.

In his sphere, he saw the archer that stood just behind Richard had begun drawing his bow, but Richard raised a hand indicating for him to stop, only to see Jake had made the exact same motion. Making both of them stop as it became clear the man could somehow still see them with his back turned.

Jake walked back to his colleagues, who stood there and looked confused at him.

“You are leaving us?” Casper managed to mutter out.

“Yeah, it was my plan all along. I have my own goals for this tutorial. If you join them, you should have a much higher chance of surviving than on your own. Don’t worry, I will check in occasionally.” Jake said, smiling at them. Not the threatening, borderline maniac smile that he had given Richard, but a friendly one.

“Do take diligent care of everyone, Jacob, and don’t let them bully you or anyone else,” he finally said, as he turned towards the forest intending to leave.

“Wait!” Jacob called out and ran up to him, hugging him and covertly passing him one of the satchels he had been carrying. One containing all the health potions from the attackers last night as well as Jacob’s own three health and stamina potions.

Finishing the hug and distancing himself, Jacob looked at Jake and smiled.

“Take care out there, my friend, and please do come back and check in whenever you can.”

Jake nodded and walked away from their camp. There was no heartfelt goodbye from any of them, but Casper, who yelled to take care. He had a strong feeling he wouldn't see them for quite a while, but even without showing himself, he hoped the power of the threat would remain. However, he was pretty sure that dear Richard would give him an opportunity to truly hammer it home soon.

He had seen Richard whisper something to the archer as Jake walked back to his colleagues earlier. Looking over once more, he saw said archer he had guessed to be his second in command now gone along with some of the light warriors.

Jake smiled as he entered the bushes and walked at a brisk pace directly away from the clearing. He could not see them anywhere in his sphere, but he knew they were coming. Richard did not strike him as a man who took threats very well, and sending a team after him to remove a potential threat was perfectly in character.

Picking up the pace, he started sprinting to create some distance. His heart was still pumping from his acting before. He didn't quite know how he had found the confidence to do that, but in some ways, wasn't there a thrill in that kind of challenge too?

Excitement bubbled up in his stomach as he found a spot that was simply perfect.

He smiled as he thought of his pursuers. They would arrive soon, he felt it. He started retracing his steps for ten or so meters by stepping in his old footsteps, as he got close to a tree. He had purposefully walked close to it on his way here for this purpose, after all.

Moving in accordance with his basic stealth skill, he felt it activate as he quickly climbed the tree, finding a good hiding-spot among the leaves. Soon they would be upon him, and he was ready for them. All thoughts of how they were human beings, not even entering his mind for a second. Today they were simply prey.

They seem to have misunderstood something, he thought as he waited. I am the one hunting them.