

Hunter 122

Chapter 122: Homecoming

Sitting down around the table, the Viper finally brought out the owed bottle of booze. Duskleaf didn't appear particularly interested but nevertheless joined them with a glass.

"I promised to answer a few questions, so here we are. Just know that there are things I cannot or will not tell you. Some because the system isn't a fan, and some because the knowledge will do you more harm than good," the Viper said, opening the conversation.

"I guess first of all... how the hell do you even know things? Things about Earth and such. I at first thought it was just a god-thing, but Duskleaf looks like a big question mark whenever you make a reference or a joke?" Jake asked. It wasn't really valuable information, just something that had been irking him.

"Didn't see that question being the first. See, I don't know everything!" the scaled god joked before continuing. "There are a lot of skills out there. As you no doubt know, the system can give you access to knowledge and Records and I happen to have a skill that allows me to know things. Think of it as me having access to a limited form of Google or Wikipedia that provides me with widely known information."

"That sounds overpowered as fuck. How to get it?" Jake asked, gaping slightly. Holy shit he wanted that skill.

"Yeah, good luck getting it before being well into godhood. And it isn't actually as good as it sounds and has many limits. But yeah, it is called Partial Omniscience. Quite a few other gods have similar skills, but I doubt anyone has one better than mine. I got it a couple of eras ago, so it is a bit of a new addition. The amount of useless info it provides is staggeringly stupid," the Viper joked.

“Doesn’t it take its toll to have that much crammed into your head?” Jake asked with genuine concern. A mere fragment of knowledge had brought him to his knees; he could only imagine the weight from all of it.

“Jake, I have more in wisdom than your entire planet collectively. I am good,” the Malefic Viper answered dismissively. “But we both know that my awesomeness isn’t what matters right now.”

“True,” Jake said, before leaning back in the chair a bit. “What can I expect when I return to Earth?”

“When the system comes, it changes a lot of things. Life planets, such as your Earth, is one such thing. As you can likely already guess, your planet was actually quite small and fragile before the system with what its inhabitants can and will be able to do in the future. It has thus been terraformed to be more fitting for the new world,” the Viper answered.

“What exactly does that mean?”

“First of all, size. It is a lot bigger than before. A lot of it will still feel familiar, but a lot will be different. The general layout of the planet remains; it is all just... bigger. Oceans are deeper, landmasses expand further, mountains now extend toward the sky, taller than ever, forests become endless metropolises of trees that extend into the horizon,” the god began.

“Secondly, the creatures that lived there will have changed. While the enlightened races – aka humans – spend their time in a tutorial, the animals that remained lived through this baptism. Now joined by others made by the system, they have changed. Don’t underestimate them.”

“D-grades?” Jake asked, concerned.

“From the original inhabitants? Yes. Many. The energy to terraform the planet has also gone into these animals, allowing them to grow far more than usual. But I doubt you will be able to find any, and they will be few and far between. Grouped around natural treasures or special areas. I would be more concerned about the third thing. Tell me, what do you think would have happened to the King of the Forest if you hadn’t killed him?” he asked.

“Don’t tell me...”

“Yeah, he would have joined you back on Earth. And he is far from the only one. Many creatures have been placed in tutorials, and now they will come to Earth. The same would have been true for the four Beast Lords you killed. Of course, now they are dead, which will leave a gap. One for you to exploit,” the Viper smiled mischievously.

“Hold your horses; what do you mean they would have come to Earth? Doesn’t that mean a bunch of extremely powerful, possibly sapient beings with their own agendas will come to Earth? What the hell?” Jake asked, slightly panicking.

“It isn’t that bad. These D-grades won’t be able to walk about as they please but instead be placed in certain areas. Remember the bubble from the tutorial with the inner area? That bubble would have been what moved. Only the original inhabitants can enter, while someone like the King of the Forest can’t leave. Of course, after a while, the bubble will disperse, and they will be free to roam about,” the Viper clarified, dispelling much of Jake’s concern.

He went back to the last part of what the god said before with a sigh of relief. “So, what am I meant to exploit?”

Smiling, the god explained. "A gap has been made with the death of the King of the Forest. More accurately, his forest has been left behind. It will, without a doubt, be close to where you will be upon returning to Earth. Find it and establish yourself there. Locate the Pylon of Civilization. Ought to give you quite the head-start and a nice base of operation. Trust me on this... it will prove very fruitful down the line."

"Not sure I am interested in settling down and getting a base. My current plan is to search for my parents along with my brother and his wife," Jake answered.

"I got the feeling that you were like me when it comes to leadership, so just find someone to dump it on while reaping all the rewards from being in charge on paper. As for the family situation...", the Viper sighed. "I have some bad news on that front."

Jake felt a creeping sensation as he hesitated to ask. "What?"

With a look more serious than before, not carrying a hint of joking around. "Don't even think about it."

Everything in his head stopped turning for a moment as he just sat there in silence, letting the word ring out in the room. It took him a while for the words to sink in. Why? was the only thing he could ask himself.

Didn't they make it? His father, Robert, had always been a resourceful man, his mother kind yet strong-willed. Caleb and Maja too... why?

"Is... is there a way to bring them back?" Jake asked, trying to grasp unto hope.

"I am sorry. I have tried, more than anyone else, to try and bring someone back to life... if it is possible, I still don't know how. If there were a body and certain items and skills, it had been done only for those who died just moments earlier. If the Truesoul is gone, however... it isn't possible," the Viper answered. "Not like it matters currently... they still live."

"What the hell!?" Jake said, a bit angry. "Then why the hell should I not go look for them?"

He was the kind of person who planned and followed that plan as far as he could go. One who set himself a goal to accomplish. He would do everything to succeed and would struggle until he won. He had done so when he set his goal as killing the King.

"Because it's a waste of time. Do you know where your family is? How far away they are? Are you even certain you are strong enough to help them? And have you considered the consequences of focusing on finding them over your own progress?"

"I had kind of hoped for you to give me a clue as to a general direction..." Jake said.

"I won't do that. The system wouldn't have given that information either. It is naïve to think that you can find a handful of people in a short time on a planet that has changed so significantly with your limited power. It's far more important for you to get stronger. Also... for once, believe a bit in them. Maybe they can take care of themselves, and your babying will only do more harm than good?"

Jake thought a bit, and as much as he hated it, he didn't really feel like he could dispute any of the points. But at the same time... he felt a bit regretful. He had chosen Hunter's Tracking to better find them. One Step Mile to hopefully travel faster to them. Was that all for naught?

"Then what the hell am I supposed to do?" he asked as he stared at the ceiling.

"Grow stronger. Make it fuel to move forward faster because you want to find and protect them. The path ahead of you is long; you will meet other people you want to protect too, no doubt," the Viper said, consolingly.

"Besides... no matter what, at least you have two buddies here who will more than likely stick around through it all," he finished with a light smile while motioning to himself and the silent Duskleaf.

Jake looked at the two of them while contemplating his future. He had not come to terms with it, but... he had to recognize that he was going to Earth alone. It's just that he still felt a bit... lonely.

His colleagues and friends were now either dead or had a relationship with him that he was far from comfortable with. Jacob had somehow survived, but he was incredibly unsure precisely what their meeting would be like. Casper was apparently an undead, so that was a whole thing he wasn't sure how to handle. Jake himself felt regret towards not helping either of them, while Jacob likely also harbored resentment towards Jake.

He never really had any friends outside of work and his family. They had all been pushed away through time, or he had distanced himself after his less than positive experience during university. The only other ones he had were friends online... and those relationships were even more ambiguous.

Perhaps he should just follow the advice of Villy. Find a base and plop himself down there and do alchemy or something. Get his head straight. But what then?

Would he become a leader of humanity and lead them in the new world? Yeah, fat chance of that happening. Would he become a hermit living alone in the woods? That didn't appear tempting either. For the first time in a long time, Jake was unsure of what to do.

He didn't have a plan. Not a long-term one anyway.

"I guess whatever comes, comes," he muttered to himself. "How long till I leave?"

"Around an hour in here. Minutes outside where time moves normally," the Viper answered.

"Let's head out then," Jake said, getting up.

Without arguing, the Viper complied as he began opening the door. Jake felt time slowly return to normal as the world returned to what it was before he entered. Except he now felt a bit more hollow inside. Hollow, but still determined.

They kept talking outside for a bit about other things he could expect back on Earth until he was reminded it was very soon time.

"I guess we will see each other later," he said, addressing the two gods. "And thanks for everything."

“No problem, that’s what friends are for, right? It would get monotonous if you thanked me every time I helped you. Just take care of yourself. Don’t die on me quite yet,” The Viper said, smiling.

“Stay safe,” Duskleaf added, opening his mouth for the first time in quite a while. “And remember not to slack off on your alchemy practice.”

“I don’t plan on dying any time soon. If ever. And don’t worry, I won’t slack. Gonna blow you away the next time we meet.”

With those words, they just stood there a while, taking in the atmosphere. It was likely the last time the three would meet in quite a while.

Jake had grown stronger once more. Titles, skills, and levels. After his last battle with the King, he had grown to entirely new levels. He was ready to unleash himself on the unsuspecting planet that is Earth.

Jacob stood beside his old friend and bodyguard as they prepared to return. The brief time spent in the temple had felt like far longer than it actually was. Well, for Bertram, it had been far longer. He had spent most of his time in a time chamber with the Grand Master after all.

While neither of them had grown overly-much in levels, both had grown in their own way. Bertram had skill-upgrades, his swordsmanship now a rare skill in itself. When he entered the chamber, he was a competent fighter by Earth’s standards. Now he was capable even by the standards of the multiverse, for an E-grade at least. He felt confident.

Jacob had instead spent his time learning. Due to his class, even this minor act had gained him two levels. Neither had done anything for their professions. Bertram because he didn't have the time, and Jacob because he already knew which profession to get in the future... and it wasn't quite time yet to get it.

A lot had been explained to them of what they would come to meet upon their return. And now the Grand Master, with his daughter by his side, gave them a final speech.

"Remember that safety is your number one concern. Avoid the danger zones to begin with while you build up your conclave of followers. Follow the Holy One's word, and you are sure to succeed in your path to enlighten your planet, but that doesn't mean you won't have to be vigilant.

"You need to be especially wary of followers of other gods. Enemy gods of the Holy Church may have blessed individuals who will target you due to your position and purpose. We cannot offer you any material assistance for the foreseeable future, so you will sadly be on your own.

"But even more so than those who wish to kill you, you must be wary of deceivers. Those who wish to use you or mislead you. Liars and the ones you thought of as friends. Do not trust easily those your skills cannot read properly," the bearded man said in his usual serious tone, finishing by turning to the guardian besides Jacob. "Bertram, your job is to protect the Augur. Your life and his are one and the same. Do not disappoint us."

Bertram only nodded, returning the seriousness of his temporary teacher. Jacob was deep in thought at the man's words as he was also still fine-tuning his plan upon returning to Earth. There were many things to address, and he needed to make sure he did things right the first time.

His resolve to spread the word of the Holy Church was genuine. His conviction true. He just needed to convince others. Religion had always been a tricky subject, one where more often than not, you were simply born into one.

With the system, it was very different. Gods no longer intangible things, no longer only representations of an ideology. They were now that and so much more. They were actual beings with the true power to influence the world.

“Has there been word on my inquiry related to the result of the tutorial I was part of?”

“Yes.”

A voice echoed out in the hall, startling everyone. The voice was overpowering yet gentle. A figure of light manifested before them, and upon seeing the visage of who had come, they all kneeled. The Grand Master had a mixed look of shock and pure reverence. The Mother...

Kneeling, none of them dared look up as the figure spoke. Even Jacob kneeled out of respect. “Your friend won. Defeated the destined King and became a Progenitor. Do not fight him, my son, but do not ally with him either. Avoid your friend for now. May you forever bask in the holy light, my children.”

With those words, the figure dispersed as fast as it came. Inera, Jacob, and Bertram all looked confused at words like ‘destined king’ and ‘progenitor.’ Only the Grand Master understood those terms. But he was too beside himself to explain as he was still awestruck by what had just happened.

He barely managed to break out of the spell and throw out a brief half-coherent explanation before the two young humans were gone, taken by the system back to whence they came.

Casper stood surrounded by floating runes as he finished up his final preparations. His skin was white as ash, and his body didn't give off the faintest hint of life-energy, yet he appeared more lively than he had ever done since the tutorial went to shit.

All the runes around him spun around as they slowly came together and formed a single magic circle. Taking out a stake from his spatial storage, he moved the circle towards it as they embedded themselves on the weapon. Another trap prepared.

Exiting the tower, he gave a final nod towards the mighty Archlich that had served as his teacher for the last few weeks. He had progressed more than he thought possible, and he felt genuinely grateful.

The Archlich bowed back in recognition not of Casper but of the one who had granted him a blessing. That blessing was more than enough for Casper to be named the leader of the Undead forces that would return to Earth, but he had refused adamantly. But that didn't mean he wasn't respected or feared by the others.

The meeting in the courtyard below was also just about concluded when Casper made his entrance. They all stopped and stared at him for a while before turning back to their leader - a woman named Priscilla who had once been human like himself.

[Risen Human – lvl 58]

She gave him a sweet smile before returning her attention to the crowd.

Casper just sneered a bit, and it wasn't helped by the locket around his neck heating up slightly due to the annoyance of the ghost within. I told you, Lyra, I don't care about her...

With a sigh, he closed his eyes as he just waited for the end of the tutorial.

63 days and a bit over 22 hours ago, all humans disappeared from Earth. Now it was time for those who remained to come home.