

Hunter 123

Chapter 123: The Blue Marble

The sun hung above as it shone upon the serene lake. The sky was blue, inviting everyone to bask in the warmth outside and enjoy the weather. Everything appeared utterly ordinary at first glance. Until it wasn't.

The surface of the lake erupted as a giant maw emerged. In the mouth of the enormous fish was a several meters long insect that had been invisibly surfing along the surface of the water only moments earlier.

The fish looked like a giant bass. Its teeth were far more prolonged and sharper than expected, and the sheen from their sharpness only amplified by the glittering droplets of water. Despite its size and jaw-strength, it failed to shut its maw tight.

Four powerful legs of what had been a small water strider before the system held it open. At the same time it opened its tiny mouth and let out a blast of water straight down into the mouth of the beast that had tried to eat it. In a turn of events where the hunter became the hunted, the fish was bisected into two pieces by a water cutter.

Blood flew everywhere as the beast died from the powerful attack, unable even to comprehend its demise. The victory of the strider was short-lived, however.

From above dove the figure of a giant bird, and before the strider could reconnect with the water and make its escape, it was caught in two powerful talons that crushed its feeble head.

The giant hawk beat its wings as it flew off with its dead prey still clenched below it. The serene lake that was now filled with blood reflected in its eyes - the sun above uncaring.

Earth had become a battlefield. A battlefield the humans would now rejoin. Rejoin, and once more, strive to be at the top of the food chain.

What had once been a great city was now but a shell of its former self. The massive monoliths of glass that had marked the prowess of human engineering now lay shattered on the ground. The structures toppled to the ground or ripped apart from the inside out.

Nature had not been kind to human civilization. It had reclaimed most of what had formerly been taken from it by urban development. Grass now grew in the streets, moss covered the buildings that still stood, and one could even see trees that had grown to full size in mere weeks.

This day there was a significant change. Scattered around the city, humans appeared. All at once, the city that had been populated by nearly a million people was now inhabited once more.

Of the million people, around 800.000 – 900.000 returned - a phenomenon that was not just in this city, but the entire world. The survival rate of tutorials coming at 86% would surprise most, some for how low it was and some for how high.

Inside what had once been the lobby of a big office building, a cluster of humans appeared. The many-storied juggernaut was now reduced to only its ground floor. Among those who appeared stood a man with long blonde hair in a white robe, together with a stoic armored man by his side.

Jacob looked around to get a feeling for his surroundings. He instantly noticed many familiar faces in the crowd. Familiar, yet foreign. Only a bit over two months had passed, but he could see the changes on everyone's faces.

His Lighthouse of the Holy Mother allowed him to soak in the emotions of all those around him. He felt mainly trepidation mixed in with a bit of relief. It was no surprise that many were happy the nightmare that was a tutorial was over.

The emotions were many and varied. But one stood out more than any of the others. Stood out in that Jacob couldn't feel anything at all.

Solitarily stood a figure covered in the brown cloak given to archers. Beneath it, one could see the black leather armor and beneath him two shoddy-looking boots. Jacob couldn't even look at his face as a mask now covered it. Yet, he didn't fail to recognize his old employee. Jake.

Soon the silence was broken as people began talking. Some were simply looking for comfort, others asking about their loved ones. Not everyone had entered the tutorial with those closest to them, far from it. A few even saw Jacob and turned to him for direction. And direction he would give them.

"Everyone, please calm down!" he yelled out, amplified by one of two remnant skills from his time as a warrior: Amplify Voice. A weak common-rarity skill, but it was more than enough to have the focus of the room switch to him. He even felt two powerful eyes from behind a mask pierce into him. He shuddered slightly inwardly but appeared unfazed outwardly.

"Jacob, is that you?" someone asked. Looking at him, Jacob saw it was Mike. Joanna's husband.

“It is good to see you made it, Mike. I- “

“Were you in the tutorial with my wife? What about everyone else in the elevator with us back then?”
Mike quickly interrupted frantically. The anxiousness clear on his face.

“I am sorry. Our tutorial was... a mess,” Jacob answered, loud enough for everyone around to hear. The focus now solely on him. “We had bad actors. They moved to conquer or simply kill everyone. In the end, they succeeded. Even I lost my life and only managed to save myself and Bertram with the help of a benevolent god. By the time I died, only two others remained.”

“Joanna... is...” Mike stammered out as tears began gathering in his eyes.

“I truly am sorry. It was a true nightmare,” Jacob tried to console him. “But I managed to help her in the end. She died with only the regret that she couldn’t rejoin you and her children here on Earth. Just know that she truly is in a better place now... not in a figurative way either. In the future, I swear you will be able to speak with her again.”

“Who or what killed her?” Mike asked, not caring much about the last part of what Jacob said.

“Her death was caused by a maniac called William. He sought to slaughter everyone for his own gains,” he answered, glancing at Jake. “An endeavor he failed. I reckon you ended him, Jake?”

Everyone turned their gazes to the masked figure; many only truly noticing him now. Even with everyone wearing widely differing outfits of questionable taste, Jake still stood out. His mask was making him more than a little conspicuous.

Jake looked up at Jacob. He tried to search his eyes for any emotions... but found that his gaze was the same as before the tutorial. If with a bit more wariness. He was relieved that he didn't appear to blame him for what happened. "Yeah, but another god interfered and ended up saving him in the end."

"So he still lives..." Jacob muttered. Turning his gaze away from Jake, he redirected his attention away from the archer as he spoke once more. "Everyone, please listen to me when I say we aren't safe even here. Earth has changed and is, in many ways, even more dangerous than the tutorials. We must stick together if we wish to make it."

"What the fuck are you on about?" someone yelled at the back. Someone who didn't know Jacob before the tutorials.

Jacob wasn't offended but answered honestly. "While we struggled in the tutorials, all that was not human struggled on Earth. To underestimate any being after the system is foolish. Additionally, the trials of the tutorials are not over. We will..."

Jacob went on to explain much of what Jake had been told about by the Viper earlier. A few details differed, but nothing of consequence. At the same time, the archer was still considering his own plans. He felt a few uncomfortable gazes on him, no doubt trying to feel him out. Mike being one of them.

Slowly Jacob began to win people over. His class and skills were surely not hurting his cause either. It affected everyone in the broken-down lobby except for Jake.

Their willingness to follow him was naturally only strengthened from the harsh circumstances. Many felt lost and without purpose. They were afraid of the future, not sure what to do. For someone to stand up and give them direction was exactly what many needed.

Winning over a few, the group-thinking quickly took over. In the end, everyone simply followed when Jacob began leading them out of the broken building and onto the street. Jake had decided to stick around a bit at the back alone, as he had gotten a prompt upon his return, making him aware he wasn't that pressed for time. Soon, he was joined by Mike.

"Why are you wearing that stupid mask?" he asked first thing. He had wanted to ask about his wife. Wanted to learn more about her killer. But instead, he threw a quick jab at the young man's appearance. He found it disrespectful and stupid for him to hide beneath a mask.

The question annoyed Jake more than it should have. That mask was the proof of his victory over the King of the Forest. Evidence of him beating the tutorial. Instead of giving a proper answer, he snapped back at him.

"Why are you so pathetically weak?"

Jake had done a quick round of Identify while half-listening to Jacob's speech. Trying to get a feeling for the average levels. And it was... disappointing. Incredibly so.

While the levels varied, the average was only around 14 or 15. Everyone had reached level 10, but many had only just done so. Jake could barely comprehend how that was even possible. Jacob had naturally been the second-highest person except for himself. A fact that clearly gave him a lot of credibility for those able to Identify him.

“What the fuck did you just say to me?” Mike said, puffing up. He was a tall man, more than half a head taller than Jake. His muscles were far more prominent than Jake’s. But he was truly weak - only level 16. Jake wasn’t even sure if he had upgraded his class yet.

“I said you're weak. Your equipment is shit; your level is shit. What the fuck did you expect to accomplish after lazing about in the tutorial for two months?” Jake snapped back. He was annoyed. Not just at Mike but everyone.

What the fuck had they been doing? He understood that not everyone is fit for fighting, but what about professions? And even if they weren’t fighters, they should at least learn to protect themselves.

His comment had clearly gotten the attention of more than just Mike as many turned towards him. Their gazes were less than gentle as he felt several people try and identify him. Useless attempts as there was no way a bunch of F and the rare E-grade humans could pierce through the Shroud of the Primordial.

“What the fuck do you know, you little whelp?” Mike yelled, his face red. “I went to hell and back, you cocksucker. Watch your goddamn mouth, or I’ll shut it for you.”

“You are free to try,” Jake said, staring into the eyes of the man.

Mike felt a shiver run down his spine as he saw those eyes. But instead of listening to his instincts, he exacerbated the situation. His own fear made him only angrier - his sorrow of his learning the death of his wife redirected into anger at Jake.

So he threw a punch.

It never landed.

Jake caught it easily. Its speed pathetic in his eyes. The strength behind it was negligible. He caught it and pressed down on the fist in his hand. He felt it squash like a rotten apple as Mike screamed out in pain.

If their conflict didn't have everyone's attention before, they sure had all eyes on them now. Jacob had been watching it from the beginning without interfering. A decision he now regretted as the situation had resulted in blood being spilled.

Several yells sounded out as people reacted. Some drew their weapons; others prepared themselves to cast magic. In a split-second, the situation had turned from just an interesting squabble to a possible fight.

"Please, everyone!" Jacob yelled out, all his skills on full display as he tried to calm the agitated crowd. It had some effect as everyone just seemed to have frozen. The only ones still moving being Mike, who held his bloody hand, and Jake, who stood indifferently staring down at the now kneeling man.

"This is a waste of time," Jake said after a bit. Taking out a healing potion from his spatial storage, he put it down on the floor in front of Mike as he turned to leave. He just wanted to get out of the situation he had found himself in.

"Jake, can I have just two seconds of your time?" Jacob quickly asked as he read the archer's intent to leave.

He really didn't want to, but Jake nevertheless agreed. "Fine."

Walking towards Jacob, people just moved out of the way. Jake could feel the looks of fear in the eyes of his former colleagues. The wariness and unwillingness to engage him. Many of the eyes belonging to people who had looked down on him or felt utterly indifferent towards him only a few months ago. In a way, it was oddly satisfying.

Jacob took Jake a bit away from the others to talk. It likely didn't help as everyone had amplified hearing with increased stats, making it more of a gesture more than anything else. Nevertheless, Jake appreciated having more space around them.

"You have grown strong," was the first thing he said, a slight smile on his lips. He didn't appear to care much for the still crying man in the background who had yet to drink the potion.

In actuality, Jacob was just happy Jake hadn't killed Mike. He had been afraid of that happening. His skills for reading people didn't work on Jake, and the last time he saw him, he had led him into an ambush. Both men had feared the other blamed them for all the shit that had happened.

"Yeah," Jake simply said.

"You are leaving, right?" Jacob asked.

"Yeah... I don't really fit here," Jake sighed. A statement Jacob couldn't really dispute.

“Just... take care, man. That tutorial was a shithole and... I’m sorry about everything I did. I am happy to hear that you managed to beat it in the end. We all need to create our own place in this new world - our new homes. I don’t know what your plans are, but I hope you find what you are looking for,” Jacob said, smiling at his friend. “I fucked up in the tutorial big-time... I nearly got you killed because of how much of an idiot I was... I hope that you forgive me, but I understand if you won’t. Just know that I will always consider you a friend, even if you don’t consider me one.”

Jacob knew the Holy Mother and Grand Master had both made it pretty clear that he should be cautious and distance himself from Jake, but that didn’t mean Jacob was going to. Jake was his friend, and not even the mightiest god could change that. Their friendship was between him and Jake, and no one else.

“I...” Jake began but wasn’t sure what to say. Jacob really hadn’t changed much at all despite everything. He had always had a hard time with words, so instead, he decided just to act. “Here, take these. Healers are still a rarity, I assume, so these should come in handy.”

He took out nearly a hundred healing, stamina, and mana potions. Most of them being his older creations, but a few newer ones were also mixed in. Jake didn’t need them, and it felt good to offload them. His only regret was losing the bottles as those could be reused. But such a complaint was too petty even to consider.

While Jake felt it was just a nice gesture, it was something entirely else for Jacob and those with sharper eyes who observed them. They saw Jake hand him a huge satchel filled with potions. They all remembered those bottles and the miraculous benefits they carried. All remember how they had saved their lives.

And now Jake gifted them so many. Nobody knew where he got them from and frankly didn’t care. Jacob and Bertram were the only ones who knew that Jake had likely created them himself. Both of

them had become privy to information not many others had, including knowledge of different professions. Alchemy naturally being one of them.

“I am sure these will come in handy,” Jacob replied as he took the satchel. He also couldn’t ignore the fact that Jake had summoned it all out of thin air, meaning he either had a pocket storage skill or perhaps even a spatial storage item. He is truly different from the rest of us, he thought.

“Here, take this in return,” Jacob said, as he handed Jake a small book. “I spent the last few weeks reading... I took down some notes that I hope may come in handy. It isn’t much, but I truly don’t have anything else of value to offer.”

“Thanks,” Jake said, depositing the small book in his spatial storage. “I’m off.”

Jake began walking towards the exit as a roar shook the building. Everyone looked around, terrified, until the source became apparent.

With a crash, one of the walls in the far back end was smashed through. Jake looked back and saw a huge lizard the size of a minivan. He didn’t feel any sense of danger from it, and a quick identification only confirmed its weakness.

[Rockeater Saurolisk – lvl 51]

Of course, the reactions from the others in the room were vastly different. The only other person who could identify its level was Jacob, meaning all people saw was two question marks. The type of enemy that in tutorials always meant casualties. But none of them died this day.

The lizard looked the room over, ignoring all the weak humans completely until its eyes finally landed on the only one with a level high enough to make him worth hunting – Jacob. Before the beast even did anything, it froze in place. Its eyes widened with fear as it found itself unable to move. A gaze had locked onto it – that of an Apex Predator, or more accurately, an Apex Hunter.

Less than a second later, its head exploded as an arrow pierced through the room. The poor lizard was dead before it could even recognize how much it had fucked up by barging into that particular building and that the human it couldn't even recognize the strength of was indeed far above its own.

“Stupid lizard,” Jake muttered as he walked out of the building. Everyone was just staring after him as he disappeared from sight.

Jacob, finding himself left to pick up the pieces of the situation that just happened, made the gawking populace focus on himself once more.

“We must leave this place. Find somewhere safe. Or at least safer. Find others to make a group big and strong enough to defend ourselves. Then- “

“Why did you let that guy go? Shouldn't he just protect us?” someone yelled out.

Jacob looked at the person, trying to hide his genuine annoyance. “His path is not ours, and none of you have any right to judge him. He has his own challenges and issues to deal with. Rather than just expecting someone to, you should instead think about how you can make someone want to protect you. We have nothing to offer someone on his level. Not yet, at least.

“Now, let us set out. Set out and create our new haven in this new world.”

A bit away from the office building, a single man stood, having retreated the moment he appeared and before anyone had even noticed him. He stood on top of the building, as he looked down at them all exiting the old lobby, and he saw the lizard get killed instantly.

He smiled as he noticed the one who did it. Jake had been the first to teach him anything about combat in this new world and was a friend long before the tutorial.

Casper saw the masked figure that was walking off, turn his eyes towards him. They locked eyes, one with hollow black eyes and the other a piercing yellow gaze.

They didn't need any words as the two men nodded at each other. Jake, smiling beneath his mask and Casper chuckling a bit to himself. Both hated social interactions, and everything that needed to be said was communicated through that nod.

Casper looked towards the horizon as he set off, the emblem he had been given already making him aware of the closest meeting spot.

Take care, mate, and let's meet again.