

Hunter 145

Chapter 145: Visitors

It had all started four days prior.

The house's construction was pretty much done, and Hank was considering making some simple pieces of furniture. They also had a sit-down to talk about plans to make a few more buildings elsewhere for themselves.

That is when Miranda got pinged by her skill that others had entered the Pylon of Civilization's area of influence. Other humans. She was immediately filled with a paradoxical feeling of both concern and anticipation.

Concern about how many they were, their intentions, and their strength, and anticipation at the potential of having more citizens join the city. Maybe begin to actually to make it worthy of being called a city.

She notified Hank and the kids as they talked over what to do.

"Louise and Mark should go hide in the cellar of the house," Hank started out with. At Miranda's request, the cellar was rather well hidden, and you wouldn't find its entrance without looking around for it. Which is to say they had put the pelt of an animal over the hatch.

"Not going to happen," Louise said adamantly. "We both evolved too. If they want a fight, let's give them one!"

“We should avoid fighting if we can. No matter how strong or how many there are,” Miranda sighed as she tried to calm down the fired-up Louise. The system clearly hadn't fixed the illogical mind of the young woman.

“I don't want to hide either,” Mark said a bit meekly.

Hank chose to concede as they quite frankly didn't have time for the discussion right now. “Fine, but no fighting unless absolutely necessary. And keep quiet.”

They spoke a bit more, all gathered around the house still, as they waited for the arrival of whoever was to come. The skill Miranda had that made her aware they were here did nothing more than that. It just gave her a vague feeling that someone had entered.

Not how many, not how strong, or where they were now. Miranda wasn't even sure if she could feel it if they left the area again. So all they could do was to wait in trepidation.

Luckily, or perhaps unluckily, they didn't have to wait long before someone arrived.

A hooded figure was hiding at the entrance to the valley and peeked out from behind a rock.

She saw the four people there, in front of a wooden lodge. The large bearded man with an axe over his shoulder, a woman, a young man, and a young woman all wearing robes. Two casters and a healer from what she could tell.

A quick identify of all four showed that none of them were overly high leveled while they were all E-grade. The woman and the man being the highest leveled individuals at 33 and 34 respectively.

She quickly retreated to her group, waiting a few hundred meters away at a small clearing within the forest. As she walked out from behind a tree, exiting stealth, the group turned towards her, a young man in the lead.

"That was fast. Did you find anything?" he asked with a slight smile.

His face was pale, and his eyes seemed a bit listless despite his smile. He was wearing a robe with golden runes and a small chain around his neck, with the necklace itself hidden beneath his robes. But even with his weak appearance, she knew that he was by far the strongest in their party.

They were a group of five that had met and survived the tutorial together - from level 0 to where they were today without losing a single member.

The party consisted of herself, Eleanor, the archer of the group. Next was their defender, Christen, the only other woman on the team. She was currently sitting in a chainmail set resting against a log with their healer Silas tending to a large wound on her stomach - a particularly nasty one that was resisting his healing quite effectively.

Then there was Levi, their weird magic swordsman who didn't quite fit into a role. He was initially a medium warrior but began picking up more magic skills and eventually evolved into a hybrid class at 25.

Last but not least was their leader Neil. The sole caster of their party and a weird one at that. He was specialized in kinetic magic, or more accurately recently, space magic. Displacement, teleportation, whatever the hell struck his fancy, he somehow figured out how to do, which is also how they had arrived where they were in their current state.

"I saw four humans. I didn't detect or see anyone else. They have constructed a lodge in the valley, and from the looks of it, know that we are here. At least they are on guard," she answered after a brief pause.

"Their levels, and were there any clue as to their classes or capabilities?" Neil asked further.

"Strongest two at 33 and 34, with the one at 34 wielding an axe, and the other wore the standard caster robe from the tutorial. The last two looked like teenagers, one of them a healer and the other a caster. Both also E-grade," she explained.

Neil looked a bit troubled at the answer. "This doesn't make any sense. Why would we be taken here if they are so weak?"

"Maybe it has something to do with the area? Have you noticed how we haven't encountered a single monster or beast since coming here?" Levi theorized. "Perhaps we are within a protective barrier of some kind."

"Wouldn't it be easier just to ask those four? With their levels, they aren't a threat," the defender Christen asked, as her wound was beginning to close up nicely.

“At this point, I don’t think we have much choice. Even if there is truly nothing here, we should have created a lot of distance between them and us,” Neil said, a bit resigned.

They had teleported there with the help of Neil and a particular item in his possession. Teleported a vast distance, likely hundreds if not thousands of kilometers. This wasn’t the first teleport either, but one of many they had been forced to perform ever since returning from the tutorial.

“Let’s go then; they didn’t look like bad people,” Eleanor said. She had her bow draped over her shoulder and her quiver on her back. If Jake were here, he would recognize the quiver as identical to his own. Also upgraded to uncommon-rarity from a token.

In fact, all five of them had gear at a level Jake hadn’t encountered on anyone except himself. Not a single one of them was wearing their starting gear, and those that were had upgraded versions. More surprising was perhaps their levels.

At the front was Neil at level 52. Followed by Christen at 48, Silas and Levi both at 47, and herself lowest at only 45. She said ‘only,’ but that was only in comparison to the rest of her party.

“Yeah, get moving, guys and gals,” Christen smiled as she stood up. Silas just shook his head as he wasn’t entirely done healing the wound yet. Then again, perhaps it was best her natural regeneration did the rest of the work for now.

The five of them walked through the narrow passage leading into the valley. The first sight meeting them was the idyllic lodge positioned right next to the pond with a waterfall - and the four people standing in front of it, clearly on guard.

Hank was in the lead, and the moment he saw them, he felt a sense of dread. He had identified the woman in front and seen her level at 48 - fourteen entire levels above his own. And a quick glance at the other members of the group of five made it very clear exactly how outmatched they were - especially the young man in the golden robe whose level he couldn't even see.

The two groups stared at each other for a while before Neil stepped forth and broke the silence.

"Ah, this is awkward," he said with a light smile. "We come in peace. So no reason to be that tense, I would just like to ask a few questions, and then we will be on our way."

"If we can help, we would be more than happy to," Miranda answered.

"Thank you. First of all, what is up with this place? The absence of monsters is quite something. And did you build that lodge behind you?" Neil asked courteously.

"The lodge was indeed made by us. My comrade here is quite the builder," Miranda said, nudging at Hank. "As for the particularities of this place, while we have noticed them, I cannot tell you the reason why it is--"

"Lie," Silas interrupted.

"Not a good start, lying in the second sentence," Neil chuckled. "For transparency, my friend here happens to have a skill that can discern lies."

Miranda felt a cold shiver run down her spine. If that was true, it threw off 90% of her plans for this interaction. That is already calculating in the fact that they were at a level of power far beyond them. Damage control, she thought.

"I am sorry, I mean that I don't know exactly why this area is as it is. Only that it is related to the owner of this land. The lodge behind me is also built for him, and this entire valley was already his home when we found it," she explained. If lies didn't work, she would have to use truths only. A bit creatively, perhaps.

"The owner, you say. Who might this owner be?" Neil continued.

"I do not know. Not even his name is known to me," she answered, praising the fact that she had forgotten to ask his name time and time again. "What I do know is that he is powerful and from what I could tell human."

"From what you could tell? What makes you think this mysterious owner isn't human?"

"I strongly suspect he is human, but since Identify does not work on him, I couldn't confirm. His level of power also making me doubtful of his humanity, to begin with," she said, expanding on her prior explanation. Deciding to let the mysteriousness of the masked man play to her advantage.

"Doesn't work?" Neil asked, a bit confused. "As in, not at all?"

"No, not at all. It just returned a single question mark," Hank said, cutting in.

Neil frowned his brows. He had only encountered that phenomenon once. It was the entity that had rewarded him the object leading to their current precarious situation - the same entity that was the namesake of his class.

He would have to get to the bottom of this. "Where is this person now?"

"He left four days back or so. We don't know to where. But I believe he will return within the next three to four days due to it being the deadline set for finishing his new lodge," Miranda said.

She very purposefully tried to make her answers fulfilling to avoid too many follow-up questions. She wanted to, at all cost, avoid any mention of the Pylon. Luckily, she was the only one aware of it.

"I see... exactly how strong would you reckon this individual is?" Neil asked as he looked to be in deep thought.

"Strong enough to make me not tell you out of fear he will retaliate when he returns," Hank cut in once more. Giving an answer way better than Miranda had thought up.

"We understand," Neil answered with a smile after throwing a glance at Silas. Getting a nod in confirmation that neither Miranda nor Hank had lied since the first part.

What ensued next was a few moments of staring at each other. Only interrupted when Christen winced a bit and grabbed her stomach in pain. It was rather subtle, but Miranda and Hank both noticed it.

“Are you injured?” Miranda asked, with a bit of genuine concern. Far from enough to overcome her wariness, however.

Neil looked at Christen for a bit, getting a small nod. “We ran into some trouble coming here. A particularly nasty curse happens to have inflicted her, and it takes some time to heal.”

Miranda nodded in acknowledgment. It wasn’t like the woman’s injury was any kind of chance for them. If a fight broke out, they would lose for sure. Just one or two of the five could very likely wipe them out. The only positive thing currently was that she didn’t feel like they intended to.

“Anything that will come to bite us in the ass later?” Hank asked, not-so-courteously.

“Hopefully not,” Neil dismissively said before turning to Miranda once more. “As this area is the safest we have come across so far in our journey, I would like to ask permission to stay here. As the owner isn’t around, would you be able to allow us to stay?”

“I...” Miranda began quickly remembering the living lie detector. She could allow them to stay, so... “The final decision is up to the owner, but I am unable to stop you from staying if you wish to.”

“Great,” Neil laughed after Silas said nothing. “Do not hesitate to ask us for anything. We truly do not come with any ill intent. I believe working together would be of interest to both parties.”

“I agree that working together is preferable to standing in opposition to one another,” Miranda smiled in return.

She reached down and took a small satchel out from beneath her robes. One everyone recognized as the one that contained potions at the beginning of the tutorials.

“Take this as a proof of goodwill,” she said, tossing the satchel to Neil.

Neil didn’t catch it per-se but instead stopped it a meter or so from his body, making it float in mid-air. Clearly still cautious despite how friendly he had acted. With a thought, he opened the satchel and saw a handful of similarly familiar bottles within.

He chuckled a bit internally at the gesture. The potions were excellent back then, but he wasn’t sure how much they would really do with everyone well into the E-grade. The only interesting thing was how the hell they had managed to save the potions throughout the tutorial.

That is until he tried identifying a few of them almost on instinct and noticed something was off. One of each type was of common-rarity.

“I would feel bad accepting your reward from the tutorial like that,” Neil said.

He had concluded that the woman had used her tutorial points to buy these potions - a natural decision and not the first instance of people doing so he had encountered. But it did make the gesture appear far more genuine.

“Don’t misunderstand; those were made by the owner,” she quickly explained.

"Made?" he asked, a bit confused.

Like Miranda, he had believed the potions to be a product of the tutorial. A system-created item to assist them, not unlike the upgrade tokens.

"He has many mysterious means, the creation of these potions just one of them," Miranda answered, doubling down on the mysteriousness of the City Owner once more. Silas was not protesting either, as it was the truth as far as she knew.

"... I will keep that in mind," Neil answered, this time a bit more tentatively. His four companions were also surprised at the thought that people could make those potions.

"Well then, to a prosperous future," Miranda said with a small bow and a smile.