

Hunter 147

Chapter 147: Unbalanced

Miranda sat on the small stairs leading up to the lodge. She watched the intricate patterns drawn on the ground by Neil as he was still trying to improve the magic circle – a massive formation covering tens of meters all around the lodge.

Hank was working with Christen to make him a better axe. She was a blacksmith and was more than happy to help when he asked. Though Miranda was pretty sure the young woman just felt terrible about the situation she had put him and his two kids in.

Silas meditated as he did most of the time. He had managed to finally get rid of Christen's cursed wound the day before and was now able to rest for the first time since she got the injury. Mark had chosen to accompany him, as he had been following the man around to learn how to be a better healer.

Louise had spent most of her time making pits and overall warping the environment around them. She had a skill that allowed her to do some minor terraforming, but it was good enough to improve their natural defenses with enough time.

Eleanor hadn't been seen for days. She was the de-facto scout of their party and had left to keep track of when the incoming party would come. They knew the direction they were coming from, and she had a few skills to locate people while keeping herself hidden.

Levi was the most useless of the bunch, just swinging his sword in the air, trying to get in every second of training possible. Maybe hoping for some miraculous last-minute skill upgrade or perhaps just a level. Whatever the case, the sense of urgency and desperation was tangible.

It was the fourth day since they arrived. The enemies could come at any point now. The time had been fruitfully spent overall as they had more or less prepared as well as they could in this time. Especially Neil, who had put down the large formation to defend them, had made many preparations. The lodge was to be their final stand.

The building was constructed by Hank, and his skills enhanced it. It was far more durable than regular wood and could perhaps offer some form of protection from weaker attacks. They knew the other side had many people, so hopefully, it could block some of their ranged attacks at least.

Miranda hadn't yet shared her role as a City Lord. Nor even mentioned the existence of the Pylon. It wasn't her place to do so. And she still didn't entirely trust the party of five. Their cooperation was forced due to the circumstances.

But if their claims proved to be accurate, then maybe doubling the 'city' population was possible. She had already gotten three more levels in the profession and reached 60. This had earned her a few glances as they were surprised her race-level had gone up by two so fast. They hadn't asked her, though. Likely they were too focused on trying not to die.

Upon leveling, she had also earned another skill. She had been offered the one related to creating quests but had decided to go with one that was a bit more immediate. Its functions were pretty simple. It was a purely defensive skill that allowed her to create a barrier in a small area.

She had chosen to share the functionality of this skill with Neil. Neil's barrier was meant to do basically the same, but his used space-magic, while hers used pure mana. But from what she had gathered... hers was borderline impenetrable on its own already. As long as it held that was... and it could only be used around the Pylon.

So they had two defensive barriers and a lodge created by an evolved builder. Bunkering down did seem like a possible tactic if all they had to do was buy time. The problem was they weren't sure if buying time would lead to anything.

The City Owner hadn't appeared for several days. In fact, it had now been nine whole days since any of them saw him. Miranda knew that he still lived as he was listed as the city owner... well, with a question mark, but still.

All they could do was hope he returned in time.

Time slowly ticked by as they trucked on with their final preparations. Miranda had a weird feeling of both wanting them to come and get the torturous wait over with and for them to be as delayed as possible. Somewhere, deep in her heart, she still hoped that they could negotiate.

It didn't sit right with her to hand over Neil and his party, but if that is what she had to do to protect Hank and his children, she was willing to do so. Reluctant, but willing. She had made a promise to help keep them safe to Hank's wife, and she had never fancied herself a liar.

Her wish for the wait to be over came true not long after. Eleanor dashed into the camp, yelling, "They are coming!" as all the tension that had built up came fully to the forefront.

Christen immediately stopped the hammer and threw it to the ground. She hadn't taken off her armor once since the wound had healed and was already ready to fight. Neil stood up from his kneeling position as he was also mentally preparing himself for what was to come.

Silas exited the lodge with a worried expression while Levi simply stopped swinging his sword and turned towards where Eleanor had come from. His gaze was showing that he was ready.

Hank, Louise, and Mark all went to the house as they had planned beforehand. Louise had been given the task of pouring mana into some runes Neil had placed inside the house to strengthen it further, while Mark was their backup healer. Hank himself exited soon after with his axe over his shoulder. Concern apparent on his face.

“They already have eyes on us,” Neil said as he stood beside Miranda in front of the lodge, all the others behind them.

“I can feel it,” she said. And she could. She had felt that people had entered the area of the Pylon earlier. Soon more pings came from her skill, signifying several more people entering.

With Neil’s group, she wasn’t able to distinguish how many they were. She still couldn’t, but the fact that several pings came once must mean that several groups had entered - that, or one massive group too big for even her vague skill to recognize it as one.

They heard them before they saw them. Several voices were heard as well as the sound of marching. Making it clear they didn’t even put up the façade of trying to hide. Their scouts, without a doubt, already having relayed that only nine people resided in the valley.

From one of the entrances, Miranda finally saw them. In front was a relatively small woman. Or teenager. She didn’t look any older than 18 or 19, but the system had made telling age quite a bit harder. Beside her walked a man with a shaved head and black beard. His appearance was very similar to the girl at his side.

She, like Neil, wore an embroidered robe of excellent quality. She also wore several pieces of jewelry and appeared to float a few centimeters off the ground. Overall she gave off an immense sense of danger, and it wasn't hard for Miranda to recognize her as the infamous Abby.

"Nice place you found yourself, cuz," she said, with a big smile as she looked at Neil and the idyllic waterfall and pond behind the lodge.

"Would be a waste to ruin it, wouldn't you agree?" Neil fired back with a similar smile. However, Miranda could feel his anxiousness.

"I don't know about that," Abby said, her smile instantly gone. "Where is the orb?"

"With me as always," he said, taking it out from beneath his robe. It was a small black marble that, at first glance, was utterly unimpressive. He had fixed it on a chain to wear it around his neck, though it wasn't recognized as a necklace by the system.

As they spoke, Miranda couldn't avoid noticing the other people also appearing all around them. She saw quite a few standing on the cliffs above looking down on them, while others jumped down to surround the lodge. She counted more than a hundred.

"So you aren't going to run this time?" she asked, her gaze still cold. "My offer still stands. Give me the orb and all of your equipment. The same goes for your comrades, too, of course."

At this point, Miranda was tired of being ignored as she cut in. "Excuse me, miss, while I don't mean to cut into your family dispute, I would like to point out that you stand on another's land."

"Shut the fuck up, you fucking whore before I rip your head off," she roared at Miranda entirely out of nowhere before just as swiftly returning to having the smile she had before. "I am speaking to my dear cousin here and not you."

Miranda was utterly taken aback, and so was Hank and the others observing from the house too. Neil's party, on the other hand, didn't appear that fazed.

"She is speaking the truth, though. This land and lodge are owned by someone else," Neil said calmly. They had already discussed earlier to try and drag out time as much as possible. Not that they knew it would help anything.

Miranda still had a slight hope that the City Owner would feel it when so many intruded upon the area.

"Oh really? So where is this owner of yours?" Abby sneered, clearly not taking him seriously. "Just cut the bullshit. Orb and all your stuff in a pile on the ground within the next minute. The same goes for your new friends too."

Neil hesitated at this sudden ultimatum. The plan of buying time was not working at all. Miranda was completely unable to string together any semblance of a plan. The other party far too hostile and unstable to argue with.

"You just want all of us to strip, and then what?" Christen cut in, clearly annoyed. Her stomach was still aching slightly even after the wound was healed.

“Got the curse fixed, it looks like. Dad can be a bit heavy-handed,” Abby laughed. “And well, you strip naked, and then if I feel like it, I will let you live. I am sure that a couple of the guys would be inclined to let you keep your head.”

“Abby, don’t joke like that,” her father said in a playful tone.

“Oh shut up, old man, you can have her.”

Miranda felt the gazes of several of the men land on her body, but she didn’t feel any lecherous intent or lust, just... pity. The worst offender being the damn father who had his eyes on her from the very beginning. Hank’s head turned red in fury as he barely managed to hold himself back from going on a futile rampage as the man even threw Louise in the lodge a quick look.

“What the hell happened to you...” Neil sighed with genuine sadness in his eyes.

“A lot of things, cuz. None of which is any of your damn concern. And by the way,” Abby said, raising her hand. “The minute is up.”

An explosion sounded out as the very space in front of Neil and Miranda was torn apart. But just as quickly as it shattered, it was solidified again by Neil, who also raised his hand, a white glow emanating from it.

Both were still forced back. However, Miranda could see that Neil was outmatched. The attack also served as an opening shot for all hell to break loose.

Levi was the first to move. He was clearly already prepared to go.

“Acceleration

,” he internally muttered as he sped forward, “Imbue Blade: Fire,” “Imbue Armor: Wind.” His blade was enveloped in an inferno of flames, and his body turned into a tornado as he soared forward.

A magic swordsman. One of his own design with explosive strength unmatched by any other in their group.

Simultaneously, as he charged forward, a barrage of arrows was launched at Abby by Eleanor. She simply raised her hand and erected a barrier, but it was just a distraction. It gave Neil enough time to use another skill as Levi was teleported to the top of the cliff. Amid a group of low-level archers and casters.

Christen also charged forward, her target being the man at Abby’s side. The one who had inflicted the cursed wound on her in their last clash. And he happily met her once more as he drew a red scimitar from his scabbard. Glowing veins covered it soon after as he used a skill to make it into a cursed blade.

They smashed into each other as their strength matched the other. It looked like an equal battle at first sight, but it truly wasn’t. Christen was a Heavy Warrior focused on strength and toughness. The man a hybrid who used not only his physical stats.

Silas was forced to support her as the scimitar moved in unpredictable patterns, forcing her to block with her shield repeatedly. Silas was trying to assist in healing or redirecting blows whenever possible, but even then, it was barely even.

Neil and Abby also engaged in a duel that looked like they were just staring at each other. But the space in between them shimmered and cracked, and it was as if reality itself was slowly being shattered.

Eleanor had tried to keep assaulting Abby but found herself the main target of the hundreds of people surrounding them. They all avoided the two other big battles as they headed for her, forcing her to run away.

Hank suffered the same fate as he tried to keep enemies off him. His level was at the high end for sure, some of the attackers not even being 25 yet. But the sheer number made him unable to fight back properly, and the wounds on his body kept getting more numerous.

It took only a few minutes for the result of their skirmish to be made clear. Christen took a nasty cut to her cheek as she screamed in pain. Silas tried to help but had also found himself the victim of the many attackers.

Neil was bleeding from his orifices as he still struggled to keep Abby in check. In turn, she looked relatively relaxed as she enjoyed the carnage around her - the result of the battle clear from the beginning in her eyes.

The only ones who had managed to damage her camp were Eleanor, Hank, and Levi. Hank and Eleanor in the process of defending themselves mainly. Levi was the only one who had done any real damage, having killed nearly a dozen people before his many enhancements ran out of power, and he also found himself overwhelmed.

“Retreat into the lodge!” Miranda yelled as she dodged a fireball flying her way.

None of the ones fighting hesitated to do as she said. As it was planned, everyone besides Levi was right outside the protective formation.

Levi, hearing the call to retreat, activated Acceleration once more as he sped up significantly, practically flying towards the lodge.

“Oh no, you don’t!”

Abby saw this attempt to retreat and raised both hands towards the fleeing swordsman. Neil did the same as he tried to help his comrade.

All Miranda saw next was everything looking... skewed. Space itself shifted as if two planes of existence tried to overlap with Levi right in the middle.

The next thing she felt was her face being covered in liquid as space returned to normal once more. The lower body of a human still remaining where Levi was just moments prior.

“AAAARGH!”

Turning almost in slow motion, she saw Levi's upper body on the steps of the lodge. His entrails on the ground as he was bisected from the stomach down.