

Hunter 153

Chapter 153: An Agreement With the Incompetents(?)

The next few hours were relatively peaceful as everyone worked together to clean up the valley. Neil and his party were in the lodge scrubbing the floorboards like their lives depended on it, while all the others went around and gathered up the corpses of their former comrades.

Nobody judged others for looting them either. All the equipment was sacked, and to Jake's surprise, offered in a big pile to him and Miranda without any prompt. Showing once more why both Donald and Abby had pretty good gear for their level. They had hoarded everything.

Jake, of course, didn't care for it and told Miranda to handle that too. Damn, it felt good just to delegate all his responsibilities away.

He also found time to drag Hank to the side and hand him the stuff from Donald. Which, Hank, much to Jake's surprise, rejected adamantly. Not because of the former owner, but because he didn't see any need for it.

During Jake's absence, he and Miranda had plenty of conversations about the future, and Hank had decided to focus nearly entirely on his profession moving forward. To lead the building initiative. With their number of citizens increasing nearly tenfold, there was naturally a need for new housing, which he would take charge of. In other words, he was now the de-facto leader responsible for infrastructure in his city. Nice.

Which left Jake with a bunch of stuff he didn't want but, on the other hand, didn't want to throw away. After going over the loot situation, he entered his lodge once more, and for the first time, got a good look at it.

It was more spacious than he had first anticipated. However, that may just be the lack of furniture. The cellar was well-hidden as they had agreed, and there was even a lovely small door leading onto a porch overlooking the pond and waterfall. It was better in every way than he expected, and damn impressive they had managed to make it in less than a week.

His entrance caused quite the disturbance for the four people cleaning it. Jake looked at them and noticed how they were all cleaning it without using magical abilities at all. Between them, they had to have a skill that could somehow help, wouldn't they? Then again, the best he would be able to do was to... actually, he could probably use Alchemist's Purification to get rid of it. Yeah, let's try that.

He hadn't really used the skill before besides purifying water. He extended a tendril of mana as he deployed the purification skill. At first, it didn't quite work, likely because the floorboards weren't considered an alchemical ingredient, but after a bit of a push, all the blood just suddenly evaporated.

Neil just stared dumbstruck at him. "Could you do that all along?"

"Seems so," Jake just shrugged, ignoring the glances he got from Silas, Eleanor, and Christen. Especially Christen. "Now that you are free, I think we should talk."

With those words, he sat down on the floor and crossed his legs, motioning for the four of them to do the same. Levi was unsurprisingly still out cold. But he should be back up within the day. He had chugged down one of Jake's own health potions after all.

After they were all sitting comfortably, or as comfortably as they could with a masked man who could kill them staring them down, Jake spoke. "Since you want to stay, I guess we should discuss what exactly that will mean."

The reason behind it was straightforward. Except for himself, the party of five was the most powerful by a landslide. They could easily wipe out everyone else if they so desired.

“What do you mean?” Neil asked. He had an idea, very much in the same vein as Jake’s, but wanted confirmation, nevertheless.

“I won’t be around all the time, which means someone will have to handle things when I am not here. Things that require strength, so we won’t have a repeat of what happened today. And as the most powerful people besides myself, that falls on you guys,” Jake spoke candidly.

“So we are to act as guards or what?” Christen asked, clearly not approving.

“Nah, shouldn’t really be necessary. We got a good bunch of people now, and I doubt they would dare cause trouble any time soon. I just need you to back up Miranda’s decisions. To be the tough hand that forces things through if her soft approaches fail to work,” he explained.

“I think we can figure something out,” Neil said after thinking a bit. “But won’t we also need to keep improving our strength? I fear we will fall behind and be unable to perform that role if we just sit around.”

Jake had naturally already considered that. “Once again, you won’t be guards. And while there aren’t any beasts in the city area, there are plenty right outside. We are still in the outskirts of the forest, and from what I have seen flying over it, you should be able to encounter several beasts of significant power further in. I would even expect quite a few D-grades in the deepest parts.”

"D-grade..." Neil frowned. "Aren't we in danger of one of them coming here?"

"I doubt it," Jake shrugged. "They have very little reason to hunt us actively. We won't give them worthwhile experience. It also isn't a permanent problem as I will hunt them down before long."

Neil sat there a bit, waiting for the punchline, but nothing came. This is D-grades... could it be?

"Have you ever met any D-grades before?" Neil asked. Because he and his party had. The disciple of Kallox in their tutorial had been D-grade. Only in the early stages, but D-grade, nevertheless. And he had been... overwhelming.

"Of course I have. On that note, there are two caves only a few kilometers from here, both in opposite directions. I have only been to one of them, but I would advise you not to go too deep. There is a biodome of sorts deep within, and a real nasty D-grade mushroom monster resides there. And I think I pissed it off last time I went, so it may still be irritable if you chose to check it out, so be careful," Jake courteously warned them. It would suck to have them all sucked dry by the Indigo Mushroom right after joining his city.

"Pissed it off?"

"Yeah, I just fought it a bit until it got pissed, so I took off. The damn thing is the size of a dozen football fields, and I wasn't entirely confident in outlasting it," he explained. I guess I should go again soon, he thought. Though he still needed to make a better poison for it first. But he didn't have time with his hunting sessions with Hawkie and all that fun stuff. Also, he had to get back to that damn bird soon.

“Anyway, we are getting sidetracked!” Jake continued. “So, do you agree to help out?”

“Alright, I promise,” Neil agreed without thinking much about it. The more he talked to the mysterious owner, the harder he found it to understand him.

“Great. So, what is up with that orb your cousin went crazy for?”

Finally, it came, Neil thought as he steeled himself. He had expected it. He also felt his comrades freeze up momentarily at its mention. It was a legendary item. An item better than any of them had seen even close to before. So, of course, they feared he wanted it... along with what else he would potentially demand.

“It is made only for Disciples of Kallox, so I don’t thi-“ he tried, but...

“Yeah, yeah, just give it here, let me check it out,” Jake said, waving his hand expectantly.

Neil sighed in defeat as he lifted it up from beneath his robes and placed it together with its chain in the owner’s open palm.

From behind his mask, Jake could see the orb and first noted how small it was. Identify, however, confirmed that it indeed was an extraordinary item in many ways. The grade alone making it very desirable.

“Neat,” he said as he gave it back to Neil. The young man was just staring back at him in confusion and then down to the orb that was back in his own hands.

“That’s it?” Neil asked, feeling more confused by the minute.

“What? Oh, I don’t want it. I can’t use it anyway, and even if I could, I wouldn’t. It isn’t even that interesting. Its high rarity is clearly because of the comprehension of Kallox’s concept of space within. In every way, it is an item made for his disciple and quite honestly has little value for anyone else, much less someone who isn’t a space mage themselves,” Jake quickly clarified.

To sum it all up, the orb was useless to him. Not that he would have taken it even if it wasn’t. He wasn’t going to claim to be some saint who wouldn’t have taken it if it proved supremely useful, but he was, as a general rule of thumb, not going to rob people.

A sentiment that clearly took Neil by surprise. Especially Jake’s calm explanation of why he wouldn’t even want it. It did hurt his pride a little to see the item he valued the most criticized, but he wasn’t going to cry about it.

There was still a bit of tension until Eleanor couldn’t hold it in anymore and exclaimed in laughter, “this is just too funny... seriously way too funny.”

She had spent the last weeks of her life running to protect that damn orb with her friends, and now it was just casually dismissed as ‘not even that interesting.’ It honestly all just felt like one big joke.

Her laughter, however, did a lot to lighten the mood in the lodge. The tenseness of it all slowly dissipated as Christen joined in on commenting how absurd their situation was, with Silas just snickering to himself.

“Hey, mystery-man, what is your class anyway? Jack of all trades?” Christen finally asked, unable to hold back the question burning in her mind.

“Archer, upgraded to a type of hunter,” Jake answered. It wasn’t really something he saw any use in hiding.

“Hunter?” Eleanor asked, confused. “Some mage variant? Magic Hunter? Mage Hunter? Caster-Hunter?”

“First of all, those names suck, each one more than the one before,” he answered. “Second of all, it has nothing to do with magic. To be perfectly honest, I don’t even have any mana skill, really.”

“Pretty sure I saw you fire off some beefed-up mana bolts,” Christen butted in.

“Doesn’t require a skill to do that: just pure mana control and manipulation. A good piece of advice I would give you is to practice using mana. All of you,” Jake advised the party of five.

All of them looked at him a bit bewildered before one of them finally asked. “How?”

Which was around the time where Jake came to realize that was actually an excellent question. Precisely how did he manipulate and control mana so easily? Well, not easily, but naturally.

“Hm... think about how you put mana into a skill when using it, and then try moving that mana, just without using any skill. Just a tiny sliver, enough to form a string or a ball in the palm of your hand,” he tried explaining.

“Not sure I get it... how am I supposed to use the mana without a skill?” Neil asked.

“Just feel its movements in your body and control it. Even now, you should feel it in your body, like a current running on your skin. The exact same is true for stamina. Though I would be cautious with stamina because if you control it in unforeseen ways, you may end up blowing off a limb or two,” Jake once more tried explaining, tagging on a warning at the end.

An explanation that once more was just met with utter confusion from all of them. Jake tried again to make them feel for the mana, or in Christen and Eleanor’s case, their inner energy.

The conversation had entirely devolved from what it had initially been about as Jake slowly felt his frustrations grow.

“Seriously, can’t you feel the mana in the air, though?” he asked Neil.

“I am aware of it, and I can vaguely get a sense of it, but... I don’t think I ‘feel’ it as you describe,” Neil answered a bit sheepishly.

“You,” he said, pointing to Christen. “How does it feel when you use a skill?”

“Eh... well I think of using the skill, and then I do it... you know, it just feels normal, I guess?” she said, equally sheepishly.

Jake felt his head was about to explode. Were these people absolute morons? Had they spent no time at all practicing anything? Didn't they have the faintest curiosity towards all the new energy types and how to use them? No desire to understand what their new powers were capable of at all?

He was seriously beginning to doubt putting faith in them at all to defend his city. Or was there just something different about his approach to mana? He had to dig more.

“Neil, when you manipulate space, how do you do it?” he asked pointedly.

“I use one of my skills that do so,” he answered. Uselessly.

“Have all of you seriously never used mana outside of a skill?”

To which he got no answer. Only four people looking down on the ground embarrassed as if they had just been scolded. Which, in essence, they had. Jake felt like pulling out a few hairs at how utterly incompetent they were.

“Alright, homework for all of you. Start to practice actually controlling your mana or inner energy outside of skills. You should be able to figure it out if you try hard enough,” Jake more or less ordered them. “Also, take these things and split them among you. I don’t need them.”

He threw a bunch of things out of his spatial storage and onto the floor. Equipment dropped by Abby and Donald that he didn’t want or need. A few of them could only be used by Neil as they required the Disciple of Kallox class.

The others were mainly scooped up by Eleanor and Christen, who split them among each other. Though Jake suspected they were saving some of the things for Levi whenever he woke up.

“With that taken care of, get the hell out of my house,” he said a bit jokingly. “And ask Miranda to come in after you. I need to speak with her too.”

“Alright, I will tell her,” Neil nodded as Christen went and picked up Levi, who slept on the floor. Why they had carried him in there again was still a mystery.

Just as they left, Jake couldn’t help but add. “One last thing. Don’t betray the promises you made today. We clear?”

To which he got four grave nods. The faint wave of bloodlust he let loose with the words clearly not harming his intimidation-factor in the slightest.