

Hunter 162

Chapter 162: Pecking Order

Jake looked at the upgraded skill with a bit of bewilderment.

[Expert Archery (Uncommon)] An Archer's best friend is the bow in his hand and the arrow in his foe's heart. You have proven yourself an expert with your chosen weapon and is fast approaching the level of mastering your craft. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Strength when using a ranged weapon.

-->

[Archery of Vast Horizons (Rare)] - An Archer's best friend is the bow in his hand and the arrow in his foe's heart. Unsatisfied with merely becoming an expert, you have sought beyond mastering common bowmanship, and do not shy away from using magic to enhance your technique. You seek to cross all horizons with your arrows, and your target shall be pierced, no matter the distance, no matter the means. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Strength when using a ranged weapon. Adds a small damage bonus to all arrows based on distance traveled and Perception.

He was bewildered... was all it took really just to shoot a long distance to get a skill with a weird name? It didn't just upgrade from 'expert' to 'master' or something like that. Instead, it changed direction.

Not that he was complaining. The skill was objectively better in every way as it added a damage bonus based on distance and perception. It also said damage bonus and not that it increased the effectiveness of his stats, which meant it likely worked like his Mark of the Ambitious Hunter.

Was it because he had reached some level of understanding of how the Mark did its damage? Was it because he had killed a D-grade while only in E-grade himself with his long-range archery? Was it because he used a plethora of different skills besides usual archery?

It even mentioned using magic to enhance his archery... did he really do that? Infused Powershot was technically magic... so was Blood of the Malefic Viper if you thought a bit about it. The arrows generated from Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter to be used against the Storm Elemental also clearly carried elements of his mana control, and he doubted it would be as strong as it was if he hadn't practiced mana manipulations and making those mana bolts as much as he had.

The usage of the word 'vast' was also weird. Why not distant horizons? Sure, one could argue that vast included distance, but it also included breadth. Was it talking about how diverse his archery was?

He had to admit it wasn't just regular archery anymore... even from a post-system perspective. He actively integrated Gaze of the Apex Hunter to strike harder, used arrows highly reliant on his abilities as a mana-user and everything from his profession.

Jake stood in thought as he considered the skill. Ultimately it was just a straight-up upgrade, so it was good, and now his perception would prove even more useful. Especially the first strike with Infused Powershot would be stronger... because he really

needed it to be.

Closing his system menus in satisfaction, he felt like he was forgetting something. Turning his gaze towards the cloud continent, he saw that the birds were all gathering towards where he killed the Storm Elemental, almost as if they were searching for som-

"SHIT! THE ORB!" Jake yelled out loud as he took flight towards the island. Damn you, fortunate skill upgrade, for distracting me!

He was flying desperately forward as he tried to keep an eye on what was happening in the distance. He saw the birds chase a Lightning Roc that had stolen it, but soon a group of Flare Crows attacked it and managed to burn it before one of the large vultures dove in, smashing its talons into the Lightning Roc.

Jake just kept flapping his wings as he tried to get closer. He tried to use Gaze of the Apex Hunter once in a while to try and stop the bird that he assumed had the Orb as he got closer at a pace far slower than he would have liked.

Miranda sat in the newly constructed longhouse with Hank, Neil with his party, and a few of Abby's former goons.

The last few days had been very fruitful for the city with the influx of 50 or so new citizens. Granted, it was a bit skewed on the gender-ratio with only five women in total: herself, Eleanor, Christen, Louise, and the scarred woman.

That woman was one of the people inside the house currently as they discussed future plans.

"Do you believe it's safe to make contact?" Miranda asked.

"Abby and Donald didn't want to... a few tried to run that night to try and enter the fort, but they were all killed," the woman explained. "We quite frankly don't know anything about them... but they were struggling a bit from the looks of it."

Miranda nodded as she took in the information.

Getting a group of survivors who had spent nearly a month wandering to chase Neil and his friends had proven quite valuable. They had seen many sights on their travels and had learned a lot.

The first of which was of a few larger human settlements. Around 20 kilometers outside the forest, a total of 130 or so kilometers, a large settlement was called 'the fort.' The reason for that was simple, as it was an old medieval fort before the system. The tourist trap was now being used with its original intent in mind as many had taken refuge there.

But... for a lot of humans to group up in one place also presented challenges. Ignoring all the usual difficulties of running a functional settlement, they also had to deal with beasts' constant assault.

A large settlement was the best hunting ground and served as a beacon to attract experience-hungry beasts. It did raise the issue of why no beast ever dared enter the area of their Pylon, but Miranda just assumed it had something to do with the Pylon itself.

Or maybe it was the Pylon's owner? Who knows...

Either way, they were currently trying to determine if they should contact the fort and possibly offer them to come to the forest with them. But there were many risks and unknown factors associated with that, and they quite frankly didn't feel comfortable making the decision without the owner there.

First of all... the fort likely had thousands within while they weren't even 60 people. And while Neil and his party were powerful, they didn't believe that they could ensure any semblance of safety against that many.

Whether the owner could, they didn't know either... but Miranda had a feeling it would be okay. Not because of any skills, though. Her Intuition skill had recently upgraded to rare-rarity and become more specialized towards city management. Annoyingly so, it included better knowing the owner's intent, yet it didn't do jack shit even if it said it did. Can the system be bugged? Or is he too strong somehow?

Besides, they had plenty of things to do already. They were currently constructing wooden buildings from the abundance of wood in the forest, with Hank taking the lead in the project. The man was growing in levels quite fast and seemed to enjoy himself. Louise helped him and had even managed to evolve her profession to some kind of architect. Mark also enjoyed helping out and would soon evolve his profession too.

The family had practically taken over the small city's budding construction industry, and Miranda was more than happy for them to do that. And the first thing they had made – after the owner's lodge – was a sign to place at the valley entrance.

There was unanimous agreement that the valley with the lodge in it would be entirely off-limits for anyone but the owner himself and Miranda when she needed to contact him. Miranda still remembered that he disliked people staring at him while he worked, and she had a strong feeling that he would like his privacy. It was not because of some skill but by reading one of the easiest people to read she had ever met in her life.

With that in mind, they began building outside the valley but still more than well within the Pylon of Civilization's domain. They only built to the south side, away from the cliff with the waterfall, making the lodge effectively the city's northernmost point.

Was this the most effective when the Pylon expanded the area in a circular area? No, not at all, but it wasn't like they needed space. With less than 60 people total, they had only managed to create two

wooden structures in the new 'city' so far. One of them was the longhouse they were currently in, and the other was a storage building.

The third building was also under construction and would be a second longhouse. The longhouses were large enough to house dozens, and they wanted one for men and one for women. Again, the longhouse for women wasn't really a pressing issue yet due to there only being a handful of them.

Miranda had to admit that she liked the vibe of the area they were building. They had purposefully left most trees standing, making everything covered by the canopy of the trees and giving off a very relaxing mood.

It appeared to help a lot of the members of those who had been forced into helping Abby. After her death, her leadership profession's effect faded, and a lot of the suppressed mental strain came forth. The psychotic little bitch's profession clearly had a skill that allowed her followers to feel... muted about doing horrible things.

Now they would have to deal with that themselves.

Neil and his party had already gone through all of them with Silas's truth-detection spell to ask some rudimentary questions. Mainly about things they had done and wrongs they had committed, as well as confirming that they didn't have any thoughts of revenge towards Miranda or Neil and his friends.

They had also asked about their thoughts towards the owner... but the response there was just weird.

None of them even considered for a second to think badly of him. The reason was that he had killed Abby... but not exactly as one would think.

Nearly all these people had been forced under Abby's umbrella early on in the system. They saw the indomitable power that allowed her to crush anything. Consciously or unconsciously, they had already put her on a pedestal in their minds that she was 'more than human.'

Now, that impossibly strong person was killed in a one-sided encounter with the owner. Crushed and made to look like a weak little girl. Instead of bringing her down from her pedestal to their level, in their minds, they had just seen an even larger pinnacle crushing her. All of their fear and – as much as they hated to admit it – respect of her power had been amplified and transferred to him.

It did mean that they worked with almost fanatical intent to help Hank build, and they seemed almost fearful in front of Miranda... the only different one was the scarred woman. Maybe because she had broken out of the spell long ago, she only felt grateful towards the owner, but that was it.

"So, we wait for the owner's return, and then if we can convince him to help us, we make contact with the fort?" Miranda asked, summing up their circular discussion, always coming back to 'well if the owner was here...'

They all nodded and they proceeded to discuss a few additional minor things before she dismissed them from their small meeting. Hank already knew what to do when it came to building things, and Neil and his comrades were also working hard on their respective professions these days. They all appeared to enjoy the downtime and not constantly to be on the move.

But she had gotten the feeling that they would soon like to go out hunting. Something they didn't really feel comfortable doing before the owners return.

I do wonder what he's doing right now...

"GET THE FUCK BACK HERE, YOU LITTLE SHIT!" Jake yelled as he chased the damn falcon-like bird that was flapping its wings desperately with a small orb in its beak. It was damn fast and used wind magic like Hawkie.

He was forced to stop up, fire a quick infused Powershot while freezing the bird with Gaze of the Apex Hunter before finally managing to catch up. He had clipped its wing and thought that finally, he could claim his damn loot.

He was already tens of kilometers away from the cloud continent, having chased down one bird after another. They had all swarmed the cloud orb, wanting to claim it for themselves.

With the Thunder Roc, Jake had been there. He had shown himself slaying the beast, intimidating all of them. Yet now, only a day later, they didn't give a shit about him. Or maybe these were different birds? Some did avoid him, but honestly... he didn't care.

It had been far too long since he killed the Storm Elemental, and he was only running on fumes now. He had used Limit Break on 20% while bombarding the Elemental and couldn't deactivate it again with a period of weakness.

The only lucky thing was that he still had more than half his stamina left as he didn't have to shoot all five arrows... but it was draining fast, the flight having already burned through half of his remaining resource pool.

His shot earlier had brought down another bird... but just as fast he did so, another one swept in and picked up the Orb.

“ENOUGH!” Jake yelled, his gaze freezing every single bird within his line of sight.

Blood began pouring from his eyes, but at this point, he was honestly just pissed.

“I killed that fucking elemental; that is MY orb!” Jake yelled furiously, getting the attention of all the birds fighting for the Orb. “Now give it the fuck here, or I swear I will make it my personal mission to hunt down every last fucking one of you.”

His outburst may seem weird... but he already knew a lot of the damn birds understood him, at least on some level. While they likely didn’t comprehend the words themselves, they understood the intent behind them.

But more than that... his aura intimidated them. A few recognized him as the killer of the Thunder Roc, too... it sure helped even more when he took out the Beastcore and held it up.

The bird currently with the Orb in its mouth looked very flustered. It was a Flare Crow with three of its comrades who all gave it a look. It flew towards the human with defeat in its eyes, the pressure from its comrades and all surrounding beasts bearing down on it.

It landed right in front of Jake and put down the Orb. It looked up at him briefly before quickly scurrying away.

By now, they appeared to all have realized: the new apex predator of this region wasn't the two D-grade titans but this small human who had slain both of them.

Jake picked up the Orb and put it in his spatial storage. He was tired and annoyed at having to waste his time chasing these shitty birds. He didn't even bother to go anywhere as he sat down on the ground right then and there, deactivated Limit Break, and entered meditation.

Not a single beast willing to get near.