

Hunter 167

Chapter 167: One-sided negotiation

Jake concentrated as he flew with Miranda and Lillian in tow. It took quite the toll to keep himself moving fluidly and make sure that the two women weren't tossed around by any sudden pulling. He couldn't do the tactic where he just touched them with mana as it wouldn't work on living beings, so he had to use the mana ropes.

Mystie had just used her mana to directly affect the outer layer of the nine people's bodies; it was an application of mana far above Jake's own. He wasn't even sure if it was a skill. But hey, the bird was D-grade; it only made sense.

He already knew that the Mystsong Bird had a larger mana pool than himself by quite a margin from the ritual. Once more, not surprising, considering it was a D-grade beast focused solely on magic. He did take a bit of inspiration and visibly improved while flying, making the ride for Miranda and Lillian a bit smoother.

Miranda looked like she was using every sliver of her willpower to remain calm, while Lillian looked relaxed, like being carried after a winged human wasn't that far-fetched. Jake couldn't help but think about what kind of shit Abby had dragged that entire group through...

Neil and his party also all looked relatively calm. They were more experienced and had spent plenty of time doing teleportation and what-not. Of course, it also helped that Mystie was a pretty damn smooth flyer and mana-controller.

As for Miquel and his goons... they looked like they were contemplating the life choices that led to them being carried through the air by a bird that could kill them at any point if it got annoyed. At least they had the decency to remain still to not make it harder on Mystie.

The trip that should have taken hours was completed in thirty-five minutes. Fifteen minutes of that spent walking when they first began, and the rest finished soaring through the air.

They landed a few kilometers from the forest but still a fair distance from the fort. The area was the same plains that Jake had traveled initially to reach the woods, but another section. This part had many more hills, and the grass was rather tall in most places.

It actually reminded him a bit of the Lucenti Plains... though no stags or deer anywhere. Well, he did spot a few from above when flying over the forest, but none of the Lucenti variant.

Touching down, Jake – pretty elegantly if he had to say so himself – put down Lillian and Miranda. Mystie landed together with him, depositing all nine human packages on the ground too. A bit harder than Jake, as one of Miquel's men fell on his butt.

"Alright, that was awesome," Christen said as she didn't mind her ruffled hair. "I want wings now."

"I am sure there are ways to fly or at least levitate without wings," Levi said. "Heck, I can nearly fly with my wind-armor."

"Who cares," Neil jokingly said while trying to get his hair under control. "Teleportation is way better."

Eleanor and Silas both just shook their heads. Silas did go over and check if Miquel and his two followers needed any help, but they were clearly okay, just a bit shocked at the entire situation.

Why did we even bring them along? Jake wondered. Well, it was Miranda who had decided who would go, so it was on her.

Bringing Neil and his party Jake understood. They were all useful to some degree and relatively strong. They worked well as a team, and there was something to say in power in numbers. Also, it would allow Jake to not bother with weaker things and just let them handle it.

Their band of 11 people and one bird walked the rest of the way at a more than steady pace. It didn't make sense to just casually stroll when they all had rather high stats, so it didn't take long for the fort to enter their view after passing over a small hilltop.

Jake observed it with his high perception, allowing him to practically zoom in on it; he quickly got a grasp of the fort.

It was large and clearly some kind of medieval exhibit or maybe even an event-spot before the world changed. It didn't look damaged in the least but looked like an old fort from the 1600s transported to the present day.

The fort was the kind of defensive structure build in the past with functionality prioritized over aesthetics. The walls were thick, placed on the top of a hill with an open view of all sides. It looked very easily defensible.

A good spot, Jake nodded internally, approving of those who had taken refuge there. The old cities were dangerous as they had many nooks and crannies for monsters to lurk in. Powerful beasts didn't necessarily have to be large, Hawkie and Mystie, case-in-point.

But.. the fort also had its issues. Not many beasts were in the surroundings, and it was the only structure for many kilometers. Jake guessed it had wells for water as the ground was well-moisturized, and hunting beasts were, of course, an option when it came to nutrients.

After evolving, humans needed way less food or water. Jake practically didn't need either after becoming E-grade, and whatever he did need, he got through eating random herbs for his Palate of the Malefic Viper. Eating was instead done to gain potential benefits from the food or to regenerate resources faster.

Breathing was a bit of the same. Breathing increased both mana and stamina-regeneration by a very minor amount by drawing in some of the atmospheric mana. Jake didn't know if all living things had some kind of hidden ability to transform it into helpful mana and stamina, but clearly, it worked.

Water was, of course, in the same boat.

But that was for E-grade. F-grades still needed some food, and with so many people, there were bound to be many F-grades to feed. The environment, such as the wind and weather, wasn't an issue for any humans, really, as the body's natural resistance made regular sickness a thing of the past.

I guess that also confirms viruses and bacteria don't get levels, Jake thought as he stood there considering all these things. Oh, but fungi does... oh shit, I can already imagine someone getting a fungal infection from some high-level mushroom... like that D-grade Indigo-fucker... I really need to get rid of that damn thing.

"Sir?" Miranda asked as she saw Jake just stand there staring into the distance. The fort little more than a small blob in the distance, even with her relatively high stats.

“Let’s go,” Jake said, coming out of his stupor. But not forgetting... the mushroom would soon meet its maker. But first, time to do some one-sided negotiations.

Jake gave Mystie a nod as the bird summoned several runes that swirled around her. First, he felt her aura disappear, and then she vanished from sight, turning invisible. Damn those magic birds and their many tricks.

Of course, Jake himself could still see Mystie. Not with his eyes, but in his sphere. He had long realized that all those magical techniques didn’t work against it. Like back in the sewer dungeon, his sphere was just too damn overpowered.

They had decided to have Mystie remain hidden, at least in the beginning. This was mainly due to the encounter with Miquel, who somehow got the idea that the bird was controlling them or that they were willingly serving it. Actually, considering the magic bird, that could totally be true.

Eleven people and one – now invisible – bird made quick progress towards the fort in the distance. As they had passed the hill and were now within line of sight from the fort, Jake felt it. A gaze had landed upon them from a distance, and he returned the look.

A human stood on the fort’s wall in the distance and looked through something that resembled binoculars. Jake made eye-contact with the man through the device, and he saw the man quickly turn away in fright as he turned to yell something. Of course, Jake was too far away to tell what he said, and lip-reading wasn’t in his skill-set. Does lip-reading even work correctly with the translation skill? It should... shouldn’t it?

“We have been spotted,” Eleanor said a few seconds later. Jake had already seen a few more people appear on the wall, and it was likely that movement she had caught.

An aura of nervousness spread in the group, and Jake purposefully walked so that he was all the way in the back. Miranda and Lillian took the front with the party of five, and Miquel and his two goons followed at the sides.

Their speed was fast even though they didn’t rush, and soon they saw something coming their way.

A small drone was flying towards them with a net hanging beneath it. Jake could see the small net held what looked like a walkie-talkie. Well, this is unexpected...

He hadn’t encountered much technology since his return to Earth... in fact, he had encountered none. Back when he made his way out of the city, he did spot some people with tools that resembled more modern weaponry, but he didn’t think much of it.

None of those with Abby or Miquel had any modern weapons either. All were using the same medieval weapons as Jake and the others. Yet now he saw a drone flying towards him. The others were also surprised but quickly collected themselves as Miranda stepped forward.

The drone was clearly remote-controlled as it floated down. It was a quadcopter-type, but Jake did notice something when it got closer. He felt mana coming off it. A magic drone... nice.

Not seeing a camera on it, Jake wondered how the person controlling it knew where to go. Though he had to guess that the individual controlling it had a skill to make it all possible. It made him wonder if it was a profession or class or maybe someone with great synergy between the two. Robot builder or

engineer coupled with a class for controlling them? These were just some of the distracting thoughts jumping around his head as Miranda got to the actual negotiation-part.

Miranda threw a glance back at the masked man before the drone landed, hovering with the net holding the walkie-talkie right in front of her. He just gave her a small nod as she took it out of the net, and without any prompt, a voice came out of it.

"Please identify yourself," the voice said in a rather authoritative tone.

The woman just picked up the walkie-talkie and inspected it for a while. Her face was stoic as she said. "I must admit, I believed all technology to be gone, but then again, it was only a matter of time before human ingenuity allowed them to recreate things. Tell me, how does this device work?"

"... A craftsman made it. Now identify yourself and your intentions for coming here," the voice answered, sounding a bit surprised at Miranda's casual demeanor and question.

Miranda smiled as she had already considered her approach before coming here. She had come to realize... that they genuinely did hold all the cards. The question was never if the forest was a better settlement than out here or if it was worth it for the fort's humans to join them. It unquestionably was.

No, the issue had always been the disparity in numbers and the fear of diluting her own influence. But... the masked man had opened her eyes to how little that mattered now. No matter what happened, he would be in charge. No leader would be appointed without his say-so. She could be replaced if he so wished... and she wouldn't be replaced if he opposed it.

She had utter faith in the owner's capabilities too. She had spent plenty of time with Neil and his party ever since they joined their little city, and he had also spoken of D-grades and how they were all absolute monstrous existences. They knew they wouldn't stand a chance against one. He told her that the disciple of Kallox in the tutorial he was in also served as the final boss. That disciple was only a projection of what the disciple had been capable of just after entering D-grade... and that was already enough to dispel any thoughts both he and Abby had ever to challenge him, as well as cementing how powerful D-grades were.

Yet the masked owner had casually waltzed in with a D-grade bird companion that he called Mystie, and the D-grade beast clearly listened to him. She saw the relationship between them... and it was clear that it viewed the owner as superior in power.

So with that in mind, she realized that she indeed held all the cards in this negotiation. Would they like more people in the city? Sure. Did they need it? No. There was plenty of time for people to come naturally like Miquel.

This entire thing was them offering something to the fort. Not the other way around. In fact, it couldn't even be called a negotiation... it was just extending an invitation and proving how much the fort truly needed them.

With all that in mind, Miranda happily answered the man at the other end of the walkie-talkie with her pre-prepared sales speech.

"My name is Miranda Wells, City Lord of a nearby settlement. We have come to offer you and the other residents in the fort a place of refuge and a safe zone to build a home. Away from the hordes of monsters, a place where no beasts dare enter."

"..."

What followed was silence from the other end for five or so seconds before a voice came from the other end. One different from the first: "I find that sentiment hard to believe. Moreover, we have not noticed any settlements in our immediate surroundings."

"That is understandable; there is a bit of a way there," Miranda said with a light smile. "Of course, we would also assist with travel as much as we can. But who might I be speaking with now?"

"Phillip Morgan, the one currently in charge of this settlement."

"Well, nice to meet you, Phillip," Miranda said. "How about we stop playing telephone and have a sit-down to discuss things?"

Once more, there was hesitation on the other end. Several seconds passed as Miranda had thrown the ball in their court. They would have to admit weakness to refuse for a small group with less than a dozen to approach, or they would get a face-to-face meeting.

"I am uncertain if that is wise," the voice said from the other end. "I believe it is safer for all parties to negotiate at a distance, free from the interference of any skills that could affect the situation."

Ah... a cautious one, Miranda thought. She hadn't considered that one. It was actually quite wise to use a drone and communicate like this to avoid any auras or other mental skills. Heck, she had an aura herself making her appear more trustworthy, as well as some other things she had gained with her Principal City Lord profession.

“While I do certainly respect and even applaud your caution... I can assure you, we did not come here with any intentions of bringing harm to anyone. We only wish to extend this offer and talk it over. Fighting would be unproductive for both sides,” Miranda said, adding. “So with that in mind... see you in a bit.”

She threw the walkie-talkie in the net of the drone, gave it a friendly wave, and turned to the others.

“Let’s go.”

Miranda couldn’t help but throw a look towards the masked man who stood with his eyes closed. Once she laid her eyes upon him, he opened them and looked straight back at her, making eye-contact. With a small nod, he seemed to approve of her way of doing things...

Feeling a lot more confident in her actions, she turned towards the fort with a big smile on her lips.