

Hunter 168

Chapter 168: Phillip

If anyone asked Jake how confident he was in their current strategy, he would give it a solid eight out of ten. Miranda had shown an adequate amount of courtesy without seeming weak or meek while also making their position clear.

She had emphasized that they were not coming as enemies but to negotiate. The strategy revolved around not needing to fight or even having to reveal Mystie. No, Mystie and Jake were the backup plans if things went south and the primary strategy failed.

But... Jake also knew one other little snippet of information. 90% of all strategies fail.

The primary cause of failure was outside sources, or emergent factors from within that didn't conform with the organization's existing culture - individual actors taking on roles to operationalize undiscussed tactics.

Such as shooting a bullet straight towards them.

Now, individual actors making these decisions sometimes had severe negative impacts on the organization as a whole - a media manager making a lousy tweet or a salesman trying to go off-script and losing a big client. But sometimes, it ended up having close to no impact, as the actor simply didn't have enough institutional influence or social capital to accomplish anything.

This did result in quite the uproar and not from the party of 11 – except Miquel, who jumped with fright – but from the direction from the fort. Miranda couldn't help but flash a small smile that Jake caught with his sphere. And he got it.

They had just significantly weakened their own position by being the first aggressors... effectively justifying any violent retaliation. Or, as Miranda planned to leverage it, make them appear benevolent for not counterattacking. It even had the added benefit of making absolutely clear how unthreatening they found the attack – and how big the power-disparity truly was.

Neil and his party alone were enough to overpower most forces, Jake reckoned. They were all above level 50 in their races, and all of them appeared to focus mainly on their classes. His barriers were even stronger than Abby's had been, which meant that he could easily block almost all physical attacks. Of course, a monster like Jake could still shatter it, but he doubted anyone at his own level could do it without using a powerful skill.

The fort was clearly restless as they approached, but no more bullets were fired. Instead, a few dozen people jumped down from the tall walls while a line of gunmen lined the wall itself. And while they didn't point their guns at Jake and his companions, they looked ready to do so at a moment's notice.

Jake observed the people that had jumped down and noted the man in front. A large man with a buzzcut, followed by a squad of people with similar hair and demeanor. Military. Annoyingly so, their stances and aura reminded him a bit of Richard...

He used Identify on the frontman and got an unexpected response.

[Human – lvl ?]

Jake felt like something blocked him from seeing the level. The others around him were clearly also surprised at being unable to Identify him correctly. Jake himself was the only person he knew of where it was blocked, and that was due to a divine-rarity skill.

But... while the others were stumped, Jake instead sharpened his gaze. He refused to believe that it was impossible to see through. His yellow eyes lit up as small parts of Gaze of the Apex Hunter activated. He peered through whatever obscured the man's level as his soul lay bare before him... and he used Identify.

[Human – lvl 59]

He saw the man on the other side shiver and throw a look towards Jake. Jake quickly averted his gaze to one of the other men, trying to act innocent. Likely not a good idea to spook them.

Inwardly he was happy that he succeeded in circumventing the skill. It likely wasn't a very high rarity as it only blocked a basic Identify. He was a bit surprised he didn't get any notification about his Identify upgrading or anything like that.

On the other hand... was it even an upgrade? Even Jake, with his transcendent instincts, couldn't tell when someone used Identify on him – other than the apparent staring – so his current use of the skill that was far more invasive couldn't be called strictly superior. He didn't even really do anything different... it was more like stepping around a wall that obscured your vision to see something better.

"Well, that was a rather rude welcome," Miranda said, breaking the silence with a light jab at the other side.

The man broke out of the stupor created by Jake as he steeled himself and answered. "I apologize; he got nervous because a group of strangers was threateningly approaching us."

"I believe threatening is a strong word. Besides, why would we threaten you?" Miranda answered, still smiling. Neil's invisible barrier remained in front of her, in case anything went bad, with Jake a single One Step Mile away.

"You never know with which intentions people approach in these trying times. We have had... issues before with new people," he answered.

"Well, Phillip," Miranda answered with a bright smile. "We truly have no interest in the fort at all. To my knowledge, you have nothing of interest besides potential citizens for the settlement, no, city, we are creating."

Jake saw the man frown a bit, clearly not expecting things to go as they currently were. Jake got it... he doubted many people would come here, and the only reason to do so was to seek refuge.

"I find this entire matter highly questionable. You claim to come from some enigmatic location safe from beasts and want us to follow you there? I don't want to insult your intelligence, so please don't insult mine by acting like that sounds reasonable," Phillip said sharply.

"It is an acceptable outcome for us just to leave now, but it would be a disservice to all the survivors within the fort," Miranda said. "I haven't lied; we truly have a safe-zone."

"I came by here before joining them a few weeks ago," Lillian added from the side. "I and the others who joined were under... unfortunate circumstances then, but they helped and allowed us to stay. It truly is a safe place."

"I second this," Miquel spoke up, finally making himself useful. "A small group of a bit over a dozen I was leading stumbled across their settlement a week ago, and I truly haven't seen a single aggressive beast in the area."

Phillip looked at the two people and considered them. "Even if what you say is true, the fort is already a safe have--"

"Lie," a voice spoke.

"Silas, please," Miranda said with faux outrage before apologizing. "I am sorry. Silas here has the skill to determine lies from truth. It is a bad habit of his to call out lies."

The military man clearly looked uncomfortable, and a few of the men behind him also shuffled a bit on their feet. Not as much from the fact that he could apparently determine lies, but more so that their leader, with his silence, clearly admitted that the fort indeed wasn't safe.

Jake was thoroughly enjoying all of them working together to 'negotiate.' They seemed to have things under control, and he could just stand at the back and observe. Way more relaxing than being forced to negotiate himself, that's for sure. Delegating tasks for the win.

Mystie was sitting on the grass at his side, clearly bored by everything that was happening. Jake could feel its impatience as it wanted to get home as soon as possible. If these matters took too long, he planned on letting her return early to lessen her anxiety. She spent a long time guarding and nurturing the egg... it was understandable that she would prefer to stay with it till it hatched.

“Fine, while we do face our difficulties, I find it very hard to believe that there is a place more defensible than this. We have a clear view in all directions, and tactically it is impeccable. We have yet to have a single casualty to any beasts entering our premises,” Phillip said, arguing back.

When it had become a discussion if the fort was safe, Jake didn’t know... but he still decided to inject himself into the conversation to speed it up.

“Are you the strongest one in the fort Phillip?” Jake asked, bringing the attention of everyone to him.

The man looked over Jake. A few people had their eyes on him from start to end, clearly already aware that they failed to identify him.

“I am among the ones with the greatest fighting capabilities, yes,” he answered. He likely knew that the human lie-detector would call out a bluff, so he decided to remain honest while still hinting at others with around equal strength to himself.

“I sense no worthwhile enchantments on any of the walls, and while the shield generated by the magic circle is commendable, it won’t matter if a powerful beast comes,” Jake said with disappointment.

“What are you getting at?”

"This fort isn't safe at all. You have no magic circle or formation able to ward off enemies and no individuals strong enough either. Unless you or others make massive progress within a short time, I can only see this place falling within a few months at most."

"Then we would evacuate if that happens. We will see any beast coming from far away and can react adequately if that happens. They won't even get close, and I doubt there are many beasts out there we can't collectively hold off. Nothing is sneaking up on us," Phillip answered, making his stance quite clear. He obviously wanted to keep his valor in front of his men and not lose face. There was just one issue...

"I find that doubtful... considering a beast powerful enough to destroy the fort already did," Jake said, shaking his head. "Mystie."

The bird was more than happy to dispel its own invisibility and let its aura lose and finally get things moving at a more bearable pace.

As for who wasn't happy? Well, practically everyone else. Miranda, Neil, and his party, and even Miquel handled it okay-ish, but the opposing faction sure didn't.

Clearly not used to the aura of a D-grade beast, many of them whitened, and a few men even stumbled back. Phillip and the men around him all went into a defensive position as his eyes darted to the small hawk sitting lazily in the grass beside Jake.

Jake thought it was a bit funny that the bird didn't even have to look intimidating at all. She just looked bored as she propped herself up a bit, trying to at least look a little majestic, which was quite easy for her with her vibrant blue feathers.

“Wha-!?” one of the men yelled as he raised what looked like a small handgun and aimed it at Mystie. Phillip was too slow to react as the second premature discharge of the day was released.

A bullet flew towards Mystie but was blocked by Neil’s barrier.

“STAND DOWN!” Phillip yelled, red in the face. He seemed incredibly flustered, yet he never took his eyes off Mystie or the man standing beside it.

Miranda turned towards Jake and Mystie and gave them a nod. Jake reacted by poking Mystie with his foot, making the bird disperse its aura once more with a small huff. Jake just smiled beneath his mask, finding the entire situation oddly entertaining.

“If I didn’t know better, I would think you were looking for a fight...” Miranda said calmly to Phillip, who tried to remain stoic as much as he could. But Jake could clearly see the drops of sweat running down the military man's back, as he was a mess internally.

“I told you before... we didn’t come here with any bad intentions. Because if we did... we wouldn’t be talking.”

Phillip managed to collect himself as he answered. “Is... that beast D-tier?”

“Yes,” Miranda answered, happy that at least the man knew about them. “The Mystsong Hawk is one of the owner’s companions. The owner is the one in possession of the land where we built the safe haven, and I am the one he appointed to manage it.”

“I assume you are this owner?” the man asked, turning to Jake.

Jake just stared back at his eyes, letting Gaze of the Apex Hunter go a little as he nodded. He felt like he had spoken enough and would let Miranda handle the rest. He had already discussed his role in all this with her beforehand, and that role had now been fulfilled. His only job left was to look scary and enigmatic.

He was taking this entire thing as just a work-thing. It somehow felt more relaxing to put it in a corporate context than to really think about the social situation.

Phillip shook once more from the Gaze, freezing him for a fraction of a second before he looked away.

“So, should we go inside and discuss things or stay out here under the sun?” Miranda asked, breaking the silence that Jake had created by tickling the opposing leader’s soul.

“... will you force your way in if I say no?” Phillip asked with defeat in his voice. He had begun to realize that he was solidly out of his depth.

“No, of course not,” Miranda said, seeming genuinely offended. “How many times do I have to tell you we are here with good intentions? I’m just saying that it would be easier to discuss this somewhere that isn’t in the middle of the plains.”

"Alright," he sighed. "Let's head inside. Please allow us to escort you... but... does the Mystsong Hawk need to come? Having such a powerful beast inside the fort will only lead to panic."

Miranda threw a questioning gaze at Jake, who turned to the Mystsong Hawk. It just tilted its head a bit as runes swirled around it, and it disappeared.

"Is it...?" Phillip asked, unable to sense any trace of the hawk any longer.

"Does it matter?" Miranda said a bit helplessly. "Let's just head in."

The man looked a bit hesitant but motioned for them to open the gate anyway. Jake followed along with the others and an invisible bird floating behind him, looking around at all the different kinds of enchantments made on the gates and walls.

All were of a low level, but as a magic bird, Mystie liked to study them nonetheless. It was magic of an entirely different philosophy, and Jake was sure that it would help her develop. As long as she doesn't begin ripping the walls apart to test their durability, Jake thought, chuckling internally.

As he walked, he also looked around him and noticed that the fort, quite frankly... sucked. It was just too small for the number of people. He saw hundreds just inside the gate, all looking cautiously at the newcomers - some of them gasping at their high levels and at being unable to identify Jake at all.

Phillip motioned with his hand to calm them down as they headed towards the fort's central building. It was one of the few intact buildings, as most other structures were just tents placed around a big courtyard in the middle of the fort. Once more... it kind of sucked.

He also saw something he hadn't yet since returning from the tutorial – children.

The Viper had told him children would find themselves in tutorials where they could safely reach level 10 in their race and evolve to F-grade no matter their age... but no such safety remained once back on Earth. It was up to the parents or the kindness of strangers to make up for it. They were mostly hidden away in the tents or hiding, all looking rather... lost.

Jake saw a small smile creep onto Miranda's lips as they saw how bad the circumstances were... and he perfectly understood. With the fort in this state, even Jake believed he could convince a majority of the decrepit survivors to leave.