

Hunter 169

Chapter 169: The Fort

The inside of the keep was quite spacious, but what hit Jake first was how hot it was. The building was split into several sections, and he felt heat emanate from one of the side rooms he looked towards. The others also looked at it. Phillip explained with a bit of pride, perhaps just happy to feel like he was not 'losing' any conversation currently.

"Inside there, we have our smithy. Lots of talented men and women who focus on their professions have managed to create old-world technology with new magical means," he said, leading them into the room, happy to show off the good parts of the fort after walking through the terrible situation outside.

Inside the smithy, Jake truly felt the heat as he saw several contraptions and worktables scattered around the room. It all looked somewhat chaotic, with the only real order being to split the furnaces and anvils away from the workbenches. Nodding his head towards one of the men sitting in the corner, Phillip brought their attention to a small thin man intensely working. The man hadn't even noticed them, or maybe he didn't care. He was sitting with what looked like tiny electronics, and Jake saw a drone on the table like the one they encountered earlier.

"That there is Arnold; he is the one who made the drone and nearly all our more advanced equipment. He made the walkie-talkie too - a real genius, that one. The rest mainly focus on weaponry and armor, and we produce a wide variety of both cold weapons and firearms." Phillip explained proudly.

"Interesting. How do firearms work with the system?" Miranda asked.

"Calling them firearms is actually a bit silly now. They are more like magical weapons now and generate their own bullets. Not that much different from wands in many ways. They also use mana, of course, so there honestly isn't much difference between a mage and a gunman," he said before continuing his explanation.

“Yet guns do retain one of their most useful features from before the system: they are easy to use. While each weapon has a level requirement to use, they aren’t that different to operate than a pre-system gun. As a ranged weapon, they are far easier to use and still vastly superior to something like a bow.”

Jake scoffed, getting the man’s attention, but he didn’t dare enquire further. While the hunter did see some usefulness in guns, he vastly preferred bows. The reason for that being relatively simple. A gun only used your magic-stats, and it was far easier to, one could say, customize your attacks with a bow.

When using a bow, Jake used nearly his entire body. He even used his magic-stats with Infused Powershot, and in cases where he didn’t use them for the shot itself, he used it with his Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter or his poisons. Oh yeah, that was another major thing. It was far easier to poison arrows than bullets.

Sure, you could build a gun specifically to use pre-made bullets and then make poison-bullets, but at that point, you should just get your shit together and use a damn bow. The only possible advantage Jake could see bullets have was with range and while using a sniper rifle. But even then, one just had to ask the Storm Elemental if Jake wasn’t also deadly at extremely long range.

“Anyway,” Phillip said, trying to act like he hadn’t noticed Jake’s protest. “We have managed to arm nearly every individual, and with our tall walls, we have managed to defend the fort from any beasts. As a large settlement, we appear to attract a lot of attention.”

“Not surprising,” Neil said, cutting in for the first time. “You are effectively a bag of experience waiting to be claimed by those strong enough. I reckon there are quite a few levels to be earned for any beasts managing to break through and enter the courtyard.”

“Yeah,” Eleanor added. “The only reason you haven’t been overrun is that you aren’t worth it for the stronger beasts. While you all level and get stronger, you will also begin attracting stronger and stronger enemies. It is just a matter of time before a D-grade comes.”

“What makes your settlement any different from ours?” Phillip asked. He appeared to understand their logic, and a part of him knew the fort couldn’t stand forever, but that didn’t mean some other place was safer.

“Because it’s my territory,” Jake answered without even thinking.

Everyone turned to him as this part certainly wasn’t part of their practice. They instead had planned on Miranda explaining how the forest was safer, how they had a talented space mage and then finishing by mentioning that the owner and the D-grade beast would defend them. Mainly the D-rank, actually, as that was a kind of power more quantifiable than the enigmatic Jake.

“I don’t see how that matters, an army of beasts could still easily de-“

“Beasts aren’t as stupid as you think,” Jake said. “They know to stay away from where they don’t belong. It’s simply pure instinct. A beast does not willingly enter the domain of a hunter.”

When he said those words, Jake came to a realization he probably should have had a long time ago. The area claimed by the Pylon was his, that was clear. His mana signature was in the atmospheric mana itself, making it clear it was his. And like a beast marking its territory, so had Jake marked what was under the influence of the Pylon.

It wasn't the Pylon keeping beasts away. It was that it was Jake's Pylon. They all felt the faint aura of Jake, and their instincts made them aware that they should stay away.

Because it was the territory of the Primal Hunter.

As Jake stood there, he had unknowingly let some of his aura spread out as he came to the realization. And while he wasn't a D-grade, that didn't mean his aura was any less powerful. But it was different because it didn't stem from the natural suppression of grade, but from everyone's instincts warning them.

Even Mystie looked uncomfortable as she was clearly affected too. It wasn't the kind of suppression that had any physical effects. No, it was purely mental. The bird gave Jake a small nudge with its wing, and Jake noticed what he was doing and swiftly retracted his aura.

Shit.... he thought, afraid that he just ruined Miranda's strategy.

The owner had truly gone above and beyond! Miranda felt cold sweat run down her back as he proclaimed the city his territory. She felt his presence even more than when the Mystsong Hawk had released its aura. Like every fiber of her being – especially the small lizard brain all humans had – practically yelling at her that she should not mess with the man in front of her.

Phillip looked like he had just been splashed with a bucket of cold water, the sweat visible on his face. He looked genuinely scared, and it appeared he just realized. The Mystsong Bird was not the strongest member of their group.

“Sir, please,” Miranda said, throwing the masked owner a look. She needed to communicate that even with his power, he was still human and at least listened to her advice. It would strengthen her position not just in this negotiation but even more so if they decided to join.

He looked back at her with those yellowed beastly eyes and almost seemed... apologetic? No, she must have read that wrong. Truly skills that could read others weren't flawless, especially not with one so much more powerful than herself.

The aura had already dispersed as the room became calm once more.

“I apologize if I offended you in any way; I didn't mean to question your words,” Phillip apologized while not daring to even look towards the owner.

“It's alright... being skeptical is to be expected and even encouraged. Now; should we find a place and talk about what comes next? I would also be very interested in hearing some more about the fusion of magic and technology.”

Miranda skillfully led Phillip away as she sent a glance towards the owner, asking him to stay. Neil and his party followed while Lillian stayed with the owner. Miquel also followed her, likely just wanting to get away from the scary masked man. The setup was perfect. Miranda believed she would never have an easier time convincing the man than now. The owner had truly played his role well.

She is so mad at me, Jake thought as he stayed in the room while Miranda led Phillip and the others away, leaving him only with Lillian. She went over to his side and just stood there, Jake not entirely sure what to do now.

Miranda didn't want him to follow; that was clear. He had made everyone uncomfortable by forgetting to restrain himself. He had known since childhood that one had to be controlled or you would scare others. Before the system, Jake had just thought he had a scary face when he got mad or something, but after the system, things began to make a lot more sense.

Thinking about it... that was clearly the bloodline, wasn't it?

His parents had never had any reactions to him, but his brother had. He remembered that Caleb would be scared if he got too close while emotional, and it was only when Jake got older and more reserved and meeker in front of him that his brother stopped being afraid.

As brothers, they naturally developed a rivalry. Jake unconsciously always competed with him, and Jake assumed that must have been hard for him.

I really need to sit down and figure out what exactly this whole bloodline-business is about.

"Sir?" Lillian asked as Jake had now just been standing still for a good fifteen seconds, deep in thought.

Jake blushed slightly below the mask as he praised the Malefic One for no one being able to see his face. "Yes, let us go check out his fort."

The three of them – two humans and one invisible bird – exited the keep, and many eyes turned to them instantly. Jake just did his best to ignore their gazes while Lillian seemed to genuinely not care. As the only woman surviving the hellspawn that was Abby and her sadistic fuck of a father, Donald, she, without a doubt, had a strong mental state.

Jake walked away from the keep as he looked around the fort. And man, did he mention that it sucked?

It looked like a sad campsite mushed together in the courtyard. The courtyard was large but far from large enough to accommodate this many people. He took the time to try and determine how many people lived there, and a conservative estimate would put it at around two thousand. Likely closer to two and a half thousand.

That was a lot of people, but his territory was also big and expanding by the day. He could already imagine the many levels Miranda would get from recruiting this entire base, and he reckoned Lillian would also get her fair share. On that note:

“Did Miranda allow you to get a profession related to the city?”

The woman looked at him a bit before she waved her hands. A barrier appeared around them. It was invisible to the eye and only had the simple function of blocking out sound. Neat skill... and handy for an assistant.

“Yes,” Lillian answered. “Principal City Lord’s Assistant is the name. She also granted me the title of Lord along with it. I believe there was discussion about making Neil a Lord as she could appoint three lords and one Baron, but nothing is settled. She gave me the title as, without it, I would be unable to access certain functionalities of the Pylon of Civilization.”

“I see. So she told you about the Pylon?” Jake asked, frowning. He was pretty sure that was meant to be a secret between them and not info just to spread willy-nilly.

Lillian seemed to get his meaning and quickly clarified. "Yes, but only after I signed a system-enforced contract that bans me from discussing anything related to the Pylon with anyone but Miranda and you, sir."

"A contract, huh?" Jake asked. He had read about contracts in the books, but he always assumed they were just regular old contracts like the one he made with Miranda. Was it possible to make them system-enforced? It must take a particular skill.

"What is the punishment if you break it?"

"Death," she answered calmly. "But I can only break it if I do so willfully. As an example, if I am under the influence of anything affecting my mind or someone can listen in without my knowledge, it does not count as breaking it. If I purposefully try to break it, I get warned by a massive headache, and if I break it anyway, I will cease to be."

Jake looked her over as he nodded. He could hear in her voice, she had experimented with it. Without even caring for her life, apparently. But... Jake didn't really have much to say about other near-suicidal people. He had done equally stupid stuff himself. And in the end, that stupidity had led to gains. Also, he would have totally done the same thing as her and pushed the contract to its limits.

"I see. Well, keep up the good work," Jake said in acknowledgment. Wait, didn't I just tell her to continue to do reckless shit?

"I will," she said with a smile. Well, who cares? Everyone likes positive reinforcement, he thought in response.

Jake walked with her through the fort as he looked the place over, and at the same time, considered if it was really wise of him to come along. Mystie alone could have done the same job of being intimidating, and at least no one expected a bird to make conversation.

But on the other hand, he didn't want to be just a freeloader. While he was totally fine with having Miranda do 99% of the work, he did feel like he should at least do something to contribute. He was technically her boss. Shit, that means I am Lillian's boss's boss...

Without really noticing it, they had made their way up to one of the walls. Lillian was just following along silently while everyone they came across got out of the way. It was somewhat unsurprising that people just tried to avoid the unidentifiable masked guy whom even their leader looked meek in front of.

Jake stood on the wall and looked out over the landscape. There were a few soldier-like people on the wall too, but they all kept a good ten to fifteen meters from the two of them. He honestly found it a bit annoying as he wanted to borrow a gun from someone.

As he stood there, a somewhat unaware soldier was walking while reading something and passed by. Jake stepped in front of him to ask if he could see the rifle he had strapped over his shoulder.

Lillian instantly noticed that Jake was staring hard at the rifle and went up to the soldier. "Excuse me."

"Hm?" the poor guy said as he looked up, seeing a scarred woman and a masked man with piercing yellow eyes both staring at him. He recognized them from when they entered, and he remembered seeing that monstrous bird too.

“Sorry, I didn’t notice that I-“ he began, but Lillian interrupted him.

“The city owner would like to ask if he can have one of your firearms to inspect.”

“I- of course!” he said as he quickly ran off. He returned less than half a minute later with a rifle nearly identical to his own.

“Here you go, sir and madam! This one is unbound and even better than my own!” he said as he handed the rifle to Lillian.

She, in turn, gave it to Jake, who stoically accepted it. Couldn’t I have just asked for it myself? he wondered. I guess she knows what she is doing, so let’s just go along with it.

He held up the rifle and inspected it, and it was nearly as disappointing as the state of the fort.

[Bolt-action Imitation Rifle (Inferior)] – A rifle that can conjure and fire inferior-rarity bullets, made to mimic a bolt-action rifle of old. It is created by a newly integrated craftsman, and while there is much room for improvement, it is nevertheless solidly built and durable for its rarity.

Requirements: Lvl 20+ in any humanoid race.

Well, I guess if it works, it works...

Jake had to remember that these were mass-produced by crafters with only a few month's worths of experience at most. That they could even make these rifles, to begin with, was impressive.

He spent the next period of time inspecting the rifle's enchantments, and he even felt the subtle probing of Mystie. It indeed was relatively simple, but the magic circle scribbled on the inside of the rifle was still a bit impressive.

Jake bound the rifle to himself as he tried injecting mana into it and felt as a bullet was conjured in the chamber. It appeared only to be able to create a single shot at a time, which was disappointing. As for how strong the bullet was... well, he had a feeling he would soon be able to test it.

The soldier that had given him the rifle had never left but kept staying a few meters away, almost as if waiting for orders. It had been nearly two hours since Jake got the gun and began tinkering with it, so the young man jumped a bit when Jake spoke.

"You got incoming."

"Huh? Incoming what?" the soldier asked, confused.

Jake pointed out into the horizon. "Quite an army of beasts. Big, four legs, looks like fat hairy cows."

The man looked out into the distance and saw absolutely nothing. He looked confused back at the masked man again. He stood there confused for a minute or two before one of their snipers called out: "I think I see something approaching in the distance!"

The young man instantly went white as he yelled to those below: "SOUND THE ALARMS! STAMPEDE INCOMING!"