

Hunter 172

Chapter 172: A Monster To Hunt

Neil frowned as he listened to the cheers of the many soldiers. The fort's inhabitants in the courtyard below didn't join in but instead began getting to work like it was just an everyday occurrence. They gathered their tools and went to fix the walls, with Neil overhearing how they talked about the fight being a bit shorter today than usual.

He and his comrades hadn't had to interfere at all... in fact, the soldiers won the fight just before they would have to. The timing of the fight ending was so... perfect. What is going on here?

Jake stared into the horizon, towards where the herd had come from. He squinted his eyes, seeing nothing but more hills for hundreds of kilometers. It was sloping slightly downward, making him unable to see as far as he would like.

Something had designed this... he was sure of it. It was too perfect, too convenient.

He gave a signal to Mystie as she began bringing down Lillian and Miranda. Jake himself lowered the mana output on his feet as he also started slowly falling towards the ground.

Jake saw Neil and his party walk over towards their landing position, already talking to a tired-looking Phillip.

"I just feel like this whole ordeal is off; beasts usually don't act like this," he said, his companions nodding along. They all felt like things seemed off.

“While I understand that you find the situation suspect, is the situation truly that off? Beasts and monsters all acted unnaturally during the tutorials, and it shouldn’t be that surprising that they act unnaturally out here in the real world too.”

“It was like that because the tutorials were designed to be that way,” Jake butted in, landing right in front of Neil and Phillip.

They both gave him a confused look, Phillip’s gaze being more confused than Neil’s.

“What do you mean by that?” Neil asked, being the first to open his mouth.

“The system designed the tutorials with input from other powerful beings - some tutorials experiencing more input and customization from these entities than others. But they were, in the end, tutorials. Everything was made easier for us in many ways by hampering the enemies we were to face... but this is the real world. If what we face still acts like there is some grand design behind their actions, chances are it is because there is a designer behind them,” Jake explained, dropping knowledge he had learned from Duskleaf and Villy. In retrospect, it was quite the bomb... but Jake hadn't really considered if he should share it.

The two men just stood there staring at him; confused after Jake shared something so massive like it was just common knowledge - both equally critical of his words as they wondered how he knew such things. Assuming they were true, that is.

Jake saw their gazes and honestly didn’t feel like explaining how he was actually good friends with a god, and he had heard this while drinking vodka with him. “Anyway, it means there is someone or something behind this. That is what’s important right now.”

“...Alright, let’s say your theory is correct; why would anyone or anything send these bovines here to be slaughtered?” Phillip asked, clearly really wanting to ask about the tutorial-business but holding himself back.

“I don’t know... but I plan to find out if I’m right,” Jake said, turning to Neil. “Take care of the business here with Miranda. I’ll head out and search for what might be the cause of this.”

He didn’t bother to say anything more as he summoned his two phantasmal wings, much to the fright of Phillip and the other soldiers. A few of them even moved their hands towards their weapons, assuming another enemy had appeared.

Jake didn’t give them time to do anything or adequately process what happened before he, with a great flap, soared into the air. Mystie didn’t bother hiding any longer either, dispelling her invisibility and following Jake. Once again, earning a scared yelp from a few terrified humans.

Miranda turned to Phillip, making a faux apology: “I apologize, the owner is a bit... eccentric, but if he believes there is something off about this entire scenario, then it would only be wise to believe him.”

“Well, he already left to investigate, so I am not sure what to say,” Phillip sighed with defeat, asking both Miranda and Neil. “What was that business about powerful beings and designed tutorials? The system made the tutorials, and they were managed by that humanoid being in the introduction area, weren’t they?”

“I thought it was designed by the system too... but in retrospect, it does make sense,” Neil began. “The tutorial we entered was managed by someone calling himself the Disciple of Kallox, with Kallox being a

now-dead space mage that had left his Legacy behind in the tutorial. The entire tutorial was essentially just a tool to find potential inheritors of this Legacy.”

“I thought it was just the setting... you know, the story spun up by the system,” Levi frowned. “Did this Kallox actually exist for real? Did you actually accept some inheritance from a dead geezer?”

“Levi, if we assume Kallox was a real person... show some respect,” Neil said, throwing him a look. Getting a slightly apologetic “sorry” back from Levi, who backed off.

“Interesting...” Phillip said as he listened to them. “Our tutorial was just an overgrown abandoned city with the only objective being to survive. We didn’t meet any living beings that weren’t monsters trying to eat us at all.”

“Not us either... but there were huge message boards with writing on them informing us of different things at different times, so someone was clearly watching. I assumed it was just the system doing it... but it may as well have been creatures from other universes,” Miranda reflected out loud.

“Most of the survivors here came from the same tutorial as me... but I think we should have done some more information gathering about exactly what type of tutorial everyone experienced. There could be a lot of valuable information to be found through that,” Phillip said.

“All the more reason why you should join the owner’s city, a place that will most certainly become a beacon of hope in this new world,” Miquel spoke up, making himself known once more. He hadn’t been useless throughout the fighting but had actually gone around and talked with the other camp survivors, trying to learn more about the fort.

He found that there was borderline no resistance to leaving... in fact, most wanted out of there. They had been confined to this fort ever since leaving their tutorials and traveling here. But at the same time, they were afraid of leaving because of the potential danger of the surrounding area.

“Indeed it is,” Miranda smiled. “Now then, should we continue our discussion behind closed doors once more to find a way for all of you to leave this place?”

Phillip gave her a nod and a smile as they left for the keep, Phillip throwing out a few last-minute orders to get the wall repaired.

Miranda kept her smile as she looked at the many eyes on her, their gazes showing signs of hope as they had heard what she’d just said. Everything was really going just as they had hoped, and in some ways, expected.

Nothing as of yet.

Jake flew with Mystie towards the direction where the Herd Leader had led its herd from. The path was straightforward to follow, as unsurprisingly, a horde of giant cows left quite the trail.

He also felt a part of him activate as he flew across the landscape. Some instinctual knowledge he so far hadn’t had any use for, namely: Hunter’s Tracking. Granted, it didn’t really help much as the trail was obvious, but it still gave him some insights.

Some of the tracks were older than the herd of the day before. Most of them were, in fact. The further he got away, the more trails he found, as clearly the bovines had been led down this specific path towards the fort.

Phillip had mentioned they came from the same general area every day... how the hell didn't he question it as being weird as fuck? Did he really think that the system is still helping humanity out?

To Jake... that notion didn't make much sense. But he did have more knowledge than others. He knew that apparently, things like the Mystbone or the giant crystal tree on the cloud existed - natural treasures that allowed beasts to progress their levels far faster and reach D-grade before any human could.

In some ways... it could be said that the system favored the lucky beasts that encountered these treasures more than the humans who got their tutorials. Sure, the tutorials had helped humanity plenty... but it hadn't allowed them to suddenly gain a hundred levels and grow to an airliner-sized Roc.

If Jake had to take a guess... then the source of this entire scenario was one such beast. He knew that some beasts could show extraordinary intelligence, such as Hawkie or Mystie. It wasn't a given that becoming D-grade would make a monster intelligent, though. The Roc was pretty dumb, and the Storm Elemental was just... well, an overgrown Cloud Elemental.

He kept flying forward for many kilometers, Mystie easily keeping up. If Jake had used One Step Mile, he could likely outpace the bird, but flying was better for this kind of scouting. With a trail so apparent, it made sense to track it from above, allowing him to see anything that stuck out.

Such as when he noticed that the trail was actually a collection of many different paths. He saw more minor signs of bovines slowly joining the herd as they made their way towards the fort, likely called there by the Herd Leader or whatever was behind this situation.

It would make sense if the Herd Leaders could collect the bovines, with their name heavily implying an ability to lead the herd.

About three hundred kilometers from the fort, the terrain finally began to change away from the neverending plains and resemble... farmland.

Jake looked ahead and saw what looked like buildings off in the distance and motioned for Mystie to follow him. He saw that the more extensive trail was leading on forward, but a small path was pointing towards the farm he was heading towards.

I guess this answers some questions about what happened to farm animals after the system came, he thought, when he arrived, flying over the large estate and inspected the state of things.

The barns and the countless pens for cattle were ripped apart, and it looked like a tornado had gone through. Magic had washed over the world, and the cattle had suddenly gained strength and levels beyond anything before. Maybe they had stayed put for a while, but when hunger and boredom set in, they must have broken loose and entered the wider world.

When he thought about it, the plains outside were filled with bovines when he made his way towards the Pylon on the first day after returning to Earth. Maybe they were out feeding or had escaped from a farm like this...

Landing at one of the barns, he entered it and began looking around the area more closely. He didn't see any blood stains or signs of fighting, so it appeared the bovines remained non-aggressive towards each other even while breaking out.

But... there was clear aggression shown towards the facility itself. It was needlessly broken, as the escaped cattle appeared to have gone out of their way to break things. It was a miracle the building was even standing.

After he was done looking around, he went to the central house... and he didn't even need to get close before a faint scent entered his nose. One he had experienced many times before. Blood, or more accurately, human blood.

It was at the estate's main house and where the owner of the farm must have lived. Jake saw a few bloodstains on the door hanging limply from its broken hinges, and the upper part of the doorframe shaved off, making the door entrance look more like just a hole in the wall.

He saw what looked like hooves at the entrance, and he knelt down to inspect them further. Something felt... off about them. His tracking skill was active, but he didn't need it to notice the huge glaring issue.

Only two hoofprints.

Bipedal cow? A minotaur? he thought as he frowned and entered the house, telling Mystie to stay outside.

The inside was... even worse. Everything was ripped apart as whatever beast entered tore through it. Yet, some signs of habitation remained. An old fireplace looked like it had been used within the last few weeks, and he even saw a few signs of cooking being done.

People had clearly been living here even after the tutorials ended. Likely been deposited back to their farm by the system and taken refuge in the house. Jake could see that with the system displacing

everything, the farm was relatively secluded with no neighbor within sight, making the inhabitants believe it was the wisest move to stay.

And it likely was dependant on their levels. The many bovines' levels weren't high, but he could see an unsuspecting family be trampled by a horde of the damn things easily. On the other hand, the bovines likely wouldn't come to the house en-masse, making it comparatively safer.

Not that the house had turned out to be safe in the end...

Jake saw the tracks of the bipedal bovine continue into the house, leaving dents in the floorboards. It was too heavy for the structure, and if the atmospheric mana hadn't made the wood more durable, it would have gone through the floor without a doubt.

He also saw a few more bloodstains leading into the living room – the room was also giving off the most pungent scent of blood.

Jake carefully made his way into the living room, and even if his sphere had already made him aware of what he would find long ago, the sight was still less than pleasant.

Five people were in the room - a man, a woman, and three children. At least... that was what Jake estimated. It was... a bit hard to tell.

Only a single corpse was even halfway complete – that of the man.

He had been strung up by poles of metal clearly taken from the pens of the barn outside. His arms and legs impaled through as he stood rooted to the floor. He looked like he had struggled before bleeding out... his struggle, clearly caused not only by his own will to survive, but what happened to the four others.

The corpse of a woman had been ripped apart into several pieces and strewn across the floor. Meathooks hung from the ceiling, with limbs too small to be that of adults. Jake didn't see any heads... but he estimated there must have been three children.

Jake felt... repulsed.

He understood hunting and killing. He had come to realize this as a normal part of life, and he didn't view the act of killing other sapients the same as before. But this wasn't just killing. It was just cruelty. They hadn't been killed with any other purpose than to bring them all more suffering in their final moments.

This had all happened at least a week ago, likely even longer. For that long, the family hung there, disgraced and forgotten by all but the culprit behind it.

Closing his eyes, he even suppressed his sphere as he collected himself. He left the house and walked outside. He already had enough information... he had remembered the tracks, and in its slaughter, the creature had stayed there for a period... leaving plenty of traces of its presence for Jake and his Hunter's Tracking to pick up. It had taken its time.

Jake turned to the house as he held out his hand, conjuring a transparent flame. He willed it forward as it took hold of the house, and with his control, he set the entire building ablaze with an all-consuming flame. He stayed there to make sure it all burned down for the next half an hour as he reflected inwardly about his next steps.

Mystie sat at his side, glaring at the fire, confused about what he was doing, but sensing his mood, it didn't say or do anything. It just waited and let the silence only be broken by the crackling embers remaining where the house had once stood.

He gazed at the ashes, not a single trace of the corpses remaining. Jake let his sphere spread once more as he carefully observed everything... and turned towards the direction the hooves had left.

"Mystie... please head back. This may take longer than I first thought. I know you want to get home to Hawkie and the egg, but I can't come back with you quite yet, and this may be a lot to ask, but please go and defend the fort in case something happens," he said, smiling at the bird apologetically, before finishing.

"I have a monster to hunt."