

## Hunter 173

### Chapter 173: Mental Magic

Jake walked slowly towards his chosen prey's direction as Mystie looked to be in internal conflict, so he decided to make it a bit easier for the bird. "It's D-grade... clearly intelligent. I have no way to determine its exact power without meeting it, so it will be dangerous. This isn't your fight, so I won't drag you into it. Just go back and take care of things."

Mystie looked at him with a bit of concern, and he understood its doubts. To pursue an enemy of unknown strength wasn't the safest or wisest course of action, and the two hawks had placed many expectations on him.

"Relax, I'll be able to escape even if things go south. In fact, I'm pretty sure I'm faster by myself than with you or Hawkie," he said with a smile, assuring the bird.

Jake saw it fly off as he turned towards the trail with the hoofprints, his smile gone.

D-grade... he was sure of it. With the combination of his Sense of the Malefic Viper, Hunter's Tracking, high perception, and natural talents, he could sense the presence left behind by the monster that had stayed in the house to torture the family.

Not just sense it, but truly feel it. And Jake felt the aura of a D-grade monster, which only made him all the more determined to hunt it down.

Based on the family not leaving, he assumed they had all been on the weaker side, and yet a D-grade had gone out of its way to kill and torture them. With a power disparity like that... it was just pure

cruelty. Clearly, the monster that did it hated them... but it had sowed karma through its actions. And Jake was more than happy to be the reaper.

With One Step Mile on full display, he followed the tracks away from the farmhouse. He crossed the vast fields in only a few minutes, each step crossing nearly 100 meters. It was far faster than his flying speed, and he quickly came to his next destination.

It was in the middle of a field, with countless tracks of bovines present. It looked like hundreds if not thousands of the bovines had been gathered for a period before they all headed off in another direction – directly towards the fort.

The D-grade had stopped there too but hadn't followed the herd. He felt its presence soaked into the area, indicating it must have been there a while, likely using plenty of skills and mana. With its presence so obvious, it didn't take him long to find the direction it had left in.

Jake followed the trails for the next few hours and traveled from destination to destination with great speed. He came to several more old farm estates, all of them looking a lot like the first. Many of them were utterly broken, and he found even more corpses of humans around or inside them.

His mood soured for every new farmstead, but it also served to reaffirm his decision to track down the monster. He wanted to kill it... but also to know why. He knew some creatures were just assholes, liking to play with their victims. Humans being principal case-studies of this. But even so... Jake still wanted to know why.

He felt the trail get more and more fresh as he moved forward. By now, he was hundreds of kilometers from the fort at least, showing exactly how much Earth had been expanded. He seriously doubted the farmers lived a hundred kilometers from their neighbors before, after all.

Besides the farmhouses, he also saw the trails left by herds of bovines, but oddly enough, none of the beasts themselves. Have they all been gathered up by Herd Leaders?

The number of bovines there had to be in the tens of thousands based on how many pens there were in the barns, yet no more than a single Herd Leader with a following of less than a thousand cows attacked the fort every time. If they all attacked at once... the fort would have been run over long ago.

He frowned as he kept up the chase, soon finding a small farmhouse that looked like it couldn't contain more than a few dozen cattle at most. The trail was still incredibly fresh, and he could smell the scent of human blood from far away.

But he also felt something else...

Jake quickly rushed into the small house and was immediately taken aback when he saw the interior.

Two corpses were lying on the ground, their bodies still emanating heat, proving they had died not long ago. Yet they weren't the most noteworthy thing; it was the person still standing there. A young girl, looking no older than ten or eleven, stood there with a sword in her hand, just staring down at the two corpses.

Jake wanted to say something but saw the eyes of the girl. They were entirely blank, and if he didn't know better, he would guess she was sleepwalking. In fact... it reminded him a lot of the eyes of the Herd Leader he had seen before.

"Hey," Jake said anyway, trying to get her attention. He got no response as she stood there, utterly unresponsive. She didn't even react when Jake took the weapon or brought her out of the farmhouse.

He really didn't know what to do. Mystie had already been sent back, and Jake couldn't see himself just leaving the girl there alone. But at the same time, he didn't want to give up on his hunt. I'll have to return her to somewhere safe.

Jake stood there, thinking if he should just rush back to the fort with her and return here again... but was that really the best thing to do? She was under some serious mental manipulation right now, and who knows if they could dispel it... or what dispelling it could cause.

He didn't know much about mental magic, so he could only guess. And even if he disregarded the mental magic... what if she remembered? The bloody sword and two corpses were leaving little up to the imagination as to what had happened.

I can't leave her here... hopefully, someone back at the fort can help.

Jake picked up the bloody girl, who didn't even react to being picked up. He took her in a princess carry as he took his first step back towards the fort, nearly seventy meters crossed.

Less range than before, and increased resource consumption... but nothing I can't handle, he thought as he evaluated the effects carrying the girl had on his One Step Mile.

He picked up his pace as he crossed the plains at an unprecedented speed. He didn't have to watch for any tracks, and he used the Pylon as a compass of sorts to remember the direction of the fort. Even if it

wasn't 100% accurate, the plains were flat and open enough that he couldn't miss the giant fortified settlement.

His pace was that of a light jog, but as every footfall took him further than should be possible, he didn't take long to return. It took him less than 8 minutes to go from the small farmhouse till he saw the fort, and another minute before he appeared on the wall, scaring the living shit out of the soldier standing there.

They pointed their weapons towards him on instinct, but Jake froze them all with a quick glance.

"Do you have anyone with skills related to mental magic?" he asked the frozen soldier. "And maybe a psychiatrist or someone good with kids..."

The soldier just kept staring at him, but another one below who had heard him ran off towards the central keep, Jake not bothering to stay there either. Glancing up, he saw Mystie sit on top of the central keep, not even caring about staying invisible. It gave him a look, but he shook his head and motioned to the girl. The bird seemed to understand and closed its eyes again. Jake was just thankful Mystie had chosen to stay at the fort... it made him feel a bit better about leaving his 'employees' there.

He met Phillip, Miranda, and Lillian outside of the keep as they rushed out to see what was happening. They saw Jake carrying what looked like an unconscious young girl and looked at him with perplexed expressions.

"I found her while on the trail of the instigator of the attacks. She is under a mental skill of some sort; got any healers who can help with that? A psychiatrist or someone with experience with regular mental issues may also be a good idea..."

Jake briefly explained what he had found as the two stood there listening to his explanation with shock. Phillip deeply frowned when he mentioned that the perpetrator was likely some kind of D-grade monster who enjoyed torturing humans, while Miranda looked with pity at the girl.

"Here, let me," Lillian said as she walked out from behind Miranda to take the girl from Jake. He gladly obliged and handed the still unresponsive girl to her.

With her handed off... Jake turned right around again, as he said. "I'm off again."

"Be careful," Miranda said with a worried expression.

Jake smiled a bit below his mask as he took a step forward, appearing on the fort's wall and another to appear on the plains below.

It's whatever fucker did this that should be careful.

Silas sat with the girl inside the keep, using the room where they had just had a meeting. Everyone else was also there, including a man who used to work as a psychologist at a high school, which was the closest they could get to a mental health professional with experience working with children.

As a healer, Silas had many different kinds of skills, and some of them even dealt with dispelling foreign mana from others. He had gotten especially good at that, having to deal with Donald's curses.

While mental magic was quite different from that... some of the same concepts applied.

He placed his hands on her head and closed his eyes as he focused on the skill. He felt his mana sink into the girl and begin searching for any foreign influences. It didn't take long before he found the source.

Silas pushed towards it to try and dispel it, but the second he made contact with it, he felt a rush of mental energy strike back at him like a sledgehammer.

"ARGH!" he yelled as he let the girl go and fell off the chair - blood flowing from his nose.

"What the hell happened?" Neil asked in fright, but Silas was more concerned about the girl. He didn't hesitate to place his hands on her again and inspect the energy, fearing it would harm the girl more.

The energy within the girl had locked itself completely down as it seeped deep into her soul. He felt an almost taunting intent from the mana as he was forced to let go again.

"I... I can't dispel it... and even if I could, I am unsure how to do it without harming or even killing her..." Silas said with regret as he shook his head and looked at the poor girl. Drool was coming out of her mouth as she stood there.

"Is there nothing we can do?" Lillian asked, her face still stoic but her voice concerned.

"I can't... but I remember Donald's curses all stopped working the moment he died... so if the caster dies..." Silas hesitantly said, quite a bit unsure.

"Let us have faith in the owner then," Miranda said.

Four minutes and forty-seven seconds.

That is how long it took him to return to the small farmstead where he had found the girl. It was quite a lot faster when he didn't carry the small girl along. He had remembered the path back, as it was more or less in a straight path.

Drinking a stamina potion to replenish himself, he began sniffing out the trail of the monster.

Based on the girl... the monster was bound to have some mental skills. It was predictable considering the Herd Leaders, but he was still a bit worried now.

A part of Jake had assumed the skill only worked on other bovines. Perhaps it was some kind of Herd Overlord that could control Herd Leaders to do its bidding... he hadn't expected it just to have mental magic in general.

From the girl, it even appeared quite powerful. Jake knew that mental energy affected some of the soul's outer layers, so he had considered if his Gaze of the Apex Hunter could have somehow dispelled it... but it was too much of a risk. Besides, even if it worked, all he would get out of it was a young girl confronted with what she had done – or if she didn't remember it – questions about her parents.



He didn't have any mental defense skills, and while he did have a decent amount in willpower, it was still his second-lowest stat, only ahead of intelligence. It should, in theory, be a bad matchup for him.

But even with his lingering worries, he didn't even once reconsider chasing down the monster. In some ways, it just made him all the more excited. It was a different kind of opponent, one he was more than happy to kill.

Picking up on the monster's trail once more, he began following it a bit slower this time. Based on the clues from his Hunter's Tracking, the fact that the girl was still alive, and the two corpses in the farmhouse still were warm, he assumed it was close.

Soon, he spotted another large farmstead in the distance, directly in the direction of the trail. It was larger than any of the other estates he had seen, and he could almost feel the presence of the many creatures there.

He even saw a few bovines in the plains around the large farm, slowly meandering about. Jake was well outside their detection radius, and he noted how they were all just normal bovines around level 25.

Summoning his wings, Jake took to the air as he flew high up into the air to get an aerial view. He flew towards the farm as he scouted it out from above.

And what he saw was an army. Tens of thousands of bovines gathered in the estate or around it, dozens of Herd Leaders and bulls. The strongest Herd Leaders were above level 90, with some of the bulls getting as high as 75.

If that wasn't enough... he felt the presence he had been tracking inside the large barn. The barn was the largest he had seen so far and looked like it could house thousands of cattle at a time. Before the system, this had, without a doubt, been a massive operation, but now it had been taken over by the creatures it once kept as livestock.

Jake didn't hesitate as he flew down towards the barn. He wasn't interested in any of the beasts, except maybe a few of the Herd Leaders. No, he was heading straight for whatever monster had managed to subdue them.