

Hunter 221

Chapter 221: World Congress: "Confrontations"

Jake had always liked to play strategy games, mainly those of the good old 4X genre. 4X was an abbreviation of Explore, Expand, Exploit and Exterminate, and was in 90% of cases, macro gameplay and economy ruled as one of the most important aspects. While they weren't the most realistic, he and Casper had spent many hours nerding out over making optimal builds and strategies, and one of the most important factors was always location.

In these games, the resources you had available nearly entirely dependent on the starting location. You may have valuable metals or expensive crystals or be placed close to a forest for logging or seaside with great fishing possibilities.

The placement of the Pylons was a bit of the same. Most, if not all, citizens prefer to be within the scope of the Pylon for obvious reasons. It increased experience gain for non-combat-related activities, and the City Lord also wanted it for all their skills to work properly.

This meant that unless you had valuable resources extremely close by, you would have to travel outside of the safety of the city to get it, something very few liked to do. There was always the risk of some high-level asshole bird descending and killing you or some huge earthworm suddenly come up and gobble you down.

Haven, as an example, had a mine placed within the area of the city with some ores and metals. Perhaps a few gems and crystals too, but nothing worth writing home about, and far from enough to call it a strategic resource. According to Miranda, they already spent all the metal they mined, making them lack that a bit, so it wasn't like getting more would be bad.

There was plenty of wood to go around being placed in a forest and all, with stones also aplenty primarily because they didn't feel the need to expand senselessly.

Jake was already fairly confident that they wouldn't lack monster material – again, forest – and fruits and foodstuff they also had plenty of. Heck, even herbs weren't that hard to get, and Jake had collected a few during his hunts deeper into the forest, but it still took time, and most herbs he found he didn't know how to use.

Other materials such as chemicals and cloth Haven didn't have anything of at all as far as Jake knew. Haven would win out in nearly every area but wood or anything from monsters. They kind of needed everything but didn't severely need anything. Except for herbs... because Jake wanted that.

The same wasn't true for other cities. Sanctdomo appeared to lack nearly everything due to their large population but apparently had plenty of gems and crystals. Other cities had one or two resources that they all seemed adamant on not needing a store for.

All of this is to say... no one could fucking agree on anything.

Jake really just wanted to leave or go chat with one of his many acquaintances present, but that was a bit hard with all the borderline yelling going on between the City Lords. It would also just be rude to tell Miranda, Neil, and Lillian to leave the platform for him to invite friends over... so Jake had to wait. The only positive thing was that you really got a good feel for the other cities based on this entire thing.

A "quick discussion so we can move on to other things" ended up taking nearly two hours, leaving only a single hour remaining before the actual vote would begin. Jake wasn't even sure any definite agreement was reached; it just sounded like people would vote for their own thing. A massive waste of time. Everything except for the first five minutes where everyone agreed on herbs that is.

Finally free, Jake considered if he should go over and ask the undead a bit more about how their stats now worked, but he noticed a figure approaching before he could do that. He was from one of the lower-ranking cities and was a person Jake recognized by aura over appearance.

It was the sleek-looking man with a bloodline.

His brown eyes were a good brown with what looked like a small flame burning within, and his gaze seemed to pick up something no one else could perceive. Jake felt uncomfortable under his gaze... like his eyes bore into his body, and he was certain of one thing... the man had a perception-based skill like himself. At least it had aspects that allowed to "see" something. No... it wasn't a skill... it was his bloodline.

What does he see? Jake wondered as the man got closer. The man's eyes flickered between Jake's chest and face as an intrigued smile adorned his face.

"Pleasure to meet you, Hunter; I am Eron," he said, extending a hand towards Jake.

Jake looked at him for a bit. Miranda and the two others stood uncomfortably behind him, not sure what to do or say. Before Miranda had a chance to come to the rescue, Jake just smiled as he shook his hand.

"Nice to meet you... Patriarch," Jake said, his voice infused with a bit of will to make it harder for anyone but Eron to hear it. It wasn't foolproof, and Miranda and the others still heard it as well as anyone using a skill or technique to snoop, but it was good enough to mask it for the casual listener.

As for why he used that term...

Eron returned his smile with an even larger one of his own. "A rarity, those like us. It would be my pleasure to host you in the city of Cardius if you find the time and wish to speak further. I believe we have much to learn from one another, and it would be my honor. You have a certain... spark in you."

The last words were said a bit weirdly, and Jake squinted his eyes.

"I'll think about it," Jake said, honestly just wanting the creepy guy gone. He got the heeby jeebies from him... but he also got another weird emotion.

Everything within Jake was telling him that the man, Eron, wasn't a danger to him. He was a D-grade, and he did have a certain aura to him, but it was far from enough to threaten Jake. Yet, Jake felt like if they fought... he couldn't win.

It was an odd feeling... he felt like fighting the man would be a meaningless endeavor. He kinda wanted to try fighting all the D-grades present just to try and battle a fellow human at D-grade. All except for Eron. Odd indeed.

Eron, hearing Jake's tentative affirmation, just smiled once more as he nodded. "Know that you are welcome."

His eyes looked at Jake's face... not his eyes, but face... or perhaps what was on it.

"Both of you."

With those words, he walked off, leaving a frowning Jake behind.

Casper stood with his eyes closed as he ignored the entire discussion about what resources to get and all that. He knew his opinion wouldn't add any value, and he would rather spend his time focusing on something more important.

Such as talking with his ghost girlfriend.

"Your friends seem nice," Lyra said, her voice echoing in his head.

They had tried and discovered that Lyra couldn't be summoned inside the World Congress, much to the annoyance of Priscilla and the schadenfreude of Casper. He didn't want to put her out there just because Priscilla wanted to flex their strength a bit.

Lyra had evolved to D-grade a week or so before the World Congress and was already damn strong for one her level. Her blight magic was damn intense, and she seemed to like fighting, which was a relief to Casper. They had even worked on ways for her to help enhance his traps to have better synergy in the future.

While it was expected that someone of the enlightened species was stronger than monsters, it wasn't a rule, far from it. Priscilla didn't like to admit it, but Lyra was stronger than her in pretty much every way when it came to a straight-on confrontation. Her race was incredibly powerful, and something equally important was something Casper hadn't even considered... she was practically immortal.

As long as the locket existed, she would always be able to reform her body. The locket itself contained at least parts of her soul... to be honest, Casper wasn't sure exactly how it worked; he was just happy that his girlfriend would be safe in most circumstances. A bit like a lich, actually. It was weird how an item could both be functional equipment and essentially the body of a "living" creature. He had been warned that certain soul-affecting attacks could still hurt her and that she was even a bit susceptible to them due to her state, but it wasn't something they had to worry about against regular beasts.

Even if he didn't care overly much about this whole negotiation, Priscilla and the others were sure going at it. They didn't really need stone but actually really wanted wood. Many trees couldn't grow within their area or wouldn't last long, and they hoped that the store would have types of wood fit for areas with high death-affinity.

He himself would like some gems and crystals, but he wasn't desperate.

They were for his profession as a Dungeon Engineer, and he needed many crystals, gems, and other energy sources to power stuff. Casper was called a Dungeon Engineer, but that didn't mean he could actually make dungeons... at least not yet. He could make certain areas with desired properties, and with his class as a Cursed Trapper, he could make some damn nice defensive fortifications. Together with Lyra, they had taken down quite a few D-grades already.

Well, Casper had taken them down alone after she reached D-grade, after which she just kept close to keep him safe. It hurt his experience gain a lot and wasn't great for his Records either, but he saw that as a small sacrifice to spend more time with her.

"Yeah, they're good people," he replied. Communicating telepathically with her had been a lot easier than he thought, and it helped him not look ridiculous by standing there and talking to himself.

"But... your friend Jake is a bit... how do I say it... unsettling. I felt like he knew I was listening," Lyra said, a bit unsure.

"Wouldn't surprise me. Also, can I point out how funny it is that a ghost is scared of a human and not the other way around?" Casper joked back.

"I am not scared! I said unsettled, not scared. Geez. If anyone is scary, it is that Augur. I feel like half of his words somehow touch my soul or something. I don't think we should interact too much with him, at least too frequently and only in small doses. I have a feeling that kind of passive mental magic can seriously affect someone," Lyra said, voicing her concerns.

"True. I don't think Jacob would do anything on purpose, but better safe than sorry. It also isn't like people can't change... and I wouldn't have thought Caroline able to do what she did, so I guess I am not the best judge of character."

They kept talking for a while, mainly discussing non-World Congress-related topics.

It was soothing, and they did have to touch a bit upon some sad facts of reality. This would likely be the last time Casper could meet this casually with Jacob and quite a few others. The political stage had yet to form into circles and alliances, but more defined lines would begin separating the factions once that was established. And there was no way the undead and the Holy Church would ever be in an official alliance.

They were only interrupted as the talks died down, and people began wandering. Casper didn't think about going anywhere, but his attention was still grabbed as a "confrontation" many had looked forward to was taking place.

Progenitor vs. Sword Saint.

Jake stood before the man as they looked each other in the eyes. Quite a few other parties, including the Holy Church, were interested to see what would come of this, as the two had just stood there for a good five seconds now.

Blue eyes deep as the ocean stared into beastly soul-piercing eyes. Their gazes could nearly not be any more different, yet they both held the same challenging intent.

At the same time, both raised their arms as they shook hands, both giving a good squeeze. The old man winced as they both let go, Jake smiling triumphantly. He won out in pure strength.

He could see it in the Sword Saint's eyes... and he knew it himself... if not for the rules of the World Congress, the old man would have drawn his sword, and Jake summoned his bow at this very moment. Sadly, there were rules, and this wasn't the time or place for a fight between what were likely the two strongest humans on Earth.

"The Noboru clan wishes to enter a formal non-aggression pact with Haven, with the goal of a true alliance," the Sword Saint spoke, finally breaking the silence with words no one had expected him to say to curtly. "I do not believe our two cities have any reason to fight. We can discuss more... personal arrangements for the future at a later time. What say you?"

"Sure," Jake agreed. "You can have your people discuss it with my people."

"We are in agreement then. Pleasure meeting you," the old man said as he bowed and moved away. Jake returned a nod, ending their second interaction the same as the first.

Their interaction was brief but impactful. Many eyes had been on them, some of them hoping for the two to enter an actual conflict.

And while Jake would love to have a fight, he didn't see any reason to involve Haven or the other guy's cities. Jake also had a feeling that they would get their chance eventually, even if a vast distance separated them... and quite frankly, while Jake was vain, he wasn't silly enough to spend so much time traveling to another city just to fight an old man. At least not before he got faster.

Jake wasn't sure what to do with the rest of the time before the next vote and just returned to his seat on their platform. Everyone else was gone again, Miranda and Lillian having taken the chance to talk to the representatives from Saya and Neil chatting with some space mage woman from a lower-ranking city.

With a mental command, he obscured the platform and took the mask off his face.

He stared down at the wooden mask. It looked entirely the same as the day he got it... but he knew it was not. Things had changed. During his race evolution, it had absorbed some of the weird energy in that space, and he had a feeling that while it increased his mana regeneration, it also constantly pulled in energy for itself.

"Hey Villy, wou-" Jake began but instantly felt something was wrong. He closed his eyes and focused and only noticed now that he couldn't feel that small, subtle connection he usually felt. He also only now discovered that he couldn't feel the Viper's presence at all.

Usually, he just zoned out the occasional peek the god took, but he hadn't peeked for this entire World Congress... and it turns out it was because he couldn't. All connection to outside sources, at least divine sources, appeared to be cut off while inside this weird World Congress space.

I guess that means all the other factions are cut off too... good riddance.

It was good to know that this entire World Congress, in actuality, wasn't a bunch of gods discussing with mouthpieces. It was also once more proof that the system was the real OG on the power scale. That it could fully cut off the connection like that so flawlessly was quite a powerplay.

Anyway, what he wanted to ask Villy was pretty simple... so he decided to ask the one other "person" on the platform with him.

He looked down at the mask once more.

"So... do you think I could beat you now?"

Jake got no response... but he was sure the King was there. Still alive. Eron had seen something... it had taken energy... the description had slightly changed... and Jake couldn't wait for a proper rematch. Of course, it was entirely possible he had misread the situation, but one can always hope...