

## Hunter 254

### Chapter 254: Personal Improvement

Jake stood looking at the large temple, deep in his own thoughts. He stood over to the side, and no one particularly bothered him. He got a few glances, but that was only to do with him looking a bit suspicious. He was a bit more self-conscious about it now, but nothing that really irked him.

It had nothing to do with him hearing Olivia's words before he left. If he took off his mask and cloak and just walked around like that, he would likely get far fewer stares... but if he was honest, then wearing the mask and cloak wasn't about going unnoticed or being inconspicuous.

Instead, it was about separation. To put a mask between Jake and anyone he had to talk with. To make sure none could read his expression and for he himself to feel comfortable. It really had nothing to do with anyone else but him. There was power in a persona, and Jake knew that. It was how he had learned to survive his entire life. Granted, him being away for weeks at a time in dungeons that were all about killing didn't do him any good either.

To summarise... Jake just felt less exhausted when wearing a mask in public. He would keep his bare face only between him and friends. He just felt more comfortable that way.

It wasn't like not being recognized was an option either. Jake had hoped not to be recognized as "Lord Thayne" but just as a mysterious masked guy. He would be recognized as "someone standing out" no matter what happened. He hadn't learned to hide his D-grade aura after all, as everyone could feel it, so he would get the glances no matter what.

Well, he could have gone full-on stealth, but he still wanted to explore the city in a more "normal" way. Or at least as normal as he could be. At least people seemed to have some tact and just acted friendly.

Also... being masked and scary-looking made people only look and not actively seek him out. None of the shopkeepers had given a damn either. In fact, most seemed to be happy when he entered as they picked up on the D-rank aura. D-ranks were bound to have a lot of money.

He did attract a bit of unwanted attention in the form of a few rifle-bearing men who he saw check him out through binoculars from a distance. They never directly sought him out, though. That was nice. It would be awkward trying to explain that wearing all-black and a mask wasn't against the rules of Haven. Jake should know. He had just made up that rule, after all.

This didn't mean no one ever approached Jake, though it tended to be people who recognized him. Pretty much everyone from the Fort knew how he looked due to his presence back then, and a few had walked up to thank him for back then. It was a bit awkward, as Jake wasn't used to it, but he accepted their gratitude nevertheless.

As he stood there, Jake felt another person's eyes land on him, and this one lingered. He looked back at who it was and recognized his observer. It was a young man with short hair and a strong build. The young man walked over towards Jake, a big smile on his lips.

"Lord Thayne," he said when he had walked over, practically bowing.

"Chris, right?" Jake asked.

It was one of the people from Abby's group back then. The first one to speak up against Donald. That is what had put him on Jake's radar and made him worth remembering. At that moment, he had chosen an opportunity to get revenge against Donald and Abby over his own safety. That was respectable.

“You remember me?” he said with a mix of surprise of happiness.

“Well, yeah. I asked your name, didn’t I? That would be silly to do if I wanted to forget it,” Jake said, shrugging. The young man looked healthy and more full of life than last time. Back then, he had been full of resentment and grief, while now he looked more put together. His level was also pretty good.

[Human – lvl 57]

“I guess,” Chris said, scratching his hair before asking: “How come you’re here at the temple? Are you here to visit? I heard the City Lord’s statue recently got made, and it has already been infused... it’s the only one in the grandest hall at the moment. Ah, I’m sure you already knew... sorry, I just got a bit excited when I saw you. I came to see the statue today myself.”

“Oh, Miranda got that statue made already? I guess I should go check it out. I haven’t heard many details of the temple. I just came by to check it out today,” Jake said.

“If... if that’s the case, should we go together? I kept up with news, and I helped build the temple... I could be a guide or something?” he asked. No matter how dense Jake could be, it was apparent the young man desperately wanted Jake to agree. Not like he had any reason not to.

“Sure thing,” Jake agreed, smiling beneath his mask. While he didn’t exactly crave social contact... he felt like having some outside people like Miranda would be good. After killing for so long, it would do him good to socialize a bit to not completely lose the ability to do so. “So, you’re a builder, eh? You get along with Hank?”

“Yeah, he’s great! He has taught me so much and-“

Chris kept talking as the two of them entered the temple. A young chatterbox and an ominous-looking masked-wearing cloaked D-grade.

Miranda leaned back against the tree, breathing heavily. One of her arms was mangled, and she had a fist-sized hole in her stomach. She had to admit that she may have been in trouble without Jake’s health potion, even with all her preparations.

Green wisps of energy still floated in the air as remnants of the battle. The atmospheric mana in the area was soaked in Verdant mana from the formation that had been active until not that long ago - a formation that had covered an area nearly 500 meters in diameter.

The formation took the form of a pentagram made of staves with now-cracked orbs on their ends in all the corners. The magic circle on the ground in the clearing had also helped immensely, as well as many of the explosive runes she had blown up.

Four entire days of preparation, all coming after more than one and a half months of killing the damn Oakwood tigers to make this a one on one fight, had led to this day. Miranda had never thought she could do it, but with encouragement from her Patron gods, she had given it a shot and succeeded – succeeded in solo-killing a D-grade before her evolution.

\*You have slain [Oakwood Tiger Alpha – lvl 103] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\*

The corpse was lined with glowing veins of Verdant Energy that had invaded its body. She had bombarded it with more regular spells too, but in the end, she had only stood a chance due to her immense preparations.

Miranda didn't think of herself as a vindictive person normally, but that didn't mean she couldn't bear a grudge. The Oakwood Tigers had scared her for a long time as she, Hank, and the kids had nearly died to one. It had taken her a long time to build up the courage to defeat one... and now she had nearly succeeded in wiping out all the Oakwood Tigers near Haven. Including their Alpha.

She had done it to face her fears, and it felt almost cathartic when she finally killed the Alpha. It was like a perfect circle of her journey to Haven had been made. Half a year ago, she had found what would end up being named Haven while being chased, and now she was one chasing and killing the leader of those same monsters that hunted her.

To truly drive home that the circle was complete, she also reached the level threshold from the kill.

\*'DING!' Class: [Neophyte Verdant Witch] has reached level 99 - Stat points allocated, +3 free points\*

Which meant it was D-grade evolution time. Miranda began making her way back to Haven with difficulty as she went over the fight a few more times in her head. She had only won because she planned everything. She had studied the beast and how it hunted and learned about all its tricks. Countermeasures for every skill were made, so the entire fight was more a play than an actual battle – and she the scriptwriter.

What little improvisation she was forced to do resulted in a mangled arm, vine-attacks penetrating her stomach, and she even had one also go through her chest. She used a health potion to make it through that one.

Miranda had gotten better at dealing with pain. However, when she began leveling her witch class, she couldn't handle it at all. She failed to focus while using skills if it hurt, and any wound practically paralyzed her for half a second from the pain. It had taken her a long time to build up her tolerance to an acceptable level. Without it, she would be dead.

The thought of risking her life wasn't pleasant, but she had felt forced to. She desperately wanted to try and keep up with Jake and the city as a whole. Neil reaching D-grade had truly pushed her. He and his party had also killed a D-grade before evolving, using their teamwork to bring it down.

On her way back, she checked out her old profession. It had been the start of her journey to finding the place she belonged in the new world, and a part of her felt sad knowing it would change.

Principal City Lord of Earth – The City Lord employed by the first human to found a city on Earth. Now on a path to create a haven for the survivors in the new world. A home to defend. City Lord is a profession focused on managing and guiding a city to glory. Grants skills related to management, economy, leadership, and control, as well as paths to protect your new dominion. However, be warned that should the city fall, you will not escape unscathed. Stat bonuses per level: +18 free points.

The profession had been great. Likely one of the better ones on Earth as a whole. She had put a lot of thought into the placement of every single free point, and after the Ladies of the Verdant Lagoon blessed her, she had begun making use of her Dreams skill to consult the other residents of the triplet-gods realm.

There were plenty of loyal subjects of the Godqueens that would gladly help her with anything she needed. Humans among those too. They had given her advice, and with that, she had what she hoped was a very optimal free point distribution. It was pretty standard to do this... and while she wanted to say that she was sure Jake put just as much thought into placing his points, she was pretty sure he

didn't. He probably just placed them wherever he felt like. Miranda wished she had the confidence to do that.

When she re-entered Haven, she stayed hidden and went straight for her home. Well, it was also her workplace, but she did have privacy in some parts of the large building. Once there, she evolved to D-grade without hesitation.

The first thing she did after evolving wasn't to upgrade her profession but instead to take a shower. Did she need it? No, not really, but she really wanted one. It also allowed her to properly identify some of the changes the evolution had brought.

Neil was already a good-looking young man before becoming a D-grade but was at old-world actor standards now. He had joked about maybe finally being able to land a partner with his improved looks, but it had led to some questions. Why had Jake barely changed when he became D-grade?

She had ended up asking a C-grade human within the Verdant Lagoon. An absolutely gorgeous woman who had explained how evolution worked in more depth. How it brought your appearance and some other things about yourself closer to your own ideal version of perfect. Did that particular mole bother you? The evolution would remove it. Did you like the mole or didn't care about it? It would stay.

This had inadvertently resulted in all humans looking quite a lot better... but it wasn't equal. You had to want it. Often it was just subconscious wants, out of one's control. Everyone had small parts about themselves they wanted to improve if they could. Some more than others. She had learned that Jake was one of the people who didn't truly wish for any significant change.

He had gotten a bit taller, and his features had been ironed out... but that's it. Not to misunderstand, he looked handsome, but he had done so since the first time they met. A bit average, sure, that coupled with his entire presence was a charming mix. To be honest, Jake's confidence made Miranda feel vain as

she stood and stared at herself in the mirror. While she had always put effort into her appearance, it was nothing compared to the makeover an evolution could bring. She felt like she looked like some of those internet influencers, except her mirror image wasn't photoshopped.

I blame the unrealistic beauty standards set by firms and the advent of photo-editing technology,

she joked with herself as she dried her long orange hair. The evolution had even made her hair feel more comfortable to touch... why the hell had she wanted that?

Shaking her head, she put on her clothes again. She felt them magically fit her slightly changed body, giving room or shrinking where needed. What was it Jake called that? System-fuckery, was it? There sure were some shenanigans going on.

Once dressed, she went and sat down as she began her profession-evolution. She couldn't evolve her class yet due to needing that extra level, but her profession had been capped for a long time.

She had a selection of five different professions on the list. When she evolved to E-grade, she had only had four. One of the new options was a straight upgrade to her existing one, not really adding anything new except tripling the stats, which wasn't bad at all, as it would offer 54 per level.

Two of the options were unrelated to her role as a City Lord, so she disregarded them instantly. One was related to her blessing from the Verdant Witches, and the other was some general social-type profession. Neither of them better than just the straight upgrade.

Which left two remaining. Both were better than the straight upgrade to Principal City lord, at least stat-wise. The first of which gave 55 stats. But...



Steward of Jake Thayne – You have sworn your life to uphold the interests of Jake Thayne and will serve him i-

No! No way! Next!

Mistress of Haven – You are the leader of the first city founded on Earth by the Progenitor and Chosen of the Malefic Viper, Jake Thayne. Haven had many expectations as the first city, and most were met, not through rapid expansion but by focusing on quality. More importantly, you have managed to stay in the good graces of Jake Thayne and keep your position. You are now more trusted than ever, as your bond with your benefactor strengthens. Grants skills related to management, economy, leadership, and control, as well as paths to protect your new dominion and remain in the good graces of the owner of the city. However, be warned that should the city fall, or if you fail up to live up to the expectations of the city owner, you will not escape unscathed. Stat bonuses per level: +59 free points.

Way better, if still a few implications I am not sure what to think about.

“Louise even helped bring food this one time, and we talked about old times. We even liked the same TV shows from before the system! Recently she began wearing this new dress; I think it’s pastel-colored? I’m not sure. I suck at colors. She looked really pretty an-“

Jake walked beside Chris, who was enthusiastically talking about his obvious crush on Louise. The young man wasn’t even trying to hide it and had begun after he probed Jake a bit. Jake had admitted that he had a girlfriend before, and that made Chris believe Jake was some expert when it came to the opposite sex. He hadn’t even gotten the chance to tell the young man that his first relationship didn’t exactly end amicably.

It was honestly enjoyable. Chris was a nice guy if a bit naïve and overly outgoing. Just as Jake was thinking this, he felt the change.

The atmosphere underwent a subtle shift. The mana changed. Jake was clearly the only one who noticed it as it was so minuscule... but it was there. And Jake also instantly knew the reason – Miranda had evolved her profession.

Jake kept walking and talking with Chris as the young man introduced all the different statues they came across of weird gods. They had decided to save the main chamber with the Ladies of the Verdant Lagoon in for last. None of these gods were infused by someone blessed, and yet they still had odd auras around them. Likely due to the sculptor infusing some inherent magic.

He kept thinking about Miranda's evolution and how he should go check things out a bit later once he was done at the temple. It turns out that wasn't necessary.

Jake felt something. A probe of sorts. Something tried to connect to him, and it felt ever-so-slightly like when Villy contacted him. Yet it was blocked. It encountered an impenetrable wall - a wall that seemed to be both grand and disconnected from Jake. He couldn't even comprehend it... and without the system letting him know, he would never notice it.

No... it was more a veil - a cloak... a shroud. Just as Jake felt the attempted connection fade, he let it through. Instantly he lost all feeling of the shroud as the system stopped making him aware of it, as Miranda's voice echoed out in his head.

"Helloooo? It should be working? Is my skill broken? Hellooo?"