

Hunter 258

Chapter 258: Jake the Corpse Merchant

As expected, Jake didn't take long before he made it to the Fort. On the way, he took note of one thing in particular... he never left the influence of the Pylon. Even when he stealthily entered the outskirts of the Fort, he was still within its range.

The Fort had expanded even more than before. Jake could see why Hank had to be there. If construction in Haven was rapid, the expansion of the Fort was just insane. He knew a lot came from caravans or smaller settlements that chose to integrate themselves, but this was far more than expected.

From what Miranda had told him, one of the major reasons why so many came was the lack of regulations yet still-ensured safety. Many other cities had a faction ruling them, and that faction wanted to at least ensure a modicum of loyalty, or at least an assurance a group or a powerful individual wouldn't work against them.

Miranda had asked if they should do something similar, but to Jake, that wasn't needed. Sure, there were some basic rules that pretty much just boiled down to: don't start fights, don't be an asshole, and if you piss off the leadership of Haven, get the fuck out. If you choose to stay anyway? Well, that luckily hadn't happened yet. Jake guessed this was where he would possibly have to come in as the owner to take out the trash.

Jake thought it was nice he hadn't needed to do that yet. Phillip was apparently the guy in charge of security, and considering the man had half a rifle-bearing army already, it made sense. Should he go by and check up on him too? Nah, no need. He was pretty sure Phillip wasn't a huge fan of Jake anyway.

Having the Fort now be actually a part of the Pylon's area after Miranda evolved was great news to everyone involved. It would allow the people of the Fort access to all the system-stuff City Lords made possible and Miranda to get a better handle on all those who lived there.

Sneaking through the outskirts of the settlement, Jake became aware of exactly how much construction was going on. Brick houses were being made by the dozen, and hundreds of workers were visible within his sphere at any time.

It appeared that Hank had gone for a more normal look for the Fort. Brick houses, stone, and even something that looked a lot like concrete. If Haven was the city of wood, this would be the city of stone. Which, in retrospect, probably was most cities, also in the old world.

While Jake enjoyed looking over the city, he still prioritized getting to the central Fort itself.

No one noticed him as he jumped over the walls and into the courtyard that was a wealth of smithing and crafting as usual. The gun production was still going strong, and Jake noticed that the level of the crafters had increased yet again. Maybe some of them had evolved their profession already... if not, they would soon.

Entering the building, Jake saw all three people of note instantly. Arnold was in his workshop as always, while Neil and Hank were in the same meeting room he and Miranda had gone to back when they first came to the Fort. Seeing them all together made everything a lot easier. Being a bit cheeky, Jake marked both Hank and Neil with Mark of the Avaricious Hunter as he went to talk with Arnold – just in case they left.

Jake tried to sneak into Arnold's workshop but found something odd at the door-entrance. A shimmer of sorts covered it. He could see it both in his sphere and with his eyes ever-so-faintly. Jake didn't know what it was exactly, but it didn't give him any feeling of danger.

Now, Jake did also notice one other thing. A doorbell right beside the door. It took him a few seconds to decide between trying to sneak in and just ring the damn doorbell, and in the end, he decided on being polite.

In one smooth motion, he rang the doorbell, opened the door, and used One Step Mile to the other side of the room where he crouched down, focusing on the stealth-functionality of his cloak and the Expert Stealth skill.

He saw Arnold turn around towards the open door, looking confused. He then took a quick look around the room suspiciously. Jake, being childish, tried to sneak up on him as he began moving forward, but at that moment felt that he had been detected.

“Ah, you, great to see you back. How did the field test go?” Arnold asked nonchalantly, not even questioning why or how Jake had tried to sneak in. Shit, he didn’t even turn around but kept tinkering with something on the workbench.

Jake looked up and saw his detector. A floating eye-ball-looking machine was suspended at the ceiling, looking straight at him. He had to admit, Arnold was very industrious and had quite a number of different machines...

“It went okay; the grenade exploded with pretty good force. Could deal noticeable damage to D-grades around level 130. Not that effective against the variants, though,” Jake answered, deciding to stop messing around and just get down to business.

“Hmm, so that hypothesis turned out to be accurate,” Arnold said as he wrote down some notes on a tablet-looking device. “How would you compare the intensity of the mana released compared to your usual output?”

“About the same, I guess,” Jake said. He had noted the explosions were roughly the same as his explosive arcane arrows, after all. Considering the spheres were slightly bigger than an arrow, and the arrow was from an epic-rarity skill while the metal grenade was common-rarity, that made sense in his head.

Arnold nodded as he also noted that down. “I noticed you have a spatial storage. How much energy dissipated before you used them? And how long went between getting them and using them?”

This went on for a while as Jake was interviewed. He went along with it as he had kind of agreed to it when he took the metal balls to begin with, and the devices had been helpful. Also, the Nanoblade was nice, and Jake believed that staying in the good graces of Arnold would only be beneficial.

Jake learned that his grenades had been substantially more powerful than the ones left behind for Arnold. Arnold could only cause some minor damage to a D-grade, and it had taken dozens of them along with dozens of other attacks for the man to kill some. Yes, apparently, Arnold had been killing D-grades to test out his stuff. It suddenly made a lot more sense why the man had managed to reach D-grade. His class wasn't as low a level as Jake had expected at all.

He badly wanted to see how someone like Arnold fought. Well, he did have a good idea based on all the drones and different robotics around. If he had a class that synergized and allowed him to make better use of all his creations, it would all make a lot more sense.

“The resulting damage was lowered further when a level 41 soldier threw a sphere too. Quite drastically, I might add. Suggests even consumables items like these have inherent scaling to the level of the user. Quite peculiar how the same item can have such a massive difference in effect just based on who threw it,” Arnold said when Jake asked him about some of the other field tests he had done with Jake's arcane grenades.

“Do you need more?” Jake asked. He could do a few if it was, but...

“No need. The biggest issue wasn’t the effect but the leakage of energy and annoyance in handling them. The nature of the mana infused makes it inherently highly unstable and destructive. The leakage also only makes them more unstable but overall less destructive. Yours reduced in effect at a substantially slower pace. May be due to you being the infuser or due to the unique properties of the affinity,” Arnold explained, shaking his head. “I decided to settle on pure fire-affinity mana instead. Far simpler and equally if not more effective in most cases.”

That one hurt Jake’s feelings a bit. Did Arnold just tell him his arcane-affinity was worse than regular-fire affinity? Thankfully, he didn’t do that. Lucky man. If not, Jake would have had to ‘discipline’ him.

“The ones with your mana are more effective within the first 31 hours and approximately 40 minutes, while after that, the pure fire-affinity becomes more effective due to the lack of natural energy leak and decline in power,” Arnold said, saving himself from Jake’s untold wrath.

Arcane-affinity is still better. Though I wonder, could I do fire magic? Jake thought. He would have to test that out for fun a bit later. He figured out dark mana, so he should be able to figure out fire mana. If he had the affinity, that is.

“Anyway, Arnold, I am in search of some new equipment, so I came to you as you seem to be one of the best crafters. I understand you aren’t a typical craftsman, but I thought to ask anyway as the Nanoblade is great. So if you have something, I may just have something for you too,” Jake finally said with a smile, turning the conversation to what he had actually come for. He was quite sure Arnold wanted what he was peddling.

"I have some projects that may be useful to you. If adequately compensated, I may trade them away. For the record, I am not in need of Credits. I have sold a few choice items to traders and on the system store and have more than adequate funds for now," Arnold said.

It was as Jake had expected. Thankfully, Jake had something far more valuable than a few Credits.

"Before I show you, be aware that this won't be a fair trade no matter what. I am certain what I offer has more value," Jake made clear.

Arnold looked skeptical but nodded in agreement.

Jake made a motion, and an odd-looking piece of metal appeared on the ground. It was a head and a torso made of metal. Both of them looked badly battered with dents and scratches, as well as many signs of Jake's arcane affinity having burned into it. The neck even had signs of what looked like rust from Touch of Malefic Viper.

Walking closer, Arnold frowned. "What is this?" he asked as he knelt down and placed a hand on the torso. Jake saw his hand emit some mana as a pulse seemed to try and go through the corpse of the Altmar Census Golem.

He stayed kneeling for several seconds without moving or saying anything. The frown on his face grew by the second until he finally stopped infusing mana but didn't get up.

"This is way beyond me," he said, shaking his head. "Even while inactive, its core is protected, and all my attempts at scanning are completely blocked. I have no way of even researching it beyond the surface

without trying to split it apart, and even if I do so, there is a chance it was built with some innate self-destruct features or something similar.”

“Doubt it will explode or have any other issues due to where it comes from and how the creators wanted it back. Either way, does that mean you aren’t interested?” Jake asked teasingly. He already knew the answer. He saw the unabated greed in the man’s eyes as he stared at the battered golem.

“Of course I want it. What do you want?” Arnold said without any hesitation. His hand was still caressing the metal. He was already looking towards the head too, but Jake quickly came in and scooped it up.

“Depends on what you have to offer. I need equipment or if you have any other cool gadgets,” Jake answered, tossing the head up and down, taking way more pleasure than he should in Arnold looking nervously at him.

“I have more Nanoblades? Two of them if you need,” he started with.

“I don’t need more than the one I got. Come on, I know you got better stuff,” Jake pushed him.

“Follow me,” he relented as he went over to something that looked like a safe. Jake noted it had quite a number of magical enchantments to protect anyone from snooping or breaking into it. He wanted to look inside with his sphere but held back as he wanted the surprise. Besides, Arnold was explaining:

“During my research of the mana inside the metal spheres, I noticed faint traces of stability within the destructive energies. This is what kept it from just blowing up or consuming itself. I attempted to take this stable aspect and increase it to create a tool to somehow make better use of the explosives,” Arnold explained as he began opening the safe.

“This proved far more difficult than expected. I couldn’t properly manipulate this energy, but I found a way to isolate and stabilize it. I had a tailor create a pair of gloves from a synthetic material I made using a few choice items from the System Store. A material with a close to flawless ability to absorb mana. Most of the materials combined to craft the material were uncommon or rare-rarity. It was not cheap. I was satisfied with the workmanship, and I even got some worthwhile enchantments as I wanted to use them myself. They did return to me as uncommon-rarity still. I made more modifications and infused mana from the orbs and an Epic-rarity item I had acquired from some travelers. The man claimed to have bought it in the tutorial store. I am not certain about this claim. Anyway, even after it all, there are still major issues. I think it’s best you see them for yourself.”

Jake saw him take out a small box. When he opened it, Jake saw a pair of gloves within. They looked thin and to be made of silk or something like that. Yet, he felt a very familiar energy from them. He used Identify and instantly saw the reason why.

[Gloves of Sporadic Manifestation (Rare)] – Gloves made from a powerful synthetic cloth. These gloves are incredibly thin and nearly unnoticeable and are incredibly resilient against all magical attacks. Relatively fragile against physical attacks. These gloves contain a large amount of arcane-affinity energy, but the energy is directionless and cannot properly manifest its properties, yet the arcane energy still manages to amplify the existing enchantments through a powerful catalyst. All mana constructs created with your hands will last for longer due to the inherent power of stability within these gloves but become unstable if they come in contact with any other types of energy. Enchantments: +100 Intelligence +75 Wisdom, +50 Willpower. Sporadic Manifestation

Requirements: lvl 105+ humanoid race

He read it over and was impressed. Yet he had one major question:

“Won’t all mana manifestation be useless by default? There are other types of energies in the atmosphere all the time,” Jake asked, a bit confused.

“Yeah. That’s the exact issue. The gloves are useless to me as they are only worth it for the stats, but wearing them would cause too many issues. If you can fix them, you can have them. I will even throw in that if I ever make anything useful based on my research related to that body, you will be the first to benefit. Also, take this with you,” Arnold promised and handed Jake a small stack of papers from within the box the gloves had been in.

Considering Jake had nothing to use the Altmar Census Golem for at all, he saw no reason to refuse the trade. Yet he still kept it cool and frowned at the opposition to make it seem like he was really losing out. It worked.

“...I may also be able to upgrade the Nanoblade...” he said, looking like the offer physically hurt him. Jake didn’t bother questioning why he was so reluctant but just smiled. “Deal.”

After some good business, Jake even offered to let Arnold watch as Jake tried to fix the gloves but got the response that he was “done messing with that unreasonable affinity” and just ushered Jake out of the workshop after having him hand over the Nanoblade. What was the deal with the whole questionnaire if the guy didn’t care about Jake’s arcane-affinity anymore?

Not wanting to get a headache from trying to understand Arnold, Jake just went on his way. He saw that Hank and Neil had both left the building too. Seeing no reason to track Hank down here and now, as the guy seemed to have headed to another construction site, Jake turned his attention to the new pair of gloves. He went into one of the closed-off meeting rooms in the central building of the Fort, sat down on his butt, holding the gloves on the palms of his hands.

Transmutation time!

