

Hunter 260

Chapter 260: Keeping It Friendly

Jake waited outside the building for a few moments as he looked through the Fort using his sphere. Hank and the four others went to another meeting room while Arnold looked busy with Jake's Nanoblade. Arnold had it suspended in some device and was firing a laser or something on it. Jake wasn't a craftsman, so he just shook his head and went on his way.

It had been close to a full day since Jake had been back in Haven, and it was approaching evening time. He had a meeting with Miranda planned, and while he could get engrossed in his practice, he hadn't forgotten it. He would have to come back to the Fort again in a few days, but it was time to head home for now.

The return trip was swift as Jake didn't have any other side objectives on the way. He was back in Haven before anyone even knew he had left the Fort – assuming they were aware he had been there to begin with.

When he got close to his valley, he noticed there was activity within. Jake frowned for a moment until he felt the auras of who it was.

The hawks were back.

He had barely managed to get into the valley before a large green projectile hit him in the chest. The projectile turned out to be a squishy bird that nuzzled itself against his shirt as Jake held the bird and rubbed her head.

“Hey there Sylphie, how have you been?” Jake asked while hugging her as she playfully squirmed in his grasp.

“Ree!” she replied, telling him it had been all good. While Jake was grinding alchemy and the dungeon, Sylphie had really entered her growth phase. She had been hunting actively, and coupled with her still naturally growing, she had gained quite a few levels.

[Sylphian Eyas – lvl 83]

It had been around one and a half months since Jake last saw Sylphie, and in that time, she had managed to go from 41 to 83. She had more than doubled it. One had to remember she was only a few months old, and she was nearly already a fully-fledged D-grade.

Jake wondered if she would reach D-grade by the time it was time for the Treasure Hunt. Sadly she wouldn't be able to enter on account of being a beast and not a part of the enlightened species. Still, it made Jake happy.

While he hugged and nuzzled the young hawk, he also checked out Hawkie and Mystie. Neither had been slacking either during this period. Hawkie had been 109 and Mystie 116 back then, and now they had both gained a good amount of experience.

[Stormsong Hawk – lvl 120]

[Mystsong Hawk – lvl 126]

While they were slow compared to someone like Jake or Sylphie, the speed was still respectable. Especially considered that they protected Sylphie during all this time and focused more on her progress than their own. He couldn't help but chuckle a bit when he imagined the little featherball reach the same level as her parents.

"You guys doing well too?" Jake asked his bird buddies. Both of them gave affirming sounds as they also assessed Jake. He saw a small trace of defeat in their eyes as they saw that he had grown as much, if not more than them.

He kept talking to them a while, having a one-sided conversation as he played with Sylphie. He felt that she was a lot more powerful. It was quite natural, of course, with her leveling so much, but she felt too strong. In fact... she reminded him a bit of himself back then. Jake imagined that if the level 83 Sylphie were put against the level 99 Horde Leader... she would win.

That is when he noticed his weird-ass time tree do something. Jake was a bit annoyed that no one was there to look out for and eat the bananas like he had told Hank, but quickly noticed why. He saw a banana ripen, and at that exact moment, a small magic circle activated as a tendril of myst fired up, wrapped around it, and pulled it down to the ground where it was covered by some kind of energy. All while staying within the area of the tree.

Jake looked over at Mystie, gaping. "You made an automatic magical banana retrieval system."

Mystie had once more amazed him. She had put down a magic circle at the base of the tree that Jake hadn't even noticed when he came back from the dungeon. It was so subtle. It just pulled in the banana and somehow stabilized it until someone came to eat it. Had she saved some for hi-

Sylphie struggled herself free from Jake's hug and, with impressive speed, zoomed over and scooped up the banana.

"Hey, that's mi-"

Sylphie gulped it down, peel and all.

"-ne," Jake finished in defeat. Now he at least knew where all his bananas went.

Without any sense of shame, Sylphie flew back and landed on Jake's shoulder, happy as a clam. She even had the audacity to nuzzle up to him. He could smell the bananas on her. If it were anyone else, Jake would be mad, but who the hell could be mad at Sylphie?

"Good girl," he chuckled as he praised her and petted her head. "But remember to share. Maybe I can make them even better? Make them into some kind of drink that makes the bananas taste even better?"

"Ree!" Sylphie agreed. Though Jake had a feeling, it would be an uphill battle. She seemed to enjoy bananas a lot, and he didn't have the heart to actively try and keep her away from them.

I guess it'll be a competition when she is here, Jake chuckled internally. The birds seemed to want to hang around since Jake was back, and he didn't complain.

They ended up playing with magic until Miranda came back. Jake fired small arcane attacks, and the birds blocked or deflected them. Jake also blocked their blows as he practiced, and he even had a few games of tag. Hawkie was still damn fast, and Jake needed to predict his movements to have a chance to catch him. In a straight-up chase through the air, Jake would lose every time.

Sylphie was still the weakest, of course, but she had some fun tricks too. Jake called it tricks mainly to make him feel better because he didn't understand what the little hawk was doing. He was embarrassed to admit he had no idea what the hell her magic was about.

Clearly, it was wind magic... but not really. It cut like wind and was speedy like wind, yet it seemed to be more. How exactly that was, he couldn't pinpoint. All he was certain of was that it was powerful and in no way a low-tier concept.

Her offense was noteworthy, but her defense was even more potent. Jake felt as his albeit playful arcane bolts were sheared away by her green winds, and those she didn't just blow away failed to have any effect as she made a green bubble of sorts around herself.

Just as Jake was beginning to think that was all Sylphie had – green wind and a green bubble, she pulled out another attack. One Jake hadn't seen coming.

He didn't know why he hadn't expected it. Maybe it was because of Hawkie and Mystie and how they fought. The small frame of the hawks. Their usual use of magic. All of it had made Jake not expect the hawk to do the most obvious of things – attack with her body.

Jake felt her fly by first, her wing glowing green. The wing was like a razor-blade, and Jake managed to avoid it as it cut through the air, making odd sounds. In a swift turn in the air, she came back with another attack, this time using her talons. Jake was curious and raised his arm to block. He allowed her talons to strike... and the result surprised him.

Both of them, it seemed.

He had to spend the next quarter of an hour consoling Sylphie after she had nearly ripped his forearm off. Her talons begun shining as she struck and had penetrated straight through the armor on his arms. It had then gone through his skin with only a tiny bit more resistance, drawing plenty of blood. Finally, the talons had clamped down and cut into his arm even more, and the only thing that she failed to cut through was the bone. Even that had some clear marks, though.

It was nothing a healing potion couldn't fix, but Sylphie still felt incredibly bad about it. She kept making apologetic screeches and nuzzling up to him, throwing glances at his already healed arm. The skin still looked a bit tender there, and his armor was still repairing itself. Jake was sure she would feel better when all signs of her overeagerness were gone.

As for Mystie and Hawkie? They just sat on the side, looking like the proudest parents in the world.

She seemed to cheer up a bit at Jake's constant reassurance that all was fine and his praises of how strong she was. He had to admit he had underestimated her. Those close combat attacks were powerful. He couldn't help but imagine how strong she would be at level 100. What tier was she in? The same as the Prima? Above it? Census Golem level? He couldn't be sure.

Sylphie was still rather fragile if one did manage to strike her. Her small frame also made her susceptible to many of the same attacks that took down Hawkie. Her means of attack also weren't that

varied, but things like that could be shored up with time.

Shortly after, Mystie and Hawkie wanted to take Sylphie along, likely to continue hunting, but the small hawk refused to leave. She kept nuzzling up to Jake, and when her mom gave a stern screech, she just tried to hide away under Jake's cloak.

"It's fine; I'll keep her company. You two go have some quality time together," Jake said with a smile. He could be the babysitter of the little murder bird while the husband and wife hawks could go enjoy a nice date killing stuff together. He was such a romantic.

Jake and Sylphie kept playing – no fighting this time – until evening arrived.

Miranda had picked out the best she could find for dinner. She was afraid she had brought too much, but it should be fine. Even if there were some leftovers, she could just take them back with her or give them to someone else.

She entered the valley with a smile on her face. She didn't carry anything as she had gotten quite the upgrade since last. A ring on her finger held a small spatial storage of about 27 cubic meters. It even appeared to freeze time for everything within. At least it kept the food hot. The ring had come from Neil trading it with one of his space mage buddies, and she could only wear it now that she was a D-grade due to the level 100 requirement.

In the distance, she could already hear Jake. It sounded like he was doing some kind of practice as she heard the sounds of things flying around. Telekinesis practice? She still remembered the first time she saw him lifting those stones at the pond.

Yet what she saw instead was the smaller of the hawks shooting small bolts of semi-transparent green mana at stones that Jake threw up into the air. He cheered every time the bird hit one and turned it into dust, with the hawk happily flapping its wings.

She had to admit, she didn't know much about the hawks. The two adults were both D-grade and more powerful than her, and she couldn't really "communicate" with them like Jake. How the hell he could hold a borderline conversation with them was still insane to her.

Though she had to admit, the small green one was quite cute. Jake also clearly liked it a lot. A feeling that was reciprocated as she rubbed up against his hand as he scratched her.

Jake turned around as she got closer, and he greeted her with a smile – his mask already made invisible: "Oh hey Miranda, I–"

He paused as he did a double-take before shaking his head. "Congratulations on your evolution," he said with a smile.

"Thanks," she answered happily, wondering about the holdup earlier. Maybe Jake was a bit surprised with her evolution? Thinking about it, she probably was the first person Jake regularly interacted with who he had seen evolve.

"So... should we go in and eat? And is it fine if Sylphie comes along?" he asked, looking a bit embarrassed. Without a doubt, due to wanting the bird to join them.

Miranda naturally agreed as they headed inside the lodge. There was plenty to talk about.

Jake walked inside with Sylphie, a bit flustered. He knew evolutions could bring changes... but he hadn't really thought about it much. He had seen Arnold before and after evolution, and that guy had barely

changed. He himself had barely changed. Jacob had always looked good, so his evolution hadn't done much. And while Miranda had been nice in her own right, the evolution had sure done a lot.

He honestly felt shitty about it... he had always been bad around overly attractive women. Jake couldn't even properly talk to Caroline back then. Miranda had been attractive before, sure, but now she had moved up a level. If it were in a larger social setting, Jake would be fine, but right now, he was alone with only her and a bird. But... it was just Miranda, right?

Yeah. Jake shook his head as he got inside, Sylphie looking up at him, a bit puzzled. He gave her small head a pat as he went to find some cutlery and plates. Honestly, feeling weird around women... wasn't it about time for him to get over that?

Miranda was Miranda. The same person, just slightly "improved," if that was even the right word. Probably missing a few organs now, too, just like him. Really, his complex was just silly. Jake had many issues in the past. He still did. But now that the world had changed, he had thrown off so many burdens. So many parts of himself that he perceived as his own weaknesses.

Evolution was meant to push you towards perfection. At least physically. The mental work Jake would have to do himself. He recognized it as a flaw and chose to see it as another challenge to overcome it. He would do his utmost to have a nice dinner with Miranda and get through the meeting with Miranda without acting weird. A part of him thought it was lucky Sylphie was there to help distract him and keep the atmosphere a bit more relaxed. Moreover, he was Miranda's boss as well. He had a responsibility to act appropriately. But more than that, he was her friend. So he would keep it friendly.

Just keep things simple... and take the complications as they come. Stop treating people differently based on how they look. In the end, everyone's kill notifications look the same anyway, he reminded himself as he set the table and threw Miranda his usual smile.

“So, tell me about that profession upgrade.”