

Hunter 293

Chapter 293: Treasure Hunt: Thief!

Jake was in a hurry to get back to the Count's chamber, as he had a bad feeling in his gut. And no, it wasn't from just being the center of attention and feeling like that time when he was a kid and was in a school play, with all the parents staring at him. Instead, this kind of bad feeling was the kind he got when someone was about to steal his shit.

Okay, it was only like that in retrospect. Because when Jake made it through the trap-room and into the chamber, he saw the state of the room. The silver coffin and altar were gone. He had only been gone for a few minutes to hunt down the Count down, and someone had taken that opportunity to rob him of his rightful loot?

Yeah, that didn't fly with him.

His senses spread in the room as Jake focused on Sense of the Malefic Viper and Hunter's Tracking both. There was no fucking way he was going to let the damn thief get away with it. Jake smelled the air and felt the mana and soon picked up on something.

There were three traces of beings in the chamber. The most powerful were the Count's, then Jake's, and finally one far fainter. No doubt the thief. He tried to sense the mana type used, and it felt faintly familiar... it was... shadow mana?

Jake suddenly remembered someone. He had seen a member of the Court of Shadows steal that Hunter Insignia when someone was forced to teleport out less than an hour ago at the lowest level of the tower. His intuition told him he was right, which gave Jake an excellent starting point.

He knew assassins were good at hiding, but Jake had a secret weapon: an obscene amount of perception.

Focusing on his Hunter's Tracking, Jake felt a faint trace leading out of the chamber. The thief had just run in, took the coffin and altar, and then run out again. Jake knelt down and saw a faint footprint that still had a bit of energy around it and took a good whiff.

I'm coming for you.

He turned and followed the scent and the traces of mana still in the air. Every living thing left faint traces in their wake. Their presences passively soaked the environment, energy was burned and expunged as they moved, and of course, all the good old physiological clues, such as smell, were also left behind.

Of course, there were also ways to hide these trails. Any kind of stealth skill made one give off fewer traces and masked your presence. However, ultimately, this was done through magic, and through magic, one could still uncover these traces. This is to say, it came down to a contest between the tracker and the one being tracked. If the one being chased was more powerful and had better stealth capabilities than the one tracking them had tracking capabilities, they would escape.

Jake didn't really have exceptional tracking skills. He had his Sense of the Malefic Viper, but that wasn't really a tracking skill. His only real skill was Hunter's Tracking at uncommon-rarity. He didn't have any experience with tracking things before the system either, so he couldn't really track anything without magic.

However, all of this didn't matter when one could just brute force the entire thing with a perception stat so much higher than reasonable at his level and a thief that was simply far too weak in comparison.

Jake ran through the trap room and stopped as he reached the crossroad. He knelt down and sensed his environment once more. He went straight.

For several reasons, he was also now confident his target was male. While he couldn't identify the figure he had seen steal the Insignia earlier as either male or female, he was sure it was a man now. Faint traces of a footprint were left on the floor, indicating a man due to their size, and the smell also told him it was more likely to be a male.

Rushing forward, he weaved through the halls, and the further he got from the chamber, the more obvious the traces got. One had to remember it was only a handful of minutes since Jake had killed the Count and the thief even became able to steal the coffin, so the person didn't have that long of a headstart.

Jake eventually reached the atrium again. It quickly became apparent the thief had fled down to a lower floor and hidden, likely among the crowd. This meant it became a bit harder for Jake to track as the traces became mixed with those of others, but by now, he was confident that he could recognize the thief's presence if he saw them.

He went three floors down by jumping off the balcony and felt the trail continued from there and down another two flights of stairs. The thief had clearly been in a hurry, and detecting the traces was easier than ever.

Storming down, he followed them until he heard people in the distance. Quite a lot of them. Through his sphere, he spotted a room through a few walls with around fifteen people in it. Some of them he recognized as observers of his battle earlier. In fact, he recognized all of them but three.

This crowd was gathered in front of a large magic circle on another gate, and through the gate, Jake spotted what looked like a display room. Or, as the recorded projection earlier had called it, a hidden treasury. Though calling it a hidden treasury was kind of wrong, considering the huge door with glowing runes on it and the magic circle.

He is in that room.

There was no doubt about it. Knowing the target was cornered, Jake just casually walked into the large room with the metal gate in it as the people discussed.

“I think you need to focus more on the leftmost quadrant and open up the mana pathway to there.”

“Hm, but won’t that trigger that thing above it?”

“Will it? Hm, what if you...”

Jake listened in as he checked the gate and saw the message with floating magical letters in front of it.

Solve the magic puzzle to open up the treasury and obtain what lies within. But, be warned that failed attempts will have adverse effects.

It was at that moment someone suddenly screamed out in pain as red runes appeared all over her body, burning with a familiar kind of magic: it was a curse.

The ones in the room looked at her but only shook their head. The only ones in distress were her party members who tried to help her, but in the end, the woman triggered her Insignia and disappeared, leaving the large coin floating behind. Someone from her party took it with no one even attempting to steal it. Which was interesting....

Because the thief was standing right behind that party, a young man in a red robe, wielding a staff with a red gem embedded in the head, giving off faint traces of fire-affinity mana, stood there, staring at the gate, not seeming to mind the ruckus from the curse earlier. Everything about him screamed fire mage. Clearly, he had changed his clothes and hidden among the crowd. Or maybe he was genuinely trying to solve the puzzle, just like everyone else, and was there for that, but that didn't change the fact that he had stolen from someone he shouldn't have.

Subtlety was often the name of the game, but not right now.

No one had noticed Jake yet as he stood all the way at the back of the room, Expert Stealth active as he hadn't wanted to attract unnecessary attention while tracking down his target. But now that he had found him?

Jake stopped trying to be stealthy but did quite the opposite as he infused his presence with mana.

One also had to remember something else... Jake still had Limit Break active at 20%. He hadn't deactivated yet to avoid the period of weakness and considered how he had killed the Count not long ago, and the stat boost had helped him track his target faster; he was good. Also... honestly... Jake was beginning to have enough resources to keep it active near-permanently as long as he wasn't in combat and used many skills. Shit, if he began lacking stamina, he still had the potion cooldown ready and could chug one.

All this meant that when Jake made himself known, everyone noticed and turned around in shock. Most of them had seen him before and instantly backed away. The ones who hadn't seen him before backed away even more than the others due to the fear of an unknown powerful person.

Jake's eyes were trained on the thief as he used One Step Mile and appeared in the middle of the crowd. Before anyone could react, Jake grasped the guy by his robe and hoisted him up, so his feet no longer touched the ground, and he even made sure to wrap a few strings of arcane mana around the man, as Jake knew he was the slippery sort.

"You stole from me. Hand it back," Jake said, looking into the eyes of the thief.

The thief, appearing to have some balls proclaimed his innocence. "Wha!? You have the wrong person! I've never stolen anything in my life!"

The man addressed the next words, not to Jake but to the crowd. "He is trying to rob me! This is just an excuse! I haven't done a thing, I'm--"

"5..." Jake said, staring into his eyes.

"I told you, I--"

"4..."

Looking more desperate, the thief's eyes darted around, seemingly looking for some kind of assistance from the crowd. He got none.

Jake did notice, however, that a few from the crowd looked doubtful. It was understandable. No one had any proof, and it was just Jake's word against the thief's. The thing is... Jake didn't need proof. He didn't need a justification or a rightful cause, and deep down, they all knew it.

"3..."

"This is simply ridiculous! Is this really what the world has turned to? Do we really allow such-"

"2.."

Yeah, his attempt at riling up the crowd hadn't worked, though Jake did see some people begin to move away. No one went for their weapons. Being a D-grade of Earth this 'early' after the integration meant you weren't a complete idiot without survival instincts.

"How can you just-"

"1..."

As Jake reached the end of his countdown, the thief seemed to realize the game was over. Only two things could happen from there. Jake would either kill him, or the thief would be forced to activate the Insignia and leave the Treasure Hunt. Both were bad options for him, and what did it matter if he had support from the public if he was dead or had lost all his gains.

So, he stopped fucking around. The thief's eyes changed as he looked at Jake.

"Is a few knick-knacks really worth making an enemy of the Court of Shadows? I was under the assumption we had a good working relationship," the thief said, his voice no longer the same shrill one from before that sounded full of fear but now confident and self-assured.

"I don't remember ever giving any of you permission to steal from me," Jake answered, not taking any of that shit. He also noted the confusion by the crowd they had gathered.

"Oh, come on, is it even stealing? I just got there and took a few things you had missed. Besides, aren't we practically family? I fought both against and together with the Judge – your brother – and all of this is done under his instructions, so shouldn't we just leave it at this, Jake?" the man said, not seeming scared in the slightest anymore.

The reason was clear... he was confident Jake wouldn't do anything to him. And Jake got that. The man was a subordinate of Caleb, Jake's brother, and the basic assumption that had spread was that Jake was practically a member or at least a close ally. Miranda had briefed Jake on this before and made him aware of this assumption. Their friendly interactions during the World Congress had spread this, and the now widespread knowledge they were brothers had cemented it.

One could argue this assumption was partially correct. Jake didn't see the Court of Shadows as an enemy organization. But, the thing is, Jake didn't put that much weight on what organization people came from or belonged to. He wasn't blind to their existence and influence... but in the end, the

individual was the one responsible for their actions, and Jake knew that Caleb was aware of Jake's point of view.

Because the thing is...

"That's funny. Caleb never stole from me, and I'm pretty sure our parents told us that was wrong. So as his big brother, let me teach his subordinate some basic fucking courtesy."

Before anyone could react, Jake tossed the thief across the room and into a wall. The man crashed into it and coughed up blood as he bounced off it. Jake hadn't thrown him that hard as he knew the guy likely couldn't handle it.

Thinking this was a chance, the thief tried running, but Jake just took a single step and appeared in front of him. "I didn't say you could leave."

Seeing Jake appear, the thief used the good old Shadow Vault of Umbra to try and simply phase through him and away. Actually, Jake was pretty certain it was an upgraded version that allowed him to pass through humans. Anyway, his response?

Jake punched the guy in the face, knocking out a few teeth, with his glove glowing from the arcane mana infused in it. Shadow Vault still had that big flaw of being unable to phase through magical barriers, and nothing was a more rigid barrier than Jake's arcane mana. Shaking his head, Jake thought about how fragile the thief was, seeing all the blood fly out from the man's mouth. He had to hold himself back so much to not break him, and it was quite frankly frustrating.

The guy tried to get up again, but Jake got in front of him, and this time the thief didn't try to run. "Are you really going to do this?" the man groaned as he held his jaw. Jake was pretty sure it was broken, so kudos to the guy for talking so clearly.

"I am. But sure, let's be nice for my brother's sake. Hand over everything you got, fuck off to somewhere where I never see you again, and I'll allow you to stick around for the rest of the Hunt," Jake answered.

"Or what? Are you gonna kill me? Damage me so much I'm forced to leave? Are you fucking serious that you would cause such a big incident for a few items? This is practically a declaration of war. I looted an empty room, and now you come and claim everything is yours. What's next? You're gonna kill everyone here because they're witnesses? You're gonna claim that everything they have belongs to you too because you came to this tower first? Is this really how the almighty Progenitor and Lord of Haven acts?" the thief said. Yet Jake didn't detect much genuine anger in his mouth. No, this guy was a snake, and not the cool beer-drinking kind, but the lying and manipulative asshole kind.

Jake looked at him for a moment before he smiled.

"0."

Before anyone could react, Jake slashed. Blood spurted as the thief was cut apart at his stomach, and his one hand – the one he was not holding his jaw with – also fell to the ground, cut off at the wrist.

The thief screamed, but Jake slowly raised his sword again above his head. The man looked up at him with wide eyes, for the first time showing genuine fear. The coward activated his Hunter Insignia and disappeared, leaving behind the large floating coin with the loot within.

“What an idiot,” Jake muttered as he took the coin and put it in his inventory, quickly confirming he had indeed been the thief. Well, that, or he had found another suspiciously similar silver altar and coffin.

Jake turned to the observing crowd, all of them looking hesitant. It seemed like the thief’s words had gotten to them, and they feared they were his target now. Jake shook his head as he walked over towards them.

“Relax, I’m done taking out the trash, so let’s all move on, okay?” he asked casually, before following up with: “Anyway, what is this thing?”

He looked up at the magic puzzle-thing on the door, finding that far more interesting now that the thief-business had been settled.