

## Hunter 40

### Chapter 40: Defect & Meeting

William looked at the now pitch-black clearing where Casper had disappeared from earlier. He had been standing there for minutes now. William didn't get it. But more infuriating than that was that he didn't understand why he didn't get it.

That power was something William wanted... he needed it. But he couldn't even begin to understand what it was. No clue remained either, as all of the spikes and the corpses of the beasts they impaled were gone.

Casper claimed it was some kind of emotional power... resentment. William understood being mad at someone, but how could that possibly be so tangible? His claim of doing everything and reaching the power he had due to love was also... ridiculous. Illogical.

He had never gotten it. Love was a weird ethereal word not commonly found in his internal dictionary. He knew that his parents had claimed to love him. But if love was such an all-consuming feeling as the trapper claimed, why had the parents who claimed to love him chosen to abandon him?

Why did people think he was broken?

William had always thought himself a smart kid. He had been quiet, controlled, and done as he was told. His school-years were straightforward and easy. He never had any friends, and he did recall seeing 'specialists' who concluded that he just had a hard time understanding empathy. Putting him on some spectrum, something that allowed him to avoid much suspicion later on in life.

At only 11 years old, he had found an old book and looked up the word 'love' and tried to do as it said. Do to others as you want them to do unto you, which meant that the next many years were fine. He was a well-behaved child and never did any wrong. The problems only started arriving when his brother was born.

He remembered his parents being happy, having fulfilled their biological quota of two children to carry on the bloodline. He also remembered them being sad when they discovered that the child was a defect. A product that Darwinism would have claimed if nature was to run its course without the interference of society.

William was 12 when the kid was born, and he would never forget the difficulties it brought. His mother had to quit working, and all semblance of free-time and family outings stopped. William may have had his issues, but he still enjoyed what other children did and sorely missed going to amusement parks and the zoo.

As the years passed, the problems continued, and William tried just to do his own thing. His parents had forgotten their otherwise 'troubled' teenager, being far too busy with his little brother who required constant care.

Then, and even now, William never understood why they kept the child. They knew even before the birth that it wouldn't come out whole. It would never amount to anything; it was a failed attempt. In all other areas, you were told that if a product turned out terribly, you just throw it out and start over or move onto more important matters. But his parents had used the ever-ethereal argument of love to bring the child into the world.

Once more, William didn't care. As long as he did nothing illegal, his parents didn't care either. Back then, William had big plans. He enjoyed studying, he liked to learn, and he found great pleasure in learning about other humans, most of all. He learned how they worked and how he was supposed to act around them. But more importantly, how to make them act as you wanted.

His plans were grand. He still remembered the day he found out he had gotten into the best university in his area. He remembered the genuine joy he had felt. But he also remembered his parent's slightly reluctant attitude to his happiness.

It turns out that having a child requiring a person to care for it every hour of the day, combined with a lot of medicine, is expensive. They never told William, but he discovered it himself as he heard his parents whisper in the middle of the night. They were about to go into debt. William would have to move to go to the university... he would need money - money they didn't have.

William did not take the news well that his plans for the future wouldn't become a reality. The child, his so-called brother, was making that impossible. So, William did as he had read in that book so many years ago. He did unto others what he wished they would do to him. So, he helped them.

He knew the law. He knew that the child, now 5 years old, was still wheelchair-bound, and quite frankly, at risk of dying to any unexpected danger. It wouldn't be suspicious if it happened.

A device was used to allow the child to breathe during the night. The thing they called his brother was so defective it couldn't even do that without help. The night was also the only time the child was left alone for just a bit of time. Still regular check-ins every hour, but alone in between.

William snuck in that night. Having just turned 18, he got to work. He considered bringing it up to his parents, but he knew no legal defense was better than not having done anything illegal. With that in mind, he decided to do it alone.

Switching off the alarm was easy enough. Guides to those devices were on the internet if one looked hard enough. Next, he did the most straightforward thing and simply twisted one of the tubes delivering

oxygen, stopping the flow. And with that, he went back to bed and slept like a baby. He had done a good deed, after all.

It was a pure win-win situation. His parents would be freed from a burden, their economic situation would improve, and with that, his plans of higher education made possible. He saw nothing getting in the way but a possible legal investigation, but he had made sure to make the twisted tube look like it happened on accident. So, if anything, it would be some unrelated caretaker getting in trouble, as she had been the last one to operate the machine and was responsible for keeping watch.

He was awoken an hour later by shouting and screaming as the caretaker panicked, and his mother was even worse off. His father had been at work, as he was working nearly every waking moment to make ends meet.

William had succeeded. His brother had slept in, never having even woken up. And now he would never wake up ever again. William was proud of himself. After the panic and mourning, an investigation was made, and it was ultimately deemed an accident.

Throughout the entire process, he had never once been suspected. He had only been questioned once, and he just claimed that he was sleeping the whole time.

But to William's surprise, things didn't immediately improve. Despite having removed the burden, his parents didn't get newfound freedom, and the focus of their family didn't go to making sure his university plans were fulfilled. Instead, it became endless mourning, and his mother even deliriously wanting to sue both the caretaker and the company that made the machine due to the alarm failing.

William didn't get why they were so reluctant just to move on. Why they had to act as they did. When the movements to sue got closer and William discovered that the legal proceedings would put the family

even further in debt, for what even he could see was a pointless legal-battle, he decided to finally come clean- There was a bit of a risk that an investigation would get reopened, but the risk was worth it.

Their response had been far from what he expected. He knew they would be angry; lying and acting deceitful was not okay after all, but the reaction was way out of proportion. He tried to explain; he tried to reason; his logic had been flawless. He had acted entirely rational throughout it all.

His father had yelled more than ever; his mother broke down crying. After that, he had been sent to his grandparent's place. He was forced to talk to shrinks, therapists, and many other so-called 'experts'.

He was sent into programs, homes, and in the end, a fucking closed facility. His parents never told anyone what he had done, and yet they locked him up like he had been the one to ruin their lives. Like he had been the burden.

He was pumped full of drugs, his logic dying, and from then, it all turned into a blur with only moments of clearness - one and a half years he spent living like that. Even now, his memories of the time were shrouded, like a cloud of mist was obstructing his mind.

He only had a single one with a clear head of those many months as he managed to fool some new hire that he was getting. That he understood what they wanted. That he understood the emotions that they all found oh so important. But he could only fake it for so long until a more experienced employee caught on, and he had no peace after that.

The system saved him. It freed him. Not just physically. It freed his mind.

Here, in the tutorial, he had time to think. He had time to do as he always wanted. He would manipulate, exploit, and do everything possible to win. He had viewed his inability to understand these emotions as a perk for the past month, not a fault.

But today, Casper had made a small crack in that belief. Was he missing something? Was he... broken? No, impossible.

There wasn't anything to fix. It was a strength, his strength. He had been called 'mentally ill' before; it wasn't new. Casper was just an outlier. William had brilliantly fooled Richard, Caroline, Jacob, everyone! Not a soul suspected him. He was perfect.

William only saw the world as consisting of two kinds of people. Those useful to him reaching his goals, and those not. If someone didn't hold value for him, there was only the value he would get from harvesting their tutorial points and the experience they offered.

The system itself agreed with his reasoning. It only confirmed his thoughts. He was rewarded for every kill. Not punished like the old world. Rules didn't apply to the strong. And William... William was strong.

He firmly believed that. He was finally untethered. No laws, no parents, no vague moral obligations to anything. The only one he had to please was himself. His only limiter was the extent of his own power. So, he would do anything to obtain more power.

William, lost in thought, found that he had wandered quite a distance. A bit closer to the camp, but not in a straight line. He did see some beasts, but all were below 25, so he was still in the outer area for sure.

As he turned to the camp's direction, he spotted something out of the corner of his eye - a single individual walking through the shrubbery. It was a man from the build, and he was wearing an upgraded common-rank archer cloak, but he saw no bow in sight. Nothing else about him was of interest, as the cloak concealed his entire body.

William considered attacking, but something made him pause. There was a presence to the man. He couldn't put his finger on it, but through all the evolutions and levels, a certain innate sense had been unlocked. And that sense was currently making him aware that the man wasn't simple.

William used Identify on the man. He knew he was terrible at remembering to use it, as he hadn't even bothered to use it on Casper before. Or anyone really. Something to improve, he told himself. But when he got the response, his eyes widened.

[?]

It was just... nothing. No feedback at all. A single question mark was all William got. After he had gotten the Identify skill to common-rarity, it had told him the race and level of everyone... but now it didn't work.

One would typically take that as a sign to avoid combat, but William saw it as the exact opposite. This was a perfect opportunity. Casper was an anomaly; he reminded himself. This lone person in front of him appeared strong. He was alone. William would make him the case-study of why he wasn't wrong.

"Hello there!" he said with a huge smile. Completely back in his faux persona. "Haven't seen anyone else for a while out here. What you up to all alone with how things are?"

William tried hard to make the man let down his guard. The man he presumed to be an archer took off his hood too, and William got a good look at the man. Brown hair, forgettable face, utterly dull. The only thing that made him stand out was his eyes. His gaze was sharp, focused.

The teenager had met a lot of people out in the wild. He had seen a wide range of emotions: fear, curiosity, caution, anger, and even happiness and relief at some points. But the eyes of the man was neither of those. He couldn't quite place his finger on what his gaze held, but William didn't like it.

He had never tried that before, and it put him slightly off his game. As he was wondering how to proceed, the man answered.

"Good question. Just got here myself. Been a bit busy in an oversized cave for a while. Or would calling it an ancient temple be more accurate?" the archer answered, shrugging before he asked. "You heard of any gatherings of survivors around here? A camp or something like that?"

William looked a bit bewildered at the man. The first part was nonsense. He had been in a temple? The young caster had been many places, and he hadn't seen even the shadow of something that one could describe as a temple. The latter part was also confusing. How could he not know of ANY gatherings of survivors? The two bases hadn't exactly been subtle with their hardcore recruitment.

"Eh, yeah, we got some bases. I am a part of one of them myself, actually," William answered, seeing an opportunity. "I can bring you to it if you like? It is a bit far, and it is easy to get lost in the forest after all."

"Hm... what's the name of the leader of the camp? Or notable people? And you mentioned bases as in more than one? Just take me as someone absolutely clueless to the situation currently in the tutorial. Because I am," the man answered, dodging the offer of the escort with his own questions.

“Sure thing! We got two bases, one run by a dude named Hayden and another run by another bloke named Richard. Both are a bit bonkers, and a big war is kinda going on. As for notable people... we got a good smith named Mr. Smith? Or well, some call him The Smith. Anyway, he is excellent, and I am sure he could help fix up your stuff,” William answered, trying to really sell his camp.

Not that he had any intention of the archer ever making it there in one piece. But if they traveled there together, there was bound to be opportunities.

The archer stood a while contemplating. William’s brain was working at high speed, trying to see every possible scenario. He wanted to avoid a straight-up fight if possible, as a direct confrontation with an enemy of unknown power seemed like a bad idea.

Finally, the archer responded. “Sure, I guess you can take me there. Meanwhile, tell me of the other members of your camp. Perhaps I know some of them.”

With delight, William smiled and cheered internally. The sucker seemed oblivious to his intentions, on the surface at least. He hadn’t spotted any openings yet, but the teenager seriously doubted that anyone could stay completely vigilant at all times. The way back to base was far. Especially far, considering William wasn’t going to take him in the direction of the camp at all.

“Of course! My name is William, by the way. A caster, as you can likely see by the robe. It’s a bit far, and my physical stats are a bit bad with my class and all, so it may take a while. But! I will have plenty of time to answer any and all questions you may have.”

William put on the attitude of a true used-car salesman. He also used the age-old trick of downplaying yourself, inevitably making the other party feel superior, making them more likely to relax.

“Well, nice to meet you, William. Now unto the other members of your camp...”

A bit annoyed that the other party refused to even give his own name, William simply endured as he happily started yapping away about his base's outstanding members.

It was going to be a long trip back.