

Hunter 41

Chapter 41: Clash

Jake walked beside the young caster as the teenager happily chatted away. Jake was taken aback from learning about two massive camps that combined held nearly all the remaining survivors in them. He had come here looking for the source of mana before, but instead, he found a caster, and from his aura, it didn't feel like it was him. Oh well, this is fine too.

The archer was able to remain relatively relaxed as he walked. He had naturally inspected the young man when they first met.

[Human – lvl 24]

He was happy to see that it now worked on humans finally. It only showed race level, making Jake have no idea about the teenager's class or profession's details. He knew he was a caster based solely on his clothes.

Jake didn't feel like sharing any personal information either, despite the other party's subtle, and not so subtle, probes. The caster called himself William or Will for short. He had stressed the last part quite a bit. Being friendly was all well and good, but Jake seriously didn't like the guy. He was far too chippy and animated to appear genuine.

All of that was naturally ignoring the fact that William was likely going to try something. He wasn't sure what, but he had a feeling. If he had to make a guess, Jake would guess a classic ambush, or maybe he would just try to backstab him at some random point?

Jake wasn't afraid, though. He was low-key looking forward to it. With the kid being a well of information, he saw no reason not to travel together for a bit. It would also allow him to better understand the level of power other survivors possessed. Even if Jake couldn't win, he was confident in escaping with his high vitality and toughness.

They walked a while, the teenager still talking and Jake giving short brief answers. His Sphere of Perception passively making him aware of his surroundings like always. He was still half-expecting an ambush to be somewhere, but no matter how long they walked, he saw nothing.

Suddenly William stopped as he knelt, motioning Jake to do the same. Perfectly aware that nothing was in the area, Jake nevertheless played along. This is silly.

"Did you spot that? I have a skill that allows me to see hidden concentrations of mana, and there is a big ambush just up ahead. They haven't spotted us yet, but I am unsure how many there are," the teenager said as he pointed down the small hill they were approaching.

"What do you want me to do?" Jake asked, trying to act as seriously as he could. His sphere still didn't pick up quack. While he wasn't going to rule out people being able to hide from it, there sure as hell wasn't anyone close.

"You are an archer, right? Can you maybe go up that hill we passed earlier and try and see if you can spot anything from up there? I know you guys got, like, super high perception, right?" William asked, motioning with his hands once more. "Don't worry, I will keep watch here and help in case they try anything!"

Jake nodded along as he listened. Cool story. Yet he followed the directions. Was he really going with that?

Jake started slowly walking up the hill, going backward, trying to act as if he was still actually looking for an ambush. William had turned his back to Jake, as he seemingly focused hard to keep an eye on things.

After a few meters, Jake turned his back to William, and the moment he did, a barrage of daggers flew soundlessly out from beneath the casters robe. Jake couldn't help but smirk internally as the expected attack came, but he quickly frowned his brows a bit at the power and number of attacks.

Fourteen daggers were coming. Without any hesitation, he jumped to the side, all the blades missing their initial attempt to skewer him. As he barely got a footing, the daggers turned in the air and swiftly came his way once more. A bow appeared in Jake's hand with a quick motion, as he dodged once more and returned an arrow towards the caster.

William had turned towards Jake at this point, surprised that the archer had dodged his sneak attack. Even as he dodged the second and third blow, the archer seemed to have eyes on his back. The counterattack was quickly blocked by William, as he was once again surprised.

What surprised him this time was not the power, but the lack of it. The arrow had been weak. He doubted the attack was from someone with even 100 strength. Something pretty much all physical fighters had - especially one an even higher level than himself.

The arrow thus easily got blocked by his iron wall, as he continued to manipulate the daggers. This was by far the most slippery foe William had ever faced. He wasn't as fast as others he had met, but he seemed to be perfectly aware of all the attacks aimed at him.

The arrows continued as he blocked again and again. It felt like a waste of time, but the archer just kept shooting. Not wanting to lose momentum, William started deploying walls of iron to try and trap the archer, but he kept weaving in and out, never having more than one side blocked at a time.

He wanted to throw a disc, but the arrows made it hard to focus. He couldn't lessen his control too much on the daggers or the walls, either. It was beginning to annoy William, and he was starting to get impatient.

Jake was in his own mind relatively relaxed throughout all this. He felt in control, and he felt the kinetic energy of the daggers lower than expected. The walls were a bit of a problem, but he reckoned the other party was draining mana fast.

Another thing he quickly noticed was the control of the daggers worsening as he moved further away. With a plan in mind, Jake kept retreating more and more, as he saw the caster start chasing him. The wall of iron always floated in front of him, making Jake only able to see that. With his eyes, that is.

As he managed to jump a reasonable distance back, he felt the caster somehow slide himself forward, almost as if he was flying. No, he was controlling his own body like he controlled the daggers.

Jake took this chance to stop retreating, deposited the bow in the necklace, and charged towards the caster. Dagger of Bloodletting in hand, he managed to close half the distance as the daggers caught up to him from behind.

Taking a gamble, he chose to betray expectations as he allowed five daggers to hit him in the back, penetrating into his flesh. However, his movements were unaffected as he vaulted over the wall of iron, swiping down with his dagger.

William was surprised by Jake's gamble as he scrambled to activate mana barrier, one of his starting skills. The barrier barely did anything as the dagger came down. William did manage to slide himself backward slightly, only taking a minor cut to his forearm.

Smirking, he had the daggers resume their assault at full power, forcing the archer on the defensive once more. In William's eyes, Jake had taken far more damage from the daggers in his back than the minor cut he had inflicted. Of course, he didn't know about Jake's ridiculous vitality. And he hadn't noticed the blood already on the dagger before it cut him.

He only noticed as he started getting slightly dizzy, losing control for a moment allowing the archer to close in a bit more. William, in panic, looked to his arm and saw the wound, now black and festering.

What the fuck? he yelled in his mind, now genuinely panicking. He had experienced poisoning from the evolved badgers before, but this felt way worse. To make matters even more horrifying, the archer was nearly upon him once more.

As the archer was only a couple of meters away, William made his final gambit. No longer aiming to necessarily kill his enemy anymore, all he thought of was to escape. Even if he won, the poison would simply consume him anyway.

The final card William had up his sleeve was called Flashing Steel. The newest skill in his repertoire. His entire body lit up with a bright light reminiscent of a flashbang, as small pieces of scrap metals exploded out of him. The whole area around him exploding as a small crater formed.

Jake was already too close and even with his danger sense he was taken entirely by surprise and only managed to raise his hands as the metal hit him. The metal's momentum shot him backward tens of meters before he finally hit a tree, unfortunately only pushing the daggers in his back further in. It was like he had just been hit by a super-powerful frag grenade at close range.

The final thing he saw before the caster left his sphere was William flying backward himself, as he manipulated his own body once more. Jake quickly lost track as he saw the caster disappear into the trees.

Pushing himself off the tree, he had smashed into, groaning as he tried to reach for the daggers sticking out of his back. They hurt like hell, but his bodily strength was not comparable to an average human anymore. Ripping the daggers out took a while because some of them were tricky to reach, but he got it done in a few minutes.

His frontside was perhaps even worse than his back. The scrap metal that William blasted him with at the end had quite the power behind them. Luckily his cloak had absorbed a lot of the impact, leaving it in tatters. He really hoped the self-repair enchant still worked despite the extensive damage.

Sitting on the floor breathing heavily, Jake meditated as he thought back on the fight. He had underestimated the other party. He had seemed carefree and inexperienced during their walk, but the caster had been ruthless and calculating in the battle. The control of his abilities impressive.

Jake had only met one survivor so far, but his plans of approaching his colleagues just yet were already questionable. He didn't have any clue as to William's relative power compared to everyone else. He knew that the teenager was a part of Richard's base, which led Jake to believe that Richard had to at least be stronger.

Lack of information was a great weakness for him currently. What if William was just an example of a regular member of Richards base? He had confidence in facing one caster of that level, maybe even two if he got the jump, but anything more, and he would surely be on the losing side. Even then... he had only won because of his poison. If the caster had known about it already, Jake wasn't one hundred percent sure things would have gone as well as they did.

William had during their conversation been very careful to reveal nothing about the powers of others. He did, however, mention that both bases combined had numbers in the hundreds. If facing just one other survivor had ended up with him losing nearly a third of his health, facing any random small squad would likely be fatal.

Worst of all, while Jake had won, he had likely failed to kill the opponent. He used the word likely as there was still a chance the caster wouldn't make it. Before his charge, Jake had used Blood of the Malefic Viper to soak his dagger in his toxic blood, effectively poisoning the enemy. He would need a healer for sure, as Jake doubted the kid had high enough defensive stats to battle it himself. That, or he would need a potion.

Which was another thing Jake didn't know about. Did they have any alchemists? If they did, could they make any detoxification potions? Smiths, tailors, and builders had all been mentioned, so them having professions was indisputable. It was also very believable that they would keep any knowledge of alchemy hidden from outside sources, along with other powerful profession types.

All of this ultimately led to Jake being very hesitant in trying to seek out his former colleagues. He had parted with Richard by killing a bunch of his men, so he had serious doubts that the guy would just welcome him with open arms.

No, for now, he needed power. Power to be able to seek them out with his head held high, and at least the confidence to escape if things went sideways. So, he decided to hunt. His class was only level 13, and he could efficiently kill level 20+ beasts for some quick levels. His colleagues would have to wait for now.

After meditating a while, he took out a health potion and drank it. It filled his pool back up quite a bit, his body visibly healing. I need to get stronger.

Turning towards the depths of the forest once more, he started searching for new prey. It was power-leveling time!

Caroline looked at the gloves in her hand as she smiled proudly at her creations. They were only inferior-rarity and didn't offer any stats or anything. But it did give her plenty of experience to her profession.

"Oh, those are nice. Made for a certain someone, eh?"

Turning her head, she saw Joanna taking a seat. The premier tailor and the one who had taught her a lot of the techniques she currently used. Caroline jokingly hit Joanna on the shoulder, reprimanding her. "Stop it... I just thought he needed some gloves, you know?"

"Hehe, don't get me wrong, I am supporting you 100%! You and Jacob are so cute together; it reminds me of when I first met Mike..." Joanna said, her bright smile dropping towards the end.

"Joanna, we don't know what happened to everyone else," Caroline said, laying a hand on her friend's shoulder. "I am sure he is just in another tutorial, and I am just as sure that he is fine. Mike was always a tough guy; he can take care of himself."

Smiling, Joanna snuggled up to her young former colleague. "You are such a sweetheart. No wonder Jacob couldn't keep his hands off you. Talking of Jacob, have you guys talked to-"

But before she could answer, an archer stormed over to them, yelling loudly.

“Is Caroline here!? Come quickly, we got an emergency! Richard is asking for you asap!”

Without any hesitation, Caroline got up as she ran after the archer. Around the gate to enter their camp, she saw dozens standing around, a few of Richard’s men keeping them away.

As she got to the gate, she saw one of the other healers sweating as he tried to heal the caster on the ground. As she saw that the wounded person was William, she was taken aback. One of his arms was entirely black, and protruding veins were visible, extending from his shoulder onto his chest. Instantly she knew that he had been poisoned by something powerful.

Richard stood at the side, throwing her a glance. She looked questioningly back at him. When he nodded, she got to work.

Focusing, she started casting a curing spell, as she allowed the other healer to continue trying to keep the young man stable. The poison was strong. Very strong. And to make it worse, it even had magical properties making it only harder to cure.

But Caroline was not the strongest healer in their base, possibly the entire tutorial, for nothing. She flooded the teenager with a pulse of mana, washing away some of the toxins. A couple of powerful pulses later, the black color had started fading slightly. With a final push, she managed to dispel every trace of poison within the teenager.

William himself was unconscious as she and the other healer managed to finally fully heal him. Caroline felt that he only had one wound on his body was a small cut on his arm. If they hadn’t healed him, he would have died without a doubt. A significant weakness of casters was not getting any defensive stats from their classes, and from the looks of it, William really had terrible physical stats.

From her assessment, a warrior like Richard, especially with his class evolution, would be able to fight the poison himself, solely due to his higher toughness and health pool.

William, now healed, still hadn't woken up. From what Caroline felt as she flooded his body, both his health pool and mana pool were pretty much empty. She didn't know their values, but she could get a rough estimate that he was low.

After making sure William was fine, the next task was to find out what exactly had happened. She put up the barrier around them with a wave of her hand, only her, the archer, and Richard within.

"What happened?" she asked.

The archer, who was, in fact, the Scout who had been following William, shook his head.

"I don't know. I was following the little psycho as always when I failed to notice a trap. I don't know what the hell it was, but I was stuck there for hours, it didn't even do anything, I was just stuck... until suddenly I saw him fly over me, and the second he did, the magic binding me was dispelled too... it was fucking weird."

"So, it's Casper?" Richard said frowning.

“No,” Caroline shook her head. “This isn’t the same type of attack as his at all. He is focused on curses, dark mana. This was poison. Moreover, the cut on his arm was made with a weapon for sure. This isn’t a beast, either.”

“An accomplice then... or an entirely new player. This isn’t Hayden. Casper would never work with him, and if Hayden had poison this strong, he would have used it before. Shit, this is all getting needlessly complicated,” Richard sighed with annoyance.

“What’s the plan?” the Scout asked. “Make the kid wake up, get info, and finish him off?”

“We could, but I have a better idea,” the former heavy warrior said. “For now, get him in one of the cabins.”

The entire situation was a shitshow, and everyone was aware of it.

Someone or something had potent poison, and Caroline was the only healer who could cure it. The other healer could heal through it, perhaps giving the person a chance to rely on their own stats to survive before they ran out of mana. But it wasn’t a reliable method at all.

The matter of William nearly dying spread throughout the camp like a wildfire. William was viewed favorably by most in their base, especially the crafters. The Smith, without a doubt, the one favoring him the most of everyone

None of them really knew about the kid from Richard’s understanding. They only knew the persona he had cultivated while within the camp. Which meant a lot of people had gathered around his cabin,

asking worried questions. Even if they wanted the teenager dead, it would be incredibly difficult. Plan C then, he thought.

Jacob had also gathered outside with the others. While he was undoubtedly worried about William, he was more concerned with Casper. It wasn't a secret that the trapper had called William out, and now the caster was nearly dead... he could only fear the worst. Either he had tried to kill William, or he was a victim himself... damn it.

Taking a deep breath, he looked towards the sky, the artificial sun hanging above. Even if everything was bad... he couldn't be the one to break. He knew others relied on him. Jacob had a responsibility. He refused to let others lose hope, so he would grasp for anything he could. Because at times, he felt like hope was all he had going for him.