

## Hunter 44

### Chapter 44: "Partners"

William listened to the woman talk on and on about the importance of others. His parents were also there, both off to his side, a chair's width too far away for it to ever be considered close. His mother was still a mess, and his father stoic.

His crying mother told of how hard it was, how it felt like she had lost both her sons. Something William naturally took offense to. How could you compare that defective product that they had called brother to him? A fully functional and overall excellent person.

But he didn't show it on his face, of course. He had never quite mastered the act of fake-crying, so he just looked down and pretended to be sad. He was sure it was fooling everyone, even the boar sleeping in the corner.

The woman, a therapist, was the only one who knew what had truly happened, what he had done. William had accepted this, as from what he had read, she wasn't required to report of past crimes committed, only suspected future ones.

The fact that his parents insisting that he "didn't know better" and "didn't do it on purpose" likely also helped. Of course, he was more than happy to reinforce that misconception, or at least he had tried to, but the damn woman in front of him was sharp and had seen through his act.

She also knew he wasn't actually sad currently, but he had to play it off to his parents, at least, as they were the ones currently sitting on the giant cookie jars. And his therapist had given him good advice on how he should focus more on other people's perception of his actions. He had to admit that a lot of her arguments had logical consistency, so he followed them.

William saw the therapist as one of the few people he had ever grown to respect. She was smart and, without a doubt, the best manipulator he had ever seen. She could speak entirely differently with him, his parents, Richard sleeping on the recliner, and when he and his parents were together. It was terrific and a great learning opportunity for him.

His father, still stoic as ever, asked while petting the badger on his head: "So the medicine is working? We want to make sure everything is alright before we take any further steps."

"Yes, they are helping greatly. We have even been able to lower the dosage recently as we are making great strides. I do believe William has more tutorial points than Richard also," The therapist answered with a smile.

William just sat there listening but was still a bit annoyed at the insinuation that he was somehow not complete. Yet he had to accept that to others, he perhaps did appear to lack something. He could make up for that by acting like he did have that something, but not always and not to everyone.

"William, do you have anything to say?" she said as she turned to him.

He had trained his response, and with as much faux sadness, he stammered out. "I am sorry... I really didn't know how much it would hurt everyone... I promise I will get better, and nothing like that will ever happen again."

His mother teared up even more at that, and even his father slackened his worried facial expression slightly. If only he could throw some fake tears in and not be covered in blood, it would have been perfect.

“And William, what about that other thing we talked about?” The kind therapist said as she smiled at him once more.

A bit confused, William wondered... what else? She rarely ever addressed him during these sessions, to begin with, but what else did they talk about?

No, this entire situation was wrong. What was going on? He looked questioningly at The Smith standing at his side, but he just shook his head, as confused as William himself.

“You know what I mean, William. That other thing we talked about you lacking,” she continued, the smile on her face now gone. A dark aura began spreading from her as a giant sphere of darkness ripped the ceiling apart.

“We talked about how weak you are, William. How pathetic you are. So broken and weak... unable to ever truly grasp for power.”

As she finished, the door was kicked in, a cloaked man with a weapon rushing towards him. He couldn't react before he was stabbed in the chest by the dagger of bone.

The archer simply looked down at him as he fell to the floor, completely paralyzed. Those eyes, staring at him like he was some defenseless critter. He couldn't move; he couldn't breathe. He felt life slowly seep out of his body as he was absolutely powerless. His chest was rotting as the poison spread, the laughing face of Casper staring down at him mockingly from within the sphere of darkness above.

He tried to scream as he found himself sitting up from a makeshift bed in a cabin. His heart was pounding as cold sweat covered his entire body.

Due to his scream, the door was swiftly opened as he saw the healer Caroline enter. William couldn't help himself from shaking... he didn't want anyone to see him right now. He felt weak.

"William, how are you?" Caroline asked, but she looked and spoke to him differently than usual. Her voice wasn't warm and friendly, but a bit cold.

William, doing everything he could to calm himself down. Too shaken to even pick up Caroline's changed demeanor. "Ye... yeah. I am fine. I am just tired, and I feel like shit."

He closed his eyes as he tried to gather his thoughts. He had lost. Lost and nearly died in the process. What the fuck was that archer? What the fuck was up with him and his stats? Who in their right mind makes a build entirely centered around perception and defensive stats? Also, the poison... it wasn't purely physical, but magical and far more potent than the venom from the badgers. Did he even have magic?

As William was gathering his thoughts, Richard entered the cabin too. The young caster didn't even think about it, as he was too stuck in his own head. He did perk up when a barrier surrounded the cabin, however."

"Huh?" he exclaimed, confused as he looked up and saw the cold eyes of Caroline and Richard on him.

"So, what happened?" Richard asked.

William looked back and forth between the two as he put on his innocent teenager mask.

"I went to look for that Casper fellow in case he needed help, bu--"

"Cut the bullshit; we know you didn't," Richard interrupted. "You went to kill him like you've killed so many others. This ridiculous farce is over, so stop spewing out garbage and tell me exactly what happened."

Once more, William was surprised. What? he knew? How? Richard had been fooled for so long, Caroline too, when did he-

"Did you think I wouldn't know? You weren't exactly subtle, William. You are powerful, yes, but you are also young and inexperienced. A powerful weapon that I have let run rampant for too long," Richard said before continuing.

"I know your type. I am not some shrink who thinks you're lesser for what you are. You are a brilliant young man with endless potential to be the perfect soldier, but every soldier needs a commander - a guide to let you reach your full potential. With your intelligence, you know the benefits of a support system."

William looked confused at the man, perhaps even more than before. He looked... serious. What?

He had never been in this position before.

“When?” was all he could manage to stammer out.

“I was on to you the first day we met. Did you think I wouldn’t notice a living weapon waltz into my camp?”

The young caster wasn’t sure what to do at this very moment. William didn’t feel like they were about to attack him, and quite honestly, he still felt too weak to fight, which was weird, as all of his resource pools were full.

“What do you want? You want me to play soldier?” he asked, trying to look stoic. He had to at least put up a front.

“No, I want you to play super-soldier. I am proposing a partnership. I will be at the back, supporting you to reach for higher power, and you will help me be the leader of this camp - an agreement of mutual benefits. I know you want tutorial points and levels and that my death would offer you plenty... but what I can provide you with while alive is far more valuable.”

William felt pleased with the man’s attitude. So that is why he hadn't done anything for so long. There was actually someone smart enough to recognize his worth. Fucking finally.

“Fine,” he agreed. This was good, right?

“Great!” Richard said with a happy smile as he went over and patted the young man’s shoulder. “You cannot begin to comprehend how glad I am to have you as a partner. I couldn’t imagine anyone better. Caroline, make sure he is in top condition.”

“Of course, boss!” Caroline said with a smile as she went over to heal the young man. William didn’t feel much from what she did, but he did feel a bit of strength returned. “I have done all I can; the rest is just fatigue. It should be all-good in a few hours!”

“Alright then, let’s give William time to rest,” Richard said with a happy nod.

“That’s it?” William asked, confused. Were they just going to leave him here unattended?

“We can find out who the idiot is who attacked you when you are in top condition. Just find me or send someone. We’re partners now; I can’t tell you what to do,” the warrior said before exiting the room with Caroline, the barrier disappearing along with her.

William wasn’t exactly sure what just happened. He was pretty sure it was a good thing, though.

Outside the cabin, Richard walked with Caroline; his smile had changed to one of disdain.

Richard had walked in with one of two purposes, and he had already discussed the plan with Caroline beforehand.

The first scenario was getting information out of William about who attacked him by acting stoic and press him. Then Richard would take advantage of his still weakened state and just finish off the kid. With him fully healed from earlier, Richard theorized he would get all of his tutorial points and full experience. Caroline may have also gotten some, but that was fine. Caroline was one of his people, after all.

The second scenario was what played out. William was vulnerable and open to manipulation. Despite how powerful he believed himself to be, he was shaken from whatever had just happened. The broken kid was even more broken than before, so Richard took advantage of that. He stroked his ego and got in. At the final moments, his skill made him aware. William was now 'loyal' to him. His quest confirmed the same thing, too, by going up a single percentage point.

Not that he hadn't been unknowingly loyal for a long time. Richard had purposefully sent the less 'loyal' groups to areas the Scout informed him William was in. As predictable as he was, William would then kill them. In Richard's mind, this was a win-win. He would have people who weren't loyal to him killed, or he would lose an attack-dog.

He had only needed to do this three times total before he just led his people entirely away from William. For a long time, Richard had hoped that the idiot would just get himself killed against Hayden's men, but sadly that hadn't happened. William, in all his arrogance, was, in the end, still a coward. If he knew a party was strong, he would avoid them entirely. It was almost comical how every time Richard went out, William would go in the exact opposite direction.

As to why he decided to bring William in now? Because he was vulnerable enough. Richard could feel his weakness the second he saw him. A broken child, unsure of himself, so Richard gave him the recognition he so dearly craved for at that moment. He began by first establishing that he was in power by putting William down and then extended an offer of partnership, to appear like he really needed him. The kid had eaten it raw.

His loyalty was fickle, the foundation a fucking mess, but it was enough for now.



All of the crafters were already considered loyal to Richard. Perhaps loyalty was the wrong term, but his skill and quest sure counted them. If he had to guess, then he would say it was more reliance than loyalty. Ultimately, he now considered them his people. The only one who didn't give him the response was The Smith, but he could handle that in time. It wasn't like he needed everyone to be loyal either.

Jacob was another example of this. He shifted loyalty nearly daily. It was peculiar, but Richard never got any sense of danger from the man. The same was true for that guy Bertram who followed Jacob around at all times. He had never displayed loyalty even once towards Richard, yet he was clearly a trustworthy man who had undying loyalty towards Jacob. Again, it wasn't really a problem, as he clearly cared for Caroline, and Caroline was undoubtedly loyal.

It was necessary to have William converted or dead. All Richard now had left was Hayden and his party and a possible third threat, aka what attacked William.

Oh, and on a final note on William... while he was a useful dog, he wasn't exactly a good dog. A bit too feral for Richard's taste. A wild dog couldn't just be tamed that quickly after all. You could feed it and keep it loyal for a while, but Richard wasn't under any illusions that William wouldn't end up backstabbing him at some point.

Against Hayden, William would be a helpful tool. It's the only reason why he even bothered to convert him today. But once Hayden and his camp were either assimilated or decimated...

The mad dog would have to be put down.