

## Hunter 51

### Chapter 51: Meeting old friends (1/2)

Waking up, Jake found himself covered in sweat as he abruptly sat up. The damp cave and the high humidity of the forest just outside not doing him any favors either. He could still remember parts of the dream, but what mostly remained was a feeling.

Loneliness.

He had spent so long without any real interaction with others, the only reprieve being his meeting with the Malefic Viper. He couldn't exactly count the meetings with William and the group he had fought earlier. The first meeting was with someone clearly plotting, and the other 'conversation' had few words that weren't curses tossed at him.

Perhaps he was rushing into things, but he felt a need to clear up the misunderstanding. To at least have the possibility of reuniting with his colleagues. While they hadn't been super-close, they were still the closest thing to friends he had.

Especially Jacob, Casper, and Caroline. Mainly the first two, though. More than a month had allowed him to rethink the silly crush he had on her in the past. He realized now that it was only a pipedream, that he had idealized and romanticized the thought of having a relationship once more. While she was physically attractive, he didn't even know her that well, actually.

He just hoped they had all managed to survive. Based on the importance Richard seemed to place on healers, Caroline should be fine. With Caroline having feelings for Jacob, chances are she would do everything in her power to also keep him safe.

If he had to go by competency, his bet on survivors would be that Ahmed and Bertram were also still kicking, with Casper also having a good shot. As he thought about it, he couldn't help but realize how lightly he took life... how he was 'fine' with expecting people he had called colleagues a month ago to be dead.

Then again, did he truly have the right to mourn the deaths of friends? He had taken many friends from others himself already... his number of kills being firmly in the double digits by now.

Shaking his head, he got off the bed and depositing it in his spatial necklace once more. After that, he took out a barrel of water to quickly clean his sweaty body. While it was a bit of a waste of purified water, it wasn't like he couldn't just purify some normal water later.

Feeling clean, he threw everything useful into his storage and exited the cave. The artificial sun was up, and beasts were once more roaming about, making sounds he could faintly hear in the distance.

Having decided to attempt to make contact with his former colleagues, he started heading inwards towards the tutorial area center.

It took him only a short while with his speed to head inwards. He was aiming for the area with the least amount of animal cries.

Continuing, he spotted something in the distance between the trees. It looked like a curtain of water extending towards the sky. Behind the curtain, he couldn't see anything correctly, yet at the same time, it appeared utterly transparent.

Getting closer, he soon found himself standing right in front of the barrier. The first thing he noted was how his Sphere of Perception got completely thrown off by the barrier. It wasn't that it blocked him per se; everything just felt... distorted. It was a weird feeling he honestly couldn't quite describe.

Extending his hand towards it, he felt nothing from his danger sense. Identify also yielded no result. Deciding to risk it, he attempted to place his hand on the barrier, only for it to pass right through.

Quickly retracting his hand, he backed away from the barrier once more. If his guess was accurate, this barrier was some kind of entrance to an inner area of sorts. While he certainly wanted to go, for now, he had already decided to contact his friends.

Not knowing if the barrier was a one-way thing, he thus decided to postpone it.

Instead, he started walking around the edge of the barrier in search of Richard's camp. If his friends were anywhere, it had to be with him.

Luckily it didn't take him long to discover a camp. Or a small village would be more accurate. It was a few kilometers away from the barrier, but it wasn't that hard to locate due to all the smoke it emitted.

It looked relatively simple, with a small wall and quite a few wooden cabins encompassed within. Climbing a tree, Jake got a better vantage point as he started scouting the place.

Dozens of people were walking about, most of them busy working on different things. Some were smithing at a small makeshift smithy, including a huge bearded man who seemed to be in charge. Others worked surrounded by tens of strung-up beasts as they were skinning their hides and transforming the raw materials into different products.

The last group he saw was a group of women and a few men sitting together, working with what seemed like threads and needles. Where the hell did they get those from? he thought to himself.

But more surprising to him was the woman in the middle. Joanna. Jake could only smile happily as he saw a familiar face after such a long time. She even had her leg back and seemed to be in quite a good mood, considering the circumstances.

Her presence also confirmed to Jake that more of his former colleagues had to be there. It took him a while, but finally, he saw two people walk out of one of the cabins. One of them, a blonde-haired man that even at this distance, Jake could identify as Jacob. The other was a woman wearing quite an elaborate white dress. Caroline.

Jake's smile grew as he saw them. At least three of them still lived. He decided to stay hidden in the treetop for a while as he observed the base's happenings. Jacob was walking about, talking with people, and from the reception, he seemed to be well-liked even here in this post-system world.

Still smiling, he summoned a piece of paper and a pen from his spatial storage; Items he had brought along from the challenge dungeon. He decided to write a note, as walking into the base didn't seem like the brightest idea considering them all believing him to be some mad killer.

He just wrote a simple request for a meeting. Depositing the pen once more, he took out an arrow and some string he had made from the stalks of a common-rarity herb. A waste for sure, but the stem was more robust than any rope he could make with the limited materials around.

Tying the message to the arrow, he took out his bow and waited. After only a few minutes, Jacob and Caroline entered a clear area as Jake aimed at the ground in front of them. The distance was hundreds of meters, but Jake had absolute confidence in the shot even without using any skills.

Letting go of the arrow, it took flight and landed only a meter or so in front of Jacob and Caroline, who both jumped back in fright, with Caroline even summoning a magic shield of some kind. Jake, however, didn't stick around as he jumped back, letting gravity do its work as he fell to the ground.

Landing softly from the 30-meter drop, he started sneaking away in case anyone was coming to investigate where the arrow came from. The ball was in their court now, and he dearly hoped that they would be open for dialogue to clear up this stupid misunderstanding.

Back at the camp, a small uproar had occurred as everyone thought they were under attack. Jacob quickly managed to calm them down, but not before Richard made his way over to see the commotion.

An arrow was sticking out of the ground with a piece of paper tied to it. Picking it up, Jacob got it loose but didn't have time to read it as he was surrounded.

"What happened here?" Richard said as he walked up to see Jacob holding the arrow and paper in his hands.

"Someone decided to send a message by an arrow; it seems," Jacob answered, as he began untying the paper.

"Who?"

Unfurling the paper, Jacob quickly scanned it and saw the name at the bottom as he became solemn.

“Jake,” he answered. “He wants to meet. Says there’s a misunderstanding.”

Richard’s eyes turned sharp as he looked at the paper. “Give it here,” he said as he nearly ripped it out of Jacob's hands.

The message was indeed just a short request for a meeting. Few words, just saying that Jake wanted to meet and explain himself with a promise that he wasn’t looking for a fight, along with a location not too far away.

But weirdly enough, the first thing Richard asked had nothing to do with this request itself.

“Where did he get the paper? And this is clearly written with some kind of pen.”

This question stumped Jacob and Caroline as well as all the onlookers. Where exactly had he gotten it?

Caroline quickly assured that he hadn’t entered the tutorial with them. The paper wasn't regular kind either, but a grayer and coarser version. The pen used was also of the old ink type, and not a modern one either.

This, however, was still an extremely puzzling matter to everyone. Had Jake somehow made the things himself? If so, why had he made it? And how exactly?

Jake had naturally never thought that the simple act of using paper and pen taken from the challenge dungeon would cause this much debate and confusion in Richard's camp. No one in both Richard's and Hayden's camp had ever done a dungeon. At least no one had returned from one.

That is if the finders had even reported it. The dungeons were hidden, and if they were found, many would keep it a secret. Perhaps to enter later or to make sure no one else could.

This meant that all items used by the survivors besides Jake were self-made either through skills or pure human ingenuity. The diverse collection of people had allowed them to get access to many more modern items of comfort, albeit in rather rudimentary forms.

A lively discussion started in the middle of the camp, with even quite a few people advocating to capture Jake to learn of his secrets. Especially the crafters got involved in the discussion. Heavily pushed by Joanna, who had been brought up to speed by Jacob. She didn't want to see Jake harmed either.

However, Richard quickly shot that sentiment down as he dragged Caroline and Jacob along to his own cabin for a sit-down. While the mystery of the paper and pen were intriguing, Richard already had other plans.

That fucking mutt, just when you need him, he acts like a stray, Richard cursed inwardly. William had talked with Richard earlier, and they had agreed for him to leave for a bit. But not after telling him all the details about his attacker...

Someone Richard quickly identified as a certain troublesome archer.

“We should give him a chance. This note clearly indicates that he wants to open a channel of communication. This can still be solved diplomatically,” Jacob said, as he got a bit heated at Richard insisting not to meet him.

“Or it could be a trap to get you and your friends alone for easy pickings. Our best healer included, as I doubt I can talk her out of following you,” Richard said with a sigh.

“I can meet him alone, I-”

“No.”

“Cara, I am sure it is best if I-”

“I said no, Jacob. Either you don’t go, or we both go. Bertram too,” Caroline said, leaving no room for further discussion.

“And there you have it. Are you seriously telling me to let you go out into the forest with only you and two others? You can’t fight for shit, Jacob, and Caroline is a healer. Bertram can maybe buy you some time, but in the end, how are you going to handle someone who can take down entire teams alone?” Richard asked rhetorically.



"I trust Jake enough to at least give it a shot. He asked to meet so close to the base that I am sure we can manage to make it back even if it turns sour. Bertram and Caroline at least can; you know they can handle themselves," Jacob argued, refusing to back down.

The discussion went back and forth a bit longer, getting more and more heated. Finally, Caroline butted in and calmed them both down as she whispered to Jacob.

"How about you go back for now, and I try to convince him? This is getting nowhere."

With a grunt, Jacob agreed, leaving Richard and Caroline alone in the room.

Richard had naturally heard the whispering. It was kind of a useless thing to do with the increased perception everyone had.

Outside the cabin, Jacob was waiting patiently as he saw Caroline put up her barrier, blocking out sound.

Jacob planned on going to the meeting either way, but it would be preferable to have Richard on board. As he stood there, Joanna walked over.

"Jake is alive," she stated. "How do you think he made it out there? With everything going on, I can't imagine what he has had to go through..."

“Jake is resourceful,” he smiled. “He must have found something special out there. Maybe he has even managed to avoid this stupid war.”

Bertram, who had turned up behind Jacob at some point, butted in. “As much as I hate to admit it, I have to agree partly with Richard. I don’t like the thought of going out into the forest to meet him.”

“We have known Jake for years. Do you really think he wou-“

“Jacob, how well do we really know him? We all saw that he is capable of on that first night. After that, he purposefully provoked and ultimately killed six of Richard’s men. I do agree that the Jake in my mind from two months ago couldn’t do that, but the Jake from that first night sure as hell could.”

Jacob turned to his old, old friend. “Do you trust me?”

“Always,” he answered promptly.

“Then trust me when I say that this isn’t Jake. My judgment may not always be perfect, but I am sure of this one. Besides, we both know the real culprit anyway.”

“Yeah...” Bertram agreed after a bit of hesitation. Joanna looked a bit confused but read the mood.

“I’ll head back over. Be careful out there,” Joanna said, giving both of them a quick hug.

Jacob and Bertram stayed behind, waiting for Caroline. Now was the best time as William had left less than an hour ago. He tended to be gone for extended periods, meaning they should have eight or ten hours at least.

Please let me be right, Jacob thought as he saw Caroline exit Richard's cabin.