

Hunter 52

Chapter 52: Meeting old friends (2/2)

Jacob happily walked towards the exit of their base, Bertram on one side, Caroline on the other. It had been a few hours since Jake's message arrived and the subsequent meeting with Richard. Caroline had somehow managed to convince him to let them leave with just the three of them.

According to her, he hadn't been happy about it and had holed himself up inside. Jacob wanted to go and smooth things out with the camp leader, but Caroline had talked him out of it. So, for now, he could only take the fortune he had been given and go to the meeting.

Caroline had stipulated that they needed a proper plan before going to the meeting, something Jacob had agreed to instantly. He did like making plans, which was why they had taken so long to leave. Jake had only specified a place to meet and not a set time. From how it was written, he wanted it to be sooner rather than later, but a few hours shouldn't be too long. The meeting area was quite open-ended, but Jacob had confidence in them finding each other.

The walk wasn't very long, only a kilometer or so from their base. They had built right next to the barrier, so the area he could be in was somewhat limited.

A hundred meters or so away, Jake sat. He, like Jacob, was nervous about the meeting. He even feared the same outcome, though for different reasons. Jacob feared that he was wrong and that Jake would turn on them. Jake feared they wouldn't believe him and think he was actually the culprit, inevitably resulting in them turning on him.

Perhaps it was the nervousness, but Jake somehow only spotted them moments before they spotted him, despite his higher perception. He had to control himself and not rush to them. Instead, he chose to stand still and let them come to him.

Jacob relaxed a bit as he saw Jake just standing there, his hood down and face visible. Especially his nervous face made him relax. He couldn't help but chuckle inwardly as Jake's face looked nearly identical to how it had the first time he was forced to make a presentation to management. And all the times after that, actually.

Jake hasn't changed, he told himself; it must be a misunderstanding. Perhaps he was just naïve, but he truly believed in Jake.

Bertram and Caroline, on the other hand, didn't share his sentiment. They both glared at their former colleague, and both had up their guards. Unlike Jacob, they didn't see him as good old Jake, but as a potential threat. Not for the same reasons, though.

His demeanor was somehow different. His face looked roughly the same, but his stature exuded some hidden confidence. An innate sense of inferiority was also faintly felt, making them aware that he was more powerful than them. None of them knew this, but this was the suppression of rank...

But more importantly, they both tried to identify him to find out they couldn't. A phenomenon they had never met before. Even if they couldn't see level, it would at least show something. But for Jake, it just gave a simple question mark. Giving them the same surprise William had, as William hadn't shared that detail with the others.

Jake remembered telling Jacob to come alone, but he was honestly pleasantly surprised that Bertram and Caroline also came along. Scouting the area with a quick look, he didn't see any signs of anyone following them.

Jacob and the others stopped five or six meters away from him, as both just stood there for a bit. Jake had run through this scenario a few times in his head before and finally managed to get something out:

“Eh... Hey Jacob, how you doing?” he asked, as he instantly slapped himself mentally. What the fuck kind of question is that?

“Oh... I am fine... you?” Jacob said, also feeling a bit awkward himself now.

“Fine... I guess...” Jake answered.

...

“So, you called us, or well me, out here?” Jacob said, taking the lead as Jake did not indicate that he would continue speaking.

“Yeah... I had some weird run-ins with people in the forest,” Jake answered, now finding a bit of confidence. “They seemed to believe I had done things I have no idea about.”

“Jake, how many people have you killed since entering the tutorial?” Caroline cut in, staring daggers at him.

A bit taken aback, Jake was surprised by the stern tone for a second, mostly because he had never heard Caroline speak to anyone like that before.

"I think..." Jake began, as he thought about who he had killed. 3 attackers during the first night, 6 people Richard sent after him, and the party of 5 with the green warrior. "Too many... but far from enough to have caused some war. After we split, I have only had to fight humans twice, once against a lone caster and the other time a party of five."

Bertram and Caroline looked at each other to assess the reaction of the other. Bertram thought that either Jake had managed to turn into an Oscars-worthy actor during the last month or he was telling the truth.

Caroline could only sigh inwardly, however. This... wasn't going as planned. Jake wasn't the bestial existence William had described; he was far too familiar... shit.

"See guys; I told you Jake didn't do it!" Jacob said as he turned smiling to the others, now in a far better mood. "William lied."

"William?" Jake asked as he raised an eyebrow. "Metal caster, young, blonde hair?"

"Yeah... he was the lone caster you met, right?" Jacob asked, looking at Jake's sour expression.

"Fucker tried to ambush me after saying he would take me to meet you guys in Richard's camp," Jake said, now with his guard up a little, as his mood took a turn.

"I guess this confirms that it is him..." Jacob wondered aloud. "Which means he must also be the one who killed Casper as he tried to pin it on you..."

“Wait, Casper is dead?” Jake asked

“We believe so,” Bertram said, as he too now wondered what the hell was going on.

Caroline was also starting to reconsider this entire thing. Letting Jacob come here was a bad idea, but she had to. Just a little longer...

“This is the first time I have seen any of you from our group. Who else didn’t make it?” Jake asked, trying to calm himself down after discovering the death of Casper. It had somehow hit him harder than he expected. Ripping off the band-aid now and accepting those they lost as soon as possible seemed like the best thing to do.

“Only the three of us as well as Joanna remain. Oh yeah, Joanna got her legs back when sh-”

But before Jacob could finish, Jake spotted something behind him enter his Sphere of Perception. A faint shimmering in the air. He instantly became alert and activated Archer’s Eye to confirm his suspicion.

Seconds later, the shimmering disappeared, revealing Richard along with four others.

Before Jake could react adequately, he spotted more and more figures appearing within his vision, as the shimmering disappeared gradually, revealing person after person.

"What the hell, Jacob!?" Jake yelled as he backed away from the three of them, ready to take out his bow.

Jacob, now also fully aware of the situation, looked confused about and spotted people also appearing behind Jake. One of them, being a person in a red robe with a spear on his back. Hayden.

"I... I didn't!" Jacob said, trying to explain himself.

"He didn't know," Richard said as he stepped closer, his massive tower shield at the ready. His armor and weapon also clearly above common-rarity.

"Sorry, Jacob, but I couldn't risk it," the warrior said in a slightly apologetic tone as he turned to Jake.

"Surrender. Come with us nice and easy, and we can get to the bottom of this together. If you didn't attack anyone as it has been claimed, we could let bygones be bygones. We can even forget the... situation that came out of the last time we met."

While the words indeed sounded genuine, Jake didn't buy it for a second. He didn't need social awareness, only his instincts, to feel the faint killing intent given off by the man - a clear desire to kill hidden in his eyes.

Focusing on his Sphere of Perception, he registered far more presences all around him. He could only curse himself for not having been more cautious and keeping his guard up. No way they should have been able to get that close even if some kind of magic hid them.

"This wasn't what we agreed! There is no reason for all this! We can-" Jacob protested but was interrupted by an intense glare from Richard.

"Enough. Jake, what will it be?" Richard asked. But Jake didn't even have time to answer as his danger sense alerted him to an attack coming from behind.

He saw a man wearing a red robe wielding a spear charging straight at him.

Jake felt pressure from the man, instantly making him aware that this wasn't someone to take lightly. Which was only further confirmed as the spear started burning, leaving a trail of fire behind it.

"DIE!" the charging man yelled, releasing a wave of fire towards Jake. His eyes filled with unbridled bloodlust.

Being prepared, the archer efficiently managed to sidestep the horizontal cone of flames as he tried jumping to the side, only to be interrupted by more people exiting the forest.

A screen of light appeared before him, blocking his path, as Jake was forced to dodge another fire wave once again.

Jake could hear Jacob yell something, but was too busy to listen. This situation was dire - enemies all around him, with no clear path of escape.

More and more people entered the fray as arrows and spell started flying about, aiming for him. Ice, fire, spikes of earth, and lightning sparks flew around his ears as he dodged as best he could, still getting hit now and then, however.

A whip of fire he was unable to avoid wrapped itself around his foot, halting his movements as he saw the red-robed man holding it on the other end. More whips came out from the other mages around him, of all elements.

Jake panicked as he tried to Shadow Vault away but found it blocked by the whips holding him down. He could barely move his limbs as he felt at least two lashes holding each of his limbs - a clearly pre-practiced tactic.

Richard decided to no longer sit still as he charged towards the immobilized Jake.

With his panic-level increasing, Jake struggled and moved a little, but it was too late as an arrow struck him on the shoulder, followed by more spells. His common-rarity cloak blocked a bit, but far from enough.

His instinctive will to survive took over, drawing from within, as Jake drew on his deep pool of mana. More than he had ever done so before. No intricate thread or such thing was created. He just opened the floodgates. A transparent sheen of mana started coming out of his pores as he yelled.

With the yell, he released an explosion of mana, dispelling the whips and sending all the spells and projectiles aimed at him flying in all directions. The earth broke apart as cracks appeared on the ground. Even Richard, who was charging at him and all the other warriors, were thrown back by the shockwave.

Shocked, everyone saw Jake's figure as the dust settled. He was on one knee, wounds covering his body. The unbridled release of mana seemed to have taken a toll on his body, as he appeared visibly weaker.

An ambitious warrior continued the attack as he charged with a downward slash.

With speed far surpassing the warrior and faster than any of the onlookers could react, Jake tossed a bottle to the side, hitting the warrior right in the face.

Falling backward, the man screamed as his skin started peeling off and rotting. The healers around him reacted fast, but before they could even heal him, half his face was gone as he collapsed dead on the ground, still decomposing.

Everyone's shock brought Jake enough time to down a health potion as he rushed away, not conservative with his resources as he used Shadow Vault.

As Jake started moving, so did everyone around him exit their stupor as their assault continued.

To Jake's horror, the red-robed man also had a powerful movement-skill, as he sprung two wings of fire and rushed with inhuman speed towards him. Gritting his teeth, he could only draw his daggers to block the blow. The momentum was too strong as he was thrown back. Ultimately it worked to his advantage, however, as he managed to put more ground between them.

Pulling out more poison bottles, Jake started throwing them towards his attackers as he retreated. The pursuers were ready as different shields and walls appeared to block them, leaving them utterly ineffective.

Richard and the spear wielder were chasing him, one charging forward with his tower shield raised, and the other with a bubble of fire enveloping his body.

As Jake Shadow Vaulted once more, he got a bit further away, but halfway through his second one, he screamed as he smashed into a transparent wall. Without even lifting his gaze, his sphere made him aware of the culprit as he turned and saw Caroline with her hands extended in front of her body.

Fuck, Jake cursed inwardly, as Richard got to him first. The man was far slower than Jake in attacking, leaving Jake plenty of room to dodge. Richard, however, had never planned to hit him.

Behind him, Caroline's barrier blocked him when a wall of light appeared to his left, with Richard jumping to the right, raising his shield as a phantom of the shield appeared, also blocking the path to his right.

Jake barely had time to turn towards his last path to move as he spotted the spear-wielding fire-caster at the end, in a stance with his spear pointing right at him. Barriers blocked him to all sides; Jake had no path to dodge or escape.

Trail of Embers

Jake heard the man's voice echo as he flew towards Jake with far more speed than before. He couldn't even react as the spear penetrated through his chest and out the back, shattering Caroline's barrier, Jake flying away still impaled on the spear held by the red-robed man.

His entire body felt like it was burning on the inside as he flew backward. His health dangerously low; both his lungs scorched, and his internal organs burned beyond recognition. A state in which any pre-system human would be long dead.

Finally, they both encounter a tree, impaling Jake on it as the caster laughed manically. "This is for my son!"

Jake, feeling no need to answer, summoned all the strength he could as he pushed himself forward along the shaft of the spear as he grabbed hold of the man. The man was surprised at seeing Jake being able to move, and more so at the nearly dead archer putting his hands on him.

This surprise was nothing compared to his astonishment as he felt an intense pain in his chest. Looking down, he saw his red robe slowly darkening as the flesh beneath started going through necrosis. Alarmed, he let go of his spear and stumbled backward, also allowing Jake to get free.

Taking no time to see his handiwork, Jake struggled as he halted away. His body in pain, but not at an unbearable level compared to what he experienced during the final trial in the challenge dungeon.

Hearing Richard and the others catching up, Jake gritted his teeth as he managed to Shadow Vault once more and tried to get out of sight.

Their chase didn't let up, however, as Jake was forced to keep Shadow Vaulting, again and again, his wounds only getting worse. He passed Richard's base as he made his way towards his goal.

Finally, he found himself at the mysterious barrier blocking off the inner area once more. He hoped it was some instance, not unlike the challenge dungeon.

Without hesitation, he stumbled through the barrier as his surroundings changed. His sphere fed him information as space seemed to rapidly expand around him, and he found himself in what seemed like an entirely different world, the barrier still behind him.

Lying on the ground, he crawled to rock, turning back towards the barrier, a bottle of poison now in hand. If any of those fuckers were going to follow him, he sure as hell would greet them with a bottle of poison to the face.

No matter how long he waited, however, no one came. At least not from the barrier.

Behind him, he saw three creatures enter his sphere. They looked like dinosaurs or something. Managing to stand back up somehow he saw their levels.

[Redhide Raptor – lvl 39]

[Bluehide Raptor – lvl 40]

[Greenhide Raptor – lvl 40]

Smiling weakly, Jake stood there as the beasts closed in on him.

What a shitty way to die, he thought, as he threw the bottle of poison towards the blue one and readied himself as they all charged at him.