

Hunter 93

Chapter 93: The Balance Broken

Jake didn't have a lot of close friends growing up, but he did have some. One of them was Patrick or Pat for short. Pat and Jake went to daycare together and even entered the same school. They were in different classes, but they still met up during recess and went to each other's places after school nearly every day.

They had the same hobbies. If one got a new cool comic book or movie, they just had to watch or read it together. Everything was idyllic and pleasant until one small thing came between them.

Jake had lent Patrick one of his new video games for the weekend, but when Patrick came Monday, he didn't have it. Jake didn't chew him out or anything but believed it to be a genuine mistake and asked him just to bring it Tuesday.

Tuesday came around, and still no game. Jake asked again and again. Finally, Patrick broke down and claimed that he had accidentally broken the disc and had lied about it. Jake was furious and told him their friendship was over if he didn't get him a new copy of the game.

Patrick cried, but Jake was steadfast and ignored it. Until he got home, where he too cried. His parents told him to forgive and forget, but Jake was too damn stubborn even back then.

A week passed, and the two of them hadn't spoken a single word. Well, Patrick had spoken, but Jake had ignored him.

Two weeks passed, and Jake kept ignoring his oldest friend despite the pleas and apologies. At that point, Jake had already begun to forget about the game as he had moved on to newer and better things, but nevertheless, he refused to forgive.

On the third week, Patrick came up to him and said that he had something for him during recess. But when the break came around, he couldn't find Patrick anywhere and found out that he had left school early that day.

From then on, Jake completely ignored him. No matter how his former friend tried to explain, Jake didn't listen for even a second.

Two months later, Patrick changed schools. Jake didn't care; he had moved on then and had just started getting into archery.

He learned a few months later that the reason Patrick changed schools was because of bullying. And not the 'tough-it-up-kid'-kind, but the 'trauma-for-life'-kind. He was beaten, isolated, belittled, and, as Jake learned later, stolen from.

Patrick never lost the game. One of the bullies stole it the day he came to return it. Patrick, being non-confrontational, didn't want to get Jake involved and just lied. Instead, he tried to fix it himself.

He managed to pool together all of his allowance and money from some odd jobs to buy a new game three weeks after he lost it. He had brought it to school and wanted to give it to Jake that very day. Instead, his bullies emptied his bag, found the game, and decided to play frisbee with the disc. When Patrick stood up to them, he was beaten, and his parents were called and took him home.

And what did Jake do the moment he learned all this? Absolutely nothing. His old friend lived less than a kilometer away from his house, but he didn't go over. A simple apology, a single "I am sorry," and perhaps he would have had his friend back. But Jake just continued ignoring him.

Jake never heard from or spoke to Patrick again. He moved away a few years later.

And the most pathetic part?

More than a decade later, Jake received a friend request on social media. It was from Patrick. The message attached was just a simple "hey remember me" kind of message, at first, but in the end, it finished with an apology for never returning the game as promised. It was phrased as a joke... but Jake couldn't move past it.

It was an olive branch, an opportunity to make things right once more. And what did Jake do? He pressed the red cross on the window's border, leaving the request pending even when he entered the tutorial.

Jake didn't know why he remembered Patrick specifically at that very moment when he sat on the ground, hands bloody and heaving for breath.

Maybe it was because the entire situation with his former friend exemplified exactly how pathetic Jake felt. He was a god damn coward, and he had always been.

Jake was a loner. It was hard for him to let people in. People represented a nearly inarticulable way for him to fuck something up.

If he did let someone in, he started to care, and he feared letting them go once more. He would ignore anything that could break the careful balance established - to the level of ignoring his girlfriend's blatant cheating, to ignoring the obvious fact that she did it with his best friend.

But perhaps the only thing he feared more than letting those close go... was to let them back in once more. It was to confront the broken balance and try to restore it once again. He feared the conversation he would have with Patrick if he let him in once more... so he just avoided that conversation.

It was the same in the tutorial from the very beginning. When Joanna lost her leg due to something Jake did, be it his fault or not, it broke the balance. Every second he was with her was one where he had to address that fact.

Being presented with an opportunity to get away and be alone when Richard appeared... he pounced on it right away. It was a way for him to escape the consequences - a way for him never to confront her and have a difficult conversation.

Jake, however, still had to admit that no matter how much he enjoyed solitude, he still craved companionship. He didn't fear being lonely; he feared being truly alone. Jake had wanted to reunite with his friends once more. To see the always handsome and coolheaded Jacob and his butler-guy Bertram, the passionate Casper, the two energetic cousins Dennis and Lina... even Caroline after the betrayal, he wanted to know why she did what she did.

He had truly missed them, so he tried establishing contact. Instead, he was met with his biggest fear... an ambush that broke the balance completely. The one he had a crush on wanted to kill him for reasons he didn't understand, his former friend Jacob appearing not to understand the situation at all.

It was a mess - chaos. It was a situation that Jake didn't want to confront... so he ran. Once more, he was ignoring the problem. But he still held on a small sliver of hope. And then the day came where the number of survivors fell from hundreds to only around 50.... and that was the last day he remembered ever seeing the number of survivors.

That was the day the balance was broken beyond repair. He had worked with statistics long enough to know that many of the dead were bound to be his former colleagues and friends. He had even reached the conclusion that among the dead, Jacob had to be one of them. He hadn't proven himself capable of proper self-defense, after all.

So Jake had continued his quest to conquer the tutorial. He had replaced everything with the single goal of killing the King of the Forest and ignored everything else. The same as he had always done.

He had ignored Patrick and focused solely on archery. Ignored his cheating girlfriend and former best friend to concentrate on studying. It was how Jake dealt with every situation: Pretending like it didn't exist and either hope it resolves itself or everyone forgets about it. Or the worst option... for no one to be alive caring about it.

What had triggered him in William's words was that it was all true. That a psycho teenager mass-murderer understood him better than he possibly even understood himself in that very moment. That the fucking psycho could relate.

However, the final straw was a faint feeling in the back of his mind when he saw that number of only two survivors: Relief. He hated himself for it. He hated that he felt like a burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He hated that he liked never having to confront any of his colleagues for the choices he had made - for the choices that could have possibly saved their lives.

Jake hadn't known that Patrick was bullied. He never saw it, and he was only a kid. But after their friendship was over, he did notice it. Yet he did nothing.

Back then, Jake was never bullied. He was always tall for his age growing up, and he had never been the type to back down from a fight. He would often win a fight as he seemed to have a natural talent for beating up others while not getting himself beaten. Which back then was enough for all the school bullies to mark him as off-limits.

When Patrick stopped hanging around with Jake, he became an easier target. With Jake, he had been safe from the bullying, at least when they were physically together. He had acted as a shield, but when Patrick lost that shield, the bullying escalated.

Yet despite knowing Jake did nothing to help his former friend. He was willfully ignorant, and even then, felt a sense of relief when he moved away. Because Jake knew he could have helped his friend. But he had failed him.

Just like how he knew he had failed Jacob and all the others after he saw the number of survivors drop drastically... he could have gone there. He could have gone and checked on them, and he would likely have been able to help them.

But doing so would require him to confront the broken balance. To face the fact that Caroline betrayed him, the fact that many of them were dead, the fact that their relationship was not the same as it had been before.

As Jake sat there submerged in his own deep thoughts, something changed in the atmosphere. The trees' rustling leaves stopped, the wind ceased, and Jake sat completely still as if frozen. In fact, the entire tutorial seemed to freeze like a still picture at that very moment.

A man appeared out of nothing as if he had simply walked into a picture. He had long white rustled hair and an even longer beard. But most weird was his smile, a smile that didn't appear to hold any meaning but simply was.

The man walked towards the crater as he headed for the broken armor and the one within it.

"Such a mess," he mused to himself as he waved his hand. William and the armor both disappeared as the man turned his attention towards Jake. Or more accurately, the one standing behind Jake.

"Not very nice of you to steal someone else's kill like that," the scaled man who stood beside Jake said, as he regarded the white-haired one.

"It is of no consequence," the old man said as he ran his finger through his beard, a trace of annoyance in his eyes. "Besides, were you not the cause of this? You told me to leave your Chosen alone, and yet you go and mess with mine."

"Oh, that? Yeah, that is of no consequence," the Malefic Viper said mockingly. "But the body of the mortal you just stole is of consequence."

The old man raised an eyebrow as he kept on smiling. "Oh? I cannot possibly see what you would want the dead body of a mortal. Why is that, if I may ask?"

"You may not," the Viper answered. "All that matters is that the kill belongs to my Chosen. I have more claim on it than you do. Are you truly going to steal what is rightfully mine?"

The man looked back at the Viper as his eyes sharpened. His smile still there, yet his tone didn't reflect any jovial mood. "... What do you want?"

"If you want the body, you owe me one. Simple as that," the Malefic Viper said, returning the smile.

"We both know that is no simple matter. How about I compensate our young friend over there?" he said, motioning towards Jake.

"Yeah, as if I am ever letting you do that. Either you leave the body here, or you owe me."

"Have you not done enough damage already? Has the interference of you and your Chosen not created enough chaos? Why do you needlessly attempt to ruin this tutorial?"

"I don't know... why don't you ask fate? Oh, but before that, leave the body and let your little experiment end here. Or. You. Owe. Me." the Viper said, the last four words heavily emphasized.

"... Fine." And with those words, the white-haired man disappeared. As if the illusion had been broken, everything started moving once more. The change was that the body was now gone and the Viper still standing at the crater's edge.

"Who was that?" Jake asked, his head still lowered.

“Oh? You saw?” The Viper said as he walked over to him. “That is actually quite interesting. Time was kinda stopped, you know.”

“Yeah, I get it. So who was it, and why take that damn body?” Jake asked

“He is an old soul like me. Goes by Eversmile, though, of course, that isn’t his actual name. Guy hasn’t stopped smiling for eras; it is actually quite creepy.” The Viper joked. “As for why he wants the body? Because he is a maniac. What is important is that he now owes me one.”

“Right...” Jake answered as he looked up at the sky. The appearance of what he presumed was a god, and the stopped time had at least served as a nice distraction. For a few moments, that is.

Sitting down beside him, the Viper joined him in looking towards the sky. “Out of all the character flaws to have, it’s not the worst, you know.”

“Right...”

“I would say that William guy had way more severe issues.”

“Right...”

“Alright, deflection's not working, got it,” the Malefic Viper said as he turned his head towards Jake. “But seriously, is it really that bad? Have you really done something so inexcusable? Is being selfish really that big a sin? Heck, this is isn’t even being selfish; it’s not wanting to deal with someone else’s unrelated problem.”

“How the hell is it not my problem when I ignore my friends and leave them to die to some psycho!?” Jake yelled at the god.

“How is it? Is their weakness your responsibility? Why is it not their fault for not getting their shit together?” the Viper asked with a laidback tone.

“So I should just go full-on selfish psycho and ignore everyone around me?” Jake kept yelling.

“You could, and it would be perfectly reasonable,” the Viper answered. “No one else is your responsibility unless you make it so. No one ever deserves your forgiveness or compassion. No one is ever entitled to your goodwill.”

“So the best way is just to end up alone and sad until the end of time?” Jake said but instantly realized. “Sorry, I didn’t mean...”

“No, you are right, that way also sucks,” the god said with a melancholic smile.

“Letting others in sucks too. It creates a weakness, an opportunity to be hurt. But being alone also sucks. It is quite a conundrum. I guess all I am saying is to pick those you let in carefully. Avoid those who will eventually end up hurting you. Living alone isn’t the solution, but neither is bearing the burden for everyone around you.”

“And how exactly do I know who to trust and who not to?” Jake asked.

“You don’t; that’s why it’s hard. But if it helps with anything, then your pal Jacob is still alive together with that Bertram guy, Casper too. You picked good friends there at least,” the Viper smiled teasingly.

“Wait. How? I thought William killed them?” Jake asked, a mix of surprise, happiness, and skepticism.

“Oh, he did. But Jacob, for example, is now the kind of guy that is annoyingly hard to kill. Heck, when it comes to getting a powerful variant class, he has both you and that William-guy beat ten times over.”

“Is he still in the tutorial?” Jake asked a bit expectantly.

“Nah, he is out and done, officially failed it. Left prematurely. To the system, he is counted as just another dead survivor,” the Malefic Viper said dismissively. “Oh, but Casper did kinda die... anyway, you will see them after the tutorial; it will make more sense then.”

“Oh...” Jake said as he fell into thought.

“Just coming out and saying it right now, you will be a god damn coward if you don’t at least speak with them when you get back on your planet,” the Viper said, this time only half-teasingly.

“Right,” Jake answered, feeling a bit better. “So, what to do now?”

“Two things. First of all, I may or may not have been the one who sicced William on you today. Partially to get revenge on Eversmile, who was also the bastard in your dream, by the way, and partially because I wanted to be a good friend and let you punt that psycho for killing so many of your friends. Also... it will do you good in the long run.”

“Not sure how to respond to that one... thanks, I guess? What will happen to him now?”

“Oh, he will probably be revived or something – oh and good riddance for smashing that little shit the first time around. He gets a full ten out of ten for being annoying. Either way, just kill him again next time, and that will be that. Though I doubt Eversmile will allow him anywhere near you moving forward. Now, on to more important things-” the Viper said, as he pulled out two bottles from the empty air, “-drinking!”

“Where the hell did you get beer from?” Jake asked, clearly confused as he looked down at the familiar bottle.

“Your fridge,” the Viper said as he popped it open.

“How the-?”

“God things.”

“Oh... right.”