

Hunter 46

Chapter 46: Unexpected Encounter (1/3)

For so long, they had waited, generation after generation, era after era. Their hope never died, their conviction eternal. Yet the branches died out one by one. Now only a single hall remained - the once glorious order corroded by the march of time.

For only the gods are immortal. Only the gods can stand against time and preserve what was. Perhaps the only reason why his hall had survived so long was that they had one such god among them.

Here, in this world, they were still respected. They had power, after all. But outside, in the other universes, their once mighty order was nearly forgotten. The Lord Protector, the god who watched over them in place of their Patron, having no desire to leave. So, they could only wait. Wait for the day of his return.

The current Hall Master was one of those waiting. She had been in her position for many generations, and like the many predecessors, she too was patient, never losing faith. Every year she dreamed of their Patron's return. And every year, she found herself saddened when nothing happened.

If not for the Lord Protector and the grand legacy left behind, perhaps even they would have forgotten the Malefic One. Many, even today, still doubted he would ever return. But she believed that the Patron was out there, and as long as they waited, as long as they remained forever faithful, the Malefic One was sure to reemerge.

Suddenly she was awakened from her meditation as an old man teleported into her chamber. He wore a black robe with a snake's motif on it, one similar to her own. However, his snake was not giving off the same aura as the one on hers. One had to distinguish ranks after all.

“What do you disturb my meditation for?” the Hall Master asked, slightly annoyed. If this were another petty squabble with the Brimstone Conglomerate, heads would roll.

“Honored Hall Master, the Lord Protector has ordered you to his realm. Immediately,” the man said, bowing deeply.

The Hall Master kneeled her brows, feeling a mix between excitement and fear. This was only the second time she would meet the Lord Protector. The only other time was during her inauguration as Hall Master, and even then, it was only him making an appearance briefly. She knew that the Hall Master that was before her had only met him twice also, the first being his own inauguration and the second being when he reached the peak of mortality. The Lord Protector didn't even bother to show up at the funeral.

“I shall go at once,” She answered as she teleported out of her chamber. She couldn't teleport straight to the entrance of the Lord Protector's realm but had to walk the majority of the way due to all the protective wards and spells put up through the ages. A minor inconvenience compared to the security provided.

As she walked further and further down towards the entrance, her nervousness only grew. But at the same time, so did her hope. Had it perhaps finally happened?

Unlike most other grand orders or churches like theirs, the Malefic Order did not build grand castles or towers that breached the skies. Instead, they built into the ground, making vast networks of caves, which wasn't to say that the splendor of their order in any way could be belittled. The gloriousness and grandness of their halls were among the best. Caves could easily be far more extensive than some landmasses, especially with a bit of space magic mixed in.

The entrance to the Lord Protectors realm finally entered her sight after only a few minutes of descending. The portal unadorned and straightforward, being merely an archway of stone with a portal in. Taking a deep breath, she stepped through.

This was her first time in the Lord Protectors realm, and her expectations were most certainly met. The realm was not very large, perhaps only the space of a few smaller planets. But numerous reptilian creatures lived on the vast landmass that floated beneath her. Very few buildings stood on the entire continent, and only a single one was of any note - the Lord Protectors abode, she assumed.

“Come, child, come quickly!”

She heard the venerated voice of the Lord Protector as she promptly teleported to the source. The god sounded... emotional.

After teleporting, she found the Lord Protector, all alone with a gleam in his eyes as he stared at a colossal obelisk made of black stone. The Hall Master had never seen this obelisk before, but she instantly knew what it was. And she knew what this meant.

On the obelisk, a rune had lit up - the only rune on it. A profound green aura shrouded the obelisk, an aura that made even the Lord Protector's seem weak in comparison. The rune represented a single message. A message they had been waiting for oh so patiently for oh so long.

The Malefic Viper was coming.

The Hall Master could only tighten her knuckles as she started shaking from excitement. Their Patron, their one true god, was coming back to them. After Eras of waiting, the Malefic One would finally return and once more bring glory to their order. Her eternal faith, their undying belief had not been misplaced.

But instantly, she was brought back to reality. Oh no! So many preparations had to be made! They had to get everything in the absolute best of conditions. She had to brief all the other leaders and minor branches around their world. There was so much! She only hoped paradoxically that the Great One would perhaps take a few more days before he-

“HELLO LITTLE SNAPPY! MISSED ME!?”

Old habits die hard. A common phrase for most, one would imagine. But Jake had never thought that a 'habit' could get old after less than a month. Without even thinking about it, he had found himself munching on mushrooms. Much to his horror, he even found enjoyment in it. The mana gained was a nice bonus too.

One thing led to another, and now Jake found himself sitting beneath a tree with a mixing bowl in his hand with moss and mushrooms floating in the purified water. After his fight with the boar and a lot of practice with his new Shadow Vault skill, he was excited to find new strong opponents to test himself against.

But after hours of looking around, he only came across a few weak beasts, none of them even breaking level 20. Barely worth getting out of bed for. So instead, he had gotten bored and started doing a bit of alchemy. It helped calm his nerves, and he needed to practice using his Alchemical Flame anyway.

He had already mixed a few common-rarity poisons and considered if he should start learning how to make stamina potions. He hadn't needed them during the challenge dungeon as he only used stamina passively, but with his new archer skills, that had changed significantly.

He hadn't gotten a level, but it wasn't surprising considering he had only done alchemy for a few hours, and the concoctions were some he had trained many times before. He still had plenty of ingredients left in his spatial necklace, so he didn't really worry about running out any time soon.

As he was about to begin another concoction, he sensed someone looking at him. At first, he thought it was one of the not-bird-birds, but it wasn't. Raising his head abruptly and turning to the side, he activated Archer's Eye instinctively and saw a man standing at the top of a hill wearing an archer cloak similar to his own.

Shortly after, he saw four other figures appear around the archer. From the looks of it, three different kinds of the warrior class and a caster. Jake, with his high perception, used Identify on each of them, as they didn't seem keen on approaching him quite yet either. Likely also all trying to identify him currently.

[Human – lvl 19]

[Human – lvl 20]

[Human – lvl 18]

[Human – lvl 21]

[Human – lvl 20]

They were all lower than the caster that called himself William, but that wasn't grounds to underestimate them. There were five of them, and one of them had a rather mean-looking two-handed sword. That warrior also happened to be the one at level 21 and was even wearing plate armor. Armor Jake guessed was enchanted, either by upgrading it with a token or just by finding it.

From a quick glance, he noticed that they all seemed to have relatively decent gear. The archer's bow even looked quite a bit nicer than his own. All of their armor or cloaks were for sure upgraded, none of them looking like they only had what one started the tutorial with.

From what he could see, there were four men and one woman. He couldn't see their faces properly, but from their posture, they were all clearly on edge - a perfectly understandable response to seeing Jake, a solitary unidentifiable human in the middle of nowhere. If possible, Jake wanted to avoid conflict and just move on with his day. Though information would be useful, as he had some doubts about the validity of what William said, considering the guy did turn out to be a backstabbing bastard.

Jake, seeing no reason for conflict, acted like he put the mixing bowl beneath his robe as he deposited it into his spatial storage. No reason to openly advertise that he had it after all. He then got up and started walking towards the five people in an as non-threatening manner as he could. Which is to say he walked with both hands held out in front of him, showing he wasn't armed. Something he could change in the blink of an eye with his spatial storage.

The warrior with the two-hander went a step forward from the group and yelled. "Who are you? Why are you alone out here? And what was that in your hand before?"

Jake, seeing no reason to lie, but didn't exactly feel like sharing much, told them the truth for the most part. "I am just an archer, and I am alone because I kind of like it that way. Also, it was just a bowl earlier, see?" he said as he pulled out the bowl once more, making sure to make it seem like he pulled out from beneath his cloak.

However, they seemed to care little for the bowl, as their gazes all sharpened when he refused to give his name.

“Are you Jake?” The caster asked as she stepped forward, glaring at him with quite a bit of hostility.

Jake was a bit taken aback at the question. The only ones in the tutorial who knew his name were the ones his colleagues had shared it with. Richard also knew it without a doubt, and while he wasn't exactly on friendly terms with Richard, he doubted the man would still have people out hunting for him after so long. Besides, if they knew his colleagues, it was more than worth the risk to strike up a conversation.

“Yeah, where did you hear my name?” he asked, hoping to finally get some helpful info.

What he got instead was a bolt of ice followed by an arrow. The three warriors didn't stand still either as they all charged the instant they confirmed his identity.

Jake took a moment to react, as he barely managed to jump to the side to avoid the ranged attacks because of his danger sense. What the hell is wrong with them? he asked himself as he saw the eyes of the opposing party. The hostility was almost palpable as the caster yelled.

“This is for Mickey, you fucking psycho!”

“Don't lose your cool and let him run!” the warrior with the big sword said in a stern tone before he sped up, a green glow swirling around his body.

Jake only got more and more confused. Who the fuck is Mickey? But he didn't have time to contemplate further, as he jumped backward, dodging the first swing of the warrior. This had to be some kind of misunderstanding. Perhaps another guy named Jake killed that guy? It wasn't out of the question for more people named Jake to be in a 1200 people group.

"Listen, I think there is some kind of misunderstanding here! I didn't kill anyone named Mickey as far as I recall! Please, just calm down! There is no reason for us to fight," Jake tried, as he kept dodging the blows of the warrior.

"Don't listen to him! Richard warned that he tried shit like this versus the metal mage!" one of the other warriors, an upgraded light-warrior as far as he could see, warned.

Jake, at the mention of those two, instantly sharpened his gaze. So, William and Richard did work together. And it seemed like that caster wasn't happy about their last bout at all, even now sending people after him.

Everything suddenly seemed a lot clearer to Jake. They weren't here for revenge for some guy named Micky; they were here to kill him. Heck, maybe Mickey was a guy from the squad Richard sent after him so long ago. Not that any of it mattered. In his mind, these five were now unquestionably marked as enemies. Yet he wasn't about to give up trying to get something useful out of them.

"So, you are with Richard and that metal-caster William. Tell me, do you know of other survivors in his camp? Names such as Jacob, Casper, or Joanna?" he asked.

An effort that went unrewarded as they all simply continued their assault. Fine, Jake thought, have it your way.

They were slower and weaker than him in pretty much every way. Sure, the warrior without a doubt had higher strength than him, but all in all, he still saw them as weak. Compared to William, none of them had shown anything that could genuinely threaten him. Well, he would be in for a lot of hurt if he let that massive two-hander hit him, but no way he was going to let that happen.

Having decided to stop being diplomatic, he no longer held back. He quickly summoned his bow as he Shadow Vaulted backward, much to the onlooker's shock as they saw him turn shadowy and fly backward.

With bow in hand, he decided to go for the weaker ones first. As he was preparing to shoot the caster, however, an arrow with far more power than he expected headed his way, allowing him only narrowly to avoid it. Parts of his cloak was still ripped apart from the wind pressure alone. Powershot, shit.

A quick glance informed him that the archer had started charging another Powershot, making Jake instantly switch his focus to him. He knew the strength of that skill, but also its massive weakness.

Nocking an arrow, he shot it towards the archer, but his attack instead struck a wall of ice that popped up before it. Cursing, Jake could only dodge once more as the two other warriors reached him, one the light-warrior and the other a medium-warrior from what he could see. Both upgraded classes, too, of course.

With his weak defenses, the light-warrior became his next target, as he quickly dismissed his bow and drew his bone dagger along with another random archer one. With no time to poison anything, he had to make do. The warrior was faster than Jake with his movements, but Jake had a small edge in strength and a relatively large advantage in technique with his Twin Fang Style, insane perception, and instincts.

Positioning himself to block the archer and caster's line of sight, he dodged the medium warrior's sword as he closed in on the light-warrior. With slight panic, the man tried to jump back as he threw small knives at Jake. Knives, he decided to ignore as he just let them hit his body. The cloak blocked nearly everything, only leaving a few meaningless scratches on his tough body.

However, the warrior was far less durable than Jake. Surprised that Jake just tanked the attack, he took several cuts across the chest with the bone dagger before Jake tried to finish him off by plunging his other dagger into his neck. Sadly, he had no time to assess if the man was a goner, as the two remaining warriors had reached him once more.

Shadow Vaulting away, he once more drew his bow and started bombarding both of them with arrows. The heavy warrior manipulated the aura around his body to block them, with the medium warrior choosing to dodge instead. A dodging attempt he failed, as an arrow nailed him in the leg.

Seeing his opportunity, Jake managed to land two more arrows on the man before he had to Shadow Vault once more as another Powershot came his way.

With some distance, he withdrew a bottle of necrotic poison and retreated behind a tree, still keeping an eye on the warriors that were still within his Sphere of Perception. He had bought himself some time to apply the poison as he saw the party try and save their comrades. He had confidence in the damage on the light-warrior being lethal.

However, the medium-warrior seemed to already be getting up, as his wounds already started healing rapidly. Not natural health-points rapidly, but a self-healing skill rapidly. Something that wouldn't happen again that easily with poison in the mix. More than a dozen arrows now soaked in some of his most potent common-rarity poison went back into the quiver.

Okay, round two.