

Hunter 107

Chapter 107: Next target: King of the Forest

Everyone likes loot. It is the reason why people bother to defeat the same bosses and maps over and over again in videogames, just for the slight chance of getting an item with insignificantly bigger numbers on it to flex on your friends.

Jake, of course, was no different. With the items now no longer merely being pixels on a screen but tangible tools allowing him to become stronger, it turned that entire sentiment up to eleven.

But it also made the disappointment worse when he got something he didn't want . And the first item, a shield, was one such disappointment.

[Bulwark of the Horde Leader (Rare)] – A shield made from the rock infused with the Records of the Horde Leader. The Horde Leader's Bulwark is highly resistant to all physical attacks while only offering medium resistance to magical ones. Allows the user to channel mana into the shield, increasing its size and resistance accordingly. Enchantments: Self-Repair.

Requirements: lvl 60+ in any humanoid race.

Yeah, sure, he didn't have a decent shield, but he didn't plan on using a shield either. Any attack he would be forced to block would likely be better blocked by his Scales of the Malefic Viper anyway. Not that he planned on tanking many hits. He preferred not to get hit at all.

Trying it out, he injected mana into it and felt it bind to him. He already kind of knew he had some kind of earth-affinity as the Soilwater didn't hurt him, but it was good to have it reaffirmed. After trying out the shield's ability a bit by making it grow in size and shrink it back down, he got a bit bored.

He put the shield in his inventory as he turned to the second, smaller lockbox. The small box was no larger than his hand, making Jake predict jewelry of some kind. What he found instead, however, was a small bottle with red liquid within.

It looked a bit like a health potion, actually, but his Sense of the Malefic Viper informed him that it was so much more. His Identify further confirmed it.

[Stonescale Heart Elixir (Epic)] – An elixir created from the heart of a Stonescale Quillbeast, along with a myriad of other rare ingredients. Allows any who drink this elixir to receive some of the innate power of the Stonescale Quillbeast. Consuming this elixir will permanently strengthen the hunter's toughness and vitality: +25 Toughness, +20 Vitality upon consumption.

Requirements: E-rank or higher.

He had to do a double-take as he read it over once more. Jackpot, he thought, as he picked up the small bottle to get a closer look. He had only ever come across one other item that permanently granted stats, and that was the Argentum Vitae Mushrooms in the Challenge Dungeon. The main ingredient he had used to pass said dungeon.

And now he had found another such item. But this time, it was not ingredients but a completed elixir.

Jake had read up on elixirs already. Elixirs are consumables that alchemists can make, that permanently increase the stats of the drinker. It was noted as very difficult to make, often requiring rare, expensive, and hard to find ingredients.

On top of that, one had to at a minimum be D-rank to make them. Something he could learn to make after his next evolution if he met all requirements to do so. But all of that was for later. For now, it was drinking time!

Opening the bottle, he got a quick whiff of it before he downed it. The taste was quite interesting. Weirdly sweet for something made from the heart of a beast.

A few seconds after he drank it, he felt the warm flow exit his stomach and enter the rest of his body.

You have assimilated intense energy of toughness and vitality.

+25 Toughness

+20 Vitality

Slowly the feeling subsided as the system message appeared. He didn't feel much different from before, but his stats had indeed increased upon checking the status menu. Vitality and toughness were two stats that were hard to really 'feel', compared to perception or strength.

Evaluating the dungeon he had just cleared, he found it may be the best one so far. While he had only gotten the tusk and the elixir as useful loot, the elixir was terrific. An elixir was even better than gear as it even worked with his percentage amplifiers on stats. Gotta ask Villy about the cap for increasing stats from elixirs. There has to be one.

The largest gain from the dungeon was the many levels, of course, gaining four in his profession and nine in his class. Quite a bit for how fast he had managed to get through it. He wasn't going to complain about his Touch of the Malefic Viper and Meditation skill upgrading either.

He had nothing more to do now than hunt down the final boss. A task he had around three and a half days to do.

[Tutorial Panel]

Duration: 3 days & 14:51:02

Checking his other system messages, he saw his two dungeons titles had upgrades once more, granting him the expected increase of +4 all stats combined. Both were at rank five now, giving him a nice +15 and +5 all stats, respectively.

The last one was an update to the tutorial quest.

Tutorial Quest: The Beast Lords

The forest murmurs with rumors of a King ruling the forest from the shadows. The four Beast Lords each guard their dungeon as their King commanded, waiting for a suitable challenger to appear. With the death of his lords, the King is sure to be forced into the light. But be warned, the Lords will not meet their end that easily.

Two lords have now fallen. The King has taken notice but has yet to make a move. Continue with the quest, and you shall inevitably meet.

With the Nest Watcher's death, your presence is now beginning to become truly worthy of notice. The King of the Forest will not sit idle as you attempt to dismantle the careful balance his domain has attained. With only a single Beast Lord left standing, your quest is soon complete, and the King shall come.

The Horde Leader has fallen, and his horde disposed of. All the Beast Lords now lay slain before you, with only one last challenge remaining. The King awaits.

Objective: Defeat the Beast Lords.

Current progress: 4/4

Quest Completed!

Reading the final entry, he smiled, satisfied with his accomplishments. He had managed to singlehandedly clear the four dungeons containing all the Beast Lords and defeated all of them. A

thought of how he didn't get any rewards did cross his mind, but then again, he had obtained plenty of things from the dungeons themselves. He felt ready to face down the final challenge.

Walking to the dungeon exit, he placed his hand on it as he exited the dungeon. His vision temporarily turned black. And then he felt it. Before his vision even returned and his body was entirely transported, he felt it. An aura more potent than any he had ever felt before.

His vision returned, and he saw the source of the aura. On the barren ground inside the hollow mountain stood a figure unlike any he had seen before.

Standing nearly three meters tall, the creature resembled more a tree than a person - two thin arms that looked like branches and legs that ended in ivory claws. The hands, too, were more beastly, as they were made of the same ivory material as well. Bone.

The chest was as graceful as the rest of the creature, with a thick cover of bark-like material covering it. Its face was... nothing. Like a wooden mask with only eyes showing, it had no expression of any kind - merely a flat surface of wood with two holes in it.

On top of the head was no hair but a web of entangled thorns, in a shape that very much resembled a crown. He didn't need his Identify to know what it was.

[King of the Forest – lvl ???]

Jake looked at the King, unsure of what to do until a voice broke the silence.

“As such, the hunter comes before me. His hunt complete, his valor earned.”

The voice echoed in his mind and not his ears, sounding like it came from everywhere and yet nowhere.

“I commend you. You have gone beyond anything I expected. But alas, the journey ends here. I do not seek your death, but simply your surrender. Let this farce end, and may we meet once more in the true world beyond this place.”

Just as the words sounded out, the system reacted.

You have been granted the Tutorial Quest: To Choose One's End.

Before you stands the King of the Forest, the undisputed lord of these woods. The tutorial's end is nigh, and it is now up to you to choose its end.

Option 1: Choose to leave the tutorial now and retain all current Tutorial Points as well as any other rewards earned. Gain a one-time bonus of 50.000.000 Tutorial Points, as well as any other rewards associated with the conclusion of the tutorial.

Option 2: Fight to the end. Kill the King of the Forest or risk dying in the process. Gain a one-time 300.000.000 Tutorial Points as well as any other rewards associated with the completion of the tutorial if you succeed in your hunt.

Note that the tutorial ends at the conclusion of either chosen option.

The choice offered in the quest was simple. Take the victory Jake had already earned and end the tutorial there and then. Or fight to the death.

A choice that should be easy for the Ambitious Hunter, and yet he hesitated for a moment. His heart and will told him to fight, but his mind told him to run. His intuition very clear that the King of the Forest was a being above him.

D-rank. If the three question marks in the Identify message was not enough.

He knew that the gap between ranks was high. The power a beast would grow from 24 to 25 was immense. The next gap... even higher it appeared - an entirely different level.

Yet, he didn't want to give up. His fire within was burning for the challenge that the creature represented. His bloodline humming with fervor. He wanted to fight - a stupid decision for sure from any logical standpoint. But even in stupidity, he could be a bit smart about it.

"Before I make my decision, would you honor me by receiving one of my blows?" he asked, playing courteous. "It would be a waste not at least to be made aware of the massive gulf that separates us."

"Oh? Thou wishes to observe the majesty of this King?" it answered, echoing in his head. "An honor for thee. By my magnanimousness, it shall be granted. Bring forth your strongest attempt."

Jake smiled at the damn monster that stood before him while still acting like he was in awe. Internally, however, he sneered at the arrogance of the self-proclaimed King. Sure, he was powerful, but he was also confident to the level of ridiculousness.

If Jake was confident in one thing, it was his striking power. Infused Powershot had proven nearly unstoppable against all his foes and could end the lives of beasts' tens of levels above him in a single shot. He had every reason to believe that the King, in all his recklessness, would also be in for quite the surprise.

There was a good 40 meters between them. The dark shining lights that marked the King's eyes stared at him as he took out his bow. It showed no reaction as he took out an arrow from his quiver, poisoned it, nocked it, and began channeling his attack.

Jake focused his entire body as he activated all he had. Limit Breaking to 20%; his power surged as the mana around him intensified. The air itself shook as his feet sank into the ground, the hard stones around him quaking and cracking.

Power built up for more than ten seconds, as Jake poured every single vestige of power in he could. His arms and shoulders strained, his veins nearly popping and his body screaming in protest.

A new crescendo had been reached once more. All the levels and fights Jake had gone through, all his experience with the skill lead to this moment. His most powerful attack yet.

Letting go of the arrow, the explosion of mana was unlike any other. The jagged spikes of rock in his vicinity broke off the ground as the pressure shot them away, the stone beneath him now little more than a crater of gravel.

The arrow itself flew true as it headed straight for the King of the Forest. Power shimmering around it as it parted the air, helped by the power inherent in his Windsoar Bow. Everything distorted in its path, as it created a vacuum - the very ground beneath it cracking in its wake, making a gorge in the environment between him and the King.

It passed the 40 meters in less than the blink of an eye. With the power to mortally wound or even outright kill a dungeon boss far above his own level.

The King of the Forest raised one of the hands of bone, just as the arrow was released. A feeble looking attempt to block the far mightier looking arrow that tore up everything in its path.

It hit the small barrier as an explosion sounded out, releasing all the energy pent up in the attack. It kicked up dust around the King, sending stone and soil flying everywhere. Jake knew the attack hadn't killed the King as he didn't get any notification, but it should at least have-

"Admirably futile attempt."

The dust parted with the words, as the King was revealed once more. Like a bubble had spread out from the creature, the dust simply evaporated, clearing the air.

Not a single sign of damage visible... no, there was something. A small scratch on the previously entirely white ivory claw that was its hands.

Jake felt dumbstruck. He had put everything into that attack. Every ounce of power, everything he had. A half-assed attempt blocked his most potent attack. He had known there was a gap, but... this was just too fucking much.

The King of the Forest once more sounded out in his mind. The tone different, the formal speech gone. The disdain was dripping with every word.

“Is this how you managed to win against all those stupid beasts that dared call themselves lords? I truly do admire for one so weak as you to manage to actually touch my body,” the King said. “One chance was what I gave you. Sadly... you wasted it.”

Taking a step towards Jake, with the hunter backing off a step. A very bad feeling brewing in his stomach, his intuition and danger sense telling him to get the fuck out of there. The King continued to speak as he casually strolled forward.

“Did you believe me to be a fool like them? To be ignorant? To sit in my little home, humbly awaiting the valiant archer to come and attack me? It appears you are not that much smarter than those mongrels,” it said, backing Jake into a corner. “I was to give you a chance to surrender. I have done so. And now, dear little hunter...

Jake knew he had fucked up.

“Now, you suffer.”