

Hunter 110

Chapter 110: Fall

Pain.

That was the first feeling that the King thought of as he awoke. He had temporarily lost consciousness from the accursed shard explosion that was the Great White Stag's final gift. His entire body was hurting. The Nest Watcher's curse and the detestable energy of the Horde Leader were still present even now... no, even more potent now, as they had mixed with the dark powers in the explosion. They had somehow been corrupted by whatever had corrupted the Mooncore to begin with.

The first thing he saw upon regaining vision was the human attempting to land a blow. Preposterous. He raised his hand and planned on blowing the arm of the human off, but what came out was only a slight wave of force that forced his attacker back.

Why? Why was he so weak? Was he truly that damaged? He attempted to stand up but found himself stumbling. Struggling. He was hurt. Truly hurt. The blow to his stomach had only been a mild annoyance. It would take time to heal, but it didn't impede him much.

This, however, was different. The King tried supporting himself with his left arm but found nothing. It was gone. He then remembered that he had tried to rip the shard out before it exploded... losing the arm in the process.

This was unacceptable. For a human, a weak human, to do this much damage.

Finally managing to get up, he lay his hazy gaze upon the human who was still standing. The King's vision was lowered significantly, and everything appeared to be covered in a layer of fog. No doubt a demerit caused by the dark mana.

The King didn't have time to stabilize himself before the man charged. Slower than before for sure, but the King was also far slower. The creature felt like his limbs were several times heavier, and every movement required excessive exertion.

The human brought down his dagger as he tried to stab the King, but he managed to block it with his ivory claw. He struggled to counterattack, having only one arm as he attempted a kick, one the human easily avoided. Using his other hand the hunter landed a punch on the King's chest, hurting his own fist as much as the King.

At least it appeared so until the King felt the intrusion of harmful foreign energy from where the blow landed. Poison. The damned human had inflicted even more toxins upon contact, injecting only a sliver of poison, but even that was enough to be an issue for the already struggling creature. To make it even worse, the energy agitated what was already ailing him.

However, the hunter wasn't the only one who managed to land attacks. Right after he punched, he was forced to back away a bit, as the King released yet another blast of force, hitting him in the shoulder, blasting him backward. He felt his shoulder dislocate from the blow but swiftly popped it back in place. The pain was barely registering.

The King observed the human and felt disbelief. The hunter in front of him was not despairing. He was not even showing any signs of exhaustion or exasperation. Instead, he grinned through the pain as his broken limb was restored. Smiled, despite his imminent demise.

Before this day, the King could count the number of times he had experienced actual pain on one hand. He had been born in a small world and had increased in power from the environment alone. Born at D-grade, he was superior to all other beings and swiftly suppressed them all.

He was an existence that believed this forest to be beneath him. He had lived in this forest for less than a decade when the quest from the system came. To battle with the other Beast Lords of the forest to claim the title of King, and ultimately have the opportunity to escape the world he found himself in.

An opportunity he happily accepted as he subdued the other Lords. With the help of the system he imprisoned them in dungeons and took his rightful place as King of the Forest. He killed all the other enlightened ones in the world, none of them even close to E-grade beforehand. The stage was prepared, and this entire tutorial was just a farce he had to be done with.

Never had he taken the entire tutorial scenario very seriously. After becoming King, he also got a follow-up quest that made it clear that he didn't have to. After the tutorial's conclusion, the entire area he was in would cease to exist, and he would be able to leave. Leave to the new universe that was just integrated into the system.

He hadn't known exactly what that meant; all he knew was that it was an opportunity to leave. A chance to explore an entirely new world and grow. The ability to conquer new land and not just be the King of this small forest.

In his eyes, and based on the system's quests, the survivors were never meant to encounter the King. He had sat on his throne and knew that he just had to wait. But it all changed when the first Beast Lord fell. The stupid badger that he had never cared for, but it was nevertheless worthy of note. For it was already unexpected for them to manage to kill a single lord. Unexpected but not impossible.

It was slain by a single human and not a group. The King could not observe the fight and only knew the results, but it was enough to pique his interest. Only slightly, though, as he quickly turned away once more.

Then, not long after, something he never expected happened. The hateful Great White Stag died. The King knew little of the dungeons' interior, but he always had the feeling that the Stag was scheming against him.

He knew they had the option to challenge his rule. To reach D-grade and dethrone him. A threat he hadn't taken seriously from any of the Beast Lords besides the Great White Stag. So when he saw that it had died, he saw it more as a blessing than anything else. In all honesty, his impression of the human improved greatly from just that. He would have had to kill the Stag in the new universe if not.

Then the Nest Watcher died, which was relatively inconsequential. A dirty being from a dirty race. Though it appeared he had managed to show a bit of his worth through the small marble of dark cursed mana he had been struck with - a miscalculation.

Then finally, the Horde Leader died. A giant boar too dumb for its own good. Nevertheless, it was strong. It had even managed to give the King a wound, one it had paid with its tusk to inflict. After the pig died, it had been time to meet the human. His quest updated, and he found himself forced to allow the human the chance of surrender. To leave for the world beyond. Even now, he had the option to allow for the human's survival for greater rewards.

The King had chosen to act as majestic as he knew how to during this brief period. He had learned that these humans, especially this one, had a great talent for growth, so he wanted not to make an unnecessary enemy. Maybe the human could even become a worthwhile servant?

Luckily the human was arrogant. He believed himself able to fight, A belief the King would crush with everything he had. He would make the human despair before he died, or at least crush his spirit so that he would never dare stand before the King again. For no other reason than his own vanity.

Yet it had all gone awry. The weak human had indeed been weak. Defenseless. His most potent attack blocked easily, all his effort thwarted as he was beaten down again and again. Until he counterattacked, and the King, for the first time, felt a feeling he never had before: Fear.

For the first time, he was experiencing real pain, genuine fear of death. His first time learning that death in the tutorial was even an option for him. That it wasn't just a pipedream, an illusion dangled in front of the survivors to give them hope. It was a possible reality. A reality that was becoming closer and closer to being truly real.

The King clashed with the human again, as he once more lost out in the exchange. His arm heavy, his movements slow, and his natural armor already shattered and broken. Rotten. Even his magic, the thing he had always relied on to win, failed him.

With his telekinetic powers, he had ripped the tusk from the mouth of the Horde Leader, squashed every other existence. But now, it was only a whisper of its usual might. With the curse, his wounds, the energies, and everything else weakening him, the King could barely display a mere tenth of his actual power.

Raising his claw, it had a faint glow of gold as he attempted to strike the human once more - a strike that was faster and stronger than the ones before. But the human still managed to barely dodge it, getting only a few scratches on his arms from the remnant energies.

At the same time, the King took more and more damage. A scratch from a dagger here, a punch or kick there, and a bit of poison from Touch of the Malefic Viper invading him at times. It was a desperate struggle from both parties as they both slugged it out.

Jake only took a single attack for every ten or twenty he landed. The disparity was apparent to any, even the fighters. The King, even in his extremely weakened state, was still faster and stronger than Jake. He should win out, but he didn't. The difference was in skill and experience.

The King had been born with a golden spoon. Superior from birth, he had never been pushed. Learning to fight had never been required of him, as a wave of his hand could kill most foes. Even the Horde Leader struck unconscious by a single full-power blast, with a golden claw more than enough to slay ten of it with a single swipe. His innate skills, talents, and powerful body had been enough... till now.

He could lose. And losing would mean death. Impossible, the King thought. Who was he? He was the King of the Forest, the mightiest existence in this world. He had never lost; he had never feared and now was certainly not the time to begin doing so. Determination the creature had never felt before built up inside him.

For the first time, he reflected upon his own existence. He realized how much he was actually still lacking. Despite being so much weaker, how the human in front of him had shown him his own limitations. The King was not stupid. Far from it. He had simply grown ignorant and childish, full of hubris from too many years of never being challenged. He had never had to grow up.

He respected the human in front of him. A weird feeling he had only perhaps ever felt for the Stag. He respected yet hated the human for all the damage and harm he had caused him. But now it was time to end it.

A blast of force slightly more substantial than the ones before pushed Jake backward, creating space between them once more. When the hunter lowered his arms that he had used to block, he saw the King's glowing eyes looking back at him as his voice sounded out.

"You have reduced me to this state... shown me that I have grown complacent. I thank you, human. I did not wish to do this... but you forced me to. That in itself is an achievement you should be proud of. Now fall."

He said as he resigned himself to end the fight.

A cracking sound was heard as the mask covering the King's face that had otherwise been unblemished now fractured. Jake hesitated for a moment to see what was happening and decided to wait cautiously at a distance. His intuition and sense of danger both warning him that the development was dangerous.

More cracks covered the mask, and the King stood up straight once more, his dignity restored. His crown of thorns started giving off a strong sense of power and majesty, aiming to suppress Jake. And then the mask fell.

Jake didn't know what he expected to see beneath. But what he saw undoubtedly would never be that. For he saw nothing. It wasn't darkness; it was just...nothingness - something his mind couldn't comprehend.

Then the headache struck. Like a sledgehammer hitting Jake's skull, he felt vertigo as everything became blurry and his head hurt like never before. Even his ever-reliant Sphere of Perception was disturbed as the information he got became warped and twisted.

He felt puke enter his mouth as black spots began obstructing his vision. He closed his eyes, but it didn't help. He had already been hit by whatever was released upon the mask shattering - a type of magic he had never encountered before. But if the more knowledgeable were there, they would instantly recognize one of the most dangerous and sought-after varieties – soul magic.

Jake tried to stabilize himself, and he felt himself slowly improve. His willpower and determination were slowly shrugging off the feeling, as he instinctually had already backed off several meters. He could beat it; he told himself as he grit his teeth hard enough for blood to flow out.

The King of the Forest simply observed the struggling human. For him to reveal his true face was something he had never hoped to have to do. It took a heavy toll on his own soul and was something he would not recover from without a long period of recovery. But it was necessary.

If he would win without, he didn't know, and that uncertainty was too big of a risk. But with it, he was supreme.

As the Malefic Viper had explained, the soul has many layers. Most of them untouched by magic usually, but some types could directly affect it. Of course, Soul magic was one of those with its ability to affect the outermost layer directly.

Senses could be disturbed, illusions brought to life through them, and much short-term mental damage inflicted. The layer would regenerate naturally, but to influence it made one hold much sway over another. And if the layer were broken entirely... so would the connection to the outside world, as consciousness would be lost.

This was exactly what the King of the Forest was currently doing, as the constant aura of his true visage burned into Jake's soul. He had already decided to leave the human alive. To simply rob him of

consciousness till the tutorial ended - a final recognition of his efforts. He could push his magic further and slay the human for good... but he wouldn't.

He felt the human's attempt to stabilize himself. An attempt he swiftly crushed as he released a wave of mental energy far more powerful than the passive exertion that he gave off without the mask. Before, it was simply a passive aura, but now he actually used the skill.

"Shatter."

The invisible wave didn't do anything to the terrain as it passed through. Like a sphere, it released outwards, covering hundreds of meters a second. Shortly, the wave covered the tutorial zone's entire inner area, and every living creature that had survived the fallout of their fight now fell dead.

Yet it didn't stop there.

When it encountered the barrier warding off the inner zone, it passed straight through and out into the outer area. It washed through the entire tutorial, everything dying in its path, falling to the ground, dead, their souls shattered. Their souls were just too weak to take the assault that was only meant to immobilize the human.

And that human, who stood before the King, was hit the hardest. The moment it hit Jake, it hit him hard. Like a broken mirror, his already drained mind gave out as his soul's outer layer shattered to nothingness. He didn't even have time to register as everything turned black, and he fell backward unconscious.

With only two living beings alive in the entire tutorial, the Malefic Viper's divination had been realized.

