

Hunter 127

Chapter 127: Monsters

As he ran through the forest, telling the others to try and keep up, Hank truly regretted convincing them all to go camping that week. But how could he possibly have known that something as world-shattering as the initiation to some goddamn multiverse could happen?

The only lucky thing was that at least they had all entered the same tutorial. They had entered the tutorial with nine people - Hank, his wife, his two kids, his sister, and her husband and kids, and a long-time mutual friend of theirs.

Out of the tutorial walked only four. Hank, the family friend Miranda, and his two kids. Not that they liked being called kids anymore, his boy Mark being 19 and his daughter Louise at 22.

In the tutorial, they had stuck together initially but had ended up split up due to circumstances out of their own control. They were forced into these trials in groups of five. Due to their class choices, Hank and his wife had chosen to split up, his wife joining his sister and her family.

None of them returned from the first trial.

Now it was just those four. Thrown back to Earth into the middle of a forest that had clearly been altered significantly from before. They had been only a few hundred meters from the road upon the initiation, but now no such road was to be found anywhere. Instead, they found themselves walking through a seemingly endless forest for a bit over two weeks.

They managed to fight off the beasts, most of them not being above level 24. Hank, his trusty axe in hand, easily able to handle them. His son, Mark, a healer who was able to fix any immediate issues. It had gone well at first, with the four of them surviving without losing anyone - until today.

A beast had appeared. One that Hank, even with his race at level 31, couldn't identify.

[Oakwood Tiger – lvl ??]

He became unequivocally sure that any beast he couldn't identify was far above his ability to handle from the tutorial. He was powerless against the tiger that was a weird mix of wood and flesh. Yet it hadn't simply killed them.

They met the tiger nearly three hours ago. They tried to run at first, hoping it would ignore them like most other high-level beasts, but this one was out for blood. It cut them off with incredible speed and attacked them, showing that it clearly was also strong. Hank felt like his arms were about to be torn off from every casual swipe of its barbed wooden claws.

Yet whenever Hank thought he would die, the beast simply switched target and attacked someone else. It only did small wounds, clearly enjoying itself... it was just playing with them.

Hank was furious, but no matter what he did, it proved useless. In the end, their only course of action was just to run.

Louise was also an evolved caster, but her spells did even less to the beast than his own axe. Miranda wasn't a fighter at all, having focused on her profession instead of class during the tutorial.

He wasn't entirely clear on her profession, but it was some kind of social type. It did, however, give her some insight into mana and an intuition skill. A skill that had guided their direction of fleeing for the past few hours. Needless to say, Hank was beginning to doubt it.

They ran desperately, encountering several weaker beasts on the way, resulting in even more injuries. Mark was already dangerously low on mana, and Hank could barely keep his legs moving with his nearly depleted stamina.

But suddenly, something changed. The tiger appeared to be unsettled by something. Unsettled enough that it decided to stop playing around and finish off its prey.

The wooden bark covering its body spit out sharp vines as it went to finish off Hank. Somehow the man managed to avoid having his throat ripped out as he ducked and blocked with his axe. Despite his efforts, he was still sent to the ground, a large gash on the side of his face where it had nicked him.

Far from done, the beast jumped at him once more. He scrambled and once more narrowly blocked, but this time he wasn't lucky enough to only receive a gash. His entire right arm was torn to shreds as his axe, and the claw both smashed into it, sending him flying through the air into a nearby tree.

Hank heard his son yell out and his daughter firing spells on the beast. His vision was waning but still clear enough to see a bolt of electricity hit the creature from the side. It did little more than inflict a small burn mark, yet it was enough to piss off the beast and make it switch target.

Miranda also tried to help, but her attacks didn't even register for the beast. His son was standing beside his sister, right in the crosshair of the charging tiger. Hank's eyes turned red as he saw his only remaining family members about to be torn apart.

His wife had died without him even having a body to bury. His friends in the tutorial suffered the same fate. The final promise he made to his wife before parting for the last time was to protect their children, and he would be damned if he didn't do everything he could.

He had learned a bit about controlling stamina through his skills. Enough to slightly increase his striking power. Today he went further as he channeled all he could into his one good arm. Instantly he felt it fill with power unlike ever before. Everything poured into a throwing skill that was also his only rare skill.

Throwing the axe, the pent-up stamina in his arm was too much as his entire arm erupted into a cloud of bloody mist. The pain was unimaginable, but he remained clearheaded enough to see the axe fly true and strike the tiger midst its charge.

The axe hit the beast straight in its midsection, embedding itself deeply. The impact also made the tiger stumble, missing its charge as it tumbled to the ground and slid into a tree.

Hank had at first felt relief, but it quickly turned to despair as the tiger turned its eyes to him. Two vines sprung from its back, pulled out the axe, and threw it on the ground - a small trickle of blood dripping from the wound.

Halfway between Hank and his children, the tiger began a new charge, this time to finish off the man who had wounded it. Hank knew it would barely matter either way. His eyes were heavy, and his entire body numb and cold. Blood pooled beneath him from the shoulder where an arm had once been attached.

His only hope was that his sacrifice was enough to buy the others a bit of time to escape. He could see the tiger was anxious for some reason in a rush. He hoped it would leave after finishing him. A naïve hope perhaps, but it was all he had to grasp unto.

Two vines sharpened at their ends flew towards him from the tiger - one for his head, the other his heart. Unable to move, he closed his eyes.

Yet the blow never came.

Opening his eyes once more, he saw the vine less than a meter from his face. Frozen in mid-air, slightly shaking. He saw the tiger trembling for some reason as its eyes focused on something off to the side. Hank followed its gaze and saw a figure slowly walking towards them.

With each step, it was as if the figure traveled several meters. A mask covered the face of the new arrival, but the build made him identifiably male. He didn't appear to carry any weapons... it was clear he didn't need one.

Two glowing eyes pierced through the mask, focusing on the tiger. Hank felt a cold shiver run down his spine when he saw them. It reminded him of the same eyes that tiger had glared at him with just as it was about to kill him - only much more intense.

Just as the person was only a few meters away, whatever froze the tiger stopped. The vines nearly at Hank's eye retracted, but instead of switching target to the new arrival, they merged back into the tiger. And with that, the beast that had chased them for hours turned tail and ran.

It didn't get far, however. With a movement that defied the laws of physics, the person cut off the tiger. It stopped abruptly and tried to get around him but was instead met with a bone-white dagger that looked like a fang. Hank was a bit surprised as he hadn't seen where the weapon came from, but the beast was even more so as the dagger swung down, aiming for its skull.

The vines sprung up once more, trying to block, but like when Hank tried to block in vain earlier, the beast's struggles were also in vain. The vines were simply pushed down, unable to pierce the armor of its soon-to-be killer.

Seconds later, the tiger that the group of four had believed to be their death instead met its own demise. Completely dominated by whomever or whatever the masked individual was.

Hank wasn't sure if he should be relieved or afraid. The tiger may be dead, but what about this new arrival? Was he human? Some kind of creature brought by the system. Whatever the case, he was far more powerful than the tiger, making all thoughts of escape disperse...

As he was in thought, the person disappeared once more, only to appear right in front of Hank. The middle-aged man tried to shy back in fright, but he could not move with his injuries. Had he come to finish him off or?

Thinking the worst, he was instead presented with a bottle containing a very familiar red liquid - a healing potion.

"Drink," the figure said in a distinctly male voice. One that sounded significantly younger than Hank would have suspected.

Sadly for Hank, he was unable even to lift his remaining arm. It had been badly mangled by the tiger earlier, while his second arm was entirely missing. He looked up at the piercing yellow eyes. They resembled a beast more than a human, making Hank believe even more than whatever he was dealing with wasn't a fellow man.

A few seconds of awkwardness followed as the bottle was presented to the man who couldn't move to accept it. The masked man just standing there with an extended arm. Luckily the situation was saved as Miranda rushed over.

"Let me," she said as she swiped the potion from the young man's hand. Hank could still barely open his mouth, allowing the woman to pour the liquid down his throat. Instantly he felt a rush of vital energy enter his body. It was like when his son healed him but far, far more intense.

He felt his stump where his arm had once been starting to itch and wriggle as a new arm slowly began growing out. His mangled arm began healing nearly instantly as even the gash on his face disappeared. He had consumed a healing potion before, but never one this powerful.

In only seconds he went from on the brink of death to relatively healthy. The only problem remaining was the arm that would take a while to regenerate, but even that shouldn't even take an hour from the still overflowing vital energy in his body. He checked his status and, to his surprise, saw that his health pool of around 1800 was entirely full. He even felt some of the remnant energy slowly fizzle out within his body, dispersing as it could not restore any more health.

"Thank you," he mumbled, his mouth now able to move correctly. His stamina was still dangerously low, and he was exhausted, but he couldn't quite relax yet. He had to figure out the situation he and his family now found themselves in.

By now, Hank's kids had made their way over and were now hiding behind their father, who had managed to stand up. Mark was especially interested as his skills allowed him insight into the potion's power.

"Yes, thanks for the help, mister...?" Miranda asked their masked savior, injecting herself into the conversation.

"... not sure that matters," the masked man answered after looking like he was stuck in thought for a bit. "What matters is who you all are and why you are here."

Miranda, who had by now taken the lead for their group, answered. "I apologize, my name is Miranda; this is Hank and his two children, Mark and Louise. We were chased by that beast and made it here on accident while trying to survive. I am sorry if we intruded where we weren't allowed."

Hank could see the sweat drip down her neck as she tried to defend them. Even in the tutorial, she was the one who handled discussions and negotiations with other survivors. He was more than happy to let her do that again.

"Oh... okay," the masked man answered, not looking like he intended to say anything more.

"If I may... how powerful was that monster?" Miranda asked. A question the entire family was interested in.

"Just 59, but it had quite high toughness for one of its level," he answered, his voice indicating that he liked that kind of conversation way more.

Miranda, Hank, and the two others were taken back by the high level of the beast. But even more so at it being described as 'just' 59. All of them had tried to identify the masked man, and they had all failed, getting just a single question mark in return

All of it only added to their already existing assumption that the one in front of them wasn't human. And if the masked man was, they couldn't explain how that was possible. They had seen strong individuals before; they even knew a woman in their tutorial who was incredibly strong. But not to the level of being able to disregard a beast at level 59. Not even close.

Yet he appeared human apart from the eyes. His entire body was covered in armor, but everything was humanoid. Miranda tried to probe to figure out if he was indeed human.

"I see... we must again thank you for saving our lives. That was the most powerful beast any of us have ever seen, even counting the tutorial. I am sure you must have encountered stronger ones during yours."

"Yeah, but not out in the open at least. Ones around that level and above tended to be holed up in dungeons," their masked savior answered, willing to say quite a few more words than before.

"Did you encounter many like it in your tutorial?" she kept probing, wanting to make sure if he had experienced a tutorial.

"When I went looking for them, yeah."

“Must have been tough to reach their level. As humans, we weren’t exactly positioned at the top of the food chain,” Miranda continued, this time looking for confirmation of the man’s humanity.

“Doesn’t mean we couldn’t claim the top anyway,” he answered, clearly affirming that he was human like the rest of them.

Silence hung in the air for a while before Miranda finally asked. “Would it be possible for us to stay here for a while? At least to get back in fighting condition.”

All of them tensed up as they awaited the answer of the man in front of them.

“...Fine, just don’t disturb me when I work or practice.”

And that was how Jake's 'city' got its first four citizens.