

Hunter 244

Chapter 244: Heartwarden

The Heartwarden looked completely unaware of the hunter that was currently observing it. Yet Jake had a strong feeling it was aware of his presence. So even if it didn't know where he currently was, it should have at least picked up that someone or something was coming.

This was why Jake didn't aim to repeat his opening attack against the Prima. He was certain the Heartwarden had something prepared as while the Deepwellers weren't the most intelligent creatures – mushroom worship, case-in-point – they weren't complete idiots.

His Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter had the issue of only working on the intended target, meaning if the Heartwarden had put up some defensive measures, his attack would be completely useless. Jake wasn't entirely sure it had, but he did notice that the area it was in was covered in what looked like four odd magic circles. All of them seemed inert, but that could just be because they didn't get power poured into them at the moment.

However, they did look to be of the same making as the wall. All the circles were placed on black slabs of stone that Jake assumed were made of the same material as the wall.

Jake couldn't see what was inside the wall due to where he stood, but he was 99% sure he couldn't get in there without defeating the Heartwarden first. It would kind of be a shitty dungeon if you could just have your defensive fighter distract the big boss as you went for the loot.

Yes, Jake did believe the Heartwarden was the final boss of the Undergrowth – at least the standard part of it. He hoped there would be more powerful foes deeper within, beyond the wall. However, that would be for after the fight to discover.

Having learned from past mistakes, Jake began summoning his Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. While Jake hadn't fought this particular variant of Deepdweller before, he had fought plenty to get a good enough understanding of them to summon the arrow.

It was an arrow much like the one he summoned against the others. The arrow was black and exuded a faint feeling of death due to its inherent necrotic properties. Jake doubled up by coating it on uncommon-rarity Potent Necrotic Poison, as well as using the same bottle to prepare a stock of stable arcane arrows coated in poison.

Once he was done, he didn't fire the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. The arrow was massive like all others, and more than a meter long, but Jake had a strong feeling it would be a waste to just fire it. Instead, he wrapped it up in arcane strings and put it on his back as he drew a regular poisoned stable arcane arrow and began charging his Arcane Powershot.

Through testing, he knew the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter would remain for at least a while, so as long as he fired it within the next five to ten minutes, things should work out fine. However, he did feel it already begin leaking some of its energy even now, making him aware he was on a timer.

Arcane energy swirled around him as he nocked the arrow, took aim and drew the string. Arcane Powershot powered up as he focused on the sensation of the arcane mana across his skin and into the bow, the feeling of stamina welling in his upper body and allowing him to display strength far above his usual.

Once he felt his body unable to take the build-up of energy anymore before it would begin to take serious damage that could impede him in the fight to come, he released the arrow to an explosion of arcane power.

The condensed mana below his feet he had been standing on unsurprisingly blew up, but his wings were already summoned as they stabilized him. Another arrow was already being drawn as his opening shot arrived, Jake only sparing a moment to freeze the Heartwarden with Gaze of the Apex Hunter as he saw the results of his attack.

When the arcane arrow was 20 meters away from the Heartwarden, a barrier of green energy appeared in mid-air as a green rune lit up on the back of one of its hands.

The arrow impacted the barrier along with all of the energy from the Arcane Powershot. It held up for a moment until it shattered, and the arrow continued down towards the Heartwarden. But it was too late as it had already dodged to the side.

Jake landed his eyes on it again and saw it now had equipment in both hands. In one hand, it wielded a mushroom shield, and in the other, it had a crystal halberd. This was the first clue on what kind of capabilities this creature had.

At the same time, as he observed the Deepdweller, it clearly also regarded him with some magical sense just before it attacked. It cut the air and sent a wave of green energy flying towards him, using a type of attack that Jake felt like every damn creature fighting with melee weapons had.

In Jake's opinion, a feeble attempt at trying to be a ranged fighter as he easily dodged in the air, firing another arrow towards the Heartwarden. The rune on the back of the hand holding the shield lit up as a barrier of green energy appeared before it.

Just as the arrow hit the barrier, it split in four, all of them exploding with destructive energy, burning away the barrier but also flooding the atmosphere in dense arcane mana. Enough for the creatures mana sense not to detect the follow-up attack in time.

It blocked two of the arrows with its shield, but the other two hit it in its shoulder and stomach. Some would argue it had gotten unlucky, but Jake called it luck that one of the arrows that hit it was the “true” arrow - the one dripping with toxic energy.

Poison successfully delivered.

At least Jake thought so for a moment until he saw the shield-holding hand light up again, and a barrier appeared – appeared inside and around the shoulder of the Heartwarden. He frowned as he felt the poison failing to spread through his Sense of the Malefic Viper.

With a quite grueling sound, a cube of flesh was ripped out of the Deepdweller’s own body, containing the arcane arrow within as well as all the infected flesh. The cube was tossed to the side, the majority of the poison wasted. As for the wound? A rune on the back of the hand holding the halberd lit up as green energy pulsed across its body, making the wound heal even faster than when Jake consumed a potion.

Well, that’s one way to deal with it, Jake thought. It honestly wasn’t that bad as he made the creature expend a lot of resources to remove the poisoned arrow. He had plenty of poison to give out, after all.

The Heartwarden seemed to know this too as it charged towards him, halberd held high. It was flying a lot like the Shroomguards had, but it also appeared to be able to step in the air like the Warlords, making Jake more certain this creature was a mix of the two.

It attacked with mighty swipes, but Jake simply dodged back, not allowing it ever to pin him down. His wings left a trail of poison gas that forced his enemy to constantly expel it while also landing the occasional shot. The fight was honestly going a lot easier than Jake expected. He did have some issues dealing damage as it blocked most attacks with the shield, and what damage he did do was instantly healed. But he was slowly winning out, forcing the Heartwarden to reveal more of its powers.

This was when Jake learned it didn't only have the powers of the Warlords and Shroomguards, but the Fungalmancers too. The ground below him began churning as vines flew up and grasped for him. It also began spitting out a cloud of spores from its mouth to counter his poison mist.

Jake cared little for the attack but sent out a blast of arcane energy down towards the grasping vines, blowing up a few of them while easily dodging the remaining ones. In fact, the newfound powers didn't change much as Jake still stayed ahead of the Heartwarden at every turn.

Feeling confident, Jake increased his aggressiveness to actually deal some damage. He had failed to land a single poisoned arrow since that first one, with the Heartwarden blocking or dodging every single one after that. To change up the situation a bit, Jake began firing more arrows, allowing the Heartwarden to get closer than before to decrease the travel distance.

Instantly he began landing far more arrows than before as it failed to block every one of them, but at the same time, Jake also got a few scratches from vines or the green waves of energy it kept sending after him. Nevertheless, it was a trade he was willing to make.

Jake was waiting for a good opportunity to land the dose of death he carried strapped to his back in the form of a giant arrow, but it appeared that the Heartwarden made its move first.

Both the runes on its hands lit up at once as the fungus vines came up from below far faster than before as they gave off a green glow. Barriers also began appearing around him to block off his path of retreat, forcing Jake to either face the rising vines or the Heartwarden directly.

He chose the vines.

Jake fired down an exploding arcane arrow that split into four, sending out a giant blast that destroyed hundreds of meters worth of airspace, taking the vines with it. He fired again and destroyed even more, yet his danger sense spiked – the Heartwarden wasn't done.

That is when he saw them in his sphere. Millions of small splinters floating in the air from the exploded mushroom vines, as it appeared like small fragments of wood had been within. All these splinters gathered in a matter of seconds as spears Jake recognized as those worn by the warriors appeared in mid-air, floating behind the Heartwarden like a giant wall of spikes.

Jake counted over a thousand... all of them now headed straight for him in a rain of wooden spears.

He wanted to dodge away, but the damn barriers appeared around him again as the rune lit up on its shield-hand, and when the halberd-hand lit up, so did the spears as green energy was infused into them.

Scales covered his skin as he summoned a shield of arcane energy in front of him. Simultaneously he flapped his wings and focused on his sphere and danger sense as he allowed his body to move as it wanted – flying straight towards the rain of spears.

This was not a situation he could get unscathed out of, but he could minimize the damage. The rain hit him as he dodged the first few. He was hit in the arm, but he avoided one headed for his shoulder due to that. He took one in the shoulder but avoided one to the chest and took one in the chest to avoid one in the head. Jake felt the poison from the spears invade his body, Palate already eating it up.

He was headed straight for the unprepared Heartwarden that was using all its focus controlling the spears. Jake broke free of the rain, and he saw all the spears turn in air and speed towards his back far faster than he flew... but Jake was ready.

The strings on his back delivered the arrow as he summoned his bow. His gaze landed on the Heartwarden, and it froze. Unfortunately, this would not be enough to stop the rain of spears as only its body was frozen. The Heartwarden seemed to have accepted to be hit by the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter to have Dozens of spears impale Jake.

Sadly for it, Jake had other plans. He needed to break its focus and make it lose control over the spears for just a moment, so he set it off.

The Mark activated, and the entire Heartwarden flashed with purple energy for the blink of an eye as it screamed in pain, the spears behind him becoming disorganized. Jake released his arrow straight towards the Heartwarden that was hit in the chest without even making the slightest attempt to dodge – a new Mark already placed before the arrow hit.

It was blasted back several kilometers and smashed into the giant wall it had guarded. It would have been impaled if Jake's arrow was able to pierce the wall, but he would just have to take the giant bleeding and festering hole in the Heartwarden's chest instead.

Jake easily dodged all the spears, as the projectiles now fell towards his body without direction as their manipulator was busy getting blasted to kingdom come.

The Deepdweller at the wall began glowing in a green light, and both its halberd and shield were absorbed into its body as it fell. Jake saw it start to enter its second phase – but he was already way ahead of it. Limit Break activated at 20% as Jake moved in, not giving it any time to transform as it pleased.

A few quick One Step Miles and he appeared where it would land. As it began mutating, it was unable to move properly, which Jake took full advantage of. He shot poisoned arrows up into the still-falling corpse, delivering poison dose after poison dose.

That is until armor covered its body just like it had covered the Shroomguards when they absorbed a mushroom. Jake smirked as he kept firing where the armor didn't have time to form yet, and when its entire body was covered, he jumped.

The grotesque falling Deepdweller mutated so much it began sending out fleshy tentacles towards Jake, black veins covering its entire body from over 25 poisoned arrows. The tentacles swiped for him, but two blades appeared in his hands as he cut at them.

He sliced and diced and jumped back as the wriggling mass of tumors and flesh began trying to take on a humanoid form. Once more, Jake did not allow it to do as it pleased. This transformation time was a huge opening that he had exploited and would keep exploiting.

His blades were also quickly coated in poison as he moved in closer. The tentacles struggled, the body still forming. Where all the flesh came from, he didn't know, but he saw it glow in a golden color, making him wonder if the damn thing had another Golden Mushroom within it.

The armor covered most of it, but where the tentacles came out, it was pure flesh. Jake cut off a part of a tentacle and used a Descending Dark Fang to puncture a deep hole into the monstrosity of flesh. Jake flipped his wrist as two items appeared in it. One of them was a bottle with Potent Necrotic Poison, and the other was a small sphere pulsing with arcane energy. Jake pulled out the pin and put the sphere and bottle into the wound as he jumped back, landing on the ground and doing a One Step Mile as the explosion came.

BOOM!

As the explosion rushed over him, he pulled out another two spheres. It was something he had remembered amid battle and thought that now was the perfect time to test them – the spheres from Arnold.

[Aluabsorbant Metal Sphere (Common)] – A sphere made of a composite metal by an extremely talented craftsman. Due to the materials used, this sphere has incredibly high conductivity and can effortlessly absorb and store most types of mana affinities. Once the orb has absorbed enough mana, the trigger pin will be fully inserted. Pulling the pin will release all the stored mana at once after a slight delay. (Charge: 99.8%)

Jake was surprised by the explosion, and based on the agonizing screams of the Heartwarden, it didn't like them either. The explosion was about the same level of power as one of his explosive arcane arrows, so it wasn't that extreme. It didn't matter, though, as the primary purpose of the sphere was to detonate the poison bottle.

He threw two more spheres to test them some more as he took out his bow and nocked another arrow. Arcane Powershot began charging as another explosion of arcane energy rushed over his body, his scales crackling with energy.

Another explosion of arcane energy exploded out of him as he fired the Powershot before swiftly beginning to draw another. He continued this as he bombarded the form that was still trying to regenerate itself constantly. It summoned barriers he broke, it sent out tentacles he ignored, and it even tried to summon more wooden spears but couldn't concentrate. Every ten seconds, another arrow pierced into it, infecting it with more poison and dealing tremendous damage. Finally... Jake activated the charge. In a final flash, the monstrosity went still.

In the end... the entire Heartwarden fight was another disappointment, even if it did have some interesting aspects to it.

You have slain [Deepdweller Heartwarden – lvl 162] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 127 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 117 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points

Jake lowered his bow when the notification came. He had won a battle against a foe so many levels above himself... yet he frowned. Was he just too well-suited against the Deepdwellers or what? They all seemed so easy to beat, even compared to other foes their level. Heck... even the Prima was more difficult to deal with than this Heartwarden. It sure as hell would have been a far harder fight if it was above level 150.

With disappointment, he sighed as he went to check out the corpse. Within, he found another Infused Golden Mushroom, to the surprise of no one.

There has to be more to this dungeon.

Jake turned his attention to the wall and the magic circles around the opening leading into it. He quickly went over to one of them, mushroom still in hand. The platform below him lit up with a green light as he

stepped on it, and he smiled. He put the mushroom into his storage, and it instantly stopped glowing. He took out another one – this one not infused – and the same light appeared. Nice.

The next minute was spent with Jake placing regular Golden Mushrooms on the four platforms, making them all glow. Once he was done, he turned his attention to the wall.

Jake saw a large gate halfway into the wall, and he saw a green shield slowly dissipate that had been right in front of a large gate in there.

Jake walked into the hole and through the fading barrier, inspecting the gate more closely. He saw that it was quite intricate, with many runes on it, and in the center, he saw what looked like an orb, or perhaps... a heart.

He flew up and put his hand upon it as a notification appeared.

You have laid your hand upon the Heart of the Undergrowth.

Your quest is done. The dungeon has been cleared of the Deepdweller explorers that sought entry to the Heart of the Undergrowth. For long, they have prepared, and at their precipice of success, the invader came.

Do you wish to complete the dungeon now or seek what the Deepdwellers tried to claim?

Easiest choice of my life.