

## Hunter 72

### Chapter 72: Den Mother

His eyes snapped open as the remnants of the dream left him. But unlike normal dreams, he could remember every single detail vividly.

Jumping out of bed, he threw it back into his necklace along with everything else. Right now, Jake was in a really shitty mood.

He was angry. And sadly for the Den Mother, it had been chosen as his outlet. Jake was tired of feeling like he was stuck in some big game. Tired of not knowing why the hell people kept messing with him. Even now, he didn't know exactly why Richard had wanted him dead or why that red-robed spearman had believed he had murdered his son.

No, instead, he would just do what he did best: Challenge and improve himself.

Taking out one bottle of hemotoxic poison, he recklessly splashed it over a bundle of arrows in his hand. He summoned his bow as he walked towards the beast.

Applying the Mark of the Ambitious Hunter was done as he lifted his bow, nocked the arrow, and charged an Infused Powershot. He didn't aim for the head of the beast as it would likely miss.

Charging it as much as he could without affecting his combat-effectiveness afterward, he released the string. The arrow was released in an explosion of mana and stamina, as Jake didn't even wait for it to hit before nocking another. He was angry but also oddly focused.

Perhaps he felt offended by his own thoughts - by his own perception of the weakness that he carried within. He was angry at himself for believing that he was weak. That the only reason why people wanted to manipulate him was because of his own weakness. And the best way to kill that feeling of weakness was to prove that he was strong. At least Jake believed it to be so.

On the other end of the cavern, the Den Mother woke up abruptly when the Infused Powershot was released. It instinctively tried to dodge but was still hit in one of its hind legs - a minor injury, but more than enough for the poison to enter its system.

The follow-up arrived far earlier than the beast had expected too. Five arrows struck it simultaneously, penetrating only a bit, but penetrating, nevertheless. The creature was surprised but not distraught as it located its attacker.

With no hesitation, it charged towards the arrogant human who had dared to attack it. It had been the Den Mother of this group of badgers for such a long time, and now some lone human dared intrude upon its lair? One that felt far weaker than itself even.

It felt the poison, it knew something was wrong, but it didn't have the mental faculties to comprehend what exactly it was. All it knew was that it had to kill the human in front of it as fast as possible.

The first swipe was dodged by the pesky human as Jake Shadow Vaulted to the side, still releasing arrows whenever possible. The Den Mother had predicted this, as it turned its head and opened its mouth.

Out came a torrent of green gas that eroded the very ground it hit. It enveloped the human, as the Den Mother gleefully observed what it believed to be the death of its prey.

Instead, it was met by another Infused Powershot that tore right through its shoulder and out the other side. With the shot, the usual explosion of mana occurred as it blew away all the gas.

Surprised, the giant badger locked eyes with the human and felt something it hadn't in a long time. The feeling it had when it looked at its Den Mother back in the day, the feeling it felt when the King of the Forest had confined it to this cavern.

Fear.

It had misjudged. What was in front of it was not prey; it was a predator, just like itself.

Screeching in fear, it hoped to throw Jake off balance temporarily. The sonic wave passed over him, but he just closed his eyes as he stood unmoving, firing yet another Splitting Arrow.

He felt his ears pop, and the blood flow down the side of his face and unto his neck. He felt the pain, but he didn't care. He didn't need his hearing right now anyway, and the pain was easily suppressed by the pure feeling of ecstasy he currently felt.

The Den Mother was far more powerful than the Alphas in every way. It was faster and stronger, its hide was tougher, making his arrows do far less damage, and it had far more skills and what seemed like a higher level of intellect. But in this fight, Jake had something he had been lacking in many of the others.

Unwavering confidence. Confidence and momentum. For the first time, Jake was the one entirely in the drivers' seat. And the beast felt this confidence as it showed signs of hesitation in its movements and attacks.

It had fallen into the mentality of prey. A dangerous situation if it wished to display all of its strength.

But even with all that going for him, it was still the Den Mother.

The beast sped up as it leaped at Jake, forcing him to Shadow Vault once more. Even in his arrogance, he wasn't stupid enough to take a swipe of the beast's massive claws head-on.

However, he quickly returned the favor with another barrage of arrows. The Den Mother's wounds were slowly building up, as its once beautiful fur now carried a red sheen.

Something unexpected happened then. The badger retreated, a first for Jake. It ran back to where he had initially pulled it from, as it made another screech. This one was not a sonic attack, but something entirely else different - a mating call.

After it screeched, the ground rumbled as three explosions of dirt fell down from the ceiling along with three massive bodies.

Three Alphas fell down around the Den Mother as they guarded her. The Den Mother itself started giving off a faint green sheen as Jake felt the effect of his poisons lessen with his Sense of the Malefic Viper. Along with it, the wounds on its body started wriggling far faster than before as they rapidly started healing.

Second phase, Jake thought, not discouraged at all.

Luckily, Jake still had another bottle of the hemotoxin poison left, as he quickly brought it out along with a handful of arrows as he doused them. He still couldn't see the level of the Alphas, but he could feel that all of them were weaker than any of the others he had faced so far. The ones too weak to gain the favor of the Den Mother.

A favor the Alphas all seemed in a rush to earn as they charged towards Jake. They took a few seconds, allowing Jake to fire a fully powered Infused Powershot. The badger in the front didn't have any possibility of changing directions as its speed was too high. Resulting in it getting hit square in the face and getting blasted backward as the arrow exploded.

Jake had taken out one of the old common-rarity arrows, going for the kinetic energy of that instead of a normal arrow's penetrative force. He knew he couldn't kill it with a single shot, but he could sure as hell make it roll around on the ground in pain for a bit.

The arrow had disintegrated when it hit the beast, the shards of wood and metal all embedding themselves in its face - quite a few even finding their way into its eyes. One could only imagine the pain as the blinded beast rolled out on the ground, trying to scrape the pieces out.

Which left only two Alphas for now. Jake managed to land a hemotoxin-poisoned arrow on one of them before they reached him but didn't have time to shoot the other. He hated to do it, but he was forced to return to kiting once more.

He landed a few arrows but quickly noticed something vital. The two badger's teamwork was... lackluster, to say the least. Whenever he Shadow Vaulted, the beasts both struggled to chase him individually, bumping into each other.

With a flash of inspiration, he realized that the beasts weren't allies to begin with. They were competitors. Both wanted to earn the favor of the Den Mother, and the best way to do so would be to kill the puny human that had wounded her. So both cared more about being the one to land the killing blow than actually managing to kill him.

A weakness he would gladly take advantage of.

Switching up his tactics, he dismissed his bow as he took out his sword and dagger. While the beasts were stronger than him physically, the gap had only narrowed since he had entered the dungeon.

His Mark of the Ambitious Hunter was also still on the Den Mother. He decided to let it be to help keep an eye on the large badger. Besides, it was even damaging her little by little, as with every drop of blood that left her body, a pulse of energy that damaged her vital energy directly was released. Sadly, he could only have one active at a time.

Charging towards the badgers startled them slightly as they also accidentally made eye contact with him. They, like the Den Mother, felt a sense of danger from the gaze of the human.

Their slight hesitation was enough for Jake to make his way to one of them with a Shadow Vault, as he stabbed an arrow in between its ribs. Only one of the beasts was poisoned before, after all, and it was only fair to share the love.

The beast, of course, didn't take kindly to his attack as it snapped its maw of sharp teeth at him. He was, however, already long gone as he jumped behind it. In one fluid moment mid-dodge, he briefly let go of the dagger, as a bottle of Necrotic Poison appeared. Catching the dagger once more, he smashed the bottle, making liquid-death splatter all over both weapons.

Simultaneously, the other badger tried to get to him, but its 'comrade' was in the way, so all it managed to do was to try and go around it awkwardly.

Jake started circling around the badgers as he landed minor cuts here and there. He made sure always to stay extremely close to them, making their big bodies a detriment - the necrotic poison seeping into their flesh.

They got angrier and angrier as they started being more aggressive and less considerate of each other. The situation only got more interesting as the third Alpha charged over. It could only use one eye, and from the looks of it, it was the one most pissed off.

Contrary to what one would believe, Jake actually only found that the fight got easier as another one joined. Like completely feral animals, they tried to crawl over one other and tried to push the other out the way to get to him.

Inadvertently they also landed several wounds on each other, Jake of course gladly accommodating their carelessness. He honestly believed fighting one of the beasts would be more challenging than three due to their reckless style.

He had also managed to poison the third one as he kept building up the wounds on their bodies.

Naturally, he couldn't avoid feeling a bit of pain himself too. He had taken quite a few scratches here and there. Luckily none of them used that skill to release their spikes of poison. Then again, it would likely help him if one of them did, as they would only hurt their allies.

Briefly glancing at the Den Mother, he saw that it was getting closer and closer to being fully healed once more. The hemotoxin in its body had indeed shown its worth by slowing down the healing process significantly.

A minute or so later, the first of the Alphas fell on the ground, Mark of the Ambitious Hunter being applied seconds before it died. Jake didn't want to miss out on that bonus experience, after all.

Two minutes after that, the second succumbed to blood-loss, leaving only a single badly-wounded Alpha left standing. It was too slow and weak by now to pose any real threat, as Jake simply left it to bleed out as he turned his attention back on the Den Mother.

Taking out a health potion, he quickly downed it as his health was starting to dip relatively low. The fight had gone in his favor, but his victory had not come cheap.

His entire chest and arms were marred with scratches and bites, with a lot of venom making its way into his system too. While he could resist most of it, it still burned away quite a bit of his health to fully eliminate.

Feeling the warm flow of the health potion, his wounds started rapidly healing. All the minor scratches disappeared in only a few seconds, but the more extensive injuries remained - including a nasty bite on one of his shoulders.



Taking out his bow once more, he focused on the Den Mother. The beast had its eyes closed as it seemed to focus intensely on healing itself. The skill it used seemed similar to Meditate, as it hadn't shown the slightest reaction to the alphas dying, albeit far more powerful as it also regenerated health.

Smiling, Jake prepared to give it quite the rude awakening. He usually aimed for the middle of the body when using Infused Powershot to ensure a hit. The arrow flew in a straight line after all, and even if it was unbelievably fast, one shouldn't underestimate the instincts of these badgers.

But now, it was utterly unmoving and unaware. It had made the mistake of trusting the Alphas to buy enough time for it to heal. However, the hemotoxin in its system and the many wounds had made this healing process take far longer than expected. As Jake prepared his shot, he got the notification that the last Alpha had bled out. With that, he switched the Mark back to the Den Mother.

Nocking an arrow with a good dose of some more hemotoxin poison, he started to channel an Infused Powershot. He took his time with this one, bringing the equilibrium right to the limit where either his body or bow would break if he went above it.

He aimed right for the eye of the beast. He didn't know if he could penetrate all the way through its skull, but he knew that the eyes of these beasts were incredibly weak. Then again, few living things could claim for their eyes not to be a weak point.

As he released his most powerful arrow yet, it encountered a barrier surrounding the Den Mother. It exploded the moment the arrow hit, making the attack miss, but it also removed any obstacles between him and the dungeon boss.

He began charging another shot, the Den Mother still not reacting. This one, he saw fly true as it struck the Den Mother right in the eye. It managed only to shudder as the arrow went right through and into its skull.

A shriek like never before came out as it started thrashing about as a purple mist started secreting from its skin. Its glossy hide turned completely purple like the mist, as the hair grew sharper and started firing in all directions just like the Alphas had done.

But Jake was already more than a hundred meters away, and the spikes were not aimed at all. The mist was also too far away to have any effect.

So Jake just started shooting his arrows. He used Splitting Shot with every single one of them, just piling up the damage. His stamina was draining rapidly, so he kept the number of splits low to preserve it. He wanted to shoot another Infused Powershot, but he already felt sore from the ones used before.

This situation showed one of the significant weaknesses of most living beings. While health points would prevent one from dying even if the brain was utterly destroyed, the functions the brain held would still be significantly disturbed.

Like when a chicken had its head cut off and still managed to run, so would one lose control of their body. Skills still worked, however, independently of the brain, for the most part. Of course, the senses no longer functioned properly, making the badger both blind and deaf.

Which meant that all it could do was thrash about as its body spasmed. In desperation, it released all of its skills, all to no avail. It couldn't feel the pain, but it knew its health was rapidly draining as the arrows struck it one by one.

It tried to crawl away, but its limbs didn't listen. Its high vitality only served to prolong its suffering as it powerlessly grew weaker and weaker. If it had enough time, it could regenerate the brain, but sadly it would never get the opportunity.

Vital organs took far longer to heal than anything else. Completely destroyed parts, as well as lost limbs, did so too. The beast had far more vitality than Jake, so it could likely heal its brain enough to regain close to standard functionality with only a few minutes.

One had to say that the last phase of the fight was rather anticlimactic. The badger still had many more skills and strengths left to show but never got the chance as it slowly died, unable to even fight back.

Perhaps it was just a bad matchup for it. Jake had misunderstood its ability as it healed. Unlike meditation, it still retained some standard functions.

It could still feel living beings and any mana that entered within 50 or so meters of it. Sadly for it, Jake's arrow didn't give off anywhere near enough mana to wake it up, and he, of course, hadn't needed to walk closer to it.

With an ending not befitting a Den Mother, the very last vestige of life left it.