

Hunter 77

Chapter 77: Pondering on ponds

The wait was short as he heard the sound of cloven hooves hitting the ground. Soon he saw a group of deer approach the pond, just like all the others had. But the fate of these beasts would not be just another peaceful drink.

He had already prepared his arrows with poison aplenty, and his resources were full, which meant it was killing time.

Jake saw no reason to delay his attack as he stood up from his hiding place and took out his bow. Nocking an arrow and drawing the string, he started charging an Infused Powershot, aiming for the stag in the middle.

The moment he started charging the mana, they all turned towards him in a startle to his slight surprise. He was a good sixty meters away, far further than he expected for them to notice him.

His reaction, however, was swift as he released the arrow. Despite them noticing him, it still hadn't even been a second from them turning their heads to an arrow arriving, penetrating the skull of the stag before it had a chance to mount a defense.

Despite the damage, Jake had not actually managed to kill the beast. However, he had managed to temporarily disable it, as it staggered and fell down on its hind legs.

With their leader out of commission, the four remaining deer briefly showed confusion before they charged towards him in unison. An expected response, as they were met with a barrage of Splitting Arrows.

Without their leader and designated healer, the deer had a hard time putting up a proper fight. Two fell before they even reached him, and a third one died as Venomfang stabbed it in the abdomen, releasing deadly toxins.

Before he got the opportunity to finish off the last beast, a light fell over it, making its wounds heal at a visible rate - the damn stag had gotten up once more, and from the looks of it, it was completely unharmed.

Bloody healers, Jake complained as he kept fighting the deer.

The fight quickly got prolonged, as he time and time again failed to land fatal blows due to the stag erecting barriers, and whatever damage he did inflict got healed right away. The damn stag didn't even try to attack Jake a single time, seemingly satisfied with just healing the deer.

The standstill continued for a good five minutes before the stag started running low on mana. Jake had been OK with just slowly draining the beast, as the deer had yet to do any damage to him. He knew the Necrotic Poison, and the toxin from Venomfang wasn't that easily healed.

He had been honed against far more challenging opponents. While the deer was stronger than most beasts, it was still weak compared to an Alpha Badger. And Jake had only grown stronger since he faced off against those.

When the final barrier shattered under his dagger and penetrated the neck of the deer, it collapsed with a yelp as the venom took hold. A swift stab with his sword finished it off before turning his attention back towards the stag. He had expected it to be already charging his way but was taken aback by what it did instead.

It ran. It bloody ran. Ran back towards the center pond, aka back towards the location of the Great White Stag.

Shit

. Jake pulled out his bow once more, simultaneously focusing his senses on the Mark of the Ambitious Hunter he had just placed on the stag. Nocking his arrow, he drew the string as the beast disappeared from his sight, hidden by the tall grass.

The paths created by the beasts were not straight lines, far from it. But luckily Jake knew precisely where the thing was even without a direct line of sight.

He took his time to line up the shot. When it felt just right, he released the arrow, as it exploded forward. The grass was parted like the Red Sea as it tore through everything in its path. The stag didn't even register it coming before it was hit in its hind, penetrating through its midsection, out the neck.

With it out of mana and far from in optimal condition, this spelled instant death. Jake barely saw it all happen before the grass flowed back into its original place, obstructing his view once more. But the notification of the kill was all he needed to confirm his success.

*You have slain [Lucenti Stag – lvl 67] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level.
94000 TP earned*

'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 48 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points

'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 49 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points

Finally, getting some levels again felt great. It was weird, considering he had leveled less than a day ago, but after his trip into the badger dungeon, he had gotten impatient with his leveling speed. He felt like he needed more, and he needed it faster.

Fighting prey far above his level, coupled with Mark of the Ambitious Hunter, undoubtedly helped him level far faster. He wasn't sure of how big the bonus was, as it just said that it gave him bonus experience whenever he killed a marked target higher level than himself. It wasn't like he got an exact number of experience earned per kill, to begin with. Could it even be quantified into a number?

But he did make it a habit to mark every beast before he killed it. It barely had any cost to use, and the effects were more than worth it just for the damage.

The duration seemed partly based on his enemy's level, making it expire faster on stronger foes. He had tested it while doing alchemy by just marking the highest leveled thing he could find and then just leave it be. He had considered just marking the Great White Stag but decided against it as he would likely have to swap it around a lot.

His intuition told him facing the Great White Stag with his current strength was a bad idea. But the deterrence was not absolute. It was like he had first felt as he stood before an Alpha Badger. It would be a bad idea, but it was not impossible. But banking on getting a skill upgrade just in time to win the fight like with his first Alpha wasn't exactly a reliable tactic.

Not that it mattered currently. Jake had ample time to gain more levels from all the beasts running around before he would have to face the big boss.

There was one thing that intrigued him, though. The ponds that the deer seemed to patrol around. One still needed sustenance at E-grade, but it seemed like overkill to go about drinking it all the time. Jake himself barely needed to eat and drink anymore, making the fact that these deer drank all the time suspicious, to say the least.

It didn't take him long to discover why, as he made his way to the pond. The water was as clear as it could get, but that wasn't the important part. It gave off an aura and even a faint feeling from his Sense of the Malefic Viper. He decided to use Identify on it to confirm his suspicions.

[Lucenti Water (Common)] – Water infused with strong light-affinity mana, making it purer and hold certain magical properties. Can be used as an ingredient in many alchemical recipes or simply consumed in its raw form to restore mana for those possessing the light affinity.

His Identify yielded him quite the information, once more proving the worth of his knowledge-related alchemy skills.

What he couldn't explain, however, was the feeling from his Sense of the Malefic Viper. It was only a faint sensation, but it was clearly there. It was telling him a herb was nearby. But the water was clear, with not a single living thing within it.

Several shining rocks were scattered on the bottom, but his Identify didn't give him any proper response.

On a closer inspection, he found what may be the explanation for the trace energy of herbs in the water. On the pond's side, submerged half a meter or so, several small holes were hidden. They were nearly impossible to see with one's eyes, but his Sphere of Perception made them clear as day.

But what was more important was where the holes were leading. They were clearly extending towards the center pond. Which would mean that whatever was infusing this water with mana would likely be found in there.

For now, however, he focused on this pond. He wanted the shiny rocks, and he wanted the water. While he couldn't identify the stones, he could feel the mana in them. The water itself was at least a common-rarity alchemical reagent that he was sure to find a use for at some point. He still had a library worth of books, and there was sure to be something on light-affinity water.

Speaking of affinities, Jake did wonder what exactly was required for obtaining an affinity. Or if it was even something one obtained. More specifically, he wondered how one unlocked the skills. Currently, he had the nature-affinity offered from his class, but that was still the only one.

I can figure that out later, Jake thought to himself as he started collecting the water and stones. However, it didn't go as planned as when he touched the water; it felt like his hand got scalded.

Grimacing, he pulled back his hand and saw that it had turned red. He had even lost a few health points. Well, there goes my plan for trying to drink it.

His body clearly disagreed with the water, but he was still adamant about collecting it. The water would hurt his skin, but he would like to see it hurt his scales. The dark green scales soon covered his hands and arms as he took out one of the barrels he had 'borrowed' from the challenge dungeon.

Luckily the water didn't affect the wooden barrel, so it was easily stored. The water still clearly tried to burn Jake's hand but was utterly unable to harm the scales. This meant that he safely collected two barrels of the water and the stones - stones, which also tried to burn his hand.

Pretty sure having the light-affinity is off the table, he sighed as he put the collected items into his spatial storage.

As he prepared to head onward, he spotted something out the corner of his eye. A deer had come from the north path and was currently staring at him... and the four dead does around him. It was with a group of two other deer and a single stag.

He was, however, once more surprised at its action. Instead of attacking, it charged towards the path leading towards the center pond. Simultaneously, the two other does headed towards Jake, as the stag started charging up its antlers.

With no time to consider the situation further, he took out his bow and focused on the doe running towards the center. He didn't need his intuition to tell him that letting it get away would result in a bad time - a very bad time.

He marked the beast as he fired a quickly charged Infused Powershot. The shot flew true as it struck the doe in its hind leg, the impact cutting the limb off.

To his displeasure, this didn't stop the beast as it managed to get up quickly and continued limping forward. He wanted to shoot another arrow but was interrupted by the two deer closing in on him.

Every second counted as the fleeing deer got further and further away. Jake decided not to risk anything as he tried to disengage from the beasts attacking him.

He used his rather unassuming skill Badger Jump to fire straight up into the air in a flash of inspiration. Followed by a Shadow Vault, he became ethereal as he made it even further up. Perhaps a bit further than he had planned.

The entire dungeon lay bare before him as he looked down. He had wanted to jump out of reach but had managed to get a good hundred meters up instead. It wasn't the plan, but Jake didn't have time to consider his horrid estimation of his own ability to travel vertically as he quickly locked onto the still running doe below him.

With ample time as he fell, he fired an Infused Powershot down towards it. It soared through the air and hit the beast right on its back, utterly smashing it into the ground. He didn't need the notification to know that it was dead.

Not that his problems were solved just like that. He still faced the minor issue called gravity as he accelerated downwards. He did take advantage of his falling, as he fired a strong Splitting Arrow that split into nine as it rained down on the two does awaiting him below.

The stag managed to block two of them with barriers, but the rest cut into the two beasts. The moment before Jake hit the ground; he took out his Venomfang and Shortsword of Icy Winds.

He impacted not the ground, but the top of one of the beasts, as he managed to take advantage of their momentary confusion caused by the arrows. Two downward thrusts penetrated deep, as the joint force of his fall and his high strength tore into the beast.

His forearms smashed into the deer just before his legs hit the ground. The deer smashed into the soil from the impact, taking the main brunt of the damage as it softened Jake's fall. Not to say that Jake had gotten off completely unscathed.

The fall resulted in both of his legs hurting like hell, his forearms being bruised, and his wrists aching. The deer was, of course, completely and utterly dead. The other one... not so much.

Still not wholly prepared, Jake got kicked by the remaining deer, stumbling to the side. It hurt, but the damage was minimal as the beast didn't have time to put proper force behind the blow.

Mildly annoyed, Jake swung his weapons following his Twin Fang Style, slicing and stabbing the beast again and again. The stag was still healing it, but Jake had learned his lesson. The slow and steady approach would only lead to more reinforcements coming.

While circling the deer, Jake finally saw his chance. After a solid stab, Jake shifted the situation by kicking the deer, launching himself backward in the direction of the stag.

A Shadow Vault borrowing the momentum accelerated him towards his new target as he brought down his vicious attacks once more. The stag had a far harder time healing the wounds inflicted on itself when it had to at the same time focus on avoiding fatal blows. Jake wasn't holding anything back either, as he stabbed Venomfang up through its jaw, penetrating all the way through to the brain.

The blow made the beast unable to cast its spells any longer, which in turn allowed him to finish it off swiftly. The assault had happened in only a few seconds, giving the deer no chance to come to help the

stag. Not that it stopped the doe from still attacking, netting it a quick death as it had lost its designated healer.

With no remaining beasts alive, Jake retreated back into the tall grass. If his prediction were correct, then a new batch of deer would soon arrive. So all he had to do was wait patiently and observe from a safe distance.

The wait took twenty-five minutes, but unlike the usual group appearing, he instead saw the enormous white form of a stag towering above all the other beasts.

It turned out the big boss had arrived to check out the crime scene.