

Hunter 82

Chapter 82: No rest for the wicked

As with any concoction, one first needed ingredients, but of course, Jake had no ingredient-list to go by with this one. So he decided to just go for whatever he felt like would do the most damage. The first of which was a little gift from the Den Mother herself.

[Den Mother's Poison Gland (Rare)] – A gland containing a highly concentrated toxic liquid, condensed by the Den Mother over a long period.

The gland was a big sack of liquid venom. While it most certainly would be considered an atrocity by many well-renowned alchemists to use such a precious ingredient so wastefully, Jake quite frankly didn't give a damn.

As for other ingredients, what could be better than a lot of blood infused with Blood of the Malefic Viper? If there was something he still had plenty of left, it was health after all. His entire body was a highly toxic ingredient in itself.

Jake took out a mana potion and quickly drank it, feeling his pool fill quite a bit. The last part of this brilliant creation would require quite a bit of mana, after all.

Standing in front of the pond, he couldn't delay any longer. He summoned the Gland from his spatial storage, tossing the thing right into the pond. As it entered the pillar of light, it started getting burned up, but it was too late as the gland's contents entered the water.

Without waiting, Jake took out his dagger as he cut both of his wrists while at the same time suppressing his natural healing. Finally, he covered both of his arms in Scales of the Malefic Viper as he plunged them into the pillar and the water.

Instantly he heard the sizzling sound of the water burning into his scales. The water was already starting to turn darker from the Gland's contents, and the addition of his blood only made the situation all the more volatile. His last move proved to be the nail in the coffin.

Touch of the Malefic Viper

Not a single thing was held back as he poured his mana into the skill. Both his hands took on a dark green glow as all the water around them began changing color.

At the same time, Jake started manipulating the water with Concoct Poison. His influence was minor as it was clearly not a controlled concoction and without help from the enchanted mixing bowl. But it was enough. Jake didn't need to make a controlled creation; he just needed to infuse his will into the pond.

It took only a few seconds for the pond to go through drastic changes. The water started bubbling as if it was boiling. At the same time, the otherwise bright white beam also started changing. At first, a faint green gleam could be seen within the light. A gleam that soon turned darker into a dominating dark green color.

Jake felt himself connect to the concoction. He felt his connection to the moon above and to the entire formation that controlled it all. He felt the mind of another being wrestling him for control of it - the Great White Stag.

But Jake wasn't fighting for control. It was a losing battle from the beginning, as his connection was far too weak. Besides, he didn't need it. He just needed to break it from within. Corrupt it. Something he was more than capable of.

The dark beam continued to feed energy into the moon as it started darkening. Festering. Cracks formed on the moon above as it got more and more unstable. He felt the madness and anger from the Great White Stag. He felt its struggle.

From the other six ponds, the light grew more assertive - the power increasing. Simultaneously, the moon started to repair itself, with only the small area where Jake's beam hit it still remaining corrupted.

He felt himself lose the battle as his mana kept draining while the Great White Stag seemed to have an endless supply of energy. He needed more.

Jake leaned forward, allowing himself to tumble into the water. The burning sensation wasn't gone, but different. It was no longer the power of light but the overpowering toxicity of the pond that now burned into him. But Jake could use that.

He opened his mouth and started drinking the poison. He hadn't used that part of the skill for a long time to avoid burning through his supply of ingredients, but Jake had never forgotten the usefulness of Palate of the Malefic Viper when it came to regenerating mana from consuming toxic materials. And now he needed mana, and he had plenty of toxicity.

He felt his mana instantly surge as he drank the concoction, but at the same time, his health dropped. His skill could only negate a part of the poison and use it to regenerate mana, while a big part of it did what any poison does, as it started to drain his vital energies.

With the increased mana, so did he raise his output. Touch of the Malefic Viper allowed him to inject poison into anything he was in physical contact with. And currently, his entire body was in physical contact with the water.

In a burst of poison from the skill, his mana pool drained faster than ever before. But at the same time, the toxicity around him helped regenerate it. He reached a slight equilibrium. However, his problem was the third part of the equation.

His health points were draining rapidly. He had taken little actual damage from any of the does, but he still couldn't keep up the current status quo for too long. Yet he pushed it further, as he released a whole batch of toxic ingredients from his storage as well as nearly a hundred bottles of his weaker poisons - the ones he didn't need to begin with.

The toxicity of the pond exploded upwards, becoming more and more deadly by the second. The beam of light had lost all semblance of white at this point, as it ate into the moon above.

Corruption spread through the moon faster than before. The ground gained by the other ponds was quickly retaken as the celestial object cracked and turned darker. Like veins of black blood, the cracks expanded and pulsed with power.

The Great White Stag tried to fight back, but the corruption was too strong. It wasn't because it was weaker or because it had fewer resources available. It was just a simple fact that corrupting something was far easier than purifying it.

For but a moment, Jake felt the control of the stag slip. He capitalized as he made a final push, his mana control on full display. A pulse of power hit the moon as a crack spread from top to bottom. The crack seemed to mark the end of the conflict as the entire moon shattered like a broken mirror.

All the power that had built up slammed downwards towards each of the ponds. Jake felt it coming but was unable to do anything as it hit the pond.

The water flew everywhere as Jake got tossed out of the pond, flying nearly fifteen meters through the air and landing in the grass.

He heaved for breath as he finally became aware of the state of his body. He looked like he had been submerged in acid, a sentiment that wasn't entirely inaccurate.

Without his high stats, he would have been dead a long time ago. All the scales on his body had disappeared already as he had stopped supplying them with mana. But they had lasted long enough for his arms to be in a less horrible state than most parts of his body.

His entire body was bloody as he had infused every ounce of blood that left his body with Blood of the Malefic Viper, which had been quite a few liters, considering how he currently looked. He had also taken a lot of damage internally as he had consumed parts of the concoction, eroding him from within.

A human before the initiation would have been dead ten times over – but Jake was more than alive as he started scrambling to get on his feet.

The fight wasn't over yet.

As the pulse hit his pond, so had it hit all the others. The moon was shattered, and now only dim stars remained above. It was black as night as he saw the creature stumble through the tall grass in the distance.

The majestic demeanor was gone, the fur no longer a beautiful white color. It had dimmed and grayed, its crown of antlers now broken on one side. It only seemed to have a single functional eye, and it walked with a slight limp as it made its way towards him.

It's one eye, however, did clearly convey all it had to say. Burning hatred directed towards the accursed human that had broken the ritual.

Two broken bodies stood, staring at each other for a while. Jake swayed slightly from side to side as he stood, his legs not quite as stable as he would have liked. But his eyes didn't show the slightest hint of weakness as he stared into the bloodshot eye of the stag – unable to suppress a smile from how much he was enjoying himself.

Both their mana pools were utterly dried up. Everything had been expended. The stag had the slight advantage of being in a better state physically. In contrast, Jake had the remnant of poison still in his body, slowly being consumed by Palate of the Malefic Viper, regenerating mana.

The stag made the first move as it charged, likely provoked into action by the human's smile. A dim flash of light enveloped its broken antlers as it tried to impale him. It was a sloppy attack, but so was his dodge.

He jumped to the side, rolling on the ground as the stag struggled to stop its charge. It staggered as Jake wobbled to his feet – at the same time pulling out his Venomfang as he met the next attack.

It was yet another sloppy charge, but this one managed to scratch him on his left shoulder. At the same time, he managed to land a cut with his dagger, evening out the trade. This continued for a while, as they slowly made minor injuries to each other.

While Jake managed to recover mana faster than the stag, he also had to use more. Several Shadow Vaults had to be used to avoid getting impaled. Simultaneously, the stag was relying solely on physical strength, slowly regenerating a bit of mana naturally.

No winner was clear after the first few minutes of struggle. Wounds accumulated on both of them, the poison seeping into the stag, making it weaker, while Jake's blood-loss and still falling health made him slower too.

Jake finally managed to land a solid blow as he pulled out a bottle of Necrotic Poison, catching the stag by surprise when he tossed it in its face. He managed to use the opening to cut into its remaining eye, blinding it entirely.

He believed he had finally gotten his victory, the beast blinded and weakened.

That belief was quickly snuffed out at the very next moment. With a bellow, the stag raised its head towards the sky. Mana, more than he believed it could possibly have left, shimmered over it as its fur returned to the brilliant white it had originally been.

Whiter, in fact, as it started shining. The moonlight returned as Jake looked up and saw the moon he had destroyed earlier. It was far smaller, but its power was still unlike anything the both of them should be able to muster at this moment.

He quickly saw the reason. All of the Great White Stag's herd had created the new moon with their ghostly apparitions. Giving their last vestige of energy for their leader.

The light from the makeshift moon descended on the stag as its antlers shattered completely. However, they didn't fall to the ground but turned to mist as they rearranged themselves in a pattern in front of the stag - a formation nearly identical to the one Jake had ruined.

Power surged as the formation exploded with mana. A beam of pure light energy flew towards Jake's battered body as his sense of danger warned him of the lethal attack.

He could try to dodge, but he didn't. Instead, he began running towards the attack that would, without a doubt, end his life.

And then... it slowed.

For but a moment, everything seemed to come to a crawl. The beam of light continued onwards, no faster than walking speed. The swaying grass around them now stood almost entirely still. Everything was moving in slow motion.

Except for Jake.

Moment of the Primal Hunter

He didn't think; he simply moved. He ran forward, right towards the stag. He sidestepped the beam of light heading his way, and the millisecond he was out of its path and right in front of the stag, time resumed to normal.

In real-time, not even half a second had passed. But to Jake, it had easily been five full seconds. More than enough to close the distance.

The Great White Stag didn't even understand what had happened. One moment the human was about to get obliterated by the beam, and the next, he was nearly in front of it. It couldn't see, but could still feel that it had missed. To make things worse, the beam was still firing, the stag unable to stop it.

Jake got closer as the circle of magic started fizzling out as the beam disappeared. The moon was gone once more, the stag returning to its dull gray color. It was exhausted. Exhausted and not ready for his attack at all.

He didn't stab it. Instead, he grabbed its front leg as he lifted the stag off the ground with a spinning motion. He spun around as he tossed it through the air, right towards the still half-full pond that now resembled a toxic swamp.

It couldn't do anything as it fell right in the middle of the concoction of death. It could only bellow towards the silent dimming stars above as it tried to get out of the pond. But it was already too late.

The once-great stag was too injured to muster enough strength to fight off the toxins. It tried, but when it finally thought it could get out, an arrow hit it right in its midsection, sending it tumbling back into the pond. It kept struggling, but soon its legs gave out as it stopped moving.

Soon after, it was no longer able to hold on as Jake got his notification.

You have slain [Great White Stag – lvl 93] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level. 146000 TP earned

Having seen the notification and seeing that he had completed the dungeon, Jake, tired and spent, fell backward unto the grass.

He couldn't truly rest quite yet, though.

Objective: Defeat the Great White Stag (Completed)

Bonus reward for clearing the dungeon solo.

Dungeon shutting down in: 00:59:51

Scoffing at the message, he closed his eyes and entered meditation, hoping to restore enough to be able to move about just a bit. No rest for the wicked, I guess, he thought as he kind of hated the system for only giving him an hour this time. At least it was fun.

“Power comes in many forms. A single individual may be able to strike fear into countless others. They may be able to annihilate civilizations. But can they bring life to a new generation? Educate them? Grow in the soil what we need to grow as people? No, they cannot.

“A lone wolf is just that: Alone. We all have our own limits, our own destinies. We cannot all be the protagonists of fate. But we can nurture those who are. None of us here are fighters or those who shall stand against our enemies. We are instead the ones who forge and sharpen their blades, who take care of their children when they fight - the ones who build their homes, their abode to rest.

“There is no shame in this. We are all a part of the greater whole, servants of destiny. A wolf with a pack to support his every move will go further than one who stumbles through the darkness alone. And even if the pack leader of this generation fails, who is to say the next will?

“It saddens me, but we are that lost generation. The ones to pave the way for the heroes of tomorrow. The ones to illuminate the path ahead for our children. We will build the foundation for a better future. We will sacrifice ourselves. But we can do so with pride and with the smile of the Holy Mother upon us.

“We will be a part of a greater destiny. A greater whole. The unsung heroes of fate. And in turn, we will find deliverance and new life within her halls.

“Many of us have already fallen - we are but a scattered pack. Our warriors have fallen, but we still have hope. So hold no fear for with hope, we shall fear nothing.”

Jacob finished as he looked out at the fervent flock in front of him. They were the scared and traumatized ones who couldn't or wouldn't fight.

His sermons happened several times every day. He would talk about different topics each day, but they all held the same message. The message that they were stronger together than apart and that there was no shame in serving a greater purpose.

After shaking hands and reassuring them once more, he excused himself to his cabin, only followed by Bertram and Joanna. The one man and woman who didn't hold a fervent gaze.

"Do you honestly believe all that stuff?" Bertram asked when they were finally alone.

"What matters most is that they do," Jacob answered with a relaxed smile. "Hope is good. Even in a hopeless situation."

"False hope is not," Bertram answered. "Are you still sure that skill is actually accurate?"

"The divination was quite clear. Far more so than I expected it to be," Jacob answered with a sigh. Something he didn't disclose was just how weird it was for it to be so precise. Fate was not so easily peered into, yet his very first vision had been so clear... because it truly was already written.

Only hours after getting his new class, he had used the skill Divination of the Augur. He had expected vague imagery, but what he had seen was indisputable. A tornado of metal would enter the base to shred everything and anyone in its way. Those that ran would surely still be struck down.

It wasn't hard to interpret. But the next part was what was more challenging to interpret fully.

It showed the people in prayer, each holding a candle. One by one, their lights would die, and they too would fall to the ground - their lights, joining together. In the end, only two would stand. They would meet the tornado outside, and they would greet it.

One a winged man, the other a golden warrior.

The winged man would soar towards the sky, surrounded by the motes of light from the candles. The golden warrior would fall to the tornado yet join the man in his ascension. The tornado would find no lives to take but only meet an empty camp.

That was where the vision ended. Jacob had been confused for a long time, but he had begun to understand. They would not survive the tutorial. At least they would not exit the same as they were. He had tried to divine different paths, but he soon understood... he wasn't meant to fight fate.

He was meant to realize it – a realization that alone netted him five levels instantly.

Jacob had grown over these few days. Grown far more than he believed possible. As the survivors' belief grew in him, so did their speed of levels and Jacob's own. Most of them had only gotten two or three levels in their classes, but he had gotten far more.

This speech today had pushed him all the way to level 50. It was a truly meteoric rise, and he believed that he was faster than even the most talented of hunters had been.

As for skills, he had gotten two. The first one was yet another support skill. One he had chosen based on the vision he had seen. He knew it was the one to pick the moment he saw it.

[Lantern of the Augur (Ancient)] – The fallen souls are never truly lost to the Augur. Summon a lantern that can store the souls of the fallen. While in the lantern, the souls do not experience any decay but are instead nurtured. The souls must enter of their own free will. Capacity and power of the souls stored are based on willpower and wisdom.

The lantern was a magical object. It was tangible to no one but Jacob himself. Jacob, and one other person. The one he suspected to be the golden warrior seen in his vision.

When he reached level 50, he only had this belief strengthened. The skill he had unlocked being the reason, of course.

[Appoint Guardian (Unique)] – The Augur of Hope is not a warrior, but his loyal guardian is. Appoint a guardian, intrinsically linking your karma and destiny to theirs. The guardian will receive a new class, as well as an entirely new path. But be warned, for that path will not, and cannot, diverge from your own. As long as you live, so will your guardian, and should you fall, so will your guardian. Can only be used on a willing participant. Skill can only ever be used once, so choose wisely.

He had many exciting choices, but he instantly knew this was the one. But he didn't pick it right away. While Jacob already knew who he wanted to be his guardian, he was not arrogant enough to just assume his chosen person wanted to as well.

Luckily, Bertram had agreed without a second thought. The middle-aged man didn't show much emotion, but Jacob still picked up through his skills that the man was happy. Happy at being asked and happy that he would not have to leave Jacob's side.

Bertram had been with Jacob his entire life. The one part of his life his father had forced upon him. When young, he was a babysitter, a butler, and most importantly, a friend. He had driven him to school every morning, picked him up, and helped take care of him.

He had always been the stoic sort. He didn't talk much, and he never had. At the company, he had been Jacob's personal assistant, more or less continuing on the legacy he had already built.

In the tutorial, he hadn't shied away from his role either. Jacob had initially feared that he would be left behind, but Bertram had remained by his side. A sentiment that touched Jacob deeply as he knew how much the man sacrificed. Out of everyone in their group of colleagues, Bertram would be the one Jacob assumed to have the highest chances of excelling in this new environment.

Of course, he no longer thought that, with both Jake and Caroline going above and beyond all expectations. But now one of those was dead, and the other unknown. Though based on his conversation with the Holy Mother, Jake still lived.

But through all of the hardships and fights, Bertram had remained by his side. He had stayed behind when all other fighters went to war. No matter how much others had tried to push him to join them to hunt beasts, Bertram had stayed. He had still managed to evolve his class, but only through the hunts that Jacob had compelled him to participate in.

And now, at the end of this tutorial, Jacob could offer the opportunity to appoint him as his guardian formally. To make their fates truly intertwined.

"And you are sure you wish to do this? There will be no way of going back. If I die, you die. We will be together if we want to or not," Jacob asked as he looked at his oldest friend.

“No different from normal then,” Bertram answered with a slight chuckle.

“I guess so,” Jacob answered with a relaxed smile. “So, shall we just get it out of the way?”

“Hit me with your best shot, kid.”

Jacob gladly did so as he pointed at Bertram and used the skill on him.

On Bertram’s side, he got a notification. It was not something that could be forced upon him, after all. An easy choice, as he accepted.

Jacob and Bertram had both expected... something to happen. But it was over just as it began. A faint light shimmered over Bertram as he got bombarded by a list of notifications. Skills lost; others gained. But more importantly, was what they both felt.

A connection like no other. A golden thread of karma thicker than any other, one forged by the system itself.

“Wait a second!” Jacob said with a faux horror. “We totally forgot to discuss the salary!”