

Chapter 231: Life Hunter

It wasn't a hard decision.

Okay, it wasn't *that* hard of a decision. It was still a *little* hard. There were a lot of options that I wanted; *[The Golem's Echo]*, *[Guardian Link]*, and even *[Bloomhaste]* were good choices, though the last one was more focused on helping the Great Core's Coreless than growing my personal power - but there wasn't anything wrong with that, really. If the Coreless were of the Great Core, then taking an ability to empower them was more than acceptable.

Unfortunately, that would have to wait. *[Verdure Parasite]* would have to be enough for now; I would just have to make sure that I used it as much as possible while slithering through the Coreless' many-nests. It might even be a good idea to make it obvious that I was doing that, only focusing on growing the plant-flesh that was closest to me - it would ensure that any stupid Coreless that had not yet seen the light of the Great Core would be forced to face it. After that, understanding the wonder of the Great Core, they would quickly convert.

A foolproof plan. I hissed with glee, letting the thought-light wash over me as my *real* choice was confirmed. Of all the choices that I was offered, it seemed the most important to take quickly.

Reward Chosen: Life Hunter.
[Life Hunter] Acquired.

Another carefully-pointed question brought the thought-light back again, revealing my newfound strength in its entirety. It was a far cry from what it had once been, back when I was a defenseless snake working to defend the Great Core.

Name: Paradox
Species: Snake, Ouroboros
Major Title: [The Snake That Eats Its Own Tail] [Little Guardian]
Minor Titles: [Minor Mana Core] [Venomous Retribution] [Touched By Fire] [Ascended Seeker]
Innate Traits: [Venomous II]
Blooded Traits: [Paralyzing Venom IV] [Poisonous Blood III] [Illusion Spark IV] [Clinging Grasp III] [Sound Shaping VII] [Chains Of The Creator I] [Anticoagulant IV] [Constriction I] [Spore Puppeteer IX] [Ascended Sense I] [Ambusher's Vision III] [Streamlined Scales V] [Sting IV] [Enhanced Lungs III]
Resistances: [Piercing Resistance - Intermediate I] [Venom Resistance - Intermediate II]
Level: 70
Trait Points: 15
Core Skills: [The Endless Cycle] [Chrono Fire] [Verdure Parasite] [The Golem's Fading Heart] [Transient Reanimation]
Lesser Core Skills: [Mana Manipulation XI] [Mana Venom XI] [Mana Fire VII] [Little Guardian's Totem MAX] [Life Essence Manipulation IX] [Life - Invigorating Bite XIV] [Life - Vitality XVII] [Life - Vigor XI] [Life - Vigorous Spores IV] [Little Guardian's Focus XII]

[Death Essence Manipulation IX] [Death - Venom X] [Death - Enervating Bite XII] [Death - Wither XII] [Death - Weakness X]

Level Rewards: [Traveler] [Mana-Life Conversion] [Mana-Death Conversion] [Mana Restoration] [Mana Blood] [Life Hunter]

Description: A growing Ouroboros, symbol of the eternal.

It was enjoyable to witness the clear demonstration of my growth - and especially the appearance of ***[Transient Reanimation]***, the power it represented like some sort of forever-trophy to mark my victory over another of the Great Core's enemies. And a terrible one, at that, one that had forced me to briefly commit blasphemies against my Creator.

Yet, even that had been worth it in the end, as awful as it was to think about. Because that false-life had served a purpose, one that went beyond even gaining a better idea of how to defeat the evil Lesser Core.

It had shown me something that I only just now remembered, with the possibility of being able to change myself from living to undead to living again.

Being undead gave me increased level reward options. I strained myself, trying desperately to remember what *exactly* the thought-light had said.

Eventually, I managed. A memory of the thought-light's appearance, more ingrained in me than normal due to the sheer horror of that previous false-life, entered my mind.

Revealing Possible Rewards Unlocked Through Species: Undead And Its Interactions...

Death Boost: You are born of death, and may temporarily imbue yourself with a small portion of the strength of those you usher into its arms, growing more powerful from the fallen. (Provided by: Undead)

Necrotic Venom: You are born of death, and your venom bears its touch. Adds a withering effect to venom. (Provided by: Undead, Snake)

Blighted Rebirth: You are born of death, and will be born of it again. Your body is healed and reanimated upon final death, providing a second chance at undeath. This effect does not free the undead ouroboros from the influence of its original reanimator. Blighted Rebirth may only activate once before needing to be selected again. (Provided by: Undead, Ouroboros)

It might be a risky choice, but I was eager to find out if ***[Death Boost]*** would continue working if I picked it and then used ***[Life Hunter]*** to bring myself back to life. If it did, and depending on how long the strength increase it gave for killing bad-things lasted, it might end up being one of my stronger options. It was too bad that I was so far away from being able to test it.

Either way, I was happy with picking ***[Life Hunter]***. If I ran into another Death Core again, and it tried to do the same thing to me as the last, I would eventually be able to break free on my own. *Without* having to commit the additional blasphemy that was ***[Scales of Devotion]*** to temporarily gain the control I needed to kill myself.

All I'd have to do is mindlessly kill, something that the Lesser Core would demand anyway, and I would eventually be brought back to life - freed from the hold of my reanimator.

Even if finding another Lesser Core focused on Death was unlikely, the safety that **[Life Hunter]** provided was worth more than I would have thought.

A weight on my scale-flesh lifted, one that had been so constant since my most recent false-life that I had begun to forget that it was there.

I wriggled in glee, exulting in the sensation. A hand scratched at my scale-flesh, running lightly down my length. I wriggled a little more, pushing against the touch.

And finally, for the first time in this new life, truly relaxed.

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My scale-flesh twisted and flexed, stretching out with a relaxing sort of strain; one that teetered on the edge of becoming uncomfortable, but only *just* so. I let my scale-flesh fall loose just before it fell over that edge, enjoying the way that my stretched-out length comfortably burned. My mouth opened wide in a great yawn, and scent-tastes pressed against my tongue.

The scent-tastes of uncountable plant-flesh and a great many Coreless most prominent among them. We had returned to the ruined many-nest at last.

It wasn't so ruined anymore. What had once been a series of broken nests wreathed in the horrid green spore-mist of a Lesser Core, there was now a...well, there was still a series of broken nests. But they were looking better. Near the place where we emerged, climbing up from a series of tunnels and wall-paths that my Coreless had found in their journey towards me, debris had been gathered and moved into piles. Great chunks of stone, many of which I noticed were remnants of The Golem's final Tiamat-shaped form and many others that were clearly gathered from the ground itself, were propping up the places where the nests leaned awkwardly, preventing them from falling as repairs went on in other places.

Even the useless moving-walls were back! I wasn't sure why; they had already shown their uselessness in holding back the Lesser Core's advance. I'd have thought that the Coreless would have learned from that. They apparently hadn't. I let out a heavy breath, giving up on my hopes related to that. I'd just have to accept their ridiculous insistence on walls that didn't actually defend anything. They just went together with Coreless, an integral part of them. Like legs.

For now.

"They're back!" a voice shouted, forcing me to put the thought aside. Scattered waves of emotion rushed towards me, carried by the **[Little Guardian's Totem]**s around the necks of various Coreless as they caught wind of our return. Their praises resounded through the massive cavern, echoing off of the walls of the ruined nests that surrounded us again and again.

[Excitement] and **[joy]** pressed against me with palpable force as the entire many-nest began to resonate with it at once, and I noticed that there were more Coreless around than when I had left, many of them dispersed throughout the forest of plant-flesh that I had created. Their hands plucked at the fruits that grew within, brushing past dangerous plant-flesh marked in blue and gold.

I focused on *[Verdure Parasite]*, and before long the lost fruits throughout the forest quickly regrew and were plucked again, sparking another round of *[joy]*. It pulsed again, growing louder as a mass of tiny feet started thudding against the ground in a thunderous roar, a giant sound formed of a great many little pitter-patters melding together.

The Grateful One backed up before they arrived, one arm dangling at her side and the other carefully shielding the crystal-covered fang that she carried, holding it away from the incoming horde. I hissed my praise at her foresight. It was a wise decision, because a tide of tiny Coreless washed over us a few moments later.

“We’re back!” not-Needle announced *[happily]*, leaning down to pat the head of the nearest of the little ones. They chirped back in a series of incomprehensible jabbers, each running into the next. I let it wash over me like a stream of mana-water gently running across my scale-flesh. Basked in it. Relaxed.

And then, when we arrived at the many-nest’s *[Little Guardian’s Focus]*, I set the disciples to work. A few bursts of *[Illusion Spark]’s* light were all that it took for them to understand, and they quickly gathered a nearby group of Coreless and got started.

Another two *[Little Guardian’s Focus]es* began to form beside the first, their construction joined by a chorus of *oohs* and *ahhs* from the audience of tiny Coreless.

And then there were three, and the formerly ruined many-nest had become about as secure as I could make it - a haven for the Great Core’s Coreless, with more than enough food and healing to go around. I hissed with satisfaction, certain that I could *feel* the Coreless’ devotion increasing.

As it should.