

Hunter 611

Chapter 611 - An Offer Jake Can('T?) Refuse

Weird notifications all around. Well, except for the first one, as Jake had finally gotten a level. So that was nice, even if it was only one.

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 201 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

However, that was not the notification bothering him. It was another message he had gotten shortly after slaying the Hive Queen, one he had never seen before. A weird one at that.

You have been branded a heretic of the Endless Empire by the Fourth Desert Queen

Now, Jake had no idea what all of this was about, but he reckoned that seeing how the Fourth Desert Queen was the one that had blessed the Isoptera Queen, then he had gotten this heretic branding from slaying her. However, that branding felt weird as he was already a heretic, which at least made the next message make more sense.

Branding failed: True Heretic status already present

Jake was apparently not just a heretic but a True Heretic. Did this mean he was an all-rounder heretic according to the system, hereticizing all over everyone and anyone? He did find the notion a bit funny. Heretics did come in many forms, with the most common one being heretics of a specific Pantheon or god, branded by them like the Fourth Desert Queen had tried. The Holy Church especially liked doing this.

A general heretic – or True Heretic as Jake was called – was one that was just seen as a heretic against all gods. Someone who refused to acknowledge them or get any Blessings and perhaps even worked against them. It was people who conceptually hated gods. Jake didn't entirely fit in this category as he just didn't care much for them being gods, but few had the privilege to have that mindset.

Oh, but branding someone a heretic did have some limitations. Such as being impossible if the person already had a high-level Blessing from another powerful god, which is what made the next message even funnier.

Branding failed: A Chosen cannot be branded a heretic

Jake could not be branded a heretic because he was a Chosen, but also because he was already a heretic – which he couldn't be because he was a Chosen. It was truly a nice little paradox. Not that either status mattered with the next message.

Branding failed: blocked by Shroud of the Primordial

Sure, Jake had only gotten the skill from his True Blessing, so maybe that shouldn't count either, which left the last "branding failed" message.

Branding failed: Successfully suppressed

This one Jake knew was all him. How did he know? His gut told him. It was naturally the Bloodline coming in and being mad some damn god dared try to brand him. Seeing as this branding was likely a system feature of sorts, it probably didn't directly take into account the power level of the people in question but relied more on qualitative and pre-decided factors to determine if it failed or succeeded.

As for worries if the Fourth Desert Queen knew all this had happened, the final message dispelled that.

All tracking successfully blocked

So, yeah, that entire thing was a nothing-burger, but it was something he hadn't seen happen before, so at least it was a little interesting. He would definitely have to joke about it with Villy later, but for now, he saw no need to discontinue his hive dive.

But before that, he had an egg chamber that needed a good cleanup. Continuing down the tunnel that the Queen had tried to flee through, he soon made it there. At the entrance to the chamber, he felt remnants of a potent barrier, likely put down by the Queen before she had left for the cavern. With her now gone, the eggs would likely die on their own shortly anyway, but Jake decided not to risk another Queen taking over.

Mana gathered all around him as hundreds of orbs condensed. With a mental command, he sent them all out into the chamber. Hundreds of explosions later, not a single egg remained unbroken, making Jake nod as he looked towards the opening leading further down the hive. Ah, but not before looting all the natural treasures in the chamber, all placed there to nurture the eggs. He was sure some of those could prove useful, perhaps even in the egg ritual.

After walking for a few kilometers, he saw nothing but unmoving termites anywhere in his sphere. All were in a catatonic state, making Jake question if there perhaps only was one Hive Queen. That there were multiple D-grades made him relatively certain that there were also more C-grades, so he doubted

that to be the case. There was also the fact that the hive kept expanding so much downwards, so it would be weird for the egg chamber not to be placed further down where the energy was stronger.

Soon, Jake came across something odd. A recently collapsed wall based on a snapshot he had taken earlier, leaving only one way rather than a fork. The one way remaining way was a vertical hole. That was the direction he had planned on going anyway, but he still found it odd.

After jumping down the hole, he was in freefall for quite a while. When he landed, he created cracks on the ground from the impact but quickly stood up and continued. Later down the tunnel, he found the same thing as before. Tunnels had been sealed off, leaving only a single path deeper down unless he wanted to start blowing holes in walls... but he didn't even have to do that as shortcuts had already been made.

By now, he would be an idiot if he didn't realize that he was being purposefully directed further into the hive. This pretty much confirmed that there was at least one more Hive Queen, but it did make Jake wonder... why? Why would it lead him further down like this? For what purpose?

Was it because a trap was prepared? If that was the case, Jake welcomed the attempt. He wanted to see what these damn insects were capable of, and if that required him to walk into a trap, so be it. Picking up speed, Jake began running faster, speeding up his freefalls and teleporting when there were long straight tunnels. No termites got in his way, but some did hide out of his way, with others scrambling to run once they saw him. He left them alone as his curiosity grew with every second. They seemed almost too non-hostile. Were they trying to bury him again or something?

Kilometer after kilometer, he went deeper and deeper. The temperature grew the further down he went, but small formations were placed on the walls of the hive here and there, helping keep it down. Pockets of magma were purposefully avoided by the termites digging.

Jake occasionally released a pulse to see what was up, and soon he spotted another egg chamber, which also had a large cavern in front of it. A massive cavern, in fact, and natural-formed as far as Jake could see based on the plants within. It had to be at least twenty-five kilometers across and more than four kilometers tall, making it quite a bit larger than the one he had fought in before.

The tunnel system that had been created for him led straight to this cavern. Straight to where he expected a Hive Queen to be, and inspecting the snapshot, he tried to see if one was there, but he couldn't. He was pretty sure she was, but all he saw was a mass of energy a few hundred meters across, making it look like a dense sphere to his Pulse.

Curious, Jake picked up speed even further, following the only path available to him. By now, he estimated he was nearly ten thousand kilometers down, which seemed like a lot, but one had to remember the planet was now nearly the size of the freaking sun pre-system. That meant it had a diameter of more than a million kilometers, and if these termites were truly aiming for the Planetary Pylon at the core, then they had a long way to go.

Jake soon reached his destination as he saw the cavern in front of him. Within, he heard the clattering of termites, but more so than that, he felt two powerful auras. Two auras that actually made him pause and then grin. Finally.

Actual threats.

Walking forward, Jake entered the cavern, letting the dense mana within wash over him. At the entrance, there was only a single termite waiting. It looked like the Guards from before but was a bit larger and stronger-looking. Still just a Guard, though.

[Isoptera Queen's Guard – lvl 256]

Decent level. If it was a high-tier creature, Jake would maybe even feel fear. The termite just looked at him for a bit before clattering its mandibles and turning around as if wanting him to follow. Jake obliged as he walked after it, sending out a new pulse. He counted a total of thirty-two Queen's Guards in the cavern, enough for him to maybe get properly serious if they all jumped him at once.

Following the Guard, they walked to the center of the giant cavern. Once there, Jake saw a giant pillar of sorts extending from the bottom of the cavern to the top, pulsing with power. It looked like it contained giant crystals within, each glowing with a yellow light, giving off intense earth-affinity mana. High-tier earth-affinity natural treasure. Maybe helped these termites evolve into what they are today.

In front of the pillar was a large platform of stone, and as he looked at it, he saw them. Two forms stood on it, waiting. One was a creature Jake recognized as the Hive King that had whopped his ass the last time he had invaded the hive, looking stronger than ever. Using Identify, he could see that he had underestimated it.

[Isoptera Hive King – lvl 272]

Firmly a mid-tier C-grade. It wasn't a horrible variant either, meaning it could no doubt offer Jake a proper match. But the other creature on the platform still stood out more. He used creature and not termite as it looked quite a bit different from anything Jake had seen before. It was a lot smaller than the Hive Queen he had just killed and looked a bit similar except for one thing. Rather than a head with mandibles, the body just ended, and out of the top grew... a humanoid upper body.

[Isoptera Hive Queen – lvl 272 – Greater Blessing of the Fourth Desert Queen]

Jake stared for a few moments as the Hive Queen – the true Hive Queen, as far as Jake could tell – turned around. A female upper body with long hair, generous proportions, and not a single shred of

clothes stared back at him, her skin brownish like the rest of her termite body. The upper part was entirely human-looking, except for the eyes that still looked firmly insect-like, now staring back at him. As he stared at her, he also felt her try and use Identify. Failing.

“Odd, even now, I cannot see. Tell me, invader of my home, what are you?” she then spoke, taking Jake aback. Her voice sounded oddly sweet, and he knew there was some passive mental-fuckery going around. Even then, Jake saw no reason not to answer, as this Queen had shown no outright hostility yet.

“Human,” Jake simply answered, surprising the Queen.

“Truly? A human has made it down here already... my Patron assured me such a thing happening was nearly impossible. Your species is not known to be very exceptional,” the Queen said, not a hint of mockery in her tone but more as if she was just speaking facts.

“Well, we got outliers, me being one such outlier,” Jake shrugged. “You even asking that makes me wonder if you have any idea what else is happening on this planet.”

“The world above ground is of little interest,” the Queen said dismissively. “Perhaps a mistake if beings such as you are up there. Human, are you a leader of your species?”

The question came a bit out of the left field but was probably relevant to why the Queen was not hostile. “I am a leader of sorts, yes. At the very least, I have an open line of communication with leaders of humanity.”

“Good. Are you capable of making decisions for your race?”

“As I said, I got influence, but that does not mean I can or want to just make decisions for others. If you told me what you wanted, it would be a lot easier to say if it is something I would even try to help with,” Jake answered honestly, wanting to know what the Queen was getting at.

The Queen looked at him for a bit before answering. “The Isoptera Hive has already laid claim to this planet in the name of the Fourth Desert Queen of the Endless Empire. Humanity and the factions of man are of no interest to us, and thus we offer you the chance to avoid a war. We are willing to offer humanity a small area of Earth to live in but ask that all major factions backed by divine forces leave or risk facing extermination. Others are also free to leave, of course.”

Once more, the tone was impersonal and spoken with a matter-of-fact tone.

“I don’t see that working for me or the rest of humanity. For anyone on this planet besides you, really,” Jake said dismissively. “Not to say I am not open to some level of negotiation. Extermination isn’t necessary as long as healthy boundaries can be established.”

The United Cities Alliance didn’t have anyone representing underground monsters, so maybe having the termite hive on board could be a thing? There was just one problem with that.

“Impossible,” the Queen dismissed him. “The hive shall not limit itself.”

Ectognas were hardwired for domination. Total domination. It was their nature to constantly expand their hives, to control whatever territory they had access to, and to consume any and all resources they could get their mandibles on. Even if they became sapient like this Queen, that instinct didn’t change, and fighting your own instinct was bloody hard. Jake knew that better than anyone.

“See, diplomacy won’t work then. You will want to keep expanding the hive and taking control of the planet, while I and others simply won’t let that happen,” Jake said, knowing they were at quite an impasse. “But I can try and connect you to people who you can at least try to reach an agreement with?”

Hey, if diplomacy could work, Jake was open to it. While he did need the core of the Queen, he would feel a bit bad about just attacking them when they extended an olive branch. Maybe they could just leave the planet or something.

“Can you contact these people from down here?” the Queen asked, confusing Jake.

“I should be able to, but it will be quite hard for you to talk to them. It would be easier if I just went and fetched someone,” Jake answered. He planned on having the Sky Whale come and negotiate as both were monsters, and out of everyone on the council, the Sky Whale was the strongest bar-none, making any threatening behavior from the hive ineffective.

“That is not an option,” the Queen said dismissively.

“Why?” Jake asked, his confusion growing.

“You will stay, human. I feel your power and find you worthy of remaining here with me as my consort. My human form is closing in on perfection, and once it is finished, we shall breed children, and you will give me new and more powerful spawns than the ones you have killed. See it as paying recompense and a privilege,” the Queen said, smiling and using her mental-affecting skill at full force.

It was Jake's turn to be taken aback as he scratched the back of his head. "Flattered, but you aren't really my type."

Insect bodies weren't a huge turn-on, and while taking a direct approach was commendable, this wasn't it.

"It matters little what you think of this form or any other I might take. What I need is only your Records to bring about a stronger next generation," the Queen said, clearly not viewing it as a big deal.

"Yeah," Jake said, shaking his head. "Not gonna happen."

The Queen stopped smiling and stared at him with condescending eyes. "I never gave you that choice, human. You can stay either as a willing participant or a servant. That is the only choice I will offer you."

Oh well, Jake thought. At least I'll get a good fight and some cores.

"I believe I also only ever gave you a simple choice. Surrender and negotiate or be exterminated. Those are your two choices," Jake said in a sharp tone.

"A shame. This could have been a pleasant encounter, but now you must either break or die," the Queen shook her head in disappointment. Behind him, the Queen's Guards cut off the entrance to the cavern, and a barrier blocked off the only other exit, sealing them all in.

“Lady, I think you are severely misunderstanding something here,” Jake said as he looked at Hive Queen. “I am not trapped in here with you; you are trapped in he-”

Jake suddenly had to teleport as a Queen’s Guard attacked him from behind, making Jake curse internally.

What fucker interrupts a good one-liner movie reference!?

Chapter 612 - \U0022Don't Falter Too Fast.\U0022

Each level in C-grade mattered far more than those in D-grade. It was just simple math, really. However, there was still one thing that could make up for this gap in stats: titles. Jake had over 70% more in all stats just from titles increasing them percentage-wise, and this was not counting all of the pure stats he got from some of them.

Jake also had a pretty damn good class in D-grade and an excellent profession. The Malefic Viper skills added even more stats, allowing Jake to truly stand out from nearly any other newly evolved C-grade. All of these advantages had already meant that Jake outclassed a level 239 Hive Queen and her Protector by quite a bit, but this Hive Queen was 272, with an even more powerful Hive King at 272. When he last visited, Jake had estimated the Hive King to be quite a bit into C-grade but not mid-tier C-grade. That meant it had probably gotten over forty levels since his last visit. If that speed could be sustained, the Hive King and Hive Queen could be in the late tier of C-grade at least by the time the Prima Guardian arrived, making their bid to take over the planet not at all unrealistic. This showed they were talented and pretty good variants with a bright future ahead of them.

A future they had now put in jeopardy by challenging Jake directly.

Guards came at him from all around, but to Jake, they weren’t much more dangerous than the ones thirty levels lower. They were still big and bulky, proving that the Queen wasn’t all she made herself out

to be. Jake dodged a few before allowing one to clash with him directly. He pulled out both katars and countered the moment it attacked. One katar hit it on the side of its head, right through its eye, while Jake twisted his body to stab the other weapon into its side.

The Guard tried to turn around and attack again, but Jake got on top of it and punched down into its neck area. An arcane explosion sounded out as Jake infused mana into the Blackpoint Burst enchantment. The resulting explosion was far weaker than a true Blackpoint Burst, but it still managed to blow up half of the neck. Another rapid stab from Eternal Hunger with Descending Dark Fang severed the head entirely, killing the Guard.

Less than two seconds had passed since Jake had started his attack till the Guard was dead. Standing atop its corpse, he turned to glance at the Queen, seeing the anger on her face. On that note, her having a semi-humanoid form was kind of nice, as he could at least read her reactions far more correctly like this.

Sadly, the humanoid form was short-lived. Quickly, the Queen's body morphed as the top half of her human body got absorbed into the termite, and its head changed to resemble the Hive Queen he had killed earlier that day. The body of the Hive Queen remained the same size, making her smaller than the other Queen, which he deemed a deliberate choice on her part.

Have it your way, Jake mentally shook his head. Physically he didn't waste the movement as he had more Guards to deal with, ten or so rapidly coming for him. The one Guard that attacked him had probably just meant to restrain him for the Queen, but upon seeing it die nearly instantly, she switched up her tactics.

The ground beneath him rumbled as walls surrounded him, trying to seal him in. Jake scoffed and blasted a hole through it, swiftly escaping as two termites were hot on his ass. He turned and kicked one of them in the face, releasing a blast of energy to launch himself backward as he pulled out his bow.

Nocking an arrow, he shot off a Splitting Arrow, making it split as much as he could. The goal was to create a lot of large explosions, but explosions of low intensity. All to buy himself some time to get off some good shots. From the previous Hive Queen, Jake knew that simply damaging a Guard was not enough, he had to kill them for good, or they would just get healed.

He also kept an eye on the one being in the cavern he was actually worried about. The Hive King had been marked first-thing, allowing him to know if it ever moved, even if it was outside of his sphere. So far, it stood unmoving beside the Hive Queen, guarding her like the Protector had before.

Jake reckoned that this Queen was a better variant than the one he had killed despite both Queens being called Hive Queens. It was entirely possible that the other Hive Queen only had the Protector while this one was capable of giving birth to a Hive King. It could also have something to do with hierarchy. If this was the Hive Queen that led the hive and had given birth to all the others, then it was possible it was the only one capable of having a Hive King.

Despite being a spawn of the Hive Queen, the Hive King was by far the most dangerous being in the cavern. Besides Jake, of course.

That is why it confused him when the King remained behind, not joining the fight. It allowed Jake to methodically kill the Queen's Guards one by one, the Queen herself helping out with the usual buffs and heals, but even her efforts felt half-arsed. Jake was almost offended as it felt like they didn't actually take him seriously yet.

Soon, ten Guards had been killed. Eleven, twelve, thirteen. With thirty-two in total, they were down to nineteen, the fight just getting easier with every kill. Jake began to wonder if the Queen hoped for Jake to tire himself out or something. He also noticed how the Guards fought half-arsed, their magic trying to restrict his movements more than kill hi-

Oh... you can't be fucking serious.

They weren't trying to kill him at all. They were fucking trying to capture him, making Jake thoroughly offended. Usually, he would detect such things, but the problem with ectognas was that they didn't really give off any killing intent or bloodlust, as they didn't have any will of their own. In fact, ectognas like these Guards didn't even have a Willpower stat as far as Jake knew. They were nothing more than drones working for the Queen, and they couldn't even be called sentient.

Only the Queen and Hive King had any level of true intelligence, with Jake still not sure if the Hive King was sapient. Not that it ultimately mattered. He would make her or both of them pay for the arrogance shown by not even respecting him enough to try and go for the kill.

He kept killing the Guards, not showing a single trace of weakness and not even taking any injuries. He just methodically dismantled them one by one, not allowing them any recourse. After killing number twenty-two, he stopped and turned toward the Queen. He threw her a look of disdain, mocking her for failing to heal or protect the Guards. Not that he was sure she even tried. Jake guessed that the Queen could just respawn all these Guards in a pretty short period of time once he was gone, with the only true loss being if the King died. The Guards were pawns, and them just wasting a few of his resources was likely a worthy trade in her eyes.

Jake's taunt did not work as the Queen kept up the same tactic, and to his annoyance, it kind of worked. Her healing made the Guards durable, making him sometimes fail to kill them in his first assault, allowing her to heal it up for another go. This made Jake burn through both mana and stamina, though he still paced himself, and his large resource pools meant he didn't risk tiring himself out. If he did get low, he also still had potions to rely on.

It did not take long before the last Guard lay dead on the ground, making Jake seriously doubt the level of judgment displayed by the Queen. While they were not dangerous individually, they could still have proven problematic fighting alongside the Queen and King, but now they had just been thrown away for nothing.

Standing between two large corpses, Jake looked over at the Queen. "What exactly did you hope to accomplish with this? Tire me out? Or do you just enjoy seeing your own spawn die?"

The Queen regrew the humanoid upper body, and the moment he saw her face, he felt something was off. She was smiling with what looked like genuine happiness.

"You are not that far into C-grade yet still display such power. You truly are an exceptional specimen of a human, with Records surpassing my expectations," she said while looking him over. "The offer still stands; you have proven yourself worthy of respect. Have your humans join the hive, and you can lead them. Whichever god you serve will also help strengthen their relationship with the Endless Empire, and all you would have to sacrifice is a bit of your misplaced pride."

"I thought the time for bullshit was over," Jake said, annoyed.

"Your defiance only makes you all the more enticing. Now, please do not struggle too much and make it worse than it has to be. Ah, but do show me what you are truly capable of. I wish you luck, human," the Queen said as she turned and looked at the Hive King.

"Go."

BOOM!

Jake raised both weapons as he blocked, barely in time. The Hive King smashed into him, blasting him back several kilometers before smashing into the cavern wall, spreading cracks across it. He braced himself as the Hive King came again and managed to angle himself well enough to dodge the follow-up.

The Hive King was the smallest ectogna he had faced that day and by far the strongest and fastest. It hit the wall hard, spinning its body as it hit with its legs first, allowing it to leap instantly at Jake once more. Jake dodged and tried to cut the King in the side but found his katar just sliding across the black chitin. A wall shot out from the stone, allowing the King to jump off to continue its assault, something Jake had not seen coming.

He tried to dodge, but it managed to scratch him with one of its blade-like outgrowths on its legs, leaving a nasty wound on his side. Rolling to the side, Jake was forced purely on the defensive as he barely avoided having his arm bitten off, followed by a leg missing his thigh by a few centimeters – an attack that would surely have penetrated straight through, potentially taking the leg off.

Gritting his teeth, Jake tried to get some kind of advantage and get a read on his opponent. See its pattern and read the flow of combat. Dodging a few dozen times more, Jake began to get in the groove and finally managed a counterattack. The Hive King snapped forward, Jake dodging by diving forward and under the attack, leaving an opening on the leg of the termite, which he exploited. Eternal Hunger stabbed into the leg, and just as Jake did so, he stepped down and teleported away to avoid suffering a counterattack.

After his teleport, Jake got some distance and managed to pull out his bow for a quick potshot. The arrow failed to penetrate the chitin as it hit at a bad angle, and the King instantly jumped. Rather than dodge, an Eternal Shadow appeared from his body, dodging to the side for him.

As he predicted, the King switched targets. Jake had dodged or at least tried to dodge every attack so far, making it predict he would do that again. Jake grinned as he saw the King's mandibles sink into the Eternal Shadow from behind, only to see the Shadow disperse. Before the King could turn around, an Arcane Powershot hit it in the back, blasting it away.

It turned around in the air and skittered across the ground, promptly leaping to continue its assault. Jake was ready, teleporting away as he blasted it again, finally getting some level of a read on the insect. His arrows barely did any damage, the chitin still entirely unscathed, though he did see some scratches on the leg he had hit with his Arcane Powershot earlier, indicating he could do damage.

The Hive King had no magic. It displayed no fancy skills. It was just a machine built for fighting with a body forged solely for that purpose. All the magical help was supplied by the Queen, allowing the King to put all of its power into physical combat. It was specialized to the extreme, which was why it outclassed Jake in every way. Every way besides Perception, combat ability, and diversity in means.

This was how Jake could get an edge. The Queen was still an issue, and Jake knew he would likely have to address her before he could finish the King off, but for now, he would focus on the threat in front of him. They clashed hundreds of times in the next few minutes, neither managing to truly land any blows on the other outside of a scratch or minor wound here and there.

Jake finally got a good opportunity as he feinted the King with a side-step, making it hesitate long enough for Jake to punch his Blackpoint Nanoblade into its lower mouth using Descending Dark Arcane Fang, the blade actually penetrating. An explosion sent the termite flying back, wounded, but rather than attack again, it just stood still after landing, confusing Jake.

"Truly marvelous!" the Queen said with excitement. "Now, you asked earlier about the Guards... I must admit that it can be seen as underhanded, but there was another motive for allowing their death. You see, resources are limited, and I believed it only proper for my King to have as much as he could."

Jake did not answer as his eyes were laser-focused on the Hive King. Then, it happened. Jake felt several auras suddenly appear within the chamber, and his eyes opened wide. It came from all the Guards he had killed, but their auras felt off. Broken. Fragmented.

Streams of energy began seeping out of all the corpses, with the King as their gathering point. The C-grade's aura grew, its body overflowing with power from the infusion, and Jake knew that with every second, it grew stronger and stronger. He remained still as he observed this, and soon, the infusion was done. Yet even then, he felt like there was more to the Hive King. Like its full potential had been unlocked, ready to be unleashed.

"Now, lay eyes on the true power of the Hive King," the Queen said, her voice sweet. "Prove yourself worthy of standing at his side... and don't falter too fast."

Jake was about to say something but kept his mouth shut as his danger sense exploded. The Hive King stared at him, and he saw its legs faintly bend like primed springs. He switched his stance to a defensive one as he prepared himself, just in time too.

The Hive King appeared in front of him with speed so high it may as well have been teleportation. Its leg shot forward, and Jake prepared to dodge but felt himself freeze as his body tensed up. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the smiling Queen, her hands glowing with energy as Jake felt the earth mana invade his body, making it feel like he was petrified.

Fucking-

A leg stabbed into his stomach like a spear, bending his body in a v-shape, blasting him backward before he smashed into the wall yet again that day. With his body embedded in the wall, he felt the warm liquid flow out of his stomach, the leg having left a fist-sized hole. If he had any organs, several of them would have been smashed, but as a C-grade, a wound like this was nothing but an inconvenience.

Using both hands, he dragged himself out of the hole as he saw the Hive King simply walk towards him.

“Just surrender, human. Join me and build something greater. Allow yourself to reach new heights with the hive,” the voice of the Queen echoed out, filled with mental magic to the extreme. Enough to push Pride of the Malefic Viper, but far from enough to truly affect Jake.

Jake looked at his stomach as the wound slowly healed, helped by the legendary Blood skill. He then looked up, seeing the Queen and King in the distance. He failed to hold back a smile.

“Thanks,” he said with genuine gratefulness.

The Queen smiled too. “I am glad you see sense, now-”

“No, not for that,” Jake shook his head. “Thanks for not being too weak... I got a bit scared after that first clash.”

The Queen’s smile faded, and she looked annoyed. “My patience and benevolence have limits. You are outmatched, out-leveled, and trapped in my domain. Your disrespect will only lead to more unnecessary suffering.”

“It isn’t disrespect. I say this with absolute genuineness: don’t hold anything back,” Jake said. “In return, I won’t either.”

With those words, Jake flooded his body with arcane energy, and his body exploded with power. The Hive King and Queen were not the only ones with boosting skills. It was just that he didn't have to use it before. But now he could finally let loose as Arcane Awakening activated, boosting all his stats by 30% in its stable mode.

"Let me echo the sentiment: don't falter too fast," Jake smiled as his bow appeared, and he stepped down and teleported just in time to dodge a charging Hive King.

Chapter 613 - A Petrifying Experience

The Hive King was blasted away by an arrow hitting it in the back just before it had time to turn and continue its assault. Jake whipped his body around toward the Queen and released a Splitting Arrow, forcing her to conjure a barrier in front of her humanoid body.

The dozen or so arrows embedded themselves in the barrier, piercing it slightly. Jake saw her fear for a moment as the arrow penetrated somewhat, but her face soon returned to being cocky at their failure to actually hit her.

"I continue to be impre--"

With a mental command, Jake shifted the stability to destruction as the arrows all exploded right in front of her face, making her scream in pain and retreat.

You talk too much, Jake mused as he decided to make the Hive Queen his primary target. With Arcane Awakening now active, he was on a timer, and he didn't want to drag out the fight too long. Seeing as the Hive Queen could heal, he would prefer to not end up fucking himself over by just fighting the King and having it constantly healed.

On the note of Arcane Awakening, it hadn't changed after his evolution besides going down in rarity; it was his body that had changed. The toll the boosting skill had on his body was higher than before after the evolution, and while he still wouldn't get a backlash from only using the 30% boost, the resource drain was still amplified. Hence the time he could use it was lessened. As he progressed through the grade, his body would once more acclimate to the skill, and he would be able to keep it active longer and longer. This was another reason why he started on the stable 30%.

He would save the full 60% boost for the finale. He wanted to savor this fight.

The Hive King seemingly enraged at his attack on the Queen, charged Jake recklessly, and finally, he felt something he had been missing from this fight. Bloodlust and killing intent. The King was no longer simply trying to injure and capture him. It was going for the kill.

Jake reacted accordingly, dodging away as he still focused his attention on the Queen. The explosions earlier had injured the humanoid upper body, but it was small insignificant wounds. He saw her begin to retract her human side, but Jake quickly capitalized on her transformation and managed to hit the chest of the humanoid body just before it merged into the rest of the large termite body.

The arrow had naturally been coated in poison. A poison that was now merged with the Queen's body, making it spread fast as he felt the large ectogna fight it off. He wanted to shoot her again but was forced away by the King's charge. He saw it open its mandibles, and the moment it did, his eyes opened wide as he ducked.

As the mandibles snapped shut, a second semi-transparent apparition of them also snapped where Jake had just been, with this second pair being roughly ten times larger. While in a precarious position from the quick dodge, Jake could not counterattack but found himself forced to blast himself away to avoid a second such attack cutting him in two.

He barely avoided two more such attacks before he was in a better position to teleport away, but this annoyingly allowed the Queen to prepare herself. Stone shards flew at him from the large insect, each of them the size of a spear. So... spears of stone.

The King was hot on his heels even as Jake teleported, shooting an arrow toward the Queen in between every teleport. She raised walls of earth to block them while trying to predict where he would teleport and cut him off with stone spears to allow the King to catch up.

Jake thus teleported in a hopefully unpredictable pattern, but he knew that patterns would emerge even if he tried to avoid them. A few of the arrows he released managed to hit the Queen, which only made her pick up the pace of her magic as he saw her power churn more and more. Streams of gold fired out at the King to make the ridiculously strong and fast insect even stronger and faster as her earth magic went for Jake.

She, too, displayed proper killing intent now and didn't waste time speaking.

From Jake's back, wings finally sprung as he began spreading a mist of poison behind himself, the King constantly running into it. At the same time, he began condensing an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, along with some other preparations. His occasional arrow at the Queen was enough to make her constantly poisoned, even if she worked to eliminate it, while the King now finally also got affected by the mist. What little his attacks had left earlier was long gone.

Golden waves were sent out by the Queen, pushing away his poison mist and faintly cleansing the King, but Jake responded simply by pumping out more misty death. He felt the frustration from the Queen – the King seemingly only capable of anger or indifference – and he knew it was an opportunity.

He dodged for a bit longer until he “made a mistake.”

His teleport was too short, making Jake semi-cornered with cavern walls to two sides. The Queen cut off the last paths as walls sprung out from the cavern wall, leaving only the path between Jake and the Hive King open.

The King charged straight at Jake as he smiled. He flew straight toward the King, looking as if he wanted to clash with it directly. Then, at the very last moment, his eyes glowed. Gaze activated as the King froze, and rather than attack, Jake twisted his body and kicked off the Hive King, launching himself toward the Queen while sending the King in the opposite direction.

Spears of stone met him, but Jake shot off arcane bolts to blow them up mid-air. The Queen then tried to make a wall, but Jake teleported around it, not allowing the Queen to impede him. Behind him, the King had finally unfrozen, the paralysis lasting far longer than one would expect – proof that the King had a weak soul as a spawn of the Queen.

Jake had already reached the Queen when the King began its charge, and he did not waste his time. The Queen tried to stomp him, but Jake dodged and went wild with both katars. He stabbed her underside dozens of times, her carapace laughable compared to the Hive Kings. She let out a screeching sound as the earth below his feet began glowing, and Jake used a katar as leverage and, with a pull, launched himself into the air to avoid massive spears shooting up toward him. The spears did not pierce the Queen but instead covered her underside to make it unattackable, which just resulted in Jake launching himself down onto the back of the termite. Both katars slammed into her hard, smashing her into her own bed of stone as the poison pumped out of both weapons.

From behind, the King finally arrived. Jake let go of both weapons, attaching only a string of mana to each as he turned to face the King. Unarmed, he dodged the first of its strikes but found himself forced to use Eternal Shadow to counter the next. His Shadow shot out of Jake as he countered with his real body, landing a palm strike on the forehead of the Hive King with Touch of the Malefic Viper active. At the very next second, his hand was airborne, and just before his entire body was torn in half, he disappeared, his body replaced with shadowy smoke as Jake switched places with his Shadow – none of the damage actually suffered. He had still lost a bit of health, but the hand was back.

Poison can seep through the carapace... but barely, Jake concluded. He would have to wrestle with the Hive King for far too long to pump in any meaningful amount. Having it slowly absorb the poison mist was a better idea for now.

Back at the Queen, she had finally managed to push both katars out of her body, forcing Jake to retrieve them using the mana strings. The moment he had both back in his hands, he attacked again, stabbing the Hive Queen several times before he had to retreat away due to the King.

Jake planned on getting the King off his back again, but he failed to even after dodging tens of blows and retreating a bit. As he blocked one of its blows, he felt his arm hurt, and when he went to dodge its leg, a small scratch was left on his thigh.

Faster. Stronger.

The Hive King was getting more powerful than before, despite seemingly nothing changing. It had made him let down his guard slightly, resulting in losing out in the exchange, and as the Queen was allowed to stabilize herself, things got worse.

Massive amounts of mana gathered, her body practically glowing. Brownish energy gathered above her into an orb that looked almost solid, floating there like a ball of mud. Jake had no idea what it was until suddenly, it shot out a thin brown beam toward him.

Jake felt the danger and dodged, the beam missing and flying toward one of the small plants within the cavern. When the plant was hit, it instantly turned into stone before crumbling into dirt. He assumed it was some kind of petrification, but it felt far more powerful than whatever that manticore in the Order of the Malefic Viper dungeon had done.

The beam had thrown him off his game, allowing the King to close in. Its attack failed to cut him, but it still slammed its leg into his shoulder, making Jake spin in the air to reduce the damage from the impact. When he landed, Jake teleported away just in time to avoid the massive mandibles about to sever his head from his body.

Pulling out his bow, Jake decided that keeping his distance from the Queen would be the wisest as he also ran away from the King. More beams got blasted out, forcing him to not only dodge the extremely fast Hive King but also not get petrified. He still managed to adapt, the King's powerup not impacting its patterns, giving him opportunities to get off potshots at the Hive Queen. She seemed quite distracted with her giant orb, allowing the arrows to simply strike her body.

Each one did little damage, but with enough, it would accumulate. Especially the poison. The beams began to become less and less frequent, which made Jake frown. Because the orb summoned by the Queen was giving off more and more intense energy, and his sense of danger grew with every second.

Jake decided to pick up the pace as he pushed himself further. Arcane Awakening increased in intensity as he activated the Destructive Form, boosting Agility, Strength, Intelligence, Perception, and Willpower by 50%, with every attack now also dealing a small amount of extra arcane damage. The defensive stats he could do without, as dodging was his only option.

With increased Agility, Jake could finally get some distance, enough to shoot off quickly-channeled Arcane Powershots at the Hive Queen. The first two hit, each noticeably dealing damage as they penetrated deep, leaving holes in the C-grade's body, the wound's themselves burning with arcane energy and poison. After the second arrow, the Hive King suddenly stopped chasing him and instead moved to defend the Queen.

His third Arcane Powershot was blocked by the Hive King simply throwing its body into it, and to Jake's astonishment, the insect just got back up again. No real damage was dealt besides a few minor cracks in its carapace that were already visibly healing.

Determined if a little dejected, Jake shot off several more Powershots at the Queen, but every single one was intercepted by the King. The beams from the Queen had completely stopped at this point as she just poured everything she had into whatever she was preparing. He knew something powerful was coming, something he knew it would be wisest to stop, but he also wanted to see what she would do. Additionally... he had no idea how to stop her. Gaze didn't work either when he tried that. It did work on the King, but all that allowed Jake to do was hit a single Powershot on the Queen.

Still, he continued trying to land enough Arcane Powershots to break her focus, but the King kept blocking. Just as he began to feel like he was wasting his energy on the Hive King – after the twenty-third quick Powershot that hit it - he saw the monstrous termite actually begin to get affected.

While his blows didn't manage to pierce or destroy its armor, they still caused a bit of internal damage from the sheer impact, reminding Jake that he was facing a flesh-and-blood lifeform. This was not like the Altmar Census Golem, which was honestly the opponent this Hive King reminded him the most of. They both had resilience way off the charts, with his attacks feeling meaningless before their defenses. However, while the Altmar Golem was indeed just a machine, this termite king was not, and the repeated impacts would affect its combat ability.

If he kept going like this it was a sure road to victory, but just then, a change.

He felt the power within the orb reach a crescendo. It was overflowing with earth affinity, and with just a single push from the Hive Queen, the floodgates would open. That push came as a crack formed on the orb, releasing a beam of brownish light that hit the ground and petrified it. Another crack then came, microfractures covering the entire thing in less than a second.

Jake did not know what he had expected the attack of the Queen to do... but at that moment, he knew he had underestimated her when it came to her magic. He retreated backward as he formed dozens of layers of stable arcane barriers, scales covered every part of his body, and he activated Pride of the Malefic Viper to further strengthen his magical defenses. Finally, he shifted Arcane Awakening to its Stable Mode, boosting all his defensive stats by 50% instead of the offensive ones.

Just in time as the orb shattered.

The explosion made no noise but was simply the outer layer of the orb turning to dust. Brown light spread out through the entire cavern like an expanding domain, turning everything in its wake into stone. Jake, even with all his preparations, could only grit his teeth as the wave reached him. His barriers turned brown one by one, and his scales gave off noise as they fought the petrification. In vain, as they too turned to stone, Jake was forced to shut his eyes as he felt them also begin to petrify, the world going black as the energy invaded his body, turning him to stone from within.

Chapter 614 - All For The Hive

The cavern was still, entirely blanketed in silence. There were no plants, no movement, and seemingly no life. Save for one creature.

A large Hive Queen still stood in the middle of the grand cavern, looking tired. As she began moving, a second figure also let itself be known. Cracks spread all over a statue of a smaller termite, the Hive King wrestling itself free from the petrification.

This was naturally to be expected. As the spawn of the Hive Queen, the Hive King was nearly immune to her magic. The fact that a layer of rock had still covered the King's body was proof of its power. It was a spell the Queen had used to slay many whenever she had delved deeper with the Hive King to conquer more area for the hive. However... it had not been enough.

The Hive Queen sent a mental command to the King to find and kill the human. The lack of notification was proof of life, even if his survival surprised her.

A shame, the Hive Queen thought. The seed of a powerful human such as him would have helped create a far more powerful generation, practically assuring their conquest of the planet. Such a shame indeed that he proved too volatile to control.

Searching the room, the Hive King soon came upon a large ball of stone, one large enough to contain one of her Guards. The Queen frowned upon seeing this. Was it the barriers of the human? The barriers should not have been petrified, but then again, he did have an interesting form of magic the Queen's innate knowledge did not shed any light on.

"Destroy the rock and the human within. Hold nothing back," the Queen commanded her King as she assisted by empowering her ward further. If the human was truly trapped within, it would be best to-

Crack

The Queen rushed to attack, but it was too late as the sphere of stone exploded, sending rock shards flying everywhere. Normally, these would be of no consequence, but the Queen felt an odd energy within them. As they flew through the air, the rocks slowly dispersed into nothing, and left standing at the epicenter of the explosion was a single human who looked more broken than whole.

Petrification had set in on different spots of his body, and the earth mana had invaded his body deeply... yet she felt it all slowly disappear. Be destroyed. Purple cracks lined his skin, seeping out energy, including the destroyed energy of her attack.

His body was overflowing with power, and the Queen knew it spelled trouble. The King moved, but the human reacted and side-stepped the attack, kicking the Hive King away, displaying more power than at any prior point in the fight.

The human's gaze then turned towards her as he grinned, his lips cracking and blood flowing out from the act. At that moment, the Queen understood. Understood how he dared delve deep into her nest.

"Nice skill."

He was insane with enough power to survive his own insanity. He was too dangerous. An eternal threat to the hive if he survived. She knew he had been in the hive before, only a D-grade then, and now he had grown powerful enough to battle her and the King. There was no other choice, he would have to die now, or there would be no future. Even if she died, other Queens lived and could take up the mantle.

All for the hive.

Jake had felt the earth affinity energy invade his body, turning him to stone from the inside as he struggled against it. The energy was powerful and overwhelming, but it still found trouble when it got inside him. It tried to petrify his blood but found the toxic substance resist heavily, his veins serving as purifying streams as the poison killed the energy wherever it passed.

Even then, it would not be enough, and Jake would have found himself unable to move for too long. His Sphere of Perception remained active, and he saw the Queen and Hive King both move towards him, going for the kill. That is when he knew he could not hold anything back.

Energy welled up from within his soul as he flooded his body. Pink-purple sparks appeared in his blood, stability and destruction mixed, and he pushed Arcane Awakening to its full potential. It felt like he set his own body on fire as his skin cracked and began peeling off. He hurt all over as the boost actively harmed him with every passing second, but he also felt what running pure destruction through your own body did to any foreign energy.

Whatever parts of him had been petrified were quickly purified by the baptism of destruction, his arcane energy passively flooding it and overwhelming it. With an internal groan, Jake released his energy outward, blowing up the sphere of stone. The King tried to attack Jake, but he easily kicked it away as he looked toward the Queen and grinned.

“Nice skill.”

He wasn’t joking either; that had been a damn powerful skill. The entire cavern now had the same brown color, and the explosion had even gone up the tunnel towards the upper reaches of the hive, turning anything and everything it passed over into stone. However, as with many other ultimate attacks, it lacked proper direction and focus.

If the Hive Queen had been capable of focusing all of the energy solely on petrifying Jake, the outcome would have been a lot different. Sadly for her, she was far from skilled enough to do that and probably also lacked the stats to even pull it off. Looking at the Queen, he felt how tired she was after using that skill. It was not the kind of thing she could do twice, and from the looks of it, the skill even included a period of weakness or something similar afterward. That, or she had just blasted through most of her resources to pull it off.

Jake pulled out his bow and was about to attack as the Queen suddenly regrew her humanoid upper body and looked towards him, her eyes serious and... determined. He felt unsure of what she was planning when she finally spoke.

“For the hive... at all cost, you must die.”

Then, she did something Jake had not expected. Her eyes glazed over, and her humanoid upper body fell forward, limp. Her presence was entirely gone in the very next moment, as Jake got a notifications that made no sense to him.

You have slain [Isoptera Hive Queen – lvl 272] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

‘DING!’ Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon’s Edge] has reached level 202 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

‘DING!’ Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 201 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

Jake stared at the dead Queen, his mind blank. What the fuck?

Had she just... killed herself? It made no bloody sense, and Jake was still utterly flummoxed as he felt something behind him. A towering presence sent a chill down his spine, and Jake barely managed to sway to the side before it struck.

A line cut through the cavern, space warping in its wake. It flew straight by Jake, impacting the cavern wall next to the Queen, sending spider-web cracks across it. Jake’s mind was still processing what had happened as he felt warm liquid run down his arm. The entire thing nearly severed at the shoulder.

On the cavern wall was the Hive King. All traces of external energy were gone. No golden lines marred its body from the Queen's empowerment, no golden aura lingered around it, and not a single trace of mana was anywhere near it. Yet Jake knew.

This was a whole other beast compared to the Hive King he had faced before.

To make matters worse, Jake was not in peak condition. He should have dodged the attack before, but the petrification skill affected him, even if it was slowly being cleansed with every passing second. Jake knew he needed to buy some time, but the Queen had been decisive and made her move immediately, resulting in Jake now facing a massively empowered Hive King.

A Hive King that did not give any pause as it leaped at him.

Shi-

Jake blocked with both katars as the mandibles tried to crush him, his arms creaking from the pain and his skin cracking open, spewing out blood. He did not have time to brace himself as a leg slammed into his side, sending him flying through the air. Jake wasn't even allowed to slam into the wall as the Hive King caught up, smashing him down into the ground.

A crater formed on impact, and Jake struggled as he rolled to the side, avoiding having his chest impaled by a powerful leg stab. He rolled several more times as the Hive King tried to stomp on him, each stomp sending explosions of rock and dirt flying while making the entire cavern shake.

After the sixth roll, Jake could not keep up, and he turned his head towards the termite just as it lifted its leg. Gaze of the Apex Hunter activated, freezing the Hive King long enough for Jake to blast himself up into the King and slam both katars into its underside, sending it flying in an explosion of arcane energy.

The Hive King hit the ceiling of the cavern, jumping off it like a spring to launch itself down towards him as it let out a deathly screeching sound Jake had never heard before. For a moment, he thought it was some kind of attack, but it truly was just a screech of pure unadulterated anger.

Jake was not gonna let it get the upper hand again, so he teleported away, trying to buy enough time for the petrification to be properly dispelled. The Hive King chased him, displaying speed far above what it had been capable of before, clearly not holding back an iota of power. He understood why too. The Hive King was already a dead creature walking, and from the poison in its system, he felt its life force drain.

He also now finally understood why the Queen had done what she had done. In retrospect, during the fight, he noticed the King sometimes getting stronger or slightly weaker based on how much damage he did to the Hive Queen. It had to be some kind of berserker-like skill by proxy, not triggered by the Hive King being injured but by the Hive Queen. With the Queen's death... the full power of the King was unleashed.

But Jake had also grown stronger with the full activation of Arcane Awakening. It flooded his system with enough destruction to dispel the earth mana far faster than the Queen could have possibly predicted. It was helped along by Jake summoning new scales that absorbed some of the mana, his blood constantly draining it, and even Palate trying to get involved when his blood mixed with earth mana, turning it into an earth-like poison for him to absorb. In conclusion, she had taken a calculated risk but fucked up the math.

Jake would be back in top form far faster than she could have ever expected, but for now, he was still on the back foot. The Hive King capitalized fully, its attacks swift and deadly. spurts of red began painting the monotone ground, cuts marring Jake's body as he minimized his injuries.

The termite was relentless, its mandibles snapping after Jake constantly, legs flying out with insane speed, and sometimes it used its near-indestructible body simply to ram him. It pushed Jake further than he felt comfortable with, and even if he got faster and faster with every moment, it also felt like the Hive King wasn't entirely out of potential.

Jake did slowly become able to fight back as they exchanged hundreds of blows. He tried to cut the Hive King but found its natural armor had also only grown stronger, so he began aiming for the termite's joints, finding minor success here and there.

The problem was that it wasn't enough. If the fight continued like this, Jake felt certain he would eventually find himself on the losing end. The Hive King was also more than happy with mutual destruction. Something Jake was categorically not.

That is when an idea appeared. Jake quickly dismissed it, but it promptly resurfaced as he considered it. His guts told him it should be possible... even if it seemed dumb. He had the tools, the concepts aligned...

Let's fucking give it a go.

Jake and the Hive King clashed as Jake used Gaze on the King, followed by a massive blast of mana, launching the insect to the other side of the cavern. He then changed his stance as he dismissed Eternal Hunger. He stared at the Hive King as he pointed the Blackpoint Nanoblade in its direction, bent his knees to brace himself, and used his entire body as leverage to keep his hand still and arm taut.

Mana flooded the surface of his body, stamina his inside. In the distance, the Hive King hit the back wall and, like a bouncy ball, sprung straight back toward Jake. Jake stood unmoving as the creature flew towards him, crossing the several kilometers long cavern in a couple of seconds.

Jake still didn't move.

The termite reached him, mandibles-first ready, to strike. He still did not react as his danger sense screamed at him... screamed, and then triggered a certain skill. Time slowed, and Jake knew this was his moment. An Eternal Shadow appeared, dodging the attack as the real Jake remained unmoving. The arcane energy flooding his body on the inside and outside suddenly changed as Jake shifted it from its balanced form to pure stability. His body became as if frozen. Stiff, powerful, resilient.

At the very last moment Jake could move, he angled the Blackpoint Nanoblade a bit to aim straight at the forehead of the Hive King. The insect had tried to avoid the blow as expected, but it had no time to react as Jake had claimed time itself. Even if it could dodge, it likely wouldn't have wanted to. Jake had given it exactly what it wanted.

Time resumed just as the impact happened. The tip of the Nanoblade hit the forehead of the Hive King, and Jake's entire arm buckled, but it was as if he was an immovable object. The arm bent slightly, bones shattering within, but the katar remained straight.

The blade finally found purchase as it penetrated. Cracks spread all over the forehead of the Hive King as it, too, attacked. The mandibles snapped shut, the King's momentum continuing as its entire body also slammed into Jake. The sharp natural weapons of the Hive King cut through Jake as his entire upper body was torn apart; the momentum of the Hive King continuing with Jake's arm now embedded in its skull.

It hit Jake as his body began shattering. He was bisected at the waist by mandibles, and his entire body got torn asunder from the body slam, flesh and blood flying everywhere like he was an average human hit by a car going two hundred kilometers an hour. His health points dropped alarmingly fast, the arm and katar also penetrating deeper into the body of the Hive King.

Jake's consciousness remained stoic, but his eyesight was odd as suddenly it shifted. His head was no longer attached to the rest of his body, and his health points dropped to a dangerous level. He would have no way to heal from this wound... so he didn't.

Two realities, with only one made true for him. His eyesight shifted again, this time to see his own broken body disperse into black smoke, the Hive King continuing its trajectory, now with a massive hole in its forehead.

Jake had still lost nearly all his health points and quickly consumed a health potion as things had gotten a bit spicier than he had planned. He still felt some phantom pain from the severed limbs, but he pushed through it as he took out his bow.

He saw the Hive King smash into the wall at the far end of the cave as Jake took out the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter and began charging Arcane Powershot. Despite the massive damage he had done to the Hive King – at the cost of his own health getting dangerously low – he did not expect the fight to be over yet.

His expectations were proven true as the termite got back up, blood streaming out of its forehead, and the carapace cracked in several places, all originating from the hole. It looked a bit unsteady on its feet, much of its brain damaged from before. Yet it still had enough instinct to locate Jake and attack once more.

However, Jake was ready as he pushed himself.

One became two as his Shadow once more manifested. The Eternal Shadow charged directly at the Hive King, with energy revolving around both katars. The second reality continued charging Arcane Powershot to new heights, the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter humming with energy.

Then, one flash and two massive explosions.

The Eternal Shadow clashed with the Hive King, and just as it did, Jake triggered the Arcane Charge from the Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter, making the termite flash with energy. This distracted the King, allowing the Shadow to release everything in one blow. An explosion of arcane power and curse energy ravaged the Hive King, blasting it upwards as its coordination was clearly damaged from its half-missing brain and Arcane Charge. The Shadow had barely dispersed as a giant arrow slammed into the Hive King, the impact launching it into the roof of the cavern, making the entire thing shake.

Just as the Hive King was about to collect itself, a second arrow hit, blasting an even larger hole in the cavern ceiling and embedding the termite's body even further. Jake did not let up as he released another shot, followed by another, and then another.

The ground beneath him cracked and moaned, forming a crater all around him. He blasted himself deeper with every shot as the King was blasted upwards, the entire roof of the cavern beginning to break apart. His arm hurt, and blood vessels burst as Jake just kept shooting, refusing to let up.

He felt his arm begin to give out, but before that, he felt something else begin to fail. He had pushed the legendary D-grade bow far beyond what it could handle, and he knew it was at the end of its lifespan. With a final push, Jake used his final trump card.

One last shot was released, this one empowered by all the Hunting Momentum Jake had built up during this entire hive dive. With a yell, he released the final arrow, the bow cracking just as he did. It flew up

and struck the Hive King, resulting in a colossal explosion. Massive fissures formed all over the cavern wall, and the very next moment, it began collapsing.

Jake lowered his arms as he breathed heavily, both of them feeling heavy at his sides and both of them dripping with blood from overextending himself. Rocks began falling all around him, but amongst the falling rocks, he saw a black shape.

The Hive King landed not even five meters away from him, its armor broken all over and blood everywhere. Jake stared at it in disbelief as the insect began standing back up.

Fucking hell.

Jake tried to muster anything he could to fight. He had luckily not deactivated Arcane Awakening yet, so maybe he could still do something. He saw the termite stand up, only one mandible still there. He felt its attention and bloodlust for a moment until suddenly it dispersed. The Hive King's aura faded, its body still standing even as the notification came.

You have slain [Isoptera Hive King – lvl 272] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Chapter 615 - The Endless Empire

Jake kept staring at the corpse of the Hive King for several more seconds, still ready for anything to happen. It looked like it could begin moving at the very next second, even if he knew it wouldn't. It took a few seconds for Jake to finally dismiss the katars as he fell backward onto his ass, breathing out a loud sigh of relief.

“Damn, you were tough,” Jake said out loud to the corpse of the Hive King. Even now, with the carapace broken in so many places, the termite still looked indestructible. It had not lost a single of its legs despite the continued bombardment, but he could see that the damage to its internals was an entirely other matter. It was all just a mush of flesh and blood beneath the armor, the explosions doing quite a number on the C-grade.

Laying there on the ground, he checked some of his other notifications. Funnily enough, he had another identical string of “branding failed” messages, and he also saw at the very bottom he had indeed gained a level from the Hive King.

‘DING!’ Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon’s Edge] has reached level 203 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

Getting only one level for killing a monster like that seemed bad... but one had to remember Jake had only spent about a day in the termite hive. Earning three class levels in a single day for a C-grade was considered extremely fast, even if one took insane risks to accomplish it.

Reflecting on the fight, there were a few standout moments.

Jake had not really thought about it in the heat of it all ... but Eternal Shadow usually had an innate cooldown of sorts. Yet he had used it twice in a row, somehow bypassing it. He frowned, looking for an explanation. Even now, as he lay there on the ground, he knew he could not summon Eternal Shadow again. The cooldown was active, despite far longer passing than the time between his last two casts.

After thinking about it for a bit, he saw only one real explanation: Moment of the Primal Hunter. Somehow the skill being active meant that the cooldown of Eternal Shadow hadn’t properly been applied, something Jake had never even considered was a thing. In combat, he had just acted on instinct

most of the time. He still wasn't sure how and why it had worked, but he wasn't one to complain over a good thing.

Closing his eyes, Jake wanted to take a breather and relax but knew he would have to move soon. The cavern was collapsing all around, starting mainly at the edges. A massive hole more than two hundred meters deep had been blasted into the ceiling, still pulsing with destructive arcane mana even now, speeding up the collapse.

With a bit of struggle, he got up and cracked his neck. He had stored the bow back into his necklace, despite a deep tear down its middle and small fractures all over it. He felt lucky that it still registered as an item and hoped it could still prove useful somehow. Maybe he could find a talented crafter to repair and improve it... who knows. Speaking of items... it was looting ti-

Just then, Jake felt like something was off, and he promptly released a Pulse of Perception. Just as he did, his eyes opened wide. "Well, shit."

Mustering all the speed he could, he jumped over and stored the corpse of the Hive King. Next, he stored the entire corpse of the Queen as well as all the Guards he felt cores had manifested within. Rushing forward, he got into the egg chamber of the Hive Queen, the barrier having faded after both the King and Queen had fallen.

He summoned his wings and pumped out poison as he also shot off a bombardment of explosive arcane bolts. Arcane Awakening was still active, and he was on a timer before he would have to deactivate it and experience what he reckoned would be quite a hefty period of weakness.

However... that was not his only problem.

From the Pulse of Perception before, Jake saw the network of the hive beneath. He saw termites, all running upwards. Thousands. All C-grade. Jake had wondered where all the spawns were... and now he got his answer. He knew this had to mean there were more C-grade Hive Queens too, but quite frankly, he was in no condition to try and find out where they were.

After all the eggs were destroyed, Jake began charging his wings, using a skill he had never properly used before. A cloud of mist formed around him as his body began to change color, and just as it did, they appeared. Termites streamed into the chamber by the hundreds, but just as they were about to reach Jake, Wings of the Malefic Viper activated, and Jake disappeared using the escape skill.

He passed through space itself, bypassing all concepts as he reappeared only a few seconds after disappearing down in the hive. He had made it all the way to the middle of the valley with his lodge in Haven, his wings turning to mist and dispersing the moment he did. Jake didn't have the energy to do anything besides falling forward onto the grass, Arcane Awakening deactivating, and Jake taking a well-deserved nap as weakness flooded his body.

Back at the hive, towards the upper layers, weaker termites had appeared again to rebuild and reclaim. None of them noticed as thousands of invisible metal spheres entered through the mounds, invisible and undetectable by them all. The spheres spread out once they were inside, each scanning its surroundings as a map was created.

Whenever a drone did get unlucky and was discovered, it simply self-destructed, releasing a wave of disruptive energy into the air, helping hide all other drones. Slowly, a map was formed of the hive, hundreds of thousands of kilometers of tunnels were put into a three-dimensional model, and Arnold, as well as Haven as a whole, began to get an understanding of what they were dealing with.

A total of forty-eight D-grade Queens were discovered spread throughout an expansive but not overly deep network towards the surface of the Earth. Deeper down, it was suspected more C-grades hid, but scouting them out was difficult for the drones.

One drone – one of the newest models – did manage to get deep. Managed to get past where Jake had fought. It went even deeper than that, remaining undiscovered or perhaps just being ignored. Its goal was not to map out anything but find out how deep the tunnels went. It flew a few hundred kilometers deeper than Jake had managed to get, and it finally reached vast expansive caverns. Caverns larger than was imaginable by pre-system standards. Their sizes were measured in hundreds of kilometers rather than hundreds of meters, and there, the drone managed to catch a glimpse.

Armies of termites battled as they tried to conquer more land. Thousands of C-grades fought local wildlife, claiming resources and battling for experience and power. Like the depths of the ocean, the pinnacle of the sky, and the restricted areas of the surface, this was the domain of C-grades.

A domain embroiled in constant war – the termites being one of the most dangerous factions. At least they were... things were perhaps about to change as the underground monsters got an opportunity to fight back with the menace of the Hive King gone.

Not to mention the coming storm as the Council, with Miranda at the helm, would also soon make their move.

Jake awoke with a huge yawn, only to cringe as his entire body hurt. He opened his eyes and stared at the sky, seeing it was now night. Not that night and day mattered much anymore. Any human, even in E-grade, was totally fine with seeing at night, and with sleep not being a thing for so many and the need reduced for everyone, there was no reason for society to function off a day-night cycle.

With a bit of struggle, he sat himself up. The period of weakness was still going strong, Jake reckoning he had only slept for an hour or so. He had really pushed himself with that Arcane Awakening, and flooding out all the earth mana had caused quite a lot of damage, as pure destruction didn't discriminate.

No rest for the wicked, Jake joked as he forced himself to stand. He started out by taking out his loot, more specifically, the corpses of the many ectognas. It took quite a bit of effort for him to dig out the cores from all the Guards, netting him another eight. Finally, he took out the two big ones.

First was the Hive Queen. The core she had dropped had an identical description to the other C-grade Hive Queen Jake had killed, but Jake felt the Records within were a lot more potent. Not just in quantity but quality, making it a far better ingredient for the Bee Queen ritual. After depositing the core, Jake stored the corpse again, something he had also done with the Guards.

Next up was the Hive King's body. Jake took it out and still felt intimidated by its appearance as he looked at it. Upon closer inspection of the corpse, he didn't feel any core anywhere. Instead, he felt strong energy from a solid piece of its armor covering the back of the Hive King. This specific piece was about a meter and a half long, and eighty or so centimeters wide, with everything around it cracked and broken. Meanwhile, this big shard of chitin looked pristine.

[Isoptera Hive King Chitin (Epic)] – A piece of carapace from a slain mid-tier C-grade Isoptera Hive King. This material is extremely durable, offering incredible defenses against all types of attacks. Has high natural rigidity, making it a difficult material to work with. Has low to limited uses in alchemy.

Jake nodded at the description, finding it very apt. The armor had been insane, and Jake was more than happy to get it. However, he was also fully aware he could not really use it for anything by himself. He needed a good crafter to work with it, but he doubted he would find such a crafter on Earth. Arnold definitely didn't strike him as the type to use chitin. He was more of a metal kind of guy.

He considered prying loose this big shard of chitin but decided to put it off as he stored the entire corpse. Jake was way too darn tired to do it now and wanted a proper break. Feeling tired despite just waking up, he stumbled into the lodge and headed straight for the bed. He wasn't sleepy-tired, but the kind of tired where you knew you couldn't sleep.

Laying down, Jake closed his eyes as he reached out to a certain someone.

“Hey Villy, had fun? Were you at the edge of your seat at the final moments of the fight?” Jake said semi-jokingly.

The god entertained him as he promptly answered. “It was acceptable indeed. How about you? Did you enjoy yourself?”

“Wasn’t bad,” Jake smiled in response. “But I do have some questions about a certain Fourth Desert Queen.”

“Yeah, I reckoned that one was coming. So, what do you wanna know?”

“Who is she? What is this Desert, and why is she the fourth Queen of it? Will there be any future trouble with her or this Endless Empire?” Jake asked rapid-fire style.

“The Fourth Desert Queen is one of the gods of the Endless Empire, as you said, and the ruler of the Fourth Desert, hence the name. The Fourth Desert Queen is quite a high title, and as far as I know, she is likely close to the level of Godqueen. Which makes her pretty strong, but not anyone to be worried about,” Villy answered. “For some context, the Endless Empire is one of the pinnacle factions in the multiverse, their total military power surpassing that of the Altmar Empire, making them equal to the Holy Church. However, they are not usually a faction you interact too much with. They claim their own huge territories, and they only really have one true enemy: the Automata. The faction belonging to Rigoria the Maker, my fellow Primordial. So, yeah, if you truly did make the Endless Empire an enemy, it could be a problem, but I doubt that will happen. Their power lies in numbers and their huge armies. They would not be interested in making an enemy of the Order of the Malefic Viper. In fact, I think they would want to forge a good relationship with you instead.”

"Huh," Jake exclaimed. "That was quite a lot of lore, but I get the gist of it. Massive ectogna faction.. Does the Endless Empire really not interact with other forces? Are there none from that faction in the Order of the Malefic Viper?"

"I never said that; I said you rarely interact with them. They do still expand and work with others, be it for trade or to recruit allies. What they especially want is something similar to what that Hive Queen wanted: powerful mates. They entice and recruit males from the humanoid races with the intent of having them help birth more powerful armies. Think about it for a moment. A Hive Queen can lay armies of eggs at a time after a single rump in the bed. What if the father of those eggs was someone like you? Someone with potent Records and a Bloodline? Well, they know what happens. Variants appear. Incredibly dangerous variants can then potentially breed further if one of them is a Queen. That is how the Endless Empire has become as powerful as they are today: through continuous selective breeding and constant improvement of their Lineages," Villy explained lengthily. "And, before you ask, yes, there are Queens from the Endless Empire at the Order, all of them working on the side as honeytraps, though most are there to further their own skills in Alchemy. Not all Hive Queens are focused on breeding either, though it is a core skill for them. Also, funny fact, you being branded a traitor by one of them would not necessarily have been a bad thing, more of a note to others of the Endless Empire that you are noteworthy."

"That sounds... annoying to deal with," Jake said after a brief pause. "Will they be more annoying than the Emberflight if I enter their crosshairs?"

"No, probably not. They tend to be very respectful and not push the issue in any way... though I can't say for sure what they will do if they discover the peculiarities about your race," the Viper answered. "I also can't say how they will react if you succeed with your Bee Queen ritual. Only time will tell."

"Wait, they will react to my ritual?" Jake asked, a bit confused.

"If you do well, I damn well hope so. Ah, but worry about that afterward. It is only relevant if you actually do a good job," Villy said a bit dismissively.

"Aight," Jake nodded as he yawned. Earlier, Jake had seen his tiredness was the kind of tiredness that was not sleepy-tiredness... well, as it was, then this kind of tiredness had a tendency to transition into sleepy-tiredness once contact with a comfy bed was made.

"Thanks for the insight... I think I am taking another nap now."

"Enjoy," Villy said, his presence disengaging.

Jake yawned a single more time as he turned to the side and took another nice nap.

Chapter 616 - Rules Are Made To Be Broken

Jake's second nap of the day was quite a bit longer than the first one. He ended up sleeping nearly ten hours straight, the longest in quite a while. And yes, he still categorized that as a nap.

Honestly, sleeping at higher grades was a weird thing. You didn't need to sleep, and Jake had heard that some races just straight-up couldn't, but those who started at lower grades where sleep was a necessity still retained this ability. As you then evolved, sleeping changed from being about physiological needs and became closer to a hidden skill of sorts. During sleep, one regenerated resources far faster, even when compared to meditation, and it especially helped refresh mental energy. Finally, and perhaps most importantly... sleeping was just nice.

Waking up, Jake struggled to get out of bed, not due to his body still being weak, but the allure of just laying there five more minutes. Alas, he had to get moving, so he got up and did some unnecessary stretches. Looking over his own body, he found most of his armor still in shambles, but at least he wasn't

outright dirty, as the arcane energy had thoroughly destroyed any blood that had gotten on him during the fight. He still went for a dip in the pond outside of the lodge to freshen up before heading into town to check up with Miranda.

Jake took out the cloak from his inventory – an item he didn't really bother wearing anymore due to how useless it was – to at least cover up the broken armor. Looking at least a little representable, Jake made his way to the main office building of Haven, releasing a Pulse of Perception to confirm Miranda was there. She was currently alone in her office, giving Jake a perfect opportunity to sneak in.

He quickly made it there, and before he had time to knock on the door, she spoke from within.

“Come on in.”

Jake complied as he opened the door, seeing Miranda surrounded by papers and seemingly hard at work as always. He also felt that she had not quite reached C-grade yet, but she was close. Very close.

[Human – lvl 199]

He reckoned she was dealing with a quest or two, as Jake heard that it usually took most a bit of time to do those. Especially the race quests. Something Jake had not experienced due to the... peculiarity of his circumstances.

It was also possible Miranda was just delaying her evolution on purpose to upgrade some skills. A bit like how Jake wanted to upgrade all his Malefic Viper skills before his own evolution.

“How did your adventure in the termite hive go? None of the drones sent out by Arnold caught you leaving, and I suddenly just detected you back at your lodge, so what happened?” Miranda asked, her voice not really concerned but more curious.

“I would say it went pretty well. I am relatively sure I took down the top Queen as well as the strongest fighter in the form of the Isoptera Hive King. Afterward, I had to tactically retreat as C-grade warrior termites came swarming, which does confirm there are more C-grades around,” Jake answered.

“We are aware. Arnold’s drones have scouted quite deeply, and while the hive does appear weakened, it is far from doomed. There are dozens of D-grade Queens still, and I am having a meeting with the World Council later today to discuss how we will address this threat looming under our feet. I assume we will likely create hunting parties and assemble an army of sorts to go and clean it out, at least as much as we can. In the deeper reaches, the termites seem busy dealing with other C-grade monsters, so hopefully, cutting off their resource supply from the surface and severely limiting their potential for growth will deal a heavy blow. Based on my understanding, a C-grade Queen cannot birth another C-grade Queen directly, requiring these D-grades to grow and evolve on their own. As long as we kill all the D-grades, we should thus cut off their future potential,” Miranda explained.

“Sounds like you got things handled,” Jake nodded, happy to hear that Arnold had agreed to help and, from the sounds of it, even done a stellar job.

“We should indeed have a grasp of the situation. Hunting the C-grades ourselves currently isn’t possible, though I will bring up the possibility with the Sky Whale if he can provide monsters capable of breaking into the deeper layers from the oceanside and create some chaos,” Miranda smiled. “Don’t worry about allowing more C-grades to enter human land. We will handle this thing without you needing to get involved, so just focus on your own projects.”

“See, this is why delegation is the ultimate superpower,” Jake grinned, happy to hear he would not have to deal with any of the cleanup or hunting of the termites himself. While he would welcome another

Hive King to fight, he didn't want to just go on a rampage slaughtering endless numbers of weak C-grade Isoptera Warriors. Hunting down D-grade Queens sounded even worse.

Miranda just waved him off before asking: "There is one thing I have been meaning to ask you. Haven, as in the city here in the forest, is at the moment rather limited in area and population very much purposefully. However, we have had a flood of applications from people who want to move here, especially influential figures and their relatives. I am talking about family members of City Lords, and--"

"They can go to the Fort," Jake cut her off. "Keep Haven as it is. There is no reason for it to grow into a damn metropolis and ruin the good vibes. Let everyone who is already here stay, and still allow in people actually worth having around. High-level individuals who have some level of actual power, not just political clout. I don't know about you, but I would prefer for Haven not to turn into a hive of political bullshit but have it be more of a relaxing place for powerful people."

Miranda smiled at his response. "Glad to hear we are in agreement. I have already had to keep a lot of recruiters out, people wanting to scout the powerful adventurers who have taken up residency. Many former mercenaries of the Holy Church, Risen, and United Cities Alliance now find themselves without any faction and, seeing as they want to stay independent, have set their sights on Haven. Will you be fine with these people coming?"

Jake thought for a bit before answering. "If they are strong enough. Just don't have too many flooding in and ruining things for everyone. No one wants endless queues at the nice skewer shops. Anyway, overall, I think you are a lot better at deciding this than I am."

"I will do so, but I still value your input," Miranda nodded. "Now, was there more you wanted to discuss? I have to prepare things for the upcoming meeting."

"Just one thing: when are you evolving? What is stopping you?" Jake asked curiously.

“Nothing is stopping me; I just have a few skills related to my class that I want to improve and touch up on to specialize myself properly in C-grade,” Miranda answered. “As for when I will evolve... should not be too long, but it all depends on if I can actually find time to practice my magic and not be stuck in endless meetings or distracted by city owners finding huge world-threatening termite hives.”

“So you want me to not report world-threatening termite hives in the future?” Jake asked teasingly.

“As long as you leave them in a state where they are no longer world-threatening, sure,” Miranda shrugged. “It would have been outstanding if you had decided to spend a few months wiping out every termite in the hive and never told me about it. But we both know that wouldn’t happen, so kudos to you for actually reporting it.”

“Why do I feel like you aren’t really praising me?”

“What? How is it not praise to recognize your ability to do what most would only consider the expected course of action? You being responsible is outside the norm and needs positive reinforcement,” Miranda said with a smile.

“I feel like I am getting bullied here,” Jake said, faking hurt. “Screw this place; I am going back to the Order.”

“Oh, sure, flee to a different universe. Go have your fun,” Miranda waved him off, indicating there wasn’t more for him to deal with. If she did need him for something, she was a big girl and could contact him herself.

Jake headed out of the office and back to his underground lab as Jake headed for the teleporter he had set up down there. A few minutes later, he was once more dragged through the void and back to the first universe, appearing in the grass area outside the mansion.

The first thing he did was check in on the Bee Queen ritual, where he saw things were going as expected. It was pretty much ready for the final push to actually awaken the Queen, and even if he decided to do this final push now, a C-grade would hatch. But Jake wanted more than that to test if he could actually control all this Primeval Origins stuff.

Let's get to work.

He had cores, he had time, and he had ideas. Combat was truly the best way for Jake to progress, and he felt like his energy control had improved quite a bit from this fight, where he had finally allowed himself to let loose. He was now also fairly sure that he had missed some very basic things from his prior experimentation.

His arcane affinity was far more central to this entire thing than he had first thought. He had several more insights too, and he didn't bother to do anything else than just get started on his core manipulation work. So, with no further ado, he just jumped right into it once more.

Time slowly passed, and outside of greeting Meira and asking Duskleaf for some basic input, he did not allow himself to get distracted as he reflected and experimented. Reflected on how he would create an item capable of truly affecting the evolutionary trajectory of another creature.

Every time Jake had affected evolutions, Touch of the Malefic Viper had been involved... but to call what Jake did transmutation during those times didn't feel entirely accurate. He had recognized before that aspects of the skill still had to be applied as Jake was ultimately transforming Records and energy.

However, Jake was now beginning to wonder if even that was all there was to the story. What he did was no simple transformation.

He fundamentally changed something. Transmutation had its innate limits, and it obeyed rules set by the system. Strict rules. The most central of which was the often-discussed law of equivalent exchange. More Records were never created during a transmutation, but all one truly did was mix and change those already present. If one wanted “more” Records, a fusion of different materials or the use of high-level catalysts was required. But, again, this did not create more Records than the sum of their parts, even if it could appear so at times.

The most potent catalysts were those directly provided by the system. Like the item Jake had used to upgrade his boots when he was in D-grade or what the Sword Saint had told Jake about having done to his old ancestral sword. In Jake’s case, he had brought out Records related to the item, while the Sword Saint had amplified and heightened the quality of the Records of the Sword.

Both were fundamental qualitative changes that resulted in better items. However, improving Records through outside items was not only possible for equipment or treasures.

Monsters could consume items with Records to level up and improve. Special items could affect their evolutions if they possessed enough Records. All of the system-provided items, such as the Mystbone Mystie and, subsequently, Sylphie had used were also system-provided. A whole slew of these items had been spread on Earth upon its integration, and all of them were effectively insanely powerful Unique natural treasures.

Humans did not have treasures like these. But they did have things they could consume for Records, and the human variant of these Unique treasures was actually Grimoires. When one consumed a Grimoire, one consumed Records to affect one’s Path.

Jake's Grimoire-creating skill had a cooldown period between every attempt and an even longer one if he succeeded. He had wondered why this was but quickly found the answer: it took an investment of something more than energy. If he was right – and the books he studied supported him – one had to put in actual Records. He had found this when he studied how to make Grimoires without the use of a skill and found many warnings that doing so could adversely affect yourself as every Grimoire required some of your own Records, and if one overdid it, one could suffer a permanent loss.

Records were odd like that. Some Records would apparently regenerate by themselves, not unlike the ethereal mental energy, or perhaps more importantly for what Jake was doing, the Records required in the process of creating a child. Having a kid did not result in you getting weaker, even if the child inherited Records. There was one important thing about both of these, though: they were assisted by the system. Some even theorized that the parents of children did “lose” Records temporarily, but the system simply restored them.

So... Jake got thinking. What if Jake had not just injected energy into these items he had created... but proper Records? The kinds of Records that one could not usually inject into something? The kind of Records that would result in damaged foundations and lead to lowered potential if not helped by the system? The kind only allowed to be given when the system allowed it? What if he had fundamentally changed items to bring them closer to these Unique natural treasures?

His Identify had not worked on the meteorite Sandy had eaten, but he still remembered the description of the Mystbone.

[Mystbone (Unique)] – A Mystbone granted by the system to the newly integrated 93rd Universe. Contains a vast amount of energy and Records that will allow any beast that consumes it to grow far faster and gain magical skills and abilities related to the path of mysticism.

These items were only created by the system. Weaker versions were around, naturally spawning from powerful dead beasts or just appearing in energy-dense environments, but they were nothing compared to these items. After Jake had become aware of things like the Mystbone, he had looked into if making them was possible and quickly found the answer to be a big fat no.

One could not simply create Records from nothing, so to make one, one had to use their own. This did sound like a possibility, but in order to create an item usable by a monster, you had to make it compatible. That was where the big hurdle was. Records to an individual were unique, tied intrinsically to the Truesoul. It was only when the system allowed a transfer of Records to happen it was possible, such as the aforementioned reproduction process or when making a grimoire.

However, there were ways to break the rules. There were ways to circumvent restrictions and do what should usually not be possible. Ways for the system to allow the impossible to be possible and make exceptions.

Transcendents... which still had a cost. A cost that rarely, if ever, matched what one gained.

And, of course, Bloodlines.

What if Jake injected Records related to his own Bloodline into every single of these specific items he had made? That somehow his Records had allowed the innate Records in an item to change? Change into an item with innate Primal Energy, as Jake called it?

If that was the case, then Jake's ultimate question was: if the system could create these Unique natural treasures that allowed monsters to evolve down a certain Path, why couldn't he? All the books said he couldn't. Everything told him it was against the system's rules.

All that really told him was that what he had done with Sylphie and Sandy had broken the rules.

But the thing is... when had Jake's Bloodline ever cared about the rules?

Chapter 617 - Passing Down One's Records

Jake's theory – that barely even qualified as a theory – did have some major flaws. Primarily, he had no idea if this hypothetical transfer of Records would be the extremely negative and permanently damaging kind to the user.

It also wasn't even certain he could do what he wanted. During the things with Sylphie and Sandy, Jake had, at least indirectly, infused a Unique natural treasure of the system that already included hefty Records aimed at allowing a monster to get a better evolution. Sure, with Sylphie's ritual, Jake had not directly used anything on the Mystbone, but the ritual had mixed all the energies, so he had definitely influenced it.

Say Jake had truly just influenced the Records in these natural treasures through some form of transmutation, thus still at least partly abiding by the system's rules, then his own upcoming attempt could prove quite precarious if he had to supply all the Records himself. Once more, assuming it was even possible.

Finally, Jake found himself clueless when it came to actually controlling this Record infusion. He had no idea how to direct it, even if he did have a damn good idea on how to infuse the energy portion, which should, in theory, make the Record-part quite simple. The problem was that he had no bloody idea what the outcome would be. It was just him blindly tossing a bunch of this Primal Energy at the innate Records and energy of a core, hoping for a good outcome. He didn't even know if any evolution he helped bring forth would be a good or bad one. Sure, the two he had been involved in had both been pretty darn good, but that could once more also just go back to the fact that system-provided Unique items were involved in both prior processes. Perhaps they added some system-fuckery for protection.

This is... risky.

Jake saw too many uncertainties. Too many dangers. His primary issue was that in most situations, Jake could get a feeling of what the best approach would be, but in this case, he was dealing with Records. Something complicated as fuck.

And messing up would not just result in him taking some damage. He risked permanently hurting his own foundation without even knowing if he was doing it. What if Jake succeeded and created a Bee Queen only to find out he had screwed himself over in a hundred years?

So, Jake did something he didn't usually do. He decided not to just jump right into it despite being able to, but instead ask someone who might have an idea: Villy. He could also ask Duskleaf, but Jake had a feeling the Viper would be better to ask, as it wasn't really pure alchemy, and it included many of his secrets. Secrets Duskleaf did not know about.

He reached out mentally, and it did not take long before the god popped in.

"Run into an issue?" Villy asked the moment he appeared. "The ritual circle looks complete, so I assume it is with the cores?"

"Yeah," Jake nodded. "So, here's the deal..."

Jake explained his thoughts and the many pitfalls he saw, the Viper listening attentively as he nodded along.

“First of all, you are a bit wrong about being able to create high-Records items. In fact, creating them is not necessarily difficult, and you don’t actually need to make any permanent investment, though permanent investment does make the end result far better,” Villy explained as he opened his palm. A small dark green marble appeared, and Jake felt an odd energy within.

“Take this bead I just made. If I was to feed this to a C-grade beast that was compatible, it would be able to absorb and use it all the way from now to S-grade, pretty much giving it a free ride. It would become a Malefic-something and even be relatively powerful for its level too. For me, creating this bead took nothing but pure condensed energy and intent. You must remember that any energy you put into anything, any action you take, any intent, results in Records in some form or shape. Even you could probably create items allowing a weak F-grade to reach D-grade, but do you know why I don’t just throw these beads out left and right, and why you forcibly raising some F-grade would be a bad idea?”

Jake was still taking it all in as he stared at the bead. He considered for a moment before answering. “Because then that bead will be the sole source of all the beast’s Records, right? And that sounds like a serious issue when you do reach some kind of bottleneck.”

The Viper nodded tentatively.

“We talk a lot about Paths. Your current Path can also simply be described as the sum of your current Records. It is what appears when all Records are mixed and placed into a framework you use to progress. Improving your Records by doing more things also related to what you already have is thus following your Path, as you raise the quality of your Records as well quantity. This does also mean that if you change your Records, you can change your Path... and if your Path changes too much, you risk it no longer being truly yours,” the Viper said, shaking his head. “A beast who ate this bead would never reach godhood. Period. And that is where the fundamental issue with these treasures come in: they rely on Records with innate intent.”

“I assume intent-less Records is what is found within these natural treasures given by the system or are naturally spawning?” Jake asked.

“Precisely. Only the system creates items wholly without intent, as no soul has been involved in their creation, and thus no tie to another Truesoul exists. As I said, then anything crafted by a person will innately have some of their Records within. Any weapon you use that is crafted by someone does, so you rely at least partly on their Records. This does not harm you in any way but only benefits them, at least in nearly all circumstances. The issue comes when the Records of an outside source supersede your own. You have experienced this nearly happening first-hand twice now.”

“With your blood and when I created Eternal Hunger?” Jake asked, clarifyingly.

The Viper simply nodded, allowing Jake to think himself for a bit.

Back when he had received a drop of blood from Villy, he had pretty much been forced into fighting a version of himself... and if he had lost that fight, Jake would have been forcibly transformed into a Malefic Dragonkin. He would have grown directly from an E-grade into a C-grade, probably after some incubation period, and his Path would have been forever tied to the Viper. With Eternal Hunger, he had battled the curse; and if Jake had lost his marbles to the mythical cursed blade, it could have pushed him down a Path he did want to walk, potentially even leading a class change. It was less severe than the blood but still severe.

“What I am saying is that forcing stronger variants, influencing Records, and creating catalysts for growth in beasts and monsters is not in any way unique. You are not trying something wholly original that no one else has figured out before. Beastmasters belonging to armies breed hordes of beasts using these methods, some alchemists specialize in it, and even cooks make special dishes for monsters and humanoids alike containing powerful Records related to certain things,” Villy explained.

“Also, losing Records in the long term is actually far more difficult than you think it is. At least permanently losing them. As long as you stay true to your Path, what you do lose can often be restored in a short period. One example is the drop of blood you stole. I put some “permanent” Records into that

and did experience a loss for a period of time, but I got that investment back with time from you being my Chosen. That is something else you need to consider. Records can be viewed as a resource, so let me ask you this: why would it be so bad if it required a permanent loss of Records to help birth an incredibly powerful, potentially never-seen-before variant?" the Viper asked with a raised eyebrow.

"The entire concept of permanently losing something just doesn't strike me as something I would want to do, but I guess I see your point. If I succeed, the Records from accomplishing it will outweigh what I put in, won't it?" Jake asked.

"Very likely, yes. You also miss that everything you do technically requires a permanent investment in Records. Namely, the investment of time and effort. Even if you end up losing Records on something or spend an extremely long time accomplishing it, as long as it aligns with your Path, you can expect to come out better on the other side. This entire Primeval Origins thing is rooted in your Bloodline, your arcane affinity, and who you are as a person. I would say it aligns quite well with your Path," Villy said with a smile.

"You also mentioned the thing about children and how the Records regenerated... that interpretation is kind of wrong. You do permanently lose Records with the birth of every child, but the Records are very, let's just say, specific. Tailored to reproduction. It does not hurt your Path in any way to lose these Records, nor does it benefit you unless your Path already revolves around nurturing and making kids. This permanent loss is why the first child is nearly always more powerful than any after, but of course, there is still a huge element of randomness. Additionally, no matter what, there will always be a minimum amount of Records a child will inherit, and when Bloodlines are mixed in, it gets even more complicated. I just wanted to point out that this separate "pool" of Records exists, and for you to consider what that means for what you are trying."

Jake nodded along, feeling quite a bit more assured. "Is that why everyone talks about waiting with kids till you reach your full potential? Or at least get close to it?"

"Partly. This separate pool is based on all your Records, so if you have a child in C-grade and another at S-grade, the one you had at S-grade will still get far more Records from you, but in relative terms, the

one from C-grade would have gotten more. Again, things get far rockier when we introduce Bloodlines. Pure randomness could also, in some cases, result in the second child, even if they are born right after each other, getting more Records. Do note I am only talking generalized statistics here,” the Viper clarified.

“Hm,” Jake said as he considered the Viper’s words. Was it possible that whatever Records Jake gave to Sandy and Sylphie worked like this pool? Maybe it was the same as the one he would pull on if he ever decided to have kids? So many questions with no answers. There was one more thing, though.

“You said earlier what I want to do with this entire ritual is not that unique or special, at least not in principle. However, I don’t get the feeling that Sylphie is lacking in potential due to her walking a Path based on my Records. Not with Sandy either. Shit, if that was the case, would Stormild and Snappy have blessed them? I would assume they could detect if something like that was the case,” Jake voiced his thoughts.

“Now, that is the interesting part, isn’t it?” Villy said with a smile. “You aren’t exactly an expert in it, but there is a way to see the connection of Records between individuals. It is a form of karmic magic, one any god is capable of. Do you know what your connection with Sandy and the hawk was upon their change?”

“You literally just said it isn’t something I can see, as I don’t know shit about karmic magic,” Jake said in a deadpan tone.

“Hey, who knows? Maybe your bullshit Bloodline gave you some insight?” Villy grinned as he shook his head. “Your connection to the two of them was... feeble. It was there, yes, but it was not the karmic connection one would expect. What I am ultimately saying is that despite their evolution so clearly being reliant on your Records, it didn’t seem to actually leave the same drawbacks. Sandy owns their Records all on their own, same with the Sylphian Hawk. Their Paths are their own, completely separate from you.

“This does mean that nothing they ever do will directly benefit you as their creator. You get no credit in Records from how they live their lives. That means you are left with the pure achievement of their creations, but that isn’t something I would discount either. There is also the Records by association as you remain close to them, but that isn’t much different from what you get from everyone else,” the Viper finished his explanation.

“Not gonna lie... I feel like I still have nearly as many questions as when I started,” Jake said. Nothing really felt clear at all. How could the things he made not contain any intent, or why wasn’t it recognized as his mana? It made no sense.

“That is what happens when you walk uncharted Paths,” Villy said in a serious tone. “What you are doing is clearly rooted in your Bloodline as it deploys a transcendent-level concept. The only thing I can be certain of is that there is a cost to all of these creations. If the benefits outweigh these costs will ultimately be up to you, and only you can make that choice. Trust your gut; that seems to have worked out well for you so far.”

“Yeah,” Jake nodded. “Thanks for the insights, as always. I reckoned this was better to talk to you about and not Duskleaf.”

“Duskleaf would have refused and gone to fetch me if you asked him.”

“Fair enough,” Jake smirked with a nod. Made sense. He could see the old alchemist seriously not wanting to give advice like this. He seemed more like the type of guy to only give advice when he actually knew things for sure.

“Good luck. I look forward to seeing the end result,” the Viper said as he disappeared before Jake had a chance to say goodbye.

"I guess it is back to work," Jake spoke partly to himself and partly to Villy, who had, of course, switched to his livestream of Jake's life.

The conversation gave Jake some ideas, but it ultimately did not change anything. It just made him more sure that he wanted to keep experimenting even if he did lose some Records or if he hurt his foundation a bit. Jake firmly believed that whatever he lost, he would be able to get back and that if he truly risked himself too much, he would feel it in his gut.

If worst came to worst, Jake could just do what everyone else who hit a bottleneck did: risk his life repeatedly until he broke through. On second thought, that actually wouldn't be that bad. Quite nice, actually.

Jake cracked his neck as he took out one of the Queen's Guard cores. He had studied enough, and he had weighed the risks. Now it was time to find to create the technique – and hopefully, upgrade his Core Manipulation skill in the process.

Thus Jake began to do what he was best at when it came to alchemy:

Reckless experimenting without any regard for his own safety.

Chapter 618 - A Hundred Eggs

"Not quite as I had hoped," the old swordsman smiled to himself as he shook his head. It had been difficult, but in the end, he had done it. The spirit of competitiveness had truly fueled him as he became aware that Jake had gained a mythical skill from his Patron, Aeon. It had pushed his old bones further than he thought they could handle, and his desire had intertwined with his competitiveness and Transcendent insights, giving him what he wanted.

[Mythical Prodigy] – A genius ahead of the curve, not even the mythical deluding him. It feels as if your Path has barely begun, yet you refuse to be confined to the expectations of your station. Creating a mythical skill while below C-grade is no easy feat and the feat of a true myth in the making. Be proud.
+100 all stats +20% all stats.

Prodigy, as a word, still felt odd to Miyamoto. It felt like a title reserved for the young. He knew that in a multiversal context, he was actually considered young and that both the former Monarch of Blood, Iskar, and his Patron were far, far older than he was. Even so, it did not change how he felt in his heart.

As for what had not gone as he had hoped... Miyamoto had also now evolved to C-grade.

“You have reached the grade of the true elites. Congratulations, I, too, feel my powers return,” Iskar said, his aura now also that of a C-grade. “For it to remain mythical would be an outlier. However, with effort and your talent, it is only a matter of time before it reaches the rarity once more.”

“I am aware, and yet I can only lament at my own lack of skill,” Miyamoto sighed. While he had managed to create a mythical skill shortly before his evolution, he had only been able to experience it for less than a day before he evolved.

“Having more than a single legendary skill upon evolving to C-grade is already considered an incredible achievement, much less a skill already so close to edging over to mythical,” Iskar once more reiterated. “Besides... the power of that skill is not to be looked down on, no matter what rarity the system has assigned it.”

Miyamoto nodded, knowing that already. Yet his vanity was hurt, his pride slightly scuffed. Hence why, he chose to change the subject. “Speaking of progress, how goes it with the young ones?”

“Better than expected,” Iskar said with a nod. “The average talent within your clan surpasses many elite factions of the multiverse, but considering this is a newly integrated universe and the absolute number of outliers present on this planet already, perhaps that should not come as a surprise. Though I do have some minor concerns.”

“Oh?” Miyamoto exclaimed. The young ones they were talking about were those who had chosen to become vampires. There weren’t that many yet, and this first batch was still very much viewed as a trial of sorts. So far, the vampires surpassed the other humans when it came to pure progress, though it was hard to say if that was only because of their changed races or due to those choosing to embrace vampirism being more dedicated to progressing to begin with.

“Your culture seems to have an... odd relationship with those born from the blood of Sanguine. Back in Yalsten, recruiting those who were not vampires was borderline impossible due to our status in the multiverse as creatures needing the vital energy of other humanoids to keep ourselves alive. However, here on Earth, it is almost... opposite?” the Monarch said with genuine confusion.

Miyamoto was quite uncertain about what Iskar was getting at. He understood fearing vampires due to their inherent requirements and the innate danger they posed to humans, so what did he mean by them having an opposite view of vampires?

“I am not quite sure I understand what you mean. Is a lack of fear not only beneficial?” he asked.

“That... I would agree, but it is more than a lack of fear. Did you know that many of the young men who became vampires now find themselves hounded by human women, especially those in their teenage years, causing a significant portion of them discomfort? Many of these women even want to have their vital energies consumed and drone around the vampires. Additionally, and perhaps the most confusing part, they keep referencing the concept of twilight for some reason,” Iskar said, shaking his head.

“Oh,” Miyamoto muttered, unsure. It was odd. He had not heard of anyone practicing or using the magic of the eventide. “Hm, perhaps we should get one of these young ones to explain this odd development?”

“I have attempted to, but they keep saying I am not in the target demographic and wouldn’t understand... as if this knowledge is not something I am allowed to be blessed with.”

Miyamoto frowned deeply with concern. He would definitely have to try and get a grasp of this development before Nevermore. If Iskar was right, he feared another fringe faction could be forming among the young. Even if he did want to take a step back from the clan as a whole, he did still feel responsible for those who chose to become vampires.

Crack

The core in Jake’s hand cracked all over, more micro-fractures forming in seconds before the entire thing crumbled into a fine dust. Even this dust disappeared shortly after, the only remnants of the Queen’s Guard’s core remaining the faint sensation of Jake’s arcane energy lingering in the air.

“Too weak,” Jake muttered to himself. He did not need to wait as he took out another Guard core and restarted.

It had been about a week since his talk with Villy, and by now, some things were clear. He needed to do this with a strong core if he wanted it to work. Jake had primarily used the Isoptera Warrior cores he had gathered during this week but found them sorely lacking.

He had then tried more on Guard cores, but these cores were also too weak for Jake to use if he wanted to create any kind of meaningful item for this final part of the ritual. The reason was that Jake didn't only inject more Records into an object but he also transformed what was already there. So if the existing Records were too weak, the entire craft would fail and fall apart.

This is what he had been mainly working on this week. Jake's problem was that he was putting too much quantity and not enough quality into the cores, resulting in them getting overpowered. This had not been an issue with prior items Jake had worked on, especially not something like the meteorite, so he needed to adapt and change his method to make it suitable for cores.

He had considered if he even wanted to use cores for this entire process and not just try and find more natural treasures in the wild. They didn't even need to be those Unique special items Earth had gotten, but just high-level items spawning in areas with dense energy. However, the problem he ran into here was that these natural treasures were not actually made to help monsters evolve. They were created simply to house energy and Records, and it was the monsters themselves turning all that into progress on their Paths.

When he got this realization, it was a big breakthrough. He had been under the illusion that he could make all Records into something to help in evolution, but that had been wrong. He needed energy and Records that were already primed toward the Path of whatever monster he wanted to consume the item. This was not something other people needed to be a thing, as they could prime these Records and the energy through their own intent during the crafting process.

Jake was not doing that.

He did not infuse his own will into the items the same way others did. At least he was not meant to. That was the conclusion he reached. His job was not to actually transform any energy or change any Records... he was to give the core all the materials it needed to make this change itself. To cut out all the fluff and make the way forward obvious.

Another impossibility based on what Jake had read. These cores had no innate intent, so how would they know they had to change and evolve at all? Why would Jake's energy make them change? For this, he had no answer, but he knew it was happening. He felt it happen. It also fit in with everything Villy had said. All Jake truly contributed was a small spark once the framework was complete.

Additionally, this theory fit with the Harbinger of Primeval Origins profession and what that had been about. The word harbinger was a very specific name in this case. The system rarely used words randomly, especially not in something as important as a profession name.

A Harbinger was not the one who actually caused something. They were only the omen, the herald, the sign and indication that something was to come. Jake was much the same. He was only the presence that let the Records know it was time to embrace their Primeval Origins. It could be argued he was the source of the change, as without him, they would not happen, but in the eyes of the system, he was not the direct cause: merely the precursor.

Jake tried and failed with yet another Guard's core, swiftly taking out another. As he was about to start, he stopped.

I think I'm right.

Nothing he thought was facts, simply his own theories of how everything worked. He had so many far-fetched conclusions and postulations that directly contradicted what he had studied to be the truth. There were so many things he knew should not work but that he still believed possible. It was reckless, but he was confident.

If I think I am right... so let's just do it properly.

Jake took out the big item. The Isoptera Hive Queen core appeared in his hand, and he felt how much more potent it was than anything he had used prior. However, even this was not enough. When he said he would do it properly, he meant that he would use all the momentum he had built up to just make a usable item for the ritual in one go. Fuse all materials he had into one core. He believed the details would come to him as he went, as Jake had already done something very similar before, relying mainly on instincts all those times.

During his experiments, he also discovered that even if the description did not say it, then every Isoptera Warrior and every Queen's Guard core had some small remnants of Records from the Queen herself. It was natural, as she had spawned them. So the first step was to extract all of this and fuse it into the Queen's core.

This process was something he knew how to do, and it was done by the books. He had already done this plenty with the cores he used for the ritual, so nothing was new or difficult here, and his Advanced Core Manipulation skill was already made to do it.

Next was the refining, another simple process he had experience with. Jake started out by cutting out certain energies within the core that he did not want, primarily energy and Records related to the earth affinity and the magic the Queen and her Guards had used. Jake wanted to only have Records related to the base concept of ectognamorph Queens, nothing more, nothing less. The Bee Queen was not a termite or necessarily used earth affinity, after all.

Jake was more careful than before and took his time, enjoying all the system assistance he could get to preserve and empower the core. He leaned into the skill heavily, and for a good reason too. Jake did not simply want to successfully create a core for the ritual... he wanted to make it a replicable process. The best way to do that was with the help of the system by upgrading his current Core Manipulation skill.

The preparations went smoothly, but Jake still took far longer with this core than any prior. Three full days were spent merging every single Isoptera core into the Queen's, with a full five days after that going to prepping and refining it.

At the end of these eight days, Jake had an Isoptera Hive Queen core far more powerful than before. He did not doubt that he could use it as a damn good ingredient in an elixir or give it to another crafter. He had discovered that he was bloody good at refining these cores and cutting away anything he did not want, courtesy of his arcane affinity.

Before he moved on, Jake stared at the core for nearly an hour, making sure everything was as it should be. He then meditated for quite a few hours to fully replenish his mental energy and resources before it was time for the final and most crucial aspect of this particular crafting session:

The true transformation of the core.

Jake took a deep breath as all his insight coalesced, and he attempted to make his thoughts a reality. To allow the core to embrace its Origin.

In Jake's eyes, an Origin was... the source of something. It's purest beginning. Primal Energy – Jake's energy – was at the core of that concept. It was the simplest form of energy and was through Jake expressed as stability and destruction. Together, destruction in balance. Jake simply sought to inspire the core to embrace its purest form.

When all else is stripped away, and nothing but the core of the Records remain, you have the Origin. When all history, all Records related to an object are turned into their simplest form, they return to their Origin. The energy becomes Origin Energy.

Jake infused the core with everything he had. His resources began slipping away, his mana, health, and stamina all draining at a rapid rate as he poured in all he had. The core did not resist but ate up all he had with glee, the energy within slowly changing during the process.

Then, a system notification made him aware he was on the right track. He would have pushed on either way.

Jake felt the Records in the core begin to change. Almost as if they responded to Jake, and some kind of... instinct awakened with it. He felt a connection to the core, but as he did, he felt rejection. Opposition. Defiance. This odd instinct-like reaction from the Records tried to battle Jake's own Records, making him only scoff. He pushed back and instantly felt the Records in the core capitulate in defeat.

Then, without any warning, mental images, faint emotions, sounds, smells, concepts, and so much more... all flashed before his eyes, each passing by too fast for Jake to comprehend them properly.

A termite working in a hive.

Queens tending to the young.

Warriors fighting in wars.

Digging.

Expansion.

Domination.

The earth was then suddenly gone; the insect now no longer confined underground.

A sensation of pure thrills and desire to conquer.

Countless planets, eggs falling like meteors.

Then, a vast empty cosmos unlike any he had seen before.

A hundred eggs, floating.

All hatched as humanoid figures emerged, radiating with power.

A hundred pairs of eyes turned towards Jake, his own presence flaring in response.

Aimed not at the hundred Queens... but the space itself that was their Origin.

And then the cosmos was gone, and he saw a small grub crawling on the ground.

Jake felt like he was in a haze, the world gone as his mind was entirely submerged in the Records. He did not know if what he saw were actually visions of the past, glimpses into the future, or merely representations of concepts. Perhaps none of them, and everything was just Jake's brain slowly getting fried as he was connected to the energy within the core.

The visions kept flashing over and over as he saw hundreds, thousands, millions of ectognamorphs in different forms, yet all visions seemed to return to these one hundred eggs. Over and over again, it returned to the one hundred, and Jake felt his own aura grow as he pressured the core.

He began to feel weaker as his fingers went numb. His gaze turned hazy, not just due to the many visions but due to an odd sense of exhaustion.

Yet he kept going as he knew he was close. He felt the core actively warp in his mind; he saw it shift and transform as slowly the visions stopped coming. Fewer flashes appeared, and fewer Records remained. Until finally, all he was left with was a burnt-in image of a hundred eggs floating in the cosmos.

An Origin... perhaps the Origin of all ectognamorphs.

Jake heard several sounds from the system as he got notifications, but he barely registered them as he looked down at the pulsing core in his hand. He tried to smile, but that minute movement seemed to push him over the edge as he saw something on his status just before he passed out.

Oh...

Status

Stamina: 1/86470

Chapter 619 - Origin Core

Vilastromoz appeared just as he saw Jake pass out. He crouched down and placed a finger on his Chosen's forehead, making the hunter twitch slightly as an instinctual response, but otherwise, Jake did not move. The Viper scanned his body briefly before nodding.

He had thoroughly exhausted his own resource pools, and his soul seemed more feeble than usual. Health Points were dangerously low, stamina too, and even his mana was thoroughly drained. The core of his soul remained firm, but the outer layers showed faint cracks all over, indicating low levels of self-inflicted soul damage. Nothing that wouldn't heal within the day, but it showed how much he had overstrained himself. Vilastromoz also felt something else was missing, but he could not quite place what, so he turned his attention to the result of this entire thing.

The Viper looked down at the core still cradled in Jake's hand, and frowned as he scanned it. He felt the Records pulsing within, and he did a simplistic divination to see what it would do and what its effects would be if used on the Bee Queen or any other ectognamorph for that matter.

Peculiar.

It was immediately obvious that Vilastromoz would not be able to take the item away. In fact, he felt it only remained stable while in the vicinity of his Chosen, making the Viper believe whatever concepts allowed it to stay whole would disperse if he took it away. Proof it was an item tied directly to Jake. Right now, a feeble balance had been reached, but more than that, the Viper felt movement within the core.

It feels... alive. Yet not.

Vilastromoz could only grin. His divination had failed when it came to showing the actual effects of the item, too, proving that it truly was related to Jake's Bloodline. He kept scanning it for a while, questions appearing with every passing moment.

In the end, he sighed and shook his head, displaying an even wider grin. "What a wonderful sensation."

The Viper felt an emotion that had been oh-so-rare until recently. Curiosity. Interest. It was amazing as he realized he only got more and more questions the longer he looked at the odd core – the longer he spent with his utterly baffling Chosen.

"I have no idea how it works. How he works."

He waved his hand as a faint mist spread out around him, entering his Chosen's body to restore him faster. Vilastromoz felt impatient as he wanted to see what would happen next. After observing Jake for a few more minutes to make sure everything was as it should be, the Viper teleported away, excited to view the conclusion of the ritual. The resulting creature he would spawn.

And Jake's reaction upon seeing his creation.

Jake felt like he had a massive hangover as he slowly awoke. He felt oddly weak, and not the kind of weakness that came from overusing his boosting skill, but something far more... foreign. He inspected his own body thoroughly and found things were not as they should be.

Somehow his resources had fully regenerated, and he sensed remnants of energy in the air and the lingering presence of Villy.

"Thanks for the heal," Jake muttered to the snake god, continuing his self-inspection.

He moved his limbs a bit and found strength rapidly returning. Yet he still felt like he had lost something. Like something was missing. Within a minute, Jake felt back at full power, and he knew that his combat ability was not affected in the slightest. The foggiess and feeling of having a hangover also faded as he moved about, making his mind clear.

Shaking his head, Jake looked down at the item between his legs. It looked nothing like a core from an ectogna anymore, but more like some crystal ball or perhaps a large snow globe. The outer shell reminded him of his own stable arcane mana, but it was what was within that interested him the most.

In the center was a dark purple spark, flashing with energy, and tendrils of lightning-like energy hit the edges of the core at regular intervals like whatever was within tried to escape. Jake looked at this spark and knew what it was. Pure energy and Records. Stabilized... at least for now. Jake used Identify on the changed core and was not disappointed.

[Origin Core of the Hundred Royals (Unique) – A core containing immense Records related to the Hundred True Royals of the Ectognamorph Lineage. This vast amount of energy and Records will allow

any ectognamorph Queen that consumes it to embrace its Origin related to the Hundred True Royals. The core desires to fulfill its purpose and will dissipate if not allowed to. Follows and is tied to the will of its creator, the Primal Hunter. Requirement: Soulbound.

Lots of interesting stuff there. First of all, the description reminded him a lot of the Mystbone, so that was good, considering he had hoped to make an item reminiscent of that. Its rarity of unique also further added confidence to this. The last two sentences were a bit odd, especially as it talked about the item having a desire and what he could only read as a warning that the item had a limited window of opportunity before it would cease to be. He did not get the feeling they were talking hours or even days, but more months or years... which seemed like a long time, but in a multiversal context, it really wasn't.

The part about following Jake's will and how it was tied to him was also a bit odd, especially the fact that it used the term "the Primal Hunter" and not something like the creator or alchemist or any other such generic term. This reliance on Jake was further established by its status as a Soulbound item, which did kill all hopes Jake ever had of becoming an Origin Core merchant.

Now, he did have some questions about the nature of what he had made. Such as what the hell the Hundred True Royals of the Ectognamorph Lineage was? Jake took the educated guess that it was those hundred Queens he saw during the odd vision, but that didn't make all that much sense to him. He had clearly felt like it was the cosmos itself that had given birth to them, but... maybe it did kind of make sense it turned out like this?

Did the system transform it into something more tangible and usable?

It was possible. Made even more possible by the next string of messages. Jake had hoped to see his Core Manipulation skill upgrade, and it sure did not disappoint there.

[Advanced Core Manipulation (Epic)] – To touch upon a core of pure energy and Records is to touch upon the broken shell of a soul. Allows the alchemist to far more easily manipulate cores and the Records within the broken soul shells with the goal of refining them. Refined cores will, in most cases, be more effective, and you can also choose to amplify certain effects. Having taken it further, you have learned that the layers of souls can be malleable in some circumstances, and applying this knowledge, you have learned to fuse cores containing similar Records and even change their nature in some circumstances as your own soul influences the core. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Advanced Core Manipulation based on Wisdom and Willpower

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[Core Manipulation of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)] – The soul of all is sacred, the Truesoul infallible, yet even the impossible awakens when the Origin calls. Allows the Primal Hunter to far more easily manipulate cores and the Records within the broken soul shells to refine and even fuse them for increased effectiveness or amplification. Infuse the essence of your being into a core, allowing its Origin to awaken, resulting in an unpredictable transformation of Records. Be warned that being the harbinger of primeval origins comes with a cost and should not be indulged in lest you wish to lose your Path and Lineage. Delays between each use of essence infusion are heavily recommended. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Core Manipulation of the Primal Hunter based on Wisdom, Willpower, and Perception.

First, the elephant in the room. Core Manipulation of the Primal Hunter. This was Jake's first time seeing a profession skill carry that name, but perhaps more than that, it was the first skill Jake had consciously made carrying the name.

The skill also included some explanation as to this odd weakness. It looked like Jake did expend some intangible energy, be it Records or something else, whenever he made these crafts. However, the system did not include a warning to never do it, only one telling him to do it sparingly and have delays in between each use.

He could only interpret this one way. System-fuckery did kick in.

A wave of relief washed over him at the system's recognition and looking at the item he had created, it didn't look like the system had nerfed him too much, if at all. If nothing else, it had turned the skill more useful. The general upgrade to the Core Manipulation skill was also more than welcome, as he instinctively knew all its existing effects were improved along with this new ability to "infuse his essence," as the system called it.

All in all, it was a damn great upgrade. It even referred to what Jake did as being the harbinger of primeval origins and called him the Primal Hunter in the description, which was damn nice. It was frankly better than Jake had expected. Made even better by the next part.

Because with the skill upgrade had naturally also come the sweet, sweet levels.

You have successfully crafted [Origin Core of the Hundred Royals (Unique)] – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 201 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

...

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 204 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 202 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 203 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

Jake nodded, satisfied and honestly not that surprised by the four levels he had gained. Upgrading a skill directly from epic to legendary in C-grade was no easy feat, and Jake did not doubt for a second that it was a high-tier legendary skill too. Not to mention the sheer act of creating the Origin Core, a potentially never-seen-before item. It put Jake at 203, still leaving him plenty of leeway for Nevermore, but no longer entirely a newbie in C-grade.

Things had gone way better than expected. Jake felt like he was on a roll, and since he was on a roll, he wanted to keep going. It only made sense to ride the momentum of his success.

Seeing as he was fully regenerated and felt sharp as ever, he saw no reason to delay his actual objective: awakening the Bee Queen.

The final part of the ritual was honestly nothing more than a formality at this point. Jake had prepared for it so much, and the ritual circle had been primed in case whatever item Jake made had a very limited duration in which it was usable. Which had kind of turned out to be true, making Jake pat himself on the back for the foresight.

Jake got to work immediately as he headed towards the circle, speaking to the watching Villy as he walked over.

“Better call Duskleaf for the watch party to see the final part of the ritual and the end result.”

He did not get an answer but knew the god had heard him as he soon after became aware that Duskleaf was now also watching.

Looking at the Pollendust Bee Container in the center of the circle, he inspected the three-meter tall boulder filled with holes that housed the egg. This container was meant to serve as the home of the Pollendust Bee Queen even after awakening, but Jake had a feeling it was no longer necessary. He still chose to hatch the Queen within it as the ritual was already designed to feed all the energy into the container. There were doubts if the D-grade ancient rarity item would survive, but it really didn't matter as long as the egg hatched successfully. The container was made for a Pollendust Bee Queen, and Jake seriously doubted that was what would hatch.

Jake did a preparatory round as he placed all the necessary time-sensitive items around the ritual circle. After some last-minute inspections, Jake was ready. He went to the central gathering point of energy and laid down the Origin Core. On a side note, Jake had discovered that storing the core in his inventory was impossible.

Crouching, Jake placed his hands on the humming ritual circle as he infused energy into it and activated the final step. The entire thing lit up, and all the catalysts and energy sources he had placed in the minor gathering points began feeding the egg at a rapid pace. The Origin Core remained unmoving, but Jake felt like it wanted to join the other energies.

He looked at it, and instinctively he knew. All it needed was permission.

"Go."

Just as the word left his mouth, the Origin Core exploded, the energy surging into the ritual circle. It utterly dominated all the other energies as it drilled into the egg inside the Bee Container. Jake felt the entire ritual circle struggle with the overpowering Records and energy, but he stabilized it as best he could. He didn't direct the ritual or do anything more now... because he knew he didn't have to.

The egg itself seemed to have come alive and begun absorbing energy by itself. It intensified with every second, and Jake helped as much as he could and even complied when he felt the egg want some of his energy. Minutes passed by as the ritual circle slowly started fading and breaking apart, the lines drawn receding towards the center. This entire final process took about an hour until Jake knew.

It's complete.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 205 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 204 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

A shockwave was released from the ritual's center and destroyed the rest of the circle as the bee container blew up from the energy overload. A bright light and thousands of stone shards flew past Jake as dense energy washed over him. The energy was followed by the presence of a C-grade as a faint scent of flowers filled the air.

Jake felt elated and smiled as he felt the powerful presence released from the Bee Queen, but his facial expression froze as the bright light faded, and he saw her form in its full glory.

Before him stood what he could only describe as a tall mature humanoid woman. She was several heads taller than Jake, standing at nearly two meters thirty, resulting in him staring straight into the two massive mounds on her chest, both of them wholly uncovered. In fact, her entire body was naked, displaying yellowish skin all over her mostly lithe body.

Jake averted his gaze from the two objects that usually only mammals had and finally saw some non-humanoid and ectognamorph-like traits. Four transparent wings sprouted from her back and two antennae from her forehead. Finally, he met her black eyes with yellow irises, finding them staring straight back at him as she, too, inspected him as he inspected her. Jake felt unsure of what to say as she spoke.

"I greet thee," she suddenly bowed deeply, making Jake even more uncomfortable at the movement of certain objects... not helped by the next part.

"My honored Sire."

Chapter 620 - Vespernat Hive Queen

Jake was taken aback at the Queen's intense stare but even more so by how she addressed him.

"Sire?" Jake asked with confusion. No, wait, she had just been born, right? How did she even know how to talk? Why did she look like a fully mature woman? Why did she also give him the vibes of a fully grown adult with some innate sense of manners?

"Is that not what you are?" the Hive Queen asked as she moved her limbs, stretching as if asleep for a long time. "Through your power, I was allowed to awaken and become who I am now. As the reason for my current existence, is it an inaccurate assessment to refer to you as my sire?"

Jake was about to answer but kept his mouth closed. "It is just that the word comes with some implications I am not sure are entirely on point."

He tried to keep his eyes locked on hers to not stare too much, and she seemed to notice.

"Excuse my indecency; I failed to consider your cultural norms," the Queen said as a yellow silken dress was summoned out of thin air and covered her body. "I did not mean to cause Sire any discomfort."

"Just... you can just call me Jake," he said, shaking his head. Saying this, he got a sense of deja vu from how many times before he had this kind of conversation. He never freaking got people to just use his damn name. They always defaulted to using something like Chosen, Lord Thayne, or even something horrible like Mas-

"Very well, Jake," the Queen nodded in agreement.

Wait... just like that? Jake questioned his own sanity. That easy? Really? He finally got his bearings to also identify the Queen and did not find the name overly flashy... but something was definitely off.

[Vespernat Hive Queen – lvl 200]

Vespernat. Vesper. Jake knew what that meant, as a sense of horror overtook his mind.

He had made a bloody wasp and not a bee! A wasp! Jake questioned how much he had fucked up. No one liked wasps. Wasps were the asshole counterparts to bees, only bringing misery and suffering while not giving any of that sweet honey or even being good pollinators.

"Say... do you remember your prior race? The one you had in D-grade as an egg," Jake asked, unsure how things worked as he wanted to figure out how something like this could have happened.

The Hive Queen nodded in confirmation. "Pollendust Bee Queen, I believe it was."

"And now you are a wasp, correct?" Jake asked.

"Yes," she confirmed.

Damn.

"As the Origin of the bee species, is that not only to be expected?" the Hive Queen asked, a bit confused at seeing Jake failing to hide his disappointment.

Wait... really? he questioned himself. Jake had to admit he had no idea where bees actually came from historically. Not now and not before the system had arrived. He did know that bees and wasps had stuff in common, but they were definitely not the same thing. Maybe the system had changed how things worked, or maybe Jake just didn't know enough about the genealogy of bees.

"Could you give me some insight into what exactly a Vespernat Hive Queen is and how you ended up as one from being a Pollendust Bee Queen?" Jake asked, knowing he was maybe overstepping a little.

"Only if you feel like it, of course."

"It would be my honor," she nodded. "Bees and wasps are indeed considered two separate variants of ectognamorphs, but the bees were all once wasps, having evolved over time to become less combat-focused and instead dedicated their skills to the cultivation of nature and supplying their hives with resources. Often these bees will be seen working closely with other species and not be solitary hives, finding protection from those more capable of combat. While powerful bee variants do exist, they are all lesser to I."

"Huh," Jake nodded in recognition.

"I did plan on spawning a Bee Queen as my first daughter to better harness materials, but I need to know if that decision is up to me or not?" the Hive Queen asked him in a curious tone.

"What do you mean if it is up to you?" Jake asked, equally curious.

"No matter what I call you, you are my sire, and I am not blind to the investment required for my birth. Debt has been made, and expectations of a return are only natural. So tell me, Jake. Why did you create me?"

Jake was taken completely off-guard as he realized... that was a damn good question. Why had he worked so hard on the bee ritual and wanted to create this Bee Queen – now Wasp Queen, apparently – in the first place?

He had wanted a bee to help tend to his garden back on Earth... a garden that he had now mostly neglected, and Rick had thoroughly handled what gardening was being done in the big underground cavern. He had acquired the Bee Queen Container before he had ever gone to the Order or really been aware going there was an option, and by now, he really didn't need a huge garden of his own.

Materials were not an issue to him. He had money if he needed to buy anything, he had nepotism if it was rare and hard to get, and even if he did want to cultivate his own garden, it would take a long time before it would give him anything he could actually use.

There was also the entire question of what the Bee Queen would want with her life he hadn't even considered. If it was a non-intelligent insect monster, which was kind of what he had expected upon buying the container, it would have been all fine and dandy to just leave her in a nice big garden and have her chill. This Wasp Queen was something entirely different.

In conclusion, Jake had totally lost track of his purpose with this entire Bee Queen thing at some point. The objective had shifted from being about the result to the process itself. It hadn't been about the Queen at all but about actually being able to spawn her and create the core. He hadn't even considered what the hell his end goal was once she was born or what he wanted to happen then.

Jake looked at the Hive Queen in front of him, patiently waiting for an answer. He decided to not bullshit her and just be honest.

"Originally, I wanted to have a Bee Queen to tend to my garden back on my home planet, but with time, that shifted from no longer being necessary, yet I continued working on the ritual. My goal moved from what a Bee Queen could help me with and became how I could use my abilities to help birth a variant as powerful as possible," Jake answered genuinely. "So, if I am being honest, then I have no expectations now. One could say I already accomplished my objective simply by you standing here before me."

Wasn't that the truth at the end of it? Jake had wanted to prove he could do something, and he had done it. He wasn't the kind of person to think that the Hive Queen owed him for being involved in one of his own selfish goals. Even if he did want her to do something for him, his own code of conduct wouldn't allow him to demand it. He never gave her a choice to be born, so who the hell was he to have expectations of a return? Only shit parents saw their kids as some kind of future investment or natural servants, and even if Jake didn't like the thought of it, he was the reason why the Hive Queen now lived.

In his mind, the Hive Queen was the same as Sandy or Sylphie. Their own people, with their own lives.

"I am uncertain what exactly you mean?" the Hive Queen asked with confusion. "If it is desired, I could help cultivate a garden. I have the skills and abilities."

Jake shook his head. "As odd as it sounds, then, from my end, all debts are already paid, and we don't owe each other anything. It's probably weird from your point of view, but you are free to do whatever you want."

"You may view it as that, but I do not," the Hive Queen shook her head. "You have sired my Path and allowed me to evolve into what I am now. Both parties have to agree if a debt exists or not, and in my view, there is one to be repaid."

"Now I am the one confused," Jake said, befuddled. "How can you pay a debt when I don't think one is owed? How can you do something to pay it when I don't want anything from you?"

"Perhaps you may not want anything here and now, but something in the future," the Hive Queen smiled as she looked around.

"I have been meaning to ask, but where are we? My awareness of the outside world was limited while within the egg."

Jake considered her words about debt and was a bit surprised at her change of subject. She seemed to realize it was a dead topic and shifted the conversation, something Jake was more than happy doing. "This is the Order of the Malefic Viper. Ah, the Malefic Viper is--"

"One of the twelve Primordials," the Hive Queen nodded.

"Huh... how do you even know that? How do you know, well, a bunch of things? Were you sealed inside the egg or something while in D-grade?" Jake asked, curious.

The Hive Queen looked at him and shook her head. "For being my sire, your lack of comprehension of my race is truly puzzling. Like most monsters born at maturity, I inherited Lineage Knowledge from my ancestors. I know of my own history, of my race, and of many things in the multiverse. As a True Royal of the Ectognamorph race, my granted knowledge surpasses that of most manifold. As for the question of if I was sealed... my first time experiencing life was the moment I was sired by you; there were no prior incarnations."

"I figured there was something like that inherited knowledge," Jake nodded. He had read a bit about how most monsters were born with some innate knowledge, and it made sense that something like a Hive Queen was born with a lot of it. He was just surprised that she held not only knowledge of her own skills and heritage but of the multiverse as a whole. Jake didn't comment on the last part, though it made him feel weird that the woman he was talking to was technically only a few minutes old.

"Can you tell me what a True Royal is?" he asked.

"The highest level of variants within a particular Lineage among the ectognamorphs," the Hive Queen answered. "For us ectognamorphs, the hierarchy is one of the most important structures. It is not simply a preference but of conceptual power. Within a singular hive, the drones bow to their commanders, the commanders bow to their Hive Queen, and the Hive Queens bow to the oldest Queen, often their own mother. This is not a question of loyalty or trust; it is their Path."

"How do True Royals play into that?" Jake asked, already knowing how hives worked.

"A True Royal is the apex of a particular variant. If I went to a hive of bees, I would be seen and recognized by the Queen there as her superior – as royalty standing above her in the hierarchy. True Royals are the Hive Queens that transcend a single hive and are the leaders of ectognamorph society."

"I see," Jake nodded with recognition. Damn, he had underestimated what a True Royal was.

"If I may ask, Jake, had you considered a name for me before my birth?" the Hive Queen suddenly asked.

"Nothing serious... maybe Beelinda, Beeatrice, or perhaps Beella," Jake said, cracking a joke. Jokes that would have Miranda threaten to kill him.

"Amusing naming sense," the Hive Queen smiled, actually getting the joke.

"Yeah, sadly, it was ruined by you turning into a wasp," Jake shook his head in fake disappointment.

"I sincerely apologize," the Hive Queen went along with it before turning a bit more serious. "If nothing was pre-determined, I would like to adopt the name of my ancestor and first of my race."

"Please decide for yourself!" Jake readily agreed.

"Very well, in that case, I shall take the name of Vesperia," the Queen announced.

Vespernat Hive Queen... Vesperia... not that much better than my naming sense, Jake thought first thing, but it probably made sense if the first Vespernat had named itself something close to its race name.

Jake also figured that he was actually being a bit rude by now. They were still standing in the plains outside of the mansion, the remnants of the broken ritual circle all around them and stone shards having ripped up big parts of the lawn.

"Vesperia it is, then. Now, how about we move inside?" Jake asked. "I got tea."

"I would be remiss to not take you up on the offer, Jake," Vesperia smiled and bowed.

Jake nodded, motioning for her to follow. They walked up the steps and quickly entered the living room as Jake went to the kitchen to fetch one of the pre-prepared pots he just had to heat.

"A wonderful residency you have here," the Hive Queen commented from the living room. "Is it provided by the Order of the Malefic Viper?"

"Yep," Jake answered as he heated up the pot of tea while walking back to the living room, cups floating behind him. "Mine is a bit special compared to the norm, but all of them are really nice."

"I can assume you are not an insignificant figure within the Order of the Malefic Viper. Hm, this may be presumptuous to ask, but do you hold the Blessing of the Primordial himself?"

"I do," Jake confirmed.

The Hive Queen nodded.

"I know my history as an egg from the land of Yalsten, sealed by the system eras ago, and that I spent much time within the newly integrated universe. I am also aware that the Malefic One recently returned to the multiverse, spurred on by something that happened in the newly integrated universe," the Queen spoke, almost as if she was just voicing her thoughts.

Jake sat down with the tea and used telekinesis to pour it into two cups as she spoke.

"Your Patron must be aware of what you are doing here and the fact that you felt confident showing methods capable of leading to my birth... I see. That is why. You are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, are you not?"

Raising his eyebrow, Jake looked at Vesperia. "What made you reach that conclusion?"

"It makes sense, and it contextualizes many of the Records I felt during my creation," the Queen nodded. "And your answer confirms it. If you were not the Chosen, you would have displayed outright denial and offense at my suggestion."

Jake once more found himself lost for words. He couldn't lie... he felt significantly outclassed in intellect by someone who had been born less than an hour ago.

"Guess there is no need to hide it," Jake shrugged.

"Is that part of the reason you do not believe I would prove useful to you?" Vesperia asked, leaning forward as her antennae shook in what he could only interpret as annoyance. "I will have you know you are severely underestimating a True Royal."

"Again, it isn't like that," Jake shook his head. He wanted to try and clarify once more as he felt someone enter his Sphere of Perception. In the entrance room to the mansion, an elf stepped through the teleportation gate and looked out the front door, likely seeing the ritual circle was gone. He then saw her rush over, and within two seconds, she reached the doorway of the living room.

"Lord Thayne! Did you succeed in-"

Meira stood frozen in the doorway as she stared at Jake and the Hive Queen sitting in the living room drinking tea, both looking back at her.

He saw her eyes dart back and forth, and Jake felt an incoming headache.