

New World 151

Chapter 151: Icosah

The espen gawked at me. It made some sense. I stood five feet taller than her, a titan in her eyes. After leaving the shop, I vowed to shrink myself some with my mass manipulation skill. This height was doing me no favors at the moment.

The espen mumbled with a fairy voice, “Who are you?”

She almost hissed her words. I say she since the espen looked feminine. She had a familiar figure, kind of like Althea. Naturally not as good, but you get the point. The differences stacked up from there though.

Unlike Althea, this espen chick had turquoise skin. Orange ovals ran up her legs, her sides, and ended at her neck. Parts of her skin reflected light like a glossy stone. It reminded me of a salamander, though smoother and sleeker. They were amphibian people.

As I watched, the espen propped her weight onto one hip. Beads on her brown clothes clattered against each other as she did.. To me, it looked like modern tribal clothing.

“Well? What faction are you from?”

I crossed my arms, “The one that’s looking for herbs. Who are you?”

She crossed her arms back at me, ruffling some of the furs on her hide clothing,

“I’m Selesha, and I own this shop. You’re welcome here if you’re paying. Before you ask, no, I don’t take credit, and no, I don’t take favors either. And before you try anything, I’ve verified my shop into Schema’s network. You steal anything, and the law will be after you. Same goes for extortion.”

I uncrossed my arms, “Naw. I have credits. What’s for sale?”

She took a step back, eyeing me up and down, “Hmmmm....”

She narrowed her amber eyes at me. Orange fins rose from her head and elbows, and she pushed her hair behind herself. Well, hair isn't quite the right word. She didn't have any real hair per say. Instead, something like a tail went down the back of her head. Down towards the end of it, the color changed to the orange of her fins and the ovals on her sides.

It fit together in my sight, nothing looking out of place. Once she flopped her head tail thing behind her, she pointed behind me, "Anything in the front is three credits a piece." She pointed behind her, "Anything in the back is seven."

I turned around, walking towards the front of the shop, "I'll take a look around."

The cloud of mana imbued mist followed me. I waved at it, but it didn't go away. Selesha walked up, pulling a jar from a utility belt around her hip, "Wait a second."

She lifted the jar up, and the fog around me flowed into the pot. I watched it, feeling the moisture leave,

"Why do you guys have these clouds of mist?"

She corked the jar and put it in her belt, "It's because espens need some moisture or else we dry out."

I nodded, "And that's why you guys have so many clouds of mist floating around your villages?"

Selesha frowned at me, "You are very new here, aren't you?"

I put my finger on a yellow flower, "Yeah, I guess."

She raised an eyebrow that was more an eye fin, "Are you a member of Soldiers of Fortune?"

I turned towards her, holding a lavender fern placed in a wooden pot, “Why do you want to know?”

She tapped a foot, “Because the Soldiers of Fortune laze around all day. You seem the type, even if you’re taller than a Gialgathen.”

I inspected the fern, ignoring her verbal jabs,

“Eh, I work hard when I need too.”

I pointed at the fern, “How much is this?”

She bit her lip, “14 credits.”

It was my turn to frown,

“I thought you said plants at the front of the store are three?”

“14 for you.”

I set the fern onto the wooden growth, “Then good luck finding some else to buy these herbs.”

She raised a hand, “Wait. I...I’ll sell it for 3. Letting a stranger in your home honors Lehesion’s name.”

Lehesion sounded like some religious figure, kind of like Baldowah. I figured speaking out on the topic was a bad idea. I didn’t understand anything about him, so I might say something outrageous.

Instead of speaking, I opened my dimensional storage, dropping the lavender fern into the dreamy portal. Looking at my status, I lost three credits automatically. I grinned, “So the prices are automated.”

I grabbed herb after herb, putting them into my dimensional storage. Selesha's eyes widened, shocked by my shopping spree. I took four or five of each plant, intent on breeding them for more later. Experimenting with some alchemy sounded fun anyways.

After buying several dozen pots, I waved at Selesha, "Cya. Let me know when you get something new in stock."

She smiled at me, her sharp teeth showing, "Of course sir."

A bell rang above the door as I did. I jogged back towards the forest, pinning myself between a few bushes. With my mass manipulation skill, I condensed myself. It hurt a bit, but after five minutes I was two feet smaller.

At this point, the gray armor over me fit like a glove. With my less striking appearance, I walked out. Once at Selesha's shop, I opened the door, bending less to get in. The espen woman gasped at me, shocked by my sudden shrinking. I brought up my status, sending her a twenty-credit tip,

"It's for the great service."

She glanced at her invisible status, then she nodded at me, "Thank you, sir."

The plants had a dual purpose. On the one hand, alchemy interested me. On the other, I couldn't have Selesha talking about my shifting sizes. I made myself into a good customer, one that would hurt to lose.

With that loose end knotted, I trekked into the city. The sun beamed down from above, midday feeling heavy from the humidity. No espens were out and about yet again. I tapped my chin, giving it some thought.

I came to a conclusion. The espens needed water to prevent their skin from drying out. They might stay indoors during the hotter parts of the day to avoid the sun. It might bake them if they sat in it long enough after all. My hypothesis seemed legit to me at least.

With those thoughts categorized, I strolled on the dirt road to Icosa. After making it past a bend in the street, a concrete walkway replaced the dirt one. Beyond the shift in

roading, the tree homes changed too. Wires hung from them, showing new heating and cooling. They took on standardized shapes like someone planned them in a city.

Along the sides of a few homes, markings were splattered with bright paint. They read,

“Traitors.”

Besides that though, the homes were just lovely. Just beyond them, the factions raised up over the trees. Futuristic jeeps rode along the concrete walkways. Power armor-clad soldiers walked everywhere, everything moving around. It contrasted the peaceful stillness of the espen’s other village.

What moved was different too. The outlines of the armors took on all kinds of shapes. Some walked on hinged legs like a goat. Others walked on all fours. More of them were bipedal, carrying a rifle strapped on their backs. Embedded into their helmets were mana stones galore.

In fact, every piece of machinery used chunks of mana stones. The jeeps used mana stones. The guns used mana stones. Hell, some people used carriages pulled by some glowing ox. Guess what they fed them as they walked?

That’s right – hay.

But still, The mana stones invaded every aspect of the society from head to toe. It was their electricity and gasoline. It was a world saturated with mana. It made sense considering the creatures here. They flourished on it, so the locals did the same.

Those locals gawked at me some. I stood a head taller than everyone even after shrinking, so I didn’t blame them. My size alienated me some, but no one dropped their rifles at the sight of me. In my book, that meant shrinking worked.

I kept the spell on in the back of my head, analyzing people as I walked. No one was over level 2,000 yet. Quite a few of them managed over 1,000 though to my surprise. The dungeons here would be more developed than on Earth since the planet was older. Higher level dungeons meant higher level sentients.

It showed in their titles too. Rift Walker, B Bounty Slayer, and along with various faction names stood above them. Many of the aliens wore painted symbols of their factions on their armor. They walked with their shoulders back, proud of who they aligned themselves with.

That loyalty splashed onto the buildings too. I walked past the Steel Legion's outpost. A fence surrounded the metal structure, engineers building vehicles and machines. The soldiers bordered on level 600, most of them in the 500's.

Across from the Steel Legion, there was a different faction called agents of Schema. In a black compound ringed by camo tents, they kept more open then. A few members fitted themselves in power armor but most preferred going for kevlar or carbon fiber mesh. My guess was for mobility and stealth.

The Steel Legion used power armor for safety. It gives you a bit of extra oomph when an eldritch tries to kill you. The agents of Schema specialized in long-range combat. Scopes lined their rifles. Night vision goggles hung from their necks. They carried sniper rifles and smoke grenades for a rapid escape. If I summed up the difference, the Steel Legion was a newbie guild. The agents of Schema hovered closer to an intermediate one.

The levels reflected that difference. The agents of Schema all hovered around level 800. They wore badges too, like a police force for Icosah.

After I passed the two garrisons, I found more guilds. A white tent stood beside the Steel Legion. Within it, the Enigmatta researched with magic and chemistry. Their pressurized suits made them comfortable in the heat. That's why they used a tent instead of a building. They didn't need much insulation.

Underneath their suits, they looked like humanoid anglerfish. The suits kept external light from blinding them, and it kept them under pressure. Talking to them worked in my favor. I might get some tech or something. They spent all day doing that studying after all.

Inside their tent, Torix and Kessiah talked with one of their members. Torix and the Enigmatta chatted away. Kessiah leaned against a table, listening close. Althea just stood around, looking like a third wheel. I jogged up,

"Yo guys, whats up?"

Torix looked at me, glancing up and down. Our personal intercom system clicked on, “How did you shrink!?”

I shrugged, “Mass Manipulation. It’s a skill. Anyways, who’s this guy?”

Torix shut our intercoms off, letting our voices spill out of our suits,

“This is a good friend of Kessiah and I. Roland Fixe.”

The Enigmatta waved a thin arm, “It is good to meet you, Daniel. They’ve spoken highly of you and your accomplishments.”

I grinned, though no one saw it through the tinted glass on my helmet,

“Thanks. What were you guys talking about anyway?”

Torix spread out his arms, “Oh, I was gathering some information on Giess. Roland knows quite a few details. He’s an experienced information broker I’ve used many a time.”

Torix turned towards Roland, “What brought you to Giess anyways?”

Roland raised a hand, “See here.”

He walked over towards one of their tables covered in glassware. In a jar of glass, Roland kept a chip of concrete stowed away. At least it looked like concrete from above. Below that disguise, its red eyes and steel underbelly shimmered along with a dozen legs. It stood still like it was hiding.

Roland tapped the jar, and the bug snapped up at his finger, its dozen legs clinging into the glass.

Roland removed his finger, “This is a saysha. It’s what the natives call a silver.”

I frowned, “A silver?”

Roland nodded, “Yup, a silver. They showed up over five centuries ago on Giess. The locals will tell you it’s because of the ‘Great Light.’ With a few context clues, the Enigmatta already discovered it was an asteroid. Based on our ideas, we hypothesize the asteroid carried eldritch.”

Kessiah pushed herself from a table, “What? Didn’t you say Schema has only been around for twenty years?”

Roland nodded, bubbles going up his helmet, “Yes, that’s right. If you’ve seen the forest, you know the creatures here aren’t normal. They can fight the eldritch.”

Roland lifted the glass jar, the saysha squirming, “And this little bug is...we don’t really know what it is. They give experience like a normal eldritch, but Schema can’t get a grip on them. They don’t act like eldritch either.”

The saysha snapped its mandibles at Roland’s hand, unable to get through the glass. I pointed at it,

“It seems pretty damn eldritch-ey to me.”

Roland waved his free hand in a circle,

“Some species of silver are reminiscent of eldritch, but they don’t exhibit the same characteristics. Most eldritch are composed of ambient mana, mana without a purpose. It means their minds are dissonant, grasping in different directions. In the end, they devolve into bundles of base instincts.”

He pointed at the saysha, “These are different. They have a distinct purpose outside of eating. They and all their brethren expand the wastelands outwards. This terraforming property is both intriguing and terrifying.”

Althea leaned towards the jar, leaning on me. She clicked on our intercoms, “These things sound a lot like Yawm’s plague.”

I nodded, and our intercoms clicked off. Roland sighed, his voice muffled by his own recorder, “There have been reports of the silvers appearing in the middle of espen territories. Some people are thinking someone is spreading them around. I’ve no idea why they’d do something like that. The Enigmatta are trying to discover why. It’s fascinating, isn’t it?”

Torix nodded with vigor, “Oh indeed. What I’m wondering is why the saysha guise themselves as concrete?”

Roland put his hands around the Saysha, “They hide on top of broken buildings. Once a creature falls asleep, they spring forth and devour their victims.”

Torix tapped his chin, “What about the biological mechanics involved?”

Roland moved his hands like he was giving a presentation, “It involves a thin surface level of stem cells spread over the upper thorax of this insect. By various undulating fibers using a thin layer of cilia-“

I tuned them out, turning towards Kessiah and Althea. I pointed outside, “Want to see the rest of the town?”

Kessiah started walking out of the tent, “Yeah. Better than watching those nerds gush.”

I rolled my eyes while Althea grabbed my arm,

“I thought you’d never ask.”

I smiled as we walked outside. Across from the Enigmatta, a marble building stood tall. Flags waved in the wind, bold and red. They carried images of an executioner swinging an ax. I pointed at the guild, “So uh, who are they?”

Kessiah whistled, “They’re the inquisitors. Not very friendly. They pretend that they’re the police force for Schema. More often than not they work like gangsters.”

A spitting sound came out of Kessiah's intercom, "If I could, I'd spit at them. They just extort the locals. Their leeches"

Althea pointed at the agents of Schema, "What about them?"

Kessiah sighed, "I want to hate them, but there's really no reason too. The agents of Schema are basically the preliminary guild for Speakers. They're diplomats for Schema's cause basically."

I nodded, "Ohhh, ok."

Kessiah pointed towards a castle beside the Enigmatta's tent, "That's the worst of them all though. They call themselves the Empire."

My eyes narrowed, "The Empire?"

Kessiah waved her hand in disgust, "They're just a bunch of pompous, self-righteous, wannabee royalty. The only thing kingly about them is their egos. They won't listen to you unless you suck their dick the entire time your talking. Hard to talk like that."

I grimaced, "Well, Schema's ok with them."

Kessiah scoffed, "Yeah, they're a strong faction. They're probably the second strongest faction on Giess."

We walked forward, people walking out from around us. Althea patted her thighs, "Who's the strongest?"

Kessiah pointed her hand at the building in front of the empire's castle,

"Them. The Soldiers of Fortune."

That's who Selesha talked about earlier. I took a mental note on them as Kessiah continued, "They're higher level than most, that's for sure. They're just a bunch of

mercenaries that clear dungeons for a price. Their motto is, 'Better to pay in credits than in blood.'"

I shrugged, "Most of the time its true."

Kessiah nodded, "And they charge an arm and a leg for it too. I worked for them for a while till one of my assigned teammates tried slitting my throat while I was asleep. Needless to say, it didn't work out for him."

Althea leaned towards Kessiah, "Why'd he do that?"

Kessiah rolled her eyes, "He didn't like how I talked to him or something. He was ridiculous."

Althea nodded, "What did you say?"

Althea and Kessiah chatted away about who said what. I wasn't one for gossip, so I looked around. I peered at the Soldiers of Fortune. Their base was more like a bar, panels of glass showing the inside.

People sat at tables, chomping away at meats and drinking brews. A few hired espens served and prepared the drinks and meats for them. They paid them in credits for cheap labor probably.

These espens served all kinds of food to all sorts of species. The inside oozed a sense of comradery, everyone laughing and telling stories together. They talked over odd but catchy music that flowed out from inside. For alien music, it didn't sound bad.

It looked pretty fun honestly.

An electronic touchscreen plastered itself along the back wall. Pictures and descriptions showed along it. A few members read from this display, interacting with the interface. One of the posts rewarded a member with several red dungeon cores for completing it.

I turned towards Althea and Kessiah, "Hey, can anyone finish the assignments or do you have to be a part of the guild?"

Kessiah looked up, “You want to do work? We just got here.”

I rolled my eyes, “It’s a great way to explore and see what’s going on here.”

She looked back to Althea, “Knock yourself out. You won’t receive full payment, but they’ll give you a slice.”

I turned to Althea, “You want to come with me?”

Althea shook her head, “I want to go see some shops. I have all this money, might as well spend it.”

Kessiah put her arm over Althea’s shoulders, “That’s more like it! Come on, let’s get you some drinks. I passed by a place right over there.”

I waved them off as Kessiah gushed about where to spend for what. I walked into the base of the soldiers, ducking under an archway. As I stepped in, people stared at me. I walked forward with a casual trot, keeping to myself.

As I passed by the bar, I reached the touchscreen. I clicked the accept button on the red dungeon core contract. I almost turned around, but someone stood too close. If I turned right now, I’d bump them. I turned my head,

“Hey, can you give me some space?”

It was a stocky, gray humanoid. A pot belly bulged from underneath his plated armor. He didn’t have a helmet on his thorny face. Based on how ugly he was, he should’ve.

Two slanted eyes stared up at me and narrowed into splits. He pointed around,

“Why are you going around putting a debuff on everyone here? Who do you think you are?”

I looked around, finding several other aliens staring at me. I shook my hand, “It’s not a debuff. I’m too heavy. I spread my weight out using skills.”

He laughed, “So you’re too heavy for the floor? What are you, a fighter?”

I nodded, “Yup. Are you going to get out of my way?”

The weird ogre guy frowned at me, “Is that a threat?”

I looked away, facepalming my helmet. This 8-foot goblin was too close to me, his breath getting on my face. He was used to shaking people down. In my mind, this guy was testing me. I didn’t want to take it personally. Even then though, this was an excellent introduction to the guild.

Real classy.

Before I did anything else, I analyzed him.

Khan Mar(Level: 1,568 | Species: Bellop | Faction: Soldiers of Fortune/The Empire) – A far-off illegitimate child of royalty within The Empire, Khan leveraged a few strings to get to where he is. He never wasted his opportunities, however, and this lets him far exceed the merits of his birthrights within the empire. Using gunplay and grappling, he kites enemies, using premade gear as cc tools.

He’s no match for you given his level, though he is by no means incompetent.

I looked back at him, knowing all I needed to know about him,

“Look, I’ve got shit to do. I explained myself already. I didn’t have to do that. Let me leave.”

Khan shook his head, the smell of booze on his breath. It leaked in through my suit. I hated the smell. It reminded me of my dad. Khan patted a gray pistol on his hip, red light glowing along it. With a sleight of hand, he unholstered the gun and pointed it at my knee,

“I won’t say this twice. Cut that aura off, now.”

I shrugged, “If I do, I’m going to wreck this place. My feet are going right through this nice floor.”

He adjusted his grip on his pistol. With only two fingers and thumb, it looked strange.

“Not my problem.”

I put my right hand on his shoulder, “Look, I’m walking out right now-“

He clicked the trigger.

Chapter 152: To Clear an Infestation

A spark of heated, red plasma melted through my gray armor. It left no mark on my actual skin beneath it. The gray goblin pulled at me, thrusting a palm at my elbow joint. He couldn’t budge me. I glanced down, seeing the plasma. If someone peeked through the whole, they might figure out my identity. That was a much more pressing concern than this guy’s attacks.

With a flick of my wrist and a clasp of my hand, I pulled the plasma off. I crushed my gray suit over the gap at the same time, keeping me hidden. The plasma splattered onto Khan’s knee, singing through his bulky armor.

He let go of me, taking a step back. He howled, his pain resistance unlevelled. Three of his buddies unholstered their own weapons at me. I stomped my foot on a telekinetic pad. It transferred the force of the stomp three different ways.

The three waves of force jerked the guns out of his fellow mercenary’s hands. The smallest of the three, an Enigmatta by the look of his suit, caught his finger on the trigger. The gun broke his shoulder out of socket. He gasped, but like a trooper, he grabbed his arm and put it back in place.

Without their weapons, they glared at me but couldn't do anything else. With that handled, I looked down at Khan. The plasma ate away at his knee. His howls could've stripped the paint off the walls.

I shook my head, pulled off the plasma with a bit of magic. I swirling the blob of plasma, condensing it into a ball. I turned towards the bar, pulling out the liquid from the mercenary's drinks. I funneled it over the plasma ball, a wave of steam pluming up.

A blue fire exploded from the plasma ball, the alcohol and other parts of their drinks burning up. It siphoned into the gravity well, creating a mini orbit before bleeding away. It all looked like a magic trick.

I walked up and tore a shoulder pad from Khan's armor. I bent the metal over the still hot ball of plasma. It cooled enough that the metal held up. I tore off Khan's other shoulder pad. I put the plate on the bar then the steel ball on top of it. I leaned over towards Khan,

"You have a drinking problem."

I reached out a hand, flicking him in the nose. His face whipped backward, a bone breaking. He flopped onto his back, unconscious but okay. He'd wake up with a headache, but that was about it thanks to Schema's healing. I stood back up. I looked around, all eyes on me. I put up a hand,

"Are you guys sure it's ok for me to leave now, or does someone else have to shoot me in the knee? No? Good."

I stepped over Khan and walked out of the guild. From my experience just now, it was more like a shitty pub. As I stepped out, a hand grabbed me from behind. I turned around, utterly pissed off. In my mind, with good reason.

It was another Soldier of Fortune. It was an espen, his amphibian hair tail flowing down his back. Unlike the other espen, his black skin had white marks down his neck. They shaped like rhombuses, but his amber eyes were the same.

What caught my eye were the scars on his face. That and his title.

Iasis Klon, Bloodwielder(lvl 5,000 | Head of Icosah Branch, Soldiers of Fortune

I tensed up without meaning too. He might know my titles and status at such a high level. He frowned at me, disappointment spread out on his amphibian features,

“Hey. I’m sorry about Khan. He’s an asshole once he starts drinking. He’s never done anything like that.”

I rolled my eyes in my helmet. I moved Iasis’s arm off my shoulder, “I’m sure.”

Iasis sighed, looking back and forth on the street, “I get it. This wasn’t the best first impression by any means. You can walk away anytime. It’s just...I saw you walk in and take that contract.”

Iasis stood up, spreading out his carbon fiber covered hands, “No one, and I mean no one has taken that contract. Period. You just walked in and took it like it was nothing. If you’re as good as you look, we could use a guy like you in our ranks.”

I shook my head, “Yeah, but I don’t really need you guys is the thing.”

Iasis bit his lip. He scoffed, “Ok, you got me there. Here’s the thing. We can offer you more than just extra money. Don’t take this in the wrong way, you look a bit stiff.”

I raised an eyebrow, “How so?”

Iasis rolled his shoulders, jostling a white rifle on his back, “You’re all uptight. You look new here, am I right?”

I didn’t answer. Iasis raised a finger at me, “I knew it. You look green.” He pointed at his chest, “I can help you out in more ways than one. For instance, keeping your identity hidden-“

I leaned over him, “Are you trying to blackmail me?”

He leaned back, waving his hands, “Oh no, not all C-138. I know a good investment when I see one. If anything, I’m trying to win you over before someone else does. Threatening you is like trying to threaten Yawm. It’s bad business.”

I looked around. The street buzzed with activity, people passing by. No one came near us though. I turned towards Iasis, “Ok, you’ve got my attention.”

He balled up a fist, “Yes! Trust me, you won’t regret giving my offer a chance. Look, I can get you to the capital-” He snapped his fingers,

“Just like that. You’re a big name. That has to be where you’re headed.”

I raised an eyebrow, though he couldn’t see under my helmet,

“And if I am?”

Iasis put a hand on his chest, “I can get you there. I can get you talking to some other big names and get you going in a good direction. Before I do that, I need you to do me a favor though.”

I sighed, “What is it?”

Iasis opened his status. He flipped it towards me, showing a contract. He pointed at it, “This is the contract you accepted. See, this is about clearing some silvers nearby.”

Iasis spread out an arm, “There’s been a problem here recently though. Plots of silvers have been popping up everywhere. Nobody knows who is doing it or why. My job is to clean the mess up though. That’s where you come in.”

I crossed my arms, “I get rid of the silvers, you give me some insider connections?”

Iasis nodded, “You got it.”

I scoffed, “So I don’t get any rewards for the contracts I complete, and you let your superiors know about a promising new candidate? I’m not buying what your selling.”

Iasis's eyes narrowed, "You know I can reveal your identity at any moment?"

I leaned over him, my shadow looming, "I killed the world eater, Yawm of Flesh. He set horizons on fire. He cleaved through dimensions with the spear of a sentinel...He betrayed Etorhma and harvested his tears."

I generated a gravity well in Iasis's head. I pulled enough that his eyes sunk into his skull a bit. His eyelids widened as I continued,

"His legend ended with the beginning of mine. You think I couldn't kill you? Try me."

I held him there for a second before letting him go. I patted his shoulder harder than I needed too, "Take care."

I turned and walked away. Iasis stumbled, falling down. He pressed his fingers on his skull, checking for damage. I left him there, reading the contract I accepted.

A Plague's Beginning(lvl 3,500 requirement, lvl 4,000 Recommended| Recommended Party Size: 4 | Tier: B-) – Throngs of silvers have been spreading in innocuous locations near Icosah. Clear these discovered locations to receive a reward.

Reward: 10 Red Dungeon cores. Goodwill with Giess increased.

The quest looked pretty solid. Ten dungeon hearts amounted to quite a bit of skill points, which would let me fill out my trees much faster. It was something to do while the others goofed off in town. Gaining a few levels would be a nice bonus too.

With that in mind, I opened my status. After selecting the quest, marks appeared on my minimap. They showed areas infected by the silvers. With a clear goal, I walked towards the infected spots. As I did, I passed by the shopping section of Icosah.

I checked everything out, trying to get a grasp on what markets were like here. The standard shops were sprinkled about like clothing, food, and general stores. Far more fanciful shops showed up too though.

Alchemy, Charged mana stones, even wizardry classes, this place had it all. More tech-oriented shops were few and far between. That suited this place since they relied on the magical more than the mechanical. After skimming the titles, I marked a few bookstores and the wizarding lesson classes. They might be useful later.

As I walked out of Icosah, the same abrupt tree line appeared. I glanced along its edge. A faint, crumbling road weaved into the forest line. Lush greenery almost consumed the brick path. Once Schema arrived, walking along these roads became obsolete. Now the ruins were all that remained.

I walked on it, enjoying the aesthetic. After about five minutes, I ran. Why waste time, right? With that mentality, I neared the first spot of silvers on my map.

As I did, a line of metal appeared in my vision. The same metal grass and trees popped up. They refracted light, showing a desolate landscape. Well, bleak for normal life. The silvers thrived. They squirmed, writhed, and all crept along every surface.

I wondered why the magical wildlife wasn't fighting the silvers like on the large, natural borders. I noted that in my memory for later.

When I stepped on the geometric metal, my foot clanked on the steel. Three gray humanoids peaked around a sharp scissor tree. They were the same creatures floating in yellow eggs on that toxic ocean. Long tongues, no eyes, and limbs bent out of shape, they were straight out of a horror movie.

I didn't have a reason to be scared of horror movies though. They charged at me as I analyzed them.

Merject(lvl 1,276 | Classification: Silvers) – Merjects are physically imposing creatures. At first glance, they're terrifying beyond measure. Their odd movement patterns make them difficult to hit. They blend into their surroundings as well, further enhancing their elusive qualities.

This sense of stealth synergizes with the metallic tongues they use as weapons. Within their bodies is a concentrated mixture of arsenic, mercury, and pollutants. They squeeze their abdomens with powerful abdominal muscles, injecting this cocktail into their victim's mouths. Espens refer to this as, 'The kiss of death.'

Despite the romanticized name, the process is disgusting to behold. Based on your levels and titles, they should fear you.

I grinned, expanding Event horizon over the grayscape. Thousands of notifications appeared in my exp inbox as I did. It was probably insects of all varieties. When Event Horizon reached the merjects, they quivered. From their disgusting tongues, purple gunk oozed out.

They ran towards me despite their agony. One of the merjects jumped from the top of a metal spire. As it reached me, I caught its head in my hand. The animal jittered around, limbs flailing with abandon. Black claws scraped my gray armor, leaving marks. I squashed its head in my hand. The skull squished between my fingers. It was like a shell of ice over water.

A purple slop stuck on my hand as I dropped the corpse. The other silvers scrambled on their feet, turning away to run. I raised an eyebrow. They really were different from eldritch. Eldritch almost never ran, at least not at the death of one of their own.

These things weren't getting away though. I charged mana, walking towards them. They disappeared in a cluster of trees, using the metal as cover. A minute later and I unleashed a gravitational singularity on the hellish place.

The kinetic impact rippled out a shockwave, pieces of metal flying in all directions. I cracked my knuckles, walking into the ashen blot. After covering the area with Event Horizon, the marking on my mini-map dissipated. I grinned at the job. It took fifteen minutes for one mark. I'd clear the fifteen spots within four hours.

I fell into a state of mind as I took on the job. I worked with efficiency, plotting out the shortest complete path for clearing the infestations. The silvers rewarded good exp for their level because of how viral they were. One silver could spread to an entire continent after all.

With that in mind, I traversed through the jungle. I obliterated one silver patch after the other. The strange, alien shapes made it easy. They weren't familiar at all. Compared with killing the zombies from Yawm's plague, this was a cakewalk.

I breezed through the process, reaching the last spot after only three hours. I got better at it as I went. I cleared out the outer ring of the final outbreak. It took far longer than the other areas. This was because of how damn big this silver patch was.

At its center, a viscous lake of muck swayed. I peered at its depths, using Hunter of Many to get an idea of what I was looking at. I squinted my eyes, using the waves of gunk as a reference for what laid beneath. Using the skill, I scoped out a mental image after a few seconds.

Beneath the waves, something monstrous stirred. It shaped itself like a dragon of sorts. Based on what it was in, it loved grime. I walked up to a long barb of metal. I pulled it up, the metal squealing as it split. I aimed at the creature, throwing my spear into the pool.

Wind burst out as the javelin drilled down. It sunk into the side of this monster. The beast shook, raising itself from the abyss. It lifted a massive figure from the slop. The lake convulsed, waves of slime-spewing to the surface.

As the monster spread its wings, I stared agape,

“What the hell?”

Chapter 153: What Once Was

The beast was a living mess. Its broad wings, once beautiful, flapped with holes throughout them. Pieces of its skull showed, patches of its skin missing. The pollution ran out of its mouth, its needle teeth still white despite years of decay.

As the slop fell from its form, the beast revealed black skin littered with yellow patterns. It matched the surface of a poisonous dart frog with the same flowing patterns of color. Despite the decomposition, I could tell this was once a noble creature.

Why? It was a fucking dragon.

Well, sort of. It lacked scales, but everything else seemed there. It even had a bit extra. These disgusting, orange worms writhed under its skin. They reached the surface on the missing patches of skin of the monster. These orange tendrils gripped and shifted like a muscle, moving this leviathan.

As it scrambled from the lake, two orange tentacles burst from its rotting eyes. The ends of these appendages opened, revealing eyes. It looked like a snail invaded a

dragon's head and burst out from the inside. These eyes looked at me, blinking in curiosity.

It was revolting.

It sniffed the air before wrenching out a geyser of purple muck. With a quick jolt, I molded Event Horizon around the monster, condensing the aura. It howled as I charged my mana and analyzed it.

Yana cluster, living hiveflesh(lvl 5,923) – Once a proud member of the gialgathens, this poor creature succumbed to the silvers. A specialized, parasitic worm, the yana, invaded the gialgathen's brain. The yana slowly ate its way through the gialgathen's body. The yana creates a living muscular system in place of the previous one, each worm acting as a muscle fiber.

This horde of yana operates as a single unit, like a hive of bees on Earth. They protect the husk, using its form and previous abilities in life.

This would typically be an impossible creature to defeat at your level. Given your unusual circumstances, it should prove a worthy challenge. Enjoy the battle.

I grinned at the message. It was like Schema knew me. The yana cluster turned towards me, wearing the gialgathen's body. It opened its mouth, gushing out more filth. I grimaced. This was like seeing a lion covered in thousands of ticks. Even in its ruined condition, I could see fragments of what it once was.

It tilted its head, the orange tentacles staying level. This alien monster scrambled towards me, snapping its jaws. Unable to charge enough mana, I unleashed a gravity well on one of the eyeballs. The pulling force imploded the organ, orange blood gushing out of it.

It howled. An unearthly ringing rattled through me. I covered my ears with armor. The creature's roar still crippled me. I took a deep breath, steeling myself. I shook off vertigo, finding my balance. The beast reached me, snapping its jaws.

I slammed my feet into the ground, sending out a shockwave of kinetic energy. I pulled in my mass, swinging my fist over my head. The dragon chomped down from above, but my fist made contact. With the force of a tank bullet, my fist slammed into its nose.

The monster's head crashed into the metal ground. A wave billowed through the steel floor, cracking the perfect sheet. With bones broken, the one remaining tentacle eye looked up at me. I pulled up my fist, covered in orange slush. I thundered,

“Come on. Is that it?”

The bizarre eye widened, pulling away. The main body pulled away, leaving its crushed snout. From the broken jaw, thousands of orange worms crawled out. They squirmed over me, like moving strings of jelly. They opened mouths lined with teeth, biting into my armor.

Within seconds, they sheared through the metal. Once they reached my actual skin, a nasty surprise popped up. My own armor drilled into the soft bodies, draining them in seconds. They squealed for mercy. I gave it none. After absorbing the bottom jaw, I charged towards the main body.

Its tactics changed. Instead of rushing at me, the four-legged creature stared. It waited for my arrival. When I reached it, the monster lobbed out a plume of purple slop from its throat. I put a bubble of antigravity over me, resisting the disgusting ass liquid.

The high pressure continued, an endless barrage of toxic chemicals spewing. It vomited up so much filth that I pushed back from the force of it. Curious, I stomped my foot on the ground. The vibration gave me a mental image of the battlefield. I used my unique skill Knowledge Maker. It gave me photographic memory.

Using that tool, I inspected the image of the battlefield in detail. The yana hive had put its tail in the lake behind it. It siphoned the mush from the pool, undulating body to pump the goo at me.

I burst a portion of my health, creating a strong gravity well above the yana's head. The well snapped its snout up, changing the direction of the poisonous sludge. I dashed towards it, the metal beneath my feet crumbling.

I leaped towards the creature, slamming my fist into its torso. The corpse disintegrated, but the worms underneath held. They rippled outwards, dispersing the force. Like a whip, the kinetic power of my hit reached its arm. It slung a rotten set of claws at me.

They snapped against my skin, but the worms struck like a wall of steel. I sliced through a pillar of metal, the gray column erupting a squeal. I crunched into the metal ground. I pulled myself out of the iron, my arms and legs popping out.

As I stood up, the yana cluster scrambled towards me. I spit out a bit of blood from my mouth before clanking my fists together. I laughed at the monster, walking out of my pit. It sliced a paw at me, but it whipped its tail at the same angle.

The slice of the paw was a feint. I ignored it, catching the tail it sliced at me from a different angle. I dragged along the ground, keeping on my feet. I absorbed the momentum of the strike, catching the tail. I grinned. The fight was over.

I created a powerful gravity well right underneath me. It kept me pinned as I lifted the yana up with all my strength. The tail shot sideways, dragging the giant monster in a circle. I wasn't strong enough to just fling it around like a ragdoll yet, however. At least not with just my raw strength.

Juggling multiple magics, I created gravity wells beside the yana. These wells assisted my swinging motion. The monster clamped its claws into the metal, resisting the dragging force. The metal caved, bending as the beast howled.

One claw popped off. Two more snapped. A few seconds of struggling and the monster's grip ceased. It slung through the air, colliding with high pillars of metal. Hunks of its rotten body fell apart. More of the orange yana revealed themselves, the horde of mouths writhing.

I swung this giant in circles, gaining centrifugal energy. Like a tornado, the monster went slack before I lifted it up into the air. The yana cluster thrashed before impacting the metal ground.

A cataclysmic boom echoed out, a wave of force sending debris in all directions. A wave rippled through the metal, like an earthquake. Thousands of the worms burst, exploding from sheer pressure. It gurgled on its orange blood, the monster writhing in agony.

I jumped up, lifting myself with gravity magic. After several hundred feet, I dived down at the monster. I pulled myself down with magic, enhancing my fall. Seconds passed, and my speed mounted. The wind's friction heated my armor as I gained momentum.

As I reached the monster, I crashed into it like an asteroid. The worms disintegrated, already weakened by Event Horizon. I pierced through the beast, leaving a crater in the metal beneath it. I lifted myself up, brushing off whitened pieces of broken steel.

I glanced down, the point of impact glowing. I looked around, and the worms scrambled in random directions. I obliterated most of them. Now they weren't acting like one creature. That weakened them, and I watched Event Horizon sap them away into nothing.

A notification appeared, showing the completion of the quest.

A Plague's Beginning(lvl 3,500 requirement, lvl 4,000 Recommended| Recommended Party Size: 4 | Tier: B- | Status: Completed) – You've eliminated the throngs of silvers outside of Icosah's borders. Reap your rewards.

Reward: 10 Red Dungeon cores. Goodwill with Giess increased.

Quest Completion Speed: S+ Tier.+3 red dungeon cores.

Thoroughness of Quest Completion: S+ Tier. +3 red dungeon cores.

Casualties and Collateral Damage: 0 dead and 0\$. -0 red dungeon cores.

Giess Affinity +25

I raised an eyebrow at the affinity scoring. I opened my status, checking for affinities. I found a few.

| Affinities |

Earth: 106,090 – You are a legend whispered by children and adults alike. A paragon of what humanity is capable of, you've positioned yourself as the savior of your world. Your status is akin to a god by some, and respect is the least you've earned.

remnants: (-5,087) – By killing Korga Ryker, you’ve destroyed one of the most prominent figures in mainstream remnant culture. This gives you a villain status when compared with most, though your skill against Yawm leaves you feared.

Porytians: 12,455 – You’ve erased one of the banes of porytian history, cementing your status as a hero. Your wisdom and cunning are also appreciated for slaying Ajax, a hard but necessary choice in the eyes of the porytians.

Giess: 25 – You’re looked at as an outsider, but one with potential.

Humans: 106,090 – Many view you as an idol, a figure higher than humanity. When someone boasts of the human’s potential and abilities, your name is the first example on their lips.

Eltari: 10,089 – You’ve freed them from their planet and given them a new home to flourish in. This gives you great status as one of the heroes of their people. Your condition as a cultural symbol is absolute.

Eldritch: 455 – Lesser eldritch fear you. To the eldritch, fear is the closest thing you’ll gain that resembles respect.

Unknowns: 2,783 – By erasing Yawm from existence, you’ve bolstered the overall reputation of unknowns everywhere. When someone is defending the status of unknowns, you are one of the examples to make their case.

Etorhma: 10,003 – By slaying Yawm, you’ve gained status as one of Etorhma’s most potent avatars. Those that worship him will know your name, and they will whisper it when they speak of Etorhma’s power.

It shocked me how many affinities I had with various groups. Before I finished reading, a blue square appeared in the air. From it, the overseer walked out. He glanced around, peering down at me,

“Weren’t you taller the last time I saw you?”

I closed my status and shrugged, “Eh, I was drawing too much attention.”

He waved a hand, leaving a trail of white energy in the air, “Ah, a significant concern given your circumstances. Excellent work here. This could’ve exploded into a much more serious problem without intervention. Keep it up, Harbinger.”

I grinned, “Oh don’t worry about that.”

The white energy concentrated into sixteen spheres. The overseer took his hand and tapped two fingers together before pointing his finger at me, and the dungeon hearts floated around me. He waved goodbye, “I’d love to chat, but I’ve business to attend to.”

I nodded, “Same. Good luck.”

He stepped through his portal. As he did, the cores dropped onto the ground. I bent over, picking them up and absorbing them. As I absorbed the cores, I placed all the points into constitution instead of endurance. At this point, the difference in raw power attracted me more than mana regen. After I finished my attribute points, I opened my skills menu. I put all the points into Force of Nature.

This gave me enough tree points for my current tree, Legendary. After investing into it, a notification appeared.

Many choose to dilute their strength over many studies. You’ve chosen an opposite path, relishing in the power of specialization. Mastery isn’t your aim. You wish for absolute supremacy.

Legendary(Tier 1) unlocked! +20% to the effect of legendary skills.

It was a simple but effective tree. I lifted my left hand, creating a well of gravity. It molded easier and stronger than before. I nodded, satisfied with the tree’s result. I opened Force of Nature, curious about its increased effects.

Force of Nature(lvl 2,068) – You are nature-given fury. Enhances all techniques and application of skills within this ability, including but not limited too: Close Range Combat, Runic skills, Telekinesis, Gravitation, Sensory Abilities, Bearing, and Draining Abilities.

Bonus Attributes: 240 Strength, 240 Dexterity, 96 Constitution, 96 intelligence, 48 Perception. +24 to all attributes for having a 2,000 total in a legendary skill.

Ability Bonus: +180%

Mana Cost Reduction: 36%

The awards stacked up. The attributes helped round out my build a bit. The real money makers were the ability bonus and mana cost reduction. They enhanced my abilities dramatically. Making the gravitational singularities would be more natural now for instance.

After reading through those bonuses, I checked out my cipher enhancements next.

[Modifications – The dimensional fabric composing this structure has been modified with code from the dimensional cipher. With mana, further bonuses can be applied. The bonuses are as follows:

+72 Strength

+72 Dexterity

+6,080 Endurance

+100% to effect of legacies

+3,040 Willpower

+50% to internal motivation]

As usual, the cipher never disappointed me. The sheer volume of free stats really mounted at this point, and my build was snowballing out of control. With all that finished, I finally checked out my status.

Dimension-C138(Level 5,653)

Strength – 5,902 | Constitution – 10,352 | Endurance – 42,195

Dexterity – 2,349 | Willpower – 24,133 | Intelligence – 8,767

Charisma – 832 | Luck – 2,943 | Perception – 931

Health: 7.15 Million/7.15 Million | Health Regen: 16.8 Million/min or 280,637/sec

Stamina: 4.60 Million/ 4.60 Million | Stamina Regen: 66,268/sec

Living Dimension: 1.03 Trillion/4.30 Trillion

Mass: 484,310 pounds(220,427.5 kilos~) | Height: Actual -12'4(3.76 meters) Current – 9'10

Damage Res – 98.5% | Dimensional Res – 49.25%

Phys Dam Bonus – 533,147% | Damage Bonus – 40%

Event Horizon – 20,000 + (100% of your total health)/min

My attributes crawled up over time. The main difference was in my physical damage. It and my mass increased by over a tenth. With the status work handled, I jogged back towards the village. Halfway there, I realized something.

My disguise was in tatters.

I facepalmed. Of course it was. I just fought a level 5,000 monster. There wasn't really armor on the galactic market that could handle that kind of stress. I opened my status, sending Torix a message on what happened. Within minutes, he replied,

Torix Worm, of Darkhill(lvl 5,000 | Guild: Harbinger's Legion | Time: 7:34 P.M. 0/25/31) – Ah yes, of course....you destroyed your armor within the first day. Fret not! I made sure to pack dozens of extras. Do be more careful, if that is at all possible.

I laughed at the message. Torix knew me like the back of his hand. The letter uploaded a few coordinates into my mini-map. I followed them, reaching a ravine two miles from the village. Bushes lined the top of it, and a sunset glowed in the distance. I waited by watching the creek flowing in the middle of the ravine.

Bubbles of glowing, blue mana rose from the ground. Fish swam up from the crystal clear water, gobbling up these bits of mana. Every once in a while, birds swooped down and tried their luck at catching one. About five minutes into watching the spectacle, Torix walked out of a portal.

He turned towards me, brushing himself off,

“Ah, good to see you’ve been fighting giant monsters. I told the others you wouldn’t relax a single moment while here. You didn’t rest while on Earth. Why would Giess be any different?”

I raised an eyebrow, “What? I relax all the time. I was just watching some fish.”

Torix rolled his eyes, “While waiting for me. Otherwise, you’d be finished with this quest and hunting for more.”

I shrugged, “Why waste my time?”

Torix pulled a gray ring from his robe, tossing it at me, “The classic saying of a workaholic.”

I caught the disc while standing up. I tore my broken armor off, setting the new exosuit on my chest. It formed over me, an exact replica of the previous ones. Torix pointed at the portal,

“Want a shortcut back to the village?”

I grinned, "Of course."

I walked through the black portal and back into the town square. Far more people walked outside than before, most of them espen. The amphibians were made every color of the rainbow. At the same time, all of them followed a simple pattern of appearance.

Their skin was one color except for the patterns running down their sides. They all had amber eyes. Lastly, their hair was mostly a tail colored like their pattern and skin shade mixed together.

They all wore some mixture of leather and carbon nanofiber. Mist covered some parts of them, and they showed more skin than people would in the same weather. All in all, they were interesting to look at.

Torix leaned towards me, "They're actually nocturnal for the most part. That's why we saw none of the natives prancing around. If you think of their biology--"

I cut in, "They'd avoid light since it would dry them out. It probably stresses the mana requirements for their mist clouds too."

Torix raised an eyebrow, "Ah, are you doing research as well?"

I shook my head, "Not yet. Just observations."

Torix pointed at Althea and Kessiah walking out of a wizarding shop, "Then observe the change there as well."

I cupped my chin, "Ah yes, noted."

Althea wore a flowing garment, something that covered her but showed her curves. It looked like something worn in the desserts back on earth. She kept a veil over her face, showing the outline of her features and her eyes. I couldn't make out her face through it though, even with my sharp sight.

Kessiah wore a tighter outfit, more fitted to her figure. She wore a veil too, keeping herself covered. Unlike Althea, Kessiah didn't let her hair flow down her back. My guess was because of the white color, and her height would give away her remnant status.

I waved at them, and they walked over. As the lovely ladies reached us, I smiled under my gray helmet at Althea,

"You look stunning."

Kessiah put a hand on her chest, "Oh thank you, darling."

Althea rolled her eyes, "Thanks. Torix said something about replacing your armor?"

I nodded, "I finished off something called a yana cluster."

Althea raised both her hands, "Ew. Sounds pretty gross."

I raised my hands, waving my fingers, "Oh it was. A bunch of orange worms took over the corpse of a gialgathen."

Something grabbed my shoulder. As I turned around, a thin, lanky alien starred back at me. He had black pupils and pale green skin. His ornate robe was a mixture of furs from native wildlife. Behind him, two bodyguards held rifles in hand.

The lanky alien smiled at me, "Are you the stranger I've heard so much about? It's good to meet you. If you wouldn't mind, come this way?"

The bodyguards stiffened, grasping their rifles. The green alien squeezed my suit,

"The Empire would like a word with you."

Chapter 154: The Empire

I brushed the guy's hand off my shoulder, turning towards him, "So you're telling me you speak for the entire empire?"

The lanky green alien looked away from me, looking around at the guards, “Well, uhm, no. Not exactly.”

I waved my hand in a circle as I shook my head, “Then you’re talking for someone. Who is it?”

The lanky alien coughed into his hand, caught off guard. He must have expected the whole empire shtick to rattle me more than it did.

“I speak for, ahem, for Duchess Caprika. She is the duchess sent here for controlling this town. She told me to summon you.”

I scoffed, “Tell Caprika she needs better manners.”

The guards looked at each other. The lanky alien scratched his bald head, “Ok, so I must’ve given the wrong impression. I didn’t mean this meeting as a threat. In fact, I’m quite nervous. This is my first time speaking with someone Caprika spoke so highly of.”

I glanced at my friends. They shrugged. I turned back around, “Ok...I can accept that, though I have no idea why I’m so highly valued.”

The green alien raised a hand, “One of our scouts saw the devastation of your last mission.”

I nodded, “I guess that makes sense.”

The messenger waved his hands, “Let’s restart this. I’m Aric. I’m the assistant for Caprika. I’m her messenger for asking for your assistance with a task.”

I sighed, “And what would that be?”

Aric shrugged, “Caprika neglected any details, but suffice it to say, you will be generously compensated for your time.”

I turned towards the others, “You guys think this is a good idea?”

Kessiah waved at me as she turned around, “You do you. I’m going to bed. I’m tired after a long day of shopping.”

Althea looked away, “I could come if you want.”

I shook my head, “I was asking more so if it was a good idea rather than if you guys would come with me.”

Torix raised a finger, “If I might interject, I believe it is. The Empire owns over 12 worlds. Their reach is expansive, and when they say generous compensation, they mean it.”

I turned back towards Aric, “Alright, I’m game. I’ll see what it is that she wants. I need to turn in a quest first for the Soldiers of Fortune first though.”

Aric clasped his hands, bowing at me a bit, “Ah, they’ve already closed. If you’d like, we’ll accept the contract and pay you twice the share that they were offering. Think of it as a gesture of goodwill.”

I raised an eyebrow even though he couldn’t see under my helmet,

“Alright, I’m fine with that.”

Aric bowed, “Then I’ll take you to her if you wouldn’t mind leaving at this moment.”

I shrugged, “Yeah, sure. Why not?”

Torix walked up beside me, “I’ll accompany you. I enjoy watching your method of handling these types. I expect it to be amusing.”

Aric looked between us, “Then we’ll be off?”

We nodded, so Aric turned around and walked towards the Empire's guildhouse. His guards stayed beside him, so I tried analyzing them. I couldn't since their perceptions were too high. I activated my personal intercom system,

"Looks like their pretty high level."

Torix whistled, "They are indeed. Both of the guards are over level 2,500. We would disintegrate them at a moment's notice in combat, however. So far, we've nothing to worry about. I'll inform you if we do."

"Sounds good."

We paced up the castle. At the doorway, Aric pulled out a crimson card from his own galactic storage. A glowing panel beside the doorway passed a bright light across the red ticket. It blinked, and the wooden doors opened. It didn't look half bad.

The inside carried the same rustic appeal as the outer castle walls. Polished wooden beams supported tapestries and trophies from hunts. Spikes, teeth, skulls, claws, bones, scales, everything a creature can leave behind, they had it mounted up. They spaced everything out, making it look clean and dense but not cluttered.

As we walked through the bright hallway, we reached a split in the hall. At this split was an espen receptionist sitting at a desk. As ancient as the stone table was, a modern touchscreen display was at the receptionist's disposal. She wore a headset, several holograms over her eyes. I enjoyed the aesthetic, to be honest.

While I looked around, she looked up at us, her holograms dissipating. She smiled, her teeth sharp, "It's good to see you Chancellor Aric. What may I help you with?"

Aric smiled at her, his mouth full of horse teeth, "I'm here to show this warrior to Duchess Caprika."

The holograms appeared over the espens eyes. The receptionist typed into a projection, looking back up at us, "Caprika will be seeing you now. Do you need directions?"

Aric shook his head, "Of course not. Good day to you."

She sipped some kind of root juice from a mug, "Same to you. I hope he's better than the last candidate."

Aric's eyes widened, "You and me both."

He turned towards his left. We walked down the hallway, paintings and fancy jewelry set up for display. Alric raised a hand, looking back at us but still walking forward,

"For the sake of brevity, allow me to discuss some history with you. How much do you know of Giessen history?"

Torix answered for me, "Very little."

Aric nodded, looking back forward, "Then let me tell you some precursory knowledge. I neglected these details with the last promising candidate. He was made out to be a fool by Duchess Caprika. I don't wish for the same embarrassment for you."

I frowned, "So she likes humiliating people? Sounds like an asshole."

Aric coughed into his hand, "Acgh. Could you perhaps avoid referring to her with vulgarity?"

I figured I should be honest.

"No."

Aric scratched the back of his bald, green head, "Well, do as you wish. I will warn you, there may be consequences for speaking in such a manner to a Duke of the Empire."

I rolled my eyes, "I'll take my chances."

Aric sighed, “Very well then. It’s your life your risking. Anyways, I’ll give you a quick rundown of some relevant details. Giess is home to two primary sentient races. You’ve no doubt seen the espens. The gialgathens are much rarer, though equally prominent.”

I raised a hand, “Aren’t they large, four-legged, flying amphibians?”

“Ah, well yes.”

I lowered my hand, “Then I killed one earlier.”

Aric laughed, “That’s what the scout reported. Anyways, long ago, The espens and gialgathens fought one another. A gialgathen named Lehesion brought peace to both races. He’s now worshipped as a god by both races.”

Torix chimed in, “He’s much like Xyjalus Moranor of Deprima then.”

Aric raised a finger, “A perfect example of the same effect. A mortal becomes deified for accomplishing something extraordinary.”

We passed by several doorways as I cut on my intercom, “Who is Xyjalus Moranor?”

Torix turned to me, “He’s a magician from my home world. He’s quite famous across the galaxy for his deeds.”

“Why did you never mention him?”

Torix shrugged, “I was far too focused on what was happening in front of us. It’s quite difficult to discuss history while making it.”

I laughed, “Good point.”

Aric looked back and forth between us, “Are you two done speaking with one another?”

I closed my intercom, “Yeah.”

Aric looked forward, a bit miffed, “Anyways, since then the gialgathens and espens have lived in a relative harmony. Schema has done much to displace the previous balance of power.”

I interrupted, “You say anyways a lot.”

Torix nudged my elbow, “He does, doesn’t he?”

Aric sighed, “As I was saying, in honor of Lehesion, there is a tournament hosted across all nations. Each town hosts their own tournament, deciding on a single victor. These winners are sent to the capital, letting them battle one another. The victor is rewarded with a religious artifact of Lehesion.”

I nodded, “And Caprika needs somebody to go in there and represent the Empire?”

Aric turned down a corner of a hallway, “You’ve gotten it.”

We reached a set of golden doors. Literal gold, not sort of gold. I laughed at the ridiculousness of it. I turned to Torix. I spoke in a mock rich person’s accent,

“Oh, as you can see, they’ve spared no expense in their doorways.”

Torix picked up on the joke, making his own mocking voice,

“Oh most indubitably.”

I held out a pinky like I was holding tea, “The sheen is simply sumptuous.”

Torix did the same, “And the craftsmanship splendiferous, truly.”

I nodded, “Ah yes, truly.”

Aric let out a fake laugh, “Oh hah hah, you’re both hilarious. You should both straighten up your act. Beyond this door is Caprika’s meeting chamber. Here she will test you both.”

Torix raised a palm towards Aric, “Don’t mind us. We’re just having a bit of fun.” Torix turned back to me, “It’s rejuvenating to let loose after all these years.”

I grinned, “I know. At this rate, you might even make Kessiah laugh at some point.”

Torix waved away my concern, “I’m not a miracle maker, disciple.”

Aric tilted his head, his eyebrows creased,

“Caprika is a high ranking noble of the Empire. She can give you both tremendous status and many rewards. This is golden opportunity for you both. Take it seriously, or else you risk wasting Caprika’s time.”

I shook my head, “Here’s the thing. If she can’t handle being spoken to like an equal, I don’t think I’m the one wasting her time. She’s the one wasting mine.”

Aric raised both his hands, “The issue is in how the Empire handles these matters. You both are newcomers. Your status is the lowest of the low. To interact with royalty, you need humility. Not just in your wording, but in the language of your body.”

I stepped up, pushing open the doors, “I don’t plan on being disrespectful or anything. Relax.”

The doors opened, revealing a throne room. Above the archways, several overhead lights landed on a golden chair. Gems encrusted it, each of them charged with mana. On the seat, a giant, furred creature sat.

Its hair was white, and the mane covered everything besides its claws. She had a feminine figure, though pretty bulky. As she shifted, muscles rippled beneath the surface of her skin. She was a beast through and through.

A circular, red mask covered her face. Holes were bored into it. No light entered the mask, leaving her face darkened. She propped her head on her right arm, looking lazy and uninterested. With her left arm, she tapped her red claws on the throne, her boredom apparent.

I analyzed her,

Caprika Novas(lvl 5,000) – An actual member of the Empire’s origin species, the albony, Caprika is strong. Their species natural strength and sharpened senses enhance their overall cunning. Combine that with substantial investment in charisma, and the albony can be imposing, to say the least.

Being a member of the Empire, status represents everything to Caprika. That is why she was sent here. She failed an ascension mission for a ruling prince of the Empire. With no way of moving up, she’s become desperate and bored.

Her combat abilities don’t match yours. Don’t underestimate the threat she can pose given time, however.

I raised my eyebrows, “She’s more impressive than I thought.”

Torix nodded, “And a real albony in the flesh. It’s been centuries.”

Caprika sighed. She raised one finger, pointing at Aric, “Leave.”

Aric bowed, closing the doors.

With a relaxed and commanding voice, Caprika continued, “You are the warriors that the scout informed me of?”

I shook my head, pointing at my chest, “Not both of us, just me.”

Caprika looked me over, reading a status. Her claws stopped tapping on the throne. She sat up, leaning towards the invisible status in front of her. The albony looked between me and her screen. She leaned back into her chair,

“Interesting...It’s good to meet you, Harbinger.”

Chapter 155: Hiding

I bit my lip, turning on my intercom, “Are you serious? Does everybody know my identity?”

Torix shrugged, “I didn’t think you would be hidden forever anyways. Considering our overall fighting potential as a group, we don’t have much to worry about.”

I took a mental note of this. The next several hundred levels I gained would be invested into perception. Having everyone see through me wasn’t what I wanted here.

With that in mind, I turned off my intercom and sighed, “So you know who I am...Why could I read your status then? You obviously can hide it from me.”

Caprika scoffed, “I let you read it. It’s my way of being polite. It also sends a message.”

Caprika leaned forward, her claws crossed, “You’re not the only one who’s hiding out in the middle of nowhere. In my case, I’m trying to crawl my way back into the Empire’s upper echelons. Unfortunately, there are very few ways of making that happen when I’m stuck here.”

She pointed a claw at me, “That’s where a brute like you comes in.”

Torix tapped the right shoulder pad of his gray armor. His helmet slid off,

“And you want this lug to fight for you right? We’ve already heard about it from your assistant.”

I pressed my own right shoulder pad, sliding my helmet off my face, “Suddenly I’m a savage now?”

Caprika leaned against the left side of her throne. With her right arm, she clicked a transparent screen. Moments later, a giant video appeared. It was me fighting the yana cluster. Caprika laughed,

“You’re more than just a barbarian from some backwater world. You’re terrifying in combat.”

Caprika shook her head, her mane of hair rustling, “I couldn’t fathom it. Defeating a yana cluster...with your bare hands? You’re not just a freak. You’re a monster. It’s perfect for the tournament.”

I molded my actual black armor from my face, frowning at her,

“You’re doing a great job getting me to help you, especially that freak comment.”

Caprika leaned forward, “Is that your true species?”

Torix chuckled, “No wonder you believed he was a freak. You thought his metal skin was normal.”

Caprika leaned back in her chair, “To my knowledge, you’re the first human to ever leave earth. If it weren’t for that video circulating on the net, I wouldn’t have known what your species was.”

I shrugged, “I’m not a normal human, I can tell you that much.”

Caprika tapped her red mask, “Yet you’re surprisingly easy on the eyes. I imagined you’d be a hideous, deformed abomination.”

I rolled my eyes, “Good to know. So uh, I have shit to do. Let’s cut to the chase. What do I get for doing this tournament?”

Caprika clapped her hands, closing the video floating in the center of the room. She stood from her throne, a full seven feet tall,

“Access to the capital, information on enhancing several skills, and you’ll be fought over by several high tier factions. I will also give over the reward for the tournament itself. I don’t need or want for it. I’m after the recognition.”

Torix crossed his arms, “And what might that be exactly?”

Caprika walked down a few steps, getting surface level with us, “It’s a mythical compendium.”

Torix whistled. I looked back and forth between them, “What’s that?”

Torix shook his head, “It’s a manual that describes how to create a mythical skill from start to finish.”

I spread out my arms, “So why’s that so good?”

Torix raised his eyebrows, “Are you serious? Have you noticed that there are very limited guides on discovering skill trees?”

I nodded. Torix continued, “The reason is that the information is valuable. Very few people will give away that information for free. If they do, teaching the creation of skills can be an arduous task.”

Torix raised one hand, “For someone of your stature, fighting with your fists comes naturally. If you tried teaching me your techniques, it would take an eternity. I simply wouldn’t learn it in the same way that you would.”

Torix raised a finger, “If you gained a skill for fist-fighting, I might gain a skill for pugilism instead. That throws a wrench in the entire teaching process.”

Torix waved his hands, “This process can repeat many times. It makes teaching other people your skills nearly impossible.”

I frowned. That explained why no one ever asked how I made my legendary skill. Mimicking 45 of someone else’s abilities was a tall task. If someone learned one wrong

craft, the legendary skill wouldn't form. I never gave it any thought, but it made some sense.

I tapped my chin, "So if I tried learning Sword Fighting from someone, I might gain Blade Working instead. That's basically the hurdle behind teaching skills?"

Torix nodded, "Yes, precisely. Imagine if you taught Althea your own variation of fighting. Knowing how she battles, her skill would develop into Mauling or Beating."

I grinned, "That sounds like her."

Caprika sighed, "The point is that unless someone else's talents are just like yours, they end up with a different skill. A compendium attunes to someone's obelisk, generating the correct description to learn the skill."

I raised my eyebrows, "Are they made by Schema? It sounds like it."

Torix nodded, "It's a useful object for progressing your skills and trees. It deletes itself as you read it, so you can't use it more than once."

Caprika waved her hand, "I don't care for it. You fight for me, and I'll give you 100% of the tournament's reward. I won't demand a slice of the reward."

I frowned, "So why shouldn't I join without you?"

Caprika laughed, "You need to represent the branch of a guild in a town. Considering your attempts at hiding your identity, I doubt you want to represent the Harbinger's Legion."

Torix turned up at me, "She has a valid point. This is a good way of maintaining anonymity yet getting noticed at the same time."

I tapped my chin, "I'll do it then, but I need a few days to level some. My perception is too damn low to go into a tournament with high-level sentients."

Caprika walked up next to me, “The tournament is in two weeks. Does that sound like enough time?”

I nodded, “It’s plenty.”

I turned around, walking away, “Cya here two weeks from now.”

Torix grinned at her, “My associates and I will be monitoring this location in case you decide to betray us. Considering you’ve already spied on us, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

Caprika raised her palms towards us, “I’m no fool. You are the Killers of the World Eater. I know when to pick my battles.”

Torix jogged up, catching up to me. We slid back on our helmets, walking out of the room. I cut on my intercom, “Want some lunch after I speak with the chancellor guy?”

Torix shrugged, “Why not.”

We reached the receptionist’s desk. I opened my status, turning it towards the espen up front. It showed my contract, along with the reward of 250,000 credits. I grinned at her,

“Aric promised to double my reward for finishing this.”

The receptionist’s eyes went wide. She coughed into her hand, “Well, uh, we can arrange that. I’ll have Aric send that money from his own private savings. He made the promise after all.”

Torix laughed a bit, “As the old adage goes, you reap what you sow.”

After she showed us verification of the contract passing, we walked outside. I glanced at the bazaar beside the guilds,

“What can you eat?”

Torix shook his head, “My immortality came at a cost. For me, it was the pleasures of the flesh.”

We walked past a few restaurants, choosing a stand with noodles and fried creatures,

“You make it sound gross.”

Torix sighed, “If you analyze life, it is rather repulsive. All living things are essentially sacks of meat sustaining themselves with instincts.”

I shrugged, taking three squid looking things that were lodged on a stick,

“Well, I’d rather be the meat sack that lives than the meat sack that dies.”

I turned towards the outpost of the Soldiers of Fortune, “I’m picking up another quest real quick. We’ll meet outside of town.”

Torix nodded, “Hopefully you won’t break someone else’s nose this time.”

I walked off with the fried creatures in hand, “Let’s pray.”

When I walked into the outpost of the SoF, I noticed a change in atmosphere from before. No one stared, though I caught a few sideways glances. No one bothered me until I walked up, looking at the quest log. I tapped my chin, looking at several of the rewards.

The highest one gave eight red dungeon hearts. I took the quest. I was going down the line of the most significant rewards. When I turned around, the head of this guild branch was standing behind me. I put my hands on my hips,

“So how’d the blackmailing workout?”

The lithe espen facepalmed, “Can you keep quiet about that?”

I rubbed my fingers together, “Only if you pay the price?”

He paled for a second. I laughed, “I’m just joking, alright. At least you know what it feels like now, eh?”

He frowned, “You’re not here to make friends are you?”

I shrugged, “Only if they’re friends worth having...What do you want?”

Iasis scratched his forehead, “I’m acting in my position at the moment. The Soldiers of Fortune have a one in one out policy. You can’t take on multiple quests if you bit off more than you can chew.”

He waved his hands, “I understand you might want to change contracts since that deal you took takes a lot of hard work. You’re not a member of the guild, however. You can’t cancel taken contracts.”

He smiled, “Sorry about that.”

I put a hand on his shoulder, and with my other hand, I gestured to all of him, “You know, you’re like a petty villain that reports to his boss that he failed his mission. After that, the boss flips a switch and you fall into a pit of sharks. It kind of suits you since your face is so forgettable.”

I lowered my hands, “Nothing that you said matters. I already finished my previous quest. That little restriction doesn’t matter.”

He grimaced, “Really now? Can you prove it?”

I pointed at the quest log, “Surely there’s a passive system set up that prevents someone from taking all the contracts, right? I accepted this new contract already. It’s not on the quest log, is it? That proves I finished the other contract already.”

Iasis glanced back between the quest board and me. He pursed his lips, “I suppose.”

I tapped the side of my head, “Looks like you need to invest a few points into intelligence.”

I walked past him, patting his shoulder, “Hope my advice helps. Take care.”

I paced out of the guild, shaking my head at that guy. He tried pestering me. He walked away with a nasty burn. That’s what happens when you play with fire though.

I walked towards Torix and my meeting spot. I was already reading the next quest.

Worshippers of Emagrotha(lvl 3,200 requirement, lvl 3,800 Recommended| Recommended Party Size: 4 | Tier: B-) – Rumors have spread of a cult that worships Emagrotha, a gialgathen that committed war crimes in the past. Find and eliminate the influence of this branch of the sect.

Reward: 8 Red Dungeon cores. Goodwill with Giess increased.

The quest seemed pretty straightforward. Find some cult, get rid of them, then move on. With my food on a stick in hand, I reached Torix and my meeting spot. It was a solid mile outside of town, giving us some breathing room.

As I walked up, Kessiah, Althea, and Torix sat on logs around a green campfire. A thick, purple smoke waved up from the fire. I walked up and sat down on beside Althea. She smiled when I put a hand on her shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze.

Kessiah dragged her hands across her face, “Bones over here just told us that you’ve been discovered by two people already. You were even spied on.”

I pressed my right shoulder pad, my helmet sliding off, “It’s not like I’m a spy or something.”

Kessiah sighed, “Yeah, ok.”

Althea leaned onto my shoulder, “Looks like you already finished a quest though?”

I lifted the six-legged squid thing, biting into it,

“Yeah...It wasn’t hard. My skills suited it.”

As I chewed, several seasonings ran wild in my mouth. It tasted like the smell of cedar and cologne. The texture wasn’t squishy. It was chewy, like soft jerky. At the center of it was a savory gravy of sorts. From what I saw in the stall, the chef injected it with some sauce.

It was really, really good.

I chomped away while Torix sighed, “My lack of diligence led to one of those discoveries. To think there’s someone with resources like Caprika in Icosah. I won’t make the same mistake twice, I can assure you.”

I shrugged, “It isn’t like we designated you as our identity protection. Relax some. The guildsmen are underestimating us big time based on how they’re trying to blackmail us.”

Kessiah grimaced, “Which one tried blackmailing you?”

I rolled my eyes, “Some guy called Iasis. I shut him down pretty hard.”

Torix frowned, “While winning a verbal joust can be satisfying, be mindful of the long-term consequences.”

I scratched the side of my face, finishing my first skewer, “If I let him walk all over me, that has consequences too, doesn’t it?”

Torix pursed his lips, “Fair point. I suppose we can’t always live in fear.”

Althea grabbed one of my skewers. She bit into it. After chewing a bit, she looked up at me, “Sorry. you made it look good.”

I grinned, "It is. There's some sauce in the center though, so be ready for that. It can catch you off guard."

Kessiah grumbled, "Looks pretty good."

I bit into my last skewer, "Oh it is."

We chatted away before I finished my skewer. With that done, I stood up, "On to the next quest."

Kessiah raised an eyebrow, "Another one...Already?"

I rolled my shoulders, "I'm bored if I'm not doing something. I think it comes with high Willpower maybe?"

Torix raised an eyebrow, "What's the contract detail?"

I opened it, turning the quest log to Kessiah and Torix. They read it. Kessiah grabbed her legs and leaned back,

"I might know what the quest is talking about, actually."

I crossed my arms, "Really now?"

A slight grin traced up her lips, "Yeah, but it's going to cost you."

Althea giggled, "She need more spending money."

Kessiah shot Althea dirty look before glancing back up at me, "How about 50,000 credits?"

I shook my hand, "20, tops."

She waved a hand at me, “Cya then.”

I turned around, walking off. Kessiah stood up and grabbed my shoulder, “Wait, I’ll take 20k. By Baldowah you are hard to worm credits out of.”

I shrugged, “You’re pretty easy to read. You always overshoot your deals by a large margin. Simple as that.”

She scowled, “Ok, good to see you have faith in me. Anyways, I was talking with someone selling a few illegal poisons and firearms. He mentioned how a few locals walked in and bought a few trapping supplies.”

I frowned, “Anything else? Calling that a lead is a stretch.”

She nodded, “It would be, but I saw the same guys rummaging around through a few of the dumpsters behind several shops. It’s weird because they were these old looking espens. They wore the furs that most of the locals here wear. They were collecting tons of disgusting garbage.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Why would they be collecting garbage?”

Kessiah opened a hand, “I’ve already got you covered. I guess that they are the people spreading silvers. Why? They’re collecting silvers with the traps and keeping them alive with the garbage.”

She shrugged, “The two things fit together in my head at least.”

I sent Kessiah the credits, turning around and waving goodbye, “Thanks. Send me images of them if you have them.”

She looked at her inbox, grinning at the influx of money. She gave me a salute, “Aye aye, captain.”

I jogged back towards Icosah, making sure my face was covered. By the time I reached the city, Kessiah had sent me a few images of the espens. They wore brown rags,

blocking most of them besides their faces. Considering how different every espen looked, finding them shouldn't be difficult.

With that in mind, I walked around town, keeping to alleyways. I kept my senses sharp, looking for figures digging through garbage. While I did that, I opened my grimoire and focused on rewriting my cipher. Considering my need for perception, I decided on creating a rune for it.

As with all cipher inscriptions, the first step was understanding the concept. Unfortunately, I didn't understand perception as well as endurance. I dwelled on what understanding meant to me, but I couldn't get any meaningful answers.

All my ideas were pretty shallow. Thoughts like, 'Perception is knowing what's around you,' or, 'It's when you're not unaware.' These ideas weren't concrete. I didn't have any resolve behind the concepts. After two hours of thinking about it though, I came up with something decent.

Perception is comprehending all of something. It was the difference between seeing the picture of a mountain and being at one. The image gave you sight, but being there gave you all your other senses. The brushing of leaves, the cold wind, even the taste of dirt, that encompassed what a mountain was.

I'll admit, it wasn't a perfect translation of my ideas, but it was serviceable for now. For the next few hours, I carved the dimensional cipher into my grimoire. As I finished the text, a rustling occurred behind a machine shop nearby.

It was the perfect timing. I laid my palm onto the cipher, pouring mana into a black page while following the hooded figure. After another half hour of hounding the espen, he walked off into a nearby hut in the old part of town. After walking into his house, I felt like a stalker.

I scratched the back of my head, feeling like I wasted my credits on Kessiah's lead. Before I ended my search, I pulled my last ditch effort. I stomped the ground, giving me a trace of surroundings. Underneath the home of the espen, an underground trail led outside the town.

I stared at it, "There we go."

After a couple more stomps, I reached several miles out of the town. Surrounded by the forest, I arrived at a trench in the middle of the woods. It was crack in the earth, stretching for miles. At the bottom of it, a pool of water swelled.

I leaped into the abyss, grating my hands against sides of the cavern. I took a deep breath before plunging into the water. With no light around me, I sensed the different currents and heat fluctuations. Using these sensations with Hunter of Many, I got a vague idea where everything was.

I found a chain leading downwards. I grabbed it, letting myself sink deeper into this pit of water. the liquid thickened over time, turning into thick mud. After descending through a layer of clay, I reached a thinner pool of sludge. I existed in my suit engulfed by a thousand feet of gunk.

I held onto the chain the entire time. Whatever metal it was made of, it resisted rusting. It guided me downwards, making sure I never lost myself during my descent. That easy to do in this poison. It was the same sludge that the yana cluster sunk itself into.

I held back a gag, thanking Torix for my gray suit. It kept this harsh, toxic mush away from me. Thirty minutes of sinking passed, letting me complete the runic carvings of my cipher. I kept it dry with a bubble of antigravity, carrying it in an air bubble.

After implanting them on the palms of my hands, I landed on stone. I let go of the chain and stomped the ground, radiating a pulse through the liquid. Sound rushed into my suit, the tiny fluctuations giving me another image. I held that image in my memory, closing my eyes and observing it. I gasped at the sight.

Underneath all this poison was the ruins of a city.

Now I was curious. I walked around, stamping my footprint into the rock beneath me. With the images, I charted the forgotten city. After thirty minutes, I reached an enormous chapel of some sort.

Mana stones encrusted its stone walls, keeping the building stable. I tapped the wall, and a hollow sound resonated back. There was air in this building.

After exploring the outer part of the building, I discovered the entrance. A trapdoor led down a tube twice my height. I dropped myself into it, swimming through the tunnel. After that, I swam up another pipeline of mush. At the end of it was a pocket of air.

I lifted myself out of the tube of muck, letting myself out into the pocket of air. I slung the sludge off my suit, letting me see my surroundings. Not much was exposed. Only the gentle light of mana ebbed throughout the chamber, revealing little of the massive expanse.

I took a deep breath. The thick smell of iron filled my nose, along with something acrid. I glanced around, noticing steel reinforcing the windows. The inside of the chapel was utterly different from the outside. All around me, lights were cut off. A few still hummed from their recent exposure.

I listened close. Something buzzed like a light bulb flickering on and off. I opened my dimensional storage, pulling out some glow sticks. I snapped them. A few tosses later, and green light melded with the subtle glow of the mana stones.

This light exposed what was hidden in the shadows. A silver's face locked with mine. It had two hollow eyes. Plates of metal covered it, though its joints remained uncovered. With long, spindly arms and fingers, it looked like a steel witch.

It hunched over an espen corpse. In its hand, a mana torch was unlit. It etched brands into the back of the espen. It looked back and forth like I wasn't supposed to be here. Its hands and knees shook, its shoulders hunched over. I walked up to it and frowned,

"So who are you supposed to be?"

Chapter 156: Eonoth

The silver's hollow eyes starred at me for a second. It turned around, running away. Before it escaped, I gripped it with a gravity well. I stepped forward, the dim lights obscuring his operating table. Embedded into the skin of the espen were strands of silvers.

The tiny, gray insects dug their feet into the espen. They interlocked, creating panels of metal on the skin of the poor man. I tapped a few of the moving bugs. They crawled away from my fingertip as if I was their kryptonite.

I sighed, “Whether you’re the cult or not, you’re definitely not a good guy.” I looked up at the shivering silver suspended midair by magic. I shook my head in disgust. If my working theory was right, then this was what the cult was.

Someone fused silvers with espens, and now these mutants were running amuck in Icosah. At least it was an easy fix for me.

I laid a hand onto the unconscious espen. My armor expanded over him, consuming the silvers with surgical precision. Seconds later, my armor retracted, and the espen was cleansed. Wounds littered him from where the silvers once were, but the injuries would heal.

I shivered a bit at the sight before looking around. As useful as Hunter of Many was, I preferred looking around with my eyes instead of my ears. With that in mind, I grabbed a glowing manastone from the side of the surgeon’s table.

I charged it with mana, and the stone shined a bright, crimson light. I walked around, inspecting the rest of this hell hole. I found other bodies of espens already consumed by silvers. In fact, silvers were everywhere.

They reinforced the building, the steel reinforcement was made of them. I looked closer. Silvers made up most of the tools, the table, even the skin of the surgeon.

I cleared these hidden threats, walking up to them and letting my armor eat them. After a few minutes, the only silvers left were supporting the entire area. I sat and waited here for a few minutes. As I did, I inspected my cipher augmentations.

[Modifications – The dimensional fabric composing this structure has been modified with code from the dimensional cipher. With mana, further bonuses can be applied. The bonuses are as follows:

+72 Strength

+72 Dexterity

+80 Perception

+6,080 Endurance

+3,040 Willpower

+100% to effect of legacies

+50% to internal motivation]

I raised my eyebrows up at the increase in perception. 80 was nothing to scoff at in as little as a day of the cipher running. I tapped my chin, thinking about it. I came to a simple yet profound conclusion.

The less an attribute had been upgraded, the easier it was to improve.

The perception bonus outsped my endurance enhancements. Without a doubt, I understood endurance better than perception. With that cause out of the way, it left one apparent reason; my perception was low.

This would explain why Schema has level caps. As you gain more and more levels, attributes require more and more mana to augment. That means putting hard caps prevented anyone from over leveling. It meant investing more into endurance was a waste of time.

Well, for now at least. Having so much endurance let me enhance the other attributes much faster. That alone made all the investment worth it up until this point. If I caught up my other attributes some, it would buff me quite a bit. At the very least, it would help round out my build.

Armed with that knowledge, I stood up and heard rumbling. I glanced up at the silver surgeon I kept suspended,

“Looks like your friends are here.”

I stood up, threw my manastone, and hid in some shadows. Minutes later, one of the silver infested espens rose up from the entrance. Its feet flopped on the ground, a rancid smell wafting inside. The creature sucked up the toxins, cleaning himself and his surroundings.

The creature walked up to the table, a brown hood draped over its face. It sniffed the air, wheezing like it was exhausted. It turned its face towards me right as I lunged out. I grabbed my hand around the hooded figure's neck, pulling it up off the ground.

Before it fought back, I dug my armor into it. The beast howled like a banshee. It gurgled from under its hood, vomiting up the mush onto me. It poured over my suit, and I kept picking the silver out of it. Within a minute, the monster stopped fighting back.

I shook my head at the sorry sight. The espen underneath the hood had been half silver. Very little of it remained. Its wounds didn't bleed, however. Without a DOT stopping his healing, the native would eventually return to full health.

I continued this cycle for several hours. I collected a pile of twelve espens, some of them children. It was an ugly affair. When we killed the plague victims from Yawm, the humans were dead. These people were alive though. Seeing living experiments...I don't know. Seeing it first hand was harder then I expected.

I swallowed my discomfort, pushing it down. I didn't have time for disgust. After waiting a few more hours, something rumbled against the side of the building. At this point, I was pretty sure I collected the normal espens. This wasn't a normal one outside.

I braced myself, ready for it to spring inside. Nothing happened. Another quake rippled through the building. I charged my mana, getting myself prepared for the worst. A few seconds later, and a figure phased through the wall.

It was a spider creature, being thin and spindly. Four legs on its back supported its main body, the other two arms ending in stretched hands. It glanced around, emitting the sound of chirping cricket. Seconds later and Schema translated the voice,

"A hunter is here..."

Its eyes snapped onto mine, eight black pupils staring at me,

“There you are.”

I stood up, raising my palms up, “I’m not a hunter. I’m here to save the poor bastards. What are you here for?”

An old, worn out cloak covered most of the creature, hiding its body. Beneath the fabric, something squirmed as the creature hissed,

“These are our test subjects. You’ve destroyed our research. You will be...eliminated.”

The beast raised a hand, but I raised a palm, “Wait one second. I’m not your enemy.”

Eyelids narrowed on all its eyes. It clicked out its words, “Your actions tell a different story.”

I kept my hand up, “What are you researching and why? We might not have opposite goals.”

The creature stood still, almost like a phantom. Mana built in my blood, the energy collecting over each second. A bit longer and I’d unleash a singularity.

“You smell...of Old One. Who do you serve?”

I frowned, “I don’t serve anyone. I’ve done a few tasks for Etorhma.”

The wiry creature took a few steps back, “You...you are an avatar...You killed the World Eater...”

It nodded, moving its mandibles and fangs as it did, “I follow an Old One as well. I’ve spoken to him. He is interested in you.”

I grimaced, “Wait...Already? Do you have a telepathic link or?”

The monster's head twitched, "I have heard but the faintest whisper of his being. His voice echoes in your mind long after he has left. I trembled before it. I listen to its echoes, and they whisper out his demands."

At this point, I understood one thing for sure – I was talking to a lunatic.

"Uh...sure. Of course."

Pressing his elongated fingers together, the creature hissed, "Eonoth wishes to speak with you."

I raised a finger at the creature, "Oh fuck no. I don't want anything to do with this Eonoth guy or any Old One."

The monster scoffed, "Do the wants of an ant decide the actions of a god?"

I made a fist at this abomination, "This ant is about to blow your ass to pieces."

It snickered, "He will summon you now. Goodbye insect."

The space around me warped. Before I dissipated, I made my move. I reached back, pulling the espens towards me. I wrapped a cord of my armor around them, piercing my gray suit. Hiding my identity wasn't worth killing these people. In my eyes at least.

If they got outside without protection, the poison would kill them. With that in mind, I created an antigravity well over us. The bug man whispered, "Futile."

The space around us curved, but I reached out my other hand and unleashed havoc. A singularity formed in the chest of the creature. It tried phasing away, but the pull of the black hole was inescapable. The beast imploded inwards, falling into himself.

The carapace over his face tore, revealing the mush underneath. The monster gurgled,

"H-how?"

A second later, and the singularity finished its feast. It collapsed, releasing a destructive shockwave. I extended my armor, creating a wall between the espens and my attack. The impact catapulted us towards the brick surface. I kicked with my foot, sending a telekinetic wave at the wall. It crumbled, the steel supports snapping like twigs.

The purple mush wrapped around us, but we stayed dry. I maintained a pocket of air with antigravity, stopping the poison from infecting the espens wounds. I landed on the ground. I pushed my heels against Giess, propelling myself up. With an outpour of mana, I created another well above me.

We fell upwards towards the surface. I used the chain leading to the surface as a guide. It was a strange feeling. Everything around us fell upwards at the same rate, maintaining our protective bubble of air. With a bit of finessing, I kept us clean until we reached the clay.

Once there, I burrowed us through the dirt. When we reached the water, we were home free. Fifteen minutes of falling up, and we arrived on the surface. With a great splash, we spurted back onto the surface world. I grinned as the sun beamed down from above.

After setting us down, I leaned up against a tree. I glanced at the espens. Most of their injuries already healed. They would be fine even without my help from here.

It let me relax for a second. I flopped onto the ground, looking up. I sighed with relief, closing my eyes and just letting go. When I opened my eyes again, my scenery changed. Beneath me, solar flares ushered out of a dying star.

I blinked, flabbergasted at the sudden shift. Nothing changed, so I blinked again. I grabbed the sides of my head. I banged my helmet, the metal denting inwards. My scenery stayed changed.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, then opened them. I looked around, accepting this madness. I stood up on nothing. I looked down. The star was dim enough for me to see. It should've blinded me if not outright incinerated me at this distance.

Yet it didn't. I looked around, finding no stars in the void around me. I already knew what happened. That Old One finished summoning me, so I shouted out,

"Where are you, Eonoth?"

My voice resonated through my surroundings. The sound bent until it was so warped, it wasn't even my own. The words bled together, turning into gibberish. The gibberish quieted until no sound remained. The noise returned, coming back with force.

The gibberish formed a language then recognizable speech,

"An interesting language. It's simple and condensed. Contextual. It must be difficult to learn."

Imagine you were in a giant, iron bell. Imagine a titan swung a hammer at that bell. Now imagine the cataclysmic, ear-busting vibrations formed a voice and spoke to you. That's what Eonoth's voice was like. Without my pain tolerance, I'd be brought to my knees. Without my massive health, I'd have died instantly.

With those tools, I stayed tall. A bit of blood dripped out of my nose. I snorted it out so I could breathe. I shouted back,

"It obviously wasn't that difficult to learn for you, was it?"

A stretch of silence went on after that. I had no sense of time. It could have been a second or an eternity. Honestly, I don't know if it would have made a difference.

"You know my name, but I don't know yours. Who are you?"

My ears bled. I sighed, pushing down my discomfort, "I'm Daniel."

A deep laugh rattled my bones.

"You are more than Daniel. You hold many names. Tell me of them."

I grit my teeth, sustaining the thunderous words.

"I'm Dimension C-138, the Harbinger of Cataclysm."

“A title more befitting your presence. Weight. Enduring. Boundless. The Bringer of Change. You hold many titles in those that know you...they fear you. Have you tasted their fear?”

I rolled my eyes, keeping myself composed, “Ok, obviously not. If you can probe my memories, you know that already.”

From the void, the voice continued, “An answered question can still sound sweet in your ears if you enjoy the answer.”

“Can we cut out all the cryptic bullshit...Please?”

“You are a being of flesh and bone. Time...Time is your most valued asset. We are beings that transcend time. It is of no value. One infinity after the next, we will see all that there is to see.”

I raised an eyebrow, “We meaning the Old Ones?”

“Whatever it is that you use to refer to us. You seem distasteful of our presence. Why?”

At this point, my mouth was pooling with blood. I swallowed, clearing out my mouth. I raised my hands, “Etorhma left an old enemy of mine in a, well, ugly state. I don’t want that same influence on me.”

“But you are incorruptible. A pure entity that is independent all its own.”

I wouldn’t let this fuck know how much damage he was doing to me. My pride wouldn’t allow it.

I sighed, “Why did you try-” I coughed up some liquid, “-and fuse the silvers and the espens?”

By now, my eyes bled, and my gums were soft. Eonoth’s voice was disintegrating me.

“...I want to bring metal to life. There is a rigidness in it. Completeness. The silvers aren’t alive. I wished to bring life to them. What life are you?”

From the void, a shapeless being emerged. It fluttered in and out of being like it couldn’t hold a physical form of itself. Either that or my eyes couldn’t understand it.

As it neared me, a sense of dread ran up my spine. My whole body screamed for me to escape or distance myself from it. It was a nightmare that I could not see, yet I could feel. I thundered out,

“I’m just a normal life form. You know, nothing special.”

My voice rasped at the end. Eonoth reached out to me, “That is a lie. There is something utterly unique about you. I await discovery.”

It got closer, the formless shape threatening contact. A deep instinct was screaming in the back of my head. It told me this – do not let this thing touch you. I didn’t have a choice. I listened.

I created a well behind me, pulling me away. Even as I moved, Eonoth’s position didn’t change. I looked around, finding nothing to hold onto. In desperation, I tore off a chunk of my gray suit. I gripped into the back of my hand, piercing the skin. My own silver blood leaked out.

I pointed at it, “Alright, you twisted my arm. See this, it’s silver blood. I’m living metal. Happy?”

The Old One stopped approaching me. My mind calmed down, fear no longer infesting me like a virus. A gleeful tone infested Eonoth’s voice,

“You are...remarkable. I will leave you be. Enjoy the scarcity of your time. It gives it value, something I cannot comprehend.”

It faded back into the void, “I’ll allow you to return to your realm. We will meet again, Harbinger.”

Space shivered around me. Before I returned, the formless shape jerked out of the darkness. It appeared in front of me. With a single appendage, it pierced my helmet and touched my forehead.

“Ah, but there is knowledge here given by Etorhma. Since Yawm, he fears your kind. He is weak, weak for one of us. I share none of his fears, for I am beyond fear. I will complete this fragment of knowledge he gave you.”

My eyes rolled back into my head. Mystifying thoughts beamed into my head, Eonoth's mind touching my own. The core of my personality unraveled into tiny, minute pieces. Eonoth's mind was broad, broader than comprehension.

He was an ocean, and I was a single drop. I fell into the abyss, my identity lost in the sheer size of it. Off reflex, I gritted my teeth and flexed my fists. It didn't matter. No amount of will would close this gap. It was like launching yourself into space by jumping.

In a word, futile.

I fought on, struggling to keep some sense of identity. After eon's of being in the belly of the beast, I returned. Eonoth evaporated back into the void,

“And you remain. You are worthy, Harbinger. You are worthy.”

I blinked. As quickly as I entered the Eonoth's ream, I returned back into my own. I was still on the tree, and the espens piled up beside the ravine. Not a second had passed.

I leaned over, pulling off my helmet and puking. Most of what I retched was my own blood, but some of it was vomit. I wiped off my face, getting my own blood off me. It felt like I just drowned. I shivered a bit, a piercing fear crawling up my spine.

Eonoth was nothing like Etorhma. Etorhma was polite and civil. He was mostly rational, though he had a few crazy moments. Eonoth was nothing like that. He was an amalgamation of a thousand minds. It was beyond comprehension. In fact, I was glad I didn't comprehend it.

Who knows what would happen to me if I did.

I shook off the overwhelming sense of dread. If not for my enhanced willpower, I'd be nothing but jelly by now. I looked at my health. Over three quarters was missing. I slapped the sides of my face, realizing how close to death I was.

I wasn't about to die to some dragon or badass warrior. I was about to die from hearing a voice. Wow. Talk about humbling.

I stood up, my hands still shaking. I clenched my teeth. I was tired of this whole jittery episode. I reared back my fist and punched myself in the face. I held onto the tiny bit of pain, using it to clear my mind.

I wasn't in tip-top condition, but it would do. I turned towards the espens, lifting them up with magic. I walked back towards Icosah, unable to muster up the mental energy to run. Instead, I looked at the walk like it was a break.

As I walked, I looked at my status. I gained about one hundred levels from spider guy, which was nice. I checked out my skills, finding a point gained here or there. My jaw dropped when I discovered my Dimensional Cipher skill. It was in the 300's after Etorhma gave me that spike of knowledge.

It was a tiny bit higher now that Eonoth finished it.

Dimensional cipher(1,081) – You bend the laws of nature with knowledge of its inner workings. Forbidden, but powerful.

I rubbed my hands together in anticipation. At least meeting a being beyond my comprehension wasn't all bad.

It had its perks.

Chapter 157: Fluidity

Before I chewed into the cipher bonus, I checked out my trees. I got a bonus of 700 tree points from Eonoth's blessing. I poured the points into my current tree, Legendary.

In your homeworld, legends are told for those that mastered their chosen craft. Einstein was renowned as a genius. Da Vinci was hailed by artists as a prodigy. Tolkien will be remembered for his woven worlds.

You will be remembered for your mastery as well.

Legendary(Tier 2) Unlocked! +40% to the effect of Legendary skills.

The instant the notification sounded, a wave of ease passed over me. I held up a hand, bending gravity as if it were a liquid. It molded with instinctual ease. It was like breathing or walking. There wasn't any thought behind it. I thought of a change in it, and the mana made it so.

It freed up space in my mind. Without effort, I exerted excruciating detail with my gravitational magic. Force of Nature assisted with other talents too though. Without a doubt, my reaction times in close combat would be enhanced as well.

The magic was my bread and butter now. Gravitational Singularity already proved its worth versus the bug guy. Spamming that move would be one of my go-to strategies for now.

After all, if it isn't broke, don't fix it.

That didn't mean I didn't have my eye set on improvement though. I kept walking while opening my grimoire. I kept it afloat with a well of gravity while suspending the espens. I looked back, thinking how difficult this was a few months ago. Now I did all of it without even thinking.

I took full advantage of that benefit, diving into my work with the cipher. It shocked me the moment I carved into the page. I didn't need to rewrite my words. I didn't need to edit my inscriptions. I wrote out complex concepts as I thought them up.

The more I etched, the more surreal the experience was. I comprehended the cipher to such an extent, it was more familiar than own language. I closed my eyes, thinking about the cipher. In a bizarre moment, my thoughts came out in the cipher.

I opened my mouth, speaking out words. A piercing, unfamiliar set of vowels and consonants came out. The demonic, alien pitch terrified me, so I slammed my hands over my mouth. I didn't want to see what would happen if I spoke out the words. It was crazy though. I wasn't limited to just thinking in the cipher.

I could speak it.

I was using a portion of my mind I didn't know I had. It was like I had a talent for some sport I'd never played. All of a sudden I started playing it and everything was easy and smooth and clear. Nothing about the cipher was cloudy. It was familiar as a family or a hometown.

I wasn't about to dive in headfirst though. Not anymore. In a sense, this was black magic. Eonoth could've just given me the right information to destroy myself or worse. I figured speaking with a few allies before trying out my new skills was likely the best idea.

With that in mind, I checked out my status, pouring my level ups into endurance. Why endurance all of a sudden? I learned the cipher worked better with lower attributes. That meant I could rapidly increase perception without my level ups.

Since endurance was sky high, increasing it with the cipher would take forever. I was hitting a soft cap with my cipher upgrades. That had zero effect on Schema's level ups though. With that in mind, I put all my points into endurance and smiled. Everything felt right.

I'd check my status after getting my dungeon cores. No point in reviewing it over and over again for small changes. That was a waste of time I didn't have.

After having done all that status stuff, I was refreshed. The jitters faded some, so I ran instead of walking. Within minutes, I reached Icosah with the espens floating behind me. After passing through the bazaar, I arrived at several of the guilds.

The Soldiers of Fortune didn't seem like the best group to leave the espens with. I chose the Agents of Schema instead. They appeared more reliable for this kind of thing.

As I walked up, people gawked at me. I looked odd, I'll give them that. My gray armor wasn't banged up that bad outside of being dirty. The patches I tore through regenerated with a bit of nanotech. My last suit was obliterated by the Yana cluster by comparison.

It saved me some time. As I walked through the entrance, a sleek interior met my gaze. Polished glass and steel gleamed everywhere, fluorescent lights beaming down from above. Lining the walls and walkways, blue neon-tinted everything blue. It gave the base an ultra modern feel.

Everyone wore power armor or diplomats robes. Everyone stared forward, busy with something or the other. They lacked the arrogance of the Empire and the ruggedness of the Soldiers of Fortune. These guys projected a robotic efficiency, much like the A.I. they worked for.

As I walked into the lounge, a few members glanced at me. No one gawked or stared. I appreciated the politeness. I walked up to their receptionist, a remnant man with a white smile. So white, in fact, that it looked artificial. It unnerved me a bit.

"Hello there! It's good to see someone new around here. How may I help you on this fine day."

I suppressed a wince. He was so fake that it hurt my soul.

"I'm here to hand in these espens."

The remnant winked at me, "Ah, were they stirring up trouble?"

I shook my head, "No. They were in trouble. Some cult got a hold of them and implanted silvers into their bodies. I removed the infestations from each of them, and I healed them. I have no idea who they're affiliated with. I figured you guys might be able to help with that."

He boomed a laugh. By god, I wasn't that funny.

"Hah, hah, HAH! I love seeing an offworlder treat the natives with such respect and dignity. Don't you worry, your good deeds will not go unrewarded. I'll file a status

report to the affiliated sub-A.I. for this sector. He should square you away as far as rewards are concerned.”

He gave me a wink. I scoffed, unable to hold back my laughter at this point. The remnant blinked, sitting straight up. He never quit smiling, “What’s funny fellow sentient?”

I waved my hand, “Nothing. I remembered some inside joke from my friends. Sorry about that.”

“Ok...I hope we see you again!”

I nodded, “Yeah. Sure.”

I turned around, setting the espens beside the front desk. I waved goodbye and walked out. From that experience, Kessiah’s disdain for them was justified.

They creeped me the fuck out. This guy was like a magazine cover. Everything was calculated and controlled for a specific reaction. I didn’t like it at all. I much preferred talking to someone who made their intentions obvious, even if those intentions weren’t full of virtue.

With that over with, I sent a message to Torix, detailing the situation. While waiting for a reply, I went back to the Soldiers of Fortune. I took another quest and received my reward for this one. Oddly enough, no one bothered me this time. Go figure.

Worshippers of Emagrotha(lvl 3,200 requirement, lvl 3,800 Recommended| Recommended Party Size: 4 | Tier: B-) – You’ve not only completed this deceptive quest, but you’ve saved several natives of Icosah as well. Excellent work.

Reward: 8 Red Dungeon cores. Goodwill with Giess increased.

Quest Completion Speed: S++ Tier. +5 red dungeon cores.

Thoroughness of Quest Completion: S++ Tier. +5 red dungeon cores.

Casualties and Collateral Damage: 0 dead and 0\$. -0 red dungeon cores.

Giess Affinity +25 for quest completion. +60 for saved citizens(5 each)

Icosah Affinity +180 for saved citizens(15 each)

It was a substantial reward. I could see that the receptionist worked fast since my quest log was already updated. Fake or not, the guy was responsive, to say the least. He enhanced my rewards, giving me S++ bonus ratings. My last quest only gave 6 extra cores. This one gave 10.

Using those 18 dungeon cores, I invested the attribute points into endurance. It was for the same reason as the level ups. I used the skill points on Force of Nature, moving the skill up quite a bit. On my last click, a notification popped up.

Down your path you walk, each step treading new ground. You've discovered the undiscovered. You've learned the secret and forgotten knowledge. The subject of your mastery is a myth. In your field, you're king.

Legendary(Tier 3) Unlocked! +60% effect of legendary skills!

I clenched a fist. The sheer depth of my magic enhanced. The efficiency and utter power of my movements and magic evolved. If I used my full might, I could move mountains. If I unleashed my full strength, I'd bend time.

The difference was so drastic, a spark of fear ran up my spine. I looked at my hands. I was working with explosives at this point. Even with all my durability, one misstep and I'd be a silver blotch on the ground. It was that intense.

I shook my head, grinding that fear to dust. I convinced myself that it was just my nerves after seeing Eonoth. Surely that was it. To check out what was going on, I looked at my status.

Force of Nature(lvl 2,251) – You are nature-given fury. Enhances all techniques and application of skills within this ability, including but not limited to: Close Range

Combat, Runic skills, Telekinesis, Gravitation, Sensory Abilities, Bearing, and Draining Abilities.

Bonus Attributes:

+352 Strength

+352 Dexterity

+141 Constitution

+141 intelligence

+70 Perception

+35 to all attributes for having a 2,200+ total in a legendary skill.

Ability Bonus: +248%

Mana Cost Reduction: 49.6%

At this point, I was exponentially growing stronger. The mana reduction essentially doubled my mana, which was already absurd. The ability bonus nearly tripled my output. My legendary skill pentupled the power of my gravitation.

At this point, the attributes were irrelevant. I had over 40,000 endurance. A few hundred attributes were nothing. The multipliers though...they were getting out of hand.

I banged the sides of my helmet, clearing my thoughts. Even if I got some godlike abilities, I wasn't about to let myself become like Yawm. I'd never allow that to happen. Never.

With that out of the way, I opened my cipher mods. They were coming along nicely.

[Modifications – The dimensional fabric composing this structure has been modified with code from the dimensional cipher. With mana, further bonuses can be applied. The bonuses are as follows:

+72 Strength

+72 Dexterity

+120 Perception

+6,080 Endurance

+100% to effect of legacies

+3,040 Willpower

+50% to internal motivation]

I whistled at the perception. 120 perception in two days was ridiculous. At this rate, it wouldn't be a problem by the time the tournament arrived. Constitution would be next. Either that or luck, so I didn't have any more run-ins with Eonoth.

With all that handled, I checked out the final status, my character sheet.

Dimension-C138(Level 5,653)

Strength – 6,176 | Constitution – 10,612 | Endurance – 43,154

Dexterity – 2,574 | Willpower – 24,581 | Intelligence – 9,007

Charisma – 913 | Luck – 3,034 | Perception – 1,174

Health: 7.35 Million/7.35 Million | Health Regen: 17.3 Million/min or 288,532/sec

Stamina: 4.70 Million/ 4.70 Million | Stamina Regen: 67,862/sec

Living Dimension: 1.04 Trillion/4.30 Trillion

Mass: 494,919 pounds(224,491 kilos~) | Height: Actual -12'5(3.83 meters) Current – 9'10

Damage Res – 98.5% | Dimensional Res – 49.25%

Phys Dam Bonus – 546,385% | Damage Bonus – 40%

Event Horizon – 20,000 + (100% of your total health)/min

My perception passed the 1k mark already. Based on my guesstimations, I should be cloaked against any enemies level 3,000 and below. Most builds didn't invest into a single attribute like I did, especially not perception. Perception only feeds into charisma, making it a poor main stat.

The new was good though. My progress was steady if not rapid. Once I finished all my dungeon cores, I'd be ready to demolish anyone at the tournament. Not having the constant threat of death looming over my shoulder was nice for a change.

Although Eonoth pulling into another dimension left a bad taste in my mouth. I'd be fine though. I always was. I never imagined we'd kill Yawm, but it happened. This time would be no different. For the last time, I checked my status, finding a message from Torix.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill(lvl 5,000 | Guild: Harbinger's Legion | Time: 1:34 P.M. 0/27/31) – It seems as though you're always meeting the most interesting entities. We can discuss the predicament in the Empire's guildhouse whenever you're ready. I'm there as we speak.

I let him know I was coming. I jogged off towards the guildhouse, everybody walking around me. I didn't get that. Why does everyone walk everywhere? We have enhanced

abilities, yet everybody uses them only in combat. Abilities are meant to be used, not saved for just the right moment.

Anyways, I got back to the Empire's guildhouse. I talked with the espen receptionist, and she told me that Torix was talking with Caprika. I reached her throne room, finding them discussing details about Giess.

"So Giess is separated along native and foreign lines then?"

Caprika nodded with her mane of hair ruffling, "Yes. From what I've gathered, most espens are spiritual and primitive. Their native wildlife fights the eldritch for them. Schema's assimilation was hardly noticed at first given the planet's resources."

She leaned against her arm, appearing a bit bored, "It sparked a civil war among the Gialgethens, however. 75 years prior, and the gialgathens used the espens as slaves. The great Lehesion freed the espens, giving them access to magic."

Caprika scoffed, "I've seen the gialgathens though. They still treat espens as a lower caste. Since Schema's coming, the espens have been fighting back. They've gained ground."

I raised an eyebrow, "How?"

Caprika leaned up off her hand, "The espens gained access to the system. The gialgethens did not."

Torix let out an evil laugh, "And so the tables turned."

Caprika raised her hands,

"The espens have leveled over the last 30 years. They've grown in might. Now the most powerful espens rival the most powerful gialgethens. It's created a rift. Some Gialgathens embrace the change. Others look at it as if the espens are stepping out of line."

Caprika put her hands on her throne's armrests, "Those giant monsters don't understand. They will be eclipsed by the espens over the next few years. The oppressed will become the oppressors."

I waved my hand at caprika, "I have a question. Is this what you do all day?"

Caprika tilted her head, "What?"

I gestured to her throne, "Just, yenno, sit in a throne room and do nothing."

She shook her head, "No. I have an assigned meeting time for two hours every day. You've only seen me during those times."

I frowned, "Sounds like you'd waste a lot of time like that."

Caprika sighed, "It's customary. The Empire follows tradition more than even law. As a member of royalty, I must have meetings with commoners."

I snickered, "Yeah, commoners. Anyways, when and where is the tournament?"

Caprika leaned forward, "Did you...gain levels?"

Torix raised his hands, "Oh do get used to it. Daniel is the most industrious sentient that has ever existed. He never sleeps, and he is always moving."

I shrugged, "Life is movement, and yeah, I gained a few levels."

Torix cupped his chin, "Would you mind telling us how many quests you've completed in the two days we've been here?"

"Two."

Torix waved his hands, goading me for more information, "And I don't mean to pry, but which quests might those be?"

“The highest ones available. Why are asking?”

Torix grinned at Caprika, “Oh no reason. Just curious.”

Caprika shook her head, “You cleared the silvers and destroyed the hidden cult...in two days.”

I nodded, “I did. I don’t spend time sitting on a throne. I’ve heard that helps.”

Caprika stayed silent for a second. Her red mask brightened, steam coming from the black holes in it. She leaned down, covering her face with a hand. Torix raised a hand, “Are you alright.”

She put a palm up to him, “I’m fine...”

I leaned towards her, “Wait a second...you’re embarrassed.”

Caprika shot up, “No. I’m not. Silence.”

I waved my hands, “No, no. It’s no big deal. I didn’t mean it like that. I was just teasing. I get you to have to do your daily rituals or whatever. It’s your life after all.”

She shook her head, “I...It just made me aware that I was on my throne. You make the sheer idea of a throne sound ridiculous.”

She stood up, walking down her heightened stairway, “I have no guests here besides for you two. I’m sure you wouldn’t report my lack of throne sitting to higher authorities.”

Torix gave her a thumbs up, “Your secret is safe with us.”

She cracked her neck, “Good.”

The throne room's doors opened, Aric walking in, "Excuse me Caprika, but you have a visito-"

Kessiah pushed him out of the way, "Move it spineless. Hey Daniel."

Caprika propped her weight on one hip, looking annoyed. Caprika looked up at me, "Is she your mistress?"

Kessiah narrowed her eyes, "The fuck did you just say?"

Torix covered his mouth, snickering with absolute glee. He pointed at Kessiah, "This is good. I wish I had some popcorn."

Kessiah pointed her finger at Torix, "I'll talk to you later."

Caprika shrugged, "What did I say?"

Kessiah stormed up to Caprika, "What makes you think I'm a mistress?"

Caprika pointed at all of Kessiah, "You're obviously not a combatant. I just assumed that was your use."

Torix's expanded into outright chortling. Kessiah blushed a bit, "Why don't you think I'm a fighter?"

Caprika looked between Kessiah and me, "Isn't it obvious?"

Kessiah raised her eyebrows, "My level is plenty high enough to kick your ass."

Caprika busted out laughing, her noble voice turning cruel,

"You? Even if our levels matched, you don't stand a chance against me or anyone for that matter. I can tell by the way you walk. Your footsteps are heavy and unbalanced. It's like watching a hunchback step through the mud."

For some reason, Kessiah always brought out the worst in Torix. He nudged my elbow, “Oof.”

Kessiah poked Caprika’s chest, “You wanna go?”

Caprika pointed around, “Why not? You seem as though you need to be humbled anyways.”

I took a step forward, putting a hand on Kessiah’s shoulder, “This isn’t a good idea. She’s double your level.”

Kessiah slapped my hand, “You said it earlier right? You do you. Well, I’m doing me.”

I frowned, “Uh, I don’t think-“

Kessiah spread out her hands, “The point is, I’m making this decision, alright? Back off.”

I took a step back, “Ok.”

Torix and I walked back towards the edge of the room. Once there, Caprika and Kessiah walked towards the opposite sides of the throne room. I grabbed the sides of my helmet, dragging my fingers down the tinted glass,

“This is a fucking awful idea.”

Torix rubbed his hands together, “Oh yes it is. I can’t wait for its conclusion.”

Caprika turned towards us, “I won’t kill her. She’ll need healing when I’m done though. Is that acceptable?”

I raised a hand, “Go crazy. I’ll be the ref.”

I walked up between them. Kessiah pulled her galactic storage. She pulled out three plastic pouches full of her blood. She ripped them apart, the blood flowing in circles around her. It siphoned into white runes that glowed on her body. Her blood sacrifice was massive this time.

With that strength, she smashed her fists together,

“I’m going to crush you.”

Caprika scoffed, “Good luck, little one. You’re going to need it.”

The albony royalty leaned back, inviting Kessiah to charge. I raised a hand, “You both ready?” They nodded. I swiped my hand down,

“Let’s go.”

Chapter 158: Getting There

Kessiah growled as she charged Caprika. With an unnerving calm, Caprika stood back and waited. Kessiah’s footsteps crushed the stone beneath her feet, her movements explosive. As Kessiah reached Caprika, the remnant launched a right haymaker at Caprika’s face.

The princess channeled the air by raising an arm. An invisible torrent cut through one of the tendons in Kessiah’s wrist. The hand went limp, unable to function. Caprika grabbed the weak arm, slinging Kessiah overhead. The shoulder dislocated while the impact shattered the marble floor.

Kessiah lost her breath, gasping out a bit of blood. Caprika clasped a clawed hand right in front of Kessiah’s face, pulling air out of her lungs. Kessiah gasped, reaching out her arms. Her chest sunk inwards, decompressed from the air magic.

I frowned, taking a step forward, “Oof. That was worse than I thought.”

Torix put a hand on my chest, “Give her a chance. It’s not dangerous just yet.”

Kessiah scrambled for a second longer before grabbing her weak arm. She shoved it back into her shoulder socket. She opened up her dimensional storage ring. A pillar of air flew out at of the portal, my ears popping from the pressure change of the room. It let Kessiah breath for a second.

Caprika reached towards Kessiah's face again. Kessiah lunged up, biting into the claws of Caprika. The princess gripped her hand, digging her nails into the flesh of Kessiah's mouth. Kessiah gritted her teeth, grabbing Caprika's arm.

The albony warrior spread out her other hand. Mana rippled through her mane of hair, lengthening the strands. Much like Amara, her hair moved. Unlike Amara, they solidified into white blades. Sharper than steel, an edge of hair stabbed at Kessiah.

Before it sunk in, the remnant released Caprika's fingers. Caprika stumbled back since she was still pulling her arm away. The fur sword sliced six inches into the marble floor, cutting Kessiah's cheek. Kessiah grinned as she pulled herself up and dashed towards Caprika.

Caprika fell onto her back and pushed her hands at Kessiah. A pillar of air pushed the albony back. While on the ground, she sliced the hair blade at Kessiah's kneecap. The blade cleaved into Kessiah's left kneecap, causing her to fall over. Caprika rolled up onto her feet.

Caprika dashed towards Kessiah, whipping a portion of her fur behind her. Mid-swing, the hair hardened into a giant blade. It would rive Kessiah in two. I readied some magic to stop just that.

Kessiah pushed up against the ground with her hands. She flung up and landed on a single foot. As Caprika reached her, Kessiah dunked down onto her one working leg. She breathed deep before spitting a mouthful of blood at Caprika.

The coagulating liquid splashed against Caprika's mask, blinding her. I raised my eyebrows, "That's a pretty solid tactic."

Torix rolled his eyes, "Ah yes, something a caveman would do in desperation. What an excellent tactic."

It worked well. The blade of hair skimmed Kessiah's left arm, leaving a nasty gash. Without her guard up, Caprika was wide open, however. With a wild haymaker, Kessiah jumped off her one foot. Her fist slammed into Caprika's mask.

Caprika dragged back a few feet from the impact, but she stayed standing. Like a real warrior, Caprika shook her head, spitting out blood. She growled like a lioness. Caprika charged towards Kessiah.

At this point, Kessiah raised one arm, unable to defend herself. Torix frowned, "Let's see what else she has up her sleeve."

I rolled my eyes at this point. Caprika lunged out an arm, a tail of fur following its trajectory. The condensed hair pierced Kessiah's last working shoulder. The air in the room condensed above Caprika, siphoning into a single point. Caprika reared her arm back, ready to launch a spear of wind through Kessiah's head.

I gripped my fist, lifting Caprika back with a gravity well. Her spear withered away, the air dispersing. Her hair blade pulled from Kessiah's shoulder. Torix sighed while floating over towards Kessiah, a health potion and spell in hand. The princess wasn't enjoying my restraints, however.

She thundered, "Who stopped me?"

It was the voice of royalty. I wasn't some servant though.

"I did. Calm down."

She heaved for breath, a mist of blood spurting out of her mask, "You will release me or--"

I clenched my raised hand, the well of gravity empowering, "Calm down."

Caprika balled up, her hair returning to its regular length. She struggled, but the pull outdid her strength. She was in a trash compactor, and I held the on or off switch.

She figured that out fast, so she gasped, "I'm calm."

I let the well's strength wane, and she composed herself. By the time the well disappeared, she had regained her noble bearing. She breathed deep a few times, looking up at me. She opened her dimensional storage, pulling out a purple health potion.

She chugged it before putting the bottle back into storage,

“Ahem...excuse my anger...I simply lost myself for a moment.”

I shrugged, “It happens.”

Caprika looked around, “I’ll have someone clean up this mess after we leave.”

She glanced around, “It could use a remodeling anyways.”

Now that Caprika wasn’t frothing in rage, I glanced over at Kessiah. Even though she managed to damage Caprika, their wounds were different in scale. Caprika could still stand. Kessiah was out of commission for a few days. In system time, that meant Kessiah was damn near death.

Still, it was an admirable effort. With a few tricks and some creativity, Kessiah dished out some damage. It was more than I expected. She took on someone double her level and held her own. If Caprika took her on with full force early on, Kessiah would be strips of meat.

But that’s the thing, Caprika didn’t.

That meant overall, Kessiah took the win in my book. With that knowledge in tow, I walked up to her. She groaned in pain, her shoulder swelling and her knee bloody. She looked up at me. She grinned, blood on her teeth,

“See? I still got it.”

I grinned, “Yup.”

Kessiah passed out. Torix glanced up at me, “Althea would’ve been shocked if she’d seen such a display of brutality. Kessiah hasn’t fought like that since she faced off against Dahkma.”

Torix whipped out a needle and surgical stitching, “It seems as though social pressure brings out the best in her. Her urge to prove someone wrong is far stronger than her urge to improve on her own.”

I shrugged, “Hmmm...maybe so.”

Torix chuckled, “She does prefer being the underdog. Perhaps this will renew her fighting spirit.”

I weighed my hands back and forth, “I wouldn’t count on it, but maybe we can push her in that direction.”

Torix stitched her knee back together, “One can hope.”

Caprika walked up to us. She placed her hands on her hips, “Her level wouldn’t indicate her strength, I suppose...What did you think of the bout?”

She looked at me as she said it. I raised my eyebrow, “Me?”

Caprika pointed at me, “Yes you. You’re a warrior of renown. Your opinion should be measured highly.”

I glanced up, “Well, if I had anything to say about it...hmmm. I think you tried to show off with the whole strangling thing. You could’ve just slit Kessiah’s throat at the start. Keeping your distance and focusing on evasion would’ve been an instant win without any damage.”

I shrugged, “You also lost your balance after Kessiah stopped biting your fingers. That shouldn’t be the case. You could elongate your hair and use the strands for balance, right? See if you can try that next time.”

Caprika used a wave of air magic, blowing the blood from her mask. She opened her storage ring, pulled out a napkin, and wrapped it around the floating blood,

“I shall try that then. Any other pointers?”

It was odd having someone ask me for advice. I squinted my eyes for a second, thinking a bit. I tapped my helmet, “You should have some helmet or eye protection. Same goes for your ears. Bright flashes, liquids, and sonic attacks aren’t uncommon, and they can be crippling.”

Caprika nodded, “I’ll try and implement a few defensive measures. Thank you for input.”

It was strange how differently Caprika treated me versus Kessiah. It was because of our levels probably. Torix stood up from Kessiah. He clapped his hands, “Anyways, I finished the suture. I’m not carrying Kessiah to her room. She’ll break my old, dusty back.”

I raised my hands, “I’m not either. Althea will kill me.”

Caprika raised a hand, “Who’s Althea?”

Althea materialized beside me. I never sensed her in any way. She was a ghost that didn’t want you to know she was there at times. Althea leaned against me, and I played it cool. I was used to it. On the other hand, Caprika wasn’t.

“What in Baldowah’s name...Where did you come from?”

Althea grinned, “Here and there.” She looked up at me, “Torix mentioned something about Kessiah needing help to her room.” Althea turned to Kessiah, “I’m surprised she hasn’t been drinking.”

I frowned. I didn’t know Kessiah drank. I had this thing against alcohol because of my dad. It wasn’t fair to judge someone for it, but I couldn’t help but come across as abrasive when it was brought up. At least I was aware of it.

Kessiah's drinking habits didn't surprise our resident lich, "As am I. She was just thrashed by the albony over there."

Althea walked up to Caprika. Althea waved a hand at her, "Hey. I'm Althea. Good to meet you."

Caprika brushed one of her locks of hair behind her and dusted a shoulder off, "Ahem. It's good to meet you as well. I'm Caprika, of the Empire."

Althea gave her a thumbs up, "I gotta take her back to our camp. We can talk later if you want."

Caprika propped her weight onto a hip, "I'll have to check my schedule, but I should be able to work you in."

There was an eagerness in Caprika's voice that she hid. I mean, she spent two damn hours a day in a throne room. Caprika had the time to spare. Althea didn't notice as she tossed Kessiah over her back like a sack of potatoes.

As she walked off, Torix walked up to me. He waved at Caprika, "We really must be going now. Thank you for the enthralling discussion about Giess politics and history."

Caprika scratched the side of her head, "Then, ah, good luck with the rest of your day as well...Torix."

Torix nodded and walked through a portal. Caprika and I stood there in an awkward silence. Caprika coughed into her hand, "Ahem, you asked where and when the tournament was, correct?"

I nodded. She opened her status. She sent me the coordinates.

"There they are. Good luck with your questing."

I shrugged, "Eh, thanks."

I turned around. I walked out of the room. As the throne doors closed behind me, I caught Caprika whispering to herself,

“That magic...Terrifying.”

You’d think my chest would puff up with pride at that. It was an acknowledgment of my strength, something I worked on relentlessly for years. I joined a boxing gym when I was twelve. Since then I’d fought every day. I didn’t do it to stomp on people. I did it so I wouldn’t be stomped on.

Now though, I could crush someone under my foot without even meaning too. My gravitational singularities weren’t fit for a human to wield. It was like a nuclear weapon. I felt like this one guy. I couldn’t remember his name. I remember what he said though – I am become death, destroyer of worlds.

I shook off my grim mood. I already observed what power could do to someone. Yawm was a prime example. He tried to play god. He ended up becoming a monster instead. I learned from his path, and I wouldn’t tread in his footsteps.

With that in mind, I set out onto the town. I had work to do.

Two weeks passed in a flash. I burst through two dozen more quests, each reward giving me even less than the last. My last quest involved pulling someone’s truck out from a bog. It wasn’t glamorous work, but it was something to do.

I ended up spending a bunch of my free time with Althea. We went out on dates, explored nature, etcetera. It was a blast seeing a new world with someone close. Either way, I brimmed with excitement for the tournament.

I missed fighting. Not life and death fighting mind you, but I wanted something to get my blood boiling. I felt like I was helping grandmas cross the street at this point.

Of course, I expected quite a few weaklings, but at least it wasn’t going to be boring. Althea and I kept that in mind as we walked up to the tournament’s arena. There was a

wide cliffside with a series of waterfalls, each one owning an outcrop. They met together, forming a raging river.

All species and manner of aliens idled on these outcrops. Kids ran around all over the place. Families tried pumping up competitors. Businesses sold snacks and drinks for everyone. The atmosphere was like a sports event. It pretty much was one. It was the most excitement this town had each year after all.

The arena was at the center of the raging river. There was a series of stones surrounded by the water. Althea nudged my side, “You sure you’ll be able to balance on those rocks?”

I rolled my eyes, “Yeah, I’m pretty sure. I might break them underfoot though.”

Althea nodded, a veil covering her face, “You’ll knock the other competitors of the rocks with the splash. You’ll be fighting underwater then.”

I grinned, “Let’s hope the other fighters can too.”

We hopped down from outcrop to outcrop. As we reached the bank of the rushing stream, a group of other fighters prepared themselves. Cameras were set up, streaming the tournament online. Someone controlled the lighting down here too, giving it a surprising production value.

As I admired the state of the art cameras, something rustled in the trees nearby. I glanced over at the treeline, a beast showing itself. I narrowed my eyes, looking closer. As I did, it walked out into the light. It was a gialgathen. I was sure of it.

The amphibious dragon walked with clouds of mist over it. With wings that spanned the width of a house, its long neck stretched up tall as trees. It wore battle armor, encrusted in gemstones. Water flowed underneath the plates, keeping the beast hydrated.

It glanced at us with vertical pupils. Unlike before, there was sharpness in its eyes. It was intelligent. A moment later, something touched my mind. I looked around, wondering what the fuck it was. Seconds passed, and the presence knocked against my mind again. A thick, regal voice echoed in my head,

“Are you one of the fighters here?”

I glanced around, “Maybe. Who are you?”

“Ah, I forgot my manners. I’m Alzroth. I’m the giant across this stream.”

I glanced up at the gialgathen. Surely enough, Alzroth stared right back at me. I thought out words,

“So you have telepathy then?”

“Hah! All Gialgathens do. We’re born with it, as we are born with many things.”

“Why do you want to talk to me then?”

He shook himself, a few birds flying from his black and white neck, “Just passing the time until the tournament begins.”

I nodded, “Ok, so what made you single me out?”

He reached up with a leg, scratching his neck, “You’re ambiance. You walk with better footing despite being the biggest one here. Rare to see a warrior from other races.”

I crossed my arms, “Well, it’s how I started out. By the time I had other options, it wasn’t worth changing paths.”

The giant scoffed, sounding like a whale breathing,

“You’re small for physical combat. You should’ve changed to something more fitting your stature.”

It was my turn to scoff now.

“Really now?”

The beast shook his head, “I meant no harm in mentioning it. It’s obvious just looking at you. I still can’t understand why other races take offense when I mention talents and traits.”

I shrugged, “You’re assuming a lot here.”

He showed his teeth, each one like a needle the size of a chair leg, “These allow me to crush most dirtwalkers in a single bite. How would you overcome something like this?”

I laughed, “Your teeth would break against my skin.”

“Such confidence. We’ll see how you and your system measure up to the true might and stature of a gialgathen.”

“I’ll see you at the tournament then.”

I snapped the mental link. The gialgathen shook his head, shocked by the impact of it. If fighting someone else’s mind was that simple, then I’d ask Torix to teach it to me. With all my willpower, it might be useful.

A wave of chatter interrupted my thoughts. I turned towards the arena, and two fighters stood on both sides of it. They both wore power armor. One of them had the Steel Legion crest on his chest. The other wore the emblem of the Soldiers of Fortune.

An announcer floated on a hovering podium. Wearing a flamboyant, multi-colored suit, the commentator flashed a smile. He had a swollen head and a wicked widow’s peak. In the most vanilla announcer voice possible, he spoke into an intercom,

“Welcome one and all to the 75th annual honoring of Lehesion! In the name of the gialgathen that united all the people of Giess, we fight in his name. Though many have tried, only seven humanoids have won the tournament. A gialgathen almost always wins!”

His podium floated over the top of the arena, and he stared into a camera, “This time I have the feeling things will be different. Now, onto our first battle of the evening.”

He pointed at the Steel Legion member, “Representing the Steel Legion here in Icosah, we have Earnest Meldiano. An expert in pistols, knives, and traps, he’s a fierce competitor.”

Earnest raised his hands, and his buddies in the Steel Legion clique roared. The announcer pointed at the other fighter, “And on the other side, we have a returning veteran. He’s come out of retirement folks. Let’s hear it for Iasis Klon!”

Pulling off his helmet, Iasis raised an arm. All of Icosah shouted out; his fame was widespread. I scoffed, whispering to Althea, “That’s the dumbass that tried blackmailing me.”

Althea raised her eyebrows, “Him? Looks a little scrawny.”

I shrugged, “He’s level capped.”

She glanced off to the side, “Maybe I should try blackmailing you...”

I glanced at her, “What, why?”

She reached up and tapped my helmet, “Because your reaction is cute.”

I rolled my eyes as the announcer boomed, “Are both combatants ready?”

They both nodded. The announcer boomed,

“Then let’s rumble!”

Chapter 159: Surprise

Earnest unholstered two pistols, quick drawing them with skill. He fired off the entire clip towards Iasis. Iasis clasped a fist at the same time. Water from the air snapped together, forming ice. This plate of ice caught the bullets, cracks snapping through the plate.

The wall of ice crumbled. Iasis turned around, gesturing with his hands. Blue, origin mana built in his fingertips. He faced the shards of ice, launching them towards Earnest. Iasis created new shards formed as fast as the old ones fired out.

The pistol expert reloaded his pistols, dodging the shards with subtle flicks of motion. Once loaded, he fired the guns at shards he couldn't avoid. As the shardstorm thinned, Earnest let out several shots at Iasis. These bullets weaved through a sea of ice shards, straight at Iasis's vitals.

Althea murmured, "Wow...He's so good."

I nodded, "Yeah. He is."

Iasis molded his ice shards, deflecting bullets and launching ice at Earnest. This flurry of activity continued, shells launching off in every direction. They fizzled against an energy barrier around the arena, keeping spectators safe.

As the standstill reached its peak, Earnest pointed one of his pistols upward. He shot into a panel of ice while firing a gun in a random direction. At least I thought it was random. The first shot bounced off the glass panel. It then snapped against the other bullet.

The rapid series of deflections launched a bullet from an odd angle at Iasis. The bullet pierced Iasis's shoulder. From it, Iasis lifted out his blood with magic. He clenched his fist, the blood disintegrating. Red mana rippled up through Iasis, making his physical might amplify.

He dashed towards Earnest, covering himself in an armor of ice. Earnest sped away, kiting the mage. Earnest fired the pistols, reloading without missing a beat. Iasis dashed towards him while dodging the projectiles by zigzagging.

Earnest tossed out two proximity mines from his belt while firing the pistols. The Steel Legion member maneuvered himself, keeping the mines between him and Iasis. Iasis took three more shots, bleeding from his legs and chest. He molded the blood into yet more mana, encouraging him further.

Iasis ran into the mines. They detonated, but the kinetic energy of the explosions siphoned into the hands of Iasis. Took off guard, Earnest threw a grenade at Iasis. It exploded, spraying superheated green plasma in every direction.

Iasis deflected the wave of goop by reaching out one of his hands. The condensed explosion in his palm released. The plasma shot back at Earnest. The master gunman turned around, his power armor flaring to life. A jetpack launched him away, the resulting fiery explosion spraying the plasma in every direction.

With the sound of singing stone in every direction, Iasis and Earnest flew. They fired ice and lead at each other, elaborate aerial stunts keeping them safe.

I raised an eyebrow, “Why doesn’t the mage just surround the guy with ice?”

Althea shrugged, “I dunno. Maybe he’s hiding his more advanced tactics?”

I nodded, “Ok, I could see that.”

Both sides fumbled, each of them struggling to gain the upper hand. The mage’s mana dwindled just like the gunman’s ammo and fuel. For the first time in the fight, the gunmen zoomed over the water. As his jetpack left a cloud of steam, the mage clapped his hands.

Thousands of ice needles shot into Earnest’s body from all directions. He crashed into the water. As he did, the announcer lifted a hand to Iasis,

“And Iasis Klon is victorious!”

Two members of the legion floated towards Earnest with jetpacks and power armor. They picked him up, pulling him to a nearby medical station. A healing mage cast magic while a doctor injected him with adrenaline and stims.

The whole crowd clapped their hands, including Althea and I. I turned towards her, nodding my head with begrudging respect, “This turned out way better than I expected. Who’d of guessed?”

Althea raised her eyebrows, “They were both cappers, so the rest of the tournament might not be as exciting.”

I sighed, “I’m just praying the rest of the matches are like that. That shit was epic.”

She giggled, “We’d take them easily.”

I shrugged, “Doesn’t matter. That was still badass.”

She pursed her lips, “I’m a better shot than that guy.”

I scoffed, “Uh huh, sure.”

She narrowed her eyes at me, “What, you don’t believe me?”

I shook my head, “I know you’re a worse shot. Here’s the thing though. Your bolt would’ve pierced the ice and killed the mage. You don’t need to be a better shot.”

She raised her eyebrows in reluctance, “I mean, I guess so.”

I nudged with an elbow, “Besides, you wouldn’t have run from the mage once he tried coming at you. You’d rip him apart.”

She smiled, “Thanks.”

I looked at the next competitors entering the arena, “Just being honest.”

The two competitors paled in comparison to the last ones. Neither exceeded level 2,000. They both relied on tech, using machine exoskeletons to fight it out with each other. They were clumsy compared with Earnest and Iasis.

Don’t get me wrong, they’d have been worthy contenders normally. Following up the first fight was a tall task though. After they both kicked each other’s asses, the announcer lifted his hands up to announce the next combatants,

“This year we have a fresh face here in Icosah. On the one side, a mysterious man who cleared over twenty quests in two weeks. The mysterious and memorable Daniel Hillside!”

I looked around, surprised they called my name out already. Althea grabbed my shoulder, “Hey, good luck.”

I gave her a thumbs up. I jumped up, letting myself land onto the arena with some gravity magic for assistance. The crowd oohed and aahed at the display of finesse. They expected me to be a fighter for my size, so seeing magic must have surprised them.

On the opposite side of the arena, a wiry alien walked up. It was a member of the Enigmatta. Hidden inside a pressurized suit, the girl prepared several spells for combat. The announcer pointed at her,

“And here is Elsa Tiary. She’s a regular combatant at the yearly tournament. Though she’s never won, she’s been a finalist several times. Don’t count her out folks.”

The enigmatta all raised their hands, air bubbles lifting in their oxygen tanks. Elsa raised her thin arms, waving at them. After the hoopla, the announcer looked at us both,

“Are both combatants ready?”

We nodded. The announcer raised his arms, “Then let the fight begin!”

I pressed down one of my hands. A wave of gravity sent Elsa to her knees. I lifted a leg before kicking out. My foot hit a telekinetic panel. A telekinetic panel generated in front of Elsa, smashing her face.

Though weakened, I kicked with plenty of force to shatter her dome helmet. She spun through the air, her suit’s water and some sharp teeth launching in every direction. She slapped against the water surrounding the arena, belly flopping hard. She was out cold.

Everything turned quiet. I didn’t go all out on her with the kick, so Elsa was fine. I looked around, making sure everything was ok. The announcer stammered,

“Uhm, wow, that was fast. The, ahem, winner is Daniel!”

I raised a hand, but no one cheered except Althea. She howled loud enough for everybody though. Althea looked around at everyone right after she screamed. Embarrassed as hell, she looked down, blushing like crazy.

I waited a few more seconds. Nobody came to help out Elsa, so I jogged up. I lifted a hand. I floated Elsa with a clump of water. I set her down in the open medbay. She landed on a bed with a woosh as the water spread out. Like professionals, the cleric and doctor shook off their surprise and went to work.

I turned around, jumping out of the arena. I fell towards Althea, the crowd dispersing and giving me space. A few sparse claps littered the area, and the announcer pointed an open hand to me,

“Look at that sportsmanship. Let’s hope the rest of the fights follow that spirit. Onto the next bout!”

The tournament fired back up, two more competitors walking up. I sighed, looking down at Althea, “Didn’t mean to make a scene. Fuck.”

Althea looked down, blocking her vision, “Don’t talk to me for a minute, ok?”

I smiled, “Are you that embarrassed?”

She looked up at me and snapped, “You shocked everybody with how cool you were. I shocked everybody by looking like an idiot.”

I hugged Althea to my side, “You shocked me with how sweet you were. Hell, I almost blushed myself.”

Althea looked away, blushing again. I’m pretty sure I saw a smile under her veil though. We chatted for a while like that, enjoying the fights. I surprised her with some stall food from a nearby vendor. We both munched on candies before they called me up again.

Once again, I floated up and landed onto the arena. This time, a bulky alien was at the arena. It was a living fungus, mushrooms sprouting from the cracks in his armor. With gray armor covering him, he dragged a flaming club behind him

It seemed strange for a plant to use fire as a weapon, but hey, it's his life.

The announcer lifted up his arms, "On the one side, we have Vox Keeocktureanitrix."

The announcer pronounced his name without fucking it up, keeping the enunciation fluid the entire time. Not gonna lie, I was impressed by that alone. He was good at this job even if he looked goofy.

The announcer pointed to me, "And on the other side, we have the newcomer who made a big splash, Daniel Hillside!"

I raised a fist as a few people cheered for me here or there. I also winced at the terrible joke. We get it, Elsa ended up belly flopping. That didn't mean it was funny.

Some people booed at him as he made the terrible joke. It sounded like they were booing at me, but I shrugged it off. I wasn't here to make fans. I was here to win.

After the hecklers stopped, the announcer coughed into his hand, "Anyways, are both combatants ready?"

We nodded. With the same attack as last time, I pushed down a wave of gravity by pushing down a hand. Unlike Elsa, Vox stayed standing. He couldn't move though, so I just lifted my hand up again. With another wave of gravity, he fell onto his knees.

I kicked forward, extending my reach with telekinesis. Vox dodged my attack, ducking down. I pulled my leg back and spun around. With a fancy spinning back kick, I shot a pulse of kinetic energy into Vox's chest. His armor caved in, and he ragdolled through the air.

He slammed into the energy barrier surrounding the arena. He fell onto the water, sinking in seconds. This time the carriers flew over and picked him up. They learned from last time. So did the announcer.

“And yet again, Daniel has conquered another round with ease. Let’s hear it for the newcomer!”

I lifted a fist, and quite a few people cheered at this point. I was building momentum. I jumped back towards Althea, people already giving me some space to land. As I did, a voice reached out into my mind. It was the gialgathen again.

I turned towards him, the behemoth staring me down. His name was...Bah, I didn’t give a shit at the time. His voice radiated into my head, “I will admit, I assumed your first bout was a fluke. With that display of power, I can firmly say you’re a worthy opponent.”

I looked back and forth, “So?”

“You’ve earned my respect. I only give it to those that are worthy.”

I laughed, “Are you serious?”

The gialgathen waved his head, “Of course I am. We gialgathens don’t lie like dirtwalkers.”

I rolled my eyes, “Bother someone else.”

He narrowed his eyes, “I warn you dirtwalker-“

“Fuck off.”

I snapped the mental connection like slamming a door. What’s his face shook his dragon head, looking flabbergasted. He was just a little bit too condescending for my taste. In fact, I planned on breaking several of his bones if we fought. I looked forward to it more than I should have.

Althea looked at me, grabbing my arm,

“Did I say something to make you mad?”

I nodded, “Naw. The gialgathen across the stream won’t cut his condescending bullshit.”

I flicked him off, acting mature and elegant. He didn’t understand the gesture regardless. He gave me a glare from hell though, wishing death upon my entire family by the looks of it.

Either way, my first impression of the gialgathens was bad. Real bad. The whole treating espens like a lower caste was pretty believable too. Still, I didn’t want to start making assumptions about other gialgathens. That would be like racism but for species. I’d be a speciesist...I think.

Anywho, we relaxed and watched a few more fights. The sun dipped down. As it did, even more espens watched the ensuing fights. Before I knew it, more business people set up shop. They sold entertainment for the lulls between fights. They sold fans, umbrellas, even fold out chairs.

It contrasted with how rural Icosah was. The modern influence was shaping the city too, seeping in slowly but surely. As the fights drew to a close, Althea and I almost left. Right before we decided, the Announcer called out, “And here is the semifinals for Icosah’s yearly tournament. We have the victorious Iasis Klon against the notorious Alzorothe Vern!”

I snapped my fingers, “That was his name. Alzorothe. Sounds like something off of Lord of the Rings.”

Althea looked at me, “What’s that?”

I raised an eyebrow, “The best shit ever. We should watch it when we get back to Earth. I’m sure we could scavenge a copy or two somewhere.”

She pressed her hands together, “It’s a date then.”

I grinned. I had something to look forward too. Interrupting my joy, Alzorothe landed on the arena, quaking the ground. Iasis walked out to the center of the stage. Before the fight started, Iasis used ice magic to coat himself in ice armor. A wave of mental energy covered every part of the arena. Speaking to everyone, Alzorothe spoke out,

“Tell me then espen. Why do you prepare for combat before we fight? You neglected that act against the pistol user.”

Iasis responded, his mental voice radiating to every one of the audience,

“Earnest and I go way back. He’s a good friend. I knew he couldn’t use magic before the battle started. I didn’t want to take advantage like that.”

The gialgathen, “Waved his wings, wind blowing outwards in every direction, “It’s good you respect me, dirtwalker. Otherwise-“

Iasis snapped, “Will you shut it and just fight?”

A look of utter rage passed over the face of the gialgathen, “I cannot believe that not only one but two dirtwalkers would interrupt me in a single day. I’m going to use your spine like a toothpick.”

Iasis rolled his eyes, “Yeah, sure.”

The whole blackmail thing wasn’t even a big deal to me anymore. I enjoyed Alzorothe getting pissed, so I raised a hand and shouted aloud,

“Kick his ass Iasis. You got this.”

The espen looked at me, his Soldiers of Fortune crest flashing. He scoffed and looked down with a smirk. He looked up at the gialgathen, ice covering him. The announcer shouted,

“That’s what we like to see. Some friendly banter before a battle!”

He spread out his arms, his goofy suit shifting in color, “Are both combatants ready?”

They nodded.

“Begin!”

Chapter 160: The Might of a Gialgathen

The gialgathen raised his neck, mana pouring from around him. Iasis charged towards him at a blistering pace. Alzorothe whipped his tail. Iasis slowed down, trying to dodge the tail’s whip. Alzorothe slowed down the shifting momentum in his tail to match it.

Iasis skidded to a stop in front of Alzorothe, fearing the crack of tail. The giant boomed a chuckling roar from his jaws. He boomed out with a mental wave, “Do you fear me to such an extent?”

Iasis kept cool, forming icicle spears. Before he shot them towards Alzorothe, the gialgathen clamped his jaws towards Iasis. The crack of teeth shot out a wave that destroyed the ice. It crumbled the armor Iasis covered himself with, leaving him vulnerable.

Iasis formed ice daggers and slit his wrists. Alzorothe waved his tail, making sure it was ready to whip at any moment. That zoned Iasis, keeping him from coming close. As Iasis molded blood into magic, Alzorothe nodded,

“I’ll give you the time you need for your magic.”

Iasis built the mana, converting his blood into crimson energy. It flooded his frame, empowering him with physical force. Crimson ice formed over Iasis in a split second, and he dashed forwards.

Alzorothe clamped his jaws, shattering the ice midway through Iasis’s leap. He whipped his tail, timing the enhanced speed of the charge. The tip of his tail cracked at it split the skin and armor on Iasis’s back. The espen crushed into the arena.

Iasis pulled himself up, a mist of blood spurting from his mouth as he did. Alzorothe kept his distance as he tilted his head,

“Is that it then? You’re welcome to try again if you’d like.”

With a toothy grin, Alzorothe continued, “It matters not. I will defeat you in any combat you wish to partake in.”

At this point, I believed the giant frog lizard.

Iasis stood up, more blood flooding into him. He opened his dimensional storage, pulling out an orange spear. With a purple sash at the end of it, he tapped the arena. Bits of crushed stone came up, covering Iasis. The gialgathen nodded, “Interesting. A spear given the blessing of Lehesion...It’s good you understand that you need a gialgathen’s power to fight me. Wise to know your limitations.”

Iasis spun the spear while swinging himself around. He bent down and lifted himself back up, almost dancing. As he turned back to Alzorothe, he jutted his spear towards the beast. A pillar of sharpened earth bolted up at the gialgathen’s throat.

A forcefield of mana deflected the shard of stone. Iasis spun and turned, performing complex aerial maneuvers. At the end of each, he prodded his spear at the gialgathen, launching rock splinters. At the end of the dance, his last missile shot forward while leaving a sonic boom in its wake.

With a reaction time defying comprehension, the gialgathen intersected the bullet. The frog lizard whipped it with his tail, crushing it to powder midswing. I shook my head,

“Iasis is getting crushed, both mentally and physically.”

Althea nodded, “Yeah. He doesn’t have raw umph to take Alzorothe on.”

The gialgathen grinned at the espen, “Do you concede?”

Iasis yelled as he flipped and turned in a dance. The air around him shivered as tiny rocks floated into the air. All around Iasis, stones floated into the air. He kept flipping for over two minutes the gialgathen picking at his teeth with his tail.

At the end of all the hoopla, Iasis did a double backflip before pointing his hands at Alzoroath. The spear flashed the distance between them both, exceeding the speed of sound. Three shockwaves blistered out as the spear lined up right for the beast's throat.

The beast caught the spear with his teeth.

I spread out my arms, "What the fuck was that? Are you serious?"

Althea's jaw hung open, "Uh, you might have your hands full here."

I scratched the side of my helmet, "Uh, yeah. No kidding. Going fast isn't the way to go."

The gialgathen crunched the spear in his mouth. He laughed,

"I assume that's all a dirtwalker can muster?"

Iasis fell to his knees, defeated utterly. The gialgathen whipped his tail, smashing Iasis from above. The blow broke Iasis's back, leaving him contorted sideways. Before the announcer stopped him, Alzoroath whipped his tail again from the side.

I clasped my hand, using a powerful pulse of antigravity between Iasis and the attack. Iasis fell sideways, fast as a bullet. The antigravity didn't stop the tail, but it did slow it down just enough to miss Iasis. The gialgathen shook his head,

"What coward took away his honorable death?"

He looked at the crowd, finding me with my hand raised. He grinned,

"Ahhh, the big dirtwalker. No one will save you when we fight."

I shrugged, “No one will have to.”

I pulled Iasis into the medbay. The crowd roared in approval, already on my side. The announcer pressed his fingers together, pinning the gialgathen down in his tracks. The announcer tilted his head, still having a huge ass smile on his face,

“That’s not a part of the tournament’s rules, now is it Alzorothe?”

The gialgathen turned his eyes towards the announcer, “Of...of course it wasn’t. It was my mistake.”

The announcer released his hands, letting the gigantic amphibian move again. I laughed, “Damn. The announcer is a bigshot. This whole tournament’s full of surprises.”

Althea leaned against me, “Have you tried analyzing him?”

I shook my head, doing it at that moment

Kiki Mosk, The Smiling Devil(lvl 9,000) – A Speaker representing Schema on Giess. Given the responsibility of organizing fights on the planet, Kiki enjoys entertaining wide audiences. With heavy investment into charisma, he knows how to work a crowd with his uncanny charm.

If you have the will to see past his facade, he’s cunning and sharp as a knife. Do not get on Kiki’s bad side or else he may just ruin your reputation as fast as he’ll crush your bones.

I nodded, “Ah, he’s a Speaker.”

She nodded, “I think so too.”

The announcer clapped his hands together, “No more of that silliness while I’m around, got it? If so, I might be forced into ensuring that such silliness cannot be done again.”

The announcer glared at Alzoroath, “Understood?”

The gialgathen nodded, “Assuredly.”

The announcer sighed, “You’d better. Now, on to the next and last round of Icosah’s tournament. We have two newcomers arriving to steal the top spots this year. On the one side, we have the incredibly disobedient Alzoroath!”

The crowd booed. The announcer amplified the sound, making it even louder. I laughed at that, surprised by how petty a Speaker could be. The announcer opened a hand to me,

“And Daniel Hillside, the warrior with unseen strikes.”

I jumped right back into the arena. As I landed, Alzoroath scoffed at me,

“Be glad the announcer is protecting you.”

I grinned, “Uh huh. Keep talking.”

The announcer turned to each of us, “Are you both ready?”

I nodded. I rolled my shoulders while the gialgathen whipped its tail back and forth. The announcer raised his hands, “Begin!”

I put myself into my fighting stance, sliding forward. The slow crawl of movement caused the gialgathen to burst into laughter,

“Do you intend on crawling me to death?”

I ignored him, keeping myself ready. After a minute of approaching him, I got within his tail’s range. He whipped it, slicing a blow straight at my left side. I leaned towards my right, shrugging my left shoulder. The blistering strike rolled up and over my shoulder, my gravitational magic helping me.

The gialgathen shook his head, “What? How did you do that? You’re so puny and minuscule.”

I kept inching forward. He whipped another tail slice at me, this time towards my right leg. I lifted my right knee up and towards his tail, checking the strike. I braced as his tail collided into my knee. I absorbed the impact, spreading the force outwards with gravity.

This stopped my gray armor from disintegrating, protecting my identity. As the gialgathen’s tail shot backward, the monster’s jaw went slack. I laughed, raising my hands,

“Come on big guy. Is that all you got?”

He lashed out, no longer holding back. After I deflected, blocked, and parried a dozen slashes of his tail, he got the picture. I kept inching forward, slow as a glacier. That was the problem for him though. I wasn’t stuck in this arena with him.

Mr. Frog-Dragon was stuck in here with me.