

New World 161

Chapter 161: A Night To Remember

With another lash of his tail, the gialgathen's desperation grew. I deflected another cutting strike. He flapped his wings, flying up into the air. Dipping into my mana, I pulled him downward. Alzeroth snapped,

"What is this vile trickery."

I stomped my heel, slamming him into the arena. His wide feet cracked into stone. He stumbled back, giving away precious space. His tail pummeled me from all angles, panic growing in his eyes. I controlled the fight with absolute calm, however.

I redirected strikes, countered his wild attacks, and pushed him into a corner. Within a minute of fighting, his back feet slipped from the arena into the water beside it. He pulled himself back up, meeting me.

He snapped at me with open jaws. With a tight, condensed hook, I crushed the needle teeth in his mouth. His head shot sideways, his tail missing its mark. I dashed forward, keeping my stance composed. Beside his belly, I gyrated a heavy hook into his side. The impact of my fist rippled up through his scaly skin like ripples through a pool.

He gasped in pain. Alzeroth raised his legs, stomping at me with his left foot. I caught his limb with one hand, my telekinetic energy dispersing the weight outwards. The arena cracked, stone breaking across the entire expanse. The gialgathen gasped,

"I...I can't believe it. How?"

I gripped my hand into his feet, bones grinding against bones in my hand,

"I'm strong."

I flung his foot sideways. As he fell, I spun on my heels. Torquing momentum into my right hand, I smashed an overhand right into his upper chest. My hand bounced back, the kinetic energy dispersing as if a bomb exploded.

With a loud boom echoing out, the behemoth tumbled out of the arena. Alzoroth slammed into the lower edge of the surrounding waterfall with another crash of sound. No one stood there, but many onlookers gawked from above. As large fissures spread across the entire canyon, those spectators spread out in a frenzy.

The entire portion of the arena threatened to collapse. I lifted a hand, clasp it as I pulled from my vast ocean of mana. The flow of energy evolved into a rush as I kept gathering energy. I reached out my hand, creating an antigravity field over the crumbling canyon wall.

I measured my output and matched the upward pull of my magic to the downward pull of Giess's gravity. This impromptu spell generated an antigravity field over the area of destruction. Kids, stalls, and spectators floated, the disaster turning into an exhibition.

As two espen children began playing in the antigravity field, I shouted,

“Get out of the magic field. I’m not holding this shit forever.”

My words spurred the stunned audience into action. A few nearby tournament fighters flew into the field, helping children and the elderly to escape. I flicked Alzoroth out of the area, floating him towards the medical bay. Asshole or not, I wasn’t about to kill the guy.

The adults didn’t need help once they got my warning. They crawled out through a field of floating debris. After ten minutes of holding the broken gorge, no one remained. I dropped my hand, letting the entire piece of wall fall. As it tumbled, the announcer floated beside me.

Kiki Mosk grinned at me, his tacky suit shifting colors at random. He grabbed my arm, raising my hand as he roared across the arena,

“And we have the new champion of Icosah! Let’s hear it for the newcomer!”

The crowd went wild. The cheering continued for a solid five minutes. B then, they exhausted my patience. I left the arena, jumping back towards Althea. As I reached her, she crossed her arms and pursed her lips at me,

“You know you didn’t have to show off like that.”

I grinned, “Did I though? He had it coming.”

She raised her eyebrows, “Ok, I can’t lie about that.”

From the crowd, a tuft of white fur scrambled towards us. Caprika reached us, her red mask reflecting an orange sheen from the sunset. She grabbed my arms and shook me, “What in Schema’s name was that?”

I wobbled back and forth, “I kicked his ass. What else?”

She spread out her hands, “If you could beat him so easily, why not just do so without causing a scene? Other members of the tournament know all of your tricks now.”

I scoffed, “That’s the thing. That’s not all the talents I have at my disposal. Trust me.”

With a slow nod, she backed away, giving me some welcome space. Caprika sighed while composing herself, “Hmmm...I suppose I’m fortunate to have chosen such an able warrior to represent me then.”

Althea grabbed my arm, grinning up at me, “You are.”

I wrapped my arm around Althea’s shoulders, “Heh, you’d be doing the same thing. It might even be more overwhelming than my fighting style.”

Caprika put her clawed hands onto her hips, looking back and forth at us,

“I believe a celebration is in order. My treat for your dominant victories.”

I gave her the thumbs up, “Sounds like fun.” I looked at Althea, “What do you think?”

She shrugged, "I'm game. Let's invite Kessiah and Torix. Kessiah will like the food and Torix will enjoy the company."

I hugged Althea up to my chest, pulling her off her feet, "I'm so lucky to have someone as sweet as you."

Althea giggled while Caprika gagged in the sidelines,

"Bleck. Your overt happiness is disgusting."

Althea rolled her eyes as I set her down, "I know a guy who knew just what to say in times like this. I quote, 'Hod think fur lady peanut butter and jealous.'"

I bust out laughing while Caprika shook her head in confusion. Caprika leaned her head into a clawed hand, "Whoever friend is, he's unbelievably stupid."

Althea laughed, "Yeah, you and Torix would get along perfectly. The grouch thinks the same thing."

We walked off through the crowd, chatting as we headed back to Icosah. I ignored my new fans, too busy to indulge them. I wasn't used to this kind of attention, and I didn't intend on getting used to it either. Knowing myself, I'd say something ridiculous and end up blowing our cover. It was better to play it safe for now.

Once we got back to Icosah, Caprika went back to the Empire's branch. Althea and I stopped by a cafe, enjoying a few drinks of some root juice reminding me of tea. Once finished with winding down, Althea went to find Torix. I searched out for Kessiah.

I found her in a bar, chatting it up with the bartender and a few rough looking mercenaries. As I trot up, the two gruff aliens stood up. One of them walked up and grabbed my hand,

"I saw your fight. It was incredible. You showed those filthy Gialgathens whose boss."

I frowned, not enjoying the fact he called all gialgathens filthy. Still, I shook his hand back. I shrugged, “It’s more about putting arrogant asshats in their place, not gialgathens.”

He slapped my shoulder, keeling over in laughter, “What’s the difference?”

I squeezed his hand, “I gotta talk to my friend. Nice meeting you.”

He nodded, walking off into the distance. I sat down with Kessiah, each of us staring forward. She sipped from some unknown brew, looking up at the television screen,

“You know, I saw how you handled Alzorothe on the television.”

I nodded. Kessiah tilted her drink back and forth, looking at me, “They’re playing you up like you’re some anti-gialgathen icon.”

I turned towards her, “Really now?”

She scoffed, “Yeah. Did you hear them right? Lots of people here despise those frog-dragons.”

I raised a hand, “You see the resemblance too?”

She spread out her hand like I was ridiculous, “Well duh. I heard quite a few stories from some training buddies back Earth. A lot of them talked about dragons. They’re just flying reptiles. Big whoop.”

I leaned back onto the bar, “They’re more like noble beasts with pure hearts, at least in Earthen fiction...Earthen fiction. That feels weird to say.”

She sighed, “It is weird to say. My point is, whether they’re frog dragons or not, someone is using you against them. That’s what I gathered from those two mercenaries.”

I rolled my eyes, “Come on, this isn’t something we have to worry about. Compare that to facing off against you know who. The stakes aren’t as high.”

She tipped her head back, downing the shot glass’s contents,

“Can’t say I didn’t warn ya. Yo bartender, my friend’s picking up the tab.”

The alien bartender nodded his head. She stood up, getting ready to leave. I reached out a hand as she turned around, “Wait a second, I forgot why I came here. Caprika’s hosting us a feast. You’re invited.”

Kessiah glanced back at me, “Thanks for the tip tough guy. I’ll be there.”

She walked out. I stayed there, wondering how she was holding up. I didn’t have time to worry about anyone else while we were fighting Yawm. Now I did. As much of an ass as Kessiah was, she was a friend. She spiraled downwards after the fight with Dahkma. She never really invested in the battle with Yawm ever.

I didn’t blame her. A part of me did at the time, but after it was over, I let bygones be bygones. I mean, no one should be forced into that kind of situation. Just because I forgave her didn’t mean Kessiah forgave herself though. She might be carrying a ton of guilt for it.

I wanted her to get back on her two feet. I resolved myself to let her know that it wasn’t a big deal. She helped us out on more than one occasion regardless, like training a few of the soldiers and giving us vital information. That train of thought got me thinking about her warning.

I never imagined someone would use my reputation against me. At least not like this. When I compared it to facing off against Yawm, my public image didn’t seem like a necessary concern. After all, it lacked the same bloodthirsty, world-destroying edge that Yawm had. That’s an edge that’s hard to overcome in my book.

Still, I respected Kessiah enough to give her words some merit. As lazy as she could be, she had a way of worming useful information out of people. Before I left, I ordered the bar’s most popular drink to try it. While waiting for the order, I checked out my statuses.

Over the last two weeks of doing odd jobs, I gained forty red cores. I invested all the free skill points into Force of Nature. By now, my current tree, Legendary, needed less than fifty points before gaining another tier in it. Completing the tree kind of terrified me, but life rewarded the brave and the bold. Most of the time.

A drink slid out in front of me, interrupting my thoughts. I raised the glass to the bartender, and he gave me a nod as I said, "Cheers."

My face mask moved out of the way as I gave my drink a swig. It closed in as quickly as I downed the mixture. It tasted just like a sharpie marker and the smell of a pencil box. A wave of nostalgia hit me for a second as I stood up. A bit of fire burned in my belly for the tiniest fraction of a second.

No sense of euphoria passed over me. My body burned the alcohol like a furnace. I snickered at myself. Alcohol was poison, and my health regeneration was a bit too stout to let it affect me. Being huge didn't exactly help with my case either. If I wanted to cut loose, I'd need to find another vice I supposed.

As I stepped out of the bar, the sun had set. Various plantlife lit the townscape, espens walking around. Fog followed them, keeping their amphibious skin hydrated. Icosah never slept, a crowd of people flooding its streets at all times. It made me pumped to see the capital considering this was such a small town.

With that in mind, I set out towards Caprika's feast. Once I reached the Empire's castle of a branch, two guards opened the doors for me. Light poured out, phosphorescent creatures floating overhead. A pulsing, percussive melody played in the background, injecting a sense of energy inside.

Anticipation rode up my limbs as I walked up the stairs and inside. The tiny, floating creatures moved out of my way, my height causing me to get in their way. I walked past the entrance, the receptionist of the empire walking up to me.

She smiled, gesturing me to follow her. I did, passing more of the floating creatures. We walked over towards the throne room. I pointed at it, "Wasn't this place destroyed?"

She nodded, "It's been renovated, sir."

I squirmed at her calling me sir. I frowned, “Damn, that was fast.”

The receptionist gave me a bow, “I’ll relay the compliment to the duchess. Enjoy your feast.”

She walked off, leaving me in front of another set of wooden doors. From inside the room, the muffled music ebbed outward. It reminded me of club music, though heavier in tone. I pushed open the doorway, revealing a place packed with people to the brim.

They danced with lights beaming down from other shining creatures above. An alien DJ played music while everybody else danced their asses off. Servants walked around, giving everyone free drinks and food. Chilled fruits, meats, powders, and drinks lined tables at the edges of the room.

Aliens sat beside these tables, eating and talking. Some people ate the random powders at the table, going off and dancing up a frenzy afterward. The sheer vitality in the room was contagious, though my willpower gave me immunity to the peer pressure.

A few of those peers glanced at me as I walked in. They raised their hands, cheering at me. Their cheer caused others to look. Given my height, pretty much everyone could see me. The small set of shouts turned into a roar of applause.

Indulging myself a little, I put a hand on my chest and bowed a little while saying, “You’re all too kind, just too kind.”

I laughed at myself, thinking it was strange facing so much celebration over something so little. Either way, I paced into the crowd before someone bumped into me. The nearly knocked me over, the strength of a steamroller behind them. I glanced down, finding Althea laughing. She smiled like there was no tomorrow. In her thick veil and accentuating her curves, she stunned me with how gorgeous she was.

She hugged me, squeezing the life from my chest. I patted her back, “Hey, use a little less strength there. Are you trying to kill me?”

She giggled, “Nope, but I’ll take you to heaven later tonight.”

I liked the sound of that. She pulled me to the dance floor, Althea going crazy. I stood there like a fish flopping out of the water. I looked around, awkward as fuck. Althea slapped my back, “What are you doing? Could you relax a little for once?”

I frowned, “I’m relaxed all the time.”

She scoffed, “Then why aren’t you dancing?”

I shrugged, “I have no idea how.”

She giggled again, “What? Just...I don’t know, pretend you’re in one of you’re... training sessions or something.”

She stumbled sideways, but I held her up. She downed her drink. She dropped the glass, but I caught it with some magic. I sent it off to a nearby servant, saving some people from a foot full of glass. I grabbed Althea’s shoulders,

“Not everyone here has skin of stone. Dropping a glass like that’s dangerous as hell.”

She rolled her eyes again, “You know what? You looked so cool at the tournament. You always do. I knew you’d...handle it. You always handle everything.”

She put a hand on my chest, “You don’t have to handle everything always. You know that right?”

I nodded, “Of course I do.”

She spread out her hands, “Then just let go for one night and enjoy yourself. You don’t always have to compete with a flagpole to see who’s more stiffer.”

“You mean more stiff?”

She shook her head, wagging a finger at me, “Nope. More stiffer.”

I rolled my eyes, smiling despite myself. I tried out a goofy jig, getting a laugh out of Althea. I slapped my thighs, “There, happy?”

She lifted herself to her tippy toes, hugging me, “Yes.”

She grabbed my hands, lifting them up and down while twisting her hips. For some reason, every girl could dance like a champ. As a guy, it took severe training to get good on a dancefloor.

Without the skills to pull off anything even remotely impressive, I played up how awful I was at busting a move for laughs. Hell, you could probably tell how bad I was at dancing by how I called it busting a move.

Despite my mediocrity, Althea and I had a blast. Caprika ended up walking up to us, dressed in a gown that worked with her fur. The albony shouted up at me over the music,

“Having fun?”

I nodded, “Yeah.” I looked down at Althea, “I have good company.”

Caprika nodded, “Remember all of this. This is how the empire throws feasts.”

I gave her the thumbs up before dancing again with Althea. After a while, we moved like no one was watching. It amazed me how private a party could feel at times. The dark lights, loud music, and pulsing lights hid you from the attention of other people. That’s why Althea and I danced like we were in our own little world.

After a few hours of eating food and being goofballs, Althea and I left the feast. It wasn’t my scene, not even the slightest bit. Althea thrived there though, and she let me loosen up while we were there. It was a lot of fun because of her.

As we left, she kept stumbling around. From what I saw, she was playing up how drunk she felt to keep the good energy flowing. I appreciated the effort, steadying her without complaint. We got back to an inn in the middle of town. I didn’t want to camp outside for a night. Besides, we could appreciate the privacy.

Once there Althea flopped on the bed, spreading out her arms and legs,

“Ahhh, this bed feels so soft.”

Her figure showed while she spread out. Her toned legs and arms, curvy hips, and voluptuous chest pressed on her clothes. Her hair went down to her waist, the purple hair smelling like lavender. She hugged a pillow, giving me a sly look out of the corner of her eye.

Fire flared in my chest as she moved her hips back and forth. With her voice dripping with seduction, she whispered,

“You want to be a little wild tonight?”

Chapter 162: Different Stars

I walked over, clicking the center of Torix’s gray suit. My power armor folded off me. I set the gray square that was left on a night stool beside the bed. I laid onto her. As I did, my real armor molded over us both, creating a sphere. As I pressed against her back, I whispered in her ear, “Always.”

Althea giggled, “Your armor’s gotten way better at that circle thing since we first did it forever ago.”

I smiled, “It had to. Otherwise, we’d be waiting for the metal longer than we spent time actually doing it.”

She rolled her eyes, “If only. Your stat sheet isn’t the only thing with a lot of endurance.”

I snickered while wrapping my arms around her. She smelled my arm, “You smell like iron, stone, and fire. You’re like a blacksmith.” She squeezed my upper arms, “If I press down hard enough, I can feel the fibers of your armor under your skin. They’re like cords of steel.”

She rubbed her hand across my arm. I pressed my face into her hair, breathing in, “Well you smell like lavender...Man do I love your shampoo.” I squeezed her, “And every part of you feels soft to me. From the top of your sleek shoulders to your nice, sexy ass.”

She wiggled her hips, smirking at me with pride. She raised her eyebrows,

“I do a little touch up with my shapeshifting powers.”

I raised an eyebrow, leaning up, “Really now? I’d never of guessed.”

She flipped over towards me, lifting her hands overhead. I pulled her dress off while she talked,

“I mean its nothing big or anything, just little improvements here or there. I think of it like makeup or exercise.”

Her voluptuous boobs bounced as her clothes passed over them. I leaned into them,

“I appreciate the effort.”

She coiled her arms around my head, her body shivering at my touch. I dwarfed her enough to wrap one arm all the way around her. Althea loved that though. She told me I made her feel safe.

I let out a deep breath, tracing my lips between her breasts. Electrical sparks shot up her body, her hands and feet twitching. I enjoyed teasing her, relishing in the sensations of her body. She left her hands over her head, closing her eyes. She loved the sense of freedom. I loved the sense of domination.

I pressed my lips onto down her neck, to her shoulders, then her side. Althea was ticklish around her stomach. I took full advantage, kissing down towards her navel. She shivered as I tongued her belly, her mind racing in anticipation.

With a gentle touch, I caressed my hands down hips. Like lightning fired into Althea's fingers, she writhed and grabbed the bedsheets. She let out a soft moan, surrendering herself to me. My own excitement built, my hands moving faster.

A carnal hunger raced up into my head, urging me on. I pressed harder against her, feeling the softness of her skin. She tasted a little salty and sweet, her body warm against me. She arched her back, pressing her most intimate place against mine.

She wrapped her arms around me, nibbling at my neck. I pressed myself against her, her tender body fitting against me. I thrust myself into her, Althea biting her lip and scratching down my back. Her lips quivered as she gasped.

She tightened against me, pulling me in. Sopping wet, she pushed her hips to me. I nibbled on her ear. She rewarded me with several breathless gasps. I sped up my pace, her body sucking on me. She pulled as I pushed. I grabbed her wrist, holding her down.

She wrapped her legs around me, pulling me into her. Her moans turned to yelps as she let go. Her hips rocked with me, the bed shaking. I growled, pressing my teeth against her shoulders and neck. I sucked on her, her chest sensitive.

She bit her lip and panted, "Ah, I love it when you touch me there baby."

I nibbled on her nipples, her body spasming in pleasure. She jolted with each pulse, her body constricting mine. I forgot about everything else, her smell and taste consuming me. I heightened my senses, savoring each move of her body.

She gripped my back, her body tightening. Her moaning gasps quickened before she yelped, her body squirming in place. She placed her hands on my chest, letting out labored breaths. She clenched on me, squeezing me tight. I clenched my teeth, euphoria spreading over me.

I let out deep breaths with my arms shaking. I finished as Althea did, each of us losing tension. I laid on her, supporting some of my weight on my arms and legs to not smash her. She whispered into my ear, "That was amazing."

I grinned, "You were amazing."

I lifted myself up, moving one her boobs out from under me. She giggled,

“I remember when you used to lay on top of them. It hurt so bad I’d squeal.”

I nodded, “And it scared the shit out of me too. I didn’t know boobs were that touchy.”

She played with my hair, “That’s not as bad as the time I kneed you right in the balls while I was cumming.”

I winced, “Jesus Christ. Don’t remind me.”

She leaned back laughing. We laid together for a moment, just enjoying the intimacy. After a minute, she grabbed the back of my hair, “Ready for round two?”

A devilish grin ran up my lips, “Let’s make it a bit more adventurous.”

With Althea asleep, I floated myself up out of bed. It turns out that magic and sex made for a solid combination. As I stepped towards a desk in the corner of the room, my armor molded back over me. As it did, confidence surged in my chest. It was my second skin after all, and I was naked without it. Literally and metaphorically.

I sat in a desk in the corner of the room. I pulled my grimoire and set to work. With the extra knowledge Eonoth unlocked, my cipher skills overshadowed what they once were. It was high time I took full advantage of my new abilities even if I feared them a little.

It also helped that my perception was just over 2,500 now. The cipher shored up weak attributes faster than high ones. The dungeon cores helped accelerate this process even further. This rapid attribute gain meant fixing issues with my build proved simple. That’s why I wasn’t worried about the televised tournament. Only classers would know who I am and that was if they specced into perception.

I doubted that many classers watched tournaments from small towns like Icosah either. They’d be too backwater

for them.

Either way, my attribute gain satisfied me for now. I wanted to unlock other parts of Schema's system. His trees and perks gave multipliers and conversions that vastly improved my abilities. If he did it, I could too. Even more so, I might make a new skill or spell that might help round out my build. It never hurt having options after all.

With those ideas bouncing around, I played around with the cipher. Instead of focusing on precision and clarity, I emphasized the fluidity of it. After several hours, I learned a few tricks and tips for creating more efficient runes.

I rewrote my perception runes, plastering them onto my forearms. After I finished the runic work, I stood up and put on my metallic disguise. Torix's power armor folded over me, keeping me hidden. I walked out of our room, leaving a written note. Althea hated waking up alone, but a note helped ease the sting.

I walked around town, buying a few traveling supplies. With Icosah's tournament handled, we'd all be shuttled to the next city, Yildraza. I figured processing some of the logistic work would take the edge off of Torix for once.

After setting down my supplies, I returned to our rented room. Althea woke up as I opened the door inside the room. She rubbed her eyes as I set down an armful of foodstuffs, snacks, and trinkets. I walked over, giving her a morning kiss,

"It's good to see you."

She gave me a lazy grin, hugging her pillow, "Same here."

After an exotic breakfast of Giessian junk food, we trekked to the Empire's branch in Icosah. The receptionist guided us to the back of the imperial building. After passing a few fancy hallways, we got to the armory and integration room. Both of the areas focused on teaching espens the proper use of imperial weaponry.

We reached a meeting room, fancy furniture clashing with high tech gear. Kessiah, Caprika, and Torix talked to two members of the empire. Garnered in fine, flowing robes, they spoke with the same red masks covering their faces.

Both of them outsized Caprika, their features masculine. Collars of crimson wood tamed their wild tufts of fur, the same material as their masks. The tallest of the two wore red, the other green. They both kept their hands hidden under by pressing their sleeves together. As we walked up, they both turned to us.

Caprika paced over and gestured towards me, “This is Daniel, the warrior I selected. This is Althea, a physically imposing assassin.”

I raised a hand, “Yo.” Althea waved at them. Caprika pointed to the red-robed one, “This is Muro.” She pointed to the green one, “This is Unoc.”

Muro nodded at me, “Ah, there you are. This is the warrior we’ve heard so much about.”

Unoc leaned towards me, “Was it magic that let you fell such a titanic beast?”

I nodded, raising a hand, “Yeah. Gravity.”

Unoc and Muro nodded to each other in excess while affirming each other,

“Undoubtedly so.”

“It’s as we predicted.”

“Most certainly so.”

“But of course.”

It got old quick, so I pointed at them both, “Why are they here?”

Caprika sighed, “They’re trying to help me win the tournament this year to accrue favor with the royal family. Their concern is kind but unneeded.”

She glared at them both as she finished. They both leaned back, Unoc whispering, “You’re always such a snappy sister.”

“It does your impression in courts no good.”

“You’ve no suitor because of it.”

“Even though you’re so beautiful.”

“It is such a shame.”

They finished each other’s sentences. I looked at them both,

“You guys are twins?”

They nodded. I gave Unoc and Muro a thumbs up, “Your sister’s doing fine.” I turned to my friends, “You guys ready to go?”

Torix nodded, staring at this status, “Of course.”

Kessiah was reading a local booklet about Giess, “Yeah.”

They both lacked agency, but it didn’t matter at the moment. Caprika put her clawed hands on her hips,

“Then we’ll be using one of our vehicles transport. Will that suit you all?”

Althea nodded. I shrugged, “We usually run everywhere, so this is a step up. It’s actually a lot fewer steps, but you get what I’m saying.”

Caprika looked up at me, “You...run everywhere?”

I spread out my arms, “We all do. For the most part. Either that or I use my magic.”

Unoc leaned towards me, “It takes a mind of steel to transport like that.”

Muros continued, “You must have quite the willpower stat.”

“It was wise of our sister to choose you.”

“She’s fortunate.”

“Do treat her well, won’t you?”

“The empire will reward you handsomely if you do.”

I raised my palms to them, “I will.” I turned to the others, “Let’s go kick some ass.”

We walked off, Caprika’s brothers doting on her while she tried escaping them. Though annoying, their concern for their sister warmed me up to them for the most part. Once we got rid of them, we walked into a garage at the back of the building.

Inside of it, numerous technicians and mechanics worked on vehicles of varying sizes. The largest car was covered in the skin of some marine animal. I frowned at it,

“Uh, why in the fuck are you guys covering your vehicles with skin?”

Caprika walked up to it, “It’s the skin of an octopus native to Giess. It’s skin shifts color and even texture rapidly, letting it escape detection while moving.”

She crossed her arms, “It’s a gift from my brothers. They don’t want me traveling without some measure of protection. I’m more than able to defend myself, but they don’t seem to understand that.”

Althea walked, “They will one day.”

Caprika shook her head, “I doubt it, but thank you for the sentiment. This abomination will be what we’re traveling in. Once at the regional city of Yildraza, our next series of fights will continue.”

Caprika opened the door to the vehicle, the sliding skin showing a sleek interior. Aged wood, silken fabrics, and embroidery gave the car a luxurious feel. Several rooms dotted the inside, sliding doors giving any occupants privacy. Two couches lined the opening room, a hologram projector letting anyone watch anything they wanted to.

After living like a caveman for so long, it left me wincing at the excess. It contrasted sleeping on rock floors quite a bit. Caprika walked inside, opening a cooler full of fresh fruits, meats, and cheesy foods. She gestured to all of it,

“Help yourself to anything while your here. The Empire takes care of our allies.”

I ducked as I entered, the ceiling too short for me. I frowned, “Damn. I’m used to eating liquid rations by pouring them over my face.”

Caprika gasped, “Truly? Liquid rations...for how long?”

Althea cringed, “I didn’t tell you? He did it for years.”

I rolled my eyes, sitting down on one of the cushions, “It wasn’t that bad. Besides for that, what do you mean didn’t tell her?”

Althea shrugged, “Me and Caprika hung out a few times over the last week.”

Caprika shrugged, “I’ve had more free time since I stopped sitting in my throne room.”

Torix walked passed us towards one of the back rooms. He looked up from his status, “Excuse my curtness. I have a series of classes to teach before grading an innumerable number of papers.”

Kessiah stomped up the steps into the car-mansion,

“What? You’re still teaching?”

Torix nodded, “But of course. A University of my own with eager students. It’s been a dream of mine for a very, very long time. A few light years won’t keep me from it, I assure you.”

He walked into one of the rooms and muttered, “Now attendance has dropped 7%. My punishments must become...stricter.”

Althea and I smiled at the old bag of bones. His dedication to his students was unquestionable. That’s why he took me on as a disciple so long ago. Interrupting my thoughts, Kessiah jumped onto one of the couches beside Caprika. Kessiah put her arm around the albony,

“You’ve got some soft ass fur.”

Caprika’s posture straightened in her seat, “I wash and condition it every day. Many albony use our abundance of hair as an excuse to bathe less regularly. Not I.”

I pulled my helmet off my face, leaning back into my seat, “Really now?”

She nodded, “Quite. I take pride in representing the Empire and what it signifies.”

Althea pulled out some juice from the cooler below us,

“So you’re a, er, patriot I guess?”

Caprika hit the top her chest, “Always.”

The car wheeled into motion. I crossed my arms, “But the Empire’s got problems, surely?”

Caprika shrugged, “Of course they do. Every state or galactic power does, even Schema. What makes the Empire unique is the sense of order it brings to a world or solar system.”

Kessiah offered her a drink, "Want some?"

Caprika lifted a hand, "Sure." She popped the top off before a strand of her hair caught the cap. She continued,

"Most states are chaotic. They call themselves guilds, but they are no different in action from the Empire. We don't cower behind some different power system and propaganda as they do, however. We display what we are for all to see."

I cupped my chin, "So, the power is more centralized?"

She nodded, "There's also a class system. There is mobility allowed between of the five tiers, though you can't rise to a tier above your born station."

I frowned, "Let me guess, the albony are at the top?"

She shook a finger, "Not always. We are born in the upper echelon." She slopped her shoulders, her proud posture deflating,

"Though it doesn't mean we may always remain there."

Kessiah took a swig of her drink, "Oof, that sucks."

Althea redirected the conversation, "You can move up though, right?"

Caprika leaned back into the cushion, "Of course. In fact, any class may move up the tiering system. If they reach the upper echelon of their class, their children may be given the status of the tier above them. This increase in status comes with enhanced responsibilities, so it's the child's choice."

I tilted my head back, "Ahhh, that does make it better. It still would take five generations for the lowest of the low to move up to royalty though, right?"

Caprika nodded, “This is true. Such rises are usually fantasy, however. It’s quite rare for a family to maintain excellence for five generations in a row.”

I remembered my own dad. She was right about that. Caprika continued,

“It promotes a stable, orderly society. Crime on imperial planets is extremely low. Giess has an extremely high rate of crime near cities since it lacks any central, governing structure.”

Kessiah nodded, pointing her glass bottle at Caprika, “I actually read about that. The capital is run by a few criminal masterminds or some shit. It’s because the espens were ruled over by the Gialgathens for the longest time.”

Kessiah finished her beverage, tossing it into a garbage bin, “Since Schema came along, the espens gained a lot of freedom. No one’s taken over yet, so it’s total chaos. Young, ambitious espens are fighting the old order.”

That was perfect for us. We could clear up one of the criminal masterminds in order to get rid of our bounties. If we played our cards right, we could create a lasting bond with Giess and the Empire at the same time.

Caprika nodded at Kessiah, “You’re informed.”

Kessiah locked her hands behind her head, leaning back, “Nope. I was just bored.”

Althea and I laughed before looked at Caprika, “Yeah, I get the order thing. I do. The thing is though, that kind of system stops new talent from rising to the top. Incompetent people can control decisions at that point. On my homeworld, the Roman Empire fell because of that...I think.”

Caprika waved away my concern, “Our political system places the most power in the most competent hands of each of the five tiers. We don’t have to worry about that?”

I raised an eyebrow, “What if someone in the lower tiers is better at ruling than someone from the upper tiers? It sounds like their talent gets wasted.”

Caprika shrugged, “Then so be it. For order.”

Althea leaned her elbows against her knees, “What tier would Daniel fit into?”

Caprika grabbed the bottom of her mask. She crossed her legs, “Hmmm, likely within the bottom of the highest tier. He’d be right at home with other albony, and his overwhelming combat prowess would win him favor with the king.”

Althea pointed at me, “His family would’ve been the lowest status tier though.”

Caprika shook her head, “That’s preposterous. I don’t believe it.”

I shrugged, “My father lived on welfare and drank like there was no tomorrow. That’s where I come from. I’d never be allowed past the bottom tier. I would be a part of that wasted talent I mentioned earlier.”

Caprika looked down, scratching the side of her head, “I...I suppose there are imperfections. It’s not something I may fix, however.”

I raised a fist, “Not until I win this tournament that is.”

Caprika leaned on her balled up fist of claws, “I suppose I may be granted that kind of power if we can accomplish the tournament and more. It’s wishful thinking for now. We’ll need far more than combat prowess for me to be awarded my own city-state.”

Kessiah leaned up, clapping her hands, “Alright guys, enough political bullshit. Who wants to watch the tournament right now?” She leaned back in her seat, “I’m guessing everyone.”

Kessiah interacted with the hologram projector in the center of the room. After a few clicks, a three dimensional, high-resolution image popped into the center of the room. It showed two combatants fighting with ferocity. I leaned towards the model, stunned by the quality. I shook my head,

“I can’t even tell it’s not real.”

Caprika leaned onto the armrest of her couch, “Once you’ve watched it enough, you’ll see it. It is a rather recently made model, so quality is quite good.”

We ended up chatting about the fights and having a few drinks after that. Kessiah talked about how she’d learned a thing or two since Caprika’s last fight. After a few verbal jousts, they ended up theorycrafting like two fangirls. It was refreshing to see Kessiah get passionate about something.

After a few hours of unwinding, I looked out of a window behind me. Towering mountains surrounded us with hills off in the distance. Along the distant hills, a metal landscape encroached, pillars of iron rising into the sky. Silvers battled native Giessian creatures to a standstill there. The battle injected me with a growing sense of dread.

Giess’s fate was up to chance. On Earth, we had to fight the eldritch or else we would all die. The espens didn’t have that problem, so they just let their wildlife take care of it. Whether the silvers, eldritch, or natural wildlife would win or not, the natives left it up to chance.

To me, it was a risk I wouldn’t be willing to take. Instead, I’d train up a group of soldiers before fighting the silvers back. As I dwelled on those thoughts, my senses sent out an alarm.

My mythical skill, Hunter of Many, let me analyze my surroundings in detail. While sparse, the scent of espen blood filled into the car. My added perception allowed me to detect it. I stood up,

“Caprika, tell the driver to stop the car.”

Kessiah bust out laughing, “Driver? You think people drive cars? Self-driving happened, like, a thousand years ago.”

I waved her off, “Who cares. Point is to stop the car.”

Caprika didn’t question me as she pressed her invisible status screen. The cars engines flared and stopped us. I jumped down the stairs, the doors sliding open just in time. Althea followed me, her eyes sharpening,

“What is it? Should I make a rifle?”

I landed on crags of rock, “Not just yet.”

She and I looked around, searching for some signs of a crash or paths. I looked towards the car, our bus looking like a pile of rocks. It blended in with the scenery making it difficult to see. I turned my gaze behind us, spotting a winding path that weaved between the mountains.

I found no signs of a crash, but the smell of blood lingered. Wind crashed against my face, bringing a bit into the odor. The blood wasn't fresh either. It was the same kind of smell as Springfield after Yawm got a hold of it. In other words, the stench of corpses.

I ran towards the stench, the hair along the back of my neck rising. I passed a few large boulders, weaving up the side of the mountain. As I closed in, metal grazed metal, and the chewing of meat entered my ears. It wasn't looking too good.

I reached the top of a rocky pit surrounded by large boulders. Althea materialized beside me. She grabbed her nose,

“By Schema that smells like corpses. Bleck.”

I rolled my shoulders, preparing for the worst, “Be ready.”

I jumped down, the scent singing my nose at this point. I turned towards the back of the pit, finding a monstrosity. I let out a quick breath, wincing while I looked away. I bit my lip, shaking my head,

“Mercy on your poor soul.”

Chapter 163: A Dark Plan

An espen laid hidden by crags of stone. The espens once crimson skin faded to a murky red, his vitality drained. A brand covered his forehead, a symbol etched on the surface. I opened my status, sending Caprika a message along with our coordinates. She might know what the mark meant, giving us a clue to what was going on.

I inspected the horror further, leaning towards the mess. The espen's hands were missing fingernails. I glanced around him, finding scratch marks from where he tried to escape. His jaw hung open, a string of blood flowing down his chest. He killed himself by biting off his own tongue and bleeding out.

I looked further down. His torso was split open, orange egg sacks writhing in his intestines. Silvers squirmed inside the capsules. Tiny, metal insects chewed on his skin and flesh, converting him to metal. They built geometric metal outwards from their host.

I snatched up one of the silvers. It was a Saysha, one of the most common silvers. I squished it in my hand, espen blood pouring out of it. I glanced around, finding no bloody marks or any tracks in the ground. Something dropped him here. I sighed, looking up at Althea, "Do you know anything about the silvers?"

Althea shrugged, "Nope. I don't know if I want to learn about them either."

I frowned, "There's really no need to see this mess then unless you want too."

A set of steps walked up, and a regal voice replied, "What is it then? Did you find a dead animal or something utterly rank? It smells positively appalling."

I shook my head, "No, Caprika. It's an espen."

Caprika leaped into the pit, her hair snapping onto a nearby rock. It lowered her down with a sense of elegance. As Caprika peered at the horror, she turned around and gagged. I stood back up, turning to her,

"We need to figure out what happened here."

Caprika hissed, "Isn't it obvious? He rode into the silver's territory before escaping. He died here."

I shook my head, “No. See these claw marks? He tried to scratch himself out of here. There’s no tracks or trail of blood either. He even bit his tongue to kill himself. Something held him down here. I want to know what that something is.”

Caprika grabbed the sides of her face, “Your ability to decipher piles of rotting meat and disgusting sacks is truly admirable.”

I rolled my eyes, walking over to her, “Come on, princess. Don’t make me use this.”

I showed her the hand I used to squish a Saysha with. Caprika leaped back, her hair forming into blades aimed at me,

“Ew, ew, ew!” She patted herself off, getting herself together, “You’re primitive and repulsive.”

“I like to think I’m pragmatic. Come on. The espen has a brand on his forehead. I don’t know what it is. You might.”

She patted the sides of her face, taking a deep breath. She turned around, her claws fidgeting in her hands. She stared at the espen’s face, her disgust fading. She gasped,

“It’s a slave’s brand.”

I creased my eyebrows, “Slavery is on Giess? Really now?”

Caprika shook her head, “Not anymore. To be accurate, there was slavery a long, long time ago.”

“With who or what?”

She scratched the side of her head, “Have you heard the story of Lehesion?”

I closed my eyes, searching my memory. I lifted a hand, “Lehesion, he was a gialgathen that saved espens, right?”

Caprika tilted her hand back and forth, “It’s not so simple. He merely aimed for social reform. He still believed that Gialgathens were superior, but he also thought that they should treat their inferiors with dignity.”

I pointed at the brand, “So he got rid of slavery? Sheesh, no wonder people hate gialgathens.”

Caprika nodded, “To the point, yes, Lehesion did repeal slavery. He preferred indentured servitude. Still a tasteless practice but better I suppose. That’s what makes this so odd.”

She squatted down, her knees together, “This is one of the old marks I’ve seen in museums. This simply shouldn’t be. Lehesion got rid of slavery 75 years ago. A decade ago, indentured servitude was deemed illegal in most city-states as well.”

I crossed my arms, “The answer’s pretty simple. Someone still has slaves.”

Caprika stood up, “This is...vile. According to what you found, he died a painful death on top of living a painful life. Now his corpse is being used as food for vermin.”

I raised a palm, pulling my obelisk from my armor. I snapped several photos of the crime scene from several angles. Caprika stood back with her hands on her hips,

“What would you have us do then, investigator?”

I shrugged, “Evaporate the infestation before getting a specialist to inspect the photos. We can’t leave this here, or else it will spread.”

Caprika nodded, “I suppose so. I’ll send in a team to clear up the mess.”

I shook my head, “No need.”

I raised a hand, condensing Event Horizon over the corpse and eggs. It disintegrated as if I used transmogrification magic. The body, eggs, and silvers melted into a black mush. This gunk spread outwards, running over my feet.

Caprika squealed, pulling herself up with her hair,

“By Baldowah, do you even know what a warning is?”

I shrugged, “Trying to get this done. I’m not getting paid for this after all. Well, if there isn’t a quest for this in Yildraza. Otherwise I am getting paid, but not by you.”

The black mush evaporated after a bit more exposure to Event Horizon. I looked up at Caprika, “Get back to the car. I’ll be cleaning the area of silvers.”

After her gut reaction, Caprika gawked in horror at my ability. Her left shoulder twitched,

“Ahem, is that one of your other abilities? Why didn’t you use it in the tournament if you don’t mind my asking.”

I stared at where the corpse and silvers once were,

“It’s not a fighting ability. It’s a killing one.”

Caprika went silent after that. I turned to her, “I’d never use it against a friend. It’s for eldritch and silvers mostly. Just, er, think of me as a Fringe Walker.”

She nodded her head, “Oh, yeah, but of course. Ugh, I’ll go back to my, I mean our ugly vehicle. You may, uh, eradicate the pests as you see fit.”

She scampered off, her discomfort obvious. I sighed as she left, shaking my head. Striking fear in my enemies was awesome. It made me feel powerful and potent. Striking fear in my friends though...It honestly made me feel like shit.

Once I heard the octo-car’s door slam shut, I jumped out of the pit. I walked around, my thoughts racing while Event Horizon ravaged any nearby silvers.

It surprised me that she feared me all of a sudden. After I fought the gialgathen, surely she understood I could've killed her at any point. I wouldn't though since I was sane. There was something different about Event Horizon that unsettled her. Since I didn't want to terrify would be friends, I vowed to use it with care from here on out.

It got me thinking about my friends too. Facing off against Yawm meant a dominant fighter was necessary. Now that he was gone, we weren't fighting just to survive. We were fighting to improve our lives as a whole. To my friends, I was a war hero and a competent ally. To newcomers, I was a dangerous liability.

That's close to how Caprika looked at me. From what I could tell, I was a risk to her. When I exposed more of my abilities, it made her realize I was a higher risk than she first anticipated. With a bit of time, she'd adjust. Until then, I'd lay low and let the others enjoy her company. I had other stuff to do either way, and I didn't want to ruin their trip.

With that matter resolved, I finished the silver cleanse. I walked back into the moving mansion. At first, I sat down with the others. The conversation lulled, Caprika turning awkward after our stop. Althea and Kessiah assumed it was from seeing the espen. I knew the real reason though.

Being more tactful than usual, I stood up from my seat, "Yo guys, I'm going to research some runes in the back. Let me know when we arrive."

Caprika gave a curt nod, "We will."

I stepped out, settling in a back room. The soft, muffled sound of Torix's ranting ebbed into my room. It put a smile on my face. He was keeping his students in line at the very least.

With a teacher's presence spurring me on, I walked past the luxurious bed and sat down. Pulling out my grimoire, I set to work. As I went over runic patterns, I remembered the impact of my perception gains. I analyzed the espen's death and perceived Caprika's shift in mood without a hitch. I wasn't like that almost ever.

Look, I'll admit. I can be a brick in conversations sometimes.

If I were lucky, then this newfound tactfulness would rub off on these runes. After a few minutes of work, I learned something fast; that wasn't the case.

The runic inscriptions that enhanced my attributes were brutally mathematical. They involved severe, involved algorithms that applied to nature based on context. Since they impacted every tree or level up, I had to incorporate every tree into their creation.

By the time I finished something resembling an attribute multiplier, it had spanned a dozen pages. Its complexity left me flabbergasted. It took hours to write, and I couldn't get a firm grasp of how it worked. Without knowing the process in detail, I deemed it way too damn risky to use. I scrapped the incantation, running my hand down the pages to erase it.

After another fresh start, I tried again. If there's one thing I owned in spades, it was persistence. I would bang my head against a wall until either I died or the wall broke. This strategy worked out more often than not. While rooted in my work, I snapped my head up.

The scent of espen blood poured into my cabin.

I stood up, walking out of my room. The ladies gossiped, giggling at jokes and the like. They looked up at me, Althea grinning, "What's up handsome?"

I smiled back, "Nothing much beautiful." I looked at Caprika, "Hey, can you open the door?"

Caprika tilted her head, "Why?"

"There's another one."

Caprika looked down, "Oh...We can stop while you finish whatever it is you're doing."

I shook my head, "Thanks for the offer, but it's not necessary. I'll keep up with the car while doing it."

Caprika looked at the others, "He can do that?"

Althea smirked, “My man can do anything.”

I spotted a few empty drinks beside her. I rolled my eyes, “Well your man’s about to go be a janitor. See you guys.”

The door of the house-bus opened, and I jumped out. I hovered using gravity, keeping up with the pace of the vehicle. I shut the door before leaping towards the source of the sent. Wind whistled in my ear as I flew up and over the rocky expanse. I found another corpse surrounded by rocks.

Fresher than the last, I analyzed the wounds. The silvers still decimated the corpse, but the tendrils of metal hadn’t yet spread out. This let me gather essential details.

The first fact I gathered was deep gashes in the espen’s shoulders. The eggs in his stomach showed no signs of larger silvers either. The marks on his shoulders were made by a beast’s talons, the cuts clean and deep. The four claw marks spread out over his upper back. They came from one paw grabbing onto the espen from above.

Skill unlocked! Tracking(lvl 1) – Though they run, they only delay the inevitable. Further details reveal themselves upon inspection. Higher levels of this skill allow the user to connect details to map a picture of previous events.

Breakthrough achieved! Tracking(lvl 1)—>(lvl 26)

It was a useful notification to get. Using it, I took a deep breath, the smell of rot less overpowering. This kill didn’t happen days ago. This espen died recently. Not many silvers flew since they were made of metal. I did know a certain race of dragon-frogs that did fly, however.

And at this rate, I’d be catching whoever did this soon. When I did, they’d pay.

Dearly.

Chapter 164: Manipulation

I am proud of my race and my standing. As an Albony duchess, I hold sway in galactic courts. I've struck fear into those that hear my name, Caprika Novas. Despite all the clout I've amassed, I won't pretend that this Harbinger of Cataclysm didn't unnerve me. After seeing him melt a corpse without any warning, he absolutely horrified me.

So the sense of relief as that monster of metal jumped out of the rickety shack was palpable. He had this feeling around him, as if he weren't mortal. It left me on edge. As he left, his weighty presence left with him. I sighed with relief, thankful for a break from him. I turned to his followers. With my chest held high as an albony's chest should be, I noted,

"Is Daniel always like this?"

The brutish Kessiah uncapped yet another bottle, "Uh, yeah. Always. He's literally always doing something annoying, hard, or both."

The civil Althea leaned forward, always defending her lover, "That isn't true. He relaxes when he's with me."

Kessiah scoffed, "Oh, really now? That shit never happens while I'm around. Could've fooled me."

I tapped my thigh, trying to find the right way to probe my question,

"Now, if you wouldn't mind my asking, what is that ability he uses?"

Kessiah rolled her eyes, "Which one? He has, like, a dozen things he can do."

I took note of her disdain. Kessiah envied Daniel in some respect. Either that or she feared him as I did. I couldn't blame her in the slightest. He was in every sense of the word, terrifying.

Althea lifted her hand, "Hmm, he has the gravity magic. Er, telekinesis, and...flying. He makes others fly as well."

I nodded, "As I just saw."

Althea scratched the side of her head, “And he has this aura.”

I pointed at her, speaking a bit too eagerly, “That one. That is the one I wish to know about.”

Kessiah narrowed her eyes at me, “Why would you?”

I stuck my chin up even as a shiver ran down my spine,

“He melted a corpse in an instant. It was like he was...for lack of a better term, a god of death.”

Althea burst into laughter as she often does when others are discussing Daniel. Her love blinds her to the horror that she lays with each night.

“Daniel is not like that. Like, not at all.”

I leaned back, my brow furrowing, “What makes you so sure?”

Althea leaned to her, “Looky here, missy. Have you ever seen him do anything outright bad?”

The alcohol had the intended effect. Mixing calming herbs and truth serum before recanning the bottles wasn’t hurting the situation either. I must use all my resources; otherwise, I would be wasteful. As a member of the Empire, I simply couldn’t have that.

I shook my head, “Hmmm, perchance I can’t call any incident to memory.”

Althea nodded, “Exactly. He seems all big and bad, but he’s just a teddy bear underneath it all.” Althea hugged herself, “Ahh, I wish I could hug him right now.”

I held back a gag, a wave of repulsion passing over me. To be so vulnerable and open, it was unbecoming of anyone but especially an albony. Kessiah mirrored my sentiments, a rare occasion on which we agreed. The brute pointed her bottle at Althea,

“See, that’s the thing. I can’t really say he’s some terrible guy either. I can say he’s scary as shit. I mean, have you ever seen him stop moving? The motherfucker is a machine.”

Althea shrugged, “He just takes his life seriously. That’s how I look at it. I wish I could do the same most of the time, but I just don’t have it in me like he does.”

I frowned under my mask, my fangs showing if I didn’t have my disguise. Albony are quite threatening and expressive without our coverings. Hiding our faces conceals our true intentions. It gives us better manipulation abilities against other, lesser races. Although calling any of this party inferior would be an outright lie. They’re too powerful and dangerous for that.

With that in mind, I looked behind me, peering out of my window,

“It bodes well that he handles this tournament seriously. I expected many aliens from across the galaxy to rush in. However, I didn’t expect to find one of the stronger ones on my side.”

Kessiah crossed her arms, “So you’re telling me aliens come in every time this tournament comes around?”

I nodded, “Of course. A fully completed mythical skill is at the very least 900 skill points along with a mythical skill. Non-natives aren’t even allowed to battle for it twice. I assumed that’s why you and your comrades have come here.”

Althea shook her head, “Nope. This is just something extra on the side. Daniel probably figured, ‘Why not handle this and this other thing at the same time? Why of course! There’s never a reason not to multi-task all the time!’”

Kessiah pointed her bottle at Althea, “Told you. A machine.”

Althea pursed her lips, “Ok, maybe a little...He’s still cute though, even if he has his flaws.”

I raised a hand, “You never mentioned what the aura is.”

Althea tilted her head, “Well, it’s...”

Kessiah snapped, “It’s pain. Pure, utter agony. I’m talkin pain like you’ve never felt it. It’s like melting.”

Kessiah shook her hands, “It can hit you from across the room in an instant. It holds you in your chest.” Kessiah grabbed at her sternum,

“Then it wrenches your guts out. Not even just that though, it makes him stronger. He’s already invincible.”

I tilted my head, “Really now? I thought he was just a solid fighter. What feats of tenacity has he amassed.”

Althea shivered, “He survived Yawm’s antimatter blast.”

My jaw went slack. Kessiah continued, “Torix told me like this, ‘Blegh, look at how smart I am.’”

Althea giggled while Kessiah continued, “That’s how he starts every conversation. Anyways, ‘He was disintegrated, not a single metric ounce of his body remaining. He revitalized in a flash of light, his body vibrating. When he struck Yawm, it could’ve shattered a planet!’”

Kessiah moved her hands about, acting out Torix’s fretting. Even I laughed at the imitation, but I marked down her words in my memory. Daniel may be able to win the actual tournament. If he did, my uncle would offer a city on the homeworld. I’d regain my former glory.

Althea shrugged, “It is kind of freaky I guess...I haven’t seen him take any real damage in a very long time.”

Kessiah leaned up, “Alright, speaking of length, I have an important inquiry. Someone here has to ask the real

questions.”

Kessiah leaned forward, “I’m about to ask you something that will change our perspective on Daniel forever.”

Althea leaned forward as did I. Kessiah whispered,

“Is the dick good?”

Althea leaned back, blushing with such intensity that I spotted it from under her veil. Despite my noble bearing, I will admit that perhaps a laugh or two escaped my lips. Kessiah simply spread out her arms,

“What? It’s a real question...”

Claws extended from Althea’s fingertips, “Ok, that’s enough questions about Daniel. I think you’ve had enough to drink.”

Kessiah leaned back, “Damn, ok. No need to get testy.” She finished another drink and threw it in the garbage, “Didn’t know it was that bad.”

Althea leaned forward, her claws growing, “That’s not the problem. You trying to steal my man is the problem.”

Kessiah rolled her eyes, “Oh trust me, I’m not getting with him anytime soon. You and Daniel are so close it’s disgusting sometimes.”

Kessiah wasn’t the kind of person to respond to threats. The fact that Althea’s made her react meant Althea had a bite to her bark so to speak. Althea might be worth investing more time into as well. The shapeshifter retracted her claws,

“Ugh, I tore open my gloves.”

Kessiah tilted her head towards the back of our rickety shack,

“Torix can stitch it up.”

Althea stood up, saying her goodbyes before going to the necromancer. He and Daniel seemed the most competent. Each of them brought brains and brawn respectively.

I mulled over the information I gathered here, trying to make sense of it. Kessiah stared at me as I did so. A moment later, she asked,

“Hey...What made you lose your rank?”

I turned towards her, “I have no obligation to share that with you.”

Kessiah shook her head, “Yeah, I guess not.” She crossed her arms,

“You know, I can tell you’re trying to gather information on us.”

I froze in place. Using techniques I practiced, I let out a loose laugh,

“Hah hah, really now? I’m simply trying to-“

“Cut the bullshit.”

I lowered my hands, staring her down. She genuinely knew what was going on. Dammit. She sighed,

“Daniel and Althea aren’t even twenty years old. Torix and I, we’ve been around for a looong time. Lying isn’t as easy. Now tell me what it was that got you booted down a rank, or else I’m exposing your ass.”

I looked down, weighing my options. Kessiah saw right through me,

“I’m not giving you time to think your way out of this. If you don’t tell the truth in five seconds, I’m spilling the beans. Five, four, three, two-“

Without time to come up with a reply, I raised my hands, “I attempted a coup over one of my sisters.” I heaved out a few breaths, “There, happy?”

Kessiah shook her head, “No, not yet. What was it like?”

I hissed my words, “I planted evidence against her for an illegal substance. I also organized a crime ring to ruin several of her businesses. I confronted her in court, and I killed her when she attacked me.”

Kessiah leaned back, “Really now? Interesting.”

I seethed, “You find sororicide of interest now? That’s just excellent. Glad my failures amuse you.”

Kessiah shrugged, “Why’d you do it?”

I shook my head, “I...It was to overturn a rival faction to get ahead. As Daniel noted, the Empire’s governing system isn’t as merit oriented as it could be. Being a female in the Empire vanquished me to a lower status in the first tier of society.”

Kessiah raised an eyebrow, “I’ve heard plenty of people complain about discrimination when they were the problem.”

“There is a law that forbids females from owning more than a single city.”

Kessiah raised her eyebrows, “Ok, nevermind. That actually is discrimination.”

I tilted my chin up, “I was a capable ruler. My sister was not. If I won the case I brought up with her, then I’d have been the first female to own two territories. I’d have set a precedent and changed the law.”

Kessiah scoffed, “Oh yeah, all you had to do was kill some people and ruin some lives to make it happen. Good job.”

I furled my brow, “Oh please. As if you’re perfect.”

She glanced down. She nodded, “Yeah, I guess I’m not.” It shocked me how much that stung her. She continued, “I won’t tell them what’s going on.” She pointed at me, her tone deadly,

“But you cross us, and I’ll get Daniel to put that aura over you. Trust me, princess, it’s worse than losing a court battle or not getting two cities.”

My heart seized in my chest. I gave Kessiah a curt nod, holding myself together,

“Then we’re in agreement.”

Althea opened the door to Torix’s room, walking out as we finished our conversation. She held up her restored glove,

“Hey guys, he fixed it with some stitching magic.”

Kessiah raised a fist, “That’s what I’m talking about. The dusty skeleton still has it.”

I nodded, “Indeed he does.”

I bit my tongue. I underestimated the remnant. She may be weaker than the others, but she could read people like a politician. It made me reevaluate my entire plan. Instead of squeezing as much out of them as I could, I’d follow through with my original plan.

I turned behind me, giving myself a mental thrashing for my lack of diligence. Father taught me better, and working within albony courts should’ve wisened me up. I still had much to learn.

As we reached past the mountain, I noted the skyline. There were no nearby birds, an odd sight this time of year. Many migratory species flocked South, so the skies were covered in all kinds of species. There were none around us, however.

As I dwelled on that, the ground rumbled. I steadied myself, wondering what was happening. I glanced up, finding a pack of birds flopping out of the sky, turning to blackened mush. I shivered, remembering Kessiah's threat.

In the distance, a dark blot of metal ripped through the sky. It sped with the speed of a bullet. I leaned towards what was obviously Daniel. I squinted my eyes, wondering what he was doing.

Kessiah tapped the window, "Holy shit...He's fighting another one of those oversized-salamanders."

My eyes widened,

"I can't believe it..."

Althea put a hand on my shoulder, "Can't believe what?"

I whispered, "He's fighting a myth. It's a Skyburner."

Chapter 165: Skyburner

I ended up finding four other bodies spread out along the border of silver territory and mountainscape. Each espen held the same eggs, in the same pit of their stomach, and it was always a he. Each corpse was fresher, the last one being brand new with blood still running.

I kept my eyes sharp as I leaped up past the mountains. I molded gravity over myself, keeping a casual pace. Otherwise, I'd outpace the damn octo-car. Swarms of birds kept getting in my way to a point I believed it was purposeful.

I wasn't into mass murder, but these fuckers had it coming. They funneled into a line before ramming themselves into me. After wiping off gallons worth of bird guts, I'd had enough.

That's why I cleared the skyline with Event Horizon as I spotted a speck on the horizon. I landed on the ground, staying low and stealthy. I stood still, praying the thing didn't see me first. It hadn't.

It flopped its enormous wings, sailing through the air with grace. It was a gialgathen, though bulkier than Alzorothe. Armor covered it, streaks of mana connecting charged gemstones. These crystals encrusted the dark green metal, the craftsmanship excellent.

Its wings dwarfed Alzorothe's as well, spanning wider than a house. It glided on those sturdy limbs, leaving contrails behind it. Thin, needle claws extended from the wings, just like on its hands. It shut its mouth, but it lacked cheeks, exposing the gums and teeth. It was ominous, nothing noble about it.

In the talons of its feet, an espen man flopped like the broken neck of a chicken. I grimaced as he closed in. I analyzed the body, but it returned nothing. The espen was already dead, his belly swollen and bulbous. I looked at the red gialgathen next.

Ryhstrika, Skyburner(lvl 9,076) – It's quite the rare occurrence that a natural creature gains an unknown status. That's what happens when you hone the physical might of the gialgathen to a razor's edge. You end up creating a Skyburner.

Their armor is composed of star iron, an alloy of orichalcum and meteoric ore. The slaves of these gialgathens encrust this shielding with charged diamonds, enhancing their already formidable mana pool.

Their combat instruction is vast, giving them experience against multiple fighting styles. Their tails are honed until they develop a callused lump of hardened scales. These scales can be ground up and used in place of diamonds.

Their cheeks are removed at birth. This gives them a swifter bite and allows for better care of their teeth, keeping them healthy. This also allows them to develop an augmented magical breath. Without cheeks and with the ability to open their mouths nearly 180 degrees, their breath is a potent weapon.

They hone their talons and claws, giving them the piercing of needles and the sharpness of broken glass. When flying, they draw water from the surrounding clouds to hydrate. Excess water is dispensed outwards once full, letting them leave contrails.

Though believed to be extinct, this Skyburner is alive and well. An ordinary sentient of your level would do well to avoid this behemoth. You, however, will find a good fight facing off against this creature.

I'd seen enough evidence to take action. I ran forward, diving into the ground. My mana charged in an instant, saturating my runic glyphs. With my strength surging, I jumped out of the earth, leaving behind a kinetic explosion.

I manipulated gravity, causing me to fall upwards instead of downwards. Without resistance, I shot through the wind at a blistering pace. Ryhstrika glanced down at me, its pupils dilating. Like a giant cannonball, I crashed into the Skyburner.

He and I shot sideways, the both of us tumbling through the air. To my surprise, his metal held, though my impact left a deep dent in his side. I condensed Event Horizon around him, the espen corpse already destroyed. The Skyburner howled out, snapping his claws at my back.

They left tiny dents in the metal of my armor, each point hard as diamonds. Ryhstrika straightened out his wings, stopping our descent. I fell off of him, tumbling in the air. I stabilized myself with a gravity well. By the time I did, the gialgathen had barreled toward me with his mouth open.

He snapped at me, and I struck at him. With technical prowess, he altered his momentum midflight to whip his tail at me. I deflected it before pulling him towards me with magic. I shot a hook at his armored belly, but he caught my fist with one of his feet.

He snapped from above and below with his jaws and tail. I whipped myself towards his gut, kicking with all my momentum. The clash of metal on metal flung him back, causing him to miss. We battled like this for several minutes, each of us strained to match the other.

As our strikes reached a fever pitch, he timed a bit at me. Caught between his upper and lower teeth, I pressed up and down to avoid death. Like a steamroller, he crunched me down, the gialgathen's strength overwhelming. I pushed up, my arms and legs

cramping from the strain. Before he crushed me, I created an antigravity point at my center. I strengthened it, pushing everything away in all directions.

With a shaky rise, the monster's maw opened. I charged my mana, saturating my frame. Before I gained enough energy for a singularity, the Skyburner's belly expanded. I shot sideways as he opened his jaws. A plume of chemical fire burst forth, white hot in its intensity.

My eyebrows singed off from being near the plume, my hair igniting. The creature turned its mouth towards me, the fire blistering. I covered my face with armor, getting rid of my eye slit. Darkness covered me. Within seconds, my helmet lit up, turning white-hot from the heat.

I ignored the flashy attack, raising a hand out to the monster. With my charged mana, I created a dense gravity well that slammed the beast's jaw shut. Flames erupted from its nostrils, tears pouring from its eyes. The corneas dried up before igniting, the monster's fiery breath blinding itself.

Before the fiery breath ceased, I reached its jaw and walloped the creature. My fist struck with the force of a train, the monster's head whipping through the air. It turned full circle, letting me kick its face with another crisp blow. It tumbled back, so I shot myself forward. I pulled it in with magic, launching a series of heavy-handed hooks into its gut.

Each blow left dents in the metal. As we closed in on the ground, the Skyburner no longer controlled his descent. I oriented myself above it, speeding our drops with magic. We built momentum and speed, each of us falling at an unnatural pace towards the mountainside.

The beast crashed into the rocky earth, the mountain erupting at the collision. A crater formed as house-sized boulders shot outwards. Heat built from the destruction, rock melting into magma. The monster's armor ripped, bones breaking in its chest. A tidal wave of sound rolled through the entire landscape, bending trees.

Then I landed.

The armor in its chest caved in as blood sprayed from splits in its skin. The ground trembled, a wave rolling through the mountaintop like a tsunami on the ocean. Lava

splashed outwards, the heat from friction melting stone. A plume of dust spewed from the mountain like a bomb went off.

The shockwave uprooted nearby trees. They tumbled like matchsticks. Landslides fell out from all angles, the cliffside falling apart. I stood up, unharmed and undazed. The gialgathen was all but slaughtered under the jolt. I waved my arms, sending out an antigravitational wave. The dust blew back, clearing my view of the landscape.

The mountain was devastated. I ogled at the catastrophic might of our battle, flabbergasted at what I'd done. I shook my head, the scene surreal. The trees around me disintegrated from Event Horizon, snapping me back to reality.

I shut down the aura, glancing down. In my status, there was no kill notification. This fucker was still alive. I stepped up to his face, his head twitching. I wrapped my hand around his neck, my grasp awkward. I pulled him up, looking at him.

My armor still glowed white hot from his earlier fire. My hand acted as a brand, singing his skin. He convulsed in my hand, death coming for him. A second later, it got him. I tossed him aside, sighing since I wasn't worming any information out of a corpse.

I whipped out my obelisk, taking pictures of the creature. After getting a view of it from multiple angles, I tore out chunks of its armor. I collected samples of its teeth, blood, and scales. I compressed the metal over the evidence, preserving it for later.

After gathering pieces of it, I leaned down and pressed my hand on the beast. My armor sapped up the corpse, draining it. Over several minutes, it disappeared. The only remnant of the Skyburner remaining was its bent, crumpled armor. It was sturdy stuff, so I decided to keep it.

Over the next few minutes, I bent and folded the metal into a ball. As I did, I ripped out the gemstones, collecting the interconnected diamonds. I put the ball of metal and the diamonds into my dimensional storage. Within a few minutes, nothing remained of the enormous Skyburner.

With the battle done, I dived into the earth before bursting out towards the octo-car. I kept myself falling towards it with a gravity well, flying over trees and other obstacles. I caught up to it over the next minute. The vehicle drove downhill on the other side of the mountain now. As I came up to it, Caprika opened the door. She leaned out of the car,

“Stay back!”

I floated in pace with the car, keeping some distance, “Why?”

Kessiah walked up, raising her hands in frustration, “Your armor is still glowing, you idiot. You’re going to set us on fire!”

I glanced down, my chest and arms still glowing red. I leaned back from it, unsettled by my numbness to the burn. It was a warm sensation, not a burning one. I didn’t even know if it was digging into my health or not. It reminded me what my damage cap and health did in conjunction.

Learning that I hadn’t cooled down yet, I shot myself up into the sky. I glanced down, finding a lake. I dived into the water, the pool belching steam as I landed in it. I dashed through the pool, enjoying the crisp cool. Within seconds, I pulled myself back up to our vehicle with magic, clean and dry from the wind and water.

I stepped onto the first step of the car. The metal caved in, my foot bending it down. The car sunk down, the suspension strained to its limits. The wheels on the other side of the car lifted off the ground before my foot snapped the metal stair. With one side keeping traction, the moving mansion whipped in that direction.

As the car turned back and forth, Caprika fell out of the vehicle. Before she got a face full of dirt, I raised a hand, generating yet another gravity well. I sighed and face-palmed. I forgot to disperse my mass outwards with Overwhelming Presence. Without doing so, I weighed at least 20 times what the vehicle did.

With that in mind, I used the skill to disperse my weight out. I turned back towards our moving mansion. The vehicle lost all semblance of control, turned sideways, and was barrel rolling in the air. Before the vehicle tumbled down the slope, I shot myself to it with a burst of mana. I grabbed the side of the car with one hand.

I extended my fingers with cords of my armor. With my grip firm, I lifted the vehicle up, steadying it. I looked around, finding the situation insane. Even with six gravity wells going on at once, I wasn’t really strained. It was...kind of crazy.

I shook off the sense of disbelief, getting back to fixing the mess. I set the car down, ramping up the speed back to normal. After that, I floated myself back into the vehicle with Caprika in tow. As I looked inside, I winced. It was as destroyed as the mountain.

Broken drink bottles laid everywhere with ice laying on the floor. The roof was wet with alcohol. Along the ceiling, five indentations jutted out from where I grabbed it. Althea stayed in her seat, her claws gripping into the car. Kessiah crushed portions of the wall, lodging her fingers in so she wasn't slung around either.

Two of the windows were cracked, but most of the interior held up. Kessiah's obelisk floated over her shoulder, recording us. I would ask why later. At that moment, I gasped with relief, "Thank god I didn't total the car."

Kessiah snapped, keeping her grip of the car, "What in the fuck was that?"

I set Caprika down onto a cushion, floating her over,

"I didn't disperse my weight when I stepped on the car. It was a simple mistake, but I shouldn't be that careless."

Kessiah hissed, "How much does your fatass weigh? Ten tons? Twenty?"

I shrugged, "Eh, I might weigh just a little bit over twenty. Nothing too ridiculous."

"The fuck it isn't."

Althea laughed, "Wow...that was crazy."

Caprika held a hand over her chest, "I...I nearly fainted."

Kessiah glared at Caprika. Kessiah looked back at me, "Oh, I'd bitch a lot more about this, but I have a hunch that someone else is going to be a lot more pissed than I am. Trust me, he can bitch with the best of them."

Torix slammed the door open from his room. He walked out, ink dripping from his face several papers stuck to it. He stared at the wall, ominous as the grim reaper.

Everyone wanted to laugh. No one did. Torix's aura was like death. My helmet was down out of habit, letting him get a good look at my face. I suppressed myself to the best of my ability. The thing is, sometimes being forced not to laugh only makes you wanna laugh all the harder.

The edge of my lips cracked up as Torix turned to me. He seethed,

"Tell me, who is the one that sent my office into a death spiral?"

No one answered. Torix took a few steps towards me,

"Ohhhh, I have a hunch it was the walking tank."

Kessiah snickered, but one look from Torix silenced her. He glared at me like an angry math teacher,

"My students saw this."

He pointed at his face, the ink keeping the parchment on his face. Althea giggled, He looked at her, a page falling off. She snapped upright like a scolded child. Torix glared back at me,

"It will take days to rebuild my rapport with my students. Just as it will take you days to grade the papers I've been piling up."

All the humor drained out of my face,

"Wait...grading papers?"

He nodded at me, "Oh that's right. Don't worry disciple. There's only 18,000 of them."

My eyes widened at the astronomical figure. Torix clicked his status, "I just sent you the files."

He emphasized the s at the end of files. He pulled a page from his face and stuck it to mine, "Here's one of the finished tests. Do enjoy it."

The group exploded in laughter, even Caprika getting one over on me. For the first time in what felt like years, I blushed in shame. I nodded, "Sure thing master. I'll get it done."

I pulled the page off of my face before looking at it. Complex magical computations covered it, an alien set of tables and texts lining it. It folded open, revealing various formulae and diagrams. Near the floor, I even saw the last page covered with open-ended questions. I closed my eyes. Something told me this shit was going to be a lot harder than slaying the Skyburner.

It was going to be a long trip to Yildraza.

Chapter 166: Yildraza

It took a week of twenty-four hour days to grade the papers. It bled into my psyche, the monotony grinding away my will to live. Of course, my willpower helped, keeping me from slowing down or veering off course. As tedious as it was, I learned a decent amount about magical theory and some other skills. Most of them grading related.

I kept myself intent on finishing the papers during this time. I ended up finishing them before we reached Yildraza. As I sent the behemoth of a file to Torix, I sprawled myself out over the bed. I earned a bit of a rest after all that grunt work.

After a few seconds, I got bored. I opened my status. I had gained over four hundred levels from killing the Skyburner. I had put all the points into endurance before the grading started. After remaking the perception runes one last time, I got to work for the week.

Now that the week was done, I inspected my armor's modifications.

[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, +1,940 Perception, +6,080 Endurance, +3,040 Willpower

+100% to effect of legacies, +50% to internal motivation, +25% to sensory range]

The new glyphs already made a difference. In about a month, I gained nearly 2,000 points in perception. The enhanced sensory range was just a bonus. With the damn tests over with, I might even be able to enjoy my senses.

Before getting up, I tidied up the rest of my status. I raised my tier in my Legendary tree with some hard-earned skill points in Hands of a Giant and Efficiency. Turns out grading thousands of papers helps with hand-eye coordination. Who'd of guessed?

Your journals will be looked at as enlightened texts for those that study your profession. Your words will be written down as if spoken from with a golden tongue. You will be worshipped by those that devote their life to your chosen mastery.

Legendary(Tier 4) Unlocked! +80% effect of legendary skills!

This was likely the strongest tree I've unlocked, even outdoing any version of Obliterator. It terrified me how easy it was to become more powerful. I was a rolling stone, and nothing could stop me now. I struggled long and hard to get this strong. It satisfied me to no end seeing the fruits of my labor coming through.

With that handled, I reached the skill menu before opening up the Force of Nature tab.

Force of Nature(lvl 2,667) – 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. Numerical bonuses are as followed:

+468 Strength, +468 Dexterity, +234 Constitution, +234 intelligence, +94 Perception

+47 to all attributes for having a 2,600+ total in a legendary skill.

Ability Bonus: +297% | Mana Cost Reduction: 59.4%

My mana was endless, enough to destroy cities in seconds. By the time I finished leveling up as a Fringe Walker, I'd be able to destroy worlds. If I fucked up using power like that, I might not just flip a car. I might kill people.

A lot of people.

I shook my head. There was no point in dwelling on doubts and worries. I needed to focus on doing what I can. I moved on to my character screen menu.

Dimension-C138(Level 6,014)

Strength – 6,648 | Constitution – 11,275 | Endurance – 46,053

Dexterity – 2,870 | Willpower – 25,903 | Intelligence – 9,610

Charisma – 1,669 | Luck – 3,246 | Perception – 3,753

Health: 8.56 Million/8.56 Million | Health Regen: 21.42 Million/min or 357,020/sec

Stamina: 5.40 Million/ 5.40 Million | Stamina Regen: 75,623/sec

Living Dimension: 1.10 Trillion/4.30 Trillion

Mass: 523,041 pounds(235,721 kilos~)

Height: Actual -12'7(3.84 meters) | Current – 9'10

Damage Res – 98.5% | Dimensional Res – 49.25%

Phys Dam Bonus – 577,809% | Damage Bonus – 40%

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

With my perception increasing at such a rapid pace, my charisma followed suit. By now, I'd long forgotten the exact multipliers for the values. Whenever I dug deeper into the numbers, I found dozens of conversions and multipliers. They showed the trees and various perks I got them from, each piece documented in excruciating detail.

Even if the system was based on an absolute, numerical basis, it still floored me. My health regen increased at an exponential rate. I regenerated more than most people's maximum health each second. At this rate, my health regen might eventually outpace an entire planet's population added together.

In fact, I could use my own tenacity as a weapon. My inspiration drew from having my skin glow white hot while not burning me. If I could heat my armor till it shined, I'd be able to scorch anything nearby. I gained a source of light from it, and that's not even counting the intimidation factor. In my enemy's eyes, they'd be fighting a moving star.

It would make me untouchable in close combat. If I was going to use something like that, then I needed to learn cooling magic too. Nearly setting my allies ablaze was enough of a kick in the ass to figure that out. That situation taught me to be more mindful.

I won't lie, the essays didn't hurt learning that lesson either.

Without thinking, I massaged my hand, the memory of cramps still fresh. I sat up, wanting to do something now. After spending a week in isolation, a conversation would do me some good regardless.

I pulled myself out of bed, leaving cuts in the fabric from my armor. I was done giving a shit about this thing. It was more trouble than it was worth.

I walked out of the door, finding Caprika, Kessiah, and Althea sitting down on the couches. Empty bottles and garbage piled up around them. Althea slept on her side, taking up one of the seats. Caprika handled documentation with her status screen. Kessiah sat back, deep in her chair. She watched holographic videos of current events.

I stepped up, creating a dozen gravity wells. The trash in the room lifted up, and I condensed it into a tightened mass. I set it into the garbage, looking at Kessiah's video. There was a mountain with a crater in it. It was the same mountain I fought the Skyburner at. A newscaster's voice talked over the image,

“Reports indicated seismic events leading to an eruption near Mt. Verner. While geologists are baffled as to the source of the explosion, some believe it has to do with recent silver outbreaks. In further news, the tournament looks promising this year. A new face named Daniel-“

Kessiah shut it down, sitting up and looking at me, “Looky here, our resident tank is making waves.”

I shrugged, “Can't help it sometimes.”

Kessiah nodded, “I know. That's why I recorded it all.”

She lifted her obelisk, showing a file of our fight. I raised an eyebrow, “What for?”

“Cause it was awesome.”

I stood up straight, “Just be mindful of what you do with it. And, hmmm, send me what you record. I might use it for something. I don't know what though.”

She waved at me, “Of course, of course. Caprika over here's been talking like you've already won the tournament.”

Caprika stared at her status screen, “After seeing that exhibition with the Skyburner, I'm more than convinced. I've been jotting down the framework of a new legislative system for my old city. It should pan out rather well, preferably lowering the recidivism rate.”

Althea rubbed her eyes, “Huh, who's up?”

Kessiah crossed her arms, “We’re talking about your boyfriend winning the tournament.”

Althea grinned, “Of course he will.”

I frowned, “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

Caprika scoffed, “Really now? You blasted the Skyburner by turning yourself into a meteorite. Afterward, you flew up to us with your skin still molten, and you didn’t even notice...What part of that indicated anyone will stand a chance?”

I shrugged, “I’ve faced people stronger than me. There’s plenty of them out there.”

Caprika shook her head, “I doubt many of them would come here. Ah, I also went over the evidence you documented.”

I raised an eyebrow, “And?”

“And it’s without a doubt a Skyburner.”

Althea stretched, “What are they exactly?”

Caprika closed her status, “There was a faction of gialgathens determined to stop Lehesion from freeing the espens from slavery. That faction was lead by Emagrotha and her elite guard, the Skyburners. Noone’s seen or heard of Emagrotha for over six decades, but Skyburners appear here or there.”

Kessiah nodded, “Rumors are floating around that some Skyburners are still trying to put up a resistance. Apparently, the social movement caught some traction a while back when Schema took over.”

Caprika nodded, “Many moderate gialgathens joined the remnants of Emagrotha’s movement then. It was a movement driven by fear. Most gialgathens are fine with espens being free ants under their feet. They’re terrified of them being their equals.”

I crossed my arms, “Why didn’t Schema make Gialgathens a part of the system then if they’re so powerful?”

Caprika winced, “They...they help eldritch.”

I shook my head, “What the fuck?”

Kessiah nodded, “Yeah, it has something to do with being one with nature. Gialgathens try to be one with nature. They think the eldritch are nature.”

Althea shook her head, “Wow...That’s soooo dumb.”

I nodded, “Yeah, that’s full-on suicidal.”

Kessiah shrugged, “At least it makes sense why Schema doesn’t help them out if they’re like that.”

I scratched the side of my head, “Surely not all gialgathens are like that.”

Caprika shook her head, “You’d be surprised. There are quite a few gialgathens that help espens and respect us as equals. There’s far fewer that believe the eldritch is a threat. Even less are willing to fight them.”

I frowned, “They’ve never seen an Endless Flesh or an intelligent hivemind then. They’re both terrifying.”

Althea nodded, “Back when I was a mercenary for Yawm, he told me that an Endless Flesh was destroying my homeworld. It was fighting another collection of eldritch lead by a hivemind. Crazy stuff. “

Caprika cringed, “By Schema...I’m sorry to hear that.”

Althea shrugged, “Eh, I didn’t even know my home world. You can’t lose what you never had, right?”

Caprika glanced out one of the cracked windows, “Ah yes...It does take away the sting, doesn’t it...”

Althea frowned, “Oh, I forgot you aren’t home either. I’m sorry-“

Caprika waved her hand, “It only motivates me to get back. Think nothing of it.”

Kessiah looked out the window too. She pointed, “Ayyyyy, look at that. It’s Yildraza.”

We huddled around the window, staring at the horizon. Out in the distance, skyscrapers towered over the skyline. They shot up in different points, giving the city a sprawled out feel. Between the sleek, ultra-modern skyscrapers, stone buildings stood out.

These historical buildings clashed with the new designs, but I liked it. It was like the ancient world was fighting the modern invasion, breathing life into the city. In this case, the old world was the espens and gialgathens. The new world was Schema, coming in to change everything.

My chest filled with excitement, a grin growing on my face. Althea dragged a hand down the glass,

“It looks like so much fun.”

I wrapped an arm over her shoulder, “Only if I’m with you.”

Caprika and Kessiah gagged again. Torix stepped out of the back, cracking his bony fingers. He wore a new robe, the fabric silky and luxurious. With silver trim flashing, he strode up,

“Ah, we’ve reached our next destination then. Excellent. I just passed out my finals for this semester.”

I grimaced, “How did you even have 18,000 tests? You only have like...3,000 students.”

His blue, fiery eyes flared an evil red, “Perhaps I let them pile up for just such an occasion.”

My face went deadpan, “Thanks a lot.”

He joined us, staring outside, “It’s never a problem, disciple.”

We got into Yildraza over the next hour. A wall towered around the city, keeping magical beasts out. When the guards saw how tore up our vehicle was, we got more than a few funny looks. They let us through once Caprika showed them our tournament pass.

As drove through the streets, it was utter chaos. Most of the vehicles here lacked self-driving. They rode through sidewalks, destroyed stalls, and forced people to jump out of the way. The self-driving cars went through the madness like clockwork, finding the inches needed to progress.

My heart seized in my chest a few times, old memories of my dad’s driving coming back. I ended up closing my eyes and saying fuck it. It wasn’t like a crash was going to hurt me either way.

After passing a few dozen blocks, stalls, and stores, we reached the heart of the city. One of the skyscrapers towered over the rest, full of flashing lights and office space. Caprika stood, “This is our stop.”

Althea clapped her hands, “I can’t believe it. We’re staying up there?”

Caprika nodded, “Naturally. Several albony own positions of power in Yildraza. I used a few connections to give us a condo to stay at.”

She turned to me, “Consider it a bonus for proving so worthy.”

I picked Althea up, “Hell yeah. Let’s go.”

Althea giggled while I walked up to the doors. Torix snapped his fingers. A portal popped up in front of me, dropping another gray square. My shoulders drooped, “This again?”

Torix rolled his fire eyes, “Of course. We’re trying to maintain secrecy for as long as we are able. Wearing a set of armor over yourself is a part of that.”

I sighed, setting Althea down. After the armor formed back over me, I walked down the steps and out onto the streets.

A blast of noise assaulted my senses. Rumbling cars, sharp cussing, skidding tires, acrid smog, rancid breath, cinnamon rolls, and thousand other scents poured onto me. Beneath my feet, cool concrete keeping me off the soft ground.

I looked around, finding dirt alleyways leading between skyscrapers. Innumerable people walked around me, dozens of species. Every shape, color, and size of species maneuvered around the madness. Yildraza was a cacophony of sound and a blitz of movement.

It was like the city was alive.

We stepped through the sea of people, my stature and size helping us out. I didn’t even have to duck under the skyscraper’s doors as walked in. With the others following behind us, I marveled at the craftsmanship.

Granite lined the walls, white streaks flowing across charcoal colored rock. The chandeliers, door handles, even the paperweights were made of gold. The ludicrous display of wealth almost made me laugh. It was extravagant, to say the least.

Once the others arrived, Caprika checked us into the hotel. As she did, the receptionist smiled at us,

“We’ve been awaiting your arrival. One of the tournament sponsors is waiting in your rooms to settle you all in and speak with Daniel.”

I frowned, “What for?”

“Oh, I’m just a receptionist. Mr. Thorn wouldn’t tell me something like that. I’m sure he’ll discuss it in detail. Have a good day. Next.”

We walked off, getting into an elevator. As we did, Torix looked at Caprika. His face was hidden under pure darkness, some magic stopping light from entering his hood. Torix said,

“Who’s Mr. Thorn?”

Caprika sighed, “An annoying fellow to say the least.”

As we went up the many floors, I turned towards Caprika,

“Hey, where did the car go to park?”

Caprika hissed, “A trash compactor.”

“Oh, alright then.”

We reached the 2,000th floor before walking out. After walking down a few hallways, we reached our room. Caprika handed us each a keycard before using hers to enter the doorway. As we stepped inside, a view of the city revealed itself.

It was breathtaking.

We saw for miles and miles, all the way to mountains off in the distance. A few high-rises rose up to the sides of our building, but they only enhanced the overall look. After I soaked in the view, I surveyed the apartment.

The entire wall of the expanse was glass, two staircases leading up to floors above. There were four private rooms, each covered in mahogany shaded wood. Off to my right, a kitchen with modern appliances and marble counter tops shined. Off to my left, an entertainment center with screens, games, and holographic projectors glistened.

I whistled, “Damn this is nice.”

We took a few steps forward, reaching a set of stairs wide as the room. They wrapped around in a semi-circle, leading down to an expanse with lounging chairs. The stairs acted as bookcases, a library’s worth of material hidden in them.

The wall of glass sat at the bottom of this expanse. Looking out at the city, an espen man stood with his hands locked behind his back. He wore a fitted, leather suit colored deep brown. I took a breath. My eyes widened in surprise.

It was tanned gialgathen skin.

Two tails trailed down from the back of his head to his waist. He kept silver collars around them, a classy wealth about them. The silver and brown matched the dull gray color of his skin. He turned, the white spots down the sides of his face sleek.

He turned towards us, a toothy grin aimed at us. With an accent and oozing charisma, he spread out his arms,

“Why hello there. I’m Thisbey Thorn, but you all can just call me Thisbey.”

Chapter 167: Thisbey Thorn

Caprika walked up, “Ah, Thisbey Thorn, it’s a joy to meet you.”

As Caprika walked up, I glared at her. Seconds ago she was annoyed at him. Now she acted like best buddies. Being two-faced didn’t sit well with me, friend or foe alike.

I made a mental note of that as the albony offered Thisbey a hug. The gray espen raised a palm to her,

“I prefer to keep business associates at a distance if you wouldn’t mind. Deals flow better that way.”

Caprika lowered her hands, caught off balance, “Oh, of course.”

Thisbey locked his hands behind him, walking up the steps and past Caprika,

“Now, it is so good to meet you and your dash’in company. It’s always good to meet competent fellows such as yourselves.”

Torix nodded, “Likewise.”

Thisbey placed a hand over his chest, “You treat me too kindly. Does this humble home suit you?”

Althea nodded, “Yeah, it’s amazingly beautiful.”

Thisbey gave her a slow nod, “Good, good. I had hoped that it would fit good people of your stature. In fact, I prayed that each and every one of you found your accommodations welcoming. It’s good those prayers weren’t done in vain.”

I didn’t like this Thisbey fucker. He reminded me of Yawm.

“If any of you wouldn’t mind, I’d adore a one on one chat with the Gray Giant.”

I crossed my arms, “For what?”

He spread out his hands, “Why, to congratulate you of course. It’s rare that someone defeats a gialgathen in combat.” He pulled on his suit for emphasis,

“Even more so when that combat involves their fists. That’s the kind of man I like to see, one that can speak with actions instead of honey laced words.”

I frowned, “Have you looked in the mirror lately?”

He gave me a warm grin, “My words are my only weapon. I’ve found that the strengths we disregard the most are the strengths we own. That’s why I find your strength...Real strength, so compelling.”

I had to admit, he knew how to flatter. It wasn't getting to me though. I kept my guard up,

"Yeah, we can do that. Be quick though, I have a tournament to win soon."

He gripped his hands together in front of him, "I promise you newcomer, I am not here to dissuade you from winning this here tournament. Quite the opposite, actually."

I said my goodbyes to the others, each of them going into a room to settle down. Once they were gone, Thisbey walked over towards a cabinet in the kitchen. He pulled out a bottle of liquor along with two glasses. He poured two glasses of it like he was a bartender.

I walked up, and he lifted both glasses. He raised one to me, "You look world-weary. Was the trip here harsh?"

I grabbed the glass and shook my head, "Naw, it wasn't too bad. I graded a bunch of tests for our wizard. It sucked ass."

He laughed, "Well I'll be, you're his assistant? I took you as the bonafide leader of this here party. Was I mistaken?"

"I'm not the leader."

He grinned at me, swirling his glass. He looked at ease no matter what I said. It was like the conversation was a joy for him no matter how it twisted and turned.

"I can tell you're not lying. You honestly believe that. I know a leader when I see one. They come in many sizes as well. Some are spiritual guides, emotional anchors, or fear makers. If you don't mind me saying, I believe you're the group's backbone."

I raised an eyebrow, "Why'd you guess that?"

He nodded, keeping his warm grin on his face, "You've got that air about you. Tough. Eats nails for breakfast. You're a man's man, a warrior through and through. Your fine

company would run with you through a gialgathen's fiery breath. On this, I have no doubt."

I shrugged. He continued, "You're a symbol. You inspire them, whether you see it in yourself or not doesn't matter. Your ability to evoke action in others is what truly matters."

I rolled my hand, "Ok, get to the point."

He turned the glass up, taking the shot of whatever it was. He set his glass down, oozing patience and calm. He gestured for me to follow him. We walked up to the edge of the glass paneling. He pointed out into the distance,

"Do you see that there over yonder hills?"

I narrowed my eyes. Off in the distance, spires of metal rose up over mountains. I frowned,

"Silvers."

"Mighty fine eyes you've got there. That they are. They've been encroach'in on Yildraza for a long time. Many of the espens here aren't willing to take a stand against them. From your astonish'in level, I can gather that you've seen what silvers or eldritch can do?"

I nodded. Thisbey sighed, "Many espens haven't. They don't recognize what a threat they present. The espen people still believe that the gialgathens will take care of our problems. I want you to inspire them, to spur them to action against this invasion."

I raised an eyebrow, "How am I supposed to inspire them?"

He gestured to me, looking up at me, "By winning the tournament and giving them some enthusiasm to fight."

I shrugged, "Why're you asking me to do this?"

He put his hands on his hips, “Did you know the gialgathens have won this here tournament for over a decade now? You want to know why they do it?”

Thisbey raised a hand, accentuating his point with his body language,

“They win year after year to send a message to the espen people.”

Thisbey reached his other hand, wiping his fingers like he was crushing a bug

“They’re tell’in us this: You. Are. Beneath. Us.”

He stood up straight again, wiping off his leather jacket. Knowing what it was made of, it made the gesture even more fitting.

“Many of our kind believes it. I don’t share their sentiment. When the great Schema came, it acted as an equalizer. We’re no longer second-class citizens. We’re of the same class.”

I stared at the silver’s spires in the distance, “Yeah, I can agree with that.”

Bitterness leaked into Thisbey’s voice, “See, gialgathens don’t think as we do. They look down on us, and they remind us of their imposing statures frequently. You’ve fought one, a riveting fought in any regard. He spoke with you.”

I bit my lip, “Yeah, he wasn’t the nicest guy.”

Thisbey nodded,

“I tell you from a place of deep understand’in – they’re all the same in that regard. They’ve destroyed the confidence of the espen people. If you win this tournament, you will be the hero we need to renew that confidence.”

He gripped his hands into fists, “You’ll prove to so many that the espen people aren’t beneath the gialgathens. You’ll show them that those beasts aren’t the gods that some people believe them to be.”

I shrugged, “Look, I’ll be honest with you. I’m winning the tournament regardless. You don’t have to motivate me for that.”

He shook his head, “The people will look to you for guidance, Daniel. They’ll look at you to help uplift them. I want you to tell the espen people to rise up and realize their potential. To fight the evils knocking on their door.”

I rolled my eyes, “And let me guess, you’ll be the leader?”

Thisbey spread out his hands, “It could be anyone. I’m not asking to be wealthy or powerful. I have both of those qualities in spades. I’m done looking after my own wellbeing. I’m looking after the wellbeing of my people now.”

With utter sincerity, he locked eyes with me,

“Can you do that? Not for me, but for young espens looking to make a mark in this world?”

The will behind his words was overwhelming. They saturated with charisma and purpose, a lifetime of work behind them. He commanded the room. If I hadn’t met Yawm, he’d have swept me off my feet.

I had met Yawm, however. His words crashed against a brick wall as I said,

“Yeah, maybe. I’ll think about it.”

Absolute delight spread over his face as he walked up, slapping a hand on the side of my arm. He shook my hand, his fingers just barely big enough to get around my palm. He laughed,

“Daniel, you won’t regret hearing me out. I promise you on the name Thisbey Thorn that you will always be welcome here on Giess. Thank you, thank you very, very much.”

He leaned back, giving me a good look, “You really are larger than life now that I see you in person.” He gave my arm a friendly pat, “You will not regret it, I promise you that. We’re going to help lift up the espen people, together.”

He turned, walking out of the room. I stood there, frozen in place. I shook my head, looking around the room. I murmured,

“What the fuck just happened?”

In the corner of my vision, a tiny orb showed itself. It was Kessiah’s obelisk. She walked down the steps, grinning at me,

“Looks like our tough guy got wrapped up by a salesman.”

My shoulders drooped, “Oh come on. That motherfucker had to be a politician. Besides, I didn’t make any promises.”

Kessiah shrugged, “Eh, you said enough that he could spin it that way. Be careful with those types. They’re too slimy to get a hold of.”

I pointed at her obelisk, “You look like you have a plan for that. I see you recorded us?”

She shrugged, “Eh, just figured it might be helpful to have some documentation. It’s a trick I got from Torix.”

I scoffed, “Yeah, I’m starting to think your warning at the bar had some merit.”

Kessiah shrugged, “Told you so.”

After I rolled my eyes, our team got back together. We chatted a bit about Yildraza, one of the biggest cities on Giess. It wasn’t the political center of the world, but it was the

economic one. It was because Schema spawned three teleporters here when he first arrived.

With so much alien tech and resources coming in, the city boomed. It flourished as several young business leaders rose to prominence. Thisbey Thorn was the defacto leader of those young business people. He owned dozens of companies, and his reach was as broad as an ocean on Giess.

He made most of his money in the silver mining. Not the metal but the creature. He hired teams of mercenaries to go out and excavate the steel and other resources. He also dumped most of the city's pollutants over there as well.

It was a one-two punch of productivity and activism. Combine that with Thisbey's sheer charisma, and he was a massive celebrity. Wearing another sentient race's skin didn't bode well with me though.

After our chat, Kessiah, Caprika, and Althea went on a lady's night out. Caprika knew a few places, and she wanted to share the delights of a big city. I stayed in the hotel room with Torix. I wanted to learn something before the biggest fights of the tournament.

I walked up the steps, reaching his door. I knocked, and he let me in. Each room had its own air conditioner, and he kept it at a chilly 50 degrees. He planted piles of books and graphs all over the tables and beds at his disposal. Within seconds, he turned the hotel room into an evil lair.

It was just like Torix.

As I walked in, he closed a holographic interface. He sighed, looking up at the ceiling, "I despise teaching the lazy and the unmotivated."

I grinned at him, "That's perfect. I actually had something I wanted you to teach me."

Torix snapped his head at me, his blue fire eyes flaring to purple,

"What? Really?"

I scoffed, “Yeah, really.”

He clapped his hands, “Yes, yes, of course. As your master, I must teach you when you’re ready to learn. You’re a rather independent student, so it’s rare I get the chance to pass knowledge on to you.”

He walked up, generating a magical chalkboard. With mana condensing over his fingertip, he puffed his chest out,

“What is it that you’ve been curious about? Perhaps magical theory? Maybe on the mathematical conversions behind mana usage?”

I winced, “Uh, not exactly. I was hoping you could teach me thermomancy.”

Torix’s chest wilted, “Thermomancy?”

I nodded. He sighed, “You wish to learn the art of heating and cooling? Really now?”

“Yeah. I do.”

He pointed at the chalkboard, “The sensation of heating and cooling is the rate of particle movement within the matter. Some matter is more resilient, meaning more energy is required to destroy the bonds connecting it. This leads to melting.”

He snapped his fingers, creating ice, “Some materials are elementary to make melt, such as water. Others, like granite, require extreme temperatures before the crystalline bonds break. This is the cardinal understanding of thermomancy.”

He melted and unmelted the ice, “Armed with this understanding, all you must do is channel mana to either speed up these molecules or slow them down. For you, this should be rather simple. Most students believe this branch of magic is oriented with origin. This false.”

He circled his hand, “Unlike with pyromancy, you don’t need to generate matter to fuel a chemical reaction. You must simply supply energy to cool or heat a substance. It’s really quite basic for anyone skilled in dominion styles of magic.”

Torix put his hands on his hips, “So why do you wish to manipulate temperature?”

I raised my hands, excited like a kid talking about a new idea,

“I’m going to heat my armor up till it’s white hot. I’ll be able to fuck people up then.”

Torix dropped his chalk, his face going deadpan. He whispered, “Really? You’re going to hurt your enemies by setting yourself...on fire?”

I shrugged, “Pretty much.”

He raised a hand. Before he got anything out, he let the hand plop against his side, “I would tell you how truly, deeply idiotic that plan is, but I’ve been wrong about your progression on more than one occasion. Do as you will. I am certain you will turn that...rudimentary tactic into a devastating force, just as you did with your fists.”

My chest swelled with pride at the backhanded compliment. Beggars can’t be choosers.

“Thanks, Professor. That should really help me get started. Cya later.”

He nodded, “Make me proud.”

I grinned, “Always do.”

With two days left until the fights in Yildraza began, I practiced and practiced. To get the Heating and Cooling skills, I froze and boiled a cup of water. I visualized the tiny particles in the liquid speeding up and cooling down. Once I got it, I focused on the basics.

With my nigh limitless mana, I could turn simplistic skills into useful powers. In this case, getting some finesse with the changing temperature was necessary. I needed to get a firm grip on both the heating and cooling parts of the skill. Otherwise, I might actually boil my own blood.

Just like that, I spent my first few days in Yildraza. I huddled in my and Althea's room, messing around with water. I gained two other skills in Thermic Expansion and Thermic Compression. By the time the day of the fights arrived, I was on the brink of creating another unique skill.

Instead of driving, we walked to the fight. It was staged in a stadium nearby with tens of thousands watching. I was in my own world while I walked through the crowd. I held a glass of water, changing the temperature as I walked.

Althea and the others guided me while I honed in on the task at hand. Fights or no fights, this water wasn't about to boil itself. With that relentless focus guiding me, a notification popped up.

New Unique skill gained! By combining the skills Heating, Cooling, Thermal expansion, Thermal Compression, and Mana Theory, you gain the skill Thermomancy! Half of the ungained skill points in the fused skills rewarded: 162 treepoints!

Thermomancy(lvl 1) – As a mage, you wield the laws of nature at your fingertips. +1% to temperature manipulation through mana.

I pumped my fists, letting out a mental roar of triumph. I glanced up, gaining awareness of my surroundings. Like waking up from a dream, I found myself situated between Althea and Caprika in the stands. Around me, thousands of aliens chatted and talked with one another. I frowned.

I was in the stadium.

It was a weakness of mine. I zoned out when I absorbed myself in a task. It helped more than it hurt most of the time. In this case, it caught me by surprise. Still, I wasn't nervous about my next few fights. If anything, I was itching for them.

The spectators shared my sentiment. We situated ourselves in a portion of the stands dedicated for combatants and their teams. Portions of the stadium were dedicated for gialgathens. Single combatants had groups of people with papers and data-charts. They discussed what to do versus each combatant.

Vendors of all kinds walked around them, feeding the crows snacks. Thousands of obelisks floated in the air as well, posting onto their social media. Not one second of any battle would escape their prying eye.

Despite the publicity, my identity would stay hidden for the most part. My perception sat at just over 3,800 now. It was plenty high to keep me from being discovered with Torix's spells and my armor. I relaxed, sitting back into my seat. I glanced over at Althea, noting how beautiful she looked in her veil.

"Hey. You look amazing."

Althea turned to me and grinned, "Hey! You're back from your...training I guess?"

"Yeah, I got a unique skill for thermomancy. Next up, I'm going to incorporate it into Force of Nature for a free boost."

She rolled her eyes, "Always expanding your horizons. We all had fun eating out and going places. They had a dancing combat sport here just the other day. They fought with ribbons. Judges rated their performance afterward."

She raised her hands, "You should have seen it. It was amazing."

I raised an eyebrow, "Really now?"

We chatted until the announcer, Kiki Mosk, came floating over the arena. Four gigantic teleprompters flashed to life with a burst of light and sound. A track played, hyping the crowd up. Always the professional, Kiki Most soaked in the atmosphere. As the throng of people hit a fever pitch, he raised a hand,

"Are you ready to see fights and fury!"

The crowd boomed from all angles. Kiki Mosk pulled on the collars of his insane, rainbow suit,

"Then do we have a treat for each of you today. This is considered the most competitive regional center on Giess. From a pool of over 500 million combatants, the

tournament has culled the weak. Now you all get to see the strongest of the strong face off in brutal bouts! Are you ready for war Yildraza?"

Once again, the crowd exploded with applause. Kiki Most floated around on a hovering disk, eyeing the congregation,

"Then let's get's ready to see some brutality and battle!"

Chapter 168: Prestige and Prominence

Kiki Mosk floated outside of the arena. As he did, the lights went off. The pre-fight hype started, clips of the fighters showing on the teleprompters. Flashy fights with no substance poured out of the screens. I leaned over towards Althea,

"This seems more like an exhibition than fighting, don't you think?"

Unlike me, Althea relished in the theatrics. She waved me away, "Just relax a little. The montages are awesome."

After a minute of fireworks and a light show, I yawned. A few minutes later and they were still hyping up the fight. I leaned against my armrest, bored out of my mind. At the apex of my boredom, a presence reached out to me. It tapped against my mind, like knocking on your door.

It was a gialgathen, one nearby. I glanced around, finding a dark green beast towering over those around him. He situated himself onto a platform for combatants. He glanced at me, his bearing noble. He waited for my permission, so I let him speak to me.

"Excuse my intrusion young one, but you mentioned this bout as an exhibition?"

I raised an eyebrow, "How did you hear me?"

"Hah! I've honed my senses over the years. It can be a burden at times. You no doubt carry that same awareness. Even as you walked in, I noticed no method of attacking you. Your guard is absolute."

He gave me a nod of approval, "It's fitting for a warrior such as you to defeat Alzoroath."

I frowned, “Are you his friend?”

The gialgathen’s head leaned back, “What? Why, I would never even give that racist a second thought! Alzorothe was an uncouth member of our people. Please, do not let his ugliness stain your thoughts of our proud species.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Eh, I don’t. Is it that common for other gialgathens to be like that?”

He nodded his head, “I will not lie to you. Many of us are. They fight to bolster their fragile egos. I share little with them. To the contrary, I am like you, Gray Giant. I fight for honor, not for fame or fortune.”

I shrugged, “I definitely fight for fortune.”

The gialgathen turned his head, the black spots on his sides reflecting light, “If that were so, you wouldn’t fight for your rewards. You would do business or the like. You’re no doubt wealthy already, or am I incorrect in my assumption?”

I cupped my chin. Now that I thought about it, I owned over 100 million credits. No matter how you look at it, that was wealthy. I didn’t need to fight for money anymore, yet I still kept fighting. The gialgathen showed his teeth with a grin,

“It was as I suggested! You give yourself too little credit. You battle to sharpen your body and spirit. In my eyes, that is a noble pursuit.”

He glanced up, “I’m glad to share some wisdom with such promising young talent. It’s good to see I can do some good even after what they’ve done to Lehesion’s Honoring.”

Gialgathen or not, I liked this guy. I raised a hand to him, “My name’s Daniel Hillside. What’s yours?”

“Eradin. Eradin Forest-Torch. I earned my last name by setting an entire forest ablaze with a single breath.” He scoffed, “Though my flames have dimmed with old age no doubt. I’d rather speak of more recent glories, yours perhaps?”

I shrugged, "I'm just here to win the tournament."

He raised his foot and stomped the ground, "As you should be! You're one of the few walkers here that I wouldn't mind winning the tournament. When I was younger, every combatant battled for honor, for glory! Now, look at them."

Several advertisements flowed across the teleprompters. Eradin growled,

"Now they use Lehesion's Honoring to gain fame and fortune. It disgusts me."

I crossed my arms, "You mean the ads and stuff?"

Eradin nodded, "They wonder why we gialgathens win year after year. The answer could not be more obvious. We battle for the sake of battle! We need no other incentive. If they followed the same ambition, they'd conquer just as we do."

As Eradin finished his spill, an advertisement for Thisbey's mining business popped up. Eradin sighed, "Thisbey Thorn. The only memorable thing about that clown is how much of a thorn in my side he is."

I liked how chatty and ornery this guy was. I laughed, "Really now? Why?"

"Because he is at the forefront of destroying what Lehesion's Honoring stood for."

Eradin snorted, "Lehesion was more than just mighty. He was an absolute force. With one breath, he could decimate a dozen Skyburners. A slash of his claws could slice through the sky. A stomp of his foot flattened mountains."

I raised my eyebrows, "Tall praise. Could he actually do that?"

Eradin's eyes watered, "It was a thing of beauty. I saw his first battle against Emagrotha's army of Skyburners. He destroyed them all on his own. When he and Emagrotha fought, their claws sent shockwaves that parted seas."

He was sentimental too. Eradin gazed deep into his memory, “He sent her a message that day. All races deserve an opportunity, lesser or not.”

I frowned. The phrase wasn’t perfect, but at the time, it was a step in the right direction. At least compared to Alzoroath.

Eradin shook his head, “I pray for your good luck in Lehesion’s Honoring but never forget this. Remember who and what you fight for. It will guide you when you’ve lost your way.”

I nodded. It was a good tip. Eradin glanced down, “Ah, look at what I’ve done. I’ve chatted away like a mother with an empty nest. Please excuse me.”

I raised up a palm, “Don’t worry about it. It was interesting. Plus it’s always good to see someone else who likes to fight.”

We finished our chat just as the fight hype ended. A fighter walked out of one side of the arena. His face appeared on the teleprompter along with his name, Mell Coff. He was lean with sharp features. Girl espens nearby swooned over him, and he beamed a grin at the crowd.

Beside him, the symbol for Thisbey’s mining business appeared. Kiki Mosk pointed towards Mell, “Here’s the fan favorite, Mell Coff! He represents the hardworking miners that clean up the city. He’s the best of Thisbey’s mercenaries. Let him know how you feel!”

The horde roared with applause. He got onto the arena, waving at his adoring fans. I analyzed him.

Mell Coff, the Earth Dancer(lvl 5,000) – A prominent social figure in Yildraza, he represents the elegance of espen magic in many eyes. While his combat abilities aren’t lacking, it’s the methods he uses that draw so much attention.

Despite his plain name and earth magic, he dances during combat to channel his spells. This creates elaborate displays of skill. While he may be popular, don’t underestimate him.

That would be my advice for most, for you he will prove no problem.

Kiki gestured towards the other side of the arena,

“And here is the other contestant, Jilian Krovov! She represents the leader of the speakers centered on Giess. She’s been funded by Tohtellah Adair, a speaker like yours truly.”

Jillian walked out, covered in black power armor. Grenades, knives, gemstones, vials, and ammo lined her sides. Several weapons were on her back. In my opinion, she looked like a complete badass.

Jilian Krovov(lvl 5,246 | Speaker) – A powerful member of the speakers of Giess. Most speakers specialize in communicative abilities or auras. Jilian is a specialist in gun oriented combat. By taking full advantage of technology and alchemy, she has proven herself to be very resourceful.

Combine this with Jilian researching her opponents ahead of time, and she poses a sizable threat to most. You are a counter matchup to her. Your abilities would overwhelm hers regardless, but the nature of your magic poses problems for her.

The crowd didn’t agree with me. They booed as Jilian walked out. She got into her respective corner of the stone arena. Kiki Mosk raised a hand,

“Are both contestants ready?”

They nodded. Kiki Mosk shouted, “Begin!”

Mell Coff sprinted forwards, jumping up. A chunk of the arena popped up under his feet, letting him fly around. He pushed his hands towards Jilian, chunks of sharpened earth flying towards her.

Jilian clicked a device on her side. The spikes of earth bounced off a blue barrier in front of her, electrical sparks flaring. She pulled a rifle from her back, aiming and firing in one swift motion.

Mell covered his hands with hardened soil. As if dancing, he spun and deflected the bullets. They slapped against the edge of a forcefield, blue energy rippling out. As Jilian began reloading, he dashed towards her.

She tossed a grenade at her feet. A plume of yellow smoke billowed out. She stepped through a portal, appearing on the other side of the arena. Mell stopped his chase, dodging the toxic cloud.

I scoffed, “So that’s why he’s popular and she isn’t. He’s the flash and she’s the fury.”

Althea leaned towards me, “What do you mean?”

I pointed at her, “Just watch.”

With distance to cover, Mell dived into the arena. He burrowed beneath the ground, trying to reach her. Jilian tossed a vial down, spraying a yellow liquid around her. It soaked into the dirt. Moments later, Mell burst from the ground, using a dirt hunk to keep him moving. The moment he got above ground, Jilian unloaded another clip right at him.

He struggled to deflect the bullets this time. One of them clipped his arms, leaving a dent on his silver power armor. Mell danced again on his platform, summoning a pillar of dirt at Jilian’s throat. She sidestepped it, continuing the onslaught of lead.

Althea frowned, “He can’t do anything.”

I raised my eyebrows, “She took away all his options.”

Mell opened his dimensional storage, pulling a vial out. As he did, Jilian unloaded a dozen bullets into the portal. I winced,

“Damn. She’s not leaving a stone unturned. You can only store your bodyweight in your dimensional storage. It costs health depending on how much you put in there. He’s paying the weight of those bullets in flesh and blood.”

Mell kept composed despite the damage. He opened the vial, a shiny dust floating around him. Kiki Most shouted, “And here it is folks. His signature move, diamond storm!”

Mell propelled shining shards at her. They shot against her shield. The specks bounced off before wrapping around her. Mell maintained the spiral of diamonds while dancing and deflecting her bullets. It was a bunch of flashy bullshit, but it was still impressive.

Jilian stayed on point. She took a device from her side, activating it. She tossed it ahead of her, and it siphoned air inwards. Like a vacuum in space, the machine pulled the diamond dust into the portal. She reloaded while waiting for it to do her work.

The second the machine stopped, she fired again. Mell kept dancing and fighting back, but the bout was over. More and more bullets clipped him, slowing him down. The more he slowed down, the more bullets clipped him. The vicious cycle continued until one smacked him in the helmet.

Knocked unconscious, Kiki Mosk snapped his fingers. A shield formed over Mell, stopping his fall. Kiki pointed at Jilian, “And we have a winner!”

The throngs of people booed like there was no tomorrow. Jilian stepped out of the arena, ignoring the jeering like a true professional. Althea sighed at me,

“Well, you were right about her being the fury. What made you guess.”

I shrugged, “Jilian was all about the fight. Mell looked more like an entertainer. He reminded me of Thisbey in that regard.”

After they stepped out of the arena, lots of people left the stadium. They were Mell’s fans leaving. Eradin sent a mental shout at me, “Good riddance! There’s no need for casuals here.”

A small grin ran up my lips at that. After the next set of ads played, Kiki Mosk gestured towards us, “The next fight is another decisive one. We have a treat for you all. Two gialgathens are going head to head! On the one hand, we have Eradin Forest-Torch.”

Eradin opened his jaws and roared out. He flapped his wings, flying up onto the arena. As he landed, he quaked the ground.”

I squinted at him, checking his status.

Eradin Forest-Torch(lvl 6,783) – Eradin is an ancient gialgathen, over two centuries old. While experienced, his best days are behind him. With a worsening heart condition, his ability to fight for extended periods of time is lowered.

Even then, his clever tactics and experience make him a harrowing foe to face. He uses his tail as clubbed whip like most gialgathens. The difference lies in his clever usage of angle. This gives him more openings for counter attacks.

You will overwhelm him most likely, though he could pose a challenge.

The crowd booed again. Near us, one of the combatants tossed a mushy piece of food at him. I flicked my wrist, sending the food right back at the combatant. He fell backward, and Althea giggled,

“Did you see that guy? Talk about hilarious.”

I smirked, “Yup. It was satisfying to watch.”

Kiki Mosk pointed near us again, “And here we have his son, Moran Blademaker!”

Another gialgathen roared. Bright green with black spots on his sides, Moran flew onto the other side of the arena. He was the younger version of Eradin, his frame oozing vitality.

Moran Blademaker(lvl 6,821) – The son of Eradin Forest-Torch, Moran has struggled for many years to prove his worth to his father. This has created a healthy rivalry where each side helps elevate the others performance. Though compliments between the two are rare, there exists a respect between them both.

He lacks his father's tactical prowess, but his raw strength and endurance give him a subtle edge in combat. Just like his father, Moran could prove a challenge given the right circumstances though its unlikely.

It made sense why most espens struggled against gialgathens. Even without the system, they seemed to revolve around level six or seven thousand. It was enough distance that you needed a class to compete.

Kiki Mosk interrupted my thoughts, pointing to each side, "Are both combatants ready?"

They nodded. Kiki Mosk raised a hand, "Then to battle!"

Eradin and Moran bowed to each other, showing respect for each other. The old lizard wasn't joking about honor. Their tails whipped behind them, the air squealing at the speed. They clashed, slapping against each other.

Each tail ripped through the air at stupendous speeds. They clashed several times a second, sending out pounding booms of sound. Each gialgathen kept their necks tucked, ready to lunge out at a moment's notice.

Eradin deflected one of Moran's strikes, sending his son's tail off to the side. The old beast snapped out, his teeth tearing into Moran's neck. Moran shot out his tail, but Eradin cocked his neck back before it landed. Another fierce volley of lashing shot out, the crowd unable to see them.

I saw them in detail, however. They both hit each other with the hardened tips of their tails, forged through years of training. Each attack was done with an angle, never head-on. They weaved each attack into the next, creating no opening for a snap of each other's jaws.

Eradin times another pristine deflection, sending Moran's tail out from in front of him. Just as before Eradin snapped out. Moran countered, snapping his jaws against his father's own. The older gialgathen punished that attempt, snapping his tail onto the side of Morna's head.

The younger gialgathen lost his balance, stumbling sideways. With a brutal flurry of his tail, Eradin tore chunks of flesh fell off Moran. Moran launched a heavy tail whip at

Eradin. The old gialgathen snapped his jaws further down his son's tail. This stopped the momentum of Moran's attack.

With one final, blinding snap of his tail, Eradin knocked his son out cold. Kiki caught Moran from falling with the flick of his fingers. Kiki pointed towards Eradin,

"And the father wins!"

Another set of boos roared out. By now, I hated the crowd. Those two gialgathens just laid their hearts out in that battle. It was was a stunning display from both adversaries. No one gave a shit. The crowd just played favorites without any rhyme or reason.

It left a bad taste in my mouth as Eradin flew back to his spot. He turned towards me, breathing heavy, "My son has improved so much since last year. I nearly lost my bout!"

I scoffed, "Yeah right."

Beads of sweat poured from Eradin, "You jest. Look at me. Fatigue almost claimed me. If he hadn't grown overeager, he'd have worn me out with that pace. It's a good battle for him to learn from. He will defeat me next year. Of this, I have no doubt."

He stuck his chest out, his head held high, "He's a good boy, no, a good warrior. He will give my family honor in the days to come. Once he's healed, I'll let him know this."

I grinned at the old guy. He was a great father even if he was a little harsh with his lessons. Just I smiled, the pre-fight hype started up again. Two big names were coming up again. I raised my head up and wheezed out,

"No, not this shit again."

Clips from the last fight popped up along with some I'd already seen before. At least it didn't last as long this time. With the hype over, Kiki pointed towards one side of the arena,

“And here we have yet another big fight! Here, on the one hand, we have the returning veteran, Jilian Krovov!”

Jilian walked out in her black power armor, stone cold and badass. The booing of the crowd commenced in full force. People poured into the arena once more, wanting to watch the next fight. Seconds later, new clips played on the teleprompter. These videos drew my attention, however.

They showed a guy in gray power armor keeping up with a gialgathen’s tail whips. He deflected each attack, pressuring the monster back. As he encroached on his prey, he unleashed a furious assault. The gialgathen didn’t stand a chance, and he was launched out of the arena. I frowned.

It was me.

A light beamed onto me from above as Kiki Mosk pointed at me, “And here we have the popular newcomer, Daniel, the Gray Giant!”

The crowd roared as I looked around. I stood up, wondering why the fuck they didn’t just give me a list of who fought who. As I pushed my ass off my seat, the entire stadium exploded with praise. I raised my hands and portions of the crowd began a standing ovation.

It was pure madness.

I pumped my fists up and down. The people standing up did the same. I grabbed one leg behind me before hopping on one foot. To my utter disbelief, some people did the same. Kessiah smacked my back from behind me. I laughed before pulling myself up with gravity, floating towards the arena.

Once onto the stone arena, Kiki Mosk pointed at the both of us, “Are you all ready to see the third high profile bout in a row?”

The crowd went crazy again. It was bizarre, out of body experience. Everybody had an expectation of me, and that expectation was who I was. I didn’t like it, and I intended on fixing it when I was able to get a speech in. All that would come later.

I rolled my shoulders while cracking my knuckles. I twisted my neck, the crowd stomping. My mana charged, building to obscene levels in seconds. An aura leaked from my armor, whipping wind nearby. Jilian Krovov took a step back, the energy causing her cold persona to crack.

Kiki Mosk raised a hand, “Are both combatants ready?”

I nodded as Jilian sighed. She pulled out her rifle, aiming it at me before the fight started. She nodded.

Kiki Mosk pulled down his hand, “Then lets fight!”

Chapter 169: Weaving Threads

Jilian fired at me, but I condensed my weight, no longer dispersing it. I sunk into the ground like diving into water. I burrowed at her while charging my mana. Jilian threw a bottle of the toxic, yellow gunk at the arena again. I grabbed it with telekinesis, preventing the container from shattering.

I tossed the vial aside. I detonated my runes, giving me a surge of strength. I propelled out of the ground, drop kicking at Jilian. Her blue energy shield shattered. It redistributed the kinetic energy outwards, canceling my kick’s momentum. This stopped her from being flung backward while flinging me back.

I rolled onto my feet as I hit the ground. I slammed my heels into the ground, the arena crumbling. Without her shield or distance, Jilian pulled out two plasma daggers. I shot up to her front, sending a heavy left hook at her gut.

She crossed her arms, blocking the blow. The armor on her forearms split, revealing charged gemstones. A mana shield generated, preventing my strike. My fist shattered the second line of defense. The thunderous, rippling sound echoed throughout the arena as it sent out another kinetic pulse.

It bounced my fist back. With a chilling calm, Jilian took advantage of my position. She sliced one of her daggers towards the left side of my throat, trying to end the fight. I raised my left shoulder while leaning towards my right side. My shoulder pad knocked her hand up, causing it to swing over my head.

With her body exposed, I turned on my heels and sliced a tight right hook at her gut. Using Force of Nature, I slammed my fist into a telekinetic pad just shy of her armor.

This converted the force of my strike into a kinetic bullet. It slammed into Jilian, puncturing her armor and sending her sailing through the air.

I sighed with relief. It was just enough force to do her in but not kill her. Unconscious and flailing, Jilian's head dived towards the rock floor. I stood upright, raising a hand. I caught her with a gravity well, stopping any further damage. I set her down. I banged my fist together, sending out a shockwave of force.

As I lifted my fist in victory, the mob shouted until the stadium rumbled. Many of the espens gave me a standing ovation, and Eradin roared out. With the fight over, Kiki Mosk boomed,

"And it's a wrap, folks. Can anyone even stand a chance against the Gray Giant? So far, no luck!"

I tapped a telekinetic pad, tapping Kiki on the shoulder. He looked around, his eyes narrowed. I cupped my hands around my mouth, "Yo Kiki."

He turned down, his expression softening,

"Ah, it's you, Daniel. I'd love to chat, but I'm busy at the moment."

I raised a palm, "I need the schedule for the tournament."

Kiki facepalmed, a grimace forming on his lips, "They didn't send you one? Wow. Ok. That's totally fine. I hope the director wasn't planning on getting a promotion anytime soon."

He fiddled with his status, mumbling under his breath,

"Idiots. The whole lot of them. I don't need to fire someone. I need a firing squad."

A notification for a file popped up. I opened it, seeing a list of battles and dates. I gave Kiki a thumbs up as I walked off the arena. Kiki wiped his forehead and smiled, "Excuse me, folks, there were some technical difficulties. Now, who wants to see the next brutal battle?"

A few medics ran up, getting Jilian out of the arena. I jumped back into the crowd, landing beside Althea. She stood up and gave me a hug, popping my back six or seven times. I grunted,

“Thank you for breaking my spine.”

Althea giggled, “Oh, sorry about that. You really taught her what’s up.”

I shrugged, “Sometimes, I just can’t help it.”

Eradin nodded towards me, “It was a good fight. You should be proud of it.”

“You should too old man. You staved off the younger talent like a pro.”

He chuckled, “It’s my duty as a gatekeeper.” Eradin stood up, “It’s time I go see my son in fact. He should be waking up anytime now. It would be a shame if he didn’t see his father’s smiling face.”

I smirked, “Or heard a little teasing.”

Eradin grinned, “Naturally.”

He flew off, leaving the arena through the open roof. I sat down, glancing at the tournament’s schedule. It seemed strange that Jilian would fight me right after fighting Mell. I shrugged it off as coincidence. I leaned back from my status in disgust, seeing that it was two days before I battled again. I gave Althea a pat on her shoulder,

“Hey, I’m going to go do some stuff. Let me know if you get bored. We can explore Yildraza or something.”

She gave me a sly grin, “Maybe something else later tonight?”

I pressed my face mask against her forehead, “Definitely...I wish I could give you a kiss.”

Kessiah shouted from behind us, “Please leave already.”

Althea laughed, and I skedaddled out of there. After passing through crowds of fans, I stuck to the alleyways. It suited me better since there were fewer people. Using my minimap, I found a quest board located in one of the Steel Legion’s branches here.

No one gave me any trouble with my heavy presence this time. After walking up and downloading all the top quests, I skimmed through them. I shook my hand, claspings it into a fist as I discovered the highest tier one.

An Encroaching Invasion(lvl 8,000+ | Party Size: 10+ | Guild Affiliation: Any) – Reports of silver outbreaks have been flowing in. This spread of silvers is challenging to stop, as cleaning out an infested area proves difficult even for high-level sentients.

For those gifted in AOE combat, clear out the border near Yildraza and nearby towns. Find the culprit(s) of this expansion and eliminate them. Considering the sheer number of silvers, a large group of sentients is recommended, preferably a guild part of some sort. An investigator specialist is recommended for the party.

If any information of who’s causing the outbreaks is found, report to Tohtella Adair. As head of the viral and parasitic research operation, she’ll be seen in the Speaker’s headquarters of Yildraza.

Rewards: 50 red dungeon cores, 1 blue dungeon core, and allows the formation of one guild branch in Yildraza.

It was the perfect questline. We came to Giess for three reasons. First, establish positive relations with the planet. Second, we needed to clear a criminal organization of some sort. Third, we had to create an alliance with the Empire and the Steel Legion.

This quest might help me with both if there was some association behind the spreading silvers. With that in mind, I scrambled my way out of Yildraza. I shot through the alleyways, leaping over the crowded streets. I got a few weird looks, sure, but I saved a bunch of time.

Half an hour later, and I blazed across the wilderness. As I traveled, I practiced Thermomancy. Within minutes, I neared the silver's border. Towards the West, an industrial town situated itself along a cliffside. Covered in Thisbey Corp's symbol, they mined minerals and dumped sludge to the silvers.

Towards the east, the border expanded out. The silver spires didn't tower over the nearby woods here. This meant it was newer territory for the silvers. I dashed towards it, beginning my search there.

My first objective was to push back the silvers some. Using Event Horizon, I cleared out all the Saysha crawling around. The tiny beetles gave me the creeps, so I was glad to be rid of them. As I passed over the fields of metal, I smashed any Merjects I ran across.

Merjects were odd creatures. They hid along the silver spires, blending in with the shining metal. They always ambushed from above, trying to stab their needle mouths into the back of my neck. If they had their way, they'd slurp my brain up like a smoothie.

I hit them as they jumped down, sending out shockwaves that attracted larger silvers. Engorgs rolled towards me, their bodies rolled up into metal balls. If they smashed their prey, they unrolled, revealing thousands of squirming legs.

Needless to say, they didn't handle my strikes very well.

Just like that, I spent two hours cleansing the border. I cleared out a broad swath of silvers, giving nearby villages some breathing room. It wouldn't last unless I did something to prevent silvers from coming back.

With that in mind, I tore a wide strip of metal from the ground. Since this was a new area, the metal was thin, making this pretty easy. I flew back and forth, tearing out tiny strips of the metal. I felt like a gigantic printer, going back and forth.

A few hours later, and I cleared the ground of the silver's stain. The only thing left of their ilk was the spires. I tore these pillars up, lobbing them like silver spears back into their territory. With a gorgeous sunset in the distance, I kicked back and looked at my handiwork.

I cleared out several mile long stretches of farmland. The exposed, dark earth looked perfect for planting crops. With that handled, I ran along the border of this newly cleared ground. Just as I expected, I found espens scattered along the edges of silver's territory.

With brands on their foreheads, they held egg sacks in their stomachs. I cleared out dozens of these atrocities, documenting evidence with my obelisk. I cleared out the entire expanse near Yildraza. I found the same talon marks left by the last Skyburner.

It left a bitter taste in my mouth, finding such damning evidence against the gialgathens. Considering the hatred for them, leaders like Thisbey might take actions against them. That was if this information went public, however.

I didn't intend on stirring up a political shitstorm. With the first part of the questline completed, I headed back to Yildraza. I followed the quest's advice, going toward the Speaker's Guild there. Using an online guide, I dived deep into the city. Not long after, I found the Speaker's place surrounded by modern buildings.

The Speaker's guild looked more like a fortress than a base. I found the entrance after walking down a set of underground steps. The opening was a massive vault door made of orichalcum. After verifying who I was, they let me into the bunker.

I stepped into the bright steel room. With harsh, blue lights beaming from above, I glanced at a wall of glass. Behind it, a worker operated a company computer with a headset. He clicked a button, sending a mist into the area. After passing a sterilization check, he spoke into an intercom sir,

"Hello, Gray Giant. We want you to feel welcome here, but we need to verify that you don't have parasites or viruses on you. Remove your armor and let an expert check you out please."

I shook my head, "I can't do that."

With a bit of snark, he mouthed, "Sorry sir, but it's just protocol."

I sighed, "Look, throw a parasite or a vial of some deadly virus in here. I can show you why I'm sterile. Will that work?"

“Of course sir. We’ll need to go through the proper channels of communication. Given a few weeks, we might be able to handle the right forms.”

I raised my head, “Ok, I just cleared out several miles of silver territory before coming here. Surely it’s on the news or something.”

“I’m sure you can do that sir, but we’re going to need a few memos verifying all that first. After we clear out the A1 forms regarding toxic form removal, we’ll get those B3 forms started for verification. It should only take Cindy two or three months for that.”

I grabbed the sides of my head, “What the fuck? How does it even take that long?”

“Calm down sir. It’s just standard protocol.”

I spread out my arms, “Its should take seconds. You send the email then Cindy responds. Boom. Finished.”

He shook his head, “Uhm, sir, if you could just calm down and let us do our jobs, then that’d be greeeeat.”

Thoughts of murder and destruction flashed across my eyes. He leaned towards me,

“Looks like somebody’s in a rush. Have a bad day at work? My advice should have followed protocol.”

I pointed at him, “Ohhhh, I know what your doing.”

“Do you sir? I’ll give you a hint, it rhymes with swallowing ethanol.”

A door beside him opened. A remnant woman walked in, her white hair wrapped into a bun behind her. She stared down at her status and a clipboard. She wore fitted business attire with a pen in her hand. She looked up, her glasses shining.

The piece of shit worker stiffened up, his back straight as an arrow as she walked in. He mumbled, “Uhm, Miss Adair, what are you doing here?”

Miss Adair stared at me. She pointed her pen at me, “Turn around.”

There was a commanding tone to her voice. She was the boss here for sure. Not wanting to reveal my identity or wait several months for paperwork, I did as she said. She turned towards the nervous worker,

“Henry, You’re fired.”

His shoulders fell as his jaw went slack. He mumbled, “Uh, but why-“

She pointed at me, “He has no breaks in his armor. He’s been sterilized. That means he has no parasites. Your duty is to process visitors quickly and efficiently, not heckle them and waste their time.”

Henry raised a hand, “Bu-“

Miss Adair raised a hand, pressing two fingers together, “If you wish to speak about your dismissal, do so with the guards. Otherwise, empty your desk and leave. Before you ask, no. I will not give you a recommendation letter.”

Henry stared at his workspace, his eyes hollow. I’m not going to lie, I was more satisfied than I should be. Miss Adair pointed towards me, “You’re Daniel, correct?”

I nodded. Miss Adair handled work as she continued, “I am Tohtella Adair. You may refer to me as Tohtella or Miss Adair, whichever you prefer.”

I crossed my arms, “I’ll stick with Tohtella.”

She gave me a curt nod, “You wished to speak with me, correct?”

I nodded again. Tohtella turned and walked into the building. “Meet me in my office. A more useful employee will guide you there.”

As she stepped into the building, the steel doors slid open, letting me walk in. I walked into a receptionists hall. An espen woman stood up and walked up to me. She gave me a bow, "I'll take you to Miss Adair's office at once. Please excuse your previous experience with our guard."

I shrugged, "Eh, it happens."

I followed her through a winding labyrinth of tunnels. We passed a laboratory full of silvers and vials of sludge. Scientists studied saysha, merjects, and other live silvers here. They even had a tube full of yana, the parasites that infected the first gialgathen I fought back in Icosah.

After a few minutes, we reached the end of a hallway. On a reinforced metal door, the name 'Tohtella Adair's Office' was imprinted. The receptionist gave me a bow. As she left, I knocked on the door. Tohtella shouted,

"Come in."

I opened the entrance, finding an everyday, regular office. So ordinary, in fact, that it seemed off. There was no dust, no disorganization, and no disorder. The only strange part was a jar full of yana worms. My guess was she kept it as a reminder of what she was working against.

As I stood in front of her, she stared at me, her eyes piercing. She pointed at a chair, "Please, sit. Does it bother you if I work while we talk?"

I shook my head, "Not at all. Does it bother you if I practice magic?"

She gave me a small smile like she was amused. When I got a good look at her, it shocked me how attractive she was. She hid it beneath her persona and workwear, but it still beamed through if you looked close.

I already had someone special though, so I leaned back in my chair. I pulled out a lump of orichalcum from my dimensional storage. I heated and cooled it as I talked,

“I’m here for a quest.”

She operated several windows of her status, “Which one?”

“An Encroaching Invasion.”

Tohtella froze for a second. She looked me in the eye, “What did you find?”

I sighed, “Is this conversation at all confidential?”

She nodded, steepling her fingers and turning towards me,

“You have my word it is. Speakers are a neutral faction. We only aim to further Schema. Nothing more, nothing less.”

She meant it too. From the beginning, everything about Tohtella screamed integrity. From the way she handled her office and workers to her candidate Jilian, Tohtealla wanted to do a good job and get results.

However, I kept myself skeptical even if my gut reaction was good. I pulled out my obelisk and recorded our conversation. I turned to her,

“You don’t mind?”

She waved her hand, “Of course not. I have nothing to hide, and documentation is almost always an excellent idea.”

I flipped the orichalcum in my hand, “Good. I figured out who’s spreading the infestation.”

Her eyes widened, and she leaned towards me, “Who?”

I frowned, “I think it’s a faction of gialgathens.”

She raised an eyebrow, “What makes you believe that?”

I sighed, “I found espen bodies implanted with eggs. They were covered in the same slave brands that Emagrotha used forever ago.”

Tohtella narrowed her eyes, “And? Anyone that knows those brands could plant that kind of evidence.”

I shook my head, “I fought a Skyburner.”

Tohtella blinked. She peered off to her side. She pushed her glasses up. She looked back at me, “Ahem, I understand that you are a contender in the Honoring of Lehesion, but-“

I shrugged, “I have video evidence of me kicking its ass. I can show it to you if you’d like. I’m the reason Mount Vernon has a new crater.”

She blinked, “Wait...that crater wasn’t an eruption?”

I shook my head,

“No. It was me.”

Chapter 170: A Nightmare

Tohtella scoffed, “Really? Perhaps you’d like to offer up that evidence then?”

I went through a few menus, opening the files from Kessiah. My obelisk played out a three dimensional model of the fight. It showed me off in the distance, duking it out with Ryhstrika. As I landed onto the mountain, Tohtella raised her hand,

“That will be more than sufficient. I have a few questions to ask.”

I shrugged, “Fire away.”

She pointed at the video, “You’re only level 6,000. How’re you generating that kind of power?”

I shook my head, “Trademark secret.”

She nodded, “I had to ask. Next, if you’re already so durable, why do you wear armor?”

“To hide who I am. As a remnant, you should know why someone would want to hide their identity.”

The same mild, amused grin went up her lips,

“You haven’t analyzed me yet? That’s polite of you, but do so now.”

My eyes widened as I looked at her status.

Tohtella Adair(lvl 9,000 | Speaker | Guild: Head of Speaker’s Guild on Giess) – It’s rare that Schema rewards a non-combatant with high levels. The reason being that direct combat potential often translates more effectively to destroying eldritch than administrative assistance.

Tohtella is the exception to this rule.

With a rigorous work ethic and absolute efficiency, she’s proven herself time and time again. She’s organized several problem planets using unconventional methods. Her ability to think outside of conventional norms has given her a remarkable achievement.

She’s one of the only remnants without an unknown status. She believes that through hard work and diligence, any remnant can rid themselves of their unknown status. Even more so, she did this without having to battle endlessly for years. She organized raids and revamp efforts on multiple fringe worlds.

She is a shining example of the upper echelon of Schema’s system. Look to her history as guidance on how to succeed within the system.

I raised an eyebrow, “Wow, there’s a lot there. Can you read my status then?”

She shook her head, “No. I invested only in intelligence, willpower, and luck. My perception is at an acceptable level, but it isn’t enough to see your status.”

I nodded, “Oh, luck then. Why?”

“Luck gives me opportunities that allow me to show my strengths. Few people invest into the attribute as well, giving me a different utility over most. Mistakes from my subordinates can be turned into advantages for instance.”

That might be why she was able to get such a good impression on me. When she put it like that, luck didn’t seem like a bad idea for my next attribute to enhance. I tucked that thought into the back of my mind as I raised a hand, “Anyways, you believe me now right?”

She nodded, “Of course. It isn’t like I need DNA samples or hard science to prove you’re powerful. That much is evident by your bearing.”

“All right then. I have a few pictures to show you.” I flashed images of the espens used as egg sacks. Tohtella didn’t even flinch. I pointed at them,

“The Skyburner I fought was carrying an espen like this one. They’re dumping the bodies along the border of the silvers. You see the matrice forming? That extends out and connects with the nearby silver territory.” I pointed at the wounds,

“I found the same kind of bodies near Yildraza with the same talon marks.”

Tohtella peered at the images, “Are you adept at Giessian history?”

I shook my head, “Not really.”

She leaned back into her chair, keeping her back straight, “There was a civil war between the gialgathens nearly a century ago. Lehesion fought for the espen’s freedom, though it was closer to second-class citizenship. Emagrotha fought for their enslavement.”

Tohtella steepled her fingers, “The Skyburners were a legion developed by Emagrotha to fight other gialgathens. Based on your evidence, it seems as though vestiges of Emagrotha’s forces remain.”

I nodded, “And they’re trying to spread the silvers. Why the fuck would they do that though?”

Tohtella sighed, “It could be an act of spite. It’s no secret that the gialgathens look down on other races. Seeing the espens rise to prominence would lower their own statuses by comparison.”

I raised a hand and shook my head, “But, why not just sharpen their skills or something? The gialgathens are overwhelming. They could still hold their heads high if they just trained a bit. Problem solved.”

Tohtella shook her head, “You have to understand their culture to see the heart of the problem. Gialgathens don’t see silvers or eldritch as a threat. They view them as normal parts of nature. This means that they won’t fight the eldritch or silvers in most circumstances.”

She continued, “They only train to fight other gialgathens. Other creatures are beneath their notice. If the silvers or eldritch did grow strong enough to actually threaten them-“

I frowned, “By then, it would already too late. You can’t let an eldritch outlevel you over and over. You’ll lose eventually, and then the eldritch eat your corpse and becomes even stronger. It snowballs out of control.”

She nodded, “You speak like someone who’s faced many of them on many battlefields.”

I shrugged, “I’ve faced a few in my day...Have you tried talking to the gialgathens about it? Maybe showing them what the eldritch are capable of?”

Tohtella’s eyes narrowed, “I have tried all manner of displays, exhibitions, and the like. The gialgathens do not take my word seriously. This lack of agency against the eldritch

bleeds into espen culture. The espens won't mobilize against the silvers or eldritch until something is done with the gialgathens."

She shook her head, her brow creasing "And...unfortunately, I have no idea how to handle the situation."

I could only imagine how frustrating that must be for her. Tohtella was a world changer according to her status. This wasn't her first rodeo. If she wasn't able to change the gialgathen's minds, I doubted that anyone could.

As I thought about it, she pressed her hand against her lips. She tapped her closed hand against her face, deep in thought. A second later, she lowered her hand and looked me in the eye, "If I may make a proposition?"

"Yeah, sure."

She crossed her fingers in front of her,

"I'm certain that you'll win the Honoring of Lehesion after viewing that footage. I doubt even the strongest gialgathens would pose you much of a challenge. This puts you into a unique position both politically and socially."

I sighed. It was another speech on politics. Fuck.

She continued, "If you mentioned your exploits against the eldritch, your harrowing encounters perhaps, you may convince the gialgathens and espens to fight them."

She looked off the side, closing her eyes, "I understand that what I'm asking is unreasonable. It's your fame and image, and you may do with it as you like."

She looked back at me, "However, I am..." She struggled out her next words,

"Unable to change the gialgathen's or the espen's minds. It is infuriating, but I've tried everything in my power. Nothing has worked in any way. They don't respond to reason."

She looked at me, “They will respond to you. You’re strong. You’re tall. You even have a good voice. Please consider telling them this during your winning speech.”

She was laying the flattery on a little thick in my opinion. Either way, I shrugged, “Alright, maybe. I’ll have to think about it.”

She raised her palms to me, “Of course. I understand. Do as you wish.”

I leaned forward, pointing at her, “I have an idea about the Skyburners though. I know a guy that I think you would make a hell of a team with.”

She raised an eyebrow, “Who?”

I grinned, “He’s a bony guy, thin as a skeleton. If you two combine your abilities, I think we can wrap this silver case up in less than a week.”

She tilted her head, “He sounds resourceful. When could I meet him?”

I straightened up, tapping the desk with my hands,

“Asap, hopefully. This is what I’m thinking, I’ll find the Skyburners. You finish what you have to do here. I’ll send you a meeting location with this guy I’m talking about. We’ll come up with a plan to take down the last part of Emagrotha’s forces before going in there-“

I clasped my fists, bending my power armor, “And kick some evil frog-dragon ass.”

She frowned, “Will you be able to find where these gialgathens are by then? They’re most likely deep in silver territory.”

I grinned, “I’ll get it done.”

She looked me up and down. She blinked, “Then I’ll believe you. I’ll get things prepared here before seeing you at the agreed upon location.”

She looked down, “Ahem, thank you for your help in this matter. I was rather powerless to handle it on my own.”

I stood up and rolled my shoulders, “Eh, thanks for handling that paperwork guy. I was powerless then, so it’s only natural I return the favor. I’m off.”

She gave me a nod, “Then good luck.”

I turned around. Tohtella stood up, grabbing my arm, “Wait one moment. We need to exchange contact information for you to send me the meeting place.”

“Oh yeah, of course.”

She sent me a friend request, and I accepted while using an alias instead of my real name. It made me snicker to myself. Even a higher up in Schema’s system still utilized the friend system to handle communication. As I began walking out again, Tohtella wrapped her hands behind her,

“Do you need the receptionist to show you the way out?”

I tapped the edge of my helmet, “Nope. I have a good memory.”

She waved me goodbye as I left. After handling the formality, I walked out of the building. I remembered the layout from walking in, retracing my steps using my skill Knowledge Maker. Tohtella sent me a message,

Tohtella Adair(Giess: (3/04/26) | Contract Formation) – I created an official contract for the mission. This will enable Schema based rewards along with recognition in Schema’s database. The previous rewards didn’t reflect the difficulty of the task.

Quest Request:

Destroying the Fragments of Emagrotha(lvl 10,000+ | Party Size: 10+ | Guild Affiliation: Any) – The reason behind the encroaching infestation of silvers has been

determined. Pieces of Emagrotha's army are trying to destroy espen civilization. It's up to you and a team of skilled mercenaries to stop them.

Reward: 1 Blue Dungeon core, positive affiliation with Giess, positive affiliation with Speakers, Speaker class offer.

It was a nice bonus for what was being offered before. With that handled, I sent Torix a message.

Dimension C-138(Giess: (3/04/26)) – Set up a meeting with you and woman named Tohtella tomorrow. You two make a good combo. Be ready.

I patted myself on the back for the direct, simple message. With a day left before the tournament began, I trecked out of the speakers base.

A half hour later, and I stood at the border between silvers and normal nature. Cool wind splashed across my face, my stuffy armor keeping me from it. As I stepped onto the plates of steel, my footing stabilized some. The sunshine rained down, reflecting off the spires and matrices of metal.

I smacked my fists together, getting ready to kick some ass. Before going deeper in, I plotted points on my minimap of where I found espen slaves. I checked out their relative positions, finding a denser cluster of points North of Yildraza.

With little else to go on, I journeyed further into the silver's territory near that cluster of points. With Event Horizon on, I left a strip of death near me. I smashed engorgs, merjects, and saysha galore. I let my armor eat the bodies, leaving nothing in my wake.

After an hour of traveling, there was no trace of Yildraza behind me. A forest of spires flooded the clouds above me. I was deep in their territory, and new monsters came about.

I found yana worms crawling in silver corpses. They wore them like a puppet, imitating the previous owner. Without fail, the parasitic worms enhanced their host, improving upon their forms. This reflected in their levels.

I found a cluster of Yana worms feasting on a merject. Once I approached, the worms stiffened into a single organism. The infected merject stood up and stared at me with its empty eyes. I analyzed it.

Yana Cluster, Merject(3,201) – This merject corpse has been eaten and imitated by the yana. Without a mind of its own, the yana will act with sub-par intelligence. This is why they prefer keeping their hosts alive. It enhances their intelligence when they operate in conjunction with a living brain.

This should prove as no worthy foe for you, but do not allow the yana worms to infect you.

I took the status's advice. I concentrated Event Horizon over it, the creature writhing in agony. I dashed forward, punching a hole through its head. After a series of hooks, nothing remained of the beast besides mush. I wiped the muck off me, glad I had the gray armor over me.

From above, another tainted merject flopped down towards me. I swiveled on my heels, hitting the beast with an overhand left. The metal beneath my feet dented, sending out a shockwave. Meat chunks landed on my armor. I flicked one of the hunks off of me.

One of the worms lived, however. It crawled over my face mask, eyes all over the nightmarish thing. It whispered in a high pitch voice from its many mouths,

“We can make you...stronger. Wiser. Let us in.”

I pulled it off with gravity,

“Uh, yeah. I'm not listening to something that looks like living cancer.”

I squashed it with a compressive gravity well and continued onwards. The deeper I dived, the stronger and more prominent the silvers became. From averaging level 1,000, they capped out at around 5,000. The biggest of them abominable, freakish monsters.

One of the species was like a flying whale of flesh. It floated over the metal spires, letting the metal beams tear its belly open. From its insides, trails of sticky blood

drained down and scooped up saysha beetles. This blood then slurped back up into the whale.

It made perfect sense why the espens wouldn't want to fight the damn thing. A merject even attempted sucking up the whale's fluids. It jumped on the side of it. When it pierced the whale's skin, the blobular blood wrapped around it.

The merject howled in terror as the blood entered its eyes and ears. The poor creature swelled up like a balloon before its insides became outsides. There were other horrors I found there as well. Massive, metal caterpillars injected their organs into their hosts. Eldritch beasts lay sprawled out, their bodies welded down as their bellies writhed with eggs.

I can't deny it – it haunted me.

This grisly land of living horrors ate away at my sense of calm. It left me stunned at how awful a situation could get. If this is what fringe worlds were like, it was no wonder Fringe Walkers were given so many resources. Having to reverse a planet in this kind of a situation...it was daunting even for a god, let alone a mortal.

I learned something while wandering through those wastelands I would never forget. This was what happened when you let a bad situation spiral out of control. This was what could happen if Earth became a fringe world. The hardest part about it all though was that I was perfect to stop it.

No one else could exterminate the vermin like I could. I crushed through these monstrosities with ease. As disgusted as I was, I wasn't about to let any of these abominations live.

I tore them apart, and my black armor devoured the corpses I left behind. It was a bloodbath, one where I numbed myself to the carnage. It was like I salted the earth, no food left for other creatures. I even sterilized the ground with Event Horizon.

The task weighed on me over time, however. It exposed something I needed to work on. Even if my willpower was sky high, I needed to control my thoughts and mind. I needed to be able to flip a switch to stop myself from breaking down.

In a situation worse than this, I wouldn't be given a chance to hesitate. I needed to pull the trigger so to speak and just go forward. When I got back, I vowed to get something from Torix to help with doing that. The bag of bones would appreciate having something meaningful to teach, no doubt.

Just like that, I drenched the silver's territory with their own blood for hours. The sun set as I stumbled onto my first breakthrough. On the side of a flesh whale, as I called them, the beast carried charred flesh and burns. Simple as it sounds, this was the only hint I needed.

Based on my battles before, the flesh whales never changed their direction midflight. They changed course if something big attacked them or they ran out of spires. Considering no silvers sprayed fire, I connected the dots; a gialgathen burned this damn thing. Armed with that knowledge, I pulled myself to the top of the metal pillars.

The thing is, the flesh whales scraped their stomachs on the spires. This leaves a trail of blood behind. If I followed the path, I retraced the steps of the flesh whale. If I were in luck, I'd find the gialgathens.

Feeling more clever than I probably should've, I shot across the landscape. Fighting the silvers wasn't an option now since it made too much noise. After a half hour of following the silver trees, I found a curve in the flesh whale's path.

I leaped down below the metal steeples, hidden by them. I discovered a path of espen blood at the bottom. I tracked the trail, weaving through shining towers. After evading a horde of engorgs, I stumbled onto an enormous wall.

Composed of welded together spires, the barrier towered over the metal treeline. From inside the expanse, hammering, squirming, and fiery breath echoed out. Espens of some kind grunted. Gialgathens heaved out their fiery breath at something.

It was what I'd been looking for. Planes couldn't come here because silvers would tear them apart. Tohtella would've needed a satellite system to show her the location, which Giess didn't have yet. Finding their base this fast was a huge boon for the plan.

Before turning around, I scaled the wall, aiming to find more information. With the wind whistling in my ears, I pulled my head over the barricade. As I looked down, I soaked the sight in. As I did, my eyes widened, and the hair along my neck rose. My stomach sank as I ground my teeth.

It was evil, plain and simple.