

New World 191

Chapter 191: A Fever Pitch

Helios began a slow, self-derisive laugh. It mounted in volume, resonating through the underground room like a hurricane of sound. A shiver ran up my spine, his voice putting me on edge. As the cacophony came to an end, Helios spread his hands in defeat,

“To think such a simple guise would fool me for so long...I still have much to learn. Some of that learning will revolve around you, however.”

He interlocked his fingers, pointing at me, “So then...Why are you on Giess and why are you helping my sister?”

I explained our unknown statuses, how we were getting rid of them, and trying to erase our bounties. I also elaborated on how bullshit it was for Schema to still have us be hunted even after we killed Yawm. As I finished giving him the barebone basics, Helios rolled his eyes,

“That’s the skeleton of why you’re on Giess. It explains little of why you entered the tournament or what you’ve done since coming here.”

With his prodding, I relented more info about what we did here. This cycle of giving just enough to answer his question then Helios goading more knowledge from me continued. By the end of it, I spilled everything we’d done since coming here, including the bit about Skyburners and Giess’s glassing.

Helios stared at me the entire time, soaking it all in. As I watched him, he made mental adjustments about the situation and our own decisions. By the time he finished assessing our plight, he was cracking each knuckle one by one,

“This is a wealth of knowledge that my sister hid from me well. I’d be impressed if I wasn’t so disappointed in her already. Her involvement with your success has been minimal at its most and abysmal at its worst. My understanding was that you all held her back in a certain regard. If that was the case, I would have already flayed you all alive. Instead, I’m rather intrigued.”

Helios gestured to the runic markings on my forearms, “Those runes in particular... where did you get them from?”

“From some offwor-“

Helios clamped his fist, making a loud clap of sound. It silenced me as he sighed in a suppressed anger,

“I’ve already proven I can tell when you lie. Answer me honestly, and you will not be harmed.”

Helios tilted his head, “Hmm, most likely anyway.”

Great. Just great.

“Alright. Calm down. I made them.”

“So another lie then. I suppose-“

A well of anger rose out of my chest, my patience for his bullshit thinning. I clamped my own hand shut, silencing him just like he silenced me,

“I can prove it.”

I whipped out my grimoire and etched in a basic runic carving of the cipher. It represented endurance, a rune I was intimately familiar with. I channeled into it for a few seconds before making the cipher rune float above the page. I flicked the white rune, sending it onto the ground. It singed into the stone, leaving the intricate detail intact.

Helios was leaning on his throne, keeping his hands on the armrests.

“So I’ve met three that can write in the language now. The Emperor, Baldowah, and now you. The other two are a given, but you...you’re an anomaly, aren’t you?”

I tried downplaying my significance. Having extraterrestrial parties take interest in me would fuck us over.”Eh, sort of. I’m not that different from a normal capper to be honest.”

“Oh, we’ll have to disagree about that. Considering your outlier status, you pose a tremendous threat to our Empire. As an example, several of my abilities were granted by the Emperor before I left our home planet. Using those advantages, I was able to circumvent the limitations of Schema’s system. My own mana generation is a result of just that.”

Helios rubbed his gauntlet, the cipher etched onto the metal,

“It took my uncle several months before he was able to charge enough mana into the rune to finish it, yet you did it in seconds and without atomic manipulation. Explain.”

“It wasn’t that big a deal.”

“You fail to understand the nature of your situation. I am not questioning you to gain information from you. I am justifying your survival. You see, you’re a threat. Threats are to be eliminated unless I can prove they aren’t threats. By hiding who and what you are, you’re only digging your grave deeper, and my mercy is by no means never ending. So Speak.”

A cold bead of sweat dripped down my forehead. At this point, showing him everything I had was my only out. I waved my friends away, and Torix, Kessiah, and Althea stepped away from me. I channeled mana into my runes, topping them off in a second. As I drained mana from the cipher runes on my forearms, the air around me blurred. Crimson lightning bolted from my skin. Cracks of pure energy radiated down my metal armor, the darkened ore oozing with unrestrained violence.

It seeped into the stone, the air, even the dimensional fabric around me. I produced a subtle warp in it, the volume of mana almost limitless. That mana infested my blood and bones, telling me to rip and tear. I gritted my teeth, forcing it to bend to my will. Without my vast reserves of willpower, it would consume me in seconds.

I’d become the plaything of my own mana. Fortunately, that wasn’t the case. Practice made perfect, and I was more than used to this by now. After a few seconds of creating a hyper-dense cloud of mana, droplets formed around me. Like a glowing rain, they dripped down onto the ground around me. Althea was exposed to a tiny whiff of the

mana cloud, and her eyes dilated. Like some stimulant, she growled as her body reformed, the mana utterly excessive to what she could handle.

She bent down, grabbing the sides of her head. She growled, “Cut it off or I’ll lose my mind.”

I snapped the mana shut, siphoning it into the rune on my forearms. The liquid mana evaporated as I breathed it back in. Even Helios seemed affected as he raised out a shaking hand,

“Incredible. You’ve more mana than even the emperor and I combined. To think a being could produce this much mana internally. An engine of destruction, aren’t you?”

I turned to Althea, “You alright?”

She raised a hand, “I’m fine. Your mana is much denser than last time you did the same thing. I didn’t think it would have this much of an effect on me...That’s all.”

She was holding back how much the mana impacted her. Beneath her skin, her body rippled like an ocean wave. It had been a long time since I’d seen her struggle to control her transformations. The sheer surge of mana was threatening to overwhelm her though. Torix noticed, so he walked over,

“Quit being prideful and send the extra mana through the conduit. You’ll be poisoned at this rate.”

She wheezed, “I’m sorry. I forgot. I’ll...I’ll do that.”

A sense of panic rose in my chest when I heard her struggle. It made me feel like some weapon of mass destruction, ready to crush something without even meaning too. I clenched my fist as Helios gave me a slow claps,

“Extraordinary. Yes, I believe the Emperor and you have much to discuss. You may prove very useful given some convincing.”

I glared at him, “It might take a lot of convincing.”

“The Emperor can pose a few compelling arguments I’m sure.”

Althea shouted at him, the mana still affecting her, “So what is it you fuck? We’re your slaves now?”

Helios banged one his armrests, “It’s that potent, isn’t it? She’s a Breaker, yet you brought her to her knees in seconds! Have you ever imagined using it to invigorate an army? The carnage they’d inflict...It would be legendary.”

I frowned, “I did it once. It was a last resort against Yawm. It worked pretty well, but I figured I’d focus on other things. It’s gotten a lot more potent since then, so I’m pretty sure it would just kill them.”

“I’ve seen plenty. Then it’s settled. After you’ve finished your errands here on Giess, you’ll be summoned to see the Emperor. I’m certain he’ll have much to discuss with someone who mirrors him in many ways.”

Althea roared in outrage, “You think-“

Helios pressed his fingertips together, encapsulating Althea in a field of azure ice. I turned to her my eyes widening. Before I could kill this piece of dogshit, he gestured a palm to me,

“She will be fine though silent for the rest of this conversation. In fact, your mana is a far larger problem for her health than my ice. I kept the ice outside of her skin, preventing it from freezing her blood. A simple flick and it would consume her, creating a bloom of red. She’d be beautiful, wouldn’t she?”

I froze in place, stunned by his ease at killing Althea.

“I mean no harm, however. She needed to be calmed before she lost herself. Just as well, she means quite a bit to you, so she means something to the Empire as well. I truly didn’t wish to be impolite. I hope you believe that as you’re valuable...in a sense.”

Helios cracked a knuckle, “Regardless, I’m rather pressed for time as you may imagine.”

Helios cracked his neck before standing, “Whether you save this planet or not, you will see the Emperor afterward. He has much to teach you, should you listen to him. Send me your coordinates after the time limit for Giess is up. I’ll send someone to pick you up.”

Helios opened a portal, “Defy me, and you’ll face the brunt of the Empire and all its allies’ might. Understood?”

I spoke through gritted teeth, “Understood.”

“Excellent. Your ire aside, you saved my sister. If you happen to need assistance, I shall grant it. Goodbye, Harbinger.”

He walked through his portal while snapping his fingers. As he did, The ice around Althea evaporated into mist. She fell down, gasping for air. Torix hissed, “Oh he’ll pay for that.”

I took a deep breath, my blood boiling, “I’ll take the blood out of his body and make that fucker drown in it.”

Torix raised a palm to me, “Perhaps not that far.”

I grunted, “Eh, probably the mana talking.”

Althea let out a loud, hacking cough. I snapped out of my anger, jogging over to Althea, making sure she was ok. She gave me a woozy thumbs up like she was drunk, “Hey... I’m alright. I just need to sleep...you made beds right?”

“Of course I did.”

She laid down onto the floor, “That’s, uh, good...Wait a minute! They aren’t rock beds are they?”

Caught red-handed, I stood up straight, “Uh...maybe.”

Torix rolled his eyes, “Enough. I’ll pull something not so stony for you to lay out on.” The lich looked up to me, “Be more careful with your mana. You could’ve killed her.”

I bit my lip while looking down. I took a deep breath, “Yeah...I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.”

“Make sure of it. otherwise I will.”

The mage lifted her with telekinesis before stepping into our room. As he closed the door, Kessiah walked up to me,

“Oof. That was...wow. Helios is strong isn’t he?”

“Yeah. He’s an asshole too.”

Kessiah took a few deep breaths, steadying herself. The conversation impacted her more than I thought it would. She shook her head, glancing up at me,

“Hey, did you really make us rock beds?”

She was using humor to cope. I figured I’d help her out.”

“What, they feel just like beds to me.”

Kessiah rolled her eyes, “Yup. Classic Daniel. Real thoughtful there.”

I crossed my arms, “I don’t see you making beds for anyone, now do I?”

Kessiah gritted her teeth “Yeah...I don’t see myself doing much of anything honestly.”

There was a deep bitterness there. I decided to pull back in the conversation,

“You know I was just joking, right?”

Kessiah let out a long sigh, “Yeah, you are. I’m not. I’m fucking useless.”

I winced. I wanted to deny it, but hey, sometimes the truth hurts. Kessiah looked up at me, expecting something. I stayed silent, so her shoulders drooped,

“Well fuck...You could at least pretend like it wasn’t true.”

I shrugged, “I mean, it doesn’t matter what I think about it. If you think it’s true, then it’s true.”

She blinked, “Ok...asshole...” She looked away, “You’re right though. I don’t know if you noticed, but my hands were shaking the entire time that guy was here. I was terrified. He could kill me without even thinking about it. Same with your mana cloud. It’s like I’m surrounded by monsters now.”

I recoiled a bit at being called a monster. Kessiah met my eye, “Was Yawm like that the entire time?”

I shook my head, a bit peeved at what she said earlier,

“No. He was much worse. Helios is a narcissistic, egomaniac fuckface. Yawm...Yawm was more than that. He had this way of worming into your head and making you doubt everything you knew to be true.”

I stared at my hands, “And before you know it, you want him to be right even if he’s wrong. Hell, there comes a tipping point where I almost sided with him just because it felt like the right thing to do. That kind of presence...it’s haunting.”

I looked off into the distance, “Helios is strong, maybe even stronger than Yawm. I don’t know honestly. The thing is, Helios doesn’t have that same effect on me. He’s just a piece of shit I deal with.”

I kept staring off into the distance, “As for Yawm, I’m still terrified I’ll end up like him.” I raised my hands, leaving an inch of space between my index finger and my thumb, “I’m this close to being like him. I mean even my friends are calling me monsters now and acting like I’m not human anymore.”

“Well, you’re not human. I didn’t mean that part about monsters either. It was more about how much weaker I was than how ridiculous you guys were. Hell, I can’t tell who’s stronger between you and Helios. You could both kill me in a second, so does it even matter?”

I looked back to her, “I guess not.”

“I can’t believe you’re still sane after that...And I was older than you. I was three times your level. I left you to do that all on your own...”

Kessiah leaned over, a bit of water welling in her eyes, “Man...I can’t believe I did that. I’m pathetic.”

I watched her, unable to help with her suffering. I wasn’t the kind of guy to say the right thing at the right time. I’d never been that kind of person. I was too selfish and self centered for that kind of thing. Either that or it was my emotional intelligence. I’d been compared to a rock in that regard, and I felt it was a fair comparison.

Still, I wanted to help as her pain was white hot and deep as an ocean. It was like she was putting herself into her own personal hell, and I didn’t know how to help pull her out of it. I had to say something though, so I put a hand on her shoulder,

“So, uhm, it’s ok.”

I cursed at myself, wishing I wasn’t a fucking idiot.

Kessiah let out a sad laugh, “Thanks for trying. At least you didn’t tell me to quit being a pansy about it.”

“I’m sorry. I’m...not the best at this. My gut instinct is to tell you to quit feeling sorry for yourself and do something about your situation. That doesn’t work for everybody though. Just, uh, focus on what you can do about it. The past, it’s gone. You can do something right now though.”

I stood up, trying to keep my words tactful,

“Besides, wallowing in guilt doesn’t do much, does it?”

Fuck. I needed to really work on this. I was more like a drill sergeant than a friend.

Kessiah pulled herself together, and went back to deflecting with humor, “Thank you, sir for the pep talk. Real helpful.”

“Well, at least I don’t have to worry about being as charismatic as Yawm.”

Kessiah propped her weight onto one hip, “Aye, stop doubting yourself. We’re talking about how pathetic I am, not you.”

I let out a reluctant grin, “Heh, if you say so.”

Kessiah raised her hands, “For real though, I really could use some work. I was over a 1,000 levels above that bag of bones when he asked me to come to earth. Since then, he’s a Speaker, and he’s tripled my level already. At this point, I went from the weak link to just...ugh.”

“The thing is, you can fix the levels pretty fast. Go clear dungeons or kill silvers. Problem solved. That’s not where your problem is.” I tapped my temple, “It’s up here with you. It’s like...you self destruct or something. You can’t get focused ever since you tapped out against Yawm. Quit focusing on your failures and start working towards success. It’s that simple.”

Kessiah looked down while crossing her arms, “Yeah...I should do that.”

I raised my hands, “Never too late for redemption. You got the talent. Get your shit together, and you’ll be a world breaker. I mean that. I remember when you first used

your blood arts. You wiped the floor with me. If you got a good handle on that and backed it up with some raw stats, you'd be formidable. If you added a Breaker class to that, and you'd be outright terrifying."

She looked up to me, "You're not fucking with me, right?"

"Look, we talk shit about you, but don't misunderstand the situation. You have potential." I poked her shoulder, "Go realize it."

I turned around, walking over towards our room, "I got to see what the hell is taking Torix so long though. Good luck."

Kessiah reached out, "Wait a minute. I forgot to tell you. Did you ever see the news?"

I let my hands plop against my sides, "What do you think?"

A tiny grin spread over her face, "Hah. Got you there at least." She raised her hands, "Anyways, Thisbey is using the bombing on our room to frame the gialgathens. It's causing some riots. You know, serious shit."

I bit my lip, "Fuck. It's one problem after the other."

Kessiah let out a hollow laugh, "You haven't heard anything yet. According to a rumor mill, there's been a revolutionary group going around clearing Dungeons. They're espens that are leveling up so that they can kill the gialgathens or some crazy shit. It's insane."

My eyes widened, "They're leveling to commit genocide?"

Kessiah took a sharp breath in, "Hey, I'm just the messenger."

I glanced down, "What the fuck is wrong with people?"

Kessiah shrugged, "Eh, pretty much everything. Just got to deal with it, right?"

I glanced down at her, “Yeah...That’s right.”

She pointed up at me, “Hah, that’s something you told me forever ago. Anyways, thanks for the pep talk. I think it’s about time I start kicking ass and taking names.”

I raised my eyebrows while looking away, “It’s about damn time.”

Kessiah hit my elbow with a playful punch, but she ended up breaking one of her finger bones. She leaned over, grabbing her hand, “By Baldowah your skin is like...like I don’t know. Jesus. Fuck.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Why’d you say Jesus?”

Kessiah waved me off, “I don’t fucking know. You always mention the guy whenever something bad happens. I figured it might help. If you’re wondering, it didn’t.”

I raised a hand and pinched my fingers together. As I did, I telekinetically set the bones in her hand. Kessiah growled, “Aghhhhhh. Fuck you.”

I gave her a grin, “Your welcome. For real, good luck with pulling it together.”

She stood up straight, “You too. And uh...thanks. You know, for everything.”

I shrugged, “Eh, I was helping myself most of the time. I wouldn’t give myself to much credit.”

I turned and walked off. As I did, Kessiah sighed and murmured to herself,

“Alright, Kessiah...you got to get your shit together. Come on. Come on. Let’s do this. No more going to bars or lounging in bed...ok, maybe a little lounging.”

I suppressed a laugh, walking into our room. As I opened the door, Torix was casting some green, healing magic over Althea. I raised an eyebrow as I closed the door behind me, “Is she sick?”

Torix shook his head, “Not exactly. I was more so checking her vitals for poisons and whatnot. After the fiasco at Rivaria, I’ve become more paranoid you see.”

I tsked, “Yeah, so have I.” I watched him use the green magic for a few seconds, “So uh, could you teach me that? I’ve been doing surgery with gravity magic recently. Turns out, it’s not exactly the worst thing to use, but I’m pretty sure there are better tools out there.”

Torix scoffed, “You’re right about that.” He opened his dimensional storage, pulling out a dusty old tome. He tossed it at me, and I snatched it out of the air. With my other hand, I pressed my fingertips together, compressing the erupting cloud of dust let off by the book.

I burnt it once I collected the lint. Torix ceased his magic and clapped his hands, “Bravo. You’ve become a fine mage, integrating such complex magic for miscellaneous tasks.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Oh this? It’s because of Force of Nature. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have this kind of finesse. It’s a pretty absurd skill, to be honest.”

Torix nodded, “Most branches of magic are when taken to their extremes. Oddly enough, I don’t know if you could even implement healing magic with your current limitations.”

I raised an eyebrow, “What, why?”

Torix gestured towards Althea, “Helios’s ice isn’t what left Althea delirious like that. It was the side effects of mana toxicity.”

My eyes widened, “I poisoned Althea with that little bit of mana?”

Torix sighed, “Indeed you did. You see, your health and mana are one. You can actually channel your mana directly into someone’s wounds to heal them. The issue revolves around its effect on someone’s mind.”

Torix waved his hands around, “You deal with unbelievably high volumes of mana at once. You could deluge someone’s central nervous system, completely overloading it and frying them as if they were on an electric chair.”

Torix cupped his chin, “In fact, it could make for a devastating combat move. Your mana elicits violence and destructive impulses after all. Perhaps causing some infighting would be very difficult to stop.”

I frowned, “It’s motivating too. You know, energizing and all that.”

Torix swung a finger, pointing a finger in the air at the same time, “Precisely my point. That rush of violence can leave someone in a state of comatose if you overdue the mana sent to them. In fact, imagine if you sent that kind of mana into Caprika. She’s even flimsier than Althea. She might even have mutated into something like an eldritch. Perhaps even worse.”

I grimaced, “So no healing magic then? Got it.”

Torix tilted his head, “Hmmm. Not necessarily. You’d need some kind of limiter or the like; otherwise, you might send too much mana. After all, if you even sneezed, you might make someone explode. To be honest, you’re not the best candidate for learning healing magic. Kessiah, on the other hand, would be quite adept at it.”

I rolled my eyes, “Pff, Kessiah can’t even get out of bed early.”

Torix spread out his hands, “I wouldn’t be so sure. Kessiah’s Blood Magic lineage gives her a tremendous amount of manipulative ability with blood itself. That means she could create blood, take away blood, etc. It is potent for both healing and attacking in that regard.”

Torix waved his hand in disgust, “That being said, she’d never take the time to learn it. Alas, for professor, there is no greater shame than wasted talent.”

I shrugged, “Eh, I wouldn’t be so sure. She might have finally gotten motivated.”

Torix looked at me. He walked up and placed a hand on my shoulder, “If there’s one thing I learned about her long ago, it’s that she’s a time bomb. The moment she gets herself together, she just implodes under pressure.”

Torix let his hands down, “I believe it’s out of a lingering sense of self-hatred after she accidentally killed her parents. Maybe she believes she’s unworthy of her gifts? Maybe she believes she doesn’t deserve happiness? It could even be out of sheer fear of her Blood Magic after watching it consume her family in front of her.”

Torix looked down and nodded slowly,

“Hard thing that...to lose one’s family that is. After I say it out loud, it makes more sense why she’s struggling. It would be like if you killed Althea with your mana just now. It might be hard to use it afterwards, as you’d fear another mishap of the same vein.”

He was right about that. I couldn’t even imagine what that would be like. Maybe telling Kessiah to suck it up wasn’t the right approach. I’d have to think about it later.

Torix counted on his fingers, “Anyways, can you reinforce the base by a bit? I’ve already planted many agents around the area, casted several wards, and I added a few choice traps at choke points. If you wouldn’t mind adding a few extra runic repulsing spells around the area, it would give my mind a sense of ease.”

I whistled, “Woah, that’s quite a bit of security.”

Torix’s blue fire eyes flared red, “I was the one that defended us against most of the assassins that came at us before Yawm. I moved our base and our troops while cloaking us. I’ve gotten slack, so now twice I failed. Never again. Your assistance will help reinforce that.”

I gave him a thumbs up, “I don’t think you should take it to heart. It’s everyone’s responsibility to stay alive. Not just yours to keep them that way.”

“Perhaps, but perhaps not. We each specialize in our own respective fields of study. My necromancy and troop management make me a natural information specialist. You’re our vanguard in battle, absorbing enemy aggression and throwing their ranks into utter chaos. Althea’s our assassin, jumping in and out of our plane much like Ajax did.”

Torix looked up, “Hmmm, perhaps Kessiah could become our healer. After all, her aversion to combat seems consistent. Using her magic to help her allies might suit her better despite her rather coarse personality. Anyways, I set up a meeting with Kiki Mosk in an hour at the tournament site. He mentioned something about the interview, so I’m certain you didn’t mind.”

I let out a long sigh, “Of course not.”

Torix laughed, “Excellent. I won’t miss the interview, I promise. It sounds far too entertaining watching you out of your element.”

“Thanks a lot. Real helpful.”

“As always. Goodbye, Harbinger.”

I rolled my eyes as I trekked out into the forest for a few minutes after. I carved runic inscriptions into a few stones nearby, charging them with mana. After I finished setting them up, I reinforced the base again, this time for security. I composed strips along the edges of the building.

It was crazy what I was doing when I thought about it. I tore my skin off, melted it with my life force, then used it to make a cool base. Odd.

After finishing the project, I sprinted off towards the stadium where the honoring of Lehesion took place. I came out of the trees from a different angle than our base was at. After all, I didn’t know if Kiki helped the assassin. I didn’t want to take any chances either way.

With the dilapidated ruins coming into view, Kiki waiting along the upper edge of the stadium. As I leaped up to him, he spread out his hands,

“Ah, if it isn’t the man of the hour. Where did you and your compatriots head off to?”

I frowned, “Nowhere you need to know about.”

Kiki gave me a warm grin, “Right answer. Trust no one. We can’t afford to lose you! Our ratings have never been higher than this year. We’ve even got a reasonable following of extraplanetary viewers. You’re that captivating. It must feel really, really great!”

I grumbled, “Yeah. That’s, uh, great...Can you tell me what you want? I’m busy.”

Kiki waved his arms, “Ah yes. I called you here to inform you about the interview’s specifics. You’ve got three rounds left. Each of these next fights will take place at the stadium as the other fights did. The rounds will have you face to face with your opponent, both of you talking a bit of trash.”

I rolled my eyes, “Oh come on.”

Kiki waved a finger, “Now now, Daniel. You can make a huge splash in these interviews. This is a chance for people to get to know you after all.”

“Something tells me people won’t like what they hear.”

Kiki cupped his hands together, “I wouldn’t be so sure. You’re an everyday man who’s extraordinary at the same time. People love it when an exceptional individual acts as if they aren’t exceptional. It doesn’t remind them they’re mediocre.”

He spread out his hands, “Why else do you think everyone likes it when a celebrity is humble? It makes the star boring, but at least your average viewer won’t be bombarded by cognitive dissonance. That’s a big no-no.”

“Uh... Yeah, sure.”

Kiki clenched his hands into fists, “Just let everyone know the real Daniel. You’ll do wonders I’m sure.”

“If you say so.”

Kiki frowned, his multicolored suit shining, “You don’t seem very enthusiastic.”

I sure wasn't. Thisbey was using me. Kiki was using me. Hell, everyone I met since coming to Giess was using me in some way or the other. To be honest, I was sick of it.

"I'm not. This sucks. I just want to fight, win, get the compendium, then get out. That's literally it. You and this whole show business aspect of it can burn in a fire at this point."

Kiki raised his eyebrows, "Wow...That's really something."

I gave Kiki a pat on his shoulder, "Don't worry about it. I'll do wonders like you said."

As I turned around, Kiki shouted, "Remember, the interview is tomorrow at 12:00 P.M. here."

I gave him a thumbs up.

I spent the rest of the day doing research for the final Skyburner's base. With all of the gialgathen's history being oral, it made figuring anything out into a huge chore at best. Research wasn't my strong suit either, and Torix was too busy making sure our ironclad fortress was truly invincible.

Still, I did gain a few hints and a good idea of where to get my answer from. My next opponent in the tournament was a general for Emagrotha like the last. Her name was Ygsdrados something or the other. She was present at the fight between Lehesion and Emagrotha, so getting her to spill the beans shouldn't be too hard.

As the morning of the interview came, I had a creeping suspicion that it wouldn't be so easy.

I was right.

Chapter 192: A Vast Universe

I spent the morning prepping with Torix for the interview. He and I brainstormed some common questions, and I practiced hiding my identity. He even cast a few wards over

me, helping hide my identity further. With everything handled, we trekked off into the forest, taking the long way to the stadium.

As we walked, I turned towards Torix, “I haven’t seen Kessiah around lately. Has she been in Rivaria?”

Torix peered at his status as we walked across the rolling hills, “I don’t believe so. In fact, I found Kessiah in her room of all things. She studied out of a medical textbook I gave her, the same as the one I gave you.”

“No shit? Wow. How did that happen?”

“I racked my brain for some method of pushing her into pursuing healing magic, as we discussed before. If I told her anything, she’d likely work towards the opposite. Instead, I hammered in the importance of healing magic to Althea. After doing so, Althea chatted with Kessiah about how helpless our team was when medical emergencies arose. The rest, well, is history.”

I picked up the pace, jogging along. Torix kept up.

“After your warning about healing magic, I figured it wasn’t going to happen for me. It doesn’t mesh well with my current setup either. Good thing she’s trying it out.”

“I’m rather rudimentary at healing as well. Nonetheless, a basic understanding can allow for first aid in dire situations. Besides, you need some method for healing your healer should they be harmed. Otherwise, they take on an undue risk when venturing out with their party members.”

We reached the top of a hill as I leaped into the air, pulling myself up with gravity. Torix floated along on mana cloud. With wind whistling in my ears, we landed onto the edge of the stadium. On one of the platforms for gialgathens, a film crew set up the lighting and cameras for the interview. A crowd of different people stood around the spot, making sure everything was ready for the shoot.

A dozen aliens congregated near the spot, waiting around for something. They were a different kind of bunch, many of them varying wildly from espens in shape and form. Before we approached, Torix leaned over towards me,

“There are likely other factions across the galaxy that have taken up an interest in you now that you’ve become relatively famous.”

“Why?”

Torix pointed at the crowd, “You’ve displayed a wide variety of skills. They’ve no doubt taken an interest in your abilities and would like to use them for their own gain.”

“Doesn’t everybody?”

“In their own way, I suppose. Keep in mind that you may use them as well, however. Creating a mutually beneficial relationship is essential over the long term.”

I rolled my shoulders, “Alright. Any pro-tips on who those people are?”

Torix raised a hand, but before he could speak, one of the film crew spotted us. In a pressurized suit, a short and tubby enigmatta glanced at us with glowing eyes and a facemask. He pointed,

“It’s about time you guys showed up. Come on up. Don’t be shy,” His voice radiated from an intercom on his suit. He found us before we could come up with a game plan. Fuck. We walked up slowly, letting me analyze him,

Grotokia Lom(lvl 1,353 | Guild: None | Association: Galactic Filming Race: Enigmatta)
– A member of the Galactic Filming corporation, Grotokia Lom is a pacifist by heart. He enjoys drinking beer with friends and spending time with family. Outside of his hobbies, he’s built up a career as a hardball reporter with a knack for digging deeper than most.

That hardball approach has left him with many enemies throughout many worlds, however. His entertaining approach is a subject of controversy in certain cultures, though nothing he does is illegal. He poses no threat to your life, though your reputation is at risk.

I held back a grimace, pacing up to Grotokia and the crowd of strangers. Besides for the enigmatta, all the other races were foreign to me. At half my height, Grotokia walked up and grabbed my arm. He pointed towards the crowd,

“Your opponent isn’t here yet. Her name is Chrona Carsiary. She’s a diehard Emagrotha supporter and general. Can’t quite accept that the war is over. She’ll try to whip up a bunch of politics, so be ready for that.”

Still skeptical, I followed him, “Uh, thanks.”

Grotokia put me in front of two aliens and turned to walk off, leaving me behind, “Talk with some of the show’s sponsors while we wait. They’d love to hear about you from the man himself.”

I narrowed my eyes at the guy, irked that he roped me into this. Beside me, a blue, glowing sphere of energy was arguing with something reminiscent of a pitbull fused with a crocodile. Torix placed a hand onto my shoulder,

“I’ll be roaming nearby, perhaps speaking with a few of these individuals to develop a network of contacts. Do your best, and enjoy your first taste of the wider galaxy. You’ve earned it.”

The crocodile pit raised his voice, swinging his hands at the floating ball. I frowned, “Uh, I’ll do my best.”

Torix walked off as the argument increased in volume till I could hear it.

“Your kind needs no meat nor blood for sustenance. That doesn’t make your race innately superior. To judge us on our biology is no different than speciesism. It is to condemn us for what we are instead of who we are.”

That impassioned speech came out of the mouth of the muscled, armor-plated ball of teeth. The creature spoke with a noble voice too, defying my expectations. The sphere of light responded in a soothing voice,

“Your species may find enlightenment by joining us. Our co-habitation programs enable a long term solution to your carnivorous habits. You choose to kill despite alternatives being present.”

With clawed hand, the beast raised a palm to the sphere, “Your co-habitation is mind control, and the Kysars will have no part in it. We need no masters.” The beast turned to me,

“Ah, are you the warrior we’ve heard so much about? I didn’t notice you. This golemite is pushing his religion onto me, and I let him drag me into an argument.”

The blue sphere of energy rotated in the air, its voice radiating into my mind, “Take no heed in his words, Gray Giant. We were not arguing at all. I was merely informing him of the error in his ways. I am simply spreading the Final Light as well as I can so that all may see.”

The Kysar rolled his eyes, waving the sphere away with a clawed hand, “He’s insufferable, isn’t he?”

I shrugged, “I can’t tell just yet. If he plans on shoving religion down my throat, then yeah, he’ll be pretty damn annoying.”

The sphere bounced in the air, “What! This is most undesirable. I meant no harm or ill will when informing either of you about the truth of the universe.”

The Kysar crossed his arms, “Good intentions mean little. Actions are the meat and bones of life.”

I pointed at the reptile guy, “I can agree with that.”

The Kysari reached out a hand, “Then its good that we finally met. I’m BloodClaw Mor, an emissary for the Kysars. We’re here to offer you a deal.”

The alien waited on me to grab his hand, so I reached out and clasped it. He gripped my hand like we were about to arm wrestle in the air. BloodClaw shook his arm and gave me a curt nod at the same time. I liked the guy already.

I wouldn't take chances though.

BloodClaw Mor(lvl 9,823 | Class: Breaker | Race: Kysar) – BloodClaw works with the Speakers of his planet to reach out for useful individuals. The Kysar lack an affinity for magic and mana in general, their reliance on physical combat overwhelming most opponents regardless.

Against many eldritch, some form of magic or augmented physical strikes are necessary, however. This makes the Kysars reliant on outside races for a variety of tasks, such as clearing certain kinds of dungeons. They often exchange their services for guarding and mercenary work as they make for brutally effective soldiers against most sentients, particularly in enclosed areas.

This has created an exciting specialization of the species. They're formidable in battle, so be wary of making this one your enemy. Your best course of action in combat is prolonging the exchange. Your regeneration will enhance your odds of winning with every passing second.

Abuse those strengths.

After reading up about BloodClaw, I turned towards the blue orb. A white aura emanated from the being, its body amorphous and composed of energy alone. Within it, tiny purple dots rotated along an axis at its center. Those specks sped up as its voice radiated into my head, reminding me of the gialgathens,

"This is an unwelcome turn of events. My first impression is surely off from what I intended, and therefore, excuse my previous transgressions. I am Animato, a member of the golemite. We are a collection of amorphous energy beings, and we spread the Final Light's message of truth."

I pointed at him, "How pushy are you?"

"Why, not pushy at all! My goal is to simply prevent the utter destruction and casting away into oblivion of all other species when the Final Light arrives. This virtuous aim guides me, and that is why I have come here today."

I didn't really know what to say to the guy/girl/thing. Animato was outside of my realm of expertise to say the very least. The blue ball had me curious though.

"So you want me to convert or something along those lines, right?"

"I would hope to convince you of even more. This interview will give you a tremendous reach to this planet. You can save the souls of perhaps billions of sentients by doing only a few simple tasks."

BloodClaw rolled his eyes, the horn crests over his eyes sheening on the midmorning light,

"Perhaps you can enlighten the Gray Giant to the simple tasks you want?"

"Of course, and thank you for offering a transition into my pitch. All you need to do Gray Giant is convert to the Final Light's way of thinking, brand a complex symbol into your forehead, never speak again, and allow co-habitation of a golemite being within you!"

BloodClaw nudged my elbow, "See, a great deal isn't it?"

I raised a palm to Animato, "How about no."

"But sir, you--"

"I don't think I need to hear anything else. The offer was as tempting as chewing a steel cactus."

"Perhaps a 'cactus' would be pleasant to chew in steel form?"

The kysar beside me laughed, his deep voice dishing out a guttural grunt,

"He's a lost cause. You and me though, we can make this worth our while."

“I’m listening.”

“This is what we need from you. A cluster of rifts opened near one of my buddies cities. We aren’t the best at clearing the eldritch coming out of it, so I was hoping we could contact you. We’ll be giving about 500,000 credits per red dungeon core and twenty million for every blue core. You get to keep them of course.”

I shrugged, “I’ve got more than enough money.”

BloodClaw waved his hands, “I get, I get it. You’re more about technology then? We have more gizmos and gadgets than most espens could dream up. You help us, we give you the schematics to make any gear you could want.”

“Ok, that I can get behind. Give me your contact info. I’ll send you a message after the tournament.”

BloodClaw leaned back and opened his jaws. He reached into his throat, pulling out a capsule of some sort. Inside it, a series of dry paper cards shook in it. He popped open the cap and pulled out a business card, pointing it to me,

“You know where to find me then.”

I took the card despite it being pretty gross. I put it into my dimensional storage as the Kysar walked off. I turned to walk towards the film crew as Animato shot in front of me,

“But sir, doesn’t the salvation of billions of souls sound like a fair deal to help us? Unless you lack morals complete-“

I raised my palm to the thing, “No, I’m good on my own.”

The orb sighed, “Then yet another opportunity is wasted. I must reflect on my way of communication. It’s failed me almost without fail.”

“You’re asking for too much for too little.”

“The soul’s salvation is all I may offer.”

“Then you’re offering jack shit.”

“I...I don’t know what to say to that besides for impolite suggestions. Since my mind is reaching a blank in this scenario, I shall refrain from speaking any more.”

I gave him a thumbs up, “Yeah, you do that. I have an interview to do.”

The orb shimmered in the air, the blue color changing to a reddish hue. I walked past it, ignoring the thing’s frustration. It lacked any personal awareness, and that killed off any relationship I wanted with him. Maybe other, er, golemites were different, but that guy just gave off the wrong impression.

As I walked forward, I ran into other aliens. This time, a discordant group of metal blocks spoke with a slender, feminine blob. They were just as odd as the last duo, so I tried stepping past them, but they wouldn’t let me. The group of metal blocks condensed into a humanoid, blocky form. It grasped my shoulder with more force than necessary,

“Stop. You must stop your callous destruction of this planet.”

Its metallic voice rang in my ears as I leaned back from the golem, analyzing it.

Kregowa (lvl 13,000 | Class: Seeker | Race: Golemite) – A member of the golemites, this sentient collection of minerals works as a rare sub-class known as a Seeker. Though lacking the combat potential of a Fringe Walker or Breaker, the Seeker compensates with tremendous potential for exploration. It enables a resource lifestyle along with immortality and even allows for escapes and a relatively high-level cap for extra attribute points. This also comes with their signature wormhole abilities.

This wormhole specialization enables Seekers to travel between worlds with unmatched ease. This in conjunction with their resilience makes them natural explorers. Kregowa is a notable Seeker, having used his class to the absolute limits of its effectiveness. He’s discovered thousands of worlds for the Golemites, allowing the atronach species to

harvest minerals and natural clusters of mana along the way. As their species is a treasure hunting congregation, this grants him respect among his peers.

While not a direct threat, Kregowa will be very difficult to pin down and kill, even for you.

I shoved his hand off my shoulder,

“You’re assuming a lot about me. Not exactly fair.”

The golemite took a step towards me, “Mana creation overloaded. Stealing from Giess’s natural reserves inevitable. I come to cease rapid corruption of natural resources.”

“It’s my own mana. I’m not stealing from Giess.”

Kregowa raised his other hand, mana welling into it, “Compliance is denied. Backup measures activated.”

Without time to think about the situation, I snapped my hand around its neck, lifting it into the air. At the same time, I grabbed the hand pooling the mana. Before the situation escalated further, the feminine blob walked up and to us. The shiny surface of its body hardened, congealing into a dense skin. A blade ruptured out of its arm, sending a ripple through its gelatinous body. The creature raised its bladed arm and spoke as a matriarch,

“Warp him, and I’ll kill you.”

I turned to the slime chick, “I’m not about to warp him.”

She pointed her blade at the golemite, “I’m talking to Kregowa.”

It bewildered me that someone was actually defending me for once. Adding to the pleasant surprise, the mana in the golemite’s hand scattered. The creature’s humanoid alignment shifted back into a collection of steel squares. It assembled back into its

humanoid form but several feet from us both. Before anything else happened, I analyzed the slime chick.

Wrath, Queen of Svia(lvl 12,432 | Class: Fringe Walker | Race: Ahcorus(Otherwise known as slimes)) – Wrath is the queen of the Svia sector of the slime’s home planet, Slus. She earned her name by conquering several of the nests that surrounded her before Schema assimilated her planet. Since then, she’s proven very effective at cleansing worlds of eldritch infestation.

Her entire species excels at tearing down many enemies, as slimes rapidly reproduce when food is available. This enables them to clear out weaker hordes with an ease that is uncanny. Unfortunately, lower level slimes aren’t added into the system to their lower level thinking. They can’t creatively gain skills or use them outside of very basic combat patterns.

They slaughter lower level eldritch, however, and their queens are more than worthy of assimilation into Schema’s system. These ancient, powerful beings can be thousands of years old, often times remembering times before their planet was assimilated. This age combined with a remarkable intelligence turns the slime queens into potent threats to the eldritch.

Though they lack the communication skills to excel at trade or diplomacy, their raw might more than makes up for these drawbacks. Wrath is one of these queens, and she has proven effective at clearing worlds, having torn through two planets over the last two decades.

She also maintains a thriving colony of slimes on her home planet, giving her economic resources unavailable to most. She would prove a worthy foe in battle, and it is recommended you try to gain allyship with her.

Her status dwarfed most, so it took me a few seconds to read it all the way through. As I did read, she and the golemite argued.

“His interference with natural order is to be terminated.”

An apex predator by nature, Wrath walked up to the golemite, “Harm him, and you will become my next meal.”

“I am not harming him. I am warping him off planet to ensure continued planetary stability. Mana pollution critical. Immediate action is necessary,” the golemite said.

I finished reading, reaching out a hand to the golem and aiming to prove my mana was my own. Under most circumstances, all my excess mana flowed into my runes at all times. I kept the flow clean and contained, otherwise it would leak out and waste energy. I allowed some of it to do so while taking a few steps back. I didn’t want another mana poisoning incident.

As I released the crimson aura, the golemite’s shifting body shivered. After a few seconds of showing my mana’s creation, the golemite stated,

“No mana pollution detected. False assumption made. Apologies rendered.”

The steel squares formed into the rough approximation of a humanoid before bowing to me. To say it was odd would be an understatement.

“You’re alright man, but don’t make those kinds of assumptions again without proof, alright?”

“Affirmative. Gift requested for apology,” the golemite said while reaching out an arm. As he did, a dimensional storage portal opened, the starry circle recognizable anywhere. The golemite pulled out a glowing grain of sand. Before getting near it, I analyzed the tiny stone.

Crystalized Mana Signature – Peaceful(lvl Req: 1,000) – This crystalized mana creates a distinct signature recognizable to golemites. This particular mana wavelength transmits feelings of peace to other golemites and will prevent future misunderstandings before they arise.

I left him waiting, not taking the crystal from him. The golemite shook the mana,

“Signature shows through your personalized dimensional pocket. Inconvenience is a minimum.”

I pointed at him with the crystal in hand, “I don’t trust you.”

Wrath paced up to me, “You shouldn’t. You shouldn’t trust anyone, as you’re hunted.”

“So slime queens keep up with the news?”

“We do, when necessary. I came here to use your talents. An intelligent eldritch has hidden deep in the bowels of our planet. Its hordes rise to the surface, and they cull my children. Would you be willing to help us?”

“For the right price.”

“The Speakers on our planet are willing to grant you numerous contracts upon the completion of the task. We can offer a city upon the completion of the task as well, along with a favorable alliance between our species,” she said while pulling out a business card from her dimensional storage.

I took the paper, surprised by a slime queen using such a standard business tactic. I inspected the lettering, “Alright. I’ll check this out once I get some time. It might take a while.”

“That is no problem for us. We’ve fought this eldritch for decades. If this hiatus doesn’t stretch into many years, than we shall wait for you. However, someone may complete the task before you come should you wait too long,” her words hissed like a snake as she said them.

I crossed my arms, “It won’t take a year most likely. No promises though.”

She gave me a bow, “I anticipated far more grueling negotiations than this. You’ve been kind to me. I will return the favor in time.”

I shrugged, “Eh, we’ll see once I can access whatever’s going on. I’ll play hardball then.”

“Then good luck with your battle, Gray Giant.”

After finishing the chat, the golemite kept buzzing in my ear about mana pollution. Since I already understood the problem and was working to solve it, I mentioned that I was fixing it. I kept the details sparse, but he got the picture and left me alone after a while.

The only reason I didn't immediately tell him to fuck off was his unique class. I'd never seen someone with one, so understanding how he obtained it left me curious. Turns out, the Seeker was a class specific to the golemites that synergized with their racial traits. After a bit of research before the interview, I learned most unique classes were like that.

It left me with a little hope for my own breakthrough. Humans hadn't discovered a unique class, and someone had to do it. Hell, I might be that someone.

While I daydreamed about it, my opponent arrived. A small, slender gialgathen with white skin landed beside us. She looked down at the camera crew and rolled her eyes. A few seconds later, she walked up to me, two trails of black spots running down her neck. With white irises, her skin shined with radiant health. She communicated with telepathy,

"So you're the Gray Giant?"

I nodded. She tilted her head to me,

"Hmmm. You're far more impressive than I imagined you'd be."

"I don't know if that's a compliment."

"What is it with earthwalker's need to sort everything? Must my statements be categorized to assist your ease of understanding?" she hissed out.

At least she didn't call me dirtwalker.

"Eh, I asked for you, not for me. I didn't want to misunderstand, but you can be an asshole about it. Doesn't matter to me."

She blinked, “Hmm, I might’ve gotten off on the wrong wing with you. Listen, I’m not good at talking with others. I’m a fighter at heart. That’s why I’m here, not for this... publicity. I will keep my answers short and to the point. I ask you to refrain from painting me and my species as evil. Please, and thank you.”

“What? Of course not. Don’t be a jackass and we’ll be fine. I can’t promise anything from the interviewer though.”

She let out a gruff sigh, “Ah, Grotokia. He interviewed me last year. It was awful, as it will no doubt be this year as well.”

“What made it so bad the first time?”

“Grotokia is a starter of fires. He’s been in Thisbey’s pocket for years now. This year will be no different.”

I raised a palm to her, “Say no more. I’m no fan of Thisbey either. He’s just a pawn to his ego.”

“Precisely my point! I’ve hated that spineless coward for years now. Someone should rip out his spine and feed it to the birds.”

I pointed up at her, “I prefer feeding the spines of my foes to wolves. More gnawing that way.”

“Hah. Clever... Well then, I should be off. It’s good to see a like-minded fighter who’s an earthwalker as well. Rare these days. Your kind used to admire us. Now there’s a tremendous disdain I find offputting.”

I shrugged, “I’ll be honest, I find it offputting too. I’m not big in the whole fame game. I prefer to lay low for the most part.”

“You could’ve fooled me.”

“People pay attention when you make a splash regardless. I haven’t done anything to become more famous after all outside of my fights.”

Chrona glanced off in the distance, “Rare these days to find anyone who proves their worth with actions.”

“How was it different back then?” I said while crossing my arms.

“In my glory days, Emagrotha and Lehesion dictated the world’s outcome. They did so through dominance and achievement. Now, this world is moved by the machinations of shadow drawn cravens.”

“Were you there when Emagrotha and Lehesion duked it out?”

She gave me a nod. I quelled an eruption of excitement.

“Where was it?”

Chrona glanced up, “I couldn’t say. It was long ago, and my memory fades with time. However, I do remember this – Emagrotha should have won. You think I say so out of bitterness. You would think wrong. Emagrotha was the superior battler. She honed her strengths endlessly, toiling away in the pursuit of perfection. Lehesion was the opposite.”

She swiped a clawed hand in disgust, “He believed himself born a god. He was right in many ways. Lehesion could tap into the mana of Giess better than anyone before him or anyone since. He neglected his training, however, and he never mastered the forms or techniques of combat as Emagrotha did.”

She leaned down towards me, her eyes slits, “Lehesion stole from Giess’s mana to win that bout. It was not his own strength. It was the strength of millions of life forms, all of them culled in an instant. Emagrotha deflected the blast masterfully, but the aftershocks left her mind shaken. She could not stand nor fly as she once had. She was a shell of her former self.”

I turned a palm to her, “So she was shellshocked?”

“I don’t understand what you mean, but it left her a bumbling fool. Lehesion made an example of her and infested Emagrotha with Yana worms before throwing her out into silver territory. She likely died many years ago, turned into food for those filthy vermin. It stings to this day. She should have won the battle, and if she had, she’d have shown mercy on Lehesion.”

She growled, “He did not do the same.”

I grabbed the side of my facemask, “Damn...That’s, well, awful.”

“It is simply the reality before us,” Chrona murmured, “We cannot change it. We must accept it for what it was.”

“Thanks for sharing though. It’s different hearing about the event first hand.”

“I welcome the chance to change someone’s mind about Emagrotha and her cataclysmic battle with Lehesion. Tell others this story, and spread her name with glory on your lips.”

I smiled, “Eh, I might do that. We’ll see.”

Grotokia walked up to us, looking back and forth, “Hey, if it isn’t my two favorite fighters? You guys ready for an easy interview and to build some hype for your bouts?”

Chrona’s eyes narrowed, “No.”

I shrugged, “Same.”

Grotokia raised his hands, bubbles rising up from his pressurized suit, “Aye, I don’t want to be here either if I’m honest with you guys, but we gotta do what we gotta do. Come one. It’ll be over before you know it.”

Chrona and I paced behind the set, lights set up in front of us. I sat down in a chair too small for me. Grotokia sat behind a desk set up on the stone slab while Chrona just stood beside us. After getting mics setup beside us, Grotokia sifted his papers before staring at the front camera. He looked to us both,

“You guys ready?”

I sighed, “Yup.”

Chrona blasted out with a telepathic wave, “Let’s be done with this.”

An espen voice actor spoke out into a microphone offset. His voice matched hers to an eerie extent. I pointed at him, “Wait, how is he doing that?”

Grotokia waved his arm, “Combat classes aren’t the only people that hone their skills. He’s got his impressions down, I promise you that.”

Chrona nodded, “He’s acceptable for representing my voice.”

Grotokia took a deep breath, “Well, let’s get started then. Shall we?”

Chapter 193: A Conflict of Interests

Grotokia looked to the camera and raised his hand, “Five, four, three...” The rest of his countdown was him moving his hand. As the interview started, he steepled his fingers and stared at the main camera,

“Tonight, we’ll be looking at Chrona and Daniel, two contestants in Giess’s yearly tournament. On the one hand, Chrona has been a regular combatant of the competition for the last decade. On the other, Daniel is a newcomer who hides his identity. We’ll be discussing what they think of each other, what their strategies are, and what they intend to do if victorious. Only here with the Galactic Filming Corporation.”

He turned to me, “Now, recently your hotel room was bombed by someone who also tried hiding their identity. Based on the reports coming in, the body was evaporated in the explosion. Is that right?”

Before I did anything, I pulled out my obelisk and started recording the interview with it. The glass orb made sure I had back up footage if these guys tried framing me. With that handled, I spoke up.

“Yes.”

“Experts are speculating that a special interest group sent the assassin to stop you from winning the tournament. Mind weighing in on that with your own thoughts?”

“I don’t think it was a gialgathen at the very least,” I said while raising a hand.

Grotokia jimmied his papers, “They have a strong motivation for doing so considering how dominant you’ve been in the tournament. This is also the strongest center for gialgathen support on the continent. I don’t mean to dismantle your argument, but the odds are stacking up against that claim.”

I could see what the guy was trying to do. He was giving me a compliment while guiding me into condemning the gialgathens. Torix and I covered this line of questioning over the last few days, however, so I had an answer already prepared.

“Think about it. There was nothing left of the assailant, right? A gialgathen would have smothered everything in blood and guts considering their size. Even then, the bomb exploded inside our room. A gialgathen couldn’t have gotten inside, and I’ve never seen one using complicated tech. They’re too good at magic to need it.” I waved my fingers,

“They use their tails for most tasks. Hard to create and use a bomb without something more dexterous like fingers.”

Grotokia leaned towards me while cupping his chin, “Couldn’t they have just thrown the bomb inside?”

“Malakai was guarding the gate. They couldn’t have.”

“But what if Malakia was the one to throw in the bomb? Seems likely given his previous lack of success in the tournament. He could have been bitter and resentful of you.”

I shook my head, “He wasn’t. Malakai almost died from the explosion. Even then, we’d have known he was throwing the bomb in.” I tapped the side of my helmet, “I have good ears and good eyes. I would have known.”

“Are you sure that Malakai didn’t deceive you into believing it couldn’t have been him?”

I was about done with Grotokia goading me into this bullshit. I rolled my eyes, “Yes, I’m sure. Malakai earned a great reputation built over decades. He’s not someone to flip on a dime over something like this. Besides, this is just random speculation on your part with no solid proof.”

Grotokia took a sharp breath, “That’s what we’re here for. To get firsthand accounts of the incident. Moving on-” Grotokia turned to Chrona, “As a long time supporter of Emagrotha’s methodology, what do you think of Daniel’s rapid rise to prominence?”

Chrona sent a telepathic wave to the voice caster who spoke out for her. Since I didn’t hear her voice in my head and in my ears, she spared us a ton of confusion.

“Emagrotha believed in a strong sense of personal responsibility. She’d have treated Daniel with a tremendous level of respect given his obvious ability.” Chrona looked at me, “I will do the same.”

I raised a palm to her, “Likewise.”

Grotokia coughed into his hand, sending up bubbles inside his pressurized suit, “It’s good to see sportsmanship so close to the match. At the same time, tension surely must be high. If you didn’t already know, Daniel has begun to represent an anti-gialgathen movement-“

I cut him off.

“Thisbey represents that bullshit. Don’t put words in my mouth.”

Grotokia turned towards me, his heart rate elevating like he was nervous. “You’re clearly the figurehead of the anti-gialgathen groups rising to prominence across Giess. I don’t think it’s something you have a say in anymore.”

What the fuck was this guy talking about? He didn't get to tell me what I was here for or what I was doing.

"What the fuck are you talking about? Of course I have a say in it. I have nothing against the gialgathens. My opinion on them is that they're strong as hell and a proud people."

"If that were the case, then why didn't you make that more clear early on? Seems like your trying to avoid taking responsibility for your actions."

Fuck this guy.

"I'm not big on media. I'm here now because I have to be. I'm a man of action. I go out into the world and act. Thisbey's the opposite. He sits around and talks all day. That's why he tries to use my own image to support his racist bullshit. He needs my positive image to use since he doesn't have one."

The reporter coughed into his hand, water swirling in his helmet,

"Thisbey's a known philanthropist, environmentalist, and--"

"And a piece of shit that bribes media until they support him like mindless drones. Case and point – you."

Grotokia was rendered silent for a bit. Chrona's voice actor burst into laughter, his eyes focused on his mic. Grotokia sent him a dirty glare, silencing the voice actor. It didn't matter. Chrona's tail was whipping behind her, and she was baring her teeth like a puppy wanting to play.

"This is most certainly the best interview I've ever been a part of," the voice actor spilled out while wincing. He was a true professional, doing his job despite his ever-rising chance of getting fired. I admired the guy for his dedication.

Grotokia didn't.

“Your unfounded speculation and accusations aside, let’s get back on topic. Chrona, you’re a known supporter of Emagrotha’s philosophies, right?”

Chrona nodded her head, the voice speaking up, “Of course. She was wise well beyond her years despite being ancient.”

Grotokia pointed at Chrona, “You do realize that Emagrotha was a supporter of slavery? Right?”

Chrona glared at the reporter, “No, she was not. She believed they should earn their freedom instead of being granted it.”

The reporter waved his hand, “You don’t honestly think that, do you? By making them ‘earn’ their freedom, the espens were held to a standard they couldn’t hope to reach at the time. If Emagrotha’s policies were followed through with, espens would have been servants to the gialgathens for at least sixty more years. Their only way out would have been through Schema’s system. Even that would have taken years.”

For once, the reporter made a good point.

“Emagrotha warned that granting freedom without recourse would lead to espens becoming parasites. Like a seer, she predicted the stagnation of the espen people that continues to this day. Despite having this ‘system’ you speak of, your average espen has hardly become a force to reckon with. If anything, they’ve grown fat, lazy, and content.”

Grotokia turned to me, “What’s your thoughts on the matter?”

“Hmmm...There’s truth to both sides. On the one hand, slavery is outright unacceptable. Period. You don’t earn your freedom. It’s a part of this whole being-alive-thing we got going. As a race though, we need to involve ourselves more in dungeon clearing and silver extermination as a whole.”

I turned to the main camera, facing the audience, “It’s how I got strong. It’s how anyone watching can get strong too.”

Grotokia nodded, “So what I’m hearing is that you believe in the espen people reaching their full potential, not earning the right to live a free life? If so, that’s an important distinction to make.”

I sat back and thought about it. Now that they were arguing about politics, I wasn’t able to keep up. Chrona spoke up,

“And that is why, even a quarter century after that A.I. came, the espens still rely on gialgathens for guidance and protection. Because you all wanted to gain without making the proper sacrifices. It disgusts me.”

I raised a hand while trying to speak up, but Grotokia egged Chrona on, “Really now? Doesn’t that sound elitist? Not everyone can be exceptional like Daniel here. He’s a rare exception.”

Chrona glared, “The poor and weak starve and die. That is the way of life.”

“So what about orphaned children? Should they starve and die?”

Grotokia cornered her as fast as a horde of bees swarming a bear stealing their honey. That’s to say really fast.

Chrona leaned back, “Well, I didn’t say that.”

“It was implied based on what you just so confidently announced. Have you not thought out these principles your spouting as facts?”

Chrona held her head up high, “The rules apply to fully grown individuals, obviously.”

Grotokia gestured a hand while leaning back into his seat,

“That’s short-sighted. What about disabled people? They should all up and die?”

Chrona snapped, “Yes. They should. The same applies to vultures like you.”

I looked down while supporting my head in my hands. Chrona was a complete dumbass, letting her emotions get the better of her. It was like she didn't even consider the consequences of saying this kind of shit. Grotokia played it up, looking solemn while staring at the main camera,

"I think that's all the public needs to know about your viewpoints. Any more and they may vomit." He turned to me, "On to lighter topics, you've shown the ability to generate massive implosions in battle. Some speculate it's the result of tiny singularities. Is that true?"

I sighed, looking up at the guy. Lying about my ability wouldn't do me much good since any expert on the topic could verify I was using singularities. With that in mind, I nodded. Grotokia leaned towards me,

"Ohhh, now that's interesting. There's only a handful of combatants capable of that feat. No one knows how it's done either. Mind explaining?"

He confused me a bit with his explanation. I unlocked my singularity skill, becoming the first person to have it. If other people were using it, they must have done so through indirect means. My method was direct enough to get a skill for it. Considering my unique circumstances, few could replicate my way even knowing how to do it.

With that in mind, I said,

"It takes a mastery of gravitational magic, an ocean of mana, and finesse."

"So you're telling me you use magic to create the singularity? Just raw magic?"

"Yeah. That's what I just said."

Grotokia let his arms flop on his desk, "Wow...That's amazing. You used Schema's system to make that happen?"

"Yeah. No other way to make it happen."

“You all heard it here first. Daniel’s an amazing example of what Schema’s system can enable you to do as long as you master it. Even tiny black holes aren’t out of the question when that A.I.’s involved.”

He started sounding like an infomercial. Weird.

“Uh...yeah.”

Grotokia turned to me, “A few more questions and we’ll be done. You neglected to tell us who you are. Are you willing to shed some light on why you’re keeping your identity hidden?”

This was a question Torix and I drilled several times. I glanced at the camera, “Fame attracts media, which as I mentioned, I hate. It’s common sense to avoid what you hate.”

Grotokia pointed at me, “But you are an espen...right?”

Even if I hated this facade, it was necessary to get the espen people moving. That’s why I nodded,

“Yup.”

Grotokia let out a deep breath, “Of course, of course.”

He was that worried I wasn’t one. It was pretty pivotal to this social movement that Thisbey was constructing.

Grotokia turned to the camera, “That’s all the time we have. Thank you all for tuning in to Galactic Filming Corp’s very own, exclusive interview. Coming up next, Lehesion’s acolyte versus Emagrotha’s follower. Who. Will. Win? Find out here.”

The cameraman gave us a thumbs up. As he did, Grotokia leaned back into his chair and mouthed, “It gets harder to do every year.”

I stood up, brushing myself off while talking to Chrona,

“You shouldn’t have let your emotions control you like that.”

Chrona snapped with a telepathic wave, “And what difference does it make? I could care less if I’m hated by your kind.”

I rolled my eyes, “You serious? You’re one of the strongest gialgathens alive. What you do reflects onto your entire species.”

Chrona winced at my words, staring down at the stone beneath her.

“I...I suppose you’re right. I could’ve managed myself better.”

“Well, yeah. I could have too though. This fucker right here nearly got under my skin too.”

Grotokia let his hand flop onto the table, “Are you serious? You put me on blast that entire interview!”

“Uh huh. It’s called fighting fire with fire. To have a good defense, you need a good offense. Anyways, is this over with?”

The camera guy gave me a nod. I pointed at everyone, “Oh yeah, is this mandatory?”

Grotokia murmured, “It is. It’s a part of a contractual obligation if you want to continue participating in the tournament.”

I spread my arms, “How is that even possible? Schema gives the rewards. Why would he make interviews mandatory?”

Chrona answered, “I asked in my first interview as well. Schema had no part in the tournament’s creation. It was formed by a group of Speakers to help motivate the populace.”

My eyes widened, “Ahhhh. That makes sense. They put that caveat into it I guess.”

Chrona spread her wings, “One of them did. I gathered a few details on the matter. It was good meeting you, Gray Giant. May we meet in battle tomorrow.”

She flew off, sending enough wind out from her take off to knock some camera supplies over. I caught two of the cameras with gravity wells, stopping them from losing their footage. After a few thank yous, I was off and back to our base. As I arrived, Kessiah and Althea waited for me at the entrance. Trotting up to them, I spread out my hands,

“Damn guys. You didn’t have to wait for me.”

Althea’s arms were crossed, and Kessiah’s hands were on her hips. I glanced at them, “So uh...what did I do wrong?”

Althea snapped first, “What didn’t you do is the real question. What kind of answers were you giving?”

It was my turn to cross my arms.

“What are you talking about? My answers were fine. Maybe not great, but hey, I did my best.”

Kessiah shouted, “That was your best?”

Alright, something was off here. I didn’t do that bad.

“Ok, what’s going on here? Is this a prank or something.”

Althea’s eyes narrowed, “Wait a minute. What kind of interview do you remember giving?”

“Eh, I tried being impartial. I was pretty rude to the interviewer, but he had it coming with how he structured his questions. He tried making me into some kind of icon for Thisbey. I shut him down pretty hard though.”

Kessiah and Althea glanced at each other. They looked back up at me. Kessiah sighed, “Yup, they edited the footage.”

I tilted my head, “Wait...what?”

Chapter 194: Another Realm

I watched the edited footage, a seed of genuine hatred forming in my chest. The video editors connected the footage in such a way that I hated the gialgathens, and that I supported Thisbey. The news report had never been live. It was a staged act, spreading propaganda for Thisbey’s media campaign.

It was a good thing I filmed it. Even then, it felt ridiculous that this kind of bullshit was even allowed.

“Why are they allowed to do this? Surely this is illegal.”

Kessiah shrugged, “On some planets it is. Giess doesn’t really have a government to look after this kind of thing. It’s too spread out and chaotic for that. It’s a, ‘If there’s no one to report the crime, then no crime was committed!’ sort of thing. Sucks for sure.”

Torix stepped up into the forest clearing, pacing out of the stairs behind us. With his arms crossed, “Well that interview was a disaster. IT seemed rather unlike you. Perhaps an explanation is in order?”

“They framed me,” I stated with a shrug.

“Ah yes, of course they would. Hmmm, this is a rather testy predicament we’ve found ourselves in.”

I pulled out my obelisk, “Not really.” I showed the footage of myself, “For once, I thought ahead and recorded everything before it happened.”

“Well well Daniel. I’m impressed. I believe this should be all the proof we need that your words and intentions were altered.”

“Where am I supposed to post this video? Is there a site for it or something?”

Kessiah bit her lip, “So, I’ve got bad news about this. You know, great idea and all to record the footage. Posting it won’t matter much though. No one will see it anyways.”

Torix cupped his chin, “Perhaps you could explain why that is?”

“See, here’s the thing. Very few people own an obelisk on Giess anyway. Even if you could get your video up on a dozen different sites, no one on Giess would see it. You’d be putting your word against the media corporations too. That would be hard to pull off, and we don’t even have two months too pull that off.”

Althea chimed in, “Why don’t people have obelisks though? They aren’t expensive or hard to get.”

Torix gestured a hand to Althea, “Obelisk operate on your personal reserves of mana. Considering the lack of leveling or use of personal mana by most espens, obelisks are out of reach despite being subsidized by Schema.”

“But couldn’t he get it posted onto some news channels maybe?” Althea chimed.

I scoffed, “Yeah, Thisbey would shut that shit down in seconds. His hands in the pocket of everyone on this damn planet.”

“Ok, so it’s not all bad though,” Kessiah said while spreading her hands. “Those revolutionaries are going to spread like wildfire after seeing this. That means they clear the dungeons, which helps a lot with clearing out Giess.”

I grimaced, “We’re sending them on a witch hunt. It doesn’t sit right with me to start a race war to help save Giess. Sure, the revolutionaries might kill off the silvers and eldritch and take back Giess. Whoopdy-fucking-do. They’ll do to cull an innocent species. I’m no saint, but that’s fucked.”

I shook my head in disgust, “At that point, what would we be saving?”

The group replied with somber silence. Althea rubbed her forehead with a hand, “It’s so hard to win this fight. We’re fighting on Thisbey’s home turf, in a battle that he’s so good at. Thisbey is probably organizing the revolutionaries right now and making obelisks outlawed in their groups. He’s probably feeding them a bunch of lies, and then the people start to believe them...Just like with Yawm in the lab,”

Althea’s eyes hollowed, “It’s like everyone just feeds on each other. The worst part is, the bigger the lie, the easier it becomes to believe. Uh, at least from what I saw.”

I shook my head, “Not quite that grim, though I can get your reaction considering the situations you’ve been in. Still, I can’t help but wonder what Tohtella is even doing?”

“I imagine it’s quite difficult for her. Thisbey was born and raised on this planet. She’s an outsider, so she doesn’t fully understand the culture and influences here,” Torix said.

Kessiah rolled her eyes, “Uh huh, sure. From what I can tell, she’s just incompetent.”

“I’d hate to agree, but yeah. That’s what this shit looks like. She’s getting throttled during this entire media campaign. It’s weird though. The Overseer seemed to think she was pretty intelligent. So far, she’s failed miserably at, well, everything.”

“Uhm, she did seem stressed last time we saw her.” Althea crossed her arms. “I can’t even imagine having that much on my plate. I’d crumble.”

I grabbed the side of my head, “Hmmm, this shit’s complicated.”

“It’s not too bad though.” Kessiah said. “You can just post the video during the fight while the cameras are rolling. Thisbey might have the stream shut down before you can show the entire interview, but maybe not.”

I snapped my fingers, “How didn’t I think about that? That’ll put Thisbey in a very, very shitty position. Hell, he might have dug his own grave with this one in fact.”

Torix opened his status, “Well, the Harbinger, Lich, and Arbiter can’t think of something that simple...Perhaps you should be running the media campaign instead of Tohtella.”

Kessiah stood up straighter, “About damn time I point out something you guys missed.”

“Now, on to the next matter at hand,” Torix spread his arms. “Perhaps we can ascertain the location of Emagrotha and Lehesion’s battle site?”

“The only hint I’ve got is from Chrona.” I waved my hand, trying to remember. “She mentioned that Lehesion drained his surroundings to gain enough mana to defeat Emagrotha. Millions of lifeforms dead, standard apocalypse stuff.”

Torix tsked, “What an amazing revelation. Truly noteworthy.”

I narrowed my eyes while tapping the side of my head. A few moments later, an actual revelation popped into my head, “Wait a minute. If Lehesion drained that much mana, then he must have created a ridiculous amount of mana pollution.”

Torix’s fire eyes grew larger, “Wait...that kind of cataclysmic event would leave an ocean of sludge behind.”

I pointed at the lich, “And we know where an ocean of that gunky bullshit is.”

Kessiah pursed her lips, “We do?”

Torix moved his hands across his status screen, “In fact, it’s quite close to where we warped on Giess. Remember how Daniel carried us over that purple ocean that had been walled off? That is by far the largest concentration of mana pollution we’ve seen on Giess.”

Althea raised her hands, “So, hm...that means they fought somewhere there.”

“Precisely. In fact, they most likely fought at the bottom of the ocean there. The mana pollution came thereafter.” Torix said.

I gripped my hands into fists, “Yes. We got a lead now.”

“I’ll analyze our flight path and gather historical records of the wall’s construction surrounding the indigo ocean. Using a bit of geometry, I should be able to get a rough estimate of the sea’s center.” Torix said.

Althea raised her hand, “I’ll get the location of Thisbey.”

Kessiah glanced at Althea, “What for?”

“To kill him,” Althea said with a frown.

“Oh...” Kessiah mouthed. “That’s going to raise your bounty. You sure that’s worth it?”

Althea scoffed, “Uh, yeah. I’m sure.”

Kessiah crossed her arms, “Well then...I...I don’t know what I’ll do.”

Torix gestured a hand to her, “What? That’s preposterous. You can simply practice that healing magic you asked me about.”

Kessiah stared down, “Could you shut the hell up, please?”

“Now why would I do that? You came to me practically begging for healing magic manuals. What did you say exactly? Hm, something like, ‘I want to help save my friends!’ Torix finished his words with a high pitched, mock voice.

“When you wondered what to do, I believed it necessary to remind you of the conversation.” A strange glee injected into Torix’s voice as he continued, “I interjected my own thoughts in the most polite manner possible. That’s all.”

Kessiah flushed, embarrassed about trying to learn the magic. Althea hugged her, lifting Kessiah up in the air, “Ahhhh, you really do care.”

“Let me down you shape-shifting, mini-brute,” Kessiah gasped while shoving her holder. Althea held on with utter ease, overpowering Kessiah like she was a child. With one last squeeze, Althea set her down. The remnant sent Althea and Torix a dirty glare,

“Oh, you’ll both pay for that one.”

Torix waved a hand, “Whatever are you talking about? We did nothing wrong.”

Althea just grinned at her. I found the scene heart warming and painful at the same time. Kessiah’s history with her Blood Arts made for a touchy subject. Torix’s sadism was leaking out a bit, but he meant well at the same time. It wasn’t like Kessiah could hide her lessons forever. Better to break the ice now than wait until it was some massive undertaking to tell the truth.

Althea played along and tried distracting Kessiah. In their own way, they were trying to take care of her. It reminded me of guys at my gym who’d roast some guy after he lost a boxing match. Even if it was rough at first, it stopped the loss from lingering. By teasing their friends, they toughened them up and stopped them from having soft spots.

I always looked at it like training. It was a bit too tactful for me though, so I stayed quiet. Better to let the pros handle it. Besides, if I said anything, I’m sure I’d make an ass of myself.

Kessiah looked like she was embarrassed a bit about caring for us too. If anything, I admired her for that line of thinking. If I was honest with myself, I hadn’t seriously considered healing magic at any point. It paled in comparison to my regeneration, but ultimately, I was too selfish for it. It wasn’t in my nature.

Still, it was time to get a move on. I clapped my hands, interrupting their chitchat.

“Alright, let’s get going guys. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

The group straightened up, and I walked downstairs. As I did, Torix and Althea opened up their statuses, getting to work on their own projects. Kessiah followed me downstairs before stepping into her room. I sat down on a chair I crafted out of stone, setting out on my own task.

After an hour of research, I found nothing about Chrona Carsiary. For a famous general, there was little known about her. Her powers, tactics, and techniques all hid from everyone's point of view. They basically boiled down to, 'she moves really fast.' That's a given considering the level of competition this high up in the tournament. The only other tidbits were that she made other people slow. Great. Real helpful.

Without much to go on, I opened my grimoire and focused on etching in the blueprint I created while searching for Mt. Ash. Its complexity threatened to overwhelm me. The dozen pages of the outline evolved into a novel's worth of work when I began carving out the actual project. Despite the nigh-infinite workload, the task cheered me up. It felt good to spend my time on something meaningful.

With a focused intensity, I mulled through the challenging project, passing the time until the fight fast. I kept at the project even while walking to the stadium, my thoughts absorbed. Kiki Most hyped up the match, but I enraptured myself in the task at hand. I also carved after jumping into the arena, pissing off many gialgathens who booed me to no end. Surprise, surprise, they hated me now.

When I revealed the video, their jeering would make my redemption even better.

Kiki Mosk announced above me, "Are you ready, Gray Giant?"

"Yup."

I had already charged enough mana for a singularity at this point. Even dimly aware of Kiki's voice, I wasn't about to let myself start with a disadvantage. Chrona thought the same, having a blue ball of mana floating above her. It sent out dimensional ripples, its power vast. With my blood saturated in mana, I mirrored her preparations, both of us ready to wage war.

I closed my grimoire shut and put it in my pocket dimension. I glanced up at Chrona who snapped at me with a telepathic wave,

"Are you finally done with your reading now?"

"Carving, actually."

“Oh, carving into pages. That’s new.”

“Eh, it’s easier that way when the pages are like rock.”

I raised my hands, both my fists harder than iron. Around us, the lava bubbled with the small steel arena hot as a frying pan. Chrona’s white, smooth skin glowed with mana. Her eyes pierced at me, her confidence resolute despite my own victories being dominant. I was okay with that. Good on her.

Before the battle began, I glanced up while pulling out my obelisk. I intended on recording the fight to show that the obelisk recorded events reliably. As I prepared the device, Ddzens of camera men floated around Chrona and I. Above them, the same massive zeppelin floated over us as before. Thisbey was mysteriously absent. Wow. Who’d of guessed?

With my obelisk set, Kiki Mosk sighed, “Well it’s good to see the Gray Giant put that damn book away! Both fighters may begin.”

I peered down, reorienting with the fight. I reached out a hand, aiming a singularity at the center of Chrona’s chest. Before I cast my spell, Chrona’s blue ball of mana ushered forth a massive dimensional ripple. Around me, large swaths of magma hardened as she drained the mana to fuel her spell. I didn’t even feel the ripple, but it still left me stunned nevertheless.

I stood still because of the ripple’s effects around me. My singularity should have killed Chrona already. It didn’t though. In fact, it took a full ten seconds before it started forming at all. I even shook my hand like it was a broken remote for a TV. Confused as hell, I stared at Chrona who already crawled away from the spell. I smashed my hands together, wondering if she had some antimagic at her disposal.

It was her turn to be surprised. She gawked at me in amazement, her utter confidence draining from her face. Chrona croaked,

“How...how are you moving like that?”

I raised my hands, “What are you talking about? I’m not even running yet.”

“But...That’s impossible.”

I still didn’t get what the hell she was talking about. She wasn’t the only one surprised. The entire crowd of githyanki and newscaster’s stared at me in silence, all of them frozen in place. It left an eerie, unnatural silence in the arena. I looked around,

“What’s wrong with everyone?”

“What plagues them is what doesn’t plague you. I...I dilated our dimension. You’re not even affected.”

I clapped my hands together, no sound ushering out. I reached out a hand, creating a gravity well above the magma behind me. It sauntered up in a slow crawl as if the lava wasn’t molten. I nodded my head, gaining an understanding of the situation.

“You’re slowing down time, aren’t you?”

Chrona shivered, fear racing up her spine,

“Yes, but somehow, you’re immune to the flow of time. It’s as if you’re in a different realm...”

“I’m not walking in a different realm.”

I banged my fists together as I grinned, “I am the different realm.”

Chapter 195: A Proposition

I bent down, charging my runes in a second. If my spells didn’t work in time, I’d incorporate a different and wholly unexpected strategy – beating the hell out of her. I detonated the runes, charging at her with fury in each of my footsteps. My stomps caved the steel beneath me, deforming my own boots. My rapid approach knocked Chrona from her stupor, spurring her to action.

She whipped her tail at me, but I sidestepped the impact. She wasn't particularly fast or secure in her striking. She relied on her magic for her edge in speed. As I reached her, I shot out a telekinetically enhanced attack. Like water, she flowed around me, my vision warping as she did. Her next tail whip came from above.

I anticipated the timing, preparing to deflect the strike. Another blur in my vision occurred, and her tail snapped on top of my face mask. It shifted speed mid-strike. The steel arena beneath me caved, her gialgathen might showing itself in spades. Even if she was leaner than most, she packed more than enough power.

Still stumbling through the fight, I rolled sideways the moment she even flicked her tail. It slammed into the metal, sending a ripple through the floor. Once again, her power and timing left me stunned. She wasn't moving that fast at first. Now it was like she was teleporting her limbs to a location, but she did so without losing any momentum in the process. It made timing her attacks next to impossible.

Without any plan of action, I leaped backward. Chrona lifted her hand up and charged at me, faster than a bullet. I turned sideways while Chrona's claws etched scars into my gray armor. As her hand landed onto the steel, she crumpled it like she was squeezing a bed sheet in her hand.

The impact sent me flying, the force of her blows sending shockwaves across the field. She reminded me of Yawm's might, sending me flopping through the air. I kept focused though, analyzing her as I flopped around and praying for more information.

Chrona Carsiary, Emagrotha's Realm Wielder(lvl 12,823~) – Little is known about Chrona. She was one of Emagrotha's most trusted and loyal advisors, someone Emagrotha looked toward when she needed something done. Chrona is a devout follower of Emagrotha's philosophies, touting self-responsibility and emotional maturity in the face of adversity.

Despite this, she struggles to control her emotions as noted in several interviews. Her immense control over dimensions is notable as well, rivaling Ajax's own abilities. Hers vary from Ajax's however. While Ajax Volan was known to possess dimensional warping and slicing abilities, Chrona appears to have the ability to stretch and compress dimensional fabric. This creates dilations in time and space. How she does so without producing intense vacuums of gravity is unknown.

This time specialization creates a problematic opponent when combined with her natural power as a gyalgathen. Approach this foe with caution.

“Fuck. That tells me nothing I don’t already know,” I said while sliding backward.

Chrona laughed at me from the other side of the arena,

“Where did your confidence go then, Gray Giant?”

Oh, it was still there all right. Even with her attack landing flush on my head, she did little damage to me. Well, more than I’d like, but I’d be fine was the point. The main issue involved keeping my armor intact for the rest of the fight. Until I understood what she was doing, I kept myself on my back foot, ready to retreat at a moment’s notice.

Before I could, another ripple erupted from the blue sphere she created at the center of the arena. Chrona rode the wave, nigh teleporting in front of me before smashing me with one of her front arms. By some miracle, I reacted in time, grabbing her clawed fingers. My feet sunk down into steel, my hands gripping her until I tore through her skin.

Chrona grunted in agony, crushing her tail against my side. My armor held on as I tumbled through the arena, but cracks already littered my face mask. Panic welled in my chest as she threatened to expose me. As I skidded to a stop, I took a deep breath, thinking about what happened.

Chrona tried slowing her opponents down by dilating the time they were traveling in. I processed the info further, pretending like it was my own ability. How would I use it? That’s when it all clicked. Chrona wasn’t just slowing time down. She was speeding it up for her, which explained why some of her movements looked like teleportation.

With that realization in tow, I dodged a series of her attacks by a hair’s breadth. Instead of evading when the attack should land, I avoided them by several seconds in advance. It stretched the limits of my senses, my mind-bending as I forced it to keep up with her attacks. The blue sphere at the center of the arena kept draining the magma around us, expanding the size of the field as well. Pacing onto the stone, we dashed and ducked across the area, flowing at speeds unimaginable to those around us.

As I got a grip on her patterns, she changed her assaults up. I wanted to come up with some strategy, but it took everything I had just to stay in there. Even without her time manipulation, Chrona was incredibly gifted as a fighter. Her instincts were sharp, her tactics varied. She alternated between all her limbs for her attacks, using her lilac colored breath when she believed I was cornered.

After minutes of her onslaught, my gray metal shell hung on by a thread. Chrona discovered my unwillingness to remove my armor, and she abused that fact. With my back against the wall, I bolted to my left, dodging the swipe of her tail. She caught me in her jaws, biting around a cracked joint of my armor. She poured her poisonous fire breath into my disguise, boiling me inside like a lobster roasting in its shell. Even as my health chunked down, I never considered removing my gray armor.

I didn't want another bombing incident on my hands.

Still, I wasn't taking damage without any kind of retaliation. Event Horizon melted her flesh from the inside, making her movements sloppy and unfocused from the pain. As the entire field of magma hardened, her blue sphere of mana shrunk in size, her time manipulation dwindling. With only a tiny shred of the magic left, I fired back the only way I could.

With her jaws on my shoulder, I latched onto her neck. With a death-grip, I squeezed the life from her, causing her fire breath to sit inside her belly. She unleashed a massive shockwave from her blue sphere, accelerating her time. I tried with all my might to grasp her, but imagine holding someone down for a second, but they fought against you for ten. Unless I was ten times her strength, I couldn't hold her.

It made her power unbearable, so she wrenched herself from me. I took patches of her skin in my hands, however. Even more critical, I flushed her out of the blue mana sphere. Without time acceleration at her disposal, she slowed to nigh 1/10th of her previous speed and strength. It was my turn to retaliate.

Chrona was more than aware of that fact as she stumbled back, "How do you still live?" Chrona wheezed out, "No...How do you still stand?"

It was a miracle to me as well. I couldn't see from my eyes anymore. Her fire breath disintegrated the skin on my face and most of my body. Blood leaked from my wounds and spilled straight into my eyes. It pooled in my mouth, having incinerated my lips as well. I probably looked more like a zombie than some hero.

My vitality was never ending, however. It was as if my soul and mind ingrained itself into every cell of my body. I lived through hell and came out smiling, and Chrona paled at the sight of it. I shrugged at her, staying silent. Around me, the final dimensional ripple ebbed out. With it, the time field dissipated, the roar of the crowds returning to our fight.

I welcomed the return to normality, but Chrona crumbled. She flopped backward as I stepped up to her. I lifted my hand as she covered her face with her clawed hands,

“I...I surrender.”

I lowered my hand before sticking it out to her, “Good. I didn’t want to have to smash you for nothing. Besides.” I pulled her up, allowing her to stand, “It makes this message I’m sending out all the more poignant.”

I pulled out my obelisk as Kiki announced, “Ever merciful, the Gray Giant has given Chrona only a few bruises and missing patches of skin! What a champion.”

Before he finished his explanation, I opened a holographic video of the fight. I shouted for all to hear, “This device records and replays past events. Its known as an obelisk, and it’s pretty common through Schema owned space.”

The crowd oohed and ahed as the obelisk played a three-dimensional and high quality mirror of my battle with Chrona. It mimicked the event without any jump cuts, smooth from start to finish.

The crowd stared in awe while Chrona and I stood underneath the hologram. A few beads of sweat poured from Kiki’s forehead as he murmured,

“Daniel...what are you doing?”

I spread out my arms, “Fighting fire with fire.” I shouted, “Now everyone watched my interview with Thisbey, right?”

The crowd gave out a series of boos. I waved them down, “I get it, I get it. I sounded pretty awful during that recording. I remember it playing out differently though. See, I believe I’ve been framed.”

A cameraman messed with his device, preparing to shut it off. I pointed at him and growled, “You don’t want me as your enemy. I can promise you that.”

The cameraman froze in place, unable to imagine resistance after my threat. I pointed at the others, “That goes for the rest of you. Anyone alter this footage, and I’ll find you. Instead of altering a video though, I’ll be altering your face. Understood?”

With their undivided attention, I played the interview in its unaltered form. I noted a few of the bigger jumpcuts and clever editing tricks, working my way through all the misinformation. I roared out to the crowd as I finished playing the footage,

“That was the unaltered interview. It’s quite a bit different than how I was portrayed.”

The gialgathens roared back. I gave the crowd a nod, “I’m no hero, and I never claimed to be. I’m no liar though, and I’m no supporter of Thisbey and his bullshit. Otherwise I’d have killed Chrona and I wouldn’t have even tried saving Delilath.”

“That was...a bitter mistake,” I winced. “But I won’t make it again. One last thing to remember is this-” I banged my chest twice, “I’m here to fight and win, not talk about politics. I’m no symbol like the media paints me out to be. I’m Daniel Hillside, and I’m a warrior through and through.”

I raised a dented fist, and the many gialgathens around roared in approval. Many of those on the blimp watching the battle didn’t even let out a peep. Most of the zeppelin riders stared in disbelief as if they were questioning everything. Good. That’s exactly what I wanted.

It left me with an unquestionable sense of satisfaction of a job well done. With that handled, I gave Chrona a pat on the back, “You’re good at what you do. If your slowdown affected me, I probably would have lost.”

Chrona tilted her head at me, “Yet it didn’t. You mentioned being a different realm. Is it possible to explain what you meant by that?”

I glanced around, “I can’t mention here. You seem trustworthy though. If you’re willing to meet somewhere more secretive, then I’d be fine with talking a bit about it.”

Chrona nodded, “Hmm, perhaps in my home? It’s quaint and simple, but it shouldn’t be considered public. By my tastes. Yours might disagree.”

I gave her a nod, “Eh, probably not. I’ll meet you there now if you’d like.”

“Hah, I’ve never met a fighter so disconnected from a battle before!” She laughed, “Hah, I brutalized you before dropping out of the fight before you may retaliate. Despite the misgivings, you’re willing to visit my home right after. Incredible.”

I shrugged, “I fight to win, not to get back at people. That’s petty.”

“Then we share that trait.” She turned to Rivaria, “I need to rest for a few minutes before returning. My body is still exhausted.”

“That’s fine. I’ll need to send a few messages anyway.”

I opened my status, sending out some updates on what I was doing. As I finished, Chrona spread her wings and moved them around,

“I should be fine to fly now.”

I raised a hand, creating a gravity well above us. It was enough to lighten her, giving a sense of weightlessness. The white gialgathen peered around, “How can you control it so well?”

“I can ask the same thing about that time dilation bullshit.”

“It makes flying effortless,” she murmured. With a flap of her wings, she shot into the air. A few gialgathens flew up to her, concern spread over their faces. They were her family, and she exchanged telepathic conversation with them all. I shifted the gravity

well in size and breadth, enveloping them all in the field. Over the next few minutes, the gialgathens adjusted to the gravitational field, relishing the lack of levity.

Gialgathen children joined from the stands after a few minutes. They ended up playing games even, doing acrobatic acts that were impossible under normal circumstances. It left a smile on my face, this being one of the few times I used my skills for fun.

After ten minutes, I created another well above me, flying up with them. At first, the gialgathens kept their distance, afraid of me. I took no offense. After all, I killed Delilath and just defeated Chrona who was tremendous in her own right. It didn't take long before the children wanted me to join in one of their games.

They created circles with their tails and bodies. The goal was to flip through the hoop without touching the gialgathen. At the same time, the higher the gymnastic feat, the better. After a few twirls and fancy moves, the kids upped their game to keep up. Twenty minutes later and the children landed on stands again, exhausted by my pace.

Chrona laughed at them, crowing out, "It's not so easy to outdo him, is it?"

The children complained at her, making up all kinds of excuses. It was the most fun I'd had in a while, so I appreciated the mental deload. I had a time limit on my horizon, so I flew up to Chrona,

"Hey, can we go and have that conversation? I've got a lot to do today."

Chrona did a backflip in the air before giving me a nod, "Of course. Excuse our playfulness. It's rare to have something so novel pass by. I had to take my chance to enjoy." She flapped her wings towards Rivaria, flying through the air,

"Come. I'll show you the way."

Ten minutes later, and we reached the highest level of Rivaria, ice sculptures all around us. Around Chrona, a dense mist formed over her skin. This stopped her skin from drying out and cracking, her amphibian nature showing. I shouted,

"Why do gialgathens live here when it's so dry and cold? I imagined you guys would love the ocean."

“It’s a mixed story. Gialgathens developed the ability to fly in retaliation to the leviathans that float beneath the waves. While we do enjoy the ocean, the creatures there are far stronger than those on land. They prove less fruitful to domesticate as well. They cannot carry loads unless you strap it to them and command them from the start of the trip to the end of it.”

Chrona dived down, reaching a cove at the mountain top. It looked like her house.

“Comparatively, the espens were far better labor and far more intelligent. They lack the tenacity to stay in environments such as this one for any length of time, however. That is why this city was created long ago, as a sanctuary for gialgathens of all cultures.”

“I don’t know if I buy that explanation. It sounds like whoever made this city did so to send a message to the espens. We’re above, and you’re below.”

“It is as you say.” Chrona landed in front of the thirty-foot cave entrance, “It’s unfortunate that our ancestors looked down on the espens to such an extent. That mentality pervades even to today, Lehesion a sad example of the belief’s reach. It’s not a reflection of we who follow Emagrotha’s way.”

Steering the conversation away from philosophy, I pointed at the cave as I landed,

“This is your house?”

“Indeed it is. It once housed Emagrotha, and now I am the caretaker of this holy place.”

My plan failed.

“I’ve taken the liberty to spruce it up to my preferences, however. It was her home, not a temple.”

I sighed with relief, praying that lecturing wouldn’t continue. As we stepped inside her home, we crossed an arc of ice, decorated in vibrant splashes of colored ice. They froze dyes with the water, pieces of the cavern a flower-filled field kind of vibe at times. For

the most part, the cavern stuck with a bright cerulean that reminded me of a tropical ocean. The sculptures mirrored this simplicity, staying elegant and abstract.

“Emagrotha admired artwork for what it was – an expression of the artist. She supported the artwork seen throughout the city, something Lehesion disdained. The culture she curated lasts to this day, Rivaria being a center of the arts for all who come here.”

I coughed into my hand, “Besides the espens.”

She glared down at me for a moment. A second later, she sighed, “While what you say mars this place’s legacy, you’re right. Gialgathens have had a long history of belittling other races. Part of our ability to fly I believe. It’s hard not to look down on those who cannot feel the wind across their face as they soar through the sky.”

“I don’t know. I always preferred the ground. I fly now mostly because of my weight. I’m too heavy, so I sink into the ground unless I disperse my mass as I walk. It’s a pain in the ass, but I get used to it.”

“So when you move, you’re in a constant state of gravitational flux?”

“Essentially, yeah.”

“Your precision is enviable. I cast my magic in vast waves, creating arenas where my abilities prosper. If I lack that field, then I can’t create the same impact as I otherwise would.”

I raised a hand, “So that’s why you’ve won the tournament before. Your skillset is built for it.”

“I could say the same of you. You’re nigh invincible in combat, and your endurance is unmatched from any I’ve seen. Not once did you slow down or show signs of exhaustion.”

I shrugged, “Eh, comes with my abilities.”

We walked deeper into the cavern, reaching a narrower hallway past the entrance. After reaching a fork in the hallway, we arrived at a room cast in green light from an emerald fire. Along the back wall, the heads of massive creatures lined the wall, most of the aquatic in nature. Chrona gestured at them,

“Emagroth lived for the hunt.”

I walked up to the green fire, but Chrona stopped me from touching it.

“That is everburn sap. It stays alight for centuries at a time. Getting it off the body requires amputation at best and death at worst.”

I scoffed, “I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me.”

“Suit yourself,” Chrona said while moving her tail from me. I lifted the sap from the container, wobbling the liquid fire in the air. Chrona eyed me, her heart rate rising as I toyed with the devastating gunk.

“Don’t worry. I don’t plan on throwing this on anybody anytime soon.”

She let out a sigh of relief, “Good. Perhaps we could douse Thisbey in it.”

I took a chunk of the burning sap and floated it into my dimensional storage, “You know what? I just might do that.”

She let out a gruff laugh, “Record it with your glass bauble. I’d love to see that sight one day.”

“You and me both.”

I stood by the fire while Chrona walked over towards the other side of it. She tilted her head at me, “Though I enjoy the conversation, that should be plenty of chitchat for your tastes. What did you really mean by your being a realm?”

I looked up, thinking of how to frame it. I didn't want to admit who I was, though Chrona probably wouldn't know. It wasn't something I wanted her to tell other people about though. After a minute of thought, she murmured,

"So it's not something to be said lightly. I've gathered that much."

"Yeah. Hm...I'm not a normal thing I guess. It's like I can be here and at another dimension at the same time if that makes sense."

"It makes very little in the way of sense, but I've seen unusual entities before. Lehesion owned a direct gateway to Giess's mana. No matter the range, he could tap into the energy source. It gave him an unbelievable power. Your circumstances explain how you were able to avoid my abilities even when he could not."

I crossed my arms, "Yeah, I'm not quite at that level yet."

"You're closer than you think. You wield mana that far exceeds Emagrotha's or my own. It makes me ponder; did your abilities spawn from your dimensional duality?"

Her question made me ponder myself. I didn't fully understand the ramifications of my dimension-ness. That might be why I wielded gravity so well. Perhaps my understanding of it was innate since I became a fully formed dimension. Hell, maybe other laws of nature would apply the same to me in that regard.

Still, I couldn't be sure.

"Not quite. It definitely helps though. Its like I'm pulling mana from the other dimension."

"Then your potential even exceeds Lehesion in that regard, given that dimension is large enough...Perhaps you could teach me how you wield that pulling force?"

That didn't seem productive, and I was on a time limit. I scoffed, "Only if you teach me time dilation."

Chrona stood tall, "Then it's a deal."

I frowned for a second, processing what she said. My eyes widened as I comprehended what she had to say.

“Wait...really?”

She showed her teeth in a grin,

“Really.”

Chapter 196: Diving In

“You offered me a deal, so I decided to accept,” Chrona stated.

“Hmm...I don’t know. It’s just I didn’t expect you to be willing to teach me something so powerful.”

“Many have tried learning from me. Few have succeeded in any capacity. Offering my magic to you doesn’t mean you’ll fully attain its potential. The same could be said for the secrets of your own techniques. Even then, you’ve used your own combat potential responsibly.”

That made sense to me.

“Alright, so where do we start?”

“With comprehension. Most can’t grasp the fabric of our dimension and sense it. That alone is a harsh first step.”

“Got that in spades.”

Chrona leaned back, “Perhaps you’re further along than I expected. Still, there’s much more to establish. You must learn to mold mana into a specific location.”

“Got that too.”

“What of mana saturation? Can you do that?”

“What is it exactly?”

“It’s to oversaturate your body or area with mana. Very strenuous, but required if you are to manipulate your own timeline.”

“I can do that, but I don’t get how this ties together exactly.”

She sighed, “Perhaps we should discuss this in the entrance. There will be more room to practice there.”

Going back to the room stuffed with ice sculptures, Chrona stood at the center of the room. She pointed her tail to a particular spot, which I walked toward.

“First, sense the dimensional fabric around you.”

I did so, noting the subtle fluctuations from Chrona’s own gravitational pull. It gave me a rough outline of the area, allowing me to discern movement. It was much harder than merely using temperature differences along with wind currents though. Those sensations gave me more to work with since a person’s gravitational pull was pretty small.

Wrinkles ebbed on the gravitational net, Chrona gathering mana from her surroundings. She wheezed, “Gah, I despise drawing mana from my own reserves. It’s exhausting.”

After a few moments, a tiny blue sphere of mana popped into existence.

“This is mana given a physical form. Can you create a ball of mana such as this?”

I raised an eyebrow, “Why are you moving it outside of your body?”

“It makes manipulating the dimensional fabric aside from my own much simpler.”

Listening to her, I lifted a hand. I redirected my mana flow to my palm from my cipher runes. A river of red mana flooded from my arm, coalescing into a crimson ball. It dwarfed Chrona's own sphere, and it left her taking a few steps back.

"Your mana is...volatile, isn't it? I understand where your fury in battle comes from. It's your spirit."

"Don't worry. I've got it under control."

"Then your mind is like Emagrotha's. She preferred using her own personal reserves of mana as you do. She believed it strengthened her spirit."

I crossed my arms, leaving my mana sphere floating in front of me, "Why don't you do the same?"

"My...my magic is too demanding," Chrona murmured while looking away. "Perhaps one day I will be able to. Today is not that day, however."

I shrugged, "Eh, keep working at it. You'll get there."

"Easy for a genius to say," she said with a glare.

I rolled my eyes, "It's even easier to make excuses."

She held her sneer before letting out a deep sigh,

"You and Emagrotha would've made good friends. You echo her ideology with your own. You're far more direct and harsh, however. She was more eloquent."

"Yeah, that's never been my strong point. I can usually fire people up in a speech though."

She tilted her head, "I would liken my own magic to a speech in nature. It's as if I'm convincing time to alter itself. There's very little force involved. It's more so an act of

persuasion. Perhaps that was why Emagrotha could never use my magic. She went through any obstacle, headstrong and unstoppable.”

“She sounds cool and all, but I need to learn this.”

She waved a clawed hand, “Ah yes, of course. Now we move onto field manipulation.”

From her sphere, a ripple ushered out. As it passed us, a familiar but odd sensation passed over me. Chrona slowed time yet again.

“Did you catch what I did?”

“I noticed the change. I don’t know how you did it.”

She flicked her tail up to the blue sphere, “I created a field of mana around us, then I altered the density of the dimensional fabric around us. I imagine it as such. Space and time are one. If you lessen one, you lessen the other. Therefore, the less space around us, the less time as well. This makes time move slowly.”

I frowned, “Shit...That’s crazy. Do you guys know about $E=mc^2$?”

“No.”

“It’s this idea by this smart guy called Einstien. He’s a, uh, famous scientist. He made that equation, and it just means that energy equals mass. It had a lot of implications back in the day, one of them being that space and time are the same.”

I cupped my chin, “Well, there’s a lot more to it, but I’m not that knowledgeable about the topic, to be honest. Point is, you’re describing his idea for the most part without knowing it. I was surprised.”

“This Einstein sounds like a fearsome dimensional mage. His understanding of the inner workings of it dwarfs my own if what you say is true.”

In a way, what he did was magic. It led to bombs far more massive than could be believed, so I guessed magician was a pretty fitting title for the guy.

“Er, Einstein wielded a different kind of magic. It was nuclear in nature.”

Her eyes narrowed while she raised her brow, “What is nuclear?”

“Basically what fuels stars.”

“Fascinating. He wielded the power of dimensions and the stars above. A star mage! Incredible. He outmatches even Lehesion in power and might then.”

Eh, nuclear bombs were a powerful thing.

“Yeah...he did. Well, he built on the magic of those before him, just like those that came after. He was pivotal in the development of the ideas though. With enough practice, a group of people could even recreate his magic.”

“What? That’s chills the blood to hear,” her eyes widened. “Too much power in the hands of many is the end of all.”

The Cold War was pretty bad.

“Yeah, he opened Pandora’s Box in a way.”

“The Box of Pandora?”

“You know what, we’ll talk about it later.”

Chrona leaned towards me, “To think you’ve such a vibrant history throughout the galaxy. Our forefathers told stories through tall tales. We passed the knowledge down by speaking with one another. Where did you come across such vibrant tales?”

“People wrote all this down in large books. That’s a big reason why Einstein was successful actually. He used the knowledge of those before him, building on it. Otherwise it would’ve been impossible.”

Chrona waved her tail, “All discoveries mirror this trait. Imagine a pathetic worm attempting to dismantle his achievements. ‘His knowledge was not utterly unique.’ Neither is the language we share, yet we do not ascribe our achievements to those that made words.” She shook her head,

“It sounds as though Einstein unveiled secrets of the universe. What more does it take to be impressed? He’s like the ancients that guided us from the sea. They turned our fins into wings, and thus, we ascended. That is what we are told in our stories.”

She was probably describing evolution. Considering how long gyalgathens live, it must have been a slow process. The fact their oral stories shifted from the truth a bit was to be expected. Fascinating as it all was, we had a job to do.

Interrupting our discussion, I created a gravity well in front of me, creating a dip in the space around us, “Is this similar to what you’re doing?”

Chrona leaned back and furrowed her brows, “It’s...quite different. You’re simply pulling on the fabric around us. I’m actually manipulating its density. It’s quite strange that you’re able to press into space with such extreme force actually. Perhaps your immunity to our time is what enables you to perform such feats?”

I shook my head, “My teacher could do the same.”

“But not to this extent, surely?”

“Well, no,” I frowned. “My mana and weight are much higher than his though.”

“What does your own weight have to do with it?”

“The more I weight, the stronger my gravity wells become. This is because I can create a pulling force that matches my mass. It saves me a lot of mana in the long run.”

Chrona sat down, on all fours, kind of like a cat, “That isn’t how my magic works in the slightest. All my manipulation requires my own intervention. It may be due to the difference in our techniques, however.”

I always assumed everyone had the same parameters around their magic, but from what Chrona said, it didn’t look like it. Maybe being a Living Dimension had more effects on my abilities than I first realized. Either way, I needed to duplicate the field she was making before I attempted anything else.

“Well, my magic involves gripping the space around you and tugging on it. I can do the opposite too, shoving it out of a point as well.”

Chrona scoffed, “What? You grab a single point instead of designating a space? Madness.”

I whispered, “No...Sparta.”

“What was that?”

“Oh, nothing. Anyways, I think your best way of learning my technique would be trying to hone into a single point, focus on it for a while, then convert your mana into that tugging I mentioned earlier.”

Chrona adjusted her feet, “Strange way of thinking about it, but I shall try.”

With that in mind, we practiced what the other said. I wielded the ball of mana and tried permeating it through the air. It dispersed like water, drowning the entire area in a red mist. Chrona crawled backward, sitting down and watching me,

“That’s good that you have that level of intricacy with your mana. You’re not dispersing it through the dimensional fabric, however.”

I gave her a curt not, “Yeah, this might take a while.”

“Worry not. It shall take me a while as well.”

After a few hours of attempting, Chrona exhausted herself. I kept at it though, trying to mesh my mana with what was around me. I attempted variations of what she said like shoving my mana into rock or ice. That was simple and easy. Interacting with the fabric of our dimension with the same mechanics, well, that was something else entirely.

Every time I tried brute forcing my way through the process, I met a wall of resistance. If I pushed harder, that repelling force grew with my attempts. After a while, I figured something out – it didn't come naturally to me at all. It was like bleeding into a pool of water then trying to use the water in magic.

No matter how much I bled, the water just diluted it into nothingness.

For Chrona, it was the opposite. She said she was the water but in a vast ocean. For her, she struggled to distinguish herself from the water at all. She couldn't progress any even after I read some magical textbooks to her on the topic.

After she rested up, we tried a new approach.

“Ok, I think I know where the problem is.”

The gialgathen scratched her side with the tip of her tail, “And what might that be?”

“Gialgathens draw mana from their surroundings for the most part,” I pointed at her. “That means it's easy to think of yourself as a part of the space around you. That is what's stopping you from being able to tell the difference between the dimensional fabric and yourself.”

“There is no difference. We are all apart of it.”

I weighed my hand back and forth, “Point is, you have to divorce yourself from everything around you. Impose your will on it. Don't let it impose its will on you.”

She lifted her head, “Ahhh. You'll need to do the opposite then. Allow yourself to be swept away. Become a part of your surroundings, then you may change the fabric itself.”

I shivered, “I don’t know if I can do that. Sounds real...I don’t know, suicidal?”

“It’s embracing that we are one with the universe. How is that suicidal?” she said with her brow raised.

“I’ll explain later. For now, just trust me on that.”

“If you say it is so.”

I understood my apprehension already. I was a dimension, and my mana was my health. Letting myself be ‘swept away’ would be equivalent to draining all my blood into someone else’s body. After all, I was a microscopic universe compared to the one I inhabited. If I was going to gain some ground, I needed a different approach.

At that point, I decided to go back home and master the magic on my own time. Before I did, Chrona shouted at me, “Are you leaving?”

“Yup.”

“Before you go, we should schedule more of these sessions.”

“What for?” I said while crossing my arms.

“I enjoy the company for one, and your musings about mana are interesting. They’re foreign from my own, and I find that fascinating.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Huh...I considered my thoughts on magic to be pretty dry stuff. We can do this again though if you like. No skin off my back.”

“Then until we meet again...which would be?”

“Tomorrow at 12:00.”

“Where will the sun be then?”

“Uh, I’ll see you in the middle of the day in other words.”

“Good. I’ll be oversleeping to tend to my wounds and exhaustion. Your training is demanding. Farewell.”

She went towards her room further in the crystalline cave. I turned and flew off. I ended up coming back the next day after working on my cipher. I tried helping out Torix with the coordinates, but he needed to teach me some calculus and trigonometry. I didn’t know anything about those subjects.

Not saying I’m dumb, but I technically dropped out of high school in the 10th grade. That was when Schema’s system came around for me. Teaching me those subjects would take more time than we would save. My pursuits were more useful elsewhere for now, though getting some concrete knowledge on gravity might help me out later.

All that to say teaching me was more trouble than simply solving the problem himself. Althea was the same in that regard. She skulked around various cities, traveling around Giess. I wanted to help her gather info, but everyone knew who I was.

Even if I wore a different suit of power armor, my height would give me away. Of course, I could’ve used my Mass Manipulation skill to change my size then buy another set of armor, but Althea told me not to bother. Even if I did all that, she said I wasn’t subtle enough to gather details.

I had to agree with her.

With nothing else to do, I dived into my cipher work and my attempts at time manipulation. The cipher work was a steady grind, giving gradual but good results over time. On the other hand, Chrona’s approach to time manipulation confounded me.

Despite some frustration, I stuck with it, my stubbornness seeing me through. It didn’t take long to realize that Chrona’s method of accomplishing the skill wouldn’t work for me. With a direct route cut off, I came up with a different approach. I attempted developing new unique skills to fill in the gaps of my understanding.

After my third meeting with Chrona, I sat in the forest clearing above our base to practice once more. I permeated my mana through my surroundings, pressing it onto everything around me. This exercise stemmed from a line of thought.

Becoming one with this dimension wasn't going to pan out, so I changed my approach. I imposed my will onto my surroundings, using my mana as a catalyst for change. The more forceful approach suited me better too, synergizing with my personality.

In spite of this directness, my plan required some measure of finesse. To get a response out of the life around me, understanding their baseline emotions were vital. Otherwise, I had no fine tuning with my mana field attempts.

I would just shove mana into a creature, making it go berserk and kill itself in a fit of rage. While not a useless skill per se, some finesse would go a long way. This meant I leveled my Empathy skill quite a bit by understanding lizards, rodents, and even the plants around me. Once I got a solid grip on shoving mana into creatures, I did the same but through a field of mana around me.

After an hour of testing, I gained a unique skill for my efforts. It was a strange one.

Unique skill gained! By fusing Mana Press, Mana Saturation, Blood Magic Manipulation, Empathy, and Challenger into a single skill, Imposer of Will was created! Half of the unearned treepoints rewarded for unique skill creation: 123!

Imposer of Will(lvl 1) – Many find that they are controlled by those around them. You choose to control rather than be controlled. Allows the creation of a mana field that influences those around you. -1% to mana cost for maintaining the field. +1% to the field's effect on those around you.

The skill wasn't as apparent as most skills, so I went into my skill menu, looking for a more in-depth explanation. I found one.

Imposer of Will – An advanced mana field manipulation skill.

Effects: Creates a field around the user that can be used to sway others depending on the mana fed into the effect. Dominion mana enhances self-interest and desire for influence. Augmentation mana improves motivation and confidence. Origin mana enhances creativity and the desire to build. Blends of mana can create different kinds of

impacts. EG, augmentation and origin mana create a sense of mania, where those around you spur into action to generate anything.

Warnings: Careful application of this skill can result in far better outcomes than otherwise expected. Be careful and tactical with its implementation. Note, those with a solid sense of mana will know you're creating a field of mana, and can resist its impact. Otherwise, the mood shift will be associated with you as a measure of your aura or overall impression on people.

You can also create an aura of influence in a location and keep it after leaving the place. This allows for the creation of many fields of varying influence. This requires plenty of mana and high proficiency with the skill, however.

It was similar to my other skill, Overwhelming Presence, though with a few key differences. For one, Imposer of Will relied on mana and was magical in nature. Overwhelming Presence relied on my charisma skills, preventing the skill from truly shining in my hands. I was a better magician than a politician, so this skill looked more useful for persuading people overall. It was a substantial first step towards making a dimensional field.

Well, probably.

Over the next ten days, I honed my prowess of the skill. I manipulated multiple fields at once, tried out different densities of mana, and tried out different kinds of influence. All my experiments shared one trait – everything went insane when in the field.

It reminded me of when Althea was exposed to my mana. Creating a light enough aura required tremendous control, and if I overdid it, the animals in the aura died outright. Even if it was just small animals dying, it left a bad taste in my mouth. It was a necessary sacrifice though if it let me prevent all of Giess from getting glassed.

The entire time I trained that skill, I trained Hunter of Many and Force of Nature as well. After a week of practice days, I gained another rank in my Originator tree.

Most tread the well-worn paths that others left behind. These walkways are straight, narrow, and simple. You choose to be different. You head into the unknown, your path unmarked.

Originator(Tier 2) unlocked! The bonus towards creating new skills is doubled for unique and mythical level skills. Newly created skills form at level five instead of level one. Skills still level as if on level one. This means you avoid the sticking point from level 96-100, allowing you to max out skills slightly faster. This applies to mythical skills as well, but from lvl 996-1,000.

The perk tree was turning into a jack of all trades kind of enhancer. It allowed me to diversify my interests without losing a ton of efficiency in the long run. Considering my current goals, it was pretty useful. With its skill formation enhanced, I grew some more ambition for my objective.

I created an outline of similar unique skills. Three stood out in particular: Overwhelming Presence, Imposer of Will, and Words of Strength. All of the skills were about beguiling people to do what I wanted. They all achieved that goal using different methods, sure, but performing all the powers at once would enhance their effects.

So I dug into the trenches of study, practicing the magic anytime I could. I got Torix to help me practice, being a guinea pig of sorts. He strengthened his mental defenses while I enhanced my own manipulation skills. It was a win-win for both of us.

I continued this line of thought over the next few days. I finished a third of my mega cipher inscription since the fight during this time. Still, I was getting anxious. We were approaching a month into our deadline of sixty days. If I was to continue this kind of study, I needed some serious results.

Fortunately, serious results arrived in spades. Torix and I were having one of our mental resistance training sessions. As we battled one another, something clicked as I used all my skills in conjunction. My aura, voice, and mana field turned into an overbearing pressure.

Even Torix, with all his experience, wilted under its harsh pressure. The lich cupped his chin,

“You know, perhaps the sky is in fact yellow. I’d never deigned to consider it, but now that you’ve mentioned it...”

I pulled back the aura, giving Torix back full control of himself. As I did, he slapped his hands together,

“By Baldowah, I fell for that ridiculous claim. Some master of the mental arts I’ve proven myself to be...”

He was wrong about that. I’d been using all my skills and gushing to him for hours on end.

“Anyone would lose some mental acuity by now. Maybe I could get you in interrogation, but I doubt anything else would work. Besides, I just got a notification for a new skill.”

“Perhaps you could show it to me,” Torix sighed. “It would make me feel better about my loss.”

“It probably will. It’s mythical most likely.”

I opened my menu, showing him the skill while seeing it for the first time.

I blinked, “Woah.”

Torix nodded, “Woah indeed.”

Chapter 197: Under Dark Waters

New Skill Gained! The unique skills Words of Strength, Overwhelming Presence, and Imposer of Will fuse together into the mythical skill, Legion of One. Half of unearned skillpoints rewarded: 78

Legion of One(lvl 5) – Your being enthralls those that defy you and invigorates those that follow in your wake. Vastly enhances your ability to influence and pressure those around you. Effect enhanced by mana used. Acts as a measure of defense against other mental abilities. Effects are enhanced with level.

“That’s quite the skill. How’s it already level five if you just gained it?” Torix said with crossed arms.

“A skill tree.”

“Ah. I suppose that makes sense. Never seen a tree do something quite like that, however.”

“Outside of the one I’m working on, me neither. Good to have though.”

It looked handy. It came with the same fluidity that my other mythical skills caused as well. Using the auras and words in conjunction came across as a natural instinct. It reduced the levels of focus and thought put into each piece of the action.

This freed up my ability to do other work at the same time. I turned to Torix, “How’s finding the location going?”

“I’ve created a range of around ten miles where the base most likely is. Considering the sludge ocean above it, I wanted to pinpoint the area a bit more before discussing it with you and the others.”

“How about Althea?”

“She’s made little in the way of progress.” Torix steepled his hands, “Ever since your tactic against Thisbey, his public approval plummeted. He’s gone underground, which has made him rather difficult to find.”

Torix waved a finger, “Tohtella actually took full advantage of your video, however. She dispersed it through the appropriate channels, verified it, and associated it with you in every manner possible. She even purchased commercials for other fights in the tournament to further its proliferation.”

“Good to see she’s showing that competence we’ve heard so much about,” I said with a grin. “This new skill of mine should help out with convincing the public to fight the eldritch too.”

“Most definitely. I feel it even as you speak right now. It’s reminiscent of Yawm in a way.”

I grimaced, “Ugh...really?”

Torix waved his hands, fumbling his words, “In a manner of speaking of course. Your nothing like Yawm.”

“Hm... Yeah. Of course not,” I said with a slow nod.

“Daniel, I didn’t mean-“

I raised a palm, “No, I get it. I’m way too sensitive about this. Sorry. Just a sore spot.”

“Of course. I understand...It’s difficult when compared with evil.”

“Yeah, evil and ignorance. Yawm was misguided. I don’t want to end up like that.”

Torix reached up and put a hand on my shoulder, “You won’t. I’ll set you straight long before you veer that far off your chosen path.”

I smiled, “Thanks for the help.”

“Likewise. Now, I’ve got a few calculations to run, and you have the battle to prepare for.”

I gave him a quick nod, “Alright. Let’s go.”

This was the last training session for us before my next fight in the tournament. I spent the rest of the day on the cipher and chatting with Althea. She stunned me with how brutal and efficient her execution strategy was. By morphing her build and face, she took on a false identity. Using that disguise, she rose up the ranks in one of the revolutionary groups. Didn’t take long considering her talents.

She planned on executing Thisbey when the group met up during the award ceremony for my tournament. In the middle of his speech, she’d phase in, lop his head off, then phase right out. I wracked my brain on how to stop that, and I couldn’t find a solution. She took the idea of a Breaker to an extreme in that regard, being nigh unstoppable.

Knowing Thisbey's death was assured, I focused on the tournament. I planned on sending a message to the general public to take up arms against the eldritch and silvers. With my new skill, Legion of One, that would be much easier. It kind of sucked that Legion of One didn't work for the time field, but I'd make use of it while I could.

Setting my plan into motion, I reached the tournament with my next fight in front of me. After running out of the forest, I leaped onto the edge of the tournaments field. As I glanced around, I found Eradin waiting in the stands. I jogged over to him with a smile on my face,

"Hey, good to see you. How's the family holding up?"

Eradin's face lit up with a toothy grin, "Ah...Ohhh, it's good to see you well Gray Giant."

I rolled my eyes, "What's with the formality?"

Eradin blinked, "Well, you just seem different now. More commanding in a sense."

I raised a hand, "Don't worry about it. Just act normal."

"Ahem, of course." He cleared his throat, "As for my family, they're doing well. My son thrashed me in one our recent spars since he finally used some tactics on me. Speaking of thrashings, I saw your match against Chrona."

I scoffed, "I didn't thrash anyone there."

"I agree. You took tremendous punishment and came out no worse for wear. I couldn't imagine being encapsulated in her fiery breath! She's a legend, one of the strongest of Emagrotha's armies. She stayed the line against dozens of gialgathens, her speed legendary. But of course, you bested her with ease!"

Considering her magic worked in a field, her holding a position made sense. In certain environments, like a volcano, she'd be nearly unstoppable. I gestured a hand to the old beast,

“It was a hard fight no doubt. I had a counter to some of her magic, but she fast as hell.”

“And despite that, you cleared the air about the falsehoods spread about your name. I promise you, I shouted to the high heavens of your innocence! The youngsters doubted me, accusing you of betraying our kind. Blagh. The young are fickle, but I’d met you. I understood your character.”

“Thanks. Always nice to know I made the right impression.”

Eradin pointed his tail at a caped figure, “Those two are here to see you as well. I wouldn’t leave them waiting.”

“Oh...Yeah, that looks like Helios. Thanks for the advice,” I said with a sigh.

“An enemy?”

“More like a self-proclaimed boss.”

“Ah. Nothing is worse than a leader no one wanted. Good luck with handling him.”

“Yeah, I’ll need it.”

I walked over to Helios who stood with his back to me. His black cape looked like some kind of microfiber mesh intertwined with silk. His white mane of hair ran down to his waist as well. Everything made him seem larger than life. As I reached him, he turned to me, his black mask covering his maw,

“Ah, the Gray Giant arrives. You seem far more driven in this fight, or perhaps less distracted?”

I kept Legion of One active, combatting his weighty presence, “I plan on making use of a new skill I gained.”

Helios tilted his head, looking down at me like I was a new person, “I can feel it. Another aura of some kind? It’s effective albeit crude.”

I shrugged, “Suits me then. What are you doing here?”

Helios stepped sideways, “Protecting a defiant weakling.”

Behind him, Caprika sat with a burn mark over her cheek. She looked like she aged quite a bit, her eyes wary of everyone around her. Considering what happened, that made total sense to me.

“Hey, it’s good to see you. How are you holding up?”

She stared at me, shaking her head, “It’s...good to see you too. I’m fine.”

Something was off with her.

“Uh, you alright?” I said while raising an eyebrow.

“Yes...it’s just when we met, you didn’t have a presence to match your strength. Now you do. It’s...fitting I suppose.”

“Really? Good. I’ll need it.”

She took a deep breath, “You’ve progressed so much since we first met. It has me feeling rather lacking in that regard as well.”

I waved off her concern, “Not a fair comparison. You were targeted and almost died. Hard to power up when that shit happens.”

Caprika glanced down, her older brother looking down at her. She murmured,

“I suppose.”

Helios stared at her, his expression unreadable. He let out a deep sigh before looking away and scratching the side of his head,

“Look...you’ve made strides in your own way...Lessons are learned through hardship at times, and...and you’ve learned much as of late. Your guard is better. Your eyes are sharper. You even found Daniel here. Those achievements deserve...some merit, in a sense.”

I suppressed a laugh at Helios’s awkward attempt at cheering his sister up. She was his soft spot after all.

“Thanks. I definitely had some time to think while in the med wards. I need to up my defensive prowess.”

Helios nodded, crossing his arms, “It would be time for that, yes. I’ll teach you a method of reflexively encapsulating yourself in your fur. It should dampen the damage from these kinds of attacks. Perhaps some kind of permanent mana shield would work as well. Schema knows you need it considering how frail you are.”

Caprika rolled her eyes, “Easy to say for a Fringe Walker.”

“Excuses are unbecoming of a Novas,” Helios stated. “They degrade you.”

“Of course brother,” Caprika mumbled with a sigh. “I’ll try to live up to my name as a Novas.”

Helios kept staring at her after they finished talking, his hand gripping into a fist. I couldn’t tell what he meant by that, but he looked...uncomfortable. This was Helios’s way of telling Caprika to take care of herself. At least that’s what it looked like to me. Even if he hid it well, he wasn’t pleased with her nearly dying.

Helios rolled his shoulders before glancing back to me, “Speaking of living up to names, your little media ploy set Giess’s media ablaze. Clever.”

“It wasn’t really clever. It was more about foresight than anything.”

“It was clever for you. I expected less.”

Oh, an insult. Great.

I rolled my eyes, “Alright then. Anyways, I have the fight to get to. Keep her safe.”

Helios looked down at me, “I have to. Otherwise, no one competent will.”

He was defensive after his sister was hurt. I understood the sentiment, so I didn’t let what he got under my skin. On the other hand, Caprika glared at him before turning to me, “Ignore him. My safety is my responsibility. Go win this tournament. There’s most certainly a spot in Albony upper society waiting for you afterward.”

I glanced up to Helios, “From what I’ve seen, there’s nothing there to look forward to.”

Helios scoffed, “Speaking from a position of envy perchance?”

“No. From experience.”

Helios rolled his eyes as I turned to the arena. I jumped across the pit of magma, lava bubbling beneath me. As I landed on the steel beneath me, my next opponent warped in. He was a thin, spindly gialgathen covered in red robes. His mahogany colored skin matched, making him look like a bookkeeper at a library. Well, as much as a gialgathen could look like a librarian.

Sun symbols covered his robes, telling me who and what he was – an Eclipse Maker. How one of them made it this far into the tournament was beyond me. They didn’t seem like the close combat type. Maybe he’d surprise me there.

With that in mind, I set myself into a sprinter’s position, ready to charge at him the moment the fight began. I analyzed the guys next.

Eclair Vivitar(lvl 6,803) – Eclair is a scholar who studies various sun magics. He once used those magics in battle, but his prime has long since passed. A shadow of his former self, he still dedicates a large portion of his time training for the tournament.

Coming from a weaker regional area, Eclair lucked out by facing weaker combatants. He's made many returns to the tournament, but it's an understood fact that he will lose to either Delilath or Chrona, depending on who won their match that year. With those two monsters out of the way, he now faces you.

He's not ready.

Well, this was disappointing, but the regional setup for the tournament explained it. After all, I fought Delilath because she lived near Yildraza. Chrona Charsiary came from Rivaria, representing one of the most influential factions of the gialgathens. This guy must be representing some rural collection of nomads or something. Since the competition wasn't as fierce, he reached this stage yet lost every year.

I was the 'wall' he met this year instead of the other two. Kiki Mosk understood this as he floated over us. With his charismatic voice, Kiki shouted to the stands,

"Who is ready to get the show on the road?"

The zeppelin above him boomed while the gialgathens stared in somber silence. I intended on getting this guy out of here quick, my mana charged. This guy didn't look like he'd be ready to defend from one of my singularities so I wouldn't use one as an opener. Charging at him should be enough.

Kiki Most took a deep, satisfied breath before announcing, "Let's see if Eclair can put up a better fight this year."

Kiki droned on and on about how pitiful Eclair was. By the end of Kiki's rang, I felt bad for the poor guy. Shit, someone even worse than him would've shown up if he hadn't. Feelings of pity aside, I wasn't about to hold back, however. I needed this win, and the more dominant my victory, the better off I'd be.

With that in mind, I used my Legion of One skill to its fullest extent. I stared the guy down, my every intention to take him out quick. Eclair didn't look ready either. He shook a bit looking at me, knowing his chances were slim at best. Kiki only exacerbated the issue. He guided the promotion of the fight towards something of a stopwatch event; how long would Eclair last?

Not very long apparently. As Kiki Mosk asked for us to be ready, we both said yes. Right after I launched myself to him, Eclair let out a telepathic wave,

“I surrender!”

The gialgathens in the stands groaned at his cowardice, and I dragged my feet to a stop. With sparks flying off the steel ground beneath me, I raised a hand in victory. If I tried giving a speech about the perks of killing eldritch, it would be rubbing salt in the gialgathen’s wounds. It wasn’t worth stirring the pot considering how volatile the political situation was at the moment.

With that in mind, I dropped my hand in a second, moving on afterward. Without missing a beat, I traveled back to Caprika. As I walked up, she nudged Helios,

“Still not impressed?”

“I’ve known giants. The Emperor, Baldowah, and many others. He’s not of their caliber,” Helios said while staring at his nails. “Not yet.”

I didn’t expect anything from the guy, but I walked past Caprika while laying a hand on her shoulder, “One left before you get your city. Good luck healing.”

“Same to you,” Caprika said with a nod.

After my goodbyes, I navigated back to our base where I found Torix pacing in the forest clearing. I walked up to him, seeing a triangulation of coordinates around the opening. Candles and several corpses were splayed out on the corners of the triangle, along with streaks of blood. I stayed well outside of it, glancing at Torix,

“So uh, what’s all this for?”

“To discover the precise location of the base. With its coordinates narrowed down, I can use a basic divination ritual to gather details.”

“What’s with all the corpses?”

“I’m still a necromancer at heart, and a few forest animals are worth the well-being of Giess. It’s a net good as far as morality is concerned.”

“Oh no, I wasn’t here to judge. I was actually wondering what they were for.”

“Oh,” Torix said while crossing his arms. “They act as catalysts to tune into the flowing life structure of Giess. I hypothesize that wherever this base under the ocean is, there will be plenty of death present there. By finding a collection of carcasses, I can pinpoint a precise position.”

“Why didn’t you use this before?”

“My mana has limits, and the ritual requires far less mana as you narrow down the search area. At times, it’s far easier to use less direct means for solving a situation. I say that knowing full well the merits of a more blunt methodology, I assure you.”

I nodded, “Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. My runic carving was like that…”

Do you mind if I watch?”

“Absolutely not. Perhaps you may learn something of use.”

Torix paced over towards the center of the triangle, placing his hands on the ground. With surgical precision, he guided his black mana into the blood markings. Wasting no time or energy, he lifted his hand up, sound and light siphoning into his hand. A purple flame outlined in black popped up, swirling with violence.

He walked over towards each animal carcass, setting a tiny morsel of the flame on them. They all burned, leaving nothing left, and the markings around us sunk into the earth. With my ears ringing from the quiet, Torix snapped his fingers. My hearing returned, and the shade around us dispersed.

My ears popped as Torix looked cupped his chin. I looked around before spreading out my arms, “So, uh, what did you find?”

“It’s strange,” Torix shook his head. “I found a collection of bodies clustered within the ocean near the epicenter of Lehesion and Emagrotha’s battle.”

“Then what’s unusual about it?”

Torix stared at me, “There are two blips of life force I didn’t anticipate finding.”

“Did you honestly expect to find nothing alive down there?” I said while crossing my arms.

Torix’s eyes widened, “These signatures weren’t normal in any regard. They were colossal, dwarfing anything I’ve ever seen. They both exceeded the energy signature of Yawm.”

Torix met my eye, “And one of them is devouring the other.”

Chapter 198: Preparing for Battle

I said, “What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know. The sheer volume of energy is astounding, however. It’s like a continent is collected into two energy blips. I can’t understand it fully, but what I do know is this – we need all the help we can muster if we are to fend it off.”

My eyes widened, “Are you serious?”

“Most certainly. Find some of your previous combatants. Perhaps they may help us.”

“Hmm,” I cupped my chin, “Maybe. I’ll have to check it out. I could get Chrona on my side. Maybe even Krog. They’d be the only ones worth gathering.”

“Then we must hurry. I’ll warp over and get Althea here. Perhaps Kessiah’s healing magic has come along enough to help us.”

I tsked, “I think she’d get gibbed if I’m honest.”

“I would as well if I took a direct blow from this kind of foe. This is a risky venture, and I’d rather not leave a stone unturned.”

“I’ll take your advice on it. Do you think we should contact Tohtella and get some of her guards?”

Torix sighed, “I...I’d rather not. I’ve been suspicious of her activities for a while now. Despite her use of your video, she’s done far too little to uphold her reputation as a world reformer.”

“Yeah, I had a suspicion in the back of my mind too,” I shook my head, “I can’t understand why the hell she’d do it though. It makes no sense whatsoever.”

“Neither do I. Perhaps this final Skyburner base will offer some elaboration and verification of our suspicions. Needless to say, we must prepare. Find allies. I’ll gather resources of my own.”

“I have a favor I can call in with Helios. Do you think this is that big a problem?”

Torix crossed his arms, “Hmmm...No, I don’t. We’ve yet to even access the threat. We’ll call upon him if it’s beyond our grasp. Time is still of the essence, however. I imagine if the draining signature finishes its siphoning process, we’ll face a far stronger foe in the end.”

“We’ll finish this fast then. Do you think you can return later tonight?”

“Perhaps in two days. I’ll give you the coordinates then, and we’ll go towards the epicenter. Good luck.”

I gave him a curt nod as he walked into a portal, warping somewhere. I sprinted over towards Chrona, tearing chunks from the ground as I did. As I flew up over the skyline, I shot across Rivaria. After reaching the upper line of the city, I flopped into Chrona’s home. The beautiful ice sculptures still reflected light in their icy shells.

As I paced through the room, several of the statues had air bubbles spread throughout them. They crafted them into words, shapes, and pattern. Each of these additions added extra depth to the already impressive sculptures. It looked like it requires several techniques to make it work right. Otherwise, the bubbles would get lost in the freezing process. They must have designed the air pockets and sculpture beforehand then flash-froze the water with the bubbles. Carving the statue must have been the easy part.

With my mind thinking about that, two different gialgathens echoed through the cavern. Though they didn't talk much, their breath was more than enough considering their hulking size. Within the room of emerald fire, Chrona chatted with another gialgathen. Turns out it was Krog Borom, the illusionist general of Emagrotha's army. It made sense these two were talking considering their history.

As I stepped up, Chrona tilted her head at me,

"Our next session wasn't until a few days after your bout?"

I shook my head, "I didn't need the rest. The guy quit."

Krog grumbled, his voice proud, "The filthy coward. If I fight him again, I'll leave him broken as he deserves."

I raised a hand, "There's something I wanted to speak with both of you about."

Chrona pointed near the fire, "We were in the middle of discussing a few recent political events. They may wait until after you've had your say, however."

Krog puffed out his chest, his black and red skin oozing menace, "Those politics revolve around you in fact. You've done much for us. I was going to thank you for it."

Huh. Didn't see that one coming.

"I actually have a way you can help me then. We found where Emagrotha and Lehesion fought. At the epicenter of their battle, a mage I know found something big."

The two generals stared at one another. After a moment of silence, Chrona turned to me, “There lies an ocean of sludge there now to my knowledge. If that’s the ‘big’ thing you’re referencing, then there’s little else to know of the subject.”

“Not quite. It’s two life forms of unbelievable size. They sounded like something you’d get from Lehesion or Emagrotha.”

The gialgathens straightened up, Chrona murmuring, “But Emagrotha...there’s little that remains of her after Lehesion’s final blast. We never found her remains. The ocean rose from the ground faster than we could recover her.”

“We’re better off not knowing what that freak did to her,” Krog growled.

I pointed at them both, “I’m wondering if either of you would come with me in case I needed help fighting this thing.”

Chrona gave a chuckle. “Of course I’ll help. I’m certain it couldn’t stop both of us.”

Krog snapped her side with his tail, the gemstones encrusted on his armor shining, “The three of us. It will be a battle worth remembering, and I may offer a measure of compensation for how you’ve treated us as a people. You deserve it.”

“Acting decent doesn’t deserve compensation,” I said while raising a palm to Krog.

“On Giess, it does. Especially given the hard times,” Krog stated.

I crossed my arms, “What do you mean?”

Chrona looked away while Krog took a deep breath. The proud beast murmured,

“I...I lost my grandfather in an attack as of late.”

I fumbled for my words, “My god...Uhm...I’m sorry.”

Krog snorted, crushing his emotions. He said, "It was in a terrorist attack led by those revolutionaries. To think they'd sacrifice themselves to cull us. It's difficult not to squash one of the espens each time I see them."

Chrona laid a wing across Krog's back, "We would be no better than them. Emagrotha would look down with disappointment."

Krog smashed a thickened hand onto the ground, cracks ebbing across the ice around us, "I know...but it's difficult."

Tears rimmed around his massive eyes, his emotion real. Minutes passed before Krog collected himself. The general stood tall once more,

"A harrowing battle is just what I need to clear my mucked mind. It will do me good."

Chrona pulled back her wing, and I stayed quiet while Krog took deep breaths. I ended up intruding on a profoundly personal meeting. If my suspicions were right, Krog came here to talk with Chrona about the death in his family. Like the jackass that I was, I ended up interrupting them. Even though I was aware of that, we didn't have time for personal grieving.

This thing could kill off a lot more people if we didn't organize quickly. I raised a fist, staring at Krog,

"Then we'll meet later tonight to go kill whatever this damn thing is."

Chrona glanced between Krog and me, concern spread over her face. Krog let out a low growl, "It shall be done."

"Good. I'll see you both in the arena then."

"Of course," Chrona said. "We'll fight with valor."

I left them, giving Krog the chance to grieve over his loss. He looked close to his grandfather, so the loss hit hard, and I didn't want to interject anymore than I already had. I needed to push him some though. Otherwise, we'd have to postpone fighting this

damn thing for a while. Considering how strong Torix seemed to think it was, that didn't sound like that good an idea.

With that in mind, I returned to our base. I raced down the steps and knocked on Kessiah's room. Kessiah called me in. She stood beside a rabbit with glowing antlers pinned to a table. Beside it, several empty syringes were stacked up, one of them half full. As I raised an eyebrow, Kessiah picked up one of the legs of the rabbit.

With a quick jerk, she pulled the limb off the poor creature. I winced more than the rabbit did. It stayed still, not even aware of its missing leg. I leaned back,

"Ahhhh. Is that some kind of painkiller or sedative?"

"Bingo. I asked Torix for some. This lets me practice my magic without having to listen to the squeals of the damn rabbit...and maybe I don't like torturing the thing either."

"Yeah, maybe. How's it coming along?"

Kessiah turned her wrists, showing cut marks down them. A few droplets of her blood lifted up spiraling into a central point. A few of Kessiah tattoos glowed as her hands shook. She grunted before molding the blood next to the rabbit's amputated leg. With delicate precision, she reconstructed the sinews and tissues that connected it.

Over the next few minutes, she connected the bone again and joined the ruptured skin. After a bit more detail work, she reconnected the veins of the creature, and she even donated a tiny bit of health to restore the creature's health. All in all, it was a success in my books. Kessiah seemed to think the same as she let out a sharp sigh while leaning back,

"Thank Schema I did it right this time. Here I thought I'd fuck it up again."

I inspected her handiwork, finding scars and other markings on the creature, "Looks like you've been grinding it out, haven't you?"

She rolled her eyes, "No, not really. I've been taking tons of breaks because this is so demanding. Still, I'm a hell of a lot better than I thought I'd be after a few weeks. Kind of scared though," Kessiah winced.

I turned a wrist to her, “Torix and I found the last Skyburner base. I was hesitating to ask, but would-“

“No,” Kessiah sliced her hands across the air. “I’ll get in the way. It’s five times my level. I’ll get slaughtered or end up getting someone else killed while they protect me. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. I think this kind of work suits you better too, and we even need it as a team. Keep it up.”

“Yeah, I’ll do my best,” Kessiah took a deep breath, “Back to getting this down. I need to work on getting the nerves right. It’s leg twitches after I reconnect the tissues...Shit, this is hard,” she mumbled as I walked off.

With two days of respite left before Torix returned, I set out on my own preparations for facing off against something catastrophic. The first priority involved safety for the others. With that mind, I took off my gray power armor before tearing out strips of my skin. It took gravitation enhancements and a series of quick jerks to make it happen for each piece.

I was tough after all.

With a pile of raw material to work with, I used Star Forger to melt the various strips into glowing globes of armor. At the same time, I sent messages to Althea and Torix for a series of measurements from them both. Using my memory, I guesstimated the average size of Krog and Chrona. It wasn’t much of a guess though, because I used my Knowledge Maker skill. Photographic memory was a powerful thing.

It wouldn’t be perfect, but I planned on fixing that by lining their armors with various furs from Rivaria. By making the gear a bit too big, I could fill in the gaps with the soft lining. It had the added bonus of making them warm and comfortable as well. Two hours later, and I finished their main battle plates with their proportions in mind.

After reviewing my memories for a bit, I recreated a series of jointed limb covers to add to that. By incorporating a set of interlocking chains, I made them easy to take on and off. I notched the joints as well, creating a series of interlocking plates that

mimicked thickened scales. For their helmets, I created angled, aerodynamic bodies for them. This had the bonus of deflecting projectiles should they hit their head.

Even with Star Forger, I struggled with the process. I was heavy as hell now, and that meant my skin was denser than lead as well. Of course, my added endurance made the metal incredible flexible and ductile too. This allowed me to keep the structures as thin as possible. I pulsed waves of gravity as well, making the internal arrangements of the metals all flow in the same direction. Otherwise, patches of the blackened ore would criss-cross in random directions. This made the overall structure more brittle.

That was a serious problem considering the flexibility of the metal was its selling point. All in all, it took more than twelve hours of dedicated work, but I finished two sets of gialgathen armors. With the main work completed, I pulled out a variety of gemstones from my dimensional storage. I charged them with mana before setting them into sockets I welded onto the base. By creating lines of Schema's watered down version of the cipher, I created pathways for the mana. They all directed towards a large diamond at the center of their plate mail.

This enabled better mana flow for the gemstones, which were brimming with my own chaotic, volatile mana. I added a series of supporting runic structures around these pathways, stabilizing the mana some. This would prevent them from going insane, or at least make it much easier for them. Considering the volume of mana and the gialgathens natural ability to draw ambient mana, they should be fine. We would be testing regardless.

All the inscriptions created polygons along the surface of the plate mail. To reinforce the structure, I added the circular spell formula to the center of the polygons. After imbuing them with mana, arcane bonds distributed through the structures much like the mana bonds coursing through my flesh.

To top it all off, I added a series of blades and claw reinforcers, adding some extra oomph to their slashes. I even finished a bladed exterior to the tip of their tail, allowing them to sever people with ease. With their added weaponry set, I sharpened each blade, making sure they weren't dull as could be. This required careful application of heat and slowly pulling tiny bits of metal from the edges.

It was worth the effort. After a quick polish, the project looked professional. Well, as professional as my first time making gialgathen armor could look. I analyzed it, seeing what Schema had to say about it.

A Corrupting Sunrise(lvl req: N/A | Race: Gialgathen | Size: Enormous | Type: Light) – Created from the condensed dimensional fabric, this metallic substance holds many properties that are advantageous to battle. When encased in this substance, the wielder's dimensional stability enhances, giving them resistance to attacks on the plane that the wearer stands.

This acts out as dimensional resistance. The sheer toughness of the compound is remarkable as well, giving it far more durability than steel or even orichalcum. This applies nearly all known kinds of damage, from chemical to elemental, it matters little when putting this armor between you and the coming damage type.

The effects are limited to just armor as well. The many ingrained gemstones can act as mana batteries, giving the wielder tremendous enhancements to their effective mana pool. At the same time, large injections of this mana will act as a stimulant, creating unnatural levels of ferocity and fury in subjects using this armor.

It can even extend the life of the wielder, offering enhanced vitality and regenerative effects to those that wield this tool. Though potent, use these features with caution. The long-term effects of using this energy source are unknown. Likely personality loss and long term brain damage can be inflicted with continuous use.

That being said, the protective properties come with nearly no drawbacks. For a gialgathen, this is an incredible tool to have in their arsenal.

TheHarbinger'sGift:

[+100Strength,Constitution,Endurance,andWillpower.

+50Intelligence,Perception,andLuck

+10,000health|+1,000healthregen/min

-10%toCharisma|-10%toManaRegeneration|+10%toHealthRegeneration | 25%
Dimensional Resistance]

(Positive bonusesdoubledifmemberofHarbinger'sLegion|
DoesnotstackwithotheritemscarryingaHarbinger'senhancement)

2,000,000/2,000,000 Mana Stored

+50,000 Health | +1,000 Health Regen/min

-10% to Charisma | -10% to Mana Regeneration | +60% to damage resistances

Bonuses doubled for a member of Harbinger's Legion. Bonuses don't stack with copies of A Corrupting Sunrise. Excess mana is siphoned to Dimension C-138.

The sheer quality of the materials used helped me a lot here. The flaws in my craftsmanship would become more apparent otherwise. It saved my ass in this scenario though. That's why the armor enhanced the health regeneration of the wearer so much. Since my own health regen was that high, it rubbed off on people wearing what I was made of.

Overall, the armor took a full day of consistent grinding to make it happen, but it increased the gialgathens chances of survival dramatically. With that handled, I glanced through my messages and took note of Torix and Althea's measurements. I stripped more armor, melted it down, and set to work.

For Torix, a thicker set of armor could be used. Of course, I kept the design light, but it wasn't entirely as necessary since Torix often warped across a battlefield. The gialgathens flew, so they needed something light. Armed with that insight, I focused on creating better joint structures for Torix. I figured as a lich, keeping his body together was the most critical task. It was much more difficult to cast without arms for example. It could be done of course, especially by a capable archmage like Torix. At the same time, why let him get crippled like that?

So I spent more time on the joints of the armor than the rest of it combined. I created wire structures that flowed and crisscrossed through the slabs of armor. These wires all culminated at the joints, adding a chainmail kind of reinforcement on those specific parts. This took forever since I had to make tiny balls of molten metal and pull thin strings of armor from them. Otherwise, the wires were flimsy and easily broken.

As the wire passed, I let it cool down by air instead of magic. This enabled it to be as flexible as possible. With the joints finally finished, I created the same supporting runic structures and mana augmentations. I used the absolute limit of my mana pressing

abilities here, giving a temporary repulsion to the armor. If a giant fireball came at the wearer, it would sweep around them. In this case, Torix.

I gave additional runic supports for the charged gems as well, helping ease Torix with processing my mana. With the framework finished, I added a few details like a skull mask and a crown of thorns. Considering Torix's penchant for dramatic flair, I felt it was fitting. I admired my work while inspecting the status. It had a few surprises.

The Blighted Web(lvl req: 6,000 | Race: Bipedal | Size: Medium | Type: Heavy) – This protective wear is composed of condensed dimensional fabric plates and wires of the same material. Many of these wires reinforce the joints, creating a web of protective armor.

Heavy yet functional, it ensures that its wearer will stay in one piece even under tremendous kinetic damage. Nearly all known damage types are mitigated as well, a capable mana press going so far as repelling most spells from even reaching the wearer. Many gemstones have been charged with volatile mana on this armor as well.

Runic inscriptions aid the wielder in wielding the energy, but its a calculated risk to use it unless the wearer is very skilled and has excellent willpower.

This nigh absolute protection comes at a cost, however – the armor is very heavy. Weighing in at nearly 3,000 pounds, it requires a high strength stat to walk around in. Think of putting it on a long range artillery mage or technician. Warping abilities prevent the armor from being impossible to wield as well, along with gravitational magics.

All in all, it's an armor designed to protect and synergize with long range combat.

The Harbinger's Blessing:

[+65Strength,Constitution,Endurance,andWillpower,Intelligence,Perception,andLuck

+5,000health|+500healthregen/min

-10%toManaRegeneration|+10%toHealthRegeneration | +25% Dimensional Resistance]

(Positive bonuses doubled if a member of Harbinger's Legion | Does not stack with other items carrying a Harbinger's enhancement)

1,500,000/1,500,000 Mana Stored

+75% to damage resistances | +75,000 health | +500 health regeneration/min

It had a different kind of bonus than the Gialgathen's armor did. It suited Torix more, though I'm sure the slight stunting of his mana generation was still a pain. Considering Torix focused on having a massive mana pool rather than regenerating it, I hoped it was worth it. Besides, the extra mana stored in the gemstones would more than make up for the difference.

With the Blighted Web finished, I set to work on Torix's staff.

It was easy enough to create a pole, but the jewel and runic work here was intense. Before doing so, I jotted down a few blueprints for the runic work in my grimoire first. After getting a plan down, I decided on an elemental augments and presence amplifier set of enchantments. Torix would no doubt be leading an army of silvers into the base with us. This would help him keep them under his thumb while giving his offensive presence a bit of a boost.

Once finished, I used Star Forger to create impossibly small points of contact on the staff. These superheated dots allowed me to trace with unparalleled detail. Without my enhanced perception, I wouldn't even be able to see what I was writing out, to be honest. I did though, so it came out clean and crisp. I'd need to work on the design a bit more in the future, but it was good enough for now.

With that finished, I carved into the top of the staff, creating many sockets for a variety of gemstones. Using some sapphires I found in a jewelry store back on Earth, I gave the staff a cold affix. By adding rubies, topaz, amethysts, and a rainbow of other gems, I enhanced every element I could think of, along with others I couldn't. It would take Torix a bit of practice before he could use it right, but it would be a powerful addition.

With the elemental augments finished, I created a series of runes to enhance charisma and intimidation. On the inside of the hilt, I injected several emeralds into the supporting structure. Before I finished, Kessiah leaned out of her room,

“Hey, can you cool this damn place down? It’s hot as hell in here...”

I facepalmed. Duh. I was turning this place into a furnace. I raised my hand, siphoning mana through my palm. After cooling the site, I set back to work. I finished embedding emeralds in the hilt of the staff, hoping they’d work well with the charisma enchantments. They ‘cooled’ mana somewhat, so charging them with my own wouldn’t overload Torix. Most likely at least.

After closing a few online guides about gem allocation, I finished the hilt. I kept it simple, giving it extra thickness so that it would be heavier. If Torix grabbed it near the bottom of the staff, he could change the angles better by manipulating its center of mass some. That’s how swords worked, with the hilt of the sword often weighing as much as the blade itself.

As the finisher, I put a citrine into the bottom of the staff. Around it, I created a series of runic carvings that altered the gravity of the stave. When mana charged into it, it would make the staff heavier. If Torix wanted to hit an incoming foe, he could lift the staff and channel mana into the construct. It would become a club at a moment’s notice.

It was a beauty.

Elemental Elocution(lvl req: 6,000 | Race: Any | Size: Medium | Type: Heavy) – This is a heavy, durable staff embedded with several augmenters. First and foremost, it enhances the effects of elemental magics. Though taking time to master, siphoning mana through various gemstones eases the conversion of origin mana into various elements. This enables further power and intensity when wielding these kinds of offensive spells.

The other augmenters are oriented around one’s speaking ability. By enhancing the feel and voice of the wielder, it gives them a menacing aura. The last enhancer is simple yet effective: a mass manipulator. By channeling mana into the bottom of the staff, the density of the matter increases. This is useful when wielding the staff as a club as a last resort.

Normally, a mage would never, under any circumstance, use their staff as a physical weapon. Most staffs are composed of woods that lose their strength and resilience within a few years. Given the unique nature of this staff’s composition, that shouldn’t be a problem.

The Harbinger's Blessing:

[+65Strength,Constitution,Endurance,andWillpower,Intelligence,Perception,and Luck

+5,000health|

+500healthregen/min

-10%toManaRegeneration|+10%toHealthRegeneration | +25% Dimensional Resistance]

(Positive bonusesdoubledifmemberofHarbinger'sLegion| DoesnotstackwithotheritemscarryingaHarbinger'senhancement)

500,000/500,000 Mana Stored

+50% to damage of elemental spells | +10% elemental piercing

Unique Skill: Overwhelming Presence – only active while wielding weapon

Like the armor, it gave the Harbinger's Blessing rather than the Harbinger's Gift. That was good considering it suited Torix far better than the previous one did. The different attributes would help him out more too, though they were lower overall. Considering I was more of a warrior than a mage, that made sense to me.

With that finished, I turned towards Althea's gear. She needed something even lighter than the gialgathens. Fabric was an obvious choice, so I stuck with a flexible carbon fiber mesh we bought in Yildraza. After pulling dozens of long wires from glowing orbs of metal, I stitched the cables between the cloth. This added extra tensile strength, which was more important than the hardness of the armor. After all, she needed the ability to shapeshift.

That's why I left plenty of slack for the wires, giving her extra space to fill out the jumpsuit. This took many hours, the stitching process inevitably taking ages. Without Star Forger and Force of Nature, I would've lacked the dexterity in my hands to

perform the task. Since I could hold the cords with minuscule gravity wells, it made the process possible though strenuous.

I was overjoyed to be finished with the reinforcement process. Since Althea's mana management wasn't as reliable as the others, I kept the runic inscriptions simple. I added thin plates to several spots on her upper arms, forearms, and back. These were stabilizing measures, for the most part, helping her focus in a fight.

Without magic being her primary defense, I added obsidian vials across the back of her plate armor. These would act as storage devices for various alchemical compounds she could inject into herself mid-battle. Althea used these kinds of compounds before, having many tranquilizers in her suit when Torix and I found her. It wouldn't take a leap in logic to assume she knew how to handle herself around a few stimulants as well.

Considering Schema had no problem with chemical compounds, it would be a huge boon for her in the fight. The A.I could care less as long as it helped with handling eldritch after all. I'd use them myself, but my health regen stunted their effect on me. By the time any potion or chem worked its way through my system, my metabolism would've disintegrated it. Fortunately, Althea's health regeneration was much lower than mine, giving her access to these kinds of tools.

So I set a few stronger potions and compounds onto the top of her armor. We'd bought some of these in Rivaria, but most of them I got from Caprika. Her family had dozens of connections, so having her ship in a few of the stronger 'medicines' wasn't a problem. Learning some alchemy on my own wasn't a bad idea, and I had some knowledge of basic chemistry. I added it to my to-do list before getting back to the matter at hand.

After adding in a few metal canisters for the more volatile composites, I finished Althea's protective gear. It was decent.

An Everchanging Remedy(lvl Requirement: 5,000 | Type: Bidpedal | Size: Medium | Type: Light) – This nano-fiber mesh has been reinforced with dimensional wiring, enabling both flexibility and lightness in combat. Through intelligent design, this protective gear is also flexible, enabling the shifting of the wearer's body. Combining the protection of power armor with the lightness of kevlar, this is an excellent body armor for any mobile combatant.

Two other features were added outside of these designs as well. The first involves runic enhancements that increase the balance of the wielder. The second feature is a set of injectors that allow the wielder to push potions and stimulants into the blood mid-fight. This dramatically enhances the potency of whatever liquid is administered.

These traits create an adaptable suit of armor for adapting combatants.

The Harbinger's Gift:

[+100Strength,Constitution,Endurance,andWillpower.

+50Intelligence,Perception,andLuck

+10,000health|+1,000healthregen/min

-10%toCharisma|-10%toManaRegeneration | +10% to Health Regeneration | + 25%
Dimensional Resistance]

(Positive bonusesdoubledifmemberofHarbinger'sLegion | Does not stack with other
items carrying a Harbinger's enhancement)

Potions stored: Eagle's Eye, Hurricane, Hastening potion(tier III)

+15,000 health | +1,000 health regeneration/min

+40%todamageresistances

+50% to effect of aiming and balance skills

Just like the rest of the gear, the Harbinger enhancement was its biggest selling point. It still gave reasonable tankiness enhancements though, and it was light enough to use. With that finished, I moved onto her weaponry. That would be the most critical aspect for Althea anyway given her skill set.

Her first new weapon was a smaller rifle. Considering she was over level 5,000 now, I'd outdo her current design by a certain amount. I molded out a cylinder by shifting my skin like a liquid. This was far simpler than trying to shape the metal on my own. Instead of snapping it like usual, I heated the connection point of the cylinder and my own body. This allowed me to disconnect it without risking a crack through the structure.

With some time saved, I etched dozens of precise enchantments along the barrel. Most of these were mass reducers and accelerator enchantments. They would lower the mass of the bullet until it left the barrel, allowing it to be fired faster. Since they would affect the bullet instead of the rifle itself, I added diamonds across the upper structure as well.

The reason was diamonds were more durable than most gems and could store more mana. This would reduce the load on Althea's mana reserves, shoring up one of her weaknesses.

After finishing the barrel, I created a series of open set pieces for the surrounding stock. Althea needed tiny openings so that she could mold her arm into the barrel. Otherwise, she wouldn't gain the benefit of her armor piercing abilities. I kept that in mind, lightening the overall weight of the rifle while making it more accessible at the same time.

Star Forger made a world of difference here, giving me a greater shaping ability than ever before. Without as many restrictions on my handling of the material, I went all out with the efficiency of the design itself. Thinner, sleeker, and more polished, the product came out without any apparent flaws. It felt good to actually add something to the work of Diesel for once since I wasn't held back by my previous restrictions.

I assembled the pieces together, lining the various sections with rough diamonds that my miners back on Earth dug up. Polished and pretty pieces weren't necessary since they were just holding a ton of mana. I kept the enchantments oriented around the gun rather than the wielder though. This meant Althea wouldn't need to mold the mana on her own. She would just need to come to me anytime she needed this recharged.

I already kept a series of blueprints for most of the enchantments in my grimoire previously. I made my adjustments subtle, not wanting to exceed Althea's level cap. The goal would be a requirement of level 7,000, something Althea reached during her weeks in Thisbey's ranks. She thinned out a few of the more scrupulous members during her stay there, taking out key targets of the revolutionaries.

As the last adjustment, I added a removable lengthener to the barrel. This would allow her to adjust the piece into a sniper rifle at will. Considering we'd be fighting indoors and in an ocean of sorts, a shorter barrel was better. Still, it never hurt to give her extra options. Just as well, I made a mass amplifier at the back of the stock too, letting her use the weapon as a makeshift club. She'd make better use of that than Torix likely would, so I figured why not.

Knowing melee combat was inevitable, I created a bayonet for her rifle, keeping the blade dull as a butter knife. I didn't sharpen it since she'd mold her arm over that part and create the blade herself. It would be superior to any edge I could create given her armor piercing.

The weapon was the best piece of gear I'd made yet. Practice makes perfect after all.

The Wake of Destruction(lvl req: 7,000 | Type: Rifle | Size: Medium) – This is a highly modified railgun that uses a series of mass manipulators to enhance the speed of the bullets fired. In this case, it fires harpoons instead of bullets, giving the gun excellent stopping power.

This weapon isn't limited to just enhancing the bullets, however. A built in battery system composed of durable diamonds increases the wielder's deft and handling of their mana. This in combination with the accuracy and precision enhancements make the item devastating in combat.

This devastation isn't limited to a range either. The rifle itself is hard, heavy, and dense enough to be used as a makeshift bludgeon. Another mass manipulator in the stock allows the wielder to enhance this effect further, making it even heavier than it would otherwise be. A bayonet attachment gives the wielder slicing potential, giving access to multiple damage types as well.

These factors combine into an effective killing weapon designed with practical use in mind.

The Harbinger's Gift:

[+100Strength,Constitution,Endurance,and

Willpower

+50Intelligence,Perception,andLuck

+10,000health|+1,000healthregen/min

-10%toCharisma|-10%toManaRegeneration | +10% to Health Regeneration | + 25%
Dimensional Resistance]

(Positive bonuses doubled if member of Harbinger's Legion | Does not stack with other
items carrying a Harbinger's enhancement)

500/500 railgun shot enhancements left in mana reserves

+200% to critical hit damage

+100% to shot speed

+75% to accuracy and precision of shots

The speed of the bullets would enhance the damage she dealt considerably. Considering
we might be facing another hybrid of sorts, the added oomph made a massive
difference. It would work well for her.

With that handled, I created a chain for her, ending in an elongated blade. This enabled
Althea to extend the range of her melee combat. Considering we might fight another
hybrid, that distance was a priority. At the same time, this melee weapon needed
durability, so I stuck with chains instead of fabric or whip. Althea was ridiculously
strong after all.

I kept the hilt relatively heavy for this weapon too, ensuring she could snap it about
with relative ease. This weapon might take training, however. She could easily whip
herself with it, and for Althea, that would splatter her across a room with no effort
whatsoever. That's why I ended up adding a bayonet to the actual rifle itself.

A Dark Prison(lvl req: 5,000 | Type: Chain and Blades | Size: Medium) – These pitch
black chains end in blades, designed to be whipped at a moderate distance. Heavy and

unwieldy, these weapons require extensive training in order to prevent self harm. If mastered, they allow for multiple styles of combat.

Simply wrapping someone in chains and squeezing can be deadly if applied with enough force. Considering the strength required to wield this weapon, that should be a given if the wielder can swing A Dark Prison. The chains also allow the wielder to tie up melee combatants, giving them a measure of control against rushing foes.

At its most extreme, the wielder can use the blades themselves at the edge of their range. This is difficult for many reasons. The chains create a delay as the blade lags behind in the swing. Knowing the exact distance of the weapon is also challenging. Those factors aside, the leverage and whip this weapon can create is intense, allowing the condensed dimensional fabric to slice almost any foe.

Use with caution.

The Harbinger's Gift:

[+100 Strength, Constitution, Endurance, and Willpower.

+50 Intelligence, Perception, and Luck

+10,000 health | +1,000 health regen/min

-10% to Charisma | -10% to Mana Regeneration | +10% to Health Regeneration | + 25% Dimensional Resistance]

(Positive bonuses doubled if member of Harbinger's Legion | Does not stack with other items carrying a Harbinger's enhancement)

+300% Critical Hit Damage (with blades)

+50% Critical Hit Damage

It would make for an interesting long term project for Althea, though she wouldn't use it in the upcoming battle.

With all those various designs finished and piled into the corner of the main room, I got to training. By the time I had a set of goals planned out Torix and Althea returned above our base. Not long after, Chrona and Krog arrived as well, both of them suited up in Skyburner attire. I gave them the location and told them to take a roundabout route here. Given our recent targeting by an assassin, they respected my wishes.

As I walked up, I introduced the two groups, letting them get to know each other a bit. With that finished, I created a hole in the center of our base, allowing Chrona and Krog to come in. Once inside, I bragged a bit about my constructive ingenuity, really soaking up their compliments. It was nice to be lauded for something else besides my ability to smash faces.

They reacted particularly well to the armor and gear I made them. I suited them up, showing the gialgathens how to put the gear on and seeing how it fit. It was a bit too loose for Chrona, though my model fit perfectly on Krog. I mentioned the fur fix and how it would make her more comfortable, to which she rubbed in Krog's face. Even ancient frog dragons could be petty. Go figure.

The best part of the meetup was seeing Althea though. She ran up, and I lifted her up in a circle, both of us smiling at each other. It made Krog gag and Chrona swoon. I couldn't care less about what they thought. I wasn't here to impress anyone, outside of my crafting ability.

With our reunion settled, we drafted up a few battle plans for the operation. Althea and Torix would sit in the back, offering potent spell support and suppressive fire. Krog and I would be the vanguards, running in front and smashing skulls in with our melee potency. Any targets we missed, Chrona would catch by creating her time fields in the middle of our group.

She was the key to our formation. She'd slow down any attackers that got passed Krog and me. On the other hand, projectiles and the like would get slowed down in her time dilation field as well. The temporal area acted as a potent offensive and defensive utility in that way, adding security to Althea and Torix. Should someone manage to pass both our lines of defense, well, Althea could handle herself up close. That much was certain.

Atop of all these advantages, Torix collected an army of lower level silvers as well. This unnerved the two gialgathens at first, but after a few illustrations of Torix's dominance in the matter, their fears wisped out. With so many layers of strategic defense, this would enable Torix and Althea to unleash the full fury of their offensive abilities.

Any single targets would get decimated by Althea's Breaker abilities. Tiny swarms would fall to the aoe and armies of Torix. It was a potent offensive core for our entire team, instilling confidence in us. Our defensive unit wasn't anything to scoff at either. I offered tremendous disruption with my gravity magic, and any prolonged conflict would favor me. That made our long term prospects much better.

Krog's illusion magic wasn't to be undermined either. All in all, I almost felt sorry for whatever it was we'd be fighting. Almost.

With our plan assured, we took the next two days to try out the gear I made and execute a variety of tactics. While we were in a hurry to destroy whatever it was in the Skyburner base, rushing in and dying was idiotic. That's why we took this time to develop our plan and execute on it in a few silver dominated territories. Getting to know each other was an added bonus, strengthening the cohesion of the group as a whole.

Once we got to a certain level of fluidity, I even gained a new skill. Hallelujah.

New Skill gained! Teamwork(lvl 5) – Others fight alone. You fight with others as one. Adds better application of team strategies when fighting with others. Effect dependent on level.

It was a nice boon, giving me the ability to synergize with Chrona and Krog more. I even enhanced some of their movements with gravity wells, extending my own gravitational enhancements to them. Though difficult, it gave them crisp movement and unnatural dexterity. Hard to match a gravity-defying maneuver, especially when that literally describes what we were doing.

With everything in place, we headed out with over a week left before my final match in the tournament. As we flew over Giess, Chrona and Krog described various wildlife and Fauna. From hallucinogenic flowers to soul stealing antlions, they expressed a medley of odd yet fascinating facts. I never knew that ice hydras enjoyed mating with

fire drakes. It was like how lots of girls enjoyed dating a bad boy even though they knew they shouldn't.

It made the trip more enjoyable than it had any right to be. By the time we reached the sludge ocean, we'd passed the acquaintance phase and were approaching full-on friend status. And not in the Facebook sense either.

Once we passed into silver territory though, Krog and Chrona sobered up quickly. Even though they were much stronger than any silvers, they feared quite a few of the parasites among them. The Yana worms, in particular, struck fear in their hearts. The idea of losing your mind to brain-eating worms was worrying no doubt, but it wasn't any worse than getting eaten.

They cleared up my misconception at that point. Way back in gialgathen's history, yana worms were used during interrogations. They weakened the mind of their host, making them susceptible to deception. At some point, you could almost enslave the host, turning them into a thrall. Maintaining that kind of balance of Yana worms required routine surgery to remove excess worms, however. This made long-term enslavement impossible.

At the worst stage of this mind destruction, a gialgathen could be convinced to kill their family, however. To most, that was far worse than death, to which I had to agree. The practice of using Yana worms in this manner died out centuries ago, but the scar remained. It was a lesson to arrogant gialgathens about the potency of silvers.

Of course, not all gialgathens listened, but it was harrowing nonetheless. They described a few other parasitic creatures as well. One variety of fungus would graft onto the lining of their lungs. This is where its name, Hollow Lung came from. Once it ate through the sensitive tissues and grew to a certain size, the fungus would attain sentience.

The fungus would then threaten the host to spread its infection or else die. Entire cities of gialgathens had fallen to this infection before, controlled through the organ replacing fungus. After a few more horror stories, it made me wonder how the hell the Skyburners survived in the middle of silver territory. Krog explained that this kind of thing happened to the stupid and unwary for the most part.

That was why they were so wary. Made sense to me.

It took two days of flying and carrying sleeping people in gravity wells before we reached our destination. It took so long because of the aforementioned rests, but also because Torix's army of silvers was relatively slow. Merjects were excellent swimmers in the sludge. Engorgs? Not so much. Torix had it balanced out so that swimming silvers and flying silvers could carry their less mobile cousins though. Even then, it took quite a while before we got to our destination.

That's where we found ourselves. Surrounded by an endless sludge ocean and thousands of subservient silvers, Chrona and Krog flapped their wings. The wind of their flight sent waves of sludge across the sea. Yellow egg rafts floated over these ripples, sending merjects into a frenzy over their young.

Althea floated in place with her legs crossed, she and I carried in my gravity wells. Torix stood over his black mana cloud, looking like a menacing overlord with his new armor set. He quite enjoyed the crown of thorns in particular, mentioning it as a nice touch. With our group of five ready and waiting, Chrona sent out a telepathic wave to everyone,

"Though I enjoy floating over toxic oceans as much as anyone, how are we to reach the bottom of the ocean here?"

I cracked my hands, "Leave it to me."

Using a vast reservoir of mana, I created a colossal antigravity well over us. At the same time, I generated a denser but smaller gravity well at its center. This counteracted the core of the antigravity well, but the edges of the magic stayed intact. With everyone in its center, we hovered down to the sea of sludge.

It was time to destroy the final Skyburner base.

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The vast waves of purple muck pushed away from us, my magic letting us dive into the abyss. After a few minutes of sinking down, Krog murmured,

"You'd better not overstretch your mana reserves. I doubt we'd be able to crawl out of this before drowning."

I waved away his concerns, "I'll be fine."

“I pray to Emagrotha your right about that,” Chrona whispered.

Two hours later, we reached deep into the depths of the grimy tides. Thousands of feet down, we landed onto gelatinous mud. Gross, but we managed. After a bit of searching, we happened across some sort of pulsing through the depths.

Assuming it came from the life signatures, we walked towards the source. We found a compound at the bottom of the ocean, a plume of sludge rising from its center. As the ripples ebbed along with the edge of our capsule of air, Althea frowned,

“It smells so bad here.”

Chrona nodded, “It reeks of the silver’s lifeblood, fresh as the day Lehesion destroyed a portion of the continent.”

“It’s oozing from beneath some sort of facility,” I murmured. “It’s hard to make out, but I can get an idea based on how the sludge is moving.”

Krog scoffed, “How is that even possible?”

“Look closely at the way the waves flow off the bottom of our air bubble. They’re shallower than the ones at the top of the sphere. Something is blocking the flow of liquid to an extent, slowing it down. The bottom isn’t colder than the top flow either, meaning this isn’t some natural current. The colder muck should both sink and be harder to move.”

“That explains how you understand that something is there, but how do you know it’s a facility?” Chrona said.

“Well, that’s because the interference in the flow is too even. A jagged rock would create a more chaotic flow, and the temperature would be more variable.”

Althea pointed at the ground, “I can sort of tell too. The ground here is warmer than the ground we walked on earlier. I’m not a detective, but there’s a source of warmth here. Considering what we’re looking for, it’s not that big of a leap to assume it’s the facility.”

Chrona and Krog looked at each other. They stared back at us, “Your group’s tracking is remarkably...detailed.”

I didn’t tell them about how Torix and I spent days and days looking for a giant Skyburner in a mountain. Keeping them in unjustified awe worked fine for me.

With the facility found, we planned out what to do before entering it.

“Several environmental hazards may be present,” Torix pulled out a gas mask for Althea, “Spores and other hazardous conditions could be present as well. It would be better if we filtered out any kind of debris in the air as well. Perhaps creating our own personalized rebreathers would assist us as well.”

The gialgathens stared at him, both of them nervous. Torix channeled some mana into his hand, “Fret not. There’s little need to worry. I researched a spell for just such a purpose. I waited as long as possible before using it as it has a time limit before it expires. Simply channel your mana into this mana construct, and it will maintain a small area of air for you to breath.”

Torix generated two semi-translucent bubbles of mana.

“That being said, if the facility collapses and Daniel is not nearby, you will come into contact with this...mush. While I no doubt trust that you both can tolerate it for a while, getting out from the bottom of this ocean might be impossible. Stick near us, and there will be no need to worry.”

Torix pushed each construct to them. Althea locked her hands behind herself, “Uh, thanks for coming here with us. I know it’s a lot to ask for you to trust us.”

Chrona guided one of the constructs onto her face with her tail, “He’s here for the goodwill of our planet. It would shame us to let him do so on his own.”

“Good.” Althea smiled, “Still happy you’re both here though.”

She put on her mask, appearing downright menacing in combination with her suit of black wires on. It contrasted her politeness, sending a wave of dissonance at me. I shook the sensation as Torix cupped his chin,

“You won’t be needing a mask, will you?”

I shook my head, “If the spores can kill me like that, then I doubt the masks and magic will stop them either.”

“Excellent. That saves me a bit of mana. Now, It will do us good to scope out the facility before entering it. The chance of them discovering our presence is low, and we have much to gain if the facility is of notable size.”

I gave him a brusque nod, giving him my approval. The others must have too as he opened a screen,

“I’ve already added some extra functionality to my one of my statuses. Using one of the Speaker’s software updates, I can map out new dungeons and areas three-dimensionally. Based on your descriptions, we should be able to get a good grasp of the entire area, allowing us to efficiently peruse it. Whenever your ready, Daniel.”

With his signal, I lifted us up into the air, carrying our air bubble around the first wall. I described the proportions of the walls and where they ended, using Hunter of Many as a reference. My depictions were foggy at best, but Torix drew in the details I missed, creating a graphic image in front of him. Althea murmured, “Did you practice with that before now?”

“Ah, you noticed,” Torix gloated. “I spent several hours on this task, ensuring I owned the tools to create something of value. My skills are by no means perfect-”

Torix pressed his four fingers together, pulling them apart, lines drawn between each bony of his hands. He let his hands stay still for a second, allowing the rectangle to sync into place, becoming a part of the hologram.

“But they should be acceptable for this purpose.”

We mapped out the rest of the facility in relative silence, everyone watching us work. This took some time and effort as we positioned ourselves around the facility. It was a good thing we did too; the facility was massive considering where it was. The map could be invaluable when exploring the inside of it.

It turned out to be a fully functional headquarters. A dozen warehouses, hallways, and rooms littered the structure. It left us scratching our heads as to how the hell they kept it running, though Torix had a few ideas. Without any clues on the surface though, we explored our final option.

Going inside.

We selected the best place to enter with the lowest probability of being found on entry. One of the buildings was connected by one hallway to the rest of the buildings. That meant less sound would leak out into the rest of the place. It looked like a storage warehouse as well, saying fewer people were likely to visit the site often.

With our point of entry scoped out, I floated us towards the wall. Althea cleaned through the two-foot thick steel wall with ease, her spacial slicing ludicrous as always. There was something strange about watching her grow a blade of bone over the rifle I made her then cleaving through iron with it. It was one of those moments where I realized how insane what we were doing was.

I shook off that feeling as we went inside. We found no one left alive, as Torix suggested. Blood was spattered onto the walls, though no corpses were left to linger. The lights blinked on and off, giving an ominous vibe to what looked like a pantry. Well, was a pantry. Something had eaten large swaths of the food stored here, and they did so by mauling any packaging the food was stored in.

Along the paths of its destruction, circular imprints were embedded in the concrete floor, marking the size of the killer. They mirrored Althea's foot size. Damn. Smaller than I expected.

Before leaving, I channeled mana, heating the steel wall into molten metal. After fusing the welds, I cooled it by pulling the heat out of it. Without needing to hold the gunk off the wall, I slowly shut down my gravity well. It was like setting the pressure of the ocean back onto the base. We all waited for a minute, making sure the wall would hold.

It did before Krog, and I paced forward and scoped out the area. It didn't take long to for me to verify that the facility was, in fact, empty as a ghost town. Everyone following close behind us came to the same conclusion not long after us.

Krog murmured, "It smells like death."

"Do tell us what death smells like?" Chrona said while rolling her eyes.

"Like dry blood and stale air," Krog said.

Chrona took a whiff, "Hmmm...It does."

The entire building smelled like a butcher's store. It was clean and sterile in most place, but every now and again, there was the curdling smell of a fresh corpse still here. The entire mood of our journey changed at that point. Everyone sobered up, getting on guard. Without wanting to wait any longer, we moved into our formation.

Krog and I stayed out front, both of us survivable. Chrona readied one of her massive blue orbs above her, keeping it contained. Staff and magic prepared, Torix marked into his 3-d map in his obelisk as we walked. Althea held her new rifle out, ready to obliterate anything in sight. With my back covered, I kept my eyes facing forward.

I reached the end of the food warehouse, finding doorways large enough for gialgathens to step through. Surprised but undeterred, I stepped ahead of Krog, ready to take the brunt of whatever infested this place. I knew I was the least likely to die if something hit me without warning.

Despite our worry, we found nothing in the vast hallways outside of more blood splatters. There were no signs of fighting, no bullet casings or chipped concrete, and especially no corpses. It was unnerving, like walking through some surreal nightmare. Despite our unease, we made steady progress through the facility, stepping through dozens of warehouses and corridors.

The spotty lighting from the flickering lights was fixed when Torix created a ball of white fire. In tandem, he and I kept our guard up the entire time, even as minutes of searching turned into hours. The others faltered at times, unable to handle the constant tension of the situation. It wasn't much of a problem, however. Torix was right with his reading that nobody was here.

We sped up our search from then on out. Even if something was here, it wasn't the most perceptive creature. Either that or it didn't find us to be a threat worth taking on. If so, I reveled in proving the damn thing wrong. After eight hours of searching through offices, cafeterias, and educational facilities, we hit the jackpot – we found the research labs and an open rift.

Turns out, the facility was connected to an active dungeon just like the last research lab. We explored the open cavern first, an entrance made for it and everything. What we found were harvesters identical to the ones I saw with the Hybrid from before. They were creating artificial dungeons and harvesting the denizens inside them, somehow. Either that or this place conveniently had a dungeon right where Emagrotha died.

I wasn't quite gullible enough to believe that though.

With the threat of another hybrid on our hands, Althea and I warned the others about the likelihood of facing another one of the abominations. It set Chrona and Krog both at ease and on high alert. On the one hand, we kicked one's ass already. On the other, it shocked them to discover that one hybrid killed an entire troop of Skyburners.

Krog took that last bit particularly hard. He was a Skyburner after all, so hearing that he was among fodder was hard to understand. As he stared in the distance with hollowed eyes, Althea walked up beside him. She laid a hand on the beast's side,

"That thing caught them by surprise. That's the only reason they didn't win."

Krog shook his head, "I never imagined that the eldritch could destroy us so easily given a chance...It's harrowing."

I waved a hand, "Not quite the eldritch, but yeah, it can happen to damn near anybody. That's why Schema's so adamant about everyone getting off their asses and killing them."

"I've heard it from weaklings, but to hear the same adage from someone I respect puts it in a different light." Krog sighed, "We must rethink our approach if we are to remain living on Giess."

I pointed at him, “Now that’s what I like to hear. We can’t save your planet on our own no matter how badass we are.”

Chrona nodded sagely, “When we go back to Rivaria, we shall spread the word of what we found here. Krog and I will scour the land of these eldritch, though we will need help to find them. Our tracking isn’t as advanced as yours.”

I cupped my chin, glancing up, “Hmmm, I know a guy who might be able to get you into Schema’s system. God knows he owes me some favors.”

Althea walked up beside me, “You’re talking about the Overseer, aren’t you?”

I smirked, “Bingo. Who knows. They might even let gialgathens into the system after they start clearing out enough eldritch.”

Krog shook his head, “Few of our kind own the work ethic necessary for that kind of task. It would be like throwing jewels to lightning elk. They would just eat them instead of understanding their value.”

Torix clapped his hands behind us, “We have a base to uncover. Back into the formation everyone.”

Krog grumbled as we followed Torix’s command, but he followed the lich’s order. We all did. Chatting while in enemy territory was an easy way to get killed. The hybrid could quickly destroy the place around us, putting us into the surrounding ocean. If that happened, I’d encompass everyone in another gravity well, allowing us to flee without getting smothered.

I needed to react if that happened though. On top of that, evasion would be our primary concern in that circumstance. Feeding a hybrid and making it stronger was our worst-case scenario, so we planned accordingly. Even then, nothing about that kind of situation was comforting.

The pressure here was extremely high. The gunk above us was denser than water, and that’s what made the facility so unlikely in the first place. Althea and Torix would be crushed. It cost quite a bit of mana just to maintain the sphere of air around us and prevent its collapse as we descended. Doing all that while fighting sounded like a chore at best and a deathtrap at worst.

We had a job to do, however. After exploring the eldritch cave and gathering a basic dungeon core, we scoured the labs from top to bottom. As we stepped into one of the data rooms, Torix, Althea, and I tried downloading the files there. The computers didn't enable uploading of any sort, and I mean that literally. The first few terminals we tried connecting with blew up the moment we set up a data link with our obelisks.

Without an obvious way into the devices, we skulked around for a while, trying to break through the security. We weren't very successful. After a while, we discovered that most of the information was encoded, adding yet another layer of protection. Even on their desks, they used a language that wasn't logged in Schema's language database. In fact, it resisted the algorithms used by Schema to decipher words.

That required intense technical and insider knowledge. Schema decoded Hod's language in seconds after I met him, let me understand the eltari reasonably quickly. Even after hours of searching through documents, Schema couldn't decode this new cipher. It was a steel wall to discovering what was going on here.

Without an accessible, clear log of info about the place, we focused on inferring what we could. The first tip we found was that they were using devices disconnected from Schema's network. They had their own intranet for the facility. This place was connected with simplex fiber optics to the outside world as well. The cords enabled them to send messages out but not receive them.

This system would allow them to research without relying on obelisks or Schema's built-in network. After a few hours of inspection, we figured out a few other interesting tidbits. The entire facility used a lot of paper to do their documentation. It was a hell of a lot more secure than using anything tech related.

Most of the tech they did use was in the form of fat terminals. We figured out why after trying to take one out of the ground. As I grabbed the metal box welded to the floor and pulled, the damn thing exploded. Turns out, carrying these terminals to a Sentinel would be a hell of a lot more difficult than laptops.

Even worse, the tech was outdated even by human standards. This made the devices like lead blocks. Storing one in a dimensional ring was damn near impossible unless you were massive. Yet I would struggle to hold more than two of them since the terminals took up so much volume.

Silly as all this sounds, this was a vital element of the facility's defenses. If I took a terminal and gave it to a Sentinel, they could call on a personalized A.I. to hack it. No matter how multi-layered the monitor's security was, Schema would obliterate any defense no matter the complexity. I refused to believe that was possible considering what he was. As an A.I. hacking should be one of his primary worries as far as killing him was concerned.

Point is, with the bombs implanted in the terminals and them being welded to the floor, we couldn't just waltz out of here with them.

A Sentinel wasn't about to walk to the bottom of the ocean to find one of these either. This made storing and removing the damn terminals both tedious and time-consuming. This evolved from a thorn in our side to a pain in our asses after blowing up three monitors. With everyone exhausted, we set up camp and slept outside the research rooms. Well, everyone that needed to rest that is.

After everyone woke up again, we set back to the task. Getting past the welding was simple enough. Althea sliced through the steel plating using an elongated claw from the tip of her finger. After that, there was a sea of wires ingrained into the floor. Althea and I were mystified, but Torix helped us out.

While not a tech-lord by any stretch of the imagination, Torix understood simple wiring. Using several online video guides, we spent two hours of slicing wires and rerouting power sources. It was a slow, painful process. After that, the terminal we painstakingly dismantled blew up.

Fuck.

Still, it was a solid fourth attempt by my standards at least. The next terminal we attempted taking out was better but again a bust. Turns out, each terminal used a different wiring scheme. Another hour and a half later, we got rid of the wires. Before lifting the terminal, we took out three bombs from inside the structure.

Althea's polymorphism proved pivotal to reaching the nooks and crannies of the machines. The issue came when a killswitch activated as I picked up the device. A sand driven mechanism in the damn thing shut on when the terminal tilted any direction by even the slightest degree. Great. Fucking great.

I wasn't about to let some ruthless, unliving machine continue to kick our asses. The sand in the terminal activated a killswitch when poured in any direction. This would set off a surge of electricity, wiping the disc and its contents. On the sixth terminal, I did something useful aside from offering moral support.

After removing the plating, wires, bombs, and the killswitch, yet another failsafe activated. A tiny emp grenade stored beneath the monitor activated. It began charging the moment I opened up my dimensional storage. Before it unleashed a burst of electromagnetism, I set my palm onto the device and drained the energy from it. It was electricity, so it proved simple enough to use with my Lightning Eater skill.

Dodging a bullet, we all sighed in relief before raising our guard back up. A few minutes later, and we finally set one of the monitors into my dimensional storage. Eureka, we were victorious. One monitor down, over a hundred left to go.

How could we take a hundred? See, most people were limited with how much volume they could put into their dimensional storages. The rings Schema gave out were like that. Even if you stored very little weight in them, the size of anything stored would cost an equivalent volume of flesh and bone. For each terminal, that was a lot to ask.

I could regenerate the damage done, but if anything snuck up on us after I stored something, we were fucked. Fortunately, my personal storage didn't have the same limitation. I gained a perk called Independent Space when I became a living dimension. It wasn't limited by volume, only mass. Without the restriction of space, I could store hundreds of these terminals in my storage and carry them out. I weighed many tons after all.

My advantage was the worst case scenario for whoever designed the security here. I could carry all of the chunky machines out of this place without risking our deaths hundreds of times.

Over the rest of the day, we industrialized our terminal stealing process. Turns out, there can only be so many different kinds of wiring schematics. After mapping a dozen of them, Torix could guide Althea through the process with ease. After the next score of grounded screens, Althea could feel her way through them, going through the motions out of habit.

I abused my abilities to their utmost extent as well, packing away anything that wasn't bolted to the floor. Figuratively speaking of course because we stole quite a bit that was bolted to the floor. Our sheer resourcefulness left Chrona and Krog dumbfounded.

"I still can't fathom how you're carrying so many of those devices," Chrona mused.

Torix cackled, "I would go so far as to say all that matters is that he can do it, not how he does it."

"I...I suppose," she murmured with a telepathic wave.

Krog eyed us as I put yet another terminal into my personal storage,

"Are we going to store this entire hellhole in that portal of yours?"

Torix glared at him, "If we could, we would. This is a wealth of data, and since we've no method of accessing it, we need an outsider's help."

Krog pointed his tail at us, "I thought you dirtwalkers--"

Chrona smacked his side with her tail. Krog continued, "Ahem, I thought you Earthwalkers were the best at using those...things."

Torix rolled his fiery eyes, "We each carry different qualities. Neither I, Daniel, or Althea know enough about hacking and security to harvest the information stored in these."

"So then they're useless," Krog said with a brow raised.

"No. We can uplink them directly to a Sentinel. Considering the importance of this base, it shouldn't be too difficult to get a personalized A.I. of Schema's to crack open the secrets within these devices."

"Hmmm," Krog tilted his head, "So you're all too dumb to do this on your own is what I'm hearing..."

Torix scoffed, “Do tell, can you access these devices? Do you even know what they are?”

“Well, no-“

“Then be silent,” Torix snapped.

Krog frowned but chose to remain silent. As much as we enjoyed finding all this tech, the entire process of exploring this base was exhausting. Everyone’s patience was wearing thin by now, even mine.

“Calm down.” Althea groaned, “That’s the last terminal here. Let’s move on and get this over with. Please.”

She had the hardest job out of all of us, yet she complained the least. I was impressed, but Althea might snap at any moment. On the other hand, I waved my head back and forth, trying to shake out my boredom. For such an exciting find, I expected more action. So far, we walked around and cut wires the entire time. Yay, fun.

I was keeping relatively alert and ready to jump at a moment’s notice though. A quick reaction was necessary if we were to all survive this. Even though the two life signatures Torix found were contained, they were massive and still here. We needed to find whatever they were and extinguish them after getting out of here.

With that in mind, we finished the final lab up, moving towards one of the last remaining research facility. It bolstered moral as Torix announced that fact. Up till now, gathering all we could had been the priority. We had no guarantee that the facility would survive the battle against whatever was down here. This was our only chance to gather intel before then.

With the last lucrative room of the facility left, we trekked onward into the depths of the facility. I stepped inside the lab first, ready to take the brunt of a heavy-handed attack. I expected resistance since this was the last room left. Like all the others, it was empty of any movement. Unlike the others, quite a few things looked alive.

In a long room, dozens of tubes lined a series of walkways. Inside vats of blue fluid, twisted bodies were suspended. Floating in liquid nitrogen, dozens of these experiments were set up on display. What lied within showed the horrific origins of the Hybrid.

At the start of the line, the experiments were just fusions of flesh and wire. The silvers were in the process of converting espens into metal. Others had the harvesters stitched onto their bodies, their meat conjoined. These victims were showing signs of being consumed by the eldritch energy coursing through their veins.

As I paced back through the room, the vast majority of the victims were in the middle of screaming. After showing signs of rejection, they must have thrown them into the nitrogen for further study. After a bit of walking, the bodies looked less warped, showing fewer signs of rejection.

Before I walked any further, the others stepped in and discovered the sick sights as well. I couldn't blame them. Even now, a bit of nausea welled up in my chest, but I held it down.

Althea didn't.

Whenever she got a good look, she vomited onto the floor. This was a carnival of horrors with all of it out in the open, so I didn't blame her. Even Torix was given pause as he stared at one of the flickering vials,

"Even I never sunk so low as to graft eldritch onto civilians."

I turned to Torix, "You experimented with eldritch?"

"Does that truly surprise you?"

I spread out my arms, "Well yeah, yeah it does."

"It was a long time ago and long before we met. I've changed since then. I've grown in both character and ability. Those trivial pursuits no longer enthrall me. That being said," Torix placed a hand on a chilled vat,

“This goes far deeper than any research I attempted. To fuel this kind of initiative would require unequaled levels of will and drive. This level of supply would involve orbital deliveries at a regulated rate.”

Torix mused, “To keep it secret, they must have used some large group of unknowns, perhaps the remnants? If so, the making of this compound must have been unbelievably expensive. Few have access to such funds.”

Krog growled, “It was Thisbey.”

Torix shook his head, “No, this wasn’t the work of some planetary conglomerate. Hiding an operation of this size would require multiple solar systems worth of Thisbey’s working together. A far larger threat is looming on our horizon.”

Torix waved a hand, “Simply keeping the scientists engaged in the work would require tremendous charisma and inspiration.”

Chrona murmured, “Either that or fear...”

As they talked, I trekked deeper into the storage unit, finding less deformed bodies towards the back. Over the years, they made steady progress towards their goal or what I assumed was their goal. A few experiments left in the end weren’t even deformed, showing few if any signs of mutation. That happened first with fusing the eldritch and silvers. The eldritch and espens followed soon after that.

Several dozen vats later, I found a collection of hybrids frozen in place. They were progressively more humanoid, each one looking more stable. At the very end of the tubes, I found the final vat in the line. It was empty, broken glass on the floor. Above the glass, there was a name tag written out. It was the only name that wasn’t in gibberish. It sent chills up my spine as I read it aloud,^{566t}

“The Hybrid – Version 2.0.”

Chapter 200: The Fallen

I turned towards the others, “Guys, we have a problem.”

Torix glanced at the tubes, “That much is obvious.”

“No, we’ve got one of them out on the loose.”

The others skulked up to us, even Chrona and Krog able to fit in the high ceilings here. I pointed at the shattered container, “This is one of those life signatures. If what you guessed is correct Torix, it’s probably even stronger than the last Hybrid.”

Torix stayed silent, his expression clouded with thought. After a few moments, he grabbed the side of his skull,

“We’re in some sort of conspiracy here. There are galactic forces at work, and we’re unequipped to handle this line of work. We’ll need to visit the Overseer and request assistance. Considering the sheer scope of this project’s success, he’ll be forced to give some support.”

“Why would they do that?” Althea said. “They wouldn’t do that for Yawm’s research, and it was almost exactly this.”

“The difference between them is twofold.” Torix raised his finger, “This research has produced tenable results. Yawm’s own studies resulted in deformed abominations, nothing unusual as far as mad scientists are concerned. This...this is a working Hybrid of some sort. That alone warrants attention.”

Torix raised another finger, pointing at it, “The second reason is that Yawm was underfunded and understaffed. Maintaining a compound the size of a small city under a dense ocean is nearly impossible, yet here it is in its full glory. Based on the number of vats here, there’s an enormous amount of time put into this project as well, decades likely.”

“Funding that kind of bullshit would require treasuries worth of funding,” I murmured.

“Precisely. We’ll likely find more, but in order to uncover the depths of this sedition against Schema, we must press on,” Torix said.

Krog glared at the line of subjects, “What of these monstrosities? They must be culled. From what you’ve spoken off, they might lead to an apocalypse of our world and many others.” He whipped his tail behind himself, “I’d be happy to do it.”

Althea raised her hands and shouted, “Wait. Don’t.” The Skyburner tilted his head to her. Althea continued,

“Smashing them won’t kill them. We need to disintegrate them from the inside and kill every piece of them. Otherwise, a tiny clump of them might survive.” She turned to me,

“Daniel has this weird aura.”

Krog and Chrona shivered, their eyes widening. Chrona hissed, “We both felt it. It’s like melting into soup.”

Althea nodded, “Yeah, I know the feeling. The thing is, that aura only kills organic things. It doesn’t hurt nonliving stuff.” She turned to me, “Right?”

I pointed at her, “Ahhh, that’s right. I can just mold my aura over these tubes and kill them in stasis. It won’t remove the liquid nitrogen, letting them escape.”

Torix leaned back, “That’s an exemplary solution, Althea.”

She grinned, “Thank you.”

“We need evidence though,” I waved a hand around. “Otherwise no one will trust us.”

A fly zoomed into the room, its little buzz notable among this asylum’s silence.

“Worry not,” Torix said while reaching a finger up for the fly to land on. “I’ve been using these controlled flies as mapping tools. They’ve accessed this facility in detail, giving us all we need as far as footage is concerned.”

I pointed at a fly, “Why make us walk through this entire building then?”

“These creatures are limited in their intelligence. They can hold only a few images in their minds before overloading utterly. Due to those constraints, they work best at

mental snapshots. Considering the importance of detail regarding this mission, I believed a more comprehensive viewpoint was necessary.”

I nodded before turning to a vat of liquid, “Then it’s time I killed these things?”

“Yes. Do try one of the hybrids at a time, however. If they happen to awaken, fighting more than one of them at once will prove itself to be a deathtrap,” Torix contemplated aloud.

Heeding his advice, I created a cloud of my Event Horizon, the aura bending to my will. After pacing back to the entrance of the lab room, I shifted the draining haze over the first vat of liquid nitrogen. The half silver died in an instant, overwhelmed by Event Horizon’s damage. I continued this on the lab’s experiments, holding my aura over the bodies until the corpses disintegrated into black blots.

It was a potent method for executing the creatures. Torix himself admitted these things weren’t even fully alive to begin with, the limitations of life sensing apparent. They showed next to no signs of maintaining a grip to this realm, yet Event Horizon affected them all the same. To me, it verified that these things would come to life if they escaped.

Either way, I killed them all over the next hour and a half. A few of the last experiments took over ten minutes to kill apiece, but none of them shifted in their tubes. We noted their apparent weakness to cold before moving on to the research logs stored here. After tearing through the terminals and putting them in storage, we moved on.

With most rooms found, we investigated the rest of the facility near the plume of toxic sludge at its center. Something was making it, though we didn’t know what exactly. With no other clues to go off of, we split up and scrutinized the many passages near the center of the rooms. Torix left two of his spy-flies on them, letting us find them. Two hours into the process, Althea sent Torix and me a message.

Althea Tolstoy, the Shapeless Arbiter(lvl 7,031 | Class: Breaker | Giess: 4:41 P.M. 4/1/26) – Found it. The passageway was hidden behind a wall. It’s beside the cafeteria on the northern side of the facility. Meet me there, and I’ll take you guys to it.

After reading it, I followed the messages recommendation using a copy of Torix’s map. As I arrived, the others were ready to go. Althea took us through a few winding corridors before we reached one of the terminal rooms again. With wires jutting out of

the ground from dozens of missing terminals, we arrived. Althea led us to a back wall, a plate of steel sliced through already.

Behind is, a series of gears exposed a vault door. Althea pointed at it, "I couldn't figure out how it worked, but cutting through worked."

Torix pinched the bridge of his nose, "Gah, I was so distracted with the terminal work that I never anticipated they'd hide it here."

"Eh, it makes sense," I said with a shrug. "Whatever it is at the bottom of this facility, they must be taking notes on it. Having the terminals nearby makes it convenient." I glanced at the vault door, "Well...as convenient as a giant safe door can be."

Althea put her hands on her hips and stood up straight, "It'll be pretty convenient for us. I was just waiting for you guys to get here in case something crazy popped out."

Althea polymorphed her hand into a claw of bone. With a swift slice, she cleaved through feet of steel like a dolphin diving through water. I reached out a hand, grabbing the giant plate with a gravity well. After setting it down, we proceeded down a staircase. As we did, Torix muttered,

"They disguised this stairwell as a slanted support for the room above it. Clever."

After pacing down the steps, we reached a series of glass rooms. They looked like quarantine facilities, yet they were empty outside of beds, nightstands, and a bathroom. It looked like someone opened the door and pulled everyone out of their cells. That assumption was a bit too optimistic for what I expected of their fates; they'd been food and little else in the end.

We searched the rooms in great detail though, and we found several journals that logged their stay here in their glass prisons. Torix read them as we went on.

After pacing past the quarantine facility, we reached a series of vaults. Althea cleaved through the doorways, letting us inspect the insides. As we opened the rooms, Chrona described what was in them.

“These are sacred relics of gialgathen ancestry. It is as if the researchers scoured all of Giess for any details of our origin.”

Althea picked up a skull with primitive paint marks spread across it, “What for, exactly?”

“That is what I struggle to understand. This place is like a museum, but it lacks any respect for the keepsakes it carries. It’s as if they attempted to find something and failed,” Chrona thought out aloud.

I tossed an unusual looking rock onto a pile of junk, “Well, I don’t think there’s much of value here. All this is way too old to be useful. If anything, it all looks like it’s about to fall apart.”

Krog grumbled, “Perhaps that is fitting. We too will fall apart if that, er, the hybrid is not found.”

“Quite.” Torix said. “I believe I’ve found something of note on that topic, however.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Like what?”

“The journal of a researcher,” Torix held up one of the journals in his hand. “It contains the account of a scientist stored here after being exposed to a sample of the hybrid. His stay was not brief either, and his account is thorough. All the other accounts are by prisoners with no knowledge of the facility itself.”

I raised a fist, “Alright, we’ll finally get some explanations about this place.”

Torix sighed, “They’re not pleasant, mind you. If anything, these pages dive into the depths of sentient psychology and how it can go astray when isolated.”

“Can you read it out loud? It would be tough for us to all read it at once,” Althea chimed.

“Of course.” Torix raised a hand and lifted up some imaginary glasses,

“This is the account of Fredrick Monostaria, a researcher of facility A-04. My specialty is in the biomechanical containment of the hybrids. It was and still would be my great honor in studying here, though I’ll lose my mind if contained in this glass cage much longer. Writing may provide me with a sense of respite, however.”

Torix nodded, “I enjoy his style.”

I rolled my eyes, “Yeah, real prim and proper. Come on, we’re on a schedule.”

“Of course.” Torix turned a page,

“I suppose I’ll explain what trapped me here. I was exposed to a variation of our hybridization project. A sample of the liquid hydrogen that stored it was shattered as I carried it into the quarantined study room. Unwilling to take a risk, they trapped me here until further notice. All of my living arrangements have been provided via portals, giving me a comfortable way of life, albeit boring.”

Torix adjusted the book in his hand,

“Even after a week of isolation and no chemical reaction to the hybrid, they’ve kept me here, ensnared by their fears. I can relate as I would no doubt do the same should the situation be reversed. This gives me no solace. It is lonely and cold here. Perhaps I can have a guard stationed here, one I may discuss matters of pertinence with Time will tell.”

Torix turned the page, the handwriting more jagged,

“It has been some time since I last wrote in my journal. The powers that be deemed my writing a danger unto myself and those around me. I believe they’ve become paranoid as of late. Time will tell how deeply set their sense of mania had sunken into their minds.”

Torix glanced at us, “This is where the journal takes a decisive turn in its contents.”

He continued reading.

“Another scientist was exposed to the hybrid and stored beside me. He did not seem even somewhat afflicted by a blight of any sort. In fact, he seemed saner than the researcher that brought me meals every day. After a bit of discussion, I discovered the cause – the team leader had begun silencing voices of discontent.”

Torix flipped the page,

“After many discussions with my fellow prisoner, I weened many facts of life had changed since my imprisonment. Several scientists had begun losing their sanity, locked deep under the depths here. The lead scientist isn’t isolating these incidents by sending them back to the surface. This is to maintain the secrecy of this project. Considering our goals, that is understandable.”

Torix waved a hand,

“What is not reasonable is his sentencing of researchers here. He deems those that disagree with his leadership as infected with the newly branded mental disorder: Depth Sickness. That is why my fellow prisoner was sentenced here. He was exposed to nothing. He spoke an utterance against the authority here, and he paid the price for it. I’ll write more as we discover further details.”

Torix flipped another page,

“It’s been many days since my last writing. They sentenced a guard to us, preventing my cellmate and me from speaking with one another. Other researchers were added as well, many of the quarantine researcher rooms filled with political prisoners. They began reducing the frequency and size of our meals as well. As if tubes of liquid food weren’t appalling enough, they’ve limited us to three a day. It is enough to survive, but it’s not enough to live.”

Torix shook his head as he continued,

“Time blurs under the fluorescent lights of my prison. The entire quarantine zone is full of prisoners now. Several of the rooms are full of more than one captive, some with over four squeezed into the barriers of glass. We watch one another, our mouths silenced. Those that speak are beaten by the command of guards. The conditions of the

other prisoners have deteriorated fully as well. They starve in their confines, unable to muster any resistance against their tormenters.”

I bit my lip as Torix continued,

“I’ve never seen such horror in all my life as I did today. They let loose a sample of the hybrid here. It was used as a killing device, emptying out several of the rooms for more convicts. I watched as a tiny, droplet sized creature injected itself into the bodies of my friends here...And they were eaten from the inside. Their eyes drained into the back of their skulls. It sucked up their organs and devoured their bones. This thing we’ve created, it is no theoretical concept. It is unduly real, something out of nightmares.”

The handwriting grew more jagged, becoming rough and choppy.

“And we were instrumental in crafting our killer. There is poetic justice in our demise here, a fitting end for us. We’ve created the coming of an apocalypse, something untenable or justifiable. I’ve denounced our research in my mind and soul after seeing the fruits of our labor. It is my greatest regret.”

Torix turned to the final pages,

“To believe that once, I was excited to come here. This is a room of torment, a museum of horrors. The defectors are fed to hybrids, fueling the experiments they helped devise. Something changed in the leadership at some point. He lost all sense, his mind lost to madness. He plays games with us. He walks in the middle passages, whispering to himself. I’ve seen what he’s uncovered and what he toils with.”

Torix got into the reading, adding gravitas to his words as he spoke them,

“It is the advanced, runic language found in a dungeon rift. The lead researcher has lost himself in the depths of the markings. They’ve stolen his soul, and he has stolen ours. It is now too late for me. I am a forgotten relic of the quarantine’s creation. I evaded death to this day, but I am here alone now. No guards. No prisoners. No food or water. Alone. Alone. Alone. I will not starve here.”

Torix turned to the final paragraph,

“He has done it. They finished the hybrid’s creation, a sentient mass controlled by the lead researcher himself. As a display of power, he showed it throughout the facility. As one may expect, it is now rampaging above. The pride of one man ended us all. I can hear the creaking above. Its blows ripple through feet of carbonized steel. It will come for me. I only ask that it kill me swiftly, though I no doubt deserve no such fate.”

I winced as Torix finished,

“I would tell you, reader, to inform my family that I loved them and will always love them. However, I will not drench their name in infamy for my own petty sense of redemption. I helped create the thing above. I will die to it as I decide.

I will die bravely, not as a coward.

Goodbye.”

The group was silent as Torix finished. As the quiet passed, Torix and Althea looked back up to me. Torix pointed at me, “That runic language you write in carries quite the set of risks. Not accusing you of anything as I’ve deigned to turn myself into a lich. I’m rather curious, however. Why do you work with it?”

It was a fair concern considering what he just read. I raised my palms to them, “It’s powerful, and I already avoided exile from it, so now there’s no real point in not using it. I’m not descending into madness because of the inscriptions I’m carving either. That lead researcher was weak in mind. That much was obvious by how he had his critics killed instead of trying to listen to them.”

Chrona tilted her head to me, “Is this runic language why your mastery of gravity is so profound? It’s rather rude not to share that knowledge considering I shared my own techniques with you.”

I shook my head, “No, well yes, partly I guess. I can promise you that this isn’t something you want to deal with though. These inscriptions are very dangerous just to know about, never mind actually write with them.”

Althea pursed her lips, “Is that what you’re writing in your grimoire all the time? Sounds dangerous.”

I shrugged, "Yeah, it can be, but I'm not convinced it's inevitably dangerous. I've been writing with these for years now, and I haven't noticed any side effects so far. I understand them pretty well now though, and there's probably a few reasons people go 'mad' when using them."

She crossed her arms, "Well that makes me feel better. So, uh, what is it that drives people mad?"

"If I was to take a guess, it would be because of the mana requirements. Once I finish the iscriptions and try to implement them, my mana is drained until the process is finished. If someone tried doing that without the proper amount of mana, they'd face extreme levels of mana deprivation."

Torix raised a hand, "Ah, that explains quite a bit. Mana deprivation is like starving the mind. It leaves lasting repercussions, which is why most mages never approach the ends of their mana pools. It's far too risky."

"Exactly," I pointed a hand at myself, "My mana regeneration means I've never had that problem. Not yet at least. There's a few other reasons someone could go insane though. It could be a case of too much pressure."

Krog huffed, "Pressure killing someone? If anything, younglings could use a bit more adversity. They falter because they've never experienced true difficulty."

Eh, sort of," I said while tilting a hand back and forth. "Knowing this code has put a target on the back of my head. Powerful people want to know how to use it, and there's a lot of risk just knowing it. I imagine someone who wasn't much of a combatant, this lead researcher for instance, would be panicky all the time."

Torix waved a hand, "You mentioned exile as well?"

I nodded, "Yeah, I was exiled the moment I gained the skill. A Speaker helped me back into the system right after, but it was terrifying at the time."

"Perhaps that is part of why the researcher was so unstable," Torix mused. "He was exiled from Schema's system then dealt with no real out to his predicament. Combine

that with the isolation of this environment and the nature of his work, and his mental instability was inevitable.”

I walked up to a few of his runes, placing a palm on a poorly written one, “Yeah, and these runes are anything but crisp. The lines aren’t straight enough, the depths between different portions of the carvings are too uniform, and you can tell he’s too weak to be carving into rock to begin with.”

I winced at a particularly nasty messup, “Like here, he’s trying to write the rune for something like the word eternal. I can tell by the framework. It’s not coming across right though, so it ends up bleeding into something more like consistency or stability. He’s a beginner, so coming up with dual meanings is an easy way to destroy yourself.”

I went on, having more to say than I thought I did, “It’s an easy way to fuck up the runes. He also is working with rock, something too hard for his hands. You need something soft enough to work with. Even then, the material has to be mana tolerant enough to handle massive flows of energy. A hard, dense metal works best from my experience, though you can disperse whatever your writing through a larger framework to make softer materials work.”

Torix looked up, “Hm, is that what that eldritch, what’s his name again....ah yes, Baldag-Ruhl. Is that what he did perchance?”

“Yup.”

“Then that explains how he managed to work such a complex ritual,” Torix said.

“Yeah, I’m not quite at his level yet though.” I said. “It’s difficult to manage to be honest, because he was gifted in more than just his technical refinement of his runic work. He was a master of conceptualization as well. He was ambitious as hell too, his work profound.”

Althea raised an eyebrow, “You almost sound like you admire him.”

I shook my head, “No, I do admire him. Sure, he was a twisted, monstrous hivemind hellbent on bending my soul into a new carrapace, but that doesn’t mean he wasn’t talented. Same with Yawm in some ways. Yawm had this presence I haven’t seen

anyone else match yet. He could pull you in, and that's even while knowing he was a genocidal maniac."

Chrona glanced between us, "Who is this Yawm?"

Torix raised his palms to her, "We'd rather keep the details sparse. It's something of secrecy for us. I'm sure you understand."

Krog narrowed her eyes, "Secrets between allies breeds distrust and animosity."

Althea tapped his armor plating, "And he made you armor to help protect you on this mission. Have you ever seen this kind of metal?"

Krog glanced at his black plate mail, "Well...no."

Althea shrugged, "That's because it's rare. If he's willing to give you something like this, then surely he's got his reasons for secrecy."

She gave me a frown, "Though I'm not the biggest fan of secrets either."

I waved my hands, "Hey, I have my reasons. I didn't want you guys to get curious and end up exiled like I was. Besides, these special runes are less unstable for me because I have unique circumstances. I'm much more careful than most too. I've worked with the basics for years now."

I let my hands flop against my sides, "I even have a few bonuses from a few Old Ones, one of them no one knows about besides for me essentially. Cut me some slack."

Althea sighed, "Ok. I believe you. Just...just make sure you tell me if something's dangerous. I want to be able to help you out if the worst happens."

I grinned at her, "Of course. I've got it under control."

“Then it’s settled.” Torix placed a hand on Althea’s shoulder, “Daniel’s words carry meaning. He doesn’t use them lightly. Now, there’s a creature nearby that needs culling, and we’re the team to do it before it unleashes itself onto a vulnerable world.”

Althea let out a deep breath while shaking out her hands, “You’re right. Let’s focus.”

I raised a hand, “Let’s finish this.”

The group’s resolve came back to full throttle as we turned back towards the end of the treasure vault. As we paced up to another vault door, Althea took a deep breath while creating a hand claw. She slit the hinges of the gate, letting me pull it out with a gravitational well.

We found a hallway made of brown rock, covered in elementary gibberish written in the dimensional cipher. It looked like my notes from when I began using the forbidden code. As we passed it, I read out a few shaky translations of the butchered work,

“Harness. Stable. Create. Destroy. Augment. Hybrid. Collapse. Mind. Sacred...That lead researcher really did lose his mind. This makes no sense.”

A droning sound ebbed into the massive corridor, sounding like the lamenting of someone fallen from grace. Krog and Chrona’s eyes dilated at the menacing hum, their nerves shot. Chrona growled, “I’m hearing things. I must be.”

Krog grumbled, “Me as well.”

“Perhaps sharing what it is that’s bothering you would help us in our search?” Torix pondered aloud.

Krog shook his head, “It’s nothing.”

Torix waved a hand, “We won’t know until you’ve said what it is-“

Krog glared at the lich as he snapped, “I said it’s nothing.”

Torix crossed his arms but said nothing. Krog shook his head, shaking off his sudden nervousness. Chrona looked between the two,

“It’s deeply personal for us. Please excuse him for his outburst.”

Torix sighed, “I didn’t mean to pry. Keep your secrets. Schema knows I have plenty of my own I harbor.”

We reached a vertical slant, leading upwards. The droning rang in my ears like the hum of some fallen angel. It was drenched in some wicked despair as if life itself was pain. I know that sounds melodramatic, but it wore down my own sense of calm as we paced uphill. Chrona and Krog restrained a palpable sense of grief. Despite their lack of an explanation, a haunting suspicion in the back of my mind was rising up to explain why.

As we reached the top of the corridor’s slope, all was explained. There was a vast corridor reinforced by orichalcum bonds and magic. All kinds of monitors were plugged into the floor, powered by something beneath the facility. If what I guessed was correct, this thing fueled the entire facility. Screens all shapes and sizes detailed the vitals of one of this entity, it’s full body hidden.

Inside the room, a lone figure stood in the darkness. This pulsing creature stood as tall as I did, its body draining the pit of its liquid contents. It wasn’t the source of groaning, however.

Inside the pit, a mound of moving liquid gasped out in a deformed, straining voice like some specter desperate to die. It was the sound of anguish and misery, a lamentation more profound than I could know. Beside me, Krog and Chrona cried out in a voice similar to the pits, though lacking the deformed gurgling.

Krog wheezed out, “That voice. There can only be one...”

It all clicked in my head as Chrona cried out,

“Emagrotha...What have they done to you?”