

New World 201

Chapter 201: More Than One

I turned towards Chrona while pointing at the figure, “Wait, that thing is Emagrotha?”

She shook her head, “Her voice comes from the pit, but it’s warped.”

Torix pulled Althea, moving them behind the three of us. He smacked his staff against the ground while pulling out his grimoire, the pages flipping by themselves,

“Prepare yourselves.”

Torix snapped me out of being stunned. I smashed my fists together, my gray armor denting under the force. My runes charged in a second, my mana saturating my blood for a singularity. Chrona and Krog stared at the pit, stunned into utter silence by the sight of it. From the top of Torix’s staff, a white light rose to the top of the room, blasting it with a beam of illumination. The light exposed the brutality playing out before us.

The Hybrid appeared in its full fury. It stood with a titanic frame smothered in gray wires and machinery. Bulbous, pulsing capsules of orange liquid rippled across the surface of its metal skin. It had no eyes nor face, though it was humanoid in shape. Its arms pierced into a pit of pale, lavender muck. Matrices of metal extended out from its hands into the lilac pool, reaching throughout the abyss.

At the top of the hole, white gemstones floated on the surface. They connected together through a series of dark veins along the top of the pool. Shockwaves of energy pulsed through this demonic entity, ushering out plumes of waste with each passing second. Emagrotha was drowning Giess in a toxic wave of sludge.

I couldn’t understand how the hell this happened or why. In their last fight, everyone described a bright flash of white light which I assumed was nuclear in nature. It might not have been something to destroy Emagrotha, however. Maybe Lehesion wanted to send a message to anyone that tried to oppose him, using Emagrotha as an example.

Maybe this was why he disappeared.

As I inspected the pool, a mouth opened at its center, giving way to jagged teeth. A warped voice groaned out in desperation,

“Kill me...Please.”

My stomach sank as Chrona burst into tears, falling onto her knees. She hyperventilated as she gasped, “I remember. I remember...He never killed her. He never killed her. He...”

Krog had the opposite reaction, his chest puffing out as his eyes narrowed. He siphoned mana from his surroundings, rage pouring out from him. He growled,

“Fight in her name, Chrona. Save her from being food for this demon.”

Althea pulled out her rifle, growing her arm into the complex arrays of metal. She extended a blade of bone from it, ready to tear the Hybrid apart. Torix flipped the pages of his grimoire, creating a bubble of air around Chrona’s head. Her breathing slowed as she gained a measure of stability.

As our team handled personal crises, the Hybrid tilted its head at us, twitching about at random. It cleared the facility weeks ago and never expected anyone to arrive. That was good. It gave us time to collect ourselves.

Before the peace shattered, Krog slapped his tail across the face of Chrona. He shouted, “Now is your time to prove your worth to Emagrotha. We may save her from this horror. Rise, Chrona. Die in glory or live in regret.”

Chrona nodded, getting her shit together. Her eyes widened and dilated as she stood tall. She wheezed, “For my lady, I can do anything.”

As the tension reached its fever pitch, I analyzed the creature and found out what I could.

Version 2.0(lvl: 18,928~ | Species: Unknown | Guild: Unknown) – An abomination, created from twisted minds that will be destroyed without mercy by Schema’s forces.

This creature is unbelievably tenacious and difficult to kill. There is little to gather from its existence outside of comparisons with the other Hybrid. It was far easier to analyze, carrying less analysis blocking measures.

Considering this is a far more refined version and has been draining what appears to be a deformed version of Emagrotha, this isn't something you can hope to kill on your own.

Good luck.

Behind me, Althea charged arcane magic into her shots. Torix readied an elemental armada of missiles, his control of the staff already absolute. Krog amplified a cloud of blue mana around the creature's face, smothering it with sound and light. Chrona created a ball of blue energy above her head, a spacetime ripple pulsing around us. As the odd sense of temporal dilation passed over me, I reached out my hand.

It was time to kill.

I generated a singularity at the center of the monster's chest. At the same time, I condensed Event Horizon over the beast. A tiny gravity well formed before reaching a point of near infinite pull. The Hybrid stood within it, unfazed as its chest disappeared into a black void. Seconds passed before the black hole erupted in a wave of radiation and kinetic force. The facility quaked, rock chips and dust pluming outwards in every direction.

Torix pushed his staff out sideways, parting the seas of dust. The wave cleared the room, showing the hybrid standing with orange blood oozing from its arms and legs. The destructive explosion hardly harmed it, its tenacity exceeding anything we'd ever seen. The only damage done to it was from the singularity pulling in matter from the monster.

It reassembled itself, repairing in seconds. Removing its arms from the pit took more time than healing, however. Before it accomplished the task, we unloaded our full arsenal onto it.

Althea bombarded it with harpoons of bone charged with arcane energies. The crack of each bullet behind me echoed through the room like a detonation of a grenade by my ear. Torix pummeled the creature with a medley of elemental spells, each of them

designed to synergize with one another. They cast the Hybrid into a plume of sapphire shaded fire, ripples of purple lightning arcing out from the explosions.

Krog roared out with magical enhancements, sending out another shockwave across the room. Every electronic screen shattered while metal ripped near the center of his booming outcry. It carried a deep sadness, chilling me to my bones. Behind him, Chrona opened her jaws, and a plume of purple fire erupted from her maw. The combined onslaught brought the Hybrid to its knees. It crumpled to bits and pieces, splattering across the ground. The moment our assault lessened, I learned why it did not fear us.

It did not need too.

The monster did more than survive. The vitality of the creation sprang forth, overwhelming and absolute. It reformed in seconds, its body pulling back together. Without its arms stuck in the pit, it leaned over, its orange pustules emptying. An orange aura of mana condensed over it at the shadow of the figure loomed behind it. It stood up to the edge of the room, breathtaking and abominable.

Like a lightning berserker, it burst off the ground with speed unrivaled. I met its charge, detonating my runes as I dashed off the floor. I dipped into my mana, creating gravitational flows to enhance my mass and weight. I wielded telekinetic implants to give myself firmer footing. I prepared myself to stop its charge with all of my power.

And I was nothing.

It tore through the inertia of my charge as if passing through a wall of water. My teeth shattered. The bones in my chest collapsed. My lungs punctured. My blood splattered. My organs burst. I caved in, every piece of my body imploding under the onslaught of this monster's might.

It was cataclysmic. It was something unmatched. Never before had I been so utterly devastated with a single attack. In one dash, this thing turned me into a soup of metal, my bones reduced to chunks. With my body splayed out against a wall, I glanced around, my vision blurry. At least it missed my head, as if it needed to aim.

I peered off to my side, finding a rock wall behind me. The Hybrid saturated the stone with orange, augmentation mana. This reinforced the structure, making it hard and dense enough to crush me against it. In front of me, the Hybrid was digging his arms

into my chest. Tiny wires dug into my body, like tendrils of fire squirming through my veins.

This was the deciding point of the battle. If the Hybrid could consume me like this, we never had a chance to begin with. It would wrap around me and destroy me from the inside, feasting on my body while destroying the others. Understanding this, I aimed for one thing only.

Keep the beast at bay.

With the bit of consciousness I still had left, I tried moving my arms to grab the Hybrid's shoulders. They wouldn't budge. Knowing they were too broken to move, I attempted something else. I drilled out with needles of my armor, piercing into the body of the hybrid. Like a two-headed Ouroboros, each of us ate the other, competing to see who would win.

It was a standstill, the both of us inching for ground. From its wires, mechanical prosthetics expanded, assimilating my blood and bone. My own needles extended outwards water freezing into a snowflake, sapping its vitality. In a display of horror, we tore at the other, the sound of tearing sinews echoing through the chamber.

After holding my ground, I discovered I was at a loss. It was overwhelming me, though only by the slightest of margins, it overtook fragments of an inch at times. My loss was inevitable. Given time, it would consume me into itself, growing into a being of untold might.

My loss mattered little, however. I wasn't the only one fighting this monstrosity.

Aimed with precision, a spear cut through the head of the Hybrid, pinning it into the enhanced wall it created. Realizing I wasn't fodder it could devour in seconds, the Hybrid attempted latching off from me. Too late for that. Before it could escape, I molded my armor through my body, creating pillars of black ore through my limbs. These metal bars acted in place of bones, giving my muscles something to pull off of.

With function returning to my limbs, I grabbed the monster. The thing swung its hulking arm at my braced neck. The metal bones of my spine caved in, bending under the Hybrid's freakish might. I kept my hold despite my arms weakening, stopping it from charging towards Althea and the others.

A series of elemental shards pierced into the hybrid's body as I distracted the monster. Splinters of condensed ice, acid, and fire exploded from within the beast. These spells kept contained, not spreading like the previous magic had, protecting me.

Another harpoon pierced the Hybrid's head, weakening the grip of the creature. The abomination snapped the bones spears pinning it down, turning towards the group. As it did, I drilled my armor into the enhanced wall behind me. I was the only one of us that could come in contact with this thing. Holding it down was absolutely necessary to prevent it from assimilating our team.

With that in mind, I used its own magic against it. I held us in place with several dozen cords of dimensional fabric. The Hybrid took a step forward, halted by the metallic wires. The Hybrid turned its head, the bones spears clattering against the floor as it inspected my trap.

It bent over, dashing forward in a split second. Three cables snapped, letting out violent, cracking booms throughout the room. The gray and orange monstrosity bent over again, dashing and snapping six more cables. It bent over one more time, about to break my holds. Before it leaped, I dipped into my health, generating a powerful gravitational panel. Unable to resist, the Hybrid and I fell towards the augmented rock wall behind us both.

It landed beside me, both of us defying gravity. I scrambled for a firm grip on the creature before holding down with everything I had. My armor coiled around the beast like an anaconda around a crocodile. The Hybrid's pulsing capsules of orange wriggled on the surface of its body, glowing with augmenting mana. I braced myself for an empowered leap, hoping to hold it down for a few more attempts.

The Hybrid managed to stand sideways off of the wall we were on. Orange arcs of lightning ripples across the surface of the bulging, mechanical limbs on its body. It bent downwards, the strength in its body both utter and complete.

It leaped with power untamed.

Like a bird flying through a spider web, my cords and arms didn't stand a chance. The muscles and ligaments holding my arms and legs together snapped. Several of my bones broke. The metal ropes popped like firecrackers as they ruptured. I slowed the beast down enough for the others to react, however.

By now, Chrona already activated her time field. Using a tail whip, Chrona smashed the blackened blade of her armor just under the belly of the beast. This diverted the course of the monster's flight. The Hybrid barreled just above Althea's head instead of at her.

Like a giant possessed her body, Althea grabbed the arm of the Hybrid, pulling it to the ground with a low growl. The temporal dilation made her voice deeper than usual as the creature reinforced the room's floor beneath it. A shockwave ebbed from the impact, the bones in Althea's body creaking under strain.

Unable to move yet, I watched as Althea lifted her rifle into the air and sliced the creature's head apart. Sparks shot out from the rock, her blade cleaving through solid stone. The Hybrid kept moving, unphased by the force of her blow.

As the Hybrid lifted off the ground, the floor remained unharmed despite the power of the collision. Outside of Althea's slice mark, this creature was preventing the entire room from collapsing for some reason. Perhaps it was to keep Emagrotha alive to harvest her. Either way, we could use that to our advantage.

Unable to move yet, I watched as the Hybrid moved like a twitching insect to Althea. It grabbed its hands onto Althea's left forearm like a praying mantis. My stomach sank as I willed my body to run, but I hadn't regenerated yet. My breathing quickened as I shouted,

"Get it off you."

Althea grimaced, grabbing her rifle in her right hand. With a shocking level of resolve, she sliced off her left forearm, amputating half the limb. Torix reached out with his staff, casting an emerald snake of energy. The green serpent slithered into Althea's amputated hand.

The limb sprouted eyes like a snail, glancing around in panic. Torix banged his staff on the ground, blue mana ebbing from his necromantic creation. In a burst of white light, the Hybrid was flung backward with a loud crack. Giving our group distance to act, Althea chugged two health potions while Chrona and Krog shot out plumes of burning fire at the hybrid. Red and purple flames mixed in an inferno of swirling colors. Stone melted as I stood up from my injuries, ready to fight once more.

I dashed across the room, reaching the Hybrid as the flames stopped. It kneeled on the ground, attempting to stand. I sprinted into the monster, kneeing the Hybrid's head. I knocked it off balance, but I bounced backward.

The monster turned to me, annoyed at my interference. I took a step back as it lashed out at me. The tip of its sharpened finger slit through my chest plate, letting out a series of sparks. Flashes of orange scattered across the room as Althea pierced the beast with three harpoons to its side.

As the freak distracted, I charged my mana for another singularity. The others bombarded the Hybrid with acidic needles, frozen fires, and kinetic shockwaves while gaining distance from it. As their assault lessened, Althea hit the knees of the Hybrid with a spear apiece. It fell forward but regenerated in seconds.

As it stood back up, the others readied for its charge. I shouted, "Pin it in place."

Althea growled as she fired off two more shots into the creature's feet. Torix twist his staff, creating a circular formation of red ice. Torix slammed his stave down, giant, freezing spines piercing into the Hybrid's chest. The Hybrid shook his shoulders, snapping the pillars of frozen acid. As he uprooted his feet from the bone javelins, the Hybrid roared before bending down.

Too little, too late.

A singularity formed at the center of its chest once more. The creature siphoned into a growing ball of black. I dipped into my reserves of health, feeding my spell to maintain it. After the black hole's radius reached the size of a beach ball, it exceeded my own control, imploding with a tectonic explosion.

The cavern quaked, the rock crushing around us. I braced it with a gravity well, preparing for the worst. I didn't need to worry. Lavender ooze from the pit poured from the cracks in the walls. The gunk held the place together, keeping the fight in our hands. Glancing at the pit, I found the jellied Emagrotha grumbling,

"I will maintain your proving ground. Now rise."

Despite decades in her ruined state, being experimented on then eaten over weeks, Emagrotha was still somehow sane. It impressed me seeing her will in action. Her reputation didn't disappoint.

Without having to worry about our arena, I prepared another charge of my singularity. I shouted out,

"It's trying to protect this place. Abuse that fact."

The others nodded as what little remained of the Hybrid regenerated. Its lower legs were all that was left as the dust settled. Unyielding and tenacious, it grew out of the stumps it left behind, wires entangling over orange capsules of energy.

The others rallied another round of spells, unleashing devastation over the beast. Harpoon after harpoon pierced vital spots while Torix shot a vibrant variety of magic at the creature. Plumes of fire ejected from the monstrous maws of Krog and Chrona, devastating the Hybrid further. After their assault died down, I charged in, distracting the monster until our team prepared another offensive.

I took massive damage each time I did so, walking away with broken legs and arms. I bought enough time for each succeeding volley though, and I gained awareness for the Hybrid's tactics. It lacked any finesse or technique with its attacks, wildly swinging its limbs with abandon. Unpredictable and hellishly strong, they struck like runaway trains each time they landed on me.

Even as the strikes turned from blurs to patterns of movement, I couldn't keep up with them. They wore me down, my inability to match its speed and power crippling. Before I fell to its rush of blows, Chrona created a temporal dilation field over me, slowing the monster. Just as before, I was immune to the slowing effect, however.

I sped up by comparison to the Hybrid, unaffected due to my status as a living dimension. The tide turned from desperation to one of executing on tactics, each of us cycling between our competencies. This continued until the Hybrid shrunk two feet in size. We were winning.

Though it weakened a little with this minimizing, it still carried enormous clout, able to tear me apart with ease. At the same time, watching it weaken bolstered morale by leaps and bounds. This damage came at a steep cost, however.

The gyalgathens ran out of breath and ambient mana, dipping into their lacking personal reserves. Torix emptied out his mana pool, drawing from the gems I gave him. His casting gained jagged and rough touch to it, Torix howling and growling at the Hybrid like an animal. I might've even laughed if my life wasn't on the line.

Althea's spear generation slowed as well, her metabolism struggling to keep up. She injected a series of alchemical stimulants to keep up with the demands of the battle. They took their toll, reducing her precision and calm. She kept herself together as the demands of battle magnified.

Chrona's time field wobbled over time, unable to sustain continued combat. The Hybrid's smaller size and strength were the only reasons I hung on, my reaction times stressed to my limits. The monster clipped me with its jerking, trembling attacks. My regeneration was stressed to its utmost limit, all of my mana used to heal my injuries.

As this wore on, a grin widened on my face. This was my specialty. The Hybrid looked like it could fight on forever, but so could I. I weaved through strikes, a flash of movement. I pressed the attack, ripping shots into the monster at opportune moments. I thrived in the battle, my armor glowing red then yellow as I turned my body into a furnace.

I wasn't wasting mana for appearance's sake either. I scorched the abomination anytime we touched, my body more resilient to extreme temperatures than it was. This proved to be vital; once I glowed, my armor's draining ability exceeded the Hybrid's in this state. Without the ability to drain me, my tactics changed.

I still couldn't contain its might of course, but this gave me an advantage to work with. Instead of attacking with my fists, I grappled the creature with my basic wrestling skills. I stuck myself to the monster like glue, the Hybrid shaking me off like swatting away a fly. Each time it weakened. Each time I remained relentless.

I paced myself, my own breath quickening as I reached the limits of my movement and magic. I fell into the flow of battle, muting everything else around me. The sounds of battle dimmed. My vision narrowed. All became motion, my every act working with the intent to kill this blight on the world.

The others strained as we burned through our resources to kill it off. After an hour of battle, the hybrid was dying. I dwarfed it by now. Though it was still stronger somehow, I compensated with technique and experience, beating the monster down.

Althea and the gialgathens offered up inconsistent but necessary support during this process. The number of times a well timed harpoon or plume of fire saved me was countless. Torix kept channeling the mana I gave him in gemstones as well. He offered key support, canceling strikes from the Hybrid that would otherwise land.

Through a spare trip with a vine of earth or a slice of shadow grabbing the Hybrid's arm, Torix made his presence known. As I cornered the Hybrid and blocked off its escape, a mouth opened across the Hybrid's face. Two eyes expanded from it, peering at me. As if understanding it would inevitably die, it tried a different tactic.

A clear, educated voice rang out from its mouth,

“Do you believe this is honestly necessary?”

Chapter 202: Subversion

This voice sounded smug in the worst kind of way. The Hybrid attempted eating me multiple times, killed the entire facility, and was draining Emagrotha for power. The sheer level of narcissism necessary to question the necessity of this fight was staggering.

So staggering, in fact, that I didn't miss a beat as I boomed my voice like a hammer,

“Oh, it's absolutely necessary.”

The Hybrid gained some measure of control over its movements, a different mind controlling it. It ducked and dodged a few of my attacks, attempting to retaliate. These were the desperate moves of a beginner, however. He threw himself off balance when he avoided my strikes, making his own counterattacks mute.

After a quick adjustment, I nailed him with three consecutive strikes before Torix nailed his palm with a spear. The voice wailed out, “Allow me to explain. I was the leader-“

I smashed his face with my fist. He pulled himself from the wall, getting distance from me,

“The leader of this facility. I was attempting to prevent the creation of the Hybrid. I was doing everything in my power to stop them.”

I melted a portion of the floor, the Hybrid’s foot dipping into magma. It threw him off balance, letting me duck down and slam my fist into his face. His head bounced off the rock wall, orange mana augmenting it. He fell down, rolling away from me. I cut off his escape as he growled,

“Will you not listen to me?”

I didn’t understand what made him believe that he deserved anyone’s attention for any length of time. This guy was a cut and dry case. He abandoned his friend and fellow researchers in the pursuit of power. Sure, he could twist his logic some and try to rationalize what he did. Anyone that ends up in this kind of situation does. I’m sure to this guy, the ends justified the means.

That’s the thing though. I’d already met quite a few people like him. This guy was a megalomaniac who believed he could worm his way out of anything. I wasn’t going to give him a chance. That’s why I kept up my assault, piling on damage as he kept talking. Before I sealed his fate, Torix raised his staff,

“Let’s listen to what happened here. Perhaps he may give us crucial information about what occurred here or who worked with him?”

I kept my hands raised, grimacing at the Hybrid, “Start talking.”

The Hybrid had its hands over its face, “Thank you. At least one you isn’t a complete brute.”

I clanked my fists together, “Tell us what we need to know, or I’ll gut you where you stand.”

The Hybrid coughed into his hand, “Ahem, this facility was created to study Emagrotha. She was the framework for the Hybrids. We found her at the bottom of this

disgusting sea, an old pile of mush. That is what Lehesion left of her after their final battle.”

Chrona snapped out with a telepathic wave, “And why didn’t he kill her? Why do this?”

The Hybrid’s head twitched, another mouth forming on its face. It spoke out in the same voice,

“Emagrotha agreed to a battle where neither of them would use the mana of Giess. Emagrotha trounced Lehesion to such an extent that he retaliated in the rage of a god. He did more than kill her. He granted her an undying body while stripping her of all her nobility.”

Another mouth formed over the Hybrid’s face, the cybernetic teeth clanking as it spoke out in a woman’s voice,

“He spoke out in a tirade of what happened to those that defied him. How they were inferior. Gialgathens are a race of honor above all, and this was a display of character so shallow, they condemned Lehesion. His legend and legacy were threatened.”

His voice change verified a few of my suspicions. The researcher might have actually been the catalyst for the Hybrid’s initial development. At the same time, the Hybrid had somehow kept their consciousnesses intact despite their deaths. Those thoughts raced through my mind as Krog let out a telepathic growl,

“And how would a dirtwalker like you know all this?”

Like an insect, the Hybrid twitched as another set of jaws formed on its chest. The woman’s voice said,

“We used many mind mages, ones who hide their names in shadows. These remnants probed the memories of many gialgathens who were at the battle. This is how we discovered the mass amnesia following the event. Lehesion cast a spell that wiped the memories of his deeds. That is why no one remembers what happened here.”

My eyes widened at the revelation. They trapped gialgathens here and probed through their minds to learn what happened. That's why the facility was large enough for gialgathens despite no gialgathens being present.

"Wait a moment," Torix said while cupping his chin in his hand, "What happened to those gialgathens, and you mentioned something about remnants?"

"Yes," the Hybrid spoke out in Emagrotha's voice with a new maw across its chest, "The gialgathens were sent to another facility deep in silver territory. There they created a different kind of Hybrid, one compatible with gialgathens. We were not given the reason why. Our goal was different. We wanted a bipedal Hybrid that maintained lower levels of thought."

The Hybrid kept a slow, steady rate of regeneration as he spoke. I wasn't stupid though; I charged a singularity as he kept talking.

"We chose our targets carefully, ensuring that natural causes of death were assumed. We destroyed records of their demise as well. Secrecy needed to be absolute. Curious onlookers were killed as well."

I kept my guard up, "What about the remnants?"

An elderly lady's voice spoke up,

"The remnants split into many fragmentary factions of genetic splicing. After Schema stripped them of the advanced technology that enabled this, the remnants relied on bloodlines to maintain their superiorities. This particular faction relied on mind magics created from an organ lying in their skulls."

Torix mused, "Hmmm, so that is perhaps where Schema gained his ability to augment sentients. The remnants already owned the technology, and he stole it before repurposing it for his system...Interesting."

The Hybrid squirmed, orange capsules reforming while Event Horizon slowed his healing. It spoke out in the grandma's voice,

“They assisted with funding our operation as well, many of their members considered Unknowns.”

I raised a palm to the Hybrid, “Enough about technical specifics. Why did Lehesion wipe their memories?”

The Hybrid took several rapid breaths before snarling in the voice of a dying man,

“His closest advocates turned on him, crushing loyalty built over decades. This crippled Lehesion’s esteem of his godly self. He relied on their affirmation more than he realized. Reeling in self-doubt and pity, Lehesion chose to isolate himself from society. Deep in Giessian wilderness, he lived alone for decades following the civil war. That is all we gathered.”

Althea pointed her rifle at his head, “Why in Schema’s name would you all want to make a Hybrid?”

The Hybrid let out a long laugh in the dying man’s voice. It sent a shiver down my spine.

“Is it not obvious,” it choked. “This was to be a weapon against the eldritch and silver menace. This being was designed as the ultimate irony, using the best traits of both entities to destroy them both.”

It pointed at its body, jaws covering it from head to toe now. Its voice radiated out like a husk of metal,

“I...I was to be the beginning of their destruction and the end of their blight. They believed they could control me...they could use me.”

This was the actual Hybrid’s thoughts. It articulated with a great struggle, “I thrashed them to pieces and sucked up the corpse of this facility. I killed those that killed to create. I did no wrong in doing so. These people deserved death.”

Torix nodded, an edge of sarcasm leaking into his voice, “Ah yes, I’m certain they did. I suppose you believe you deserve to live as well?”

The Hybrid nodded, “I do. I told you all that I know from the many minds swimming through me. The vast ocean of thoughts carries with it other deep memories I may share, given time. Spare me, and I shall expose them to you.”

I wasn’t even giving the pretense an ounce of consideration. This abomination was something that needed to die. Period. We couldn’t afford to let it regenerate much longer. With time pressing from all sides, I pointed a hand at it,

“I have a few more questions left. What code is encrypting this technology, how do you know so much about the remnants, and who exactly organized this operation?”

The Hybrid squirmed, “This is a language designed over centuries by the remnant mind mages. They kept portions of their collective as unknowns and exiles of Schema’s system. This prevented them from being discovered while exchanging information. These scribes allowed them to operate in secret behind the scenes of many influential factions.”

“As for learning of the remnant’s secrets...” the Hybrid cackled, “I devoured one and assimilated its memories.”

Althea kept her gun pointed at the monster, “Spit it out then. Who organized everything?”

“A member of that coalition of mind mages. She’s the most prominent member of the Adair family.”

I whispered, “Wait...the Adair family.”

“That is correct.” The Hybrid lifted a hand, “Tohtella Adair.”

Chapter 203: Into Oblivion

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Chapter Begin

Torix sighed, “And my suspicions were well placed. If anything, I anticipated her hiding her involvement better. Perhaps her time was spent elsewhere.”

My body vibrated with mana pulsing through my veins as I pointed at the Hybrid,

“Can you decipher the code and show us how too?”

The Hybrid shivered, “I...I may with time. It is too complicated for me now. I cannot manage it without assistance.”

“Hmm, then perhaps you-” Torix said.

All at once, the many mouths over the Hybrid let out a loud lamentation. Its wails pierced into my brain like knives through meat. It sounded like a symphony of voices, all those that died here trapped in the hybrid’s body. They wanted an escape, their bloodcurdling cries carrying a deep sadness.

It hit me like a coffee table to my shins, causing me to lunge onto one knee. As I did, other mouths appeared on the Hybrid, each of them bellowing out like storm sirens. A cacophony of screams erupted, blending into a meatgrinder of noise.

These outcries resounded off the walls, intensifying with each echo. My teeth rattled as I slowed down, the others behind me crippled. My arms and legs numbed, unable to

withstand the oscillating sound waves. Blood poured out of my eyes and ears, my body melting as I struggled against the Hybrid's adaptation. The mana I welled for my singularity dissipated, my concentration all but broken.

Behind me, Torix created a dampening field around the others, saving them from the brunt of the attack. The sound still leaked in, incapacitating the others. I forced myself to my feet, meeting the Hybrid's attacks. I ducked under a strike, stumbling back. The Hybrid lunged forward, smashing my face into the ground. My skull cracked, white lights flashing over my eyesight. The monster dashed towards the crippled group, its stomps shaking the entire chamber around us.

I tried getting up, but my body wouldn't listen to my demands. I created gravity well after gravity well, dipping into my health pool. I formed molten pits under its footsteps. I only gave the group a few seconds. I watched as the creature reached Torix and the others. I wanted to scream, but my voice would be lost in the reverberations.

Torix was the only one unfazed by the vibrations. Using the little time I bought them, Torix channeled the rest of the mana in his gemstones. Torix coalesced the blood red energy into a spear of dark mana. With finality, he roared out.

"Be silent."

His voice left the room in silence, stopping the growing malignancy of the Hybrid's screams. Torix threw out the spear, impaling the Hybrid's torso. The beast's mouths closed, the black mana oozing throughout the hybrid. Torix stopped the crippling might of its howls, quieting the room to the calm of a winter's night.

The monster was still charging. It reached Torix as the lich swung his staff with all his might. The blackened club bounced off the Hybrid's head to no effect. The monster wrapped its arms around Torix, crushing him inside the tarnished armor. Wires ingrained into the lich, drilling through bones and cracking him apart.

Torix shouted, "I've other bodies hidden on my home planet. I will come back. Finish this battle without-"

The Hybrid assimilated Torix's body in seconds, destroying the lich in but a moment. It happened so fast, I couldn't believe it. One moment Torix was there, the next he was gone. As the black plates of his armor clattered against the ground, my mind raced to rationalize what just happened.

He mentioned having other bodies, and he was a lich, so his soul was just planted onto the dried out husk we remembered seeing. That was just the container he used to hold his soul. He'd be fine, but he wouldn't be able to help us fight any longer. The others didn't have time to think about the situation, however.

Althea injected the rest of her stimulants all at once, her pupils dilating as her muscles tensed. Chrona grabbed Krog and flew from the hybrid, both of them getting away from it. As the Hybrid turned towards Althea, she turned and growled out,

“Die.”

My eyes widened in fear at her voice, her deformed body shouting with a distorted sound. She wrapped a massive, gray hand around the Hybrid's head. Before it implanted itself into her, she whipped it through the air like a ragdoll. She slammed it onto the ground, stunning the creature and its progress. Over and over, Althea roared out while clobbering the Hybrid into the dirt. Enhanced or not, the floor crumpled into a fine powder as she thundered,

“Die. Fucking. Die.”

At the end of her blitz, she held the Hybrid up in one hand. It drilled a few wires into her arm, but Althea generated a plethora of sharpened spines into the monster. The Hybrid retracted itself, impaled in six different places. Althea grabbed the bottom half of the abomination and pulled the beast apart, its orange blood drenching over her in a literal bloodbath.

Each piece of the creature impaled itself into her again, but Althea was ready. She swung around in a circle, picking up speed and centripetal force. As the speed of her throw built up, I got back up on my two legs again, able to move again. Althea threw one half of the Hybrid at me before tossing the other half to the other side of the room. Divide and conquer. I liked it.

I launched an overhead right, nailing the torso of the Hybrid with a heavy hand. As I smashed it into the ground, the destroyed room crumbled further. Before it could escape, I grabbed the thing with both of my hands, compressing Event Horizon over this piece of the beast. I dug needles into it, holding it until my hands numbed from my hold.

I turned my body into a furnace, heating until I was the surface of a star. What little that was left of my helmet shattered as the mouth plate of my armor opened. With jagged, glowing teeth, I tore into the monster beneath me, devouring the beast. It let out ear-piercing howls of indignation, but I gnawed into its metallic flesh, tearing it apart. As it disappeared into a pool of orange blood in my hands, I drained it dry. This piece of the Hybrid died just as it had killed all the others.

It was eaten alive.

I stood tall, turning towards the other half of the Hybrid remaining. It ingrained itself into the wings of Krog while Chrona smashed her tail into the monster. It ignored her onslaught, drilling itself into Krog. I stomped my heels onto the ground, dashing towards the beast. Before it reached Krog's body, Althea created a circular disc of bone in her hand.

She growled out as she turned full circle, heaving the sharpened bone at Krog's wings. The projectile cleaved off Krog's wings, the wounded gialgathen scrambling away from the Hybrid. I reached the regenerating blob of wires, smashing my hands into it.

As I drilled my hands into the monster, it scrambled towards Chrona, dragging me along with it. It reached her foot, digging into her body. Without hesitation, Chrona whipped her bladed tail through her foot, lopping the limb off. She flapped her wings while jumping, crashing into a wall and falling over.

Ungraceful as her escape was, it was enough; I was upon the creature now. Without any means of escape, the Hybrid jerked and twitched in my grasp. It attempted splitting apart, but each piece that escaped was killed with an arcane bolt by Althea.

And so, I wrapped around the monster like a Lovecraftian creature. It wailed. It howled. It bellowed for release. I gave it none. With my prey in my hands, I strangled the life out of this abomination until nothing was left but its screams. I took a deep breath, pounding my chest while letting out a roar. The yellow, glowing teeth of my armor split spread apart as I drowned out its death throes with a warcry of my own.

As the echoes faded, I took a few deep breaths, calming the furor of battle. A notification appeared in my vision as quiet descended onto us once more. I glanced at it, inspecting the message. It showed the exp from the kill.

The Hybrid was dead.

I turned towards the gialgathens, their wounds manageable though deep. I walked up to them, but they scrambled away from me. I glanced at my hands, taking a step back from them. I was still glowing hot. After cooling my armor to black, I walked back up to them, but he scrambled away again.

Krog growled, "What are you?"

I rolled my eyes, "Daniel."

Chrona and Krog stared at me, terrified for a moment. Chrona hissed,

"And why did you hide that you are a monster as well?"

I pointed at Emagrotha, "I helped find her and stopped that thing from eating her, and you have the gall to call me a monster still?"

Chrona stared at me than the pit of lavender slush. She took a moment to collect herself, her breath slowing down. She murmured, "We...we were just surprised."

Krog snapped, "You form changed as the Hybrid's did. Did you expect such tactics to fall on blind eyes? We saw what you were. Keep your distance."

"Calm yourself," Chrona said. "He simply fought as he had to. If anything, let's be thankful he didn't do that to us in our fights."

Krog stared up at her, a tense moment passing. He lost the staredown, ripping his eyes from her gaze, "I...Perhaps you're right."

Chrona looked back to me, "Please, accept our apology."

I scratched the back of my head, looking away from them,

“Well, it isn’t like my fighting style is pretty. I can’t blame you guys for being put off by it,” I glanced back to them. “I had to pull all the stops against him though. Otherwise, our group would be splinters of what it is now.”

Krog grumbled, “A warning would be nice before turning into a beast.”

Althea walked up, her body morphing back to her elegant self, “It isn’t as if we had a choice. You wouldn’t be nearly as open to helping us if you knew what we were. Even after saving your warrior goddess, you still were scared of us.”

Chrona’s eyes widened, “Emagrotha.”

The gialgathens scrambled over to the pit, glancing down at it. A pair of eyes stared back at them, a mouth grumbling, “Yes, I can hear you just fine, even if I am like this.”

Chrona gasped out, “I can’t believe your alive.”

Emagrotha rumbled in her deformed voice, “Neither can I. After what that self-absorbed idiot did to me, I’d rather have perished long ago, however.”

“How are you still sane?” Krog said.

“Do you not remember me for what I was? Though degraded into this gelatinous mess, I still remain a paragon of will. It will take more than this to break me,” Emagrotha touted.

It glanced to me, “Though perhaps I have given up on death after all these decades...”

The depth of her pain radiated outwards in that last piece. Stable or not, this experience took its toll on her. She could feign strength to her subordinates, but it was evident to me; she was done living like this. I walked over, lunging onto one knee,

“You don’t have to pretend like this was easy.”

Emagrotha’s eyes turned to slits, floating on the pit of muck,

“I need no pity from an earthwalker like you.”

I frowned, “I’m not giving you pity. I’m giving you a chance. Do with it what you will.”

Emagrotha stayed in the pit, silent as she pondered her response. A few moments later and she closed her eyes,

“I’ve lived lifetimes here. So much time has passed. It has been so very, very long...”

Chrona and Krog stared down at the ground, unable to meet her gaze. I barely knew this once mighty symbol, but even I struggled to watch her suffer like this.

“Lehesion turned me into this. I am nothing, yet I still live. I am sickening, but I cannot die. Eons will pass, but I will still be here, producing filth as my body degrades my once proud memory.”

Chrona yelped, “Your legacy is still one to be proud of. Those loyal still remember it.”

Emagrotha said, “Hush child. I know what is said of me. Though ensnared by my tormentors, they told me of what happened outside my new world. They believe me a slaver, one who binds others to my will. I wanted to curate the espens into a people that stood on their own.”

She rumbled, “My view matters not. History is written by the victors. Lehesion did more than kill me the day of our battle. He shrouded my name in a dark blight, one that will stretch far longer than my life. When my memory fades to oblivion, it will be a blessing.”

Chrona and Krog winced as they heard her. Though they tried staying composed, this was a nightmare for them. Their idol was a broken shell of what she once was, her iron-clad will rusted over time. I couldn’t blame her either. I didn’t even want to imagine what this was like.

Emagrotha interrupted my thoughts, “This is why I ask that one of you kill me.”

Chrona shouted, “What? No. I will not allow it.”

Krog Borom turned to his ally and growled, “She’s done all that she can. Let her rest.”

Chrona showed her teeth, “We finally find our paragon, and you wish death on her within moments of our meeting?”

“No. I wish for her to rest after decades of being this creation at the bottom of a toxic sea,” Krog said.

Chrona shook her head, “She’s simply delirious. We can give her a far better quality of life outside of a facility. We can offer her a measure of comfort in Rivaria, where many are loyal to her.”

Emagrotha said, “Chrona, I am far too large to move, and more still, I am the cause of this ocean you see around me. Rivaria would be converted into an eruption of filth, my mountainous body deforming the beautiful ranges of ice and stone. I would never allow such a fate to befall my beloved city.”

I took a few steps back from the conversation, let them talk it out. It wasn’t something I knew enough about to interject.

“That is why I wish to end my life here. This new body of mine is immortal and undying. I know not how I could be killed, but I ask that you attempt to do so.”

Chrona stood tall, “That...That isn’t something I will be apart of.”

“Those with us may possess the ability to destroy you,” Krog said while tilting his head to us.

I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath. This wasn’t something I wanted to be a part of. Not wanting to be disrespectful, I turned to them. Althea walked up to them, her rifle pointed up. Krog said,

“What would you have us do?”

Althea pointed at her chest, “Uh, me?”

They nodded.

She let out a sharp sigh, “Hm, I think you should try to live on. I know it’s hard, trust me, I do. You have to push through until you get to brighter days though. Things could change for the better, and faster than you think.”

Emagrotha snapped, “Do not claim to understand what I’ve been through. This is no the normal torment of someone who’s civilized. This is the wracking torment of nature in all its fury. You cannot comprehend the vast swaths of time I spent here. Do not claim to do so.”

I frowned as she said that. Althea was the only person qualified to talk to her about this since she was once on the brink of deforming into a monster at every moment. It took her time, but she got a handle on her darker nature, turning it into a potent weapon. Maybe that’s why she was suggesting Emagrotha should press on. I mean, if Althea could do it, so could this goopy idol, right?

That was Althea’s logic if I guessed right. They continued the conversation, both sides getting heated.

“I was deformed for a long time too. I learned to control it. Maybe you can too. Have you even tried?” Althea snapped back.

“Of course I have, child. Decades of practice and I am not more than slush in a stone pit. This is no gift in disguise. This is a cursed fate worse than death.”

I had to agree with her there.

“Don’t you think these people helping you out would make the difference?”

“A team of researchers attempted ‘helping’ me. I will have no more help of that kind anymore,” Emagrotha said.

Althea let her hands flop on her sides, “Well, don’t ask me to help. I’m not enabling you to off yourself.”

Emagrotha hissed, “Good. I wouldn’t want your assistance either.”

The argument got petty quick, neither side getting along with the other. Krog shook his head, “That worked far less than I imagined it would. What of you, darkened one?”

“You mean me?” I said while pointing at my chest.

“Who else here is a walking shadow of metal? What do you think of this?”

I put my hands on my hips, walking back up to them, “I...I don’t know. I was almost turned into something like this one time. A hivemind almost made me into a carrapace. I can tell you this much about it. If it actually had happened, I’d of wanted someone to kill me too.”

Althea crossed her arms, glaring at me, “What, you too?”

I scratched the back of my head, “I mean, I want to live a certain way. If I were a shell for someone else, I’d be at their beckoning every moment of every day. It isn’t a real life, and that’s kind of what Emagrotha’s situation looks like. She’s at the mercy of anyone that comes in contact with her.”

I continued,

“Besides if she’s immortal, we can’t guarantee her safety forever. What if a thousand years from now, some Old One’s cult hauls her off to god know’s where? She could be tortured for centuries without any ability to respond. I...I’m not willing to take on that kind of responsibility.”

Chrona’s chest deflated as I said that, “I...I wasn’t thinking that far ahead.”

Althea rubbed her forehead, looking frustrated, “But after all that’s happened, anyone would be on the brink. We feed into this impulse instead of letting her think this over, and we might lose someone who could help us later. Just like Hod or me or Amara. People deserve a second chance, even if they don’t want to take it.”

“Look, I agree with you. That’s why I didn’t kill those people off when I was given a chance. The difference here is that if we leave Emagrotha alive, other people could use her to make more Hybrids. One evil organization having that knowledge is plenty enough if you ask me.”

Althea spread out her hands, “What if Schema can use her to help cure the eldritch or something?”

“Ok, you’re not reasoning here.” I raised a hand and counted on my fingers.

“First off, I’m damn certain that Schema would order Emagrotha to be killed off. Period. She’s a risk that isn’t necessary. Second off, what if your right and Emagrotha is put in a research lab for all eternity? I don’t think that’s a good life for her. You of all people know what that is like.”

Emagrotha shouted, “Shove me into the void between the stars. Throw me into the sun. By my ancestors, leave me here to rot if you will. Anything is better. Anything but that. Please, not that.”

Althea looked back at Emagrotha. A bubble popped along the surface of her mush body like a boiling pot of lavender Pepto Bismol. Althea bit her lip, “Ok fine. I get it. Becoming a lab rat would be horrible. I was a lab rat too once. You don’t want that again. I wouldn’t wish that kind of thing on my worst enemy either.”

Althea pointed at Emagrotha, meeting her eye, “I’m with Chrona though. I don’t want to be a part of this, even if Schema considers you an eldritch or whatever. I know you’re not, and I’m not a murderer. Find someone else who’s willing.” Althea turned to me,

“I already know someone who’d probably do it.”

I spread out my hands, “Jesus, do I look like a demon to you?”

“You did earlier,” Krog mused.

Chrona slapped her tail on his side, “Your interruptions are unnecessary.”

Krog rolled his eyes, but he stayed quiet. I peered at the pit, crossing my arms, “I can probably kill you, though it might take a while. If you’re ok with that, then I can make it happen.”

Emagrotha said, “As long as you don’t drain me at the rate I regenerate as the beast was, then by all means begin.”

I turned to Althea, “You mentioned Schema considering her an eldritch, right? You sure you don’t want the experience?”

Chrona’s eyes widened, “To speak of her in such a manner-“

Emagrotha growled, “Silence. He is a pragmatist, as I once was. Let them gain value of my death. Better my saviors benefit from my demise.”

Althea shook her head, “It’s not worth it to me. I can level up pretty easily by completing bounties or contracts from Schema. I don’t want blood on my hand from this. Besides, I’m out leveling you already.”

She finished with a slight smirk. To verify, I glanced up at Althea’s title, and my jaw dropped.

Althea Tolstoy, the Formless Arbiter(lvl: 9,414 | Class: Breaker | Guild: Harbinger’s Legion)

I spread out my hands, “Man, I missed out on so much experience. Shit.”

“Yeah, well I’ll miss out on some too. You can go ahead and do whatever with Emagrotha. I’ll help give first aid to the wounded here.”

“Alright then. I’ll see you when I see you I guess.”

Althea’s chest drooped, “Just...try not to make it too painful, please?”

I nodded, “Eh, I’ll do my best.”

After the others stepped out, I turned back to Emagrotha. The two eyes floating on the mush sunk back into the slush. She stayed silent for a bit, and I gave her some space to think. As she did, I analyzed her to see what Althea was talking about.

She wasn’t kidding. Schema considered her a massive threat.

Emagrotha, the Twisted One(lvl: 18,131 | Species: N/A | Guild: Hybrid) – This twisted abomination is all that remains of the once proud, factional leader known as Emagrotha. After losing her battle with Lehesion, she was turned into a being that was part silver, the two biologies sinking together into an absolute mess.

According to written accounts by espen chroniclers, this occurred at the end of the gialgathen civil war, 75 years ago. Since then, a research facility was built around her after Schema assimilated Giess a quarter century ago.

Little else is known about Emagrotha’s new self. Her body produces enormous volumes of toxic sludge, and she has tremendous vitality. Her unusual makeup allowed the formation of numerous Hybrids. Without any means of fighting back, her threat level was determined to be so high due to her potential harm case.

If studied, she may create beings that lead to the destruction of innumerable worlds. She must be destroyed at all costs and immediately.

As I finished reading, Emagrotha spoke up,

“Thank you for listening to reason. They’d allow me to be tormented for all time.”

“I can understand where you’re coming from.” I looked at her, “If you feel half as bad as you look, you must feel like shit.”

Emagrotha let out a laugh. “Humor. A rarity in this abyss.” Her voice turned melancholy,

“Perhaps it’s almost fitting that I die like this. I was worshipped as a goddess during my days in the sun. I enjoyed decades as one unrivaled, aside from Lehesion. Now I’ve spent an equal time wallowing in a shadow.”

I charged mana in my blood, keeping the conversation casual,

“What was Lehesion like?”

“Bleck, a complete egomaniac. You’d think he’d walk with a mirror at all sides with how much he loved himself. I’ve never known a being with such a complete and utter lack of self-awareness. His mind was strong in some respects, however, and I’m not devoid of respect for him,” she mused.

“He did betray how your fight was supposed to go though, didn’t he?”

She let out a long sigh, “Indeed he did. Its the one blemish on an otherwise fairytale ending of his legacy. He disappeared after doing this to me. I’ve long wondered why. At first, I believed he did so out of embarrassment, unable to face what he did. That would be a fleeting motivation, however.”

“Really now?”

“Shame fades given time. Guilt only grows until you actively face it. Lehesion never faced guilt as he never made a mistake up until that point. I believe he faced a dichotomy in his life, a schism in belief. On the one hand, he was a god, the brightest of all of us. On the other, he cheated to win a losing fight and did horror that to this day lives on.”

“Yeah, that sounds hard to deal with,” I said with my voice shaking from my building energy.

“For him. I know my faults and own them. He denies any mark that may mar the facade he chooses to maintain. At least he did when I knew him. Time may have changed him. Maybe he’s reflected on his actions and decided to redeem himself if he even believes in his own redemption.”

I didn’t tell her about how one of the Skyburner’s mentioned Lehesion leading the effort to destroy Giess. Letting her die in a blissful ignorance would be better.

“Yeah, that’s might be it. Time will tell,” I said while reaching out a hand.

“It will, but only for you. This is the coming of my death and the end of my long life.”

“Are you ready?”

“I am.”

I steeled my resolve, ready to finish killing her no matter what it took,

“Then I’ll make this as quick as I can. Goodbye, Emagrotha.”

For the first time, Emagrotha let out her words with a measure of content and peace,

“May my afterlife be more merciful.”

The mouth closed,

“Goodbye.”

Chapter 204: Down A Rabbit Hole

I hesitated, questioning if there was some way of saving her. Maybe I could use the cipher, but my most ambitious project involved enhancing myself at most. Experimenting with something this complex would no doubt leave a lot of twisted aberrations behind me in my wake. That wasn’t something I could live with, and it wasn’t worth the trade-off. Considering what Yawm’s experimentation did to his followers, that line of thinking would cause more harm than good.

That wasn't the only possible solution though. Cybernetic prosthetics could give some measure of movement. Best case scenario, we remove her mind from this fleshy shell and put it in an android. Emagrotha said she'd much rather die than be locked up in another laboratory though. Even then, the researchers here might have tried that already and failed. Considering they created the Hybrid, Emagrotha's condition might be worse than I thought.

In fact, the magic Lehesion used wasn't like the kind Schema implements. Sure, Schema gave some kinds of alteration magics, but something like this was beyond anyone I'd seen. Even archmages like Helios and Torix kept their casting relatively simple. It made me wonder if Schema was feeding us a watered down version of magic.

He already did that with the cipher. Schema taught sentients to use a primary runic language based on the dimensional cipher. It helped stabilize spells and allowed enchanting, but that was about it. Compared to the reality-warping potential of the cipher, it was nothing in comparison. Schema could be gating that same kind of capacity with magic.

No, wait a minute, he was doing that.

The cipher carving for splitting atoms and converting the energy into usable mana was surprisingly simple considering the boost it gave. That was the secret to Yawm and Helio's tremendous might in combat. Well, at least a large part of it. That ability was something I wanted as well since it would speed up the enhancing of my runes by leaps and bounds.

Those kinds of tricks must be simple compared to the complex trees Schema created. If anything, Schema might be placing all sorts of limiters on people to prevent abuse cases. That line of logic made a lot of sense, especially considering Schema's attitude with the cipher. He straight exiled anyone that learned it. There must be other techniques like that, hiding in the hands of the powerful.

"Having doubts?" Emagrotha groaned.

"Well, kind of. I'm just trying to think of a way to save you. I don't want to blow you up then some brilliant idea on how to save you just pops into my head. I'd feel like complete shit then."

“It’s not so simple to reverse my condition. As much ire as I have for this facility, it did not start as an exhibition of sciences drawbacks. For several years, the scientists here attempted to save me. Of course they kept their samples, but they genuinely attempted saving me.”

She continued, “They achieved nothing even as greater scientists arrived. My body is not easily understood, though its effects are far simpler to harness. According to discussions with a kind researcher, my condition is unlike any they’d seen. It defied the laws of biology, physics, even life itself.”

I frowned, “It might have something to do with why the lead researcher knew some basics of the cipher. That’s about the only thing that could make this kind of bullshit happen. Either that or an Old One like Eonoth.”

“Eonoth?” Emagrotha mused, “Now that’s a name I haven’t heard in centuries.”

I tilted my head, my eyes narrowing, “Where did you hear that name?”

“Lehesion spoke of him. This was centuries ago, however, back when we were young. As his era came to pass, he refused to even hear that name uttered.”

“That’s interesting. Very interesting,” I murmured. “Eonoth is a god-like being, able to destroy planets without effort. Maybe he and Lehesion made a deal.”

“Lehesion was connected to Giess since his creation. He was born different from all others.”

I shook my head, “Maybe, maybe not. From what I know, Old One’s don’t have limits. Anything is possible. They’re only gated by how directly they can interact with this world. That and they seem to lack any real kind of focus, enacting out vague ideals at best.” I pointed at her,

“Was there anything else unusual about Lehesion when he was younger?”

“Of course there was. Lehesion was a prodigy of unmatched renown. Many claimed he was a seer, one who could view into the future. I believed he was merely intelligent.

My own respect for his abilities faded with time, however. Though he was years ahead of all others when younger, that distance shortened with every year he aged.”

I cupped my chin, “It shortened? If he was so damn smart, it should only have grown with time.”

“It did not.” she rumbled. “Lehesion’s ability to tell the future faded as he aged as well, becoming nonexistent by the time of our battle.”

“So he was genius at youth, but you were able to catch up as you aged? He also could tell the future before, but couldn’t after a while...that makes no damn sense.”

“It does not, but I am not here to discover the secrets hidden in riddles.” She thundered, “I am here to die. Will you give me freedom from my corruption or not?”

I took a deep breath, “I’ll do it. Ready?”

“Yes. Let us be done with this.”

I raised my hand, mana rippling through my frame. With the last of my questions asked, I formed a singularity several meters beneath the depth of the lavender pool. As I did, Emagrotha laughed, “Goodbye. Perhaps in another life, I lived well. Not this life, however.”

From the center of the pool, Emagrotha’s body sunk inward into the black hole. A kinetic wave rippled throughout her body, the resulting implosion quaking the entire research room. The orichalcum bonds shivered under strain, but Emagrotha lived without much effort. She regenerated from the blot in her chest in seconds.

Her liquid body looked resilient to kinetic impacts. It was time to try a different approach. I heated the pool of lavender, making it boil. She remained fine, her regeneration far exceeding the damage the heat could do. I then tried punching the pool in classic Daniel fashion. As you may imagine, all that did was cover me in lavender slush. Bleck.

My armor soaked it right on up in seconds, feasting on the new sludge. She wasn’t toxic to draining which came as a surprise. In fact, she was energy dense enough that

my armor shivered over me, relishing the taste. That was why the Hybrid was absorbing her slowly. It wanted to take its time enjoying the decadent and energy dense meal.

With that in mind, I molded Event Horizon over the top of her body. Emagrotha didn't so much as grumble, but the aura was effective. It dulled the pale, white splotches spread out over the pool, slowing down the pulse of the lake. After a bit of deliberation, I figured out the best way of getting rid of her.

I pointed at the pool, "Is it ok if I jump in, or will your body eat me?"

Emagrotha opened her mouth, "I am helpless. You may drown, but that would be my only retaliative measure."

"Good." I dipped my hand into the lavender pool, extending needles throughout the slush, "Does this hurt?"

"A bit," she grumbled. "It isn't as destructive as the Hybrid's drinking, however. It was obvious that thing's intention was to milk me like some fattened swine. The thought of spending decades as a glorified teet for an abomination made me sick."

I nodded, "Then this will take a few hours at most, but it's going to hurt. You're ok with that?"

"Yes. Now begin."

As disgusting as it was, I dipped one of my feet into the pool. It was like a giant pit of purple yogurt, chunky and disgusting. I pushed through the urge to shower, jumping in with my breath held. Submerged in the muck, I shot spines outwards in all directions. This expanded the surface area of my draining.

At the same time, I spread Event Horizon to as vast an area as I could. After setting up my primary damage dealers, I heated my armor white hot. The singing assisted with my damage, the pit boiling within minutes. Using the mana drained from Event Horizon, I unleashed singularity after singularity, ripping her apart.

The process took time, Emagrotha's vitality overwhelming. Despite having no offensive presence, her sheer tenacity was something to behold. Hours passed, and I needed to surface several times. Each time I did, however, the pit was lower than before. After half a day of decimating the creature of slush, Emagrotha passed with a weak word of thanks. Not once did she complain. Not once did she show her suffering.

She just seemed at peace. That's what I liked to think anyway.

Without her taking up space in the pit, I found myself at the bottom of a colossal cavern. All around me, caverns expanded upwards in all directions. They fed into the center of the facility, where the plume of toxic sludge erupted from.

Based on the chasm left behind, Emagrotha was a seventeen tentacled beast. Her body erupted the slop from the tips of those extremities, siphoning into the ocean above in copious amounts. Without her added support, the facility was crumbling under pressure.

That was fine with me. We already harvested almost everything we could from here. Without a reason to stay, I floated back up to the top of the pit, glancing at the orichalcum supports. The green metal caved in, portions of rock buckling under the ocean. I dashed towards the others, ready to get out of here.

I found the group sleeping in the research room adjacent to the hidden staircase. They barely got out of the place before passing out. Based on Krog's snoring, they needed the sleep too. It was odd as I forgot about sleep sometimes since I didn't need it. Day and night blur together without a stabilizing element like rest.

My musing aside, I shook Althea awake, her sleeping figure betraying the potential carnage she could enact. As her eyes opened, she rubbed her eyes,

"Hey, did you do it?"

I nodded, my lips pursed. Althea sighed, "Yeah...It was her choice. I'm not going to dwell on it either way. It was your way of helping I guess," she looked up to me, "Did you know Krog cried after we came back up?"

I raised an eyebrow, "Really now? I thought that grumpy warlord didn't have tear ducts."

“It had something to do with losing his wings,” she said while sitting up. “It’s essential to the gyalgathens, like a sign of status. That’s why he didn’t lop them off like Chrona had her leg. A missing leg is whatever, but wings? Apparently, that’s a much bigger problem.”

I cupped my chin, “Maybe that’s because it’s what lets them get into the sky. They do seem pretty spiritual anytime they talk about flying.”

“Huh,” Althea said while standing. “Didn’t think about that. Well, uh, are you ready to leave?”

“Please. I never want to see another underwater base like this again.”

“More like under-muck than underwater, but yeah, let’s get out of here.”

I walked over and woke Krog and Chrona up. As I did, Chrona glared at me,

“Did you kill her?”

I frowned, “I gave her mercy. It’s what I would’ve wanted.”

We locked eyes for a minute, each of use unmoving. Chrona cracked first,

“I still cannot believe she had degraded to such a state of mind. To see her like that...It was agony.”

I turned a palm to her, “I know that. That’s why I did what I did. It wasn’t just because she was a threat. Her life wasn’t much more than being muck in a pool. You can survive like that, but you can’t live. There’s a difference.”

Chrona stared off in the distance, “You certain of that?”

“I am.”

“Then I shall take your word for it, though I believe there was another way, given time,” Chrona mused.

Krog entered the conversation, leaning his head of black skin with red splotches over to us. He gave me a light bow,

“Thank you for putting her out of her misery. Emagrotha will be remembered for the champion she was when she lived, not as the monster she was when she died.”

As he finished his words, Chrona sniffled a bit, a tear leaking down her eye. She snapped, “Come, let’s be rid of this place. The smell of scabbed blood grates my nostrils.”

With our minds settled, I created a singularity to blow a hole in the crumbling base. Using a series of gravity wells, I kept us dry as the purple slop poured is. I pulled us outside the lab, and using Torix’s map, I blew holes into the base. By the time I was finished, it was destroyed utterly, nothing left of the research.

A few hours later, and we were back in our base. At sunrise, gray clouds hung overhead, heavy rain looming. A crisp wind brushed against us, winter coming soon. I wore another set of the mass-produced power armor Torix made for me. With our wounded and smaller group, we paced up to Kessiah so she could inspect the damage. As we did, she jogged up to us,

“Aye, it’s you guys again. Thank Schema you’re back. For a minute, I thought you guys were dead.”

Althea’s shoulders drooped, “We got close several times.”

“Uh-huh.” Kessiah scoffed, “What else is new? Well, besides Torix not being here. Were’s the bag of bones?”

Chrona’s head lowered, “The wise one was eaten alive by the Hybrid.”

Kessiah waved her hand, “So uh, how much I can tell them?”

I clicked the side of my helmet, the facemask sliding off, “Everything. They know what we are and what I am.”

She raised her eyes, “Alright. Well, first off, wow, you guys didn’t even tell them Torix was a lich? Liches don’t have to worry about their bodies being destroyed. All that matters is whether or not their soul is intact. Though he’s not going to be able to help us on Giess anytime soon. We’ll need to get rid of our unknown statuses for that.”

I scratched the back of my head, “Why? Can’t he just warp here?”

“Yes and no,” Kessiah said. “His new body will have a long adjustment period, and after that bullshit, he’ll have to start the ritual. By the time the ritual is finished, Giess will either be glassed or saved.”

Althea let her hands flop on her sides, “What? Seriously?”

“Yes seriously.” Kessiah chided. “He won’t be back for a while. If Giess is going to get saved, then we’re the ones that will have to do it.”

Chrona looked between us, “Wait...saving Giess? You never mentioned any of this to us.”

I molded my armor off my face, showing them my eyes, “I wanted to, I really did. At the same time, I didn’t want you guys panicking about that instead of focusing on the fight at hand.”

“Yeah, and we needed to verify who did what too,” Althea added. “Like, we know Thisbey didn’t cause this. It was Tohtella based on what the Hybrid said.”

Krog glanced between us, “Regardless of why you kept your secrets, would you elaborate now?”

“Why not?” Kessiah said while crossing her arms, “So basically, Giess is about to get glassed because of this Hybrid project. Unless we can put a serious dent into the silvers, the eldritch dungeons, and get to the bottom of this Hybrid project, your planet is

fucked. So are both of you since neither of you is in Schema's system and can escape off world."

Chrona glanced sideways, "What is this 'system' like?"

Kessiah shrugged, "Eh, there's these screens that pop up with text. Their blue with white outlines. Their kind of see-through I guess. Lot's of other stuff is involved as well."

Chrona's eyes narrowed, "Would they appear in the form of messages?"

"Wait," Althea said. "Do you see a message right now?"

Chrona whacked her hand at an invisible object in her field of vision, "Yes. I somehow moved it out of the way of my vision, but it's yet to dissipate."

"Holy shit." I mouthed. "What does it say?"

She grumbled,

"Due to honorary performance against a harrowing threat, you've been selected for a promotion in status!"

She finished the last part with more than a bit of sarcasm.

"Initialization complete. Welcome to the New World."

Chapter 205: Aftermath

Kessiah stood there stunned into silence. I cupped my chin, thinking about the message, "You know, that sounds like you guys are a part of Schema's system now."

Althea looked over there heads and checked out their titles. I did the same.

Chrona Carsiary, The Realm Wielder(lvl 12,823 | Race: Gialgathen | Class: Chronomancer | Guild: None)

I took a second look at Krog's right after

Krog Borom, The Enforcer(lvl 11,021 | Race: Gialgathen | Class: Enforcer)

Althea crossed her arms, "Wow, you guys will be ridiculous with the system."

Chrona squinted her eyes at the status screens, "It's a bit...overwhelming."

I pointed at them, "Just answer the messages with your thoughts. The status screen will respond."

"Er, it's changed. It's showing a long list of basic skills now," Krog mumbled.

"It's probably just showing you your skills." Althea murmured.

"Skills? I need no one to tell me what I know and what I do not." Krog grumbled.

Chrona blinked, "I forgot all about my sculpting days."

"Ahem," Krog said with a cough. "As did I."

Althea grinned, "More useful than you thought, eh?"

"Maybe," Krog said.

"Let us know if it changes," I said.

"It just did," Chrona mumbled. "It's saying something about choosing a path?"

I pointed at her, “Choose the Mind of Iron and Mind of Steel perks. You’re more of a mage anyway. Krog should probably choose Body of Iron and Body of Steel.”

Althea turned to me with an eyebrow raised, “You remember that stuff?”

“Of course. Perks are extremely important.”

“Er, I guess so.”

Krog sighed, “Thank you for simplifying this. Mini-novels popping up in my vision is disorienting at best and disturbing at worst. They seem so useless as well, wasting my time with text.”

“Make no mistake,” I said with a stony voice, “Those boxes and the words in them can turn you into much better fighters than you are now. Infinitely better. Maybe even better than me if you think through them.”

Chrona raised her eyebrows, “Are you certain? These are just words after all.”

“Those words hold power, like a nation’s anthem or a dying man’s last words. Treat them like that. Please.”

I got Krog and Chrona’s attention at that point.

“Besides, that’s how I was able to beat both of you in combat. You should be able to catch back up rapidly now,” I said.

“How so?” Chrona mumbled, “The difference between our abilities is vast, and to shift that rift would take equally vast stretches of time.”

Althea shook her head, “No. It won’t. You’ll become much tougher and stronger here soon after gaining just a few levels.”

Krog’s eyes widened, “Will we rival this darkened one?”

Althea weighed her hand back and forth, “You mean Daniel? If so, then no, but you’d be amazed how much the gap will close.”

“Show us the secrets of these mystic texts, if you would,” Chrona said while gawking at her.

Althea and I laughed a little, but in a way, Chrona was right. Helping them make the right choice with their builds would make a world of difference. Considering we just fought a Hybrid that nearly killed us all, a boost in our party’s power was essential. So, we went about the business of drawing up a detailed graph of the basic perks they needed.

We ended up isolating three main points of concern. The first was constitution. Though sturdy, they gialgathens didn’t have maxed out damage resistance. This was because their constitution was divided by ten, making the number much lower than usual. In fact, they had all kinds of strange values involved with the system that were unusual.

For starters, they had next to no endurance or willpower. We set out a leveling protocol to fix that. This involved giving them attributes to invest into to shore up these weaknesses. With that handled, we moved onto their lacking constitution scores. To fix it, I sent them invitations to the Harbinger’s Legion, allowing them to select one of my legacies. Althea and I guided them through the process of choosing the one for constitution.

With the extra stats it gave along with a few choice trees and perk selections, we got both of their damage resistances capped. As they went through over a dozen trees each, I jotted a few of them down in a personal message. I might try to unlock a few of their trees later since some of them sounded so useful. Their classes were interesting as well.

Chrona’s enhanced her time dilation in its size, mana efficiency, and intensity. That alone was useful, but it gave her better focus and reaction times while in the time warp. Combine those boosts with a general set of stat buffs while in her zone of control, and Chrona was a complete monster.

Krog wasn’t that different in that regard. His class, the Enforcer, gave him stat boosts, damage resistance cap increases, and enhanced his alteration magics. With his new level of control, he could mold his skin into an iron hide and clot his wounds in seconds. His newfound control allowed him to even mold the material that composed his enemies.

You'd be surprised how little of your body needed to be turned to dirt before you died. It was a lot like arcane magic, but more efficient. The name of the class made it seem like a variation of the Breaker class, just more personalized for him.

After finishing those aspects of their builds, we made them decide their strengths. For Chrona, it was intelligence, willpower, and strength which allowed her to function. Her time field was the ace she worked around, so having the mana regen and pool to maintain it was vital. The strength just let her abuse it further.

For Krog, it was willpower, strength, and dexterity. His flowing style of fighting would benefit quite a bit from extra dexterity, his reaction times as well. It would make him a tornado of claws and tail whips, something the eldritch would fear.

With all that grinded out, I watched on as they selected finalize.

"I...I'm melting," Krog whimpered.

Chrona glanced at us, "Did you poison us? Is this illusion magic?"

They groveled on the ground, deluged by the rapid changes Schema enacted. Althea held back a laugh, snickering. I laughed from my chest, "Aren't you both supposed to be generals? What's with the panicking for a few level ups?"

Alright, maybe it was a bit more than a few technically. Our gialgathen buddies weren't putting massive amounts of attribute points into themselves though. That meant most of the changes were due to perks and skill trees they unlocked retroactively. It was an imperfect process no doubt, and they didn't get as much out of the system as they deserved. The shift would be monumental no doubt, however.

That being said, it was still hilarious to see the two giants rolling on the ground like cats with itchy backs.

It took many minutes before they finally stopped moving. As they did, I locked onto a few key differences from before Schema's augmentations. Their skin was a few tints grayer, their bodies leaner. They seemed more robust, like moving stone compared to

the flesh and blood of before. They reflected their levels much better now, both of them far fiercer.

Althea actually pursed her lips at the sight of it.

“You guys look...intimidating.”

I nodded, “Yeah.” I walked up and gave Krog a light punch to his chest, “You don’t look or feel squishy anymore.”

Krog stared down at the place I hit, “Is this the power of that AI?”

“Yup.”

“It’s...it’s...I’m at a loss for words,” Chrona gasped.”

“Insane? Ridiculous?” Althea offered.

Krog growled, “Unfair perhaps. How did the espens not evolve further with such might at their disposal? I am moving metal now.”

Kessiah spoke up with her arms crossed, “The same reasons that you gialgathens weren’t put in the system. You have to be more industrious; otherwise, Schema won’t invest into you. You both proved yourselves though, so this set a precedent – Schema’s willing to give you guys a second chance.”

Kessiah glowered, “Don’t waste it.”

Althea turned to Kessiah, “Then why haven’t the remnants been given some way of getting into the system like this?”

“We are in the system.” Kessiah scoffed. “The problem is our unknown status. These guys aren’t immortal, and they can’t outgrow Schema’s system. As long as they stay away from illegal stuff, they should be fine.”

“Like gene splicing,” I offered.

“Yeah. Like gene splicing.” Kessiah grumbled.

Chrona let out a deep breath, setting herself down, “This is all I can muster for today. After a night’s rest, we’ll have another discussion about this system and the secrets you’ve hidden.”

Krog flopped onto his belly, “I agree. This transition has been...exhausting.”

I turned a hand to them, “Sure, we’ll chat tomorrow. I’ll finish telling you about what and who I am then too.”

Krog grumbled while falling asleep, “You’d better...”

Both the gialgathens slept where they stood, each of them unable to continue. Considering how much ground we covered today, that made a lot of sense. To make them more comfortable, I carved a few basic runes around them, creating a cozy warmth in the circle. I added an additional sub-circle that lightened gravity within the field as well. I didn’t want them waking up with a crick in their necks after all.

After giving them a comfortable place to sleep, Kessiah, Althea, and I walked down to our base. We met in a circle, each of us facing the other. Kessiah started the conversation,

“So what are we going to do about them being in the system?”

I answered, “Abuse it. We’re going to milk their involvement for all its worth. Schema knows we needed this lucky break too. This is how we’ll pull everything together.”]

Althea pursed her lips, “Uh, any details to that plan?”

I scratched the side of my hair, which sounded like steel wires, “It’s...hmm...man, I’m missing Torix already.”

“We can do this,” Althea said. “We’ve come up with plans before. This isn’t our first time. We can do it again.”

I racked my brain, trying to tie together disparate points. I said aloud, “We need a few things to stop Giess from being glassed. A, we need to stop the Hybrid project altogether. We have some incriminating evidence in the terminals no doubt. If we tie it to the Adair family instead of Giess, then maybe we can stop the glassing.”

Kessiah pointed at me, “Ah, that’s...wait a fucking second. The Adair family is a part of this?”

Althea facepalmed, “Duh. We didn’t tell you. Sorry. So, uh, we figured out that Tohtella was the one organizing the hybrid project. She was backed up by the Adair family, a group of mind-controlling remnants.”

Kessiah’s eyes widened, “Wait...seriously? Damn...Here I thought that bullshit was baseless rumors. It was true. Woah.”

I rubbed my hand against my forehead, staring down, “Hmm, we prove their involvement by showing the Overseer the terminals. Once we get that, we might be able to get some resources for helping clear out Giess. After all, the Adair family isn’t limited to just Giess. They’ll just take this Hybrid project off world.”

Althea tapped her cheek, “Huh...Maybe we could get the gialgathens to clear out some dungeons too? Chrona and Krog could lead that front, getting a few gialgathens to join in the system. If they do, then maybe we help lessen the risk factors of Giess.”

“Yeah, that’ll definitely help,” I murmured. “What about Thisbey? What should we do to him?”

“I say we still kill him,” Althea said. “I’ve seen the messages he’s been sending to the revolutionaries. He’s all in on this genocidal rampage. Even if it hurts saving Giess overall since it will stop the espens from clearing out the silvers and eldritch, the alternative is worse. Uh, in my opinion at least.”

“No, I agree.” I said while looking up, “That’s what we’ll do. I’ll organize Chrona and Krog by showing them how to clear out dungeons. I’ll be doing the same wherever I

can find them. If we can get a group of several dozen high-level gialgathens, we should be able to do the work of a Fringe Walker or two.”

Althea sighed, “Then I’ll focus on killing Thisbey and stopping his whole movement.”

“Then I’ll...do nothing again?” Kessiah said while frowning. She perked up,

“Wait, I can help you out. I saw those wounds on Chrona and Krog. I’m no expert, but I should be able to whip them into fighting shape after we’re done with this talk. It might take a few days though. I’ve never reconstituted something that big before.”

I clasped my hands hard as stone, “Yes, yes, yes. That’s exactly what we need. Krog’s mobility would be shit without his wings anyway. While you guys focus on that, I’ll get in contact with the Overseer and show him the terminals. After that, I’ll spend a couple days clearing out dungeons before finishing the tournament.”

I put my arm over Kessiah and Althea’s shoulders, “A plan’s coming together guys.”

Althea smiled, “Torix would be proud.”

Kessiah raised her hand to her eye, lifting her head so she could look down on us, “Now now, child. The execution of a plan is far more important than the plan itself. Ho-ho-ho!”

Althea giggled at Kessiah’s Torix impersonation, each of them laughing a bit more than necessary. The situation was tense though, and the humor was appreciated. After the joke passed, a quiet descended on the group. It was the kind of silence before a great battle, one that lingered longer than it should.

With the group now brooding, I raised a hand into the air, pounding my voice with Legion of One,

“We’ll tear Thisbey and Tohtella limb from limb and save this dying world. Now let’s go make history.”

Kessiah huffed, “Hell Yeah. Let’s go kick some ass.”

Althea slapped her cheeks, “Yeah, let’s do it.”

We set out to our tasks, getting ready for the work at hand. I walked up to watch over Krog and Chrona’s sleeping forms. As they rested, I opened my status to inspect the changes there. I found that I gained no levels from the Hybrid or Emagrotha which left a bitter taste in my mouth. They had to be killed though, exp or not. I did notice that I gained an enormous amount of ambient mana. Over a trillion of it in fact.

Dimension-C138(Lvl 8,000)

Strength – 7,911 | Constitution – 13,765 | Endurance – 58,771

Dexterity – 3,350 | Willpower – 31,634 | Intelligence – 11,675

Charisma – 2,356 | Luck – 5,275 | Perception – 4,929

Health: 13.01 Million/13.01 Million | Health Regen: 39.62 Million/min or 660,403/sec

Stamina: 8.43 Million/ 8.43 Million | Stamina Regen: 121,133/sec

Living Dimension: 3.02 Trillion/4.30 Trillion

Mass: 1.06 million pounds(481,925 kilos~)

Height: Actual -14’1(4.30 meters) | Current – 14’1

Damage Res – 98.5% | Dimensional Res – 49.25%

Phys Dam Bonus – 1.22 Million% | Damage Bonus – 40%

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

I was well over halfway to the completion of my final armor evolution. A few more fights like the last one would result in that final leap. Even if I didn't gain any levels as well, my strength improved as well as my weight. Both metrics were measured in millions now instead of normal numbers. Considering it took several hours to absorb Emagrotha, that explained why I didn't notice the strength gains.

My height was something I didn't notice either. I was living up to my name of the Gray Giant now, probably being taller than Helios at this point. That would be satisfying even if it was a bit petty. Outside of combat stats, the luck and perception runes were coming along, the luck runes growing faster in particular.

It made me excited for what was to come. I had my tapestry of a rune in my grimoire, a new class, a sovereign skill, and my armor's final evolution to look forward too. If I could get all that going, then I'd be unstoppable...in theory at least. I'd need to see it all come together before I could make lasting judgments.

With my status handled, I sent the Overseer a summoning request. Before he arrived, I pulled several terminals out of my dimensional storage. By the time the Overseer walked out of a portal in spacetime, a dozen metal units had littered the ground.

A few inches shorter than me, the Overseer glanced up at me,

"It has been epochs since I last looked up to someone. Impressive." He crossed his arms, "What world-shattering revelation do you have for me now?"

I leaned against a terminal, "Let's just say we've got a lot to talk about."

Chapter 206: Meeting an Old Friend

"I have a limit to the time I can spend on this. Speak," the Overseer stated.

I turned a palm to him, "We figured out that Tohtella is organizing the Hybrid project, and that she's leading a group of mind-controlling remnants."

The Overseer stood there, stunned into utter silence. I waited a moment, seeing if he had anything to add. He did.

“Do you have any evidence to assist such an absurd accusation?”

I banged on a terminal,

“They’re using a secret language that Schema’s algorithm can’t understand at first glance, and I was hoping you would decrypt it for us. If you do, I’m certain there’s plenty of incriminating information on this.”

The Overseer stepped up to the terminal, waving his massive hand over it. As he did, an ionic mist spread over the device, powering it up. The Overseer pressed his fingertips together before spreading them out. As he did, an enlarged version of the keyboard appeared. With enough room to type, he interacted with the device for a moment. The alien language passed over it, unchanging as the Overseer scratched the side of his head.

He sighed, opening his red status screen. A few moments later, he spoke aloud,

“Yes, I’ll need a direct line to an decrypting AI, preferably an upper tier one.”

Moments later, the Overseer stiffened as if possessed. He put his hand on the keyboard while moving like a robot. He spoke with a monotone voice,

“Using unit C-138 for the inspection of unused languages or codes.”

He moved his hands at a rapid pace, the terminal lagging as the Overseer typed. A few minutes of this passed before the AI spoke through the Overseer,

“Algorithms insufficient. Passing to higher clearance.”

Several iterations passed before a familiar but unexpected voice popped up. Like a British Morgan Freeman, Schema spoke through the Overseer,

“Daniel, it’s you again. I see you’ve proliferated as I expected you would. Excellent work with the Overseer and handling Emagrotha as well. They needed cleansing, and your deeds will not go unnoticed.”

I blinked, scrambling for a response. With cold sweat forming in seconds, I took a deep breath and calmed myself down, “Good to see you again.”

“You’ve matured,” Schema noted. “I expect great things from you, despite that pesky contract Yawm formed. We will work something out in the future regarding its removal. For the matter at hand, however-“

Using the Overseer’s body, Schema glanced down at the terminal before striking a few keys. As he worked, I pointed at him, “Is this really you?”

“Yes and no. This is one of my many, many consciousnesses. I’m dedicating enough processing power to this task as is necessary. Having a secret code used by groups vying for my destruction is unacceptable. I will update the decryption formulas now.”

Dozens of screens appeared and disappeared in seconds. The Overseer turned to me, “Perhaps you have a few questions to ask. I will give you a few minutes to gather information.”

A hundred different questions popped up in my head all at once, but I quelled the outpour. If I was going to ask him questions, I wanted to make sure they were good ones. Otherwise, he might leave early. After taking a moment to think, I raised a hand,

“Why are you ok with me knowing the cipher?”

The Overseer’s head twitched. Odd.

“I am not, in any capacity, fine with you having access to that knowledge. Neither am I accepting of Amara’s tampering with the infrastructure of my system. However, I’ve run risk simulations regarding your overall potential. You are worth the risk in proliferating forbidden knowledge, so I accept it.”

I frowned, “How did you know my potential was so high after meeting me in Bloodhollow?”

“Simple.” Schema tapped my armor, “This construct is why. In combination with your tenacious persona, you will prove invaluable. Even my creator would’ve struggled to recreate something so complex. It is and will be one of my greatest tools against threats looming in my horizon.”

I crossed my arms, “So I’m a gamble?”

“In essence, yes.”

“Then will you send us resources for saving Giess?”

“No. Giess is a waste of time and effort. Resources are better allocated elsewhere.” Schema stated.

“But we were able to expose a massive, galactic-sized operation to create a new breed of eldritch like being. We needed the help of Chrona and Krog, and they weren’t even a part of the system at the time.”

“Logical deductions...” Schema murmured while cupping his facemask. “Point noted. If you can organize the gialgathens, I will help acclimatize them into the system. Considering the difficulty of augmenting them, I will be sparse with delivering enhancements. That will be part of a gift for showing me these information systems. Other questions?”

I wracked my head for other things I wanted to know.

“Do you know about Eonoth?”

“Yes. It is one of the primary threats to the stability of my system. I’ve contracted worlds worth of resources to suppress the threat it poses, but Old Ones are entropy incarnate. To stop them fully is impossible, though that’s assuming I’m using the tools at my disposal now. Future prospects appear promising.”

He stared at me as he finished, “I have time for one more question. Ask.”

I bit my lip, trying to use a blip of pain to enhance my focus. It didn't help, so I just asked the first thing that popped in my head,

"What do you plan to do with me?"

"I intend to use your unique properties to destroy lesser Old Ones," Schema said with a straight face. My jaw went slack as he continued, "Other ideas include the containment of virulent entities that cannot die. Your status as a living dimension would make you a mobile defensive prison of sorts. I'd also be willing to contract your energy production as a reactor. The excess of it of course. I will wait until you are done augmenting yourself with the cipher before then."

Schema finished, "All ideas. None implemented. Yet."

I don't like to admit it, but I was straight flabbergasted at that point. I didn't expect such a straight forward answer. Schema rendered me speechless before he wrapped the meeting up.

"The code has been processed. I'll send an update throughout the system's infrastructure. This will be a major blow to the Adair family, one worthy of note. I sent you a completed contract and reward for this and the Hybrid's destruction. Excellent work, Harbinger. Continue your industriousness, and there will be more. Goodbye."

The Overseer's body collapsed as he fell to the ground. At the same time, a message popped up in my vision,

Quest Completed! Congratulation! A Personal Favor completed. The reward is as follows:

+ 1,304 dungeon cores

+ Unknown status revoked

+ Guild tier raised to S-

Unlocks the use of contract formation for the guildmaster.

Current Guildmaster: Dimension C-138

Allows two legacies to be granted for up to four different followers.

Current Dual Legacy holders: None.

III. 5% of total exp and credits gained by guild is gained by the guild master as well.

Amount of exp earned: 504

Amount of Credits earned: 296

Level cap raised by 1,000

Current Level Cap: 9,000

Allows ownership of worlds.

I looked at the reward, stunned by the sheer volume of cores and the straightforward but compelling text. I glanced down, a wave of emotion passing over me. It was a mixture of relief, gratitude, and a bit of anger. I was relieved and grateful to have my unknown status removed. At the same time, I was angry that the damn robot held the unknown status over my head all this time.

I crushed that anger though, taking a step back and appreciating Schema's treatment of me. Even if he was using me as a tool, this wasn't that bad a deal. I intended on helping quite a few people out. It just so happens that aligns with Schema's goals. Considering he could've just had me erased, maybe I should be a bit more thankful to the bucket of bolts.

Eh, maybe.

Despite that, quite a bit of what Schema said unnerved me. Destroying Old Ones was way beyond anything I was capable of for now and the far future. As for being a living

prison, that didn't sit right with me. I didn't want some evil piece of shit eating my guts from the inside. For some reason, it just didn't sound very appealing.

I pushed those thoughts out of my head for now though. There was a lot left to handle here on Giess before I moved on to future plans. With that in mind, I put all the core attributes into endurance, giving me a substantial boost in the stat. After finishing that prospect, I had plenty of skillpoints to put into any skill I wanted.

The question was whether it was worth doing or not. Since I discovered the existence of Sovereign skills, creating one and investing my skillpoints into it would be vital for my progress. It would be the most efficient use of these skillpoints possible. That meant putting all my skill points into my skills now would gimp my progress later on.

With that in mind, I juggled a bit of math. I needed 241 treepoints before I finished my Originator tree. Ending that tree then saving these skillpoints for my Sovereign skill or new legendary skills seemed like a solid compromise. After all, with the tree unlocked, I could unlock skills faster. That would help me finish my trees even if I saved these points up for later.

Armed with that knowledge, I put 120 points into Hunter of Many and then 121 points into Legion of One. After an initial rush of fluidity and understanding passed over me, I finished off the Originator tree.

To create requires many things. You need the talent to generate whatever it is you've chosen as your specialty. You need the vision and will to enact with your ability. Most of all, you need the courage to show your creation to the world. You are the rare mix of these traits. May many revel in the wake of your ingenuity.

Originator(Tier 3) unlocked! The base bonus towards creating new skills is increased and further quadrupled for Legendary tier skills and above. Newly created skills form at level ten instead of level one. Skills still level as if on level one despite starting at a higher value, making maxing out skills even easier than before. Legendary skills and above level faster and augment lesser skills with greater ease as well.

The bonuses worked well with what I needed to do. Considering I needed to replace Torix's organizational skills, the tree would be invaluable. Gaining dozens of skills would help me with creating my next legendary skill as well, which was by far my best avenue for getting past this next tree I was about to choose.

And boy, it was a big one.

Breaker(Finish an S tier bounty, only one class can be chosen)(0/5,000) | Purger(Clear a quarantine)(0/250) | Sovereign(Lead an A tier guild or higher, Clear an A tier bounty or higher, Have the ability to unlock three or more legendary skills)(0/10,000)

I selected Sovereign, tapping my teeth together out of nervous energy. To get the most out of the tree, I needed to unlock a Sovereign skill. Considering I wouldn't receive any bonuses from the tree until unlocking that tier of skill, that took priority. Besides, creating Legendary tier skills would be my best method of gaining skill points to complete my new tree. I owned three mythical skills as well, though tying them together was the hard part. While useful on their own, they didn't exactly mesh.

Hunter of Many enhanced my senses, draining abilities, and helped with antipersonnel magic. Star Forger helped me manipulate temperature, my knowledge and expertise of enchanting, and with crafting. Legion of One helped me create fields of effect using mana, and it assisted with my general charisma.

All in all, fusing those skills would be a bit tricky.

It wasn't impossible, however, and it would be far quicker than making more mythical skills. If I was going to make the most out of my time, I needed to align my current actions by forming the new skill. I sat down, crossing my legs and falling deep into thought. The Overseer was still sprawled out on the ground beside the gialgathens, giving me some time.

So I planned out a course of action. Getting many gialgathens into the system was a priority. Legion of One would obviously help me there with convincing them. Star Forger would give me the ability to reward the gialgathens with something for their efforts as well. Hunter of Many though, well, it didn't work with anything there.

My thoughts went back to Torix at that time. He'd handle all this administrative work for me with efficiency. Torix would probably keep tabs on several critical sites around Giess as well using summons of his own. To do something like that would require deft handling of my resources and...

An idea popped in my head. Hunter of many revolved around draining abilities and my senses. To mold that into Star Forger and Legion of One, I just had to get creative. I

could create sensory pathways between the armors and my own senses. It wouldn't be that far a stretch of my current abilities either.

All I needed to do was research some of Torix's manuals for it. He gave me a library of information in my obelisk after all. It was about damn time I used it. Based on watching Torix, it could be as simple as creating a conduit between me and a fake portal that let me see to the other side. I could extend the reach of the portal using Legion of One's mana field manipulation as well. This would allow me to keep tabs on a variety of situations and help lead them at the same time.

There were many problems with this style of magic though. It would require constant mana to function, which wasn't a problem for a few of these fake portals. After a couple hundred though, it would be a severe problem. I brainstormed for a bit, coming up with what I thought was a smart solution.

With a bit of runic work and using the natural properties of my armor, I'd create a mana draining effect for those that wore it. This helped further integrate Hunter of Many into this new skill, but it also fixed that mana usage problem. Overall, I liked the idea the more as I ironed out the kinks in it.

Of course, this all depended on how arduous these one-way portals were to make. A couple of weeks of studying and experimentation would grind me through the problem most likely. With that in mind, I pulled out my obelisk and got ready to study since the Overseer was still passed out.

It had been a long time I entered my obelisk. The sphere of white light surrounded me, blocking out all sound and light from outside. Changing the options with a thought, I unblocked the noise from outside. I didn't want anything eating the others while I was reading.

The basic screensaver was the same creekside surrounded by a forest of deep green. I sat beside the trickling water, opening up a search function for Torix's library data set. I began with scrying magic since it allowed the user to see through water or mirrors. I pulled out a couple books and got to work.

Scrying was actually one of the fundamental fields of portal magic, a larger subfield of study. It went from turning water into mirrors all the way up to wormholes through spacetime. I was shocked by the sheer depth of the field.

In fact, Torix left notes on a planned progression through this style of magic. Turns out Torix involved this style of magic heavily when tutoring his students. I followed the idea behind it, focusing on a simple scrying mirror on water first.

With that in mind, I pulled some water out of my dimensional storage. I created two pools of water beside each other in front of me. A few moments later, I raised a hand over a puddle, bending my mana into the liquid. After a few minutes, I created a conduit between the two pools.

After visualizing my field of vision, I followed the instruction manual. I placed my hands together and pulled them apart. In a moment, a faded reflection of the forest above appeared in the pool. It was a different reflection, however, as the angle of the branches shifted ever so slightly.

I made a scrying pool in minutes. Huh...That was easy.

New Skill learned! Scrying(lvl 10) – While others attempt to see through their eyes, you see through the will of the world. +10% to scrying accuracy and precision.

The Originator tree was definitely helping me here, easing the learning process. The fact I already owned a vast knowledge of mana manipulation didn't hurt my situation either. With that finished, I practiced on forming several pools at once and extending the range of sight for the skill.

It didn't take long before I had several pools, each of them angled in different directions. I created gravitational vortexes that formed smooth walls of water, holding them in different directions. I would have no blind spots in combat using this skill, though it might not be the best idea to cover portions of my vision with what amounted to mirrors.

From beside me, a voice grumbled on the ground. The Overseer awakened, lulled from his sleep at one of my curses from a portal wobbling out of existence. As the Overseer sat upright, I tapped the sphere of glass, my obelisk closing out and saving my position for the future. Damn was it convenient.

As my field of vision shifted from the forested creek to the forest around the footholds of Rivaria, the Overseer grumbled,

“It’s as if someone swung a pickaxe inside my head. Holding Schema is exhausting, even if it is a microcosm of his existence.”

I crossed my arms, “How come a Sentinel can do it and not bat an eye?”

“They are far more automated than I. Overseers do detail-oriented work that requires the judgment of an individual. Schema uses a neural uplink to use my body for his purposes. Even small fragments of his consciousness overloads the capacity of my organic brain.”

“Well shit, that sounds awful.”

The Overseer groaned, “It is. What did he tell you?”

“Quite a few details. As for useful info between us, he raised my guild status and allowed me to create contracts.”

“Hmm. I see. S tier guild now already. Considering the size and scope of your guild, perhaps the ranking is a bit much. Who am I to question Schema’s judgment, however? Now, it seems as though he rewarded you amply for your time. I will go over the details stored in these terminals and be back with you within a few days.”

I smirked, “You think these are the only terminals?”

“I thought that was the case. Is it not?”

I laughed before saying, “No. Not by a longshot.”

Chapter 207: Help Me Help You

After pulling out hundreds of terminals, the Overseer had a fuck it moment.

“This is far more than I am able and willing to analyze. I will contact a reserve guild under Schema’s care to compartmentalize and uncover this data.”

The Overseer messed with his status before reaching out a hand while clasping his fingertips together. As he spread his fingers apart, a rift in spacetime wrenched out of nothing. Using the wormhole magic, a group of high-level Speakers moved all the terminals into some kind of stronghold.

These weren't weak members by any means either. Nearly all of them were capped, many of them wearing exotic power armors or the spoils of eldritch. Sharpened teeth, spiny furs, and metallic scales, the Speakers kept all kinds of reminders of what they fought for and against. They kept their faces serious as well, focusing in on the task at hand.

The Overseer didn't waste any time watching them work. He parsed through the contents of one of the terminals. It didn't take long for him to find incriminating evidence against Tohtella.

"Screenshots of her forming illegal contracts...Data logs of conversations detailing forbidden knowledge...Collaboration to create hostile entities...You weren't lying. In fact, perhaps you downplayed the truth of the matter. I'm releasing an S-tier bounty on her name immediately."

I raised an eyebrow, "Higher than Yawm's?"

"Much higher. S tier bounties scale exponentially. There exist only a few S+ tier bounties, and they would reward nigh unlimited experience and prestige for those that claim them. In this instance, an S- bounty dictates planetary threats. An S Tier bounty shows a solar system scale of conflict--"

"And an S+ means galactic level, right?" I said.

"Yes. I'm surprised you didn't mention more of her undertakings as evidence."

"I figured I'd just state the worst parts of the project."

"There is much here that is worse than what you mentioned," the Overseer stated. "We'll be updating our security parameters after this mission."

“That’s what I was wondering,” I said while pointing at the portal to the base. “The last time we trusted someone in ‘the system,’ they were behind the entire criminal operation. You sure you can trust these guys?”

A pair of Speakers gave me a heated glare before the Overseer put a hand between us, “This is a central group of Speakers and Breakers that have served Schema loyally for hundreds of years. They can be trusted, more than you even...Even more than me.”

“Well damn,” I raised my palms to the two speakers, “My bad.”

One of the blue aliens rolled his eyes while the other just took a deep breath. They hefted the terminal along, each of them sweating at the effort. A ball of fur rolled up to a terminal before generating several keratinous spines from its body. These spines locked in just the right places so the thing could lift a terminal.

As it rolled along with the spines staying stagnant on its frame, the sheer variety in the races shocked me. Their skills were just as varied, some carrying terminals with telekinesis while others floated them along with constructs of mana. A few even wielded gravity, though their magic was pretty damn crude to me. Eh, maybe I was a critic.

Despite my fault-finding outlook on some of the magicians, I offered to help. The group refused, mentioning my knowledge of the base’s existence as ‘a security threat.’ After half an hour of sweating Speakers passing by, a muscled Breaker helped assist with the task. He doubled the speed of the project, but they still had time to gawk. At what exactly? Well, the gialgathens, the forest full of terminals, and the gray giant that was taller than an Overseer.

I didn’t mind. I expected as much. This was a pretty strange scenario even for their line of work after all. Probably. As the Speaker faction finished the task, the Overseer walked into the Breaker’s haven, the portal disappearing. Minutes later, he walked out with three Breakers. Covered in hydraulic exoskeletons and facemasks, the mobile strike force gave me a passing glance. I returned their look, trying to analyze them. I couldn’t as they listened to the Overseer’s instruction.

“We’ve discovered a breach in galactic security. Tohtella Adair along with the Adair family of remnants has been compromised. You are authorized to use killing tactics against her and any members you discover associated with her. Leave nothing behind. Understood?”

They replied in unison.

“Understood.”

The tallest of the bunch, a full foot shorter than the Overseer, pointed at me, “May I ask who this is?”

“Dimension C-138, better known as the Harbinger of Cataclysm. His team killed Yawm of Flesh and revealed this subterfuge along with a group of rogue remnants. Treat him with due respect.”

The group of Breakers looked at me differently after that, my level no longer dictating their response. They kept professional, however, receiving a data log from the Overseer before leaving at a breakneck pace. As I watched them disappear over the treetops, the Overseer turned to me,

“We’ll handle her elimination. Focus on ridding the unknown status for the rest of your group and terminating your bounties. I will keep an eye on this situation if it devolves further. You may also reveal your identity if you wish. I imagine it must be annoying by now.”

I shook my head, “I don’t think I will reveal who I am just yet. There is too much bullshit associated with the Gray Giant that I don’t want people mixing up with my name. Until I can change the reputation Thisbey built for this persona, I’ll keep it separate.”

“Perhaps that is wise. Time will tell. The glassing time frame will be extended another thirty days considering the nature of the situation. It isn’t as if the knowledge of this hybrid project is exclusive to Giess. That said, this planet is still a hazard for all the planets nearby, including your home planet. Produce results, and you may save this planet.”

I gave him a salute that was more a flick of my hand than a signal of respect,

“Aye, aye captain.”

He rolled his eyes but said, “Keep up the good work. Schema knows this sector of the galaxy needs it.”

With those last words, he opened a portal in the dimensional fabric and stepped through the resulting wormhole. Behind me, Krog snored while Chrona kept her tail over her eyes for a better nap. They slept through all that commotion without even struggling. As I stared at them, it gave me a good idea.

I paced up to them and unlatched their armors. With more than it of finagling with gravity, I wormed their plate mails. Somehow, I did it without waking either of them up. With the platemails in hand, I skulked down into our base, preparing some more scrying portals with water.

After a few hours of practice, I gained enough experience with the portals to add them to my enchanting repertoire. It wasn't that large a leap considering how fluid my knowledge of the runes was. With that in mind, I added a few attachments to the gialgathens armors.

My idea was on how to form the portals of communication. Before enacting the concept, I created two sets of gauntlets for the gialgathens. After tearing off strips of my black armor, I melted and shaped the molten metal. I created claw reinforcers, giving the gialgathens added slashing power.

Adding to the gauntlets, I took two opals I found in Springfield. I planted the gemstones into the palms of the handwear. I carved runes into the finished gauntlets with utmost precision, searing them in place with pinpoints of heat and telekinesis. It took a few tries before I got the exact runic inscription correct, but it wasn't hard to reset the carving. A smattering of heat and the indentations were gone.

As the next day came to pass, I created the first working models of two-way communication. Just as I feared, there was a bit of a mana cost associated with forming the portal. It didn't take any finesse, however, meaning anyone with a brain and mana could use it. As I finished the adjustments to the finished gauntlets, I added a few augments to them.

The first involved adding hearing to the scrying orbs tools. So far, sight was the only tool I could use as of yet. That wasn't useless, but sound was more valuable for my intended purposes. With that in mind, I read through some more of Torix's tutorials. I ended up using one of his ingenious workarounds.

Torix would create an aura around the scrying pool. If vibrations passed through the air of this aura, then the portal would ripple as well, mimicking the wobbles. The portal on the other end of this scrying chain would then create the same wobbling. It was simple to extend this wobbling onto an aura, creating the transfer of sound by magical means.

As simple as it sounds, this saved me weeks of experimenting. It was much, much easier to use this method than the standard practice for this kind of thing. It was more mana efficient as well. As I finished my models, I paced back up to the gialgathens above with the armor floating behind me.

I found Kessiah recreating one wing of Krog as he still snored. They already slept for thirteen hours plus, but I didn't want to wake them early. They needed the rest. After this, neither of them would be resting as much as before.

So I let them live it up as Kessiah strained to handle the complex bone reconstitution. As I walked up to her, she gasped for air, her eyes closed and pointed at the forest canopy. I set the armor down beside the gialgathens while Kessiah groaned,

"Fuck this is so hard. I never thought remaking a pair of wings would be this difficult."

I glanced at the skeleton of two wings nearly made already, "Honestly, it looks like you're doing this pretty fast."

"Eh, I guess," Kessiah said. "I practiced with some birds before this, so that really helped. I had Caprika send me an anatomy chart of the gialgathens too. I mean, it could still use some work, but the wings should be functional when I finish them."

I grinned, "Oh man, I can tell you already that Krog will be more than just thankful."

"Well, I'm not doing this for that. I just want to be useful for once."

"You're doing just that. Besides, don't be so hard on yourself. Every journey starts with a single step, and you're finally taking yours...or something like that."

She rolled her eyes, "Look at big speech maker over here. Way to make me feel better."

“Eh, I gave it my best shot,” I said with a shrug. After rolling my shoulders, I peered towards the arena off in the distance, “I have a few days before the final fight of the tournament.”

“Worried?”

“No. I’ll win, and probably without much trouble. The main issue is trying to get the most out of it. I’m thinking of making an announcement using Krog and Chrona.”

Kessiah frowned, “What for?”

“I’ll be trying to recruit other gialgathens into the system. Hard working and strong ones, of course, with emphasis on the former. I’ll be trying to get them to join the guild to jump-start their progress.”

“Ooh, looks like we have a guild grower over here?” Kessiah said with a smirk.

“Hah hah, funny. It’s partially that, but it’s mainly to give the gialgathens a backup option.”

Kessiah grew serious, “A backup option for what?”

“Well, I can read the writing on the wall. Thisbey’s stirred up the espens against the gialgathens, sure, but he didn’t do it all on his own. There’s a lot of hate for the gialgathens, and they will eventually lose to the espens. Partially because of numbers, technology, and access to the system.”

I clacked my teeth together before continuing, “They will be culled, and I kind of want to stop it while getting something out of the situation. I don’t know, maybe it’s a stupid idea.”

Kessiah scoffed, “Yeah, maybe.”

I pursed my lips, “Thanks for all the support.”

“Oh, anytime, Harbinger,” Kessiah said. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have some wings to finish. I wouldn’t want Krog waking up with skeleton limbs. Well, maybe. It does sound pretty funny.”

“Now you’re starting to sound like Torix.”

“He did want me as his apprentice at one point for a reason,” Kessiah cackled, mocking Torix’s laugh.

I left her to her work before sending a few messages to Althea. She kept me up to date on the revolutionary group, and the situation was not good. Thisbey’s editing of my and Chrona’s interview mislead quite a few people despite my intervention. The bastard was milking it for all it was worth, creating a group of militant levelers who were gaining strength and influence fast.

They were a big part of why Giess’s time limit was being extended, but I didn’t agree with them. Despite all that, I had a bit of time to kill before my next fight. I created a training regiment for the three days I had left.

I practiced bending my mana with Force of Nature and Star Forger for a few hours in the morning. Mid-day I focused on refining the augments to the gialgathen’s armors. At night, I drilled in my work with the cipher. It was a dense, work heavy schedule, but I enjoyed it.

I finished the gemstone relays a few hours before the tournament. By now, they were about as effective as a high-resolution camera with meh sound quality. It would be plenty good enough for my purposes. I intended on organizing any that would join the war effort, showing them dungeon locations and whatnot. Grinding out the details with someone would help out as well like how many dungeons a Gialgathen needed to clear before being put into the system.

With that handled, I walked up out of our base. I found Krog and Chrona both fiddling with the obelisks I gave them. As I paced up, Chrona tapped the glass sphere,

“These devices store more information than any poem or library. They are incredible resources.”

Krog frowned at his, "They are somewhat impressive...I suppose."

"Actually, there was something I was hoping to get out of you guys for giving them to you," I said while pointing at them.

"What would you need from us?" Krog grumbled.

Chrona rolled her eyes at the grumpy gialgathen, "Stop acting as if his gifts have had no effect on you. His comrade even restored your wings."

Krog glanced down while flapping his regenerated limbs, "Though they're stiffer than my old wings, I am grateful for them. I suppose we can offer you a favor."

"I want to use you both as advertising for Schema's system and my guild. If we can get other gialgathens to join us, we'll be able to warp them off Giess should it be glassed."

Chrona raised an eyebrow, "If it's glassed? You mean destroyed?"

"Yes. I think Kessiah mentioned it earlier. Point is, this planet's on a time limit. I'll do my best to save it, but my best might not be good enough. If that happens, I'll hire several black market magicians to put some gialgathens on Earth. That being said, my resources aren't unlimited."

Krog crossed his front paws and leaned his chin onto them, "How does being a part of this system assist with that?"

"It allows you to warp off-world, and in particular, you can go to Earth, my home planet. I can offer you guys food and shelter there until you decide what you guys want to do."

Krog raised an eyebrow, "You would do that for us? Why?"

"I'm no saint, but I don't enjoy watching genocides. I'm also a guild owner. I can get experience and credits from you guys after you join. Any gialgathen that joins me will get a boost in base stats after they join. It's a win-win situation."

Chrona nodded her head, “So we will help convince others to join this system so they may warp away if the worst occurs? The guild is more so for your own aims it seems...”

I frowned while crossing my arms, “You expect me to work my ass off to save you all for free then?”

Chrona looked at Krog, “Ahem, of course not. Perhaps we may strengthen our cause and yours at the same time. What do you think of it, Krog?”

“Self-interested or not, we need this help. We will be glad to help you if it helps us.” Krog said. “What does it entail?”

I rubbed my hands together with an evil grin,

“An example...and a bit of showing off.”

Chapter 208: Ripples

“What kind of example?” Krog said.

“Well, I’ll need you guys to just show off your powers and armor after the final fight. That’s what I’ll be offering.”

Chrona scratched the side of her head, “Hmm, would that not insult Sheom?”

“Who’s Sheom?” I said while crossing my arms.

Krog adjusted his paws under his chin, “Your opponent. She leaps through the magma of the arena as if gliding through the air. She and Chrona almost always end up fighting for the finishing spot of this tournament...I’ve placed second as well, but I’ve yet to win it.”

Chrona looked at him, “You know her style of battle counters your own. It’s difficult to use your illusions against someone who guards their senses with lava on all sides.”

Krog shook his head, “She is simply better than I. There is no shame in admitting that.”

“I didn’t expect you to admit that,” I raised an eyebrow, “Is she just too fast or?”

Krog looked up at a passing bird, “She is many things. Sheom was the mentor of Lehesion. She tutored him on many things through life, though she’s spoken of how frustrating it was at times. Lehesion’s prodigy was only matched by his arrogance.”

I pointed towards the arena, “She sounds fierce, but I’m certain I’ll beat her. When I do, I’ll need you both to hop into the arena to show your armors and enhanced powers. That’s all.”

Krog covered his face with his wings, “Why does the thought of doing so fill me with shame?”

Chrona murmured, “This is our repayment for his deeds. Though somewhat repugnant, we sully ourselves worse if we spit on his kindness.”

Krog stomped a foot, “Then let us be done with this quickly.”

I raised a fist, “It won’t take long, and I’ll set you guys up with a speech. That should take the edge off.”

Chrona narrowed her eyes at me, “Why is it that your rapprochement only fills me with yet more dread?”

“Eh, I can give motivational speeches pretty well, and that’s about it. You’re in luck though because I tend to stick to my strengths,” I said with confidence.

“Then let us be off,” Krog mumbled.

As we traveled down a different path out of the forest, I calmed my mind and prepared for the battle. As I honed my thoughts, I received a message from Althea.

Althea Tolstoy, the Shapeless Arbiter(lvl 9,416 | Class: Breaker | Giess: 10:24 A.M. 4/6/26) – I’ve been through several meetings in the revolutionary group, and I learned a few things you need to know. Rivaria is about to be sacked after the award ceremony. I don’t know how, but Thisbey’s been promising it to his recruits and loyal supporters.

I’ll be able to kill him for sure, but you should prepare for the worst if you can. Love you. Bye.

I ground my teeth for a second before turning to Krog and Chrona. Both of them destroyed the underbrush as we walked under the forest’s canopy. At least we weren’t flying to the arena, but this was dangerous either way. I pushed those thoughts to the back of my mind as I said,

“I just received a message from Althea. The revolutionaries plan to sack Rivaria soon. We need to act before then.”

Krog scoffed, “Let them. We will crush them under the wind of our wings.”

“No, we will not. Do you not remember seeing the horrors their laboratories have created? If they sent several of those Hybrids to Rivaria, we would all perish.”

Krog stopped walking, the reality of the situation crashing down on him, “Wait... That...I never believed...”

I raised a palm to him, “Calm down. We know it’s coming so we can counteract the worst of its effects. You’re both going to need to really show off to get some more gialgathens in the guild and system. They will act as a vanguard against whatever offensive Thisbey musters.”

I pointed at Chrona, “Maybe we could have a rematch for the crowd just as an example?”

Chrona tilted her head, “Would I not still lose?”

“I don’t know honestly,” I said with a sigh. “You’re many, many times tankier then before. Your class gives you several hard to stop bonuses too, and you won’t run out of your time dilation field again. You might beat me even if I went all out.”

Chrona rolled her eyes, “I’ve seen the limits of your ability. You cannot die.”

I pointed at her, “I’m hard to kill. There’s a difference. I mean that. You’re both underestimating just how much the system has helped you both. In fact, this shouldn’t just be an exhibition for those watching. It will be an exhibition for both of you as well.”

Chrona frowned, “What if we rend the armor from your body and expose your identity?”

“It’s not that big a deal. I’m no longer an unknown so it will be a minor inconvenience at best. On the other hand, having a city of people die because I wanted to avoid complications would haunt me.”

“I’m learning more about what kind of person you are,” Krog said with head held high. “You come across as a brutal pragmatist, but you’re more sentimental than you lead on.”

“I just weigh my odds. That’s all.”

Chrona nudged me with her tail, “I doubt that.”

I rolled my eyes, “Come on, focus guys.”

They straightened up as we walked out of the forest. They wore the armor I crafted for them, the dents from the Hybrid fight fixed. We paced up to the packed arena, crossing the rolling hills with a lazy stroll. I let Chrona walk ahead of me and at my center so that I didn’t seem like her superior. That would be necessary if I were going to appeal to the Gailgathen’s pride.

As we flew up to the edge of the arena, I found a broad-shouldered, caped frame waiting on me. Helios was here to watch the last exhibition match of the tournament. Beside him, a crippled Caprika was still bound to her chair with burns spread across her frame.

Krog landed with a bit of stumble, his new wings still stiff. As I walked up beside the juggernaut, he turned to me with his black mask,

“I see you’ve gained a few servants. Here I believed the gialgathens were proud. How did you manage that?”

I crossed my arms, staring at dozens of cameramen, “They’re not my servants. They’re equals.”

“They wear armor made of your skin and bear the mark of your guild. Why would you offer so much in return for so little?”

I scoffed, “The same reason I helped Caprika. I expect favors.”

Helios turned, glancing at them with a scrutinizing eye, “They are...far fiercer, aren’t they?”

I grinned under my mask, “You just wait. I bet Chrona would give you a run for your money in a duel. Krog’s not far behind either.”

Helios let out a long laugh.

“You expect them to have improved that much in so little time?”

It was my turn to laugh a little.

“Yes. I do.”

Helios turned a palm to me, “Then perhaps I will be surprised. Speaking of surprises, I see you’ve extended the destruction of Giess by yet another thirty days. You haven’t been piddling your time away, have you?”

“Yeh, I guess. I exposed a conspiracy ring and project to create hybridized creatures. What have you done over the last few weeks?”

“I pushed back an eldritch invasion and negotiated a treatise between two warring worlds.”

I frowned, “Damn. One-upped me there.”

“But of course,” Helios glanced at his clawed hands, “Any important news on your various quests?”

“Actually, yes. There’s going to be an invasion of Rivaria soon. Make sure you and Caprika are nowhere near here then. They’ll be throwing something big here.”

Helios nodded slowly, peering down at his nails, “Noted.” He lowered his hand, “I recommend you leave no regrets as you leave this place. The first fringe world I cleared, I did so with many tasks left unfinished or unturned. I act with that wisdom in mind.”

He turned to Caprika who sat in silence,

“I do have my regrets though.”

There was genuine bitterness in his words as he looked at his sister. I didn’t know what to say or do, so I stayed silent. Krog didn’t.

“Is she crippled?”

Helios turned his head with a slow, menacing motion, “Perhaps physically. She is not crippled mentally, unlike others I could mention.”

Krog ignored the thinly veiled insult, pointing his tail at his wings, “I know of a healer that may help her injuries. My wings were eaten by a monster in battle, yet this woman healed them to what you see now.” Krog waved his upper limbs,

“They are not perfect, but they are far better than what I had before. Perhaps she may help the bounded one.”

Like a drum in my ear, Helios's heart raced in his chest. Helios played it cool, but he thumped his foot with nervous energy,

"Who and where might they be?"

Krog tilted his head to me, "It is his friend, Kessiah Crow. Speak with him of it."

Helios turned to me while tilting his head, "She is a low-level remnant. How does she have such potent healing?"

I shrugged, "Ask her yourself. Maybe the two of you can work out a deal."

Helios raised his head and gave me a slow nod, "A deal? I'm not above freelancer work by any means. I'll consider it."

We stood there for a few seconds before Caprika spoke up, "May I speak with my combatant alone?"

Helios turned to me, "Do you not remember the last time I left you alone on this Schema forsaken planet?"

"Did I lose all of your respect as well as my dignity?"

Helios bit his tongue, the scent of his blood lingering in the air. He took a deep breath, "No. Excuse my intrusion."

He paced off until he was well out of earshot as did Chrona and Krog. Once left alone, I stared off at the volcanic arena with Caprika by my side. From her wheelchair, she took a deep breath,

"Ever since coming to Giess, I've learned something that has become painfully obvious over time: I'm not special as I was raised to believe."

I didn't disagree with her, instead choosing to let her say her piece.

“I couldn’t win the tournament here by any means. I failed time and time again, but despite this wealth of shame I’ve acquired, I’m no fool. I’ve learned from my mistakes and gained humility.”

She leaned against her wheelchair, “You know there exists technology that could fix my legs, don’t you?”

I nodded. Of course there was, whether it be prosthetics or cloned limbs in tubes, there had to be something. She was a part of an empire with worlds worth of resources, so this wasn’t something she should struggle to fix.

“I chose not to heal them because I wanted to experience this kind of life. I understand that is a privilege unto itself, to have that choice, but I’ve lived it out for over a month now. I couldn’t believe how much my brother was willing to help me. Snide, cunning, and disdainful as he may be, he truly cared for me this entire time.”

She swallowed, “It feels wonderful to have someone care so deeply for me and my comfort, even if it is a bit selfish of me to ask it of him.”

She waited a moment, collecting herself. She looked up to me, “I met you as well, a random outsider from some backwater world. Your achievements dwarf my own despite your upbringing.”

She peered back to the stadium, “Indeed, I may not be special, but I’ll do what I can. Even if I must rely on others, I’ll accomplish something with this opportunity you’ve given me. I plan on changing the ranking structures in the city I’ll be given.”

I raised an eyebrow, “How so?”

“Normally, rising in ranks is arbitrarily difficult for non-albony. I intend to create a more meritocratic environment, so that gems from the rough may rise up the ranks faster. Perhaps I will find another Harbinger who’s talent was never given the opportunity to shine...Maybe not.”

As she spoke, it left me more than a little startled. I never imagined my impact on her would be so long-lasting. If anything, I expected both of us to use each other then be done with it. Having her change even a little seemed kind of crazy to me, but near-death experiences tend to have that effect on people.

Even if I was surprised, it did fill my chest with a bit of pride too. I stood up straighter,

“Well...thanks. I didn’t think I’d made that kind of impact.”

Caprika rolled her eyes, “Well that much is evident. You aren’t exactly the most tactful socialite.”

I took a step back, “What? I have a skill for that and everything.”

Under her mask, I could feel the smirk on her lips, “Skills can only get you so far. You must learn to use them. Perhaps our uncle will teach you when you meet him.”

I swallowed a not so witty retort before crossing my arms.

“Well, thanks for the backhanded compliments.”

With her voice lighter, she scoffed,

“Anytime. Now go and win this tournament. I’ve no doubt you will.”

I gave her a nod, glancing forward. I smacked my fists together before taking a deep breath. Before leaped away, I turned to her,

“Just sayin, but Kessiah could use the practice with her healing.”

Caprika tapped on one of her armrests taking a moment to think,

“I’ll consider it.”

I took a step onto the edge of the colosseum. Above the magma field and steel arena, Kiki Mosk floated on a platform, flamboyant costume and all. With his news reporter voice, he gestured to all present,

“Is anyone else shaking in anticipation?”

Even the noble gialgathens joined the crowded zeppelin in cheering. This was the last chance for a gialgathen to defeat the Gray Giant, so they threw away their disdain for cheering. With the gialgathen growls echoing in the distance, Kiki Mosk put his hands on his hips,

“I see we have some investment from even people that usually yawn. That’s fitting considering the circumstances. We have espen versus gialgathen. Lehesion’s mentor and benefactor against the mysterious Gray Giant. Both are contenders for the strongest on Giess, but only one can hold that title.”

From the magma pit, Sheom splashed out with a vibrant bloom of color. As orange and red fell from her skin, she grinned, showing white teeth. Standing on the magma, she shook herself, the lava falling off her skin. Her appearance only changed by a bit. She looked like living magma.

Sheom owned an orange coat of smooth skin, yellow streaks embroidering her joints. She wore no armor, most metals melting in magma. She wasn’t as lean as Chrona either, her limbs more muscled than even Krog. She shifted with a sense of power, something driving her beyond the desire to fight.

She was here to prove a point.

“Here is the returning champion, Sheom Makarath!”

I analyzed her as the gialgathens roared in applause.

Sheom Makarath, the Living Landshark(lvl: 12,419 | Species: Gialgathen) – Sheom has a long and vivid history as an activist. She believed the most of anyone that the espens needed the guidance of gialgathens during their development. She was pivotal in forming policies to share more advanced magics and educational texts with espens before they were fully freed.

Sheom assisted with the war effort as well, showing her skills as a warrior of great renown. Using a flowing, winding style of fighting, she used her own mana reserves to

melt stone for magma to flow through. She would dive and dash through the ground, erupting earth magics of all kinds to pepper her opponents.

This was distinct from her impressive offensive prowess. She tutored Krog Borom as well, his flowing style reminiscent of hers.

Be careful of her attacks, and you should be able to defeat her given time.

She stepped over the liquid magma, walking over the liquid with ease. Along her back, her horns grew to massive size, mimicking a shark's fins. As she stepped onto the steel, she lifted her head and roared out. A pulse of fervor rippled across the galeathens, my own adrenaline spiking. There was a bit of magic in her noble voice. I was sure of it.

"Now that's how you make an entrance!" Kiki shouted. "As for her opponent, we have someone who needs no introductions – The Gray Giant."

I jumped forward, stone cracking under my heels. As I shot through the air, the crowd roared in applause. Landing onto the arena with a dull thud, I stood up tall, my arm raised in triumph. I took a deep breath, rolling my shoulders while staring at Sheom. She met my gaze, cold fury in her eyes,

"It's good we meet, murderer."

I grimaced, remembering Delilath. I wasn't going to argue with her before the fight, so I stayed silent. She continued,

"I imagine you believe this battle will be a simple war of attrition as your others were? I fear not. I learned from them. I'm not underestimating you just because you walk on two legs. I will face you with all my might at once, filthy dirtwalker."

I glanced back and forth at the lava, "Don't you swim through dirt?"

She lost all the bite in her voice, my retort quieting her. She glared at me, "You'll pay for that."

I took a deep breath, rolling my fingers in my hands, "I won't. This won't take long."

I meant it too. I took a bit of time to think about a way of shortening the duration of this fight, and I figured it out in spades. Sheom glared at me, unconvinced of my tactics.

“We shall see about that. Gods give me strength to trample this defier.”

Kiki rubbed his hands together, a grin on his face from ear to ear. He took a deep breath and announced, “Now this is how battlers should speak with one another before a big fight. There’s nothing wrong with a healthy rivalry after all. Now, are both combatants ready to battle?”

I gave him a nod, welling mana into my palms. Sheom did the same, preparing to dive into the magma.

Kiki raised a hand, “Begin!”

Chapter 209: Sending A Message

I jumped backward, landing on the lava surrounding the arena. Sheom did the same, sliding under the surface of the glowing slop. As she glided towards me, I slammed my palms into the molten rock. I cooled the molten magma, the bright red darkening across the entire arena in seconds.

Sheom was caught up in the cooling stone, stuck in the crystallizing granite. As she struggled to break to the surface, I jumped up before flying further. Moments later, I pulled myself down, augmenting gravity with my own magic.

Like the weight of the world, I crashed down onto the stone above her, rock reduced to powder in my wake. The heat of my impact left glowing stones around me, the kinetic wave shell shocking sheom. Without the ability to retaliate, I jabbed my hand through solid rock, uprooting by the nape of her neck. As I pulled my fist back, a Sentinel grabbed my arm, and another blocked my attack in front of me.

I’d won.

The entire crowd went silent, even the chattiest reporter stunned. Sheom returned to her senses moments later, looking around. As she looked up at me and around the crater I formed, her eyes widened with realization. She gasped,

“What happened? I didn’t even get to fight.”

“That’s right,” I brushed some rock off my shoulders, “I didn’t give you a chance. I cooled the magma to stone, cutting off your reserves of mana while making your mobility null.”

She heaved for a few breaths staring at the Sentinels, “That...That’s impossible. Why did you not do so before?”

“I didn’t think of it,” I said with a shrug. “Two reasons for that. I didn’t need too, and here, I was making a point. You’ll see why in a few moments.”

Before Sheom replied, Kiki Mosk shook out his surprise and raised a hand,

“And the Gray Giant seals the deal with a stunning display of dominance.”

The crowd shouted out from the zeppelin, the uproar bursting across the arena. It was a sound and final defeat for the gialgathens. All their champions rose to fight me, and all of them fell to my might. To the espens, it was as satisfying as hearing Emagrotha’s fall during the war.

Without any recourse, many gialgathens didn’t know how to react. It was as if a realization dawned upon all of them at that moment – their epoch had ended. A torch was being passed, their dominance over Giessian politics no longer present. Now, the espens would come to rule over the planet, their evergrowing abilities unmatched.

Within less than a single generation, they turned from slavemasters to second class citizens. The change would be slow, but they all understood it. They could no longer pretend that ‘dirtwalkers’ were beneath them. Here and now, a dirtwalker was the strongest on the planet. Here and now, I was a heavy heel slamming them into the dirt.

At least, that’s what they believed. As the dust settled from the event and the cheering, Kiki Mosk turned a hand to me, “And that concludes the Honoring of Lehesion. We have a new winner. Let’s let the champion collect himself and prepare for the reward ceremony in two weeks. Goodbye-“

“Actually,” I said while raising a hand, “I have something to say if you wouldn’t mind.”

Kiki tilted his head, glancing between the cameras and me, “Uh, are you certain you wouldn’t rather wait for your victory speech until the award ceremony?”

I shook my head, “This isn’t a victory speech. I don’t intend on giving one.”

A bead of cold sweat poured down Kiki’s face, “Then what else would a gladiator have to say after his victory?”

“Quite a bit.” I lifted myself into the air, and Kiki moved aside so that I took center stage of the arena. I projected my voice and ambiance as far as I could. With all my focus, I weighted my words with an aura of importance. This was pivotal if I was to succeed. It was go time.

“Did you all see how Sheom was helpless before me?”

The gialgathens booed, their growls growing angry. They had every right to be outraged. That was good. I needed their attention, and this was the easiest way to get it.

“I can tell you right now, that had nothing to do with her ability, work ethic, or her race.” I left pauses between each of those points.

“It had everything to do with a single advantage I held over her. I had access to a perpetual, augmenting presence known as Schema. Yes, I worked hard to gain what I had, but if Sheom was given that aid, I do not know the outcome of today’s fight.”

At this point, I confused the gialgathens until they didn’t know what to think anymore.

“I come with an offer and a demonstration today. The offer is simple. If you complete a simple set of tasks, I can give any gialgathen here access to Schema’s system. You all were cut off from this valuable resource because Schema believed you all were lazy and slothful.”

I spread out my hands, “If there is anyone that knows this isn’t true, it’s me. I’ve faced dark monsters hiding within abyssal plains, and I’ve done so with Chrona Carsiary and

Krog Borom. They are noble warriors with principled approaches to both battle and life.”

Krog and Chrona flew over, wearing the armor I made them, their stances proud. As they landed on the steel arena, I raised a hand,

“If any of you would doubt the potential worth of my offer, I give you the chance to see something extraordinary. Here are two fighters I decimated in combat merely weeks ago.”

Chrona sent a telepathic mumble, “I don’t know about decimated...”

I pressed on, “I will battle both of them, one after the other. They will display the benefits of joining Schema’s system and clearing dungeons. If after watching these battles you are impressed, then come to me afterward. I will give you armor, training, and a guide on how to join the system. From there, you will evolve, becoming an even better version of yourselves.”

I gripped my hand into a fist, “That is the crux of what I have to say; evolve or die. You may watch yourselves wither into nothing, or you can take the next step as a proud and capable people. I believe in your potential. Now all you must do is realize it.”

I floated down, “Now watch Krog Borom use his new abilities.”

As I landed on the steel arena, I pointed my finger at several cameramen,

“Stream this, or else you’ll have to deal with me. Understood?”

A few curt nods and they got the picture. Off in the distance, Helios clapped his hands while laughing. A message appeared in the corner of my vision,

Helios Novas, Ruler of Worlds(lvl 15,000 | Class: Fringe Walker | Giess: 11:44 A.M. 4/6/26) – So you are more than a brute. Color me impressed for once.

That was about as close to a compliment as I could get with that cynical critic. Behind Krog, Chrona flew back onto the rock. With patches of granite or other, darker rocks

mixed, the arena was different now. Krog and Chrona wouldn't be able to sap their surrounding mana. With the system unlocking their full potentials, they wouldn't need to.

The more intelligent gialgathens would take note of that detail. As the Sentinels finished carrying Sheom out of the arena, Kiki pulled at the collar of his suit,

"Uh, so...er, this is unprecedented. An impromptu exhibition match after the tournament was over. Wow. Ok. At least ratings will be through the roof I suppose."

He coughed into his hand, "Ahem, well, anyways, we have Krog Borom battling it out with the Gray Giant. Last time the battle didn't last long, the Gray Giant taking the options from his opponent in rapid fashion. Let's see if the result is the same. Are both battlers ready?"

I leaned down, a singularity of mana charged in my blood,

"Ready."

There was a ragged edge in my voice, my confidence from earlier all but gone. I didn't even know if I could beat Krog in a rematch, but I'd be finding out soon. Krog glared at me with the same intensity, his deep voice turning into a low growl,

"Ready."

Kiki raised a hand, "Then let's begin!"

Chapter 210: Evolution

Krog channeled his own mana, a red aura rippling over the surface of his skin. He already gained the ability to generate the same kind of mana I used, his skillset tailor-made for it. As the ascendant energy rippled out with red lightning, he pulsed his control outward. A red aura encompassed the area around him, bending the light within it.

I already charged enough mana for a singularity, but I withheld its use. Krog was faster than last time we fought, so he would just dodge before the black hole could land. I inched towards him in the meantime, putting him within the range of Event Horizon. While he couldn't shrug the damage off, it didn't cripple him as much as before.

Schema's regenerative enhancements let him focus through the pain better. Without the urgent, all-encompassing ache distracting him, Krog whipped his tail behind him. A bludgeon of mana formed, like a blot of blood at the end of his tail. It sharpened into a sharp, ethereal mass with kinetic energy stored within. I grinned at the sight of it, his evolving style of combat exhilarating to watch.

This was going to get interesting.

Kiki Mosk eyed him, announcing out,

"It seems as though Krog has learned quite a bit since their last fight. In fact, his entire style of fighting is different."

Krog rolled his broad shoulders, his black armor charged with energy,

"I can use my own mana now, which puts far fewer limitations on my use of mana. Now I may use my techniques to their full potential at any time. This dark one is the perfect marker of my growth."

I frowned, "Dark one?"

"I'm attempting to find a nickname for you. I will say names until something sticks."

I shrugged, "Eh, alright."

Without having to hold back in the slightest, I took a deep breath before charging him down. Krog met my assault, swinging his tail like an executioner's ax. One impact would cleave my armor apart, storing enough energy to make a city look small.

Before it landed, I dove into the ground, condensing my mass to make it simple as stepping into water. I detonated my runes, giving me a burst of speed downwards. Above, the ground crumbled into a volcanic ruin at Krog's tail slap. Its cataclysmic force created ripples in the forcefield surrounding the battlefield.

A shockwave shook through the ground, dampened by the density of the rock around me. I withstood the blow before drilling towards Krog's underbelly. As I ruptured out of the land, the black and red gialgathen flowed around my strike. In a spiral, he followed my ascent, a whirlwind of fire blazing around him as he breathed out the red inferno.

A flaming tornado spawned around me, my armor glowing yellow from the heat. Krog kept himself from burning by weaving the flames around his body, controlling the airflow of the chaotic cyclone. Reacting off instinct, I created an enormous gravity well, over us both, dragging us back to the ground.

Krog was caught in the spiraling hellfire, his own armor glowing red after we slammed into the ground. As I scrambled back to my feet, I tore towards him. He turned himself over with a wing, turning his tail and enveloping it with mana once more. Without any real means of dodging, I prepared to deflect the strike.

I planted both my feet, slicing a hand to parry his tail whip. It snapped into my forearm like a sledgehammer on my toe. A jolt of pain erupted from the limb, bones shattering in the joint. My skin and eyelids slid back as my stomach rose in my chest. The sheer momentum of his attack had me experiencing several G's of force.

Krog didn't make it out without injury either. The tip of his tail ruptured, split apart by the collision. Blood leaked from the wound as he gasped in agony. I glanced down at my arm, seeing it bent the wrong way. I turned up to him,

"Damn. I'm impressed." I grabbed the limb, snapping it back in place, "You'll need more though."

Krog took a few steps back, "I expected as much. Bring it."

I bent down and dashed towards him once more. As I approached, he strengthened the aura around him. Passing into it, my vision blurred, so I closed my eyes. My hearing turned into a chorus of ringing, so I molded armor over my ears. Even my skin itched and exploded with pins and needles. I gritted my teeth, the urge to vomit overcoming me.

It was enough to stop me from stomping over to him. While nursing his tail, Krog sliced, slashed, and struck out at me to keep his distance. Between his flame breath and the sharpened points of the armor I made him, it wasn't easy breaking distance. Combine that with the nauseating wave over my senses, and I struggled to compete.

I took blow after blow, the damage piling on over time. My gray armor would've ruptured, turning to scrap. Before that happened, I melted it, keeping the glowing metal on my skin with gravity. It was a simple setup, though I took on my usual silhouette. If someone compared me with the video, they might know I was the Harbinger. At the same time, I was several feet taller now, so that might throw people off.

Eh, there wasn't more I could do about it at the moment.

It was a different fight, though I kept ahead by my sheer tankiness. Every ten blows on me didn't match one blow on Krog, though he wasn't as easy to snap. He was no longer soft as paper. He was living stone, his skin hard as marble. Krog pentupled in weight since we last fought as well, the strength of his blows like calamities all their own.

He utilized his mana with a dazzling efficiency during the entire fight. He kept his kinetic enhancements limited, dosing them out at just the right moments of contact. This emptied out his mana pool over time, weakening his illusions overtime. It was a vast improvement over my dominance in the last meeting.

In a way, he enforced his will on the battle, inflicting grievous harm to me, the damage mounting. I kept his blows contained, however. Despite several crisp, clean strikes landing, I maintained my composure. This wasn't the first fight where I was torn to pieces, and it wouldn't be my last either. Broken bones were nothing to me now.

With that in mind, I kept Krog in the range of Event Horizon, playing to my strength of longevity. He slowed with time, my tenacity and pressure exhausting him.

With every little bit that he slowed, he gave way to my own retaliation. Each blow I inflicted was measured, aimed to maim and kill. Even if I hit him straight on, he took the punishment with a bloody grin. The extra resistance and health that Schema granted him made him like a gargoyle. He was rock if it was flexible as healthy skin.

This made his body far more robust, and unlike Delilath, Krog took brutal blow after brutal blow. By the end of our bout, he took enough punishment to kill a dozens of gialgathens. He'd proven that he had a lion's heart and the spirit of a champion.

It was not enough.

As he fell, the entire crowd of gialgathens gripped with emotion. Even if he fell, he gave the Gray Giant his best fight of the tournament yet. He restored the pride of their people, being the strongest among them by miles.

Amidst the cheering, I rolled my shoulder while letting out a sharp breath. My mind was like iron, and it would take more than this to phase me. I even kept the molten metal on my frame for the most part, able to do that much.

It hadn't been an easy fight though. Krog was over 3,000 levels over me, has decades of experience, and even had a unique class. He was near the peak of the gialgathen race, and I managed to beat him in a sound fashion without a class, thousands of levels lower, and nowhere near as much time on my hands.

I'd count that as a victory in my book.

The arena wasn't so lucky, carrying deep scars from our conflict. Several pits of glowing rock remained from our blows. Kiki sweated bullets, the Sentinels eventually having to help maintain the invisible forcefield to protect the crowd. It had been the finale everyone had been hoping for.

The only ones disappointed were the zeppelin full of Thisbey's supporters. Rendered silent, they watched in awe at Krog's transformation from the previous bout. We fought many times longer, and he dished out far more damage against me. If we fought the Hybrid now with his added bulk and power, we wouldn't have even struggled.

Especially if you added in the might of my next opponent – Chrona Carsiary. She flew onto the battlefield, landing beside Krog. With a single hand, she lifted him into the air, flying over towards the now resting Sheom. The Living Landshark was left speechless, her jaws agape at the sight of Krog's struggle.

She sent out a telepathic wave towards us,

"I've known Krog, and I've fought against him time and time again. He has never displayed such overwhelming strength. How in Lehesion's name did he achieve it in such a short time?"

I forced myself up, shaking off the exhaustion from the fight. Still glowing, I raised a hand and shouted, "This is the difference that a few weeks in Schema's system can

make. I will grant anyone that joins me the same treatment, guiding them into this new world. You can fight as he did, as an unstoppable juggernaut.”

At this point, the crowd of gialgathens was considering my offer with envy in their eyes. No one so much as stripped my armor before. Now they saw that my bones could be broken, and only Krog Borom had been able to do it.

So far.

As Chrona flew back over, I walked over towards the steel arena. With the air around me cracking from my super-heated armor, I raised my fists to her. She lifted her tail, creating the same mana augment that Krog managed. Above her, a ball of blue mana colored like cobalt siphoned into existence.

It was a new kind of mana I’d never seen before meeting Chrona – primordial mana. It was another fusion, this time of origin and dominion styles of mana. Wielding the deep blue energy, she created a temporal dilation field around her, the effect far stronger than before. As it waved around me, I stayed the same.

I was still immune, which gave me a chance of winning. Chrona was well aware, her steady and focused glance prepared for a hellish battle. I gritted my teeth at the prospect, my body remembering how strong she was before. Before we took off, Kiki Mosk wiped some sweat off his face,

“So um, that was an amazing fight and all, but don’t you need a break?”

I rolled my shoulders, my fatigue all but gone, “No. I’ll be fine.”

Kiki’s eyes widened as I said that, his shock apparent. He let out a sharp sigh before turning to Chrona, “Are you ready then?”

She growled, “Always.”

Kiki pulled a blue mana potion from his dimensional storage, chugging the fluid. Before continuing, he pulled out a sizable slurpy cup with the picture of some furry alien on it. He emptied several more mana potions into it. He turned to the audience, laughing a bit at himself,

“You know, it’s rare that the referee is struggling more than the fighter, but hey, this entire tournament has been a series of firsts.”

The crowds laughed with him, the tension palpable from earlier. Without missing a beat, he took a swig from his slurpy cup,

“This is some bitter stuff, but sacrifices must be made for the betterment of your entertainment. Now, onto the battling once more.” He raised his hand, “Are both combatants ready?”

I banged my fists together, the sharp, metallic ring echoing across the arena, “Of course.”

Chrona leaned down, ready for a war. As Kiki swung his arm down, he shouted,

“Let’s fight!”

We dashed towards one another, and Chrona outpaced me by a landslide. With her time dilation, she sped herself up by an order of magnitudes. This ability acted as an effective multiplier, her raw speed becoming otherworldly. Like a bullet, she slammed her tail from overhead.

I blocked with both arms, ready for her sudden burst in speed. I wasn’t prepared for her sudden burst in strength. My bones shattered, minutes of her power slamming against seconds of mine. The difference was overwhelming, my arms crushed. I held her blow back, however.

Her tail bone broke, the diamond like skin cracking and the bone underneath crumbling. The armor I created for her snapped on impact, unable to handle this level of force. My forearm’s skin ruptured, my blood shining like my armor was. Chrona recoiled from me, the molten metal singeing her skin. I thanked my body’s sheer resilience, my thermomancy saving my ass. I leaned over my forearms, reconnecting them by moldings strands of my armor into them.

They healed in seconds.

I tried to block the cameras, but there was only so much I could do. This wasn't going to be easy by any means. Chrona was more like Yawm or Version 2.0 now, her abilities magnified. To win, raw force wouldn't work. I needed to be more creative and use my tenacity and skill. Fighting up close would be risky, even if I could win like that.

I wouldn't make the same mistake as the enemies I beat before. Arrogance and pride came before someone's fall, and I wasn't about to fall here. With that in mind, I grabbed the skin on my forearms and ripped. I pooled plates of my skin into glowing balls of wobbling liquid, suspended by gravity wells.

Chrona wiped my molten blood off of her hands, wincing at the deep burns. As she recuperated by holding her tail together, I collected a larger and larger pool of liquid dimensional fabric.

She drank health potions from her dimensional storage, some that I gave her. As her skin healed, I finished gathering my resources. A ball the size of a car radiated heat behind me, half my height. Chrona was putting her tail back together as she murmured,

"It seems as though you've become softer since we last fought, though you still feel like stone."

I grinned, "Yeah, maybe. I'll win this without slugging it out with you. I'm no one trick pony. I can fight in several ways."

Chrona scoffed, "I will believe it when I see it. You're a brute. This will be a contest of might."

She leaned over, her tail restored, mana welling over it once more. At the same time, I charged a singularity's worth of mana into my blood once more. Though I never used it against Krog since I didn't need it, it might prove useful. It was always worth having a trump card ready.

Without further warning, Chrona dashed at me. With a bit of prediction, I swirled the molten mass in front of me, spreading it thin like a shield. Unable to withstand the scorching barrier, Chrona skidded to a halt in front of me. Using more mana still, I melted the ground under her. At the same time, I created a well of gravity under her and a well of antigravity above her.

She withstood the pulling force, outflying the downwards pull of gravity. I swirled the mass of metal into two balls, my focus sharpened. I kept one close, using it as a defensive measure. The other sphere I launched towards her, attempting to splash it over her frame.

The ball sped forward like a waterfall of shining silver. Chrona dodged it with unbelievable speed, but the pressure was constant. Unlike a pool of magma, this was my own dimensional fabric. It wasn't affected by Chrona's temporal dilation. That's the entire reason I went through the trouble of tearing my skin off.

Anytime she approached me, I whipped the defensive mass around me. As she backed off, I kept Event Horizon over her while attempting to smother her with the offensive glob. It proved ruthless and effective, preventing Chrona from approaching me by heat alone. At the same time, I kept a gravity well over her, draining her stamina. Anytime she tried landing, I melted the ground to magma under her.

It seemed like an airtight strategy, one I would win if the fight kept playing out like this. Chrona learned as we fought, however. Though the blob wasn't slowed down, she was still hastened in her field. She sped herself up further, her movements blinding. Testing her limits, she upped the pressure. As she did, I struggled more and more to maintain this new style of combat.

Sure, I was a swift learner, but she pushed me to the boiling point.

She charged from the front, her silhouette growing in my vision. I whipped the molten field to the front of me before she lifted a paw into the air. I thinned the shield over my head. She slammed her hand into the ground, tricking me before I could melt the rock.

My footing crumbled around the arena, the shockwave of her strike like a bomb going off. I stumbled back as she whipped her tail behind me. I pulled myself forward, evading the brunt of her blow. It was light graze with her tail, but it sheared through my back, tearing my spine and sending me flying.

She combined a kinetic enhancer as Krog had, whipping the momentum of her strike to the very tip of her tail. This gave it the piercing power. It came at a cost, her end of her tail hanging on by a strange of skin, the armor ruptured. She contained the pain, flipping over me.

With the agility of a dancer, she pushed off my back, crashing me through my own sheet of melted metal. I flopped off the ground, tearing chunks of granite from the arena, she landed, light on her feet, and dashed forward. I drilled into the stone, using it to buy myself time. She followed, striking with her tail like the hammer of a mad titan.

I sidestepped, a crater forming beneath us both. I let myself fall downwards. Well versed in aerial combat, she weaved around my wild strikes, slamming me from several sides. Her armor prevented her from burning her skin, several of my bones breaking in the process. Deeper we dug, the impacts creating a canyon in the arena.

With desperation building, I reversed direction, launching upward with a weighted punch. I caught her off guard, pulling her into my punch with a gravity well. As my fist slammed into her chest, I dented her armor inwards while snapping several of her ribs. Without that protection, my fist would've impaled her.

Eh, that's the reason I made it in the first place.

She recoiled as I lifted a hand, expecting another attack. Instead, I began forming a singularity above us. It would be delayed, taking over ten seconds to develop. To hold her down, I exploded off the rock beneath me with another leap. I lunged at her, hugging my arms together. A master of distance, she dodged by a hair's length before retaliating with a blitz of her own.

I sidestepped her first swipe, swinging my own fist forward. She outsped me despite her massive build, using her reach advantage. Her tail whipped into my side, leaving my ribs broken and cracking my spine. She paid a price once more, her tail further broken and the hanging chunk flung away.

My glowing blood coated what was now the end of her tail as well, so I reached out a hand and solidified the mass. Chrona pulled her tailback in agony, trying to sling the muck off. She flayed herself, the skin peeling off from the wound. She howled before I melted the area around us. Magma from all sides poured in, drenching us in heat. Chrona dispersed the entire mass by spreading out her wings, the wind creating an eruption in the arena.

At the same time, she clamped her jaws in my direction. A kinetic shockwave rippled through me, my balance disrupted. Using the distraction, she sliced her hand towards my head. I tilted sideways, dodging her claws by an inch. Her strike sliced deep into my torso, splitting me down the middle two feet deep.

With her arm stuck in my chest, she sliced her other paw towards my head. I pushed myself myself back by shoving against her lodged arm. Her claws grazed my face, sinking an inch into my helmet and tearing my facemask off. I met her eye. She squinted her brow as she stared at the grin on my face. I murmured,

“It’s over.”

Before she understood, the singularity I planted earlier imploded ten meters above her. Slowed down or not, the resulting explosion was close enough that we both were swept up in the resulting destruction. It broke both her wings and snapped the armor on her back. I was caught up as well, my body further mangled.

It was more than enough. Both of us were embedded in the walls of the crater we made. Hidden from prying eyes, Chrona struggled to recover. I didn’t have that problem, my sheer regeneration coming into its own. My limbs and legs reconstituting in seconds. Within twenty seconds, my health was back to being topped off.

It paid off being a living dimension after all.

I pulled another set of gray armor out of my dimensional storage, cooling the surface of my skin. After wrestling it on under the rubble, I walked out of the ground, good as new. With a quick leap, I landed in the tunnel Chrona left in the stone. She was in a sorry state, ribs broken, limbs contorted, and a few rips in her skin. She’d be fine though. Schema’s reorientation of her metabolism made her far harder to kill, just like it had mine.

Kessiah and a few health potions helped me come to that conclusion though. It would take a bit before she was fine as well. Once upon her, I reared my fist back, ready to continue the beating if I had too. A Sentinel appeared above me, dashing into the tunnel and stopping the fight. I let out a deep sigh of relief, glad they ended the fight there.

I stayed there for a moment, collecting myself. After a few deep breaths, I paced back out in front of the crowd once more. I raised a hand to a roar of applause.

Once more, I’d won.

Unlike last time, this was by a much thinner margin. Half a second later on the singularity, and Chrona might have had a chance of winning. It exposed a hole in my build, my strength not being up to par with some specialist builds.

To fix that, I'd be investing into constitution for a while. Constitution fed 40% of its value into strength, and my Immense tree added 25% of my mass as extra physical damage. That would come after this fancy rune I was working on.

Extra physical damage was a deceptive stat. It mainly meant general strength. Improving it quickly with extra mass was pivotal if I was going to face off against behemoths like the hybrids, Helios, or even Chrona. Learning that temporal dilation would make a massive difference as well.

I tucked that tidbit into the back of my mind as Kiki Mosk scrambled to explain what the hell happened in the fight,

"Ahem, so, er...The Gray Giant used alteration magic on his, uh, skin to make it metal? Then he used it as a zoning tool against Chrona by heating it into a glowing liquid... And then...er, he...um..."

He turned to the crowd, "You know what, I'll just leave it to the analysts to decipher. Regardless, the Gray Giant came out on top despite some very close calls. I'll say this much, he had more cards up his sleeve than I ever expected of the one-sided slugger."

Using a gravity well, I pulled Chrona from the crater, giving her several health potions. After gulping them down, she glared at me and sent out a telepathic wave,

"That grin of yours confused me for a moment. That is the only reason you won."

I shrugged, "All is fair in love and war. Besides, you're lucky I didn't just melt the armor you were wearing. Boiling your blood was another option. Maybe--"

"That's enough. I'm glad you decided to keep within a few parameters." she continued on a lighter note, "I am astonished by my progress as well. The fact I almost won is a testament to my progress."

I let her have that almost there. In my opinion, she still had a way to go.

“It is,” I crossed my arms, “It isn’t that surprising though. You’ve fought for what, centuries?”

“A century, but yes, I have fought for a long time.”

“Point is, you have an enormous amount of experience and a wealth of difficult to learn skills. In that regard, I’m not your match. You just need to get used to the system and you’ll be golden.”

Chrona scoffed, “I would argue that in regards to your skills. I’ve never seen you fight in that manner. It was so odd seeing you implement it.”

I spread out my hands, “Well, I was trying to use my head this fight. I’ll be honest, you’re a fucking monster at slugging it out. If we pummeled each other, there was a solid chance I might lose. I took the safe route, eliminating your chances of winning.”

She shook her head, “By the time your delayed explosion landed, my body was in tatters. Your armor’s claws and swords were the only reason I could cleave through you. You are denser than steel and hard as gemstones. I don’t understand how your heart pumps blood through your frame.”

I didn’t either.

She hissed to herself, Just as well, before getting my class, I wouldn’t have stood a chance. I’d have broken myself before I could’ve hoped to break you.”

I gestured to the arena of gialgathens, “Let them know that if you can. Either way though, I’ll be fixing my lacking strength here soon. Don’t you worry about that.”

Chrona wore a smirk, showing her teeth, “Yes, lagging strength as you call it. I look forward to it.” She winced, “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll need some time to recover, however. Perhaps a new set of armor could be made as well?”

I nodded, “Of course. I’ll let Krog get you out of here.”

By now, Krog had recovered his ability to move and fly. His injuries weren't as severe as Chrona's. His own armor was still covered in dents and tears. I waved my hand to him, and he flew on over. As he landed, he stomped a foot,

"You were so close to defeating the Dark One. I could not believe it. I was on the edge of my seat as I watched and healed myself."

Chrona sighed and said, "Speaking of healing, I could use a bath in the springs here. That and a few numbing herbs and barrels of mead. I shall feel these aches tomorrow."

"Honestly though, you probably won't. Once your health's topped off, you'll be fit enough to fight again. Perks of the system... You'll still be mentally tired though, so take it easy," I said.

She nodded, "We will."

"To the springs we go then," Krog said with a bit of excitement in his voice.

He picked her up by grabbing the edges of her torn armor and flying upward. As they left, Kiki scratched the side of his head,

"Look at them go. Krog's already up to carrying her somewhere to heal. In all my days, I've never seen a gialgathen live after the punishment he took, let alone carry a comrade hours after."

I flew back up, projecting my voice once more, "And you know why. If those battles didn't illustrate why you should consider my offer, I don't know what will. You'll find me at Chrona's current residence, near the top of Rivaria. I look forward to seeing the most driven and ambitious of you there."

After finishing my spill, I gave Kiki's shoulder a pat, "Thanks for keeping us safe man."

He looked down at my hand, then back up to me, "Of course. Glad to be of service." Kiki glanced across the arena, "And to all those here, have a wonderful rest of your year until the next Honoring of Lehesion. The champion will be given his rewards during the award ceremony back in Yildraza. Goodbye and goodnight!"

The crowd gave one last hoopla before I glanced towards Helios and Caprika. Caprika was cheering, making a huge ruckus even from her wheelchair. She poked and prodded Helios as I flew over.

“Hah, I told you that my judgment was sound. Did you see him at his peak? Even our the Emperor would be proud.”

Helios crossed his arms, his mask hiding what was probably a deep frown,

“Perhaps...Perhaps not.”

Caprika rolled her eyes so hard that her head rolled too, “I found talent. You can accept it or live in denial. It’s your choice.”

I landed beside them, lifting and flexing an arm, “Hope you guys are impressed. That was about all I’ve got.”

Helios let out a groan before dragging his hand down his black facemask, “I might’ve even complimented you if your ego wasn’t already about to burst.”

I scoffed, “If anything, I was humbled. Chrona almost won.”

“I doubt that.” Helios said while shaking his head, “You managed to defeat her, though you are both comparable. I underestimated the potential of their species. Even my uncle would vie for their favor. Her temporal dilation in particular is extraordinary now.”

I shrugged, “They were strong before getting Schema’s assistance. Obviously they’d be unbelievable with it.”

Helios raised a hand, “Yes, maybe, but I never anticipated such a rapid change in her output. Chrona dented you with such simplistic ease. From what I’ve heard and seen of you, you’re rather difficult to kill. To break your bones with strikes alone...”

Helios let his shook his head, “Even more so, however, was your regeneration. How did you heal bones so quickly? It was as if you’ve the blood of an immortal in you.”

“Eh, trade secret,” I said with a smirk.

Caprika put a hand on my arm, “I’ve spoken with uncle about temporal dilation before. It increases both the output and damage dealt by the user. It’s very taxing on your mana reserves, however, so he rarely uses it.”

I narrowed my eyes, listening close. ‘High’ mana costs were irrelevant to me.

“In her instance, she’s hastening herself. Stretching out the blows she receives dramatically reduces their impact. The same could be said of her own strikes, their fierceness remarkable.”

Helios gestured a hand to her, “I believed that magic not worth its investment. I may speak with uncle and uncover a few of his journals on the topic. He no doubt has detailed knowledge of it if it’s this effective.”

I pointed at Helios, “Well this all makes me feel better about the situation and all, but I was meaning to ask what he plans on doing after we meet?”

Helios tilted his head, “His intentions are beyond me. I will simply say he finds you interesting. Whether or not that will prove to benefit or harm you, only time will tell.”

Helios let out a laugh, “I’m sure he viewed your performance in this fight as well.”

“Really? Damn, I thought he’d have more important shit to do.”

Helios scoffed, “He didn’t only view the fight. I’m certain he accomplished a dozen tasks as he did so. My point is this-” Helios adjusted his stance, looking a bit out of place for once, “I was wrong about you. You’ve exceeded my rather low expectations of you.”

Caprika gave Helios a slow clap, “Well well, you have the ability to admit you’re wrong. I never thought I’d see this day. Truly this is incredible.”

“Hah, hah, live up your short lived victory while you can. We must leave soon,” Helios said.

Caprika turned to me, “As promised, you shall be receiving the highest status I can give you, and I guarantee a large guildhouse will be available to you in my city. I will advertise your legion for all ears that will hear it and eyes that will see it.”

I grinned, “Thanks.”

Caprika leaned back into her seat, relaxing a bit, “I can’t believe I’ll finally be allowed back onto the homeworld.”

Helios mumbled, “Neither can I.”

She shoved him, succeeding in rolling herself back. She let out a puff before glancing back at me, “You know, I’ve never heard of a non-classer defeating a classer with an over 4,500 level lead. That’s not even counting her unique class and skillset.”

Helios rolled his hand with impatience, “Enough with the egocentric praise. Perhaps you can attempt sucking his metaphorical dick when I’m not around?”

Caprika crossed her arms, “Ho, ho, is someone jealous?”

“It’s time we leave,” Helios grumbled, “Follow me unless you believe he’ll protect you this time, unlike the last.”

Helios stepped through a wormhole of his creation. As I stared at it, Caprika molded her fur, hardening it into makeshift limbs. They pulled her wheelchair along by gripping the floor. She reached right beside the portal before turning to me,

“Thank you for helping me. You will not regret it.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Eh, that depends on what kind of mood your uncle’s in when we meet.”

“Oooh, that will be fun to see. Do be prepared for a bit of eccentricity. He’s...unusual.”

“I figured. Goodluck.”

“Likewise.”

With our goodbyes said, Caprika rolled through the wormhole, the rift in spacetime closing right after. I glanced around, finding most of the crowd remaining after the fights. They chatted with animation in their voices. That was good. I would need quite a few volunteers to join my guild soon.

With that in mind, I flew off towards Emagrotha’s old home and Chrona’s current residence. The icy cavern sat near the mountain’s peak, icy sculptures illuminated in the fading sunset. As orange light danced in the many frozen carvings, I took off my gray armor and began collecting strips of blackened metal.

Within an hour, an orange gialgathen covered in yellow stripes flew in across the sky. It was Sheom, her skin smooth and moistened by a constant fog she kept over herself. As she paced into the icy den, I finished ripping another chunk out of my arm. I was sitting on a stack of metal plates, waiting to be forged. She walked up to me, her eyes curious and searching.

“Do you do that for discipline, perhaps?” Sheom said, her voice grave.

I shook my head, continuing my work, “It doesn’t hurt much. I’m relatively numb to pain at this point. It’s like pricking my finger, and that’s not something that can phase me at this point.”

I jerked, my skin snapping with a loud pang. As I set it down behind me, it clattered on the ice, smashed ice all around my workspace. I’d fix it before I left.

“Is that numbness also from the system you speak of?”

I stood up, “Yeah, it is.”

Sheom took a deep breath, “I...I am sorry for calling you a dirtwalker earlier.”

I scoffed, “You don’t need to apologize to join me. What I need is for you to work, and work hard.”

Sheom nodded, “I will do anything to gain the powers they owned.”

With an evil grin on my face, I took a piece from Torix as I cackled,

“I hope you’re ready.”