

New World 211

Chapter 211: Logistics

She gave me a nod, Sheom's spiraling, orange markings matching the sunset's glow. With her commitment, I pointed towards the black pile behind me,

"I'll be making you a set of armor like I did for Krog and Chrona. There will be a scrying portal that will let you communicate with me once it's made. I'll let you know the specifics after I've made your gear."

Sheom tilted her head, "I've yet to prove my worth. Why would you give me something so valuable?"

"Because I don't want you to die proving yourself to me. You'll be killing eldritch or silvers or both. Either way, you'll need protection if you don't want to die. You'll also need direction. If I don't instruct you where to go and when it will take you forever to finish the requirements."

"What will the requirements be?"

"Prove your worth to Schema. That's it," I said flatly. I didn't know the exact requirements since I hadn't checked out my guildmaster menu yet. Still, I knew enough about Schema to understand what the A.I. wanted.

"Then I shall return here tomorrow as the sun rises. I will see you then."

I gave her a nod, "Good."

Before leaving, Sheom glanced at my gray armor and me. She raised one of her horned brows, "Why do you wear armor over your armor?"

"To hide who I am. It's not as necessary as it once was, but it's still a precaution for now. In fact, a few key people on Giess already know my identity, but revealing it plays against their goals. They need me to be the Gray Giant, the hero of the espens."

“That is a strange game that you play. I do not relish in tricks. I prefer showing my teeth when someone tries using me or lies about what I am.”

I pointed up at her, “Sometimes you can’t show your teeth, but I trust you more already.”

Sheom let out a hearty chuckle.

“You are enigmatic, but that is not a bad thing. You remind me of Emagrotha, though lacking some of her more distasteful qualities.”

I shrugged, “Eh, I try.”

“Then till tomorrow morn, I will look forward to being a student instead of the master for once. It will be interesting.”

She turned and flew away, a bit of excitement lingering from the echoes of her voice. As she left, I let out a sigh of relief. She reminded me to check out my guildmaster menu and get a handle on the exact requirements needed for gialgathen to join the system. With that in mind, I opened my status.

After a bit of maneuvering, I found the guildmaster tab. As I opened it, a message popped up.

Update required. Guildmaster S- Tier rights unlocked.

A few moments of mana flowing from the system and another message appeared.

Congratulations on earning your next rank up as a guildmaster! As a guildmaster, specific exclusive abilities will be unlocked to assist you with managing members of your guild, along with additional interfaces to help with organization. Below is a tutorial on how to set up your four initial followers:

Setting Up Followers: Choice Matters!

When selecting your followers, keep in mind the triumvirate of good followers: Loyalty, competence, and industriousness. These three qualities are the most critical aspects of what will effectively be your generals. These members will get access to follower rights, allowing them to grant quests of their own so some managerial experience will help them as well!

That was a pretty good set of bonuses. I intended on giving Althea, Torix, and Hod the follower bonuses. Torix was a no brainer, his organizational abilities letting him use the quest generation well. Althea could create a group of assassins too, giving my guild a greater range of flexibility.

Hod was my next choice for some rather difficult to discern reasons. He was the defacto leader of the eltari, a group of mobile warriors. What Hod lacked in general intelligence, he made up for with his charismatic and goofy demeanor. He also was surprisingly reliable once shit hit the fan, so he seemed like a pretty decent choice.

The options after that became pretty murky. Kessiah wasn't reliable enough for another legacy bonus or the quest making abilities. Maybe with a bit of time, she could earn that, but until then, I'd withhold anything permanent. Amara was similar since I didn't fully trust her. She was still an eldritch, though a potent one. Her ability to disrupt Schema's system was powerful though, so giving her extra oomph was tempting. My gut told me it was too dangerous though.

If Amara somehow put many eldritch into Schema's system, we'd be facing some unholy spawns in no time. I'd rather not deal with all that, so I stayed on the safe side of this situation. After finishing off my thoughts on the matter, I read on.

The next generic right is the ability to disperse credits, experience, and items at a set rate determined by an algorithm of Schema's making. The most important factor is your guild ranking in this formula. Considering your guild is S- tier, you have quite the sum of credits to disperse!

Current credit dispersal allowed: 5,000,000 credits per week.

Current exp dispersal allowed: 500,000,000,000 exp per week.

Current item dispersal allowed: 10 Legendary Items per week. 100 Unique Items per week. 1,000 normal items per week.

Note: the 5% bonus exp and credit earning rate as guildmaster applies to these rewards as well, so start creating those quests!

I scratched my head, not really having much context on exp gain. I hadn't looked at the actual amounts of experience I earned in a long time. I had an idea of how much five million credits was though. Yawm's quest reward was over a hundred million, so it would take about five months of dishing out credits rewards to match that bounty.

That seemed pretty good to me. It was definitely more money than I needed to live comfortably even if I coasted off my 5% share of that amount. I guessed that five hundred billion experience was about the same amount of exp so I could cap out my levels with that given I had the patience for it.

I didn't, but it was nice to know I had that option.

As for the items, they seemed pretty good though my crafting abilities outdid the bonus there. Eh, not every gift would be useful after all.

The third right as a guildmaster of an S- tier guild is the ability to appropriately select members of uninitiated species into Schema's system! This is a powerful tool, one that needs discretion and wisdom with its use. The reason Schema saw it fit to give you and other guildmasters this reward was because he understands something simple – Schema's nearly perfect, but not quite.

Sometimes, species as a whole aren't worth elevating to system status. On the other hand, certain industrious members of those species would fit in well. Schema's too busy handling entire galaxies worth of planets and growing his sphere of influence. This is where you come in to help fill in the gaps in his ability!

By granting system access to worthy individuals, you gain loyal, powerful members to your guild while enriching Schema's vast member base. It's a win-win for all parties involved!

Even for S tier guilds, this right tends to be pretty restricted. You've been selected for your previous ability to enlist help from species unaffiliated with Schema! Good work.

Here is your first and final warning about this ability: it may be revoked at any time. Schema needs to be efficient and selective with the individuals he grants access to his system. Certain species, such as larger creatures, are inefficient to enhance. Sentients with low ambition, cognitive ability, or general laziness are also best avoided.

If you misuse this ability, then you'll be wasting precious resources. This means that a few measures are recommended when giving access to individuals.

First, test their responsibility. If you can't guarantee that they'll adhere to a quest requirement or a time limit, then perhaps they aren't a good candidate for enhancement!

Well duh. Either way, it surprised me that I was given this ability directly instead of having to go through the Overseer. It was a pleasant surprise though, and it made the process far less time-consuming.

Second, make sure they're on your side and the side of Schema. If they don't remain industrious after years have passed, then it will have been a wasted effort!

Third and most importantly, never enhance eldritch and unknowns. This will result in immediate exile from Schema's system. You have been warned.

That made not selecting Amara even easier.

The fourth bonus as guildmaster involves the acquisition of resources. You may now own a planet(s)! This means extending your 5% experience and credit gain to anyone utilizing your territory. This will not be a bonus for you like your guild members. This will be a tax to those using the protection, stability, and resources you've worked hard to promote and set up.

After all, the only two things that are certain in any world are death and taxes!

Note: If you're level capped, the excess experience you earn may be given out as rewards for quests, in exchange for credits of your own, or for items of your choice.

This was a very, very powerful bonus. This meant if I extended my reach far enough, I could have nearly unlimited resources. Of course, setting this up would take a lot of

time, but the long term benefits were immeasurable. It made me wonder just how much of a stockpile the Empire had. It would be absurd.

The fifth and final bonus involves a reward more personal in nature: level cap augmentations! Schema understands that the most reliable motivation for most species is personal gain and personal power. As you accrue resources, you can extend your level cap by increments of ten at a time. This cost of credits, stored experience, or/and items will scale exponentially as you raise your level by significant amounts.

While this cost can become ludicrous over time, this enhancement to your level is endless. With this, you may join the ranks of those that are truly elite in Schema's system.

Once again, congratulations on gaining a guild of such renown, and remember, your guild's glory is your glory.

As I finished the tutorial, I delved into thinking about the matter. These bonuses explained how the Emperor managed to exceed his level cap. Of course, he also had access to the cipher so it could come from other sources as well. This was a part of it though. If I managed to get an extensive network of members, I could gain quite a bit from the level cap increase.

At the same time, I dwelled on the requirements for system access. If I gave individuals without any real history of combat the bonus, I was digging my grave. Veterans of war seemed like the best candidates considering they kept their skills honed. They didn't mind taking a few hits either, which was necessary if they were to clear out a few dungeons.

With all that in mind, I came up with a simple process for weeding people out. If they wanted guild and system access, they needed to clear ten dungeons, kill a thousand silvers, and do it in a week. The time limit was vital since they would need to hurry if they wanted to achieve it in time. I also intended on making the silvers be anything but saysha beetles. Killing a thousand of those would take walking for a few minutes.

Not exactly hard to do.

After deciding on the entry quests, I opened my menu and created a quest for Kessiah, Althea, Torix, Chrona, and Krog. It was pretty simple to do. I just followed the guidelines after the system assessed the difficulty of the assignments I created.

For Kessiah, it involved healing ten combatants while on a mission. Althea's was to kill Thisbey with exp bonuses when she killed other essential members of the revolution group. Torix's was to respawn and join us here on Giess. Chrona and Krog were given the same requirements as the other gialgathens entering my guild.

It wasn't worth the dissent if they didn't accomplish the task as well. I had no worries they wouldn't finish my requirements though. With all that finished, I set out to work my way through the armor building.

I piled up the scraps I collected as I thought my way through all the guild logistics. I melted them and created several balls of glowing metal. Stretching them out, I molded them into folding plates. Like a series of scales, I connected them over chain mesh. This took hours, but it suited Sheom's burrowing strategy.

After grafting on dozens of gemstones, the two portal points, and blades at crucial places, the armor was done. My experience with Krog's gear helped me quite a bit here, giving me get an understanding of the process. Knowing her fighting style helped with the runic stylings as well. I kept them oriented towards movement and in mana flows.

If I was right, I could teach Sheom quite a bit of what I know about borrowing. My own skillset would transfer very well to hers, many aspects of my build lining up with her fighting patterns. I intended on trading it for her knowledge though. I wasn't a saint after all.

With that in mind, I went to work on creating more sets of armor. By the time night fell, six other gialgathens had shown up, their faces familiar. Some of them I recognized from the tournament, some heard rumors. Either way, it was a decent showing. Creating their armors took all night, time passing in a flash as I adjusted them around their specific needs.

As the morning came, I gave Sheom her set of armor along with a list of instructions on what to do. Several other gialgathens showed up, and I demonstrated the portal and how it worked. I created a scrying pool, letting Sheom generate her own scrying portal by channeling some mana. Though a bit fuzzy, they could understand me pretty well with it.

Using the maps from my own system data, I pointed them in the direction of many dungeons. I recommended they stick to a group and work together. Taking twenty rifts

with someone's help was a lot easier than taking ten solo. I faced a lot of resistance as I pitched this idea, most of the gialgathens thinking the eldritch weren't a threat.

Krog swung by and crushed their growing dissent. He told stories of the Hybrid like how it was nigh invincible and could swallow a gialgathen whole. With that in mind, they separated into three groups of two with Sheom still choosing to fight solo. After they left, I turned to Krog and looked him over.

He still had cuts, bruises, and a few new scars from our fight. His armor carried many dents as well, so as we talked, I bent it back into shape. I started us off,

"Thanks for the help there. They looked like their pride would get the better of them."

"It would've. If there is one thing we gialgathens must overcome, it's gaining a sense of humility. Losing my grandfather to what I believed were little dirtwalkers sprouted that idea in my mind. Meeting you solidified it into stone," Krog said.

He turned to the outer entrance of the cavern, "We gialgathens must do as you said. Evolve or die. This world is changing, and I'll be damned if I'll be left behind as a remnant of the past."

I grinned, "I got a good start then for you. You saw that quest I gave you?"

Krog nodded, "Indeed I did. I was thinking of passing an idea along to you."

"Go ahead."

"I remember your friend, the healer Kessiah. Her talents lie in her ability to mend what is broken, not in killing."

He was kind of wrong about that, but I let him continue.

"I would have her come along with me to share in the, er, experience of my new mission. Would that seem suitable?"

I crossed my arms and tilted my head, “You’d do that for her?”

Krog shook his head, “What? But of course. She saved my wings. I am no broken, hollow member of my species any longer. This is the least I may do to repay a piece of what she gave me.”

There was a depth to his gratitude I didn’t expect. Krog often hid his emotions, so seeing him open up like this caught me off guard.

Krog mumbled, “Ahem, that is if I find the time to do so...”

I rolled my eyes at him saving face.

“Yeah, I think that’s a great idea. Kessiah really needs those levels, and she’d make you safer in the long run as well. You should do that.”

Krog puffed out his chest, “But of course. While I may be new to this ‘system,’ I am no fool. I pay my debts as well.”

I finished fixing the dings in his armor, and he spread his wings,

“Then I will be off to ask her for assistance. Farewell, Dark One.”

“Cya later, Krog. Try not to get yourself killed.”

After Krog left, I found myself with little else to do after finishing a few sets of armors. I kept myself busy by practicing several skills while grinding out some work with my cipher carving. It was coming along fast, my progress mounting in speed. Something about it felt right, the work just flowing well.

I kept at it for the next two days, a bit of disappointment setting in at how few gyalgathens showed up. It wasn’t long into the second day that Sheom popped up, ten dungeon cores in a pouch on her side and her quest completed. As she landed in front of me, she was heaving for breath, a sheen of sweat over her skin,

“I...I finished what you asked of me.”

I scratched the side of my head, “Well damn...you finished this much faster than I expected. I barely even had to tell you what to do or where to go.”

“I know where the silvers reign, and finding the ‘dungeons’ wasn’t difficult once I knew where they were. Finishing at this pace was difficult, but I managed to do as you said with impunity. The most challenging part was grabbing the dungeon cores for two of the dungeons.”

Sheom winced, “There was this vast pillar of white energy. It chilled my bones when I touched it.”

I raised an eyebrow, a bit impressed by her resolve. She didn’t know the difference between an open rift and a dungeon, but she didn’t let that stop her.

“What kept you so motivated?”

“I wanted to join the ranks of Krog and Chrona as quickly as possible. It shames me to see my rivals overcoming my own ability with such ease. I taught the great Lehesion after all. My failure besmirches his memory.”

I chuckled a bit when she said besmirches, not gonna lie. As my amusement faded, I opened my status screen and let her join my guild along with the system. Her work ethic was incredible, and she followed my instructions to a T. She was what I was looking for.

I helped her piece together her build, giving her a detailed walkthrough of several paths available to her. After a half hour of grinding it out, I finished the process. An enormous pipeline of mana flowed through her as she went through the enhancement process. Once completed, she laid down near me, needing a nap like Krog and Chrona had.

I went back to my work with the cipher, two more groups of gialgathens returning over the next five days. In total, the first week of my recruitment gained me a total of five extra guild members, only three of them having classes. It was a disappointing result considering how much effort I put into this.

It was more than nothing, and I even gained a few levels from the sidelong exp. Despite my lack of progress on that front, I finished a personal project of mine. The flowing tapestry worth of runic work was completed. It spanned two dozen pages in total, the detail uncanny and precise. I read through my work, and it was a reflection of myself that impressed me.

It was like an autobiography in cipher form, reflecting my principles, my beliefs, and my history all in one flowing inscription.

Ready to reap the benefits from the rune, I channeled my mana into the tapestry of work. Twelve hours of sitting still and doing nothing later, and I finally finished the damn thing. Even with all my willpower, it took a lot out of me to sit still for that long. This damn thing had better of been worth it.

With my grimoire humming with power, I pulled the white, glowing inscription from the book. The pages turned slowly as the cipher markings pulled out of the pages at a slow pace. With the light of the room siphoning into the markings, they folded over me and onto my armor.

The markings wrapped around my upper chest and neck, flowing down my back in two parallel lines. It followed the taper of my back before cascading down the sides of my legs, ending mid-shin. It was a bit too showy for my tastes, but it was a marking of practicality, not a fashion statement.

Out of nowhere, a sharp crack erupted from my hands. I glanced down, finding my grimoire on fire in my hands. I held the book up looking at the red flame. The mana must have overloaded the grimoire, but I smacked it a couple times. Charred bits of paper fell down, the majority of it destroyed outside a few black pages at the end of the grimoire.

I cursed at losing the premade markings, but remaking them wouldn't be too difficult. Well, that would be the case for all of them outside of this new runic marking. Speaking of which, I shoved all my mana into the inscription, wondering what would happen. A few minutes passed, and I noticed no change. I took my time, being patient for results. I trained for an hour, practicing some complex shapes with my gravitational skills. After four hours passed, I opened my status, wondering what was going on.

Dimension-C138(Lvl 8,047)

Strength – 8,125 | Constitution – 14,209 | Endurance – 61,291

Dexterity – 3,420 | Willpower – 32,768 | Intelligence – 12,072

Charisma – 2,435 | Luck – 5,516 | Perception – 5,062

Health: 14.01 Million/14.01 Million | Health Regen: 45.16 Million/min or 752,658/sec

Stamina: 9.20 Million/ 9.20 Million | Stamina Regen: 131,133/sec

Living Dimension: 3.04 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

My stats increased a bit from all the cores I obtained, but outside of that, I didn't notice anything too game-changing. After spending a couple months on this rune, I expected something with a bit more oomph. Disappointed but undeterred, I parsed through my status one last time before noticing something off.

Living Dimension, my ambient level of mana, increased by two-hundredths of a trillion. I know, that sounds like nothing, but gaining that much was actually a substantial difference. It was twenty billion mana, which was a mother-fuckload for most people. It wouldn't just appear out of nowhere.

A bit flabbergasted, I helped two more gialgathens out by giving them armor and setting them up with quests. After doing so, another four hours had passed. I opened my

status and found another bump in Living Dimension by the same amount. That was when my eyes widened in shock.

The new rune wasn't improving my stats like my other markings had.

It was siphoning into my next evolution.

Chapter 212: Fallout

I did the math for my mana by using a calculator option in my status. It would take about ten days before my next evolution at my current pace. Considering the spike in power I'd get from it, this moved that further up in my priority list. At the same time, I couldn't lose sight of my goals. I still had to save Rivaria from some kind of invasion from Thisbey.

To make that happen, I needed more recruits. From my experience so far, no gialgathens came by during nighttime. Working in a bit of dungeon clearing and eldritch harvesting into my schedule wasn't impossible by any means then.

With that in mind, I helped two more gialgathens join my cause before heading out overnight. Throughout the night, I cleared dozens of opened rifts, focusing on ones where eldritch worlds were spilling onto Giess. This helped prevent gialgathens from dying or being trapped in those worlds. It also gave me more mana from the white pillars of light that sustained the portals.

While I ran through the countryside and silver wastelands, I kept focused on training Force of Nature. I drilled a variety of complex gravitational formations. While floating from area to area, I held complex patterns of sand and soil. At times, I rotated dozens of rocks, creating mini-solar systems hovering over my palm. This was far more difficult than it seemed.

I had to create a gravity well mirroring the pull of Giess. This let me hover a few dozen stones midair. After that, I melted one of them, creating a miniature sun at the center of the replica. After enhancing its gravitational pull, I tweaked it until the stones around it fell in orbit. Doing all that while punching mind controlling moles in the face was hard as hell.

I kept at it though, attempting to create small environments on each rock I hovered in my hand. This required precise manipulation of the heat around each stone. Over time, I created wet spots over the pebbles, mimicking oceans. I managed tiny little wind

systems, keeping outside interference minimized with further gravitational manipulation.

By the time I was satisfied with this project, I had created hundreds of gravity wells. I balanced them in a dance of sorts, weighing the pull of each of them. I even attempted the creation of geological formations on the stones. I melted the inside but kept a thin layer of crust on its surface. After setting the cracks adrift, I hoped volcanoes and the like would form on the pebbles.

If they did, I couldn't tell. I did use the word 'attempt' after all.

Despite some lagging aspects of the exercise, I gritted my teeth and pushed through the process. Over the next three days, I gained a few levels and capped out my cores in the process. Despite getting to level 8,111, my mana regen didn't grow by that large an amount. That made sense considering the mountain of endurance I already stacked up. The ambient mana gains were minimal as well. Every little bit helped though.

On the other hand, my guild efforts picked up quite a bit. With only three days remaining before the award ceremony, I managed to get twenty-four gialgathens into the system and my guild. While it wasn't an army by any means, it would help out with the cause. If I were up against many hybrids as I suspected, I'd need all the help I could get.

With that in mind, I called in my three most significant advocates for a meeting. Sheom, Krog, and Chrona were all sprawled out in Chrona's home. The scars I left behind with all my armory work made it look and smell like a blacksmith's shop at this point. To be fair, Chrona didn't really care. She relished in the new combat that the system allowed. Sheom was the same in that regard, pursuing battle after battle.

Krog had been different, leading the recruitment effort. He was the biggest reason I gained so many gialgathens so soon. By speaking with many leaders of Rivaria, the old general secured me a guildhouse, the first one in Rivaria. Even more surprising, he campaigned for my cause, and he was cunning about it too.

He used Kessiah's unique skills to gain members. By offering to restore the limbs and injuries of war veterans, he added loyal, competent soldiers to our ranks. Malakai was one of the first gialgathens he went to, his burns still fresh from the bombing of our room. He among others were given a second chance to fight, and they were hungry for action.

Kessiah gained an enormous amount of training with her skills during this time, becoming proficient at turning her blood into flesh and bone. It was a miraculous turnaround for her. She went from one of the most useless, frustrating friends I had to a godsend overnight. She even gained experience when healing fellow guild members, boosting her exp gain. In between the healing, Krog took her out to destroy silvers, raising her level by over a thousand over the last week or so. Krog even sent updates on all this as it occurred, keeping me in the loop at all times.

All in all, it was a boon I never expected. Maybe that's because my expectations were low. I figured it's better to be that way. I was never disappointed and pleasantly surprised sometimes.

Krog was becoming one of those surprises. He was reminding me of Torix at this point, his political skill uncanny. Considering the guy was once a general, it made perfect sense. He was bound to have some skills in that department.

Unlike with Chrona and Sheom who were given their position based on their battle sense, Krog's logistical abilities made him invaluable. It kind of left me envious. He was using his resources better than I had, his social prowess dwarfing my own. I swallowed my pride though, remembering that as individuals, we each had our own strengths.

It was still a bitter pill to gulp down, however.

I shook off that bit of jealousy, glancing at the three titans. Though Krog's efforts impressed me most, they all supported the cause in their own way. With each of them here, I stayed standing up,

"It's good you all made it here so quickly. There's something important I need to discuss with each of you."

Krog gave me a curt nod, "What is it that you have to report?"

He was falling into the whole general more than I expected.

“Well, something is going to happen to Rivaria during the award ceremony in four days.”

Krog’s eyes widened, “Why didn’t you tell us sooner?”

“I had no information about it, and I still don’t. I didn’t want to stop you guys from accomplishing real tasks to handle something so vague.”

Chrona blinked, “If there’s no information of the assault, then there’s little we can plan to do. Perhaps we may host members of your army around the city to assist with evacuation. I can think of no more we can do.”

Krog growled, “These gialgathens have grown lazy and fat since the war has ended. They won’t listen to an evacuation order. Even my warnings of a storm on our horizons do us little.”

Sheom’s eyes narrowed, “That’s too high a price to pay for simple knowledge.”

Krog shook his head, “Some lessons may only be learned in exchange for blood.”

It made sense why Sheom wasn’t on their side during the civil war. From what I’d seen, they were always butting heads. I intervened before the issue spiraled any further,

“Enough. We’re sticking with a simple strategy. We’re splitting you three into teams, each of you having seven gialgathens under you. Decide who gets who amongst yourselves.” I raised a hand,

“During the award ceremony, you’ll be patrolling the city. If anything crops up, go in as a team and destroy it.”

Chrona smiled, her sharp teeth showing, “That seems simple enough. It will prevent us from being overwhelmed should we face another Hybrid.”

Sheom frowned, “What will you do?”

“I have to visit an award ceremony in Yildraza. I’ll be rushing back to Rivaria right after its finished.”

Sheom tilted her head, her eyes narrowing, “So a trophy is more important to you than Rivaria?”

I crossed my arms, “It’s the mythical compendium that I give a shit about. It will help me progress rapidly in my goals. Those goals don’t include being a savior to people who can save themselves.” I scowled,

” If anything, I’ve done more than enough by informing you all and getting some gialgathens into the system. What do you expect from me?”

“Could this outing not wait until after the coming invasion? You’re exchanging people’s lives for your convenience.” Sheom snapped.

Krog growled, “I see you’re used to dealing with saints then, Sheom. We are not so helpless as to need his guidance in every matter, and he has a life to live as well.”

Krog turned to me, his chest puffed out, “Allow me to thank you for all that you’ve done.”

Sheom bit her lip. She murmured, “I...I overreacted.”

I didn’t give two fucks about this drama. I suppressed the desire to roll my eyes, “It’s fine. Focus on what matters; prepare yourselves for an incoming invasion. You were all part of a war, right? Use some of those skills to get this shit done.”

Krog gave me a curt nod, “Of course, Dark One.” Chrona followed suit with Sheom. I raised my hands, “I’m your leader, yeah, but this isn’t a militant organization.”

Krog shook his head, “They may do as they wish. I prefer more formal lines of command.”

Huh. This was a strange feeling.

“Uh, sure. Anyways, that was all I wanted to inform you guys of. Figure it out from here.”

As I walked off, Krog turned to them and began a telepathic conversation. I went back to my day job as a blacksmith, fixing up some extra armors and runic configurations. After a half hour of talking the three of them left with some goodbyes. As they did, a message popped up in my status.

Althea Tolstoy, the Shapeless Arbiter(lvl 9,457 | Class: Breaker | Giess: 6:41 P.M. 4/16/26) – They’ve ramped up their assault on Rivaria. Everyone here is talking about it. I’ll be stationed in Yildraza on the 20th during the award ceremony. After I kill Thisbey, we’ll meet up outside the north side of the city. That ok?

I thought back,

Dimension C-138, the Harbinger of Cataclysm(lvl 8,113 | Giess: 6:42 P.M. 4/16/26) – Yes. I hope you’re ok, and I love you.

We exchanged messages for a while about what we were doing. She thought my recruitment was a fantastic success, but she was pretty biased. She felt the same way when I complimented her on her assassinations. After that, our conversation turned into goofy rambling, and it made me miss her.

I had a task here though, so I pushed that out of my head before leaving for the night. For the next two days, I continued enlisting help and searching during the nights. I say enlisting, but no other gialgathens showed up. Rivaria was clean out of fresh recruits.

Not wanting to sit around with a half dozen extra sets of armor, I devoted the rest of my time clearing out dungeons and silvers. After my armor evolution, I’d focus my time on their recruitment. Perhaps I could find a few like-minded espens to join my cause, but I didn’t know if I could trust anyone.

Thisbey’s influence ran that deep, unfortunately.

It didn’t take long before the fatal day arrived. I managed to get up to level 8,231, and my mana regen did rise by a bit. It wasn’t enough to get the evolution just yet, however.

I sent a few messages between Althea and me, making sure the plan was going smoothly. It was, so I got ready to leave.

Without any more time to spend, I went off to Yildraza with Chrona, Krog, and Sheom on high alert. After flying across Giess for several hours, I reached Yildraza's soaring skyscrapers peeking over the horizon. With the silver mining business peaking, pillars of black smoke rose up to the sky in the distance. All along the various buildings, flags were hanging with my image on them. It was my hand raised after defeating Chrona.

No doubt they spun that somehow into me being a bigot. I couldn't wait until Thisbey was gutted alive. With those thoughts burning in my mind, I flew through several alleyways before reaching the giant stadium where I faced Delilath.

As I entered the building, the crowds were in an utter uproar. Their champion was here in the flesh, the Gray Giant becoming a legend for the espens. This was to be my triumphant return after stomping the gialgathens into submission. They dedicated quite the set of resources for it as well.

The production company set up a gray pyramid of steps at the center of the arena, several spotlights set over a glass trophy with a book in it. Along the walls of the steel structure, images of gialgathens were etched into metal. They even scorched the edges of their flame breath as if the fire was alive.

At the top of the pyramid, a pillar of light descended around a gyroscope the size of a fist. With three rings circling around it, the cube at its center was floated with an iridescent sheen.

It was the mythical compendium.

Schema's protection ensured no one stole before I grabbed it. Around the seats, screens were set up to encapsulate the moment. It was a strange sensation. The next few seconds would mean so much to so many people, yet it mattered so little to me. I just wanted to get in and get out as fast as possible.

I wasn't ignorant of my surroundings, however. There was a bloody undercurrent to all the celebration. A few glares peaked from under shrouded hoods and masked. White knuckles gripped guns of all kinds, ready to open fire. I analyzed dozens of the audience members as I walked up to the center stage.

I found several warriors over level 3,000. Some of those were to be expected, but there were more than there should be. Without hesitating, I sent Althea a message about the situation. As I waited for a response, Kiki Mosk was floating over the arena as always. He gestured a hand to me,

“And as always, arriving right on time, we have the Gray Giant!”

As I stepped up to the gray pyramid, the lights in the arena shut off. I leaned over, prepared for a fight, but that wasn't the case. Glow in the dark paint covered the monument, showing the fierce gyalgathens being killed. Either smashed with fists or thrown into pits of lava, the gory details popped out in the dim light.

Kiki Mosk gestured to me, “The hero of the espens and the one to rule them all has come here to display his dominance and gain his reward.”

I had no intention of showing dominance here. As Kiki continued chatting, I glanced up at the side of my status. My inbox was still empty, no new messages received. Althea tended to be pretty quick with those unless she was busy. She could've been in the middle of the assassination at this point though, so I stayed calm.

Kiki went on and on about the history of the event, but I was too busy to care. I floated up to the mythical compendium and stuck my hand out to the white light. It receded while the gyroscope lurched out onto my palm. The many rotating spheres aligned like the rings of a planet before shining blue lines crisscrossed the cube. The many lines divided the compendium into fifteen smaller chunks.

They spiraled along an invisible center as a message popped up.

Analyzing skills, previous knowledge, and needs...

Ten seconds passed.

Mythical Skill decided after completing the analysis. Metamorphosis skill path set. Metamorphosis is a mythical skillset revolving around using mana to change one's inherent characteristics.

This style of magic utilizes Quintessence, a mixture of augmentation and origin magic. It allows for higher purity in personal enhancements, the manipulation of matter, and the manipulation of personal attributes. The unique skills involved are listed below, followed by the five skills required for their creation:

Quintessence – Origin, Origin Manipulation, Augmentation, Augmentation Manipulation, and Serenity.

Mutagenesis – Mutation, Growth, Deconstruction, Auto-cannibalism, and Anatomy.

Mass Manipulation – Spatial Awareness, Proprioception, Compression, Decompression, Mana Manipulation(Any type)

While there may be stalls in the process, this guide will allow the learning of the mythical skill within three days for a determined person.

Congratulations on gaining this reward from Schema. You've earned it!

The pieces of the iridescent cube latched onto the rings of the compendium. They expanded before floating over my forearm. Like needles, the metal sharpened as the gray rings snapped into the flesh of my forearm. A pulse of blue energy shot through me as the device molded to me.

I guess it would be hard to steal at least.

As I glanced at my forearm, Kiki coughed, "Ok, that wasn't the signal to go, but whatever. When it comes to the Gray Giant, you never know what to expect... especially as the commentator!"

Kiki both glared and grinned at me, holding both false joy and suppressed anger all at once. I smiled back,

"Eh, I'm not a ceremony kind of guy. Wrap it up. I'm leaving."

Kiki blinked, holding his grin by sheer will alone, “Ok. Thank you for the heads up. Better than last time I suppose. Anyways, we now have the final and new event for this year’s Honoring of Lehesion.”

The crowd glanced around, confusion spreading over their faces. Kiki said,

“Our sponsors have allowed us to continue this effort despite the effort and cost involved. With that in mind, we would like to give the floor to the man who made this entire operation possible.”

My eyes narrowed to slits. My fists clasped tight as hungry jaws. Something wasn’t right about this. Althea should’ve responded by now.

Kiki raised a hand, as the top of the stadium opened. Large sheets of metal powered by hydraulics lifted up in a slow reveal. Above all the ensuing events, a man in gialgathen leather was floating above the group. He hovered on a platform held aloft by blue fire. Two guards stood beside him, each of them masking their identities. With a smirk on his face and his hands gripped behind his back, the living piece of shit locked eyes with me.

Kiki gestured up to him,

“Thisbey Thorn has arrived!”

Chapter 213: Breach

My mind raced at the sheer stupidity of Thisbey for a moment, but then I gave pause. While Thisbey was a slimy snake in the grass, he wasn’t an idiot. He wore that damn leather to fuck with me, and he wholeheartedly believed he had control of this situation. The robed guards might be why.

My doubt faded. Thisbey better pray they could stop me.

I bent down, ready to launch myself like a missile. Before I leaped, Thisbey announced,

“Now I love giving a speech in someone’s honor, but I must confess – I’m not here to do so. I’ve other matters to attend to, least of which is celebrating this here hero.”

He locked eyes with me, “On the other hand, the most important matter involves that pretty lady of yours. You come crashing up here, and we might not be able to guarantee her safety.”

The runes over my armor glowed red inside the gray confines of my disguise. I charged a singularity in my blood, my rage palpable. I silenced my wrath, saying,

“You caught Althea? Yeah, doubtful.”

Thisbey pressed his fingertips together, “Yet I knew when and where she was to silence me.” He brushed off his jacket, “Yet here I am, safe and sound. The can’t be said for your darling if you don’t think things over very carefully.”

How he knew all this was beyond me, but I honed in and focused on his every word. Even if I wasn’t some genius, I had a head between my shoulders. If I was going to step out on top of this situation, I would need to use it.

“Why should I trust you?”

“You shouldn’t, though you can check your status and see if she’s alive. Assuming you two are in the same party or guild that is. Based on you two’s relationship, that’s hardly a presumption.”

I took a moment and thought this over. Althea dying wasn’t an option, but both of us dying was even worse. At the same time, I was confident Thisbey didn’t have the means to adequately restrain or hold Althea back. Also if he did, I could break her out even with explosive methods if it came to that. Etorhma’s tears guaranteed she’d survive even if those around her didn’t.

With that in mind, I stood up straight. Instead of letting on how much I was thinking, I played the part of a big, dumb fighter,

“Show me where she is-” I grimaced, “unless you enjoy the feeling of worms eating your corpse.”

Thisbey leaned back, his eyes widening. A bead of cold sweat went down his forehead as he grabbed his collar. He still feared me, and rightfully so. By now, the entire crowd

was confused as well. The cameramen already shut down the live streams, and the power around us shut off, casting the masses in darkness. The pillar of light from the sky illuminated the two of us, each facing one another.

I leaned back down, threatening to leap as he raised a hand to me, “Wait! I’ll take you to her. That was my intention all along.”

I pulled myself up with a gravity well, ascending into the sky of Giess. I got myself into Event Horizon’s range as I shouted, “I have a magical aura that can kill you instantly if you try anything.”

Despite my pressure, Thisbey kept his cool despite some cold sweat, smiling, “I wouldn’t even think of it. Now, if you wouldn’t mind, we have a date with destiny, and she’s rather impatient.”

I rolled my shoulders, getting closer to the slimeball. Thisbey pointed North, “We’ll be heading over the silver’s territory. Follow along now.”

I did as he said, having already sent messages to Kessiah, Althea, Torix, and my gialgathen followers about the situation. As I did, Thisbey smirked and chuckled to himself. He oozed confidence despite knowing how quickly I could kill him. There was a reason behind that. There had to be.

After floating for several minutes, Thisbey struck up a conversation,

“Do you want to know why I despise gialgathens?”

“No. I don’t care either.”

He scoffed, “Well I’ll tell the story to the sky. Perhaps she’ll listen.”

I rolled my eyes as the chatterbox continued.

“Despite my appearance and wealth, I came from humble beginnings. The humblest, in fact. My great grandfather was an espen slave. My father was a servant to that same

family of gialgathens. If I followed their footsteps, I'd of ended up the same. I saw through the facade those beasts put up, however."

I frowned, "Of course you did."

His brow furrowed, "They look down on even you still, and you're this world's greatest bipedal fighter. If you can't earn their unanimous respect, what is a mere spokesperson supposed to do? Lay beneath their feet and rot?"

"Just go about your business. You don't have to make your life revolve around them."

He shook his head, a grin of derision plastered onto his face,

"I beg to disagree. Without fail, those giant amphibians will make your life revolve around theirs...if you give em a chance. I happen to have a streak of defiance in me, so I oppose their subtle oppression. On the other hand, my father was different."

Thisbey shook his head, "My father was a great man, not in birth but in character. A man of morals, dignity, and work ethic. He served Lehesion when I was a child, and to me, there was no greater goal to aspire to. He meant the world to me, and without my mother to help guide us, he did his best."

Thisbey pursed his lips, "His best wasn't good enough. I watched him carry a hundred-pound bag of wet salt up a mountainside. As he fell from exhaustion, they put the bag on another man and left him to die. I defied them, but they burned my back for my outbursts."

Thisbey pulled up his coat, revealing deep burns covering most of his back. He sighed, "And I promised that day to make him pay for marring my skin. Through a tenacious effort, I escaped, created an empire of business, and I had that gialgathen flayed alive."

He gestured with his suit, his eyes hard as iron, "And I still wear that skin to this day. It reminds me that even if they look down on me for this weak body I own, they can never look down on me for my spirit. I will do anything and everything it takes to achieve my goal of equality."

He grimaced, "Even if that means doing some acts that are...distasteful."

I crossed my arms, hovering above the forest-scape, “Distasteful?”

He met my eye with a charming grin, “Yes. Distasteful.”

He took a deep breath before cracking his knuckles. We passed into the silver’s territory before I snapped, “How much longer before we reach her?”

Thisbey glanced down at an unnecessary watch, “Oh, it shouldn’t be much longer now. You’ll understand soon why I’m at ease.”

It was my turn to grin.

“You shouldn’t be.”

“I’ll let you decide that after I’ve revealed my hand. I’ve already seen yours after all.”

Huh. Strange.

We passed over a set of hills before moving into the spire forest. After diving beneath a cove of spires, we dashed into a dark cavern with nothing illuminating its bottom. A lone pillar of light leaked in from the entrance, revealing us.

My senses were not so dull that I didn’t understand what was in this cavern, however. When I entered it, my hair stood on end. Deep within me, a primal fear surged forth. A haunting, ragged breath emanated throughout the entire expanse, the deep voice mangled beyond repair. It gasped, unable to restrain itself from struggling. It gave the same deformed growl as Emagrotha had.

It was bad news, no two ways about it. My guess was that Thisbey grafted a hybrid to a gialgathen from the sounds of it. If it increased its power even more, then I wasn’t able to beat it in 1v1 combat. I opened my status, sending a message to Helios to call in the favor for saving Caprika. It came with coordinates as well, letting him know where I was at.

Thisbey opened his own status, staring at an invisible notification. His eyes opened wide before he tugged at his collar, "Let's hurry now. I wouldn't want to keep your miss waiting."

My eyes narrowed. That was twice now that the asshole reacted oddly as I sent a message. That would make sense if I were interacting with the screen, but I wasn't. I was doing all my commands mentally. I distracted Thisbey with banter, preparing to send another message to test my theory,

"What's that breathing in the distance?"

He grinned at me, "Well, he's how we pinned down your lady. She's quite difficult to restraint otherwise. But enough of that. It comes later."

Mentioning his puppet calmed him down, his nonchalance unnerving me. Whatever waited in the dark, it was enormous beyond measure. Trying to see it, I channeled mana into my armor, making it glow. A portion of Thisbey's coat caught on fire. He slapped it out while cursing, "What in the hell are you doing? Have you lost your mind?"

I shrugged, "It was entirely accidental. I forgot you were like paper mache compared to me. My mistake."

It was anything but a mishap. It had the intended effect as Thisbey brushed off some imaginary dust from his shoulders, "I don't mind defiance boy, but I do mind stupidity. Another stunt like that and Althea is dead."

"Then you will die right after, along with everyone else here. Your puppet can't save you." I snapped my fingers, "From a death happening faster than a snap of my fingers."

Thisbey froze up for a second, but he composed himself, "Now, now, I told you all that comes later. Calm yourself and allow me to show you to her prison."

The orange glow from my armor illuminated a tiny portion of the cave, enough for us to navigate. Deep in its depths, we reached a broad platform of stone. We stood at opposite ends, the heat off my armor making the three of them uncomfortable. Thisbey channeled a bit of black mana into it a podium of rock, and the platform sunk down with all of us on it.

I chided, “Of course you’d have dominion mana.”

Thisbey only nodded in return. As we sunk down into the miles of metal and stone, I prepared a message to send all of my guildsmen. It was a message for springing a trap against Thisbey at this location. It was a completely bullshit message, but I wasn’t about to send it. I had other goals in mind.

With Thisbey thrown off from my earlier stunt, he opened his status, glancing at something. As he did, he coughed into his hand. He turned to his guards,

“Be ready for some undue surprises.”

They nodded silently. I kept my face frozen, but underneath my calm, I realized something pivotal – Thisbey was reading my status. I didn’t know when or how, but he could see it and react in real time. I burrowed through my memories, trying to figure out when he did it, but I didn’t know enough to pinpoint the breach. After peeling Thisbey’s face off and shoving it down his throat, I’d be hiring a hacker or the like to discuss security options.

As I delved further into the implications, my heart sank as the repercussions rippled over me. These events all began making sense. My status was how the Skyburner bases had next to no information present. Even more important, this was how he caught Althea. He understood when and where the assassination would take place, then he would counter it.

That meant I sabotaged the attempt each time I sent her a message about it. It was my fault.

My blood ran colder as we continued to sink, but I held the guilt inside. I couldn’t give Thisbey any more tools to work with. I had walked into traps before, and I needed every advantage I could get. My mind raced with possibilities as we reached a narrow corridor. Thisbey led the way, pacing further still before entering a dimensional shift.

I raised my eyebrows, “We’re in a rift. That’s a surprise. You cozy up to eldritch now?”

Thisbey raised a hand and grinned at me, “Mighty keen of you to sense that. There’s a good reason we’re here.”

No matter the reason, being in a rift improved my chances of succeeding by an order of magnitudes. One of my trees, Obliterator II, doubled my damage while in an opened rift. They wouldn’t know that since I hadn’t checked that tree in well over a year. The data connection for my status opened up as well, a sort of wifi connection appearing as it had before in other rifts.

I blinked, thinking about the remnant’s hidden language and exile from the system. Maybe these guys hid in a rift to prevent that, slowing down Schema’s updates. There were more obvious reasons for him being here though.

“You need eldritch for your experiments with the Hybrid.”

The guards turned to me then Thisbey, their eyes showing from their slitted hoods. They widened in shock. I smiled under my helmet. Heh, I could use this to my advantage.

I continued, “You’re using Harvesters to graft silvers onto espens and gialgathens alike. I’m surprised you haven’t used these guards for experimental material yet in fact. Perhaps you will after this.”

At this point, the guards stared at each other with a remarkable intensity. Thisbey turned to them, “I assure you, we’ve done nothing of the sort here. Besides, neither of you have anything to lose anyway. Schema’s already thrown you out. That’s why we’ve paid you so well in the first place.”

Thisbey’s words calmed the guards down somewhat, letting them regather their composure to an extent. Unfortunately for him, it gave me something to work with. I wasn’t about to let my chance slip.

“Well isn’t that interesting. Yenno, I’ve been exiled twice now from the system. Schema’s far more forgiving than you’d imagine, however. I’m not even considered an unknown anymore, and I’ve dabbled in plenty of illegal acts,” I glanced at my nails, acting like the situation wasn’t even stressful like Helios always did. I figured it would put some pressure on them both.

As that went on, we reached the end of a hallway. A set of orichalcum doors sealed us from the hidden room, runic work covering the walls. The enchantments sealed in the area, keeping it quarantined. Spread over the runes were oaths written in blood. They created a seal inside the area, and it revolved around fogging the mind.

I took another deep breath, smelling the familiar stench of a remnant's blood. It had a sterile, bleachy scent to it once it dried. I remembered facing an antimagic remnant before. When we faced off against Yawm, a group of Breaker's attempted killing him. One of the remnants could use antimagic, making her critical to their success. She might carry a specific bloodline for that trait like Kessiah did with her own Blood Arts.

As I glanced at the runes further, I grimaced as I trusted my instincts here. They used their connections to get the blood necessary to create an anti-magical field. Before stepping inside, I channeled enough mana for a singularity in my blood, energy radiating from my frame. I hid my mana saturation with the glow of my armor, prepared to unleash havoc.

We stepped up to the doorway as Thisbey raised a hand to me,

"Try not to make any sudden moves. We wouldn't want anything devastating happening to your significant other."

I glared down at the little man from across the hallway,

"No. We wouldn't, would we?"

He averted my gaze before channeling his mana into the doorway. Seconds later, and the orichalcum doorway pulled open. White light poured from fluorescent light bulbs, their sterile glow casting the room in an eerie light. As with the other camp, tubes of experiments floated in suspension fluid. Beside them, living researchers from a variety of races toiled in front of their monstrous playthings.

An orichalcum floor covered the expansive room, making everything green. The runic work covered every square inch of the floor. The same terminals were used here as the other facility, allowing off the grid communication. They even used paper for most of their work since Schema couldn't access it.

Seconds after walking in, a thin mental haze clouded my mind. It reminded me of being tired and wanting to sleep, a sensation I hadn't felt in years. I glanced to the side of the doors. From each side, orange, pulsing sacks ebbed on the surface of two humanoids. Their metallic frames gurgled with each breath, both of them around ten feet tall.

They were smaller, thinner Hybrids.

My eyes widened as Thisbey snapped his fingers. Both of the Hybrids lurched forward, grabbing the guards beside him. I turned to him while two more Hybrids close the doorway behind us. As the guards howled in agony, Thisbey sighed,

"I intended on keeping you both for a bit longer, but seeing as you threatened a mutiny of sorts, you closed out my options."

The Hybrids assimilated them in seconds, each of them gorging on the guardsmen. From the scene of abject horror, violet skin peeked out from the crunching armor and robes. They were remnants, likely hired to help Thisbey from Tohtella. I managed to keep myself composed despite the sudden carnage.

Well, for the most part.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Thisbey rolled his eyes, "Do you think my image would remain salvageable if I brought two of these heathens with me as my guards? Not even those revolutionaries would swallow something so sinister. I had to bring two others along to dissuade you from threatening me further."

Thisbey laughed before saying, "It was a mighty fine gamble if I do say so myself. Now that you're here, I don't think we'll have any more problems."

"We'll see."

I reached out a hand, attempting to form a singularity. My mana was still there, but the mental fog stopped me from shaping it. Thisbey pointed at me, and the two Hybrids lunged towards me. I took several steps back, analyzing them both. Their statuses were identical.

Version 1.0(lvl 10,000) – This being is a mixture of harvester DNA, silver biology, and an espen host acting as a central nervous system. From terminals, we've gathered the primary means of production involves the destabilization of the Harvesters bodies. This creates a DNA cocktail of genetic matter.

Once injected into various subjects, certain ones mutate. Others accept the shift in their DNA structure. After this process, further refinements are made by introducing drastic changes to their metabolisms. Silver constructs are surgically implanted, allowing scientists to monitor the rate of their infection.

The vast majority of subjects die during this process; however, the few that survive are reborn as mindless Hybrids. They possess enormous physical might though next to no level of intelligence. These processes were discovered and implemented by Tohtella's team of parasitic researchers. She used her position as Head Speaker to utilize Schema's own resources.

After honing down the process over two decades in dozens of laboratories, they discovered a means of control subjects. Through the injection of Yana worms, they created functional yet braindead creatures. Using cybernetic enhancements, they molded them into powerful puppets. Though volatile, they are loyal and steadfast.

Kill any all that you come in contact with immediately. They cannot be allowed to exist.

I smashed one's face before spinning on my feet and elbowing the other one's chest in. The other Hybrid's joined the effort as Thisbey raised a hand,

"They aren't killing you, my friend. They're just restraining you. No doubt you noticed the enchantments in this room, correct? It stops you from controlling your mana. Without control, you can't make it do anything, like that aura of yours. It won't work here. All you have is your raw physical might. Now while it's impressive, it's no match for these brutes. Settle down. We've got time yet."

Underneath my helmet, I stayed quiet and did as he asked. Hybrid flesh singed, grabbing my armor. At the same time, I couldn't help but smile. He believed my aura was attached to mana, and that was a fatal mistake. While true I couldn't mold my mana even in the slightest, Event Horizon didn't require mana. It was an innate ability of my armor, much like my enhanced dimensional storage or increased resistances.

Still, it didn't hurt the situation to check. I attempted molding Event Horizon. It shifted under my will, natural as breathing. With that trump card in my hand, I let Thisbey take control of the situation. He seemed like the gloating, petty type.

I wasn't wrong.

He grabbed his jacket, flourishing it in front of me,

"Ah, that's better, isn't it? I do hate having my life on the line, but sometimes it must be done to uphold my ideals. Of course, you understand I imagine?"

"Where are you taking me?"

"Why, to your significant other. I stick by my promises."

I growled from deep in my chest, "If you experimented on her—"

"We haven't had time for that. Letting you reveal your identity would've ruined my plans, and that's simply not something I could allow to take place. See, we need people to believe you are who you say you are. You likely already know why."

I pretended like I was trying to jump at him, letting the Hybrids restrain me. I was hoping he trusted they could stop me utterly. Thisbey shook a finger side to side,

"Tsk, ts, I wouldn't try that. Even if you're stronger than they are, these Hybrids are evil things. They'll crawl through your flesh like worms through dirt if you keep acting up."

He didn't know about my armor's own infectious qualities. I almost trumped Version 2.0's individual rate of infection. These Hybrids were inferior by comparison, so overwhelming them wasn't off the table. With that, I had two trump cards at my disposal now. I wiggled my armor to make sure it was responsive. I didn't want the mana restriction to stop me from moving myself due to my blood magic.

It wasn't a problem. It was more like the thought required to lift a finger rather than accomplishing a complex equation. That's what channeling mana felt like normally. This was a massive advantage to me, many of my abilities unhampered by his restrictions.

Thisbey continued, none the wiser,

"I'm glad you understand. Now follow me if you want to live for a few more minutes. You can die right here if you'd like. It doesn't really matter to me anymore. Your usefulness has dried up."

I kept silent, following him. The scientists continued at their work, ignoring the massacre behind them and the Hybrids restraining me. If anything, they worked even harder. Fear was a powerful motivator after all, and that bloodbath would instill it in hardened veterans let alone scientists. That told me these weren't warriors, however.

Hybrids were the majority of his forces. That made things simpler.

I let the Hybrids drag me to behind Thisbey. As they did, their footsteps dented the orichalcum beneath them. Without dispersing my weight, I was a Goliath to these creatures. They scrambled to hold me up as we passed through a doorway. Above, a massive earthquake rippled through the entire facility, as if an eruption occurred above.

The orichalcum shivering under strain. Thisbey let out a sigh of relief, spreading out his hands, "This will be the day of their reckoning. It will be glorious..but let's keep moving."

Once inside, we discovered many prison cells full of deformed people wallowing in anguish. Thisbey shook his head,

"It's amazing how many espens rejected my philosophy of growth and prosperity. It's a simple thing stopping them, however. At the same time, they make for useful materials. If you're lucky, you might end up like them."

He turned to me, a sadistic smile on his face, "You remind me of Emagrotha though, and I hate her almost as much as Lehesion. However, we happened to make use of them. We'll make use of you too."

Once more, I kept quiet. After passing the barred cells, we reached another doorway leading towards the center of the rift. A blue dungeon core radiated with energy, sending a pillar of white light up into a containment capsule. Inside of it, Althea appeared frozen in time like a life-like statue. She wore the armor I gave her, her blackened chainmail giving her an edge of danger despite her beauty.

Thisbey pointed at it, “That woman is carnage given form. She killed dozens of our guards, slicing them apart. She almost killed me before I called in my trump card. He froze her in time using a tremendously powerful temporal dilation. That’s how we took her here before using the dungeon core to power his enchantment.”

I furrowed my brow a bit. I was immune to temporal dilation because of what I was made of. I was almost sure my armor gave some sort of dimensional resistance as well, making Althea less vulnerable. She could’ve escaped.

Thisbey laughed, long and loud while facing me. I faced him but looked up to Althea with only my eyes. Still standing in place, she winked her eye at me. A bolt of confusion overwhelmed me before the situation cleared.

Althea had let herself get captured on purpose.

A wicked smile spread over my face. Althea wasn’t letting herself get captured to be a damsel in distress. She was using herself as bait to bring us right to the core of the enemy’s operations.

Thisbey continued in ignorance, “You heard that rumble above us, didn’t you? That trump card is on its way to Rivaria to raze it to the ground.”

I stayed muted. Thisbey cackled, a bit of an unstable edge in his voice, “That puppet of mine is going to devour the gialgathens as food. It will be the ultimate irony. Their greatest hero turned their greatest enemy. It will be justice in its greatest glory, a feast for the ages. Metal turned flesh. Flesh turned metal.”

Something was wrong with Thisbey. Something very wrong. Before he continued further, I sent a message to Helios giving him the coordinates to Rivaria and telling him to go there. Thisbey glanced at his status before walking up and tapping my helmet. Yup, he could see my status.

He tilted his head at me,

“You think it’s fun watching you big, bulky idiots make the decisions? You think it’s easy to sit and wait for the right moment to strike? Of course it isn’t. This kind of plan took decades to accomplish. Without Tohtella’s assistance, I’d never have succeeded.”

Thisbey’s eyes widened, “And some other more...sinister forces. I paid the price for that. It will be worth it in the end.”

I scoffed, “I can tell. You’ve tampered with Old Ones, and they’ve begun invading your weak little mind.”

Thisbey snapped his fingers, his eyes narrowing at me. The Hybrid’s dug into my armor, sticking needles into my skin. I pretended that it hurt, screaming aloud. Behind Thisbey, Althea grinned at my acting. It wasn’t perfect, but it got the job done.

Thisbey took a deep breath, “That’s nothing compared to what awaits you. Now watch her die.”

It was time to act. I glanced up, “That trump card’s gone then, isn’t it?”

“And what of it? You’re food for these puppets.”

I grinned, Event Horizon stretching over the Hybrids. They writhed around me, scrambling to escape. Entangled in my darkened skin, I dug into their bodies, devouring the four of them from the inside. As the Hybrids deformed into shapeless blobs around me. I pried my arm from the Hybrids.

Thisbey took a few steps back from me, fear spreading over his face. My fingertips elongated and wrapped around his frame. They pulled him to my palm. I lifted him to my facemask as it cracked open, revealing the jagged jaws of my armor.

With a vicious smile spread over my helm, I growled, “You’ve created dark things here. You will find I am a dark thing as well.”

Thisbey looked around, praying for help. There was none. I continued, the jaws of my armor widening,

“But I am more than a mindless monster.”

Thisbey screamed. My calm voice flooded over his,

“I am the eater of monsters.”

Chapter 214: What Is to Come

I clamped my jaws downward, but before the jagged teeth of my armor separated flesh and bone, a wave hit my mind. A sharp, harsh slice split my mind, tearing into my thoughts. The fiery burn exploded in my head like dipping a wound in salt. It stunned me, loosening my grip on Thisbey.

The slimeball crawled out of my grasp before scrambling away. I blinked attempting to mold Event Horizon over Thisbey. Several forces berated my mind all at once, a fire erupting throughout every cell of my body. They wrestled for control of my entire being, my ability to function crumbling.

Unable to fight off the Hybrids and the mental attacks, I retreated into a corner of my mind, regrouping and restructuring my sense of self. As I looked forward, Thisbey heaved for breath. He wiped the cold sweat from his forehead,

“Did you honestly believe that I’d fight you with just a few brutes?”

I growled, but words didn’t leave my mouth. The cessation of control was mounting as if I fought an army of wills all my own. I fought back, blasting raw, unshaped mana back at the assailants. The tethers connecting our minds wobbled but held firm.

From around me, my armor stopped growing into the Hybrids as they drilled into my bones. Event Horizon’s reach rippled, their influence interfering with my ability to function. The Hybrid’s overwhelmed me, devouring my body.

Thisbey scoffed, “You might find me lacking in any kind of combat, but you won’t find my allies lacking.”

Matrices of metal crawled over my vision, their wires stretching over my eyes. Blood seeped into my mouth and out of my eyes, blurring my already blocked sight. I took a deep breath, my lungs filling with the stench of silver's blood and iron. I made one last push of raw mana against the assailing minds.

Skill unlocked! Mental Defense(lvl 10) – Others defend their home and their body. You defend that which matters most: your spirit. +10% to mental defenses.

Several of the mental tethers snapped. Even if I knew nothing about mental magic, my mana was a potent tool all its own. Just as it made Althea jittery and ready to kill, it would do the same to my attackers.

To my knowledge, that wasn't the best mentality for mind magic. Just a guess.

As my grip over my mind expanded, I acted. Tearing through wires, I grabbed two Hybrid's heads and smashed them together. Event Horizon stabilized over the group once more, sending the Hybrids back into a state of panic. My mountain of willpower kicked into high gear, giving me the ground I needed.

As more mental tethers ruptured, I stopped breaking them. I reached across the links, slamming my mind into theirs by launching an enormous blot of mana at them. Unyielding and prepared, a group of souls met my assault like a brick wall. Unable to advance, I swung my arms, smashing my fists into the nearby Hybrids around me. My armor pierced into the wiry masses as well, feeding me the health I needed.

The mass of minds sent out another blitz against my thoughts. I met their charge, and they crashed through me. My retaliation slowed their onslaught, allowing me to hold onto my core functions. Before they attempted another devastating attack, I sent out another mental barrage. The random, disjointed attack did little against them. It was like a child swinging his arms in a frantic rush to defend himself.

It was enough.

Skill Unlocked! Mental Bombardment(lvl 10) – Many would crawl into another's mind. You collide without restraint, overwhelming with raw will. +10% to effect of basic mental attacks.

The Impenetrable wall they composed trembled, but my attack did not even leave a crack on its surface. It lessened their attack, however. Without being able to go all out in their mental assaults, the pressure decreased on me, restoring even more control. After one more blast, they disconnected entirely, leaving no more mental tethers.

Without the restraints on me, I jerked myself away from the Hybrids towards Thisbey. The espen turned and ran, cursing under his breath, "These damn remnants are useless. To think a dozen of them can't overwhelm one big ape."

After dislodging myself from the Hybrids, another cord of metal wrapped around my leg. I tripped, falling forward. As the orichalcum dented beneath me, Thisbey ran towards Althea's containment field. As I glanced up at him, a bolt of bone drilled straight through his head and out the back of his body.

Arcane bolts of violet lightning rippled across the nearby machinery, disintegrating it at an atomic level. A gaping hole the size of a softball clapped against the green tinted floor, blood splashing onto the ground. From above, Althea aimed her reformed arm at the Hybrids, ripping out a series of five shots.

They landed flush through their chests, the arcane spikes searing through their flesh. I expanded my armor and condensed Event Horizon over them, the Hybrids struggling against me. The piercing headache ceased as mental tethers snapped in an instant. As they did, Althea howled out in agony.

Without the mental tethers connecting me and the mind mages, I turned towards the Hybrids, raising my fists. I couldn't help Althea with physical fighting, but getting rid of these Hybrids might make her job more manageable. As I turned to them, they flailed their wiry arms like windmills. I weaved between the rain of strikes, bolting blows through them with precision and deadly intention.

Without my magic, my blows lacked their usual devastation, crippling them momentarily. Althea's screams fed my growing sense of desperation, my attacks throwing caution to the wind. I tore through the masses of wires and orange sacks. I chomped into their flesh, feasting on their bodies. They drenched me in their orange blood, their life force sustaining me.

Minutes passed as I killed two of the Hybrids. Three more crashed through the doorway sealing us inside Althea's containment unit. I roared, "I don't have time for this."

I turned back to Althea and Thisbey's body, but my eyes widened in surprise. Thisbey's body was gone. I facepalmed before a Hybrid slammed his fist into my side. I smashed my fist into the edge of its jaw before rearing my head back and slamming it into the creature's skull. It gushed out, the orange sack within splattering like an egg under an anvil.

Thisbey had used his revive from the luck perk. It was just like the fight with the Breakers against Yawm. Yawm had to kill everyone twice to win. He was still alive.

I didn't have time to dwell on my mishap, however. I grabbed the shoulders of the headless Hybrid and bit into the thing's chest. Tearing through wires and orange pumps, the creature gurgled in agony as its brethren reached me.

Taking a page from Yawm, I picked up the headless Hybrid by its leg and swung it at the reinforcements. A titan among men, I stood several feet over them as I quashed them with a corpse. With the Hybrids unable to withstand my full might, I crippled two more of them and killed another.

As I stepped onto the rough approximation of a skull, the mental attacks returned in force. Ready and waiting, I met their assault with a mental wall of my own. I kited backward, keeping the approaching Hybrid at bay while focusing on psychological warfare. While I couldn't create a tether of my own, I could use their own tethers against them.

With their minds split between Althea and me, I bashed the raw might of my mind against them. While inexperienced, my sheer willpower and mana reserves made the crushing blows against their mental defenses effective. Without being able to suppress Althea in her entirety, she ceased her screams and stood.

With bloodshot eyes, she heaved for breath before groaning out,

"I...I'll kill...Thisbey."

I shouted, "Go. Kill him."

She leaped from her containment unit, shattering the glass confines. Speeding like a bullet, she dashed towards the Hybrids blocking the doorway out. As she did, I charged forward into the room full of prison cells. At the same time, I launched another mental

assault. Their attention divided, the incoming Hybrids scrambled without any true concentration. Likewise, our mental assailants didn't manage to block me and cripple Althea at the same time.

Althea disappeared into the facility, the screaming of scientists echoing into the prison cells. The Hybrids turned to them, attempting to defend their creators. Before they could do so, I reached the center of the mob, using Event Horizon over the crowd.

They turned to me and attacked. Surrounded on all sides by a mass of deformed monsters, I lashed out with abandon. They tore and gashed through my body, their attacks many. My endless vitality sustained me, their health-enhancing my regeneration further. An army of one, I ripped and tore through the Hybrids around me.

In the other room, the splashing of blood and the crunching of bone resounded into my ears like a symphony of carnage. The fervor of battle consumed me, all becoming a shifting blur of destruction and death. A reaper of machinery, I pulped the Hybrids into a mound of orange wires beneath me.

Their abundance fed my health, giving me enormous regeneration. No matter the number, the Hybrids could not outdo my restoration. I culled them from this plane. I left them a mess of blood and bodies. As the mound piled beneath me, my armor crawled out like a growing shadow, darkening the room.

Althea did worse, enacting slaughter in the next room. Ignoring any Hybrids, she dashed throughout the facility. Fast as a bullet, she ran through the bodies of researchers. Her arcane magic left the scent of singing flesh enter my room. Leaving clean, angular sliced chunks of people behind her, she was a surgeon of death.

Within half an hour, the entire facility quieted. I absorbed the mass of dead Hybrids while Althea searched out every living thing in this base. Not even the Harvesters were left alive as I returned to Althea's containment unit. I pulled the blue dungeon core from above Althea's containment, soaking in energy. Waves of white energy consolidated into my frame as I reconnected this place with Schema's system.

After destroying the rift, I sent a message to the Overseer about the new facility and the attack on Rivaria. Before searching deeper into the facility, I hunted for the mind mages. They must have been outside of the facility, allowing them to perform the mind magic. If they were still here, killing them would be a massive boon for our efforts.

I tore through the orichalcum floor, sheering it away with raw strength. I burrowed through the ground around the headquarters, using a periodic burst of mana to speed myself along. After leaving the mana restricting zone, my channeling returned to full force. I could even generate gravity wells within the facility from the outside.

That's how they intended on killing us. Using the remnants with mind magic, they intended on pinning us down before mauling us to death with Hybrids. Even if I was strong, I wasn't supposed to be able to brawl it out with those abominations.

They didn't predict my willpower being so high, and they also didn't know the extent of my armor's virulence. As for being able to connect using the mind magic, I didn't understand how that worked exactly. If I had to guess, the anti-magic area prevented me from forming and manipulating my mana.

If that was the case, the tethers acted as pipelines that guided my mana in place of me. Even if I couldn't make my mana shape properly, I could still make it blast down those pipelines. The tethers did the rest, making them take the raw brunt of my mind and mana. I'd need some reference and research in the topic if I wanted a better understanding than that.

In fact, mind magic might be potent for me considering how high my willpower stat was. I tucked those thoughts into the back of my mind as I drilled through the rock around the base. Using the vibrations off my armor, I gained an idea of my surroundings based on the reverberating sounds. I discovered a room above Althea's holding chamber.

After bursting through the metal confines, I found a small area covered in runic work. The enchantments enhanced mental magics and deterred detection. Empty mana potion bottles littered the floor along with a few singe marks. Considering there was no entrance outside of the one I just made, someone warped them in and out of this place.

Whoever warped them might have teleported Thisbey from the area as well, though that wasn't guaranteed. Considering how unstable he was, he might be outliving his usefulness for this shadow group at this point. I didn't have enough information to tell though, so I didn't cross his death out just yet.

With that lead gone, I smashed my way back into the facility, finding the Overseer standing beside terminals. Running beside him, a group of guildsmen Speakers and technical workers ran about. They grafted cables and used various devices to infer the

state of the place. At the same time, two giants nearly the size of the Overseer walked about, clearing the facilities anti-magic runes.

Watching the activity, the Overseer held his head up with a heavy hand. I walked up, Althea standing beside him and covered in blood. She dragged three scientists behind her, wrapped up in torn orichalcum from the walls. I grinned,

“Looks like you got them all.”

Althea frowned, “I missed Thisbey. He escaped through the elevator while two Hybrids stalled me.”

I raised an eyebrow and crossed my arms, “I doubt he has the means to survive on the surface without guards.”

Althea glanced down and to her side, “I don’t know about that.”

The Overseer sighed, “So the scale of this operation expands further...to think this level of mutiny continues under our noses” The Overseer banged his fingers against his helmet, the pang louder than a sledgehammer on an anvil,

“We. Will. Kill. Them.”

The Overseer looked up before glancing up at me, “It seems as though you’ve been busy as of late.”

“I have been. So has she,” I said while pointing to Althea.

Soaked in blood, Althea gave me a thumbs up. That was my little devil.

“I can see that,” the Overseer said. “Now there is the matter of killing Thisbey and Tohtella whom you both failed to destroy.”

I rolled my eyes, “Sorry I couldn’t do your job better. My bad.”

A few Speakers stared at me, stunned I spoke to the Overseer like that. The Overseer crossed his arms, “Manage multiple armies worth of classers and speak with me of my inadequacies.”

I turned towards Rivaria, “I’m working on it. In fact, I have to go keep the army I’m making. Something big is coming to Rivaria.”

The Overseer opened his red status, “There is an enormous energy signature over Rivaria...”

The Overseer took a step back, “It...it appears larger than a spatial fortress.”

I narrowed my eyes, “Wait...spatial fortress?”

The Overseer shook his head, “A piece of Schema’s galactic forces. It’s one of the stronger warships at his disposal, and it’s used to combat threats that are solar system-wide in nature. The issue is that this thing dwarfs one.”

I turned to Althea, “We have to go.”

She gave me a nod before a message appeared in my inbox. It was the quick, short kind of message you send out in the heat of battle. As I finished reading the words on my screen, my blood ran cold.

Helios, Ruler of Worlds(lvl 15,000 | Guild: The Empire | Ownership: Belka-623(planet), Meliton(planet) | Class: Fringe Walker | Titles: Winter’s Wrath, Cold of the Void) – Cannot contain the threat. Need help.

Chapter 215: Out of Fire and Into Hell

The mana driven elevator rose as my two hybrids stopped that butcher in female form. She shifted into disgusting shapes as she killed, some twisted polymorphic reaper. She was nothing but a disgusting monster.

I leaned back against the cold rock behind me, gasping for breath with my hand over my chest. I failed. My plan had been foolproof. Perhaps I gloated more than I should’ve, but every piece was there. Those heathen abominations weren’t normal in any sense of the word, however. I’m not even talking about Hybrids either.

The Gray Giant chomped into the damn Hybrids...It's not that I won't comprehend it. It's that I can't. Hell, most warriors can't even get near an eldritch without getting some parasitic infection. Hybrids are far worse, and that armor wearing idiot devoured one? It makes about as much sense as Emagrotha's whole philosophy.

That is to say, none.

I slapped my forehead a few times, my hair flattening from my sweat. A group of mind mages had failed to overwhelm that degenerate cannibal as well. They rendered his female friend unable to move an inch during the entire journey, yet he was only stunned for a few seconds. That let him break her capsule somehow. I lost my life for that.

Fortunately, I'd yet used Schema's revival. As my mind went blank, I stared at the blood caked on my hands. It was my blood, and that was why my palms shook with fear. That cannibal nearly ate me alive with jaws dark as the sea at night.

If he showed that side of himself to the public, perhaps he might not be quite as popular. He made my entire media campaign difficult. Up till now, I struggled just to keep him from turning against me. To think he had the foresight to record a video of that interview. I kept information channels limited, but there's only so much that can be done. The truth speaks for itself after all.

After learning he recorded it, I told Tohtella to corrupt the file on his obelisk. She told me that it would compromise our information channel. Thinking about it gave me a bad taste in my mouth, so I spit. It was red as wine, so maybe the bad taste wasn't from thinking about her after all.

I cursed that woman with my every breath. She came to me promising a plan for the ages. I was to become the central power on Giess and eliminate those filthy gialgathens at the same time. Now my throat thickens as my own blood jellies in my throat. It was a waste of pure blood. There were few pure espens left these days.

I dragged my hand down my face, refocusing on the issue. I, Thisbey Thorn, had been taken for a fool. Never again. Once I re-established my base of power here, I'd hunt her down like the dirty pig she was. In fact, I'd do away with her entire pig race.

Sometimes, filth needed to be cleansed. Turns out, I'm the only one willing to do the cleansing.

Heh, maybe not the only one. The Gray Giant was giving me a run for my money with how he tore through those Hybrids. For a moment, I thought he was a demon come to life. In fact, his being a demon is about the only thing that makes sense about this entire situation.

I licked my lips before shaking my head in disgust. Tohtella's mind mages were as useful as starting a fire by rubbing ice cubes together. Relying on them in any capacity had been my downfall. Now our base of operations was destroyed, and our unity was decimated.

With my eye for talent, I could salvage the situation, however. This wasn't the end by any means. I still had control of the Hybrids, and even if only a few of them were left, they'd be plenty for my purposes. I'd been lower before, and I'd rise up now as I did then.

As the damn elevator finally reached the top of our cavern base, I whistled out. From the dark two Hybrids skulked up, their bodies disgusting and grotesque. I suppressed the urge to vomit at the sight of them before pulling a hover pad from my dimensional storage.

The cube of silver expanded, becoming a comfortable size and easy to balance on. Why any idiot would ever waste time on learning to fly was beyond me. After all, I had lofty ideals unlike most. Purity was my absolute goal, yet few understood my ambition.

I put myself back into this moment. As the hoverpad fired up, I stepped onto the stabilizing platform, gravitational restraints making the device easy to use. Otherwise, it would take the agility of the damn theonostra, and those deep dwellers were about as trustworthy as an Old One.

After flying up a few feet, I thought over to the Hybrids to make them obey my will. Even so much as touching their minds made my skin crawl, but to clean up a mess, sometimes you needed to get your hands dirty.

Without any real face to speak of, they kept their mishappen heads staring at me. I pointed at them and snapped my fingers,

“If you two could grow a brain perchance and listen for a second, I’d be mighty grateful.”

They kept staring at me, silent as the night. I narrowed my eyes, glaring between the both of them, “So the both of you are staging a mutiny as well now? Who’d of thought you imbeciles could muster up an ounce of defiance. I must say, I’m impressed.”

In my mind, the image of Tohtella appeared. Her repugnant violet skin and nasty white hair made me want to vomit once more. I’d had plenty of practice containing my nausea each time I stared at her alien face, however.

I glared and thought to her,

‘What’s the meaning of this?’

‘Precisely what it looks like. You’ve outlived your usefulness as you might have already suspected. These two will take care of you.’

My face reddened as I hissed in outrage, “Who are you to double cross me? I sacrificed everything for you. My reputation, my businesses, even my rebellion. My chance is gone because of you.”

Calm and collected, she gave me her amused smile, ‘I care about results, Thisbey. You know this. Unfortunately, you’ve given me quite the opposite.’

I roared aloud, “Your mind mages were overwhelmed by a warrior. A dumb, idiotic barbarian. He has no technical knowledge. He’s a goddamn caveman, a backwater savage, a...a chunk of iron without a brain. For espen’s sake, you couldn’t even use those advantages to come out on top.”

Tohtella’s smiled turned into a frown, ‘My bug only allows me to view his messages, not his status or other information. He even created a telekinetic network, further muddying my informational timeline. As a team, we planned based on his abilities given the nature of the tournament. We could not have predicted his resilience to mental magic.’

Tohtella sighed, 'His mind is as strong as his body it would seem. I will act accordingly to kill him shortly. You will not.'

The Hybrids lunged to me, but my hover pad propelled me into the air. I spit at them, "You filthy, disgusting animals couldn't catch an ice snail let alone little ole me. Know this. I ain't dying here. I can guarantee that. There's too much dirt I need to wash away before I pass. Purity will prevail."

Tohtella's amused grin returned, 'I will enjoy seeing you die. The delusional musings of your cleanliness and our filthiness will not be something I miss. Goodbye.'

Her connection snapped, and my head rang like a bell being hit by a cannonball. Blood dripped from my nose as images of horror spread over me, putting me to my knees. I bit through my lip, the twang of my blood keeping me awake. It was the pain really, as the blood from my nose was more than enough to make me gag.

The synaptic infusion had been a mistake. I knew it the moment I agreed to the procedure, yet now it was far too late. Control of the Hybrids was too much to pass up on, but they've robbed me of even that. Advanced usage of mental magics or not, the cost was being at those pig's mercy.

Once I established myself once more, I needed a surgeon to flush out my spine before they turned me into a full-blown simpleton. My IQ already lowered just speaking with them, let alone sharing a neural network.

With my body and mind crippled, I used my willpower to push myself up. I was the Thisbey Thorn. A little discomfort was no impingement to me. I'd been through pain, and I learned that hard times had not come to stay.

They came to pass. For me that is.

I'd rise up after escaping this miscarriage of an operation. I floated above the surface, surrounded by the only thing worse than the gialgathens – the silvers. I willed my way above the spire forests, keeping far away from the most nauseating beings in existence.

Beneath me, the worst garbage squirmed in all their filth. They'd be cleansed after we expunged the gialgathens and those filthy remnants. It would take time, but it would happen. I would make sure of it.

To do so, I needed the big bad himself if I wanted all that to happen. I flew over to Rivaria, intending on persuading that mindless puppet over to my side. With his brawn and infinite mana, I could make miracles happen.

Within a few feet of the cavern's entrance, another headache exploded through my brain. Each pulse of my head beat against my eyes as if pushing them out my head. My hoverboard clipped the sharpened top of a spire and ripped the machine's guts out. As it crashed, I fell down with my stomach rising in my chest.

The metal ground grew closer before I clunked against the edge of a spire. My vision flipped as I vomited up my guts. I crashed into the metal ground, my sight spiraling. A spike of agony stamped up my leg as warmth spilled over my left foot. All went black.

As I woke up, I glanced down at my leg. A horde of saysha beetles crawled across the wound, sipping at the red blood. I screamed with enough force that spit flung from my mouth,

“Get off me you filthy, disgusting mongrels.”

They didn't shift an inch. I moved my arms, and the beetles scattered away from me. Good riddance. I glanced around, hearing the haunting echoes of silvers from the metal forest. Across shining spires, my reflection sheened back at me. I met one ugly mug staring back at me.

Scabbed blood, marred hands, and a split lip formed a rather handsome face given the circumstances. I glanced down, waves of pain riding throughout my entire body.

I tried moving, but my lower body didn't respond. I crawled with my elbows a few feet before my twig arms turned to jelly. I hit my hand onto the metal ground, and something in my wrist popped. As a sharp pang rose up the limb, my throat clenched up. My eyes burned. Tears fell down my cheeks as I shouted out in frustration.

In the distance, something stirred. I turned my head, expecting a merject to come end my misery. I wasn't so lucky. Some kind of squirming, fleshy mass slithered towards me, about the size of a fat child that overate candy. It writhed in a translucent sack, its organs shifting within it.

My stomach sank at the sight of it, my breath catching in my throat. I crawled away from it, my arms gaining back some strength. It was incredible how much desperation acts as a motivator. My dread mounted as I dragged my legs behind me. The thing approached closer, saysha beetles scurrying away from me. I reached a spire as above me, something lunged down, landing in front of me.

At eye level, a merject slammed into the metal, its breath disgusting. It lapped its tongue over its eyeless face, tasting the air near it. I shook my arms and growled out,

“Come and get me then.”

I spit at it, but the monster lapped up the bloody gunk off its face. The merject tilted its head before leaning its head back. Before the beast plunged its iron tongue into my skull, a drizzle of red, singing slime landed onto the creature. The merject howled out in anguish, the acid melting its skin and pulling it up into a red mass of jellies above me.

I let out a gasp of relief as I was saved once more. It was my destiny to keep on living after all. I pulled myself up to the spire and leaned my back against it. Exhaustion took over as I stared up at the sky. Some kind of giant, fleshy monster floated along. As it moved, it tore its belly open, and its blood devoured merjects beneath it.

What a filthy world I lived in.

My eyes widened as something walked onto my legs. I glanced down, finding the writhing, fleshy mass having reached me and crawled onto my body. I reared back my fist and slammed them down onto the organ sack. It was like slamming my hand into clay, leaving tiny indents but no real damage. A growing sense of horror rose in my chest as I panicked. I tried pulling away, but the fat thing was too heavy for me.

The end of the creature opened up, revealing a ring of teeth. I screamed for mercy as it dug its mouth into my stomach. The beast stabbed into me, and pain erupted like a fiery eruption going into my belly. I lifted my head, trying to slam it into the pillar behind me. I was dead, but I didn't want to die like this. I planned to knock myself unconscious.

My head crushed a saysha beetle behind me, keeping me alive. Before I reared my head back again, the fleshy sack wriggled and twitched about. A slimy mucus sprayed over me. I mashed my head against the pillar, but the gel kept the impact low. I stayed conscious.

As the reality of my situation dawned upon me, I hyperventilated, breathing in the mucus to strangle myself. I didn't lose my breath. I was still alive, the mucus somehow breathable.

Trapped under its bile, the beast squeezed its body with rings of muscle. My belly swelled as it shoved its organs into my chest. The pressure mounted yet I did not die.

Someone, please kill me.

Chapter 216: The Heavens Weep

I turned towards the Overseer, "We're going to need your help."

The Overseer nodded while lifting his hand overhead. He pinched his fingers together, a pulse of energy passing through the dirt. Light leaked onto us from above while I glanced up. He punched a hole through the rock in an instant. It was strange since the antimagic field had zero effect on him.

Hmm, he might be using tech instead of magic. For some reason, I never even considered that. In fact, using tech and magic would diversify an Overseer's arsenal, making antimagic zones like this less potent.

I didn't have time ponder though. I followed his lead, jumping over the hole in the orichalcum. Once out of the mana obstructing area, I lifted everyone with a gravitational vortex. It jerked us all up along with anyone else who came into the circle. The Overseer shouted beneath us, his metal voice absolute,

"Breakers, follow me. Send Sentinels to Rivaria."

We didn't wait for a reply as we flew up to the surface. Glancing down, I found some poor sap being eaten by one of the organ caterpillars. Bloated and deformed, it was difficult to even make out the face of the guy. I'd put him out of his misery if I had time. From what I could tell, those organ sacks could keep their victims alive for days.

I didn't have time to help the poor guy out, however.

The Overseer channeled some mana before pressing his fingertips together. As he pulled them apart, a warp in space-time appeared, Rivaria and the mountain popped up in the portal.

A crisp wind brushed against my face from the opening. As I glanced into it, a frozen tundra replaced the once vibrant forests. It was ground zero; nothing was left alive within dozens of miles near the battle site. Well, no normal life at least.

The sheer scale of the battle made the inklings of fear crawl up my spine. Further cementing that suspicion, a cataclysmic explosion radiated out from the mountainside. Dozens of miles from the epicenter, the rippling echo roared out from Rivaria's mountaintop. Within the clouds, a snowstorm brewed. Pillars of azure ice created new geography around the entire expanse.

Flashes of blue light brightened these clouds as if suns were forming within. Each illumination exposed the shadow of giant wings looming over the shattered city. They were beyond enormous, dwarfing any living creature I'd ever seen.

The Overseer seethed out, "Helios isn't to be underestimated. This is a threat to my entire sector."

The Overseer turned to us, finding several Breakers and two Speakers waiting for his call. They wore variants of power armor, their faces hidden behind blue-tinted face masks. Some channeled mana while others used energy weapons. A few of them jumped on their feet and stretched. This must have been their first battle in a long while. I couldn't tell if that was a good or bad thing.

Understanding they needed time to get ready, the Overseer turned to all of us, "Prepare yourselves. I'll be dropping us down several miles from the point of contact. Be ready for heavy resistance near the peak of the mountain where the ice collects. We will leave in five minutes."

He turned to me, "Say what you must say before leaving. Several of us might die here."

I gave him a quick nod before jogging up to Althea. As I reached her, she jumped into my arms, and I spun her around in circles. She laughed a bit before I gave her a light squeeze. As I set her down, I smiled too and for her,

“Hey, it’s amazing to see you again.”

She let out a sigh of relief, “Same here, though you’re a bit taller again. Hmm, maybe I’m just shorter?”

A lull happened for a few seconds, the atmosphere growing awkward. I snapped my fingers, “That reminds me…”

I checked my status for a brief moment, investing all my points into endurance. I wasn’t about to invest into constitution until my next armor evolution. Considering my armor evolutions tended to be big power spikes, getting it sooner was better for my immediate power. Besides, I had less than a day before it finished.

It wouldn’t happen in time or during this fight though, but every second counted. Once that was handled, I turned to Althea, “Sorry about that. Had to clean up my status.”

She frowned, glancing above my head, “Dammit. You outlevel me again. Scientists don’t give the same kind of points as evil toasters do they?”

I gasped in disbelief, “Wait…toasters?”

She waved a hand, “Pff, that’s pretty much what you fought.”

I spread out my arms, “Wait a minute. Hybrids are not evil toasters. They’re horrific monsters.”

Althea glanced at her nails, “Eh, seem like toasters to me.”

I rolled my eyes before Althea giggled. I deadpanned, “Looks like you still have your sense of humor.”

She locked her hands behind her back while meeting my eye,

“Yup.”

I pulled one of the last shreds of my Gray Giant disguise off my leg, my last extra set left in tatters. I turned to her,

“On a different note, why did you let yourself get captured? Seemed risky.”

She took a deep breath, “Uh, there’s more than to that then you’d think. When the award ceremony started, I launched myself right at Thisbey. Dozens of guards reacted, but I, yunno, sliced them up. Anyways, after all that, those mind guys used some mental wave attack on me.”

She shivered, “It crippled me, and that’s when they captured me using some flash of magic. They put me in that containment capsule before taking me to the prison outside Yildraza. I didn’t fight my way out because the mages quit attacking me. Once I was in there.”

I nodded, “Ah, so you tricked the mind mages into releasing you. Smart.”

She banged her helmet, “That and I could move because your armor is resistant to the time mumbo jumbo. You really thought ahead with that one.”

I grinned, “I try.”

“Here’s the thing though. I still didn’t know how I was going to escape.”

Althea kicked a saysha beetle away from her, “While I was trapped, it gave me time to think. They took me to the center of that facility before Thisbey told me how they were using me as bait. I thought to myself, ‘Wait a minute. They’re bringing Daniel right here? They don’t know that I’m not stuck here. This is a golden opportunity.’”

Althea smashed a beetle under her heel, “So then you came, and we kicked their asses. To be honest, I didn’t think you’d stay calm enough for the plan to work. I thought you’d just kill Thisbey immediately and ruin my scheme.”

I raised an eyebrow, “What did you intend to do then?”

I figured I’d wait a few more hours before running out of that place if you didn’t show up. I had an escape route planned out and everything. Everything ended up working out better than I thought it would.”

“Come on. Cut me some slack. I know I’m not subtle but-“

Althea rolled her eyes, “Daniel, look at your track record. They say history repeats itself. At this point, I can say you punching and asking questions later is a part of history.”

I flicked a beetle off my shoulder, “Way to inspire some confidence.”

She grinned, “I try.”

The Overseer glared down at us, “Are you two ready then or does chatting take precedence?”

I waved off his concern, “Will getting tense help us fight better? I doubt it. Besides, I don’t want all my adrenaline drained before the battle.”

Althea pursed her lips at me, “Do you still have adrenaline?”

I cupped my chin, “Huh...good question.”

Moved his head in an arc, and I was sure he was rolling his eyes under his helmet. He paced beside the portal, standing above the crowd. He pointed at it,

“This is a threat to Schema’s authority, a being controlled by heretics. They will be burned as all things that defy Schema will be. Today, we will act as the instruments that enact his destructive will.”

The Overseer raised a fist, “Our footsteps will quake the ground we walk upon. Our flight will shift the skies we cross through. As pathfinders, we will traverse the unknown, yet our wake will be one of ruin. Are you all ready?”

His speech was pretty solid, so I stiffened up along with everyone else. In my mind, I quashed any doubts, hesitations, and worries. This would be the make it or break it moment for Giess. A planet rested on the result of this battle, and I had a say-so in its outcome.

The others mirrored my somber approach. The Overseer kept his hands loose, his breaths deep and calm. Althea did the opposite, shaking her head and jumping to get herself amped up. From her dimensional storage, she pulled several canisters of chemicals out. She put them along her back, whipping out some body reformation to do so.

Once finished, she clamped her teeth and clenched her hands. I charged a singularity in my blood, the process far less time consuming than it had once been. My the runes over my skin glowed bright, amplifying my strength further. The runic work across my back and arms glowed a dull red before my armor smiled.

It was time.

The stepped through the portal, snow crunching under his feet. We followed along with the Speakers and Breakers. With Rivaria out in the distance, I created a gravitational vortex to lift us up. We floated above the ice-ridden surface, and I carried us to the mountain.

Once near the peak, the giant beast was hidden amongst the clouds. A gurgling growl pierced my ears like stepping on a rusty nail. The wind howled like an angry banshee. We all stayed silent, our eyes peeled for the enemy to appear.

In a swooping motion, a pair of wings flapped, a wave of wind blowing the clouds away from the city. Helios stood on a column of purple ice, blood dripping down one of his arms. It hung loose in its socket, dislocated and limp. A piece of his mask was missing, exposing an eye. The vertical slit was like that of a lion, yet it was pale blue and cloudy.

Helios was blind.

Around him, a blue aura radiated. The air pressure shifted, creating a constant mist falling from his feet. His gauntlets glowed the color of a blue star, the runes crackling the air around him for mana. In a way, it was ironic to see someone with the name of a sun god embody ice so well.

Helios still stood tall with pride despite his injuries. At his sides, two Sentinels stood beside him, their blue armor crackling like thunder. The violet blades carried arcane energies, the hum violent and hungry. Along their face, three lines shined a deep blue, their dense, sky blue armor gleaming.

They carried scars from the conflict. Deep crevices embedded their blue plate mail. Several open patches of skin showed themselves under their armor. I expected to see circuitry, but the Sentinels had a familiar, violet skin. From several cuts, they bled red blood like us mortals.

Flying near them, Chrona Carsiary kept a temporal dilation field around herself. She darted around, taking the frozen bodies of several Gialgathens away from the battle. Krog was alive as well, mustering several gialgathens to regrouping for some sort of counter-attack further behind the rest.

These forces didn't demand my attention like the figure above all others. At the peak of Rivaria, a living sun spread its wings and cast shadows to the horizons and further beyond. Its mythical skin gleamed with the radiance of stars. Crystalized mana covered much of its frame, giving it a golden glow. Its eyes were colored the same as ancient amber, several lifetimes of memories hidden within them. It was the closest thing to a god I'd seen.

Around the beast, a holy aura cascaded, bathing its surroundings in light. At the same time, sinister edges exposed what ingrained itself beneath the surface. Pulsing, orange lines streaked beneath its skin like magma pumped in its veins. Around its joints, wires and cords shifted. Hybrid technology ingrained throughout its body.

The beast heaved for breath, unable to live a second in comfort. Despite this, the creature exuded a limitless vitality, mana flooding its frame at all moments. Even my mana generation could not rival the sheer magnitude of this being. Neither could Yawm, nor Helios. We paled in comparison.

Beneath one of its mighty feet, the smattered corpse of Sheom was splayed out. Sheom's entrails covered its foot as it lifted the limb and slung the gunk from its body.

It glared down at all of us right after, disdain, boredom, and pity spread across its face. The beast breathed out towards the clouds, a shining fire nuclear in nature. Explosive pulses spread across the heavens in a display of overwhelming power. Waves of radiation spilled out. The air heated and rose above, the world cast in a blur from the heat around us.

As the ice storm receded, the beast glared down,

"Others have come. Others will fall. I am the end of all resistance and the beginning of the new epoch."

With a telepathic wave across the entire region, it proclaimed,

"I am Lehesion."

Chapter 217: A Shattered God

As I stared, I analyzed him. He did not stop me from viewing his description. After seeing it, I understood why. He had no reason to hide anything to us.

Lehesion, the Shattered God(lvl 32,092 | Species: Gialgathen | Status: Exiled | Bounty: S) – Lehesion is the mythical creature that is said to control all the life of Giess. He was worshipped as the most potent gialgathen to ever exist, his reign absolute. Once viewed in person, these reports and legends are obviously verified. He far exceeds expectations in most regards.

His mana is endless. His size grants him tremendous vitality, needing no food, sleep, nor air to breath. He is immune to many kinds of damage, and his skin is laced with a crystalized mana that disperses most types of damage. Even more so, his mana shield is one of the strongest ever generated, rivaling spatial fortresses in power.

These characteristics are incredible in their own right, but his offensive potential is unknown. Few have seen his attacks in person, and even fewer have lived after to tell the tale. All that is spoken of is hymned in legends that tell tall tales of his deeds.

The sky darkening before blinding lights bathe the battlefield in destruction, enemies metamorphosing into hideous creatures, even enemy's minds turning to slush, Lehesion has done all this and more. The full extent of his abilities are hard to grasp but know this. You are not ready for such a foe. A team of Overseers aligned with a high-grade guild would be required to compete against this monstrosity.

My stomach sank as Helios raised a hand, his gauntlets coalescing the blue tinted air near him. In a wave of devastation, he unleashed a wave of pure energy. The tide shifted into azure ice, spines of the magic racing towards Lehesion. The golden beast rolled his eyes,

"This again? Do you have no other tricks, or are you actually this limited?"

The ice crashed into a golden sphere of energy around Lehesion. The beast raised a wing, flaming swords forming under the shadow it cast. The swords shot out in every direction as Helios roared out while casting more magic.

From all around, portals to the void appeared. They swallowed the swords that would've landed on allies. Helios closed his hand, the warps condensing into finite points. Helios threw his fist at Lehesion, unleashing blue lightning from the portals into Lehesion's shield.

It absorbed the clash with ease, an explosive boom radiating outwards. Helios howled in frustration, "I killed all that is near us. What well do you still draw this mana from?"

Lehesion scoffed, "There is no 'well' that I draw from, insect. I am without borders nor restrictions. Mortals like you must know your limits, or your limits will let themselves be known by your failures."

The Overseer raised a palm, the lights on his suit glowing. An invisible wave of force clashed against Lehesion's forcefield, the golden aura sinking in before smoothing itself out with a ripple. Lehesion turned to us as the Overseer stated,

"The creature can resist antimatter waves...I don't understand."

Lehesion let out a laugh, "You are no unstoppable force, but I am an immovable object. Crush under my heel."

He lifted a paw and slammed it down. A wave of gravity smashed above us as if we were holding up another planet. Before it overwhelmed everyone, I lifted my hands, creating a gravity well opposite to Lehesion's pull. I held firm, keeping the force from destroying us. Lehesion's eyes widened as he laughed.

"So the little ones defy me? We shall see if your defiance holds under strain."

He strengthened the crushing aura, but I resisted it without a struggle. As the resistance mounted, I dipped into my mana regen. More and more, Lehesion tested my limits. On and on, I exceeded his expectations and prevented us from falling.

At the same time, I lifted out a hand and attempted condensing a singularity inside his chest. The magic failed, so I summoned the same force within the golden aura. The gravitational implosion tore apart a portion of Lehesion's crystalized mana armor. As chips of pure mana rained down, Lehesion's expression shifted into a snarl,

"You've angered me, worm."

His armor regenerated as he ceased his gravitational magic. The Overseer lifted his hand to fire at Lehesion once more. I smacked his hand down before clapping my hands. The metallic ring silenced the field as I boomed,

"We don't have to fight here."

Lehesion raised an eyebrow as a grin grew over his face, "Oh, the wisest of you all decided to bow and ask for forgiveness. How fitting for a Harbinger." Lehesion let out a long laugh.

"Perhaps I am the cataclysm you omen?"

I didn't understand how he knew me but considering his level, it shouldn't be that much of a surprise. I shook my head,

“Bowling might be taking it a bit too far, buddy. All I’m saying is we don’t have to kill each other. Why are you attacking Rivaria of all places anyway? I thought you founded the city or something like that.”

Lehesion turned to the ruins of rivaria, the frozen bodies of gialgathens acting as statues. Some would never melt, and like ghosts, they’d haunt the city until they were destroyed. Lehesion tilted his head,

“I...I do not know...”

I spread out my hands, “And Sheom as well. She was my friend and your mentor, correct? Why would you kill her as well?”

Lehesion shivered as he listened, and his eyes grew sad. I continued,

“Well then, this seems pretty simple. How about you quit attacking the city, and we talk, eh?”

Lehesion stood still as a statue, not breathing or reacting. Some kind of mental war took place before he twitched his head. He silenced his conscious, snorting out of his nostrils. He crushed some sort of dissonance within himself as he glared at me,

“You...you are the one that won my honoring, didn’t you?”

I crossed my arms, “You mean the tournament? Yeah.”

Lehesion glanced down at his claws as if blood covered them, yet none was there.

“These...heathens have fallen so low. I am here to cleanse them and you from this world.” He gained confidence as he spoke, “From my world.”

I waved my arms, “Yeah, see, why do we need to be cleansed though? We could leave if you like. Boom, planet cleansed.”

Lehesion blinked, entirely at a loss for words. He shook his head before roaring out, “You will not dissuade me with mere words. I am no poet. I am a warrior. Giess belongs to we gialgathens, yet you espens attempt to usurp us. You attempt to...”

Helios put his arm back in socket and shouted,

“He’s gone mad. The imbecile cannot reason at even a basic level. It’s rather disappointing considering his otherworldly reputation.”

Lehesion turned to him, glaring in disdain, “And so one without reason will be the one feeding your corpse to worms, little cub.”

Helios let out a low growl, “Only one person can call me a cub, and he doesn’t rule one world.”

Helios raised a hand, portals forming around him,

“He rules many.”

The Overseer raised his arm, “The tech core verified it. He’s being controlled telepathically. We’ve attempted disrupting the mana flows, but some form of an enclosed neural network is being used. Lehesion is too unstable, and must be eliminated.”

I let out a sigh, “I don’t understand how they can control him. Lehesion’s mind must be powerful.”

The Overseer charged mana into his palm, “It does not matter how. It only matters that this is our reality, and it must be dealt with.”

I frowned, “Then so be it.” I turned to Althea, “I’ll try to distract him. Save your strength for after we destroy his defenses.”

She gave me a nod before stepping away from our plane and into another like a ghost. I turned to the Breakers in armor, “I don’t know if any of you are close combat specialists. If so, stay away from me as I’m fighting.”

One of the breakers reached out a hand, “Is there a reason for that?”

I waved around me, “I have an aura that does quite a bit of damage. I don’t want to injure you guys.”

The Breaker nodded, “Understood. Let’s head out.”

Lehesion readied another volley of fire swords. Before he released his attack, I reached out a hand and unleashed another stored singularity within his forcefield. Another glowing rain of mana droplets fell, and the behemoth stumbled backward.

Cracks ebbed down the mountainside at his thunderous footsteps while the fire swords scattered into the skies above. The swords hummed, resonating with one another. They detonated, creating a cascading chain reaction of red fire. Their detonations engulfing all my sight in brilliant plumes of destruction.

I shook off my awe before dashing forward, my armor glowing yellow with heat as I neared Lehesion. The Breakers followed behind several preparing attacks of their own. Lehesion grinned down at us, his teeth menacing. He swiped a paw and cast a wind incantation. Green sprites ran into us with feathered wings and trails of light behind them.

I held firm with a gravitational anchor, but the others were swept away with the wind. Lehesion rolled his eyes while stomping a massive paw. He grounded the Breakers with a gravity well of his own. They crushed into the icy mountain below, pinned down but still alive.

It didn’t matter. I molded Event Horizon over Lehesion as he tilted his head,

“You can affect me from within my domain...Interesting. You mustn’t use some trick with the cipher for all your strength as the cub does. It is your own might.”

The Overseer created ripples in this golden aura the entire time. Despite the unreal output of energy, the golden energy rippled yet never yielded. Helios waved one arm at the same time, generating a pillar of ice rivaling the size of a small mountain. It rammed into the side of Lehesion’s forcefield before shattering in a dazzling rain of

purple shards. Helios did the same motion with his other hand, and another mountain-sized pillar appeared. It snapped without effect on the aura.

Before the ice fell, Helios clapped his hands together, the thousands of shards flying towards Lehesion. With another flap of the golden beast's wings, a torrent of wind blew back the incoming ice storm. Helios swung an arm overhead, turning the shards of ice into soft snow. The world ruler generated a dark blizzard around the shattered god.

A dark aura surrounded Lehesion as sparks of golden lightning rippled across the terrain. Like a stormy ocean of liquid gold, Lehesion's protective field billowed without end. Lehesion stared down and let out a long laugh,

"You are nothing."

The Overseer launched waves of antimatter at him, the assaults fizzling into nothing against Lehesion's shield. My singularity's crossed the border, but the mana armor soaked the damage with ease. Every time I landed one near him or even within him, his crystallized armor dispersed the impact, leaving no trace of the attack.

At the same time, Krog and a dozen of our gialgathens flew over Lehesion, breathing elemental fires. They created brilliant swirls of shaded rainbow flame. Acid, poison, ice, death, and decay, all elements intertwined in a violent yet beautiful display of their might.

The Sentinels sent out dimensional rips with their spears during the carnage, creating splits in spacetime. These catastrophic shockwaves pounded against the forcefield, letting out enormous booms that echoed into the countryside.

Even then, it was not enough.

Lehesion drew from endless reserves of mana, his techniques unbeatable. He soaked all of our attacks, glancing down at us as if we were insects. As the realization of our limitations came to the surface, Lehesion began to laugh. It was a haunting laugh, the kind that crushed your spirit and sent chills down your spine.

It crushed our army's morale. Lehesion stood at the epicenter of attacks that could quake planets, yet he did not so much as let out a whimper. He simply glared down at our futility with a disdain fitting for his position. As several breakers lost their reserves

of mana, our assault lessened. The gialgathens lost their fire breath and relied on physical attacks. Any contact with the forcefield sent out devastating recoil, ripping them back as if struck by lightning.

After minutes of our blitz, Lehesion stared down at his claws, ignoring us entirely,

“Is this the extent of your abilities?”

Helios grimaced before turning to the Overseer. As the Overseer charged another attack, Helios put up a hand. A portal appeared in front of the Overseer’s hand and beside Lehesion’s side. The Overseer’s hand reached through, letting him place his hand on the mana armor. With contact made, the Overseer’s invisible wave punched a hole through Lehesion’s chest.

There was no blood nor guts from the impalement. It was clean as if Lehesion always had a missing portion of his torso. Lehesion tilted his head in surprise,

“An actual wound...hm, I’m surprised.”

He frowned,

“But now you incite my anger. Feel the wrath of a god.”

The giant raised his wings, clouds shifting with each of his movements. The skies darkened as golden energy traveled towards the sun overhead. The aura coated it in its entirety before turning dark as a moonless night. Above us, an eclipse formed over the sun as Lehesions puffed out his chest. The golden beast roared,

“Let the stars bathe this world in their light.”

As he finished his words, lights formed over the eclipse as if a piece of the starry sky was blocking the sun. It was surreal as the stars expanded. Seconds later, huge balls of light fell from the sky. Trailing like comets, they slammed into the earth in all directions for as far as the eye could see. The entire landscape erupted into chaos.

One light collided with rivaria below, wiping it from the map with a tectonic explosion. The shockwave sent me tumbling through the air, the sheer destructive might overwhelming us.

Helios attempted forming portals to catch them as he did before. They were too large and too many, so Helios stepped through a portal to evade the calamity. The Sentinals swung their spears, using slices in spacetime to absorb any incoming shockwaves. Likewise, the Overseer mimicked their tactics, his body impervious to the resulting carnage around us.

The others were not so lucky.

Three gialgathens disintegrated in a direct impact from one of the novas. Two more were left broken and bent beneath us, taken out of the fight entirely. One of the two Speakers fell after a shard of debris cleaved his skull in half. Two Breakers were left with missing limbs.

One attack left our forces in shambles.

Lehesion laughed before staring down at us, "In my wake, there is only ruin."

The hole in his chest sealed up as the wires bundled around the wound. Mana siphoned into it these cords, regenerating him utterly. We were going to all die here if this continued. We needed to come up with a plan and fast. I turned to Helios,

"Create a portal for me."

Helios lifted a hand, creating a gateway into Lehesion's sphere of control. I jumped through the portal, coming face to face with the Leviathan. The aura strangled me, leaving me unable to breathe. It was an oppressive amount of mana to be sure.

At the same time, I sustained through its influence. I was used to my own torrents of mana, giving me plenty of experience dealing with it. To move, I created a counterflow of mana, letting my own aura grow outward. Without the golden energy restricting me, I turned to the monster.

I glared up at the beast, his eye the size of my body and his talons larger than my chest. Molding Event Horizon over him, I fired myself towards him like a tank round.

Lehesion rolled his eyes, “And the ant tries to bite m-“

I collided with him, dropkicking him with all my might. I created gravitational flows to enhance my mass and speed. I shifted telekinetic points to reduce the surface area of my blow, turning it into a tiny bullet of impact. I bounced backward, my body aching at the forces rippling through me, but my bones didn't break.

Lehesion stumbled backward, his large frame taking up my entire field of view. As landslides occurred beneath him, he gasped at his broken ribs,

“The little ant has a sting, doesn't he? Let's see if he has a backbone as well.”

Lehesion whipped his tail through the air, crystalized mana forming a spiky club at the tip. As it slammed into me, I used a tremendous gravity well to anchor me in place. Using it to ground me, I whipped my right arm with everything I had. The mana exploded over my body with a kinetic conversion. The tail itself was massive and colossal.

Somehow, I held.

I parried his strike as his eyes widened,

“You are no longer an ant. You are a beetle now.”

Lehesion's eyes narrowed, “And like all beetles that bother me, you will be stomped under my heel.”

His golden aura coalesced over his tail, his protection ceasing for a split second. The energy created waves in our dimension as Lehesion roared out,

“Begone.”

The tail made contact, and all went blank. My eyes opened within a crater on the mountain. My body was mess, cracked and broken. I molded strands of my armor, forming splints that jarred my bones in place. As the cracks mended, I pulled myself up, rock melting beside me. As I stumbled up, vibrant energy filled my body, the same as after crashing into the earth or being attacked by Yawm. This was my chance.

I leaped up, a thousand feet of molten rock surrounding me. As I flew upwards, I stared down, finding new scenery.

Rivaria was gone.

It was as if a meteorite slammed into the ground where I landed. I turned back to the battle, finding Lehesion whipping his tail about. His golden aura covered him once more, several holes in his body healing. He sheered through two gialgathens before swinging his tail at Helios.

The two Sentinels guarded him, using their spears dimensional tears to zone any contact. Lehesion ignored them once, attempting to outmuscle the Sentinel's defenses. Lehesion's tail fell into the void before the Sentinel on Helios's right closed the gateway.

Lopping off the limb, Lehesion growled in disgust,

"You have parlor tricks, do you? So do I."

Lehesion's tail regenerated, wires forming a framework that mana condensed into flesh over. Lehesion generated a portal within his golden domain, the same as the Overseer's kind. His tail whipped from behind Helios, but Helios turned in time. He created a counter portal that appeared beside Lehesion's head. The beast's tail smashed his own face with his own tail.

It lopped off his jaw, steel cables keeping his maw hanging from his head. Malevolent strands expanded from his body, pulling it back in place with violent jerk. As it did, the giant lost himself for a moment. His surrounding aura shivered. All the forces at our disposal unloaded, pelting him with an armada's worth of magic, explosives, and fiery breaths.

It did not touch him.

Lehesion's jaw reformed, his Hybridized body owning a tremendous vitality. The golden beast grimaced and showed his teeth,

"And so, you little ones believe you're clever then?"

I reached beside Helios, standing beside the icy lord. He turned to me, his one exposed eye opening wide as he gasped

"How are you still alive?"

I patted his back, "I'm tough. Real tough." I pointed up at the sky, "When I come down, warp me into Lehesion's aura."

Helios's eyes narrowed, "Is this suicide?" Helios sighed, "Our uncle will be very disappointed, but I understand." Helios put a hand on my shoulder, "Your sacrifice will be valiant--"

I slapped his hand, "What? Hell no. I'm kicking that monster's ass and coming out fine afterward. Are you ready?"

Helios raised his eyebrow, "Oh... Well then, ahem, I am."

I shot up into the sky as Lehesion let out a wave of his atomic breath at Helios. The Sentinels blocked most of the nuclear stream with their spatial slices. The surrounding heat was cooled by the ice magic of Helios. As I rose into the distance, Chrona came into the fray. Her temporal dilation didn't affect Lehesion, the old monster grinning,

"Petty techniques will not affect me. I am above time and above death."

The shiny frog dragon sure had a bunch of one-liners. I wondered if he just sat in front of a mirror and thought them all up. At the same time, I shot myself way up into the stratosphere, reaching into the edges of space. After minutes of rising high, I weighed myself down.

A living meteor, I shot down towards the golden spot under me. Heat built in my skin and bones, a violet radiance washing over me. As I neared the fight, Helios generated dozens of portals at once. He allowed the entire group to assault Lehesion directly, the Sentinels defending him as he did so. The dragon out regenerated their attacks, using his tail whips to suppress any that came close.

Lehesion began casting his starfall magic once more, another volley more than enough to wipe us out. One of the Sentinels leaped into the air, launching himself over Lehesion. With a long swipe of his spear, he created a massive rip in spacetime. Lehesion's golden aura dissipated into the void before the golden beast glared at the Sentinel,

“And that is your last deed here on this plane.”

With a thunderous smash, Lehesion smashed his tail onto one of the defenders. The kinetic impact shattered the light blue armor and crushed him into the ground behind the beast. Blood splattered all around its body as the Sentinel twitched like a headless snake over fire. Lehesion lifted his tail and unleashed a finishing strike at his body, crumbling it under the impact.

Bones, plate mail, and circuitry splattered in every direction. The Sentinel's spear flopped towards the mountainside as shrapnel launched in every direction. A chip of blue armor embedded itself in Helio's shoulder, making his right arm useless. Lehesion roared,

“You will all perish here, reduced to powder and ash and nothing.”

Helios heaved for breath, exhaustion setting in. Even with infinite mana at his disposal, he still needed mental energy to cast it. Lehesion glared at the Novas, rearing his tail back for another swing. Before it landed, the remaining Sentinel stepped forward. His armor charged as the tail whipped towards him. In a display of pure skill, the Sentinel parried the strike.

It came at a cost.

The Sentinel's arms shattered as his armor crumpled. The spear cracked yet held. The ice pillar beneath Helios and the Sentinel fractured as the other ice columns off in the distance took damage as well. The Sentinel fell to his knees before collapsing. As the others rained down hellfire onto Lehesion, the behemoth raised his tail,

“This is your end, little kitten.”

Helios raised his left hand, gasping for breath. A portal formed above Lehesion as I reached him in a blaze of glory. Lehesion looked up as I collided between his wings and against his spine.

All went white as the mountains trembled. The skies ran from the impact, forced by the wind. The others were whipped apart by the decimation, the calamity utter and complete. As the collision settled, my eyes opened once more, finding myself surrounded by meat chunks and misty blood vapor.

Lehesion was a pile of glowing mush and red mist. He was chunk soup as I stood from a red hot crater formed atop Rivaria. The mountain looked like a volcano, a pool of magma surrounding us. More concerning than the cataclysm I wrought was the golden forcefield surrounding me and the corpse.

Lehesion was still alive.

Untold amounts of mana siphoned into his liquid body, wires forming the framework of his bones. He regenerated at a rapid pace, his tenacity exceeding my own. I turned to the others, finding them stunned, injured, and dead tired. It wouldn't take three minutes before Lehesion was back to full strength either.

I turned to the mush pile, creating a singularity at its center as I thundered,

“Kill it.”

The mush fell into the gravitational implosion before erupting with the magma. After the shockwave rippled through the remaining golden aura, I drove my hands into the bloody pulp, drilling my armor through Lehesion's body.

Pure yet dark mana flooded my system. It was quenching, my armor grinning over my face. At the same time, there was something eerily familiar about this energy. It was corrupted by some hideous influence, a darkness that couldn't be expunged.

Even then, Lehesion's clout amazed me. The legends of Lehesion's mana being connected with the world were true. He owned a direct pipeline to the planet's mana, and even I couldn't match a mana source like that.

Yet.

That got me thinking, however. At best, we killed Lehesion over the next few hours, but we would slaughter Giess at the same time. At worst, we'd still kill almost the entire planet before dying here like dogs. In fact, we'd probably already slaughtered the entirety of a continent.

As I stood there and soaked that reality in, everyone around me unleashed havoc. My allies created portals into the golden aura, and Althea appeared to fire her arcane bolts on Lehesion's liquified body. Her bolts pierced the aura, slicing through the soupy body. Arcane lightning rippled from her attacks, disintegrating masses of flesh.

At the same time, Helios gave the Overseer full reign, launching one pulse of destruction after the other. The gialgathens attacked with all they had as well. Their fiery breaths caused stone to bubble and the air to squeal. The remaining Breakers shot out energy pulses loaded with Arcane energy.

Even now, with no discernable features of Lehesion remaining, I found no signs of the creature dying. Lehesion's body was still pulsing with vitality, life oozing from it as if it could never die.

My eyes widened. That was just it.

Lehesion couldn't die.

I gasped as I recognized the energy inside of Lehesion. It was the essence of an old one, just like Etorhma's tears in Althea or the time I spoke with Eonoth. An Old One was keeping this golden monster alive. This was why even an Overseer couldn't pass the golden aura. It defied logic because it was being maintained by a being that defied logic.

With my arms and legs lodged in the beast, I bit down on my tongue as frustration mounted. As ridiculous as it sounds, defeating a planet seemed doable. Defeating an

Old One? That was a daydream at best and a nightmare at worst. Without waiting any longer, I turned and shouted to the others,

“We cannot win. Lehesion cannot die.”

Helios raised a hand, blood dripping down from what remained of his mask. He boomed,

“He is nothing but mush. This is the only chance we have. To retreat now will void all the sacrifices your forces have made. Do you kill your own for nothing?”

I shook my head, “No. I think an Old One is keeping Lehesion alive. Even now, Lehesion isn’t any closer to dying. I can feel it. We can’t win this.”

Helios roared, “You called me here to fight a war I could not win? Do you use your favors so carelessly, or are you simply an idiot?”

I bit my tongue, swallowing a few choice curses to respond with. I sighed before saying, “Whether I am or not is an argument for another day. For now, we have to escape before he’s back to full strength.”

The Overseer grabbed the sides of his head with his hands, “An Old One...in my sector...Why would one interact so directly here? What does it have to gain from keeping this arrogant fool alive?”

I shouted, “It doesn’t matter why. We need a warp to Yildraza. We’ll regroup somewhere near there, wherever you think is fitting.”

The Overseer took deep breaths, “We die here for nothing.

A portal appeared beside him. Krog growled at me as he flew above,

“I did not take you for a coward, Dark One.”

Several gialgathens howled with approval. I turned to Krog, absorbing as much of the mana as I could,

“His mana is endless. Ours is not. We must live to fight another day.”

Krog roared, “My comrades died here today. Their sacrifices will mean nothing if we leave now.”

My voice echoed over the burning fires and swirling ice,

“Make no mistake, we are not giving in. I will hunt this monster down and kill it. We all will. When we return, it will be overwhelming and in force.” I scowled, “But that’s hard to do if we die here.”

Krog heaved for breath, his eyes full of anger. He let out a howl of frustration before saying,

“Then we shall do as you say, commander.” He narrowed his eyes, “But next time there will be no surrender. I will fight till my death.”

I smiled, “Of course. So will I.”

They flew towards the Overseer’s portal, warping away. I turned to Althea and the others. Only two Breakers were left and both the Speakers died. Althea raised a palm,

“You don’t have to convince me. If anyone knows how insane Old Ones can be, it’s me.”

I sighed with relief, “Thank you.”

She walked the portal. The two Breakers stared at one another then back at Lehesion and me. The giant beast was halfway reformed already, his ribs and spine the size of bridges. The Breakers jumped into the portal, leaving the battlefield.

I pulled my arms and legs from the beast, turning to Helios and the Sentinel. Helios snapped his fingers, forming a portal besides me. I stepped through it. As I walked near him, the Ruler of Worlds stared at me for a second. He murmured,

“You are immortal.”

I pointed at Lehesion, “He is as well. We have to run. We’ll regroup and fight him with more assistance.”

Helios tried moving, but his knees wobbled. Before he fell, I grabbed his arm over my shoulder and helped him walk. Using gravity, I carried him over to the portal. I did the same with the collapsed Sentinel.

Despite his debilitation, Helios grumbled between heavy breaths,

“Carried by a backwater savage...with no class...My pride will carry scars...from this day.”

I turned to him, “I can carry you in my arms if you want. Just saying.”

He narrowed his eyes, “I’ll kill you...if you dare mention this or that again.”

I rolled my eyes as Helios struggled not to vomit from mana deprivation. As I passed over the battlefield, I spotted the smashed corpse of the Sentinel beside the crater in the mountain.

I picked up the body of the Sentinel and his spear with a gravity well. As I passed through the portal, the Overseer put his hand on the Sentinel’s body,

“He...he will be missed.”

Hearing those words stung. Even if I was casual while talking with Helios, our loss was starting to sink in. We failed, and we didn’t stand a chance. Lehesion was stronger than I ever imagined. No, then we ever imagined.

We would need a real plan to fight it out with him next time. We couldn't rush in blind, or we would all be ground to a pulp like we were this time.

As Helios and I stepped through the portal, the Overseer followed. The scenery shifted, and we were in the middle of a field overlooking Yildraza in the distance. Insects chirped, birds sung, and the air was sweet in my nose.

Despite the peace of it all, the sounds of war left a lingering silence in my ears. I'd done everything I could. In the end, it didn't matter. Rivaria was decimated, and we lost good people here.

As I dwelled on the outcome, the Overseer closed the warp behind himself. All the others sat or laid around in a circle atop the hill. Everyone gasped for air besides for the Overseer and me. I set Helios down, letting the ice mage rest. As I did, Helios slammed his hand into the dirt and squeezed a clump of grass in his fist.

"I bring shame to the Novas name."

The others glanced down, each of them counting their mistakes in the battle. I didn't know what to say, my words catching in my throat. We lost well over a dozen of our members. Six of my guild's gialgathens were dead. Three Breakers and both of the Speakers were dead as well. The most significant loss came in the missing Sentinel.

I laid his body down beside a patch of flowers. The Overseer and I stepped up to him. The Overseer, in a rare moment, exposed some emotion. He lunged onto a kneed and placed his hand onto the Sentinel. The Overseer whispered,

"You may rest for all time, brother. You fought the tide, and so it fought you back. Though washed away to sea, you will always be remembered."

He laid his head onto his chest,

"In Eternum, Vive."

I stared at the Sentinel's crushed armor and spear. He reminded me of the first Sentinel I met back in Blood Hollow. Everyone I spoke with told me they were machines. They weren't, not even in the slightest. They felt pain, prejudice, and pride like anyone else.

In the end, I didn't understand what they went through to become Sentinels. What little I did know was that it required sacrifice, diligence, and courage. They were Schema's frontline soldiers, so they fought against the eldritch. Either that or they guarded doors.

On second thought, I really didn't know much about them.

The Overseer stood as I pondered. He placed a hand onto my shoulder,

"You...you can make use of his body, can't you?"

I turned to him, leaning back, "Are you serious? He's your ally, and he just died. Don't you guys have a funeral or something?"

The Overseer shook his head, "When they die, their records are cleansed and their failures erased. The only legacies they leave are the people they save and the armor and spear they wore."

The Overseer gripped his hand into a fist, "He will either be eaten by you or the animals here."

The Overseer gripped my shoulder tighter and stared at me, "His death can mean something, even if only a little."

The Overseer took his hand off my shoulder and stared away, "Though I understand if you aren't willing."

I glanced down at the Sentinel. It had violet colored skin just like a Kessiah or Tohtella. I turned to the Overseer,

"Is he...a remnant?"

The Overseer sighed while taking a step back, "Yes. Most believe they are machines, but this is a misnomer. Their true identity is hidden by Schema. Considering the mental conditioning Schema put them through, perhaps that is better."

The Overseer waved a hand, "A portion of the remnants didn't rebel against Schema. They were rewarded the highest of honors, given the right to be Schema's soldiers. After being sterilized, they were forged into warriors. They carry a great responsibility and great power in equal measure."

The Overseer peered into the distance, "But they are limited in number. Every Sentinel that dies is one less that Schema has in his arsenal. Each of their deaths is a blow to Schema and his forces. There is one great light that shines from this Sentinel's passing, however."

I raised an eyebrow, "What is that?"

The Overseer's voice rang like metal,

"It guarantees that Lehesion will die for this."

I nodded, "He will...I'm wondering why Schema sterilized the Sentinels though?"

The Overseer shrugged, "Perhaps it was fear. The remnants were once complex enough with their knowledge to create Schema. If they created something of such unequaled potential, who is to say they couldn't have crafted another A.I that is his equal, or perhaps his better? We cannot know, and Schema did not want an answer to that question."

I frowned, "So he purged their population and limited it because he was scared? That's cowardly."

"It was calculating." The Overseer sighed, "That is what we must be if we are defeat what we face throughout the galaxy." The Overseer pointed at the Sentinel,

"You must be calculating as well, unless you wish to become like him."

I shook my head back and forth, getting rid of my apprehension. As the others licked there wounds behind me, I kneeled down and placed my palm onto the Sentinel. My

armor drilled into the corpse and soaked it up as Helios chugged mana potions and summoned the medical force to assist us.

By the time a nurse reached me, the corpse was gone. The Overseer picked up the armor and spear of the warrior, leaving nothing behind. A blue-skinned nurse with most of her face covered in a facemask walked up to me a few minutes later,

“Do you need help?”

I stared at my hands,

“No...I think I'll be fine.”

She narrowed her eyes, “You don't have to play tough. It's ok if you're hurt.”

I stood up while rolling my shoulders, “I'll be fine. Er, thank you.”

She paced off as a message appeared on my screen. It had been a long time coming, but I prayed it was worth the wait.

Evolution gained. The Living Multiverse unlocked. Evolve Y/N?

Chapter 218: Something Else Altogether

I hovered my hand over yes before turning to the others,

“Guys. I'm probably going to look like I'm dying over here. Don't worry too much about it. I'll be fine.”

Althea frowned, “What do you mean?”

I took a deep breath, “It's my next armor evolution. It's been years, and something tells me it's not going to be a simple, easy thing this time. It might take a while.”

Helios raised his exposed eyebrow, “Evolution? Your armor evolves?”

I nodded, "It's about to again. I'm going to take a few steps away, just in case."

I lifted myself up, "I'll be back in a minute. Well, it might take a while actually. I don't know yet."

I spoke my goodbyes while the others were patched up by the medical facility. With formalities handled, I zoomed off into the distance. After pulling myself along for about a mile, I landed surrounded by the sounds of a forest. I sat down cross-legged as I absorbed the atmosphere around me. I loved nature, and my mom would sometimes say I liked trees more than people. At the time, that was truer than she'd ever imagined.

After settling down, I mentally prepared myself for what was to happen. This would be a real mind breaker of an experience. With that in mind, I meditated for a moment, getting fully prepared. After a few more seconds, I selected yes on my status.

Something changed as I did.

Around me, the dimension around me receded, giving me distance. I went somewhere else, my body suspended in a blot of pure black. This stretched into a circle around me. I stood and turned, finding something familiar about this darkness. As I dwelled on it, I understood why.

The range of the darkness mirrored Event Horizon. I shifted it back and forth, ripples reverberating through the space around me. It was a surreal sight. All this time, it felt like I was impacting the dimension around me. Now it was more like I was claiming a portion of it as my own. No, I wasn't taking anything. I was making it.

Another series of sensations sprung forth. An urge to devour washed over me, both intense and persistent. It threatened to control me, but I summoned more of my willpower and quashed it. I long ago learned to control my mana, and I wouldn't let a simple increase overtake me now. Still, it would be annoying having to tame it all the time, but I had the willpower to spare.

As I finished handling the sudden surge of mana, a heat built in my chest. Like a furnace, something burned away all the impurities in my body. It started light but built in intensity. A pain built in my chest at that moment, spreading to all my limbs. I blinked, my eyes watering. As I lifted my hands, all my blood steamed from the interlocking plates on my body. Like a metal lobster, I boiled alive inside my body. As my skin and bones bubbled, a pain erupted into my body.

As the process continued, this ache turned like liquid fire in my veins. All remnants of my humanity expunged, something else replacing it. Every cell was washed away in order to make room for the new. This cycle of heat building continued, the sheer volume of energy amassing to absurd amounts.

I became a living star, my body having no right to remain alive. I kept my voice from escaping my chest even though I wanted to scream. It was terrifying yet necessary. It was as if all my weakness was being washed away by a hungry fire.

It wasn't fire alone that plagued me. Pressure on all sides compressed me down to a finite point as if I was a singularity. It changed me into something odd, a material I'd never seen nor heard of. Reactions took place that I did not comprehend nor understand. It felt like I was being forged at the center of a nuclear reactor, being turned into a weapon.

Hours passed, perhaps days. I couldn't tell in that state of constant agony. It was more than a human mind could handle, but I was more than human now. As my body finally stopped boiling, I cooled down until my chest no longer burned. The pressure ceased, but I didn't take a breath.

I no longer needed air to breathe.

I stared at my hands, expecting to find myself looking like a charred corpse. Instead, I wasn't completely different in appearance. I was similar in composition, though my armor was a very dark gray rather than pure black. There weren't any plates over my skin anymore either, just a few thick spikes along my shoulders and back.

This gave me a biological look, like a creature that existed in a dimension of only metal. I still had bones, muscle, and the arrangement of a human. The difference came in my composition. I don't think there was any water in me anymore. I mean, my blood was silver before, so I already understood I wasn't normal. Now, I was the refined version of my old self.

That begged the question – was I ugly as fuck now? I pulled back my helmet and felt my face. It was as dense and hard as metal, though it still had the texture of human skin. Really, really hard human skin. I made my hand glow, and my skin didn't reflect a ton of light off my face. I wasn't shiny then. I would probably look grayish now. Didn't I look grayish before? Man I needed to look in a mirror sometimes.

Maybe I could change my appearance in the future, but that would be up to Althea. After all, I didn't want her to think I was hideous. While I was at it, I felt along my back. My runic work remained from my previous transformation, so I retained my ability to siphon mana into myself.

After a while, I tore a strip of my skin off, melted it, and turned it into a smooth panel. It acted as a mirror that I hovered in front of me. Overall, I looked quite a bit different, less busy in appearance. Although my own look never bothered me, it was kind of nice not being such a sore thumb. At the same time, something about the way I stood took up more space. I wasn't physically larger, but there was a pressure I exerted.

I looked as if I didn't belong here.

I didn't really understand it myself. As I moved my hands to check them out, there was no resistance in my movements. How a material was so dense and so hard yet moved with ease was mystifying. My joints glided along, not needing any added strength to move. Everything worked like clockwork.

As I appreciated my lack of defects, I stared around me, the black aura receding. In its place, a mild, red tint remained. Event Horizon was visible now. That was weird.

I pulled Event Horizon inwards, finding the forest remaining as I left it. That was also strange. Event Horizon should've disintegrated all that was around me into black slush. Instead, everything increased in size. I walked up beside a tree, and I found myself shorter than before. That was strange as I expected to be taller. Being a fourteen-foot giant had its cons though, so losing a few feet in height wasn't the worst thing in the world. I'd manage.

As for my mana, I channeled it. It responded in an overflow, flooding any of my expectations. It was pure without any instability. No internal forces fought to create this energy. Enhancing the flow did not require effort either. At my uppermost limit, it did not threaten to bother me in any way whatsoever. My mind was clear, as if I was meditating on a calm Sunday morning.

The life around me trembled, however.

My aura reached the skies. It devastated everything around me, red, glowing lines growing over the trees and wildlife. They cracked and crumbled, unable to sustain through the sheer volume of life force oozing into their bodies. Even the temporal space around me shivered, unable to endure the sheer volume of vitality. This mana pooled at my feet, crystalline mana structures forming. The clouds above let out ripples of red lightning, a thunderstorm generating in seconds, but it carried no rain.

At the same time, it shocked me how easy the mana was to summon and maintain. I used to ramp up to my limit. This came like a flood after a dam broke. This red aura drenched everything around me, a glowing red crystal forming over nearby trees and grasses.

I pulled that mana inwards, satisfied with the sheer volume. Once more, I expanded Event Horizon to see if it was still weakened. The response was immediate and utter. Within the aura, everything died. All the life force around me sapped inwards, a minuscule flow of mana coming with it. The trees, grass, and all life evaporated into nothing.

It was as if the world siphoned to me, no black sludge remaining from the bodies. It was as if someone salted the earth. In fact, there was a strange sense of control over the entire area. It was a lonely but comfortable feeling like standing atop a mountain's peak.

To get a better idea of what was going on, I opened my armor menu to check out what the bonuses were. After all, I needed to figure this stuff out and use it to my advantage.

The Living Multiverse(Unknown Composition | Class Permissible) – Your body is a multiverse. This gives you many unique properties that may be altered depending upon your mode of being. This current mode is decided by your primary mana type at any given moment. Current Mode of Being: Ascendant

Dimensional Wake – Your reach as a dimension has manifested. It extends outwards like an aura, currently known as Event Horizon. Depending on your current mana type, this aura can be altered to one of six mana types: Origin, Dominion, Augmentation, Ascendant, Quintessence, and Primordial.

Event Horizon – You gain the ability to manipulate the space around you for your benefit. The effects are many, but they revolve around controlling your surroundings to empower yourself.

Current Radius: 500 ft/152 m | Size of aura can be increased by your mass

Endless Hunger – Siphons enemy's mana and health to you. Current Siphon Amount: 50,000 + 100% of your total health/min | Affects both mana and health | 100% of mana and health absorbed converted into health. Reduced by physical or mental resistances.
Oppression – This aura is palpable, and it affects the mental state of anyone within Event Horizon. This gives dramatic bonuses to your ability to intimidate and inflict fear in both allies and enemies alike. Be mindful, as this effect can turn allies into foes if overused.
An Ascendant's Domain – Within Event Horizon, Dominion and Augmentation effects are enhanced. This means your ability to control objects and minds is enhanced, and your self enhancements are empowered. This includes your own mental defenses and debuff resistance as well.

Strange Matter – Your body is entirely composed of a compressed version of matter found within the center of neutron stars or theoretically in black holes. The atoms forming your body have lost all distance from one another, creating a denser state of matter than is otherwise achievable. This degenerates typical neutrons, protons, and electrons into a quark soup.

These quarks are very compacted, fusing together into an unbelievably solid and dense material known as strange matter. While your body is currently in a thinned version of this matter, it still carries many qualities.

Density of Strange Matter – resistance cap increased by 4.02% | Current Max: 99.02% | Can be increased further by added density
Stability of Strange Matter – Health is multiplicatively doubled | Overall Health Multiplier Including Perks: 16.0
Plasticity of Strange Matter – 10% of total health added to health regen per minute.

An Infinite Being – You are without limit, allowing you to change yourself without any restrictions. This will enable you to create augmentations to yourself with greater ease, manipulate what's around you without effort, and expand your mind without limit. The effects are as follows:

A Dimension's Autonomy – Cipher augments are now much easier to complete than before. Your control over mana carries no limit. Willpower increased by 10% multiplicatively.
Of All – Your ability to manipulate matter and energy is enhanced. Any enchantments, items, and potions you create are far stronger than before.
Infinite Soul – Cipher alterations to your body are considered soul forging. These costs are halved.
Cosmic Expansion – Mass is enhanced by total ambient energy absorbed.

Current Bonus: 278,486 KilosIndependent Space – You can store anything within a personalized dimensional space. Limited by your mass. Cosmic Entity – You’ve been enhanced by an enormous flow of energy, and your new body is much easier to enhance than before, raising your level cap | 1,000 to all stats | 1,000 to level cap | Current Cap: 10,000

The bonuses were mind-boggling, and it would take some time to inspect them all. Before doing all that, I opened my status to check the hard numerical changes. They were colossal.

The Living Multiverse(Lvl 9,000)

Strength – 11,246 | Constitution – 17,772 | Endurance – 69,872

Dexterity – 5,744 | Willpower – 41,969 | Intelligence – 16,658

Charisma – 5,282 | Luck – 8,147 | Perception – 6,907

Health: 36.5 Million/36.5 Million | Health Regen: 179 Million/min or 2,990,601/sec

Stamina: Infinite | Ambient Mana 3.136 Trillion

Mass: 1.42 million pounds(647,163 kilos~)

Height: Actual – 9’3 (2.8 meters) | Current – 9’3 (2.8 meters)

Damage Res – 99.02% | Dimensional Res – 100%

Phys Dam Bonus – 1.96 Million % | Damage Bonus – 40%

Event Horizon – 50,000 + (100% of your total health)/min

I went ahead and crunched some numbers from some previous stat screens. Compared to the last time I checked, my effective health quadrupled if I included my resistance

cap increase. My mana regen pentupled, increasing even more. This made me nigh invincible considering how hard I was to kill before. After looking closer, I figured out that I could increase my resistance cap even further by adding extra mass. That was good considering my synergy with extra mass already.

Aside from the added toughness, it was so much mana that it boggled the mind. It wasn't measured in millions by the minute anymore. It was by the second. It made me wonder how a rematch between Chrona and I would play out. She snapped the bones in her tail while hitting my arms before. Now she might cleave it off if she tried attacking me at full strength.

I wasn't aiming to beat Chrona, however. I was trying to kill Lehesion, and I wouldn't match him now, even with all my enhancements. I might've saved a few more people at most. To be fair, that depended on if he was able to kill me instantly anymore. If he couldn't, well, my healing ensured I would win over time. I regenerated five times my health every minute after all.

As I dwelled on it, that wasn't the problem. If an Old One was keeping Lehesion alive, I'd never finish him off. It would be a perpetual conflict until the end of all time. I needed to figure out some way of canceling out his connection with Giess and that Old One. If I did that, then Lehesion wouldn't be difficult to stop.

I grabbed the sides of my head, the difficulty of the task mounting. That was fucking impossible with my current tools. I didn't have any clue how Old Ones worked, and I had no idea how Lehesion was connected to Giess either. To figure out how my only plan was to investigate his history. Knowledge was power in this case, and any other kind of power wasn't about to work here.

You can't overpower an Old One after all. They are inevitable.

Despite that sense of hopelessness, I had ways to enhance my strength from this point onward. My multiverse augments mentioned different mana types giving me different abilities. Considering my mythical compendium gave me the ability to create Quintessence mana, I could shift my ability then. That would give me a few more options to work with.

Unlocking all those skills and the mythical skill as well would give me a massive upgrade to my skillpoints as well. If I could make a legendary skill, then I could

progress my Sovereign tree. Getting an actual Sovereign skill might actually turn the tides as well.

All of these options gave me hope. Even if I wasn't ready for Lehesion just yet, it might not take as long as I imagined it would. Getting a class was also something on the horizon, but I didn't even know where to start with that.

With all that in mind, I prepared to leave. As I did, a dull ringing formed in my ear. A howling came up, louder than a bottle of thunder smashing over my head. A sense of impending doom seized my chest as if I locked eyes with a predator. Frozen in place, I waited. Cold sweat poured down my head, and I suppressed a shiver. What I did to the insects around me, a presence was doing the same to me.

I blinked, and the world shifted around me. I glanced around, finding nothing but a never-ending void. I stared down and found nothing under my feet, so I stood on an invisible force. Underneath that null space, I found the dead spots of a dying sun beneath me. The light off the star was muted so I wasn't blinded.

I remembered this place. It was a personal dimension for an Old One I faced earlier on my time here on Giess. Without waiting, I shouted out,

"Why am I here, Eonoth?"

My voice rang through this new space, trembling in the distance. This space acted as an echo chamber, the sound resounding in my ears until it was as crippling as a mother's death. It shattered my calm, sweat pouring down my forehead. As I steadied my breathing, a familiar and haunting voice answered,

"You know where you are, one with many names. Gray Giant. Dark One. Immortal. The Multiverse. You are many and one. You are only a moment, yet always. I indulge in your presence. You are what I aspire to create."

His voice resounded until it threatened to grind my body to a pulp. Somehow, I withstood the vibration. In fact, I held up better than I expected. Last time I was melting at this point already. Now I was just uneasy. This let me think about what he was saying. Unfortunately, it was still more riddle nonsense from this guy. I clasped my hands into fists,

“You, I remember you mentioned you wanted to discover living metal.”

Eonoth spoke, his voice coming from every space around me,

“Yes. Firmness. Absolute. Cold. You are those and more. It is glory to meet you in your final form. You’ve achieved what I wished for, yet you did not understand it to begin with.”

A formless blip appeared in my vision. It was an ever-changing, flickering abomination. In one moment, it was entrails, a riverbed, and a firework all at once. It was also none of those things. In the end, it was like a person pretending to be a 2-dimensional cartoon. It was impossible. All it ended up accomplishing was a hollow masquerade of mortality.

I frowned, “You don’t have to give me something to look at. I know you aren’t like me, and I’m ok with that.”

The voice radiated from all directions,

“It is strange how time travels in circles. I created one event, uncovering the lost failures of a proud son. He wrought havoc on an untested world. Now you come to cleanse that which acts as the cleanser. Ironic. Satisfying.

Eonoth spoke his last word with a hollow ring to them.

“Humbling.”

I grimaced, “You sound like you know what I’ve been doing.”

It shivered without recourse, “You think of me as a riddler speaker. You speak riddles to me. Yes. I am the cause of your challenge. I am the bringer of your burdens and the killer of your children. The proud son is unleashed.”

I crossed my arms, “Is the proud son supposed to be Lehesion?”

“Is that how you understand him? Curious. I created him with gifts beyond reckoning, yet he accomplished nothing but his corruption. Disappointment. You were born with nothing, yet you bring what I seek.”

The shifting object shifted towards me, jerking with rapid, twitching motions. I remembered being paralyzed by a deep, primordial fear when I met Eonoth before. It was there, but it wasn't overwhelming anymore. I didn't feel as lesser to him anymore.

Eonoth boomed,

“I feel no fear. You've changed. You are no longer mortal. You are more.”

I swung my hand out and gnarled out,

“Yeah, but I couldn't give two fucks about that. From what you've said, you created Lehesion. From what I know about the guy, you kept him alive in our last fight. Why in the hell would you do that?”

Eonoth backed up from me, “There are gifts that cannot be taken away. They are permeated. Infused. A part of. That is the proud son. He no longer can be killed.”

I pointed at my chest, “How the fuck am I supposed to kill the guy then?”

Eonoth tilted the rough approximation of a head, “You cannot. Do not kill the unkillable. It is the body of a greater beast. Lop the head from the body, and it will no longer have teeth to gnash. Tear. Crush.”

I blinked, thinking about what he said. He was right. Fighting Lehesion head-on was a fool's errand. It might be far easier to take down Tohtella and her shadow group. Once they were gone, we could control Lehesion or at least stop his madness.

Eonoth reached out to me, “You accomplished what I could not. I will reward you. Take as you wish.”

I frowned, “Eh, I'd rather not get anything if I'm honest.”

Eonoth grumbled, “You will take as I give.”

It jerked towards me, touching my head. Its consciousness expanded over mine, a cosmic entity in its entirety. Its mind was all consuming like a plague of locust. Despite the deluge of thoughts, I held together. My sense of self was constant. I wasn’t washed away by its enormous mind, and I did it by keeping my thoughts as condensed as possible. My mind was like an iceberg floating on top of an ocean.

Minutes passed as Eonoth struggled to implant some kind of information in my head. I held steady, stopping this thing from tampering with my mind. After minutes of its probing, I grew frustrated with this damn thing toying with me. I lashed out against it, searching through its own thoughts.

With a violent snap, Eonoth left my presence. As it did, I crossed my arms,

“Yeah, its not very comfortable, is it?”

A deep silence returned my answer. Years may have passed or seconds. I couldn’t tell while here. My sense of time was too warped. After waiting for a reasonable length of time, I shouted,

“Are you finished then? If this is all you come to say, then I’m leaving.”

Eonoth reverberated out, “You may not. Invasion. Anger. Wrath. To test my mind...you will never leave here. My domain, absolute.”

A deep sense of dread rose up my chest as he finished his words. I quivered for a moment, losing my composure. Minutes passed before my eyes widened. I remembered who I was and what I could do. I wasn’t some scared, little boy anymore.

I raised a hand, standing tall. I reached out with Event Horizon. The aura didn’t mold with ease. It struggled out as if moving through solid concrete. I pushed through the resistance, creating a sphere of control within Eonoth’s dimension. I clasped my hand into a fist, saturating it with my aura. I spoke up,

“Yenno, I have a damn good reason for stopping you from tampering with my mind. You see, I’ve seen what you and other Old Ones do to people. Yawm was turned from warrior king of a race to an insane, genocidal maniac. Lehesion was turned from some sort of Messiah to the puppet for some shadow organization. Now you want to have your way with me.”

Eonoth grumbled, “I aim not to harm you. I am different.”

I shook my head, “I don’t think you know what harm really is. You are entropy incarnate, and fortunately for me, I don’t have to rely on you right now. I have ways of accomplishing my goals with my own two hands. Try not to take it personally.”

Eonoth droned, “I attempt diplomacy. You tamper with me and my mind, a lesser being. An ant. A void.”

I raised a hand and grabbed my wrist. I clasped a hand, “Yeah, maybe I am an ant. So was Yawm, and I remember you mentioning that Etorhma was given fear by him.”

The dimension around me shifted, becoming unstable.

“Maybe I’ll be the one to give fear to you.”

Eonoth’s voice thundered in my ears, louder than a supernova,

“This is mine. It cannot be taken.”

I shook my head, “Not anymore. I’m no longer at your mercy.”

Cracks appeared in the distance. Event Horizon stretched outwards as my infinite mana soaked my surroundings. A tint of red expanded outwards further destabilizing my surroundings. As the star beneath me turned red, Eonoth roared,

“Defiance. You will be crushed. Maimed. Murdered.”

I frowned, “We’ll see.”

Something seized in my chest, and my eyes watered. As I blinked, my scenery shifted back to the forest. I took a sigh of relief out of habit before looking around me. I was surrounded by a circular ring of dirt with trees just outside the range of Event Horizon. The sunset over the skyline cast everything in an orange hue. Not a second had passed in realtime. Leave it to Old Ones to defy the laws of physics.

I shook off a few jitters, the meeting unsettling me. It wasn't as if I could actually overtake Eonoth's mind or anything even vaguely like that. All I could hope to accomplish was a meager kind of retaliation at best. I was pretty sure that Eonoth was more offended and outraged than actually harmed.

Still, I didn't have time to think about this yet. Ready to go, I floated back towards our campsite. I needed to meet up with the others and form a plan of action. As I arrived, I found nothing remaining except a few marks in the grass and the Sentinel who survived. His arms were covered in scars from the conflict, the armor over them shattered. He owned quite a bit of muscle as an ionic mist of some sort ebbed out of the cracks in his armor. This lit the air with electricity.

As I approached, he pushed himself up using two Sentinel spears. One was his, and the other belonged to his fallen brother. He left them embedded in the ground while looking me up and down,

"You've shrunk. I thought you said you'd evolve, not turn smaller."

I raised an eyebrow, "I did, though you probably can't tell because of your perception. Where did everyone else go?"

The Sentinel stared at me, "You do have a different presence...Cleaner, maybe? As for the others, the Novas sent them to a medical facility after you left. That was three days ago."

My eyes widened, "Wait...three days ago? What?"

The Sentinel nodded, "Yes. I've waited for the Overseer to return and put me into another position. Perhaps he is taking so long to give me time to rest and reflect." The Sentinel glared down,

“His kindness is noted, but it simply gives me more time to think. That is the last thing I need right now.”

I frowned, “You can follow me for now if you’d like. I can give you something to do.”

The Sentinel rolled his eyes, “Why would I follow someone like you?”

That annoyed me, so I put a hand on his shoulder. At the same time, I tested out the new function for Event Horizon. I shifted the oppressive aspects of the aura over him, pulling back the actual damage dealing effects. It worked without a hitch, the red tint growing in the air.

As it landed over the Sentinel, he froze in place. He whispered, “Who is putting out that pressure?”

I grinned, “I am. Now you can choose to lay on this hill until the Overseer returns. Perhaps that could take years or minutes. We can’t know. You can also choose to follow me, and I guarantee I’ll give you a purpose.”

I pulled back the aura and my hand, “It’s up to you.”

A few droplets of sweat poured down the Sentinel’s arms, his breathing ragged. He stared at his hands, his fingers shaking,

“You...you’re more than I imagined.” He clenched his hands into fists, “Perhaps I am as well.” He stood up and faced me, “I shall leave with you until I am called to duty once more.”

“Good,” I said while disguising some surprise. I didn’t expect that to work as well as it did. The new control aspects of Event Horizon were powerful, scarily so. I would have to monitor my usage of it. Otherwise, I might become another Yawm.

In this case, it was far better than the Sentinel sitting here and moping around. With that in mind, I opened my status and sent a message to Helios. I asked him where he was and that I was with the Sentinel at the hill. About three minutes later, a portal generated out of nothing.

Helios walked out with his arm in some sort of cast. Despite his injuries, he still wore his cape and kept his dignified manner of being. His mask was fixed as well, the blackened polymers mirroring an aged wood to perfection. He stared down at me,

“And so the immortal returns. You seem different. More pure, and...shorter maybe? Odd. I-“

I rolled my hand, “Expected you to get taller. Yeah, so did I. Where are the others?”

Helios pointed back at his portal, “They are resting within the empire’s medical facilities. You’ve no problem with paying for that service, I assume?”

“As long as it’s reasonably priced. Otherwise, fuck that.”

Helios tapped his claws against his side, pausing for a moment,

“That was a joke.”

I spread out my arms in mock disbelief, “Wait a second...you have a sense of humor?”

Helios deadpanned, “Not anymore.” He waved a hand, “Enough chatter. Come.”

He stepped halfway into his portal,

“The Empire welcomes you, Harbinger.”

Chapter 219: A Wider World

I raised an eyebrow, “Wait, I’m seeing the Emperor right now?”

Helios dragged his hand down his mask, “No. He’s busy. You have an appointed date for meeting two months from now.”

I pointed at Helios, “Don’t act like I’m ridiculous here. What you said was misleading.” I turned to the Sentinel, “Isn’t that right?”

The Sentinel uprooted his spears from the ground and swung them over his back, “Just leave. I’ll wait here until you’ve come up with a plan of action.” The Sentinel glanced down, entering a deep state of meditation. Helios stared at the Sentinel,

“You convinced that oaf to follow you...How?”

I gave Helios’s shoulder a pat, “I have my ways. Let’s go.”

Helios eyes me for a second before letting the issue pass. He pulled himself through his portal, and I followed. As I stepped through it, we entered an office of sorts. The room lacked a desk, instead opting for an elevated platform in the middle of the room. Several paintings covered the walls, very renaissance in style. It was an elegant, efficient room outside of the view.

And what a view it was. An entire glass wall gave a glimpse of a futuristic city outside the office. Mana powered cars flew through the skies in streams of traffic. Sleek, modern buildings raised up to the heavens with entrances to them at over a hundred stories high. Beneath these giants, smaller buildings carried more character. Composed of glossy stone, many shops, service centers, and entertainment squares existed.

They were neatly organized, this being a city built well after building codes were established. Pre-planned parks were made to incorporate a nature motif, letting the entire place feel less stuffy and constricting. The buildings never lined up to block a clear view of the sky. It was breathtaking.

Helios caught me staring, so he puffed his chest a bit, pride leaking into his voice,

“It’s awe-inspiring, isn’t it? This is the power of the Empire.”

I put my hand on the window, feeling a subtle layer of carbon fiber over it. I tapped it, and Helios answered my question before I could ask it.

“The windows are lined with a graphene-polymer resin. They intersperse layers of the composite between the glass, strengthening the material. This prevents any weather from becoming a problem, even on far harsher worlds than this.”

Helios crossed his arms, “We never needed to worry about weather here, however. Belka-623 is an optimal location for many different species to live on.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Belka-623?”

“It’s one of the worlds I govern. Though many of the innovations you see here were originated by my uncle, I carried them out. We raised this planet out of an enslaved position with a group of raider mercenaries. They weren’t very open to negotiations at first.”

Helios let out the sporadic kind of laugh someone lets out from thinking of a personal joke,

“The Emperor can be quite persuasive, even to savages...No, especially to savages.”

I nodded, turning back to Helios, “I’d imagine so. I always go the skull cracking route. It’s easier that way.”

Helios scoffed, “Perhaps you and uncle would get along better then I imagined. Now, I’m certain you’re curious where your friends are?”

“Yeah.”

Helios tilted his head to another room. He turned, walking up to the raised platform. A series of screens opened as Helios did.

“Eva, send a message of my arrival at the Selta Medical Center. I’ll be having a guest as well.”

A feminine, warm voice answered, “Of course. It is a personal or business arrangement?”

“Perhaps both.”

“Then I’ll make the necessary arrangements.”

Helios interacted with several of the screens, moving them over. I pointed at them, “Why don’t you just do it mentally?”

Helios moved his hands across the screens with quick, practiced movements, “I prefer something to visualize. It enables me to keep track of many things at once as well.” He turned to me, “Several planets worth, in fact.”

I had to admit, Helios impressed me quite a bit here. I wasn’t the biggest fan of organizing groups of people, but he was selling the concept without even trying. He was also giving me a lot of ideas for accomplishing the monumental task.

The Ruler of Worlds cracked his neck before closing out the personal AI and turning to me, “Excuse me for the delay. I was in the middle of handling a few problems before you called.”

“Dude, don’t even worry about it.”

Helios turned and walked towards the sliding glass door of his office, “I assure you, I’m not in the slightest. It’s a matter of pleasantries. Now let’s go see your allies.”

We walked through a hallway, dozens of offices lining the building. They worked with diligence, organizing many elements for the planet from the looks of it. As we passed the entrance, two guards pressed their hands to their chests, saluting Helios. The Novas raised a hand, letting them stand at ease.

After passing through the metal hallway, we reached a landing platform on the side of a taller skyscraper. Helios turned to me, “I doubt a vehicle is necessary for our travel. That being said, do try to avoid creating a catastrophe with your gravitational wells.”

He waved a hand, “Most don’t quite weigh as much as you do. We wouldn’t want cars crashing into buildings, now would we?”

I mumbled, kind of starstruck by everything,

“Uh, not really. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Helios stepped onto a panel of ice, and I created four gravitational vortexes. Two were antigravity and the others average. They counteracted each other’s forces, resulting in a cylinder around me that kept me afloat. Helios turned to me and shook his head. I frowned,

“What? It’s a way to get around.”

Helios grumbled, “It’s quite the opposite of what you’re imaging. I’m actually impressed you’d use such convoluted magic just to fly for a few miles.”

I crossed my arms as we hovered over the cityscape, “What’s so convoluted about it?”

Helios dragged his hand down his facemask, “You own no perspective of normal, do you? At times I forget you’re a backwater savage.”

I pointed at him, “An impressive backwater savage.”

Helios turned to me while standing on the ice, “In ways, yes, but in others, I’m remarkably disappointed. It’s odd. You seem exceptionally competent in some subjects, and in others, you’re but a toddler by comparison.”

I shrugged, “I know I’m not a genius. I have to stick with what I know, or else I’ll get overwhelmed.”

Helios opened his status, fiddling with it as we spoke, “Wise. I don’t have that luxury. My position demands flexibility, so I must diversify my skillset to succeed. Even then, I doubt I could rival your fluidity with magic no matter the circumstances.”

I spread out my hands, “Pshhh, you’re selling yourself short.”

Helios shook his head, "I'm being realistic." He raised a gauntleted hand, the cipher sheening on it "Do you know what this is?"

I pointed at it, "It looks like a transcription in the dimensional cipher for splitting atoms then containing and converting the energy into usable mana before it's discharged."

Helios let his hands flop on his sides, "And there's the wild swing in competence once more. How do you know this?"

I shrugged, "Yawm used the same technique, though his ability was from Etorhma's cipher augments." I shivered, "Now those were confusing. I looked at them quite a bit, but they never cleared up. I figured they're just unusable after a while."

I released a torrent of mana from my hand, "Besides, I'd never need more mana than I have."

Helios pointed at my hand, "That is why your magic is so fluid. While this augment gives me access to a limitless supply of mana, it comes at a cost. It's not my own personal mana reserve, making it unwieldy. It's like going into another person's body and trying to fight using it."

I grimaced, "Man that sounds impossible."

"It isn't, but it's difficult. Innately, the potential difference in fluidity prevents me from achieving feats of magic like you have there. Of course, I can mimic that kind of magic on a smaller scale using my personal mana reserves. However--"

Helios sounded like he talking through a clenched jaw,

"They're dwarfed by yours." He calmed down, "It's an unfortunate reality, but that's the nature of talent, isn't it?"

I scoffed, "Talent? I've invested almost entirely into mana regen from the very get-go. At least 90% of my investment was into pure endurance."

Helios leaned back, “What? Endurance guides health regeneration, not mana regeneration.”

I banged a fist against my chest, “I have blood magic.”

Helios stood silent for a moment. He cupped his chin, “You’re rather open about the intricacies of your status...aren’t you?”

I grinned, “It isn’t like I’m letting you know my weaknesses.”

“No, but knowing an enemy’s strengths is equally valuable. Avoiding them can easily lead to victory.”

I tapped my hand against the side of my head, letting out a metallic ring, “Hard to avoid having skin harder than steel.”

Helios let out an amused jeer, “Perhaps. Perhaps not. We’ve arrived.”

Beneath us, a facility was labeled by several drops of blood. It looked more like an asylum than a hospital, dense, orichalcum chambers interconnecting with concrete bridges without windows. As hovered down to a small entrance, I said,

“So uh...This place looks friendly.”

Helios sighed, “It’s like speaking with a child.” We walked through a series of doors, several guards saluting Helios. The Novas rolled a hand,

“What would lead to most of the medical injuries within an advanced planet.”

I cupped my chin, “Hmm, eldritch.”

“That’s correct. Now tell me, what’s a hazard of treating injuries from the eldritch?”

“Well, they could have pieces of the eldritch in them, parasites in their blood, all kinds of problems really. That could get messy fast.” I snapped my fingers, “So that’s why you guys keep it so locked up here. Its to stop the eldritch from escaping into the middle of the city.”

Helios nodded, “It’s good I didn’t have to explain even further. Perhaps you should think a little before asking an endless stream of questions.”

I rolled my eyes, “I haven’t even been in the system for five years. Cut me some slack.”

We stepped through a series of hallways as Helios continued,

“I already have. Many wouldn’t and will not. It’s better you develop these habits now than later.” Helios shook his head in exasperation, “Why am I helping you with this?”

“Maybe because you know I can help you. Could be pity though.”

Helios stopped walking and looked at me. He turned and stepped forward,

“Definitely pity.”

We reached a larger room, one without an orichalcum binding. It was for larger patients, many of them looking like war animals. Most of them laid on heated pads with troughs for food. The gialgathens had the troughs taken away, fresh carcasses taking their place.

There was still a sterile smell to the air along with a bit of giant animal funk. As walked through the corridor, Helios waved a hand, “This is the best room we had available on such short notice for them. They’re quite large and difficult to tend to.”

I waved a hand, “I get it. They’re gigantic.”

We stepped through an automatic door, finding Kessiah tending to the wounds of several gialgathens. She looked out of place compared to the other nurses and doctors nearby. She still had her mid-drift showing, her classic leather jacket showing plenty with a few tattoos on her arm and neck.

They didn't discriminate despite her being a remnant. She didn't look up at us as we walked up, her eyes focused on an orb of her own blood. She took a deep breath before funneling it into the necrotic limb of a gialgathen. The black, festering leg gained some color, turning purple from black. Kessiah smacked a plastic bottle off a table beside the gialgathen,

"Goddammit, I fucked it up."

A nurse raised her hands to Kessiah, "I assure you miss, you're doing excellent work."

Kessiah waved her away, "What the hell ever. I know when I'm doing well and when I'm fucking up." Kessiah shook her head, "Damn, I'm just so tired."

I stepped up to her, "Looks like you've been busy. I was wondering where you were."

Kessiah looked up to me, "Wow... You look different. Maybe I just forgot how imposing you can sometimes be. Eh, I don't know."

Helios raised a hand, "I want to thank you again for your work here. It's invaluable."

Kessiah poked Helios's chest, "You're lucky I'm helping you out. I hate arrogant asses, and you definitely count as one. Most people from the empire do." She shrugged,

"But money is money."

I turned to Helios, "Damn, I didn't expect this...like, at all."

Helios deadpanned, "At times, Diplomacy is painful. Let's go view the others."

We walked off as Kessiah rubbed her hands together, "Alright you piece of shit, get ready for round two."

I suppressed a laugh as I looked at Helios. He stared forward,

“Though unorthodox, she’s quite the healer. It’s rare to find someone who can restore limbs, let alone bring back people who are half dead. I also have more personal reasons for allowing her to treat me in such a manner. They matter more to me than my pride.”

I didn’t press further as we stepped up to an elevator. Helios stepped into it, so I followed. As we went down, turned to him,

“What happened when you arrived at Rivaria? I forgot to ask.”

“Chaos. I arrived as Lehesion was enclosing onto the district. At first, I believed I could fend him off, but that proved futile. After a few rounds of attack, I humored him while allowing many of the citizens there to escape.”

Helios shook his head, “Your guildsmen assisted with this. Chrona, in particular, used her hastening to carry people out of harm’s way. Sheom attempted to reason with Lehesion. He reacted poorly...”

I bit my lip, “What then?”

Helios supported his forehead with hand, looking disappointed, “The escape was working well until Lehesion discovered what we were doing. He was furious, howling out his insanities. Instead of letting us evacuate, he drained the life force of the gialgathens and surrounding wildlife. They howled out in anguish as their life drained from their bodies.”

Helios shivered, “I created an ice vortex to destroy the life nearby, including their kind. It was strengthening him. He stealing their lives. I decided to eliminate them before he could.”

Helios stared at his hands, “I...I take no pleasure in genocide.” He clasped his gauntleted hands into fists, “But sacrifices needed to be made.” He turned to me, “Tell me, does my choice bother you, oh great Harbinger?”

There was a bitterness there I didn’t expect. I crossed my arms,

“You did what you had to do. Besides, I’ve been there. My hometown was wiped out by a plague from Yawm. I ended up killing almost everyone that ever lived there, down to the last woman and child. I lost my friends to that plague. They almost killed me at the time.”

I shook my head, “Sometimes, you aren’t given good choices. You just do what you can.”

Helios stared off into the distance, “For once, we agree.”

We stood there in silence for a while, both of us thinking. As the doors opened in the elevator, Helios straightened up and walked out. We entered a more luxurious room with old wood, various paintings, and gold lining the walls. It was a more old fashioned kind of place, though it lacked nothing in modern niceties.

We turned to one of the rooms where Helios knocked on the door. We waited a second before a familiar voice answered.

“Come in.”

Helios opened the door towards Caprika’s voice. We found her and Althea standing over the model of a city. I turned to Helios,

“So that’s why you let Kessiah treat you that way.”

Helios stepped up them, “Silence. There’s work to be done.”

Althea walked up and gave me a jumping hug. I hugged her back,

“I love you too.”

Helios glanced at Caprika’s model city,

“It seems you lack the standard barriers between classes. Do you intend on implementing a less physical obstruction? I wouldn’t suggest it. It’s far easier to forget a mana barrier than an actual wall. You wouldn’t want rabble wandering, would you?”

Caprika shook her head, “No, I don’t intend on having them at all.”

Helios leaned back, “Hm...if this is a joke, it isn’t humorous in the slightest.”

Caprika walked up to him, “You’ve seen what rabble can do. I’m not letting someone with talent get smothered. I’ll use every resource I have.”

Helios tilted his head, “Even if you believe your so-called meritocracy of classes will result in equality, you’re simply replacing one oppression with another.”

Caprika looked him in the eye while crossing her arms, “How so?”

“It’s a simple deduction. Talent is dispensed unequally, creating an imbalance in how resources are distributed. This creates individuals with sufficient collateral that can be leveraged for better training and education. This is difficult to differentiate from talent.”

Helios leaned over Caprika, “This is how the Empire began. Is that no different than the monarchy that’s now been formed?”

Caprika held her ground, “It’s good to give people the chance to make empires of their own, however. It’s more motivating that way you’ll find.”

Helios stared her down a for moment before letting up the pressure. He gave her a slow nod,

“I’m impressed by your conviction. Do as you wish. I look forward to seeing the results.”

Althea and I looked on, my hand over her hip. Caprika turned to us as she sized me up. I gestured a hand to her, “It looks like Kessiah fixed your legs.”

Caprika nodded, “She certainly did, though she was generously compensated for that... You seem even more menacing than before. What changed about you?”

I gripped my hand into a fist, “I’m tougher than before.”

Caprika scoffed, “I find that hard to believe. Now, I’ve been speaking with Althea about various details of my city. Her insight’s been helpful, but she’s no replacement for the guild leader. I was hoping to discuss a few trade deals with you.”

I scratched the back of my head, “Hmmm, alright, I can do that. It can’t take up too much time though since I need a few days to learn this mythical compendium.”

Caprika let out a laugh before laying a hand on my forearm for a moment,

“You’ll find them amicable, I’m certain.”

I raised an eyebrow, “You seem more confident than before, like your old self.”

Caprika raised her glance, looking haughty, “I’ve much to be confident of. I allied us with a rather potent ally, The Immortal.”

Helios shoulders drooped as he let out a groan. I glanced between them, “What was that?”

Caprika nudged Helios, “He’s the one that gave you that title from the Empire. That’s what he told our father when reporting to you earlier. That’s what I overheard while listening to him in his office earlier.”

Helios sighed while holding his head up with his hand, “He is a giant block of iron with a brain of equivalent functioning. I chose a rather flattering interpretation in my report.”

Caprika put a hand to her face, “Ho ho, of course you did. Thank you for that.”

I turned to Althea, ignoring the siblings’ antics. I pressed my forehead to hers, “It’s great to see you.”

She grinned up to me, “You’re looking handsome today. How’d the...uh, evolution treat you?”

“It was painful. Not as painful as missing you though.”

Helios raised a palm to me, “That’s enough. Any more flaunting of your affection and I’ll vomit.”

Caprika pointed towards the city, “Perhaps we could talk business instead?”

I frowned, “Eh, ok.”

Helios left us while we ended up spending the better part of the next hour discussing some economic transactions between my guild and her city. Though it was pretty tedious, we ironed out a few resources to exchange. I learned a bit from the talk too.

The way resources worked in the galaxy wasn’t quite what I was expecting. Of course, dungeon cores, credits, and troops were valuable. I saw that coming. On the other hand, it shocked me how useful our old world tech was. It wasn’t because it served a practical purpose, but quite a few wealthy collectors sought out the remnants of ancient societies.

Caprika let me know a few spots for premium exchanges using her contacts in the Empire. She gave details for a few material collectors that would pay top dollar for fragments of my armor as well. Combine that with our old world style paintings, and Earth was turning into an antique shop rather than a junk heap.

I wasn’t sold on selling pieces of my skin, but it was nice to know that this would help Earth transition into a new power, though it would still take a while. That got me curious about how Earth was doing in general, including Hod and Amara. I was about to open up my status to send them a message before I remembered that Thisbey could read it.

I turned to Caprika as she gushed over the new design of her city,

“Wait a second before you continue, I was wondering if you knew anyone that understood system hacking?”

Caprika sputtered her words, “Ahem, wait a moment, you mean hacking into Schema?”

I waved my hand, “I already know someone like that. I’m talking about someone’s status.”

Caprika spread out her hands, “What? How do you know a system hacker? I don’t even know one, and our resources are incomparable.”

I shrugged, “I’m lucky. I don’t know a status hacker though.”

Caprika facepalmed, “It’s like talking to a baby that can’t crawl but has access to nuclear bombs. I’ve learned that the more I know about you, the more you have hidden.”

I waved off her concerns, “I’m not really hiding anything. I just never mentioned it. I really need some status hackers though.”

Caprika sobered up, “Would you mind disclosing why?”

“Thisbey could read my status. From our fight, it wasn’t my character screen at least. That’s why I was able to overwhelm his trap.”

Caprika froze up for a second.

“What?”

“Thisbey could read my messages. Most likely, Tohtella could as well. That’s why Althea was captured.”

Caprika leaned back from me, her head tilted, “Wait. Before we speak further, I’ll send in a techsmith for you. Your system might be recording us now. You should have mentioned this earlier before we elaborate on any sensitive information.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ve been juggling a lot here recently, and details are leaking through the cracks.”

Caprika sighed, “I know you’ll be fine if they lure you into some sort of deathtrap. Your followers are far less tenacious, however. Nothing is guaranteeing that they aren’t attacking your base on Earth, for instance.”

I shook my hand, “I’m doubtful. No one’s sent me a message about it, and Hod and Amara are very powerful, Hod in particular.”

Caprika raised her head, “What are his accolades?”

“He killed Yawm by tearing him apart. With help of course, but still.”

Caprika nodded, “Then assaulting your keep isn’t as easy as you’d presume. Hmm, would you need me to send guards perhaps? The Empire’s resources are vast, so we could afford to spare a few.”

I raised a hand, “Thanks for the offer, but I want Earth to be independent. We start our own fights, and we finish them.” I frowned, “You do have me nervous, though. This system hack might be blocking messages from my allies. I should check up on them.”

Caprika scoffed, “Whoever hacked into your status did so by very subtle and difficult to detect means. Otherwise, it would’ve been easy to pinpoint when and where they did it. That means it must be relatively limited. Otherwise, they know of hacking methods that even the Empire doesn’t know of.”

I sighed in relief, “Thank god. Here I was thinking they could stop me from leveling up at this point.”

“That power only belongs to Schema.”

Well, she wasn’t quite right about that. Amara put me out of exile status, and that let me level up again. I wasn’t about to mention that, so I turned to the door,

“If you say so. This was a good talk, and I’m glad your legs are up to snuff again. I have to go organize my guild though and come up with a plan to take out Lehesion.”

Caprika scoffed, “If an Overseer couldn’t kill Lehesion, what makes you think you can?”

I shrugged as I walked out of the door, “Who said anything about killing him?”

I rubbed my hands together, “I’ve got a few better ideas.”

Chapter 220: Laying Out Options

Caprika rolled her eyes under her red mask, “Such as?”

I coughed into a hand, “Ahem, I’ll let you know later when I’ve let the ideas gestate for a bit...”

Caprika laughed for a moment before turning back to her city, “Good luck with your goals. I’d offer more help, but I doubt I’d be of much use in that regard. Battle was never my forte, though I’ve already sent for the techsmith. He’ll be here in the hospital within the hour.”

She raised a hand, “Ah yes, I took every precaution necessary to ensure his security since you’ve been hacked before. I’ve already run a background check along with compiling a history of his service. He is absolutely trustworthy, having a family he cares for within this city. This is a big opportunity for him.”

I walked out of the room, “Thank you for that. You’re way more thoughtful than I’d be, that’s for sure. Anyways, see you later. Maybe we can have lunch in your new palace at some point.”

Caprika steepled her fingers, peering down at her model city, “We just may. Good luck getting rid of that monstrosity.”

I left the room before rounding up the others physically rather than by message. I didn’t want to message them and expose our location to anyone peeking at my status. It didn’t take long before I, the gialgathens, and the other aliens were standing in a circle in the healing room for large animals. It was the only room big enough for everyone. They all

still wore my armor, though the old black plates carried a few dents and slices from battle. I was glad it held up.

As I stared around, a surreal sensation washed over me. It was kind of strange that I was the most human person here. That was factoring in my dimension status, which was kind of wild. Either way, I rolled with it as I spread out my hands,

“How’s everyone holding up?”

Krog glared down at me, a bit of fury in his eyes, “We’ve lost half our gialgathen members. The humanoids were safe, as always.”

I turned to him, raising an eyebrow, “If there’s a problem, just bring it up. Don’t dance around it.”

Krog shook his head, “We gained nothing, and we lost good people. What isn’t there to be infuriated about?”

I waved my arms, “I understand what you’re saying, but you’re looking at this all wrong. We might not have killed Lehesion, but we learned some essential information about him. That wasn’t the kind of enemy you defeat easily and in one encounter either. I mean, you of all people know that. He defeated Emagrotha.”

Krog’s expression soured further. I raised a hand and counted on my fingers,

“Let’s look forward, alright. What did we learn? Well, first off, he’s immortal. Lehesion cannot be killed. This changes how we’ll approach the situation entirely. We can repress him and incapacitate him with Helios and me as long as we have the element of surprise. I can use that orbital bombardment to buy us time to capture him.”

I raised my eyebrows, “That’s if we can get Helios’s help again of course. I’ll admit, that’s a big if. For now, let’s assume we will.”

I raised another finger on my hand, “We have ways to circumvent his aura. Anyways, the second set of tactics we learned were ways to avoid Lehesion’s aura. Helios’s warps bypass it. We can plan around that in our next encounter.”

Althea crossed her arms, “So can Lehesion though. If he moved around, then he wouldn’t have taken that kind of damage. I doubt he’ll let us wail on him after you decimated him like that.”

Chrona murmured, a bit sadness in her voice, “And my aura will remain useless against him, along with most of our abilities.”

Krog was breathing hard in the back. Something about what she said was riling him up. Considering he just lost his home, grandfather, and many friends, I could understand why he was angry.

Before he lashed out, I pointed at Chrona, “Maybe, but I might have another solution. While within Lehesion’s aura, I could counter its effects by manifesting my mana. I should be able to create a gap that lets you all attack him while I keep him busy. It shouldn’t be impossible considering the boost I got to my mana recently.”

Krog frowned, showing teeth, “There are many ifs and few absolutes in this plan of yours. There is one thing for certain, Lehesion crushed you in one swipe before when wielding his full power. What makes you think you can hold him off on your own?”

It was a reasonable concern. I raised a hand, “I recently became much harder to kill. As long as my body holds, I’ll be able to hold the line against Lehesion. He isn’t actually that skilled since he relies on his aura and infinite mana for most of his offensive prowess. On top of that, his mind has degraded quite a bit. I’m pretty sure his actual tactical depth will be lacking. That gives us wiggle room to work with.”

I banged my cheek, a metallic ring echoing out, “Getting tougher is why I went missing for the last three days actually. I’ll be working on it until we fight again as well. Considering Lehesion needed that aura condensing attack to really hurt me, he’ll leave himself wide open to really do some damage. You all will be ready to fire away when he does.”

Chrona tilted her head at me, a genuine confusion spreading over her face, “How can you fight him on equal footing now?”

I nodded, “Er, my armor has these evolutions. They are a big reason for why I’m so strong right now, though I did build to accentuate my armor’s strengths. I just had a

massive breakthrough involving the evolutions. It made me several times harder to kill, and my mana increased by a similar level as well.”

I raised my hands, “Of course, I can’t muscle past Lehesion just yet, but I should be able to hold the line indefinitely as long as you guys are on point with countering his aura attacks.”

Krog scraped a claw against the ground, “I understand your confidence, and I know what kind of warrior you are, but you must understand something. We put lives on the line last time we fought. We’re fortunate to have lost so few, even if our homes were destroyed.”

He pointed his tail at Chrona, “You were throttled in one strike by that behemoth. I can’t in good conscience put our troops on the line over your estimations, as good as they are.”

I shook my head, “Trust me when I say the situation has changed since then. We have a chance, and don’t forget this planet will be glassed in the near future if we don’t act soon. Otherwise, I doubt we’d even attempt fighting Lehesion again.”

Krog’s tail whipped back in forth, “Perhaps a demonstration is in order then? We need something concrete to work off, something that can be seen perhaps. It would ease the concerns of the group I’m certain.”

Krog narrowed his eyes, “That shouldn’t be a problem unless you’re lying about your sudden change.”

Chrona turned to him, “What would you have him prove? Your own blows do nothing to him.”

Krog nodded, “Perhaps, but your strikes are different from my own. You crippled him in your last bout even if he recovered quickly. Daniel, if you could withstand her strikes, it would give me confidence to follow you and your assertions. Would you mind setting concerns to rest?”

I bit my tongue, a bit annoyed at Krog’s sudden rebellious streak. They were much more emotionally invested in the fight than I was, however. It made sense they weren’t handling it quite as well.

Taking that into consideration, I quelled my irritation. I was a leader now, and it was my responsibility to be level headed even if my followers weren't. Even then, a simple demonstration wasn't asking for an arm and leg. Well, most likely at least. I turned a palm to Krog,

"Alright, sure. It's good you're skeptical. I wouldn't want you guys running in unless our plan was bulletproof anyways."

I turned to Chrona, "I can show you guys anywhere you want. The others can watch as well."

She nodded before we walked out to the center of the spacious room. It gave us plenty of space to move and attack with. I rolled my shoulders, facing Chrona's bright blue form,

"Use your time dilation and give me a good whack with your tail at full force." I turned to Kessiah, "Be prepared to heal her."

Chrona's eyes were sad as she waved her tail behind her. She sighed as her dark blue, primordial mana pooled behind her. She murmured,

"Be ready. I would like to think you haven't forgotten my potency when I can use my abilities."

I shook my head, "Of course I didn't forget. I know full well how strong you are, and that's why this demonstration will be so effective."

As I finished my words, the blue ocean of energy welled above Chrona. The dimension around us shifted, her temporal dilation set. The others slowed down while Chrona and I readied ourselves for the attack. Chrona frowned,

"You understand I can attack better when you aren't moving, don't you?"

I nodded, "Uh, huh."

“Just making sure. I’m nervous I’ll really hurt you.”

“The math says I should be fine tanking your attacks now. If there’s one thing that’s worked for me so far, it’s the system’s math.” I took a deep breath, “I should be fine if it’s right, and it hasn’t been wrong so far.”

I set myself into a fighting stance, “Anyways, whenever you’re ready.”

She gave me a curt nod, “In Emagrotha’s name, we fight.”

Her tail whirled behind her, slicing the air behind her with a loud howl. With the momentum set, she reared the tailback and snapped it towards me. She hastened her movement, making her armored tail whip as fast as a falling anvil.

As it grew in my vision, friction from the air made the room heat up. It would hit me like a runaway train. That much was certain. I braced my arms overhead, meeting her slam from over me. I flashed a potent panel of gravity above me at the moment of impact, preventing the resulting aftershock from destroying the hospital. I didn’t want to ruin all the favor I curried with the empire over some test.

Without having to worry about the repercussions, I stared up as her tail made contact. The protection my black armor gave faltered, the metal shearing. Unable to handle the stresses placed upon it, her entire tail bent forward to an odd angle. As the forces rebounded up the bones of her tail, they snapped several vertebrae in.

The skin ripped along with a few muscles keeping the tail together. I winced as Chrona stared at the pale bones and pink flesh in her tail in shock. Blood seeped into the wound, turning it into a disgusting mess seconds later. It was an odd moment. My forearm acted as a dull blade, like slicing an orange with a rolling pin. If you add enough force, however, you could cut just about anything in a smashing sort of way.

In this case, it was like cutting your finger off by slamming it with a car door.

Turns out, that’s pretty painful.

Chrona winced as she gasped in a suppressed agony. I pulled her tail back together with a gravity well. After it plopped back down, Kessiah shuffled over with her blood arts at

the ready. Within seconds, she shifted a pool of blood over the arteries, nerves, and tissues. Keeping a professional demeanor, she stared at the wound without so much as flinching.

A few minutes later and Chrona was good as new. The gialgathen glared at her wound, moving her tail back and forth as if she didn't believe it was already fixed or that it broke in the first place. I let my arms down, gialgathen blood dripping down my forearms as I looked at the others. My armor soaked in the blood as I said,

"That should be plenty enough to tell I'm not joking around about what I said earlier."

Krog's eyes were wide as I'd ever seen them, looking more like dish plates the angry orbs they were before,

"To think you've changed so much in so little time. Last time you crumbled, and this time you withstood with ease."

I shook my hand, "To be honest, this evolution has been a long time coming. It took years on investment. Just as well, I didn't crumble last time per se. The bones in my forearms broke. If it wasn't for the armor I gave Chrona, that wouldn't have happened."

I gestured to myself, "Since then, my skin and bones condensed. That means my old armor didn't hold up. Without that, Chrona is trying to cut a steel wall with her tail." I pointed at the splattering of blood on the floor,

"Needless to say, it didn't work out."

Chrona looked as if she'd seen a ghost, gasping for air as she turned to me, "Please remind the others not to doubt you next time." She glared to Krog, "If they do, they should be the ones to test your tall tales instead of me."

Krog grimaced a bit, a look of shame spreading over him. I turned to everyone, "The only reason any of you doubted me was because I failed you guys. If any of you are angry and frustrated, I want you guys to understand that I'm angry as hell too. Lashing out is what I want to do, but that accomplishes nothing. Instead, I have a better idea."

I narrowed my eyes, “We get even. Lehesion took away your home, but he can never take away who you are. Now we can turn on each other and let our comrades die in vain, or we can stand together and tear Lehesion apart. The choice is obvious.”

My words sunk in over the next few seconds before Krog frowned, “I am still angry over our loss and the comrades I left behind, but-“

His voice softened, “But I can see you’re attempting redemption. You mean to avenge our fallen comrades. I will follow you still, in earnest.”

I raised a hand, “Good. I’ll need your help for what comes after I distract Lehesion then.”

Chrona collected herself and spoke up,

“What else is there that can be done?”

I tapped my temple with a finger from my raised hand,

“We’ll be infiltrating his mind. From his insane ramblings, we learned he’s being controlled to an extent. If he’s being controlled, we can tamper with that telepathic link or maybe even control him in their place. Now while I may not be the best at mind magic, I know someone who is.”

Althea grinned while snapping her fingers, “Torix.”

I pointed at her, “Bingo. He and I can wrestle for control while you guys pummel Lehesion to powder. If we can smash the mind magic that’s controlling Lehesion, then we can stop him from becoming a threat altogether. Hell, he might actually be an asset at that point.”

Althea bounced on her feet, “That’s perfect. Good thinking.”

I grinned at her, “Thank you. Those mind mages we fought when we found Thisbey made me think of it. Since my willpower is astronomical, I just need some fine tuning

before I can wrestle control from them. I put up a good fight with zero experience, after all.”

I scratched the side of my head, “I think so at least. Torix will let me know. All in all, that’s the plan. We incapacitate, get to work weakening their control of his mind, then we figure out where these guys are and kill them too. What do you guys think?”

Chrona laid her head against her paws, her voice relaxing, “It seems well thought out. I’ll follow it.”

Krog rumbled, “I dislike letting that betrayer live, but if it must be done, it must be done.”

Kessiah let out a breath as she composed herself after healing. She looked rather pale as she turned to me, “I’ll be honest, this isn’t my area of expertise. Just go with your gut.”

I clapped my hands once, “Alright, we got a plan. After a techsmith handles this bullshit system hacking, I’ll be sending Torix a few messages to see what’s going on. I’ll probably meet up with him wherever the hell he is and sees if we can’t get him back over here.”

After a few explanations about the system hacking, an albony walked into our room. It wore an orange mask over his face. The tribal, wooden cover was simple, engravings embedding the strangely shaded wood. With a few holes in it for viewing, the albony stepped up. He gave me a bow, brandishing a fitted coat. It showed the albony’s thin, lanky frame.

“It is good to meet you, Daniel. I am Jim Mcsmitty. I am the techsmith sent by Caprika Novas.”

I almost burst out laughing at the name, the simplicity of it caught me off guard. After suppressing my snickering, I raised my head, “Uh, good to meet you too, Mcsmitty.”

“But of course. Now, if you wouldn’t mind, I’ll be perusing through several diagnostic procedures with you. Could you take out your obelisk for me?”

I opened my palm, my obelisk floating out of the gray-black metal. I tossed it to him, Mcsmitty catching it with refined grace. He threw it up before suspending the object with several blue strands.

From these strands, a defuse light ebbed, scanning the glass orb. Within seconds, Mcsmitty tossed the ball back to me. As I caught it, Mcsmitty locked his hands behind him and bowed to me,

“This is the source of the contamination. It’s a simple message conscription software installation. It creates an immediate copy of all your sent messages before sending them out to whoever planted the bug. According to my data, Tohtella Adair planted it several months ago while you were in Yildraza.”

I facepalmed, “Of course. It was when I let her use my obelisk.”

Mcsmitty nodded his white fur ruffling, “That is precisely so. This is a very commonly utilized virus, and there’s no shame in having been hoodwinked by it. That being said, I do recommend viewing this as a learning experience of sorts.”

He raised a finger, “Simply put, never allow anyone access to your obelisk outside of trusted confidants. Even then, I wouldn’t recommend taking that risk.”

I glared at my obelisk, “Then what should I do with this?”

“You’ll need to dispense of it, preferably using some sort of hydraulic press. I know of several excellent locations-“

I crushed the obelisk in my hand to a fine powder, the glass screeching as I did. Mcsmitty winced at the sound,

“Ahem, I wasn’t aware you serve as a hydraulic press already. Do excuse my lack of tact.”

I pointed at the guy, “You know what, I like you Mcsmitty. How about you work for me?”

Mcsmitty rose out of his semi-bow, glancing around, “What, me?”

I nodded, “Yeh.”

“Why I’m flattered, but I’m several levels below you in status. Perhaps a higher rank techsmith will better suit someone of your needs-“

I waved my hands, “Is that why your mask is orange instead of red or black?”

Mcsmitty nodded, “That is precisely so.”

I raised my eyebrows, “How do the classes even work?”

“There are five tiers for our masks. I am in the middle range, giving me access to an orange wood from the defalga tree. The uppermost ranking is only for those that rule large territories, and they wield black masks. Below that are royalty or nobles who may rise at some point in time. They wear red masks.”

Mcsmitty let out a sigh, “Orange masks are commonly held by skilled technical workers, ambitious warriors, or merchants. Below that is the yellow masked, and they are what most refer to as commoners. I began in that status before proving my worth.”

Mcsmitty shook his head, “The lowest status are those wearing a white mask. They are considered useless to society and carry not even the most basic of privileges. It’s quite simple to move out of that status. Few of the lowlings opt to do so, however.”

I nodded, “Huh, so where am I?”

“You’re considered a lower tier red mask, sir.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Can I be honest with you here?”

“But of course.”

“I couldn’t give two fucks about my ranking. You figured this problem out fast, and you did it professionally. I also don’t have time to learn the ins and outs of this tech stuff, so hiring you makes sense for me. How much do you make?”

He coughed into his hand, “If I may be honest as well, I make a humble 100,000 per year-“

I snapped my fingers, “Alright, doubled. Welcome to the Harbinger’s Legion.”

Mcsmitty raised his palms to me, “While your generosity is more than amicable, I live with my family here on Belka-623. I couldn’t leave them.”

I cupped my chin, “Could you move to my home planet then?”

“We could, though this begs the question – why do you desire my assistance to such a degree?”

I shrugged, “You seem trustworthy, and you’re good at what you do. This is also very convenient for me, so I have no problem paying a bit for this kind of security. You’ll probably be looking over several thousand people besides for me, and you might need to host a few classes on the technical side of things.”

Mcsmitty leaned back, his uncertainty showing, “This is quite the addition to my current responsibilities...”

I pointed at him, “You drive a hard bargain. Tripled income and free housing. Deal?”

I stuck out my right hand, and Mcsmitty looked at it. He stuck out his left hand, grabbing the back of my hand. He glanced down at it then back up to me, “Is this the custom for an agreement in your culture?”

I shook my head, “Not even close, but I get what you mean.” I patted him on the back, “Welcome to the team.”

We handled a few more details involving his acceptance into my guild. Mcsmitty was stunned when he had the option for a legacy from intelligence, endurance, willpower, strength, and constitution. The thin albony scratched the side of his head,

“This is quite the conundrum. Which legacy would you recommend?”

I smiled, “Endurance because not dying is pretty important. Still, you know what you need better than I do.”

“Perhaps this will be better then. Willpower will allow for further study, and increase my intelligence by quite a bit as well. Thank you.”

I drew up a quest acceptance for three hundred thousand credits per year of dedicated service from Mcsmitty. After lining up the responsibilities, I sent him the contract along with Earth’s coordinates. He accepted before locking his hands behind him and bowing once more,

“You’ve tied my hands, sir. I’ll need a week before I’ll be ready to change locations to your base of operations. Thank you for your time and consideration.”

I gave him a nod before he stepped away. I glanced at my hands, thinking about what just happened. Owning a guild wasn’t so bad if I could gather people like that so quickly. I wondered if we needed a recruiter in general to shore up the weaknesses in our guild. Considering how much money I had, that didn’t seem like a bad idea.

With that in mind, I sent a message to Torix about everything that happened along with my thoughts about a recruiter. The long message detailed everything that happened since his untimely consumption by Version 2.0. I waited a few more minutes before scratching the side of my head. It might take a while for him to resuscitate after his soul was sent to its phylactery.

I wasn’t about to waste any more time waiting for a reply, though. It was time to work on my ability to take Lehesion on. That started with the cipher. As I looked over my armor augments, one of them included making the cipher more efficient. It was already a massive source for raw stats, but now it would be even more useful.

Using it correctly was key to my progress from here on out. While I could siphon my mana into my fancy, massive rune across my back for more ambient mana, it wasn’t

that efficient. Instead, I aimed to create a rune to enhance my constitution. With the way all my trees and perks worked, that would be my most viable and efficient way to improve my fighting ability. My mana regen and miscellaneous stats were plenty high at this point anyway.

Those thoughts guided me as I walked through the hospital for a quiet place to work at. I found a hallway between two rooms that ended with two plants, a comfy looking chair, and a window showing the city. It looked like space was leftover from the two surrounding rooms during the hospital's design. Someone spruced it up, so it didn't look out of place.

It suited my needs perfectly, sunlight streaming in from the glass window. After sitting down and enjoying the quiet, I smoothed the luck and perception runes over my forearms and palms. I pulled my grimoire out of storage, opening towards the few black pages left at the back of the booklet. All that remained was the charred corpse of my old grimoire, but this booklet served its purpose.

I would need to make another grimoire soon though.

I sharpened one of my fingertips until it was like a pen before tapping it on the black page. Brainstorming about constitution, I outlined my thoughts about it. For starters, the literal definition revolved around the way something was put together. My composition was one of the biggest reasons I was a good fighter, even if it wasn't something I thought about all the time.

When I did think about my constitution though, it didn't mean being a dense, heavy, and hard substance to me. Constitution was the stat that refused to be moved. It was making your last stand against incredible odds. It was staying defiant in the face of the impossible and improbable.

In other words, having a great constitution was having a great backbone.

I guess you could say that was more a mental attribute than a physical one, like willpower and intelligence, but I had to disagree. When I first faced monsters that made my skin crawl, my body was the first thing to shut down. My vision narrowed, my heart raced, and my muscles seized up. It was as much a physical reaction as a mental one.

Pretending there wasn't some kind of physical element to it seemed short-sighted to me. After all, if I faced someone who I dwarfed, I oozed confidence. There was no

sense of impending doom anymore, and that let me focus on performing instead of trying to calm down.

So in a way, having a great constitution allowed me to have certainty when facing a foe of immense size and power. It was the first line of defense against fear, and that was all important to avoid. Fear was the mind killer, a real destroyer of rationality. If I lost those tools in the middle of a fight, then death was waiting right around the corner. Keeping myself composed was pivotal then.

Confident in that interpretation, I set to work on my runic work. I used tiny pinpoints of telekinesis along with some heat to burn into the pages. They mimicked metal more than pages anyway, so this worked well for me.

Several minutes evolved into several hours, the sun setting down and night passing. A janitor caught me, wondering what the hell I was doing in the hospital still, but I convinced him to leave me alone with some mental pressure. As the morning came, I finished my runic work and channeled some mana into it.

Ten minutes passed, and both runes were finished. After placing them on my palms and arms, I smacked my hands together. It was a job well done. I opened my status to make sure I didn't have any messages about the guild. Besides a few dozen miscellaneous messages from my followers, there was nothing of note.

Shit. Torix was still doing whatever he needed to for recovering. Not everyone had my kind of regeneration, so I had to be patient. I took a deep breath before moving down my list of priorities. The reason the cipher came first was that it would work in the background while I did anything else. It was layering the things I accomplished at once, kind of like cooking food in the microwave while putting dishes in the dishwasher.

Well, Mana channeling into the dimensional cipher was pretty damn different, but it was the same concept I supposed.

Anyways, I opened my status menu before checking out my tabs. I found a new one for the mythical compendium, which was next up on my list of things to do. Without further wait, I clicked it, opening a new menu.

The mythical compendium is about to be open. User will be unable to move or think for three days once the virtual simulator is opened. Are you in a safe and comfortable position?"

I sat up straighter, my posture kind of shitty. I clicked yes, and another message popped up,

Data Processing...Data Processing...Data Processing

I tapped my fingers, waiting on the damn thing to finish. I went ahead and sent everyone a message that I'd be unavailable for the next three days. Better to let them know instead of letting them panic.

Data Processed. Simulation Created. Consciousness Being Transferred.

Some force grabbed my mind, making my hairs stiffen up on end. I fought back without meaning to, a deep, primal reflex activating. Some type of calming aura washed over me a few seconds later. I tried keeping my eyes opened, but they closed seconds after.

All went blank before I opened my eyes, finding myself in a different world. As I glanced around, I cupped my chin,

“So this is the mythical compendium, huh.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“It's...weird.”