

New World 221

Chapter 221: The Learning Process

Around me, a room the size of a parking lot expanded outwards, all the walls white and blank. Glowing lines generated up and down the walls, creating squares of glowing light in the three-dimensional space. In front of me, an ethereal being floated with energy rippling across its shapeless form. Even if unseen, the entire expanse saturated with primordial mana and pulsed as if alive.

The sheer volume was stunning, but it was docile kind of magic. Something filtered it, reducing its volatility from staggering to unnoticeable. Listening close, a gentle hum rang in my ears, the kind let out by a cooling system of sorts. It trickled in from beyond the walls like the echoes of a far off stream.

As I placed my hand on the white panels beneath me, the floor was unbreakable. Compared to walking on the ground, it was actually pleasant. Dirt might as well be a thin soup at this point, and having something firm to stand on was lovely. The floor's refusal to give even a micrometer gave me a few ideas as to where I was.

As I stood up, I finished scoping out the room. A message appeared in front of me.

Transient AI-2035 finished generating. Further explanations will be handled by the personalized AI.

I stepped up to the wispy being and waved a hand,

“Uh, hello.”

It shivered before answering in a monotone and robotic voice,

“I am Transient AI-2035. I am your tutor for your stay here within the temporal dilation chamber 2035. I will assist you in learning the mythical skill Metamorphosis along with suggestions for further growth in other areas. This is to utilize the data scans during the mythical compendium's scanning.”

I cupped my chin, “You mentioned a temporal dilation chamber?”

That would explain all the primordial mana. Schema was slowing time in a massive area here.

“Yes, this is a time chamber. Your consciousness was jettisoned into a small cube. This cube is placed with thousands of other cubes within a chamber that slows your perception of time, elongating the effects of the mythical compendium.”

Some of the squares around me shined bright, grassland appearing after they dimmed down. Transient continued,

“This allows for the virtual creation of many habitats and scenarios as well, creating an optimal learning environment. Here you will be instructed for sixteen hours daily while allowing for eight hours of rest or relaxation per rest cycle. This is to prevent mental burnout.”

Something in my head throbbed a bit, though it required my enhanced senses to even feel. As I rubbed my temple, Transient continued,

“This area places tremendous strain onto individuals minds. This often determines the amount of time that can be allowed here. Average time limit is equivalent to three days over three hours. Assessing ability to tolerate time dilation...”

My headache spawned from the effects of the temporal dilation. Alright, that made sense to me. A satisfying ping sounded out.

“Estimated time before departure will be three weeks due to above average durability. Adjusting the curriculum around excess time limits.”

I raised my eyebrows, “That sounds good.”

“It can be considered a good thing. Usability assessments added. Integration suggestions expanded. Real-time practice added. Enhanced rights applied. Are you prepared for the curriculum’s beginning?”

A message popped up.

Y/N

I raised a hand before answering, “Wait a minute. I have a few questions.”

“Ask away.”

“I was wondering what you meant by enhanced rights? I’ve heard about different kinds of rights since getting into Schema’s system, but I still don’t know what they do.”

“Rights are a generalized term for the systematic application of various privileges and responsibilities to different parties based upon the merit and success of their individual efforts. In Schema’s tutorial, the generalized term is defined through several key quotes. One such quote is as follows-“

The AI’s voice changed to a smooth recording of Schema’s British Morgan Freeman voice,

“A discussion of a sentient being’s rights cannot be had without an equal discussion about responsibility. This is due to the nature of rights. Their existence guarantees responsibility. This duality is evidenced by a series of simple examples.”

Two generic, blank humanoids appeared out of one of the glowing squares. One of the humanoids held a knife before stabbing the other one in the neck. The living humanoid puffed out its chest before another humanoid appeared behind it. It too stabbed the killer in the neck, and so the cycle of death continued.

Schema’s voice reverberated,

“If a society grants its citizens the right to not be murdered, then it is each citizen’s responsibility to not murder as well. If you are given the right to pursue happiness, then it is your responsibility to not interfere with another’s right to pursue their happiness. Rights within my system are given with this general assumption in mind.”

An emoji of a Sentinel appeared as the voice continued,

“This is a Sentinel, and it has been given enhanced rights. This comes with the responsibility to use these rights for the good of others. If the Sentinel misuses these rights-“

The armor fell off the white, humanoid blob.

“Then, these rights will be taken. The greater the rights given, the greater the fail safes employed to prevent the misuse of these rights.”

I frowned, “If that’s the case, why not call it a job instead of rights?”

The AI’s robotic voice returned, “Schema ran tests of the reactions of persons to various wordings, and rights were received in the best manner. This also teaches a key philosophical point of Schema – status, power, and influence are earned, not given.”

I glanced at a few of my quests, finding one that mentioned gaining the ‘rights’ of a Sentinel. It was basically an invitation to become one. That was far less tempting than what the quests implied by their wording, which was a bit of a disappointment.

I pointed around me, “Alright, I have a few more questions. If Schema can just pull your consciousness out of your body like this, then why not do it to criminals and the like in Schema’s system? You’d turn them into vegetables in an instant.”

“The amount of mana required for such an undertaking is excessive. This requires the scanning, physical manifestation of compendiums, and it would rapidly fill up the time dilation chambers at Schema’s disposal. This would also strip any knowledge and experience gained from the parties responsible for killing said criminals.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Huh, so the logistics don’t work out.”

“If there are no further questions involved, then instruction may begin. As a reminder, remember that your time here is limited.”

I shrugged while selecting the Y button in my status. Around us, the environment changed to that of an unmoving, shallow ocean with an island of warm sand under my feet. The crisp, cold wind smothered out the heat from a blinding sun overhead. A few

birds cooed in the distance or dove into the ocean to pick up fish from the sea. I glanced around, kind of confused.

“Why are we here?”

“This is to teach the baseline skill Serenity. This will be the cornerstone in the creation of origin mana, which is the polar opposite of your ascendant mana type.”

I cupped my chin, “Man, it has been a while since I’ve thought about mana types. Can you give me a refresher?”

The hovering energy ball rose up to my left shoulder as a graph appeared in front of me,

“There are three primary mana types. Origin, the mana of creation, augmentation, the mana of inner control, and dominion, the mana of outer control. These mana types can be fused into three more types of mana, each carrying stronger qualities than the mana types used to create them. They are referred to as higher manas.”

In front of me, a ball of light blue, orange, and black mana appeared. Above the bright blue was the word origin, augmentation was above the orange ball, and dominion above the black. I pointed at them,

“Yeah, I remember now. My ascendant style of mana is dominion plus augmentation.”

“That is correct. It is the mana of control in its entirety. Using ascendant mana creates favorable conditions for its wielder. It relishes on control and dominance, such as draining enemies of their mental strength and enhancing your own.”

The orange and black balls of mana on the screen fused into a ball of bloody mana. It was my mana. The spheres of energy split back apart before the light blue and black manas merged together. The deep blue mana looked like the depths of an ocean,

“This is primordial mana. It is the mana of animation. Origin mana requires the release of control, while dominion demands the opposite. This allows for the generation of fully autonomous beings such as golems or conjured beings. It can also be used to

create areas with conditions that enhance you as well. Note, negative consequences will result in negative consequences for the wielder as well.”

I frowned, “How is that different from Torix’s summoning, and why does it make him an unknown?”

“Torix Worm utilizes a soul grafting to control eldritch. Primordial mana generates utterly subservient beings created from nothing but energy. This means they lack the volatility of eldritch.”

Torix dug his own grave in that regard. It did give him summoning abilities without having to learn this mana type, though. Gaining primordial mana would expand his capabilities quite a bit. I took note of that before letting the AI continue.

“Chrona uses this style of mana for her time expansion and hastening effects. While admirable, this isn’t the most efficient process for you for several reasons.”

I raised my palm, erupting a plume of red mana from it, “Is my mana type why?”

“This is one of several reasons why. Your limitations stem from the nature of your existence. As a dimension, you will struggle to influence the spatial laws around you. In many of your conflicts, others have tried manipulating the space around you to negatively impact you in some way. Your complete autonomy is why you’ve come out unscathed.”

I clamped my hand shut, letting my hand fall to my side, “Like Ajax’s dimension slicing or Chrona’s time manipulation...Huh, so why do physical attacks still affect me then?”

The graph showing manas shifted, showing images of Chrona and my fights.

“You are still physically here. The dimensional attacks warp the space around you instead of you directly. They aim to create an effect on the space, which will then incur the same effect on you. You stand on another plane, however.”

“That’s been pretty useful then.”

“Given the right circumstances, it is. During your attempts to learn Chrona’s magic, it acted as a roadblock, however. You attempted manipulating the dimensional space around you. Even if you succeeded, you would never have hastened yourself.”

I pursed my lips, “That means I can’t have the same ‘slowing’ affect that Chrona has, doesn’t it?”

“Yes and no. You could, in theory, perform the same enchantment she is. It would be the same as drowning an ocean with a bucket of water. Conceptually, it simply isn’t practical. Hastening, on the other hand, will be even more powerful with you than her. This will be the primary reason for teaching you quintessence mana.”

I pointed my thumb to my chest, “Ah, I’ll just make my dimension’s time move faster.”

“This is correct. Without quintessence mana, this would be impossible. With it, you will be able to change the parameters of your existence. This is critical for your ongoing progress.”

I nodded, “So the quintessence mana is the last ‘higher’ mana type then?”

“This is correct. This is why we will be instructing you to learn the Serenity skill. Review completed. Sit down in a comfortable position to begin learning Serenity.”

I did so, the warm sand being pushed away by my heft. The cool sand beneath me contrasted the warm sun above. In a cross-legged position, Transient swirled to the front of me,

“You must clear your mind of all thoughts and feelings. This includes ambition or impatience. Focus on being at peace with the state of the world. Let go.”

I scoffed, “That explains why I never learned this skill at least. Gotta stay moving to stay alive sometimes.”

Transient quivered for a moment before stabilizing, “You must balance your approach, or you will fail to realize your potential.”

I went ahead and gave it a shot. Turns out, not thinking was actually pretty hard. Considering I hadn't slept in years, I fell out of practice with the whole slowing down my thoughts thing. By now, doing so was like using an atrophied limb. It would take time to build up my tolerance to the new activity.

Several hours passed with a bit of progress. Turns out, my willpower actually hurt my growth. If I tried too hard, Transient would announce, "Levels of relaxation compromised. Reset composure." I heard that phrase dozens of times, and it grated a bit on my nerves after a while. It helped to have someone creating clear boundaries for me even if they annoyed me.

The second thing I learned was that this island and its surroundings were perfect for clearing my mind. There was just enough going on that it wasn't unsettling to just sit still. There wasn't too much going on to distract me either, keeping the experience in a state of balance. It made the whole meditating thing much more comfortable.

The third thing I learned was that Originator, the tree that sped up my skill creation, would save me a lot of time here.

Skill gained! Serenity(lvl 10) – While many attempt to crash through boulders with force, you remain formless like water. +10% to tranquility.

Disappointed by the skill but not showing it, I patted my hands on my knees,

"So what's next?"

Transient let out a small spark, "Five hours passed." The monotonous voice changed to an overly happy one, "This is excellent progress!"

I shook my head before gasping, "Wait...five hours? What the fuck."

"This is Serenity. It allows you to be at peace despite what goes on around you. This is essential for you to learn origin mana. To begin, channel your mana into augmentation and dominion manas."

I raised my palms and did as the AI said. It wasn't tough to create augmentation or dominion now. With the black and orange energy spheres floating over my palms, I said,

"What comes next?"

Transient bobbed in the air, "After developing control of an upper tier mana type, many lose their refined control of the sub mana types used in its creation. You haven't. This speeds the process along."

Transient floated backward, "Now grasp onto the feeling of producing your armor or regenerating. Do so while activating the skill Serenity."

It was a surprisingly simple request. I did as the little ball asked, taking a few minutes before calming myself down. After a while, I raised my hand and attempted molding my armor. It did so, but the innate vigor of the material disrupted my peaceful state of mind. It was like meditating with a hungry wolf howling at my door.

It snapped me out of Serenity like a whip across my back. Transient murmured,

"Try again."

I sighed,

"This is going to take a while."

From the pit of embalming fluid, I splashed upwards in a jolt of panic. I turned and shouted, splashes of the fluid spilling onto the white stone,

"Me. It will take time for me to reconstitute but I...I"

I turned around, discovering the dusty crypt I once called home. Within the confines of it, various ghostly lamps lit the silent corridors, death lingering on the howl of each gust. Though I resented my sense of style at the time of my making it, it did have a sort of angsty charm. If not for that, I might have stripped my lair down till nothing but scorched stone lay beneath its remains.

As I glanced around, I found dozens of vats stored with direct connections to my phylactery. At the center of these vats, a sizable glass bauble acted as the anchor for my soul. It contained within it the remnants of my original body burned to ash within the glass sphere. This protected it from further chemical decomposition.

It worked as intended, though it may be lacking in regards to an elegant design. Considering my soul crossed light-years of space before reaching this distant beacon, it might have been months since my passing. In actuality, the process might've even taken longer. Once stored, my soul reconstituted, solidified, and strengthened using the ambient mana stored here.

What was once an impressive sight of concentrated mana now seemed childish on my aged eyes, however. I'd met monsters on my travels when I left these hallowed halls, not least of those monsters becoming my disciple. As lucidity returned to me, a sense of urgency rose in my chest.

My disciple. My guild. We were in battle before that abomination latched upon me. I opened my status, several of my preset leveling parameters taking effect. They automatically allocated my points for me, a sudden surge of clarity coursing through me.

At the very least, they killed the hybrid. Despite this surge of level ups, a mental fog remained over my mind like blood upon a murderer's hands. Before anything else, I opened my status to assess the situation.

Torix Worm, the Harbinger's Erudition(lvl 8,211)

Strength – 100 | Constitution – 100 | Endurance – 100

Dexterity – 100 | Willpower – 9,035 | Intelligence – 18,278

Charisma – 8,927 | Luck – 7,763 | Perception – 4,907

Health: 39,485/39,485 | Health Regen: 394.8/min

Mana: 1.3 million | Mana Regen 130,028/min

Stamina: 872/20,176 | Stamina Regen: 20,176/min

Mass: 1,210 pounds | Height: Actual – 6'6 (1.98 meters) | Damage Res – 95%

Phys Dam Bonus – 6,092% | Damage Bonus – 40%

I scrolled past my character sheet, looking at my party member's statuses.

Living Multiverse, the Harbinger of Cataclysm(lvl 9,018 | Guild Leader: The Harbinger's Legion | Class: None | Location: Belka-623) – A being composed of an unknown matter with untold potential, this being is predatory to the eldritch. It consumes them to gain strength which can strike fear in even fearsome rift keepers. With the ability to shift forms at will, this amorphous creature holds no permanent shape and is ever-growing.

This is mainly due to the ease of changing the material's composition. Due to the amorphous structure of the cells and even atoms, shifting this creature's atomical structure in a positive manner is quite simple. This enhances the amount of stats and bonuses that this creature receives from the system...

Althea Tolstoy, the Shapeless Arbiter(Althea Tolstoy, the Shapeless Arbiter(lvl 10,016 | Class: Breaker | Location: Belka-623) – Althea is a polymorphic member of a forgotten race. Her exposure to the Tears of Etorhma created a volatile and potent chemical structure that enables her to ignore many of the laws of physics. How these abilities manifest is unknown, but they prove no less potent for it...

I scrolled down the list, finding them with full or nearly full health bars. I leaned back into the vat behind me, relief washing over me along with the embalming fluid. He and the others were still alive, and that was what mattered most at that precise moment.

As I collected myself, I dragged my hand down my face, both my panic and my reprieve hitting my senses as if alive and seeking revenge. Despite not knowing Daniel and Althea for a protracted period given the scope of my life, they meant quite a bit to me. Perhaps more to me than I'd like to admit, even to myself, but these were thoughts for a different time.

I pushed myself up from the bath of formaldehyde and methanol, only the bones of this corpse remaining. It would be enough to act, so I did not dwell on my appearance. I stumbled forward a few steps before falling on onto my knees. A bone in my shin cracked, a sharp pop echoing across my chambers.

I let out a long sigh before pushing myself back up. Schema's policy on lichs was more than merely mildly frustrating. The AI preferred only amplifying the main body of the lich, passing on the enhanced physical tenacity once. As a lich moved onto its other bodies, they lacked Schema's enhancements. In the world of eldritch and classers, I was but a frail skeleton, softer than wet tissue paper now.

It mattered not. My mind and my magic were the catalysts of my power and strength, and they would likely be needed, considering the obstacles we faced. I waited a moment on the floor of my phylactery, giving my pathetic body time to recover and resonate. As my soul grafted onto the new physical body, I peered around my chambers.

The same maps, charts, and runic symbols covered the walls. They seemed so elementary to me now after discovering the runes within Bloodhollow. No, they didn't appear primitive. They were primitive. Though my talent for runic work was slight, my dismal performance here grated at me. It reflected my mentality at the time. I believed that my progress, slow as it may be, would mount over time. My safety took precedence.

That was the only reason I went to Earth at all. It was a backwater, green world without Schema's scars or marks. This lack of time ensured the danger there would be small. Who was I to guess that it would be the place of my greatest battles, my greatest victories, and my most valued family? Not I at the very least.

I tilted my head, confused at my own wording. I supposed family was the correct term for the guildsmen, disciple, and others I'd come to cherish. They gave these old bones a renewed vigor as if life took hold of my undead body once more.

I hoped they thought the same of me. One could only hope.

It boggled the mind why I drifted towards these thoughts. Something about this dusty tomb induced this sense of nostalgia. Perhaps it was the vast swath of time since I'd last came here. Though only a few years had passed, that span resembled a lifetime in the density and quality of time spent. I would traverse the hills of skulls and mountains of corpses to go back to that invigorated life.

That wouldn't be necessary, however.

I simply needed to create a portal towards Belka after getting myself in order. Reviewing my status, I discovered hundreds of unread messages from my students, professors, and proteges. I sorted through them by importance, the guild leader's notes naturally rising to the top. In his messages, he detailed much of what happened after I'd passed to Version 2.0.

It was a simple, concise, and blunt explanation. I expected no less from Daniel, his entire manner of being more akin to a hammer than a human. If what he worked at did not bend in one swing, he simply swang more until it did break. I would've once called this approach foolish. I do so no longer. It worked on Earth as well as Giess. He killed Emagrotha, the Hybrid, and destroyed the rebel's headquarters. He won the tournament and enlisted many gialgathens, going so far as to recruit them within Schema's system.

Exemplary work, enough for me to be proud.

A shame swam underneath that warm delight, partially from my missing the adventures and partly from dying. I swatted away those trivial concerns. In the grand scheme of things, it was better that I was targeted. Resuscitating me required little more than time. Doing so for the others wouldn't be quite so simple.

I squeezed my bony hand into a fist. My outlook may be overly optimistic, given the circumstances. That was my first death since becoming a lich centuries ago, and now my ensuing deaths would occur with far greater frequency. Despite my immunity to true death, this incident proved that a temporary demise could create quite the conundrum.

Dwelling on my impotence did no good, however. I opened my other messages, skimming over the topics of them. Nothing of note occurred on Earth outside of a few conflicts with rival factions near our base. I would leave those trifles for another, less

critical time. After guaranteeing that our headquarters remained in one piece, I forced this weak, shaky body to stand.

It required mana just to hold the joints of the bones together, the connective tissues weakened beyond repair. My less than representable shambling continued as I walked down the familiar hallways. I passed several open doors, several of my old subjects still remaining where I left them.

Two of the dark knights still stood on guard to at the door of my portal room even after all these years. They raced over at the sight of me, reaching and lifting me from under my armpits. Detestable as it was, I accepted their help to carry me over towards the portal device at my disposal.

I attempted speaking, but my words jumbled together in broken phrases. Several attempts into the process, my words formed correctly,

“I...must...go...to...Belka.”

Both the knights nodded, their intelligence mirroring educated humans. They required instruction to use, but the animated corpses accomplished their goals with resounding competence once a goal was given. With a purpose set, they pulled me into the room with my warp device.

A well of ambient mana shined a bright blue, the dense cloud powering the device above it. Carved from the lunar stone, the portal device carried the best runic work of my race, courtesy of Xander Epitaph. Though a nuisance in person, his talents were undeniable.

It would grant me the highest satisfaction to see his smug face crumble when faced with my disciple and his runic work.

It was another victory for another day.

As the knights began the work of activating the device and powering the coordinates, two other knights stepped into the room and stood beside me. Without words, they agreed with my other minions to guard me on my travels with my new body. Though my sense of scale in my previous life was lacking, my instruction was not.

Under my tutelage, I trained a vast army of soldiers with excellent tactical nuance. Their levels were so low in comparison to me now, however, that they were all but useless. Althea alone could decimate the centuries of resources spent here, let alone Daniel or Helios. It was something I learned when faced with a being like Yawm. The might of many paled when faced with the resolve of one.

Pressing on that very subject, I sent him a reply that I'd be there in person soon enough, he need only be patient. We chatted for a moment before the portal device lit up in a blaze of blue fire. This runic machine eased the process of getting to a location, though it didn't assist with getting back once there. It wasn't a particularly difficult problem, though it caused quite a stir when Schema's quarantine trapped me on Earth.

That was more than a dull mess, and I doubt a two-way portal would've fixed it either.

The situation on giess devolved in much the same manner, in fact. Old Ones and shadow organizations ascended to the surface like a monster from the depths. I had every confidence that this would be our victory given time, however. I was more than merely resourceful, and I had every intention of proving it once I returned.

I paced up to the portal with my guard in tow. Several other guards approached, handing me a new robe, mimicking my old one in both appearance and power. It would do little outside of maintaining appearances, but that was still a necessity, especially when dabbling with the Empire.

Before stepping to Belka, I turned and observed my old fortress. I created it upon the moon of my homeworld, preferring the quiet isolation of a ruined world to the rigor of living company. Perhaps I'd show Daniel this place after we eliminated my unknown status. Time would tell.

As I stepped through the portal, a sense of excitement filled me. I was returning to the land of the living, weakened but not dead. I was the advisor to the Harbinger and his legion. If I had lips, they would be smiling wide as a canyon.

Onwards, the legion marches. Onwards, the legion marches.

I leaned my head back, letting go of my stranglehold on my mana. Instead of molding it into a shape, I allowed it to take form as it wanted to. At the same time, it manifested independently of me. I didn't guide it as it formed or flowed. I simply let it be like wind through a forest.

From my palm, a plume of sky blue mana ebbed outwards. I stared down at it, no wave of emotion washing over me. I was at peace with this, and it was an inevitability in my eyes...Even if it took days of exhaustive effort before I finally accomplished this bullshit.

And the spark of pale mana crumbled under a wave of red. I tsked before clasping my hand over the bloody energy, the red wisping between my fingertips. This was the fifth day I worked on forming origin mana since I arrived in this time chamber. Well, the fifth day relative to my perspective of time. According to Transient, only twelve hours passed outside of this chamber.

The airy little AI was doing his best to make me lose my damn mind the entire time I tried this shit. Despite that, his methods were surprisingly effective. Five days to get this close to a new mana type was no small feat. It being night time at the moment meant he wasn't here, and the process a bit harder.

You wouldn't catch me dead telling him that though.

Either way, with a renewed vigor, I silenced my mind once more. I let go of my mana flow, allowing it to wonder and shape itself as it saw fit. Like a wolf unchained, it roared out with abandon. Half an hour later of letting it loose, it settled down into a calmer state. As it did, Serenity activated.

It was hellish to keep calm when my mana flared like that. Even if my evolution eliminated my mana's effects on me, it still sent the world around me into chaos. In a way, the mana was a reflection of my inner thoughts. It showed my belief in myself and my urge to move and progress. At the same time, to learn origin mana, I needed to get rid of that constant urge.

So I calmed myself till my mind and body were like a waveless sea. Even as the volatile energy escaped me and warped reality, I remained mute. I pressed myself into a state of uncaring, my mind content. Once more, I raised a palm after channeling this peaceful mentality for an hour.

The slightest drop of blue mana released. It shaded the dark island around me in a sky blue, both beautiful and haunting. I took a deep breath as I allowed more to escape my hand. It did so with glee, the blue waves forming into shapes.

The glowing energy created dolphins that danced across my sight. It rippled across my view, ebbing into the island. Greenery expanded from the sand, trees taking root. Bees and hornets swarmed into the trees above, forming nests. A series of wolves spawned from the glow, creating a pack.

As they gained life, they let me continue my work with reverence. Moments later, a message appeared in my vision.

Skill gained! Origin Mana(lvl 10) – Though others aim their intent to destroy, you focus your efforts on creation. +10% to origin mana's potency.

Skill gained! Origin Mana Manipulation(lvl 10) – Through the chaos of life, you control your will with tranquility. +10% to ease of using origin mana.

I stood up, raising a fist in victory. A torrent of red energy deluged the blue sending the creatures into a bloodthirsty frenzy. My arms hit my sides as they tore into one another, eager to devour the others. Blood splashed into the water, turning the blue into red as carnage took hold of the gentle beauty.

I stared with my jaw slack as every animal killed the other. Teeth, claws, and stingers ran amok as they gorged on the blood of their brethren. As the last wolf limped away from the battlefield, it clamped its jaws into the flesh of its legs. It tore the limb off before consuming its meat. It cannibalized itself until it bled out. I didn't even have time to celebrate the milestone as my act of creation was replaced by destruction.

Huh. Life's weird sometimes.

I reached out with Event Horizon, the corpses, blood, and remnants of the battle disintegrating. In a way, it felt wrong. I gave them life only to take it away moments later. I stared at my hands, feeling like some clueless tinkerer that destroyed people with what I created.

I shook that feeling off before glancing around. The virtualization cleaned itself up, the island back to its pre-bloodbath state. The next time I created something from origin mana, I would be more careful. It was a responsibility in a sense, and toying with life just didn't seem right. I wasn't that divorced from reality. Not yet.

Still, getting a better grip on my new mana was vital. I called back that state of mind, my mana releasing in a torrent. Before I got a hold of it, a message popped up in my status. I almost swiped it aside because I hated distractions when I studied, but I gave it the benefit of the doubt. The moment I read the messenger's name, my eyes popped wide open along with a grin on my face.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill(lvl 8,211 | Guild: Harbinger's Legion | Class: Speaker | Time: Unknown) – It appears as though I've finally resuscitated. Though you've performed a rather admirable job, all things considered, my assistance is no doubt needed. I will be returning to the location you sent me, though I will be rather weak. Meet me there in three days.

That worked perfectly with my schedule. At the moment, I was sitting in a hospital, my mind somewhere else altogether. Knowing all that, I sent him a message back.

The Living Multiverse(lvl 9,024 | Guild Owner: Harbinger's Legion | Class: None | Location: Belka-623 | Time: 12/4/1412) – Alright, cool. Cya then.

A message appeared seconds later.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill(lvl 8,211 | Guild: Harbinger's Legion | Class: Speaker | Time: Unknown) – I suppose I'll question you on your level and status after we meet once more face to face. Good luck.

I sent back,

The Living Multiverse(lvl 9,024 | Guild Owner: Harbinger's Legion | Class: None | Location: Belka-623 | Time: 12/4/1412) – Sure thing.

I went back to work afterward, rubbing my hands together. I fell into a deep well of calm, relaxation, and peace as the force of mana increased. With a rising surge, I tested my limits with the new energy, the mana of creation coursing through my veins. It was

altogether pleasant, and for a moment, I was envious of those with an affinity for origin mana. It lacked the same bloodthirsty insanity of ascendant mana.

This wouldn't require the same levels of willpower to control, though that might not be the case. This mana made me feel at ease and content, which could be a good thing. It could be detrimental too, though. If I needed motivation, this wasn't the best mana for it. Ascendant mana would fill me with a surge to move, and that was more than just useful in certain circumstances.

Considering the peace origin mana gave me, I might be able to channel the aura to make people fall asleep or at least cool a heated negotiation. I still had to be careful not to overdo it though. I was sure that if ascendant mana sent people on a bloodthirsty frenzy, then origin mana could do something equally awful.

After toying with the feeling for a while, I remembered a portion of what my evolution did. It mentioned different effects depending on the aura of mana I used. With that in mind, I channeled origin mana while sitting down cross-legged. As it reached its peak, I pressed outwards with Event Horizon, but as I did, I realized something. It wasn't Event Horizon anymore.

It was something else altogether.

Chapter 222: To Create and Destroy

The sensation encompassed me as if I was standing in some tropical paradise. When I reached out with Event Horizon, it was a siphoning, choking kind of energy. It strangled the life around me, and that only made me stronger. This new aura lacked the same selfish intention, a subtle, blue tint covering the air. It was light and fluffy, a gentle sensation compared to Event Horizon.

Some of that came from the difference in raw power. Event Horizon was just stronger in general than this new aura. Still, this different feeling had merit in its own way. It imbued a wild growth around me. The visualization turned real as sand spawned beneath me. Water filled the chamber, generating a genuine pool around me. A palm tree spawned behind me, fish filling the pool along with various predators. I lifted a hand, and a wall of origin mana coalesced in a pillar in front of me covered in moss. I raised my eyebrows, thinking crabs should be on it.

Low and behold, crabs spawned onto its surface.

Too many crabs in fact. It was a veritable swelling mass of the crusty crustaceans. Hermit crabs, spider crabs, coconut crabs, crabs I saw on the Discovery channel but didn't know the name of, you name it and that kind of crab was there. It scared me a bit due to the sheer rate of crab generation. I'd used the word crab so much in the past couple seconds that it didn't even sound like a word at this point.

Either way, the spring of crabs needed to stop. I raised a palm to it, willing it to cease. Instead, more mana siphoned into the spot. The spring of random crabs evolved into a geyser of them, turning the pillar into a crater of crustaceans. They spewed forth from solid stone, defying all logic.

Flabbergasted and befuddled, I stood and watched as the mountain of crabs turned into an incoming tidal wave. Transient would be pissed when he came back in the morning and there were water and sand everywhere. The plethora of crabs wouldn't exactly put a smile on his face either. If anything, it might tip him over the edge.

I shifted mental gears, covering the aura of growth to one of destruction. Event Horizon passed over the expanse around me, and I kept careful of moving the aura out of my own cubicle. I didn't want to melt someone else in one of the other cubicles if that was even possible. I wasn't about to take that chance regardless.

The crabs disintegrated into mana the moment Event Horizon passed over them. It was like turning my mana into crabs then back into usable mana as they disappeared without a trace. The moss on the pillar evaporated as well, leaving several tons worth of water and sand.

Great. Just great.

I sat down on real sand, the visualization already eliminated. I lifted sand up in my hands, squishing it in my palms. The grit crunched like cereal under a hydraulic press. I melted it in my hands with a potent burst of heat. It globbed into a glowing ball before I stretched it out into an ugly ass panel. I cooled it, bubbles interlacing the clear crystal.

I raised my eyebrows at it, the ugly, dirty, and bubbly glass looking terrible. I was messing around at this point, just enjoying my new powers. I dropped it into the water letting out a splash in the pool. I glanced at the notifications of my status though, and they surprised me.

Skill gained! Life Creation(lvl 10) – While others aim to take life, you aim to give it. +10% to duration of created life forms. +10% power of created life forms.

Skill gained! Matter generation(lvl 10) – Those that create will always live in abundance. +10% to efficiency of creating matter. +10% to the stability of created matters.

Skill gained! Glassmaking(lvl 10) – Though brittle, glass holds many useful properties. You take those properties as your own. +10% to ease of making glass. +10% to glass's clarity

I gained three skills, just like that. The first two sounded like high tier skills, but after reading their descriptions, their basic status made sense. These skills didn't allow me to create any matter or life on command. They just let me create those things period. That meant anytime I channeled those skills, it would be like releasing entropy. There was no rhyme or reason to what was being created. It was dangerous and not very useful either.

I had a few ideas on what to do with them, though.

I tapped my chin as I dived into thought. Creating this many skills was a big deal, especially if it was this damn easy. In fact, while Transient was letting me 'rest,' I could focus on just making random skills with this mana type. If I gained enough of them, I might even be able to make something for fun. At this point, the sky was the limit.

Before I got to grinding out that plan, I opened my status. After a while, I opened up my multiverse menu and glanced at my skills. Event Horizon was still in it. After clearing my mind and changing my mana into Origin, I looked at it once more. As I expected, the ability shifted.

Dimensional Wake – Your reach as a dimension is manifested by 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.

Edge of Arcadia(Origin) – This aura enhances your ability to create life, matter, and energy sources. It also promotes a sensation of peace in those within it as well.

Current Radius: 501 ft/152 m | Size of the aura can be increased by your mass

Maker – Enhances the ability to create in all its forms. +100% to matter creation.

Giver – This aura makes the efficiency of origin mana higher than usual. +100% to the potency of origin mana.

Arcadia – Created objects, energies, and lifeforms are closer to their original forms than usual. -20% to imperfections during the creation process.

An Originator's Domain – Within the Edge of Arcadia, Origin mana's effects are enhanced. This is a general enhancement to the mana type.

I knew something was awe-inspiring about this whole multiverse thing. It let me have this wave of control over this new mana type. Considering my ridiculous output of energy and this general buff, my origin abilities far exceeded my experience with them.

That lead to the plague of crabs. I shivered at the thought of it, the wall of legs and claws coming at me. It posed no harm, but something about it just creeped me out. They were just the spiders of the sea, after all. One was to be squished while the other was delicious. Life worked out like that sometimes.

Anyways, I honed my mind back onto the task at hand – creating skills. I brainstormed for a bit and came up with a list of prioritized skills. The elements came first because controlling lightning, water, etc. would be useful. After that, I intended on making certain kinds of life instead of just random creatures. Once that was done, different materials were next.

With that in mind, I aimed to create water. I already made some on accident when I first used Edge of Arcadia, so I hoped it would be simple to create some. After several hours of practice, it proved to be the opposite.

At first, I worked with enormous volumes of mana at once. Why? It was my normal amount at this point. Turns out, controlling the mana required to make a mountain wasn't easy. Years of experience let me do so with my ascendant mana, but that wasn't the case with this new origin kind. It didn't make sense to me in the slightest how someone even used it in combat to begin with.

Origin was all about letting go of control and just focusing on creation. Well, if I spawned an inferno, having no control of it was worse than no magic at all. In the case of water, it was a particular kind of material with a set chemical composition. Generating that wasn't easy even in the slightest. As I worked with origin mana, I was more impressed by Helios and Torix.

Helios wielded this as if it was nothing all while using a source of mana that wasn't his own with his gauntlets. Torix exceeded that even, being able to wield all three types of mana fluently. Though he lacked the raw oomph of Helios or me, Torix made up for it with his deft control. That might be why he preferred taking over existing creatures to creating them on their own though.

He was a dominion mage through and through with a very high affinity for that mana type. Using advanced origin magic would prove difficult if not outright impossible. He circumvented that need by controlling things that already existed. In a way, he avoided two of his limitations, both his smallish mana pool and his inexperience with origin mana.

It also played more to his strengths in controlling. The more I thought about it, the more ingenious it seemed. At the same time, it made me wonder why Torix was so dead set on being a summoner/necromancer. I'd ask him next time we met after he interrogated me about my evolution. It would be one piece of information for another.

As I pondered all of that, a virtual sun rose in the distance, indistinguishable from the real sun. As the orange light sheened off the water, Transient popped out of nothing. It spoke in a monotone,

"Good morning, Daniel. Training will resume."

I nodded, "Good. What's next on the menu?"

"Sand, water, and a palm tree. The training area must be cleaned before we can continue."

My shoulders drooped, "Fuck."

I swear there was a smugness in Transient's voice, but maybe I was just hearing things.

"Fuck, indeed."

I ended up just chucking it all into a single location using a gravity well and shoving it into my dimensional storage. Emptying that out later would be vital if I wanted to keep using it, but I was still barely touching the surface of its potential. Several tons of water and sand were nothing to me now.

With the cleanup handled, Transient said, "Create origin mana. Begin by--"

I raised my hand and released a plume of the cyan colored energy.

Transient continued, "Excellent work! You will now fuse together augmentation and origin mana, creating quintessence."

I scratched my cheek, "So why not fuse dominion and origin into primordial mana instead?"

"That mana type is unsuitable for your needs and will prove very difficult to create. It will be the most difficult to curate since it doesn't utilize your natural affinity for augmentation. It is similar to a short, overweight human attempting to play professional basketball."

I nodded, "It's an uphill battle. Gotcha. What will quintessence take?"

"It requires a shift in mentality, combining the sensation of both origin and augmentation magics. Begin by channeling augmentation mana."

I did as commanded, a flood of orange rushing over me. My motivation was high as I reached out with Event Horizon. Once more, the aura was different. Unlike Edge of Arcadia, this aura was like a watered down version of Event Horizon, lacking many of its features. It just wasn't as strong in general, and that made it little more than a novelty at this point.

As I flailed around with the aura, Transient spoke aloud, “Now attempt to achieve Serenity while doing so.”

I blinked, “What? How’s that even possible? They’re polar opposites.”

“They are not. The desire to improve is not opposed to the desire to create. Your mind is orienting towards ambition in a selfish light. Direct your thoughts to the growth of all things, excluding the necessity of doing so with only yourself. You must learn to give. Try again.”

I let out a long sigh. This was going to feel like a lot more than just three weeks at this rate.

It would feel like an eternity.

My arms crossed, I stared outside while tapping the edge of my gauntlets. Uncle’s craftsmanship was always something worthy of admiration, but my thoughts dwelled elsewhere at the moment. I stared out, inspecting the workings of my galactic city. I did so without the aid of sight, my eyes left blind since birth.

I see into the vast voids of other dimensions, but sight of the realm I exist in eludes me. It was a necessary sacrifice. The sights I see cannot be easily gained. A few simple pulses with my mana gives me an excellent view of my surroundings. By utilizing a high photographic memory, I view all that is around me like a general viewing a battlefield.

As I did so, the Empire’s citizens bustled about, beneath my notice yet somehow calming me. Glancing at the rabble reminded me of simpler times when managing planets wasn’t required of me.

Commoners knew nothing of this responsibility. They pittered and pattered about, their worlds the size of a city at most. I closed my eyes. I wish that my world was the same. Pity. I was born into this, and that, like many things, would never change.

I opened my eyes and sighed. The trade negotiations between Belka-623 and Orba were going well, perhaps better than expected. Exceeding expectations was a given when I involved myself in a matter, however. I reached out a hand, tapping the glass. Yes, I did exceed expectations on almost every account.

Every account but the battle against Lehesion.

Staring at the reflective glass, I glared at myself. My black mask was formed from the most beautiful woods on our home planet. They ingrained wood that smelled of a deep forest and crisp breeze. Those natural oils never left, the trees farmed for the task highly evolved for just that purpose.

My mask represented the merit of my achievements. Few obtained my status, but this did not sate me. I always told my inferiors that success was not a history but a state of mind. If your last attempt at anything was a failure, then you were a failure until you redeemed yourself.

My own words echoed in my ears as my face deformed into a grimace. It was deep scowl, the kind of reaction one has to the piercing screech of nails on a chalkboard. Something infuriated me as of late, yet I didn't comprehend the exact reasoning behind it. I was called into a battlefield with no time nor resources to prepare. I fought until I fell from mental exhaustion, my responsibility to my favor fulfilled. It didn't matter. I failed.

I tapped the glass before lowering my hand. At this rate, I'd shatter the panel. The trouble involved with fixing it wasn't worth venting my irritation. As that deep-seated fury rose from my chest, that armored idiot popped in my thoughts once more. As he passed, Lehesion crossed my vision as well. The fight on Giess flashed across my eyes along with my genocide of the gialgathens in Rivaria. I killed them so that we could fail the battle. The more I dwelled on it, the more mistakes I made during the conflict.

I misused my portals from the beginning. If I had simply used them well enough, then the damage to that monstrosity would've been infinitely higher. Managing my mental stamina would've changed the outcome of the fight as well. I exhausted myself casting imposing but ineffective void ice magic. Sitting behind the other combatants and assisting with portals might have turned the tide.

My thoughts devolved further as I returned to tapping the glass in front of me. That pitiful attempt at battle was my favor to Daniel for saving my sister's life. It was a

disgrace to the empire and the royal family to repay meaningful assistance with that display of incompetence. My incompetence.

My tapping turned to thudding on the transparent panel. I even lost a Sentinel since I didn't evade Lehesion's strikes. My combat skills devolved to such an extent that sacrifices were needed to simply keep me alive. Pathetic. Imbecilic. Inept.

My tapping strengthened, cracks spreading through the panel of glass. Despite this complete and utter failure, I received no consequences. My position was absolute; my past actions ensured that I was untouchable. My deficiencies merely resulted in that Harbinger's guild suffering severe losses. I grimaced at my fractured reflection.

If there were no consequences for me, then why did that event haunt me so?

I turned back to my AI, Eva, while rolling my head to alleviate the tension in my neck. My duties would distract me from the wandering thoughts that plagued me as of late. I snapped my fingers, several orange screens appearing. I found the tint easier on my eyes.

Considering I stared at these mindless numbers and charts more than I stared at the physical world, minutia like the tint of a screen took precedence all of a sudden. It reminded me that I focused more on trifles like this than my own abilities in battle.

Eva spoke up, interrupting that string of thought,

"Helios, it's good to see you. What do you need assistance with?"

"I wish to speak with my father. I need his guidance."

Eva answered, her voice easy on my ears. Of course, if her voice weren't natural to hear, I would've long ago gone insane standing in this office.

"He is currently busy suppressing a rebellion on his world."

I glanced up, peeved but undeterred. Of course he was preoccupied with his own mismanagement of his own affairs. This must be the sixth rebellion within the last

decade. A few changes in his enactment of imperial policy would rectify the issue in an instant. Instead, my father wallows in incompetence. Typical.

His softness would be his undoing. If a leader grants his underlings an ounce of independence, then those underlings shall starve for more. Repression is often times freedom in these instances. It prevents the imbeciles and ignorant masses from causing their own undoing. Rebellions cannot be tolerated after all, and those that commit treason will be treated as traitors.

And traitors are to be crushed under the Empire's heel. Their blood paves the way to a brighter future.

I silenced that rush of thoughts, however. More pressing matters were at hand. I said,

"Then call Caprika instead."

"You seem disappointed. Would you rather I call the Emperor?"

I raised a palm, snapping my words like a whip. "No. I will not waste his time on my emotions. He's more important tasks to indulge in, as do I." I clenched a hand into a fist,

"But focusing on my responsibilities is difficult when my judgment is impaired. This must be dealt with despite my own misgivings."

Eva replied after a pause, "Of course, Helios."

As Eva called Caprika, I took my mask off for a moment. I pinched the bridge of bone between my eyes, attempting to silence the sea of thoughts rushing to the surface. It was all so tiresome, so I suppressed them while dragging my hand down my face. I put my mask back upon my face as Caprika appeared in a video chat.

She tilted her head, her red mask still being worn. Unusual.

"Oh, this is new. My older brother is asking me for assistance? How quaint."

“Quaint indeed. Perhaps I should ask someone else then? They may mock me less and offer better counsel.”

Caprika leaned back, “Wait, you’re serious about this? I-I’m sorry. I thought you were calling to scold me.”

“No. I’m asking for your viewpoint. Nothing more.”

Caprika gulped before sitting up, straighter, “Then what is it, brother?”

I stared at the claws of my hand, a bit of shame welling from my chest from directly speaking out my thoughts,

“I’ve found my emotions difficult to handle as of late. I’m quick to anger and slow to contentment. It’s a bother. Perhaps you may understand it better than I.” I glanced down to her,

“After all, you’ve more experience in regards to handling difficult emotions.”

Caprika fumbled for a moment, composing herself. I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes, granting her a few moments to think. She raised her hands, gesturing like salesmen giving a pitch as she spoke,

“I don’t fully understand why, but it could be resentment to your failure in regards to Lehesion. If you’re ashamed of your performance, I assure you, no one imagined that beast would live up to the legends told about-“

I seethed, “That is not what angers me. It would never.”

Caprika trembled, a shiver racing up her spine. I winced at my lack of self-control. Scolding her felt like whipping a child. She was still my little sister, after all. One victory did not shift the long history between us, one where I succeeded, and she failed. In my eyes, however, none of that history mattered. To me, she was my superior at this point in time.

I leaned back from my screen, shaking my head, “I...excuse my outburst. That may well be what’s infuriating me considering my reaction just now. Perhaps your insight was worthwhile as a verification of sorts.”

Caprika took a deep breath before leaning towards her screen, “Are...are you alright? It’s not like you to ask me for help, and it’s even more unlike you to lash out like that.”

I scoffed, “That is precisely why I called you. You’re supposed to assist me in the matter, not point out the obvious to me.”

She stayed silent, keeping eye contact though I couldn’t see it behind her mask. From all the years I’d known her, I built up a vague understanding of her facial gestures despite the veils between us. Right now, she showed genuine concern to the extent that it oozed from her like juice from a smashed fruit.

It was humiliating.

I composed myself before answering. Showing more weakness would only exacerbate the issue.

“Your insight has been more than enough to rectify the issue. I’m merely optimizing my mental state for my continued performance. Nothing more.”

I stared at my palm as I spoke, inspecting the runic work of the Emperor. It calmed me as Caprika nodded,

“Of course. You assisted me in more ways than I care to mention, and returning your backing means quite a bit to me. If that requires being a shoulder for you to lean on or an ear that listens to you, I’m at your beckoning call. Simply ask.”

I let my hand down, peering back down to her, “I see. Thank you for the sentiment. I must go now. Thank you for your time and consideration.”

Caprika leaned back, “That’s rather formal of you. It isn’t as if we’re merely business associates.”

I raised a hand over the exiting command for the chat, "I'm an ice mage. What else would you expect? Goodbye."

I closed the call, glancing back at my daily duties. They involved the maintenance of Belka and Meliton, the planets I ruled. Every bit of it bored me, but finding another competent soul to manage these affairs was far more complicated than merely completing the tasks myself. The Emperor was fortunate to find me. I lacked the same luck.

A few hours passed as I found myself fumbling with the simplest of tasks. Managing planetary interest rates, ending geopolitical disputes, even planning various educational reforms, they all eluded me. After a few minutes of work, I closed the holograms along with Eva. I turned back to the city and gave my situation some thought.

Considering my coarse reaction to Caprika's suggestion, she was correct even if I attempted denying it outright. Now that the source my malaise was known, aligning my actions to remedy the situation was simple.

Ending Lehesion took priority. The question was thus:

How do you kill the unkillable?

An interesting question. I steepled my fingers.

I had interesting answers.

With my eyes closed, I sat with my legs crossed. For the thousandth time, tranquility washed over me, keeping me calm. As I opened my eyes, I imagined Althea in my mind. I wanted her to succeed on her own terms. I remembered the bit of joy I got from watching Kessiah finding her way. I envisioned a weakened Torix needing my help.

With all those thoughts driving me, I channeled my mana into my palm. I honed in on that sensation of warmth and comfort from their company. I focused on helping them

with whatever it was they needed. As I took a deep breath, a mental image of Althea stuck out in my mind. Every time I thought about her, I wanted to protect her.

These thoughts even carried some guilt. I focused so much on my own progress that I seldom helped them with their own. The only glory I could claim from helping them was leading by example. That only got me so far in my book. Healing techniques, utility magic, even defensive auras, I never even attempted to gain any of that.

With relentless perseverance, I kept the single-minded pursuit of self-empowerment. It hasn't failed me yet, but it might have failed those around me. That might of been why Torix ended up being consumed by the Hybrid. After the lengths he took to help me, I resolved to make the same lengths in assisting him. After all, he was the main reason we killed Yawm. He saved my damn home planet and then some. The guy deserved my respect for sure, and I owed it to the guy to help him out a bit more than I had.

Despite this wave of remorse, I quashed any guilt in my mind. Feeling wrong about my past never helped me or anybody for that matter. Doing something about it, on the other hand, could help out quite a bit. Those thoughts inspired me. I could remake Torix's armor better than before, make it more foolproof. Who knows, maybe I could even get Chrona to teach him primordial mana. His summoning would be even better then.

In a way, his victory would be my triumph, just as his failure was my defeat. If I was going to run an organization, that's how I had to think about everyone under me. Focusing on only myself wasn't an option anymore.

As those thoughts welled in my mind, the blue mana in my palm shivered before reforming into a transparent, white orb. It swirled over my hand, mirroring a tiny hurricane. It carried the same potent volatility of ascendant mana, but it didn't spark outward with arcs of electricity. It radiated out air, enough to blow my hair back.

Unique Skill gained! The normal skills, Augmentation, Augmentation Manipulation, Origin, Origin Manipulation, and Serenity combine into the unique skill Quintessence! 118 tree points rewarded!

Quintessence(lvl 10) – Most divert their attention to themselves, pursuing narcissistic endeavors. You divert outward, avoiding the pitfalls of ego. +10% to ease of Quintessence creation. +10% to the potency of Quintessence mana.

My hand wobbled beneath the mana, the energy threatening to ebb outward into my surroundings. I laughed at it before glancing back up at Transient,

“Aye, I did it...Finally.”

Transient made a satisfying bing noise, “It only took 242 hours of virtualized time to complete!”

The bing wasn’t quite so satisfying anymore. I frowned, “Thanks for reminding me.”

“There is still plenty of time left in your time dilation period; eight days remain.”

I scratched the side of my head, “I’m grateful and all for the help so far, but wasn’t this supposed to take like three days?”

Transient bobbed in the air, “Yes. Your situation isn’t a normal one, however. Most compendium’s taught skills that are combinations of already learned skills. They borrow more from existing unique and mythical skills than your current virtualization is. Unlike their learned skillsets, yours is much more expansive in nature.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Why?”

“To utilize the most effective form of long term growth for you given your unique parameters. Tolerance to time dilation to this extent is exceedingly rare. We can achieve more than usual, given the circumstances. This means we will be incorporating the learning of skills that will enhance your long term potential.”

I nodded, “Ahhh, yeah, that makes sense.”

Transient dimmed, the ethereal energy ball fading, “We will continue this session tomorrow. Be ready.”

Transient disappeared while the island around me dimmed to dusk. I sat up and stretched a bit, my legs asleep from all the sitting. After rolling my shoulders, I raised a palm and channeled that mindset of victory for all. In my hand, the swirling piece of

white mana returned, ebbing outward with air. I directed more of it before engulfing the training room in a windstorm.

My control of the new mana collapsed, converting into ascendant mana once more. Sparks of arcane lightning ripped out for a moment before I quashed the ball in my hand. I sighed, but learning a new mana type would take time. I was lucky I progressed this quick already. Without Transient's tips and tricks, I'd never have broken through all the plateaus I faced in the same time frame.

Making progress in the new skills front was going far better for me, however. I learned water creation after a while by submerging myself in the fake ocean around me. Immersed in the element, I used the feeling, sensation, and weight of it to produce the same material. This method of placing myself within an element worked wonders.

Now, an average person probably would wince at setting themselves on fire to learn about it. For me, it was run of the mill though. Hell, I'd jump in a damn volcano if it helped me learn skills faster. At this point, I had a no-fucks-given attitude to a bit of discomfort.

That's why after discovering this new method, I talked with Transient about letting me manipulate the projection around me. The sardonic little orb had no problem with it even if he doubted my intelligence the entire time. Armed with some agency, I created an icy wasteland, burning hellscape, and a windy skyline.

Using origin mana, I composed each of these elements of ice, fire, and wind. Fire was the easiest since it was similar to my Star Forger skill sorta. Wind was quite tricky just because it was so light and airy. I couldn't get a firm grasp of the concept, probably because I so far from it in composition now. Eh, I couldn't know for sure.

What I did know was that I was a motherfucking, full-fledged sorcerer now. Hell yeah.

I wouldn't be trapping souls or creating void ice anytime soon, but fire breath was in my grasp. It wasn't nearly as powerful as my mythical or legendary skills though, and my control of the elements was rudimentary at the moment.

Still, it was pretty cool.

The next logical step was creating these elements using the better quintessence mana. That would take a bit of time, so I left that for tomorrow after Transient helped me with the odd energy. I decided on combining these elemental skills into a unique ability instead. In my mind, that revolved around the skill Energy Creation.

Energy Generation(lvl 21) – From your mind spawns the forces of nature. +21% to spawned energies. +21% to intensity of spawned energies.

This was the skill I gained before producing fire. At first, I attempted creating two materials that combust with each other, but that was impossible. My finesse with Matter Generation was nonexistent. I produced random stuff at random rates in random places. For now, It astonished me just how useless the skill turned out to be.

It enabled me to produce water and wind though, and that's why I believed Energy Generation was key to an elementally inclined unique skill. Before I set to work, I chuckled at myself. My thoughts right now were nostalgic to me; it reminded me of when I first joined Schema's system. Gaming the system, theorycrafting skills, it was all a lot of fun then and now.

This was different from before, though. Unlike my work with my other abilities, this was an endeavor of curiosity. I wasn't forced to learn this to live. I was doing this for the sake of doing it. That lack of restriction was like a breath of fresh air, my responsibilities leaving my mind. After taking a literal deep breath, I relished in that feeling.

It made my mind wonder about other possibilities like what I would've done if I didn't spawn in a dungeon. I might've just dicked around, discovering new skills to learn that were fun to practice. That's probably what the average person was doing on Earth right now. I stared off in the distance as I envisioned a group of high school guys firing ice bolts at each other.

Sounded like fun.

I shook that out of my mind and refocused. With a practiced motion, I slid my hands outwards, taking a flowing pattern of movement. Two spheres of water appeared at the edge of my left palm before I transferred my right hand's mana to ascendant. Using the violent force in right palm, I fired the water ball forward before freezing it into ice using my left hand.

It was like learning to write with my left hand. It flexed mental muscles I didn't know I had. I managed it though, a lance of ice piercing into the sand. I grabbed it, spinning it like a movie. It snapped in my hands as I swung too hard. Fuck. I let out a few more colorful curses before lifting the halves of an ice spear and melting the ice under a plume of fire. I kept doing so until it evaporated, turning into a ball of mist. I shot out my hand and launched a gust of wind.

It shot across the sand. The mist sunk into the ground before I lifted my left hand, creating tiny shards of ice. For several hours I continued this melding of elements, attempting creative combinations. It was a great mental break from the mindless grind that Transient's exercises had become. Before that plasma ball arrived, I got what I was looking for.

Unique Skill gained! Fire Creation, Ice Creation, Water Creation, Wind Creation, and Energy creation fused together into the unique skill Elementalist! 215 tree points awarded. Elementalist is unique among unique skills. It can absorb other elements that weren't involved in its creation, further strengthening the skill!

Elementalist(lvl 10) – You wield the elements with deadly intent. +10% to elements intensity. +10% to elements purity.

It was an excellent skill, albeit lacking in raw might. I was pretty sure that with time, it would become a force to reckon with. The tree points, in particular, were excellent. I opened my tree menu, finding 986 unused treepoints. I placed them into my Sovereign skill tree, but I didn't get any bonuses from it. I tsked in disappointment before moving on.

I spent the rest of the night attempting to form earth magic. Despite getting numerous hot mud baths and getting stuck in quicksand pits later, the skill didn't click. Oh well. The next day, I learned a bit more of the ins and outs of quintessence mana. It was the mana of victory from what Transient told me. Leaders used it for the enhancement of their armies more often than not.

Ascendant mana seemed capable of the same purpose, but I had already understood the drawbacks quite well involving that bloody mana. Ascendant mana did motivate troops to fight, but it also drove them to feed. Just as the wolves and hornets devoured each other, so would a horde of my forces. Quintessence was altogether different, however.

Sheathing an army in armor, giving them swords of ice, or arming them with ammunition, quintessence did it all and more. The benevolent nature of the mana helped with keeping soldiers in the general's repertoire as well. Primordial mana was potent as well for this purpose, though few enjoyed being controlled.

In a way, quintessence was the mana for getting and making an army. Ascendant mana was more for people that wanted to be a one-man army instead. To each his own.

I wanted both. With that in mind, I wrestled with quintessence all day. As the sun went down and Transient left me, I created a condensed sphere of quintessence in my hand. I dipped it into a pile of sand I made earlier. The sand shifted into limestone before standing upright. A tiny, sandstone golem walked up from the ground, about a foot tall.

It blew my mind. With ascendant mana, I enraged the beast, making it clobber a few buildings and trees apart in the simulator. I created a golem of wood minutes later, calling it Mini-Yawm, and I had them fight one another. The wooden one lived up to its predecessor's name, throwing the sand golem aside after tearing its brother apart.

Mini-Yawm beat its chest for a moment before staring up at me. It lacked eyes, though it sensed its surroundings. The wood golem ran up and hit the side of my leg, doing nothing more than breaking its fists. I leaned over and reached out a hand to it. The crude, wooden puppet smushed its blunt hands against my fingers.

I frowned before waving Event Horizon over the tiny construct. It evaporated into the air as I took a breath. These were extraordinary, life-altering powers at my disposal now. It kind of creeped me out, but mastering them might prove vital further down the line. With that in mind, I tore strips of my armor off. Once I gained a large pile, I telekinetically lifted it into a humanoid.

After carving a variety of elementary runes onto the creature, I gained the rough approximation of a bodyguard. Well, at least in theory. It might end up like the plague of crabs earlier. I waved my hands back and forth before emptying my mind. As I filled it with thoughts of triumph, quintessence channeled through me. I directed it further, the mana encompassing my being in its entirety.

A rotating sphere of the pale aura generated around me, the pressure building. The runic markings over my armor glowed a bright white, contrasting my armor's grim appearance. After maintaining this high octane amount of mana, I finally felt comfortable with the sensation.

I attempted to reach out with my aura. The white cloud expanded outward from me in a smooth expansion. As I did, a snowy sort of tint ebbed over my surroundings.

At the same time, it lived up to being the mana of victory. The energy invigorated me like liquid power. I trembled as my abilities extended. My eyes sharpened. My thoughts cleared. My body loosened. My skin hardened. I expanded in both mass and potential. Even my mana quaked in an uproar, bursting into the air with a crescendo of might.

I was no longer covered by a condensed ball of wind. I walked as a living hurricane, a boundless storm shifting around me. The energy filled and fueled me, giving me the urge to create. I wanted to paint, sing, even build a house brick by brick. It didn't matter what it was, I needed to make something that would last through the epochs of time.

As the new sensation normalized to me, I glanced around. The sand island blew apart from around me. I lifted my hands, channeling quintessence to reform the island. The golem behind me absorbed the energy, its markings growing white. The rough joints straightened out, becoming straighter. The jagged edges smoothed, gaining a subtle sheen.

My eyes widened as the thin, wispy bodyguard gained life and an improved body. With the same white glow in its eyes, it glanced around, confused about what was happening. Before anything else, I analyzed the structure.

Dimensional Golem(lvl 500) – This dimensional golem is created by a living multiverse, acting as a fragment of its body given free will. Though unintelligent and weak, this being holds tremendous tenacity, proving difficult to kill even for those twice it's level. This comes down to the composition of its body.

The foreign matter is both stable and volatile, proving an adequate defense and offense all at once. The armor can infect any that touches it, slowly absorbing the life force of its would-be attacker. This allows this golem to become a robust and worthy competitor given time.

You can kill this with ease given your abilities.

I eyed the creature, stepping closer to it. It peered back and mimicked my motions like a mirror. Staring down, I tapped my chest for a moment. Maybe I couldn't use origin to

make better material for golems, but I had the best golem material right here. An endless army of mindless subjects was at my fingertips. Before I carried out my evil laugh, the golem attempted taking a step.

It fell sideways, the ground quaking beneath it. Unharmmed and undeterred, it attempted standing up. As it fell sideways, and I understood a simple yet profound fact – making golems was hard. Sure, its level wasn't the worst in the world, but it was just about useless. The simple runes I composed on the creature barely let it move, let alone fight back.

I cupped my chin, thinking of more advanced algorithms to give it specific movements. After a few minutes of brainstorming, I cursed. This shit was impossible. There was a reason fully robotic guards weren't possible for the most part. Programming combatants were often times much harder than just training real people instead.

Due to all the complications, I put off pursuing this kind of study until later. I waved Event Horizon over the creature, expecting it to just evaporate. It took a step back, its knees wobbling under strain. The white light dimmed before the golem crashed to the ground in pieces. It was a haunting sensation. Till now, I hadn't used the revamped Event Horizon on a creature that could withstand it whatsoever.

This one lasted a few seconds, and its health was actually high enough to withstand my aura for even longer. The reason it died was from the mana drain. It and I experienced the new mana drain on Event Horizon for the first time.

It was an absolute, destructive mind obliterator. It subjugated its victim by eliminating the ability to even think, let alone fight back. It really did embody a physical manifestation of oppression, the pitiful golem's pure mind crumbling before its body did. To me, it was somewhat horrifying watching such an innocent intellect be dismantled under the heel of Event Horizon.

I stared at my hands. I was a monster.

Next time I would just kill the damn thing. Until I could control my creations, I'd stick with simple stuff instead of making golems. This was just too much for me right now, and that was saying something. After all, I'd put myself through grueling torture while training. Doing that to newly formed life though...It was different. That's all I'll say about it.

I was still driven, however. I shook off that guilt before moving on. There was no rest for the wicked after all. Before going back to my skills, I opened my status to investigate the new aura.

Dimensional Wake – Your reach as a dimension is manifested by 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.

The Rise of Eden(Quintessence) – This aura enhances your ability to create and augment all forms of life, matter, and energy. It also instills the urge and inspiration to create in all those within the aura, spurring them to action. This dimensional aura also enables the construction of various effects depending on the mutations used on oneself. This gives this version of Dimensional Wake tremendous versatility.

Current Radius: 501 ft/152 m | Size of the aura can be increased by your mass

Creator of All – This aura enhances all acts of creation, growth, and empowerment within its radius of any kind. Doubles experience gain. Skills level twice as quickly. Augmenting auras enhanced by 50%. Imperfections reduced. The potency of quintessence is enhanced.

Perfection – Augments the raw base stats of allies within the aura by 40%. Your own base stats are increased by 30%.

A Magnum Opus – Creates an aura of intense motivation and the desire to create in all its forms. This kind of creation can be immaterial, involving skills, ideas, and pursuits.

The descriptions were stunning but straightforward. The most apparent benefit involved the general stat enhancement. The sheer volume of mana was awe-inspiring from it. Including all my modifiers, it over doubled my mana regeneration. It was so potent, I would use quintessence as my new baseline mode. It would make my runes fill out even faster, which was always good.

It wouldn't take that many enemies before Event Horizon exceeded the potential stat boost though. At the same time, this was a better solo strategy, giving me a bit of flexibility. The aura itself was also perfect for crafting in general. Using quintessence for Star Forger sounded like a recipe for unbelievable items.

If I wanted to become a one-man army though, Event Horizon was still my best bet. The new mana drain was particularly potent on it, muting enemy minds proving valuable. As for a charismatic general I needed to be, quintessence fit the bill for now.

Well, as charismatic as I could be at least. There was only so much that stats could fix after all.

I rolled my shoulders, getting back to work. I spent the rest of the night training Elementalist within The Rise of Eden. It added to the impact of elementalist quite a bit, turning fire into an inferno and waves into tsunamis. As the sun rose up again, Transient arrived along with a new task.

“You seem different.”

I glanced down at my palms, a white glow ebbing from the cipher on them, “Eh, it’s nothing much.”

“Noted. We will be moving on to the Mutagenesis skill line. This series of skills is far more geared towards your base nature, which will speed up the learning curve substantially. Outside of the formation of the mythical skill itself, the creation of quintessence was the largest hurdle involved during your stay here...Most likely.”

I let out a sigh of relief, “Thank god.”

“Don’t thank god. Thank Schema.”

I rolled my eyes as it continued,

“Mutagenesis is composed of five baseline skills, Mutation, Growth, Deconstruction, Auto-Cannibalism, and Anatomy. We will begin by learning the Auto-Cannibalism skill.”

I winced, “Sounds fun.”

“It isn’t as unpleasant as one might believe.”

“Please don’t tell me it involves eating myself.”

The AI bobbed up and down, “It does but in a practical manner. You won’t be required to devour yourself. A longer, less direct method has been created for the learning of the skill. Allow me to explain-”

After a long lecture, I got the basic idea behind the skill. As I began mutating myself, the ability to degenerate the changes from mutagenesis was necessary for several reasons. Practicing alterations, eliminating changes, and restoring myself were several of them. The reason I didn’t learn Deconstruction instead was that Auto-Cannibalism had a recycling component to it.

While deconstructing changes wasn’t the worst way of getting rid of mistakes, it wasn’t as efficient as auto-cannibalism. The only reason to learn deconstruction was to dismiss any life I happened to form with my origin mana once I was done with it. Having that level of control over another life kind of shocked me, but it wasn’t all that different from Event Horizon in effect.

It still felt like I shouldn’t be given tools like this. I swallowed that unease and kept trucking on.

In fact, Event Horizon covered all the bases Auto-Cannibalism and Deconstruction attended to. That choking aura used ascendant mana as a battery, however, which made it unusable in The Rise of Eden. It was a quirky conundrum, making my life more complicated than it needed to be. Either way, I ignored Transient completely before tearing off my own limbs and devouring them. Boom, I gained the Auto-Cannibalism skill.

Transient said it was unconventional. Eh, maybe.

After gaining that in mere minutes, I created a couple dozen water elementals. Like tiny, uncultured children, they wandered the temporal dilation chamber. I practiced disconnecting the mana I placed within them from the materials composing their bodies. It was dark work, leaving quite an impression on me. There was something innately twisted about giving life then taking it, even if it was on a scale this small.

The more I did work like this, the more I understood how someone like Yawm came to be. This was corrupting as the eldritch. Creating and killing life reduced the sanctity of life itself. It numbed my basic sense of ethics and morality. As I took each of the little lives away, it didn't bother me as much as the last one did.

That bothered me more than an eldritch chewing my face.

Still, I did the work that had to be done. It wasn't like I would be doing this forever, and my mind was more stable than stone. I wouldn't let this series of exercises leave me warped.

I pushed through a sense of nausea from the spells. It took four or five hours to gain Deconstruction, mostly from my own misgivings with the skill. The progress was at light speed compared to gaining origin mana though. After that awful affair, Event Horizon would be my go-to for dismissing my creations. It was less...personal that way.

We moved on to Anatomy. It was one of the most effortless skills to gain since my first few skills back in Bloodhollow. After reading three hundred pages of an anatomy book in an hour, I learned the ability. Easy peasy. It surprised me how quickly it all came to me and how quickly I read as well.

I remembered taking anatomy back in high school. I got my ass kicked by that class. The memorization aspect of it was so simple now, it seemed like child's play. Even more so, the more complex bits about how various systems worked together on a conceptual level, that just zipped into my brain. Of course, I wasn't an expert. You wouldn't see me handling a tricky diagnosis like pulmonary embolus. I'd fuck that up with something more common like pneumonia. That kind of expertise would still take time, diligence, and experience, but I was on the road to that level of understanding.

My progress stuck out to me just because this was one of the subjects I studied from my previous life before Schema. It was difficult, arduous, and complicated once upon a time. It was so easy now by comparison.

I was no longer a troglodyte in regards to my smarts. Yay.

After finishing that anatomy booklet, I moved on to the skill Growth. Before Transient even attempted giving me a primer on the topic, I expanded myself using the skill Mass Manipulation. Transient chided,

“That isn’t growth. You’re simply expanding the distance between the atoms of your body. Growth is different. You don’t shift the density of your atomic structure. You add atoms to it.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Like getting fat?”

“No. This skill is a simple skill used by many to create a more imposing presence. You use origin or quintessence mana to create more of your own body. While very dangerous to learn for most, it should prove quite simple for you considering your circumstances.”

I cupped my chin, “Why is it dangerous?”

“Mold origin mana into your body. The answer shall present itself.”

I narrowed my eyes, “Huh...ok.”

I shifted my mode of mana, blue lines glowing across my helmet and runes. I saturated my blood a bit with origin mana before my vision blurred. Falling to my knees, a wave of nausea suffused me, and I wretched. The empty gag followed the vomiting of an eyeball a moment later. My own eyes widened with horror as I leaned back from the squirming eyeball. As it glanced at me, a far stronger urge to hurl deluged from my gut.

I upchucked a waterfall of eyeballs. They crashed into the ground, a massive pile forming beneath me. The fleshy spheres swelled from my eyes, under my skin, in every inch of my body. They soaked into my bones and blood, growing from my body in an abominable mass.

Before drowning in detached eyeball, I shifted Event Horizon over my frame. The flesh dematerialized in an instant, the pressure dissipation from around me. As I gasped for unnecessary air, I glanced up at Transient. The AI chirped with a bit too much glee,

“That is why it’s dangerous.”

I shook my head before banging my chin once. The whip sharpened my thoughts as I stood up. I glared down at the energy ball as ascendant mana coursed through my veins. Red mana leaked from my frame, my armor grinning with red leaking from it. I reached out, molding the lightest touch of Event Horizon over the little ball of aether.

It trembled, the mana composing its body draining. As Transient groaned in torment, I leaned over to it,

“Thank you for explaining why origin mana is dangerous...Do you feel that?”

It shivered, dimming as I seethed,

“That is why I’m dangerous.”

I stopped the aura and stood up again, “One lesson for another. Now, would you mind telling me what to do next. This time in detail?”

More subdued, the AI continued, “Of course. My apologies. Let’s continue.”

I raised a hand, channeling origin mana, “Let’s.”

Chapter 223: His Own Way

After that display of mine, Transient fell in line. He wasn’t as cryptic with his hints or indirect with his phrasing. While I didn’t relish in threatening people, it sure got the job done sometimes. Especially after they made me vomit eyeballs, guilt wasn’t an issue. Man, who would’ve guessed?

Sarcasm aside, Transient’s change in attitude didn’t fix my issues with Growth. This difficulty stemmed from several causes. The least obvious but most impactful being my trait – blood magic.

It was what unified my mana and health into one resource, and I had only learned magic while using it. It was a different style of mana usage compared to more conventional means. Typically, a mage externalized his intents and used a tremendous surge of thought and will to manifest it into reality. This required utter focus, complex formulations, and precise timing.

My magic was the opposite. I sacrificed my physical well being for my magic to manifest. That sacrifice's effect was based on what I sacrificed, however. That's why adding more endurance and size effectively strengthened my magic. I was immolating something more valuable, therefore getting more in return. Since I could exchange blood and bone for mana, the reverse was true as well. This meant my mind strengthened the rigidity and stability of my body.

These factors cleared up quite a few oddities about me in general. For instance, my instinctive learning style, it worked because of blood magic. Your average mage couldn't go by 'feel' at all. It would disrupt the flow of mana, making it all fall apart. On the other hand, my style oriented around intuition and something similar to muscle memory.

This was why most mages relied heavily on their grimoire for practical magic. The algorithms in their grimoires acted as the software of a computer while their reserves of mana acted like the hardware. The better the software, the more efficiently they used the hardware.

My style meant any finesse with my magic should be outright impossible. The result was quite the opposite if what Helios and Torix told me was true. Well, after thinking it over, I figured it out along with why this compendium wasn't exactly optimal.

This virtualization was teaching me using the standard mage's learning curve. That's why the compendium was behind its initial estimate for my pace of learning. I was using an inferior method to gain knowledge for me. Once I understood the roadblock, maneuvering around it was simple.

I would just skip all the convoluted conversion bullshit and use what I already understood. Instead of learning Growth, I used transmutation on my flesh and blood. In layman's terms, I was cutting out the middle man. In this case, the middle man was turning my body into mana then formulating that mana into what I wanted. That part was hard, tedious, and arbitrary.

Why do all that when I could just change my body right into what I wanted from the start? All that other nonsense was slowing me down. Hell, logically speaking, this new style still used quintessence because of blood magic. My body was my mana pool. Using it was no different than using mana in the end.

Subtle as this change was, the difference was immediate and overwhelming. Within hours, I created immense torrents of water and expansive infernos. Using The Rise of Eden, I turned into an elemental tornado of volatile forces. My density, regeneration, and overall mass gave me a tremendous base of material to work with after all.

That was the icing on the cake for me. If I turned myself into water, I gained water worth about double what I sacrificed. Due to my density and mass, an arm's worth of mana could flood a room easily. Combine that with my already vast well of experience with converting my body to mana, and I wasn't a fish out of water anymore.

With that bottleneck broken, I practiced with a relentless fervor. It was how I learned best. After a few hours, I gained several notifications.

Breakthrough Achieved! Elementalist(lvl 21) —>(lvl 36)!

Breaththrough Achieved! Elementalist(lvl 36) —>(lvl61)!

Skill gained! Transmutation(lvl 10) – While others devour to expand their horizons, you use your own will to expand yours. +10% to efficiency of transmutation. +10% to ease of transmutation.

My changed way of doing this yielded enormous results. This was how I was used to doing things, and cross-applying my experience to different fields of study saved me a fuckload of time. Transient was pretty peeved since I ignored all of his advice over the last few hours, but I gave two fucks what he thought at this point. After that eyeball incident, I trusted no one until I got back to that hospital in Belka.

This new tactic even gained me quite a bit of usability with The Rise of Eden. Sure, the extra stats while using quintessence were hella nice, but my magic was pitiful since most of my ascendant oriented skills didn't work with quintessence. Now I could imagine actually using quintessence for something like Star Forger. Force of Nature wasn't about to be usable with quintessence anytime soon though, if ever.

For now, this was enough. After rolling my shoulders, I honed in on the next skill on the list – mutation. It was a natural skill to gain. For starters, I summoned three elementals using the virtualization. The fire, water, and earth ethereal beings hovered in front of me, their bodies mimicking tornadoes of their chosen elements.

Around me, I generated an abandoned set of ruins, vines, and moss hanging on ancient stone. Birds chirped outside the shaded interior, crumbled pillars supporting a massive stone labyrinth.

Once in front of me, I dashed towards the summoned monsters, instigating a fight. They attacked me in sync, each wielding its element with proficiency. As they did, I transmuted portions of myself to fight them. The water elemental summoned a viper of aqua, its fangs rushing towards me. I turned the surface of my skin to fire, a detonation of fire erupting from my frame.

The attack fizzled into nothingness before the earth elemental spiraled in the air towards me. Its fragmented body coalesced into an arm, crushing where I stood. I swung an arm, turning a portion of it to water. Within The Rise of Eden, this conversion of flesh to water proved efficient. A flood plumed from my frame, turning earth to mud.

From my side, the firey spirit flanked. It turned its body into a fireball lunging right at me. Where I stood, I stomped a foot and shot my hands out towards the creature. A wall of icy spines erupted from my frame, the fire melting it to water. The elemental collided into this growing surge of liquid, bursting into an ever increasing fog.

I sunk into the fog, avoiding the earth and water elemental's retaliation. They chased into the mist. Before they caught up, I turned the surface of my skin into pale ice, masking me in white. Hidden within the fog, I used my hearing to leap into the gust of earthen pieces.

I shifted my frame, a tide of water smothering the earth elemental. Turned into a muddy slop, it died beneath me. Angered by the death of his brethren, the aqua elemental turned its body into a floating fist. As it crashed down, I smashed my hands together. As I did, I converted a portion of my palms into wind. The clap's shockwave rippled up the beast's frame, creating a cylinder of water.

I pulled in my hands as it splashed around me. Before it reformed, I stood tall and spread my arms. A vast wave of wind unleashed from my frame, the water dispersing like a water balloon shot by a rifle. As the rain fell from around me, I glanced at my notifications.

Skill gained! Mutation(lvl 10) – Environments and circumstances change, but so do you. +10% to mutations efficiency. +10% to speed of mutations.

Unique skill gained! The basic skills Mutation, Efficiency, Anatomy, Transmutation, and Matter Generation fuse into the unique skill, Inundation. 195 treepts rewarded.

Inundation(lvl 10) – You live in abundance, drowning your foes with your frame. +10% to matter conversion ratio. +10% to volume of converted matters and energies.

I raised my hands, staring at them. I glanced up to Transient,

“Now this is a skill I could imagine myself using.”

Transient started with an unusual silence. It whimpered,

“The mythical skill we had planned will no longer be formable. Skill shift volatile.”

I shrugged, “So what? Make a new one.”

“It is not so simple. The compendium expended its ability to analyze you when it was assimilated. The previous pathway nullified.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Huh...Well, it’s not that big a deal. I’ll just make a different mythical skill, one that suits me better.”

“Impossible. The compendium analyzed your history, status, and fighting patterns. You cannot craft a better-utilized skill.”

I shrugged, “Eh, maybe if it was working on what I was like before. My armor evolution as of late makes me quite a bit different now though. Considering I’ve changed and the compendium hasn’t, wouldn’t that make it incomplete?”

Transient was left speechless. I waved it away, “Anyways, thanks for the help with quintessence. That shit would’ve been damn near impossible to make without your help. From here on out though, I’ll handle it.”

Transient remained frozen in place, unable to so much as budge. It wobbled for a moment before shaking. It shivered, mumbling to itself in a monotone,

“Mythical skill ungained. Purpose incomplete. Failure. Failure. Cannot compute. Mythical skill ungained...”

It repeated that phrase over and over. After about ten minutes of that bullshit, I waved Event Horizon over the damn thing. Its mind shattered as the mana drain muted its thoughts utterly. Those shattered fragments drained into my frame, strengthening me.

I shivered a bit. By destroying its will to resist, I empowered myself. In a way, I ascended by their destruction. It made sense why it was dominion plus augmentation. Their fall was my rise.

Either way, without Transient bothering me and the ability to control the simulation, I went about my own business. The most logical skills to combine into a mythical skill were Quintessence, Elementalist, and Inundation. With that in mind, I spawned hundreds of various enemies and elementals around me.

I rolled my shoulders before pounding my fists together. Learning by kicking ass was more my style. After destroying the first wind golem with a torrent of its own element, I grinned. As I did, my head throbbed with a headache that’d been growing over the last several days. I shook it off, laughing the pain away.

Yeah, this was more like it.

I stared down at my disciple, already accustomed to the different environment of Belka. To my surprise, my disciple’s coordinates led me directly to a hospital upon this imperial world. Once within its confines, I discovered several of my allies. Kessiah, in particular, proved a fruitful encounter as she healed my fractured knee. Her restoring several of my key injuries and lacking aspects eased my life quite a bit.

I always told her that her magic was powerful when harnessed. Hmph.

An old mage’s musings aside, I, along with Helios, stood in a rather unused portion of the hospital’s hallway. We both were looking for my disciple, his presence known by

the staff. They referred to him as the stationary man. To be precise, his presence here stirred up quite the fuss.

A news station covered his presence, mentioning the strange being's refusal to respond to any outside contact. Despite being healthier than any patient currently residing within the hospital, this resident refused to move. They sent a moving crew to take him out of the facility, but this creature's weight far exceeded all but the most active being's ability to move him.

Therefore, Daniel was treated as a statue and oddity. How quaint.

The spectacle expanded until even Helios became involved. Upon coincidence, my arrival coincided with his being called here. With a like-minded goal in our sights, Helios guided me towards the statued man.

And that was how we found a necromancer and world ruler staring down at a dimension. It was quite a sight; Daniel's bench had been long ago removed. He stayed sitting despite no support, his gravity wells in place. Of course they were. Otherwise, he'd collapse the entire building with his heft alone.

I marveled at the magical constructs, the gravity within them contained as I tilted my head,

"Daniel is rather anchored at the moment, isn't he?"

Helios stood, leaning against a wall while facepalming. In silence, he reflected on this interruption to his day. The Ruler of Worlds called to move a statue man from the most excellent hospital of Belka.

In a word, humorous. In another ludicrous.

I snickered at him before nudging the giant with my elbow, "So how do you intend to move him? Perhaps a portal leading elsewhere? You'll find that difficult as he isn't actually sitting there. He's pinned in place by his magic. He won't fall down even if you put a portal beneath him."

Helios stayed there, still brooding over the sheer ridiculousness of the situation. I relished in this more than I'd like to admit, so I continued my teasing,

"Oh, I'm certain we could call in a few more members of the royal family. Perhaps you could use an enormous shard of that void ice to move him. You'd need only rebuild a large section of this state of the art hospital then. It's quite the elegant solution, really."

Helios lifted his head, "I was interrupted from my work...for this. Baldowah kill me already. Why lengthen the torment?"

I waved my hand in a circle towards Daniel, "Perhaps this is a trial sent from Schema to test your will."

Helios stepped up to Daniel, "No. This is entropy incarnate. Nothing more. Nothing less."

I turned towards Helios, "On a more serious note, would you elect to tell me how long Daniel's been here?"

"Ten days. Perhaps more. The hospital staff didn't discern his stay initially. After several days, it became noteworthy. After that first week, he was an oddity that even local news stations took note of."

Helios banged the side of Daniel's face with his gauntlet as if knocking on a door,

"Perhaps this idiot will be more responsive to force."

Helios inspected dents in the metal that composed his gauntlets. I chuckled, "Perhaps not."

Helios rolled his eyes under his mask, his emotional state transparent. I locked my fingers behind me, my chest out, "I shall wait here for him until he returns from his mental odyssey. You may continue with your duties as you were."

Helios glanced down at me, tilting his head, "Mental odyssey...Would you mind elaborating, perhaps?"

“His mythical compendium. It shouldn’t require much more in the way of time. It’s been quite a while for him to still be within its confines. I’ll relinquish you of your responsibility in this matter for now. You may attend to what you wish thereafter.”

Helios scoffed, “Confident, aren’t you?” He crossed his mammoth arms,

“What else would explain you giving me permission to continue my duties?”

I waved a hand at Daniel, “I’m merely informing you that I shall attend to this responsibility. Nothing more.”

Helios turned away, his cape flourishing, “Then see to it. I will not be as lenient should I be called here a second time.”

I gave him a shallow bow, “But of course.”

After he left, I leaned forward, inspecting the runic markings over Daniel. I tapped one of them with a bony finger,

“Hmmm...I remember them being a distinctly bloody red. Since when did they become white as snow? Curious.”

I created a physical cloud of dominion mana, sitting beside my disciple. I shrugged, “The questions mount. I await the answers to my various ponderings.”

I opened my grimoire, “But until then, it’s time I dive into the depths of mind magic.”

I cackled with a bit of glee,

“Perhaps there’s more I may learn of it before he returns.”

That headache evolved into a full-blown migraine about a week back. At this point, blood dripped down my nose, out of my mouth, and even my eyes. I already passed the three-week deadline a while back. I figured this chance wouldn't come often, so I fought using my skills, molding as many together as possible.

I glanced at the side of my view. I gained my mythical skill a while back.

Mythical skill gained! The unique skills Quintessence, Elementalist, and Innundation fuse into the mythical skill, An Endless Flood! 104 treepoints awarded!

An Endless Flood(lvl 10) – From your mind, the torrents of the material world erupt, cascading across all before you in an endless flood. Augments creation skills, transmutations skill, and created elements. Increases ease of use for these types of magic as well.

I hadn't closed the notification out for a long time. I liked the name of it since it reminded me of my first mythical skill, A Boundless Storm. In a way, this new skill emulated those words far better. From my hands, I created vast swaths of elemental carnage. I decimated horde after horde of the enemy, yet my abilities never waned.

I wielded more of my mana, the sheer volume mounting to absurd extents. It changed the nature of my onslaught. I created vast icestorms or fiery hellscapes on my own. I wielded the wind with an utter completion, hurricanes left unbounded.

I used Star Forger, melding the skill into my movements. Water to mist or ice, Star Forger's temperature change made these transitions easier. At times, I glowed like the sun, fire erupting from my every motion. At other times, I slid across the virtualization as a phantom of ice, my movements unreadable. I learned to wield earth, mist, magma, and sand. They molded into An Endless Flood, augmenting the potent skill.

After wielding the might of these forces, a few more weeks passed. I used summons of my own to combat the ensuing hordes. I charged them with quintessence, their bodies strengthened, and their minds emboldened. We wrought destruction, the virtualization cracking at the seams.

They lacked any complex movements, so I spoke out to my forces. I gave orders and commands, shouting out for eternal victory. Using Legion of One, I gave them the spirit to continue despite the undying throngs of monsters. They fought for their own lives as we continued on this path of total annihilation.

Our enemies darkened the skies with their numbers, but we bathed the ground in their blood. My body trembled under the strain of forced time dilation as the endless battle ebbed from weeks into months.

From every surface, I bled, my mind disintegrating. I pushed through this, continuing forth. This was an opportunity to use my skills without any limit or consequence. It was a playground I would rarely return to. At the height of the war, a grin spawned onto my armor. The jagged teeth exposed a haunting white light behind them.

This spurred me forward until the damage to my mind began exceeding my ability to regenerate it. Without my mana pouring forth, I ceased the incoming hordes. As I stood atop a mountain of corpses, my bloodstained summons raised their hands in triumph. They survived. I stood above them as their general, my own hand raised. I thundered with the might of a giant,

“We are legion. We are eternal.”

As I spoke out the words, the simulation died down. The reality around me shifted. My lungs filled with a bit of dust, making me cough. I stood up, more dust falling from me in clumps. I turned around, finding the hospital surrounding me. That’s right. This was where I began the compendium. I hacked up the grime in my throat before turning to the hallway.

I found Torix beneath me, a series of booklets in hand. A cobweb was attached to his shoulder, a spider crawled on its surface. He peered up at me, his skeletal face showing no emotion. I hugged around him, picking him up with a chorus of cracks ebbing out. I leaned back, most of his ribcage and spine shattered. I suspended him with gravity, my eyes wide with shock.

I muttered, “Oh shit.”

He raised a frail hand, “And here I believed you wished to send me back to my phylactery.” He gestured towards his body, “As you may have surmised, it lacks the rigidity of my previous incarnation. I shall deal with this as necessary, no need to worry.”

Torix grumbled, “However, keep the bear hugs to a minimum if you would.”

I shifted my mana to quintessence, The Rise of Eden crossing over him with a subtle white tint in the air. Torix's bones and joints began to heal as he gasped,

"I...what is this? Your new mythical skill?"

I laughed before grinning at him,

"No. It's much more than that."

I raised a hand, quintessence ebbing from my palm,

"It's a new aura called The Rise of Eden."

Chapter 224: Consequences

I set Torix down after he healed, the aura spurring his meager natural regeneration. Torix tilted his head at me,

"The Rise of Eden? It sounds like an advanced origin skill."

I raised a hand with two fingers nearly pinching,

"Close. It's an aura I got from my last armor evolution. Apparently, I'm a multiverse now. The way it works is that each mana type changes my current state of being. This is the one for my new mana type, quintessence."

Torix cupped his chin, "Quintessence?"

"Yeah." I pointed at my other hand, showing the ball of white mana, "This is what it looks like. It's origin and augmentation mana. It's pretty solid overall. It's about the same power level as ascendant mana, just in a different way."

"Ah, so that's why your runic markings are glowing white then. They're charged by an energy different in nature."

I clasped the ball of mana, dismissing it, “Yup.” I opened my status, giving it a glance. I gained a few levels, so I invested them into constitution and selected finalize. Right after the little power boost, I swiveled it to Torix,

“You see those numbers beside the attributes? That’s the bonuses it gives. It works multiplicatively, making it kind of absurd.”

The Living Multiverse(Lvl 9,124 | Current Influence: The Rise of Eden)

Strength – 19,955(25,941) | Constitution – 27,627(35,915) | Endurance – 69,872(90,834)

Dexterity – 10,593(13,771) | Willpower – 52,345(68,048) | Intelligence – 26,880(34,944)

Charisma – 9,973(12,965) | Luck – 14,655(19,051) | Perception – 10,656(13,853)

Health: 67.7 Million/67.7 Million | Health Regen: 459.9 Million/min or 7.67 Million/sec

Stamina: Infinite | Ambient Mana 3.136 Trillion

Mass: 3.19 Million Pounds(1.45 Million Kilos~)

Height: 11’8 (3.6 meters)

Damage Res – 99.04% | Dimensional Res – 100%

Phys Dam Bonus – 6.85 Million % | Damage Bonus – 40%

The Rise of Eden – enhances base stats by 30%, increased to 40% to allies within radius of aura.

Torix froze up for a while. I waved my hand in front of his face, “Hey, you still there?”

He spread out his hands, “What kind of ludicrous status is that?”

I shrugged, “It’s a bunch of multipliers working together.”

Torix lifted his hands up, “Your lowest stat...is higher than your current level...That is utterly incomprehensible. It’s... it’s...I don’t have the words to describe it.”

I pointed at the numbers, “Alright, let me explain. So, you remember how attributes feed into each other, right?”

Torix leaned over to my status, “Yes. The first cardinal chain was...Endurance, willpower, intelligence, luck then charisma. The second cardinal chain was...ah yes, constitution, strength, dexterity, perception, then charisma.”

I pointed at Torix, “Right.” I looked back on my status, “A general stat buff like The Rise of Eden makes every stat higher. Well, the stats closest to the top of that chain get the least. Why? They don’t have any other beefed up stats feeding into them. The lower the stat on those chains though, they end up getting a multiplicative bump.”

I closed my status, “Therefore, I’m more of a generalist with this aura. You are as well. Go ahead, check out your own status. You’ll have received the same kind of benefit.”

Torix let his hands flop onto his sides, “What happened to your flesh-eating aura then? Did it up and disappear?”

I shook my head, my armor’s runic work turning a bloody red. It grinned, the teeth jagged, “Want to feel a bit of it?”

Torix took a step back, “Ahem, should I?”

I shrugged, “Eh, probably not.”

Torix rubbed his hands together before standing up straight, “Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Do keep the health draining component out, however. My constitution is lacking as of late. If you can’t do that, then we’ll cancel this little experiment.”

“I can and of course.”

I molded Event Horizon over him, keeping only the mana drain and suppressive effects on. As it waved over him, he withstood it for a few seconds before falling down, his body shivering. He gasped, “Ah...I...I”

I retracted Event Horizon moment he fell down. As I did, Torix gasped without needing to breathe. I didn’t need to either, so I got why he kept doing it. Old habits die hard, after all.

I placed a hand on his back, “Are you ok?”

Torix shook his head, “Yes, I am. It simply caught me by surprise.” Torix leaned back against the wall behind him, “That’s a potent tool. I’d recommend you use it sparingly.”

I shifted Rise of Eden over him, “This will be my base mode now anyways. Gotta charge my runes and all that.”

Torix let out another sigh of relief. I sat down with him, leaning my head back on the wall too. We sat staggered, my frame taking up all the space in front of me. Torix shook his head,

“You never cease to surprise me.”

I raised a hand, “We’ll see. Killing Lehesion will still be difficult.”

Torix scoffed, “Perhaps. You’ll be far more of an adversary in your current state. You’ve yet to even tap into your true potential.”

Torix stared away from me, a bit of shame leaking into his voice. I gave his shoulder a tap, “Neither have you.”

Torix waved his hands, “I, I rather lack in my battling capabilities at the moment. Perhaps I can muster up a measure of assistance through my other skills, but actual fighting will leave me decimated by a stiff breeze, let alone the attack of a titan.”

It hurt hearing Torix say that. In fact, his overall confidence and demeanor paled when compared to the last time I saw him. Despite some of the bullshit in the compendium, I remembered my promise to help Torix out. That’s why I shook my head,

“You’ll be fine. I’ll make you a new body. It will be better than anything money can buy. That much, I can guarantee.”

Torix shook his head, “Souls may only be stored in organic tissue. Otherwise, the soul dissipates over time, resulting in the loss of sentience. This is why golems are such pains to maintain. Any soul you place in them slowly but surely falls to madness.”

I banged the side of my head, “This is organic...I think.”

Torix waved a hand, “It doesn’t matter in the end. Even if we attempted a transition, and for the sake of this thought exercise, let’s assume your right. It carries my soul without a hitch. What of the rather volatile influence of your mana? It will slowly erode my mind, making me into a bloodthirsty thrall.”

I channeled dominion mana, infesting my mind with the desire to dominate and control. My runic markings glowed a hollow black, sapping the light around me. I pointed at myself, “This will work, won’t it? In fact, it’ll probably just make your mana even stronger.”

Torix leaned towards me, “Fascinating. What is that?”

I pointed at my title above my head, “I’m channeling dominion mana right now, so I’m all dominion-ey.”

Torix placed his hands onto his temples, “Dominion-ey you say? Hmmm, I suppose it could work.” A hunger came over his features,

“Ah, to hell with it. I’ll attempt this, er, transition.” Torix waved his hand in disgust, “Better than living my undead life as a used napkin waiting to be burned.”

I frowned, his words burning a bit. Torix was someone I deeply respected, and to see him driven so low walloped me. Torix picked up a chunk of his broken ribs, staring at it as his blue, fiery eyes glowing red,

“I’d rather take my chance at living on as someone worth respecting than this pitiable state.”

I put a hand on Torix’s shoulder,

“You got us through Yawm. You taught me magic and runes. You’re the reason I’m here. Trust me, if there’s anyone worthy of respect, it’s you.” I raised a fist,

“So quit talking like that. I have to defend my master’s reputation when it’s being besmirched after all.” I gave his shoulder a gentle nudge as I let it go, “Even if my master’s the one besmirching it.”

Torix glanced down, covering his mouth with his hand. He waved it a second later, “You’re right. I represent more than just Torix Worm. I am the master of the Harbinger of Cataclysm, and one of his four followers. I have a responsibility to uphold myself.”

I raised my hands, “Let’s call it something else, like generals or something.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s just eerily reminiscent of Yawm.”

Torix stood up, “Catchy alliteration aside, you’re quite right.” He brushed off his robe as he stood up, “Let’s be off then.”

I stood with one leg, doing a pistol squat, “Of course.”

We stepped out of the confined hallway, everything looking smaller than before. I grew about two feet in the compendium. Ah that was right, I turned to Torix,

“Hey, how long was I in the compendium?”

“About three weeks.”

My eyes widened, “Ahhhhh fuck. We have to hurry. Where is everybody?”

Torix waved a hand, “Back on Giess. They’ve all been busy with the comings and goings involved with planetary safety. We’ve made some measure of progress to be sure, though your absence has been quite...difficult.”

A wave of guilt passed over me as I tapped my forehead with my door knocking knuckles. I molded my helmet back onto my face, “Alright, can you give me a report on what’s happened?”

Torix’s chest puffed as he gave me a curt nod, “But of course. I’m the Harbinger’s Erudition after all.”

Erudition, what a word. I looked it up real quick using my status,

Erudition – Knowledge acquired by study, research, and experience.

Eh, it was precisely what Torix was: a mass of wisdom. While having my status open, I checked out Torix’s,

“Looks like you got experience from that Version 2.0 dying.”

Torix waved off my comment, “Ah yes, and you outlevel my cap before you’ve even gained a class. What of it?”

I glanced forward, the hallway smaller in my vision then I remembered it. I pretended to be Torix,

“To compare oneself to others is to forever live in a shadow. Find the light that you emit, and that shall be your guide through dark days.”

Torix opened his status, “Very humorous. Now, here’s what’s occurred. After Lehesion demolished Rivaria, the Adair Family has been rather quiet as of late. There have been a few events on distant planets. I hypothesize they’re using Lehesion to assault other worlds, start rebellions, something of that sort. As for our members, Chrona and Krog spent their days gaining gialgathens into your guild. I took the liberty of assisting them with the process while waiting by your side. I assure you, my screening process was thorough.”

“I believe you.”

“As for Althea, she returned to Earth with the help of Helios. Once there, some of my trained mages constructed the teleportation ritual to get her back onto Giess. While my students toiled, Althea gathered Hod and many of the Eltari. She’s taken them to Giess and put them through a boot camp of sorts.”

I raised an eyebrow, “What’s she doing?”

“She’s creating a group of assassins. After her being trapped by Thisbey, she’s taking a numbers approach to the elimination of inscrutables. Instead of relying on only plan A as it were, she’ll have many backup plots within her arsenal. It suits Hod as well considering his specialty with shadows.”

“Alright, that’s very good. I can give her the follower status then. That should help.”

I sent her the promotion as Torix said,

“I’d recommend it. She’s been showing a measure of ambition as of late. It’s an excellent characteristic for someone born into such talent. Perhaps ‘made’ into talent is a better term. I digress.”

I weighed my hand back and forth while wincing a bit at his wording,

“Uh, yeah, let’s go with earned her talent.”

“Ah, yes. Of course. As for Kessiah, she’s been assisting Krog and Chrona with their recruitment. She heals the non-system gialgathens that lose limbs during the initiation procedure.”

Torix rolled a hand, “It takes the edge off the transition you see. Otherwise, it’s a rather risky undertaking.”

Torix finished speaking, and we stepped outside. I shifted modes, lifting the both of us with Force of Nature. As I did, I maintained my size using Mass Manipulation. It would be annoying to shrink and grow each time I switched mana types after all.

With that fluid control, I generated a plethora of gravity and antigravity wells linked up into an airtight chain. It prevented ‘gravity pollution’ as I called it. Otherwise, the wells would disrupt traffic or worse. We headed towards Helios’s office, the location set in my mind.

As we traveled, Torix turned to me,

“I sensed some guilt from you earlier. I understand the sentiment, but know this – your spike in potential and power will not go unnoticed. This, ahem, Rise of Eden was it? That’s quite the powerful ability to gain. In my eyes, the mythical compendium was more than worth the investment in time.”

I raised a hand, “That wouldn’t have been enough. I gained a mythical skill too.”

“Ah, that’s the impetus behind entering it. What was it called?”

I checked my notifications to check on the name again. My jaw dropped as I read through the message.

Legendary Skill Unlocked! Combines the three mythical skills, Legion of One, An Endless Flood, and Star Forger into the single legendary skill called, Apotheosis. Half of the remaining skill points in these three mythical skills are rewarded. Total Bonus tree points from fusion | 1164 | Below is a list of the legendary skills other bonuses.

Enhances the skill and technique of all skills that compose Apotheosis. There is no cap for a Legendary skill, meaning your potential with the ability is limitless.

Legendary skills cannot assimilate skills. Instead, a legendary skill can be used in the creation and enhancement of other unique and mythical grade skills.

A legendary skill can be used for earning a class. Example Classes: Overseer, Speaker, or Breaker. Some classes are hidden and need quests from Schema to unlock.

The difficulty of upgrading Apotheosis does NOT increase or decrease with the level of the skill. Level 1 is just as difficult to improve as level 1,000.

For every 100 points in Apotheosis, you gain 10 Constitution, 10 intelligence, 4 Willpower, 4 Perception, and 2 Endurance.

These free attributes are determined by the legendary skill's needs. If your legendary skill needs willpower and perception to operate, leveling it will grant willpower and perception.

For every 100 points in Apotheosis, +10% increase in range and power of Crafting, Generation, and Aura abilities from these skills. Mana cost for any skill within Apotheosis is reduced by 2% as well – this particular benefit is halved for every 1,000 points in the skill.

Current Effects:

+10 Constitution, +10 Intelligence, +4 Willpower, +4 Perception, and +2 Endurance+10% to Crafting, Generation, and Aura abilities-2% to the mana cost of Apotheosis

I raised a fist, "When it rains, it pours." "What happened?" "I gained another legendary skill, Apotheosis." Torix shrugged, "I'm done being surprised. It's too emotionally draining." I laughed a bit as we pressed on. After landing near Helios's office, I paced up with my mana shifting to quintessence. We walked through the metal hallways and administrative offices. Once outside Helios's office, Torix and I stepped up. As I knocked, Helios waved us in. Helios still glanced at his orange screens, Eva assisting him with various tasks. After moving through the process, he closed them and walked up to us. He glanced down at Torix, a look of disdain on his face. Torix averted his

gaze. That pissed me off a lot more than I expected. I swallowed that frustration, but I swore to make Helios regret his dismissal of Torix. After that, Helios glanced at me, “Hm...you seem taller now. Sharper as well. You’ve been a rollercoaster of body types as of late. It’s unusual. “Comes with the territory.” “Was the compendium fruitful?” There was an edge of annoyance in Helio’s voice. It was like my time in the compendium bothered him. I didn’t know why, and I didn’t have time to ask. I said, “Can you send us to-“ Helios raised a hand, “You are an acquaintance, and I am no chauffeur. Stop asking me to warp you where you need to go. Find your own solution on your own terms.” I narrowed my eyes at Helios for a moment, thinking of forcing him with Event Horizon. It was a bad idea. It would ruin our relationship, and after thinking about it for a bit, Helios was right. Torix’s unknown status wasn’t something he should have to fix. I sighed, “Yeah, alright. I get that. Thanks for letting us in.” I turned to leave, but before I did, Helios raised a palm to me, “Despite my misgivings with transporting you and your allies further, I want you to understand something. I have every intention of assisting you in your next bout with Lehesion.” As he finished speaking, a dark hatred leaked into his voice. Man, he hated that golden frog dragon. Helios struggled a bit with his next words, “I, I could hardly say that my performance in facing Lehesion constitutes a proper favor. Especially one as important as saving Caprika. When you need my assistance against that corrupted mongrel, you need only ask.” I waved a hand, “Pff, don’t worry about it. There’s only so much one person can do anyways. I hope you didn’t think too hard about it.” Helios froze up for a moment before grabbing the collar of his cape and adjusting it, “Of course not. I’m far too busy for brooding.” “Good. See you later.” “You as well.” I gave Helios a nod before we left. Torix and I passed the city skyline, gravity hovering us over the horizon. We found a lovely park with a pleasant pond before sitting down. We chose the biggest bench we could find. A necromancer and living multiverse sitting on a park bench. It was strange and kind of surreal, to say the least. After about a minute of thinking, Torix spoke up first, “How will either of us leave this place in time?” I pointed above my head, “I can leave anytime. I got rid of it after killing Emagrotha. If you’d have seen her, I think you would’ve have killed her too. She was a mess, and that’s putting it nicely.” Torix raised his hands, “While the morality of your decision is no doubt interesting, I’m more interested in the teleporters between worlds. You can use them now, can’t you?” I knew what Torix was suggesting, so I raised a palm to him, “No. We’re fixing your body situation asap. That’s a given.” I rubbed the edges of my temples, “Let’s brainstorm some different solutions outside of me leaving you behind. How long would it take you to make one of those illegal warps?” “Three weeks give or take. I can’t carve into stone quickly, so I’d need to instruct you on the ritual.” “Shit. By then, Giess is glassed.” We waited for a moment before drifting into an awkward silence. While we waited, I brushed up on my status. I smacked my forehead as I realized I had enough tree points for the first rank up of the Sovereign skill tree. I poured over two thousand points into it, most of it from creating Apotheosis and leveling the skill. To be sovereign is to hold supreme power and authority. You do so not over others, but over your mastery of self. Your potential to withstand torment, tedium, and torture to further your mastery is unrivaled. You stand as the foremost authority over the domain of skills you’ve chosen, rising above all those that come before you, and likely, those that will come after. Multiplicatively doubles attribute gained from your Sovereign skill. Multiplicatively

doubles attribute gains from your Legendary skills. Doubles Sovereign learning speed, ease of creation, and assimilation strength. Doubles Legendary skill learning speed, ease of creation, and assimilation strength. Doubles Unknown skill learning speed, ease of creation, and assimilation strength. Class unlock status: 25% completed. A slight increase to my stats flew through my system, mainly from Force of Nature. The depth of my understanding of both my legendary skills also deepened, a strange intuition about them growing in the back of my mind. I glanced at my hands, expecting a bit more out of the tree, but that was it. It wasn't horrible per se, but I expected quite a bit more from the tree. However, that would all change if the class it unlocked was truly magnificent. Only time would tell. I closed out my status, going back to thinking. I practiced the formation of various elements in my palm out of habit. Torix stared at the shifting elemental structure, "So that's the legendary skill?" I nodded, "Yeah. There's quite a bit more to it, but this here is the gist of it." "It appears to be some sort of matter manipulation. Interesting. It suits you." "Yeah," I said with resignation lingering. "Torix leaned back on the bench, "It must be an utter chore to handle all the matter you've created. One can only imagine." I nodded, "Yeah. My personalized AI, an asshat I called Transient, ended up making me put a few tons of sand in my storage." An idea popped into my head, so I stood up, "Might as well clean that up right now. You think this park could use a beach?" "I don't see why not," Torix said while dusting himself off. "Perhaps it shall help us think up a solution, the vacation air and all that." I rolled my eyes while we walked over towards a beautiful lake, the creatures within singing and frolicking. I opened my dimensional storage, the space-ey portal rippling above my hand. I remembered all the items in it as I did so, and I willed the sand and water to spill out. Walking along the edge of the pond, I converted it into a sunset paradise.

We got a few unusual stares, but zero fucks were given by either of us at this point. As I reached the last bit of sand, a couple coconut crabs crawled out of the portal. They darted around in the water, and I leaned back from it, remembering the plague of crabs. I shivered a bit before Torix tapped my shoulder. I turned to him,

"What's up?"

"Was that...a living creature?"

I nodded, "Yeah. Crabs...They came from my first few experiments with origin mana. I must have missed them when I cleared the area with Event Horizon."

Torix pointed at my storage portal, "Normal storages can't hold life forms. They are killed within the pocket dimension Schema uses for his storage rings. On the other hand, your personal storage related to your dimensional nature, it can store organisms. It could theoretically hold people as well, couldn't it?"

My eyes widened as what Torix was saying dawned on me. I rubbed my hands together,

“You’re a genius Torix. I think you just found our way back to Giess.”

Chapter 225: Moving with Intent

Just outside of the intergalactic customs on Belka, I looked around. I stood out among the throngs of different aliens, of that there was no doubt. It was strange, almost as if I was the alien here. Well, I was, so maybe it was normal.

I threw those puzzling thoughts aside as I stared at the pristine metal prisms that formed an asymmetrical tower of steel. It flowed in my sight, however. It radiated a sense of strength despite the variety of formations and shapes that composed the building. On a plaque at the top of the entrance, a quote read.

Though we are many, we stand as one against the coming darkness, one tide against another.

It was a bit ominous yet inspiring at the same time. After reading that, I walked past a set of polycarbonate glass doorways. They opened with a soundless slide, even to my enhanced senses. Stepping past the throngs of aliens, I was a full head or two taller than most. This not only let me view others well, but it also let others view me.

Eyes of all sights stared at me as if I was an eldritch in the middle of a city. I was an oddity to them, something unfamiliar to them even amongst the exotic aliens here. I stared back by moving my eyes, my helmet blocking the sight of my face. That was one of my favorite aspects of having a helm on – I could stare without staring.

Indulging in my curiosity, I inspected thin, fat, muscled, and wiry aliens alike. They carried different shades of colors, most lacking armor on in this public area. Those that wore it had enchanted power armors if they were higher level, in the range of four or five thousand. Some even carried fancy staffs along with grimoires like Torix. Others stood along the edges of the walkways, their obelisks covering them in balls of impenetrable white light.

A few even walked with bodyguards, the majority of those individuals wearing gemstone encrusted robes. These robes carried massive varieties of infused manas, giving them the aura of archmages. Outside of those few, several diplomats owned

guards as well, walking the dignity and constant charisma of a politician. These individuals came across as fun, adventurous, and open-minded with just a grin.

That's charisma at work for you.

Eventually, my mind numbed to the exotic blend, the constant shifting of shapes and colors becoming normal. I walked further into the room. Above me, the ceiling stretched high, at least a hundred feet higher than my titanous height. Beneath me, an onyx floor bore the brunt of my heels without worry. Of course, I kept myself lighter here, but it was unusual nevertheless.

At the back of this expanse, several rows of counters and signs were laid out. Behind a few of them, warp drives were set up. I stepped up to one of these counters. It was a polished granite, immaculate with its cleanliness if not outright sterile. Behind it, a generic but attractive female humanoid stared at me. She had blue hair and purple skin with yellow eyes. The colors melded together into a girl that looked kind of like she was made of candy.

It weirded me out as I stepped up to her after waiting in line for a few minutes. Once there, she coughed into her hand,

"Ahem, may I ask what you're here for, sir?"

Man, sir felt weird to hear for me. I tapped the countertop, a bit nervous for no good reason,

"Uh, I'm trying to warp to another planet called Giess."

Her eyes widened as she leaned back, "Giess? They're staging an evacuation of the planet right now. Are you certain you'd like to go there?"

I nodded. The receptionist leaned her head sideways, holding the heft of her head on her left hand.

"Uh, ok. This will require payment of 15,000 credits along with a screening process before moving to the planet. If you pay double, then you can leave right now instead of

with several others. Here's the waver you'll sign for any damages occurred during the screening process regardless of your choice."

A status screen appeared in front of me, a six hundred page document for this simple, everyday process. Damn bureaucracy. I scrolled to the bottom.

Do you accept? Y/N

I clicked yes before sending 30,000 credits on over. The receptionist gave me a practiced smile, "If you would step to the side, there's warp being powered for your coordinates as we speak. The screener will be here shortly."

I stepped over to where she asked, not wanting to be a problem. After about two minutes of waiting, an octopus-headed person walked up. It looked like it just stepped out of a Lovecraft novel, its eyes menacing. It raised webbed hands as it spoke in a guttural voice,

"You're the one going to Giess? Hmm...you look ready for it. Can you open your dimensional storage for me?"

I raised a hand, the ring from Schema I gained forever ago molding to the outside of my finger. I opened it as the octopus man wriggled his tentacles. Out of nowhere, this creature's body lifted out of the air as if possessed. Underneath him, a circle of demonic formations embedded into the ground with streaks of fire.

Speaking in tongues, he growled out, "Heasheom, mackrlthck, bashtorageiox, bhaoghastixyur."

I couldn't understand a word he said, but from his chest, a pair of cricket legs sprouted out, covered in blood. I looked around, gauging other people's reactions. They weren't even looking this way. This was just a typical day at the office for them.

Damn. Just...damn.

A slithering mass of tentacles and limbs crawled out of the octopus man's chest before crawling up my side and into the dimensional storage. The demon mage clapped

against the ground, blood splattering everywhere. A few minutes passed as I thought up stories for why I wasn't a murderer in case someone came to arrest me.

After a few more minutes passed, the evil creature spawned out of the portal. It skulked right back up to the dead mage and began devouring his corpse. The horrific sight ended a minute later as the beast's belly swelled, and it finished lapping up the blood. It expanded too much, its back ripping out.

As it did, the octopus man stood out of the carnage, robe clean and everything. The remnants of the leg monster disintegrated into the onyx floor, ridding it of the infernal markings. The tentacle creature turned to me, giving me a thumbs up,

"You're good. Have a pleasant stay on Giess."

I fumbled out my words, "I, I will, but, are all the screeners like you?"

The tentacled man shook his head, "Not really, but it's not that uncommon. Is that all, sir?"

I nodded, "Uh...yeah."

As I stepped up to a platform of metal stairs, I looked around at every alien differently. That was their normal, yet somehow, somehow, I was unusual. That thought alone disturbed me and made me curious at the same time.

Stepping into a confined warp drive, the pylons around me engaged, bursting into ocean colored fires. Primordial mana flowed beneath me, filling several rings filled with crystalized mana of the same color.

The air around me vibrated, the steel sheening with a dark blue color. Moments passed as it reached a fever pitch. As if blinking, my surroundings changed without me noticing.

Glancing around at the pylons, they no longer burned. I shrugged before stepping out of a mirror match of the previous warp drive. As I did, I found myself in the same style of building. Unlike the clean, organized Belka, panic engulfed my surroundings.

Espens and different races shouted at the receptionists. People shoved and attempted forcing other people down. One of the warps had dozens of people in it, everyone struggling to escape the doomed planet. A Sentinel stood guard in case actual violence erupted. Their hulking frames kept the underlying chaos at bay, but it was evident to anyone with a brain that a riot was moments from exploding.

Usually, I'd just push past the frenzied congregation. I didn't have a ton of time for this, however. I stepped down from my platform, waving outwards with Event Horizon. The aura passed over the room, only the suppressive effects were active. The entire group went silent in an expanding wave with me at the center of it. Espens ceased crawling over one another. Diplomats quit arguing. Guards struggled to keep their composure, not wanting to be fired.

I glanced around, "Follow the normal procedure. Understood?"

Those closest to me outright lunged onto a knee. Some bowed. Even the Sentinels took a step back. As the silence stretched out for a few moments, I repeated,

"Understood?"

Everyone spoke in eerie unison except the Sentinels,

"Understood."

I pulled Event Horizon back, my runes turning white. I walked out of the now orderly place, everyone falling in line, waiting to be screened. As I stepped out, of the building, one of the Sentinels blocked my exit with a spear. I glanced at him as he gave me a curt nod,

"Thank you."

I gave him the same nod soldiers give one another before continuing my walk out. I stepped out onto a view of Yildraza. The city changed since I last saw it. The once bustling area of commerce hit a fever pitch of panic. Smoke rose from several buildings in the distance. Banners were hung from buildings, many of them embroidered with the image of a hanged gialgathen.

Roaming groups of espens walked along the streets, many of them wearing masks over their faces. Their symbolized uniforms and coordinated movements gave them an official look, though their actions didn't. They shook down shop owners, various strangers, and anyone without that symbol on their chest.

The symbol of a hanged gialgathen.

As I paced further, I discovered what was bothering me about Yildraza. Only the thinnest veil of sanity covered the otherwise evident terror that had taken hold of these people. They no longer cared who brought stability, the imminent glassing making many go mad. Some sort of quasi-government took hold of the fractured factions during this time.

It was the same government that Thisbey attempted to make.

I stepped past these events, standing over the throngs of people. So many people scrambled in desperate for an escape. The repercussions of the Overseer's proclamation was evident to me now.

This was a planet on the brink of destruction.

This was only more motivation to get moving. I rolled my shoulders before bending down and leaping up. The concrete walkway cracked under my heels as I shifted mana types fluidly. Using Force of Nature, I pulled myself along. Leaving fractures in the pavement, I zoomed across the skyline, avoiding others gifted with flight.

After a few minutes, I reached the hill Helios teleported us to after we got our asses kicked by Lehesion. Once at the mini-mountain, we found the Sentinel still there. He meditated on the ground with his legs crossed, a couple rays from the sun glinting off his armor. He gave off this air of majesty.

I walked up before tapping his back. The Sentinel lifted his head before turning to me. I offered a hand as he began pushing off the ground. He grabbed my hand, pulling himself up. As he did, he rolled his shoulders,

"It appears as though that evolution you spoke of has finally begun manifesting."

I still frowned from the events in Yildraza, “Eh, we’ll have to see.”

I opened the dimension I gained from my armor evolutions. It acted as a separate space I could manipulate, and I hadn’t yet truly tapped its potential. After opening the star-laden portal, I willed Torix out. Like pulling a cadaver out of the morgue, his body floated out with his arms by his side. I suspended him with a gravity well before Torix snapped into action.

He turned around, stunned at his surroundings. I set him down, keeping him standing even as his knees wobbled. The Sentinel gave him a look of disdain, eyeing his weakness. Torix shook his skeletal head,

“It’s a pure stasis. All was null, and for me, no time has passed. It worked just as our experiments predicted.” Torix glanced at his status, “Uh, seventy messages already? Ugh.”

The Sentinel stared between us, “What did you mean by ‘experiments’?”

I said, “I stored him in this pocket dimension I have control of. It’s untraceable apparently, letting me smuggle Torix onto Giess.”

The Sentinel glared at me, “You admit crimes to me? Do you forget who and what-“

I slapped his shoulder, “Come on man, you’re off duty. Besides, we have a lot to take care of, like, I don’t know, saving a planet from getting glassed?”

Torix nodded, clasping his hands behind himself, “Indeed. I’d imagine saving billions of life forms takes precedence over a petty case of smuggling. Wouldn’t you?”

The Sentinel sighed, “Fine. Where will we go, and what will we do?”

I turned to Torix, “That’s a good question.”

Torix kept reading messages, “In all likelihood, we cannot prevent the glassing of Giess any longer. Even if we destroy all the silvers, Lehesion, and the Adair family within the next three weeks, Schema will be sending a message with this planet’s utter destruction.”

The Sentinel glared at Torix, “Then you’re not stopping the glassing?”

Torix raised a palm to the Sentinel, “We shall still attempt it, but I doubt we can sway the decisions of a godlike entity such as Schema. Instead, recruiting those that cannot escape takes precedence. In this case, that means offering sanctuary for the gialgathens as they are the most sentient and most useful to us and our cause.”

He waved his raised hand, “In my eyes, the most justified course of action would be uniting with Chrona, Krog, and Kessiah. We’ll be able to leverage their base of operations most effectively once there. As we cut our losses, we’ll be relying on you to lead them once there.”

“Can do.” I pointed in the distance while glancing at the Sentinel, “Can you teleport like an Overseer can?”

The Sentinel pulled his spears from his back, the ornate engravings catching my eye,

“Yes, but only to places that I’ve been to.”

Torix opened a map of Giess, showing the location of the encampment known as Elderfire. The Sentinel pointed to a site about halfway there, “I can warp us this far.”

Torix closed his status, “Excellent. That’s about 50% closer than I imagined we would be.”

The Sentinel swung his spears in circles overhead before lunging forward. His legs landed ahead as he stabbed the lances into the air, the violet blades rippling with arcane energy. They tore through space-time, the continuum around us buzzing.

The Sentinel jerked back while pulling the spears apart. A high pitched ringing echoed out around us along with a shockwave. The Sentinel sheathed his spears along his back, and the lances thudded across his back as the electromagnets activated. Stepping up to

the portal, he grabbed the edges of the tear and pulled apart. He struggled for a bit, so I stepped up.

I channeled The Rise of Eden, encompassing him within the aura. Grabbing the edges of the tear in the continuum, I yanked up. The dimension caved in my wake. I stepped along the bottom, stomping the bottom of the portal under my heel. It opened a view to a desert, the dry air pouring out of the tunnel.

Holding it open with my hand and foot, I gestured to them both, “let’s go.”

The Sentinel looked at me before peering towards the portal. He stepped through with a shake of his head. Torix followed, his skeletal hand cupping his chin.

Stepping into the desert, the hot sand crackled under my feet. As I stepped out of the portal, space-time slammed shut, sending out another wave through space. Sand dusted into the air, flying away with the wind. I walked through it, finding myself standing atop a dune of sand. I lifted the Sentinel and Torix, launching us into the air. As we beamed forward towards the coordinates, I turned and asked Torix,

“Where too?”

Torix pointed into a direction, and I pulled us along. As we traveled towards Elderfire, I tore strips of my armor off and melted them. I stored the glowing liquid within my dimensional storage, aiming to use the utility more now. Torix reviewed the messages from earlier, his gaze focused and littered with concern. As he closed his status, he turned to me,

“Be prepared when we enter Elderfire. Tohtella made her first genuine assault on the gialgathens while you and I were traveling here.”

I pulled us forward, the three of us speeding along like a missile,

“How bad was it?”

Torix winced, “Very.”

After a few hundred miles of dessert, we reached a set of ruins along with an oasis in the desert. Perhaps oasis was a bit too strong of a word. It was more like a waterhole. The refugees built Elderfire on some ancient ruins, and the supposed spring was actually just a well of water. Various gialgathens drank from this pool and used it to keep their skins hydrated. Otherwise, their hides would crack under the harsh winds and heat here.

That's probably why they chose this isolated position. The genocide of the gialgathens escalated as the panic of the planet reached a fever pitch. With hiding as the goal, the gialgathens settled in a good spot. They abused espen's amphibious nature here. To attack, enemy forces had to cross a dessert as well, and staying here also gave the gialgathens a great view of their surroundings. While safe, this position still came across as desperate.

That fact unsettled me. To my understanding, the gialgathens had always overwhelmed the espens in martial might. Turning the tables would be no small feat. Either way, we landed among the ruins of the old city, the general malaise and dismay verifying my assumption. The attack must've left a nasty scar then. Walking past the collapsed pillars, Gialgathens huddled under the shade, their different shades and sizes a feast for the eyes. On a different day, they'd be the majestic creatures I remembered.

Now they bundled together, many of them injured. Their body's carried fresh scars and still scabbed over wounds. They lacked the pride and noble bearing I remembered from the gialgathens I saw in the past. I winced at the sight, but it made sense I supposed.

The guy they worshipped as a god was a puppet for the enemy. Their stronghold was decimated by that same idol in less than a single day. Now they faced a relentless force intent on exterminating them. Seeing their broken spirits and humility, it made me miss their cocky demeanors from before all this happened.

And still, I questioned how this kind of thing happened.

After passing dozens of these worn down derelicts, we reached the well of water at the heart of Elderfire. Chrona stood at the entrance to what was a rift opening. It opened up to an underwater domain with fish and other creatures swimming through it. The time mage peered up at me, her eyes weighed with exhaustion and her chest lowered. It caught me a bit off guard.

Beside her, Kessiah sat down on a block of stone, attending to an endless array of wounds. Dark circles sagged under her eyes, her will extended to its absolute limit. Above them both, Krog flew and spoke to several armored gialgathens, ordering them to patrol the area.

As we stepped up, Krog glared down at us. He flew down, his feet crushing stone under his clawed feet. As he grimaced at me, I found new scars over his face, neck, and body. His wings carried a few extra holes. In his eyes, the spirit of a warrior burned bright.

In just a moment, I understood who was leading this entire effort.

Krog kept his head high, his pride still there. There was a subtle desperation and relief in his words as he nodded to me, “Thank you for your arrival, leader.”

His respect caught me off guard. Something awful must have happened. I glanced around and spread my arms, “So, uh, what happened here?”

Krog glanced at Chrona, then back to me, “Several of our cities were assaulted this morning before dawn. It happened after the Shapeless Arbiter killed several of the standing members of the rebels.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Shapeless Arbiter?”

Torix leaned towards me and whispered, “They call Althea by that name.”

I shook my head, “Good god, what has her so motivated all of a sudden?”

Torix shrugged, “Perhaps something more personal occurred.”

I made a note of that before hearing Krog out. The red and orange gialgathen continued, “They retaliated with a fierce counterattack.” Krog shivered,

“A mass of Hybrids assaulted our cities. It was a complete and utter slaughter. Our forces are in turmoil. I cannot organize them or gather moral.”

I narrowed my eyes, “And this happened this morning?”

Chrona stepped up, leaving her station, “Yes. Up till now, the rebels hounded us like weaklings. They nipped at our heels, but they never openly confronted us. Today was different. They darkened the sky with their numbers, the Hybrids raining down like an endless storm.”

I glanced around, “Ok, and what did we do to stop it?”

Krog looked at me, “I organized the retreat from Selarelia and Monothel. Chrona and I stopped them in those two cities. We were unable to stop the masses in other locations. From the messages I’ve received, they are war zones.”

Torix skimmed a few of his messages, “This report mentions that most of those caught in the crossfire weren’t killed. What did you mean by that?”

Chrona steeled herself, “It meant what it says. Before this attack, we believed this was a genocide. We all believed that we were to be culled. This isn’t so.”

I glanced between them as Krog’s eyes grew distant,

“No, it is not something so simple. They aren’t killing us. They never were.”

A spark of realization sprung through my chest as Krog growled,

“They are harvesting us.”

Chapter 226: Against the Tide

The group went silent as each of us contemplated the consequences loaded in Krog’s words. Harvest, in particular, rang quite a few alarm bells. It sent shivers up my own spine even. It meant they looked at the gialgathens as a resource, and I understood good and well the impending dread that came with that.

When Torix and I first met, he mentioned how I could be used as a mana battery. Even now, my skin crawls at the prospect. Knowing what the gialgathens were up against, a fate even worse was waiting for them.

Still, I wasn't about to let myself get caught up in the moment. Before letting the situation get out of hand, I walked up to Krog,

"Now wait a minute... You're telling me they're harvesting you. How do you know that?"

Krog shook his head in disgust, "The way they ensnared us... No one was killed. They were put at the brink of death yet left to live. That isn't the act of someone without the intent to use us whilst alive."

I cupped my chin, falling deep into thought, "Yeah, that makes sense. That means our priority should be getting you guys the hell off of Giess. That shouldn't be that difficult. I can get about ten of you out at a time. We can get of Giess before Elderfire is crushed by Lehesion."

Krog showed his teeth, "That, that's incredible. I'll trust you in this then."

I glanced around, my hands on my hips, "This should only take a few hours at most. Who wants to go first?"

Krog narrowed his eyes, "Wait one moment. How do you intend to move all the gialgathens on Giess in only a matter of hours?"

I leaned back, "Wait a minute, all the gialgathens? There's a misunderstanding here." I pointed around, "I'll help those here. The strangers off in the attacked cities are on their own though. I'd like to help, but I have to look after my guild."

Krog shook his head in disbelief, "What do you mean strangers? They are our people, our kin. Are you so heartless as to abandon them?"

Yeah that stung a bit to hear. I crossed my arms, "Heartless is a bit of a stretch. I'm still here to help out. I'm no saint though, so you got me there."

“You...we believed you to be the champion of our people. You were to lead us when we needed help. Why do you admonish the responsibility now that it beckons to you?”

Yeah, it was a responsibility Krog was thrusting onto me. I tapped my chest with my hand, a metallic ring echoing,

“I’ll help fight Lehesion since he killed members of my guild. I’ll also get the gialgathens in Elderfire off of Giess. I’m doing quite a bit right there. Roaming the entirety of Giess and fighting enhanced Hybrids to save total strangers?”

I shook my own head in disbelief, “You’re asking a lot more of me than I can afford to give. Think about my situation. What if Lehesion attacks my own guild? Everything I’ve worked for and helped create will be destroyed if I’m not there. You can’t expect me to drop all that to save you all. I wish I could, but I can’t. It’s just too risky...”

I winced a bit, realizing how cold I sounded,

“I’m sorry.”

Krog took a breath before glancing back to me, “But surely our kind deserves a better fate than this one?”

I looked up at him, my gaze hardening “Calling this fate is an excuse for the gialgathen’s inaction.” I glanced around, “None of you are helpless. You all waited until this situation spiraled out of control. That’s not on me. That’s on you. All of you.”

In my eyes, that was the hard truth. Yes, they needed help. That didn’t mean they deserved it without even trying themselves. When Yawm came crashing down onto Earth, I wanted someone to save me too. No one did, so I saved myself. The gialgathens could do the same.

Despite how standoffish that sounded, I did want to help them. Doing all this for nothing though? They were taking advantage of my goodwill. Yeah, I wanted to help. I also wanted to help people back on Earth. I couldn’t save everyone though.

As those thoughts raced through my mind, Chrona leaned her head back,

“Perhaps some sort of deal can be arranged then? We are not so ungrateful and needy that we would ask for such assistance without equivalent compensation.”

I let out a sigh of relief as I crossed my arms, “Thank you. That makes this situation a lot easier for me. What kind of terms are you thinking of?”

Chrona and Krog glanced at each other, speaking out a telepathic conversation only they could hear. As they finished, they turned to me, and Krog spoke out,

“Chrona and I will serve without question over the next century, as will any gialgathens we save. Is that appropriate?”

My eyes widened as I scoffed, “What the hell kind of deal is that? A Hundred years?”

Krog’s composure showed a few cracks as he scrambled out a few words,

“Then...then make it three centuries of enslavement...And Chrona and I will serve till our deaths. Surely that is enough?”

I facepalmed, “Good god, did you think I’d ask you to flay yourselves alive then parade around your skin? I was thinking more like, I don’t know, a decade or two of service. Maybe more from you two.”

Chrona’s eyes widened, “That’s all?”

I shrugged, “Yeah, that’s about it. We can grind out the details later, but it would probably involve taking out dungeons, defending Earth, and educating yourselves. That’s about it. You’d be free to do whatever outside of that.”

Krog peered at Chrona before turning back to me and giving a vociferous nod, “We accept your terms. We absolutely accept.”

I turned to Torix, “Alright, we’re helping the gialgathens. Any thoughts on how?”

“After my initial presumptions, the most efficient avenue of assistance involves going towards these warzones. Once there, we may assist the gialgathens held within them. It seems the most effective course of action.”

At this point, other gialgathens grouped around us. I glanced around, “Yeah. That sounds solid...Hmm.”

The gialgathens drooped their heads, much of their pride shattered. It was an understandable reaction. They’re god turned on them, twisted into a war machine. They lost their stronghold to that warped creature, and now they were getting harvested by an unknown force.

Yeah, they needed a pep talk to shift morale. That would come after we got our own counter-attack organized. I rolled my shoulders, “It’s time to get this operation started.”

Torix cackled, “Excellent. What would you recommend?”

I began cracking my fingers one at a time, “Alright, we’ll round up the gialgathens here. I’ll be using a blue dungeon core to make this place safe while we’re away. That should give us the time we need to get back if this place is attacked.”

Torix nodded, jotting down some notes, “That’s quite the resource to spend on securing a base of operations. Are you certain it’s worth the investment?”

I waved a hand, “I have three blue cores at this point. I’ll need to use them eventually, and having a safe zone like this is just too useful. It makes the logistics involved with this kind of plan infinitely simpler.”

Torix’s shoulders drooped as he murmured, “Ah, yes. I suppose evading that burden is wise.”

I pointed at the necromancer, “You’ll have plenty to do. Don’t worry about that. I’ll still be working on your new body in the meantime, regardless.” I turned to our Sentinel friend, “You don’t mind working hard to save these people, do you?”

The Sentinel tapped the hilt of his spear, “If it served Schema, I would work tirelessly forever.”

“Alright, good. We’ll be using your teleportation abilities to warp everyone around. We’ll get going from city to city, clearing them out and getting the gialgathens here.”

Chrona tilted her head at me, “I would ask of you, how would we support so many people here? I’m certain you noticed, but it’s a desert.”

I raised a hand and clamped it into a fist, “I’ll handle that part.” I turned to Torix, “I’ll be needing a new grimoire. Do you think you could make me one?”

Torix shook his head, “It’s beyond my abilities now. The volumes of mana I would need to siphon would reduce my current body to ash.”

I tsked, “Shit. I’ll do it then, but I’ll need your help.” I turned to Krog and Chrona, “What are you two doing here exactly?”

Krog raised his head, “I am attempting to organize the retreat of our forces.” Chrona followed, “I am guarding Elderfire against this...portal of some sort I suppose? I know little of it.”

I pointed at the rift, “I’ll clear that real quick and get you guys a different source of water and food.” I closed my eyes for a moment wracking my brain. I opened them,

“Yeah, and we’re going to need your scouts Torix. If we can somehow get some information on the enemy’s movements, that would make this much easier.”

Torix nodded, working through several status screens at once. As I watched him for a second, a wave of deja-vu passed over me. Torix reminded me of the first Speaker I met, Tera, the World Breaker. I grinned. We’d be getting Torix a similar title soon.

I turned to Krog, “Once we get an idea of their movements, I’ll be launching myself as the vanguard for our forces. After I punch a hole through whatever we’re facing, you guys come in and clean up the mess I make.”

Chrona nodded, "We will turn their corpses to ash and send their memories to oblivion."

Watching their spirits lift, I rode the momentum of the gialgathens surrounding me. I turned to Torix, "Make my voice louder. I'm going to remind these guys what they're fighting for and who they are."

Torix cackled, "Of course, guildmaster."

I lowered my hands, channeling quintessence under me. A pillar of stone rose from the ground, putting me above the heads of the gialgathens. I stared around, waving my arms, "Come, everyone."

My voice echoed across the desert, my tone commanding and confident. I wasn't feeling that inside though. Talking in front of a huge crowd like this made my stomach sink. At the same time, they didn't need to see Daniel Hillside right now. They needed the Harbinger of Cataclysm, a figure larger than life.

Even if I didn't think of myself as that figure, these guys did. At the very least I'd have to fake it until I made it. Using that belief, I took a deep breath before glancing around. It was time to live up to that title Schema granted me years ago.

Shaking out the jitters, I shouted at them,

"Tell me, why do you all look so defeated? It's making a mockery of the pride I've come to expect from you all."

The gialgathens glared up to me in anger. I raised my arms, "Good. You can still be angry. You're not quite as beaten as you look then. There's still fire in you."

One of the oldest gialgathens shouted out, "We appear defeated? You tell us we still have fire? Foolish. You haven't seen what these forces can do. They know our every movement. They prod our every weakness. They hunted us down like lambs to the slaughter. You alone cannot change our fate."

I stared him down without flinching,

“I haven’t seen what these forces can do, but I have felt what you gialgathens can accomplish. You’re capable of bending time, drenching horizons in flame, and crushing stone like roaches under your feet. You’re telling me that you’re lambs to the slaughter? Maybe you don’t know the gialgathens that I know.”

The gialgathen bowed his head, unable to withstand my words or stare. I turned, glancing around the crowd,

“The gialgathens I know are monsters worth fearing. They are creatures of legend that stretch their wings so wide they cast shade across entire battlefields. They are behemoths that stand taller than the mightiest trees. They are the kings of the sky, unmatched and unyielding.”

I raised a hand, “I faced the mightiest of your kind, Lehesion, and I lost. Tell me this – if he could reach such heights, who is to say that you couldn’t do the same?”

They glanced up at me, many of them inspired by my words. I continued, wielding the momentum like the edge of a sword,

“In each of you lives the wrath of a god and the might to crush mountains. There isn’t just fire in your chests. There is fire in your wills, the kind that can melt steel and bones alike.”

For added effect, I slowly encompassed The Rise of Eden over them. As I did, I thundered,

“In each of you is the potential to turn any tide. I will stand with you, and we will stand against this storm. After we’ve annihilated these monsters, we will leave behind a legacy. Your children will look back at your generation as those that stood against the abyss. You will be embodied as those that stared into the depths, yet each of you laughed in the face of calamity.”

I gestured to everyone, “If you do so, you will be remembered, for what you do in life will echo for eternity. Now tell me what echoes will you leave behind?”

Krog thundered, “Roars that quake the land and fire that will burn the sky.”

“Did you all hear him? Who here will roar with your general? Who here will add to his call?”

Dozens of gialgathens roared, the symphony of warcries blending into a deafening and constant boom. I lowered my hands, oozing quintessence mana into the sand around me. This was the moment to pull it all together. I took a deep breath out. It was now or never.

From the pillar, life sprung forth. Mosses, vines, and water spread over the expanse. As the mana reached the sand, sprouts expanded from the ground and trees sprung forth. A jungle grew, flowers, grasses, mushrooms expanding. Roots, bushes, fruit trees, and vegetables sprung forth. Animals of all kinds, the chirps of birds, they came out in an ever-expanding torrent of life.

Shade from the canopy of trees eased the suffering of the gialgathens. I lifted one of my hands, and from above, clouds formed. Lightning crisscrossed the growing blot of mist. The piercing sun ran against the clouds, shade encompassing Elderfire.

From above, rain poured forth in a downpour. As the liquid of life soaked into the sand, I shouted over the storm,

“From Elderfire, we will create a fortress against those that would face us. From Elderfire, we will rain down an endless flame that will burn them to ash. Our enemies will weep in our wake. We will be their nightmares given life. We will be their terror given form.”

The gialgathens of Elderfire roared out, defiance saturating their voices. I boomed,

“And we will turn this tide.”

Chapter 227: Retaliation

I turned around, the gialgathens livened up. I continued channeling the quintessence around the area, soaking it in the rain. At the same time, I pulled out a blue dungeon core from my pocket dimension. The azure aura passed over me, energy radiating from the sphere that fit in my palm.

It mimicked a pill more than a core at this point, given my size. I pulled it up to my face, wondering how the damn thing worked. A screen popped up as I did.

Blue core menu activated. What would you like to do, sir?

Exchange blue core for fifty red cores? (Y/N)

Establish city and defensive aura? (Y/N)

Sell blue core for resources? (Check out galactic rates!)

The core trade seemed pretty one-sided in favor of Schema, at least based on what Caprika told me. Either way, I selected the establish city option.

Error, rift located within city confines. Rift must be closed before a city may be established.

I sighed before hopping off my stone pillar. As I clashed against the ground, cracks in the stone radiated outwards from beneath me. As I stood up, I wondered about the destruction. I usually absorbed the impact with gravity, but using it with quintessence was finicky at best. Distributing my mass was more about strengthening the materials I stepped on than reducing my own weight.

Stone could only be so durable after all.

Still, I filled in the cracks around me with a similarly colored stone as I walked up to the rift. I turned to Chrona,

“I’m clearing this real quick. You guys start organizing everyone.”

Chrona glanced up at the clouds above, a bit of wonder in her eyes,

“Yes, of course.”

I dived into the pit, shifting to Event Horizon. As I did, I pulled my way through the water, discovering an underwater ecosystem. Hammerhead fish, glowing nine-tailed eels, and dark fire piranhas littered the water. They averaged about level 1,000, so a quick pass through with Event Horizon obliterated them.

Once finished, I collected a red core stored inside some glowing coral at the bottom of the pit. Within five minutes, I shot myself back out of the rift, shifting my mode of being back to Rise of Eden. Just as the clouds above dissipated, I restored them to their full glory.

I assimilated the red core, putting the points I gained into Apotheosis. A mere blip of potency coursed through me and only for a moment. I turned towards the gialgathens, finding them devouring much of the food I made. They drank from the pools of water, some holding their mouths open for the rain.

By now, their skins rehydrated, giving them the sleek, colorful appearance of a salamander. The moisture gave their skins brighter shades of coloration as well, the jungle becoming a moving blur of vibrant colors. The shift wasn't just physical either. The rain brought them a kind of joy I only saw in children. It was as if they forgot their worries for a moment, and that moment was all they needed to get back some hope.

Some of the younger gialgathens even played in puddles, relishing the water. To keep this place fertile, it needed a constant stream of mana from me, however. I needed to leave soon, so I cupped my chin and thought for a moment.

I came up with a simple solution. I walked back over to the earthen pillar I created for the speech. I converted a wall of rock around it before walking forward, stepping on air. Before my feet fell, I generated a stone staircase to walk upon. As I passed, I carved a variety of runic configurations.

This slow, careful pacing left me at the top of the pillar within thirty minutes. The runic configurations proved straightforward, and they provided an enchantment over the area that mimicked my own quintessence. While not a perfect conversion, water was all the group really needed. The life here would maintain itself with that.

With that in mind, I lunged to one knee and placed a hand onto the stone. Channeling an abhorrent amount of mana into the rock, quintessence saturated the makeshift enchantment. As I pulled my hand from the rock, a chunk of the pillar stuck to my

palm. A few fractures radiated out a few inches from the channeling spot as I did. A white imprint of my hand remained made entirely of crystallized quintessence.

After wondering how much crystallized mana costed on the market, I pulled out the blue core again. Opening the menu once more, I selected the 'establish a city' option. Another message popped up,

Before placing your new city please read this directive on the specifics of cities within Schema's system.

Cities enable a guild to establish itself on a world. This requires free territory or permission from the current ruling party. While not necessary for an establishment, blue cores give provinces a safety that cannot be matched by other means.

Using the blue core as a central conduit, the city drains reasonable sums of mana from the population. This generates a sphere of mana over and under the city, preventing invading eldritch, approaching nuclear threats, and even a moderate defense against solar flares or other environmental disasters.

The level and scope of these defenses are determined by the population size and mana generation of the population at any given moment. The higher the mana, the greater the shield of protection. Blue cores can store excess mana from a city for later use up to a cap of 10 billion mana. This enables the capital's of planets or important galactic hubs to retain excellent defenses should the population fall for any reason.

Blue cores also guarantee the establishment of several utilities within Schema's system. Teleporters, galactic markets, and registration onto the safe locations list(SLL) also come with the use of a blue dungeon core. The current location's safety ranking will then be determined by population size, mana stored, and other factors.

Further reading can be found here for only several easy payments of 49.99 credits!
(Variations in tax rate not applicable)

I closed out the first ad I read in years. I blinked a few times before pulling the core up between my thumb and index finger. As I did, a visualization of the core's range popped up. It expanded off into the distance, covering a far larger area than we needed. I scoffed at myself. My mana generation skewed the core's calculations by just a tiny bit.

Using a few mental options and levers, I reduced the size to a reasonable area. It gave room for growth of our operations along with the teleporter locations. Those would prove invaluable as we saved the gialgathens.

As I selected finalize, the core snapped out of my hand and into the air. A massive plume of ethereal water erupted from the top and the bottom of the core. This wave of liquid energy coursed over every bit of Elderfire, ingraining itself deep into the land. Sparks flared across the trees and people here like roots made of blue electricity.

The gialgathens in Elderfire glanced over to me, and I stared up. A tidal wave of hexagons dispersed from a focal point above the new city. Semitransparent, these hexagons created a subtle blur in the air behind them. Once the framework set itself, vibrant, navy-colored energy coursed through the translucent structure.

Vitalized and swarming with power, strings of visible, liquid mana funneled into the new dome. I watched over the next few minutes, the visual obstruction fading with time. As it finalized itself, the barrier's visibility faded till it almost disappeared. Only a few fragmented, tracing blue lines from the hexagons remained in the distance.

It was stunning.

As it ended, a pull on my mind fought over the mana I siphoned into my cipher engravings on my forearms. I let the blue core take its fill, channeling my excess mana into it. Peering between gaps in the canopy, a few gialgathens shook their heads. It looked like this new mental pull affected them as well.

Not long after, Elderfire settled down. Even with my absurd mana generation, 10 billion mana would take a bit of time. Using that time, I walked down the steps of the stone staircase, finding Torix and Chrona at the bottom of the expanse.

As I paced down, Torix raised a hand to me, "Ah, would you mind excusing me for a moment? I need your assistance with a quandary."

"What is it?"

Torix waved his hand around, “A few unknown scouts have happened upon our base on Earth. What would you have us do with them? I envisioned having them captured and tortured until death. Perhaps my overly cautious approach is unwarranted, however.”

I frowned, “I do think caution is the best way to handle this. Of course, that doesn’t mean torturing them to death though. Have someone spy on them and try to discover the faction they’re from. We might be able to make a friend instead of an enemy.”

Torix nodded, “Then, it shall be so.” He turned to walk off, but before he could finish doing so, he turned his eyes back to me,

“Ah yes, the time limit for Earth’s safety net is expiring soon. Other factions will be landing onto Earth and vying for territory. Do think about it and our courses of action in the future if you could.”

Torix stepped away before Chrona telepathically spoke to me,

“When will we stage our first retaliation?”

I crossed my arms, “Do you have the locations of the attacked areas?”

“We do, though the extent of each warzone is unknown.”

I turned a palm to her, “How about tomorrow morning? A good night of rest will do you all a lot of good, and mentally preparing for the carnage to come is necessary. While you guys rest, I’ll have plenty to do, and it gives Torix time to work out the logistics and strategies we need. How’s that sound?”

Chrona nodded, “It sounds perfect. I and the others will be at your beckoning call.”

I raised a hand, “Wait one moment. I thought about it a bit, and I think you’ll do better here.”

Chrona’s eyes widened, “What do you mean stay here? My people are dying in droves and being abducted. How can I sit in this sanctuary while you and the others take the skies by storm?”

I walked up to her, waving my hand in a circle while pointing at everything,

“All of this is why. We need a defender here, someone who can stand against a random attack while we’re gone. If you stay here, then you’ll have time to create a temporal dilation chamber for yourself. Since you can stay in place, it makes you much, much stronger during a siege. It’s the best way to use your talents.”

Chrona took a step to me, “But I, I could act as the defender of our ranged forces. I could guard them, enabling their offensive.”

I raised a palm, “You could, and that would work very well no doubt. The problem is that if a group of Hybrids destroy this place while we’re gone, then it won’t matter. We’ll be back to square one either way, dead enemies or not.”

“Perhaps Krog could stay in my place then. I’m better in battle. He will be of more use here, protected by this aura.”

I shook my hand, “Krog’s the tactical head of the gialgathens. I need him to help me command our forces. He’s absolutely necessary to have by my side and on-site.”

“Then...Then we could-“

I laid a hand on Chrona’s side, “Chrona.”

She took a deep breath, “Fine. Though loathe to admit it, your reasoning is solid. Besides, now is not the time to dawdle and waste time arguing. Now is a time for action. I will guard this place until I’m needed elsewhere as you wish.”

I gave her silver-colored side a nudge, “That means we can all focus on getting the gialgathens back home. Good luck.”

“You as well.”

I turned towards the sun, finding pieces of its light peaking through gaps in the trees. Before setting down for some runic work, I hovered across the domain of Elderfire. I covered it with trees and new soil, along with a variety of life forms. A few times I overdid it, and a large pile of crabs was made, but hey, mistakes happen.

I was just glad I didn't do that during the speech.

After covering Elderfire in fauna and flora, I went over towards the temple Torix settled in. The rustic, primitive designs within the orange stone wore over time, giving it an aged appearance. Here the Gialgathens carved images of their race into the sides of the expanse like cavemen back on Earth. It acted as a historical timeline for their race.

One of the longer murals painted a scene of gialgathens swimming through the water. From their mouths, jets of boiling water killed the surrounding fish. Once dead, the fish floated to the surface before being devoured by the gialgathens. That's probably where they developed their fire. One step at a time, they went from fish to an oceanic dragon of sorts. After taking to the skies, their evolution stopped.

Either way, I paced deeper into the temple littered with the history of the gialgathens. Torix found the deepest, darkest hole he could and settled there over the last few hours. Across every wall, a variety of maps, charts, and standard Torix gear smothered every open space.

Cords of mana acted as strings, connecting a few critical positions across a virtualized map of Giess. Silver streaks coated large swaths of the planetary map, the silvers having taken ground over the centuries. Elderfire was in the dead center of the diagram, a few mountains surrounding it on all sides.

I pointed at it, "So we're in the Rak'Shah desert?"

Torix looked up from his own map, turning to me,

"Ah, yes. We're in the dead center of Giess. Tactically speaking, this place was once abundant with water. Mountains rose around it during a peak of tectonic activity. Thereafter, moist air wasn't allowed to float this far inward, creating the desert you see here."

Torix sighed, “It’s a shame really. This position is excellent outside of the high maintenance cost.”

I shrugged, “I’ll manage it. The blue core should be fully charged now as well, keeping us safe from even an orbital bombardment.”

Torix laughed, “Perfect. The utility that infinite mana of yours gives us is quite useful. Just as well, I’ve used our Sentinel friend to disperse a few spies at key tactical locations based on this map. I’ve learned an inkling of the strategy that Tohtella imposed here.”

Torix walked over to the map, gesturing to it with his hands.

“You see here? This is a string of positions attacked by their forces. It creates a distinct line that prevents gialgathens from escaping the landmasses of Giess.”

I walked up to it, the map looking a bit like Pangea,

“Yeah. It kind of looks like they’re attacking where the silvers haven’t infested yet. Weird.”

“That is precisely so. I believe their plans involve pinning the gialgathens onto the mainland of Giess. There they intend to limit the mobility of these flying creatures. Once forced into the Rak’Sha desert, they shall weaken due to the lack of moisture. After baiting them into a poor position, they will prove easy to capture.”

I clanked my fists together, “Then we’ll act as the stronghold here then.”

Torix nodded, “You understand my intent entirely. We shall do so by using gialgathen guildsmen to assist refugee gialgathens across the Rak’Sha desert to this location.”

Torix waved a hand, “You see, the gialgathens within Schema’s system are far less susceptible to the perils of the elements. The system’s resistances grant the necessary fortitude to traverse these extreme distances. We should be able to confound their operation in this manner.”

I crossed my arms, “Knowing how they work, they’ll figure this plan out fast, though.”

Torix raised a hand in expectation of that point, “Well put, and I’ve devised how we shall avoid this informational fallout.” Torix walked over to a pile of papers before pulling out an overlay for the map. I leaned back,

“Where did you find the time to get one of those?”

Torix waved off my question, “Lichs have their resources. Now-“

He placed it over the locations on the map,

“We have access to various resources as well. I’ve invested my time researching into common hacking methods. Using Althea and her various agents, I’ve implanted a few surveillance devices onto many of her targets. Her shadow group was the spies I mentioned earlier. They have given me a sea of data that I intend on using.”

I pointed my finger at the overlay that Torix was holding onto the map. Clay holds formed along the corners of it, freeing up Torix’s hands.

“Thank you.”

I lowered my hand, “No problem.”

Torix made a circle over several of the larger cities in espen territory,

“Using Althea’s knowledge of the Adair’s organization, we’re isolating the individuals that control the flow of information. By manipulating what they see and hear, we’re confusing this critical resource.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Well, damn. That will buy us some time.”

Torix raised a finger, “It will do more than that. A troop of the students from our guild has come here from Earth during your stay in the compendium. They are the elite mind mages I’ve been curating since we established ourselves outside of Springfield.”

Torix waved his fingers maniacally, “Using them, we shall create decoys and misdirection during our attacks, allowing us to save more gialgathens. While our own psionics pale in comparison to the Adair’s, we simply need to avoid the true masters of mental magic they have. Using these methods, we shall eradicate their implanted forces here on Giess.”

I stared at Torix in silence as he continued,

“Furthermore, we shall be using your assaults to throw off the Adiar’s finding of our location here in Elderfire. Your blitzes will be targeted in such a way as to cause them to incorrectly guess where our base is located. The Sentinel’s teleportation shall be key in this. This shall give us the time needed for the final piece of our operation.”

Torix cackled a bit before spreading his arms towards the map,

“We shall be training and leveling gialgathens along with our own troops during this time. The silvers act as simple catalysts towards this end. This shall enable us to build a retaliatory force that shall be stationed here in Elderfire. By the time they discover this place’s location-“

Torix let out a bout of evil laughter before turning back to me,

“Even an assault led by Lehesion shall prove futile.”

I soaked in the extent of Torix’s plan for a moment. After a while, I shook my head,

“I’m glad you’re on our side.”

Torix stood up straight while holding his head high. He interlocked his hands behind himself. The guy was in his element as he met my eye,

“You’ve spent your time honing yourself into a weapon. I’ve long thought my responsibility was and is to enable that pursuit of yours. You gain power, and I shall arm you with the tools necessary for your position. You shall lead from the front and inspire others to follow, both our vanguard and our immortal leader.”

Torix's blue, fiery eyes flared,

"And I shall assist you, hidden within the tall shadow you cast."

I turned a palm to him, "You don't have to do that, you know. I have no problem sharing the credit."

Torix shook his head, "Though the sentiment is appreciated, it is unnecessary. I am at home in the darkness, and I find satisfaction in a plan well executed. I may do both of those best here, hidden from prying eyes."

Torix waved his hands, "Besides, a target on your back is far less threatening than one on my own."

I snapped my fingers, "That's right, your new body. It sounds like you got this plan locked in. I'll let you do your thing while I do my own."

Torix turned back to his map, "But of course. By morning, we shall be prepared to counterattack. I wish you farewell."

"You too. Cya Torix."

I walked off into a different room of the temple. Once within its depths, I exchanged a few messages with Althea. It had been so long since I last saw her because of the compendium. I missed her quite a bit, so even though I despised 'texting,' I preferred it to no communication at all.

After devising something resembling a loving message, I got to work on Torix's new body. I shifted to dominion mana, letting the aura leak over me. My armor responded in kind, grinning an evil, insidious smile. The dark gray of my skin darkened to a pitch-black as I gathered several tons worth of the material, regrowing devastating wounds in seconds.

After getting the dominion laden metal, I shifted to quintessence. With The Rise of Eden, I emboldened my mind with the will to create. Wielding Apotheosis, I melted the armor into a mass ball of molten metal.

Instead of vibrating the particles like I did with Ascendant mana, I injected raw thermal energy into the metal. It was actually easier to do. During this, I mixed some of the metal harvested while traveling to Elderfire as well. Once pliable, I shifted out globs of the heated metal before setting to work.

I formed black bones, Torix's preferred form. I stuck with solid outer shells instead of a solid structure. Otherwise, the skeleton would prove too cumbersome. I left a framework of supporting structures within the skeleton's bones to keep it sturdy though. Once I finished with the bones, I aligned the metal by pulsing gravitational waves through it. This eliminated air bubbles and evened out the metal's grain structure.

Once I finished up with the body, I added a bit of flair onto the skull, hands, and shoulders as well. The scapulas acted as slightly thicker plates, the skull carrying Torix's signature crown of thorns over his head. On the hands, I kept short spines on the outside of his fists. I kept the features of the skull hollow and menacing, though I did interlay a few supports through it.

The idea was that when Torix stepped out onto a battlefield, I aimed for our enemies to feel fear. After finishing the crafting of the skeleton, I created hundreds of thin wires. The practice from my previous armors helped me out here, allowing me to complete a large pile in only an hour.

I set those aside before using several bouts of quintessence. After a few failures, I eventually created a gray ball of fabric. I weaved it with the wires, creating a robe similar to his current one but much denser and more protective. I also made a cape for his back composed entirely of the thin wires. It was large enough to cover the entirety of Torix if he wanted it too.

It would be a makeshift shield if he needed it or perhaps a kinetic dampener. Either way, it would be useful and look cool at the same time. As far as I was concerned, that was a win-win situation.

With suitable proportions for the new body, I ended up with a nine-foot-tall robe. The black on gray created a nice contrast as well, appearing malevolent and powerful. With

that finished, I took a few golden rings from my pocket dimension and melted them down. Proving much easier to work with than my own skin, I embroidered the trim of the robe with Torix's classic touch of gold.

This livened up the clothes a bit, making them look less dreary. I also created a thin shoulder plate for the cape to hang from. On it, I crafted dull, angular tines that jutted up. They protected the sides of his face, and when worn, Torix would appear broad and menacing.

Once finished with the main body, I looked at the time. It took about 8 hours in total, far less than I imagined it would. The Rise of Eden did wonders for my productivity. With the little time I had left, I worked out some of the runic inscriptions. Instead of the watered-down runes Schema used, I decided to use the cipher. The idea was that he would wear the robe over the carvings, keeping them cloaked from prying eyes.

With the cipher at my disposal, I scoped out a quick synopsis of what I viewed Torix as. Diligent, ruthless, and astute, I carved out the idea of a mastermind with a familial side. Even if he'd given up on life, he found something worth living on for in his undeath.

In the end, Torix turned into a father figure for me. I never had one really, and he did a pretty good job of it. At the same time, he was a teacher and mentor that enjoyed sharing his hard-earned knowledge. Despite this academic nature, Torix kept grounded even when there was chaos erupting around him.

Even in the eye of a hurricane, Torix always headed towards an efficient and effective solution for any problem he faced. He never struggled to learn from those younger than him either, his humility impressive. At the same time, his rage was a dark, abyssal thing and well worth fearing.

His ability to command tactically was unequaled as well. He maneuvered our troops around Yawm's followers with absolute brilliance. His new plan was both cunning and capable, and he would no doubt execute it with deadly efficiency.

The more I mapped out my understanding of Torix, the more confident I was of my conclusions. The Torix I knew was a dark overlord, not some old skeleton about to break from a stiff breeze. When I finished this, everyone else would understand that too. I would make damn sure of that.

Immersed in my work, I lost my sense of time and sped through it with cold efficiency. As Torix tapped my shoulder, I just finished my notes on my status. I shook my head, stunned that he snuck up on me.

He peered up at me as I stood up straight. I found that standing was the most natural thing in the world now that I was so dense. If I didn't force my body to move, it was stiff enough to just lock in place. If I wanted to, sleeping while standing was utterly possible.

I didn't have time to waste, however. Torix glanced over my shoulder at the bones on the floor,

"Ahh, it looks rather malevolent...I quite like the design you're going for. What inspired it?"

I shrugged, "Eh, some card games and other stuff from way back in the day...Is it time to head out?"

Torix nodded, "Yes." He steepled his fingers,

"We'll show them the might of the Harbinger and his legion, one broken bone at a time."

Chapter 228: An Enemy Worth Fearing

I lifted the bones into my pocket dimension, my crafting not quite finished. Torix stepped out of the room, and I followed not far behind. Once we reached the outer edge of our temple, we stepped out to a crowd of gialgathens. Ten were at our disposal during this attack. They were all guildsmen, including Krog.

Kessiah was on his back, strapped onto it with a leather saddle of sorts. She wore a set of power armor that cloaked into its surroundings, though the invisibility was incomplete. At a distance, it would prove useful, however. Krog was rallying the members,

"Jokia is here. That's all of them."

Krog turned to me, “We’re ready.”

I glanced at them, sizing up the troops. The gialgathens were either young and fearless or old and resolute. They either didn’t understand what we were running into, or they knew full well the bloodbath but dove in anyway.

It didn’t matter since we couldn’t afford to be picky here. I waved The Rise of Eden over them while shouting, “Are you all ready for war?”

They roared out in a symphony of their intent. I turned to Torix, “Will you be coming with us?”

Torix shook his head, “Unfortunately, no. I cannot afford to leave this tactical point as I’ll be managing a variety of forces during your excursion. Krog’s tactical knowledge, while perhaps not quite a match for my own, will prove more than suitable for this battle.”

Krog nodded to me, “Your master is a monster in his own right. I was wrong to ever doubt him.”

I rolled my shoulders, “It happens. Now, let’s show the Adair family we’re the real monsters.”

Torix sent me a briefing of the current operation along with a few details for this specific mission. Our resident Sentinel reared back his spears before tearing a hole in dimensions. I stepped up to it, and Torix followed me,

“You’ll begin the operation by stealthily reaching the agreed-upon coordinates. Once there, assault Polydra from this angle. I’ll be relying on you to adjust the plan and deviate as necessary.”

I ripped open the space-time continuum as I gave Torix a thumbs up,

“Of course.”

After a bit of finagling, I got the tear to hit the size necessary for the gialgathens to walk through. Beyond it, the wind whistled through trees with insects chirping in the distance. It was night time in the region, two hours or so before dawn. A fine mist settled onto the forest floor, giving it a mythical appearance.

Holding open the portal, the gialgathens skulked into the ancient woods. As they did, Torix put muffling magic over their wings and feet. Sliding through the portal myself, I verified the age of the forest. Giant trees soared to the sky, each of them towering as skyscrapers. The branches and bramble at the forest floor were large enough to mimic the size of commercial busses.

Before soaking in more of the scenery, Krog walked up to me, “This is Deepwood, a forest East of Polydra. Torix discussed this location with the Sentinel here. It’s a sacred place, so I ask that you avoid destroying what lives here. It acts as a museum for prehistoric times on Giess, many of these species longer-lived than even we gialgathens.”

I nodded, reading a bit of the briefing as we traveled eastward. I carried us through the trees, hovering the entire troupe while Krog gave me essential tactical info. It kind of made the muffling spells useless, but whatever. This wasn’t that hard to do, and maybe the spells would last into the fight and save a life. Eh, I didn’t know.

Krog said, “The assault shall be staged on the western bank of the city. This, along with our other attacks, will imply we’ve come from the west. Considering our amphibious nature, an aquatic or island base seems more believable than one stationed in the Rak’Sha dessert.”

I dipped us below a curving oak, “Makes sense.”

“Polydra itself is a city where both Gialgathens and espens lived together. Since ancient times, the gialgathens lived on the upper portion of the cityscape. Since Schema’s arrival, this has created a disparity in the technology used by the upper and lower echelons present there.”

“So the top half is like Rivaria with stone buildings and below it is something like Yildraza?”

“Yes. The Hybrid’s attack came from the sky while the espens below blocked off underground or land routes of escape. This has encapsulated the gialgathens into an

ancient storage room for leviathans from times past. Though sturdy, the walls of that prison shall not last forever.”

Krog looked me in the eye, “Our goal is to wipe out the surrounding forces and enable their escape. That is how we shall free them.”

I pointed down, “Why not burrow a tunnel for them to escape from?”

“Beneath Polydra is a dormant volcano. The magma ensures we cannot escape through that avenue without suffering severe losses. Seismic activity has also spiked here over the last decade. Polydra’s about to be the sight of an eruption.”

I winced, “So underground burrowing isn’t an option. Alright. That does give me a few ideas, though.”

Krog showed his teeth, “I’ve seen and heard of your ‘ideas’ before. That destructive, orbital bombardment shouldn’t be used until after we’ve taken the gialgathens out of the leviathan’s prison. Otherwise, they shall all die.”

I waved a hand, “Just one thing before we continue. What were the leviathans again?”

“A race we fought to free the espens from servitude. They are large and capable but limited to underwater domains. They are the reason we escaped to the surface many years ago.”

If they were anything like the gialgathens, then they were worth respecting. We might be able to talk with them at some point. I tucked that tidbit into the back of my mind before frowning,

“Huh...Ok, so we’ll be tearing a hole in the forces surrounding this prison then getting the gialgathens out?”

Krog nodded, “You understood our intent. Once they’re out, we’ll be escaping to the sea west of Polydra. There we shall use your Sentinel friend to warp us to Elderfire. Kessiah will tend to the wounds of those that are near death. I shall assist with immediate tactical maneuvers. You will be our forerunner of destruction.”

I clanked my fists together, “Sounds good to me.”

“Think it over as we travel. You may finish reading the briefing as well. We’ll arrive ten minutes before dawn.”

The troop fell into literal silence, though several of the gialgathens were holding a telepathic conversation. They invited me into their discussion, so I listened in as they talked a massive amount of shit to each other. Like soldiers, the sense of comradery was there, and they laughed off the jitters before battle.

After an hour of dashing through the forest, we dipped into a set of smaller trees. Here my gravitational abilities proved vital; it made less noise than their wings did. We skimmed up through a mountainside, plumes of dark smoke rising in the distance. Dozens of miles passed before we swooped around towards the western side of the mountain.

As we darted around the center of destruction, Polydra looked like one big smoke cloud, at least from below. Fires burned in the proud city. We knew that much. That was the price we paid for the deceptive lure tactic – a good vantage point. It would come with time.

After reaching the other side of this lavaless volcano, we traveled over the peak of the mountain. Hovering over the edge of the snowy peak, a few clouds cloaked our descent. I set us down onto the snow, where the mist didn’t block our view of the city. Finally, Polydra came into full view.

Polydra was as Krog described, a city etched onto the side of a mountain. It was separated into tiers of old and new buildings, stone, steel, and glass composing its varied surface. It matched up pretty well though, the contrast pleasant on the eyes due to some good architects no doubt.

That’s where the prettiness ended.

Half a dozen skyscrapers along the lower edge of the city were engulfed in flames. Portions of the espen’s territory carried scars from the escaping gialgathens. Patches of newly molten and solidified rock, crushed military vehicles, and fires littered the cityscape. At the same time, the older, rocky apex of the city was in shambles.

Five massive, aerodynamic spaceships hovered over the top of the city. They used gravitation to suspend themselves, an antigravity field surrounding them. A few floating pieces of rubble around the ships acted as the dead give away for that.

Atomic energy powered the innards of these ships, along with some Hybrid tech. A series of orange, pulsing capsules lined the lower sides of it. Above the orange cysts, lines of blue plasma sheened under clear panels. These spaceships stood at the front and back of two colossal dreadnoughts.

These dreadnoughts carried heavy firearms along with a central cannon designed for mass devastation. This along with a few smaller fighters offered aerial support to the hordes of Hybrids spread throughout Polydra.

These Hybrids acted as the ground force, several gialgathens in view pinned down. The Hybrids infested these restrained gialgathens with wires, organic tissue, and the carrot-colored organ sacks. Still alive due to their natural hardiness, these gialgathens groaned out in agony for help.

Other Hybrids investigated buildings with the assistance of espens garbed in their symbol of a hanged gialgathen. If they found a Hybrid pinning down a gialgathen, then they used a hoverpad to lift them up and carry the mass. After lugging them beneath one of the dreadnoughts, the gialgathen floated into the waiting abyss.

There was no doubt in my mind that the ship was taking them to hell.

The other method of capture involved massive spires composed of Hybrid flesh and metal, the orange cysts spread throughout the city. Towering and tall, these twitching monoliths wobbled in the wind, sensing disruptions on the surface.

Below one of these spires, a smaller gialgathen attempted darting from one building to the next. As it did, the giant pillar of cords and entangled wires and slammed downwards, mauling the poor creature. Many of its limbs broken, the green gialgathen was lifted up before being deluged in a sea of cables.

The metal twine swarmed into the flesh of the gialgathen, piercing skin, flooding its mouth, and digging into its eye sockets. Still alive, the gialgathen was pumped to the base of a spire, a bulging mass of other collected gialgathens there. Getting the

gialgathens out of there was a high priority. They deserved a better death than that at the very least.

Those pillars extended well beneath the surface, roots extending outwards. They dug deep, cutting off an underground escape. The entire event reminded me of Springfield's utter destruction by Yawm's plague. I empathized with how these guys were feeling, watching their home and society crumble.

I shook out my own jitters before breaking the ice. I turned to Krog,

"Those pillars are another reason we can't burrow from below. Good decision on the sky attack."

Krog took a few deep breaths, his composure shaken. The other gialgathens mirrored his unease, many of them remembering their other battles. They reminded me of when I first saw Springfield torn apart by Yawm's plague. I remembered deformed faces running at me, wanting to tear me apart.

I was afraid and alone. I wanted someone to come down and save my ass. No one came though, and I had to save myself. Not everyone could do that though. Right here, right now, I could be that guy saving people. People who were just like me five years ago.

I took a few deep breaths, thinking of what I would've wanted to hear when the plague hit its fever pitch. I envisioned the kind of person I wanted to arrive and save me. Using that imaginary guy, I faced forward, encompassing The Rise of Eden over my allies.

I did my damndest to be that guy I as I said,

"It's time to fight. No more hesitation. No more fear. If I were down there, I'd be praying for help. We are that help. We'll drag our brothers and sisters out of hell. We'll give them a second chance, just as they'd do for us."

I waved my allies forward. They listened to me, stepping forward into a line with wobbling steps. In the telepathic conversation, I thundered,

"Come on now. Instead of fearing what may happen when we dive down, fear what will happen if we don't. Everyone down there will all die horrific deaths."

I turned to the soldiers, “In our hands is the power to stop that. In our hands is the power to enact justice.” I grinned a thrilled, wild smile while spreading my arms,

“Think of it this way. Would you rather live in a hellish world like this, or would you rather die fighting against it?”

The trembling stopped as I turned around.

“I don’t need to hear your answer because my decision has already been made. Has yours?”

I waved them forward, and they stepped up with a renewed bravery. They lined up beside me, and I turned to them as I said,

“Let’s show them hell.”

They let out a telepathic roar as I ran forward, accelerating towards the hellscape. The other gialgathens followed me, keeping a fair distance. Using the Rise of Eden, I kept my mass high as heat built over the surface of my skin. I jumped forward, riding down the edge of the mountain by generating a trail of hardened ice beneath me.

Once I gained actual speed, I shifted to Event Horizon, gravitation expediting my body to the speed of a bullet. A visible pathway of destruction formed as I channeled my anger into a frenzy for havoc. They would regret doing this, making me their enemy. I’d make sure they’d tell their children stories of what happened here to scare them.

They would remember this day.

As I sped down, trees ignited, the ground giving way in my wake. Boulders and rocks ripped from the ground as I bolted near the mountain’s surface. A shockwave rippled out from a sonic boom as I drilled forward. My skin shined yellow, the heat of a star building over my skin. Red lines formed over my runes, my armor grinning wide with jagged teeth.

Comfortable and focused, I willed myself forward faster. Uprooting entire oaks, I tore a gash of devastation across the forest as several Hybrids stared at me from below. One of the five smaller starships turned towards my incoming assault, the gialgathens far behind me ignored.

How could they be expected to notice the dragons when a sentient meteorite was coming at them?

Trees exploded beneath me, the water within evaporating at my passing. I molded myself into a spear shape, accelerating myself further. Two of the starships now faced me, one lined up behind the other one. Their gravitational drives fired as the plasma engines flared. The sound of ripping steel echoed across the mountainside as they charged their cataclysmic weapons.

As if wielding the might of the stars, the first ship launched a bolt of purified energy at me. It ricocheted off the surface of my skin, deflected by my slanted and narrowed shape. The deep burns across my side healed as a portion of the mountainside disappeared behind me. The blinding light behind me flashed, but it carried with it no sound.

I was faster than sound.

The clouds near the ship shout outwards in a circle before I rammed into the first ship. As I did, I outstretched tendrils of my armor, ripping the innards out of the fighter. At the same time, Event Horizon culled much of those onboard. I killed their bodies and their minds, the mana of life siphoning into my frame as I passed out the other side of the ship.

The next ship behind the first fire its own blast. It collided with my head, the impact direct and on point. A white light blinded me, a third of my health disappearing instantly. I let out haunting laughter as the ionized, misted air caved around me in one motion.

I hardly slowed down.

I turned and dropkicked towards the ship with both my legs outstretched. Just shy of contact, I used an enormous bout of telekinesis. Converting the force of my travel into a direct kinetic bullet, the lower belly of the ship exploded in a grand plume of orange fire. A rain of steel assaulted the city below, crushing the stone to powder.

I bounced backward, my legs broken. They shifted back into working limbs as I fell downwards. I enhanced this loss of levity, my stomach rising in my chest. Beneath me, a spire whipped towards me. It made contact, my body too dense and too hard for it.

I impaled the tentacle, metal debris falling from the sides of the living spire. Like a juggernaut, I crashed through a stone building before landing atop two Hybrids carrying a kidnapped gialgathen.

They pulped under my heels, splattered into a fine mush from the kinetic blowback. The crater around me vaporized the espen carriers, their forms nothing more than red mist. The paralyzed Hybrid holding a gialgathen spiraled through the air, whipped into a barrel roll. It left fractures in the stone building. Slabs of stone collapsed as I walked towards it.

I reached out an arm and jerked it back. The holding Hybrid unlodged from the wall, the building collapsing in a plume of dust. I waved my hands outward, the brown cloud blown back by the wind. I reached out my hand, catching the incoming Hybrid and gialgathen.

The massive ball ceased moving the moment it met my palm, cracks erupting outwards beneath me. It's orange capsules pulsing, the head of the Hybrid remained. It let go of the Gialgathen, crawling out and away from the poor beast.

The Hybrid attempted dragging itself away from me. I walked up and stomped its chest, caving it in and into the dirt beneath me. Its head remained while gurgling orange blood. I reached down and grabbed the head. Wrenching it from its body, wires snapped and veins split.

I popped the skull of the monster in my hand, orange blood splashing over me. My armor devoured the blood as I peered towards one of the fighter ships. I roared for all to hear, my voice like a talking mountain,

“So you all want to pretend you’re monsters?”

A singularity charged in my metal blood, energy emanating from my frame,

“Then let me show you what a real monster is.”

Chapter 229: The Battle for Polydra

Several of the shining ships turned towards me as I shifted to The Rise of Eden. The enhanced mana generation saturated my blood faster than Event Horizon did. After a few seconds, I changed back to Event Horizon as one of the ships aimed at me. A swarm of fighter jets charged as I discharged a singularity at the frigate.

The blot of black expanded halfway into its hull, the devastation expanding. As it reached its apex, the ship ripped apart inwards. The gravitational implosion rocked outwards with a deafening echo and shockwave. The flameless explosion let me see it all in pristine detail.

The glass shattered on nearby buildings as concrete collapsed. Cars upturned and one building collapsed sideways. The pulse caught several of the fighter jets, sending them spiraling outwards like a shotgun blast. Fireballs erupted across the city as the planes tumbled into buildings, pavement, and the rubble.

The frigate showed one-third of its hull eaten by the singularity. The other two-thirds carried abuse from the chaotic shockwave. It was like staring at a decapitated corpse walking forward off momentum alone, its fate already sealed. Like a helicopter that lost control, the main ship spiraled in circles before collapsing into the city. Its front deck split apart from the back as it crashed into the ground.

The resulting plasmic fire erupted, and the radioactive cores heated to extreme temperatures. Nearby stone ignited as the metal nearby melted. I sprinted forward, the cityscape bending under the weight of my heels. As I leaped up, glass shattered around me, nearby cars sent tumbling.

Leaving a crater behind, I jerked myself forward towards the collapsed starship with a gravity well. Two fighters dashed past me as I did, but Event Horizon killed the crew members.

Dozens of other fighters followed in their flight paths, the crew members fell like flies. After crossing over a few buildings, I slammed into another group of Hybrids and espens. Vaporized on impact, they died without effort. I glared up at one of the two remaining larger frigates. They escorted the massive dreadnoughts encircling the city.

The fleet rallied to defend against me. Two of the cannons on the frigates aimed at me before unleashing havoc. Plasma bolts crashed into the ground where I stood. My

surroundings melted into a pit of glowing soup. My health depleted for a second or two, burning through a third of it. Once the initial burst of damage finished, my health bar raced back up.

It wasn't nearly enough to stop me.

From around me, I collected the plasma and liquified rock into a gravity well. It fell from my skin, leaving me in a smooth crater. With the flick of my wrist, I lobbed the plasma and rock back at the frigate, spraying the liquid wide like a net. It caught several smaller fighters, killing them on contact. The frigate fared no better.

The larger vessel mimicked an acid victim, the right half of its hull caving inwards. I stuck my hands outwards, wielding vast oceans worth of mana. I created dense gravity wells within the ship, strong enough to cave in steel. I waved my arms, the gravity wells shifting inside the hulls. Pulling the plasma deeper in, enormous shards of the ship ruptured out. Once weakened, I wrenched out the guts of the vessel.

One swipe after the other, colossal portions of the ship fell apart from the main body. With one last surge of will, I created a telekinetic splice down the middle of the vessel. With a growl, I pushed outwards with all my might, riving the ship apart.

The rippling, alien sound of tearing cords and shearing metal echoed across the landscape. Two halves of the ship tumbled apart with a shockwave erupting from the telekinetic splice. The plasma cores exploded before I tore the radioactive centers from the confines of the halved ship.

The superheated cores cast the battlefield in a massive white light like stars. I lobbed them at the last remaining frigate. The ship's diagonally set engines gave it maneuverability. Using them, it shot sideways, dodging the catapulted cores.

My element of surprise all but gone, their forces refined their tactics. I stepped out of my crater, as the ship pulled back. With a blot of gravity, I pulled my hands forward and pulled it back. It charged a bolt at me, firing another shot.

In one motion, I released my gravitational anchor on the ship and shifted to The Rise of Eden. With a burst of quintessence, I generated a pillar of metal in the plasma's flight path. The energy bolt burned halfway through the steel with ease, but I kept piling on more mana into the cylinder of steel.

The bolt slowed down before stopping just shy of me. I coated the gloppy metal in a wave of ice which held it together. The enemy frigate regained stability from my gravitational jerk as I grabbed the sides of the iced plasma. I reared my arms back and chunked the icy log of plasma and metal at the remaining ship.

The force transferred from my arms to my feet and into the ground. A smaller building behind me collapsed backward from the shockwave of toss. The large, iced plasma column slammed into the front of the ship, destroying its central hub. Plasma melted through the ice, coating the vessel in plasma and mist. It crumbled as a shining rain of ice erupted from the impact, a beautiful sight amidst the devastation.

Melting into oblivion, the ship wobbled but stayed standing. I sprinted forward before leaping up. With each step, I created blobs of stone underfoot. The stones exploded under the impact of my stomps, but with them, I ran right up to the ship.

Lunging off the last stone, I landed onto the hull. The smooth, steel shell buckled under my footsteps. The frigate dipped down as my mass interfered with its once effortless hovering. I stuck my hand into the ship, drenching the whole vessel in a monumental wave of mana. The quintessence injected thermal energy throughout the hull, melting a vast portion of the ship beneath me.

The metal depressed beneath me before liquifying. I fell downwards into the molten abyss. Around me, I flooded the hull with more heat. I melted through the ship, my armor glowed white as I passed the final flooring. Landing onto Polydra's ruined metropolis, piles of molten metal pooled into white, glowing sheets around me.

I glanced upwards, finding a gaping hole liquified through the center of the ship. Crew members within caught fire before jumping out of the hell they found themselves in. Others ran from the heat and into the depths of the doomed vessel.

The starship fell into the side of a skyscraper, a storm of glass erupting on impact. The structures both collapsed over the other, utterly demolished. Plumes of dust and fire erupted from the collision. As it passed, I scanned my surroundings, finding the dreadnoughts unmoving. Instead of fighting me, they collected a few final githyanki from the Hybrid ground forces.

Before they finished, I reared back, grabbing a giant boulder with a gravity well. I catapulted it out towards the nearest dreadnought. It collided with an invisible forefield,

a wave of dust sputtering out. I jolted all the remaining rubble near me, no rebar or concrete left for hundreds of feet.

Once out of projectiles, I made some. Using quintessence, I created chunks of iron beside me. Shifting back to ascendant mana, I lobbed the craggy balls of metal at the giant, hybridized dreadnoughts. They clanked off of their forcefields, a thin wave of blue erupting from the collision points.

They stopped collecting gialgathens, several of their warps failing. One of the massive destroyers let out an alien, gurgling echo. Around me, several of the wobbling spires began winding up.

I slammed my fists together, ready for their attempts of retaliation. The first pulsing spire snapped towards me. I countered its blow with a swipe of my hand. The pillar crumbled at my touch, the rubble ground around me bellying up with fissures.

Before it jerked away, I reached out a hand and pulled it back with a gravity well. The spire bent towards me before I grabbed hold of it. Shifting to Rise of Eden, I extended my armor into the tentacle stopping its escape. It let out a high pitched squeal, the organic being writhing in pain.

Too dense for it to swing me, I snapped my hand towards the next tendril attempting to attack me.

It crushed against my frame, its own body too soft to properly harm me. Slabs of iron fell into the ground as I latched onto it. In my arms, I held two of the massive yet thin tendrils. From above, Krog and four of my gialgathen guildsmen flew to help. Krog rallied them as they let out streams of multi-colored fire at the bases of the living spires.

They writhed in my hands, but I held them in place, using their contrasting pulls against each other. A few seconds later and the resistance let up. The gialgathens melted through the entire tentacle bases. As they gathered up their brethren. The dreadnoughts turned towards us. A Horde of Hybrids ran up to the tentacles bases and up to me. I shifted to Event Horizon, stealing dozens of Hybrid's life force at once.

Their rage-fueled run devolved into a desperate crawl. The Hybrid's mana flooded into my blood, evolving me into a living nightmare. As the mana saturated my body, the dreadnoughts lined up some sort of weaponry at my guildsmen. As they readied to fire, I wielded cities worth of mana in each arm.

I clenched my teeth and fists as I used a myriad of gravity wells to move the spire in my right hand. With a growl, I lobbed it in front of the dreadnought's first onslaught. A wave of arcane lightning bolted into the massive tentacle. The giant spire absorbed the entirety of the attack, violet cracks forming over the superstructure.

The mammoth tentacle crashed into the city before crumbling into a fine ash as if it never existed in the first place. My eyes widened.

Alright, I might want to dodge those beams.

I roared as I chunked the next spire at another incoming burst from the other dreadnought. Another rippling wave of arcane force shot outwards from the point of impact. It disintegrated the tendril in an impressive yet silent display of power.

Having bought them time, my gialgathenic guildsmen pulled large piles of captured brethren out of the torn tentacles. The dreadnoughts turned their attention to me and readied another series of attacks. I ran towards them, my footsteps quaked the earth beneath me. As they let out the deafening crack of readied bolts, I dove into the ground.

As if diving through water, I swam through stone. I burst myself further down. Above me, the ground disintegrated into the fine ash of before. I whipped back to the surface with a cataclysmic jolt, discharging my runes.

Using the burst of power, I shot out like a bullet. I dashed towards the massive dreadnought, wind whistling in my ears. Once more, I drop-kicked at the forcefield, unleashing a kinetic round at the superstructure. The impact created a massive wave across a nigh invisible field of blue energy. It held as I bounced backward, both my legs fine this time. A slight bend in my legs stopped all the force from transferring right into my bones.

As I fell, fighter jets swarmed towards me from all directions. They flocked from the dreadnought's hull. They collapsed towards the ground around me, like bees flying into a fire. Their lives gave me untold vitality as I flipped myself around and shot myself back at the barrier. Anchoring myself with a gravity well, I pressed on while smashing my fists into the forcefield.

The reverberations off my strikes rippled across the entire landscape. The forcefield shivered like a stormy sea as portions of it billowed outward. The shield caved inwards after several blows. I followed it, continuing to ground myself with gravity despite my lack of footing.

At that point, I closed in on the frame of the destroyer. At this range, the cannons couldn't touch me. They were far from helpless, however. From the hull of the dreadnought, dozens of people stormed out. They formed squadrons of seven, five power armor laden warriors in front of two mages. These units positioned themselves on decks spread throughout the dreadnought's surface. Along with them, an enormity of anti-personnel cannons pointed in my direction.

With a flash of color, they unloaded spells, bullets, and energy beams. A rain of blue bolts erupted from the rifles and cannons. They launched rays of navy blue that darkened everything near them. These beams crashed against my skin, the superheated plasma sticking like glue.

On the other hand, the solid bullets crashed against me more like kinetic launchers than piercing weapons. Their speed allowed for tectonic collisions, the projectiles disintegrating against my skin. A few of these impacts knocked the plasma off me, and a few gravity wells in the distance threw their aim off.

With that reprieve, I countered the mage spells the best I could. These multilayered offensives rushed towards me like a fireworks display. Soaring eagles of yellow light dove down from the skies while aiming at my eyes. Delayed orbital bombardments of light shot down out of the clouds. From below, a horde of green bees stung and bit at my legs.

I darted back and forth, creating subtle shifts in my position as they came at me. These subtle jerks evaded many of the crew's spells. On the other hand, some area of effect spells hit me with little effect. That was fine. Tanking those wasn't much of a problem. The violet lightning was, however.

A series of arcane bolts erupted from a group of specialized mages far back on the dreadnought, their violet lightning exploding in a storm fit for demigods.

For the moment, I aimed all my attention at the arcane bolts. With subtle shifts in my position, I edged between the rain of arcane destruction. Many struck me despite my

dodging. The flock of energy attacks was too thick. It was like trying to dodge the rain during a thunderstorm.

The electricity stung like a mix of poison and fire. Chunks of my health fell down as I raced for a counteractive plan. I created semi-permanent gravity wells around me, saturating the areas with mana. With those keeping me afloat, I shifted to The Rise of Eden.

I created growing chunks of dirt in front of me. These blocked many of the arcane bolts. Between volleys of arcane magic, I shifted to Event Horizon, wailing on the forcefield with abandon. They changed tactics after half a minute of this dance.

They alternated to a steady stream of arcane strikes, attempting to wear me down. This made switching my mana types far more difficult. On the other hand, I dodging a couple bolts at once was doable. We kept changing our strategies back and forth, each us attempting to stay one step ahead of the other.

With a portion of my focus aimed at this tactical dance, a wave of psionic energy slammed into my mind. Distracted and preoccupied, it hit me like a truck. Oddly enough, a truck of mental force wasn't so bad.

Their psionic abilities didn't cripple me like the last group had. Several reasons explained that. I wasn't an utter novice anymore, and either of my Dimensional Wakes resisted psionics as well. Event Horizon fizzled the mental assaults before they reached me. The Rise of Eden just gave me the raw stats to buffer my lack of experience.

Without the cutting edge of the last psionic onslaught, I kept sharp and on point. The enemy forces rallied more troops, more mind mages joining their ranks. My iron-clad hold over the situation turned brittle over time. Cracks formed in my mental defenses. Attacks I'd otherwise dodge landed on me verbatim.

Despite this offensive, I maintained a steady stream of attacks on the forcefield. This wasn't my first fight, and amidst the chaos, I carved out a stable center of calm. They were dipping into my regeneration, but I held my own. Getting through this shield would change the battle, so I kept focused.

As a few minutes passed, they attempted using complex runic formations in battle. They used their grimoires for these inscriptions. It was ridiculous. Distracted or not, I wasn't about to let these guys spend more than a few seconds on their spells.

One booklet at a time, I ignited their tomes with bursts of thermal energy. I aimed these ignitions during the apex of the mage's ritual. This created severe magical blowback. Mage after mage lost years of work in seconds, and several even lost their lives as their bodies burned to cinders.

Still, juggling all these parts proved difficult over time. Many minds worked against me, my control over fine motor functions dwindling. My offensive crumpled over time. Arcane shots shot into my gut, and their absolute damage was a thorn in my side. Though slight, the rain of bullets and bolts proved distracting. The mental angle of their attack expanded over time as well.

The other dreadnought pincerred me in, attempting to block off my escape. My regeneration kept me alive, but my health danced up and down now. The forcefield thinned, the pale force pushed to its absolute limit. As they threatened to overwhelm me, Krog flew up from below.

He let out a roar towards the dreadnought's crew. A dazzling display of lights, sounds, and other illusions engulfed the crew members. For several seconds, the hail of bullets, storm of psionics, and tornado of spells ceased.

It was all I needed.

I reared my fist back and shot a devastating hook into the forcefield. I smashed a tiny hole through the barrier. With a desperate jolt, I slipped into the field as it reformed behind me. The crew members gained an understanding of their surroundings moments later as the illusions faded.

They saw me, no field between us. The battle changed. The psionic assault ceased, and the rain of bullets and spells ended. I stared at the crowd of crew members. Beads of cold sweat formed on a few of the mage's exposed faces. Even the fighter jets ceased coming at me.

A few of the members stared around, gaging their allies reactions. An intercom radiated inside the ship. It was a deep voice like a whale was speaking,

“Hello, warrior. We are willing to negotiate-“

I pointed at one of the nearby individuals. I flooded his system with raw origin mana. As I lowered my hand, the guy's body bulged under his power armor. As it did, the glass panel covering his face shattered. His eyes fell out with a mixture of blood, guts, and grit. This sandy concoction poured from every joint and opening.

Those near him stared in abject horror as the body thudded against the ship's deck. Those at a distance trembled. I roared,

"I'm not here to negotiate. Lower your weapons and shutdown your shield. Surrender immediately."

The intercom radiated out,

"We just need some time to discuss terms that we can agree--"

Krog sent a message,

Krog Borom, the Harbinger's General(lvl 13,000 | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion) – They are buying time so that Lehesion and others may join this battle. We must end this quickly. There isn't time for this.

I took a deep breath, resolving myself for what had to be done. I dashed forward, towards the crowd. They unloaded the same assault as before. It was too late. As Event Horizon reached them, a symphony of screams erupted. After that, carnage cascaded out in an endless torrent.

Blood. Guts. Pain. Bones. Metal. They blended together into a single vision. I let the ascendant mana take me over, my urge to devour overpowering all else. My enemies crumbled. I indulged, ripping and tearing and ripping and tearing.

Minutes passed, the onslaught turning into an utter bloodbath. I was a living weapon, a creature of complete carnage. In my wake, I left piles of corpses. In my path, I was the forerunner of devastation. I was an omen of their downfall and a nightmare given life, a horror given form.

With carcasses spread across the deck of the dreadnought, I held up a robed mage. I squeezed my hand. Like a neck caught in a garage door, the mage's head decapitated from the blunt force. I dropped the body, the remains around me disintegrating.

I turned back to the ship, sprinting towards a wall of metal. I smashed through it, finding myself inside a storage room. I continued my run forward, the standard crew falling to Event Horizon as I passed. A minute of running through the lower portion of the ship and I fell into a large holding room.

Lining the bottom of the dreadnought, the dim room held the echoes of dying gialgathens. I sent a torrent of thermal energy into the ceiling, the glowing metal washing the area with a subtle, orange light. It was beyond anything I imagined. Groups of Hybrids paced around the metallic warehouse, dragging the gialgathens. They either piled them up into holding areas or hung them onto meat hooks across the ceiling.

Once on the meathooks, several masked individuals walked across metal walkways. They implanted tubes that pumped their bodies full of the orange muck that filled the Hybrids. The gialgathens bulged, wires forming in their body as they were processed.

Once finished, a group of Hybrids ripped them from the hook and placed them onto the back wall. A group of quarantined scientists injected them with some sort of clear fluid. This liquid evoked convulsing and squirming in the victims, the hybridizing gialgathens clanking against the hull.

They then placed the creatures into suspension fluid to finish the transformation. Those at Elderfire were right. They were turning the gialgathens into Hybrids.

A wave of nausea, deja vu, and fear raced through me. After holding back the urge to vomit, I was repulsed that people did this. These people and their motivations...they were incomprehensible. Yawm destroyed my city to protect himself. He deformed people into abominations not out of hatred but out of necessity; Springfield was caught up in the aftermath. We weren't targeted. We were unlucky.

This was nothing like that. This was the systematic destruction of a species. Flashes of the holocaust and images from years ago in school filled my vision. These people didn't see the gialgathens as something with a mind or a soul. No, they were animals to be slaughtered and used.

As for the fear, calling it that wasn't quite right. The horror of the situation wasn't lost on me. This was hard to watch. Something simmered under this lining of terror, however. Perhaps calling it an emotion wasn't precise.

It was far too cold and too calculating for that. It was a rationalization of the situation, and it was the only logical response to this. This deserved reconciliation of the same kind and caliber. With my two hands, I swore to wrench the Adair family from their roots.

The reason was simple – they were insane. I've seen and lived with insanity before. It corrupts and bends the individual to perform the most abyssal acts. We were already their enemy. If they aimed this kind of insanity at us, then there was no predicting the outcome. Well, outside of it being bad. I knew that much.

The only way to stop this was to put them down. Perhaps they would attempt to sway me with words. Maybe they would give me their motivations for rebelling against Schema. They would speak in sweet words, saying the ends justified the means. No matter what they said, I wouldn't forget that their good intentions paved the way to this hellhole right here.

No matter their justifications, they would find no forgiveness in me. As I stared at this slaughterhouse for a sentient species, I carved its image into my mind. This would not be forgotten. I would remember what they were capable of.

And they would remember what I was capable of too.

Knowing all I needed too, I dashed down. I shot across the factory floor. Event Horizon would kill the gialgathens. Using the Rise of Eden, I sliced, gored, and pulped every Hybrid, person, and scientist here. One by one, member by member, they fell.

It was a strange scene. These madmen were calm seconds ago as they butchered the gialgathens. Now that someone did it to them, it was suddenly something horrifying. Their hypocrisy wasn't lost on me. On the other hand, their cries, screams, and howls fell on deaf ears.

I killed everyone. I chomped through bone, squashed skulls in my hands, and caved torsos with my feet. I tore off limbs, ripped out organs, and splayed the walls in their blood. Once dead, they evaporated with a momentary passing of Event Horizon. I left

nothing behind, cleansing this place of these monsters. They were no different than eldritch. They would be treated as such.

After slaughtering these psychopaths, I sent a quick message to Krog explaining the situation. I kept the details to myself, not wanting Krog to be stricken with horror. With him being informed, I pulled the gialgathens from the hooks and holding cells. I piled them into one corner of the room. The gialgathens inside the tubes...I killed them. They were too far gone, the Hybridization all but complete.

That sadness in Helios at killing Rivaria, I empathized now. Executing the defenseless...It was a hard thing to do.

I numbed myself as I did all of that. It was necessary. Many would call it running away. Maybe I was. I didn't know for sure. What I did know was that I had to keep going. If I let my emotions overwhelm me, no one would be saved. They would all die.

So I took on the persona of the unfeeling Harbinger. More machine than man, I tore through the shuttle, the walls sturdy as cardboard. I learned a bit of the ship's design as I did. The top part of the hull was where the fighting members stayed. Killing them with Event Horizon was simple.

The middle of the ship harbored crew members along with crucial ship functions. The radioactive cores and plasma vats sat here in the center of the battle station, protected by walls of steel and more. Hybridized fluids also gave them stores of mana to use, several semi-Hybridized creatures used as mana batteries.

It was the fate Torix warned me about.

I tore through them, and I emptied the guts of the ship like an internal hemorrhage. The bottom of the ship contained the gialgathens and their Hybridization operation. It acted as the belly of the beast. Armed with that knowledge, I slaughtered every living ship member I could find there.

Some members offered resistance, but environment favored me. I could move through the metal walls with ease. I sensed were they were long before they knew my position. It was simple in the end.

Minutes later, the flaming dreadnought was falling apart. I eradicated vital functions for the vessel, mainly the radioactive cores. With the ship tumbling down to Polydra, I readied the rescue operation. I coordinated with Krog. He and my guildsmen would act as decoys while I pulled out the victims here. Otherwise, the other dreadnought would fire at the refugees I rescued.

With that in mind, I shattered a wall of the holding cell. The open sky filled my field of view as I glanced at the other dreadnought. Krog and the others unleashed an inferno against the other destroyer as I launched myself out. I pulled a massive clump of several dozen gialgathens out with me, a gravity well pulling them along.

As I leaped out, the downed dreadnought crashed atop the shattered city of Polydra. A vast shockwave of kinetic energy and flames erupted, decimating blocks of the town. Hybrids vaporized near the point of impact. Entire buildings collapsed outwards.

Krog pulled away from the other gialgathens, shouting out telepathic orders. They kept distracting the other dreadnought as Krog and I grouped up, passing portions of the city. As we did, Krog led me down to a cluster of buildings that still stood.

He turned to me, "The tunnels under Polydra aren't large enough to move the gialgathens in that manner."

I found three clean but unconscious gialgathens in a pile and threw them to Krog. He caught them between his wings. Switching to the Rise of Eden, I placed fifteen more of the gialgathens into my dimensional storage. The rest I split up into three different clusters. Instead of bending gravity to hold them, I created an actual gravitational force to suspend them.

It strained me, my brow furrowing. Krog nodded at me,

"That will do. Come."

Krog used his tail to smash a hole to the sewers. We jumped into the labyrinth beneath Polydra. As we skulked buy, we met dozens of footsoldiers roaming the tunnels with Hybrids. We killed them all, Krog sending them into disarray before I tore them apart.

Once we carved our way into the depths, we reached a dead end. A few spell casts and a bit of gialgathen blood later, Krog revealed an illusory flooring. A cylindrical tunnel leading beneath the city showed beneath us. Krog and I dove down.

A few seconds later and we landed. Without a gravitational web beneath me, I smashed three feet into a stone. That was after reinforcing it with quintessence. As I pulled my feet from the floor, Krog paced to a doorway littered with the cipher.

He interacted with the doorway, his eyes closed. I pointed at it, “You know how to read that?”

The cipher sheened black, the blue mana lamps near us dimming. Krog shook his head as the stone doors ground open,

“No. I know this how to work this, uhm...interface I suppose? I don’t know what to call it. It’s similar to one of the status screens of Schema, however.”

I inspected the intricate cipher work as we walked past. After committing the image to memory, we entered the hiding place for Polydra’s gialgathens. It mirrored a hollowed-out mountain; someone carved the room out of the rock that filled the peak. The maker of this prison created walkways at the edges of the expanse.

Beyond these walkways, room-wide stairs left the rest of the room several feet lower. Marble pillars jutted out of the elevated walkways, supporting the miles of rock above. Cipher inscriptions rippled with the mana of Giess here. My guess, the cipher runes did all the heavy-lifting here. From my experience, marble was actually quite soft for rock.

The entire room carried little in the way of weathering or erosion either. Whoever built this place built it to last. The leviathan’s prison was well preserved. In the center of the room, ten raised seats for gialgathens encircled a podium of sorts.

A gialgathen was seated on all of these seats, and they all maintained a meditative state. A hooded figure stood at the center, scars covering an espen face. He opened his eyes before turning to us. The grizzled and gray espen sighed, viewing the gialgathens behind me.

He winced, his voice ancient,

“I see those left on the surface have been treated unkindly. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Krog blinked, “It...we’ve done what we can.”

Around the old espen, dozens of glowing lights hovered near him. They carried images of waterfalls, submerged caverns, and aquatic lairs. In some of these orbs, war-torn and wounded gialgathens swam in primordial pools. I turned to Krog,

“I have to try and clear these guys of the tech in them before they turn. As I do, explain how this place works.”

The weathered espen turned to Krog, “I see you’ve allied yourself with a rather arrogant dirtwalker. What will we do Borom?”

Krog grumbled, “Listen to my commander for one. Don’t use the word dirtwalker again for another.”

The old espen’s eyes widened, “Oh...excuse me. I didn’t realize that.”

I snapped, “Doesn’t matter.” I set the three clusters of gialgathens down behind me. About twenty plopped against the stone floor. They wriggled for some sort of release from their torment as I walked over to them. Pulling several gialgathens from my dimensional storage, I shifted to Event Horizon. Otherwise, I would exceed my carrying capacity for my pocket dimension.

Digging my hands into the worst looking member of the bunch, I siphoned the life force and metals from the Hybrid embedded into the gialgathen’s body. The old espen glanced at Krog as I drilled tendrils of metal through its body. The old guy spoke,

“Are you certain he’s here to help?”

The gialgathen I was working on wriggled against me. I forced it down with a panel of gravity, stopping its struggle. It let out hoarse howls as Krog growled, “Obey him and do not question us anymore. We don’t have time for your curiosity.” Krog turned to me,

“This place is known as Solis, the prison of the ancients. Long ago, it was created by an individual who’s name was lost to time. Since then, it has been used to hold enemies who’ve fought against us in the past.”

I bit into a Hybridized portion of the gialgathen’s leg, tearing it off and swallowing it. Krog sent out a telepathic wave,

“This old espen is Kaios, a loyal member of the espen race. He’s over a century of age, ancient by espen standards. When the espens were freed, he chose to continue serving us.”

Kaios bowed, “It is only right.”

I finished draining the Hybrid from the gialgathen, the many wounds on its body opening up. Blood poured out of the creature before I turned to Krog, “I need Kessiah here. Where is she?”

Krog turned to Kaios. The old espen turned to the glowing spheres, taking a deep breath. A portal opened at the bottom of the raised platform, a spiral of blue energy maintaining the tear in dimensions. Krog growled, “We need you, Healer of Rivaria.”

Kessiah jumped out, landing onto the ground with a bit of stumble. As she got her bearings, she glanced around, finding me. Kessiah ran over, her face pale. She wiped some sweat from her brow while opening her dimensional storage. She pulled out three bags of blood along with some of Torix’s rations.

In a very Daniel-esque way, she snapped the bag open over her face with her mouth open. She gulped as much as she could, most of the rest of it soaking into her skin. A bit of color returned to her face before she ripped open a bag of her blood.

The sanguine fluid poured down before Kessiah caught it in her palm. It spiraled into a horizontal circle before Kessiah sat down in front of the injured gialgathen. Kessiah looked like a different person, her purpose and intent obvious – save some lives.

Her patient let out a low groan before Kessiah’s bloodshot eyes widened. She snapped like a whip,

“Shut the fuck up. I’m focusing.”

Some things never changed.

She channeled the blood into crucial areas, healing the torn arteries, veins, and nerve tissue. After that, she stood and pulled the wounds together. Fusing the skin with a bit of blood, she worked her way to the skull. She snapped her fingers in front of the gialgathen’s face while shouting,

“Can you fuckin hear me? Hello?”

The gialgathen’s eyes twitched a bit before she threw its head onto its leg while pacing over to me,

“He’ll be just fine.”

I cleansed the next worst off gialgathens as she worked, but it was kind of mesmerizing. She did her work with diligence and a professional demeanor. A few months ago, I wouldn’t have even considered Kessiah and the word ‘professional’ in the same sentence. Now she was a different person.

I mouthed, “Woah...I’m impressed.”

She met my eye, an obvious irritation showing, “Yeah, that’s great and all, but would you mind hurrying up? Not all of us can make a river of blood. Working with anemia is a pain in the ass.”

She pulled out another three blood bags, and my eyes widened. This was why she looked so tired at Elderfire. It wasn’t because she was exhausted with just healing. She drained her blood over the last few weeks for this, giving her a massive stockpile for this situation. She suffered anemia during that entire timeframe.

Maybe she wasn’t fighting on the frontlines, but she fought hard in her own way. It gave me a newfound respect for her. With that in mind, we worked through the Hybrid victims while Krog read his status and spoke with us,

“Taking Polydra is going better than expected so far. Daniel, you destroyed most of their aerial forces in your initial assault. The ground troops and those squirming spires must be dealt with for our escape, however. Staying here for much longer risks Lehesion showing as well, and we can’t afford to face him head-on yet.”

I nodded, “Did our guildsmen make it out?”

Krog clanked his teeth together before murmuring, “We’ve lost two members so far.”

I kept working, “That’s expected. We’ve saved a lot more than two gialgathens. They will be remembered.”

Krog shook off a bit of grief as he nodded, “You’re right. We have to remember the goal. After cleansing these gialgathens, can you return to the surface and destroy the spires? That will give us much more mobility in the air and on the ground. Cleaning up their ground forces shouldn’t be impossible for us then.”

“What about the dreadnought?”

Krog shook his head, “Though you did well, it required far too much time for you to decimate the first one. More gialgathens are stored within those spires than the hulls of those ships. We have to rescue as many as we can before they fully...change.”

Krog glanced down and to the side, his heart racing with a bit of panic. He silenced those dissenting voices as he took a deep breath,

“Otherwise their forces will overwhelm us here.”

“Noted.” I finished the last gialgathen present before pulling out the rest of the gialgathens from my dimensional storage. Krog glanced up, “We won’t be able to keep them at bay for much longer.”

Dust and a few pebbles fell from the ceiling, the ground above us rumbling. Kaios frowned, “Yes, it won’t be much longer before Polydra is but ash. I can feel it in my bones. The mountain is about to unravel entirely.”

Krog turned to him, “You mean the eruption?”

“Yes. The sea of magma beneath this place is not far from its detonation.”

My eyes narrowed as I thought about the Hybrid’s covering the surface of the city. Killing them all before Lehesion arrived was impossible on my own. Borrowing a bit from mother nature could bridge that gap though.

I gave the nod as I turned to them,

“I have an idea. One of my attacks was mistaken for an eruption once. Why stop there?”

Krog tilted his head at me along with Kaios. I cackled a bit before Krog’s eyes widened. The red and orange general leaned back,

“No, no, no. We can’t throw your life away like that. We need you for further assaults.”

I stood, my hands embedded into the gialgathen. My armor grinned as I finished clearing the Hybrid from my patient. Reforming my limbs back into forearms and fists, I glanced at them,

“Who said anything about throwing my life away? I’m just finding my limits.”

I rubbed my hands together,

“After all, nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

Chapter 230: The Silences Between

Kaios glared between us both, “You intend to incite the eruption prematurely? How?”

I pointed at him, “I’m going to hit the mountain hard. To get that done, I’ll need that dreadnought out of the way. Otherwise, a wave of arcane magic might even kill me as I come down.”

Krog peered at the wounded gialgathens, “We’ll need it disposed of to escape as well. I doubt the Adair family will give us the couple hours required to destroy this dreadnought once more as well. If other forces arrive in tandem, we will face obliteration.”

I cupped my chin, “Alright, then we’ll need a more stealthy approach. Not my strong suit, but maybe...hmmm...”

After diving into my thoughts, I snapped my fingers, “I got it. You used your illusions to distract the dreadnought’s crew before, right?”

Krog nodded, “It was difficult, but yes. I was correct in assuming you only needed a moment of respite.”

“Good call. I’m wondering if you could make afterimages of me throughout the city. Yenno, masking my presence or something.”

Krog tilted his head, staring up, “Hm, good question. I believe I could quite easily, though masking your mana signature and gravitational mark is far beyond my capabilities. An auditory and visual illusion will be child’s play, however.”

I tapped my head, forcing myself to engage with this situation. If I didn’t think this through, people would die. I could run through this problem, but other people couldn’t. Using Rise of Eden, I compressed my hands together, along with all of my mana. Checking out my status, I found myself level capped at 10,000. I raced through a quick investment into constitution, mentally clicking finalize.

A rush of mass flooded my frame as I condensed and expanded. My metallic body adjusted fluidly to the augmented size, no odd fluctuations anymore. Once the size shift finished, strength rushed in. Another wave of adaptations rippled through me. The metallic fibers shifted to create higher output with less energy.

As it finished, I turned to everyone, “Invest in your statuses now. We need every edge we can get here.”

A few of my guildsmen nodded at me, the reminder necessary to these newer members of Schema’s system. After a minute, I lifted a chunk of radiating, crystallized

quintessence. The broken, shivering stone of white wasn't made well; it carried many imperfections. These flaws worked for our goals, however.

Shifting to Event Horizon, I saturated a gravitational aura over it. Using my sense of the natural force, I mirrored the imprint my mass left behind. Once soaked into the white, glowing gemstone, I tossed it to Krog. He wrapped his tail around it, inspecting my handiwork,

"This will work well. A truly great tracker would note the difference. The analysis of a machine will not...Though perhaps something more stable shall prove safer?"

"No, this is perfect." I pressed my hands together again. "I'll set these crystals to blow once someone tampers with them. All you need to do is destabilize them a bit. I'll make a few for both my mana types. That should throw them off plenty."

Krog closed his eyes, channeling his mana towards an illusion over the quintessence I handed him,

"They shall act as landmines then. I'll mask it with your presence and demeanor."

Kaios turned to me, "What do you intend to do with the distraction?"

I pointed up, "There's a massive starship above. I'll be unloading a gravitational bombardment into it. I got the general gist of the ship's insides from the last one I tore apart. I'll be targeting those areas to cripple it."

Krog scoffed, "You shall decimate it within minutes if you're left uninterrupted. The others and I shall help distract them as well."

I shook my head, "I appreciate it, but we have other priorities. We're aiming to gather up the gyalgathens. Everyone we save is one less they get to turn. That's the mission, not destroying the enemy. The illusions will be more than enough help for me."

Krog blinked, "Then it is as you say, Harbinger."

After a bit of queasiness at the respect Krog gave me, I turned to Kaios,

“I was wondering a few things about Polydra. How many of the espens are against the gialgathens? I’m wondering if we should try saving some.”

Kaios gave me a repressed glare, annoyed at Krog’s high regard of me. I ignored his hostility as Kaios said,

“Polydra is a city with a mangled history. It was formed as an important strategic stronghold and resupply depot during the war against the leviathans. Afterward, the noble gialgathens saved we poor espens from true slavery. Polydra was where much of the espens’ reconditioning took place. This, ahem, process lifted our race from tadpoles in pools to powerful and educated beings.”

Kaios threw his up hand in disgust, “But we espens took the gialgathens’ benevolence for granted. The espens of Polydra despised the gialgathens for this necessary act. Ever since bad blood has boiled between the groups.”

I turned to Krog, “Reconditioning, huh?”

Krog stared down and to the side, “We...we were still primitive and brutal.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Well, that explains why so many espens joined Tohtella’s little rebellion. Yenno, outside of the slavery thing.” I turned to Kaios,

“If I had the time and resources, I’d try to get some of the espens out of here. The gialgathens take priority. I know they’ll be loyal. The espens, not so much. Giving Tohtella free spies would be crippling, and I can’t screen them.”

I took a deep breath. My eyes went distant, “They’ll all die, but at least it will be painless.”

Kaios stared between Krog and me, “Wait a moment. You intend to destroy Polydra without saving us?”

I finished my mana crystal, tossing it over to Krog. I stepped up to Kaios, “Yes. They’ve shown which side they’re on. Actions carry consequences. Considering the chaos above, we’re saving them from being food for the Hybrids.”

I spoke with a resolve even I wasn’t expecting. Kaios spread out his hands while turning to Krog, “If anyone understands why the espens must pay, it is I. However, for all of them to die? That is...it’s-“

Krog laid his tail on the shoulder of Kaios,

“You’ve acted as the guardian for Solis for decades. It’s been a long time since you’ve left here. You cannot comprehend the comings and goings of the surface. What is being done above here...It is unfathomable.”

Krog turned to me, his head held high, “We aren’t murdering anyone. We’re giving them mercy.”

That’s what I hoped it was at least. I hardened myself, speaking with a voice like stone,

“Each Hybrid is a risk to an entire world, this world included. I’m sorry, but I don’t have any means to stop the Hybrids before Lehesion arrives. If that demigod shows up-“

I leaned over to Kaios, “You’re all dead. It’s as simple as that. Unlike the painless death I’m offering, you’ll be turned into footsoldiers.”

Kaios took a step back, turning between the two of us, “What of Solis? This place is sacred. It must be preserved.”

I finished another gemstone, tossing it over to Krog,

“I am here to prevent a genocide, not protect an old jail and its warden. I am also not here to argue my methods. You haven’t seen what’s up there. I assure you, it’s worse than this prison being destroyed.”

Kaios nodded, his doubts fading, “I...I shall take your words on faith then.”

I pressed my palms together, generating another white gemstone. As I did, I went to walk around,

“I’ll be checking out the runic work here while making these crystals. As I do, prepare the soldiers for our next offensive.”

Krog did so, starting up a telepathic conversation with the others. As I inspected the runic work, I committed all of it to memory. It was rare I found runic achievement that exceeded my own abilities, and this was ancient and powerful stuff. I ran a hand across the etched surface, the variable depths masterfully made.

A sickening sort of mana radiated from it. I closed my eyes, sensing a bit of the structure beneath. Huh. Traced beneath the surface, a dual-layer of runes eased the depth work involved. I pushed through the wall, the thin structure crumbling. Peering behind the wall, I stepped over with a glowing palm.

The runes were completed on both sides. The exposed layer acted as the core function, while the sub-layer acted as the subordinate helper. This process deepened the meaning of the messages ingrained within. The sheer extent of the message’s meaning...It was stunning.

Along the outer edge of this hollowed hallway, a familiar miasma emanated. I took a deep breath, familiar and volatile energy permeating the fabric of reality here. While I wasn’t some mana sensing genius, I already familiarized myself with this guy.

It was Eonoth.

The Old One had been on Giess for a long time it turns out. Even more worrisome, these structures reminded me of Baldag-Ruhl’s carvings. I raised my eyebrows, and I shook my head. Naw, that couldn’t be right. After giving them a closer look, the sheer precision rivaled the old hiveminds. It was no perfect mirror, but the similarities piled up enough to make me nervous.

I scratched the side of my head. There was no way an Old One taught Baldag those runes. There was no reason too. Besides, Alfred and that hivemind worked on that runic formation for centuries. They did it themselves.

But to say I understood the motivations of the Old Ones...I had about as much confidence in that as I had in romance. If an Old One was involved, Baldag-Ruhl might've been a pawn in their plan. If he was, well, I might be a pawn too, running down some predetermined path. The idea of that unnerved me.

I mean, I wasn't much of a faith and fate kind of guy. I always prided myself on my sense of initiative and on my use of opportunities. Having all that dictated by some unknowable god robbed me of that. I based a decent chunk of my identity on that shit. Having that taken away in a fell swoop would suck. After all, curating my meeting with Baldag didn't exceed an Old One's capabilities.

I shook my head, silencing those thoughts. I didn't have time to think about it. Anyone could philosophize their way into inaction. I prided myself in not doing that. With that in mind, I finished my inspection of this place walked back out of the hidden hallway.

Instead of spending my time on airy, philosophical thoughts, I honed in on the mana channeling process. This mana crystallization took quite a bit of effort, though I'd done it a bit before. It was like an advanced version of a Mana Saturation, the skill I used to maintain enchantments.

Mana Saturation lacked the free form abilities of crystallization. Saturation played out an already existing magic. This crystallization required more mana for one, but it also took a cleared mind. If I grafted intent onto the mana, it created a specific effect. The training with Serenity helped me out here, allowing me to keep an empty head.

As I created more of the crystal, a bit more depth revealed itself. For starters, different mana types resulted in various gemstones. Creating the pure mana was painless in the appropriate Dimensional Wake as. The energies molded to my touch, giving me a bit more finesse with it.

By the time I finished the tenth crystal, I had chopped a lot of time off the process. It also carried a trigger for its release. Contact with telepathy was all it took to blow. The psionics would make the mana detonate when they attempted using it.

Unique skill gained! You discovered the unique skill, Mana Crystallization from no basic skills! 100 skill points rewarded!

Mana Crystallization(lvl 10) – Your mind tempers the wild flows of mana around, harnessing it in physical form. +10% to the ease of mana crystallization. +10% to the potency of created crystals.

Well, that was a nice boon. I turned to Krog, “Hey, let me remake all the crystals I just handed you. I got a skill, and it should make the process better.”

Krog sighed as his current illusion fizzled, “If you must...”

I put the nine crystals into my dimensional storage, noting how useful they might be in the future. Storing hundreds of these crystals could give me a massive burst of mana in a fight. The options were endless.

I tucked that away in the back of my mind, getting back to the problem at hand. After remaking the crystals in half the time, I turned to Krog, “Where’s the Sentinal?”

Krog pointed towards the peak of Polydra, “Torix told us that his utility for mobility was far too valuable to risk on a direct assault. We left him along the route of our escape, far from this conflict.”

I frowned, “Well, fuck. The Sentinel would’ve been useful here.” I took a deep breath, “Does anyone have a layout of Polydra?”

Krog nodded, pulling up an ancestral map covered in concrete dust. He murmured,

“We found it within a decimated museum. I know it isn’t perfect, but it may prove useful.”

Glancing close, I remembered most of the districts matching up from above,

“Hmmm, seems close enough, I suppose.”

My approach involved running and destroying everything. Maybe that would work out for me, but other people could die. Instead, I thought of what Torix would do here. He’d place the illusions at critical points to distract the dreadnought or something like that. No, he’d do even more given this chance to plan.

Not only would he distract them, but he would aim the mana crystals to blow up and cause as much damage as possible. A couple minutes later, I clapped my hands echoing a metallic ring. With everyone's attention, I pointed at the map,

"Alright, so here's what we'll do."

Our guildsmen gathered. I pointed at a few essential points on Krog's ancestral map,

"You all remember where the spires were?"

A few of them nodded. I turned to Krog, "Mark them on the map."

Krog pressed onto different marks on the map, piercing the old paper with precision. These points clustered close to where the spires were around the city. The spots had no distinct pattern besides being on the outskirts of the town. I pointed at the center,

"This is where the dreadnought will be."

Krog narrowed his eyes, "It's a ship. It can move. How do you know it will be there?"

I waved my hand in a circle of the spires, "The spires are to stop gialgathens from escaping. They want them in this dreadnought. A central location lets them do that quickly."

Krog nodded, "A workable assumption."

I drew another circle with my hand around the city, "This, this is where we'll put the illusions and crystals. Our goal is to bait the spires into attacking the illusions. We'll cripple the spires from the resulting detonation of mana."

Krog's eyes widened, "Ah, that's clever."

I nodded, "We still want the distraction element, however. We want to hide the illusions where they aren't too obvious, but at the same time, still findable. That will buy me a

few minutes and let them gather their forces around these illusions. During that time, I'll send an artillery strike at the dreadnought."

Kaios glanced between the map and me, "Where would this 'artillery' come from exactly?"

I raised a hand, "It's in my blood." I turned to my guildsmen, "Are you all ready to go back in?"

They gave a roar of approval, the jitters from battle fading as I expanded The Rise of Eden over them. I formulated my best commander's voice. Confident. Decisive. Driven. Come on, Daniel, you can do this. I pointed at the gialgathens,

"You all will be tasked with defending these illusions from oncoming ground forces. If a Hybrid triggers one of these things, that's one more spire you guys have to deal with. Understood?"

They spoke out in a telepathic wave, "Yes, sir."

Another chill ran down my spine from the sir. I shook it off. After all, sometimes I had to fake it till I made it. I turned to Krog,

"We'll be leaving in fifteen minutes."

"Yes, commander."

I walked off to the steps around the room. I created a few more mana crystals during the short downtime. As I did, Kessiah walked up and sat down beside me. She gasped while leaning back against the stairs,

"I've never worked this hard in my life. Fuck."

I scoffed, "Yeah, you're definitely right about that one."

She turned to me, frowning, "Ok, thanks for that. Real supportive."

“I do my best.”

She stared forward, glancing at the gialgathens, “Man, shitty one-liners do make me feel better. Makes me forget about what we’re doing for a bit.”

I shoved another quintessence crystal into my pocket dimension,

“Yeah, same here. It breaks the ice before the battle. It makes it less...terrifying, I suppose.”

Kessiah rolled her eyes, “You? Terrified? Yeah, ok.”

I turned to her, “What, you think I don’t feel fear anymore?”

“Why would you? You can’t die.”

“I’m hard to kill. There’s a difference.”

Kessiah shrugged, “If you ask me, you crossed the line between mortal and immortal a while back. Now you don’t even seem real sometimes. Like, at all.” She stared off in the distance,

“Shit, I remember when we first met. You were just some edgelord brat who thought he had it hard. I could’ve snapped you between two of my fingers. Well, turns out you did have it hard. I, er, was part of that. I kind of threw all that on your shoulders. Sorry again for that.”

She shook her head, “Now, well, you wouldn’t even need to look at me to kill me. Watching you change, it’s been humbling and inspiring both. That’s for sure.”

I thought about Delilath dying, the gialgathens I couldn’t save, and Springfield being destroyed by Yawm. I frowned,

“Even if I can’t die, I’m no god. I still fail all the time.” I turned and gave Kessiah a pat on the back,

“This healing thing you got going...I’m, uh, proud of you for it...”

Kessiah bust out laughing, “What was that supposed to be? Inspirational?”

“Just trying to, er, communicate, I guess.”

She laughed, “Heh. You’re doing a pretty shit job.”

I shrugged while lowering my hand, “Eh, doing my best here. That’s all I got.”

Kessiah stretched, “For real though, you’re doing a great job. After that fight with Dahkma, I broke down. You stood up and took the brunt of what I didn’t want to deal with. Now look at you. You’re doing pretty ok at this whole commander thing.” She pointed at the gialgathens, “These suckers are eating it up.”

I narrowed my eyes, “For now. We’ll see how long I can keep the act up.”

Kessiah pushed herself up, “Don’t worry about it. They’ve seen you fight. If they aren’t willing to follow you, then they wouldn’t follow anyone. That’s when you’re at your best – tearing shit up.”

I stared at my hands, “Yeah, that’s the easy part. It’s the silences between the battles that get me. The echoes reverberate in my ears and mind. Doubts pile up. Blagh.” I looked up at the gialgathens as Krog rallied them,

“It’s a loud kind of quiet. It keeps getting louder if I ever sit still. Eventually, it turns into a deafening boom in my ears.”

Images of the dreadnought’s underbelly flashed in my eyes. Memories of the spored people resurfaced in my mind. Before the memories consumed me, Kessiah kicked my side,

“Cheer up. You’re doing better than you think. ”

I gave her a slow nod, “Yeah.” I stood up, “I hope so.”

Kessiah stepped forward with a wave of her hand,

“Do what you can, even if it isn’t much. I remember some armored guy telling me that a while back. Helped me. Might help you.”

I rolled my fingers in my hand, making and loosening my fists in waves,

“Yeah. I’ll do that.”

I stepped forward, “Thanks for the pep talk. Needed it.”

Kessiah grinned, “Aye, aye, captain.”

She took a few steps before wobbling. I reached out a hand, catching her with a well of gravity. I narrowed my eyes, “You alright?”

Kessiah shook her head, “Yeah, just a little woozy. It’s anemia from all the blood loss. I’ll be fine.”

I opened my dimensional storage, a 2-dimensional portal that mirrored liquid space. I pulled out molten metal I stored earlier. Using this melted dimensional fabric, I split it apart with my finger tips into five molten blobs. I spun them in circles with five gravitational vortexes. Once dispersed into flat circles, I worked on my first three pieces.

With a few adjustments, I thinned out three of the orbs into rings. I turned to Kessiah, “What’s your ring size?”

“Uh, eight.”“

I glanced back at the rings, changing their sizes. Once made, shifted to The Rise of Eden. I solidified the rings with an injection of icy energy before remelting their surfaces with a thermal jolts. Taking a deep breath, I created raw, telekinetic energy for precise contact points. Wielding them with care, I carved out the runes needed.

It was anything but easy. I struggled through the process, wielding Star Forger with quintessence instead of ascendant mana. It was worth it, however. The Rise of Eden made anything I created far better. Even with a cruder set of tools, the raw materials were so superior it didn't matter.

Knowing that, I finished off the ring after a minute. The next two rings didn't require the same amount of time as I got into a rhythm with it. After finishing off the three rings, I channeled the next blob of molten metal into a bracelet of sorts. It was basically just a big ring. I eyeballed its size for Kessiah's wrist before etching in similar runic work.

All the wording involved regeneration and hemonic generation enchantments. This was all supposed to ease Kessiah's burden for healing. After finishing up the bracelet, I generated another one that mirrored it for her other hand. All of ten minutes passed, the enchantments rather basic yet effective for what she needed.

I clustered the objects into a gravity well before tossing them to Kessiah. She caught two of them before the other jewelry clattered onto the floor. I walked over, picking them up with her,

"Ah fuck, I don't why I threw five things at you to catch. That was dumb."

Kessiah frowned, "Eh, I just suck at catching stuff."

I watched her pick up the jewelry. Her hands shook as she dropped one of the rings. She bit her lip before grabbing it again, this time her grip firm. I raised an eyebrow at her, meeting her eye,

"Is shaking like a leaf a symptom of anemia too?"

She grabbed her wrist, staring away, "I'm fine."

I frowned, staring at her. She was terrified. I picked up the jewelry and handed it to her. As I did, I waved The Rise of Eden over her. She took a sigh of relief,

“Thanks. Whatever that is it feels great.”

I waved at the metal rings and things,

“Put those on. You’ll feel better.”

She did, and they boosted Kessiah’s regeneration as all my items did. Kessiah rolled her shoulders,

“Damn. I’m already feeling way better. Thank you. I should’ve asked for this stuff forever ago.”

I waved a hand in circle, “All my armors boost a person’s regeneration, endurance, and constitution. I’ll be honest here, if I knew you were this effective at healing, I would’ve already made them for you.”

She rolled her eyes, “Yeah, sure.”

I met her eye, “Hey, I’m serious. Give yourself some credit. You’ve changed. Stop pretending you haven’t and own it.”

She blinked, stunned for a moment,

“You really think so?”

There was a hint of desperation in her voice. She wanted to believe my words even if she didn’t believe them herself. I shook my head,

“Think? No, I know so. You capped your level. You healed my sponsor. Hell you’re even fighting in a war. You are not the same Kessiah that ran away when we faced Yawm.”

I raised a fist, my voice firm, “You’ve become a warrior in your own way, working around your own limits. Take pride in that.”

She nodded, feeling the gray metal on her wrists, “Thanks...Heh, looks like you’re not the only one that needed a pep talk.”

I scoffed, “Eh, you gave it first.” I turned to the gialgathens, “Let’s go. We need to get back out there.”

Kessiah nodded, her eyes steeled and her hands clasped to fists as we rejoined the group. Krog finished up his tactical orders, our guildsmen split into ten groups. A few healed and willing gialgathens joined them, bolstering our forces. Behind them, ten illusions of me stood with the mana crystals beneath them.

I turned to the group,

“Are you ready?”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

I walked towards Solis’s exit, the roar of battle growing in my ears,

“Then let’s go tear them apart.”