

New World 231

Chapter 231: Havoc

As the ships droned and the Hybrids stomped, we skulked beneath them in the sewers. We passed several of the checkpoints, dispatching several groups of Hybrid sentries sent to find us. Once up close to the first point for our illusions, I stepped up the wall of stone. As if covered in black water, my skin shifted like living blades. I cut through the rock with ease, pulling myself forward with gravity.

I rose through the dirt and stone, passing up into the first building. I walked up to the top floor, the windows blown out from the chaos below. Beneath me, Hybrids haunted the streets like steel titans. They stood over the doorways and cars, their monstrous frames crushing the city with ease.

Several of the Hybrids carried carcasses of espens, chewing on the opened entrails. They dug their metal wires into the corpses. It mirrored the mandibles of a mantis munching through a cicada. Several of the espens were alive, screaming for help.

I crushed the urge to help them as I planted the quintessence stone. I ripped my gaze from the horrors, pacing back down into the depths. We raced through the hidden hallways of the city. Once through to the next point, I walked into a woodshop that survived the last incursion. I planted the illusion and passed the corpses of a family of espens. Someone devoured only their eyes and the contents of their skulls.

Throughout the entirety of placing these illusions, the city showed signs of devastation. The totalitarian rebels took a zero-tolerance policy for those that didn't join them. Though it might not have started that way, over time, these people devolved as the conflict continued. From what I imagined, the rebels committed acts of evil after joining. Once done, they either rationalized what they did or went insane.

This devolvment of the city's people made Polydra's destruction less of an issue for me. This place died a while back, and now it was a shambling corpse instead of a living metropolis. Either way, I planted the final illusion near the entrance of a metro.

With that finished, I turned towards the final group remaining with me. The others split from us as we planted the decoys. Now Kessiah and Krog braced themselves for what was to come. I raised a hand,

“For the guild. Let’s show them what we can do.”

They gave me a curt nod before racing off to their positions. I did the same seconds after, burrowing until I reached a tall skyscraper. After passing a beautiful but downtrodden reception area, pounding footsteps echoed above me. I sprinted towards an elevator shaft, not wanting to walk up hundreds of staircases. Avoiding prying eyes played to my advantage as well.

I wiggled into the elevator sideways, struggling to fit. Seconds later, I melted through the top of the metal box. I timed the roof’s destruction with a giant explosion in the distance. After rippling of the wire ebbed in my ears, I shot up with gravity guiding me. Hundreds of floors passed before I reached the top level.

Far above the destruction below, I gained a view of the entire city. I walked up to a wall of glass, Polydra’s ruin spreading out beneath me. After rolling my shoulders, I pressed my hands together. A dozen different objects lifted from around me. I pulled my arms in, the furniture racing forward.

With office chairs keeping me hidden, I sat down in a fort of printers, water coolers, and office furniture more akin to cardboard than wood. From the cracks in my guise, I reached out a hand, mana saturating my blood like liquid energy. It built in my hands as I stared at the dreadnought. A few seconds later, and my hand trembled with palpating power.

I braced a hand while sending a message to the others,

The Living Multiverse(lvl 10,000) – Go

– Kessiah –

I turned my gaze up as a flash of light erupted over the city. Above, cataclysmic detonation echoed across the city. Plugging my ears, I braced myself as a shockwave dispersed throughout Polydra. A sound loud enough to shatter teeth and crack stone followed.

Krog raised a wing, protecting me from being launched like a styrofoam cup caught up in a gust of wind. The source of the carnage, the enormous vessel’s forcefield billowed

out. My breath seized in my chest at the sight of the damn thing. It was just so fucking big. Ah fuck, why was I here again?

I shook my head as glass pelted me from above. I was tough enough for this shit at least. I turned down as Krog ripped a Hybrid from one of the gialgathens. Yeah. That was why I was here. To help this asshole. Great.

I hyperventilated as my eyebrows singed off my face from Krog's heated breath. That was about the only thing that matched the guy's fiery temper. Once the Hybrid disintegrated, I leaped down onto the broken pavement. Stumbling over to the gialgathen, I opened my ring's storage.

"Fuck, ah fuck."

I pulled out a bag of blood before ripping it open. A car beside Krog exploded, another shockwave making me stumble to my side. I lost focus for a moment, the blood falling down in a torrent of red. I reached out a hand, my eyes widening,

"Ah, hell no. No, no, no."

If I had to fucking use my own blood again, I'd fall out right here.

Another deafening boom shot out from above, the dreadnought unleashing arcane bolts at one of the illusions near us. I attempted ignoring the insanity all around me as I healed this gialgathen that got caught up in this shitstorm.

I stuck to the wounds that usually resulted in death. Pretty much, they were always blood loss, cardiac arrest, or organ failure. The other stuff was beyond me, so, I prioritized the major arteries first to stabilize their blood pressure and lower blood loss. After that, the guys needed an injection of fluids to help the heart with the whole pumping to live thing.

Once I got them stable, I slapped the shit out of them to wake them up. Worked like a charm.

With that in mind, I unleashed a furious flurry of slaps onto this random dude. The gialgathens eyes twitched, so I set his head down. Tossing it onto rock wasn't a good idea. Done it once and the gialgathen died. Talk about a lot of wasted effort.

A bit of Hybrid mush beneath me twitched, so I jumped up and screamed,

“Oh shit.”

Krog obliterated it with a tail whip, dirt spraying over my face. I spit out some mud, my hair blown back. I turned to the asshole,

“Thanks for the help.”

The damn gialgathen smirked at me,

“No need for thanks. I would do it anytime.”

He pulled the gialgathen up onto his back with a wing. After he adjusted it, I jumped on top of the pile of bodies. We leaped back up to the chaos, the wind off his wings, sending cars flying. I stared at the dreadnought, the ship casting entire city blocks in the shade. It looked like shit.

Daniel already blew up vast portions of it. Large hunks of the ship were just missing. It looked like a void shark just took a massive bite out of the damn thing. No void sharks here though. Only Daniel and his good ole singularity thingamajig.

As we crossed portions of the ruins, one of the spires reared back to swipe at us. It was like staring at a giant dick of death. Well, maybe the fact I thought of it like that said more about me than the damn spire. Eh, whatever.

As it whipped towards us, I swore to Baldowah that if I lived through this shit, I was never going back to a warzone. Leave this hell for fighters like Daniel. I preferred putting the mess back together afterward. Yenno, in a safe ass hospital. This shit, this shit right here sucked.

As the metal tendril of doom slammed towards us, I covered my ears. Krog unleashed a devastating roar towards the metallic tendril, the sonic boom sending the tentacle sideways from the impact. The wily old general aimed his attack to send the spire at one of Daniel's illusions. As it landed beside the mana crystal. Krog sent out a telepathic roar. Once his mind touched the gem, the white stone detonated. An elemental blast boomed from the tiny bomb. It unleashed blue fire, orange ice, and multi-colored crabs from the point impact. I shook my head, utterly flabbergasted at the sheer amount of crabs here. I mean, what the fuck was going on?

There were so many crabs. Why were there so many crabs?

Wait a minute. They were elemental crabs. The elemental crabs latched onto the frozen tendril, crawling across its surface. As they pooled near the base of the massive pillar of metal, they used their claws to snip the damn thing to death. I started rooting for the little guys.

I waved my fist. Go crabs. Go get that bastard. Fuck him up.

Another calamity discharged behind us, the behemoth of a ship quaking under the might of another gravitational implosion. We rode the shockwave, Krog smoothly adjusting to the shift in his flight path. I stared down, several other spires stuck in giant blocks of burning ice. The frozen fires allowed more crabs to destroy more spires.

At this point, the entire battlefield descended to utter madness. Hybrids attacked crabs. Crabs attacked Hybrids. Gialgathens burned. Gialgathens got burned. I'll be honest, I kept my head down as Krog took the brunt of the battle on. This shit was way beyond me at this point.

The battle continued even if I didn't look at it though. We landed at the base of one of the pillars. It smelled like a jug of milk left in a hot car for months, the Hybrids repulsive as can be. I gagged as Krog ran up to save other gialgathens.

From this stinking, orange, and sloppy pit, Krog roared once more. The apricot-colored liquid sprayed out at us, but Krog waved his wings, sending it flying everywhere else but here. Thank Baldowah. I did not want that shit on me.

Krog reached into the pit of metamorphizing gialgathens. Pulling them out one by one, his eyes widened as a thousand-yard stare covered his face. It was too much for the old

guy, and I couldn't blame him. A lot of these poor bastards didn't have skin, the orange slop replacing it with metal wires and corded steel.

It gave me flashbacks to the endless flesh that used my body like a puppet. The violation. The helplessness. My breath quickened as I calmed myself, using some mental tactics I developed to deal with it.

Count to a hundred by 7's. I didn't understand how Daniel pushed through all this. He just did. I wasn't like that. It hit me hard, and I couldn't just keep standing up after every knockout blow like Daniel could.

Hell, it took all I had just to stand back up.

I shook out that memory, getting back in the moment. I slapped my cheeks as Krog sorted the gialgathens. One pile was for those beyond saving. The others had a chance. Once completed, I jumped down, my feet cracking stone under me. I frowned at the rock. I wasn't fat, alright? The pavement was just weak.

Anyways, I ran up to one of the tangerine-colored bodies. This one retained skin for the most part. I grabbed the sides of my head, panicking for a second. I couldn't do a damn thing due to the nature of the wounds. These guys were in the middle of a reformation. All my skills oriented around healing injuries, so what good was I here?

From behind me, another enormous detonation echoed out. As it rippled past me, I stumbled forward. A good portion of the orange gunk sprayed off the corpses, stopping their reformation. That was it. I raised my hands while turning to Krog,

"I think I have an idea for how to get rid of this...Krog?"

I turned around, unable to find the fiery gialgathen. I walked back and forth, my gaze wide. Hybrids sprinted off in the distance. They burrowed through the ground and grabbed running espens and gialgathens alike. For a moment, I wondered if the old bastard left me. If he did, I was dead. I couldn't even fight one of the Hybrids here. They'd reach their hands through my skin, eating me alive from the inside.

A primal, dark fear manifested in my chest. Memories of that day versus Dahkma ran through my mind. My breathing quickened. My pulse pounded in my ears and chest,

almost painful as adrenaline flooded my system. A second later, Krog let out a roar of agony.

I sprinted towards the source. I wish I could say it was to save a friend. It wasn't. It was to save me. As I neared the gialgathen, I found three Hybrids pinning Krog down as one pried his mouth open. One of them was trying to crawl inside him, his skin too hard for them.

My heart seized while my stomach sank. My vision narrowed as fear overcame me. My knees wobbled. My hands trembled. I blinked back tears as they crawled towards Krog, making progress in their infestation.

I willed myself forward, desperate to help him, to help me. I didn't budge. I stayed in place. A wave of guilt and self-loathing washed over me. Why was I so weak? Why was I so pathetic? I could do this. It was better to die saving Krog than trying to run away.

But no matter how hard I tried running forward, fear paralyzed me. It whispered in my ear about my failures. It spoke about all the times I failed not only myself but other people. It reminded me that when everyone needed me most, I failed.

My vision blurred as tears of frustration built in my eyes. I fell down to my knees as nausea passed into my chest. I watched as the Hybrids edged closer and closer, Krog struggling to stop them. I looked down, grabbing fist fulls of dirt.

Why was this all so hard? Why did fear stop me?

I didn't find an answer.

I glanced back up, the horror of the situation overwhelming me. For a moment, it was like I was looking at myself from a distance. A realization sparked in my head. What would happen if I just kept laying here?

I would die.

I was letting the fear of what may happen stop me. Well, if I did nothing, the outcome was about as bad as it could be. I pushed my knees, wobbling as I stood up. I gripped

my hands into fists. It was about damn time I put my fear behind me instead of letting it stop me.

Still shaking, I opened my dimensional storage. I pulled out dozens of blood packs, tearing them open as the blood siphoned around me. It pooled, purifying in a sanguine sphere. I siphoned streams of my blood into my eyes, ears, and skin. As the sensation of power flooded my frame, memories of killing my family with my blood arts rushed into my head.

I shook them off. Black veins spread over my skin as the urge to kill and crush rushed over me like endless rain. Even with fear still coursing through me, I dashed towards the Hybrids over Krog. My feet turned pavement to dust as I tackled one of three Hybrids holding Krog down. The metal crumpled under my touch, but my own skin and bones ripped as well. The Hybrid tumbled across the ground before colliding with a building beside us. Concrete powder billowed out from the Hybrid's impact with the building as I let out a grunt. Staring at my wounds, I diagnosed myself.

I wiggled an arm. Pain radiated upward. Yup, I dislocated it while covering it with a few nasty gashes. Pulling the blood from the wound, I healed the external wounds before taking a deep breath. I bit into my sleeve as I shoved my arm back into the socket. I let out a scream muffled by the jacket as I turned forward.

The other Hybrids turned to me, their insectoid mouths squirming. Their twitching, deformed features sent another wave of terror up my spine. I lifted my shivering arms and said in a meek voice,

"Get off him."

Krog took a breath, this one moment enough. He opened his massive mouth, the Hybrid falling into his maw. Before it infested him, he roared out. The other Hybrid flew off from the shockwave. Even I dragged back several feet; his roar was simply that strong.

Krog stood up as another Hybrid jumped behind him. The old general whipped his tail, annihilating the Hybrid into a fine mist with an explosive impact. He stomped another into nothingness, killing it under his thick heels. He turned to me,

"That was brave, little one. Thank you for saving me."

I won't lie, I blushed a bit. I don't know why exactly, but I did.

"Uh, no problem."

Krog pulled the gjalgathen onto his back before gesturing to me,

"Come. There's still much to do and little time to do it."

I took a few more deep breaths. He was right.

"Yeah. I'm coming."

As I ran over, I peered down. Oddly enough, there was a grin on my face. I lifted my hands in fists. I did it. This time was different because I was different. I was a new me.

Another ungodly explosion radiated out from above, and I howled while raising my hands over my face. The moment passed as I lowered my hands.

Ok, maybe not an entirely new me, but it was a start.

– Daniel –

Ascendant mana coursed into my blood before dispersing through my palm. My hand glowed from the flow of energy, lighting the cluster of shitty office furniture covering me. In my view, another singularity obliterated the side of the dreadnought through its forcefield. After twenty minutes of bombardment, the spacial field protecting the dreadnought fizzled out.

I reached out my hands, the furniture crashing outwards along with the glass wall lining this portion of the skyscraper. I sprinted forward before lunging out over the battlefield. Firing over the expanse, I shot forward with a gravitational well. A shockwave ebbed under my heels as I shifted my body into a sharpened blade.

Piercing into the ship's hull, I sprinted through several walls before reaching the factory line for the gialgathens. I grimaced as I stepped out onto a metal walkway. Someone in a gas mask glanced at me, stunned before I stared down at him.

I backhanded his face into a pulped mush against a nearby wall. His remains splattered onto the floor beneath me. One of the workers gasped as blood covered him. I stepped forward while cracking my knuckles. With Event Horizon, I jumped down as the bodies near me evaporated into the abyss.

I silenced every voice, a symphony of screams then silence passing over the line as I salvaged the gialgathens here. Once culled, I sprinted back out towards the hull. I gripped the steel wall before shearing it in my palms. Like wrapping paper, it tore with utter ease, the splintering steel rippling out with an ear-piercing squeal. Gravity contorted the walls further, letting me pull the gialgathens from this hell.

Working with Krog, I threw the ball of gialgathens out into the sky. A legion of gialgathens raced passed, collecting their fallen brethren. The most contorted members stayed suspended within my dimensional warp, keeping them from infecting others. The others were carried to relative safety.

With the gialgathens out, I turned back to the metal structure that held them. I leaned down, planting my feet. With telekinetic augments, I shot upward. The walls of metal bellied outwards, stretching and leaving the surface heated. I crushed through walls and expunged the people here. Within minutes, I killed most of the crew.

As I lifted out of the dreadnought, I left a void in the hull beneath me. The torn upper portion of the ship sheened in the sun as fires and explosions rippled out beneath me along the surface of the vessel. I glanced up at my allies as the dreadnought collapsed onto Polydra.

A blinding light flashed behind me as I stared at a golden line grafting into the sky over the other side of the city. Lehesion's aura leaked out, but the colossus himself didn't pour out of the portal. Ships and other resources flooded from the rippling void, along with an army of Hybrids, however.

Around me, my guildsmen and the injured regrouped onto the other side of the city. As they flew beneath me, another entity came from the portal. It was a different member of the Hybrids, its bulk far larger and its form more humanoid. It mimicked the energy aura of Lehesion, a palpable, golden atmosphere encompassing it.

It showed the same sleeker, more shaped body of the Hybrid in the nautical base. It carried the same variety of faces, mouths and electronic eyes scattered over its upper body. Unlike Version 2.0, it glared across the battlefield, its eyes analyzing with a cold, calculating gaze.

In a way, it was like staring at a crowd glaring in the same direction. Within seconds, it locked its many eyes on me, a shiver racing down my spine. I analyzed the creature. As I did, I grimaced. This was worse than I thought.

Version 2.2(lvl: 19,429~ | Status: Unknown | Bounty: S-) – This unholy amalgam of eldritch and silver has developed baseline levels of intelligence and autonomy. This in conjunction with an immense, natural tenacity given its form, and the monster is enough to be considered a planetary threat all on its own.

This is due partly to its insatiable nature, but it also persists from a presence in its mind. Due to some psionic influence, this beast is far more stable and intelligent than it would otherwise be. Combine this with the apparent feeding from Lehesion's own reserves of energy, and this Hybrid is an utter and complete monstrosity.

Good luck should you be forced to face its wrath. It's recommended you run and plan against it, however.

I took a deep breath before charging energy into my blood. Defeating something like this on my own was beyond me. I understood that in an instant. However, holding it at bay was within my grasp. Until my forces retreated, I'd fight this behemoth on my own.

You'd think fear would be racing up my spine, but no, an excitement grew in my chest. I glared at it as it glared at me. It gave me a menacing, broken grin. From one monster to another, I grinned back. And so, I dashed forward, into the swarm of metal.

This was going to be fun.

Chapter 232: The Minds of Many

As I charged forward, I lifted an arm. A singularity formed over the chest of Version 2.2. The Hybrid shot out sideways, evading the entirety of the annihilative explosion before dashing towards me. It slid across the sky with a vapor trail behind it. I shot myself sideways and met the monster's charge.

Except, it dodged my gravitational tackle. I slid past it as the Hybrid charged towards the gialgathens that flew from Polydra. I reached out a hand and released an enormous well of gravity. Chunks of stone from the city below floated into the sky, clouds above curving towards the well's center.

The pull slowed the Hybrid's charge forward before I shot towards my well. It spurred me onwards as I saturated mana in the well. Before impact, I soaked my frame in quintessence. An elemental bomb, I slammed into the side of the Hybrid. Two balls of metal, I ceased its direct charge towards the vulnerable refugees.

The Hybrid turned to me, opening a jagged maw. We whipped around the gravity well I powered before as I slammed my fist into the abomination's teeth. Orbiting the well like planets, we wrestled for some semblance of control over the other.

I matched the monster's strength for the most part, though its ability to jerk outdid me. Both of us struggled with the rotational combat fueled by the gravitational anchor. Using a swell of energy, the Hybrid shot a hard fist into my gut. Silver blood sprayed over its face. I drilled my armor into the creature out of anger.

It resisted my absorption, but for some reason, a glance of shock covered its face. It retaliated in kind, and the cords over its body attempted burrowing beneath my skin. My armor grinned, white light leaking out in a torrent. My metal skin heated until it glowed white. The sound of singing flesh sounded into the air as I opened the maw of my helm and chomped into the neck of the creature.

It grabbed my head and jerked backward. Tendrils of steel fell into the orbiting path we fought in. Other, lesser Hybrids assisted Version 2.2, but the flow of gravity overwhelmed them. Caught into their own orbitals, they whipped around a growing field of debris.

The city bled into this gravity well, collapsed chunks of buildings sucking into the expanding strata. Polydra and Giess's sky swirled behind Version 2.2 in my grasp, neither of us gaining any ground. I placed a hand onto its mouth, spawning raw quintessence into its body.

Before my mana formed, a psionic force crept into my mind. It tussled with the torrent, my mana wisping away into the ether. Extracting memories from my mind, the minds

of many permeated my psyche with horrors. My hands shook in response, a volley of thoughts overwhelming my own.

Version 2.2 reached out a hand, a flaming sword of energy manifesting. Noble and blazing brightly, it contrasted the hideous visage that held the blade. Wielding it with experience, the Hybrids swung the edge in a tight arc. It sliced six inches into my chest before snapping. The remains of the sword flung out of the Hybrid's hand. I reached out an arm, spawning another well over the blazing blade. I snapped it back towards us, sinking it through the Hybrid's torso.

The weaker children of this monster grappled onto me from all sides as we fought. Converting Event Horizon over them, I suppressed the psionic onslaught with a vast wave of raw mana. Version 2.2 shuddered in response, the energy overwhelming it.

Its many cold and calculating eyes locked with mine as Version 2.2 shoved itself from my grasp. It flopped away from me while I grabbed and crushed the obnoxious Hybrids over me. They crumbled in my hands like an ant before a giant.

Whipping onto a chunk of broken building, I glanced around at the debris field. As if fighting on the rings of Saturn, I gazed at the awe-inspiring destruction. The moment passed as I gauged my surroundings.

An army of Hybrids swept up into the field. They spiraled along a growing center of compressed stone, metal, and corpses at the center of the gravity well. Along several initial orbits, clusters of debris crashed; tectonic booms radiated at each passing collision. With a grasp of the situation, I discovered Version 2.2's hiding spot.

It hid behind a chunk of rotating stone. It latched its hands into the outer edge of the rock, keeping it facing outward from the well's center. This kept it from exposing itself to me. Seeing through the hiding place, I pushed off the stone beneath me.

It crumbled to powder as I smashed through several floating stones on my path to Version 2.2. It waited for me. Slicing through its concealing cove, I crashed into its chest. I grabbed ahold of the creature, digging my hands into its wiry chest.

But the wires were gone. A set of crystalized mana covered its torso, the same armor Lehesion wore. As the gemstones shattered, psionic ripples echoed out in devastating waves. My eyes bled silver blood, and my teeth cracked in my mouth. The mental

assault escalated, surface scans of my mind grating my nerves. It mirrored chewing broken glass, the sensation almost intolerable.

Taking advantage, the Hybrid, sliced at me with two more blazing swords. With the aim of a master, it sliced one blade at my neck and the other between my ribs. After snapping the edges like before, it swung the same weapons twice more. Each slash dug deep into my skin, leaving opened wounds and chunks of the sword behind.

In seconds, my body devoured the foreign steel, indulging in the meal. The wounds healed as quickly as the Hybrid made them. Once I stabilized from the psionic waves, I retaliated against the mental force. The telepathic tether rippled as the raw might of my mind crashed against them.

At the same time, I deflected the swords several times. Whoever piloted this Hybrid swung with the practiced composure of a teacher. They lacked the ferocity of a beast, however. In a way, its strikes were gentle, and its intentions were flawed. The innate hunger and monstrous instincts of its cousin, Version 2.0, weren't within this monster.

Even more so, I gained mass and strength in spades since then. My draining deluged its own abilities, and my regeneration exceeded what it showed thus far. If anything, I out-monstered it, my mettle and vitality unmatched.

It cornered me in its tactics, however. Most of this derived from a lack of expectation. I never imagined a Hybrid would use a mana field over itself that carried psionic explosions within. This lack of preparation on my part put me at a disadvantage.

Wielding my experience in battle, I shifted my tactics accordingly. This sword slinging Hybrid wanted slow, steady combat with periodic lulls. I swarmed the beast instead, giving it no time to plan or respite to relax.

Version 2.2 cleaved burning swords at angles aimed to kill. I deflected them using a shrug of my shoulder or the swing of my palm. Wielding less range, I closed the gap between us but maintained half an arm's length.

With shorter levers of attack, my strikes crossed the distance between us quicker. Each time I deflected a swing, I whipped a wild hook into its chest or face. These blows radiated out with the raw oomph of train wrecks. The impacted released waves of sound that shattered glass and ruptured eardrums.

The monster adjusted, tightening its strikes. The faster pace favored me, however. Both of us pushed our limits, each of us making mistake after mistake. With my regeneration exceeding the monsters, it built up damage over time.

This strategy collapsed as the Hybrid showed its full hand. A golden aura encompassed the creature, soaking all my strikes with ease. Within seconds, the Hybrid recuperated. This cycle continued, my inability to make a lasting dent apparent.

At the same time, the mental assault of this creature stalled my movements. Unlike the other mind mages, the insidious nature of this onslaught aimed at my weaknesses. It found the gaps in my will and the faults in my mentality. Memories of my failures, wells of guilt, the deaths of friends, these mages found the places where I hurt and pulled them to the surface. With each passing second, this mental blitz required more and more of my attention.

My physical control suffered as a result. The Hybrid's attacks, precise as when we started, ripped and tore through the shoddy defense I mustered. The tide of battle turning, I reached out a hand, ending the massive well suspending us. We fell towards the ground, Version 2.2 caught off guard. It fell off balance while I sliced into the dirt.

I retreated, regrouping for a moment. I burrowed down, hiding in the earth. Above, explosions radiated out as where I stood vaporized. I shot through the ground, finding myself under a building. Using it as a sanctuary, I hid on the second floor of a skyscraper.

I racked my brains for a solution. My physicality exceeded Version 2.2's. Its mental attacks overwhelmed me given time, however. Outlasting the creature wasn't an option because of that. Giving it time to cull my forces wasn't exactly optimal either.

A message popped into status feed at that moment.

Krog Borom, the Harbinger's General(lvl 13,000 | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion) – We've moved most of our forces towards the ocean. The evacuation has started. Hold the line for a few more minutes.

I blinked as a realization overcame me; killing this damn thing wasn't necessary. Remembering my goal, I sprinted out of my hiding place and into Polydra's street.

Pavement powdered underfoot as my heels slammed into the ground. Peering around, only Hybrids and a burning city exposed itself.

I flew up into the sky. Peering down, I found Version 2.2. It gathered a mass of forces for gathering those that left Polydra. Opening my dimensional storage, I pulled the quintessence crystals I stored before the battle.

I shot towards the cluster of enemies. They found me before I arrived, but I kept about two football fields between us. This kept me out of their psionic reach. Keeping that distance, I generated another massive well of gravity at the center of their troops. Their forces fell towards the center of it except Version 2.2.

Coated in a golden aura, it ignored the physical manifestations near it, all but immune to the material world. That didn't matter. I reared my hand back and chucked a crystal at the ball of Hybrids. Like a baseball, it shot right at the monsters whistling through the air. Version 2.2 intercepted the gemstone using a ball of raw force that detonated it early.

An elemental eruption cascaded outwards from the mana bomb. It carried the destruction of magmas, burning ice, and flaming metals.

Version 2.2 bent down to charge at me. Before it could, I lobbed the rest of the mana bombs I made earlier. They veered in strange angles, manipulated by the gravitation.

Whipping through the air, Version 2.2 took desperate measures. It waved a hand, creating six swords of light. These blades sheened with energy, locking onto the quintessence bombs. Before the monster unleashed its attack, I dived into the ground. Bursting through the soil, I built the momentum of my charge.

As the Hybrid reared its hand back to fire the light blades, I tackled into the monster. The swords of light fired off into the distance, creating expanding stars at range.

These forming lights siphoned the sunlight nearby, darkening the sky. They left behind blinding blots, however, mirroring space for a moment. Version 2.2 and I tumbled across the ground with these strange visions spiralling in our sight. Luck favored me, and I ended up on top of the monster. Instead of pounding its face, I stood and slung the creature at the balled-up Hybrids. If it kept probing my mind, it might discover something worth remembering.

Before it got the chance, I let the creature go. I turned and sprinted away. A few footsteps later, an elemental wave jettisoned me from the pile. A massive explosion of purple fire erupted, the metal singeing from the acrid acids and molten minerals.

I tumbled once more, barreling across the ground like a ragdoll. Once oriented, I slid onto my feet. Making a mad dash, I belted away from the clusterfuck behind me. I stumbled on my feet as another wave of psionic energy blasted my mind. A vision of Yawm twisting Althea into an abomination flooded my mind.

In my eyes, I turned into a child, helpless and alone. I stared around, finding myself stuck under my bed. The sounds of breaking bottles and the smell of rancid booze flooded my senses. I shivered as the head of my mother clunked against the floor. My old man's feet walked across the floor, his steel-toed boots clanking against the hardwood floor.

He placed a hand on the ground as I covered my nose to stop the sound of breathing. As his green eyes met mine, I came to.

I awakened, darkness surrounding me. I reached out an arm, dirt surrounding me. I passed out before falling into the ground. A wave of anger spread from my chest along with self-loathing. I was well past being scared of that old bastard. Falling for that pissed me off.

As the ground above me disintegrated, I turned towards the Hybrid coming at me. I launched my own telepathic assault the moment it created a mental tether between us. Wielding my wrath and hatred as a weapon, I crashed against their psychic network without mercy. The Hybrid fell onto its knees before I grabbed its mouth and lifted it off the ground.

An endless torrent of quintessence siphoned into its frame. It bulged from within, unable to withstand the expanding matter. A cold, spiteful glare plastered onto my face. A piercing, genuine hatred manifested into my chest. I wanted this abomination to suffer. I wanted it to crumble in my hands and weep.

It did, a deep fear spawning in its many eyes. As with all my victories in this battle, the golden aura returned and eliminated the ground I gained. The energy deleted my mental line and disintegrated the generating matter. I stumbled backward, the field even shoving me back. Version 2.2 renewed the psychic assault.

I shot out another pulse of energy, the mental wire splitting. We both stared at one another, each of us at a standstill on how to gain any ground. The abomination's features shifted, the being standing taller. The cold, calculating gaze returned.

It spread out its arms and spoke using magic,

"It's been quite some time, hasn't it?"

The voice stopped me in my tracks. I narrowed my eyes,

"Tohtella?"

"Yes. It's good to see you again, though I don't enjoy the circumstances." The Hybrid lifted its hand, and the crowd of Hybrids stopped moving in their tracks. I glared between them both, confused and on edge by their behavior. While charging a singularity in my blood, I tilted my head at the Hybrid,

"What are you talking for?"

The Hybrid gesticulated with its disgusting body, turning a hand to me, "To come to a compromise."

Chapter 233: Elysium

Keeping on guard, I finished charging my singularity while gazing around. Stalling suited me just fine. Every second spent on this gave my forces more time for their retreat.

Tohtella Adair spoke with the Hybrid as her puppet,

"Aren't you curious what I mean by that?"

Suspending myself midair with a gravity well, I glared,

“What could we possibly compromise on? Genocide? Manipulation?”

The Hybrid waved its hand, Tohtella voicing towards me,

“This is all a necessary evil. It is tasteless, abhorrent work-“

“Work you make other people do for you. Must be nice having the best of both worlds there.”

The Hybrid stayed calm,

“I understand your moral stance given your exposure. You’ve seen little of Schema’s system, however. That much was apparent from our few conversations. You’re simple-minded and short-sighted, but not willingly. Schema masked what it does, and it has abused your situation.”

The Hybrid reached out a hand, “Give me a chance to express exactly how. I’m certain you will find most of what I have to say of value.”

She spoke with sterilized words, clean and unmarked by the reality of what she caused. It reminded me of Yawm and his disillusionment with Schema’s system, just from a different source.

Still, I listened since she might carry some valuable info,

“Say what you’re going to say.”

“We’re doing this to ensure the safety of our union.”

I pointed at Polydra, “You’re telling me that doing this for safety is OK?”

“No. It isn’t for my safety or anyone in the Adair family. We’re competent enough for that if you haven’t surmised that already. This process ensures safety for our citizens in the future.”

My eyes widened, “Citizens?”

“Yes. We intend to create a nation that will stand against that robotic tyrant. We have the resources to accomplish this after gathering the gialgathens on Giess. They are a necessary, yet regrettable, need for this goal.”

I spread out my hands, “Every bounty hunter across the galaxy is hunting you down. No one who allies themselves with you is safe. Period. Killing off a species doesn’t fix that.”

The Hybrid raised a hand and a finger, but Tohtella’s voice rang in my ears,

“You fail to consider the circumstances I’m suggesting. A normal citizen is far less safe within the territory we control. Exiled, unknowns, and others like them will gain protection, however. You should understand that. You were an unknown until recently. All you had to do was kill Emagrotha and Yawm for freedom.”

Frustration built in Tohtella’s voice,

“You had to face impossible odds, win, then prove your loyalty time and time again. The reason wasn’t that you didn’t earn freedom earlier. Killing Yawm was more than enough based on current galactic standards for cleansing your unknown status.”

I shrugged, “Eh, I figured that much.”

The Hybrid bristled,

“Schema calculated how much he could gain from you based on your history. With that data, he leveraged your situation as much as he could.”

I waved a hand, motioning her to move on,

“And?”

“And that doesn’t bother you even in the slightest?”

I spread out my hands, “You did the same thing.”

“My manipulation is out of desperation and necessity, not to gouge those that can be gouged.”

I believed her as much as I believed a timeshare salesman.

“Sure.”

The Hybrid raised a finger,

“My point still stands. Not everyone can defeat impossible odds as you did. People fail. People die. On a more personal note, most of my family passed in the pursuit of freedom from Schema’s system. I worked for decades to the same end. I became a renowned Speaker. Do you know what I earned at the end of that path?”

Tohtella, controlling the Hybrid’s body, threw up its arms in frustration,

“Endless work and endless toil. Schema wants everyone to become a machine that accomplishes its goals. I’ve read on your case files. He intends to use you as a bringer of destruction. Should you refuse, Schema intends to turn you into a mana battery.”

That declaration unnerved me even if she curated her words to incite that kind of response. I narrowed my eyes,

“I’m an investment and risk. He wants a payout. That makes sense.”

It took me off guard as she replied,

“You’re a hardened individual, so your resignation to your fate is expected. However, the Adair family is offering a sanctuary for those that want to avoid that outcome.”

I raised an eyebrow, “How?”

“A nation that protects people with people instead of the consequences of an AI. The Hybrids, they will act as guards and hunt down those that kill members. Detectives will work in conjunction with scryers to find these murderers and bring them justice.”

She finished her words with an edge of anger infecting her voice. I narrowed my eyes,

“What makes you think you can control the Hybrids on that kind of scale?”

She lifted the Hybrid’s hands, “As you can tell, we’ve learned to control them well at this point. That is undeniable. Do you know how?”

I frowned and stayed silent.

“We use our innate psionic abilities. We gained those abilities through genetic modification millennia ago before Schema decimated our species. Our current abilities pale in comparison to what we once had. The reason for that is simple; our blood has diluted over time.”

The Hybrid tapped the edge of its head, “We’ve relied on an inheritance that is slowly waning in potency. Our bloodline will fade given a few more generations. Even with this pitiful level of psionics, we still can control armies of these monstrosities, however.”

The Hybrid spread out its arms, “And we aim to give this gift to the masses.”

Possibilities sprung into my head like fireworks at her words. The Hybrids existed above the eldritch. On the one hand, they endangered every species and living being across all of space. On the other hand, the Hybrids could be used to protect people as well, even those that lacked protection from Schema’s system.

Despite her bold claims, her ideas still held a few holes. I calmed myself,

“How do you intend to handle the eldritch without Schema’s incentives? Anyone joining your system will be exiled. People won’t kill the eldritch without an incentive.”

The Hybrid tapped its chest, “With the Hybrids in the manner you see before you.”

I scoffed, “You honestly think they’ll handle the eldritch?”

“Not by themselves, no.” She tapped where her temple would be, “Using our minds, we pilot these creatures. This method will be given to those that earn the right to wield it. Hybrids stand above the eldritch, and they can be used to cull them utterly.”

She raised the Hybrid’s hand, waving it across the sky, “No one will be forced to risk their lives just to gain even the lowest of status. We will be equals standing with equal protection.”

I cupped my chin, genuinely diving into thought, “OK, Schema’s not agreeing to this, obviously. Every citizen in your nation will have a bounty, and they will be attacked. You intend to use Hybridized gialgathens to defend them?”

“No. The gialgathens will defend our planets from glassing. From Schema’s previous history of handling rebellions, that will be his first course of action. The AI will glass every world that joins us.”

I pointed down, “Like the espens on Giess?”

The Hybrid spread out its massive arms, “Yes. Exactly.”

My voice grew grim, “And you’re murdering an entire species for this?”

The Hybrid nodded, “Sacrifices must be made for the betterment of others.”

I pointed at her, “Yeah, as long as they aren’t your sacrifices? Right?”

The Hybrid leaned its head back, “We have no intention of continuing this method of expansion post Giess. Once several planets are under our control, we’ll rely on other methods. To begin this rebellion, we must stand on the corpses of many, however.”

She spoke out like a surgeon. Not only was she cold, but she lacked any real exposure to what was being done. She commandeered a puppet to fight for her. She manipulated a race to kill for her. She even offloaded moral responsibility with the classic claim, ‘the ends justify the means.’

In a way, she mastered the art of rationalizing evil.

I spread out my arms, “OK, so you’ve got this nice, idealistic concept. Have you actually accomplished even a trial run of the idea?”

The Hybrid lifted its chin, staring down at me with confidence,

“Of course we have. We’re positioned on a planet. How else do you think we have this level of resources.”

I blinked a few times, all her claims blowing my mind. At this point, digesting the information required time and some other perspectives like Torix or Althea. Hell, maybe Hod could intuitively grasp this whole mess and give us some golden insights.

Eh, probably not.

Either way, coming to some grand realization at the moment wasn’t possible. No matter how honeyed her words seemed, her actions revealed the ruthless monster she was beneath her facade. The dreadnought’s hulls held horrors unmatched, and they spoke volumes by themselves.

Even more so, trusting Tohtella’s words was idiotic. She lied about everything to me when we met. Everything. In fact, viewing the situation from that lense cleared the case up quite a bit. Tohtella was, without a shadow of a doubt, a manipulative piece of shit. No matter what she said about that fact, it remained just that – a fact.

That simple logic guided me for now, though I intended on gathering my own insights on what Tohtella mentioned earlier. I crossed my arms,

“I’m not sold.”

The Hybrid lifted its palms, “You shouldn’t be. You should doubt everything I say considering I’ve lied to you. That’s good. I don’t want some half-hearted resolution after this single conversation. I want to change the mind of a key player in the coming conflict.”

“Wait a minute-” I pointed at myself, “Key player?”

“False modesty is unbecoming of you or anyone for that matter. You matched this Hybrid in combat, alone. That is, by itself, a miracle. That doesn’t include your decimation of Lehesion, though that won’t happen a second time.”

The Hybrid gestured to all of Polydra, “In fact, this entire battle will act as a calling card for your guild overtime. Many of the higher-ranked guilds have been doubting you. Now they will know what you’re capable of.”

Well, someone in this entire city must have recorded some of the fights or maybe streamed it live. That made sense. I tilted my head,

“Then you should realize that I don’t take kindly to this whole genocidal, ruthless bullshit your pulling. You’re just justifying evil, and I’m not falling for it.”

Tohtella showed no remorse as she spoke,

“You assume the worst of me. I fight for more than myself. I embody an ideal and illustrate my character with my ambitions. You’re just a gifted individual that acts in his own self-interest, the same as anyone would.”

I pointed at her and me, “Let’s quit talking in about airy concepts and ground this conversation a bit, shall we? Let’s look at our actions instead of our intentions for just a second.”

I raised a finger on my hand, “I saved my home planet. I’m working on saving the gialgathens. I even killed a planetary threat in Yawm. You organized a few worlds before culling a species and creating horrific, cybernetic terrors that outdo even the eldritch.”

I shook my head, “Where’s the debate here again?”

The Hybrid's many mouths seethed, "You're simplifying something complicated to disguise your stupidity."

I spoke with a voice like stone, "Really now? It sounds like you're complicating something simple to mask your hunger for power. Why don't you even try reasoning with Schema?"

"You think we haven't tried? If there's one avenue of change, it will not come from Schema. The AI is defensive, set in its ways, and cowardly. It's been programmed to want the eldritch to remain a problem. It's as if Schema's treating a patient in a hospital." The Hybrid took a step forward,

"Schema has a cure, but it wants the patient to remain sick and need its care. Schema then leverages this need to demand whatever it wants. We are those patients, trapped in that hospital, all of us dependant on a crooked system to sustain us."

The Hybrid raised a hand, "This is an alternative, a different way of accomplishing the same goal. Instead of treating the symptoms of the disease known as the eldritch, we'll be curing it. Surely you can understand that?"

I frowned, "You can close dimensional gateways and organize them like Schema does?"

The Hybrid's eyes narrowed, "We will wage war with Schema until we've won. It will be bloody, but at least we won't be at the mercy of some cold, unfeeling machine."

I grimaced, "No. They'll be at the mercy of a cold, unfeeling psionic that can twist their minds at will."

The Hybrid took a moment to collect itself, pinching the imaginary bridge on an imaginary nose. With a sigh, it raised a palm, "Then think on it and gather information on the subject. This will not be the only time we meet given your persistence in being a nuisance."

"Oh, so I'm a nuisance?"

“Yes. Very much so.”

“Damn. I was hoping I was at least a pain in the ass.”

The Hybrid leaned towards me, “You’re as charming as always...All we’re asking is that you stop your interference with our plan. Nothing more.”

I leaned down, ready for her retaliation, “Then you’ll let us leave?”

The Hybrid’s many mouths frowned, “Of course we won’t. You’re making a dent in our collection quotas which must be met. Release the stolen goods, and we will allow you to leave without any grievances between us.”

The Hybrid steepled its twisted fingers, “Or are you declaring war with our new nation?”

“A new nation, huh? What’s it called?”

“Elysium, the sanctuary for those that have been forgotten and abandoned by Schema. We will offer refuge and resources to those that need it. To any that aim to stop us, we will respond with force.”

Tohtella meant what she said. Using any means available, she intended on rivaling Schema’s influence and eventually usurping him. If anything, her goals seemed alright. Help unknowns, exiles, and some others who Schema persecuted. At the same time, the execution of her goals bordered on insanity.

It made her stated goals hard to believe. If anything, personal gain and revenge twisted her ideas beyond recognition. That was my gut reaction, and I trusted my instincts. I raised my hands,

“I understand that you’re trying to do the right thing, but you’re going about it all wrong. Just, just take a second and look around you. This is what you’re doing. This does more damage than good. That’s obvious.”

I raised a fist, “Yawm acted like you do. He believed that the ends justified the means no matter the cost. You’re smarter than Yawm, and an Old One hasn’t warped you into his plaything over time.” The golden radiance of Lehesion ebbed off the Hybrid’s frame. Knowing the source, I murmured,

“At least, I’m hoping that hasn’t happened to you yet...Has it?”

The Hybrid’s many eyes twitched as Tohtella lost her patience. The Hybrid raised a hand,

“Enough talk. Understand this – you’re making an enemy you don’t want to make. Powerful forces support us, and powerful factions fear us. We will cast a net across many worlds, and we will not be stopped. Not by you nor anyone. This revolution will not be a whimper. It will be a roar that will echo across time.”

The Hybrid gestured a palm to me, “Right here and right now, you stand at the crossroads of history. I advise you to make the correct choice and leave the gialgathens with us.”

At that moment, I sealed the deal on battling it out with these guys. All the semantics aside, my issue with Tohtella boiled down to responsibility. She never faced the consequences for her actions. She let others face them for her. They’d do the same to me.

If I allied myself with them, the Adair family would make me into their puppet like Lehesion. Ethical concerns aside, joining with them exiled me from Schema’s system. My entire guild probably followed me if I did that, and that put us in about as much danger as we could be in. Even worse still, I held no faith that Tohtella wouldn’t hunt us down after the Adair Family established itself.

We understood many of their motives, and we acted against them on multiple occasions. Even more so, my guild posed a severe threat to their goals. Otherwise, Tohtella would never speak with me personally; it would be a waste of her time. The more I thought about it, the more it looked like she was buying time to gather her forces.

Once gathered, the Adair family might put my guild next on the chopping block. They already culled the gialgathens. Why would humans be any different?

Even beyond all of that, I just didn't hate Schema. At one point I might have, but by now, a lot of the AI's methodologies made sense to me. Schema proved a harsh, uncompromising presence, but he almost always came across as fair. While the AI wasn't perfect by any means, he did a pretty OK job of handling the eldritch in general too. A lot better than I'd do, that's for sure.

Considering these Adair guys made a factory line for converting people into monsters, they had a worse track record than Schema. At least based off what I'd seen.

After considering all the data, my answer to Tohtella was simple.

Hell no.

But, I cupped my chin, pretending to consider her proposition. As I weighed some imaginary options, another message appeared in my status.

Krog Borom, the Harbinger's General(lvl 13,000 | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion) – The evacuation is finished. You can retreat.

I peered at the message, reading it with a quick glance. As I turned back to the Hybrid, it lifted its chin, gazing down at me,

“Well?”

I reached out a hand, jerking a singularity into existence over her body. As expected, Tohtella's fighting prowess lacked in many respects. She responded like a snail, unaware of the danger. The Hybrid's control jerked over towards the experienced pilot in time, however, so Version 2.2 avoided the gravitational abyss.

Despite the dodge, the implosion radiated out with devastation, and the Hybrid stood beside the impact. Lobbed aside like a ragdoll, Version 2.2 clashed against the ground, collapsing structures as it passed through them.

I turned and dove into the ground, using the singularity as a distraction. Dashing through the dirt, I shot out towards the sea. I traversed through the subterranean stone. Meeting where the others congregated, I swam into the waters of Giess.

Massive creatures cloaked in the dark sea swam in the distance, many foreign shapes traversing the oceans. The plant life beneath us owned a lavender hue, the seaweeds and corals contaminated with mana pollution. Several shelled bottom feeders feasted on the carcasses of other species that died from the corruption.

A few strange, glowing crabs mixed in with the bunch of bottom feeders. They wielded elemental energies, casting out living darkness and corrosive light magics. The odd sight caught me off guard, but Giess' wildlife was anything if strange.

Using a well of gravity, I pulled myself towards a deep cave under the sea. Once there, I found a subterranean pocket of air that harbored my allies. Krog, Kessiah, and the Sentinel remained. They positioned themselves near a rip in space-time, a view of Elderfire behind them. As I walked up, I pointed at each of them, "How many did we save?"

Krog sighed, "At least four hundred. The rest are dead."

I took a deep breath, "I'm sorry for your loss."

"While I appreciate the sentiment, there's much we must do. There's no time to grieve. This is war, and those that move first will win."

Krog wasn't wrong. I glanced at Kessiah, and she showed signs of exhaustion. Despite that, something about her changed. She stood taller, more confident in herself despite the fatigue. With that in mind, she spoke between heavy breaths,

"I wish we could've dented their army before we left. At least we saved a few people."

I turned to the Sentinel, "It's not too late if you're willing to take a risk."

The Sentinel pointed at himself, "Me? What do you want me to do?"

I shrugged, “Eh, nothing much. All I need you to do is tag along and make a portal or two.”

The Sentinel took a step back, grabbing its spear with both hands,

“Why are you smiling like that then?”

“Because we’re going to be leaving them with a bang.”

Chapter 234: Kaboom

The Sentinel turned towards his portal, “Perhaps risking your life for a blow to the enemy isn’t a good idea.”

I shrugged, “Every fight is a risk. It’s a part of the whole ‘war for Schema’ thing. Either way, you won’t have to do much. All I need you to do is create a portal before I slam into the ground.”

The Sentinel’s eyes narrowed, “You intend to use your orbital bombardment to incite the eruption of Polydra?”

I spread out my arms, “You got it.”

“That’s insane.”

I shot the guy two finger pistols, “Insanely smart?”

“No. You’ll die in the aftermath at the very least. The eruption will consume you.”

I shook my head, “Not exactly. From what I’ve gathered, this eruption will be more like a bomb going off. It will be like Mt. Saint Helens or Krakatoa.”

“What are those?”

“They’re famous eruptions from Earth’s history. I watched a documentary on them one day while I was bored. I didn’t understand all the technicalities at the time, but the destruction from the eruption wasn’t from magma.”

I opened my status, opening up Schema’s information network. Though it sterilized a lot of the information, volcanic eruptions weren’t something Schema censored. A few seconds of reading later, I tilted my status and showed the Sentinel some images.

“See here? It mentions a pyroclastic flow. We can instigate that to wipe the city. It takes this kind of eruption a few minutes to finish. That’s plenty of time for me to survive. The Hybrids aren’t as rugged as I am though.”

The Sentinel tilted his head, “You have fought with glowing armor before, haven’t you?”

“Yeah. Heat isn’t something that bothers me much. It should be plenty to cull Poldyra utterly, though.”

The Sentinel sighed, “Then I will create the tear. I must first visit the place. How will we get there?”

I pointed towards Polydra, “We’ll use the sewers. I’ll send a message, you just have to slice the portal for that then jump through it. I’ll land my orbital bombardment into the sewers, creating a kinetic explosion beneath Polydra. The weak spot should create an escape for all the pressure to escape from.”

I pointed back to the Sentinel, “Just make sure to keep the portal open for me to escape from...And, uh, keep your distance. There will be a fragment of the energy and magma escaping through the portal. It’s enough to kill, though.”

The Sentinel spread out his hands, “How do you survive these impacts.”

“A loophole using one of Schema’s trees.”

The Sentinel gestured up with a spear, “Schema may allow a loophole to occur once, but multiple times? He wouldn’t allow it.”

I shrugged, “Eh, he’s allowed me to do this three different times so far if I include my first Skyburner fight. Either way, it’s reliable and works very well. I don’t understand how Schema does it, but I don’t have to.”

The Sentinel stared down and cupped his chin, “Hmmm, perhaps he’s pulling your mind from your body at the last moment then restoring it after the impact.”

I raised an eyebrow, “You mean like what he did for the compendiums?”

“I...I wouldn’t know. I know that Schema has a registry of people’s consciousnesses for his revivals. They are costly, however. This is due to the nature of restoring a being’s body, not from holding the consciousnesses, however.”

The Sentinel waved his arms, trying to make sense of it, “Perhaps not all of your body is destroyed on the impacts? If that were so, then putting your mind back into a tiny portion of your remaining body would be more than enough. Your regeneration would follow through, your brain intact or not.”

I leaned back, feeling my head, “Do I even have a brain anymore?”

The Sentinel gave me a deadpan look, “I do question it myself at times.”

I rolled my eyes, “I mean the actual organ...Alright, I’ll ask the Overseer next time I see him if I remember too. Anyways, do you think the plan will work?”

“It will, given you survive it that is.”

I turned to Polydra, “My mortality exists on the edge of believability at this point. Hell, Kessiah called me unkillable earlier. I’ll do my best to prove her right. The only way to do that is to survive what shouldn’t be survived.”

I opened my personal pocket dimension, “Anyways, let’s get this done.”

The Sentinel stared at me and the portal, “What do you need from there?”

I gestured between him and the portal, “I don’t. You just need to step in here. It’s easier to keep you safe here.”

The Sentinel lifted his spear, “I have a better idea. ”

He swung it in an arc, creating a portal towards the forest we arrived in Polydra from. I walked over and pulled the tear apart, and he stepped through. After hopping over, the wistful forest carried the smell of ash. Smoke plumes rose from Polydra as two more dreadnoughts arrived to finish the town.

The Sentinel pointed at the city, “We can walk there.”

I walked up while nodding, “We could. You could also get captured and killed that way. Sounds like a good way to die.”

The Sentinel stared at the city as a tectonic explosion rippled out from a dreadnought. For miles around the city, massive oaks bent and tore from the impact’s energy. I leaned over to the Sentinel, “How’d you take one of those?”

Two explosions later, and I raced towards the city with the Sentinel in storage. I burrowed beneath the mountain, keeping my distance low. I encountered the defenses the Hybrids mustered against the gialgathens. My mobility within stone overwhelmed them, leaving their mammoth, mechanical worms hunting for nothing but the tunnels of softened earth I left behind.

Once in the sewers, I pulled the Sentinel from the Abyss. He fell out, suspended by gravity. He looked around, shaken by the experience but still lucid, unlike Torix. He landed on his feet, taking a deep breath before rearing back his spear. A second later, he tore open a portal to the Rak’sshah dessert. I hopped in there, amazed at how smooth the operation worked so far.

Passing into the desert, I lifted up into the sky while the Sentinel walked back. The same heat built over my skin as usual, and I braced for the inevitable impact. Landing into the tiny warp proved simple. My depth perception impressed me from that perspective. A full minute away, I viewed the portal in pristine detail despite the distance.

All those points into perception paid off.

Once I sped up to an immense extent, I adjusted my descent slightly from my other attempts. I kept myself narrow like a sword slicing the air. As I whipped through the portal at supersonic speeds, I flattened my body. Instead of mitigating the impact, I created a wider surface area. This meant I hit the ground like a hammer instead of a bullet.

At the same time, I created an extended, powerful well of gravity just beyond the portal. This used my excess mana, giving me an even stronger point of impact. I also shifted into the Rise of Eden at the last moment for extra mass. This enabled the destruction to reach new levels. I questioned the merit of these adjustments until I landed.

At that point, the devastation was undeniable.

The entire mountain quaked, creating a chain reaction of carnage. The first piece of the bloodbath resulted from my impact. The enhanced mass and energy from my descent assisted my fall, creating a larger kill radius. Multiple miles, in fact. A smaller city would've vaporized in an instant.

Polydra's survived, though the ancient portion the gialgathens lived in disintegrated. Several of the skyscrapers wiggled like worms, the resulting shockwave pushing them one way. The earthquake pulled the foundations in a different direction, creating violent clashing forces in the buildings.

This created a whipping effect at the height of these massive buildings. As the kinetic chain completed at the top, the buildings splintered into shards of death. They plummeted down, creating aftershocks from my landing and shaking the mountain on their own.

My landing carried friction as well. Friction caused heat, and this heat created a molten vat of magma large as a small island around me. It was as if the shell of dirt over the molten earth was dissolving. I existed at the bottom of this magma pit, the lava comfortable as warm water to me.

I reintegrated into my body, opening my eyes to vibrant orange and red. The lava touched my eyes, a mild discomfort resulting from the contact. It mirrored leaving my

eyes open in a pool. At the same time, I radiated with astounding energy, the kind few could tolerate. It created dense, dynamic shivering throughout my body.

Holding onto the vast energy kept all my concentration as I blasted myself from the pool. Lifting from the lava, I picked myself up onto a broken landscape. Nothing stayed standing within a kilometer of my landing point. After that, the signs of devastation lingered, most buildings leveled.

The Hybrids degenerated into crumbled piles of metal. Both the dreadnought's shields popped like air balloons from the shockwave. They stayed afloat by the crew coming together during the crisis. Deep below the mountain, another, far vaster wave of destruction loomed.

A blistering, ungodly crack erupted above Polydra. I turned to the sound, and my eyes widened. A black plume rose miles into the sky, a pyroclastic cloud swallowing the sun. From this rising cloud, a swarming, starving wave of blackened ash swarmed across the forest.

It consumed all in its path, unstoppable and unyielding. My own power paled in comparison to the wrath of nature, the flow encompassing all my vision. It swarmed towards the city, a harbinger of death and a herald of annihilation.

It created a seizing in my chest, my adrenaline screaming for me to run. I quashed this natural reaction, inspecting the field of lava around me. Within the pit, nothing survived. Beyond the hole, along the edge of the destruction, a familiar face showed itself.

My armor grinned as I dashed towards Version 2.2, the body left broken and mutilated. I wasn't lucky the monster died, but I was lucky I got to see it pass in person. As I came upon it, the Hybrid's bleeding eyes turned towards me. A mangled pile, it reached up a hand towards me and gurgled,

"This...you used a nuclear weapon? You speak of ethics to me when you would break the Engrevia Code. Even I would not stoop so low as to leave a nuclear wasteland."

I laughed, a long, haunting kind of gesture. It echoed across the ravaged landscape, a message towards the Hybrid and those that led it. I leaned over the mangled body, red radiating from the jagged maw of my armor,

“I don’t need a weapon of mass destruction to wreak this havoc.” I reared back an arm, “I need only my own two hands to unleash destruction.”

With a swing of my arm, my palm crushed Version 2.2’s torso, pulping its surface. My armor drilled into the body as Event Horizon smothered it. The looming black cloud rumbled as the pyroclastic flow expanded in our vision, its size incomprehensible. It devoured the edge of my magma pit, my skin glowing white as I leaned towards the Hybrid,

“You’ve done well in creating this hell.”

As the pyroclastic surge neared us, I roared,

“Now let’s see if you can fight here, where the monsters come out to play.”

The ashen cloud frenzied over us in a blistering cloud of dust. I ceased breathing, lifting the Hybrid into the immense cloud’s torrent. Enormous boulders bounced near us, the sound of extinction screaming in my ears. The wind whistled like a banshee. The heat caused metal to melt and rock to soften. The ashen clouds smothered anything that needed air to breathe, liquifying their lungs with ash like broken glass.

I stood at the center of the devastation, and I laughed in the face of it. The Hybrid scrambled in my hand, squealing in agony as it attempted to escape. The psionic force left the body seconds after, unable to withstand the torture. As life left the dying monster, I grabbed its throat and crunched it in my hands.

Ripping off the skull, I held both pieces of its body in each hand, pacing through the blackened cloud. Rushing boulders and ash created a cacophony of sound that masked my surroundings. Like an ever changing wave, getting a firm grasp of it was impossible. My gravitational sense saved me here, giving me a rough outline of my surroundings.

A quick dash around the city revealed the absolute nature of the destruction. The volcanic eruption continued shelling the area like a carpet bombing. Any living Hybrid died from the resulting buildup of heat. These clouds reached temperatures exceeding a thousand celsius. Water burst into steam when it passed. Even rock melted if exposed for long enough.

As I paced across the fields, I hunted down any stragglers. I survived in this purgatory, all those around me left dead and dying. After stomping across the hellscape, I pulled myself above the wave of desolation. I stared above. Blots of lightning rippled across the enormous cloud above Polydra, the eruption rising beyond the clouds.

This cloud left the heavens above scarred, the clouds mangled, the sky darkened. As night descended onto the day, I stared down at the charred corpse of Polydra. I peered further down at my hands, the weight of my actions pressing down onto my shoulders.

A looming shadow crossed over the landscape, volcanic ash falling like gray snow. Left lifeless and dying, I dashed down towards the tear in space-time. The ash and magma submerged it, but the siphoning of liquid made it easy to find.

I dashed through the portal, keeping the lava off me with an antigravity well. As I paced out of it, the searing sun of the Rak'sha dessert belted down without mercy. Beyond the portal, ashy glass formed along the edge of a new magma pit. Ash and a portion of the dune flowed in the air, blown away by my initial landing.

The Sentinel stayed off in the distance, two dunes away. I leaped over, my feet creating waves through the sandy mounds. As I neared him, the Sentinel stammered at me,

"It...it seems as if Polydra has been decimated. An explosive eruption wiped the city from the map, as you wished it to. Several news outlets are guessing at the cause, from nuclear blasts to some kind of kinetic weapon in orbit above Giess."

The Sentinel sliced a spear, creating a rip to Elderfire,

"They know it was your guild that caused the havoc, however. Until now, many higher powers questioned the status of you and your followers. They spoke of a weak, new guild given special treatment over a fluke. They can't defy your ranking anymore."

The Sentinel pulled the portal apart with a bit of effort before turning to me, "How does it feel to put your guild on the galactic radar?"

I peered at the horizon,

“It’s pretty good I guess. I find myself thinking about Schema’s system more though. Sometimes it’s like I’m Schema’s mercenary, just doing what he wants without really knowing what’s going on.”

The Sentinel scoffed, “Schema’s far more informed than you could ever hope to be. He also created a stable environment to live despite the eldritch’s best attempts at stopping him. Being his mercenary is the same as being a champion of justice.”

Eh, I doubted that.

The Sentinel stepped through the portal, “Now come receive the spoils of war, as a mercenary should.”

Before stepping through the portal, I glanced at my notifications for a moment. I found dozens of messages, too many to read at the moment. As I stepped through the portal, I reminisced on what Tohtella said. Wrong as she was, the core of her points still stood on their own merit.

Putting entire species forever in an unknown status was fucked. That wasn’t the only disaster Schema caused. He eldritchified Hod’s homeworld. He limited information to paint a certain kind of narrative. Hell, each world’s initiation into the system was known as ‘the culling.’ Bottom line, Schema wasn’t perfect.

Maybe I wasn’t going to be able to change the AI’s mind, but there might be other ways of improving Schema. Doing so would take a lot of time and effort though, so I put these thoughts into the back of my mind. Stopping the Adair family and the Hybrids took precedent. With that newfound resolve, I stepped through the portal.

It was time to break them, one city at a time.

Chapter 235: Upbringing

Walking into Elderfire, the city changed since I last left. Stepping through the forested walkways, the density of plantlife dropped off some. A few of the gialgathens channeled some kind of mana, bending nature into homes for them.

Trees gnarled into rooftops, giving the people here homes walled off by twisting branches and thick bushes. The beginnings of walkways formed throughout the city,

foot traffic creating these pathways of convenience. Beyond the basics, the mentality of the town shifted outside of that.

The gialgathens stood straighter, walked faster, and moved with purpose. A liveliness infected them, and it spread out like a disease of joy. I enjoyed it. The difference between the drab, hopelessness of before acted as a nice contrast. Even with only one victory, people believed in our cause all of a sudden.

Too sudden, in fact.

The monster's mentality towards me changed as well. Instead of a dirtwalker, the gialgathens treated me with reverence. It unsettled me some, the difference staggering as night and day. I rolled with it, waving at bystanders as they bowed to me.

That's right, bowing. After pacing through the jungled city with our Sentinel, I paced out into the heart of Elderfire – the pillar supporting the blue core. Around it, the runes glowed white. Beyond the inscriptions, an installment of metal situated itself in the middle of ancient stone.

It was Schema's entourage.

Several speakers situated themselves in kiosks of metal, open for anyone to walk by. These kiosks offered several services. They gave the citizens a general supply store to exchange credits for material goods. A bounty board acted as a questing panel. A little warp drive even situated itself between two Sentinels sent here to guard the area.

I scratched the side of my head,

“How did they show up so fast?”

Our Sentinel gestured to everything with his spear, “Schema marvels at efficiency, and his guilds embody that.”

I looked between the Sentinels and our Sentinel.

“What should we call you? Sentinel will start to become confusing soon.”

The Sentinel shrugged, “It doesn’t matter. We have no names.”

I pointed at the two spears on his back, “You’ve got more of those than normal right? How about we just call you Spear?”

Our Sentinel stared at his dimensional slicer, “Hm...I like that. You may call me Spear.”

I put my hands on my hips, “Alright then Spear, where’s Torix?”

“In the temple where you left him last.”

“I’ll see you then. You can just...I don’t know, stand around, I guess?”

“I will meditate on our actions.”

Spear sat down right there, crossing his legs and leaning down. Transforming into a statue before my very eyes, he entered a deep state of tranquility. I left him there in Elderfire’s courtyard while recharging the mana in the runes and blue core. After finishing that up in a minute or so, I jumped towards the tallest temple jutting over the jungle.

Coming up to it, I paced through the corridors, remembering where Torix was last. As I did, I inspected my status in case something shifted after the battle. Some stuff had.

New skill created! The unknown skill Orbital Bombardment! Being the first sentient to create this skill grants you a bonus of 500 skillpoints. Use them wisely!

Orbital Bombardment(lvl 10) – You rain down desolation from above, a meteoric bringer of extinction. Grants additional speed, impact dispersal, and heat resistance when executing an orbital strike.

Alright, it was official – Schema stole the name I used for the skill.

Title gained: The Cleanser of Polydra,

+250 to level cap | Current Cap: 10,250

This was a nice little bonus for my efforts. It also let me know I wasn't wanted for taking out some of Polydra's residents. I bit my lip remembering that, but I moved onto my status. After putting my points into constitution, I inspected it closer.

Damn, I was heavy.

The Living Multiverse(Lvl 10,250 | Current Influence: The Rise of Eden)

Strength – 31,695 | Constitution – 45,135 | Endurance – 90,834

Dexterity – 16,240 | Willpower – 65,986 | Intelligence – 34,882

Charisma – 13,411 | Luck – 19,024 | Perception – 14,912

Health: 70.46 Million/70.46 Million | Health Regen: 472.8 Million/min or 7.88 Million/sec

Stamina: Infinite | Ambient Mana 3.57 Trillion

Mass: 4.63 Million Pounds(2.10 Million Kilos~)

Height: 13'4 (4.06 meters)

Damage Res – 99.05% | Dimensional Res – 100%

Phys Dam Bonus – 11.24 Million% | Damage Bonus – 40%

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

The main stats moving now were my physical damage bonus and my general mass. That wasn't the end all be all, but they made the most significant shifts overall. Those dramatic shifts explained how I outmuscled Version 2.2. The Hybrid hadn't weakened. I had strengthened.

I welcomed the news, all the investments into constitution paying off. A large portion of the constitution bonus came from my cipher runes as well. My new evolution took well to the runic adjustments, making the attribute increases far faster. In fact, even without Schema's involvement, I improved quite a bit.

Even if he exiled me, it wouldn't matter from a personal strength standpoint.

Of course, I wouldn't go out of my way to make that happen. At the same time, it was kind of nice not having that threat hanging over my head like a noose. That weight of my chest explained why Schema kept me as an unknown for so long, however.

His control over me faded once I reached my level cap. I didn't need a class anymore. I'd be fine without it, though I still wanted one. Without a solid point to leverage me on, I could act as a rogue agent with far fewer consequences than most.

In a way, I could move outside the law.

I rolled my shoulders, knowing I didn't want to doublecross that all-knowing AI. Schema would make me pay for betraying him. Of this, I had no doubt. Besides, I had other reasons to fight on. With that in mind, I reached the temple's darkest depths. There I found a strange sight. Torix talked with a few enigmatta, the fish guys in pressurized suits. Their eyes glowing under dark, glass helmets, the enigmatta spoke through intercoms,

"We need more compensation."

Torix snapped back, "You'll get 100,000 credits and no more. If you've come to gouge my moment of need, you're sorely mistaken. Pressed for time or not, I shall not take such an absurd deal regardless of the circumstances."

The enigmatta glanced at each other before shrugging. The one on the left replied, “We won’t do it then.”

Torix shoed them off while leaning over a few diagrams, “Then goodbye.”

The other enigmatta raised its gangly arms, “Wait a minute, we’ll do it.”

I stepped up, towering over them like a metal golem,

“What’s the problem here?”

They gawked up at me. One of enigmatta whispered,

“It’s the Sunmaker.”

I darted my gaze between both of them,

“Sunmaker? What?”

Torix cackled, “It’s the title several news stations granted you after your performance at Polydra. Considering the eruption and the blot of light your orbital bombardment created, the name is fitting. It’s suitably ominous and awe-inspiring as well.”

Both of the enigmatta glanced down, unable to meet my eye, “We’ll...We’ll do it.”

Torix steepled his fingers, “Excellent. You may both be excused.”

They paced off, and I peered at them as they did. Turning back to Torix, I pointed back at them with a thumb, “Uh, what was wrong with those guys?”

“I televised your perspective during the battle of Polydra. Having seen it in person, few would be willing to deny your abilities thereafter.”

I frowned, “How did you televise it?”

Torix turned towards me, raising his palms in his defense,

“I may have had to implant a program using John Mcsmitty’s help.”

I narrowed my eyes, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“There were three compelling reasons. The first and foremost being this; at times, it is easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. The second reason was more ethically sound. I didn’t want you thinking of your viewers as you fought. You’re best when executing on a purely practical front.”

Torix waved a hand, “The other reason involved distracting you during the battle. I didn’t want you to be nervous during your fight either. I was in full control of when to stream your PoV the entire time. I limited it to the carnage alone.”

I crossed my arms, “You can trust me with that kind of thing. You don’t have to lie to me either. I can handle it.”

“But of course, and I wasn’t questioning your ability either. Even more so, I don’t enjoy lying to you, though this was more so restricting the truth than lying per se. That being said, I had every intention of informing you as soon as you arrived. The effect I desired already manifested, after all.”

I remembered the weird reverence everybody gave me. I facepalmed, “Wait a minute, that’s why everybody was acting weird.”

“Precisely. The stream built hope, motivation, and respect all at once. It even served as a potent deterrent to would-be enemies as well. I brainstormed the idea with one of my associates after that fiasco with televising our battle with Yawm. I figured that if videos acted against us at times, they could also act for us in other instances.”

Torix waved his hands, “So if our enemies present us in a dim light, I simply exposed us during our best moment. It’s standard practice for larger guilds. Considering the splash you made in Polydra, we’ll need to incorporate even more policies in the future.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Ah, you’re using my style of fighting for good PR. I… I can understand that I suppose.” I pointed at Torix, “If you make a habit of this, I won’t be able to trust you though. Remember that.”

Torix met my eye, “I am well aware, and I will be measured in these instances, I assure you. Your trust is valued, and I will not abuse it.”

“As long as you understand that, we’re good.”

Torix raised a hand, pressing his fingers together, “Just as well, I’d like to inform you that our guild’s security is being taken care of with these videos as well. I’ve taken measures to ensure our location isn’t leaked, and I’ve even used a necessary mental screening process for new guild applicants. All of this to say, I’m taking our guild’s recruitment seriously.”

Torix clapped his hands once, “Now, with that out of the way, let’s begin discussing our next assault.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Where is it?”

“It’s the hometown of Eradin Forest Torch, Astelle.”

After a bit of mental searching, I remembered who he was talking about,

“Ah, that’s the old gialgathen I fought from the tournament. He beat his son and everything. He was alright.”

Torix nodded, “Indeed, he was. Now, Astelle is a stronghold for the gialgathens. Our goal will be less saving them from the invasion and more so mobilizing their forces here. This group of soldiers should enhance the sheer numbers we’ve garnered.”

We discussed some of the details, along with a time frame for the attack. It would take about three days to organize everything, so I had some time to kill. After finishing the debriefing, I trecked over towards the medical center of Elderfire.

Within a pool of soothing, warm water, many of the gialgathens restored themselves. Natural wisps floated around many of the hybridizing gialgathens. They kept the wounded in a semis-stasis. It let them live until now. As I paced up, Kessiah worked with vigor. I raised an eyebrow,

“You’re working already?”

She bit into her thumb and spit out a clump of skin.

“After a big battle like this, a healer is the busiest. It’s like Saturday night at a bar but a lot less fun.”

I sat a ways from her and drained the gunk from one of the gialgathens. One of the wisps floated up to me. It shivered after a moment, darting away. I frowned at it while Kessiah shook her head,

“You can’t expect them to do anything else. You’re intimidating.”

I frowned, “Huh...What are these little guys anyway?”

“They’re spirits summoned by the sages and mages the gialgathens have. They connect with Giess and use the natural mana flows to sustain the wounded. They defy nature for them as a gift for the gialgathens summoning them here.”

Kessiah reached up a finger, and a wisp floated onto her hand,

“They like it here. I guess they think the material plane is cozy.”

The wisp hovered away as Kessiah got back to work. After clearing up the hybridizing Polydrians, I went back to the temple. With three days left before my next attack, I worked on the next portion of Torix’s armor. It required a new grimoire before I could begin, however.

With that in mind, I shifted to the Rise of Eden. Wielding quintessence, I carved a series of runic markings onto the floor. As appropriate, I added portions of the cipher into the formula. Each runic piece increased in complexity until I reached the center.

The most strenuous pieces of the liturgy involved the center fragment. It required a dual-layered portion of the cipher using techniques I learned from the prison beneath Polydra. Once finished, I placed a hand onto the central tablet. After an hour of channeling, the configuration coalesced into a blight of mana.

The whitened ball shifted into a series of pages. As it did, the entirety of Elderfire shook beneath my feet. Even while containing the mana, the sheer volume created a seismic event, the energy dispersing like waves of a storm. Once wholly composed, a strange booklet plopped into my hands.

The black tome weighed at least a half-ton, the structure of it beyond my previous book. It carried a bendable stone on the surface of each page. As I turned them, they bent with ease in my hand despite their unusual, rocky texture. The thickness of the pages proved deceptive too. Wondering what was inside of one, I tore the first page. Like white mercury, a milky metal seeped out of the edge. I inspected closer, finding molten gunk flowing within the pages. This pool of liquid traveled from the dense spine of the grimoire. The design of it defied convention, but I trusted Torix's judgment, my runic skills, and most importantly, the amount of mana I poured into this damn thing.

It was too big to fail...probably.

Using the grimoire for the first time, etched into it using heated points of telekinetic contact. As I went through my work, the stone functioned well. It needed just the right amount of heat, making it easy to write in but hard to mess up with a careless stroke. At the same time, the metal beneath served many purposes.

It acted as a connection point between pages. I figured this out once I began work on the second page. Instead of needing some runic markings to ensure continuity between pages, the metal handled that for me. It saved me plenty of time as I went through the complex configurations.

As I continued, the merits of the new design unveiled themselves to me. The metal augmented my mana conversion, making the cipher require less mana. It was like conducting electricity through copper instead of wood. The white mercury transferred the mana between pages with a simple thought as well. This let me mix and match various runes without needing to plaster them together.

Hell, the metal even let me implement the whole dual layering technique I learned earlier. With a mental snap of my fingers, I could make two pages act like they were the same surface. That let me contextualize some of the more nuanced passages involved.

All that to say, it was pretty metal.

Awful puns aside, I finished plenty of runic markings for Torix's armor by daylight. Using this new grimoire felt like I found a missing piece to a puzzle. Everything came together in a rush right after seeing it. Considering my time constraints, I appreciated good luck.

With the markings finished, I channeled my excess mana into the grimoire, holding it at my side. With Torix busy and no one else to talk to, my mind wandered for a bit. I dwelled on Polydra's fate, scorching in hellfire and brimstone. A building well of guilt swelled in my chest before I grew lonely.

The odd sensation refused to leave, so I looked through my contacts. I called Althea, hoping she could answer. I missed her, and talking for a bit would do me some good. Even I needed some rest and relaxation sometimes. With that in mind, I sat on the edge of my seat, waiting for her to answer.

Three rings in, I gave up. As I hovered my hand over the exit command, Althea answered. I lit up, a smile spread over my face as her far more beautiful face popped up. Of course, it hadn't been nearly as long for her, but the mythical compendium made it feel like forever for me.

She carried a few more scars than before, but she was the same woman I remembered. As I glanced closer, I found that wasn't exactly true. A hardness formed in her eyes, the kind you get from seeing things that shouldn't be seen. Even more so, she had the same exhaustion on her face that plagued Kessiah. While Kessiah's motivation was to prove herself, Althea's seemed more profound, like an ocean compared to a pool.

Exacerbating this change was the fact I hadn't seen her in months. From that distance and time, a sort of coldness formed between us. To break the ice, I scratched the back of my head,

"Looks like you've been busy."

She gave me a small smile, “You have been too...I saw you fighting in Polydra. It was brutal and awe-inspiring as always.”

I looked down, a bit embarrassed for some reason, “Ah, I was just raising hell like normal...”

A silence came over us. It wasn't the kind of comfortable calm that passes over two familiar friends, however. It was a heavy quiet, the kind where other noises grew in volume until they rang in your ears. Before that silence altered into a canceled call, I turned a hand to Althea,

“So, I was wondering how you've been?”

She blinked, looking for the right words to say,

“Hm...I've been doing good, I guess. I've been grinding the war effort from an espionage front. It's been...hard. I learned a lot. Like, a lot. It's also been eye-opening, to say the least.”

She stared into an abyss. Her eyes reminded me of the underbelly of the dreadnoughts, the galleons hung up like produce. She must have seen something similar. I shook off the heaviness, pushing through,

“Damn, that sounds hard. I know I've been letting Torix handle most of the logistical work involved with this new, er, war I guess. It's made my situation a lot easier. He points in a direction, and I smash. It suits me perfectly.”

Althea laughed, “Hah, it does. It sounds like you've got it under control over there.”

I nodded, “For the most part, though I've been aching recently.”

Althea raised an eyebrow, “Wait a minute, you have aches?”

I placed a hand over my chest, glancing up, “It's a broken heart.”

Even I hurt from that one. My cheesy line had the intended effect as Althea giggled a bit before rolling her eyes,

“A broken heart from what?”

“Not seeing you of course,” I said with finality.

“Really now? Hm...I might have been missing you a bit too, I suppose.”

I leaned towards her screen, “Yeah...me too.”

We stared at each other for a second, both of us glad we still cared for one another. The moment passed as I took a deep breath, “Whoo, I didn’t want to say it, but I was kind of nervous about, uhm, us.”

She nodded, “Oh, I was too. It just felt awkward at first, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, it was like we didn’t know each other.”

My words left my mouth with more weight than I wanted. I glanced at Althea, and she glanced at me. She frowned, “It does kind of feel like that sometimes, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah...”

She shook her head, “I’m sorry I haven’t been messaging you more or calling. I’ve been so busy with this new effort I’ve been undertaking. It’s hard to juggle everything all at once, and some stuff fell to the wayside. I’m sorry our relationship got caught up in that.”

I nodded, “Yeah, I’ve got about fifty projects I’m working on right now. It’s so much I forget some of it sometimes. To be fair, I’ve been like this since Schema’s system washed over Earth. Something about it unlocked some hidden workhorse in me.”

She tilted her head, “Wait a minute...You weren’t always like this?”

I scoffed, “Hell no.” I waved my hand, “I was...I don’t know, lost, I guess? I didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life. I had no direction, and that made me end up coasting. Well, outside of boxing. That kept me out of trouble.”

I frowned, “I don’t know who I would be without that passion keeping me afloat.” I met Althea’s eye, “Speaking of passion, I was, uh, wondering what made you want to put out like this on Giess?”

I raised my palms as she raised her eyebrows, “Not to criticize or anything. Do what you got to do. I get that.”

She laughed, “I knew when I got with you that you were blunt, Daniel. You don’t have to apologize for it. I find it refreshing, actually. Anyways, your question...hmmm...”

She pursed her lips, “If I had to guess, it would be how much it reminds me of Alice. This whole situation that is.”

I narrowed my eyes, “Who’s Alice?”

“She’s a friend from my childhood. She was one of Yawm’s lab rats, just like me. We were friends, and we played together all the time.” Althea’s eyes went distant,

“It was...I don’t know how to describe it...haunting. I saw several children being indoctrinated by some of the rebels. One of their psionics was tampering with its mind. An espen child resisted, but she was too small and too weak. She was crying and...”

Althea’s composure cracked, but she stayed resolute in her words,

“Seeing the kid crumble like that. I don’t know. It reminded me of myself. I was that little girl, crying in the face of some monster that I couldn’t understand. Everything around me was chaos and scary and lonely. I couldn’t take it. I bottled it up inside and pushed it down. I was numb.”

She shook her head, her voice cracking a bit, “And I saw that kid doing the same thing. I don’t know, but something in me snapped after I saw that. I promised to stop Tohtella and everyone involved in this or die trying.”

Thinking of the Hybrids, I nodded,

“I can understand that feeling.”

Althea wiped away a tear, composing herself. As she did, I thought about what she said. The fact I didn’t know she had this happen to her hurt a bit. This happened a while ago, and I wasn’t there to help.

I gained some solace since she trusted me enough to tell me about it. Besides, maybe she wasn’t ready to tell anyone until now. I couldn’t know, and I had no intentions of asking. I reached out a hand to the screen,

“I’m sorry...Are you, er, ok?”

She giggled again, wiping her eyes, “You’re terrible at this, you know that?”

I swallowed a bit of sadness, smiling at her instead, “Yeah...I know.”

She smiled back, “I appreciate it, though. I really do.”

We stayed there for a moment. A loud crack leaked out from Althea’s screen as her eyes widened. She turned towards an unseen exit,

“I got to go.” She turned back, “Hey...thanks for the call. It means a lot.”

I grinned at her, “I enjoyed it too. Go kick some ass.”

She gave me a confident smirk as she closed her screen. With it out of my way, I peered out an opening in the temple’s wall. Revealing the forest city of Elderfire, the trees blurred under the heat of the desert sun. I spent a minute thinking about all that was happening.

This war was changing us. Whether for better or worse, I couldn't tell. It did carry a sting that the conflict with Yawm didn't have. Before now, all I expected from myself was survival. In fact, that was all I could've hoped for against Yawm or Baldag-Ruhl.

This situation was different. I wanted more and falling short grated me. After all, I had a history of succeeding in spite of terrible circumstances. That pressure mounted in the back of my mind. I did well enough for now, but I had a feeling this conflict wasn't going to end without a mess.

Either way, I did what I could.

With that in mind, I got back to something I was actually good at, which was making Torix's armor. The rune's charging finished a few minutes later as I planned out some of the placements. I put them along the surface of the blackened bones, keeping them in view. That finished the essential runic layering.

After looking it over, I scoped out a few more dual-layered rune sites. Torix's new body carried hollow bones, and that would allow me to use these techniques. With that insight, I created a few nuanced inscriptions for the guy.

They involved a few specific augments. The first revolved around Torix's charisma and presence. Ever since Torix's body was destroyed, some people looked down on the guy. That pissed me off, and I aimed to rectify that bullshit.

So, I went about creating an intimidating aura for this new body. I used Event Horizon as a reference, putting the choking, constricting nature of it on full display. At the same time, control over that influence was essential. I used the second layer of the runes to give that ability. It was like adding a parenthesis after a confusing passage. It contextualized an easily misunderstood remark.

With the presence of the body finished, I plotted out a few enchantments for mental magic. While not the most well versed, I could give the guy some charms for help. I moved on to the mana shield augments after that since Torix relied on them for his durability.

I understood little about them, but I didn't need to know much. Instead of enhancing the shield itself, I created connections for stored mana to power said shields. This would make the next portion of my armor building far more powerful.

I placed my hands onto the bones, shifting my being to one of dominion. With the oppressive, commanding mana saturating me, I channeled mana into the hollowed bones. Crystallized dominion filled the hollows, nigh weightless yet carrying tremendous energy. As I channeled this mana, I worked on the last aspect of my inscriptions.

This last part was a simple idea I had. Torix's mind would be in this thing, so making it easy for him to acclimatize to it seemed like a smart idea. At least I thought so. Guided by that intention, I went about creating an inscription describing Torix.

It wasn't too hard. I kept it simple, concise, but complete. Torix was a mastermind, a willful, dedicated summoner who absorbed himself with his goals. His work ethic was unquestionable, and he kept himself diligently devoted to his crafts of choice.

No matter what anyone else believed about the guy, he carried absolute respect in my eyes. His tactical and strategic abilities would create an enormous impact on any battlefield, regardless of the circumstance. At the same time, he carried a remarkable enthusiasm for education and learning.

He wasn't someone who held his secrets and harbored them selfishly. He shared his knowledge with great fervor. He wanted to enlighten all that he could as if he was offering light in darkness. At the same time, he familiarized himself with that darkness. In that vein, Torix never shied away from the messy, dirty aspects of life. He thrived on them, death being a concept he cozied up to long ago.

That's who Torix was in my eyes, a warlord worthy of respect. As I finished the markings, it mirrored the mural I made about myself. It was more concise and less detailed, however. Considering my time constraints, it was about as much as I could expect from myself.

By the time I charged those runes and placed them, three days passed and the body was finished. I checked it out, analyzing my finished project. It was my best work so far.

A Nightmare, Manifested(Lvl Requirement: None, Requires Mental Affinity | Type: Body) – This creation is a product of the efforts of a multiverse given sentience. Given the nature of the materials used, this artifact is utterly unique, carrying characteristics that defy convention.

As an opening mention, this body is durable. This word fails to adequately describe the sheer tenacity it holds. In all sense of the word, it is nigh unbreakable, a constant fixture created without an intended expiration date. If given any kind of care, this body will last forever.

This invincibility isn't the only characteristic this creation carries. Wielding many advanced inscriptions, it augments the wielder's mind in many ways. It creates barriers from entry, but it also allows for a greater field of influence in whoever manages to wield this structure.

This, in combination with a medley of physical augments, and this body is invaluable to many species or necromantic practitioners.

Bonuses(Unstackable with similar bonuses):

+500,000 Maximum Health, +500,000 Maximum Mana, +500,000 Maximum Stamina, +100,000 health regen(per min),100,000 mana regen(per min), 100,000 stamina regen(per min)

+ 10,000% physical damage, +5% to total damage, + 10,000 pounds of mass(4,536 Kilograms), + 2.5% to damage resistance cap, +25% to potency of dominion mana, Innate Mana Shield (10,000,000/10,000,000), + 25% to impact of influence oriented skills, +1% to mental resistance cap

+2,500 to Endurance and Willpower

+1,500 to Constitution, Strength, and Intelligence

+500 to all other stats

The sheer size of the enhancements floored anything I'd made before this. It even raised the resistance cap of anyone using this, which kind of defied Schema's general conventions. Either way, I lifted the body for a moment, the nine-foot-tall structure sizeable and imposing. It even carried some Torix's dramatic flair, the crown of thorns a nice touch.

I carried it with me, walking over towards Torix's new lair. As I walked into the crowded room, Torix stayed intent on his work. He dived into it with an intensity rivaling a deep hatred. I knocked on the edge of the room,

"Hey, Torix, how's the planning coming along?"

He kept his gaze down over a few charts,

"Excellent. I've devised a few of the weaker points in their offensive, and three cities in particular lined up well with a few projected attacks. I intend on scouting their responses with a few false attacks, however. I am confident they'll be better prepared this time."

He lifted his head, finishing his work with a final stroke of a feather pen,

"And so shall we."

He turned towards me before his old jaw went slack. Without a word, he lifted his hands at the body I made. He fumbled out his words,

"I...It...Is that...What?"

I gestured to the item, "I call it: A Nightmare, Manifested. What do you think?"

"It's...Well, I would sum it up in...the words escape me...it's..."

He walked over and gave me a hug,

"Thank you...Thank you so much."

A bit embarrassed, I scratched my cheek, "Uh, thanks...Glad you like it."

I set the body down so Torix could inspect it further. After a few minutes, he turned to me,

“It far exceeds any expectations I carried for it. You’ve outdone yourself, truly.”

I lifted up my chest, “Well, I enjoy crafting stuff. It was a fun distraction from all the fighting.”

Torix scoffed, “So this is a fun distraction? I’d hate to see a concerted effort then. I might feel impotent by comparison.”

Torix flicked one of the metallic bones, the tip of his finger snapping off from the impact. He cackled with glee,

“I’d be furious given a different context, but for now, I’ll settle with being overjoyed.”

Torix turned back to me while brushing off his robe, “Ah, my childish giddiness aside, are you ready for the battle?”

“Always.”

Torix peered at the body for a moment, “Yes, as we should be.”

I peered between the body and Torix,

“Hm...you know we can get you in that before we leave?”

“I understand, but delaying our plans for my personal satisfaction doesn’t suit me. Besides, we’ve plenty of time for the necromantic transition after this next battle. I’ll need some time to craft another phylactery and ritual site regardless.”

I crossed my arms, “If you say so. When do we head out?”

“Within the next few hours.”

I gave him a curt nod, “Alright, good. Anything you need in the meantime?”

Torix raised a finger, “Perhaps you could take a quick voyage to our base on Mt. Verner? Planting a blue core over our home for security would put us at ease for the time being.”

“Ah, that’s a good idea. It’ll be nice seeing Earth after so long.”

“Excellent. It will be good for you to see the progress of our base.”

After finishing up a bit of discussion, I walked back towards the center of Elderfire. After a quick conversation with the receptionist, I set up travel back to Earth via warp drive. Once on the ringing, sterile teleporter pad, a bit of nervousness rang up my spine.

Leaving Hod and Amara there might not have been the best idea. From Torix’s estimations, I didn’t need to step in. That didn’t guarantee an absence of craziness, however. Knowing there might be some surprises, I closed my eyes as electric pulsing pounded in my ears.

I mean, how bad could it be?

Chapter 236: Better Than Expected

Knowing Hod, it could be pretty bad. I calmed myself down as I sent messages towards the guild.

The Living Multiverse(Lvl 10,250 | Guildmaster: The Harbinger’s Legion(S-) | Titles: The Harbinger of Cataclysm, The Cleanser of Polydra | Cities: Mt. Verner, Elderfire) – I’ll be arriving in a few minutes. I need to meet with Hod and Amara. I won’t be there long, but it’ll be nice to see Earth again.

After sending the message, I took a deep breath. I gave a thumbs up to the Sentinel’s guarding the warp drive, and they activated the teleportation device. Electricity rang in my ears as a blinding light encompassed my vision.

I blinked away the blindness as sights of my base splashed in my eyes. They put this teleporter inside the second layer of the mountain where industry thrived. As I remembered it, machines bustled in the background with welders hard at work. At the center, a pillar of stone acted as the heart of the floor.

Surrounding it, a variety of different departments exposed themselves. Aiming to inspect them further, I stepped out, shaking off the rematerialization. I'm guessing that's what teleportation was. Either way, it made me woozy for a few seconds. Glancing around, the room's machinery and welding stopped. I found a factory floor full of people gawking at me like a lion walked inside. I raised a hand,

"Uhm, hello."

The crowd exploded with activity, swarming me from all directions. They reached the height of my waist, so they stared up at me. A cacophony of questions burst forth from all directions. The attention caught me off guard, overwhelming me for a moment.

I lifted my hands, saying over the crowd's rumble,

"Everyone, one question at a time."

I answered a few basic questions about Giess and my adventures there before a familiar face walked up from the crowd. I raised a hand, "Hey Diesel. How've you been?"

The inventive engineer squeezed past two people lifting up a grimy hand. Several people backed off from the guy, giving him some space. I stepped past the onlookers, reaching him and reaching out a hand,

"Good to see you. Have you come up with any new blueprints lately?"

He shook my hand with a bit of gusto,

"I've got a few new designs lined up."

I turned towards the crowds, spreading my arms, "Everyone, I've just come back from Giess. I'll be looking around to make sure everything's running smoothly. Get ready for that."

I clapped my hands for some emphasis, "Alright, let's move."

The crowd rustled into activity, everyone moving towards their allotted stations. Diesel walked off and gestured for me to follow. Past the metal girders and steel piping, I found myself squeezed into a cubbyhole Diesel used for his diagrams. The guy worked with me on creating Althea's new cannon models. Now he worked on designs that might help the entire colony.

I glanced around, impressed by the sheer complexity of a few of the inventions,

"Damn...this is good work."

Diesel scratched his chin, a five a clock shadow covering it,

"Heh, that's rich coming from you."

I turned to him, my helmet peeling off my face,

"Hm?"

"Oh come on. Everybody saw your fight at Polydra. Talk about crazy." Diesel gestured with a swing of his arm, "I could hardly believe when you punched through a ship's barrier. My favorite part was when you stood over the evil guy and said-

Diesel put on a serious face,

"You've done well in creating this hell. Now let's see if you can fight here, where the monsters come out to play."

It had been a while since I'd been embarrassed on any level. Having Diesel fanboy over my own fight like this, it would've made me redder than a tomato. Right now, my gray skin and metal body prevented that, but the shame still stung all the same.

I raised a palm, "Please, stop. Mercy."

Diesel blinked, “What? Oh, sorry. I don’t know what it is, but when you showed up, I feel full of energy.”

I raised my hands, “That’s an aura I have. It’s called Rise of Eden, and it boosts your stats.”

“Ah, that’s why it felt like I leveled up. Here I thought you were just that inspiring.”

I rolled my eyes. At this point, Diesel was just teasing me. It felt good having someone feel at ease around me, though. I wasn’t some deity, and it grounded me when someone talked to me like this. After joking a bit back and forth, Diesel turned severe as he crossed his arms,

“So, why are you back?”

I pointed around at the base, “I’ll be needing to install some defenses. I’ve made some enemies on Giess, and I don’t want them attacking Mt. Verner.”

Deisel raised an eyebrow, “I’ve actually got a few turret models you might want to have a look at. Not all of them are great, but I could show you the best of them and see what you think.”

“Sounds good, though I probably don’t have time at the moment. I’ll get someone to review it for me though...” I peered around at the walls of stone, “It’s good to see things have been moving well without me here. Of course, I still miss Earth sometimes.”

Diesel took a deep breath, “Man, I couldn’t even imagine staying at Giess. That’s like...lightyears away. Literally and figuratively.”

I cupped a chin, “What is life like here, anyway?”

“It’s bland, I guess. Ever since you guys left, there hasn’t been the same kind of grind there was while you were all here. Everyone’s sort of laid back. That could just be things settling down, though. We can’t stay in do-or-die mode forever.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Yeah, that might be asking for a bit much.” I saw the sheer volume of activity around Diesel’s cubbyhole,

“At least people are still alive. I half expected Hod to have already killed everybody.”

Diesel scratched the back of his head, “Hah...yeah...”

I narrowed my eyes at him, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Look, man, I’m not supposed to be telling you this, but some of those intelligent eldritch escaped.”

I gritted my teeth, “Really now?”

Diesel raised his hands, “They found all of them and got rid of them before they became a problem. I’m just letting you know security wasn’t airtight. We were able to handle it, but we lost a few people.”

Diesel narrowed his eyes, “If I’m honest, I think we should get rid of Amara. That monster couldn’t give two fucks for any of us...Not to question your judgment sir.”

“Where is she?”

Diesel scratched the side of his head, “Hm...I think she called Hod in from Giess to guard her as she talked to someone.”

“Alright, thanks. I’ll check it out and make sure the situation is stable. A reminder of who Amara’s working for might be in order as well.” I rolled my shoulders, “I can be intimidating when I want to be.”

Diesel scoffed, “That’s an understatement, sir.”

Being called sir still weirded me out some, though not to the extent it used to. I pointed at the designs, “I’d love to talk more about this stuff, but I have to head out. It was good catching up.”

Diesel stepped back, giving me some space to move out of his workspace,

“Sure thing, sir.”

I stepped out onto the second floor. Here the merits of industry shined. We developed some laser and plasmic weapons while I left, several individuals using them on a shooting range. The plasma, in particular, looked useful against eldritch. It clung onto whatever it hit, singing and melting until nothing remained but a puddle. Considering how virulent eldritch could be, that thorough destruction was invaluable.

It kind of disappointed me finding only a few elemental weapons left. Their designs mustn't have been very efficient when weaponized, considering no one used them anymore. For the most part, the main difference in their weaponry stemmed from a shift in mentality.

All this gear worked against eldritch. Acid, plasma, and kinetic firearms were the name of the game. Our soldiers used these in conjunction with each other for maximizing their effects. I learned these tactics while walking towards a few darkened rooms with chairs for sitting.

These dark lit rooms made the perfect places for sitting down in an obelisk. Those devices encompassed their users in light. The dark made them easy to spot, so you didn't run into them. Using a preloaded program, they built a few simulations for testing these weapons out.

I found a line of people running through artificial dungeons. Above them, a screen exposed their current positions and POVs. These soldiers worked together, tossing out grenades and using harpoon cannons. The ballistic weapons left massive wounds on the eldritch. They would heal these quickly if not for the backup troops behind them.

This other set of soldiers behind the ballistics corp fired the acid and plasmic weaponry into the wounds of the monsters. This halted regeneration while inflicting massive internal wounds. The strategy seemed sound, safe, and sane when compared to my own methods.

At the same time, this teaching method wasn't without its problems. I watched one of the procedures from start to finish. A few of the troops goofed around, teabagged the

eldritch, and took it as a playful exercise. That kind of attitude resulted in death further down the line. They also ran the same simulations with only subtle variations in it. That wouldn't work in the real world.

Every dungeon was different. Learning to adapt to wildly varying scenarios was the name of the game. Besides these trainees, an instructor dripped cold sweat. I turned to him,

"You oversee this?"

The mustached man stood up straight, giving me a salute, "Yes, sir."

I waved a hand at it, "This is a great strategy. It makes killing certain eldritch a cakewalk. At the same time, this might be too easy. What kind of other simulations are there?"

The officer waved his hands, "The technology department hasn't made any other virtualizations since this is relatively new. We're working on a few other scenarios as we speak."

"Good. I'd recommend giving the troops a scenario without weaponry. Avoiding the eldritch or learning to compete against weaker ones without weapons is essential over the long-term. Otherwise, they're very dependent on their gear to survive."

I counted on my fingers, "If they run out of ammo, someone sneak attacks them, or any number of situations occurs, these guys are dead. Not every fight will be clean and dry like this. Some are messy. They should be ready for that kind of a mess. Otherwise, they'll die."

The officer blinked, "Uhm, yes sir. Of course. I'll pass it along to the tech department."

"Overall, you're doing well. Keep it up."

The officer nodded, "Thank you, sir."

I waved a hand, "Uh, as you were."

The officer turned towards the people in the simulation while shouting, “Get to work maggots! I want to see some sweat.”

I walked off, not sure if I helped the situation. After passing the weaponry department, the construction portion of Mt. Verner revealed itself. The implementation of mana changed every aspect of technology. With a reliable, clean energy source at our disposal, power constraints like batteries ceased existing. Instead, runic inscriptions allowed the conversion of mana into electricity. They used all kinds of methods for this conversion to handle a lack of skill on the user’s part as well.

Some worked like engines, converting mechanical force into electricity. Others required the direct input of lightning, using discharging overloaders to redistribute bursts of power. As complicated as that sounds, it only held an overabundance of energy to prevent the circuitry from frying.

Past these smaller devices, the larger vehicles and power armors lined up. A few of the vehicles mirrored the machinery on Giess, using crystallized mana of some sort. After sending a few messages, I found the head of the vehicle department.

A chubby, rotund man wobbled up out of his office using an uncomfortable jog. He reached out a hand as he neared me, “Hello there sir. I am Mike Mcgusto.”

I gave him a handshake using two of my fingers, “I’m Daniel Hillside. I wanted to talk to you about these new vehicle designs. How do they work?”

Mike jimmied a fancier uniform that still carried a layer of oil and grime on it,

“We’ve been experimenting with the use of external mana outputs you see. These here are some of the prototypes for that very design. While not perfect, they might allow us to use vehicles that don’t strain a person’s mind while driving them.”

I put a hand on his shoulder, “I’m halting research and development of this technology in the guild. Immediately.”

“W-w-what sir? But these will make transport simpler, and there’s plenty of mana to be found in the dungeons we’ve conquered. Why would we abandon something that could revolutionize our lives forever?”

I stood up straight, “I’ve visited Giess, and I’ve learned that using that mana creates mana pollution. It’s hard to get rid of, and nasty creatures can feed on it. If I had time to go into detail about it, I would. Suffice it to say, this will cause more harm than good.”

“I...I” Mike’s arms flopped against his sides, “Understood, sir.”

I pointed at the tech department, “This is all very impressive. I’ll have Torix increase your funds to compensate for the wasted research and development. That should make this setback easier to tank.”

Mike nodded, his mood reversing the moment money was mentioned,

“Of course sir. That would be amazing.”

“Alright. How about two million credits yearly?”

Mike took a step or two back before falling backward. I caught him with a gravity well before he busted his ass. I raised an eyebrow, “Are you ok?”

“Y-y-yes. Very.” He got back onto his feet, “That’s simply quadrupling our funding. It took me by surprise.”

I shrugged, “I’ll pay for it personally. Also, increase Diesel’s budget. He gets one-tenth of that.”

“Absolutely sir. Perhaps you’d be interested in seeing our selections of power armor?”

“Yeah.”

We walked across a series of forklifts and engineering panels. Situated into the wall, dozens of different power armors covered the walls. They used the same discharger

design, converting raw mana into power using a variety of different methods. Some even used a technique I'd never heard of, the elemental muscle design. EMD for short.

It was something Diesel came up with. Specific individuals had affinities for different kinds of elements or elemental forces. By implanting those elements into the joints of power armor, a mage could use them to manipulate the suit. It acted like a muscular system and required years of training to master.

At the same time, the maneuverability and power of these devices were unmatched, at least for other armors. Even better, the user's level-ups enhanced the plate mail as well. This was because their mastery of mana and the element increased the control and force they could use with the devices. In fact, it mirrored my own use of gravity in combat.

I enhanced my movements with gravitational flows. An ice bender would do the same technique but by jerking icy blocks hidden in the armor. My method skipped the whole armor and elemental grafting part, but not everyone could use gravity like I could. This let someone cleverly overcome physical limitations.

My instincts about Diesel were right. After getting showed a few more experimental and less practical designs, I worked my way towards the eldritch holding cells. Here I found a few surprises. The first involved Amara and Hod, both of them talking with a feminine blob of sorts.

Hod reminded me of his previous self, though his demeanor changed a bit. He stood eleven feet tall, a bit of a shadowy aura ebbing from him. The birdman looked tense, ready to strike at any moment. Amara stood at ease, trusting Hod with her protection as she faced her palms to Wrath.

On the other hand, the dark, gray-blue blob spoke with quiet confidence. The humanoid figure's words echoed across the rooms with an absoluteness to them, the same as Helios or Caprika.

Yup, she was royalty. What kind of royalty I couldn't say.

As I stepped up, I analyzed her.

Wrath, Queen of Svia(lvl 12,837 | Class: Fringe Walker | Race: Ahcorus(Otherwise known as slimes)) – Wrath is the queen of the Svia sector of the slime's home planet,

Slus. She earned her name by conquering several of the nests that surrounded her before Schema assimilated her planet. Since then, she's proven very effective at cleansing worlds of eldritch infestation...

They all stared at me as I walked up, each of them looking confused. I waved,

"Hey guys. I'm here to visit. Did you get my message?"

As I stepped up, I outsized them all, though Wrath carried a weight to her presence that made up for that. Well, that's not factoring in my auras. Before the queen responded, Hod raised his hands,

"Harbinger back. Hod miss buddy."

He ran up, giving me an awkward hug. I hugged back with one arm,

"It's good to see you too..."

About seven seconds later, Hod still held on.

"So, uh, are you going to let me go?"

Hod pulled himself back, a look of satisfaction coming over his face.

"Hod understand Harbinger's confusion. Hod's brilliance hard to understand. See, Hod not know how long hug last. Sometime long hug. Sometime short hug. Always hard work telling which hug should use."

Hod tapped the side of his head,

"Hod discover secret. If Hod hold on until ask to stop, Hod not have to tell which hug type is. Hod activate easy mode." Hod lifted his chin, pleased with himself,

"Hod outdo himself sometimes."

Amara stared down, even aiming her hands down as her long, wispy black hair covered her expressionless face. It impressed me that Hod evoked shame in an eldritch. Socially speaking, it was an achievement. Wrath walked up, ignoring them both. Her steps were silent, akin to a predator. She turned between the both of us,

“You must be the guild leader here? How do you know who I am?”

I pointed between us, “We met before during my interview with Chrona. I’m the ‘Gray Giant.’ This is me without the disguise.”

Wrath tilted the rough approximation of a head, “So you hide your true self in a shell, like a hatchling before birth. Why?”

I waved my hands, “It’s complicated. Thisbey used my identity for his own means. I didn’t agree with those means, so I separated my personal identity from the Gray Giant. Either way, it’s almost irrelevant at this point, but please, don’t go spreading it around.”

Wrath lifted her arms, each of them ending with four fingers and golded claws,

“You are a predator with many faces. I understand the concept, though it sounds exhausting. I prefer the simplicity of a single face. Otherwise, I am lost in a web of lies of my own making.”

Wrath carried a strange dialect and wording that took some getting used to. Still, I got the gist of what she meant.

“I get that. It wasn’t easy, but at least I don’t have a ton of bullshit associated with my name now. Reputational blowback sucks to deal with. Either way, what are you here for?”

Amara walked up, her eyeless face as unnerving as ever. She peered at me, the eyes of her palms inspecting me with a bit of fear. The small hairs across her body stood on end as she said,

“Wrath came here to understand her enemy. To understand us.”

I glanced between them both, “Yeah, that’s not ringing any bells.”

Wrath raised a hand, squeezing it into a fist. Her claws retracted, she moved her fist sideways in a long arc. The alien hand gestures mismatched what followed,

“When we met many moons ago, I asked for your teeth in facing Svia’s greatest threat – Plazia-Ruhl. The hivemind harbors in the center of my homeworld. It sucks the life from my homeworld. We need an eliminator to cull its kind from us.”

I raised a palm to her, “First off, don’t worry about using hand gestures with me. I can tell they’re awkward for you, and I want you to just relax.”

Wrath let out a big sigh like I just took a massive weight off her shoulders. I continued,

“Second off, I can help you with that. It’ll be at least a month before I can fight it directly though.”

Wrath pointed her finger at Amara, “That is the true reasoning for my hunt here. This... eldritch is known as an expert on intelligent eldritch. Plazia-Ruhl is a tactical genius, making maneuvers at every turn. His armies of insects plague our planet, and his presence shades our world in darkness. He must be killed.”

A bitter memory of being locked in a cave and at the mercy of a hivemind flashed before my eyes,

“Wait a minute...Plazia-Ruhl...You sure about that last name?”

“It is an ancient enemy of our species. Forgetting its name is difficult even after our kind dies. That abomination bends the rules of the universe, toying with what should not be toyed with.”

My stomach sank after hearing that. I fought Baldag-Ruhl a long time ago, and his genius with the cipher is what made my armor. If Plazia-Ruhl rivaled his intelligence, killing him would be a tall order. Hell, it might be impossible at this point. Learning from him might even be an option further down the line, however.

Either way, it was definitely interesting, to say the least. I made a mental note of that before turning to Amara,

“So, you’re a known expert on eldritch now, huh? How does that work?”

Amara cackled, “My knowledge is not as limited as one might think. I use the laws and rules of hunger to keep myself alive. Whoever comes here needs my expertise. Killing me results in them gaining nothing.”

Hod’s head twitched as he mouthed, “Hod not take well to any hurt for Amara. Amara beautiful.”

Amara steepled her hands, “Hod defends me with totality. It serves well in my meetings with others. As my reputation grows, I garner more resources for my...research. The cycle continues, giving me more material to work with.”

I spoke to Amara, “Yeah, I’m going to need to see this research in detail.” I turned to Wrath,

“Alright, we’ll help you after agreeing on the rewards. I’m sorry, but outside of that, I can’t promise much. I need to cut this conversation short cause I’m in a hurry. As for Plazia-Ruhl, I have a few tips.”

Wrath sighed, “Then your assistance is appreciated, but your knowledge of Plazia-Ruhl cannot outdo my own. He is an enemy of epochs, one who has existed since ancient times. We’ve fought with him more than any other foe, and we’ve learned of his trickery.”

I counted on my fingers, “Well, a reminder never hurt. First, don’t walk into traps. Second, get an expert in runic knowledge. Third, don’t give him a lot of time to plot and plan. Keep it busy, or it will gut you while you sleep.”

A phantom pain ran up my spine, “With a bit of time, the guy can craft some pretty unimaginable horrors.”

Wrath stepped up to me, raising her clawed hands,

“You understand our enemy well, better than many of our world. I too have warned the other queens of giving Plazia time to fester. They neglect the diligence to quash this enemy. That abomination has blighted our worlds for long enough. We must destroy him before he is given a chance to do the same to us.”

Wrath paced back and forth, “The others ignore my worries. They say I am a bloodthirsty razor queen. Though truth soaks their words, my bloodthirst has yet to cloud my judgment on this issue. I know this to be true. Plazia is plotting something. We must strike before that monster finishes his plan. Otherwise, we may be the ones who are eaten in its place.”

I frowned, “If you ask me, your planet is already doomed. If it’s anything like Baldag-Ruhl, it’s far too late to recover now.”

Wrath stopped pacing, turning up to me, “You’d say Plazia’s jaws are already around our neck then?”

I shrugged, “Well, the situation probably isn’t that bad. It just sounds like the situation has gotten complicated. If that’s the case, the more intelligent someone is, the better a chance they have at succeeding. That’s why I recommend smashing someone like Plazia before that ever happens. Otherwise, your chances of winning begin to dwindle.”

Wrath peered down, “I will use your omen to sway the other queens. Perhaps your reasoning will bolster my own claims. Time will tell.”

I turned to Amara, “So, how about you show me your research?”

Amara grinned at me, “You will be pleased I would think.”

Wrath and Hod followed, the four of us passing over towards an orichalcum bunker. The green metal served as a reinforcement to the eldritch’s prisons, runic markings suppressing them. After stepping up, I pulled open the doorway, making a note of the security involved.

Once inside, a metal hallway lined with clear, crystal glass kept the eldritch at bay. Finding a panel near me, I inspected the glass. At a touch, I learned it wasn't glass at all; it was some kind of polymer composite. Upon closer inspection, I found tiny strips of gray crisscrossing the glass.

Amara stepped up behind me, her hands clasped behind her,

"It would seem that you are curious. I shall explain. This uses strips of graphene to strengthen the cleared crystal. While not wielding the same strength as orichalcum, it allows us to study the eldritch."

Behind the panel, a ravenous, acid hornet stayed locked in a nest of its solidified saliva. It glared at us, its glowing green eyes piercing and loaded with malice. I peered back, Event Horizon saturating my frame.

Its bravery crumbled as it skulked into the back corner. Wrath and Amara turned to me. Amara murmured,

"That is...impressive. That's the Blight Wasp. It's a sample we found forty miles south of here. Her kind's saliva solidifies into materials harder than steel. It's the strongest adhesive we've found. The acid breaks it down, though it also breaks anything else down as well."

"Huh, interesting."

We continued down to the next containment cell. From within, a shapeshifting being tucked itself into a corner. Its body wriggled back and forth, struggling to take a set form. I turned to me, locking hollowed eyes with mine. Its frame expanded, cracking as wood covered its skin. Glowing green veins streaked across a now muscled frame.

A mane of flowing leaves reached its waist behind the creature as it reached out with a massive palm. Larger than life, its voice echoed through the chamber and glass,

"It's good we meet once more, Harbinger?"

I took a step back, fear racing up my spine. The spitting image of Yawm laughed before stepping forward with its arms spread wide,

“I still see you own the same fear as before. Good. Your fear will keep you alive. It shows you when you’re outclassed, and at this moment, it is ringing in your ears, isn’t it?”

With absolute confidence, Yawm steepled his hands, “I suggest you listen to it. Otherwise, you might find yourself shattered and broken, a corpse among the many.”

My heart pounded in my chest until I could hear the pulse in my ears. I turned to Amara, “What the fuck is that?”

Amara seethed, “It is a shapeshifter that mimics your greatest fear. I despise the creature. It is a coward that relishes in the fear of others.”

The shapeshifter glared at Amara, its form changing once more. Bark turned to metal, and biological panels of darkened steel formed over its frame. It increased in size further, an aura of red saturating its structure. This suffocating, weighted presence soaked over us, permeating every crevice of the room.

A spitting image of me, the shapeshifter crossed its arms and leaned towards Amara, “You think I’m afraid of you?”

Amara’s face wrinkled all over as she frowned. She kept herself composed as she turned to me, however,

“It’s ability to read into the mind of anyone that locks with its eyes is invaluable. The ability to reform is useful for several of our members as well.”

The shapeshifter took a few steps forward until it stood inches from the glass. It glared down at Amara, a sinister smile of jagged, metal teeth forming on the helmet,

“Are you ignoring me?”

Amara’s breathing hastened. It continued,

“I’m your only hope to survive, yet you think you can ignore me?” It banged a massive hand against the glass. Amara whimpered, taking a step back. The shapeshifter goaded,

“I can melt you with so much as a thought. Be careful, or you’ll be locked in one of these cages next.” It turned to me,

“Isn’t that right?”

I grimaced while showing it what the real thing was like. With a wave of Event Horizon, its hand evaporated into mana. I frowned at the eldritch,

“Fuck off.”

The shapeshifter scampered back to the back of the compartment. It shivered with fear as I turned to Amara,

“You think I’m scarier than Yawm? Really?”

Amara twitched, “Please speak on this later when other hunters aren’t here.”

I turned to Hod and Wrath, “Alright, if you say so.”

Wrath glanced up at me, “You fear that being of wood the most?”

I shrugged, “Uh, I guess so. It makes sense to me. When we met, I was as helpless as I could be against Yawm. I had to lie to him over and over just to survive. Otherwise, he’d use me as an experiment or mana battery. At this point, he wouldn’t be able to lord over me like that.”

I sighed, “But...I still remember what that was like I suppose.”

Wrath tilted her head, “You’re open with your weakness. Few would do the same in Svia. As queens of many, we must feel no fear and relish in devouring the weak. Otherwise, the other ahcorus will believe we are frail. The frail are fed to the strong in Svia.”

I raised my eyebrows, “That’s a way of living, I guess. As long as the weak contribute, I’m fine with them doing whatever personally. Anyways, someone mentioned eldritch escaping here. What escaped and how?”

Amara grimaced, “An incorporeal eldritch escaped its containment through one of the guards. They ended up devouring several other guards before we could respond. Seeing the swollen belly of a possessed human...it left a mark on many who saw it.”

The image of a fattened zombie popped into my head. I gestured towards the cells, “What do you do now to prevent that?”

We stepped towards a cell. Two mages stood guard of a shadow wisp floating under florescent lights. One of the guards slept while the other suppressed the wisp. Amara spread her arms to them,

“Torix has been teaching many students the art of mental manipulation. Using those students, I created a rotating set of guards. They keep the shadow wisp confined to this space, and they reap the rewards for it. We keep the controller since it gives insights into mind magic and possession.”

Amara met my eye, “Considering the enemy we face on Giess, it is invaluable to learn what we can, any way we can. Otherwise, we will be hunted.”

I nodded, “Alright, that makes sense. Set up a few more guards along the outside of this place to contain any events of contamination. Give a stipend to the guard’s families, and have a reward ceremony and burial for each of them. Make it clear how much their sacrifice helped the colony. That should help ease the grief if only a little bit.”

Amara bowed to me, “It will be as you requested.”

I turned towards the doorway, “I’m setting up additional defenses for this base. You’ll be safe, but if the eldritch leave this facility, they will be disintegrated. Just letting you know.”

“Understood.”

“Alright, see you guys later. Sorry I couldn’t talk more, but I’m in a rush.”

Hod stepped up, so I turned to him, “What’s up?”

“Hod...Hod sorry for eldritch threat. Hod not prepared. Hod not let happen again. Hod protect home.”

I put a hand on his shoulder, “It’s alright. You guys did a good job holding this place down while I was gone. Everything’s coming along nicely, and there were only a few mistakes. I doubt I’d have done a better job in all honesty.”

I turned around, waving to them, “Keep it up, guys.”

As I left them, Wrath and Amara gushed about the eldritch, though they kept their tones different. Wrath focused on killing them while Amara concentrated on understanding them. They complemented one another, each of them offering something new.

After stepping out of prison, I made my way towards the third floor. Along the massive pillar of stone at the center of the mountain, orichalcum bonds reinforced the structure. While not as robust as my armor, it held some antimagic properties, and it was harder than steel. Combine that with murals of runic work, and the defense here wasn’t bad.

It could be better. It would be better.

As I stepped out onto the third floor, the curved bookshelves met my eye. They oriented themselves around the colossal pillar, giving easy access to students studying on the third floor. Stepping out, I drew in another scene’s worth of people, but I expected as much. After handling a few questions, I hovered myself up towards the top of the pillar.

There I intended to create the runic inscriptions and positioning of the blue core. The central position was at the deepest part of Mt. Verner. This made coating the mountain with a forcefield the easiest it could be. Hovering up there along the high roof, murals of battle covered the ceiling. A few of the art students must’ve been commissioned for the work.

A few segments of the painting depicted our battle against Yawm. Other portions showed my fight against Polydra, the paint still drying in a few spots. The flowing art style gave a dramatic feel to the equally dramatic events. I liked it a lot.

After appreciating the aesthetic, I sliced into the stone using a blade of thermal energy. It melted the rock into a thin slice of magma. I pulled the chunk of stone out of the pillar, using a gravity well to stop magma from dripping below. Once inside the support, I hollowed out a portion of the support by melting it. I pooled the magma outside, freezing it with bursts of icy energy.

Once I hollowed out a sizeable space, I reinforced this inner sanctum with the molten portions of my own armor. A thick plating of the dense, dimensional fabric kept the chamber safe. After adding a few more supports, I kept the overall structure safe.

With safety ensured, I pulled out one of my blue cores. With it, I created the specific zone needing the core's protection using the menu. I created the area necessary for the eldritch facility, and I gave Amara immunity to the core's defenses. After finalizing a few more details, I finished the defense system's creation.

The hexagonal patterns dispersed around Mt. Verner, though I missed the sight deep within its depths. Sitting there, I charged the blue core while stepping out and inspecting the magical area. Before leaving, I resealed the stone doorway, knowing no one needed access.

I found several new areas here. Instead of having the old world magical feel of before, quite a bit of tech crept its way in. One of the departments used the same virtualizations as the previous floor. After making the same comments as before to this area, I explored further.

Along the northern side, sorcerors refined their magic in surprising ways. They used runic weapons, pistols with barrels and handles lined with inscriptions. These runes gave them superior balance, aim, and power for their own magic. Some even assisted the conversion of mana into their own elemental forces.

Further within, I found sparring matches within the armors that Diesel designed. Like golems fighting, they practiced wielding EMD's by wrestling. Jerky, unrefined, and raw, they needed quite a bit more experience before they were ready for an actual dungeon.

Still, it was a start.

Outside of that, I found the elemental weapons department. Turns out mana acted as an excellent catalyst for elemental casting. Weaponizing it proved far more effective than using conventional means. Room-clearing acid bombs, blinding spore gases, origin mana overloading mines, insanity potions, hell, they even had tranquilizer darts that turned you into easy to kill animals.

The creativity at work defied convention. Compared to my own use of magic, it almost embarrassed me. I took a few mental notes as I passed, impressed by the work on display. The most impressive sight was when I passed the sparring room. A young, orange-haired mage sparred against three other sorcerors. None of them wore armor, each of them preferring the mobility of robed combat.

I gazed at the battle as the three mages attacked Mr. Orange Hair all at once. Mr. Orange Hair created a panel of violet, arcane energy in front of him. The other energies fizzled against it, the arcane energy dispersing as Orange Hair shot out a few blips of the volatile energy.

The other mages blocked using created matter. I nodded as I saw that. It was a tactic I used as well. Arcane energy disintegrated anything it touched, meaning something as simple as dirt was a highly effective defense. These mages took full advantage of the opening that defense offered, pummeling orange hair with a variety of spells. Orange hair rolled sideways before standing upright with two hands raised.

Violet spears formed, each of them about six feet long. I nodded with a grin. Clever. If matter blocked arcane energy, then the longer the bolt, the more piercing power it had. Orange Hair feigned against the two outer mages. They rolled out of the spell's way, both of them crumbling under pressure.

As they stopped, Orange hair ducked under a bolt of lightning while slinging the spears. They stopped inches in front of the chests of the two mages. After that, the middle mage and Orange Hair exchanged a few spells. Within minutes, Orange Hair suppressed them.

Impressed by the display, I walked into the sparring area. Within it, I remembered who Orange Hair was.

"You... You're Alexander, right?"

Orange Hair turned to me, “Uh, yes. It’s good to see you, commander.”

The four of them bowed to me, but I raised a palm, “Guys, at ease. Anyways, that was impressive. Just stopping by to let you know to keep up the excellent work.

Alexander beamed a grin at me, his chest puffed, “Of course sir. Ah, my pain tolerance is seventy-six. I didn’t let that lesson go to waste.”

I grinned, “Get to the upper eighties soldier. Dismissed.”

Alexander went back to help his fellow fighters while I finished my inspection of Torix’s university. It was in excellent shape. With that finished, I took a tour of the fourth floor where the logistics for the guild was handled. All kinds of accountants, managers, and organizers worked here.

Along with handling the logistics, other shops popped up in the floor. They sold exotic alien goods that were traded in for Earth’s pre Schema goods. These oddities filled in all kinds of needs, from eldritch goods to specific tech for obelisks. After passing that floor by, I moved up to the fifth floor where the garden flourished.

Strange plants of all kinds covered the area, many new types prospering. They offered exotic fruits with unique properties for alchemy. Many expanded faster than typical plants, their actual growth evident in real-time. Either way, they fueled the growth of the colony, and that was the general message since coming here – the situation was pretty damn solid.

If anything, Torix managed the facility with a deft hand and great care. It surprised me, but it also put me at ease. Having somewhere to return to made traveling more comfortable. It kept me grounded. With those thoughts swimming through my mind, I sent a message,

The Living Multiverse(Lvl 10,250 | Guildmaster: The Harbinger’s Legion(S-) | Titles: The Harbinger of Cataclysm, The Cleanser of Polydra | Cities: Mt. Verner, Elderfire) – The base is looking good. Keep up the excellent work.

With everything handled, I traveled back down towards the residential ground floor. As the giant elevators at the center of the facility hummed, I noticed a holographic screen in the elevator's room. On it, an edited video of my battle raged on screen. Several others riding the elevator peered back between the fight and me.

I ignored the attention until something unexpected popped onto the screen. Images of the dreadnought's underbelly flashed with a black and white filter. Torix edited the footage to show the horror that Tohtella committed. I winced at the footage, the brutality cutting like a knife.

It reminded me of what I was fighting for as well. Well, that and the fact Tohtella would be pissed when she saw that footage being spread around. As I stepped up past a few onlookers and into the warp, it felt good having somewhere to come back too. My helmet crept over my face as I glared forward.

This place was my home, and I'd do everything in my power to keep it that way.

Chapter 237: Tactics

Flashing back towards Elderfire, I stepped out onto the city's center. Gialgathens flew overhead, carrying clusters of wisps held in glass orbs. Several groups of gialgathens carried tail covers on their back. This allowed them to smash a Hybrid, get rid of a tail cover, then replace it with a new one. Considering how infectious the Hybrids where, that kind of defensive utility was invaluable.

Walking past a few groups, they gave me a bow of respect. It weirded me out as always as I stepped up to Spear. I tapped the Sentinel's shoulder,

"Hey, we're about to head out."

The Sentinel's shoulders moved as he jostled back to life. Standing upright, Spear cracked his neck before turning to me, "Then let us go."

We passed through Elderfire before meeting up with Torix. The ancient lich tapped his finger over a map as we paced up.

Spear walked up, "We're ready to leave."

Torix cackled, “Excellent. This battle will be different from the last, that much I know for certain.”

I raised an eyebrow, “So we’re not just rushing in?”

Torix lifted a map with the flick of his finger, hovering it against a wall,

“This is a map of Astelle. With it, we can come in through the sewers like before. The goal is to overwhelm them with a direct assault that crushes their resistance to ash.”

I walked up, staring at the map. It showed a city surrounded by ancient woods, the kind of town from early civilization. As I inspected closer, I committed the routes to memory. Unlike in Polydra, we weren’t forced into heading in blind. Instead, we had a choice to take our time and really wallop them from the get-go.

Torix cupped his bony chin while staring up at me, “What are you pondering?”

I pointed at a few places, “This city will have spires, won’t it?”

“I would assume so.”

“Then they’ll probably be here, here, and here. The Adair Family likes to cluster the spires along the outskirts of the city, and those chokepoints let them keep the city contained. It also prevents anyone from burrowing out of the city. They have these root systems that extend outwards.”

I clasped a hand, channeling energy into a mana bomb, “We can run along the sewers of this town and plant bombs onto those roots to blow these connections points apart. After that, I’ll use my Orbital Bombardment to make a splash as we rush in.”

Torix leaned back, “Huh...that sounds, ahem, well thought out.”

I turned to him, “I’m just using the information I have. It’s like you said. They’ll be more prepared this time. We’ll need to finish this fast before Lehesion can show up and make a mess. We still aren’t ready to take him down.”

Torix spread out his arms, “I didn’t take you for much of a strategic asset, and perhaps I was correct in that regard. However, tactically speaking, this is quite the edge we’ve gained if you happen to be correct.” Torix turned towards the map,

“Considering the chokepoints you mentioned, perhaps we can design a route using the city’s sewer structure? It should aid in speeding through this process.”

I nodded, “Yeah, that’ll work. You can sketch that up in a few minutes and send us the coordinates, right?”

Torix steepled his fingers and cackled, “If I couldn’t, then I wouldn’t be much of a mastermind than, would I?”

“Good. We’ll head out towards the landing zone when you can organize the soldiers.”

Torix sent a few messages using his status, “I’ve already sent the position for them to head to. We’ll be traveling using our Sentinel’s spears.”

Spear raised a, well, spear, “I am known as Spear now.”

Torix turned to him, looking him up and down,

“Hmm...fitting. Spear can land us relatively close to the city. He’s been stationed within a rift near the area fortunately for us.”

I received the meetup position in my status before rolling my shoulders, “Let’s show them what we’re made of.”

After stepping out of the temple, we rendezvoused with the troops. Near the outskirts of Elderfire, our legions assembled. They carried more confidence than before. We would need that if this was going to work. As I placed another mana bomb into my storage, soldiers lined up. Many carried fresh scars on their faces.

Beside me, Krog landed with enough weight to quake the stony slabs over the sand. He gave me a bow before looking towards the troops. Kessiah rode on his back, her face exhausted yet determined. They faced the Hybrids in Polydra, yet they still went into battle. Many of the gialgathens here did the same.

It took guts to stand up after seeing those monsters in person. As a hundred or so gialgathens amassed in front of me, a few butterflies flew up in my stomach. That nausea crept up into my chest as I got nervous.

There was expectation in the crowd. They needed a leader, and I was the best we had. No matter how many times I did this, it never got more comfortable. The thing is, they showed guts coming to fight again. It was my duty to show some guts too.

I lifted my hands, “Everyone here saw the battle for Polydra?”

Almost everyone nodded.

“Then you understand what’s at stake. The Adair Family is going to turn each and every one of you into mindless husks. In a way, your backs are against a wall, and there’s nowhere to run. It’s death one way or the other.”

I banged my fists, “How do you want to die? Strung up by butchers, or would you rather burn in a blaze of glory, a fire to be remembered?”

They gave me cacophony of roars, deafening like thunder in your eardrums. I gripped my hands into fists, giving them a look of absolute confidence. I spread The Rise of Eden over as many soldiers as I could,

“That’s good, because we won’t be dying here. We know the enemy, and they lack grit. They fight with surrogates instead of fighting in person. They can never understand our resolve because they would never do the same.”

I banged my chest, the sound of metal on metal echoing across the desert,

“Let’s show them the might of those that fight for survival.”

As the crowd boomed, I pressed my palm together for another mana bomb. I turned to Krog, “You know the plan?”

Krog nodded, “Of course. According to Torix, you and I will be planting bombs before I rush in with the soldiers. You’ll be creating chaos elsewhere.”

I grinned, “Good. Let’s go.”

As Krog explained the plan to the troops, I created more mana crystals. As I did so, I experimented. Instead of creating pure quintessence bombs, I injected a bit of ascendant mana into them as well. This created white crystals that carried flowing red streaks in them.

The idea was simple. Instead of making mindless elemental flows, I intended on giving the elements a bit of sentience. Nothing too complicated, but just enough that ascendant mana would affect them. This provided the elemental bombardments with a targeting system of sorts.

It would be like detonating a grenade and having the shrapnel seek out enemies. The idea seemed sound as I progressed through the various mana bombs I created.

Breakthrough achieved! Mana Crystallization(lvl 13) —>(lvl 38)

The bonus enhanced my fluidity and control, letting me give a firmer intent to the mana crystals. By the time everyone was up to date, and Spear ripped open a portal, I created twenty crystals. Stepping up to the portal, I ripped it open, letting the troops walk through.

As the last one through the warp, we ended up beside an eldritch’s nest. A hive of spacial ants warped around in a colony made of chewed wood. This anthill stood taller than a small building, piled on top of what used to be a dungeon entrance.

The situation lacked any real urgency, however. Many of Giess’s flaming anteaters feasted on the eldritch. Literal herds congregated around the anthill, their tongues lashing like flaming chains at the ants. This natural wildlife made Giess safe even without the espens clearing dungeons. It’s crazy to think that ended up being more of a problem than a boon. It led to the reliance on natural mana, the silvers spreading, and even the espens lack of initiative.

It was too late to solve that problem now. With our routes set, we traversed through a familiar ancient wood. As we passed trees that dwarfed even redwoods, Krog spoke with a mystic reverence,

“This is where the world began on Giess. This is one of the most ancient woods and the first place where our species crawled up from the oceans. Our connection with life is greatest here, and this is also where Lehesion was born.”

Krog grimaced, “And now it will be the place where our kind was slaughtered and used as cattle.”

I shook my head, “It will be the place where the gialgathens fought back. That is how it will be remembered.”

Krog peered ahead, “Yes...It will be.”

As we navigated through the dense forests, mana crystals stayed exposed on the surface. Here the wildlife effused mana, ancient and powerful beings staying here. Ice hydras, island sized turtles, even aetherial wisps stayed here. As we closed in on Astelle, the wildlife changed.

A few of the natural creatures showed scars or signs of hybridization. The mana here carried the Hybrid’s blight, infected with their ilk. Their stench tainted the wind, and their poison effused the ground. It showed that while the wildlife stopped silvers, they couldn’t stop the Hybrids.

That task fell to us. After a half-hour of traveling, we reached near Astelle. The city laid at the center of an island lake and along its shores. Ancient as time itself, the stones carried the deep scars of wind and rain. The new scars carved into these old buildings from the Hybrids above.

They swarmed from dreadnoughts above the city. They reminded me of an anthill that was stepped on, their numbers changing the color of the landscape. The same horrors blotted the area, and the spires wriggled above the horizon, enclosing the skies.

Hybrids corrupted the skin and flesh of gialgathens, many robbed of their lives as they were harvested. Unlike Polydra, Astelle lacked a prison that protected them. They took the full brunt of the Adair Family's power. In the face of their might, the gialgathens fizzled like cinders under a rainstorm.

We were ready for this, however.

Most of the forces stayed back, hiding along the forest's wall. Krog and I snuck out towards the eastern edge of the city. There we found the entrance to the sewers. Guarding it, two Hybrids cackled like deformed insects.

Signalling Krog, I sprinted forward and lifted up my hands. As I did, walls of rock compressed over the Hybrids. I heated the rock with Star Forger, melting it within a second. They still moved even when covered in lava. To stop them, I flash froze the rock.

As the lava hardened, the Hybrids stalled in glassy obsidian. Running up, I smashed them with telekinetic bullets. Shattering like ice sculptures, I turned towards Krog. The old general's eyes opened wide as he whispered,

"You might've discovered their weakness."

I rolled my fingers, "Let's hope. Come on."

After wrenching open the gate, we ran through the sewers. The map Torix obtained was up to date, and the routes held up. We tore the Hybrids apart using the flash freeze method I stumbled upon earlier. It made killing them far quieter, which worked in our favor.

We passed through a ten-mile circle of the city. I planted all twenty mana crystals near the roots of the spires and at critical locations. It took a bit of rerouting since my predictions weren't perfect, but they were close enough. Along the way, we decimated the underground forces planted here, giving our forces routes to escape and move through.

Within thirty minutes, we completed the operation. With the sewers cleared, we regrouped with our troops. They still hid within the dense underbrush of the ancient

woods. After Krog assumed control of the soldiers, Spear and I made a mad dash through the sewers once more.

As we searched, we uncovered more tactical information. Near the bay of the lake, we discovered new piping leading to the island at Astelle's center. These routes proved valuable as the lake teemed with Hybrids. Their metal frames let them run across the lake's bottom. This gave the monsters fantastic aquatic maneuverability when you'd think they could hardly move.

The massive pipelines gave us dozens of routes towards the island, evading our enemies when they enjoyed an advantage. We also avoided their aerial support which was a nice bonus. Here at the center of Astelle, many of the Adair Family's forces clustered together. With a bit of scouting, we found the majority of the captured gialgathens stuck in pits. There they hybridized in an orange soup.

Between several pits, we pinpointed the perfect place for unloading the Orbital Bombardment. With our mission complete, Spear warped us out. After informing Krog and the soldiers of the new routes, we adjusted our obelisk's maps. The preparation emboldened our troops, instilling confidence where there was none. In a way, all the pieces we needed fell in place.

Compared with the last assault, this one would make it look like child's play. With time on our side, Spear warped us out into the Rak'Sha desert. We took the next few minutes prepping the final details – more mana bombs, more molten dimensional fabric in my storage, and enough mana for a singularity in my blood.

Like clockwork, I rose into the atmosphere over the next ten minutes. A comet coming from the sky, I raced down with enough force to level a city. Around me, the violet hues of heat coursed over my skin. The portal expanded in my vision, a spot of sewer floor in the middle of the sandy dunes.

I sent a mental message towards the troops to rush in. They ran down the preplanned routes, ready to detonate the mana bombs with a telepathic wave. With seconds before I landed onto the ground, I issued the final command.

The Living Multiverse(Lvl 10,250 | Guildmaster: The Harbinger's Legion(S-) | Titles: The Harbinger of Cataclysm, The Cleanser of Polydra | Cities: Mt. Verner, Elderfire) – Let's go.

Chapter 238: Brimstone and Steel

The mana bombs exploded moments before I collided with the ground. The raw quintessence manifested into the same elemental fires of before. Once fully ablaze, they spiraled into vast tornadoes of fire and ice. Hollowed eyes and rasping cries echoed from the energies as they sought out anything alive near them.

In a rush, these beings of pure power rushed into the nearby spires beside them. They wrestled for control, storms forming over the city as clouds darkened and lightning struck. The wailing and combat expanded into an earth-shattering frenzy. The booming echoes tore apart, and the lake around Astelle boiled.

It was pure chaos.

When I landed, the Adair Family's troops scrambled to retaliate. My eyes went white, my vision ceasing as the ground trembled. My impact converted into a wave of heat that expanded outwards in an unstoppable shockwave. The kinetic force leveled buildings like an avalanche leveling trees. The deafening crash silenced the roar of battle like a thunderclap silencing a scream. Even the mushroom cloud expanding off the collision tore the sky apart in its wake.

Rising from the resulting magma pit, I peered around. Finding several of the encampments ravaged, I dashed towards the pits they stored gialgathens in. We calculated correctly, and the Hybrid holds stayed along the edges of the impact radius. This collapsed most of the Hybrid's defenses yet kept the captured safe.

Once upon them, I inspected the orange pits. More Hybridized than on Polydra, they carried deep implants and cyberization. Despite those signs, they could recover. The dreadnoughts would fully process them, and that couldn't be done down here.

Sending a command, I signaled for our gialgathens to fly over towards us. They dashed over the chaotic battlefield in pairs of two with wire nets between them. As they landed near me, I pulled gialgathens from the pits and put them into the mesh. With four gialgathens apiece, we doubled the number of gialgathens our troops could carry.

After packing dozens of the fallen, Krog landed beside me as Hybrids across the city sprinted towards us. I welled a mass of mana into my hands before melting the stone beneath their feet. With a quick turn of my arms, the magma lifted, and flash froze over them.

Once encased in obsidian, I expanded the Rise of Eden across our forces. Krog took a deep breath, the wind whistling as he expanded his chest. With a blaring howl, Krog sent out a sonic shockwave across the hordes of frozen Hybrids.

They shattered outwards in a broad wave like falling dominoes as Krog turned in a full circle. As Krog finished his sonic breath, he stood tall over dozens of destroyed Hybrids, nothing left but shards of shiny obsidian.

“It would seem as if we’ve stumbled onto a potent maneuver.”

I lifted another few gialgathens into the last of our wired nets, “We’ll use it later. Let’s go.”

With our forces gathered, we rode over Astelle’s lake, the stormy clouds cloaking us in the shade. Without the spires pinning us down, flying was an option. We abused it as the enemy rallied from our initial burst. Their dreadnoughts turned their massive cannons towards us, aiming at the center of our aerial force.

Before they shot outwards, I reached out a hand and unloaded a singularity onto one of the ships. I aimed at the cannons themselves, causing a potent discharge of arcane energy as the batteries overcharged. Portions of the vessel vaporized in a clean line from the singularity’s black void. Once full, the darkness imploded, the perfect sphere of black giving way to reality once more.

The forcefield over the ship turned into a stormy sea, rippling with abandon. Before the other dreadnought shot us, I turned towards the barrel’s line of sight. I stopped in place, anchoring myself with gravity. I lowered my hands before straining my mana and arms.

As I slowly lifted my hands, an enormous panel of gravity lifted a portion of Astelle’s lake. The shoreline fell a few feet as a swirling plume of water blocked an incoming bolt of arcane lightning. Ensnared into the water, the bolt fizzled into nothing as the water boiled.

Wielding it, I shoved the colossal water cloud towards one of the dreadnoughts. It covered the entire ship in boiling water, covering it completely. Before letting the water go, I welled even more mana from my blood. A thermal wave coursed through the water. In a moment, the water froze into a glacier that surrounded the dreadnought.

Weighed down, the dreadnought hovered down towards the lake below. With another monstrous wave of mana, I pulled it into the aquatic abyss. A tsunami rose from the water, rushing across the lake as the dreadnought fell into the depths.

Once beneath the water, I extended the icy prison using the lake. The deep blue water shifted into white ice as I willed it. It looked like the tsunami caused it, my pace matching the wave. Once frozen in place, the dreadnought remained suspended in the icy prison.

Only one dreadnought remained in the sky after that. I glanced below, watching Hybrids get sent tumbling within the massive wave's aftermath. Above them, the gigantic vessel fought off a few of our remaining gialgathens soldiers. They swarmed in circles around it, pelting the ship with flame.

The forcefield held up before the vessel opened panels across the sides of the ship. From within, thoroughly hybridized gialgathens rode out. Some kind of humanoids rode on the backs of these metal terrors. Clad in power armor, they sent out psionic waves across the skylines. Our gialgathens fell from the sky like flies, unable to withstand the mental assault.

Dashing towards the ship, I sent a message to avoid the flying Hybrids at all costs and to retreat. Like a bullet, I ripped across Astelle's skyline, the water of the lake billowing beneath me. As I reached peak velocity, I charged my mana into my blood at the same time.

By the time I reached the ship, I broke the sound barrier. Crashing with a colossal thud, I snapped the forcefield apart before unloading another singularity into the ship's depths. It turned sideways on the impact, being jettisoned in different directions by contrasting forces. It stayed afloat as I ripped my way back out of the vessel.

Across the skies, gialgathens fought what was once their own kin. These shattered beings showed the Adair family's intentions. Entirely hybridized, they carried the disfigurement from their abuse. Open wounds littered their frames, the tubing from their pods being ripped out without time to heal. The orange gunk within the Hybrids pumped through their veins, keeping them alive. Like pulsing flesh sacks, they sustained inhuman metabolisms.

One gialgathen set the new, flying Hybrids ablaze. The Hybrid took the punishment, its metal skin scorching. The beast roared out with a metal voice, screeching like a

machine. The orange fluid coagulated over the ruined metal skin. Cords rose out of its body, covering the massive wounds as it chased down the gialgathen that burned it.

I propelled myself out of the shuttle, bending steel like tinfoil under my feet. With a soul-shattering impact, I collided into the Hybridized gialgathen. The power armor wearing rider whipped in the air like a leaf in the wind. While tumbling with the Hybrid, I reached out a hand towards the rider.

A dozen tiny, condensed gravity wells spiraled inside its metal plating. Blood bubbled up from underneath the humanoid's facemask as the individual grinded up into pulp from within. I spread my fingers, the being's limbs ripping off and blood drenching down like rain. Turning back to the Hybrid, the metal plating and cords shifted under my hands like logs floating on a river.

Its body rived as it contorted back towards me. With a chilling howl, it sent innumerable cords at my eyes, skin, and body. They crashed against me like drills of paper against stone. Snapping onto my helmet, the monster's jagged teeth snapped against my plating.

I dug my hands into its body while wrapping Event Horizon over it. Screeching like rippling wire, it caved away from me. We crashed into the ground with a colossal thump. As the ground shook beneath our landing point, I wrenched its body apart. Covered in its orange blood, I glanced up. It disintegrated beneath me as I analyzed one of the flying Hybrids.

Blighted One(lvl 12,712) – This twisted apparition is the soulless body of what was once a gialgathen. Having its blood replaced with a bionic solution of sorts, the proteins composing its flesh have given way to corded steel. Combined with elastic polymers, and the flexibility retained makes the beast far tougher against most damage.

It lacks the reasoning and awareness to do anything outside of eat, hate, and fear. These primal emotions resemble an eldritch more than a machine, its higher-level cognitive functions reduced to nothing in the wake of hybridization. This prevents any kind of rehabilitation. In more than one way, this process is a permanent reduction in mental functions, effectively killing the individual.

In many ways, it's a fate worse than death. The memories of the individual surface rarely and are scanned for information from those that control this beast. That is the

sole reason for this beast's creation. Within the Adair Family's army, these creatures create an aerial backbone that is difficult to stop by conventional means.

Missiles often use heat-seeking for aiming systems. These are cold-blooded, creating a need for individualized targeting systems. Worse still, melee combat is absolutely out of the option. Raw strength aside, these creatures can quickly assimilate even rugged fighters. Contact with this creature is a death sentence.

The best method of handling this creature is by killing the psionic master that rides its back. If you fail to do so, the beast will use advanced maneuvers against you. Once the psionic is executed, the beast's higher-level functions cease to exist, and it will attack friend and foe alike.

It poses no threat to you, however.

I smirked as I glanced at the last bit. I rolled my shoulders before dashing up towards the fray. Surrounded by the pandemonium, I found a dozen of our gialgathens having individual dog fights with the blighted ones. I rushed beside three of them. As I did, I created a gravity well over me.

Their flight paths altered into orbits around me, pulling them in. In front of each rider, I created water panels. As they crashed through them, I froze them mid-flight. These ice walls knocked the blighted riders off the blighted one's backs. With the rider and beasts separated, our troops burned them alive with vibrant, red flames.

Collapsing in towards me, the blighted ones shattered their icy, melting confinements. As they did, I poured Event Horizon over them and locked them in place. Gravity wells anchored them before I lugged them behind me like an ugly, metal sack of potatoes.

Like mobile batteries, they fueled me as I flew and helped my other soldiers. As I passed up, several of the mind mages smashed their wills against mine. Stunned for a moment, I stopped my flight, paralyzed by psionic daggers they lobbed against me.

If I was to compare them with the last mind mages, these were like hammers instead of scalpels. They aimed to smash my mind into shards, crippling me in the process. After taking their first onslaught, I retaliated in kind. Diving deep into the minds of many, a few of their thoughts sprung into my mind.

‘Kill him.’

‘Get that monster away from me.’

‘When is Lehesion coming?’

After pulling them to me and disintegrated them with Event Horizon, I worried over that last thought. Capable as I was, I wasn’t ready to face Lehesion on my own. I got back to our mission’s goal. A few quick skirmishes later, our forces expunged the last of the blighted ones.

With a half dozen dying behind me, I created rock over them, melted it onto them, then froze it. Like a ball of metal and obsidian toffee, the black and metal ball disgusted me. I reared my hands apart. Clapping my hands together with all my strength, I created a shockwave that snapped them into brittle pieces. Suspending those parts, I disintegrated the dead bodies.

Turning towards the flying dreadnought, I analyzed the battlefield. Our forces tore open the hull already. They ripped out dozens of gialgathens, the inner crew left in chaos. Another wave of mind magic hit me as I stood still, but I fought it off, gritting my teeth as I did. Clasping my hands, I dashed in to help them out.

This was a circumstance I often dreaded – what if the mind mages targeted my soldiers instead of me? Turns out I shouldn’t have worried. The gialgathens communicate through telepathy. In a way, two arguing gialgathens fought in a psionic battle. Though nowhere the level of these mages, our forces held their own enough for me to help.

Not crippled by the psionic offensive, we finished the crew of the dreadnought. I gained about twenty gialgathens into my storage before we flew over towards the remaining battleships.

The ice suspending the dreadnought almost caved by now. Blighted ones melted the ice with green, sickly fire and cracked it with their tails. As they unleashed their breaths, a saddening chorus erupted from the lake. It was as if the converted gialgathens lamented the twisted shadows they became.

Giving them release, Krog flew over with a squadron of gialgathens. Krog adjusted his tactics from before, keeping as much distance from them as possible. They smothered

the escaping riders and blighted with their flames. The blighted ones recovered, but the riders burned alive. Even the ship itself melted under the incendiary breath.

Singeing metal and white mist covered the lake as both sides held out for victory. Our team kept the edge, so I let them be. This gave me time to face the remaining dreadnought without arcane cannons. It prepared reserve rifles that slung out plasma bolts. As I reached the ship, their guns charged with blinding light.

With a bit of creativity, I filled the barrels with dense stone. As they fired, the plasma recoiled into the ship, the cylinders ripping to shreds in a blob of blue light. The plasma ate metal as I reached out a hand, having charged enough energy for a singularity once more.

Another growing blot of darkness expanded but within the ship this time. As it released kinetic force, the metal on the outside of the hull undulated outwards, a wave creasing steel. Cores melted inside the vessel as the forcefield dampened. Without a reliable power source, it weakened.

I dashed forwards, snapping through the barrier with ease. Popping like a semi-translucent balloon, the energized tethers fell apart at the seams. Panicking, members attempted fighting along the outside of the vessel. Instead of warring with them, I used a massive wave of gravity to lob them off the sides of the ship.

Falling to their deaths, dozens of crew members howled as the pulped against the rubble below. A sickening chorus of breaking bones and ripping ribs let out from below. Dashing into the steeled vessel, I tore through the crew without mercy, yet I kept my intents focused.

I reached the factory floor for the gialgathens. Tearing through them, I used the same process as before. I sorted the gialgathens into two groups – those that could be saved and those that couldn't. Of those two, I put who I could into storage and carried the rest in a gravitational ball behind me.

After pulling them out, I regrouped with our forces coming from the other dreadnought. Like clockwork, we carried the maimed gialgathens across the sky towards the meeting point. Deep within the sewers, Spear created a spacial rend, letting us transport the gialgathens to Elderfire.

With the three dreadnoughts cleared, we raced towards the exposed bases of the once towering spires. Stored within the recesses of their roots, hybridizing gialgathens turned in the orange slop. As we came upon them, a cataclysmic eruption boomed over Astelle.

Pulling gialgathens from the pits, I turned towards the sound. Some being ripped open a portal in space-time, large enough for a city to fall through. From its depths, a gilded aura coursed out like evaporated gold. Claws large as subway trains cut into the edges of the warp, a maw of full of serrated teeth following not long after.

Lehesion arrived in full force. As his full-frame came into view, the gialgathens near us shivered with fear. Many remembered Lehesion as a saint. Having his hulking frame and enormous stature rise against us spawned terror in their chests. It seized our troop's minds, making them numb and slow.

I sent a message to our troops to retreat immediately. As I did, Lehesion rose from the warp, landing atop the island on the lake. His feet crushed entire buildings and his tail leveled city blocks. As the ground quaked under his feet, he turned towards the site of destruction. Disgust spread over his face as he viewed gialgathens fighting Hybrids.

His voice sent waves across all of Astelle,

“So my children would defy me? Perhaps you all have forgotten the age I left behind and the world I created. Allow me to remind you of what you face.”

The sky above darkened. My heart pounded in my ears as I sprinted forward. My blood charged with mana as an eclipse formed over the sun above. As the false moon devoured the sky, shade smothered the battlefield. A starry sky developed over us, as beautiful as staring at a horizon on a clear night.

A grin spread over the ancient being's face,

“Fade into memory, your bodies eaten by the light.”

Chapter 239: Racing Towards Infinity

As the shattered god charged his attack, so did I. Bolting towards him, I neared him as the sky darkened. As stars formed overhead and fell, I reached out my hand, creating a singularity over Lehesion's chest. The golden aura siphoned into the void, the unstoppable wake of destruction eating it. Once full, it ripped outwards.

The golden aura soaked most of the gravitational implosion, smothering the explosion like a wet blanket over fire. My attack served its purpose despite that. The falling stars dimmed, unable to unleash their full might.

And even when dimmed, the lights were blinding.

They shattered the horizons surrounding us, turning Astelle into a memory in seconds. Portions of the city evaporated, nothing remaining after the collisions. Several fell towards my own soldiers, but they flew away from the detonations. Those that couldn't react...they perished in a painless fire.

I saved who I could. Several of the recovery squadrons were near me. I blocked the comets from above by making enormous shells of chilled earth around the lights. They detonated preemptively, turning the dirt into liquid magma. I lifted water from the surrounding lake, freezing it at the same time. The magma gushed over the ice, solidifying and shattering all at once.

While not a perfect shield, it saved the gyalgathens I covered. I did so with four different groups at once, my mind straining under pressure. My skin glowed and my blood boiled, the sheer volumes of energy coursing through me generating enough heat to melt steel. Staring Lehesion down, he turned towards me,

“Ah, little one, it would seem you rise against me once more? I quashed you once with many at your back. What will you do now when facing me alone?”

He laughed, a booming, noble voice,

“Perhaps you will crumble like the many that have come before you.”

He whipped his tail through the air. I anchored myself in the air, clenching my hands together and intercepting his strike. Parrying sideways, I knocked the tail sideways. A sonic boom erupted beside me, as I slapped the blow sideways, the echo alone causing the lake to rumble.

Lehesion's eyes widened,

“And so you rise instead? Interesting.”

He grinned, “Then let us play in this venerable wood, each of us faint wisps when compared with the ancients.”

The skin on my hands healed, several bones crushed in my hand. I rolled my shoulders as I growled, “Come on then.”

Lehesion’s laugh created waves and bent trees with the wind off his breath. He lashed out with his tail, using only the physical might he was gifted with from birth. I snapped each attack sideways, regenerating minor wounds from the act. The practice with Althea’s spears from long ago gave me this ability. If I blocked his tail swipes, the recoil into my frame would make the damage pile up.

Instead, I held firm under the storm Lehesion rained down.

After several minutes of tail swipes later, the pace of his attacks increased. I learned something about our previous fight from this – he wasn’t even trying before. He toyed with us, and he was still toying with me now. I strained under the onslaught, his strikes growing in precision. He learned from each attack, the angles of his attacks becoming harder to predict. With each slicing strike, he injected feints, varying pressures, and different amounts of ‘whip’ in his attacks.

He glanced down at me with a grin,

“Not since Emagrotha have I been matched so equally...Perhaps I can show my true potential.”

I internally groaned as the dispersed aura around him coalesced into his frame. I overcharged the runes over my skin, mana saturating my metal blood. As he swiped, I reacted long before he crashed towards me. I released enormous gravity wells. I used the Rise of Eden right before he made contact, enhancing my stats. I generated momentum blockers, making his tail slam through stony blocks.

And I was nothing.

He amputated my arms while cleaving off my torso from my right collarbone down to my left hip. Despite the grievous wounds received, I held firm. His tail bounced back, and I held my ground. Air in this case, but that was irrelevant. Lehesion understood the significance of me still standing there, facing him down.

It was written all over his face.

“You...you’ve changed, haven’t you little one? From ant to beetle to bird. I’m mesmerized by what you’ve achieved in so little time. How did you accomplish such a feat?”

I gurgled on my own blood, silver streams pouring out of my mouth. My body came back together over the next few seconds, aided by my regeneration. Lehesion gave me time to collect myself, not out of arrogance but out of respect. It kind of surprised me if I’m honest, but you won’t hear me complain about it.

As I gained the ability to speak, I figured conversing was just as good a distraction as fighting, better even. One involved not getting my ass kicked.

“I...trained.”

It was the extra mass in all honesty. It was like slamming a sledgehammer on a rock. If the rock didn’t break, the ricochet off the strike would rattle up your arms. I was that rock, and instead of breaking, I managed to stay together. To be honest, I couldn’t guarantee I could do that again.

Lehesion scoffed, “Training, truly? Here I imagined I faced one with a birth equal to my own.” He leaned back onto his hind legs, crags of earth rising from the pressure while he lifted his front paws. His claws glistened,

“I was given this frame when I came into this world. You earned your gifts from what I’ve seen. That is incredible, even if perhaps futile when faced with a being of my caliber.”

Eh, he was kind of an asshole, but whatever. This was as good of a chance as any to waste time.

“Eh, we’ll see if it’s futile later. It’s already made a difference, hasn’t it?”

Lehesion stared at me, his expression unreadable. A sadness spread over his face along with a small smile,

“You cannot understand the depths of my ability. I am the end and the beginning. I am the sun and the stars and the earth beneath them. From my breath, life overflows.”
Lehesion stared up, trees expanding from beneath him without effort on his own part.

Two could play that game.

I rubbed my hands together, welling quintessence into my hands. Beneath me, I generated as much life as I could. An endless torrent of crabs filled the lake below. Crabs? Why was it always crabs? I closed my eyes in shame as I took a deep breath.

Lehesion raised a horned brow, “It is only crustaceans, but you too can make life... perhaps you are a god in your own right. What is your name?”

“Daniel.”

“Daniel? A name without the same impact you carry. Perhaps you carry other names?”

“Eh, I do, but they’re not the names I’ve chosen.”

Lehesion grinned at me as if looking at a student,

“Names define us. They act as the one denotation that embodies our character and what we are. When spoken, names create a vision, a surge of emotion. That sentiment is the truest expression of one’s self.”

Lehesion stared off into the distance, “And we, our acts in life, they decide the significance our names will carry. Despite how elemental names are to our being, there is one characteristic all names share.”

Lehesion met my eye, “A name is not chosen. It is given. Just as your name was given, I too shall give you a gift, the gift of recognition. You’ve left a legacy behind you, a path all your own. I shall remember the name, Daniel, the name you’ve chosen, along with the might it inspires.”

Was he...complimenting me? Lehesion was full of surprises.

Lehesion’s face twitched as he blinked away some mental struggle. His slitted eyes sharpened into thin lines as he heaved for breath. He swallowed, his eyes normalizing. He shook his head at me while peering down,

“Even with a thousand lifetimes, I would still live out a life filled with regrets. If you should live through this battle, I urge you to dwell on your actions along those lines. Think of the regrets you may face and quash them before they live on to poison your thoughts and mind.”

I blinked, “Yeah...I will.”

Lehesion grinned, spreading his wings wide. The Hybridization spread further into them, wires tracing under the golden webbing.

“Only three have withstood the strength of an actual swipe from me. You, Emagrotha, and Sheom. One was my ultimate rival before I...before I carried out one of my many grave mistakes in this life of mine. The other was like a second mother, someone who I...I cannot understand why I killed her.”

Lehesion glared down at me, rage filling his eyes as the psionics overtook his mind,

“And this one before me...He too shall crumble into the memories of those that knew him. It was good speaking with you, but this is goodbye, Daniel.”

His palpable aura rippled as gilded flares swelled off his body like golden crescents. As if staring at the sun and the moon, Lehesion towered over me. He whipped his tail with untold energy. I reached out a hand, creating a singularity in his chest.

With mobility defying his size, Lehesion shot sideways, the lake of Astelle crashing from him. A resulting tsunami consumed the city, he whipped his tail towards me. I

lifted my hand, opening my storage. Using the portal as a shield, Lehesion's tail pierced into the alternate dimension.

The force of the blow did as well, making the beast lose his momentum. With 20% of my health disintegrating from storing a chunk of his tail, I closed the warp. Lopping off a third of it, streams of blood poured from Lehesion's lost limb, flowing like rivers of gold. Lehesion stared between me and his tail, confusion spreading over his face.

"You've more tricks up your sleeves? I am impressed once more."

I grinned, "Hah...It actually works. I can't believe it."

As my health regenerated, Lehesion's tail reconstituted. The orange gunk and wires acted as catalysts for his mana to reform onto. Lehesion grinned,

"A worthy foe. Let us play upon this plane, and may it be fragmented beneath our heels."

He flew into the air, the air off his wings causing massive waves and collapsing buildings. Flying towards me, I pulled myself sideways while he crashed into the ground. Like a battering ram worthy of crushing continents, the entire island in the lake caved in. The lake rushed out, barely enough liquid left for a puddle.

The island itself spread out into our surroundings, crags of dirt and boulders of stone lobbed miles away. Moments later, a torrent of rain poured from above, a storm forming from the lake's water. I tumbled from the impact, unable to hold myself down with a gravity well.

A familiar kinetic shockwave rippled through my body. A human's veins and insides would've dissolved from the internal vibrations. Being pure metal, I withstood the shellshock, though it took a tenth of my health.

As I crashed against the landscape, I created craters beneath me, the ground crumbling and trees splintering. My own impacts meant nothing in the wake of Lehesion's charge, however. Astelle disappeared. Trees leveled. Buildings caved. For kilometers in every direction, no tree stood, no rock remained, and no life lived. A bringer of extinction, Lehesion annihilated everything.

Thank god our troops were already out by now. Otherwise everyone, and I mean everyone, would be dead.

My fight or flight instincts activated, fear racing up my spine as I laid on the ground. I got a sample of Lehesion, kept him at bay till our troops evacuated, and we saved most of the gialgathens. Escaping turned into my priority.

Lehesion pulled himself from the new crater he created, a bit of glowing stone under the center of his impact. He grinned while turning around,

“Surely, you survived? Come, let us quake the lands and bend the skies.”

How about fuck all of that.

I dug into the ground as he laughed at the destruction around him. A bit of madness leaked into his voice as Lehesion rose back into the air and announced,

“Remember this. The surface of most worlds are like layers of dust over molten marbles. If you strike the ground with enough force, that dust shell shatters, and the magma rises from below. We stand atop an ocean of magma. Let me bring it to the surface.”

I didn't like the sound of that, but it gave me an idea.

Lehesion bounded onto the ground, hopping from space to space. It was the kind of movement I expected from an excited toddler. Unlike a toddler, this simple motion flattened fields and vaporized forests. Each time Lehesion landed, actual earthquakes bounded around the scenery.

The ground wobbled. The earth-shattering bounds defied all logic. As if acting without limits, Lehesion tore the region apart. Unleashing a level of havoc that made natural disasters envious, Lehesion lifted into the sky once more. The clouds relented to his wings. With another impact, he created kinetic shockwaves that uprooted trees miles away.

He laughed as he did, the simple act of moving more than enough to destroy any enemy he'd ever faced.

I was out of there by then. I dug deeper down, deeper than ever before. Past literal miles of rock, I flew past the mana pollution layer and into the pressurized magma lying beneath the surface of Giess. It was my only hope of escape.

Surrounded by the endless sea of glowing rock, I followed the coordinates to Elderfire. As I abandoned the fight, Lehesion let out a roar that bent the skies and broke the mountains. He announced,

“Tell me then warrior, are you ready to play with the gods?”

Swimming through the magma, I resolved to myself to take him down a notch. Neither of us were gods. As strong as he was, he wasn't divine. I dwelled on the piece of his tail locked away in my dimensional storage. It worked. I never imagined it would, but using the pocket dimension to block attacks worked.

It wasn't enough, however. Lehesion toyed with us at Rivaria. He took our most potent barrage without so much as flinching before showing us his wrath. That 'wrath' was a piece of his abilities. If anything, this fight solidified something I'd been thinking for a while.

Schema was underestimating Lehesion. In fact, Schema underestimated the Adair Family in general. Lehesion was beyond anything I ever imagined facing. That golden dragon made the Overseers look inept, and the Sentinels resemble fodder. If he strengthened further, then defeating him might become literally impossible.

If that was the case, this rebellion might spread further through the cosmos, creating a galactic civil war. Lehesion could spearhead the effort, acting as a planetary destroyer. Schema needed to crack down immediately. Otherwise, this problem was going to spiral out of control.

And even worse than that outcome, an inevitable reality lingered in the back of my mind – Lehesion was holding back.

I might've started a fight I couldn't win.

Chapter 240: Omens

After hours of crawling through magma, I reached Elderfire. Coming up through sandstone and dunes, I pulled myself up a few miles outside the town. Brushing off chunks of solidified igneous rocks, I ran towards the center of the city.

I found most of the gialgathens being taken care of in the wisp laden pools. The gialgathen shamans leveraged off the artificial life I created here, creating a natural zone of healing and stasis. They already saved hundreds of lives. Besides for them, Kessiah zoned in on her work.

The sheer consistency of her effort amazed me most. Sure, anyone can put out for a few days or even weeks. Months though? That took some serious grit, and Kessiah was showing that in spades. If anything, she deserved a reward for it.

I put that on my growing mental checklist of stuff to do. Having sent a message to Torix letting him know I'm fine, I reached the temple where the lich laired himself. If that wasn't a word, I'm coining it expressly for Torix since he did it so often.

Walking into said lair, I found him talking with the Overseer. They discussed along heated lines, Torix brandishing his hands,

"I understand the need for surveillance, but to demand complete control of the projects? This is an abuse of Schema's power, and I will not stand for it."

The Overseer raised a hand, replying with a no-nonsense tone,

"It is not up for debate. Your eldritch studies have been proceeding without guidance for an extended period already. You are simply fortunate that further action hasn't been taken."

I stepped up, "What's the issue here?"

The Overseer turned towards me, and he took a step back,

"Ah, you have arrived."

Torix walked up to me, his frail bones clanking against the stone and threatening to snap with each step,

“Perhaps you may talk more sense into this belligerent. He’s demanding the confiscation of our eldritch research. While I’m willing to make a compromise, demanding absolute control is absurd.”

I turned to the Overseer, “You want to detain Amara or something like that?”

The Overseer stumbled his words a bit though he gained confidence as he continued,

“I...Schema is demanding the confiscation of the research due to the legalities involved. It’s highly illegal, and your guild is fortunate that more action wasn’t taken.”

I spread out my arms, “I’ve adjusted the defenses as needed. The blue core I set up has billions of mana to stop any escaping eldritch. That much mana could evaporate just about anything. We have the situation under control.”

The Overseer turned a palm to me, his electronic suit humming with energy, “This is a matter of legalities, not of compromise. You’ve been breaking the law, and action must be taken. Due to extraneous circumstances, we can bend the law for you and your guild. Your progress against the Adair Family has been noted.”

He let his hand down, “However, this will not be allowed to continue.”

I crossed my arms, “Look, I understand if you want to make sure our research projects are ethical and up to Schema’s standards. I can’t agree to give away portions of my guild for nothing, though. I’m stressed for resources as it is.”

I raised a hand, “So how about this – you can send a few Speakers to help with the research. We get some competent scientists to help us out. You get to share in the research and make sure it’s up to par. Does that sound good?”

I reached out a hand. The Overseer stared between my hand and me, “Hmm...”

Torix stared between us, “What? I just offered the same consideration, yet you utterly ignored my own proposition. This-“

The Overseer waved away Torix’s concerns, “Let me consider this in silence.”

I looked to Torix then back at the Overseer, glaring at him. I chose to remain silent for now. A few seconds later, the Overseer lifted his hand, “I will accept this compromise.”

I narrowed my eyes while shaking his hand, “Sure. There’s some other stuff I want to talk about real quick if you have the time.”

The Overseer turned to me,

“I will cancel two of my appointments. We have nine minutes remaining to discuss whatever it is you wish to speak of.”

Wow. He made time for me. That was new.

I lifted a hand, “So, I wanted to ask for some help from Schema.”

The Overseer opened his status, “Let me analyze our resources...We may offer support during key conflicts. You are fighting against the Adair Family, and Schema supports that. What would you need the most?”

I counted on my fingers, “We need mind mages, any troops you can give, as many healers as you can spare, and we need people that can transport people quickly.”

The Overseer fiddled with his status for a bit,

“We can do nothing for the mind mages. Other worlds are rebelling now, and Schema is utterly unprepared for the scale of the conflict regarding the mental assaults. The same can be said for generic combat forces. However-“

The Overseer sent a few messages. Torix read the posted messages before clapping his hands, “We will accept your generosity, oh powerful Overseer.”

Even through his massive helmet, I could tell the Overseer rolled his eyes,

“Your flattery falls on deaf ears. I’ve given a task force of five healers and two portal specialists for you to utilize. While unable to create portals of vast distances, they are serviceable on a city-wide scale. Will that do?”

I raised a fist, “Honestly, it’s a lot more than I expected. Thanks. I also wanted to warn you about Lehesion.”

As I said those words, the Overseer stood up straighter. I continued,

“The thing is, he was holding back against us when we all fought together. I think Schema needs to come up with an actual plan to take him out. I’m willing to help out, and so is Helios.”

The Overseer shook his head,

“I fully understand the threat Lehesion poses, but Schema has this situation under control. If our research is correct, Lehesion’s mana is tied to Giess. Schema is going to sterilize the surface of the planet, leaving nothing but glass remaining.”

The Overseer pressed his fingers together as if crushing an insect,

“Lehesion will have no mana source, and the threat will be muted.”

I shook my head, “That’s not the only place he gets his mana from. At least I’m pretty sure, at least. Lehesion is connected to an Old One.”

The Overseer took a step back, “They’ve made contracts with Baldowah?”

I shook my head, “No, it’s probably Eonoth.”

The Overseer tilted his head, “Eonoth? I’ve never heard of that Old One. This is...new. Are you certain it wasn’t an illusion from Etorhma or Baldowah?”

I nodded, “Yeah, I’m sure. Eonoth talked to me. I tried to shut him out, but he was too big for me to handle. I came out sane, and during that discussion, I learned that Lehesion’s connection to Giess is based on Eonoth’s interference. Glassing Giess might not be enough if that’s the case.”

The Overseer raised a palm, “I’ve heard your concerns, but I assure you of this – spatial fortresses cannot be destroyed. They are immovable and unstoppable. They are Schema’s strongest defense, and one is coming here to assist with the glassing. That is a deep nail in the coffin the Adair Family have found themselves in. Focus on your own problems, and we shall handle ours.”

I weighed my hands back and forth, “Let’s just think this out for a moment. What will Schema do if the glassing fails?”

“It will not fail.”

This was starting to remind me of a few conversations I had with a Sentinel back in BloodHollow. I took a deep breath, “Well, just consider it hypothetically. If the glassing fails, that is going to put a lot of fire under this rebellion. More worlds are going to follow in the wake of an event like that.”

I tapped the side of my head, “Think about it. The scale of this rebellion will explode since rebelling worlds won’t have to worry about glassing anymore. It will be a calling card for the Adair Family. Tohtella’s smart about this kind of thing, so she’s definitely thought about this.”

I waved my hands, “What can Schema do if he doesn’t have that defense?”

The Overseer crossed his arms, “It is simple. Torix has run an effective media campaign that shows the extent of the Hybridization program. It has proven very effective at dissuading worlds from joining the rebellion.”

Torix weighed his hands back and forth, “Unfortunately, Tohtella devised a relatively effective countermeasure. She is showing footage of Daniel tearing engineers apart and evaporating people in the dreadnoughts. They’re painting him out as a mindless monster that is also a dog for Schema.”

I turned to him, a bit peeved, “Really? What kind of response do people expect when you see that kind of shit?”

Torix lifted his palms to me, “I never mentioned agreeing with the message. While not carrying the same sting as our own campaign, it has leveled the playing field to an extent, so to speak.”

Yeah, that made sense. Still a bit peeved, I turned to the Overseer, “Well, there you have it. We need to do more than what we’re doing.”

The Overseer met my eye, “While I understand your lack of faith in a spatial fortress, you simply have never seen one in action. They. Are. Immovable.”

I pointed behind me, “Here’s the thing, so is Lehesion. I don’t know if you watched our fight, but-“

The Overseer raised a palm, “I saw the footage Torix showed. I was impressed by you, not by Lehesion’s abilities.”

Just remembering the fight made my skin crawl a bit. It reminded me of facing Yawm so long ago. I was helpless, and I couldn’t do a damn thing to stop him. Schema watched on the sidelines then, and he was watching on the sidelines now. I spread out my hands, my voice growing heated,

“The guy toyed with me and with everything we’ve sent his way. He’s been fucking around this entire time. You think that was his limit? Just sitting there and tanking antimatter waves with ease? The guy has the mana of a planet or maybe even more. We don’t know. We haven’t even tested that thing yet.”

The Overseer glanced down while holding his face up in his hand. He took a deep breath before putting a hand on my shoulder,

“Daniel. Schema is not as limited as you seem to think. He has this situation under control. I can understand your fear. I can understand you worrying about your guild’s future. I assure you, Schema will handle this. You are an asset now. Schema is not going to leave your guild to die like he did with Yawm. I have convinced him otherwise. This time will be different.”

The Overseer hit the nail on the head. For once, it sounded like he was talking as himself instead of as the Overseer. I took a deep breath, realizing how worked up I was. A tense moment passed as I swallowed, calming myself down. This situation was similar to Yawm. I was just trying to do right by the system, yet I ended up facing some sleeping behemoth.

Unlike last time, I had a lot more to lose. A guild, yeah, but also my friends, mentor, and a kickass girlfriend. I know it wasn't as big or fancy as something like the empire, but what I had meant the world to me. The thought of losing it all because I tried doing the right thing...it made me want to crawl into a hole.

I got my composure back though, settling myself down,

"Yeah, I get it. Sorry about that. It's just a lot to take in. Lehesion could crush Mt. Verner in a second. That's scary."

The Overseer put his hand down, "I understand, and given your history against Yawm, trusting Schema is a lot to ask. However, I still ask it of you. Is there anything else you wish to discuss?"

I took a breath before thinking for a moment. I looked to the Overseer,

"Is there anyone that could help us with our campaign on Giess?"

The Overseer glanced up, "Hmm, not on such short notice, but perhaps overtime. I would recommend contacting the Golemnites and the Ahcorous."

I pursed my lips. The Overseer lifted a hand, interacting with his status. A picture of Wrath showed up along with some floating ball of energy,

"The Golemnites are a species of aetherial beings that manifest in physical objects. While a strange race with odd conventions, they are excellent at mind magic. They will prove useful given their incorporeal form as well. It is difficult to find better scouts or spies."

“They sound oddly familiar.” I pointed at Wrath, “I’m pretty sure I’ve actually met her.”

The Overseer looked over Wrath, “Ah, yes, Wrath. She is a prolific Fringe Walker. Most of the Ahcours are, in fact. The queens are at least. They are a race of amorphous blobs operating on hydraulic, internal pressures. They form large, sprawling colonies, their members ravenous. They would do well in eradicating silvered territory, as they can eat metal.”

Torix tilted his head, “You seem to have thought quite a bit about this. That isn’t by chance, is it?”

The Overseer shrugged, “I considered them as options to assist Giess before the glassing was announced. Is this the kind of information you needed?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

The Overseer pressed his fingertips together before pulling them outwards. His suit buzzed as a tear in space-time rended open. He gave me a curt nod,

“That is the limit of my time. Goodbye, Harbinger.”

As he stepped out and the portal closed, I turned to Torix. Once gone, I pointed to where the Overseer was a second ago,

“Was it just me, or was he acting weird?”

Torix shrugged, “It is quite simple, really. The Overseer respects you more after viewing your last battle with Lehesion. You and he are equals in many respects now, despite the vast rift in levels. That is precisely why he ignored my own arguments and favored your own. It’s the difference in what we’ve achieved.”

I spread out my arms,

“I just never imagined he’d be like that. I thought he’d listen to what you’re saying rather than thinking about who is saying it. I mean shit, I’m strong, but you’re obviously the better strategist. That strategic ability helps, and it’s worth a lot.”

Torix shook his head,

“There is still much you have to learn, disciple. In Schema’s universe, one’s status is reflected by their ability to kill eldritch. This is Schema’s primary directive, and he dispenses influence depending on that one parameter. You are far better at killing eldritch; therefore, the Overseer respects you more. Quaint, simplistic, and direct, yet that is how people are.”

Torix shrugged, “Such is the life we live. Though, at times, I must hold my tongue, I will endure as long as we get what we need to accomplish our goals. I’d rather not let my pride halt our progress. That would simply add to my rather long list of regrets.”

I scratched the side of my head, “Well, I still think it’s bullshit, but I’ll keep that in mind. Let’s talk about something else. How much longer before the next battle?”

Torix held up four fingers, “It will require four days of planning. This is mostly due to waiting for those healers and warp specialists to arrive. I organized the actual assault weeks ago.”

I spread out my arms, “So we have some extra time?”

“I would suppose so.”

I rubbed my hands together, “Enough time to for the new body thing?”

Torix leaned back, surprised by what I said. After a bit of thought, he rolled his hands, “Perhaps. It would take three days at the absolute least.”

I cupped my chin, “I’ll be honest, I’ve been curious about the lich thing for a while. How does it work?”

Torix coughed into his hand despite being a skeleton, “Ahem, well, it’s a...complicated process.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Why do you sound so nervous to tell me about it?”

Torix sighed and took a deep breath, “The nature of the process is rather...how to put it...ruthless, perhaps?”

I rolled my eyes, “Well, I figured that much. It’s necromancy, and I’m sure you’ve done some questionable stuff before we met. It’s part of being hundreds of years old.”

Torix grabbed the back of his neck, looking back and forth. He cast another silencing spell, covering us with it. He pointed at me, “This is not to leave the sanctums of your mind, understood?”

I sat down, suspending myself with a gravity well, “Of course.”

Torix sat down on a blot of dark mana, “Then, perhaps it is time I share some of my past with you. It’s about time for the passing of that knowledge.”

Torix lifted his hand, creating an illusion. A red star with a planet circled around it. Torix pointed at the planet,

“I was born on Xanthar, a planet tidally locked. One side faces the sun at all times, the other peering out into the depths of space, shaded in perpetual darkness.”

Torix gestured a palm, “This resulted in int two primary landmasses on the planet, one molten and the other frozen. Between these two existed a strip of arable land known as Arcadia. Large mountains kept the frigid blizzards and the heated storms from reaching us. In a way, it acted as the Elysium of the entire planet.”

Torix stared off into the distance, traveling towards a distant place, “I was born there centuries ago. During that time, I was a member of the Anamor Clan. Any influential Iteran was of course-“

I said, “Iteran?”

“My species.”

I lifted my head, “Ah, here I always thought you were pretty much human.”

Torix stared down at himself, “Our races must have a similar structure. Odd.” He peered up, “Now, as with most of our species, the Anamor Clan held many alliances, rivalries, and hostilities. During my younger years, I engrossed myself in this rivalry, my desire for combat fervent. In a way, I was much like you, though more magically inclined.”

I raised my fists, “Hey if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

Torix scoffed, “Perhaps. That point aside, I became curious about necromancy after my clan suffered severe losses to a rival order. They used dark magic that resulted in our forces being wiped out. During that time, I studied tactics and counter maneuvers to combat their abilities.”

That must have been where Torix got all of his tactical nuances. I listened as he continued,

“No matter what I employed, we suffered severe losses. Despite the warnings from my family, I understood we would be wiped off our homeland should we continue fighting in that manner. I dived into the darker magics, my own nature well suited for it.”

A bit of bitterness leaked into Torix’s voice,

“Perhaps too suited for it. I achieved many victories, fighting fire with fire, so to speak. At the same time, I came close to true death many times. That fear, it soaked into my very bones and marrow. It clouded my judgment, and it left me weak.”

Torix continued with a bit of delight in his voice,

“In order to transcend death and surpass my physical limits, I devised a plan. I created a sacrificial ritual sight to become a lich. To do so, I needed a vast well of vitality and

life, however. Fortunately for my aims, the rival faction served that purpose rather nicely.”

His tone turned cold,

“And that is what I did. I culled our enemies while giving myself an everlasting life. My family did not see it as such. They feared me, and perhaps they were right to do so. That was a dark time in my life. After I was exiled, I turned towards experimentation as an outlet for my frustration.”

Torix stared down, “I...I did things that are better left unspoken.”

I winced a bit at the prospect. Torix pressed two fingers against his temple,

“I devised a lair on Xanthar’s moon, my phylactery safe for all time. I tangled myself with many unsightly organizations, the least of which the necromancers. While I never did something on the scale of the Hybridization program, I...I might have given a chance.”

He shook his head slowly,

“And...and I would like to think I’ve changed. No, I know I have, but I see that darkness well up to the surface at times. When I met you, I saw my younger self before I lay corrupted by my own resentment. There are times I fear you too shall fall to the same bitterness.”

I remembered the hatred I felt for Schema when he left me against Yawm. Hell, that same feeling flared when I imagined Schema leaving us against Lehesion. It’s enough to drive a guy mad if it happens enough.

Yeah, I could imagine being consumed by that kind of thing.

Torix continued,

“I hoped to help you with it, and I like to think I have in certain ways.”

I stared at Torix, “You have.”

“Thank you. This is why I never mention my homeworld, my family, or my past as a rule. It is nothing I’m proud of. I hope to redeem myself with what we’ve built.”

“We will.”

“I would like to believe so. As far as transferring the body is concerned, I would need a vast well of mana, an enormous overflow of life, and a safe spot for a new phylactery.”

I pursed my lip, “Why not just use your old one?”

“It is located far away. We would need to travel there, and that would require warping towards Xanthar. Once there, traversing towards the moon and finding the exact position would take a measure of time as well. By then, we’d have lost too much time. It’s quicker to simply craft another phylactery.”

“So, finding a safe place is the problem?”

“Indeed. While I have faith in a blue core’s abilities to defend, a phylactery on either Mt. Verner or Elderfire could be evaporated by Lehesion. My life would be forfeit then.”

I frowned, “Huh...what about putting it in dimensional storage?”

“A phylactery is considered organic matter. This creates a rejection for the dimensional storages Schema dispenses. I’ve crafted my own pocket dimensions as well, but they are maintained by my mana. Without an actual body, a soul struggled to use mana of any kind. Most pocket dimensions cannot be maintained. My soul would be lost to eternity if I passed.”

I tapped my chin, “What about my own pocket dimension? I mean, I’m not dying anytime soon.”

Torix leaned back, “Huh...That would be more than suitable, though your death would result in...Even then, I wouldn’t perish forthrightly.”

I shrugged, “You’d lose your phylactery, sure, but you could just resonate again with your old one. For now, it’s a safer place than either base, at least.”

Torix peered off into the distance, “I...I suppose that would work for now.”

“What do we need next?”

Torix pulled his grimoire from his robe, “There are two more obstacles, the first of which lies with resonance. Much of the time involved with becoming a lich comes from a lack of continuity between the new body and the old mind. If overall affinity is low, then the mind will reject the body, and as such, the soul anchoring process won’t take place.”

Torix knocked on his old, bony body, “This is particularly a problem with Schema’s system. He doesn’t wish to re-invest into a new body each time a lich dies. That is why I am so frail. Fortunately, your construct is more durable than a system enhanced individual.”

I pointed around at the trees in Elderfire, “Would the life from quintessence work for your summoning rituals?”

“It would, though it would be far from optimal. The best source of fuel for a lich’s ascension comes from the desires, memories, and pain of the living. It takes time to manifest memories and desires which your creations have yet to develop. I would suggest using eldritch and silvers with a surge of artificial life to assist.”

I crossed my arms, “Do you have any places scoped out?”

“Indeed, I have found a few excellent spots for the process. These places are isolated from interference, teeming with life, and unprepared for magic. They suit our purposes perfectly. Now for the subject of resonance-“

Torix snapped his fingers, the sound swallowing barrier dissipating. We walked back towards his lair, finding the metal construct on the ground. It crushed into the stone a bit, the rock unable to withstand its weight. Torix gestured to it,

“The runic markings you made, they assist with that process quite a bit. I would actually ask of you to carve a set of runic markings into it from my grimoire.”

“Why do you need me to do it?”

Torix raised a finger, “The first reason is that these are the standard etchings I utilize to ensure resonance. They allow certain aspects of my personality to personify more easily.”

Torix lowered his hand, “Perhaps more importantly, however, is that I cannot carve into the metal.”

Oh. Yeah, that made sense.

Torix put his hands on his hips, “That is all it requires. I’ve already handled the details involved outside of those requirements.”

Glancing down at the darkened frame, it dwarfed Torix’s current skeletal form. It radiated with dominion magic, a hunger emanating from it. Torix leaned down and dragged his hand across a metal plate on the shoulder,

“Can you hear it? It calls for a master, its howls haunting.”

I cracked my neck,

“Then let’s go make this happen.”