

## New World 241

### Chapter 241: A Dark Underworld

– Althea –

I held my breath, slipping into the other plane. Stepping onto a string of connected steps, I followed the line leading towards the remaining members in the compound. Phasing back onto our plane, I grabbed the remnant's white hair, slicing clean through her neck.

Pink flesh and the arteries exposed themselves under the fluorescent lights. The body flopped forward, splattering onto the ground. I frowned while turning towards the other scientist. Wearing a medical mask, his brows creased in horror. Instead of running or fighting back, he froze in place. That was something I learned after assassinating many people.

There isn't just a fight or flight response. There was also the freezing option. When faced with a surreal, horrifying reality, most people only lock up. Not wanting to waste time, I pressed my heel against the ground. The sterilized tile beneath my feet cracked, the floor smelling of chlorine and antiseptics.

I bolted towards him before piercing a dagger at his heart. I slit upwards while tiptoeing around him. Like peeling a bloody banana, his face sternum, collarbone, and skull split apart. His blood sprayed onto the ground, none of it touching me.

Bleck, blood was so gross, but it was inevitable in this kind of work. Daniel kind of just wallowed in the stuff. It was rare I hit that kind of bloodlust anymore. Now I just entered this cold state of mind, like nothing mattered.

Around me, the fluorescent lights flickered over tubes of Hybrid research. With each flicker, a pair of red eyes darted further into the facility. I followed it as a shiver raced up my spine. It still stunned me that he could turn into a different person like that.

Opening the door to the next room, the lights flickered as a dozen scientists studied their work. They peered around in confusion as the lights above them went on and off. I watched as the shadows of the researchers came together. A broad figure rose from the umbral well. He peered around, the researchers paralyzed with fear.

A tense moment passed as they understood what was about to happen. I wanted to close my eyes, but I kept them open. There was something sickening about watching someone look at death. It was the same stare a mouse gave a cat. They both stay still, knowing what would follow. Neither moves alone. They spur into action together, each of them struggling for life.

That unbearable specific kind of silence stretched on for a few seconds. To its victim, it was an eternity. That infinity passed in the eyes of the researchers. None of them so much as breathed. The most primal emotion, fear, wrapped its cold embrace around them.

At this moment, recognizing their death, they were most alive. The lights flickered, going dark for a second. As flight returned to the room, entrails and blood covered the entire space. Hod butchered them during the lapse in light.

Hod was a natural assassin in that way. Fast, efficient, and quiet, he cleared rooms without needing more than a semblance of shade. I didn't quite understand how his powers worked, but I didn't need to. All I needed was the work he could get done.

He turned towards me, a black flame ebbing from his swollen, muscular frame. Without saying a word, we stepped up to the computers, downloading files and information. We used a cipher from the Overseer developed with a group of researchers. The software let us read the hidden data. Another researcher opened the door before closing it.

He stared up at Hod, who glared at the scientist with eyes lacking empathy. The lights flickered. More blood. More gore. More death.

I shook the chill off, turning back towards the data. We found information, lots of it. The kind of information that really helped the cause. That's what this was all for. I found one of the research facilities conditioning children. Since then, I wasn't about to let the Adair Family off the hook. They'd hang on the noose they made for themselves, and I'd be the hangman.

Er, well hangwoman, but whatever.

Anyways, I sent the data over to Torix before finding an opened file. Skimming over the information, my eyes hollowed, and my stomach sank. I turned away, a bitter taste

leaking into my mouth. Hod stepped up, his frame shrinking back to his other form. I took a sigh of relief. He was so much easier to talk to when he was like this.

“Hod not good at read. What thing say?”

I took a breath, “It’s a record of Schema’s offenses. It’s...ugly. Like, really ugly.”

“Hod wonder what kind of ugly?”

“Uhm, it’s hard to explain.”

“Hod willing to listen.”

I dragged my hand across the back of my neck,

“So, it, hm...It’s detailing a few of Schema’s crimes against the remnants, but it has other stuff we didn’t know about. It mentions eldritchifying worlds so that they can glass them later. I...I know that’s hard to hear.”

Daniel and I went to Hod’s homeworld after it was destroyed for some reason. Daniel mentioned runes or something like that, but it seemed kind of random to me. Either way, Hod lost his home because Schema eldritchified it, so hearing this must of stung.

Hod stared down as he mumbled,

“Ah.”

A silence passed before he nodded, “Hod understand why Adair Family do what Adair Family do.”

I bit my lip, not wanting to go on with the list of stuff Schema was doing. Hod stared at his winged arms and taloned fingers,

“Hod lost home. Remnants lose home. They want home back. Simple reason. Powerful reason. Hard not to understand for Hod.”

He gripped his hands, “But Adair Family take Gialgathen home. Adair family ruin other home to make new home. Adair Family ruthless. Adair Family evil. Must be stopped.”

I nodded, “Yeah. I think so too.”

Hod took a deep breath, “So what else AI man do?”

I shivered a bit before replying, “Er, this document is saying Schema has created massive mana battery farms to power the system. There’s no concrete proof, but there’s a lot of circumstantial evidence here.”

Hod shook his head, “AI man bad. Not bad as dry man, but bad man still.”

I let out a nervous chuckle before the gloom returned. I scratched the side of my head, “Yeah, but that’s not all of it. It says here that Schema is purposefully stalling the research of the eldritch or the dimensional cracks and where they come from.”

Hod spread his wings, “Why AI man do that? Thought AI man want get rid of eldritch?”

I blinked, kind of stunned at the accusations I was reading,

“Your guess is as good as mine, but it says here that Schema is programmed to stop the eldritch a certain way. If people got rid of the eldritch, Schema would lose his reason for existing. This goes on and shows a list of canceled research projects about these subjects. It then details how Schema is essentially a symbiotic life form to the eldritch.”

Hod gave me a classic confused stare,

“What.”

A bead of cold sweat dripped down my forehead, “It’s saying that Schema needs the eldritch to be a problem, so Schema’s making sure they are a problem that is never completely solved. In a way, it needs the eldritch like we need food or air.”

Hod rubbed the underside of his beak,

“Hod see...AI man now Conspiracy AI man.”

Hod’s oddness was refreshing at times like this. I let out another laugh. Another awkward pause passed over us. Hod turned to me,

“Hod wonder...Does lady friend think we do right thing?”

I wondered about it for a moment. I remembered my childhood with Yawm, how awful the research had been. I dwelled on the hollowed faces of starving children, and the looks of those with scrambled minds. I took a deep breath,

“I...I don’t know. I think it’s more like we’re just choosing our poison. For me, I’m sticking with Schema...Yenno, for now.”

Hod nodded, “Then Hod do same. Come. Lady Friend and Hod not finished. Work still left undone.”

I followed him after we harvested the data from the room. Hod took an enormous breath, forming and breathing in a dark miasma. Brightening the room, his lanky frame swelled with umbral energy, the shade empowering him. His eyes shifted from a hollow white to a piercing red.

He turned towards me and nodded. I phased off our plane, entering somewhere else. To be honest, I still didn’t quite know how it worked. All I knew was that I had to hold my breath and that no one could see me.

I phased through the door while he fell into the shadows. Both of us wandered through the underground facility, each of us killing dozens of researchers, guards, and managers. In those moments, I went cold. My heart slowed. My mind numbed. I quit thinking. I quit doubting.

There was no time for doubt. There was too much to do. We found horrific experiments, groups of indoctrinated children, and deformed gialgathen hatchlings. The deeper this rabbit hole I went, the more I wondered where it would end. The more twisted it turned, the more I understood it would never end.

Down into that winding path we went. A researcher found me slicing someone's throat. He went to scream. I dashed forward, reaching out my hand. I squeezed my hand to stop his voice. My hands cut through neck. Blood sprayed. Disgusting. I wiped my hand on a tissue nearby.

I walked up to another data log, Hod inspecting other parts of the facility. In the next data patch, I discovered the extent of the rebellion's success. More cold sweat poured down my back as I read on.

The rebels amassed over five worlds to their side already. These reports listed easily controlled societies. Lots of them were enslaved worlds subservient to new races that came in and took over after being systemized. Earth was on the list.

I kept reading, my nerves racing. Lehesion decimated everything in his path. It was a biblical kind of destruction, the kind that left the viewer in awe. He eradicated the defensive operations on the planets, letting the rebels organize. Even worse still, there were reports of the system still being used by the insurgents.

I remembered Amara and what she could do. Did the rebels have someone like that too?

It was too much to think about. This rebellion was expanding faster than I ever imagined. The only real thorn in their side was the glassing of Giess, which they seemed pretty calm about. Well, that and Daniel. These reports had a lot to say about our guild, and most of it was really bad.

At least they didn't know where we were. Yet.

I scanned over some more of the documentation. It mentioned cloning an army of psionics. It talked about figuring out how to hack into Schema's mana streams and information channels. It even detailed a few ways of systematically killing Sentinels and taking their armor and spears.

The more I read, the more I realized something – we were in way over our heads. I wondered since this rebellion started how the enemies organized so quickly. Turns out this, had been planned for years. They were just waiting for the right time to mobilize. Since we got in the way, they spurred into action early.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. Some of the stuff on here didn't even make sense. It mentioned something called a dimensional cipher. There was a bunch of mumbo jumbo about rewriting reality like Schema did.

Pfff, uh, yeah, whatever. Talk about ridiculous.

I downloaded the rest of the documents, regrouping with Hod. In my status, our scouts found another base nearby. I began the information transfer to Torix, making sure he understood what was going on. After that was finished, my mind went cold again.

That was enough thinking for now. We needed a cold, ruthless assassin. I enveloped my mind in apathy. These were enemies, not worth my emotions or empathy. They were lambs to the slaughter. They were to be culled.

It was time to move on to the next mission.

## Chapter 242: A Nightmare, Manifested

-Daniel-

I grabbed the back of my neck, shaking out some mental exhaustion from the past three days. Turns out, setting up a necromantic ritual was hard work. Now that I understood the process, it made Torix's first blood sacrifice all the more impressive.

Even against mindless silvers and a few not so mindless eldritch, the setup proved difficult. It began by setting up a three-mile wide circle of runic inscriptions. To my surprise, the metal matrice that the silvers created actually made that part much more manageable. Dirt would've washed away before we finished. Metal stayed strong even when stomped on.

Without having to worry about the markings, I finished that part in half a day. On the other hand, gathering some semi-intelligent eldritch proved difficult. I actually had very few suppressive techniques at my disposal. For the most part, I specialized in lethality

when interacting with eldritch. Finding the right mix of toughness and intelligence was trying for that reason.

Torix scoped out a few prospective dungeons with our limitations in mind. After passing through four of them, we found targets suiting our needs. Within the countryside of Giess, a few stone angels actually enslaved a village of espens.

These eldritch put the espens through pretty brutal living conditions, mirroring labor camps. These were relatively strong eldritch, sitting around the level four thousand mark. For me, it was child's play to beat them down into submission.

I simply floated over the village before landing in its center. Even without Event Horizon's crushing aura, my presence proved formidable. Wary of me, the angels attempted some intimidation.

Said intimidation failed.

A few cracked faces and broken noses later, they fell in line. That worked to our favor since the stone angels suited the ritual for a variety of reasons. They each owned undying bodies, meaning old age wouldn't get them any time soon. They proved plenty killable though as long as enough trauma was inflicted.

On the other hand, that immunity to father time gave the angels tremendous vitality and loads of memories. That worked to our favor regarding Torix's ritual. Without needing to find any other groups of eldritch, we transported them towards the ritual site via Spear's warps. Once there, we prepared the mana for the ritual to take place.

It took a few hours, and Torix was once again floored by my mana generation. At this point, he argued it was a selling point for the guild as a whole. I could fly in, charge a blue core, then zoom out before the day was over. Profitable business strategies aside, the final portion of the ritual was the most straightforward part.

Torix needed a tough, mana pliable object for his phylactery. I took out a chunk of myself and melted it down into a dodecahedron. Once made, the ritual was ready to take place.

Around us, we surrounded ourselves with the dense, abundant life of the silver's territory. We cleared the field of spires within the ritual site, giving an open view of the



sky. Around us, Torix controlled a vast army of silvers on the outskirts of the ritual site. I created golems of metal using quintessence for him to drain from. Combine that with the gargoylic angels, and the sheer volume of life mirrored a compact city.

I extended the Rise of Eden outward, using life creation all around us. A swarm of color expanded from the metal as quintessence rushed into the expanding jungle around us. After several minutes of growing a field of developing life, I added to this density further. The Rise of Eden even strengthened those here, giving them more life force.

Torix took the dodecahedron towards the center of the site, getting his mindset ready for the transference. I followed him, choosing to stay silent so he could organize his thoughts.

Torix floated the dodecahedron onto the monolith's centerpiece. It hovered over the central pillar, the red steeple made of congealed bloodstone, a kind of organic crystal. Intricate linework traced its surface with deeply etched lines spreading out from it. As the centerpiece, it acted as the ritual's heart.

Both of us standing beside it, Torix inspected the dense jungle around us,

"You've become rather adept at creating life. It's rare for an individual to create it with this sheer amount of volume. In fact, creating your forestry in these barren landscapes, it feels surreal as if living out a dream at times."

I raised my eyebrows, "I just have a lot of mana to swing around. I'm honestly not all that technical with quintessence yet."

Torix peered around,

"Perhaps, though it's impressive nonetheless. I know that individuals with large mana pools tend to struggle with finesse in regards to their sorcery. It's the same as coordinating an army of a hundred versus an army of ten. The more you have to control, the more difficult control becomes."

I cupped my chin, "Maybe that's why I make too many crabs sometimes."

Torix cackled before scoffing, “You’re more crustacean than human if we dwell on the topic. Your armor is a shell at this point, guarding the softer insides, much like an exoskeleton.”

I shook my head, “It’s more than a shell now. It’s my blood, my bones, and my skin. I am it, and it is me.”

Torix tilted his head, “How does your heartbeat then? Sweat as well, how does that work?”

I shrugged, “I haven’t sweated really since my last evolution. I don’t think there’s an ounce of water in me anymore. Besides all that, what about you? Do you really know how you stay alive in a body like that?”

Torix stared at his dry, cracking form, “Hm...Perhaps some questions are better left unanswered. Now, we’ve prepared the recipients. The more living individuals we may fit within this circle, the better. You obviously took that candidly considering the throng of individuals here.”

Torix gestured towards me, staring down, “I understand this last requirement of the ritual is staggering, yet I still ask it off you. The final piece of the phylactery process will require a primary energy source to act as an impetus for the process.”

I rolled my hands, “Yeah, you said something about some lifespan, right? I’m ready for it.”

Torix met my eye, “That is precisely correct. This will require upwards of a thousand years of your lifespan, Daniel. This is a serious commitment. You could easily die despite your vitality. I wouldn’t ask this off you, but hopping between the bodies will be impossible otherwise. I simply lack the skill I would otherwise need.”

I waved my hand, “It’s actually not that big a deal. I got this perk forever ago. It gives me one year of life for each eldritch I kill that’s over level 1,000. I’m sure that counts for silvers and Hybrids too. In fact, I think have more than one. It’s hard to remember. Either way, I got wayyyy more than a thousand years left in me regardless.”

Torix coughed into his hand, “Ok...Well then, I suppose it will sting a bit. What are a mere thousand years in the face of the Harbinger of Cataclysm? Nothing, apparently. I assume we’ll begin the ritual now then?”

“Sounds good.”

Torix pulled out his grimoire, turning towards me. A few pages later in Torix’s tome, and he began the ritual to lichdom. A hollow, draining sensation encompassed me as a dark aura gripped my soul itself. Torix murmured,

“This is a dark medium used to channel the life force. It acts as a ‘room’ for my soul to inhabit within the phylactery. The more you feed it, the more it will grow. This strengthens the structure of it, allowing me to expand my potential over time. Just feed it the bare minimum for now. We can develop it later if need be.”

I gave him a thumbs up, “Of course.”

The dark thing began siphoning energy, expanding with each bit of life force I gave it. It burned a bit, like stepping into bathwater that was too hot. In classic Daniel fashion, I stuck to a reasonable amount of life force. With a connection fully established, I gave it a substantial chunk of my life force.

I underestimated how much I had at my disposal. A wave of vitality deluged towards the phylactery. Torix strained out his words, “I told you to send as much as it needed.”

I let my hands slap against my sides, “Look, man, I didn’t even give it half.”

The phylactery laughed with glee. A few thousand years, and it began choking on the flood. After about twelve millennia’s worth of life later, give or take a few centuries, the medium could take no more. Waves of blue mana flooded out of the monolith, falling into the metal below. Torix scratched the side of his head,

“Huh...that was...fast. Any estimates on the life force?”

I gave Torix a thumbs-up, feeling a bit drained, “Plenty.”

Torix shrugged, "I'd rather you not overdo it, but I'll accept any extra you've given. Now, let's begin the controlling process. With two minds, this will prove simpler than me finagling this medium on my own. This is dependent on the amount of life force-fed to the creature, however. You fed it more, so it will prove more difficult than normal."

I pointed at the translucent, spooky specter, "Do we like...suppress it?"

"Ahem, essentially, yes."

My armor grinned at the ghoulish ghost, and I molded Event Horizon over it, condensing the aura over the thing. I thundered while pointing at the soon-to-be phylactery,

"Get in there before I make you drown in your own ectoplasm."

The spirit backed into the geometric object. It infused into the structure, permeating the metal as if its life depended on it. Torix shook his head,

"This entire process is far more anticlimactic than when I first accomplished it centuries ago."

I shrugged, "Eh, I'm not here for theatrics."

Torix brandished a hand, "Neither am I, though I do enjoy them at times. Now-" Torix looked at his status,

"A few new reports from Althea, hm? I'll read them over once we've completed the ascension. Now, I will transfer my soul into this object. The chance of success is higher than normal, considering the power of the object and the amount of life in it. Your restraining tactic seemed rather potent as well, so it shouldn't require much to resonate."

Torix took a deep breath before holding it up and staring at me, "If I dissipate, then I'll return to my own original phylactery. If you can pick up the phylactery and hear my voice, then it was a success."

Torix's current form cracked, his bones ebbing out darkness. The phylactery hovered over the monolith. I pulled myself out of the massive circle's range, making sure I didn't catch myself in the ritual.

It wasn't because it would kill me. Quite the opposite, actually. My high willpower and sheer volume of mana acted as a stonewall against the ritual's process. It basically peeled the minds, memories, and mana from the individuals within the circle, leaving husks behind. This took time and required the mental effort of the creator of the phylactery.

One by one, Torix needed to strip the minds of each individual trapped within the zone. Of course, for weaker minds this was simple. The stronger the mind, the more difficult this process became. Finding the right balance between mind's worth taking yet soft enough to wrestle down was essential. It made Torix's previous effort all the more impressive.

He must have really hated that rival clan. Like, really hated them.

That aside, I watched as the ceremony began. From the outskirts of the massive circle, darkened mana crept into the runic lines of the ritual. The aura of the ritual carved into the sky, the darkness eating the light.

With each moment, bodies fell one by one. The artificial life fell, no fight in them to hold on. The silvers proved similar, their grotesque, instinctual natures crumbling to the calculating, developed mind of Torix. When the angels began falling, Torix's pace hardly slowed. That surprised me the most.

The insidious, practiced ability reminded me where Torix planted his roots. A necromancer through and through, he ripped the souls and minds of his victims apart. Within a few hours, he completed the ritual, his mind magic unbelievable.

Each conquered mind funneled into the monolith, the crystallized bloodstone radiating. From each body, more blood drained into through the engraved cracks in the metal. From the monolith, the souls coalesced into a shifting orb of liquid blue. The dozens of mana stones littered about drained into the ritual as I fed dominion mana into the site.

Torix laid on his knees at the monolith's foundation. As if worshipping, he prayed to it before his body crumbled into ash. The shifting orb of blue rippled before siphoning

into the dodecahedron of metal. In a masterful display of control, he funneled mana without excess or waste despite the overwhelming volumes of mana at use.

As it came together, the bloodstone beneath it cracked. It cracked, leaking blood onto the ground of the ritual site. A pool of blood spread from the melting pillar. It was time.

Flying over, I pulled Torix's new body from my personal storage. The darkened metal lustered in the sun, polished more than mirrors. I hovered over the pool of blood, waiting for a moment. A telepathic tether inched into my conscious, and Torix beamed,

"We succeeded. This phylactery dwarfs my previous incarnation. My mind can expand without bounds, and I will face no limit. I will be eternal."

Torix's voice carried the edge of unrestrained joy. It was an almost manic happiness, the kind only seen once in many years. I couldn't help but get a giddy grin on my own face hearing how damn happy the old guy was. I pointed at the darkened skeletal construct,

"Are you ready?"

"Yes. Now is the best time to achieve resonance. Dip the body into the blood. I will do the rest."

I did so, and the body submerged into the pool as if dipping it into a bottomless depth. I hovered towards the phylactery before placing it over the blood pit. Right as I lowered it into the blood, Torix murmured,

"Wish me well, disciple. It is my time to ascend."

I gave him a nod, "Good luck."

As I set the phylactery into the pool, I hovered away from it. Seconds passed with nothing happening. I glanced around, wondering when the process would begin. Wondering if the operation failed, a plopping sound echoed into the open field of metal.

A bubble of red burst. The blood boiled. The sanguine pit released a red vapor into the air above. The ground around me quaked, the metal around the hole shifting in color. The light dimmed, eaten by the forces within the blood pit. I gave the abyss more space. As I flew off, the air around the ritual spiraled.

The clouds dispersed from above. As they splintered, light did not leak down from above. An umbral pillar radiated down, permeating the pit in the dark. Dominion mana rippled out in waves, world bending to the primal might of the ritual.

This metamorphosis continued expanding in influence. In a circle around us, a shadow grew over the forest of spires. Glistening metal turned into shaded spines. The horizons faded as the darkness crept over the space around us. Time shifted, slowing down. The world itself protested at the aberration taking place, a low howl echoing in the wind.

This howl evolved into a percussive drone. The droning rippled across the countryside, pounding in my ears like a chorus of wailing. It devoured the other sounds, sending chills up my spine. I shivered, a coldness leaking into our surroundings. A looming shadow of death crept over the long shadows of the land.

It infected every creature and mind for miles. I shook my head, a smell of iron, blood, and death reaching me. The cold wind seeped through my armor, into my skin, and deep into my bones. It was the kind of cold you couldn't fight. It was the kind of chill that dimmed your vision and numbed you.

The pit of sanguine stood out among the blot of black. Clear as the sun in the sky, this red blot etched shrunk into a finite point. From the pit, the construct rose. Surrounding the skeletal frame, the light around it darkened. The mere presence of it altered day to night.

Far above us, black lightning erupted from the clouds in the distance, draining life and vitality from everything it touched. The droning ceased. All sound for miles ended, my ears left ringing. A dense miasma crawled over the surface of Torix, the runic carvings bleeding darkness that sapped the life around it.

When the blood drained into the steel, Torix's soul bonded onto the metal. The dark skeleton convulsed as Torix strained under the pressure of the dominion magic. He fought with the defiance of a warrior. He stood against the flood of energy, a conqueror in his own right. Minutes passed before I grew worried.

I landed beside him, walking up to help. The construct raised a hand, a shiver racing up my spine. A voice replied,

“No...I am worthy...I am able.”

It was Torix, no doubt, but it sounded altogether different. It was as if someone alloyed his voice with aged iron, making it command respect.

I took a step back, respecting his wishes. As the volatile miasma sunk into the blackened bones, it looked as if it would consume him. For a moment, despair crawled out of my chest as my stomach dropped.

It lasted but a moment. A wind erupted from the darkened skeleton, Torix's soul snapping in place. The resulting shockwave sent an impact that bent spires for miles in every direction. I withstood the impact, anchoring myself with gravity. The deafening boom radiated outwards like a meteorite striking Earth. The clouds in the sky bent outwards in a circle, giving way to the finalization of Torix's reformation.

The skeletal figure fell down onto the ground, light peaking from the sky above as the ritual completed. Standing from the sand, darkness radiated out of Torix's new body. He ebbed an aura of absolute death and carnage. A darkened warlord and archmage, he stood, a preeminent figure amongst the endless spires.

As he rose, Torix lifted a hand. Dominion welled into his palm as he let out a haunting laugh. It continued until it echoed onto the horizons around us. Fear raced up my spine, but I smiled all the same. This was it. This was who Torix really was.

The metal lich glanced around, his figure imposing. I pulled the cloak I made for him from storage. He took it, brandishing the cape over his shoulders. He raised a foot before stomping into the metal. It tore under his heavy heels, dominion magic seeping into the ground.

Around us, the field of corpses rose from the ground. Summoned from death, they turned towards Torix, lunging onto one knee. The summoner held his head high as he stared at his forming army. The silvers carried tracing lines of dark mana. The stone angel's skin cracked, exposing their darkened insides.



They bowed to their leader. They carried the marks of Torix's reformation, their frames radiating with mana. Torix turned towards the horde and me, spreading his arms. He commanded,

"I am undeath given form. From my darkness, blight will follow in my wake."

He turned towards me,

"Let us show them what occurs to those that oppose us."

## Chapter 243: A Discourse

Torix –

As the resonance finalized, I stared forward with invigorated senses. Strength. Power. Might. I was all these things and more. Is this what Daniel felt at all times? The sheer vitality and mana generated defied all convention. It was as if I siphoned into the body of a deity, stealing all that came with said implication.

In order to test my newfound capacities, I stomped my heel onto the metal flooring of the silver's territory. It caved underfoot, and my dominion mana flowed with the fluidity of mastery. The sheer volume of mana coursed into the land, drenching it in my abyssal influence.

I seized control of the bodies, each of them coming to life. Given form anew, they rose with utter allegiance. I stood tall, my confidence soaring towards the heavens.

I spoke with a new voice,

"I am undeath given form. From my darkness, blight will follow in my wake."

Daniel stared at me, his stoic persona cracking with a semblance of emotion. Taken aback, I composed myself. Now was not the time to be overwhelmed. An example must be set, and I was the one to do it. I turned to him.

"Let us show them what occurs to those that oppose us."

Daniel raised a hand,

“Hell yeah man, we did it. It’s about damn time.”

I followed suit, raising my arm,

“But of course. What else is to be expected of us?”

We clapped our hands with enough force to crack concrete. I recoiled from it, taking a step back. Grabbing my wrist and staring down, visions of a snapped arm terrified me. I envisioned my bones shattering into a thousand pieces, yet my new arm held strong. It absorbed the force without worry.

I stared at my palms, the bones interlocking smoothly. I clenched my hand into a fist, stunned by the sheer forces I dealt out at every passing second. I peered back up to Daniel,

“Is this what it’s like at all moments?”

Daniel gave me a matter of fact glance,

“Yup.”

Concise and straightforward as always. I took a moment, staring at the army around us. I bent over, inspecting the metal I broke through with a stomp. In the heat of the moment, I did such a thing. It astonished me now. Even my system enhanced body could never have handled such forces. Now I played with metal as if it were putty.

No scratch littered the surface of my foot, either. I was even more resilient than expected. Excellent. I grabbed the steel, peeling it in my fingers as if it were moist dough.

I cupped my chin, “Well...perhaps there were merits to being physically imposing after all.”

Daniel patted my back, “I can’t wait to see what you can do now.”

I raised myself back up, “I as well. Thank you for this, disciple. A master could ask for no greater gift.”

“Eh, I do what I can.”

With a moment of silence passing between us, I turned towards the monolith’s previous position. As the ritual dictates, there my phylactery sat exposed to those around us. It was strange. Even in the open, it felt far more secure than my previous one had. Considering the tenacity of the material that composed it, I was likely right in that assumption.

I grabbed the dodecahedron, tossing it over towards Daniel. He put it in his pocket dimension. As I dwelled on the ability, the utility of it astounded me. Smuggling, absorbing energy, even deflecting strikes, it was an awe-inspiring talent.

I peered down at myself, wondering if I owned similar abilities. The closest phenomenon I garnered was a sensation of ownership over the space I occupied. It felt as if I ‘owned’ an area around me. Upon closer inspection, I comprehended my misunderstanding. The space I owned was subservient to a much larger force.

I peered up at Daniel. Ah, of course. His aura.

He created a far greater stranglehold than I could enact. He was the origin of this material. It seemed more than likely that he acted as the premier space owner. In fact, this body of mine was a mere shadow when compared to the original.

A realization sparked in my mind. This pale imitation extended my own abilities by leaps and bounds. The distance between us...it mirrored the difference between an ant and a lion. While mind-boggling, I found those thoughts comforting.

This apprentice and ally of mine, he carried this kind of frame. Now I owned something similar. New possibilities popped into my mind as Daniel pursed his lips,

“Alright, what next?”

I steeped my hands, “We should replan our battle stratagems. This new body of mine, it has extended my abilities by many orders of magnitude. It allows us to battle differently than before. I may now join the fray on the frontlines without much in the way of risk.”

Daniel nodded, “Yeah, sounds about right. We’ll be getting a new tactician on the ground, which helps a lot. I’m a lead by example kind of guy, but actually managing the troops is difficult.”

Daniel was wrong about that. His tactical prowess showed itself in the last battle with his newfound mana bombs. That alone saved many of our soldiers. I shook my head,

“I believe you’d be more than capable of doing so, but you already bear a tremendous burden in regards to our martial might. By alleviating that burden, I may unleash both of our full potentials, one tactical and the other militant.”

Daniel rolled his shoulders as if getting ready to fight at that moment,

“Yeah, let’s hope so. I mean, just imagine having each of their dead give us a new soldier. That’ll show the Adairs what it feels like having their own turned against them. It will be a taste of their own medicine.”

I cackled, “Oh, there will be much to discuss, but before we do so, I must access my status. There are notifications to parse through and little time to do so.”

“I’ll make some bombs or something.”

He prepped mana bombs while I opened my own status. I made sure he could view it at the same time. As I stared at the literal first number I found, I fell backward.

It was incredible.

Torix Worm, the Harbinger’s Erudition(lvl 9,000)

Strength – 2,132 | Constitution – 2,419 | Endurance – 4,160

Dexterity – 1,104 | Willpower – 19,702 | Intelligence – 28,052

Charisma – 14,264 | Luck – 11,153 | Perception – 6,829

Health: 1.2 Million/1.2 Million | Health Regen: 2.4 Million/min

Mana: 3.8 Million/3.8 Million | Mana Regen 4.4 Million/min

Stamina: Infinite | Mass: 601,302 pounds | Height: Actual – 9’6 (2.74 meters) | Damage Res – 97.5%

Phys Dam Bonus – 32,092% | Damage Bonus – 45%

I stared in utter disbelief. Daniel squatted down, resting his arms on his knees. He inspected my status,

“Huh... You’ve gained more willpower than anything. It actually looks like my multipliers for my stats carried over for you. That’s gotta be a nice bonus. Didn’t expect that.”

I gestured to my status with a hand, “How did my willpower over double? That’s absurd.”

Daniel shrugged, “There are all kinds of perks and multipliers involved with my status. You didn’t have them, now you do. If I’m honest with you, I’ve always wondered why Schema was so damn generous with stats to me. This explains it.”

He banged his chest as if knocking on a door. It let out a metal ring,

“This stuff, it’s easier to manipulate than what a normal person is made out of. I mean shit, the bonuses carried over to you. If that’s the case, then the bonuses must be pretty

easy to maintain and keep up. That also explains why Schema's ok with me abusing my Orbital bombardments."

Daniel stared up at the sky, "I'm easy to keep and hold onto, I guess."

He offered me a hand, so I accepted said offer. After rising, I attempted to compose myself,

"While perhaps unbefitting a lich, one cannot blame me for reacting in such a manner. I am over forty times more durable, my mana pool tripled, and my mana regen increased by twentyfold. This...this is unbelievable."

Daniel gave me a nod, calm as always, "Yup. Did you get any other notifications along with them? You never know what else carried over."

I peered at my status updates once more. I found surprises in spades.

New Body Gained! The Following bonuses have been unlocked!

Dimensional Pliability – + 1,000 to level cap | Your body is simpler to adjust with mana, making your level cap increase due to this efficiency. Dimensional Wake – You've gained the ability to extend yourself into your surroundings, manifesting as an aura | Current Aura: Cerebral Corrosion – Allows the user to dominate the minds of others by slowly draining their willpower and resistance. This applies to both the soul and mind of enemies and allies alike. It also enhances dominion magic against effected targets, including but not limited to, telekinesis, telepathy, gravitation, etc. A Dimensional Construct – Your frame is composed of an odd substance coursing with vitality. This grants additional multipliers for specific attributes! +60% to Endurance and Willpower. +20% to strength and constitution. +10% to all other stats. +300% to health and mana regen. +100% to Health and mana. Stamina is no longer a limiting factor. 5% of mana added to mana regeneration...

These additions explained much of the nonsense on my status sheet. I cupped my chin as I read through them, "Ah...yes...This would explain most of this insanity." I peered at the final notification. New Trees unlocked! | Archmage(0/5,000) | I crossed my arms as I spotted this new tree. Five thousand entire points for a single tree? It was absurd on many levels. It outdid my class unlock for becoming a speaker. Perhaps that was precisely what it was – another class for me. Considering the level limit of being a Speaker, this would suit me quite well and extend my limits. I selected it, having

already cleared out my remaining trees long ago. Having been obsessed with learning for ages paid its dividends, after all. I earned many skill points over the years, which in turn gave me many tree points. This was how I unlocked a class before Daniel. I simply had more skill points earned over my lifetime. Up till now, I never owned enough skill trees to invest in, however. Schema tended toward unlocking trees based on achievements. This meant I lacked many trees to place my horde of tree points into. This, in turn, suited me quite nicely in that regard. Without a word, I placed 4,281 points into the tree. While not owning all the points for it, I held more than most. The refreshing sound of Schema's voice boomed in my mind, his prerecorded messages refreshing to hear after all these years. This world is one dictated on the principle of knowledge. Knowing an enemy is understanding their weaknesses, strengths, and essence. You've understood this concept for many years, your diligence for study impeccable, your intention for research unwavering. This will prove your greatest asset in the trails to come. + Doubled ease of creation for unique magical skills + Doubled ease of creation for mythical level magical skills + Doubled ease of gaining magical affinities The nature of your mind gives you a sensitivity for the subtle. Details that appear meaningless to others evolve into vital insights when seen through your eyes. These insights are gained not through talent alone; they are the result of study. In any undertaking, your skills will prove critical. + Doubled ease of creation for magical Legendary skill + Doubled learning speed of magical legendary skills + Doubled learning speed of magical mythical skills

Others decided they would swing swords or fire bullets until their hands bled. You read until your eyes bled onto the page. Anyone may swing a hammer or block with a shield. Few carry a devotion to diligence. Few carry a resolve to learn.

In a vast sea of complexity, you are the beacon that guides the blind to shore, a harbor for lost minds and lost souls.

This is power incarnate.

+ Doubled ease of gaining higher tier magical affinities

+ Doubled ease of Grimoire use

+ Unlocks advanced spell formulae for Grimoires and spellbooks

The payoff remained at the very end of the tree as it had with the Speaker tree as well. Even considering that these benefits were superb. Developing affinities was by far the most elusive magical endeavor, my own mastery of origin and augmentation lacking in

many regards. Easing that process might allow me to create the primordial mana that Chrona uses. Perhaps even the ascendant mana Daniel implements.

One may dream.

The spell formulae remained the most immediately useful benefit. Developing complex spells within a grimoire was a foolhardy venture. The sheer complexity often overwhelmed even the most studious individuals. It was the same as explaining to a child how to walk. The intricacy involved was simply too much.

I found far better success merely allowing the children to gain a ‘feel’ for walking instead. This tapped into a primal part of the brain controlling motor function. This composed much of the mental power in sentient species, and tapping into it was a wise choice. This was actually how Daniel progressed in his own magic.

Speaking of which, I glanced back up towards the titan. He patiently waited on my status updates. He raised an eyebrow as I met his eye,

“What did you find?”

“Much that will be useful for us. I believe I’ve unlocked the class of an Archmage. I will need more time to fully unlock it, but it appears interesting, to say the least. If my assumptions are correct, then it is an upgrade to the Speaker class.”

He put his hands on his hips, ““Huh, you can upgrade classes?”

“I would assume so given the nature of this skilltree.”

Daniel sighed, “Yeah, I’ve got a class to unlock too, and it is a pain in the ass to finish.”

I dragged a hand down my face, “Tell me about it. It seems we’ve come to the same conclusion regarding class unlocks. They’re more than merely frustrating.”

Daniel grabbed his fists, one after the other. It was a subconscious habit he developed long ago, and I doubt he was fully aware of it. He turned towards the edge of the silver’s territory off in the distance,



“Let’s stop there. Complaining’s a bad habit. You ready to head out?”

I nodded, “But of course, though, I believe there are a few reports from Althea I must parse through. They’re listed as urgent.”

I opened the status, and as I read the reports, my jaw went slack,

“This is...unfortunate.”

Daniel –

Ah shit, bad news. I crossed my arms, preparing for the worst.

“What went wrong?”

Torix shook his head, a bit of his new dark aura blurring the air around him,

“It states here that they’ve found circumstantial evidence that’s rather critical of Schema.”

I frowned, “Circumstantial evidence that supports a biased position? That just means bullshit.”

Torix waved a hand, “While normally I would agree, this report includes some of Schema’s wrongdoing that we’re aware of.”

“Huh, really now?”

“Indeed, it mentions how certain worlds are being eldritchified to get rid of unwanted races or influences.”

I scowled, “Like what happened to Hod’s homeworld?”

“Precisely. Since we know that at least one of the propositions in these documents is true, it means the other proposals gain validity.”

I shook my head, “Damn...Alright, what’s left then?”

“There are two other claims here. The first I’ll mention is the mana farms. Here it mentions many high profile mages disappearing at random. All of them carried tremendous mana generation, and therefore it concludes they are being used to power Schema’s system.”

I scoffed, “Uh, no. That’s impossible.”

Torix leaned back, “To dismiss it so rapidly, perhaps you may explain where your confidence stems from?”

I pointed at myself, “My mana generation is literally thousands of times higher than anyone I’ve ever met. From what we’ve seen, I’m very responsive to Schema’s alterations too. Despite all of that, it takes an enormous amount of time to implement even small adjustments onto me.”

I lowered my hand, “If that’s the case, then there’s no damn way normal mages could power the system. If anything, I think Schema is burning matter for energy like Yawm or Helios. If that’s not the case, it’s coming from a different dimension or something like that.”

Torix nodded, “Hmm, a logical manner of thinking. I would agree, yet I find myself wondering how you understand the mana constraints involved with system augmentation. Is there an elaboration in order?”

I pointed at my runes,

“This is what Schema’s using to enhance people. Runes. The big AI in the sky probably has a huge database with specific cipher inscriptions for every individual. He pumps mana into those inscriptions based on the amount of ‘experience’ someone’s earned. I can’t think of any other way he does it, at least.”

I tilted my head, “That’s actually why I think Schema increased my level cap. He’s pumping the same amount of mana as he would for a normal person. I just end up using it more efficiently. Once again, just a guess.”

I raised my eyebrows, “I mean, if we use that line of logic, it’s also why you have my bonuses. Your new body just uses mana and the cipher better.”

Torix’s jaw went slack. He stayed silent for a moment. I waved a hand over his face,

“Uh, you ok?”

“Ahem, certainly. I was simply astonished. I’ve never deduced such a likely method of Schema’s enhancement. It was a mystery for me until you just dissected it in front of me with ease.” Torix stared at me,

“To have gained such insights into the inner workings of Schema, and to do so from such disparate observations...I must say, I’m impressed.”

I coughed into a hand, a bit embarrassed by the compliment, “I mean, I wouldn’t say it’s perfectly accurate. Schema might be using something else. That’s just my guesstimation.”

Torix waved a hand, “Please, don’t belittle your findings to me. That was a very sound and logical method of handling system augmentation. In accordance with Occam’s Razor, that’s almost certainly correct. I do find myself wondering what you meant by a cipher, however.”

I scratched the side of my face. It might be time to tell him about it.

“It’s a code that lets you change the laws of our universe. I use it. Don’t learn it, or else you’ll be exiled from Schema’s system.”

Torix raised a hand, “Ah, that’s why you’ve never spoken of it. Forbidden knowledge. I will pursue it no further per your wishes.”

I turned towards where Spear waited for us to return,

“Let’s talk while we walk.”

“Let’s.”

I turned towards the army before jumping from the ground. Torix paced onto a condensed ball of dominion mana, pulling himself up with it. We reached Spear, who helped us warp everything here to begin with. He meditated at the top of a flattened spire.

Several saysha beetles crawled over his armor, each of them confused by his existence. As we approached, Spear awakened. He stood, turning towards us while brushing the Saysha beetles off. Spear looked Torix up and down. Spear crossed his arms,

“Hm. You might be more imposing. Time will tell.”

Torix steepled his fingers, “Indeed, it shall.”

Spear stared for a moment before giving Torix a slow nod. Spear turned to me, “I like the change already. The lich is more confident, and confidence leads to victory.”

I pointed towards the army, “That’s exactly the plan. Those guys are going to help us out with that, but we have to get back to Elderfire.”

Spear gave a curt nod before leaping down onto the metal below. He crashed into steel, the matrices caving under his heft. After walking over towards the army, he cleaved through space-time. As the soldiers walked towards an empty side of Elderfire, I turned to Torix,

“Alright, so what else did they find in the reports?”

“Ah, yes, the reports.” Torix skimmed through them, “It also mentions that Schema is purposefully stalling eldritch research.”

I yawned, “Yeah, and?”

Torix fumbled his words, “W-what do you mean yeah and? This is a revolutionary discovery.”

“I’ll be honest, I’ve thought that ever since I met Yawm forever ago. He hypothesized the same thing, and his logic was sound. Considering how limiting Schema’s research and whatnot is, it only makes sense that he’s doing it for a reason.”

Torix waved a hand, “Then why haven’t you disclosed this information with us? Also, why haven’t we done anything about it?”

“Schema exiles anyone that doesn’t do what he wants when he wants it. I didn’t want you guys involved, and the information isn’t exactly helpful. I mean, at best, we risk our guilds and lives for a chance at changing Schema. At worst, we’re all exiled before we even get the chance.”

I shrugged, “It just seems like a lost cause. I mean, look everyone who’s tried. Yawm was a monster. The Adair Family is turning people into monsters. Everyone who’s tried ended up going way past the deep end. They’re insane, and not because they know Schema isn’t perfect.”

I rolled my shoulders,

“They’re insane because of what they’re willing to do to change the system in place. That’s why we’re working hard to stop them. How much do we need to know about them before they’re considered enemies?”

Torix cupped his chin, “Hmm, perhaps you’re correct on that account. I understand the need to put them down. I was simply feeling a bit left out is all.”

I grinned, “Now you know what it felt like when you streamed my fights without telling me.”

Spear turned towards us, “I find it odd. You both are very critical of Schema.”

I raised an eyebrow, “I understand what he does is hard. That’s why I’m helping out. I just understand where he could use some improvement. That’s all.”

Spear put his spears back into their magnetic sheaths along his back, “If so, then that is reasonable.” He turned to the shrinking horde, “The army is almost back in Elderfire. What’s the next course of action?”

Torix walked up to the portal, the desert contrasting the metal hellscape of the silvers. His legion of infused undead covered several dunes worth of sand, their numbers many. The lich turned towards us and cackled,

“We sharpen our claws and bloody our teeth for war.”

#### Chapter 244: To the Forefront

Torix and I walked through the portal, Spear following not far behind. As the hordes of undead marched into Elderfire, Torix and I let the populace know what was going on. Once the army amassed into a relatively uninhabited part of the city, we gathered our legion.

Well over a hundred gialgathens fought alongside us today. Torix situated our invasion point in a forested area for some reason. As he notched an X into the ground, I walked up while moving a vine out of my face,

“Why are we moving out from here instead of in the desert? The underbrush is in the way. It will slow us down.”

Torix clasped his hands, “We’re throwing the enemy off with misinformation.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Now that you mention it, I don’t know where or what we’re doing in this next city. I’ve been so busy with the lich thing that I don’t really know the plan.”

Torix raised a hand, “It’s quite simple this time when compared with our other assaults. The city we’re attacking is Fausel. It’s a city situated among the flowering plains. According to scouting reports from Althea, this town’s sewers are infested with Hybrids. Its defense actually outdoes the surface. It isn’t a practical plan to continue our launch point from beneath the surface.”

Torix shook his head, “Instead, we’ll be incorporating a different strategy. We’ll neglect your orbital bombardment in order to utilize my necromantic abilities. After warping into a larger building, we’ll swarm their forces and kill the espens and mind mages.”

I crossed my arms, “Why would we do that?”

“Orbital Bombardment would cull over a quarter of the town’s inhabitants instantly. Due to those repercussions, we’ll need to take a more targeted, specific approach this time. Fortunately, we’ve suitable alternatives arranged. Simply cull the mind mages, and I may wrestle control of the Hybrids. Once taken, we may use them against our enemy.”

My brow furrowed, “Wait a minute...you can take control of the Hybrids?”

Torix cackled for a moment, enjoying his big reveal. He tapped the edge of his umbral skull,

“I’ve already proven my ability to control silvers and eldritch. Hybrids are not so different. Considering this, I will need you to make a few adjustments towards this crown of thorns.”

He pulled his crown of thorns off, placing it in my waiting palm. Pulling out his grimoire, Torix turned it towards a later page,

“I’ll need you to embed this inscription as I inform the army of our plans.”

I lifted the book with a well of gravity before reading it over,

“Can do.”

We stepped through dense foliage, and I carved into the booklet with heated telekinetic points. I walked through vines, each of them snapping,

“I get not using my bombardment skill in the city, but that still doesn’t explain why we’re launching from this point.”

Torix gestured around us, “I’m working off several deductions. Considering the Adair Family caught wind of our sewer tactics, we’ll utilize a large building as a launch point instead. This will be done with a purpose in mind. We shall hide it enough that they won’t discover the portal easily. At the same time, it will be obvious enough for them to find.”

I pointed at his drawn X, “Then they’ll see a thriving jungle instead of a desert?”

“Precisely. This deception will prove necessary, as Althea’s reports note that Elderfire is on a list of possible locations for our base of operations. While low on the list, that fact ensures some measure of deference is necessary. Ignoring their information network will lead to our downfall.”

I nodded while moving all of my fingers at differing points for the runic drawing,

“We’ll lead them to some jungles on Giess instead of to the Rak’Sha desert. Smart.”

Torix gripped his hands into fists, “That’s my intention. Once staged, we’ll be staging a frontal assault after your bombs have been placed. This will be difficult considering the geography of the territory. Fausel’s surroundings are the flowering plains. They are situated upon a colossal plateau along the northern edge of the continent.”

Torix gestured to the jungle, “There, trees can no longer grow due to the lack of moisture. Wildflowers coat the ground to the horizons, however. It is flat as a table for miles in every direction, and this means aerial superiority is integral to our success. Given the suppressive nature of the Hybrid towers they use, we’ll need your mana bombs.”

I gave him a thumbs-up, “I have like forty of them ready to go.”

“Once planted, we’ll eradicate the spires in one fell swoop. At the same time, we’ll be utilizing your gravitational singularities to cripple their dreadnoughts. I shall assist our aerial forces by eliminating the mind mages on the vessels.”



I pursed my lips, “You can do that?”

Torix steepled his fingers, “But of course. I intend to use this body’s abilities to their fullest. Control is its greatest strength, and that shall be the knife I use to slit our enemy’s throats.”

I pointed at myself, “So what do I do after finishing off the dreadnoughts.”

Torix sent several messages as he spoke, “Simply support Kessiah and Krog’s healing. They and Schema’s forces shall ensure a far higher turnover for gained troops. Given the nature of our goals, that shall take precedence.”

I leaned back, “Wait a minute...I’m going to be healing people?”

Torix scoffed at me, “It shall be a first.”

“You can handle the fighting without me?”

Torix met my eye, “I’ve spent the past months honing my mind’s abilities and preparing a plan to use them. I understand your skepticism despite this. You’ve beaten me in individual contests of will in the past. Without meaning to demean you, those victories were due to your overwhelming base stats.”

He raised a hand, “Given my augmented willpower and this crown, I will be a force unequalled in that arena. That is the general gist of our plans. I intend on this battle being the genesis of my newfound abilities. I wish for it to be a beginning to be remembered.”

The lich radiated confidence in his potential in a psionic arena. Trusting him, I gave the guy a begrudging nod,

“Alright then. Lead the way.”

Torix turned towards a growing horde of gialgathens in the forest. He took deep breaths for a moment, unnecessary as they were. In all honesty, he was simply using the sound

of taking a deep breath to calm himself. Staring at the army, Torix looked like he was about to step into a fighting ring.

Having noticed his apprehension, I put a hand on his shoulder,

“Uhm, you ok?”

“Of course. There’s simply something I must do, and I am nervous about doing it.”

Huh. Torix usually didn’t get nervous.

“What is it?”

“A public discourse of our plans and intentions.”

“You mean a speech?”

“Ahem, yes.”

“I’ve got practice. I can do it. You don’t have to stress about it.”

“I know full well you can, and I thank you for the offer. However, I will be leading many of the troops. Knowing who I am is important for ensuring cohesion among our troops. It gives them a face and persona to follow when I give them orders.”

Torix peered at the army, “And in a way, this is a crux for me. I’ve lead undead armies, but never armies of the living. It’s actually far more intimidating to command sentient beings. This fear is partially why I’ve made you give the speeches in the past. I wish this to no longer be a weakness.”

Within his hollow eyes sockets, blue fires spawned. They mirrored the former flames of his old body. They blazed with intensity as Torix said,

“The resonance is complete, and at the precise time I anticipated. Excellent.”

I raised a hand, “Hm...Alright. Want some tips?”

He gave me an eager nod, “Oh, most certainly.”

I counted on my fingers, “Speak with confidence, remember no one knows you’re nervous, and have a plan of what you’re going to say.”

Torix scoffed, “I know that much of the issue.”

“A reminder never hurt.”

Torix sighed, “Indeed. Give me a moment to myself. I must collect my thoughts.”

I let the guy distress how he had too. I walked off as he sent out messages and orders. Our forces concentrated in the forested spot while I worked on the crown of thorns. It was a concise and straightforward conduit inscription, something I’d done a thousand times before for our soldiers. In fact, it mirrored the same markings we used against Yawm.

Yup, this was a psionic amasser. It would take several individuals with similar inscriptions and wield their mental influence using this as the hub. If I had to guess, this was part of why Torix was keeping an open portal towards Elderfire. Telepathy didn’t have infinite range, so the mages were in the city, wearing their own versions of this.

It was a risky strategy in many ways, but the payoffs were massive. If we succeeded, we’d gain a large portion of troops and save more gialgathens. It would be far better than just destroying the city like I did to Polydra.

It was a good plan.

Making a few subtle adjustments to Torix’s template, I leaned back against a knurled tree. Not long after, Krog arrived with Kessiah in tow. Several other people clad in power armor rode their backs as well. They wore painted blue crests on their chests. It was a symbol of a 2-D solar system from above. At the corners of the solar system,

gnawing mouths chomped at the planets. It must have been some symbolism of the eldritch.

Either way, the six individuals oozed a professional demeanor, each of them having a no-nonsense attitude. Krog carried them through the trees, weaving through the vines and underbrush. He landed with a subtle quake beside me. The general dipped into a deep bow,

“Commander.”

It took a second before I recognized he was talking to me. I coughed into a hand, “Ahem, as you were.”

His change in attitude was a stark reminder of what we were doing. Earning respect like this felt good, and having Krog recognize my efforts was motivating. Following up on his bow, Kessiah leaped off his back, and she gave me a quick salute. It was less sarcastic than I expected.

Eh, I’ll take it.

She introduced the six other soldiers,

“These are the Overseer’s guys. They’re pretty good compared to what I expected.” Kessiah leaned closer, cupping her mouth, “But let’s be honest, we didn’t expect much.”

The soldiers hopped off Krog’s back, undeterred with Kessiah’s teasing. They gave me a coordinated salute. I raised a hand, “Uh, all of you, at ease.”

They lowered their hands, saying in unison, “Sir, yes, sir.” One of them walked up, about half my height. She reached up a hand, “It’s an honor to serve under you, sir. Let’s give em hell.”

We shook hands, and I stared at the gesture, “Is it common where you live to shake hands?”

“No. We did research into your background. You’re a legend, sir.”

Awe shucks.

Kessiah walked over, “Don’t let it get to your head. Anyways, I’ve whipped these guys into shape. The healers know what to do for the most part against the Hybrids. These three are going with Torix to help warp our soldiers around.”

I gave her a nod, “Perfect. How are you holding up?”

She gave me a grin, “Just fine. I’m getting good at this healing thing. I actually beat these guys in a demonstration earlier. Felt nice.”

The one that shook my hand stood at the edge of the line of six. She nudged the member to her left, “That’s not saying much when you’re up against Shola.”

Shola stood a head taller than her, and she rolled her eyes for all they were worth while the group laughed. That was good. There was some comradery there. They would need it for what was to come. I looked between our new people and Kessiah. I turned a palm to her,

“After this next battle, I’m making you a suit of armor. It should help against the Hybrids.”

“Thanks. The enchanted ring and necklace already helped a ton.”

“Good. Now let’s get moving.”

They shuffled off, three of them walking over towards Torix and the other three hopping back onto Krog’s back. The grizzled gialgathen lifted a wing to me,

“You’ve done more for the gialgathens than any other before you. I wanted to thank you for all you’ve done and for giving us a fighting chance against these monstrosities. I would also like to apologize for my contempt for your actions at certain times. I was wrong to do so.”

Not even remembering the situations he was talking about, I scoffed, “Just make sure you guys never let yourselves get into this kind of situation again, alright?”

He met my eye, “We will never allow such a catastrophe to pass once more. Of this, I swear to you and on Emagrotha’s grave. See you in battle, commander. May they fall before us without effort.”

“Same to you.”

As they flew off, I walked over towards Torix. The lich was midway through giving the troops a rundown,

“Outside of those general tactics, remember this – stay out of contact with the Hybrids. They will crawl under your flesh and wear your skin like a fine robe. Remember that.”

They replied, “Sir, yes, sir.”

As I walked up, Torix turned to me. I handed the finished crown of thorns to him, and the lich inspected my handiwork, “That was quick, as expected. I see a few adjustments. Interesting. This will do nicely.”

The lich stood tall, placing the crown on top of his head. As he channeled his mana into the inscriptions, he sent a few messages towards mind mages in Elderfire. Torix spread out his hands, the flames in his eyes expanding.

The blue fire spread over towards his face and shoulders. Once fully assimilated, his aura saturated the entire area. The cobalt blaze singed nothing physically, but it stung my mind. It gave me a subtle headache, and it exhausted me.

At the same time, the fires soaked in the light around him. The glowing flare contrasted the shadowy surroundings, making his figure stand out among the greenery. He seemed taller, more commanding. The three warp specialists took a few steps back from the lich, unable to withstand the aura shift.

Torix lifted his hands, staring at them as they shook. A few moments later, the flames receded a bit, though they still rose from his frame. His hands ceased shaking. His aura condensed, his approach refining with each passing second. By the time he finished wrangling in the psionic energy, the difference was staggering.

It was like comparing a chunk of iron ore with a sharpened knife. The latter was far more deadly. Even gialgathens in the distance took note, many of them staring at the metamorphosis. Torix turned towards me before coughing into a hand,

“That was far more difficult than I anticipated, yet it was altogether necessary.” He looked towards the sky, “Ah, she has finally arrived.”

From above, Chrona’s silver skin shimmered in the sun’s light. Lean and lithe, she darted between the trees and canopy without slowing down. Touching down without so much as a sound, she glanced between us, a grin over her face,

“It is good to see you are both well.”

Torix gestured towards the X on the ground, “This will be the position you guard. Simply create a time field around this area, and cull any Hybrids or enemy forces that so much as look at it.”

I crossed my arms, “Man, so that’s why you’re not worried about leaving a portal open. We have the perfect defender right here.”

Chrona raised her head in confidence, “I will be a mobile fortress. This is our land, and it will remain that way as long as I am here. Just as well, it eases my heart to help the war effort outside of defending the city. These claws and teeth of mine were getting dull.”

Torix turned to me, “With this, our preparations are complete. It is time.”

With our forces pulled together, we stood in the jungle surrounding Elderfire. The sun belted down with intensity, the heat sweltering everything for miles. That is, except for a single point above the jungle’s floor.

There the light dimmed. It ran from a source of darkness, a creeping dread that infested those that saw it. Radiating blue flames, Torix stood over the treeline, his figure unmistakable. He lifted a hand, his sound amplifying magic taking effect,

“Those present, I ask you to listen.”

His request hit home like a command. The eyes of our troops locked into the shadowy figure, his sapphire hue contrasting the umbral outskirts of his presence. He raised a hand,

“I am Torix, a lich serving under Daniel, your commander. I am the one who commands and organizes the resources of Elderfire. I’ve worked tirelessly within my lair, ensuring that your kind has a chance against the Adair Family.”

He clenched his hand into a fist, “This shall continue no longer. Armed with a new body harder than steel, I shall join the battle with each of you. I may command the dead to rise and fight alongside you. Know this – each enemy you cull is another ally at your side.”

The gialgathens roared with approval, bolstered by the unexpected blessing. From behind us, the army of silvers and stone angels crawled out from the treeline. The gialgathens grimaced at the undead troops, but Torix raised his palms,

“Wait a moment. These are your new brethren. They shall take fatal wounds for you. They shall bleed in place of you. Where you would die, they shall die in your place.”

The gialgathens calmed down as the growing army of the undead skulked from the trees. Torix spread out his hands,

“I am also armed with a mind that can combat their mages. Many of you have tasted the sting of mental warfare. Know this as well – I too am armed with psionic abilities. I shall leave their forces scattered, and I shall turn their own footsoldiers against them.”

As the army amassed behind him, Torix gestured to his soldiers, “You all shall no longer fight against a superior force in number. We may take the city by storm, each of their dead given new life and purpose in our cause. With but one mighty surge, we can cripple them, scattering them like ashes in the wind.”



The gialgathens cheered once more. Torix steepled his fingers, his presence sending a chill up my spine,

“Armed with these new tools, we will do more than land a strike at their side; we will slice into their neck. Our battle in Fuasel will be different than any other assault before it. Here we make our first true stand against the enemy. We will expunge them to the last man and save nigh everyone of your lost. Our return will be triumphant, our heads held high.”

The mention of saving their fellow kind bolstered the troops, and the remark about heads held high made the soldiers do the same. They remembered what they fought for, and it reminded me too. Torix thought this speech through.

As the thousands of silvers stood behind him, the lich cackled. His laughter echoed across the dense undergrowth. As its haunting remnants faded, Torix steepled his fingers, his entire being exuding confidence,

“We shall show them what it is to have their own turned against them. We shall take back everything they have stolen from us. We shall retaliate with force unmeasured. We shall show them the might of the gialgathens. We shall stand over their empty graves.”

My hair stood on end as Torix seethed,

“And regardless of their wishes, they shall join the Harbinger’s legion even after death. Of this, I assure you.”

## Chapter 245: Tactics, Evolved

Motivating through fear, the gialgathens under our wing roared in approval. Without needing more preparation, Torix sent a few messages all at once, interacting with multiple statuses. Our forces moved all at once in an outpour of motion.

Chrona stood beside our primary gate along with Spear. Krog, Kessiah, and Schema’s troops stood in front of a legion of our own. Splitting into four battalions, I glanced at each of them with some confusion. Torix turned towards Spear,

“Slice it where we suggested.”

Spear walked over towards the marking on the ground while waving his spears. With a wicked slice, he cleaved reality. Torix turned to me,

“We’ll need your might, Harbinger.”

I paced over before pulling the tear further apart. Torix lifted his hands, “That is enough for now. Warp specialists enter.”

They walked through the gateway, an open field of flowers present. Torix followed, and I stared into the opening. For miles, there was nothing but flowers. Beside them, another eldritch den was locked behind a dungeon’s doors. It confused me since we weren’t near Fausel at all.

In a spur of genius, Torix generated a portal as far as he could. Layering their gateways, the other warp specialist closed miles and miles of distance in seconds. They continued until their portals reached a waypoint outside the city. Torix turned towards me,

“We’ll be entering an auditorium. You and I shall cull the Hybrids and other forces that lay within its bounds. Are you ready?”

I stepped forward, shaking off my surprise,

“Of course. Let’s go.”

The blue flames expanded over Torix as he stared down for a moment. A tense silence passed over the entire field and soldiers behind us. Torix stared up, sending several messages,

“Open the launch zone.”

A warp specialist lifted a hand, creating an opening into an auditorium in the city. Torix and I stepped in, finding a dozen Hybrids within its confines. Without waiting, I ran forward, grabbing two of them and smashing their skulls together.

At the same time, Torix pointed his hand at two of espen soldiers near the back. They convulsed immediately, overwhelmed utterly. Two of the Hybrids turned towards the others, dashing towards them. They rolled towards me, and I stomped them into pulp while crippling the others with Event Horizon.

Torix followed up, finding several other espen controllers. Torix stared at one of them at a time. Within a second each, he devastated their minds, forcing them to kneel. Their controllers crippled, the six Hybrids I killed then stood once more. Dominion mana oozed from their frame as the forces in this room stared at Torix, waiting for further commands.

I stared at the guy with newfound respect. We annihilated their installment in an instant.

The lich walked forward, his presence leaking into the entire room. He turned around, the espens opening their statuses. Torix peered at me,

“They’ve sent reports of how the auditorium is empty. I’ll also tamper with a few of their information channels. Considering they use psionic telepathy for communication, this should prove simple.”

I raised an eyebrow, “You can beat the entire psionic congregate?”

Torix raised a hand, “Oh please, I could never. These are fragmented intranets used in each commanding battalion. As long as they miss any differences in these individual’s mentalities after my takeover, we shall be fine. They will miss us entirely as if we were passing ghosts.”

I slammed my fists together, “Alright then, let’s go tear them apart.”

Torix turned to me, “Before we do so, give each of these individuals a few of your mana bombs.”

My eyes widened, “They’ll be suicide bombers.”

Torix cackled, “Precisely. This ensures a measure of precision that would otherwise be impossible. It also gives us ample time to enact other measures.”

The auditorium's occupants lined up, and I handed each of them three mana bombs apiece. They hid them under clothing or in their stomachs. Torix turned towards our portal,

“And so, it is now time to impart our forces across the city.”

Torix sent a few messages. Spear walked into the auditorium with the three warp specialists. The warp behind us faltered, disintegrating into nothing with a quick siphoning sound. Spear cleaved through dimensions once more, opening the portal without delay.

I followed suit, ripping the tear further. The three warp specialists lined up, and Torix raised a hand towards me,

“They may only open a single portal at any one point in time. This utility is tremendous, however. We may launch in four different areas. Now, to the next zone. It shall be a closed stadium. Are you ready?”

I grinned, “Always.”

The warp specialist took a deep breath, his breathalyzer humming in his suit of power armor. With another, far quieter sound than Spears portals, a portal opened up into an empty bathroom. Torix stepped through with me. We paced out into a hallway, dispatching several guards.

Torix didn't so much as maintain eye contact. With a mental will that was downright frightening, he walked with a casual air, our enemies falling as he passed. Passed the shaded hallway leading into the stadium, thirty or so espens with hundreds of Hybrids skulked about.

Torix's blue flames rose out from him as he turned to me,

“Each of them commands several Hybrids. We need not kill them, merely knocking them unconscious is all that is necessary. Given I cannot take on so many at once, dispatch of as many espens as you can.”

I stepped up to the edge of the hallway's shade. Camouflaged from the enemies, I reached out my hands, taking a moment to focus. My mana glowed red as I sensed each of the espen's locations. With a burst of effort, I swung my arms outwards, using a rapid jolt.

Dispersed across twenty different locations, telekinetic impacts jostled each of the espen's jaws. Whiplashed into unconsciousness, they tumbled to the ground. Their Hybrids glared around, no longer controlled.

Before chaos erupted, Torix already suppressed half of the remaining espens left. I took another breath, using another quick snap of my arms. Two of the remaining espens tumbled before Torix conquered the rest of them. One by one, the subconscious espens rose from the ground.

Torix cackled, "Who would've guessed you could simply knock them unconscious? I'd have anticipated something closer to decapitation."

I rolled my shoulders, stepping out onto the grassy field, "I could say the same for controlling so many people at once."

Torix followed me, the small army of individuals assembling in front of us. I stared at them in amazement,

"I never would've imagined you'd be this damn effective with your mind magic. This is incredible."

Torix scoffed, "You knocked twenty individuals unconscious with a flick of your wrists. Without that, they'd have informed their chain of command already."

Torix's blue flames expanded further, "In essence, our teamwork enables this profound effect to manifest. Now, it is time to decimate their forces further."

More warps opened after Torix sent a few messages. We rinsed and repeated this process two more times, taking over a hotel lobby and a wedding venue. At that point, Torix's blue flames radiated with such intensity that I gave the guy some space. Otherwise, I'd develop a ringing headache.

Standing there with a bit of difficulty, he raised shaking hands, “Who’d of estimated that only ten thousand minds was my effective limit...for now.”

He opened his status with a bit of difficulty,

“I won’t be able to maintain this large a force concurrently. Due to that fact, I’ll be implementing suicidal tactics for the controlled members. As well, it has been less than an hour since we’ve touched down, yet the mana crystals are in place, and our four launch zones are ready.”

Torix turned to me, “We only need you to station yourself atop the Eridian Tower. It gives an excellent view of the city, and it enables you to dismantle their dreadnought forces using your singularities.”

I gave Torix a nod. A few minutes and warps later, I found myself on top of said Eridian Tower overlooking the entire city. The flowering fields in the distance contrasted the blighted city. Hybrids skulked across the streets, each of them covered in debris. Hidden in pits, the gialgathen citizens were put into the orange soup and converted into the Adair Family’s denizens. Yeah, it would feel good taking these guys out.

After getting a grasp of the city’s layout, I put up a few pieces of furniture to disguise the glow of my mana, but I could still see the entire city. A few seconds later, Torix sent out a message,

Torix Worm, The Harbinger’s Erudition(lvl 9,007 | Guild: The Harbinger’s Legion) – Whenever you launch your first singularity, we shall bite into their exposed neck so to speak. Act whenever you are ready.

I took out about a hundred condensed mana crystals of raw ascendant mana. A pile of blood-red gems sat in front of me, darkened lines tracing each jagged gemstone. With the volatile energy source right in front of me, I raised a hand and charged a singularity.

They and Torix were in for a surprise.

Ten seconds later, I lobbed the first singularity at a dreadnought’s arcane cannons. The moment I finished the hungry void, I assimilated ten more crystals, draining them with my armor. My skin radiated heat as billions of mana coursed through my veins. A lesser

creature would've evaporated just handling this mana. Dimensional in scope, I used the energy with fluidity and precision.

The crystals wisped out of existence, and I lobbed another singularity at a different dreadnought. A living, breathing gravitational cannon, I shot out a dozen various shots at the battleships, taking aim and firing without taking time between each shot. It was a new tactic I thought up a while back.

And with it, I shattered the horizons.

Each cataclysmic jolt of gravitational energy rocked the ship and nearby buildings. So many dynamic, contrasting forces erupted that entire blocks of Fausel were flattened. The sheer volume of noise shattered every glass panel across the whole city. The land itself quaked under the monumental destruction. The clouds above ran from the outbreak, the sky blown outwards from the city.

The destruction itself wasn't the only impressive part. I aimed each shot at the powered cores and command decks of each vessel. Having been in them several times made this much more manageable. Practice also made perfect, and that let me tear the ship's guts out.

This meant each of the dreadnoughts fell without so much as a fight. At the same time, my other mana bombs erupted across the city. These proved far more effective than before. From within the massive, moving spires of Hybrid flesh, our suicide bombers hit them at their source. It wasn't from a point near the root. The explosions ripped out from within them.

This was the difference between swallowing a grenade versus having one blow up in the room beside you. One carried a chance at life. The other ensured an instant death. Between the singularity shower and the mana bombing, we eliminated their entire fleet in less than ten seconds.

Their forces weren't prepared for what was to follow.

As deafening booms echoed into the distant plains, our forces mobilized. From our three other strongholds, gialgathens flew out of the buildings. Torix's silvers ran out onto the streets, catching espens and Hybrids off guard. I even opened my dimensional storage, two dozen gialgathens flying out from the umbral portal.

We covered the skies with wings of wrath. From our forces, the enemies crumbled. The ferocity and speed of our attack, it rivaled a lightning bolt in intensity. Our enemies never stood so much as a shadow of a chance at even fighting back. Even without my intervention, the enemy forces crumbled. It was an instantaneous victory from the onset.

Our aerial superiority caused most of this. On the ground, gialgathens were clumsy, immobile things. In the sky, they might as well have been dancing by comparison. This gave them the ability to stomp out the Blighted Riders who crawled out of the dreadnoughts. They roasted in plumes of iridescent fire.

Since the enemy forces were crippled, I looked for Torix. I expected some sort of unexpected mishap, but no, our army didn't need me to fight. Lacking a direct need for a juggernaut, all I needed to do was follow behind Torix's rush. Before leaping out of the building, I inspected my surroundings.

I discovered a grounded dreadnought behind me. With an explosive dash, I shot out of the Eridian Tower. As I did, I cleaved the building apart, causing the massive, metal pillar to fall. Aiming its descent, I created another catastrophic blow to the enemy. The tower landed on the grounded destroyer, rupturing its forcefield.

Leaving that chaos behind me, I found Torix riding on the back of a Hybridized gialgathen. When and where he took the damn thing over, I didn't know. All I knew was that an ancient lich riding a cybernetic dragon was just...awe inspiring.

Around the dimensional necromancer, several dozen Hybrids ran out towards the orange pits. They tore open the orange slop and pulled gialgathens out. It was a clever workaround. Unlike our forces, the Hybrids were immune to the slop's effects. This meant they could pull the injured out easier than we could.

Torix wasted no time with this process, however. Instead, he moved onto the next pit the moment he finished. It was like watching an assembly line as Krog landed behind him in front of the piles of Hybridized gialgathens. Taking a deep breath, Krog unleashed a sonic roar that blew the orange slop off of the injured.

The healers and Kessiah leaped off Krog's back right after, running up to each individual. Kessiah tore open a dozen blood bags, healing several gialgathens at once. The other healers followed behind her, stabilizing the gialgathens.



The wind whistled in my ears as I slowed my descent. Landing near them, I sprinted up towards Kessiah's injured. She looked up at me, pointing at the healed gialgathens behind her,

"Just take the Hybrid out of them. That's all you need to do."

I gave her a nod, and she refocused on healing wounds. I honed all my intents onto removing the Hybridized parts of them. This was a necessary adjustment. Ever since Polydra, the gialgathens we saved were more and more hybridized. This left fewer and fewer gialgathens alive after we got them back to Elderfire.

To counter this, we needed a more effective and less haphazard rehabilitation process. With a near factory line level of efficiency, we achieved just that.

We saved hundreds of them.

Moving from pit to pit, Kessiah and I burned through the injured gialgathens. We took a broad stroke approach, doing as much as was needed for the gialgathens to live. The healers behind cleaned up any missing parts we left behind. This high octane, rapid approach over doubled the speed of our healing.

Even better, the silvers that Torix controlled carried the healed back through the open portals. Of course, the enemy forces attempted stopping us, but we implemented yet another new strategy of Torix's making. This plan was simple yet stunning in its effectiveness.

It came in three parts. The first part needed aerial superiority, which we established instantly. With it, our gialgathen forces could comb the city and use their flames at a distance. This kept an appropriate distance from the flyers and the Hybrids. Distance meant the close combat capabilities of the Hybrids were a moot point.

The next part of the strategy involved tactical use of the silvers and Hybrids that Torix controlled. Given his inability to control an infinite amount of them at once, Torix regularly sent them to their deaths. He then conquered more forces as needed. This tactic reduced the enemy's troops on two fronts.

At the same time, this recycling wheel of new troops meant Torix never needed to control tens of thousands of individuals at once. It worked around his limitations, letting him focus on his other responsibilities. It also fed into the third part of the plan.

By creating chokepoints of controlled troops and enemy troops, Torix generated clusters of enemies. Given our gialgathens could see these clusters, they set fire to every monster fighting in them. This decimated entire legions of troops as a group of gialgathens passed above. It let them scorch the earth and all the enemies involved. Mitigating contact, this approach saved most of our forces.

All these factors culminated in a ruthless war machine. Three hours of well-oiled destruction passed. By then, Torix, Krog, Kessiah, and Schema's sent troops stood near Fausel's auditorium. We were moving out the last of the injured gialgathens through opened portals.

I walked up to them, dragging a Hybrid behind me. It reared back to life in my hands before I smashed its skull in my fingers. In front of me, Torix sent several messages a second. He controlled the troop's escape with an enviable serenity. There was no nervousness or doubt; Torix understood what was needed.

In many ways, the battle acted as a turning point for the necromancer. Several of the people gathered here doubted him in the past, Spear in particular. Watching Torix in his element could change even the most biased party, and that's precisely what happened.

The entire group looked at him differently, Spear and Krog, in particular. It was like they looked down on Torix before, and now they looked up at him. Subtle as that change was, it stuck out to me. Even Kessiah, a long-time friend, seemed moved by Torix's display of competence.

In fact, the only person that didn't look at him differently was me. The reason for that was obvious – I never lost faith in the guy in the first place. Stepping up, I held back a few 'I told you so's.' Before I could congratulate Torix, One of Schema's troops walked up. Staring at the lich with reverence, the faceless trooper saluted Torix,

"If I may sir, I wanted to say this was a slick operation. The Overseer said we'd be with the best of the best. He wasn't exaggerating."

Torix closed his status, staring at him for a moment,

“I merely gained the correct stage to showcase my talents...but thank you for the recognition.”

Torix turned towards the destroyed city, “I must say, replicating this should prove feasible. In many ways, we’ve cracked the code for dismantling the Adiar’s operations.”

Spear glanced at the warp specialists then back to the lich, “Layering the portals in such a way...That was smart.”

Spear and Torix locked eyes for a second. It was one of those stares where a conversation took place. To me, it looked like Spear ate a fresh, delicious slice of humble pie. Torix saw through this as well. Torix’s blue eyes flared brighter as he looked down on the Sentinel.

For a trice, it looked like Torix was about to give Spear a lecture on respecting his elders. Before Torix did, the lich peered at me for a split second. Torix clenched one of his hands into a fist before letting it go. The ancient necromancer turned a palm to Spear,

“It’s an idea I’ve used to mobilize my undead armies in the past. It would be impossible without your warps.”

Torix turned towards the entire group,

“In essence, all of your talents culminated in our victory here today. Without each of you, this would’ve been impossible. As your commander, I wish to tell each of you that I could never have asked for a better fighting force.”

Several of the people here cheered. I smiled at the guy, proud of him. Glancing above his status, I found he made progress. He deserved it.

Torix Worm, the Harbinger’s Erudition(lvl 10,000)

Good feelings aside, we prepared to get out of here. Spear cleaved apart dimensions, and I pried it further apart. As we did, another portal opened in the distance. It was golden-hued, sending a chill up my spine. I turned towards everyone present,

“Enough chatter. Let’s move.”

Those here ran through the portal as Lehesion’s mammoth claws sliced our dimension apart. His golden maw reached out, one of his eyes meeting my own. I turned around, giving him a wave of my hand as I stepped through the portal.

Like bandits, we got the hell out before the cavalry arrived. Our army amassed in the jungled dessert, I glanced at everybody. Everyone stared at me with expectation. Not wanting to let them down, I raised a hand and thundered,

“We won.”

Simple as the words were, they carried a tangible impact. The gialgathens raised their heads, roaring out. Krog joined them, his entire demeanor changed from before. He looked hopeful and young as if the fight shaved a few decades of age.

That same feeling applied to every gialgathens here. We were guerillas before this fight. We might save some gialgathens, but everyone understood we weren’t actually winning the war. With Torix’s arrival, the situation changed, along with the mentality behind it.

Once the cheer ended, we handled the rest of what was left to do. The first part involved handling the injured and new members of Elderfire. Considering the size of the city, finding them homes grew in importance.

With that in mind, Torix and I handled the logistics involved. He registered the new members so we knew who was here. After that, we created homes for them. With my quintessence, I molded houses of stone, keeping to general, vertical layouts. I usually reinforced the walls with steel for stability. Combine that with a bit of added nature, and they had an Aztec feel to them.

Once stowed away, Torix organized a few meetings with them. Getting them accustomed to life here was an important task considering. Organizing food and other resources meant provisional efforts were needed as well. I handled most of the production efforts while Torix dispatched the resources.

Settled away, the gialgathens would begin life here. Torix actually gave them regimented schedules to remain here. I discovered the details as we constructed the homes. To get the gialgathens into Schema's system, Torix created a dungeon a day protocol.

Spear would warp the gialgathens into a silver infested territory and let them handle an eldritch infestation. This gave them experience and allowed us to gain more usable soldiers. Just as well, it was better than each of them wallowing at home.

In a way, I couldn't blame them for that struggle. After all, this transition was difficult for them. Their lives flipped upside down after the Adair Family made its move. Because of that, they grappled with the sudden shift to military life. Sitting at home didn't seem to help them transition, and we couldn't afford that level of care either. Just as well, I recognized this wasn't the best treatment for them. The thing was, it was the only kind of treatment we had. Desperate times called for desperate measures after all.

Several hours after the battle, we handled those here. Finally able to sit down and think for a minute, I walked up towards my temple cove. It was near Torix's evil lair, a few rooms down. I had nothing in the place outside of a few pieces of unfinished metal works.

For the first time in a long time, I laid down on my back, wishing I could sleep. Instead, I closed my eyes for a minute, clearing my mind. Even with my eyes closed, my status popped up in my line of sight. Someone sent me a message. I considered brushing it aside.

Pushing through the mental fatigue, I took a deep breath before opening my eyes and getting back to work. I could rest when I was dead anyway. I opened the message. It wasn't what I was expecting, not by a longshot.

Helios Nova, Ruler of Worlds(lvl 15,000 | Guild: The Empire | Ownership: Belka-623(planet), Meliton(planet) | Class: Fringe Walker | Titles: Winter's Wrath, Cold of the Void) – Daniel. The emperor wishes to meet you and Torix after your battle at Fausel. He understands if you lack the time for a meeting. That is why he wants to visit you. We lack knowledge of where you're situated, however. That is why I'm asking for the coordinates.

I understand if you're wary of open communications. Considering all that you're involved in, perhaps a personal meeting to discuss the details would suit you better? Inform me of where you would need to meet for your convenience.

I closed my status and stared at the wall for a moment. It looked like my appointment with the emperor came early. Why exactly?

I had no idea, but I was about to find out.

## Chapter 246: A Reprieve

I replied,

Daniel Hillside(lvl 10,750 | Titles: Harbinger of Cataclysm, Dimension C-138, The Living Multiverse, The Cleanser of Polydra | Guild Owner: The Harbinger's Legion| S-|) – Come on man, you don't have to be all uppity. If you're acting this polite, your ass must be on the line for me to meet up with the Emperor. Just consider this a favor for now. We can meet in my first city. You can ask Caprika for the info for where that is.

Within seconds, I got a reply,

Helios Nova, Ruler of Worlds(lvl 15,000 | Guild: The Empire | Ownership: Belka-623(planet), Meliton(planet) | Class: Fringe Walker | Titles: Winter's Wrath, Cold of the Void) – Of course. May we meet in three hour's time?

I sent back a 'sure.' I pushed myself back up as a cackling ebbed in from the other room. No doubt Torix got a message with something similar in it. Considering Helios's disdain for us before, this new attitude was more than just a little bit satisfying. That was doubly the case with Torix.

The sound of footsteps on stone ebbed into my room before Torix leaned in,

"I'm assuming you received a similar message, no doubt?"

I nodded. Torix walked back and forth as he snickered, "This is quite the boon. Having that twat suffer for his treatment of us is oh so very satisfying."

I shrugged, “I mean, yeah, yeah it is. We can’t let it get to our heads, though.”

Torix waved a hand, “I allowed Spear and Krog to do without the sting of humiliation. Allow me this relishing, however.”

“Ok, ok. It’s pretty damn nice seeing this attitude shift from Helios.”

Torix and I cackled for a moment before the lich coughed into a hand, “Ahem, now that we’ve cherished this victory, perhaps a plan moving forward is in order? I’m rather concerned with meeting the Emperor considering the scope of his resources.”

I frowned, “I don’t know what to do exactly. I know the Emperor will be strong, and whoever it is will know a lot more about the universe than us. If anything, I’m hoping to listen to the guy a lot instead of talking a bunch.”

“Perhaps having a few questions in order would suit us well?”

I cupped my chin, “Alright, what about...Why did you want an empire?”

Torix waved a hand, “Blagh, that reason is obvious. He simply desired influence and power.”

“I don’t know. There might be more to it.”

“We’ll ask the question then, though I doubt he’ll add much in the way of depth to my assumption. I wonder if he may describe Helios’s mana management stratagems. Considering the volumes of mana he operates with, we may use the same techniques to tremendous effect.”

I waved my hand back and forth, “Doubtful. Converting that much mana requires one hell of a sense for mana. Considering he does so in realtime, Helios must have a next-level mana control ability.”

“Well, that’s rather disappointing. At least we own a limitless mana supply here.”

I shook my head, “For now, I say we talk to Helios about what we should say and ask. He knows our circumstances and can help us out.”

“Then I’ll trust your judgment. I’ve several appointments with our new gialgathenic citizens. They’re rather resistant to the lifestyle here. It’s rather disappointing.”

I frowned, “It makes sense because Schema’s world is a brutal one. We aren’t offering the gialgathens some utopian world. If anything, it’s a pretty steep downgrade in lifestyle compared with before.”

Torix shrugged, “It is the inevitability of the eldritch, I’m afraid. Everyone must be a warrior to some extent. Those that falter die.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty shitty, but there’s nothing we can do about. Anyways, let’s get everything situated before we need to head out to see Helios.”

“Of course.” Torix scratched the side of his metal cheekbone, “I...I also wanted to thank you for your trust in me. That enabled me to succeed as I did. I couldn’t have asked for a better disciple...So thank you.”

I gave him a grin, “It was your time to shine. I could just tell.”

“Then, I will go handle the logistics involved. Goodbye.”

Torix left as I peered off into the distance. It was interesting seeing the new system goers. The resentment for Schema saturated a lot of the older gialgathens. Even the younger ones made it look like being drafted into military service. In a lot of ways, though, that’s exactly what it was; fight monsters or die.

It reminded me of a few of the Adair Family’s goals. Right now, I just accepted the deaths against the eldritch as a cold, hard reality. In many ways, they were offering a way to eliminate that entirely. Having a psionically controlled Hybrid fight in my place, man, I had to admit that would be pretty nice.

Of course, they were demons that needed to be put down, but I empathized with them more now. We’d lost over a fifth of the rescued gialgathens to the silvers and eldritch. Just as well, not everyone was built to fight. In this kind of environment, we didn’t



have other options, yet it still irked me a bit. I was choosing a choice I had to choose instead of making a better one.

In a way, I was complacent. That bothered me.

I shook those feelings off. As strong as I was, I couldn't stop the eldritch from spawning. Calling my current lifestyle busy was also an understatement. That was a problem for another day. With all that in mind, I pulled out some more molten metal from my dimensional storage. Three hours was just enough time to finish some more reinforced clothing for Kessiah.

Getting to work, I created several hundred strings of molten metal. After talking with Torix for a minute, I got some white, stored polymers from the guy. With some pretty meh sewing skills, I crafted a bodysuit to Kessiah's proportions. It was meant to lay under her clothing. Asking for her measurements sounded awkward no matter what, but I didn't need to anymore. My eyesight and depth perception exceeded the norm, allowing me to eyeball the specifics without worrying.

Armed with those abilities, I traced the metal wires through her new bodysuit. With supernatural, telekinetic precision, I weaved them into the polymer fabrics. This time-consuming process took up the majority of my time. Once entirely made, I melted a few of the polymers together.

With the ball of melted plastic, I created reinforcing plates over the bodysuit. I bolstered the sheaths with more wires of dimensional fabric. This gave them longevity, and it made the plates stiffer. Once created, I etched in elemental runes for regeneration.

This process took very little time. My heated telekinetic points made carving into meltable materials a breeze. Otherwise, the process took a ton of time. I didn't need to stress about it, so I just enjoyed the simple work. After finishing the set of runes, I brainstormed a few other augmentations.

These were relatively simple, so I created a few gemstones of quintessence mana as I did. These weren't the hulking, lumbering stones I made before. Instead, I kept them small and targeted. This produced far more solid stonework. The reason for all that was simple. Having them blow up would kill Kessiah, and that wasn't exactly ideal.

I placed these stones across a few of the plates. I kept the intention behind them loose, letting Kessiah work the mana in how she wanted to. Most likely, that meant making

more of her own blood, but I didn't want to limit her. You never know when someone might need more utility after all.

Once completed, I decided to show some ambition with this work. With the hour I had left, I created a series of crisscrossing mana wires. These were simply thickened strands of my armor hidden under the white plastic. They acted as a framework for what was to come.

Injecting a bit of intent into the wires, connected them to the gemstones. Once finished, they created an artificial aura similar to the Rise of Eden. While minuscule by comparison, it still helped the user by a bit. It gave the armor a white, unearthly aura.

This gave me a power outlet for adding certain utilities. The first one involved antigravitational foot placements, which let the user float and bounce off their heels. I created the opposite onto the knuckles of the hands. If the user so wanted, gravity spiked over their hands. This pulled their enemies to their fists and their fists to the enemies.

It had other uses, I'm sure, but I'd leave that up to Kessiah to think up. I sat back from the armor, keeping it afloat using a gravity well. Thinking about it more, Kessiah's arms would definitely break if she used the gravity enhancers. I created a few thin sheets of armor to reinforce her arms. They acted as hidden gauntlets, preventing her bones from collapsing.

This gave her a few charges of a gravitational strike on command. Considering she worked around the Hybrids, this was enough to turn a few of them into jelly. With that finished, I had a few minutes before our meeting with Helios.

I picked up the suit and sent a message to Kessiah, asking where she was. After getting her coordinates, I walked over towards her location. Within the shaman's healing center, Kessiah worked beside the other healers. They kept our people healthy, letting them fight much more than otherwise possible.

Quite a few of the wounded were from fighting silvers and dungeons, not even the battle against the Hybrids. I took note of that as I stepped up. Kessiah glanced up at me, giving me a salute,

"Good to see ya."

I pulled up the white bodysuit, showing it to her, “I made this. It’s meant to go under your gear. Use it wisely.”

As she stood up, I tossed it to her. She almost fell backward, stumbling a few steps back. I winced as she held her breath to stabilize her core. Kessiah lifted it up, “How in the hell did you get plastic armor to be heavier than steel plate mail?”

I facepalmed, “I’m an idiot. I traced wires of my armor through that. It made it much heavier than I thought. Sorry.”

She lifted it up with a bit of strain, “Eh, it’s alright. I’m not about to complain about it...I did expect it to be black, not white. That seems to be your general fashion.”

I frowned, “What? That’s just the color of my armor. I can’t help that it’s the most practical material I have to work with.”

One of the healers stared at me, her helmet off. She stood up, wearing combat fatigues. Having blue skin and fins across her face, she reminded me of an espen. As she spoke, I recognized her. She was the sociable one from before,

“You use your own armor to make equipment? How do you have any left?”

I grabbed a portion of my forearm, ripping a piece of the fabric off. The healer cringed at the sight before I lifted it with gravity. After melting it, I stored the substance in my dimensional storage. By the time I did, my forearm was good as new.

“That’s how. It’s my skin.”

The healer stared at me then back to Kessiah, “You use your skin to make equipment.”

I stared up for a minute, giving it some thought. Yup, she was right. I did use my skin for armor.

“I mean...yeah. I do.”

The healer gasped, “Doesn’t that, like, break the laws of matter conservation?”

I rolled my eyes, “Oh come on, that’s what you find weird about that?”

“Uh, yeah.”

Kessiah leaned onto the healer’s shoulders, “Look, Nora, I told you before, don’t question the commander’s actions. He’s a pragmatist to a fault, and so far, it’s worked out pretty good for the guy.”

Nora looked overwhelmed as she murmured, “And you made it float. Then heated it. And stored it in dimensional storage? But the storage doesn’t let you store organics... I’m so confused.”

I shrugged, “I wish I had time to explain, but I don’t. I have to head out. Hope you like the new bodysuit.”

Kessiah stared at it, “Well... Yeah, it’s amazing, if a bit heavy.”

I shook my head, “Don’t worry about it. You’ll be strong enough to wear it once you’re wearing it.”

She stared at it, analyzing the suit. I did the same.

The Hemonic Equalizer(lvl requirement: 5,000) – This suit of armor is designed with blood production in mind. As if designed by a thirsty vampire, it specializes in hemonic production. If cut, the wielder will pour fountains of blood and not so much as flinch in the face of it.

The reinforcing web of metal under the plastic gives it a tremendous reinforcing substructure. This provides the suit with a far greater tensile strength than even high order power armors. Combine that with the mana framework, and the suit carries a replaceable power source of several million units of mana.

Combine that with the gravitation augments, and this is a tremendously rare and tailor-made bodysuit. If in need of blood and survivability, the Hemonic Equalizer is unrivaled.

Doubles effective blood volume

Doubles efficiency of blood sacrifice

+50,000 Maximum Health, +50,000 Maximum Mana, +50,000 Maximum Stamina, +10,000 health regen(per min), 10,000 mana regen(per min), 10,000 stamina regen(per min)

+ 1,000% physical damage, +5% to total damage, + 1000 pounds of mass(453 Kilograms), + 1% to damage resistance cap, +10% to potency of quintessence mana, Innate Mana Shield (1,000,000/1,000,000)

+25% to blood production

+10% to pain resistance

+500 to Endurance and Willpower

+300 to Constitution, Strength, and Intelligence

+200 to all other stats

I scratched the back of my head, “Well...maybe it won’t make you strong enough. I was expecting a bit more if I’m honest.”

Kessiah fell backward. She gasped, “What is this armor?”

I glanced away, a bit of shame welling up, “Look, I only had three hours to make this. I get it’s not-“

“Three hours? You made this since the battle?”

“Well, yeah.”

Nora peered at the armor then back up to me. I might as well have been an Old One standing before her,

“This is the most powerful equipment I’ve ever seen...Ever.”

I scoffed, “Well then you’re in for a surprise when you see Torix. I made that body of his.”

Nora flatlined, “No wonder the Overseer said you guys were some of the best Schema had. I’m...I’m going to get back to healing. It’s better if I just stay in my lane after all.”

I pointed at the Hemonic Equalizer, “I can make something like this for you guys too. You just have to perform.”

Nora turned to me, the fins on the side of her face wiggling, “Really?”

I nodded. I turned and began walking off, “Yes. Really.”

Pacing off, Nora whispered to Kessiah, “He makes artifact level gear for just this?”

Kessiah shook her head, “Yup.”

Man, I didn’t know what I did was this unusual. In fact, I didn’t know much about the average person in Schema’s system. The system was so vast that maybe knowing the average was impossible, but I could get a better general idea, at least. I put that in the back of my mind before pulling myself over towards the center of Elderfire.

Surrounded by Schema’s workers, I found Torix waiting for me. The lich raised a hand, “Perhaps leaving a planet owner waiting isn’t the best of ideas?”

I grinned, “Eh, he’ll be just fine.”

Torix turned towards the warp, “Let’s not leave that up to chance. Let’s be off, shall we?”

“Of course.”

We stepped through one of the warps, already primed for us to teleport. Walking through the cloud of ionized mist, we stepped out onto the second floor of Mt. Verner. The machines and technical work whirled around us as industry boomed.

Seeing the fruit of our labors coming to fruition was nice. At the edge of the shooting range, a group of unusual people talked. Hod, Althea, and Amara chatted with Helios of all people. Althea looked beautiful if a bit wartorn. She and I locked eyes, and I murmured,

“Hey beautiful.”

Reading my lips, she peered away, blushing with a sheepish grin. As Torix and I stepped up, Hod spread his wings,

“Hod think fluffy man like dry man. Fluffy man should not let Hod words overwhelm him.” Hod cupped his chin, nodding with absolute confidence,

“Hod understand if Hod smartness too much for fluffy man.”

Helios stood there, facepalming his mask. Althea covered her mouth, forcing her bouts of laughter down. Every now and again, a snicker would come out. Even Amara looked amused, a telltale grin tracing her eyeless face. The hacking eldritch tilted her head to Helios, peering through the slitted eyes on her palms,

“Is Hod overwhelming this wolf, perhaps? You should sharpen your teeth to those that hold different views to your own. Otherwise, this wolf will be left without fangs.”

Althea just held back even more laughter. As I walked up, I patted Helios’s back, giving him a slight shake,

“Ah, I see you met Hod. He’s just a blast, isn’t he?”

Helios kept facepalming before I bust out laughing. I laughed a lot harder than I ever expected to. Althea laughed with me, even Torix and Amara joining in. Helios lifted his head, his black mask covering his face,

“In a way, associating yourself with such people is fitting. It’s precisely what I expected.”

Torix turned a palm to Hod, “Over time, you’ll adjust to-“

Hod snapped out his words, “Is that dry man?”

The entire group glanced at Torix. Even Helios gave him a good look over. Torix covered his mouth, “Ahem, it is I, Torix. What of it?”

Hod put his winged arms onto his hips, “Hod must admit, Hod impressed. Dry man no longer dry. Dry man actually like wrathful lich now instead of just saying dry man like wrathful lich. Hod approve.”

Despite the compliment still being backhanded, Torix waved a hand, trying to find a way of taking the commendation,

“Well, ahem, this much is to be expected of me. Now, let us move onto more fruitful discussions, such as our meeting with the Emperor.”

Helios seemed visibly shaken by Torix’s transformation. The world ruler turned his head towards me, “Did you craft this body out of your own skin?”

I nodded, “Yeah. Took a few days.”

Helios stepped up to Torix, “You mentioned this lich being your master. A disciple that’s willing to give his blood and flesh for the good of his master...Nothing more could be asked of him, could it?”



Torix stared at me with pride, “This only a mere fragment of his goodwill. It is I who chose him, after all.”

Helios gestured a hand to Torix’s arm, “Would you mind if I inspected this closer for a moment?”

Torix glanced at me, and I gave him a thumbs up. Torix raised his arm, and Helios glanced at it then back to me, “This is artifact level work. You’ve never mentioned being this skilled a craftsman.”

“I’d rather my work speak for itself.”

“Understandable. Actions speak louder than words.” Helios turned towards our group as he let Torix’s arm go. He gave us a slow nod,

“I’ve long wondered why Schema had the nerve to grant your guild an S- ranking. Now that I’ve seen it in person, along with the ingenuity of humans, it seems far more justified. I am impressed, and perhaps even the Emperor will be as well. Are each of you ready to meet him?”

Torix and I nodded. Althea phased off of our plane while whispering,

“Uh, no.”

Gone without a trace, Helios peered around,

“She dissipated, hm?”

The situation reminded me of when he encapsulated Althea in ice back on Giess. With a bit more spite than I intended, I made a finger pistol pointed at his head,

“Yup. She could fire a spear right between your eyes if she wanted to. Considering her bolts could pierce me, I doubt you’d survive, but hey, who knows. Maybe keep that in mind next time you want to cover someone in ice though?”

The room's mood shifted in an instant, hostility lingering in the air. I glared at the Fringe Walker as his neck twitched a bit. After the slight shiver, Helios stayed composed. He murmured through clenched teeth,

"I...I shall do so, Harbinger. It is a mistake I will not make again."

I frowned at him as I seethed,

"Yeah, probably a good idea."

A phatasmal hand gripped mine. It was an odd sensation, but I knew it was Althea. I held her hand as a tense silence passed over us. Breaking the ice, Amara turned to Hod, who stood there with his scrawny chest puffed out. With his winged arms on his hips, the eltari puffed his chest out even more as he announced,

"Amara and I dating. Amara not accept yet, but Hod believe. Hod always believe."

Amara turned back to Helios, "...I am not ready to see the Emperor."

Helios cupped his jaw, peering at me, "Perhaps visiting him would be preferred?"

I shrugged, "Doesn't matter to me."

Helios waved his arm,

"Then we shall meet him upon Vivaria. He's deep within an enormous dungeon there known as Gargantua. He's searching for relics of a bygone era. Do both of you find that interesting? If so, I may warp us there at this very moment."

Torix turned to me, "He's piqued my personal interest."

"Yeah, sounds cool. Let's go."

Helios took a step into the portal,

“Then let us go. Obolis is waiting.”

Chapter 247: Obolis Novas

Stepped through the blue warp, following Helios,

“Obolis? That’s his name?”

Helios replied as Torix followed through the gateway. I didn’t hear Helios. The stark contrast between the rooms hit me like a truck as I stepped into a different space.

Decrepit, dusty, and old, we entered into a set of ancient ruins. The constant pressure over us let me know we walked deep underground, miles in depth probably. Staring around, multicolored mana crystals dotted the cavern walls. Strips of a red metal traced the walls, reinforcing it with runic markings carved in metal.

Some kind of lichen traced between the crystallized mana and the red metal. Pulsing with life, these lichens channeled the mana towards the runes, powering them up. Glancing around, a few skulls and mummified corpses sat out in the open. By the looks of it, this was some kind of aged bunker. It held up to the test of time, the lichens powering it even after the civilization collapsed.

Around us, scientists and archaeologists of all kinds inspected the surrounding work. They carried lab samples of the lichens, red metals, and pictures of the runic work. They set up a variety of lighting, the fluorescent, sterile white contrasting the more subdued, natural tones of the cavern.

In the distance, a variety of tents were set up, some kind of reinforced plastic set up in the middle. Helios stepped forward, gesturing towards the quarantined area,

“They’ve discovered a viral eldritch entity, one without a cure. Neither of you should be susceptible to a viral infection given your anatomies, however.”

If we were, I’d just sterilize it with Event Horizon. Stepping past dozens of people in power armor, we found a dozen guards standing around the tent. Before being allowed

in, Helios walked between two of them. An Albony with an orange mask inspected him with some kind of technical wave of sorts.

The dispersed, holographic scan passed over him before the orange mask nodded,

“My sire, you’re welcome within.”

Helios walked forward with practiced ease. I got a bit nervous as I stepped up, waiting for the same kind of scan. The orange mask did the same to me before giving me a bow, his voice raspy,

“Honored guest, we detected no viral programs on your person, however-” He gestured a hand to me, “Your defensive software for your person is rather outdated. If I may make a recommendation, I can suggest a few more cutting edge programs you may utilize.”

I turned Torix, “Uh, yes, please do.”

The orange masked albony took a step back, closing his hands together, “Thank you, sire. Please, the Emperor awaits your company.”

Torix followed suit, being scanned over the next few seconds. We passed through the plastic lining that protected the area. The decontamination area didn’t go off, though. After stepping into the zone, we found dozens of garbed scientists researching with tech I’d never seen.

They stuck to two general styles of machinery. One used mana and the other used electricity. For the most part, they analyzed the data from two different perspectives, one magical and one more conventional. Torix almost walked over towards the magically inclined lab, his curiosity burning as he said,

“Now that is rather interesting. I’ve never seen anything quite like that if I may say.”

Considering the lich’s experience, that spoke volumes to the level of resources the Empire had in hand. Walking further into the encampment, we passed a few more plastic linings. Helios led the way, ensuring we didn’t get lost in the quarantined

labyrinth. Once within, we walked into the central space. I recognized the Emperor immediately.

He held a squirming, neon white eldritch in his hand. The writhing, viral liquid restrained itself to his demands, the Emperor enacting his will on it without effort. It struck me as odd. Viruses were pretty damn primitive. If even it understood to obey, the Emperor must be using some kind of aura similar to Event Horizon to command it.

More questions and fewer answers I supposed.

Soaking more of the sight in, I noted a few more oddities. Besides the Emperor, a cracked, spherical crystal laid cracked on a pillar in front of him. It looked like that glowing white muck came out of it. Staring at the ground, I found dozens of lichens leading to the pillar. They channeled the naturally congregating mana into the sight, keeping the area protected.

The Emperor broke into this vault and discovered some kind of new eldritch species. The guy had balls, that was certain.

As Helios walked up to the Emperor, Helios bowed to him. Despite the wriggling eldritch in the Emperor's hands, Helios's confidence in the Emperor didn't so much as waver. He trusted the guy would hold the eldritch in absolute control to an extent where he didn't even wear protective gear.

Even having just met the guy, I shared that confidence with Helios. The Emperor stood a head taller than even Helios, his frame like a living fortress. As he met my eye, his gaze was piercing. Obolis didn't look at me, the guy looked through me. It was as if I was a walking biography, and he had read the contents a dozen times over.

I didn't like the sensation, but there wasn't much I could do about it. This guy's perception was so damn high it was literally tangible. I didn't even need to see the guy's status to know that.

At the same time, the Emperor didn't lack in other areas either. He wore gray armor, the design old and angular. If I guessed correctly, he found it in some vault like this one during his travels. The relic oozed mana, the kind of mana that Lehesion carried. I looked it over, seeing traces of an Old One there, not one I'd met before.

It looked light as a feather, the dull gray substance harder than steel. If anything, it rivaled my own armor in hardness, though it lacked the same weight to it. My gravitational sense told me that much.

Noticing my overview, the Emperor grinned, his teeth predatory and menacing. Three scars traced his face, one through his lip, another over his eye, and the last one across his neck. The most prominent feature wasn't any of these distinct aspects of the guy.

It was that he was the only albony I'd ever seen who didn't wear a mask.

The Emperor raised a hand towards Helios, his voice deep but not harsh. It was listening to three-hundred-year-old brandy,

"Helios, I've told you not to bow to me before. Why do you do so now in front of guests?"

Helios murmured, "To show them the appropriate behavior towards our Empire's ruler."

The Emperor turned towards us, some kind of constricting atmosphere passing over us. He grinned with a spark in his eye,

"They'll bow if they so choose."

I'm not gonna lie, his presence overwhelmed. I almost stepped back, but I stayed standing despite the sudden pressure. Torix couldn't withstand it, new body or not. He fell onto a knee before hitting the ground and cursing,

"Dammit."

The Emperor met my eye, the pressure building. I gave him a smirk, my own confidence building. If this was it, then he was in for a rude awakening...Probably.

I reached out with Event Horizon, deciding to join in the Emperor's little game. The scientists and guards overlooking the area shook with fear before staring at the both of us. They fell down as I increased the pressure, ramping Event Horizon up.

Understanding the unspoken competition, the Emperor raised an eyebrow, his unseen aura becoming palpable. A navy blue aura ebbed from him, drenching his surroundings in a cloud of mana. I followed suit, the air tinting red from Event Horizon's influence. We augmented each of our respective auras until I maxed out Event Horizon, and the air quivered in response.

I condensed the aura over the Emperor, taking a more targeted approach. He seemed at ease, but he still gave me a knowing nod,

"Well, well, it does seem as though Caprika found someone interesting, didn't she?"

I spoke without too much of a struggle, "I'd hope so. Why else would you want to meet us?"

The Emperor pulled back his aura, so I did the same. The people around us breathed, having held their breaths the entire time of the battle. Torix stood up before putting a hand on my shoulder,

"That was...difficult to withstand."

The Emperor offered a hand to Helios, who accepted the gesture. Helios pulled himself up, looking at Torix,

"Your disciple's more of a monster than I expected."

The Emperor lifted the shivering, white eldritch to me, "Would you like to inspect it? It's far different from most viral eldritch. This society's efforts to hide it were more than merely justified. It showed great wisdom."

I raised an eyebrow, taking the eldritch from his hand. I kept Event Horizon's mental effects over it as I commanded, "Stay still little guy. Wouldn't want me to hurt you, would you?"

The blot of white shivered in response. I analyzed it,

Plaga Ustus(lvl 15,000) – Plaga Ustus is a variant of viral eldritch entities found deep with Vivaria’s depths. Discovered by Obolis Novas, this virus was named with its general functions in mind. Plaga Ustus is a variant of burning diseases. It feasts on the carbon within its victims, oxidizing them and absorbing the byproducts of the resulting combustion.

This casts the victims in a vibrant, white flame. Turned to ash afterward, the pool of mush that remains after the viral infusion is the grown virus. This rapid destruction of organic tissue makes Plaga Ustus challenging to combat as it’s infective results are in real-time. Even more concerning is the concentrated mana stored within its body.

This makes the virus difficult to detect in planetary custody and inspection. This is further exacerbated by a primal intelligence rivaling small children. As the virus pools together, the nuclei stored in the cells congregate into a core in its center. Hidden in the coagulated membranes, this core commands the viral entity.

This means the virus can remain hidden and inactive in its hosts. Even worse still, the virus can also strengthen its user, misleading its host to its true intentions. Often times, this leads to sudden spikes in power for the individual who’s infected before they die.

All of this information was uncovered by Obolis during his relic hunt on Vivaria. For further questions, contact the Empire’s Viral Containment Unit. They may assist if the user is currently infected.

I lifted the Plaga Ustus up, looking at it under the light. Yup, the core was hidden but visible since it wasn’t as translucent as the rest of it. Handing it over to Obolis, I noted,

“It sounds like a double-edged sword if anything.”

Obolis nodded, inspecting the creature with fascination, “It carries many traits I wish to take advantage of in the future. If tamed, it may even act as a super serum of sorts for our soldiers. It may be used as a biological weapon against our adversaries, or lesser eldritch as well.”

Obolis lifted it up, giving the pale blob a gentle caress,

“And perhaps it may be a pet for those that are worthy. Time will tell.”



This was not how I expected my first meeting with this guy to go. Well, the aura part sort of, but no this. I raised a hand, “So what did you want to meet for?”

Obolis set the eldritch back onto the pillar, the slime crawling back into its prison. He gestured towards us both,

“A more formal greeting is in order before we continue. I am Obolis Novas, the Empire’s ruler.”

Torix’s blue eyes flared, “I am Torix Worm, of Darkhill.”

Obolis nodded at him, “You withstood my aura for far longer than most. If you master your own dimensional abilities, you’ll become far more difficult to suppress.”

Torix looked at his hands, “Wait a moment...I have dimensional abilities?”

Obolis glanced between the both of us, “You’re constructed from Daniel’s strange matter. You share many of the properties he owns. In fact, your ability to broaden your mind’s abilities is largely due to this connection point.”

Torix stared at the Emperor, “How did you understand all that with a glance?”

Obolis tapped his temple, his white fur ruffling, “I am a perceiver of the unknown, the finder of what is hidden. It is simply my domain to understand what I see, and I have seen the both of you.” Obolis turned to me,

“Though you both are, in many respects, still enigmas.”

I had to admit, I was pretty impressed already. Obolis knew more about Torix’s abilities than Torix or I did, and he just met us. If anything, it made me wonder what else he could tell us. As if reading my mind, he gave me a knowing smile,

“In many ways, I am likely an enigma to both of you as well. Come. Let us discuss this elsewhere, somewhere more fitting for such honored guests.”

We walked out of the room, and as we did, they didn't scan Obolis. On the other hand, they did check Helios then Torix. As they went to examine me, Obolis lifted a hand without looking at us,

“He is a sterile existence by nature. Therefore, he doesn't require any scouring. “

The orange masks bowed, speaking in unison, “Yes, Emperor.”

A moment later, we stepped through the quarantined area. As we passed, the scientists quit working, giving Obolis a bow. They didn't resume working until after he left. Obolis didn't even note the shift in attitude. It was palpable for me though.

After walking out of the area, Obolis reached out a hand, a spacey portal opening. Obolis pulled out an obelisk, though the crystal orb looked different from the ones Torix gave us. Instead of a bright glass orb with a stripe of electronics, this obelisk carried dozens of strips of electronics within it. They radiated out from the center like a gyroscope.

Powered by his mana, the obelisk dispersed a holographic projection into the entire room. As it did, I took a step back, the boundless sights around us taking me aback. Torix did the same, the ancient lich having never seen these sights.

Below us, a blue star flared. It carried violet tendrils of energy, solar flares stretching out into the infinity of space. Around us, swarms of astral creatures flew through the vastness of the great void. They shifted coloration as they moved, each of them waving through different light spectrums.

What stunned me most was the new color they had. It was impossible to describe, but I can try. Imagine staring at something bright, full of life. This color carried that kind of impression. It reminded me of staring at a more powerful light on the electromagnetic spectrum. To me, it's what I envisioned radiation might look like if it was an actual color.

Regardless of our reactions, the Emperor seemed taken aback, his glance carrying the weight and distance of nostalgia. He walked forward, touching one of the creatures. A moment later, he turned to us, his feet standing on space,

“Would you like to touch them as well?”

I turned to Torix. His jaw was slack, the lich’s senses overwhelmed. I shook off the feeling of disbelief as I walked forward. Reaching out, I touched the living painting. I blinked as I could actually feel it as if it were there. I turned to Torix,

“Torix. You can actually touch the thing. I don’t know how the fuck he’s doing it, but you can actually touch it.”

Like a warm grandfather, Obolis gestured to the spectral creature,

“Come Torix, if you would.”

Torix fumbled over before reaching out. As he touched the creature, he stuttered, “How is this possible?”

Obolis grinned,

“It’s not a simple illusion, I can guarantee you that. I’d heard of these creatures during my travels. They’re called by many names, though I prefer referring to them as cometelias, the flowers of comets.”

Several of the cometelias flew around Obolis as he reached out his hand to them. He closed his eyes, staring upward,

“This is a physical manifestation of one of my memories. I picked one of the more visually tremendous recollections.”

Staring around me, the detail of the memory was stunning. Nothing about it was foggy, even in the slightest. It was clearer than crystals in its clarity, like viewing HD footage. No, it was more than that. This experience carried other senses other than sight and sound. The entire experience rushed in.

The endless space, the deep cold of the void, even the waves of shifting heat, they wrapped over me as if I was there. I might as well have been. Staring in awe, I murmured, “This is incredible.”

Obolis grinned, “Isn’t it? It was well worth the trip. The magical incantations necessary to survive the journey were well worth the investment, though you wouldn’t require the same protection. Chaining together these kinds of experiences is what I live for. I’m glad to share them with each of you.”

The Emperor turned to me, “Though a proper greeting is in order.”

I turned to the Emperor, kind of blown away at this point,

“I’m Daniel.”

He smiled with the wisdom of ages past in his eyes,

“It’s good to meet you, Harbinger. I am Obolis, the Finder of Secrets.”

Chapter 248: An Imperial Overture

As the cometelias darted around us, they danced among the stars, adding to the moment. I gathered my composure, calming myself down. I turned towards Obolis,

“Thanks for sharing all this with us. It’s incredible.”

Obolis gestured a hand to me, “Perhaps in our next meeting I may share even better scenery. For now, however, you no doubt are curious as to why I wanted a meeting with you in the first place. You withstand a strained schedule, no doubt, and conceding me your time is a valuable concession. I have no intention of spitting on the favor.”

I nodded. Torix paced up beside me, “Indeed we are, though this is a rather extraordinary method of meeting us. Perhaps it’s a diplomacy tactic?”

Obolis carried the natural confidence of a ruler. Obolis stepped up to us,

“It is, though, I relish in the same scenery even when doing something as simple as reading. One day, both of you may choose to do so as well.”

He turned to Helios, who remained to kneel at his side, “Onto the matter at hand. You remembered to write the contracts I mentioned?”

Helios kept his gaze low as he lifted his hands. His status appeared, showing several documents detailing arrangements between factions. In this case, our factions.

“These are written well. Excellent work as always.” Obolis turned towards us, “I’ve actually been wishing for an arrangement between both our guilds.”

Staring around, I murmured, “What could you want from us?”

Obolis scoffed, “You both carry an otherworldly level of humility. Disarming as it is, I need you both to understand the resources you have to offer. Think of this as a gesture of goodwill on my part. Few would inform their dealer of a fortune beneath their feet.”

I shrugged, “Unless it benefited them, of course.”

Obolis chuckled as the multi-layered obelisk above his palm shimmered for a moment, mana coursing through it. A frosty projection appeared, showing edited footage of our last battle in Fausel. This hologram layered over the more realistic, materialized memory.

In the sub-layered video, cataclysmic detonations echoed throughout a familiar city. I recognized the growing voids and detonations of my singularities. The footage demonstrated the Adair family’s fall in absolute clarity. Obolis gestured to it,

“Perhaps the Empire could create a far vaster impact throughout a war. Our resources are vast in that regard.” Obolis clasped his hand into a clawed fist,

“However, we could not rival this level of martial might on such a small scale. That is invaluable to my aims in particular.” He met my eye,

“I say this in seriousness – this is devastation the likes of which even solar-scale guilds fear.”

A chill ran up my spine. I kind of knew we were getting good at fighting, but I didn't understand how good exactly. In a way, knowing this built my confidence but also put even more pressure on me. Having this kind of influence meant any of my mistakes might result in mass havoc.

I didn't want more massacres on my shoulders.

Helios turned to Obolis, the blind ice mage mouthing, "It's remarkable that he's progressed to such an extent since we met. He was an oddity at first."

Obolis turned to Helios, "Caprika informed me of your treatment towards the Harbinger's Legion. We will discuss it in detail later."

I expected Helios to wince. He cowered, his hair standing on end.

Damn.

"Onto more fruitful discussions," Obolis said with a knowing grin. An image of Polydra exploded on one of the projections,

"I've been viewing your battles since the first in Polydra. You've access to several forbidden technologies and techniques. I am curious if you would perhaps share your knowledge with me in that regard."

Obolis, ever curious, pointed at the point of impact for my Orbital Bombardment,

"No matter how many times I survey the broken fragments of footage from your landing in Polydra, I cannot dissect how you created such devastation."

Obolis waved his hands, staring at them for answers, "My mind wanders to nuclear weaponry, yet you're not exiled from the system."

Torix scoffed, "We would never even dwell on such callous tactics."

Obolis pursed his lips, “I expected as much. You both likely know that certain species of eldritch feast on radiation. This gives them a tremendous growth potential after nuclear weaponry has been used. After uncovering that, Schema illegalized them. With that option gone, I wondered if it was a kinetic bomb of sorts.”

I pointed at him, “Bingo.”

The Emperor’s eyes widened at the prospect of learning something new,

“Ah, so my presumption was correct. Allow me to guess how you accomplished the feat.”

He covered his mouth with his clawed hand, “Perhaps you took an orbiting chunk of solar debris and pulled it towards a planet’s surface?”

I bit my lip for a moment, thinking it over. I mean, technically yeah.

“Uh, yeah, pretty much.”

Obolis tapped his chin, “You then created a warp where it would land, redirecting the force?”

Torix laughed to himself, “Essentially, yes.”

Obolis narrowed his eyes, “I dismissed such a proposition given more thought, however. Even with unlimited resources, calculating the descent of the celestial body, and within the time frame necessary, was all but impossible.”

Obolis shook his head, “And that’s assuming your portal creator can get in the required position in time. The frictional heat from the descent of a meteorite can ignite creatures dozens of miles away. The more I dwelled on the topic, the more curious I became.”

A look of hunger came over Obolis’s face, “How did you two work through the logistics involved?”

I pointed at the city then at me. I raised out a flat palm then smashed my other fist into my other hand. Obolis raised an eyebrow. I shrugged,

“I smashed myself into the ground.”

An awkward silence passed through the living memory and the group in it. A look of disbelief crossed over Obolis,

“Wait a moment...you smashed yourself into the ground? That’s it?”

“Yup.”

Obolis jaw went slack, “And...you lived?”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t utilize a complex and coordinated series of magical bombardments?”

“No.”

“Or perhaps a synchronized portal warping to transport a solar flare?”

“No.”

“You just...smashed yourself into the ground?”

“Yes.”

Obolis crossed his arms before giving me a slow nod. He shook his head while raising his eyebrows,

“Well...Here I was hoping for some replicable scheme. In many ways, this is even more impressive than trickery, however. You don’t need tricks. You simply accomplish



your goals with brute force. I admire that, though I prefer different methods. In my long life, I've found that at times, brute force is all but necessary."

Obolis gestured at the contracts, "That's precisely why I wish to create an alliance between us. As you've already surmised, we each carry different talents that are specific to each of us. My information network is vast, and I own decades of experience within Schema's system."

Obolis gestured an open palm to each of us, "On the other end of this spectrum, you both are isolated yet overwhelmingly powerful in a direct confrontation. While I may maneuver myself through different situations using information and resources, there are times where I need a hammer. I'm here asking for your guild to be that hammer."

I raised my eyebrows, "You want to hire us as mercenaries?"

Obolis cupped his hands together, "You saw through my political wording in an instant. Rather blunt, but that's precisely how hammers should be. Heavy. Hard. Unstoppable. I'd be contracting your guild to handle insurrections of my Empire, along with a few specific goals further down the line."

I frowned with my eyebrows raised, "So you'd be like a boss?"

Even with his mask on, I could feel the glare coming from Helios. Obolis peered at me, undeterred. He gestured towards Torix,

"Tell me, are there entities you fear?"

I turned to Torix, who gave the question some thought. I wanted to say there was none, but that'd be a lie. Instead, I let Torix answer,

"Perhaps there are a few enemies in the distance we'd rather not face head-on at this moment, yes."

Obolis nodded, "A wise decision in many respects. If you lack fear, then you'll crash against something you cannot kill before it kills you. Case and point – Lehesion. An Old One. Schema. This concept is precisely why your guild is hiding from prying eyes."

My eyes narrowed, my voice harder than iron "You're going to threaten to expose our guild's location to the Adair family?" A jagged maw tore open across my faceplate, a red miasma leaking from between the teeth,

"That's a dangerous road, friend."

Torix's burning, blue eyes shifted to a blood-red in an instant. Obolis raised his palms,

"Perhaps unwarranted accusations aren't the most amicable means of continuing a discussion?"

I calmed myself down, shaking off the sudden spike in anger. Obolis was right about that. Torix did the same as Obolis gave us the benefit of the doubt,

"I understand your wariness, given your violent situation. To be certain, the answer to that accusation is no. I carry no such intentions, and Schema would eviscerate any guild that did so."

Obolis tilted his head, "However, there are many spies that are attempting to discover your guild's location at this very moment." Obolis turned towards Torix, "You act as the logistician, general, and resource manager, correct?"

Torix lifted his fingers, counting on his fingers. At nine, Torix stopped, "Among other things, yes."

I winced a bit. I had to take some workload off the guy.

Obolis gave Torix a knowing nod, "Surely, you must be struggling under such burdens?"

I turned to Torix, a bad taste lingering in my mouth. I bit my lip, taking a deep breath. Obolis was right about that. Torix managed dozens of positions in our guild, literally. Hell, even when working on the lich circle, he still maintained his duties. I fell behind, overwhelmed by the tasks at hand.

Even if Torix didn't fuck up further down the line, it wasn't fair putting so much work and stress on the guy. After all, you can't be perfect at everything. Obolis spread out his hands,

"Before you is an offer to alleviate much of the tedium in those tasks. We would give you access to one of the galaxy's widest information networks. Security and secrecy would be an issue of the past, allowing you to look towards the future."

I turned to Torix. The lich considered Obolis's proposal for a bit, but Torix seemed unconvinced overall. Obolis grinned,

"Unconvinced? Understandable. There's more I may offer. You'd gain access to resources your guild couldn't even dream of, such as relics lost to time. These artifacts could result in enormous boons for your guild."

I considered Obolis's offer, but after thinking of what I may want, I came up blank. I tilted my head,

"Like what exactly?"

Obolis gestured to Helios. The World Ruler lifted his hand, taking off his gauntlet covered in the cipher. Obolis grabbed it in his hand,

"Given the cipher carved into your own skin, I'm guessing you already know the nature of these runes. You understand the implications of giving you this relic, no doubt?"

I stared at the markings, my entire mindset giving way to greed for a moment. Obolis noticed the subtle shift in my face. As I tore my eyes from the relic, I shook my head in disappointment. It was unlike me to want something I couldn't just make for myself. This right here though, this was an incredible offer.

Within these gauntlets hid the secret for matter conversion. It was the secret Yawm used for his near-infinite mana production, given to him by Etorhma. Wielding this gauntlet, Helios did the same, shoring up any concerns for mana he could possibly have.

The process for that tactic was deceptively simple too. With just a tiny bit of mana, the cipher inscription auto-piloted the splitting of atoms. It then converted the resulting

energy into usable mana. Of course, wielding the resulting mana was a volatile, dangerous, and challenging task. I was confident I could control it with a bit of practice.

No, not confident. I was certain.

You'd think I lacked much use for the gauntlet considering my mana generation. Quite the opposite, actually. If the resulting energy from those transcriptions fed into the runic markings of my cipher, I could rapidly augment my stats. As great as my current cipher inscriptions were, I hit a wall in my progress recently.

This would give me another way of breaking through to that next level.

It was an offer I never expected, and Obolis was well aware of how valuable this artifact was. The Emperor turned it in his hand,

"It's a miracle in many ways, isn't it? I discovered this while searching through several fringe worlds outside of Schema owned space. It's interesting to see how the development of the eldritch is viewed in those isolated areas. The entire timelines of the species are different in nature."

Obolis handed the gauntlet back to Helios, who dawned it on his clawed hand again. Obolis turned back to us,

"In many ways, the resulting desperation of those species resulted in ingenuity we cannot match. Their dying civilizations, overrun by monsters, spawned genius. That gauntlet is the result of that genius, and it isn't the only elemental furnace in my possession."

Torix stared between the Emperor and me, "I don't understand how a piece of armor would be so valuable. Perhaps someone may explain?"

Obolis gave me a smile, showing his white teeth, "Perhaps you would elaborate?"

I tapped the cipher markings on my palm, "The gauntlet isn't important. It has a dimensional cipher formula on it that converts matter into energy. It then turns that energy into mana. It's invaluable, like giving us a portable, nuclear reactor for personal use."

Obolis nodded, “You’re remarkably well informed for someone so new to the system. You must have been exposed to the cipher early on in your systemization.” Obolis eyed me,

“The composition of your body, is it the result of the cipher? I can see no other manner of its creation.”

I gave him a small grin, “I’d rather not say.”

Obolis gave a curious glance to Torix as well, noting the materials involved. Obolis glanced back at me, “Your frame aside, this deal of ours would compensate you with not only elemental furnaces.”

I raised a hand, “So they’re called elemental furnaces?”

“Indeed, they are. Now-” Obolis turned a palm to Helios who pulled out two other multi-striped obelisks,

“These are, in a phrase, cutting edge. They use the highest levels of technology currently available to Schema. They use secure databases and operate with absolute security. Given the nature of your foes, this, too, would be invaluable to give you and your lieutenants.”

Torix’s eyes shifted to green orbs of flame, his envy oozing out. It was my turn to stare at the two of them in confusion,

“So...what’s a big deal about these.”

Obolis glanced at Torix with expectation. Torix spoke up,

“These allow for far greater allowances with not only management but with overall system functionality. Much of the work I do manually may be managed within that orb’s software, from the creation of maps to even advanced simulations.”

Obolis stared at the two orbs, “These are personalized models that Helios and I use as well. They carry ingrained AI systems to assist with management details. Much of the work that Torix handles could be optimized, allowing him to focus his efforts elsewhere.”

Torix grumbled, “It could even act as a sparring partner to practice my mental magic with. You as well.”

Ok, so I might have been a little impressed at this point. I spread out my hands, “Alright, I’ll admit it, you’ve got me interested.”

Obolis rotated the obelisks in his hands, speaking with ease, “We could give you these pieces and so much more. Antiques from epoch’s past? Done. Secrets that ensure the security of your guild? Within your grasp. Detailed reports on many common threats in the galaxy? Child’s play. It is my domain to revel in these intricacies and much more.”

Obolis turned to us, “And I am willing to share this all with you. Why? The answer is simple – your guild is a coming calamity. I have seen the omens of the stars, and you, Harbinger, are the cataclysm you omen. Schema was wise in granting you such a title. He saw greatness in you. I see that greatness as well.”

He turned to Torix, “And with the wisdom of an ancient lich, you’ve been given the ability to embody the primal might of force incarnate. I simply wish to have you on my side in the coming days. You are a sword I would never wish to be pointed at my throat. This is a preemptive offer of sorts.”

The holographic projection around us shifted into a picture of the Milky Way. Across it, thirteen blips popped up into existence. Hundreds of smaller blips appeared, likely places Obolis visited at one point or another. Obolis gestured to all of them,

“There is so much more I wish to explore. The limits of those exploits are found in the dangers along the outskirts of Schema’s system. Your talents are necessary to uncover the clandestine. They are needed to become pathfinders of the unfound.”

I felt myself getting wrapped up in his words. Obolis was a damn good speaker, and it made me nervous as hell that we were getting into something over our heads. Torix turned to me,

“I see no reason to refuse his offer.”

I related to Torix’s giddy enthusiasm. I wanted to accept the offer without thinking it over too. That’s actually what set off alarm bells in my head. It was like being conned by a conman. A conman’s entire goal was getting you in this state of mind, and the Emperor did it without breaking a sweat.

In a way, that was more terrifying than a deadly battle.

Getting some severe Yawm vibes, I kept myself under my own control. I leaned towards Torix but kept staring at Obolis,

“There’s plenty of reasons. We’re not making this decision for us. We’re making it for our entire guild. Hell, entire species are at stake. Don’t forget we’re still fighting the Adair Family. This is going to be hard to fit in on the side of all that.”

Torix leaned back, stunned by what I said. He shook his head, clenching one of his fists, “Bah. I lost myself. There is still much I must learn.”

I set a hand on the lich’s shoulder plates, “Hey, that’s why we’re a team. We help each other out.”

I turned to Obolis, “I’m sorry, but I can’t give you an answer right now. I need to talk to my guild first.”

Obolis gave us each a warm grin, spreading out his arms, “The Empire is a faction gifted with patience and wealth. We are in no rush to finalize negotiations. This discussion was in no way meant as a threat. It was simply an overture between our two guilds. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Obolis lowered his hands, and Helios pocketed the multi-layered obelisks into his dimensional storage. Obolis reached up to his own fancy-schmancy obelisk and did the same. The materialized memory faded, returning us to the quarantined cave.

Despite the sudden shift in scenery, I found the dry, musty air refreshing. It helped ground me since this entire experience was a lot to take in. No amount of preparation

would've prepared us for it either. It was like learning to swim. You couldn't know if you could swim until your feet were off the ground.

Understanding our feelings, the Emperor gestured towards Helios,

"It's good you're considering the proposal seriously. Hire a few lawyers and have them parse over the contracts. They will find the terms stated simply. We wish for a few rebellions to be put down and for your protection during several of my planned explorations."

Obolis shrugged,

"We'll offer certain artifacts and technology in exchange for the service. The rewards shall be staggered over each clash you assist us with. During artifact hunts, we will split portions of the found relics. I will have first pick considering the effort involved with finding and planning the excursions."

One of the albony Speakers walked up, his robe bejeweled with mana stones. Obolis didn't notice, and he continued speaking until the orange masked Speaker tapped his shoulder.

"Think things over. There's much to consider, and-" Obolis turned towards the Speaker. The Emperor's left eyelid twitched,

"Ah...Odus."

The orange masked albony bowed and cupped his hands, "Ahem, sire, there are a few scientists who wish for your insights regarding the Plaga Ustus."

The Emperor frowned, "Is it pressing?"

Odus guarded himself a bit like he was visibly shrinking, "It involves how the virus spreads. They believe it may be weaponized and may assist with preventing future outbreaks of viral eldritch."



Obolis sighed, "It's pressing then." The Emperor peered back up to us, "It's a shame that our meeting must be cut short like this, but another situation calls for my direct attention."

Torix opened his status, viewing dozens and dozens of messages, "Ah, it would seem the same for us as well."

I blinked, being the only one without some diligent, planned schedule ahead of me. I scratched the side of my head, "Oh yeah, definitely."

Obolis clapped his hands,

"Then we'll reserve a meeting time for your decision. Perhaps the day after Giess is glassed? That may allow for an easier time making your commitments, I assume."

I crossed my arms, "Why?"

Obolis scoffed, "That is the day this small insurrection will die. Each of you will be freed to other tasks at that time."

I pursed my lips, "So why would you think that?"

Obolis glanced at Helios before both of them laughed. It felt just like I wasn't a part of some inside joke. Obolis turned back to us,

"You've never seen a Spacial Fortress, I assume? If you accept my contact request, I'll send you a projection of one. View it when you have time. It will ease your concerns regarding this slight insurrection."

I raised my eyebrows, "It beats Lehesion?"

Obolis stared with absolute confidence, "Outside of another cosmic event on the scale of the big bang, there are only three existences that can destroy a spatial fortress: An Old One, a quasar, and a point-blank supernova. Lehesion is mighty, but Spacial Fortresses are unbeatable."

Obolis spoke while looking into the distance, “There has never been a recorded defeat of a spatial fortress. Sentinels? Of course, you’ve seen them fall. Overseers? At times, yes, though it is rare. A spatial fortress? They touch the might of gods in ancient religions. They are sights only seen when Schema’s enemies have evoked his highest wrath.”

Obolis spread out his arms, “I invite you to watch from a distant moon deeper within Giess’s solar system. Perhaps seeing it in person will allow you to understand what it is to defy Schema.”

Torix turned between us, “They would seem rather rare. I’ve never even heard the slightest murmur of one before the Overseer mentioned them.”

Obolis appeared taken aback,

“I’ve seen only one, and it was...humbling.”

I put my hands on my hips, “Well, shit, that’s kind of comforting. It makes me feel better about being the spearhead against this rebellion.”

Obolis leaned towards us, “Have you heard rumors of what commoners are calling it?”

Huh, commoners. Never thought I would actually hear that word spoken seriously. I shook off a bit of discomfort hearing the term, leaning towards Obolis,

“Naw.”

“They’re calling it the Blighted Schism. Poetic, isn’t it?”

“I...I suppose.”

“Those that are Hybridized are referred to as blighted. Considering the entire rebellion is due to a portion of worlds splitting off, schism is a fitting word as well.”

Not knowing exactly what the word meant, I crossed my arms, “Is it? I mean, I sort of know what schism means, but not really.”

Obolis raised his eyebrows for a second,

“It’s simple. Whenever a group fragments into several opposing factions, it is referred to as a schism. It is a rather dramatic way of wording this rebellion, however. The wording implies tremendous importance for this little event.”

Obolis wondered mused, “We shall discover if schism is fitting once the glassing has occurred. I would wager that they shall crumble, as all other rebellions have in the past.”

Sensing a bit of bias, I let the issue go. Torix must have figured the same thing, so he simply listened. Before Obolis continued, Odius tapped his shoulder again,

“Ahem, sire?”

Obolis raised a palm, “Thank you for the reminder.” Obolis turned to each of us, “It was good meeting the both of you. I hope to hear good news when we meet again. Regardless of the outcome, I hope we’ll stay in touch.”

I raised a fist, “For sure. This was fun.”

Torix steepled his fingers, “It was fascinating in its own way.”

Helios stepped beside us, creating a portal. Obolis turned with a deep sigh,

“These scientists better pray to Schema that this issue is half as interesting as my previous company.”

Odius began settling the Emperor down, each of them falling into habits for their daily matters. We turned towards Helios, who gestured a hand to the portal,

“Are you ready to return?”

Torix and I stared at each other. I stepped up the portal,

“Yeah, let’s head out.”

We walked through the portal, reaching back towards Mt. Verner’s second floor. Waiting for us, Hod, Amara, Althea, Kessiah, and even Krog discussed with one another. It was a splintered kind of conversation, each party discussing different aspects of the guild.

As the three of us stepped up, I found several members of our guild staring. Each of us caught the eye differently, so I didn’t blame them. We needed to get work done even when visitors arrived, however. With that in mind, I clapped my hands,

“Come on, everybody. Back to work.”

The workers got back to, well, work. Without needing as many prying eyes, our head guildspeople turned towards me in expectation. I glanced at Helios who raised his hand,

“You all are busy, as am I. As the Emperor mentioned, we’ll stay in touch.”

I gave him a wave, “See ya.”

After Helios warped out, I turned to everybody, “Alright, the Emperor says our guild is good at fighting, so he wants us to fight for him. We’ll be quelling rebellions on his worlds and helping him explore the galaxy. Of course, that’s if we say yes. I wanted your opinions first.”

I turned my head to everyone,

“So, what do you guys think?”

Chapter 249: Reasoning

Hod wiggled in place, “Was Emperor man like fluffy man?”

I nodded, “Yeah, I could tell they were related. The Emperor was much more, well, polite than Helios was.” I turned to Althea, “In fact, he went out of his way to chastise Helios for how he acted towards us.”

Althea grinned at me, and I smiled back. I walked over, through the crowd who parted for me. As I did, she blushed for a moment. I hugged her to me, and she murmured,

“You’re embarrassing me.”

I smiled, “I love you too.”

With that gushy moment finished, I turned back towards the group, “Any other thoughts?”

Amara spoke up first, “If we are to join him, would we not be his servants? It bodes ill for wolves such as we.”

I turned a hand to her, “Think of this as a partnership. Outside of the rebellions on his planets, we’ll be helping Obolis raid ancient tombs and whatnot. We’ll be splitting the goods, and just from the few minutes we saw the guy, he’s got and has found some good stuff.”

Amara lifted her palms, the eyes on them narrowing, “Such as?”

I thought out my response for a bit, thinking about what Amara would think is valuable. I spread out my hands, wondering why I didn’t think of this sooner,

“When we walked up, he was studying a viral eldritch called Plaga Ustus. I’m sure he’s found dozens of interesting eldritch like that, and he could help you with his research.”

A grin grew on her face, her jagged teeth unnerving, “Interesting. We would be among wolves, listening to the echoes of lambs.”

“Uh...yeah,” I turned to the others, “Anyone want to chime in? I’ll listen to whatever you have to say.”

Several of those present took a moment to think things through, none of them wanting to give me some half baked idea. Torix spoke up first,

“If I may, I believe I have an opinion worth voicing on the matter.”

“Of course man, go ahead.”

“As you all know, I carry the ambition of proliferating education throughout Schema’s system. Teaching is something of a passion for me, and I need resources to do such a thing. The first order of business would be establishing myself as an academic force on a galactic scale.”

Torix lifted a metal hand with his fingertips pressed together,

“In order to do so, I will require three things. First, an academy with its own grounds. The third floor serves this purpose well. The second requires a consistent stream of students, which we have few of. The last of which is the most cardinal of these issues: safety.”

Torix turned to me,

“I know it is hard to hear, but Lehesion and the Adair Family pose a grave threat to this place and the people therein. Allying ourselves with the Empire would allow us to operate without the need for such secrecy, as they would prove an effective deterrent. Gaining a steady stream of students from their planets would grant us a consistent supply of talent as well.”

I considered his points, each of them well thought out. Before I could reply, Althea walked up,

“I think we should wait until after we’ve gotten rid of the Adairs first.”

Torix tilted his head, the mage not expecting Althea’s defiance,

“Is there perhaps further reasoning as to why?”

Althea turned to the group, and she swallowed before speaking, “Well, I think there are a few reasons. I mean, we can’t guarantee that allying with the Empire will make Lehesion refuse to attack us, right?”

Torix cupped his chin, “True.”

“Uhm, if anything, it sounds like this Emperor guy really knows his stuff. If we assume that’s the case, he might actually want us to relax our security. Imagine if we had our base destroyed. The Empire would look like a pretty nice hiding spot at that point. He could get a lot more out of us then.”

Torix’s fiery eyes flared white for a flash, “Ahhh, he may anticipate us joining him thereafter. While in most situations, I’d displace your thoughts as a mere conspiracy. However, given Obolis’s nature, that may not be the case. He’s a rather dubious individual, after all.”

Althea spread out her arms, gaining confidence, “And besides, you want to prove your the best teacher in the galaxy, right?”

Torix coughed into his hand, “Ahem, perhaps.”

Althea smiled, “Then we can teach the orphans and gialgathens from the war. They’ll be like sponges, and you won’t have to, er, get rid of any bad habits.”

Huh. Althea has a soft spot for children. Noted.

Torix saw through her like a window,

“The students from the Empire will be far more receptive and won’t require relearning the basics. I may instill advanced magic in them that orphans would likely struggle to comprehend.”

Althea pointed at the lich, “Exactly. If you don’t have to really teach them, then how are you proving you’re the best teacher? Besides, you think the Empire’s students will

stick around after you give them the best education the galaxy has to offer? If anything, they'll go right back to the Empire."

Torix shrugged, "I know when I'm defeated. Consider me convinced, young lady."

Althea stood up a bit taller.

I agreed with her points for the most part, so I turned to the others. As my gaze landed on Krog, I waited for him to speak up. He didn't. I raised an eyebrow,

"You know you can let us know your kin need help, right? We'll listen."

Krog took a deep breath. An internal war waged in his head, different thoughts fighting for control. As one side won, the grizzled general's eyes gazed far into the distance,

"You're guild...it has done more for my kind than I could have ever have asked of it. I treated each of you without honor when we met. It is a mistake I regret. Even though I wish for us to continue waging war until the Adair Family has been erased, I will continue to serve you regardless of your choice."

My eyes widened from shock as I heard the guy talk. I raised my eyebrows, "You're sure?"

Krog nodded with a bit of struggle, "We've saved enough of my kind that my species may continue here on Earth. More are left being Hybridized, yet I cannot force you to continue to fight for us alone. In the end, you must fight for what you believe is right."

Damn. My respect for this guy went up as he spoke.

I scratched the side of my head, "Well, shit. How am I supposed to say yes to the Emperor after that?"

Krog grinned, a wily look crossing over his face,

"You're not supposed to."



I scoffed, “Ok, so that’s how it is. I’ll keep that in mind.” I turned to everyone else, “Anyone else have something to add? I’m all ears.”

Hod lifted a wing, “Harbinger not made of all ears though? Hod confused.”

I raised my hands, “It’s an expression. It means I’m listening.”

Hod shook his head while crossing his arms, “Hod think phrase make no sense. Hod know listening start with brain, not ear. Hod ear only hear. Should be Harbinger all brains, not all ears. Hod believe new phrase make more sense.”

I stared at Hod in awe as he spoke with absolute confidence. In its own way, it was kind of incredible how he just...believed in himself like that. There was something to learn here.

And something not to learn too, but hey, I was trying to give credit where I could.

I frowned, “Yeah. Noted.”

Kessiah walked forward from beside Krog. She turned a hand to everyone, “So uh, let’s talk about something, I don’t know, less stupid?”

She got a few nods, even from Hod. A bit flabbergasted, I listened as Kessiah spoke,

“I know I haven’t been the most reliable person in the past, but I just wanted to say something.”

She patted Krog’s side, “This guy right here has been a damn fine companion. A lot of these big, ugly bastards have shown me what it means to go to war and fight for something. I’m still fighting to prove myself, but they gave me another reason to go to war. For my brothers and sisters out there. If we run now, who will help them?”

Shit, at this point, I felt bad for even bringing up the Emperor's deal. I put my hands on my hips, looking towards everyone, "Noone if I guessed right." I turned towards the group, "Anyone else want to voice an opinion?"

Hod walked up, scrawny as ever. He raised a winged arm, "Hod wish to speak to group."

With everyone's attention, Hod raised his taloned hands,

"Hod know what losing home like. Hod lose home after all. When Hod arrive on Earth, Hod gain new home. Hod want same for big salamanders. Hod not just want new home for big salamanders though."

Hod squeezed his hands, his scrawny arms shaking from the effort,

"Hod remember Yawm. Yawm scary, big plant man. Yawm threaten Hod new home. Hod know all us want help, but no help come. We fight alone. Gialgathens, they fight against Adair. Without us, gialgathens fight alone."

Hod pointed off at where the world tree once stood over the horizon,

"Hod believe the Adair like Yawm for gialgathens. Hod know it hard, but Hod want help against Adair. Hod want us be help us never had."

I raised my fists, "Alright then, it's settled. We'll wait on the Emperor's deal until after we've taken the Adair Family out."

The atmosphere lightened as I peered back and forth,

"But, uh, that doesn't mean we said no, does it?"

Amara and Torix shook their heads. Althea and Hod looked more in the middle about the issue. Kessiah and Krog seemed peeved that I even considered accepting the deal in the first place. I raised an eyebrow at Kessiah and Krog,

“Why don’t you both want to accept the deal? You can be honest, no hurt feelings here.”

Kessiah grimaced, “The albony treats everyone like ‘commoners.’ They’re complete dicks.”

Fair enough.

I turned to Krog, “What’s your reason?”

“Those that speak honeyed words are the least trustworthy. My gut tells me that Obolis intends on more than he let on, like a beautiful grail full of poisoned water.”

I took a deep breath, considering what he said. As I did, I mouthed, “Huh.”

I gave a slow nod before turning towards everyone, “Alright then, we won’t make any clear decisions right now. We have until a day after Giess has been glassed anyways.”

As I mentioned the glassing, Krog winced. I noted his reaction, making sure to remember a different way of wording the event for later. The group began chatting with a few mentions,

“Seems reasonable.”

“We trust your judgments.”

“Sounds good to me.”

I turned towards Torix, “When’s the next battle?”

The lich steepled his fingers, “Two days time. Our forces need rest and time to heal their wounds.”

“Alright then. We’ll meet back in Elderfire at 9:00 in the morning, Giess time. Until then, prepare yourselves for war, everybody.”

The crowd gave me a cheer, my friends and allies having a warm reception. Well, except Amara, but she gave me a tiny fist wave. For now, it was enough.

I walked up to Torix, “Hey man, there’s something I wanted to talk with you about.”

Torix’s blue eyes flared for a moment, “Ah, in private, I assume?”

I nodded. We turned towards the group, “I need to talk to Torix about something. If anyone needs me, I’ll be in my room after that.”

Amara narrowed her eyes, “Is there something you hide from us, leader of wolves?”

I shook my head, “Naw. I wanted to practice mind magic with Torix. I feel like it’s going to be invaluable in the future.”

Amara winced at the prospect, “Then sharpen your teeth with the fangs of others. I shall go back to my den, where the darkness welcomes me.”

“Alright...Sounds, uh, good.”

Man, I always felt so awkward anytime I talked to Amara, but hey, I got the job done. That was what was important, right? Anyways, Torix and I walked off before reaching his private study. Laid to the walls and back, Torix really set up shop in his private study.

Having teched himself up a bit, many of the charts here used touchscreens. It still carried a bit of Torix flare, several sheets of paper lifted up with different kinds of tacks. It always amazed me how Torix kept a different sort of utensil for any given situation. Of those many utensils, each specific one was different from the last. It created a kind of pleasing patchwork, the type where only he understood the chaos he created.

In that chaos, I welcomed the overwhelming complexity. I was already used to it anyways. If anything, it gave the room a homey sort of feel. As we situated ourselves in desks, Torix opened up his own dimensional storage. I raised my eyebrow at the gesture as he pulled out some kind of glass bottle with an amber liquid in it. Torix gestured it to me,

“This is something similar to alcohol. It’s far more Schema-proofed, however. In many cases, it would be considered a potent poison. For you, it might even create a slight buzz. Would you like some?”

Feeling good, I grabbed the bottle and looked at it, “Yeah, it looks pretty good, I suppose.”

Torix pulled out two glasses. I pursed my lips at him, “You’re going to drink some?”

“It’s designed to be metal soluble, so I intended to try.”

We took the bottle, pouring out our own glasses. After tapping it, Torix announced, “For the legion.”

“Yeah, for the legion.”

Damn, I’m awkward. Anyways, I took the shot and noticed a slight burn in my throat. It was caustic, like acid. My body absorbed it, leaving a lingering feeling of wooziness. While not on par with alcohol in the past, it did do something.

Torix turned the bottle in his hand, “Well...that’s rather disappointing.”

“Yeah, I expected more kick.”

Torix chugged half the bottle, the liquid catching on his skeletal frame and robe. As it assimilated, I chugged the rest of the container. It left a bit more impact, though not much. Within seconds, it dissipated into memory. I shrugged, “Eh, at least we tried, right?”

“Indeed. Now, what was this matter you wished to discuss...Ah, yes, mind magic. Given my superior statistics compared with last time, I should be a far more able opponent this time around-“

I raised a palm, “Wait a minute. I do want to discuss that afterward, but something more important needs to be handled first.”

Torix tilted his head, “Such as?”

I pulled out my obelisk, going through some of the streams and videos Torix made of me. After a few minutes, I found what I was looking for. I pointed at the moment I used my dimensional storage as a shield.

“See that?”

“I, in fact, do. What of it?”

“I have that portion of the tail still in my storage.”

Torix stood up with a jerk, his chair falling back, “You retained the tail?”

“Well, yeah.”

Torix pressed his hands against his temples, “Is this perhaps a joke of some sort? Why haven’t you mentioned this earlier?”

“We needed to get your body sorted out. After that, the Emperor called me. It’s been a damn busy last few days, so cut me some slack.”

Torix contemplated aloud once more,

“Hmmm, perhaps I judged rashly. Regardless of the timing, this is a tremendous boon. Given the nature of the tail’s composition, we should be able to study Lehesion’s composition with it. We may discover his weaknesses, or better still, a method of ripping him from their psionic control.”

I pointed at Torix, “Yeah, that would be pretty damn nice. I was wondering if it was safe to pull it out of storage yet, though.”

Torix pulled his chair back up with a flick of his wrist, all while sitting down. A telekinetic impulse knocked the chair right in place, and he crossed his legs once sitting. Torix stared down, deep in thought,

“That is a pressing conundrum.”

“That’s what I’ve been thinking too. If Lehesion knows where his tail is, he’ll find Elderfire or Mt. Verner. I think we should test it somewhere remote. That should make it easier to figure out.”

“Perhaps. It would also give us a means of escape should he follow us. We merely need Spear there with us.”

“Exactly. After we’ve inspected it and made sure it’s safe, I say we can inspect it before putting it back in storage. We can learn a lot of stuff from this given a chance, but I don’t want to push our luck.”

Torix’s eyes shifted to a purplish color, “You’re frightened by this mere fragment of Lehesion? You’ve fought his entirety. Surely this should pose no threat towards someone such as yourself.”

I scowled, “It’s less fear and more so respect. I know what Lehesion can do, and I don’t want him unleashing that havoc anywhere near me. We may discover his weakness from inspecting the tail. At the same time, we could also end up with the Adair Family knowing where we are or worse.”

My eyes turned grim, “I don’t want our home destroyed just because we wanted to poke and prod a chunk of meat.”

The atmosphere in the room turned heavy. Torix crossed his arms,

“The issue exists due to safety, correct? In this instance, we’re balancing the pros and cons of inspecting the tail further. On the one hand, we could discover the weaknesses of our greatest foe. On the other, we may undo ourselves in the process.”

Torix shrugged, “I say we risk this endeavor as the benefits are too great to ignore.”

I raised a hand, “I mean, yeah, I agree. The thing is, I’m saying we should keep the research short and contained. Otherwise, we’ll end up exposing ourselves to whatever it is that’s controlling Lehesion. If it can control him, then it may be able to control us.”

Torix lifted his hands, his curiosity spurring him like hunger does a starving child,

“But there is so much to uncover here. We could expand our base of knowledge ten times over with only a few discoveries. Imagine the informational currencies we’d have to exchange with the Emperor. The elemental furnace, the obelisks, all that and more would be within our reach.”

I bit my lip, tempted by his offer. I stared at a wall of the lair, a map of Giess laid out. As if staring at the battlefield, I remembered the gurgling Hybrids. I murmured,

“Did we ever figure out what the orange soup is?”

Torix pulled his hands back, recoiling from the sound of my voice,

“Ah...we did.”

“What is it?”

“Ahem...Well, we discovered that it is a non-newtonian fluid composed of various nutrients, liquids, and, most importantly, nanomachines.”

I met Torix’s eyes, “Was there anything else odd about it?”

“It carried viral qualities, explaining why our soldiers struggled with fighting off ‘infections,’ so to speak. It also held some sort of psionic fluid as a base for the Adair’s



Family's control. It's similar to a one-way network that enables commands to be sent towards the messengers."

Torix raised his palms,

"However, the nanomachines weren't able to carry tracking systems due to their size, so our location is still a secret. The blue core surrounding Elderfire also utilizes several security measures in order to stop any transmissions as well. Schema's foolproof in that regard, the blue cores being a relatively higher tier item."

I raised an eyebrow, "How does a blue even do that?"

Torix crossed his arms, metal clanging on metal, "It's an interesting concept that Schema has never truly exposed and rightfully so. Explaining your stealth often undermines it entirely. Now, while on the one hand, many theorize Schema is utilizing a different kind of mana source, I think it's something else altogether. I'm of the opinion that Schema uses spatial magic to isolate spaces within blue cores."

I glanced around, thinking of how the invisible forcefield protected us,

"Mysterious...Schema has a lot of conspiracies around him, doesn't he?"

"He does. As for the nanomachine soup, we've tried out several methods of destroying the machines without relying on your cleansing. It would allow healers to work without your required clearing of the Gialgathens."

I tapped my chin, thinking of movies I'd seen forever ago. About a minute later, an idea sparked in my mind,

"What about an emp of some kind? It wouldn't hurt the gialgathens, but it would kill the machines inside, wouldn't it?"

"Hmmm...It would be a rather deft way of handling the issue. A localized emp isn't precisely difficult to create, and nanomachines are tiny, easily neutralized things. This wouldn't work on fully hybridized creatures, but perhaps it may on the nanomachine fluid. It isn't designed with an intention for battle after all."

Torix shrugged, “Eh, why not try it? We’ll see if it works. This would be a practical method of solving the issue at the least, that much is certain.”

“Let’s hope. Would that work on Lehesion’s tail, maybe?”

“I doubt it, given the antimagic properties of his aura. We may find some manner of freeing Lehesion given further research with our sample, however.”

I stared off, remembering Lehesion’s sadness when he last fought me,

“That would be the best-case scenario. How do you think they’re controlling Lehesion anyways?”

Torix took a deep breath, “If my inferences are correct, it revolves around their method for mind magic.”

I raised my eyebrows, “I know they can link up. Does it have to do with that?”

“Absolutely. Remember that psionic base I mentioned earlier? The Adair Family seems to have discovered how to relay communications rapidly using it. This allows them to control Lehesion and the Hybrids over vast distances, a utility most other mind mages lack. After all, there is a limit to transmission speeds. They seem to ignore it entirely.”

“So it’s like a fiber optic cable or something?”

“Indeed it is, though I ascertain its origin as the result of using techniques from Schema. The remnants were a species that formed him. It is safe to assume that not all of that technology was forgotten. They are likely using fragmented pieces of those technologies to enable their rebellion.”

I frowned, “Damn. What if they made another Schema?”

Torix scoffed, “I’ll answer your question with another. What if the Adair Family mind controlled an Old One?”

I shook my head with a bit of exasperation, “We’d be fucked.”

“Most certainly so, and I would assume the same if either of those premonitions came true. In a manner of speaking, that is far above my pay grade.”

I laughed a bit before looking around. The charts and calculations splayed out reminded me of the battles we fought. I stood up, rolling my shoulders, “Alright then, enough talk about what-ifs. Let’s organize the research on Lehesion.”

Torix stood up right after, “It shall be done.”

I cracked my neck, “Alright then, once that’s finished, how about we do some mind magic training? You game?”

Torix’s eyes tinted red as he cackled,

“Oh, it would bring me the utmost joy, disciple.”

#### Chapter 250: Mental Warfare

After about an hour of prep, Torix set up the research event for Lehesion’s tail. It stunned me just how involved the process was. The right researchers, equipment, and safety precautions required organizing from scientists and engineers alike. Torix knew the individuals involved with each operation, however, simplifying the process quite a bit.

With all that done, he and I readied ourselves for some good old mind magic shenanigans. Torix pepped up as he ran himself through a few mind magic drills of his own creation. Once finished mumbling to himself, he turned towards me,

“The first, most cardinal of all mind magic is the art of establishing a telepathic link. You’ve had it done to you with any gialgathen you’ve ever spoken with, and it’s child’s play to learn. Simply release your established mental defenses. It’s a feeling similar to opening your mind to new possibilities.”

I frowned, “Huh. That might take a while. I’m used to closing everything off, not opening myself up for the attacks.”

“While perhaps true your defense suffers, your strategy is similar to only learning to wield a shield when others are fighting with swords and shields. The mere act of owning an offensive measure dissuades a total offense, and that is a valuable defensive utility all its own. Otherwise, your enemy shall ignore any defensive measures of their own.”

That made a lot of sense, so I gave it my best shot. It took about fifteen minutes before I established a mental connection to Torix. It came with a nifty notification.

New Skill Learned! Telepathic Link(Lvl 10 – Others build walls of thought to ignore those around them. You go into the unknown, unafraid of the minds of others. +10% to telepathic link’s efficiency.

It was a nice bonus to get, but I failed to notice it at all. When I linked to Torix’s mind, it was like drifting into space. Mysterious, ancient, and boundless, Torix’s consciousness differed from the mind mages I fought against. Unlike the Adair Family’s troops, he was a vast, alien entity. This lich dwarfed them hundreds of times over.

I never noticed it before, but only two entities I linked with ever mirrored my mind’s stats. Etorhma and Eonoth overshadowed me in all honesty, but they were Old Ones, not people. It made sense that they felt endless, like staring into eternity. For an actual, living person to stand beside me with such mental prowess, it wasn’t just humbling.

It was actually kind of scary. Damn. It had been a while.

A shiver ran through my spine as Torix lifted his hand, “Ah, that was quick of you. Perhaps you own a few trees that assist with the creation of skills?”

I blinked a few times, finding myself in awe at the lich’s mind. I shook off my reverie before turning to the guy, “Uh, yeah.”

Torix shook his head, “It is odd to find such a vast mind matched against my own. You still carry the single largest source of mental will I’ve seen in all the years I lived. It is like staring into an ocean.”

I murmured, “Yeah. Same.”

Torix’s eyes hues purple, the flames carrying vibrant frenzies of fire. The lich leaned his chin down, as if ready for a hit. I did the same, mentally preparing for his mind to clash with my own. Before we began, I remembered a few of our mental fights from before. I stood up straight,

“Hey, before we start, I was wondering about the other kind of training we had before.”

Torix stood up, “Ah, perhaps you mean the aura training we conducted?”

I raised an eyebrow, “So it wasn’t mind magic?”

Torix shook his head, “In a manner of speaking, it was yet wasn’t. Your auras are unique. They contain palpable, physical effects on reality. Training that did test my mental fortitude at the time, but it wasn’t true mind magic. You didn’t link your mind with mine. We simply clashed with our inherent auras.”

I frowned, “Auras, eh? Sounds vague.”

“That’s simply because it is. I don’t fully understand how your auras operate. I did my best to work around those limitations in understanding and in our stats. It allowed me to give you reasonable training sessions. This is much more so my forte, and I’ve trained myself extensively within this particular domain.”

I leaned back down, “That’s why this feels so different then.”

“Precisely so.” Torix leaned down his chin, interlocking his umbral hands behind him, “And with that out of the way, we have a few hours to practice. Are you ready?”

“Yup.”

“Then let us begin.”

With the link established between us, Torix attacked first. I expected a probing jab of sorts, something to test my defenses. This was nothing of the sort. Like a rampaging rhino, Torix sprinted into my mind with a titanic clash. It took everything I had just to stay standing in the fight.

Not pausing for a moment, mental probes sprinted around me, searching for weak points. Torix managed each of these while maintaining a constant, unrelenting pressure. I held my breath as I shoved back with all my might.

Mentally stronger than Torix, I shoved him. Like an experienced wrestler, he sidestepped the force, pushing me sideways. Experiencing a bit of vertigo, I struggled to maintain my defenses. From a different angle, Torix applied a precise, devastating pressure. It tore into my mind like a hot knife into butter.

A headache roared into my head as silver blood dripped down my nose. The taste of it cleared my head, a bit of bloodlust pouring over me. Wielding it, I made several wild charges against him. Torix evaded each of them, parrying my psionic onslaughts.

He did so by plating the portions of his mind that I attacked. It was similar to facing someone in a suit of armor with a sword. Except, in this case, the armor bent on the knight's skin like a liquid. With a deft hand, Torix intercepted the blows of my mental sword, collapsing all of his mind's might at one point.

This meant that despite my superior mental strength, he shoved my attacks aside without much difficulty. He did so all while attacking me from every angle, exposing all the weak points he found. In a way, it wasn't that different from the mind mages. The difference came from the size of Torix's mind and the ferocity of his execution.

In his new body, he wasn't wielding a mind one-tenth the size of my own. His willpower was much closer than before, and his intelligence mirrored my own. These attributes gave his mental skills a bite I wasn't expecting.

Torix didn't seem to notice. He stayed still, appearing totally unaffected by me. After several minutes of the attack, I shivered from the strained effort. After an hour of surviving the torment, Torix forced me to fall onto my knees. Once my mind's defenses fell apart, Torix ceased his attack.

He walked over, offering me a hand,

“That was far better than I expected. Well done.”

I stayed there for a few seconds, heaving for breath. I blinked in surprise, looking back up at the lich. He looked huge, like a giant staring down at an ant. It came with a bit of fear, but I shook that emotion out after a bit of rationalization.

For the first time in a long time, someone around me could seriously harm me. That wasn't the end of the world. Thinking about it, Torix did the same for months in his previous body. I did so for most of my life before Schema arrived. If anything, it raised the expectations I had for myself. Here was a new frontier I hadn't ventured into, and that was exciting.

Eh, and maybe scary.

“How...how did I lose so badly, though?”

Torix scoffed, “Are you serious? In an arena you've never participated in, you managed to evade defeat for over an hour's time, against a master no less. Lost badly? If anything, I'm disappointed I didn't dispatch you faster.”

I grabbed his hand, standing up. My mind's composure reformed as quickly as it fell apart, my mental bulwark reforming. I shook off the jitters, calming down as I mouthed,

“I felt like I was dying. Damn.”

Torix nodded, “As you should've. I could've suppressed the conscious control of your body at that moment. You'd of been the world's strongest puppet, that much is certain.”

I stared at him, a bit of horror leaking onto my face. Torix cackled, “I wouldn't be so disappointed. You've several tools at your disposal to even the odds.”

“Like what?”

“Your auras for starters. What was it called...ah yes, Event Horizon and The Rise of Eden. Both of those would’ve turned you into a far more formidable opponent.”

“Wait a minute...I wasn’t using The Rise of Eden?”

“Well, you weren’t using the aura. That’s precisely why I wasn’t able to crush you far faster. Without you sharing the enhancements, your willpower and intelligence exceeded my own by leaps and bounds. Event Horizon would prove even more effective, however.”

Torix lifted his hands, “It eats at your enemy’s minds, blinding them with pain and immobilizing them with pressure. It enables you to commit to complete offense without having to lessen your defenses. I believe this is how you’ve managed your mental battles so far.”

He raised one finger, “You turned your mind into a fortress while using Event Horizon as a whip. That is by no means an ineffective strategy. Having established the mental link, however, enabled me to wreak havoc upon your waiting mind.”

I gave him a slow nod, “So I haven’t actually been fighting in my mind battles?”

“I would say not. Your tactics are efficient, and they’ve worked around your limitations so far. This has enabled you to avoid the primary detriments of mind magic, like memory manipulation. On the other hand, you have experienced crippling pain from it, correct?”

I remembered the headaches from fighting Version 2.2.

“Yeah, it’s been painful despite all my pain resistance.”

“A less tenacious individual would’ve already crumpled, yet you stayed standing in an arena you had no business being in. For that, I would take pride.”

My defeat didn’t sting as much all of a sudden.



“That being said, your tactics and movements mirror a novice. We’ve much to work on, from the strategies you employ to the nature of your defense. That shall be what we work on.”

And the string returned. I listened as I glanced at my notifications. Yeh, the training was working alright.

New Breakthrough Achieved! Mental Defense(lvl 12—> 37 lvl)

New Breakthrough Achieved! Mental Bombardment(lvl 14 —> 39 lvl)

New Skill Learned! Mind Magic(lvl 10) – Many would fight with the physical. You choose to transcend the corporeal, overwhelming other’s minds.

I gave the notifications a nod before meeting Torix’s eye,

“Alright. Give me an overview. We’ll go to round two after a few tips.”

Torix stood with pride, “Of course. The first lesson revolves around one thing and one thing only – mind partitioning. The majority of your will must be used to immobilize your opponents. An excellent offense is an excellent defense as it were.”

He lifted a fist, “In a manner of speaking, this blot of willpower is your hammer. On the other end of the spectrum, you must wield the clout of your mind with precision. These are the feelers you no doubt noticed. They allow you to discover weaknesses to exploit. Without them, you may be worn down by a mind with superior willpower.”

Torix shrugged, “That aspect of mind magic is challenging to learn, and requires refined mental exercises to create. It is similar to multitasking, but on dozens of different facets at once. This is what most mind mages use to separate themselves from individuals that are often only looking to defend themselves.”

The lich gestured a palm to me, “Given your time constraints, I believe learning to tighten your defenses and sharpening that ‘hammer’ of will would be most effective.”

“You’re the pro here, so that sounds good to me.”

Torix's eyes shifted purple, and I winced at the sight. He cackled, "And as we both already know, you learn best from participation, not merely listening. Perhaps another sparring session is in order?"

I took a deep breath, "Man, this is going to be a long day."