

## New World 251

### Chapter 251: General Understanding

We practiced for two more hours, each of them stretching on into eternity. It was a painful, slow, and tedious process. The reason for that was simple – I was bad at it. This wasn't like runic work or punching stuff down. I lacked talent in mind magic, and Torix showed the opposite.

For example, as I got better and gained skills, Torix exposed more depth in the mind magic battles. I didn't close the gap. Instead, it remained constant, like running up a never-ending set of stairs. Each time I gained a bit on him, he showed more of his skills.

Traps, illusions, attrition, blitzing, scouting, countering, hell, he even used parallel thought lines at one point. All you do is separate your consciousness into multiple, independent entities and have them each do something different. It makes specific strategies, particularly blitzing and scouting, far more effective.

Even after going through the rounds of those tactics, Torix demonstrated nuance with each tactic. His traps, initially just nuisances that wasted my time, turned into crippling landmines. When I attacked the wrong target, it created a whiplash effect. It was like swinging a bat at a stone wall. The reversed force made my bones ache in response, and Torix never gave me time to recover.

It gave me a newfound respect for mind mages and what they went through. Here I imagined the process of learning it was simple and easy. No, it was brutal, and anyone that chose this path didn't do so lightly.

This wasn't for lack of Torix's teaching, however. The guy did a fantastic job of explaining the concepts. His descriptions and elaborations were concise, passionate, and thorough. They had no excess rambling, yet they never missed essential details either. In every way possible, Torix showcased a mastery over the art of teaching.

It was nothing like how I explained stuff. I just...felt my way through things. Torix created these massive mental systems to guide his way through complex problems. That meant that even if someone didn't know where to start, Torix could spell out even the most basic concepts.

In other words, when Torix taught, my limit was my comprehension skills, not the lesson's quality.

Either way, I was glad the lesson was over when Torix unclasped his hands behind him and said,

“That is all the time I have left, unfortunately. There's much administration work I must finish, but we should devote more time to this task. While potent, you lack a refinement to your mind magic. Considering the opponents we find ourselves facing, this should be a priority.”

I pushed past a wave of dread,

“Yeah, you're right...This is harder than gravity magic or learning runes. It's definitely something I need to work on.”

Torix shrugged, “It is inevitable that you shall find a field you lack talent for. This is no excuse for being incompetent, however. This is especially true given the resources at your disposal and the enemies we face. We shall devote an hour's time a day until you've reached a reasonable quality in your mental warfare.”

I nodded. Talent or not, I needed to learn this and fast. Having more mind magic oomph during our battles would make a huge difference. It would remove a lot of the strain on Torix, who was already handling dozens of different tasks. Considering all that, I resolved to put my all into this.

However, I needed Torix for the training since no one else had the base stats to fight me on even footing. I left him in his lair, letting the guy manage all the affairs he needed to. Once gone, I walked to my room on the top floor of Mt. Verner.

It was the same as I remembered it, though someone cleaned it before I arrived. Otherwise, a dense layer of dust would've formed over the stonework and floors. I paced over towards the Earthen, modern facilities like a fridge and sink. It came across as nostalgic, something I'd forgotten about.

With a small amount of time to kill, I plopped myself onto my bed, pulling out my obelisk. A dozen different gravity wells suspended me over the fabric, stopping me

from destroying the entire floor at this point. There, I researched a few topics I was curious about.

The first was getting some better obelisks for Torix and us. It took a few hours, but I found out quite a bit. For starters, obelisks weren't cheap by any means. They started at around 300,000 credits and worked their way up from there. How Torix had that kind of money when we met, I don't know, and in all honesty, I kind of didn't want to know. It was a different chapter in his life, and the guy had changed since then.

Either way, that was chump change at this point. Surfing through the market, I discovered a vast system of exchanges for used obelisks and the like. The obelisk manufacturers mentioned the risks involved, from implanted viruses to fishing schemes that gained your financial data. It reminded me of the web before Schema arrived.

Considering my sheer lack of competence, I didn't trust myself to find a good deal. Instead, I just went towards different manufacturers and looked for an obelisk like the Emperor's fancy one. As expected, they weren't on the market. The ones I found paled in comparison, even as they reached into the millions of credits. Even for me, that wasn't an unsubstantial sum, which was stunning in its own way.

The average person would never be able to afford them. Ever. It was a luxury item sold to the highest class of businessmen or guild owners. I fell into one of those categories, so I ordered one, dipping into my personal funds. I got one that carried a relatively primitive AI, but it could still automate a few of Torix's tasks with a bit of finagling.

It came with software package options, something else I knew nothing about. After letting out an internal groan, I handled the research for that too. Once again, I went with an expensive but standard package for general security needs. It wasn't nearly as pricey as the obelisk but still came in at a few hundred thousand credits.

Finishing my shopping up, someone opened up the door. I leaned up, finding Althea peering into the room. Our eyes met, and a grin popped up on my face. As she walked up, we hugged for a bit, just enjoying each other's company.

She whispered, "I missed you."

"I missed you too."

“I missed you three.”

I leaned back, “What? Missed me three?”

Althea shrugged, Well you said you missed me two. I missed you more, so I missed you three.”

It took me a second to comprehend, and when I facepalmed, she giggled at my frustration. We fell into a light-hearted chat, something we hadn’t been able to do in a long time. With an entire evening ahead of us, she wanted a personal, homecooked meal from yours truly.

It reminded me of the dates we had forever ago while preparing to fight Yawm. Like then, I stuck to relatively simple recipes, sticking to stuff I remembered cooking for myself. We laughed, relaxed, and enjoyed ourselves. It was the first night in a long time where I just...shut the world out for a bit.

Once Althea slept soundly beside me, I went back online, scoping out other obelisk functions. I always dealt with real-world, pressing issues for the most part, so I never explored this part of Schema’s universe. I assumed all of it was heavily censored, which was partially correct. Criticism against Schema was strictly forbidden.

On the other hand, everything else wasn’t. People still didn’t share skills and trees, keeping those details to their guilds or clans. On the other hand, the utter strangeness of an online space still thrived. Memes of all kinds, inside jokes, constant bickering, it was a lot like the internet of ages past.

I kept out of those time sinks for the most part, being too busy to relish in that kind of arguing. I did laugh at a few comment threads on the videos Torix posted of me, though. People were clever, and they honed their comment game to a fine edge. Some gems I can remember off the top of my head,

‘Incoming news report: Gravity Guy too angry to die.’

‘Hybrids: Exist.

Gravity Guy: Imma end this whole man’s career.’

A lot of these jokes actually came from people on Earth, which surprised me. I learned after that the comment system sorted by location, and that explained a lot of what was going on. I was from Earth, so Schema gave me Earth comments. Because of this, meme culture lived on into Schema's age, still going strong. Of course, a large variety of jokes from other cultures intermingled with them, but I didn't understand them. The cultural disconnect was real, and I was out of the loop big time.

It was still interesting to see a general, positive sentiment for our guild. In fact, Torix even created a specific page where we released the videos at timed intervals. It worked towards making the guild more famous while boosting our guild's image. He did a good job, editing it in such a way that I looked pretty good. He let people apply for our guild without giving away our location either, and taking such efforts for security ensured we were safe for the most part.

Something that surprised me about the videos was a small, vocal minority in favor of the Adair Family. These comments were shot down immediately after being made, but when I did see them, they carried a sting I didn't expect. They spawned from people who lost their entire families to eldritch all the way to the world's recently Schemafied. These people created a potent, negative undertone among the masses.

I ignored them for the most part, closing out of my obelisk's browser. While getting a feel for galactic sentiment was nice, I still had dozens of tasks I needed to do. I said my goodbyes to Althea before heading towards the lower segments of Mt. Verner.

At the bottom floor, the residential district thrived as usual. Our guild's presence acted as a deterrent for eldritch infestations in the immediate area. This let people focus on more than fighting, and that showed in the variety of shops available. People made art, music, and other stuff that, while not utterly necessary, did add a lot to live for.

Stepping through the residential district was an experience in its own way as well. People stared, no, gawked

at me as if I were some historical figure walking around. I guess I was, in a way. Well, to these people at least. It stopped me from hearing what people actually thought, however.

That's why I was down here. I wanted to get some kind of understanding of what an average person's life was like. I felt it would help me understand why the Adair Family

was doing what it was doing. After all, they wanted to change Schema for a reason. If I got a grip on that, then I might gain an edge our guild needed for success.

It seemed worthwhile, and Earth's safe period after being Schemafied was coming to an end soon. Expanding my guild would never be easier than it was at that moment, and there were probably a lot of people out there needing my help. It gave me something to gain instead of just giving away my resources for free. Considering how easy help was to give, it seemed like a real shame to ignore the masses out of ignorance.

That's was the crux of the issue – no one told me what they actually thought. They got starry-eyed the moment I walked up, even the stoniest cynic in the room. All our guildspeople's problems melted away when I asked for some insight, and eventually, the lack of honesty grated my nerves.

Without any means of getting a decent answer here, I took my sights elsewhere. I downloaded a map of the area, searching out different communities we found that weren't too far away. While not perfect, it gave me something to look at to scope out a normal person's prospects. If I chose a town to nearby, then I'd get some community already receiving our guild's assistance.

That wasn't what I was after. I wanted to know a normal person's life, and that meant no Harbinger's Legion helping them out. Determined to figure this out, I raced through the night sky, suspended by gravity wells. With stars gleaming overhead, I inspected three random towns within a few hundred miles of Mt. Verner.

They...weren't what I expected.

I thought people would've already organized and handled the eldritch for the most part. In one of the villages, Brownsville, they had. Brownsville was a militant, authoritarian settlement. Surrounded by barbed wire and electrified fences, it was once an old military base. This let people level quickly after the culling first began. With this solid backbone, they kept the nearby areas cleared of eldritch for the most part.

This came at a severe cost, however. No one retained any freedom, a strict curfew enforced. Armed guards paced around, enacting order as much as keeping roaming eldritch out. In general, a lingering sense of fear soaked every interaction here. These people barely hung on, and they couldn't thrive like this.

At first, I thought Brownsville was a real shitshow. I was wrong. It wasn't so bad compared to Gale City. Gale City was an extensive collection of people at the center of what used to be Lansing. Along the horizon, I found dozens of different bridges built across the skyscrapers. It was a new town built on the bones of an old city.

Trees covered the streets below, and they lacked any kind of maintenance. There along overgrown streets, eldritch roamed free, monsters skulking in the dark. These beasts crashed through glass panels, searching for meat and sustenance. Hyper competitive, eldritch fought one another, feasting on each other's corpses.

At the same time, they hungered for anything weaker than them like ravenous insects. By now, some of the eldritch reached level 1,000, the dungeons having developed quite a bit. Fringe zones developed across the countryside, no real force eliminating them.

The reason for that was simple: for the most part, humans lacked the same leveling capacity. That made sense. Most people didn't thrive in this kind of environment. Most people just wanted to do enough to get by, and that wasn't enough for Schema. The AI lived out the virtue of kill or be killed.

Inspecting from afar, I found the average level in Gale City was around six to seven hundred. It was about three hundred levels below your average member of Brownsville. That was impressive, but they weren't keeping up with the eldritch below. Instead, they stayed hidden above the ground in the skyscrapers.

The bridges let them exchange resources, from lumber fueling fires to the meat of hunted animals. They cooked and ate eldritch, something I found dangerous considering how viral those monsters could be. Some farmed along the rooftops, having taken soil from the ground up to the top of the buildings.

They kept guards along the rooftops that defended their crops from flying eldritch. It meant their diets weren't awful, and they weren't wallowing in absolute poverty by any means. At the same time, damn, they were definitely struggling compared with our guild.

I...I guess I hadn't been a usual person in a long time, even from the very get-go of the culling. I got out of BloodHollow over-leveled and armed with a massive advantage in the form of my armor. Other people weren't that lucky, well, if you could call my experience in BloodHollow lucky.

In a way, it was, though. I got ahead of the experience curve. Being overleveled let me explore and fight often without much fear of dying. These people were struggling just to hold on. They were in a rat race of sorts where they never had enough to start thinking long-term. This meant they were forced into short term decision making, preventing them from ever really getting ahead. It hurt seeing this, and it made Schema's world look like a real dystopia.

Imagining this kind of suffering across thousands of worlds...maybe the Adair Family was aiming for something different. They still needed to be put down, but this put their actions into perspective. It also showcased a need for military might. The eldritch required systematic eradication. Otherwise, people would be forced into this kind of life, one where they didn't know if they'd have a tomorrow to wake up to.

It wasn't all doom and gloom at least. Some places handled themselves well with just a bit of assistance. Along lake Mead, South of Mt. Verner, a lake town did pretty well. It was located on an old port city, Fairmount, built around the waterside lifestyle there. The Steel Legion landed here, just as they had in Springfield.

Because of that, the population was armed and organized. The Steel Legion was mainly the neutral guild Schema used for modernizing new worlds. Using that new tech and policies, Fairmount did well for themselves, the population rivaling Mt. Verner.

They kept several boats roaming the lake's edge to monitor any eldritch spawning in hidden coves. The city itself needed little protection, having been built along a cliffside. With only one face of the town needing protection, this gave them a lot of leeway. The power armor didn't hurt them in that regard either.

Fairmount seemed self-sufficient for the most part, getting most of their food from the lake. They also took in refugees, something I hadn't expected. After skulking around the town's edges, I discovered the Steel Legion enforced the whole accepting new member's policy.

Several of the bars and hangouts didn't accept anyone but natives. It showed a general disdain for newcomers. It was better than Brownsville, but not by much. Either way, having one out of the three towns be halfway decent was pretty good. If this was how the rest of the world was doing, then it wasn't all bad.

Having seen my fill of sights, I flew back towards Mt. Verner while lost in thought. After weighing my options, I decided to give most of these towns offers to join my



guild. Even if they weren't the best fighters, they could provide extra resources overtime. We would protect them in exchange. It would be like a representative government.

Schema helped us there with his handy guild functions. I could keep the taxes relatively low, and it wasn't like I cared much for the money. Either way, it seemed like a good deal for most of these cities. Having resolved that, I headed back towards my room as the sun rose. Walking in with the sunrise, Althea's eyes cracked open, finding me.

After having a quick breakfast with just eggs and bacon, we parted ways with a kiss and hug. She backlogged a few missions for our evening together, and I needed to organize a few meetups. With that in mind, I called Chrona having her answer with a big yawn,

"Ah, Daniel, it is good to see you well. What are you calling for?"

I peered at her silver skin, the moisture levels maintained by mana laden mist surrounding her,

"I need you to talk with Torix about your mana. Considering his specialties, I think he'd be great at learning primordial mana. It would be great for his summoning too."

Chrona murmured, "Hmmm, the walking skeleton? Ever since he shifted bodies, he has shown far greater confidence than before... Yes, I believe he would learn quickly. I am available most days during most times, so I shall work with him. As you command, Daniel."

"Alright then, cool. Let me know how it goes after a few sessions."

"I will. Is there anything else you need?"

I shook my head, giving her a thumbs-up right after,

"Nope. Thanks and keep kicking ass."

Chrona frowned, “It is you who is performing the kicking of the asses. I am merely waiting for a crisis to show my skills.”

I crossed my arms, “Guarding Elderfire could save countless people.”

Chrona sighed, “I understand. It is simply difficult to wait, that is all. I will stay here and serve your commands heed, for they are the lifeblood of my people. Goodbye, and may the stars shine upon you.”

“Er, may the stars shine on you too.”

Chrona chuckled as she closed the call. Right as I finished it, I walked into Torix’s lair. Centered here, Spear, Torix, and several scientists looked ready for war. The scientists carried lead suits over themselves, keeping out anything trying to get in. Spear even wore protective gear over his exposed skin.

Beside them, dozens of different instruments measured air pressure, temperature, levels of radiation, and a dozen other metrics I didn’t know about. Torix advised the group on handling several of the magically inclined devices, his tone sharp,

“And if any of you drop one of the resonators, I shall simply mirror the condition of the device onto you. Understood?”

They each gave a heavy nod, their nervousness oozing through their plastic facemasks. I paced up, a behemoth among them. The disparate sizes of Torix, Spear, and I created a split in the room. It was like two worlds colliding, each of us living different lives. That was good because we needed what these guys were good at.

After a few greetings from each scientist, I learned their names and occupations. Rob, Scotty, and Amanda, they worked in the eldritch research center that Amara oversaw. Though nervous, they carried a general air of professionalism no different than a surgeon. Either way, they looked like good people.

Torix turned to them,

“This is a life or death discovery. We know nothing about what this section of Lehesion will do. Perhaps it will cling and crush one of you. It may release a biohazard that

requires each of you to remain in quarantine for months. Perhaps it shall do worse. Are each of you prepared for those realities?”

They replied in unison, “Sir, yes, sir.”

“Excellent.” Torix turned towards me,

“Are you prepared for the discoveries we shall unfold?”

I clanked my teeth a few times before taking a deep breath,

“Always.”

#### Chapter 252: Energized

With our goals set, we walked through the dimensional rift. Pacing out onto a pale mountainside, a snowstorm whirled around us, the winds deafening. The crisp cold woke me up, the scientists shivering even through their lead-laden hazmat suits.

Torix shouted over the howling tempest,

“Excuse the scenery. This is one of the few locations that won’t allow the eldritchified landscape to sink into our study.”

A strange, three-headed beetle crawled under Torix’s foot. Torix stomped the insect below his heel, quashing it against the dark stone,

“Ahem, mostly.”

Following behind him, Spear and I carried several rugged computers, measurement devices, and battery cases. Setting them down, the scientists got to work setting up the various equipment. Spear closed the gateway while I stood guard.

As they did, the icy cold stung, melting over their heated suits. I lifted my hand, noting how it didn’t feel even cool to the touch. If anything, it felt no different than the air. For the scientists, it made working the tech difficult, so Torix mouthed an incantation. Dark

mana pulsed through his palm, creating a shield of shade that deflected the wind. It softened in color, turning semi-translucent, the blizzard bounding around the buffer.

Using its protection, the researchers connected the power sources with the analysis devices. Not knowing much about any of it, I let them work. In the meantime, I stepped outside the barrier and inspected our surroundings. As I did, the view below the mountain top opened for my viewing pleasure.

Vibrant forests miles below us covered the ground to the horizons. Upon closer inspection, I found wounds scattering the landscape. Mana pollution soaked into every region, pools of purple creating circles of dead trees in the forests below. The life on Giess struggled against silvers and eldritch alike, the battles below foreboding a grim reality.

Giess was dying. Staring at the havoc, it seemed distant though not altogether unexpected. Lehesion burned through the planet's mana to fuel the rebellion's efforts. This would wreak havoc on the world's wildlife, and that meant the silver's infestation would spread. Combine that with the growing blots of mana pollution, and Giess was all but done for.

The scientists behind me set out to stop that. Chemistry sets, Petri dishes, even Geiger counters sprawled out over cheap, plastic tables. It let them approach the inspection from a variety of angles. As they finished the set-up, I kept my eyes peeled for interruptions.

I found a variety of eldritch creeping around, small vermin hiding in the snow. Some insects hid in gaps between the icy blanket, the cold unable to stop them. While harmless for us, they exposed how deeply the life of Giess now fell. Even the tops of mountains carried the classic signs of a fringe world.

As I stared off in the distance, I spotted more signs of Giess's fall. Dozens of growing rifts created tiny plots of mismatched environments. Without the wildlife handling these infestations, Giess was ill-prepared for the interdimensional terrors. The only respite from the eldritch came from the forests of spires where the silvers thrived.

Between both of those crushing forces, Giess drowned. It was a shame, but I didn't have time to mourn a dying planet. Using Event Horizon, I sterilized the area outside Torix's shield, stopping the insects from piling up. Ice beetles, foxes breathing out cold

air, even an estranged silver or two came near. I culled them without much thought, the scientists trusting me in that regard.

With the preparations complete, I paced back into Torix's protective barrier. On a metal stretcher, several sets of hands looked ready to inspect Lehesion's tail. I turned to those here,

"Be ready for anything, alright?"

Rob, Scotty, and Amanda gave me solemn nods, each of them ready for the worst. Torix stared with intent, his grimoire opened for quick access to spells in case of crisis. Spear whirled his dimensional slicers overhead, prepared to retaliate against whatever came nearby.

The pivotal moment arrived, and I opened my dimensional storage. From it, I pulled out the chunk of Lehesion's tail, the flesh no longer radiating with his usual golden aura. As I set it down, it warmed my hands like a fireplace in winter.

It showed no signs of life, so the scientist closed in after a few seconds. In a sudden spur of motion, the tail writhed, spazzing with abandon. I grabbed it, pinning it in place with a gravity wells and my hands. The aura soaked around the tail once more, Lehesion's presence growing.

Torix gestured to the scientists, "Hurry. We've little time to work with."

As they set up to work, the tail heated in my hands. A glow spread over it, the yellow aura turning blue. It grew more luminous before shining even brighter than a blue sun. Creeping out of it, a relentless, unknowable amount of energy coursed into the tip of the tail.

Those around me panicked, but despite the blinding light, an insidious presence leaked out of the tail chunk. The presence merely whispered, yet it left my ears ringing with pain. Despite the volume, no one else reacted to the sound. They only reacted to the light.

Blinded by the gleam, the scientists blinked in blindness, even my eyesight muddled. As my eyes healed, a warmth washed over me. It reminded me of what sunlight used to

feel like. It intensified over the next few seconds, and the air hissed in my ears, squealing out in agony.

At the same time, the Geiger counters rocked towards their maximum values. I turned towards them, finding them capped out at 10,000 roentgen. I stared at the device, a bit confused at the reading before one of the scientists stumbled. Torix howled,

“Cover the tail.”

Shaking off my confusion, I wrapped my armor around the flesh chunk, my body molding over it in a second. The metal composing my body, ten times the density of lead, held in the glow. Carrying the irradiated mass in a pocket of dark metal, the blue shine ceased. Amanda stumbled forward, falling onto her knees. As she vomited into her glass facemask, Torix channeled a spell over the area.

It lessened the warm glow from the tail, but it still singed my skin a bit. I winced, imagining the devastation it must be dishing out to the scientists. Rob and Scotty fell right after and vomited as they did. Turning towards the scientists, I found Spear taking a few steps back, even the Sentinel affected by the sudden burst of radiation. Torix and I stayed standing, only the two of us unharmed.

In fact, Torix was less injured than I was. Having fire eyeballs, the guy wasn't blinded by the light. He already acted, rushing towards the scientist's aid. I tried doing the same. Several of them began convulsing in their suits, and I stared at them, helpless to heal their injuries. Torix flipped his grimoire, pelting several spells into the area. Healing auras smothered us, and their shaking stopped.

Torix let out a sigh of relief, staring at the scientist below him.

I murmured, “What the fuck just happened?”

Torix checked a scientist's vitals using a spell,

“They've suffered acute radiation poisoning. The tail might as well have been ten nuclear reactors all at once.”

Torix scrambled, a ball of activity,

“Even with lead shielding, this level of radiation is toxic. It’s as if we stumbled into the core of the sun without the heat it would emit.”

The lich sent a dozen messages before turning towards Spear,

“Can you still cast your dimensional warps?”

Spear held it together before nodding,

“I am able.”

“Then we shall need a medical unit to offer them iodine and to wash them off. The sudden flash of radiation shouldn’t have been fatal, given our medical resources.”

Torix turned towards me, “I will need you to pilot much of this machinery after they’ve left. Only the two of us are resistant to the radiation.”

I stared at the rows of knobs and dials, the machinery looking more like a monster than any eldritch,

“Uh...ok.”

Around us, the eldritch beyond Torix’s veil evolved. They mutated in an instant, assimilating the radiation at a moment’s notice. Even the smallest beetles turned into a dog-sized abomination. Before they finished their disgusting reformations, I evaporated them with Event Horizon.

I frowned, “So that’s why Schema doesn’t like nuclear weaponry? Yeah, it makes sense.”

Spear cleaved through dimensions as he gasped in exhaustion. From the portal’s opening, the industrial bay of Mt. Verner buzzed with activity. Torix organized a unit of medical personnel before we began. Spear couldn’t stand any longer, the remnant unable to endure the exposure. Torix pulled the Sentinel’s arm over his shoulder and

lifted him up. Spear stared at Torix as the once frail lich pulled him to safety through the portal.

I pulled the rest of the scientists out using gravity wells. Torix turned towards the medical personnel flooding the scene. Workers peered at the crisis from afar as Torix shouted,

“Remove their clothing and have them washed. We must limit their exposure to radiation.” He mouthed spell, a shield passing over those present, “That shall prevent those present from being irradiated, though everyone will need decontamination at some point.”

As the stretchers came unto the scene, I stood surrounded by the equipment we intended to use for inspection. With Lehesion’s tail tucked in a ball of metal beside me, walking through the portal wasn’t an option. The radiation might harm the people there, and it could give away our location too. If the tail came to life, then it may escape as well.

Walking through the veil wasn’t worth the risk, but it still stung, watching the scientists be carried away. I waited there, minutes stretching on like tiny eternities. After a while, Torix walked through the dimensional slice. He sighed,

“They’ve administered the iodine and Prussian blue. They shall live, though they’ll likely need to get used to new hairstyles, no doubt.”

Torix pointed at the portal,

“The research must continue despite this crisis. We’ll need to cover this space with a panel of your armor. It shall prevent the enormities of radiation from leaking onto Mt. Verner.”

I began shredding portions of skin from my arm, the injuries healing in seconds. As I did, Torix walked over and put a hand on my shoulder,

“Your suggestion to keep the research elsewhere besides for Elderfire and Mt. Verner saved dozens of lives. That was an excellent use of foresight.”



I molded the dark metal, using quintessence to melt it. After hovering it over the circular warp, I created a wall of metal over it, curving it around the warp. I turned to Torix,

“I just know I can’t heal people, so I have to think more carefully about this kind of risk. Otherwise, people will just die around me. In the end, I will always be the final survivor, and the last thing I want is to be standing on a mountain of corpses. My friend’s corpses.”

Torix stared down at his own hands, “Ah...Perhaps I will be similar given time. This new body’s resilience is the only reason I didn’t vaporize instantly. We’re fortunate that we prioritized the creation of this new body over researching the tail.”

Torix pointed at my ball of metal by my side, “Speaking of which, it’s contained in that bulb?”

I nodded, grabbing it in one of my hands like a metal basketball. Torix sighed, “Let us inspect if it is researchable still.”

I grabbed the armor and jerked. A tear opened, releasing a plume of blue light. It was as if a star stored itself within, the light bright enough to pierce the clouds above. Torix paced over towards a table, picked up a dosimeter, and put it over the pillar of blue light. Torix winced,

“That blue light is the Cherenkov effect. I doubt the electrical equipment will hold up with these levels of radiation. This will require good old fashioned magical inquiry.”

Torix picked up a scalpel and a petri dish, aiming to gain a sample. I pulled most of the tail hunk out, the light blinding. As Torix walked back over, the scorching warmth faded from my hands. The evanescent light waned, along with the tail’s structure.

Some kind of self-destruction began, and the tail melted. Before it finished, I drilled tendrils of my armor into it. Draining it, I devoured the nanomachines spread throughout the chunk. It wasn’t enough. Torix attempted taking a sample, but the flesh hunk, along with the energy it carried, degenerated into mush.

I kept the golden mush in a gravity well, preventing it from soaking into the snow and soil below. Torix took a sample of it and tried analyzing it, but the lich cursed as he viewed it,

“This is patently absurd. To think they’d create self-destructive implants throughout the tissue.” Torix grabbed the petri dish, smashing it into the stone below,

“It’s useless. All of it. Dammit it all.”

We stood there for a moment, the wind howling outside Torix’s bubble, muffled like music from behind a building. The muted blizzard only made the moment worse as Torix shook his head,

“I had hoped to discover our enemy’s greatest weakness. Instead, I’ve hospitalized three of our best workers, along with over a hundred thousand credits worth of equipment.”

He sat down onto the stone below, letting himself flop down. He crushed stone to powder, so I followed suit. I didn’t let myself slam down like he did. Otherwise, I might cause a kinetic explosion. Torix stared down,

“Bah, this isn’t my first failure, though it still carries a familiar sting. We’ve gained nothing from this golden opportunity.”

I pulled up the golden blob that once was Lehesion’s tail, “Hah, golden.”

“You’re not helping.”

“Sorry.” An awkward moment passed before I pointed at the blob, “What do you want to do with this?”

“Dispose of it how you will. There was no recognizable cellular matter within the petri dish, and the radiation has left it utterly. It is but a liability given it no longer offers anything of value. Even the nanomachines self-destructed.”

I sighed, using my armor to drain it. At the very least, it carried an enormous amount of mana. Feeling the extra weight, I leaned back,

“Well, that sucked.”

Torix nodded, “Indeed.”

We waited for another moment. I shook my head,

“Man, why in the hell was Lehesion letting off that kind of radiation? Why did the tail connect with him as well, even from this distance?”

Torix scoffed, “Perhaps they wished for a clean source of energy.”

He and I laughed, but mostly to defuse the shitty situation. As our pity laughter died down, I sat up,

“Wait a minute...I mean, they actually might be doing that.”

Torix’s blue, fire eyes sparked white, the flames building in his hollowed sockets,

“By Schema, you might be right.”

He stood up, walking back and forth, “Now that I’m dwelling on the matter, this was by no means a true failure. There is much to learn, though it may be through inference and deduction rather than observations alone.”

I pushed myself up, not quite as excited as he was, “I guess, though it won’t be as concrete we hoped.”

Torix lifted his hands, “For some of the information, perhaps, but some of our deductions will be based on fact. The first of which is that mana is coursing through Lehesion.”

I pursed my lips, “Didn’t we already know that?”

“The difference is in the sheer scale of the event. Think about it. The amount of mana contained within that tail dwarfed all the mana on Giess combined.”

I raised my eyebrows, “What? Really now?”

“As hard as it may be to fathom, it’s true. If the rest of Lehesion mirrors that state-“

I spread out my hands, “The guy’s a living supernova.”

“Precisely, perhaps even greater. It would rival cosmic events with the sheer scale of mana being produced and filtered through him.”

I grimaced, “The kind of mana needed to take down a spatial fortress?”

Torix shook his head, “No, the kind needed to evoke a cosmic event which far outweighs the energy required for something simple as taking out a spatial fortress.”

My stomach sank, “What in the hell would they even need that kind of energy for?”

“I’ve no idea, but we know they have it. That alone is valuable.”

“Well, we also know they can produce that kind of energy too.”

“Precisely so. If the Adair Family managed to recreate novas worth of mana, then they’ve connected Lehesion to a far greater power source than Giess alone. The question lies in what exactly could supply that level of energy.”

We pondered possibilities for a bit. I recounted the radiation and what it felt like. Memories of the malevolent presence returned, and with it, a cold wave of dread. That fear washed over me like jumping into an icy lake. I shook my head,

“They...they couldn’t have. That’s impossible.”

Torix tilted his head, “What couldn’t they have done?”

I blinked, my heart racing in my chest. When the tail first ebbed blue, my ears were left ringing. It was like a quiet explosion. It reminded me of a booming voice I’d heard before. I pondered aloud,

“They...they might be using Eonoth somehow.”

One of Torix’s fiery eyes expanded as if he was raising an eyebrow,

“Eonoth? Perhaps I’ve forgotten who that was, though it sounds familiar.”

I stared where the tail once was,

“An Old One. They might be using an Old One.”

#### Chapter 253: Conflicting Ideas

Torix rolled his eyes, “That’s highly unlikely. They are beings that transcend time and space.”

I raised my hands, “I’m not saying their controlling Eonoth, just that they’ve found a way of using him to their benefit. The Old One is connected to Lehesion directly after all. It’s not that much of a stretch to say the Adair Family figured out a way to abuse that connection.”

Torix cupped his chin, “Hmm, perhaps. I’m doubtful, but we’d better report our findings and our hypotheses to the Overseer regardless. He’s busy, no doubt, but this information may prove vital.”

I nodded, “Let’s do it.”

Torix called the Overseer, who neglected to show up in person. Instead, he called over a chatline Schema made publicly available. With it, the Overseer used a randomly

generated password for security purposes. Once logged in, a tired, annoyed voice rang through,

“What is it now?”

Torix turned to me. We both had a silent debate over who would answer until the Overseer announced,

“I’m leaving-“

I shouted, “Wait a minute.”

Torix quietly cackled as I eyed the ancient lich. The old mastermind got me there.

“What did you both call me for?”

“Do you remember my last fight with Lehesion?”

“Vaguely.”

“I blocked one of his attacks with a pocket dimension I can control. I ended up getting a sample of Lehesion that we just studied.”

The voice perked up,

“This may have been worth answering then. What did you uncover?”

“Nothing direct. Some kind of nanomachines self-destructed the tail slice, but we did figure some details out. For starters, the tail was bathed with an unreal amount of energy.”

“Yes, his golden aura, as always.”

“At first, yeah, but then it glowed blue. It had enough radiation to even put Spear out of commission for a bit.”

“Spear?” the Overseer rumbled.

“Yeah, the Sentinel that’s helping us.”

“The breaches in his armor plating are likely why. Their armor is highly resistant to radiation of all kinds.”

I raised my hands, “That’s the thing – it was enough radiation that lead-lined suits weren’t nearly enough to withstand it. We’re talking way more mana than a single planet could possibly hold. We think Lehesion’s energy source is coming from somewhere else besides Giess.”

“Did either of you videotape the footage of the event?”

Torix opened his status, sending something to the Overseer. A few seconds of observing later and the Overseer murmured,

“It’s very...blue.”

Torix leaned over, “That’s the Cherenkov effect. It’s perfectly normal when dealing with high volumes of ionizing radiation.”

The Overseer sighed, “It’s giving me very little to work with as far as viewing is concerned. Do you have any samples left of the tail segment?”

I shrugged, “I ate it.”

“... You ate it?”

“Yeah.”

A quick thud later, likely a facepalm, and the Overseer grumbled,

“No samples remain?”

Torix spread out his hands, “It wasn’t as if something of value remained. There weren’t even cellular structures remaining. The energy-laden jelly was simply a blob of the elements composing Lehesion. It gave us nothing of value. At least Daniel may strengthen himself with it.”

The Overseer took a moment to consider Torix’s defense.

“That is a shame. We could’ve have uncovered an actual weakness.”

Torix lifted a finger upwards, “And therein lies the core reason for this call – we believe that they are drawing this energy source from Eonoth.”

I turned to Torix, “You didn’t want the call at first, right?”

Torix waved away my retort, “Our point is that Lehesion may be empowered by cosmic beings that defy convention.”

The Overseer flatlined,

“It doesn’t matter.”

Torix and I stayed silent for a second.

The Overseer’s voice carried quiet confidence,

“You both know little of how a spatial fortress operates. Here is how they work. Spatial fortresses are ancient, almighty eldritch that have evolved beyond what eldritch are normally capable of. These eldritch are the end results of fringe worlds.”

I crossed my arms as he continued,



“A subspecies of eldritch will dominate, the evolution of their species wiping all life out on a planet. Over time, these eldritch can cover the entire surface of planets, creating worlds of flesh and bone. These worlds lob spores out in all directions. This is why fringe worlds are such high priorities. They often lead towards entire sectors being overridden by behemothic eldritch.”

Hm, that sounded a lot like what was happening on Wrath’s world with Plazia-Ruhl. If that was the case, Plazia was taking his time with his assimilation of their species to stop a spatial fortress from blowing up the world he was on. Considering the depth of that plan, he was definitely related to Baldag-Ruhl.

I made a note of that for later.

The Overseer continued, “Schema has discovered a use for these abominations. Using ancient techniques, he can override the sentience of the eldritch ruling over the planet. Once taken over, Schema converts them into a station that acts as a stronghold. Our worst enemies become our most powerful weapons in this way.”

Torix pondered aloud, “I wonder what these ancient techniques may be?”

I leaned over and whispered, “It’s the cipher. I’m 100% sure of that.”

The Overseer griped, “If you could avoid discussing forbidden knowledge, I would appreciate it.”

I gave him a thumbs-up, “Of course.”

The Overseer continued, “These overtaken eldritch are referred to as spatial fortresses. One of the upper-tier fortresses is going to warp into the solar system that Giess is housed on. From across the entire system, it will lob a metal bullet at such speeds, the entire planet will split apart.”

This speech sounded vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t remember why.

The Overseer made a dull thud that echoed over the voice call,

“I do not mean that figuratively. Giess will splinter. Giess is an active, volcanic world. Underneath its crust is an endless sea of magma.”

Yeah, I could verify that.

“This shall not be a kinetic explosion that would wipe life from the planet. It will crash through the entire world. This will disintegrate the entirety of it from existence, washing everything in a gravitational storm of magma. Over time, the remnants of Giess will create a tiny asteroid belt where the planet once was.”

The Overseer deadpanned,

“That is why neither of you should be concerned with Lehesion. He is a powerful entity, but he will be alone. A single entity can only cause so much trouble, and we’ve already tasked several of our greatest Breakers with ending that monster. Without any base of operations, the Adair Family will crumble as well.”

I turned to Torix, “Huh...That does sound pretty effective.”

Torix crossed his arms, “I...I never knew Schema carried such potent tools at his disposal.”

The Overseer muttered, “This is why I am not worried. The rebellion shall be quashed, as all other rebellions have been. Now, this is the last of what I’ll listen to about this matter. Is that understood?”

Torix and I spoke in unison,

“Understood.”

“Eh, ok.”

The Overseer continued, “Good. Neither of you will have to worry about the rest of the rebelling worlds either. They all have forfeited their right to exist. Every planet will be

obliterated. That is Schema's power. That is who they defy. Now, if you both will excuse me, I have an entire sector of the Milky Way to attend to. Goodbye."

The Overseer closed the call, leaving Torix and I wondering about what he said. I frowned,

"Well shit. Here I thought Schema's big bads were the Overseers. That radiation looked ugly, but I don't think they're ready for what a spatial fortress can do."

Torix shrugged, "We shall see. The Adair Family has demonstrated a measure of competence up to this point. If they chose to defy Schema, it would only make sense if they carried the tools to follow through. Otherwise, they've admonished their lives for nothing."

I tsked, "Damn...Time will tell then."

"It shall."

I turned towards the warp back to Mt. Verner, "That sounds a bit over our heads anyway. Let's just do what we can for now. When's the next battle?"

"Tomorrow on Tholosa. As for details, Tholosa is a coastal town with gorgeous seaside views and a thriving glass crafting industry. The gialgathens mold the molten glass using their heated breaths. It's turned Tholosa into a thriving tourist destination."

The lich coughed into a hand, "Ahem, was a thriving tourist destination. It's a beautiful wasteland now."

I shrugged, "Nothing we can do about that, though we may save a few of the artists. They might keep up the traditions, who knows. Anyways, I'll read whatever you send me between now and then. This gives me time to finish a few tasks on my to-do list."

Torix reached out a hand, grabbing my shoulder, "Now wait one moment, Daniel. We need to finish our daily mind magic training. Meet me in one of the combat zones on the third floor. We'll practice for an hour as we agreed before."

I suppressed a verbal groan, settling for a mental one instead.

“Of course. See you then.”

We handled some more practice on Mt. Verner, a crowd of onlookers watching. Humbling as always, my struggle served as a lesson for them. Even the strongest member of the guild worked on his weaknesses, so they should follow my example. Either that or they learned that I could get my ass kicked. Honestly, I couldn't tell.

After finishing the session, I sat down and looked through a few of my messages. It reminded me of checking my email, a tedious task that needed doing. I skimmed through the emails while crafting crude golems along the outskirts of Mt. Verner.

The simple act of creating let me relax as I learned a bit about our situation. The best bit of news was information on the unknown scouts. We made contact with them, and they were the Empire's people. According to Torix's update, they were accessing the locations near Mt. Verner to gauge our level of influence.

Torix believed the Empire intended to take as much of Earth as possible. With the areas near my guild conquered, the Empire would leverage their ownership to their advantage when making deals with us. It was about what I expected to be honest.

After finishing my reading, I stared at quite a few golems. I injected a bit of quintessence in order to give them functioning minds. Once made, I practiced a bit of mental magic with them. They weren't great for learning in-depth details, but a few dozen of them made for a reasonably strong-willed opponent.

This was because of what they were made of. My armor tended to give high willpower bonuses, meaning even these mindless golems could resist some. Tackling fifty at once meant I could do something similar to weight training for my mind.

All I would do is strengthen my baseline, fundamental skills with these guys. With Torix, I could hone the more technical aspects of mind magic. To me, this seemed like a reasonable approach to my training. It gave the newly created minds of the golems the right amount of stress to grow as well.

Over the course of the night, I got them to understand simple concepts like protecting and movement. After all the mental beat downs, they listened pretty closely at this point

too. With the battle at Tholosa looming, I sent a message to Torix about the battalion of golems I made.

As Torix came up, he found me sparring with a few golems at once. I turned towards Torix, willing the golems to do the same. Torix gave me a slow nod,

“Hmm, I must say I’m rather impressed, though I do find myself wondering what use these golems might have.”

I gave one a heavy bang with a fist onto its chest,

“They’re stout, resistant to Hybrids, and they make good footsoldiers that are hard to control. While not perfect, they can protect the portal makers and medical personnel. If not, then I’ll just leave them here.”

Torix looked them over before creating a few telepathic tethers with them. Finding their wills more difficult to control than expected, Torix shrugged,

“They’re more resilient to mind magic than the Hybrids, that much is certain. They should make for a fine set of guards for the military groups you mentioned.”

I rolled my shoulders, “Alright then, you ready to go kick some ass?”

Torix’s blue, fiery eyes flared bright, “Always.”

We met up with Spear outside of Mt. Verner, where the Sentinel stood ready to warp us back towards Elderfire. We found Hod standing beside him, his lanky silhouette contrasting the Sentinel. Hod puffed his chest out while putting his winged arms onto his hips,

“Hod free today. Hod can help out with fight against Adair Family.”

Torix’s eyes sheened purple as he sighed. I gave the Eltari’s champion a thumbs up,

“Hell yeah, sounds good. How good are you at handling the Hybrids?”

Hod raised his winged arms, “Hod handle Hybrids like pan handle pancake.”

I turned to Torix, hoping the necromancer understood Hod’s simile. The lich stared down, pinching where the bridge of nose would be. Yup, that’s about what I expected. I gave Hod a look over,

“I’m sorry. I don’t get it. Can you handle them?”

“Yes.”

I spread out my hands, “There you go.” I gave Torix a pat on the back, “You’ve gotten another elite soldier to work with. This should be interesting.”

Torix let out a deep breath before standing tall. He walked over towards Hod, who now mirrored his height. Torix murmured with a whisper sharp enough to kill,

“Understand this, Hod. If I am tasked with babysitting you during this battle, we could lose thousands of lives. I am currently stressed to my utmost limit, and there simply isn’t enough patience nor time in my schedule to handle your every whim and need during a battle. Is that understood?”

Hod gave him a blank stare before giving him a clumsy salute,

“Hod hear lich man.”

Torix kept glaring for a moment. After the tense inspection passed, Torix turned towards Spear, “I suppose we’re ready then.”

A quick tear in dimensions later, and we stood around a horde of waiting Gialgathens. Surrounded by the spawned forest of Elderfire and the dunes of the Rak’sha dessert in the distance, our army hungered for a fight. Though new members stood among the ranks, the majority weren’t green anymore.

They'd fought several times, no longer new to war. These hardened members were tasked with leading the newer soldiers, giving them advice and tactical input as needed. Combine that with our vastly superior methods of handling our assaults, and our casualties cut down even more.

We stood at the same mobilization point as before, the underbrush and trees surrounding us. Torix turned towards Hod and me,

"We shall be attacking Tholosa in the same manner as before. You two are prepared, I presume?"

Hod puffed out his chest, "Hod always ready."

I raised a fist, "Yup."

"Perfect. Now, I shall give another rallying speech for the others. Perhaps you may inform Hod of the plan from last time?"

I gave him a nod, "Sure thing." Turning to Hod, I raised a hand,

"Here's what we did. After Torix and I mentally suppressed several rallying points, we warped from outside the city into the buildings. Hidden there, we got all our soldiers ready to fight while sending several Hybrids to plant mana bombs."

I pulled out some crystallized mana for reference, the red-streaked and pale crystal pulsing with energy,

"Using a pile of these, I rained singularities down on the city before blowing several of these across the city at the same time. After that, we blitzed them while saving as many gialgathens as possible. Your job will be to follow Torix and help him with preparing gialgathens for healing and transport. Got all that?"

Hod gave me a nod, his blank eyes giving me very, very little to work with. I took it on good faith that he wasn't completely lost as Torix worked his way through another rousing speech. With the troops inspired, Hod walked over towards Torix and Spear. The Sentinel waved his spears, preparing to slice dimensions. Torix finished sending messages before peering at Hod,

“We’ll be heading out within the next few minutes. Do prepare yourself if you would.”

Hod walked off from Torix without letting the lich know if he actually listened. Hod took a deep breath before breathing out every last ounce of air in his chest. When he reached the absolute apex of scrawniness, the Eltari’s champion breathed in.

Siphoning energy from around him, a dark aura spread across his frame like charcoal-colored fire. It encompassed him entirely, his frame saturating in shadow. He expanded to triple his previous density, his newfound frame muscled and imposing. The once blank eyes now showed a different side of Hod; they carried a primal, malevolent aura.

Umbral claws expanded from his fingers. His actual shadow grew, crossing into several other shadows near him. The air surrounding him darkened, his mere presence suppressing the light. With a sinister aura, he turned towards us and brandished his claws.

The Shadow Stalker growled,

“Tell Hod what to kill.”

#### Chapter 254: Quickly Into the Night

I grinned, my helmet forming over my face. As the metal shifted like liquid, red mana ebbed from my eye slit. Turning towards Spear and Torix, I found the Sentinel swinging his weapons of trade. Hod and I walked up to them as he sliced through dimensions. Beyond the veil, a sandy shoreline popped into view.

Like the previous launching point, this portal showed the opening of an eldritchian rift. A giant pit of sandstone carved deep into a craggy shoreline, black stone jutting out of white sand. Deep within the depths of the opening, staggered stairways dug hundreds of meters down.

Along these crisscrossing stairwells, entrances lead deeper down into the abyss. Beady, aquamarine eyes stared from these entrances, eying us like prey. Well, everyone but me that is. I walked down into its depths for a moment, and the eldritch backed away.



They were right to fear me. With a thought, I liquified them into mana with Event Horizon. After securing our position, I walked out of the rift's depths and onto some shoreline. Around us, the ruins of a gialgathen civilization showed itself.

Several empty buildings littered the shoreline, though few and far between. We were near Tholosa, and these were the equivalent of suburbs to the central city. Getting a feel for where we were, Torix turned towards us, "Just as before, we shall secure several locations before launching our assault from each gained point."

He locked eyes with me,

"I shall require your assistance with dismantling their mental defenses. All you need do is overwhelm them. I shall handle the rest."

I nodded with an internal wince, "Sounds good."

Meh, I didn't really enjoy mind magic. It was underhanded though useful.

Torix turned to Hod, and the lich narrowed his fiery eyes, "You've been assisting Althea with her assassinations, correct?"

Hod's outline shifted, bleeding into his surroundings,

"Yes."

Torix nodded his head, "Then you're adept at disguising your presence. Follow behind us, hidden in the shadows. If any members discover us and look as though they may alarm others, kill them quickly and quietly."

"Yes."

Torix looked Hod over, surprised by the Eltari's down to business attitude. Taking the surprise in stride, the lich turned towards the portal,

“Then let us be off. The first location shall be a popular hotel that housed gialgathens visiting Tholosa. It gives us space to hold many within its bowels.”

Schema’s three warp specialists stood beside Torix and the portal. They used the portal layering technique to cross vast distances in seconds. A few minutes later, and the outline of Tholosa showed itself in our view. Another few warps and the city’s details sprawled out in all their splendor.

We were attacking at sunrise, the subtle orange light of dawn leaking over the shoreline. Like the rift, white sand contrasted the black stones nearby. Someone carried the white sand from a distant shore, most likely espen slaves from ages past.

The signs of their laborers exposed themselves to other parts of the city as well. Tholosa was set up in two portions, like most of the other towns on Giess had been. The lower section of the metropolis was made of glass, crafted from gialgathens. Here the espens made their way, homes of a reasonable size set up for living space.

Above them, an enormous cliffside housed many lounging spots for the gialgathens. They reinforced the cliffside with bars of steel, melted from the same fires that forged the glass homes below. This created a city of two parts, one for those that flew high and one for the espens below them.

I didn’t get to glance much longer as we warped onto the top part of that cliffside. It was barren, no living souls housed here. The sun baked this spot, making it too dry for a gialgathens comfort. They wouldn’t let espens live above them either, whether literally or figuratively.

Upon this vast plateau, Torix took a deep breath, ready for an immediate battle. One of the warp specialists did the same before casting her spell. I followed suit, clearing my mind of distractions. A moment later, one more gateway popped up, and the hotel’s inner sanctum revealed itself.

Torix, Hod, and I rushed in, ready to dismantle anyone here. No one was awake yet, however. This gave us some time to observe, and we found exotic seashells and trees decorating a marbled expanse. That’s right, fully sized trees. The entrance was large enough for them.

Luxurious carpets and banisters showed apparent wealth but also the ravages of war. The lights went out long ago, crushed portions of the floor remaining from a fight that

took place weeks ago. The windows of the walls laid shattered on the floor, some blood intermingling with the shards.

A few burn marks coated the walls and scarred the tapestries. Gialgathens fought here. The entirety of the building suited gialgathens with everything oversized for them. Of course, the building lacked simple stuff like water fountains and elevators. Instead, a massive vertical courtyard opened its way to the highest recesses of the building. If not for a lining of glass along the top of the building, our fight's sounds would've informed the soldiers nearby.

The glass was there, however, along with several silencing spells cast by Torix. That worked perfectly for me since I didn't have to duck beneath the doorways. Some doorways weren't huge at the lower levels, these normal-sized spaces used to house espens. Torix pointed at these rooms and whispered,

"Our scouts reported this is where they sleep. We'll be taking the rooms one at a time."

Hod and I nodded, and the three of us walking through the lounge. I cast some antigravitational pads under my feet, making me weightless. This silenced the sound of my footsteps, which otherwise made booming thunks at all times.

Along the corner of the hallway's entrance, some kind of leathery shell laid splintered about on the floor. I reached over, picking up a piece, and I found an oily texture smothering the spry husk.

Torix shook his head with disgust while whispering,

"I doubt the Adair family wished for it, but these soldiers smashed the gialgathen eggs stored here. A travesty."

I turned to him,

"Why would the gialgathens put their eggs in a hotel? Shouldn't they be in an incubator or something?"

Torix shrugged, “Gialgathens are amphibious by nature. Tholosa was actually a beloved nursing spot for newly laid eggs. These shall not be the first nor the last we see of them.”

I frowned at the shell, but it didn’t affect me much. At this point, I expected the genocide and mass murder. If anything, I was only numb. With that lack of feeling, I focused as we explored the inner sanctum of the hotel.

I took a moment to familiarize myself with my surroundings. Honing in on the air currents, temperature, and subtle fluctuations in gravity. With a firm grip on the hotel’s layout, we walked up to our first room to siege.

As we did, a creaking door echoed along a hallway. Someone was coming out. Torix turned towards the sound, his blue eyes flaring bright. Two espens wearing gas masks paced out of their hotel hideaway, fluorescent light pouring from their room.

I waited for the lich to silence their minds, but Hod acted first. The Shadow Stalker dispersed into his surroundings, only his eyes visible among the dark. Hod closed his eyes. When he opened them, he did so across the room and behind the espens.

His form coalesced from the surrounding shade. The soldiers turned towards us, wholly unaware of the monster behind them. Lines of shade traced across their bodies as they stared at us. Their expressions didn’t shift, and both of them stood utterly still as if frozen in time.

I tilted my head, expecting a scream or shout. Instead, they both fell apart, blood splattering from their wounds. The red carpet drenched with the sanguine fluid, clean cuts carving them into a dozen different segments. It reminded me of Althea’s slicing, surgical, precise, yet wild.

Hod once again closed his eyes, dispersing from behind them. Opening his eyes, Hod reappeared beside Torix and me. The entire time I didn’t hear any of his movements, his sudden shifting unsettling even me. Torix gave the Eltari an approving nod before we moved deeper into the hotel.

Our first room was how we took the rest of them. I reached for the doorknob, grabbing it to get an idea of how large it was. With a quick gravitational vortex on the other side of the door, I unlocked the latches. Torix cast silencing magic to mask the sound of the first doorway at the same time.

Finding the group sleeping, I created a telepathic link with each mind present. Like a raging bull, I rushed in with a mental bombardment, splintering their drowsy minds. Torix came in right after, reorganizing their thoughts for our benefit. Hod stood by in case anything went wrong.

This worked like a charm, letting us siege several dozen rooms. During those attacks, the espens's mental strength startled me. They withstood my psychic attacks better than I thought they should. After a few hallways, I created a telepathic link with the lich before thinking over,

"Were the espens always this tough?"

"I would say not. When we fought last, the grunts fell with relative ease. Though they're still amateurish, these soldiers strengthened their minds somewhat. The Adiares must be preparing them after our last onslaught."

"Damn, that's a relief. I was worried I'd somehow gotten worse at mind magic as we practiced."

"I wouldn't put it past you, given your lack of experience."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

After cutting that link, we moved through the first floor in this way before reaching the upper levels. Anytime someone walked out early, Hod handled them in an instant. Some of the rooms didn't just carry espens, however.

Where the gialgathens would normally lounge, the Hybrids and the blighted stowed away. Even when kept under mental shackles, they didn't trust them enough to sleep near them. Personally, I'd do the same. Keeping an ample distance from those monstrosities would sit pretty high up on my to-do list.

Despite the different opponents, we used the same strategies as before. They fell far easier to my mental attacks, so we gathered an ever-increasing force of psionically controlled soldiers. My psychic blasts tired me some, but it left Torix with more energy

for controlling the weakened troops. This expanded his working army of mind-controlled soldiers. They assisted us with searching out resources for our own soldiers.

Within an hour, we eliminated the armed forces here, turning them into our puppets. Gialgathens poured in through our portals, and we sent several Hybrids to lay mana bombs. We put the pieces in place for another swift victory before heading out to secure the other outposts for our attack.

These points of control fell like those before them, our lich mentally crushing them into submission. The plan ran along smoothly as we put everything into place, readying another offensive. Minutes later, I positioned myself along the cliffside. My dark armor blended into the background, disguising me.

I chose this position since the dreadnoughts all pointed at least one cannon at the tallest buildings across the city. It was a slight tactical adjustment from them, but it wasn't anything we couldn't work around. After setting myself up for a gravitational bombardment, we initiated our blitz on Tholosa.

It crumbled like cinders on a windy plain.

Our offense came crashing down with might and fury. The first blow struck with a cascade of singularities, umbral spheres forming across the dreadnoughts floating over the shoreline. Seconds after, the mana bombs detonated, unleashing elemental storms and devastation.

The ascendant mana loaded within the bombs infected nearby espens. Driven to absolute rage and hunger, they tore one another apart. Others flooded with the quintessence, matter generating within them before popping them like swollen flesh balloons. Torix flew across the city, casting spell after spell.

Shadow hands ripped out of the ground and pulled people under. Ice beetles injected cold into espens, freezing their blood. One espen's skeleton pulled itself out of the espen's body while it was still alive. Others stared out into an abyss, overwhelmed by the onslaught and carnage.

These members made easy pickings for mental magic. Torix swooped in and evaporated the little mental fortitude they still had left. Their wills suppressed, these controlled members fought amongst the Adair Family's troops. A cannibalistic uprising formed, and they destroyed themselves.

The dreadnoughts fell in much the same manner. Devastated by the singularities, they collapsed from the sky, their wings clipped. Once on the ground, we ran past them one by one, leaving the crew killed and the gialgathens saved.

Well, the few gialgathens left. Most were turned, so killing them was the only option. That dirty work fell to me, my abilities well suited for it, though it was far from pleasant. Once we finished with the crew and the ground level troops, I helped heal with Kessiah and the others. It was a welcome reprieve from smashing test tubes before pulverizing whatever was inside them.

Hod stayed in the front of the assault, using the shadows to warp around the battlefield. He pierced into the depths of each dreadnought, using the now darkened ships as effective slaughterhouses. Using his blackened claws, he tore apart their shadows. This cut apart the real person owning the shadow.

It was surprising. By hitting the shadows, Hod ignored most of their defenses, and it enabled Hod's other abilities. He could also switch locations in an instant, making for an odd thing to watch. Most creature's blindspots resided where their shadows started and ended.

He jumped between them, his fluidity and lack of hesitation, giving him lethal effectiveness. In many ways, it was inevitable that they would die when Hod popped up behind them.

He seemed like an entirely different person, his methods ruthless and his mentality lacking mercy. Gone was the goofy guy and his surprising empathy. A cold-blooded killer took his place, and he stayed relentless in his pursuit. It unnerved me a bit, as I understood little about his abilities or motivations.

Having a soldier that could switch on a dime like that, it was...strange.

I put it on my to-do list to ask him about the personality shift. I ignored it before since I didn't think Hod was dangerous. He was a true threat now however, and dismissing a danger to my troops was irresponsible. I was a leader now. I had to make sure they were safe.

In all honesty, I didn't like digging into the history of my allies. I knew what it was like to hide a piece of my past, and I respected them not wanting to talk about it. At the same time, that kind of personality shift would unsettle anyone, given how drastic it was.

Either way, Hod proved useful as I expected. He was a vanguard of death, selecting the right targets at the right time. It was as if he saw through the enemies, and using that foresight, he crippled their defensive forces.

That allowed Torix to collect far more substantial portions of their military under his wing. From ten thousand strong in the last battle to thirty thousand, Torix commanded a massive force. This caused utter havoc in the ranks of the Adair Family, and they shattered beneath the overwhelming pressure.

That pressure crushed them far faster than I imagined it would. Within two hours, I gawked at a devastated cityscape. Orange and red pools intermingled in the ocean's water, a surreal sight. Without anyone left to oppose us, Torix forced enemy soldiers to slit their friend's throats.

Torix explained that overwhelming someone's self-preservation was nearly impossible with mind magic. Making them kill, though? That was much simpler. If they culled each other and moved on, slaughtering them systematically wasn't so difficult.

This left a bad taste in my mouth, though I understood precisely why the lich did it. Leaving enemies alive like this was a recipe for disaster. They might dissect our tactics, rejoin the Adair's cause, or compel others to do the same. Still, it sickened me to kill them when they couldn't defend themselves like this. If anything, it made me glad I wasn't the best at mind magic.

It might be better that way.

My ethical dilemmas aside, we finished taking over Tholosa's troops, taking the gialgathens in after settling the battle. Torix handled the logistics while I gazed at the blood-soaked shoreline. Not long after, I found Krog doing the same, peering out at the distant sunset. I turned to the guy,

"You look awful."



Krog nodded, "You as well."

I frowned, hoping to get a rise out of the gíalgathen. Instead, we watched the waves wash away the blood of battle. I sighed,

"Was it a tough fight?"

"No. This was all too easy, like stealing candy from children and watching them weep. Battle without resistance is akin to a game with the winner decided. It loses its luster, and the game will no longer be played."

I stared down, understanding him completely.

Krog sighed, "This is no game, however... You know, many espens died in this place. Though Tholosa may seem like a tropical paradise, it was a dense slave center decades ago. Graveyards litter the surrounding plains, the slaves buried in mass when they died. Not even their gravestones remain. Do you know why?"

I winced, not wanting to hear an answer, "Not really."

"They have none. We didn't even think the espens worthy of a gravestone to cement their memories and legacies in this world. Slaves or not, they deserved better."

"Damn. That's fucked up."

Krog nodded slowly, "It's a grim reminder of what we did to them and their species. In many ways, I believe the evils we face today are a result of those acts. We face the sins of our forefathers. The price we pay for their misdeeds is in our blood, and that blood was paid in kind by the espens long ago."

Krog shook his head, pushing himself back up onto his four feet, "In the end, they will never forgive us. From my recollection, my own soldiers will never let go of their hatred either. The cycle must end somewhere. Who shall end it, anyone may guess. I wish for those days to come soon, however."

Krog's spill got me thinking. I didn't dwell on the espen's history. Considering what they went through, their hatred for the gialgathens was understandable. I wouldn't pretend like I could understand something like being enslaved, either. I imagined it was a humiliating, dehumanizing experience. My imagination could never simulate the real thing, however.

The Adair family used that resentment along with Schema's indifference to gain control of the espens. That didn't justify what they were doing now, however. I stared at the sand, "I won't say I understand, but I agree with what you said about killing the defenseless. It feels awful."

Krog turned towards Torix and Kessiah who tended to the cleansed gialgathens,

"Yet we do what we must. Come, this is no time to regret war. We won the battle, and that is worth celebrating."

I nodded, thinking about what he said. We passed up to the wounded gialgathens, the members already cleansed by me earlier. Torix turned towards me as he stared at the corpses along the sand,

"Ah, Daniel, I wanted to ask you something."

I raised my eyebrows, "Go ahead."

"I could raise the corpses of our enemies and use them against the living. They would rot after a few days, but even their skeletons could be reanimated. Do you think this would be a good idea?"

A glint showed itself in the necromancer's eye. Once an evil lich always an evil lich I supposed.

I pursed my lips, "Wouldn't that ruin our guild's reputation?"

Torix's shoulders drooped, "Bah, an old sorcerer can try."

Kessiah smirked, "Told you he'd say no."

I glanced at the cliffside, “Any ideas why Lehesion didn’t show up or at least a few evolved Hybrids?”

Torix raised a finger, “I timed our battle during a specific rebellion they planned on enacting today. Their attention split, we rushed in and used the opportunity.”

I nodded, “Good work.”

He shook his head, “You may thank Althea and Hod for that. Their intel is the only reason for our successes.”

Hod walked out of Torix’s shadow, spectral mana ebbing from his shoulders,

“Are we finished?”

I gave him a curious glance before spreading my arms out, “Yeah, I think so. Everyone, you all did a great job. We’ll be back before nightfall. Drinks are on me.”

That last line got a cheer from the group. As everybody walked off, I caught up with Hod. He stared at the sea, his eyes idle. I did the same,

“I was actually going to ask you a few questions after the battle. Can we talk somewhere private?”

The darkened energy saturating his frame faded, and the goofy, stringy Hod returned. He paced up with a few unsteady steps, “Hod not in trouble?”

I shook my head, “Of course not. I just wanted to talk.”

“Hod not blame you. Hod pretty good talking partner. Hod so good at talking, Hod sometimes talk to Hod. Hod just that interesting.”

I pursed my lips, “Alright.” I looked to Torix, “Let me know if you need me.”

Torix gave me a small yet respectful bow, “As you wish.”

I walked off with Hod before no one was around. I turned to him, meeting his eye,

“We’ve known each other for a while. I’ve been wondering about a few quirks of yours for a while.”

Hod grabbed the side of his elbow, a bit of discomfort radiating from the birdman. I turned a palm to him, “Before battle, you saturate with mana, right?”

Hod nodded, “Hod does. Hod psyche Hod up.”

“Yeah, you seem to change at that moment. Is there a reason?”

Hod stared, his blank expression unreadable,

“Hod think so.”

“Well, what’s the reason?”

“Hod let other Hod out.”

I let my arms flop against my sides,

“Ah, so that’s it.”

A second passed before I shook my head,

“About that, mind telling me a bit more about other Hod?”

Hod straightened up, “Other Hod rather not say.”

My eyes narrowed, “I need to know, so explain.”

Hod sighed, “Hod explain. Hod not know if Harbinger like Hod explanation.”

Chapter 255: Multifaceted

Hod’s hands twitched as I stared him down. The birdman’s scrawny frame trembled after a few seconds, and Hod let out a groan,

“Before Hod explain, Hod ask Harbinger to stop staring at Hod.”

I scoffed, “What? You know I’m not going to hurt you or anything like that...right?”

“Hod know...Other Hod don’t.”

I crossed my arms, “Well, consider this conversation a hostage situation. You’re hostage until you talk about the whole other Hod thing. I need to know what’s going on for my soldier’s safety. I don’t think you could kill me or anything, but everybody else? I have no idea.”

“Other Hod...says you not need worry about other Hod.”

“Let me talk to this ‘other Hod.’ I’ll decide that on my own.”

Hod’s eyes widened with fear, a bit of sweat pouring from above his beak. Hod wrestled with himself for a moment before his frame once more saturated with mana. With the umbral energies permeating his surroundings, his eyes turned red and bloody. He spoke clearly,

“I...I am other Hod.”

I walked up to him, waving my hand across the dark energy leaking off his frame,

“Ah, that’s eldritch energy.”

Other Hod's eyes narrowed like a cat getting sprayed with water,

"How can you identify the energy type?"

I glanced at my hand, "I can taste it. The energy is eldritch for sure."

Other Hod's breathing sped up, close to hyperventilating. I peered back and forth,

"Are...Are you ok?"

"Yes...Other Hod just fine."

A liquid like oil dripped from his frame. We stayed there for a few moments before other Hod whimpered, "Can I leave?"

"I'm not angry at you, you know that, right? I just need to know who you are and what you're doing."

Other Hod took a step back, his legs trembling. His mental defenses falling apart under some unseen pressure, he fell onto his knees. He grunted,

"Please...don't kill me."

"Never intended to."

Its breathing slowed, the eldritch energy signature dampening a bit. It rekindled, a blaze unbridled as its eyes widened,

"You're not?"

I spread out my arms, "What do I look like to you? A monster?"

“...Yes.”

“What, really?”

“You are far more a monster than I.”

I crossed my arms, “You’re an eldritch, huh?”

Its eyes narrowed, “I...yes.”

I raised an eyebrow, “You’ve been hiding this entire time, inside of Hod...Why? Most eldritch are far too hungry for that. They’re more mindless and virulent. This seems a bit too calculating for an eldritch.”

I remembered Baldag-Ruhl.

“Well, most of them.”

The eldritch stared down, fear oozing off it,

“I was hiding.”

I pointed at my chest, “From me?”

“Yes. You are a true monster.”

I dwelled on that for a bit. Huh, me, a monster? Yeah, maybe. I was tough to kill and could out drain a Hybrid, let alone an eldritch. At the same time, I always thought monsters were made in the mind more so than the body. It’s like serial killer compared to a wolf. The wolf might kill you for food, but that wasn’t evil. It was just trying to survive. A serial killer? They were evil down to their core, whether in a human body or not.

I was more like the wolf in that regard. I mean, I didn't kill eldritch unless they were mindless murderers. True, that was more often than not, but I made exceptions like with Amara. To think of it, that shapeshifting eldritch showed me as her biggest fear. The eldritch in the tunnel too, they all looked at me like a monster. I tilted my head,

"So why do eldritch seem scared of me?"

Other Hod waved a hand across his face as if the answer was obvious, "You cannot be killed, and your hunger is unending."

"Yeah, that's kind of true. I'm not really hungry. Ever, actually."

"You starve so utterly that you feast on your own unending flesh."

My eyes widened, "Ok, that's a new one."

Other Hod pointed at the markings on my arm, "What is that then?"

I peered at my cipher inscriptions on my arms, "What, these? I'm just putting mana in these for extra stats. Nothing special."

Hod pulled his shoulders up as if disgusted, "You use your blood, flesh, and bone to sate yourself. Even we, our hunger unending, refuse to dine on our own bodies."

"Huh...I do have blood magic, and this is technically using my flesh and blood for mana...I mean, I guess that's true. It seems like a stretch to me, though."

"I can see it as nothing else. You are Ouroboros devouring his own tail, and that is terrifying."

"So, I know that's strange, but I wouldn't think of that as enough to be outright terrified of me, which you seem to be. There has to be more to this."

"It is simple. You cannot be killed."



“I’m pretty sure I can be.”

Other Hod winced,

“It is not possible. When was the last time you lost awareness or your judgment?”

I pointed at the ground, “The last time I splattered myself against this planet. Everything went white for a while.”

“But think of it. Did you ever truly lose consciousness?”

I followed his advice, guiding myself through my memories. The more I thought about it, no, I never did actually go unconscious. Even when totally vaporized, I could still think. That didn’t make much sense. I should need a brain to think. Otherwise, I was thinking without even using it.

Wait a minute, was I as brainless as I thought?

I shook off that ridiculous series of thoughts. I glanced at my hands, “Huh. Yeah, it’s been a while.”

Other Hod’s eyes narrowed once more,

“You are the undying, a force that cannot be killed nor quenched. That is worthy of fear, something above we eldritch. We are like wolves and your kind like lambs. You, you are different. You are a bear, something even we wolves fear. You rule the forest, and all that lies within it. You are preeminent, and to any with eyes, it is obvious.”

“Ok, so I’m like a higher being to you eldritch, kind of like an Old One or something. I get that. What I don’t understand is why you hid all this time?”

Other Hod stared off to the side, “I...I wished not to be devoured.”

I let my hands flop against my sides, “If that’s it, then don’t worry about it. You haven’t killed or overtaken Hod. If anything, you’ve got to be the reason he’s even halfway competent in combat.”

The eldritch looked up at me, a glint in its eyes. Stunned to silence, it stayed there for a while. It murmured,

“You’re...impressed?”

“Uh, yeah. You’re good at what you do.”

Other Hod stared down, “To think it would show me mercy. That’s unexpected.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose while staring down,

“Jesus Christ, are all eldritch like this?”

I looked back at it, “I’m not killing anybody. I could, but that doesn’t mean I will. I just wanted to know what was going on.”

The eldritch half of Hod marveled at me as if staring at an idol. It bowed,

“I...I haven’t overtaken this simpleton. I shall continue to lay in the shadows, serving as you need.”

I furrowed my brow, “What? No. You should get the recognition you deserve. Let me know your name, and I’ll make sure our troops know it. I give credit where credit is due. Simple as that.”

Other Hod scratched the back of his head with a winged arm,

“That is unfair to Hod.”

“So he actually helps with fighting? Wow.”

“No, he does not, though his insights can, at times, be telling. He has lost much of who he was due to my manifestation.”

I remembered where we found Hod, underground in a desert world. Other Hod turned a wing to me,

“I am what spawned from the energy pooling within him. I drained a mammoth portion of his mind. Your friend is the remnant I left behind. There would be nothing left by now, but you cut my control short with this...ring. It siphons my growth towards you, and you eat it.”

He showed an ebony ring, runic markings carved on it, and I remembered creating the conduit to prevent mana poisoning. I did the same to Althea, sending her excess mana towards me, though for different reasons. Hers was to prevent haphazard transformations while Hod’s conduit was to stop mana poisoning. Turns out this personality was what I was actually hampering.

In Althea’s case, she eldritchified at random when her emotions spiked. She could control it now for the most part. Hod never got to that point, so he always supplied me with a steady source of energy at all times. At first I figured it was from a lack of control. It was instead stopping this other Hod from taking him over.

It explained a lot.

I scratched my head, “Your words are more put together, and you seem to understand your situation better than Hod does. By that logic, surely you could overwhelm him even in your current, repressed state?”

“I could...I choose not too. You seem to like him and his meanderings.”

I did like Hod, goofy as he was.

Other Hod’s eyes narrowed, “And...at times, a wolf must wear a sheep’s skin to graze.”

“Damn. This is a lot to take in.”

“It means little for you. I shall not overwhelm him. You shall continue your obliteration of the Adairs, my assistance guaranteed.”

I pursed my lips, “Because you’re afraid, huh?”

“It is as you say.”

I shook my head, “Here I hoped it would be out of admiration or respect. Maybe I was hoping for too much.”

“Fear is a far more reliable motivator than either of those weak emotions. Fear is primal. Fear is a destroyer of logic and the spawn of panic. It rips the mind into pieces, and those pieces are without cohesion. Without that wholeness, those pieces crumble before little.”

Other Hod gripped his winged, clawed fist, “And I shall put that fear behind me, using it to keep me alive.”

Huh, other Hod didn’t seem so bad. Maybe he was a little dramatic at times, but he could have been far worse. If we talked more, I might understand the eldritch better overtime as well. He and Amara were both valuable resources in that regard.

I raised my eyebrows. Speaking of Amara, I pointed at other Hod,

“Wait a minute, are you why Hod has a crush on Amara?”

The umbral flames shrunk from around Hod as his presence waned. His scarlet eyes blinked several times before he murmured,

“Uh...no.”

Even beneath his dark transformation, the inklings of an intense blush leaked through. I grinned, “Ok, Ok. Sure.”

“Do not tell her. Please. I beg you.”

I raised my palms up, “I wouldn’t do that.” I nudged him with my elbow, “Not to say I couldn’t give you any pointers, though.”

I raised my eyebrows a few times. The eldritch half shrunk further,

“She fears you as I do. I doubt your meddling would be of much assistance.”

I stood tall, “Thanks for letting me know all this. I’ll keep it in mind going forward. You wouldn’t mind talking about the eldritch some other time, would you?”

“I wouldn’t defy you. If you desire to speak of it, we shall speak of it.”

“Good to know. You’re dismissed.”

Other Hod’s chest drooped as his energy waned. Returning to the inner sanctums of Hod’s mind, he hissed, “Thank you for letting me live.”

I raised a hand, “Oh yeah, I was wondering if other eldritch are also scared of me like this?”

Other Hod’s eyes narrowed, “All of them, whether they shall admit it or not.”

I smirked, “Good to know.”

Hod returned, and his nonchalance came to as well. He glanced around, “Ah, Hod happy to be back.”

His lack of articulation became a little less funny knowing the cause. I walked up to him, giving the guy a pat on the shoulder,

“It’s good to see you again. How about we throw a feast for you? It’ll be fun, and I’m sure the gialgathens could use one.”

Hod's chest puffed,

"Hod like food."

I smiled through a bit of sadness,

"Come on, let's get you something good to eat."

#### Chapter 256: Feasting and Plenty

Before feasting, we still had a job to do. We got the troops out of Tholosa without incident, our evac successful. Our rate of saving gialgathens plummeted from the last city, the Hybridization too far developed for most of them. We still saved several dozen, and every blighted one we killed was one less we'd find on a different battlefield.

It still tanked morale seeing how effective we handled the operation yet also finding fewer saved. Bolstering people around saving others was easy. Getting them excited to kill was something else altogether. That's what we did more now than ever. Go in, kill them all, then leave.

It was a bloody task, and it suited Vikings more than a developed society. After all, not every civilization glorified war, the gialgathens included.

That's why the feast I threw for Hod would result in a much-needed confidence boost for the soldiers.

It made our success more concrete, and it might even give the troops some camaraderie. Celebrating brought people together in that way. After pitching the idea to Torix, the ancient lich agreed with my idea. He even helped me organize the event.

Adding to the impending hoopla, I injected a reward ceremony. Krog was all for it, and he helped spread the news. That excitement surprised me. After seeing a lack of animation in the gialgathens, I expected them to dismiss the event altogether. Maybe they didn't see the systemization as a reward in and of itself, and glorifying that transition was necessary.

That made sense to me after a bit of thought. The gialgathens were strong by birth, and they didn't really need Schema to be fierce fighters. It helped, but compared to a human's transition, it was paltry by comparison. Gialgathens might value social recognition more than the actual strength of the system.

Well, whatever floats their boat.

Either way, many of our gialgathen troops were being initiated into Schema's system, which was a massive boon for us. Each soldier wasn't exactly comparable to Krog or Chrona, but they held their own. They were leveled, powerful troops at our disposal. That kind of progression deserved praise, especially during desperate times.

With that in mind, I got some medals that enhanced health regen and the like ready. Basic as they were, they gave the soldiers a significant boost to survivability. That gave me plenty to do before the celebration began.

Having spent the entire afternoon blacksmithing, I suspended a ball of several dozen medallions over my shoulder. The gravity well kept them orbiting around an unseen center, a constellation of umbral metal. It gave me a few stares as I walked through Elderfire. Well, more stares than normal at least.

Reaching the ceremony's outskirts, I discovered a bit about the gialgathens. They preferred nighttime parties, the sun drying them out in an unpleasant way. They scattered torches colored like gold, silver, and copper across the ground, not really used for light. Above, dozens of gialgathens soared through darkened skies.

I joined them, curious about what they were doing. Some flew as a backdrop to talking. Others soared for the sense of wonder that flight gives anyone living. A few even played a game of accuracy and strength. It was a team game where two gialgathens would smack one another's tails. The end goal was to lob one gialgathens into a circle on the sand.

They strategized for it. One flying salamander stayed still, the other let the momentum of the tail smack launch him into the distance. They would then let themselves fall where they would.

It was interesting to watch, each team trying out different tactics. At one point, one of the gialgathens tried using his wings to dart into a circle, which resulted in his

immediate loss for that round. Watching wasn't as interesting as participating, though, so I moved on not long after.

I continued flying while gazing down over the torches. Moments later, and I discovered their purpose. They aesthetically lit the jungle, revealing long shadows of trees and the underbrush. Their light leaked through the dense canopy of my quintessence forest as well. These lights mirrored stars of all colors. At that moment, I didn't know where the sky ended, and Elderfire began.

It was beautiful.

Around a few of these torches, groups of gialgathens bowed their heads. Mana channeled through them, in and out with a steady beat like waves on a beachside. It reminded me of how gialgathens used to drain their surrounding manas. Now they took it in before releasing the energy back into the world.

It was an interesting exercise, something I might try later. If anything, it mirrored meditation of the mind, the act carrying the same kind of reverence and focus. Past those meditation circles, I neared the award ceremony.

We agreed earlier to use the ancient temple in the middle of Elderfire as the location for the commemoration. It stood as a symbol of a prosperous past for the gialgathens. We figured it was as good a place as any to celebrate their future.

Preparing the site, Chrona and Torix hung up various glassworks, similar to the sculptures in Tholosa. Made from superheated breath, these baubles were well developed, detailed fixtures. Chrona hung them up while other gialgathens went behind her, placing torches behind the glass.

The glass bounced the torchlight through their crystalline forms, creating shining figures in the dark. Torix kept his efforts on the legitimacy of the ceremony, organizing the rewards and speeches. As I floated down beside him, he turned towards me,

“Ah, I see you've brought the medallions. Excellent. That shall make this process carry an impact it otherwise wouldn't. After all, what is a reward ceremony without a suitable reward?”

I turned towards several tables lined with food,



“Eh, probably a glorified party...It’s a relief to see the gialgathens getting to enjoy themselves either way though. Saving them wouldn’t mean much if they had to live in misery all the time.”

I tapped a glass fixture, a nice ring resonating through it,

“It’s amazing what they can do when they put their mind to it. To be honest, they just needed a push.”

Torix waved his arms, “Save your inspiring words for the ceremony. You’ll be the one handing them their emblems after all.”

After letting out an internal groan, I tapped the glass fixture a few times, noticing the consistent ringing it gave out despite its complex shape. A few more light touches and it sounded more like an instrument than a decoration.

Chrona paced up behind me, her silver scales taking on an orange hue from the torchlight,

“Isn’t it amazing? Glass artisans can not only create glass that is beautiful, but they may also craft them into instruments at the same time.”

I raised an eyebrow, “I’ve seen something sort of similar in my world, but it wasn’t quite this...developed.”

Chrona grinned, showing large teeth,

“It is our specialty. We need no furnace nor tools, our tails honed to sustain through the molten sand. With careful flicks of the tail and a keen eye, we may even create instruments designed to refract light during specialized ceremonies.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Really now? That sounds amazing.”

Chrona tilted her head up, “It is something we hold pride in. To be blunt, we intend on having a few of our remaining artisans show you one of these displays tonight. It is thanks for our savior, the Harbinger of Cataclysm.”

Those gave me a smile I couldn’t stop,

“Huh, you make that sound much less...evil.”

Chrona took a deep breath, “You’ve done much for us. We would like to repay you as we can. Perhaps what we lack in martial might we may compensate for with our culture.”

Most gialgathens must think humans are complete monsters if I’m their only reference. I shrugged,

“Eh, living is more than enough of a reward for me, but this is a nice touch.”

Chrona turned towards Torix, “When shall this ceremony commence? I grow more nervous with every passing moment.”

Torix opened his grimoire, channeled some mana through some runes, then visualized a timer above our heads. The old grouch seethed,

“Do you see that clock? It reveals the exact, precise time the ritual begins. Stop your pestering of me.”

Chrona frowned, “Ah, excuse me. It’s been a long time since I’ve performed in front of others. It has me on edge as if I were going into battle.”

I crossed my arms, “Wait a minute, perform? You’re the one doing the glass band thing?”

Chrona blushed, “I, along with a few others. Given my status as the guardian of Elderfire, I have time on my hands. I’ve been working on it for the past few weeks. I pray it doesn’t displease you.”

“Pshhh, what? Hell, it feels great to have any kind of recognition period. It should be fun to watch either way. Besides, I’ve never seen one of these shows, so I won’t be able to catch your mistakes.”

I nudged her with my elbow, “Yenno, assuming you make any.”

Chrona scoffed, “Please, I’m well beyond such hatchling mistakes. It’s more the design of the show I worry about.”

Torix tapped my shoulder, interrupting our conversation,

“I need your assistance with this line of the speech. I was thinking, ‘We’ll turn their corpses into food.’ What do you think?”

I facepalmed, “Sorry Chrona. Let me help Torix for a minute.”

After getting the speech in order, we organized the event. It was simple, satisfying work. I long forgot what hosting a party was like, and this was a refreshing change of pace. Of course, I rushed through the tasks using gravity wells, several at once, in fact. It reminded me of when I used to do this kind of thing by hand.

That sense of progression was nice. During that time, I reviewed over a massive document Torix sent me. It detailed who I was rewarding and why. I researched it while we rounded the gialgathens up. During that time, a few helped Chrona set up the crystal band of sorts, with two gialgathens standing at the sides.

As the ceremony began, Chrona and her bandmates readied themselves on the temple’s courtyard. Their glasswork glistened as the two gialgathens at the side blew plumes of yellow flames. I watched from the temple steps, sitting with Kessiah, Althea, Hod, and Torix. With the old crew together, we relaxed as the gialgathens began their song.

They tapped the oddly shaped, glass instruments in different places. This created a pleasant, low ringing sound. A few seconds later, one of the gialgathens set up the main backdrop for the song. It was a series of six notes, going up and down in tone. This created a nice flow before another gialgathen to Chrona’s side added in ambient tones.

The hollow, percussive sounds filled in most of the gaps in the melody. With a spring-like, airy sounding song forming, Chrona began the detailed work. She started slow, raising her sounds into the surrounding cacophony. The gentle, elegant pitches gave way to crashing throngs as she used much harder, sharper taps on the glass.

The spring song turned to summer, heavier and fuller than before. Taking on tones of life, the complexity rose into the stratosphere. From the sides of the band, the yellow fires added visual splendor to the song, each gialgathen carefully monitoring their flames. Above them, two more of the beasts flew in intricate, detailed patterns.

Their flight paths carved shapes, letters, and runes. This added an element of showmanship. The heart and soul of the song lived through Chrona, however. In order to keep up, she hastened the time around her, speeding herself up. The temporal dilation allowed her to create inhumanly fast cords.

It was impressive, even to someone used to more modern music. I ended up wide-eyed and slack-jawed as they finished with an intense crescendo. When the echoes of the song finished, Chrona took heavy breaths while the other gialgathens looked relieved that they didn't mess up.

I stood up and began clapping. It was damn good and something I hoped to see again. Others joined me, the metallic rings of my hands getting lost in a throng of claps, shouts, and deep, bellowing roars. Chrona bowed with her head, along with the other members of the band.

After they finished, we lined up the system initiated. With two hundred lined up, we didn't have long to celebrate each of their successes. I was the one recognizing their achievements, and I honestly couldn't remember their names nor faces. At the same time, Torix handled that already with that large document from earlier.

Using the system prompt as a guideline, I was able to be surprisingly personal. It included their names, significant others, and their major contributions in each specific battle. It also kept a list of lost loved ones on the battlefield for each individual, along with a few heartfelt lines for each. This gave me a paragraph's worth of material on each of them. They couldn't see the prompt either, which helped tremendously.

By the end of the ceremony, even I got a little emotional seeing their responses. To me, this was just some political stunt meant to boost morale. To the soldiers caught in the line of fire, this was a celebration of their work, grit, and sacrifice.

I didn't expect it to work as well as it did. A lot of that was owed to Chrona's amazing performance. Her show framed the ceremony as something grand, and even I felt the effects of that illusion. I had to learn how to play one of those damn things at some point, though I'd probably shatter the glass without so much as trying.

Either way, we finished with the feast, and boy did we need it. Gialgathens drank some weird brew that mirrored alcohol. There really wasn't anything strong enough for Torix or me, so we sat on the sidelines. We made sure everything went smoothly, which for the most part, it did.

Hod ended up eating until he was swollen. A large part of that must have been his eldritch half, spurring him towards consumption. Krog, Kessiah, Chrona, and Schema's personnel exchanged war stories. Kessiah mentioned how she tackled a Hybrid off of Krog at one point.

It was inspiring to hear how far she'd come.

At the same time, I stayed as an outsider during it all. It was the role of a leader in some ways, being viewed as different and being unable to mingle. On the other hand, Torix was the same, though for different reasons.

He stared longingly at the food, something he desperately desired. After a few minutes, he shook his head,

"It is a sad thing to lose a sense. Though at first, I thought little of the delights of feasting, I must admit – it does pain me to watch it so closely."

I shrugged, "I was never one for eating."

Torix scoffed, "You've nearly eaten all of my rations, in fact."

I scoffed, "I don't know if I'll eat after they're gone. I don't need food anymore."

Torix nodded, "Perhaps one day you'll find yourself desiring food once more. Do me a favor and enjoy it enough for two should the urge strike you."

“Will do.”

We watched the others enjoy themselves for a few more minutes. I turned towards Torix,

“There aren’t many more gialgathens we can save, are there?”

Torix stared forward,

“Few remain.”

I nodded, “Yeah, I guessed as much. They’ve nearly finished the Hybridization of them all. We aren’t saving people as much as culling their numbers some before Giess’s glassing.”

“That is our intended purpose, outside of saving who we can. It’s unfortunate we couldn’t have saved more, though we did what we could given our resources. I’d say we did a miraculous amount of work considering.”

Torix’s eyes turned from blue to black,

“At the same time, we made enemies with a rather potent enemy faction. We may come to regret it.”

I sighed, “I’ll be honest, it made me sick to my stomach thinking about it sometimes.” I gestured to the others,

“When I look at this though, it makes me feel better.”

Hod did a bouncing dance to a backdrop of music, his swollen belly bouncing to the beat.

Torix scoffed, “Ah, yes, the most excellent of energizers. I feel so rejuvenated seeing Hod do...whatever that is.”

I remembered why Hod had his mind so shattered. I murmured,

“Hey man, try to give him a break. He’s doing the best he can.”

Torix stared at me, making sure I was serious. After seeing I was, he went back to staring forward. He sighed, “Well...perhaps you’re right.”

Another moment of comfortable silence passed. Under the surface, both of us wished to get to work. Even taking this much of a break irked me. The others here were unchained from the drudgery of their everyday. We were, in turn, chained to this freedom, each of us itching for more.

I crossed my arms, “How many more sieges do we have left before the glassing?”

Torix deadpanned, staring forward while planning them,

“Three.”

I pushed myself off the stone floor, turning towards him, “They won’t plan themselves, will they?”

Torix flicked his wrist up, pushing himself up with magic,

“I doubt they would. Perhaps we should intervene?”

“Let’s.”

I turned towards his temple lair, walking up the steps. Torix followed, each of us ready for a long night ahead. As we passed the halfway point, a call opened in my status. I went to hang up, but I decided to check the caller on a whim.

My eyes widened as the name revealed itself.

“Obolis Novas, huh? I wonder what he wants.”

Torix leaned over, “Ah, I do as well.”

I pointed towards the temple’s entrance,

“Well, let’s find out.”

Chapter 257: Rhetoric

– Helios –

It was time for our meeting, and I was never one to keep Obolis waiting. He took poorly to delays of all kinds, especially the avoidable setbacks. Given our positions, it would be a severe misjudgment to disappoint him.

And so, I hurried.

The guards made way, our positions sure. Crossing over onto the outer world, I found myself stepping out of a portal of my own design. I landed onto a series of floating stones, overlooking a world of waterfalls and mist. Above the display of nature’s fury, I found the floating islands of Grangea.

Here Obolis took to another one of his outings. He was ever curious of the world and what lied in the stars. I could never tell if I admired or hated him for it. On the one hand, it gave us and our family positions of power, worthy of even the gods. On the other hand, it chained me to my post as a ruler of worlds.

Still, I despised the prospect of lowering my place in society, if even a little. Given my missteps against the Harbinger, I needed to tread lightly. Mistreating his significant other was a folly I wouldn’t repeat again. With each passing battle we viewed from his live streams, of that folly, I became more certain.

By now, Daniel could overpower me, even with an elemental furnace at my disposal, among my other resources. Our Empire kept me safe, but that safety came at a steep cost, given my recent failings. I shook off this unease as I stepped onto the main island of Grangea.



Despite my nervousness, the serenity of this land calmed me. I wished I could stay here, lay down, and go to sleep. I could not. Every day, I moved forward with my eyes wide shut, hating what I must do yet compelled to do it. With that umbral monstrosity waiting in the dark, my commitment to the Empire was even more absolute.

It was no longer a choice to serve. It was now my only path.

Those thoughts tumbled in my mind as I stepped up to Obolis as he observed a tablet etched with the cipher. He leaned towards it, his innate curiosity spurring him towards viewing its contents. I recognized him not by sight, however. It was his mana that was unmistakable, the dense primordial energy blinding among the darkness of the world around him.

That mana sense was the only reason I could handle the elemental furnace on my hands. Most who attempted to wield these devices of mass destruction ended up destroyed and maimed, their own faults causing their downfalls. My ability to see mana, a gift given by my blindness, enabled my control of the energy.

It would otherwise manifest as a nuclear blast, a lethal blow to whoever was wielding the furnace. Thereafter, it would spawn twisted eldritch that would be difficult to kill and even more virulent than usual. That was why Obolis remained steadfast that few could be given the furnaces.

I was one of those few.

Wielding mana of such volumes required labor to use them, however. The conversion of the mana, the intricacy of the mental handling, even guiding it into the runes, it all required absolute focus. It left me with blunt magic that could level mountains. At the same time, precise, intricate magic was beyond my grasp while using it.

I appreciated the device nonetheless, the apparatus enabling many of my powers. I told Obolis that giving a furnace to Daniel was a mistake. That monster dabbled in the cipher without even needing to raid ancient tombs. He did so of his own volition, his knowledge of it perhaps rivaling even our Emperor.

I couldn't deny Daniel's utilities, however. He would act as a deterrent for the eldritch. Within Schema's controlled sector, the monsters weren't that difficult to handle unless

one stayed on a fringe world. Here, along the outskirts of Schema controlled space, they were far more challenging to handle.

Centuries of evolution would do that, and having a trump card like Daniel allowed us to worry far less about those abominations. It enabled more dangerous raids with less planning. That would over double the speed we procured resources, making it a worthy investment. The other members of his guild may be equally valuable as well.

Althea can phase off our plane into some...other place. That alone was frightening, but if what Daniel said was true, then she was an assassin without equal. The other member, the shadowy figure that darted across the field in their last bout, he too seemed like quite the force. The ability to warp across shadows alone was valuable, but tearing others apart from their shade alone?

It was worthy of fear.

That fear was why I was stepping up to Obolis. Reaching behind the old man, he turned towards me with a wise smile but piercing eyes,

“It’s good to see you again, Helios.”

As always, he peered through me, as if I were easily unraveled. In response, I kneeled with a deep bow,

“You as well, uncle.”

The Emperor interlocked his hands behind his back, walking up to me,

“I’ve told you time and time again, you need not bow before me.”

I stayed in position, “And I shall do so without order, out of respect, not fear.”

Obolis kept a grin on his face, lifting his hands, “Then rise, and I appreciate the gesture.”

I did as he commanded, keeping my gaze low. Obolis looked at the waterfalls beneath us, “It would seem your brother is still struggling with the rebellions on his world.”

I narrowed my eyes, burned by the mentioning of him,

“I would expect as much.”

The Emperor tilted his head, “Please, Helios, give him mercy. A struggle is to be expected. The rebellions, they’ve worsened since the Blighted Schism began. It’s as if the individual rebellions are feeding on one another. It is a bizarre thing, seeing the commoners attempt to displace their standing.”

His aged and scarred eyes narrowed, “They wish to usurp the order we’ve garnered. No longer do they struggle with eldritch. No longer do they suffer from roaming monsters or slave traders. I still have yet to understand their defiance, but perhaps, one day, I will, in time.”

I grinned under my mask, my own sentiments mirroring his own. Obolis sighed,

“Yet such is life. I’ve been watching the battles on Giess. The ones where Daniel and his guild do battle. They’re interesting, aren’t they?”

I winced, remembering my failures,

“They are.”

“I’ve been thinking...Torix, was it? He’s been using mind magic to control the enemy. Given how the rebellions are, in fact, our own citizens, perhaps he could assist us in suppressing them?”

I nodded, “A wise suggestion.”

The Emperor spread his arms, “It is difficult to send our military to kill our own people. Doing so with mind magic is far more humane by comparison, and it’s far better than asking our kind to kill their own kin. I’ll ask if I may commission the necromancer for the task.”

I kept my gaze downward, “Perhaps an exchange is in order?”

Obolis scoffed, “In time, yes. I doubt giving their guild too much will serve us in a meaningful manner, however. We must control the rewards we grant. Otherwise, we will be left with nothing to give and nothing gained.”

“Of course. If I may interject, I doubt Daniel would appreciate this use of mind magic. From my meetings with him, he seems like a blunt individual that prefers direct confrontation. Toying with the minds of anyone, even commoners, would likely anger him.”

Obolis’s eyes narrowed. He bit his tongue, holding something back,

“I shall take that into consideration, though perhaps I should consult Caprika on how to exchange with him. She’s generated positive relations between us, unlike some.”

I remembered encasing Althea in ice. Like someone stabbed a razor through my heart, I wheezed out in pain,

“I...Of course.”

Obolis’s brow furrowed as the hardness masking his expression faded,

“I...I didn’t mean to chastise you so harshly. You simply did what you believed best. Fate decided how it was handled thereafter.”

He gave me too much grace.

“Thank you.”

“Now, I shall call them for that proposition along with perhaps a few other ideas I thought up since we last met.” He stared at his status, “You may stay and listen if you like.”

“I would like that.”

Staying allowed me to gauge my position and whether it was secure or not. If Obolis decided to undermine our relationships to bolster his friendship with the Harbinger, then at least I would know as well. Either way, staying only assisted me should I avoid being an idiot once more.

Those thoughts raced in my mind as the Emperor opened a call. From the visual screen, a vast party showed itself in a heavily jungled...desert? Trees bloomed from dry sand. Vines traced under an arid sky. Even the gialgathens seemed peeved by the dryness.

Daniel was no worse for wear, his metal frame tall and imposing. Without his helm, he carried a gruffness all his own. Small, minuscule scars traced his face, none of them marring him, yet they showed the markings of many battles. He wanted nothing more than to finish the task before him, then find another task as fast as he was able.

This was a large part of his rise to power, yet he somehow avoided the bureaucratic burden I found myself saddled with. It...annoyed me, but I would not speak on it. He earned his position, and that was worthy of a measure of respect.

Obolis shared that same freedom he owned, and they had a curious kinsmanship spawn from it. That came across with every word as Obolis said,

“It is good to see you enjoy yourself after the battle. I watched most of it while sorting through a document I discovered. It was enjoyable to view.”

Daniel sighed, a dark look looming over his face,

“Yup. We killed a lot of people.”

The Emperor winced, “Ah...The Hybridization must be close to completion, I imagine.”

That instant intuition was why the Empire was so successful. It gave me pride in being Obolis’s kin.

Daniel shook his head, “Yeah, and it sucks. It’s more like we’re just going in and destroying everything now. I’m fine with tearing some eldritch apart. People? Man, it’s hard to rev myself up for it.”

I remembered my culling of Rivaria. It was not an easy thing. That same burden caused someone so steadfast in their goals to show doubt. In a way, it was humanizing. It made the young prodigy seem more mortal.

Noticing his own weakness, Daniel took his gauntleted fist and tapped it against his forehead. It left a dull ring, like two chunks of metal banging against each other. He continued, his vigor renewed,

“But we have to do what we have to do. These are bad people, and someone has to put them down. We’re the ones to do it.”

Ah, as expected of him. That humanity faded as fast as it cropped up. But of course.

Obolis scoffed at the warrior,

“What are your rewards for taking that mantle, I wonder?”

Daniel pointed above his head, his title evident,

“250 levels per city conquered. I’m also saving the gialgathens.” He turned his perspective, showing some sort of party in the background. A birdman bounced up and down, his belly jiggling like an overstuffed sausage.

Blegh, grotesque and ugly. What an idiot.

The Emperor laughed,

“Hah, feasts and plenty. They are their own reward, I suppose. I was actually hoping for a bit of a discussion on rewards and deals, in fact. You see, we’ve been struggling with insurrections recently.”

Daniel nodded, “The rebellions?”

“It is as you say.”

“Heh, I’ve been struggling with a rebellion too, but you’ve probably already heard about it.”

The Emperor gave him a knowing grin, “And given your expertise, I was wondering if we may commission assistance with our own squabble.”

“Commission, huh? What kind of terms?”

“Torix has shown himself adept at mind magic.” A cross look came over Daniel’s face, and the Emperor took note, “I was wondering if we may use it to stop the riots in our cities. It would be far more civil then using the military to achieve our aims, you see.”

The Emperor turned to me, giving me a look of appreciation. I beamed with pride, smiling under my mask. Daniel scratched the back of his head,

“Why not negotiate then?”

Obolis’s smile dampened, “They wish for more than I can give.”

“Like what?”

“They want an equivalent status to the albony, and the albony want the mask system I put in place centuries ago to be dismantled.”

“That...doesn’t really sound like much if I’m honest.”

The Emperor struggled to keep his expression amicable, but he managed the feat. I did not, my grimace palpable even through my mask.

“There is far more at stake than those simple adjustments would imply. Our entire society is built off a foundation of order and rulings. Without them, the resulting chaos results in victory for those that would reap the benefits of turmoil. In this case, the eldritch.”

Daniel stared down and to the side, deep in thought. He nodded slowly,

“Yeah, my own homeworld is struggling with them.”

The Emperor tilted his head, “Wait a moment, I thought your world was new? If it has champions such as you at its disposal already, then how can the eldritch be a problem?”

Daniel sighed, “It’s a long story. The short of it is that my guildmates and I needed to get rid of our unknown statuses. Now we’re wrapped up in everything going on here.”

He stared off, “If I’m honest, I’d like to go back to Earth and help settle everything down. It would be nice to go home.”

He turned back to us, his gaze like iron, “The thing is, humanity isn’t on the brink of extinction like the gyalgathens are. I’m going to help them right after I finish helping these giants, though. I’m not one to leave something unfinished or with regrets. If I let them all die here, I definitely would.”

A slight grimace crossed over his face. Perhaps he failed to save others before? I couldn’t tell, but Obolis might have deciphered the meaning behind his words. Regardless, Obolis gave a concerned look,

“And living without regrets allows you to look forward to the future. With regret on your back, you’ll stare into the past instead. Wise of you to handle yourself in such a manner despite being so young. I only wish I had done the same.”

I remembered the bloodbaths on Ostaltia, and the carnage Obolis wrought there in his younger years. To this day, he is worshipped as a deity there. Perhaps the Harbinger wished to avoid those same titles. I couldn’t comprehend why, but he carried his own reasoning, no doubt.

The umbral knight spoke,



“Yeah, not piling up regrets is easier said than done...Is that all you wanted to talk about?”

Obolis shook his head, “Not quite. I wanted to offer you and your compatriots passage upon one of my private vessels. I intended to watch Giess’s glassing, though I understand if you’d rather not see it.”

The Harbinger’s eyes narrowed, “Do you think that’s safe? The shockwave could destroy the vessel, right? And if the glassing goes wrong, we’ll be pretty close.”

Obolis waved his hands, “Oh, by no means shall we be within the shock radius. We’ll be planets away, deeper into the solar system. That will allow us to look onward with safety.”

Daniel tapped his chin with the knuckle of a finger, “Hmmm...yeah, we could do that. I’d have Spear there in case we needed a quick warp out, though Helios could help with that too.”

He gave me a glance, “Good to see you’re not looking too bored.”

I gave a solemn nod, “You as well.”

The guild leader turned his attention back to the Emperor,

“It sounds interesting, I guess. It would at least give me closure for this...mess of a situation.”

The Emperor pressed his palms together, “Then, until then, I pray for your victories and wish against your defeat.”

Daniel scratched the back of his head, “Uh, yeah, you too.”

If there was one thing that dimensional, metal monster could work on, it was his goodbyes. Obolis closed the call and turned his gaze towards me,

“That was an interesting series of events. He seemed almost sad despite his many military feats. Perhaps he is unsuited for war?”

I shook my head, “He prefers situations that are black and white, good and bad. It lets him act without reservation, and this situation is far from it.”

Obolis picked up the cipher inscribed tablet in his hands, “Indeed. It does put one at a disadvantage when their resolve is muddled by uncertainty. In time, the results of his valor will show themselves. Of this, I have no doubt.”

I frowned as every victory the Harbinger won was yet another strike against me. His success was my failure now, and it acted as a catalyst for my removal from my position. I seemed safe for now, however. Obolis sighed,

“We’ve compiled the documents of the cipher, correct?”

I nodded, “Yes, Valencia handled them.”

The Emperor shook his head in disbelief, “She is a gem of our empire, isn’t she?”

I suppressed a wince. I hated Valencia.

“Indeed, she is. We are lucky to have her.”

“This document should act as another temptation for Daniel or anyone else interested in the cipher. I’ve begun scoping out other parties interested in my guard deal as he’s been slow to respond. It will do us no harm in either regard.”

I turned a palm to him, “Their shadow slicer was a menace on the battlefield, wasn’t he?”

Obolis pepped up, “Or she, we honestly have no idea. Regardless of his origin, he struck fear in the hearts of many. It was quite the display, showcasing his ability to tear people apart through their shadows.”

I raised my other hand, “Perhaps a field of light would stop him?”

Obolis leaned over, “He seemed able to suppress light for short spans of time. That alone would give him all the time he needed to enact his judgment.”

I leaned back, “But surely the ability carries limitations?”

The Emperor weighed his hands back and forth, “Perhaps, but assuming it’s so simple as...wait a moment, I just received an important call. It’s an emergency.”

Obolis opened his status, showing a control room on one of our worlds. An orange mask grabbed the sides of a camera, shaking it as he shouted,

“They’re here. They’ve come. We can’t stop them. They’re eating us.”

Obolis’s eyes widened, “Who is eating whom? And where? You’re an officer. Calm yourself and explain so that I may act.”

The orange mask quivered, “The Hybrids. They’re here.”

I took a step back, my blood freezing in my veins. Ice expanded from my feet as even Obolis blinked in disbelief. Obolis murmured,

“We...have been attacked?”

The orange mask rasped,

“They’ve come for us. The Empire is under attack.”

Chapter 258: Newfound Reason

-Daniel-

I turned to Torix, “Well, that was different than I expected.”

Torix beamed with pride, “I as well. Who’d of anticipated that I would be the first one he’d ask the assistance of. It’s quite flattering, I must admit.”

I rolled my eyes, “Alright, don’t get too smug about it.” I frowned, “If I’m honest, I don’t think it’s a good idea either.”

Torix nudged me with an elbow, “Ah, is my disciple worried he shall be overshadowed perhaps? Fear not. Your strengths are invaluable...That isn’t it, is it?”

I shook my head,

“No. Using mind magic against the Adairs? That’s ok because of what they’ve done to people. The people rebelling in the Empire? We don’t know why they’re doing it, who’s involved, or anything really. Going in and brainwashing groups of people for someone, and all for our own gain...”

My voice trailed off before I sighed,

“I don’t think that’s the kind of guild I want to lead.”

Torix thought for a moment, picking his words carefully. He raised a hand, “I understand that sentiment. Mind magic is a wicked, sinister thing. It’s a tool that allows you to violate the most sacred piece of another’s privacy. That is worthy of deft handling and fearful usage. At the same time-“

Torix raised a fist, “We are against a threat also worthy of that same fear. Lehesion could wipe Mt. Verner from the map in seconds if he so chose. Elderfire is at the same risk. All he needs is the location, and everything we worked for is destroyed in an instant. The only remains of the wreckage shall be you and I.”

Torix put his hand on my shoulder, “That is what I believe would be most tragic. I would awaken alone. You...You would be amidst the carnage, the only soul living.”

Torix’s blue fire eyes turned into a darker shade, “I...I could not bear to witness it.”

Flashes of Hod, Althea, Kessiah, Diesel, even Amara flashed in my eyes. Watching them all be slaughtered, just the thought of it made my chest seize and my palms sweat. If I could still sweat, that is. Either way, Torix made a good point. Lehesion was unstoppable for us, and we weren't able to muster up enough oomph to face him down.

Yet.

An idea popped in my head. I still hadn't unlocked a class yet. If I could do so, I could close the gap between Lehesion and I. Maybe not close it all the way, but I could at least shorten the distance. Combine that with an elemental furnace, and the sky was the limit.

I raised my palms, "Those are valid points, but what if we had a different solution for taking on Lehesion?"

Torix crossed his arms, "Like what?"

"I have a class called Sovereign waiting for me. It will be a massive power spike from the system. If I could unlock it before Lehesion finds us, then we won't need to do this sort of thing. We'll be on even footing."

Torix raised a hand, "Ah, you do lack a class, and it would accelerate your growth dramatically. Perhaps that would be a method of taking on that golden behemoth. How many more stat points would you need for it?"

I checked out my status, and my heart sank.

"6,227..."

Torix facepalmed, "By Schema, my apprentice has lost his mind. We merely need to wait a few decades for you to finish off your tree."

I raised my hands, "Wait a minute, there might still be a way to shrink that gap. I haven't gotten dungeon cores in forever. I could get all of the ones I can, invest them in my skills. After that, I could complete another legendary skill."

Torix scoffed, “A Legendary skill is not created so easily. Besides, you may only have one at a time-“

“I already have two. I’m aiming for another to make a Sovereign skill. That’s where the class came from, actually.”

Torix gawked at me for a moment while standing still. He sighed, “Ah, I’d forgotten. Apotheosis was it? Quite the name for quite the ability. It could work, though at times I wonder if Schema’s rules even apply to you.”

I grinned, “They’re not steadfast, that much I know.””

Torix shook his head in disbelief, “If...if you can make that madness work within a few weeks, then we may turn down the Emperor’s offer. Otherwise, it will be far too large a risk for our guild. It’s only a matter of time before the Blighted Schism spreads, whether Giess is glassed or not.”

I shrugged, “It’s worth a shot. I’ll go check out the galactic market for red cores and see what it’s like. I can pay for what I can buy and harvest the rest from other dungeons.”

Torix opened his status, “We have a few in reserve. That should assist you with your hunt.”

After glossing over how many I had left, I winced,

“Ah man, I’ll be needing over 200 of them.”

Torix let his hands flop against his sides, metal ringing against metal, “How have you fallen so far behind in your core assimilation? That’s absurd.”

I shook my head, “Look, I’ve been swamped lately, and my levels shot up several times here on Giess. It isn’t like I’ve been able to do anything for my status for a while now. I’m actually behind on putting points in stats.”

Torix waved his arm, “But of course. You’re strong enough to lack a need for optimizing your status. It is an unequal world we live in.”

I narrowed my eyes at the guy, “Come on now. I know I’m not Mr. Updates-All-the-Time, but I optimize very well for my fighting style. That is the only reason I’ve made it this far.”

Torix relented,

“I know, but hearing about something like leftover skillpoints from leveling...It’s as if it doesn’t matter to you.”

I frowned, “That’s because it doesn’t. I haven’t needed to get stronger in a long time. I’ve been focusing on getting stuff done rather than extending my own power. It isn’t as if surviving has been a huge issue, either.”

“Ah, that would explain it. Why focus on self-betterment when you are already good enough?”

I raised my eyebrows, “Well, I’m definitely not good enough anymore. Lehesion doesn’t seem to have limits, but we’ll figure that out after I’ve got a class. I need to run a few calculations real quick. After that, we’ll talk about the sieges on the rest of Giess.”

“I shall be in my lair, organizing the information as I need too for our success.”

I walked off towards the portion of the temple that acted as my room. I found vines and moss prying their way into the depths of this ancient cathedral of sorts. The jungle expanded outward, no longer restrained by my magic alone.

That manifested most in my room. It wasn’t a horrible change, the empty, stone walls lavished a bit with some greenery. I situated myself on the ground, amidst the moss and mushrooms. There, I opened my status.

It had been a while since I even viewed the thing. Glancing at it, I had quite a few skill points to allocate.

I also found my constitution coming up to fifty thousand. It was an absurd amount, enough I didn't need anymore. Raising my hand, I remembered my battle against Lehesion at Astelle. I could rival his mass at this point with the augments of gravity.

Glancing at my runic carvings, I took another look at their bonuses.

[Modifications – The dimensional fabric composing this structure has been modified with code from the dimensional cipher. The rewards are as follows.

+7,121 Constitution

+6,083 Endurance

+5,557 Perception

+3,042 Willpower

+1,777 Luck

+72 Strength

+72 Dexterity

+0 Charisma and Intelligence

+100% to Effects of Legacies

+ 50% Internal Motivation Multiplier

+1.4 Trillion Ambient Mana]

I gawked at the numbers, kind of stunned that Constitution now got more bonuses from the cipher than endurance. The boosts my cipher inscriptions got from my last



evolution were now paying dividends. Altogether, my cipher augments gave me over 23,000 skillpoints, which rivaled about 6,000 level ups, even including my tree bonuses.

Damn.

Combine that with the other effects, and these bonuses mattered more than levels did now. Until I unlocked my next class, this was the vast majority of my progression. Considering that was the case, it was about time I reinvested in an old, reliable friend.

Endurance.

Bolstering the stat would let me buff all my other stats more quickly since it gave me the most mana. That was the name of the game now – the more mana, the better. After getting a lot of points in it, I'd probably invest in intelligence. It never hurt, and it would result in a natural boost in my mana once more.

That being said, I turned through the pages of my grimoire, the liquid metal between the pages shifting. I forgot I destroyed my last grimoire, and with it, the endurance rune as well. The new goal ahead of me, I rewrote the endurance passage I created before. I used the new knowledge gained from my other experiences, along with the dual layering technique.

Because of those adjustments, it took two hours to finish the familiar marking. After channeling the mana for another hour, the enchantment shined with quintessence mana. It felt good to sit down and craft for a minute.

After creating the glowing, tracing lines, they floated in the air. Careful and concise, I set the markings back onto my wrists, rewriting my constitution runes. With a quick re-siphoning of my mana, my endurance began a slow, steady rise. An Elemental Furnace could change my priorities, but I lacked one for now. I would act like I'd never get one until then. For now, this was my plan going forward.

With that handled, I checked out my status once more. A quick few clicks later, and I put my extra points into endurance. It was an easy way of giving it another little boost. Finishing that quick assessment, I counted up the easy skillpoints I could get.

After scrolling through the history of my additions, I found that creating a legendary skill usually created over 1,000 tree points. The cores could get me right at 2,300 of them as well. That put me right at points into Sovereign, which meant only a few weeks of grinding would finish the tree.

Getting that many dungeon cores would take a long time if done by hand, however. I opened my obelisk, accessing a galactic market. After a bit of searching, I found red dungeon cores sitting at around 500k for a single one. It was an atrociously high price for anyone.

Well, anyone who gave a damn about money.

A few minutes later, I opened a call with a fence that sold the things for Schema. I wasn't about to blow my fortune on something without negotiating first, and negotiate I did. Half an hour of heated discussion passed before I drove the price down to 430K apiece.

I argued a bulk purchase like this guaranteed enormous revenue, reducing the overhead for each core. That ensured that the fence was getting a much higher profit than usual, even at a lower price. The little weasel tried every trick in the book to convince me otherwise, but I stayed my ground.

In many ways, it was one of the hardest battles I'd fought in a while. Either way, within a few minutes, I had a stockpile of 230 cores waiting for me at a galactic currency exchange anywhere. It only cost...99 million credits.

Ouch.

All the money from killing Yawm only amounted to this much, which was a bit disappointing. The cost aside, I needed the cores and now. That was the entire point of money, convenience. Hoarding it now meant I'd probably never use it.

Heading over towards the Sentinels and clerks at the center of Elderfire, I found them waiting in the middle of the night. One of the receptionists even dosed off. After a few surprised gawks later, I carried a clump of resonating, red dungeon cores back to my base.

Minutes later, I assimilated them. I put all the extra stats into endurance. I had one last selection to handle, and that was which skill to put all my points into. I decided on Apotheosis. It was my second legendary skill, and it was lagging way behind Force of Nature. 2,300 points later, and I opened my tree menu.

Putting all my stored tree points into Sovereign, I passed another threshold. With it, another quote came in from Schema, trying to help motivate me if I had to guess.

In this manner, you construct history in every moment. In your choices, you decided to become a living monument, a colossus of knowledge, and a giant of ability. This competence lends to all under your mastery, and it will grant you tools beyond a normal sentient's wildest dreams.

+ Now when your legendary skills are used to create a sovereign skill, the slots will reopen for further use, effectively extending the legendary skill cap to six total legendary skills. 3 in the Sovereign skill and three outside of it.

+ Guild Leader level cap upgrades cost 50% less.

+ Allows ownership of worlds through clearing eldritch (\*Explained below)

Class Completion: 50%

\*World Ownership: Owning a world is a big responsibility, but it comes with some pretty hefty benefits too! As the owner, you receive 1% of the credits generated on a planet. Your home planet of | Earth | would net you 900 billion credits yearly from this ownership. That's a whole lot of credits!

Claiming ownership requires action, however. Your guild must be responsible for clearing over 50% of the total eldritch on a planet. That requires a tremendous investment of time and resources, cities, and various other benefits. At the same time, this stabilization process helps the citizens of a planet tremendously. It also enhances productivity dramatically, along with the quality of life.

After all, it's difficult to do anything when world-ending monsters roam the hillsides, isn't it?

World owning also comes with a lot of personal power in how your world is governed. Do you wish for a dictatorship where you control everything? No problem, though you still must follow standard taxation protocol as Schema dictates. Further details will be granted upon gaining ownership of a planet.

Your guild also can begin forming embassies on other planets if you own a world. Simply create a city around on their planet in a location they deem acceptable.

With that in mind, make sure to hurry! Other guilds will attempt to take control of your planet by helping handle the eldritch there, often for free. It won't be free for long though once they're in charge! You can get a leg-up on other guilds by showing up on a planet quickly and establishing yourself early on.

Go get started killing the eldritch, or else someone will do it first!\*

I shook my head at the sheer advertisement feel of the explanation. Overall, the bonuses, much like the last ones, were delayed once more. This gave me very little right now, though maybe the level cap increase might be useful at some point further down the line.

For the most part, the tree's usefulness came from information about how the Empire operated, along with Schema. Ownership was dictated on how many dungeons you kept cleared and suppressed. If you handled the majority of them on a world, then you got say on how that world was run.

It was a simple, succinct way of dishing stuff out. It also led to the hyper-competitive handling of eldritch. It did clear up new worlds quick, which prevented more fringe worlds from forming. On the other hand, giving this kind of power to anyone seemed short-sighted.

This was how the Empire owned several worlds. They came in, cleared out eldritch, then took over once they hit the benchmark needed for ownership. After that, the culture was suppressed, the albony were given enhanced statuses, and they were given a juicy cut of the credits. Those credits fueled the Emperor's escapades into the unknown.

I didn't really know what to think about it.

On the one hand, my exploration into far-out villages was bleak. Most of society collapsed from Schema's initial coming. His tutorial killed many of the young, elderly, and sick. In one fell swoop, planets lost lots of their amassed skills and wisdom, resulting in a dramatic loss in general productivity.

Combine that with the hordes of eldritch roaming around, and the worlds would be in chaos. A guild like the Empire was a hell of a lot better than everyone starving and being eaten, so a big guild would come in, clean shop, then rule. Hell, there could be meetings about this kind of thing between large guilds. They could slice up territories and worlds like slices of pie, each of them negotiating to stifle competition.

I lifted my palm. I was becoming one of those guilds.

With a deep sigh, I gave my cheeks a few slaps. Getting lost in my thoughts wasn't helping anybody. At least I knew the Emperor owned a Sovereign skill since he owned worlds.

Well, unless there was some other way of owning a world. It didn't seem like a common thing, however.

Refocusing, I opened my status for the final inspection. I got everything done that I could. Clicking finalize, there was a rush of energy.

The most palpable difference came from Apotheosis. I didn't gain any new concepts at once, but the skills I finetuned up to this point became second nature. I reached up a hand, casting a gravity well with quintessence. It no longer carried the same awkward clunkiness as before. The mana converted silky smooth, easier than walking.

Apotheosis also helped with my crafting, along with some of my influence skills. Those changes would take time to manifest themselves. For now, I satisfied myself with the ability to shift mana types with zero effort.

I rolled my shoulders, the physical changes meaningful but not as dramatic. I was already fearsome physically. Experiencing a rush of power was based on the comparison. The stronger I am, the more of an enhancement it takes to notice it.

I counted my blessings that it even registered. Either way, it turns out the cores, levels, and cipher marks made a difference.

The Living Multiverse(Lvl 11,000 | Current Influence: The Rise of Eden – Attributes increased by 30%)

Strength – 38,998 | Constitution – 54,728 | Endurance – 102,553

Dexterity – 20,580 | Willpower – 74,370 | Intelligence – 41,587

Charisma – 15,485 | Luck – 22,070 | Perception – 17,412

Health: 91.2 Million/91.2 Million | Health Regen: 685.4 Million/min or 11.4 Million/sec

Stamina: Infinite | Ambient Mana 3.567 Trillion

Mass: 6.11 Million Pounds(2.78 Million Kilos~)

Height: 12’8 (3.6 meters)

Damage Res – 99.12% | Dimensional Res – 100%

Phys Dam Bonus – 17.1 Million % | Damage Bonus – 40%

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

The main difference from my last check-in was the sheer difference in my raw strength. I was over twice as strong, and that was mainly due to a few trees, the stats piling over, and my cipher encryptions for constitution. That caused a slow, gradual increase in my physical might, something I didn’t notice much.

Despite the gradual increase, the impact was palpable over time. The fights on Giess also gave me plenty of mana from draining the Hybrids. That accelerated my attribute growth, and that’s why my constitution was enormous now.

It still paled in comparison to my endurance, but that attribute was the cornerstone of my build. At this point, I outdid the most die-hard specialists with my attributes. Those stats drove a lot of my progress, and it explained why someone like the Emperor didn't affect me much. We were equals despite the level difference.

Getting the class would assist with my overall progression dramatically from here on out, however. The cipher channeling guaranteed some progress, but the 250 bumps from each conquered city didn't mean much anymore. In a way, I was beyond levels and stats now, and I needed ridiculous, reality-warping skills to progress.

Those thoughts went through my mind as I walked back to Torix's lair. Marching in, I raised a hand,

"So, I managed to get a lot of extra stats, but I wasn't able to fully unlock my class yet."

Torix had a few of my mana bombs, and he inspected them with a magnifying lens made of mana. The lich stared at his work as he grumbled,

"Classes are not so easily unlocked, I'm afraid."

I weighed my hands back and forth, "True, but I got to 6,800 in my Sovereign tree. I'm over 2/3rds the way there."

The necromancer shook his head, "A ten thousand point tree. By Schema, it's ridiculous." He sighed while turning to me, "It should only take a few years of dedicated practice to finish off the remaining few thousand, correct?"

I shook my head, "I need another legendary skill, and I'm good. How am I going to do that? I've got no idea. I'll just brainstorm it late--"

I gawked at my status. Torix crossed his arms,

"What is it?"

I shook my head in disbelief, “The Emperor...He’s calling again for some reason.”

Torix scoffed, “Oh, I’m certain the Emperor of a multi-planetary empire is just giving you several calls a day.”

I shrugged, answering the call. From it, the Emperor’s scarred face and imposing frame showed itself. What he lacked was his natural, effortless confidence. Exhaustion and anger smothered his face, the scars coming to life.

Before this moment, they were like little props that gave him a gruff appearance. Now they revealed a warrior’s past, one that climbed mountains of corpses, and someone who already owned a Sovereign skill. I scratched the back of my head, a bit nervous.

“Uh, you ok?”

He answered with ferocity,

“No. The Empire’s been attacked by the Adairs.”

I took a step back, stunned to silence. Obolis seethed,

“I wish to forge an alliance with the Harbinger’s Legion.”

Chapter 259: Coming to Terms

I turned to Torix, and the necromancer’s eyes burned a brilliant, white flame. He, too, stayed silent, unable to process what he just heard. The Emperor kept firm,

“I understand the absurdity of the request. To offer a commission to your guild one day, then ask for its assistance the next...Shameful. Despite my pride, my Empire requires immediate aid.”

He turned a palm to me, “Your guild can give it, having faced and conquered this foe on several occasions. That would be invaluable to our people.”

His eyes narrowed to slits, “Whether they believe they need it or not.”



Wondering what that meant, I held up my palms, “Give me one moment to think.”

I tapped my chin with a fist, giving it some thought. It wasn't that surprising that the Adair's chose to attack the Empire. The Emperor and Helios mentioned rebellions for months now, and the Adair's grip extended across several planets. One of those planets being in the Empire's worlds wasn't much of a stretch.

I shook my head,

“Dammit. Did they use the rebellions on your planets to do it?”

The Emperor tilted his head, “They did, in fact. How did you know?”

I shrugged, “It makes sense that they would join forces. The enemy of an enemy is a friend.”

The Emperor's face stayed solemn, “That's a good phrase. I shall steal it for my own use later. Useful idiom's aside, I can offer much in exchange for allying with us. You know their tactics, and your skills are necessary to cleanse our populace.”

He weighed his hands back and forth, “I understand if it will require coaxing. I am willing to relent our resources as necessary-“

I waved a hand in front of me, “Don't worry about it. Like I said, and enemy of an enemy is a friend. That phrase works for them, but it also works for us. We'll send you some files on how they fight, how the Hybrids work, and how to combat them.”

Grizzled and skeptical, the Emperor furrowed his brow, “Hmmm...Perhaps you may enlighten me as to why you would offer the Empire such kindness?”

I scoffed, “You guys took a risk associating with us. I'm no genius, but even I know that. Consider this repaying the favor.”

The Emperor stared with piercing eyes, the kind searching for the motivation behind what I said. It was a strange feeling, and Torix eyed me with a bit of skepticism as well.

Even without talking, I could tell that the lich disagreed with allying so quickly. At the same time, he would never disagree with me in front of someone like the Emperor.

Even if we disagreed, Torix respected me enough not to do that.

Obolis crossed his arms, his gray armor thudding with a dull ring,

“Hmmm, that’s rather...altruistic of you. Surely you understand I’m skeptical of your goodwill? It’s difficult to find, more so than relics and treasure. Of that, I’m certain.”

I raised a hand, “Come on, let’s not overthink this. I’m here to help. That’s a good thing.”

I frowned, “We don’t have time to argue about something simple either. People are dying. Let’s get to it.”

The Emperor nodded,

“Fair points. Perhaps not knowing the origin of your helpfulness is good – it too is a puzzle I wish to find the answer to.”

He sounded much more like the Emperor I knew, his panic fading. Even he could react with emotion when the stakes were high enough. The white-furred albony nodded,

“I’ll take your earlier advice and accept the alliance. We need your help in several of our major cities immediately. It is as you say; the Adairs have used the rebellions on several of our worlds to attack us. They’ve joined with the locals, somehow armed them with Hybrids, and they are attacking the ruling classes of each city.”

Obolis raised a fist, “Help us, and I promise you, the Empire will be indebted to the Harbinger’s Legion. As its ruler, I guarantee you this – the Empire pays its debts in full.”

I nodded, “Alright. We’ll need to finish our sieges on Giess, but after that-“

Obolis's eyes widened, "What? You want to save the ruined cities that remain on Giess?"

I raised an eyebrow, "Uh, yeah. That been our plan over the last few months."

The Emperor paused, changing his tone, "I...excuse my interruption. It's just...I watched your last battle, and it was tremendous in its own right. However, you did not save more than a few dozen gialgathens, many already heavily Hybridized."

He lifted his hands, trying to keep himself calm, "Our cities house billions of civilians. We may save far more lives by tackling the assaults on our worlds than those on that dying planet. It's not that I question your virtue. It's that I question which would lead to the greater good."

He squeezed a hand into a fist, "To me, that answer seems obvious."

I grimaced. The Emperor's argument was sound, and I had to agree. Despite wanting to help the guy out, my guild promised Krog and Chrona that we would support the gialgathens as much as we could. I needed time to train skills for my Sovereign class too, and we were already stretched thin as it was. Fighting a war on two fronts was out of the question, given our resources. It didn't take a genius to figure that out.

At the same time, if I was actually trying to help people, then the Emperor's offer was superior. He had more resources, more people to help, and we could stop the Hybrids from ever getting a firm grip on the Empire. That alone hurt the Adair's goals more than saving three ruined cities on Giess.

I wrestled with the idea for a moment, and the Emperor viewed my struggle. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. Calmed down, Obolis announced,

"You've promised those there that you would help them first, and now you're struggling with a difficult choice. I understand. It is no easy thing to choose one life over the other, and these decisions take time. Speak with your confidants, and after coming to an accord, inform me what you will do."

Obolis lifted a loose fist, "I will appreciate your decision regardless of what you decide. Your help is invaluable, and we appreciate it. Goodbye."

I winced,

“Thanks for understanding.”

We closed the call before I turned to Torix. The lich shook his head,

“I would normally never question your judgment, but I would enjoy an explanation in this instance. We could’ve gained a plethora of resources for a modicum of effort. All his knowledge, the credits, even the elemental furnaces, all of that would’ve been ours. You just...threw that opportunity away.”

“For now, yeah.”

Torix shook his head, “Why did you do that?”

I shrugged, “I’m looking to make an actual ally, not a business associate. Besides, it felt like the right thing to do.”

Torix held back a colorful variety of curses as he gawked at me. Even if Torix disagreed, this wasn’t something I was going to back down on. The Empire needed our help. Perhaps they could’ve been a bit easier to negotiate with, but they never treated us poorly. If anything, they were the only guild of any size that so much as interacted with us.

I didn’t see other guilds offering invitations to talk or form negotiations. The reason for that was simple – they didn’t want to become enemies of the Adairs. That was the exact same reason no other guilds helped us when Yawm attacked. The big tree man was too big an enemy to make for a small, unestablished guild.

Well, the Empire didn’t let that stop them and for a bigger fish than Yawm. Whether associating with us caused the attacks on the Empire’s cities or not, they showed a willingness to help out. We’d do the same in return.

Torix didn’t share my viewpoint as he pinched the bridge of his nose,

“I see you’ve taken a sudden turn towards a more ethical agenda.”

He said ethical with exasperation oozing from his voice. I raised an eyebrow,

“Those resources you mentioned before, the Empire will give them to us regardless. The difference is that by not taking advantage of the situation, we’re speaking with our actions, and they tell a lot about our character as a guild.”

I made a circle, “That goes for other guilds watching. They’ll know we’re good to have as allies, and that means more negotiations and opportunities. Think of this as an investment.”

Torix pulled back, cupping his chin, “Those...are good points.”

I turned my palms to the necromancer, “Exactly. We’ll get everything mentioned earlier, but we’ll get it along with a genuine friendship. Those are hard to find, and from my experience, they matter most when you need them.”

I lifted a hand, “We don’t need a friend right now, but we might in the future. In all honesty, though, this is more about doing the right thing for me. Well, trying to at least. I’m just letting you know it isn’t a bad idea from a more resource-driven standpoint.”

Torix raised a hand as if to argue. He pulled it back, staring down while deep in thought. A moment passed before he shook his head,

“I...Perhaps you’re right.”

He peered back up at me as if staring at someone else,

“Excuse my silence. For a moment, you sounded like my son, Alfred. I was taken aback.”

It had been a long time since I heard his name mentioned. Torix didn’t like talking about his past or his son, and I respected that. Anytime he did bring it up, he held my rapt attention. Even if I chose not to ask, that didn’t mean I wasn’t curious.

So as Torix spoke, I leaned close.

He stared into the distance, “Alfred and I argued on many occasions about these differences. They were of the sort you’d expect from one young and the other old. He, being inexperienced and naive, wanted to act out a sense of morality. I, being cynical, wished to act with a practical stint.”

Torix winced, “Those differences in plans led to our...eventual separation. I still regret that our last words were harsh. Alfred, he was undeserving of my scorn.”

I remembered the young mage and what happened to him in Bloodhollow. He and Baldag-Ruhl created the runic carvings that eventually led to my armor. Alfred did that by trusting an eldritch, which was pretty naive, and that matched what Torix was saying. That’s why the guy died, deformed into an abomination.

At the same time, Alfred created a living multiverse. To me, that sounded pretty damn impossible, yet Alfred got it done. That kind of ambition probably took a bit of naivete. Either way, it wasn’t a one-sided kind of issue, so I kept listening as Torix spoke from memory,

“You sound more like him now. When we met, we were very similar in how we did things. Practical, ruthless, and self-interested. Those were the pillars we used to support our lives, and they have kept us that way. Alive. Time has passed, however, and we no longer need to focus on only surviving. We may focus on thriving.”

Torix stared at a skeletal, umbral hand, “You’ve outgrown surviving, yet I have not.”

He was right about the survival aspect. When I was introduced into the system, it was a bloody, brutal welcoming. I stayed in fight or flight for literal months at a time, and it didn’t really stop until after Yawm died. Since then, I’ve been trying to walk out of his shadow. I still had a long way to go.

Torix still lingered in the darkest part, the necromancer more at home in the shadows.

I shook a hand,

“Here’s the thing, there’s a balance. You keep that cutting, efficient edge, and I’ll make sure we don’t go too far down that line and forget why we’re doing what we’re doing in the first place.”

Torix scoffed, “Are you telling me to continue over-analyzing and coming up with evil solutions?” His eyes flared a bright blue,

“Because that’s precisely where I shine.”

I smiled,

“Exactly. We’ll keep each other in line.”

Torix nudged me with his elbow, “Speaking of in line, that was a rather politically suave way of handling the Empire. The more I think of it, the better the outcome becomes. For instance, asking for a proper reward would’ve been difficult. In this situation, he shall give us a gift.”

Torix cupped his chin, “That gift will likely outdo anything we would’ve asked for. Going about it this way ensures a solid relationship, but it also ensures we won’t ask for a reward far below what we deserve.”

Torix tapped the side of his head, “That’s excellent foresight. Well done.”

I scratched the back of my head, “Eh, I didn’t think it out that far.”

The lich continued, lost in his thoughts,

“And I doubt the Emperor would give us a reward unbecoming of our help. Hah, we reap more rewards while gaining a firmer ally.”

I shrugged, “Sometimes, I get lucky. Either way, do you think we should save the gialgathens or help the Empire?”

“Pfff, of course we should assist the Empire. There isn’t an option to the contrary.”

I narrowed my eyes, “What do you mean?”

“Daniel, excuse my curtness, but this is a simple exercise in mathematics. One side is numbered in the billions, the other in the hundreds. One side has access to innumerable resources, the other has lost everything. We would be wasting our time attempting to save more gialgathens.”

Torix’s shoulders sunk ever so slightly,

“For lack of a better word, there is no one left to save.”

I stared Torix down, my mindset more heated than I expected. Something about the situation made me feel helpless, and for some reason, I found that infuriating. I shook my absurd frustration off, reasoning to myself it was unfounded.

Even if this was tough to accept, Torix and the Emperor were right. I turned towards the temple wall and kicked a loose stone. It shattered to powder, billowing across the room. Rolling my eyes, I siphoned the cloud into a gravity well, creating a swirling ball of dense, dry dust.

I collapsed it back into real rock, compressing it back into a solid. I let it fall back down, the object returned to normal. Torix gawked at the magical display,

“That was a rather casual display of potent magic.”

I stared off, “It’s just a bit of compression. I’m just thinking about what I’m going to tell Krog and Chrona. ‘Hey there, guys. Sorry, but your race is dead. Tough luck, buttercups. We’re heading off to fight another war while the rest of your kin are killed. Get ready.’”

I shook my head, “Being a guild leader has its cons, that’s for sure.”

Torix sighed, “It is an unfortunate reality. We’ve done more for the gialgathens than they could have ever expected. You remember what Krog said when the Emperor initially offered his artifact search?”



I did. Krog was ok with us stopping our assaults. Even though he knew I wouldn't agree as he said it, the sentiment was real; Krog understood what we were putting on the line here. Chrona might be different in that regard, but she could still be reasoned with. We put a damn good effort in already as well.

I nodded, thinking about all that,

"Yeah, Krog seemed resigned already. This battle's wearing everyone down too. We're going in and slaughtering entire city's worth of people. Killing the Hybridfs isn't a problem, but the espens...It's dehumanizing. Hell, even I feel more like a monster than a man sometimes."

Torix listened, but he didn't know what to say. Maybe the guy didn't understand me. He was a lich, after all, and that meant he was a pragmatist through and through. To him, the people were numbers on a sheet. Killing them all was the simplest, most elegant solution. That meant it was the best solution.

I didn't hold that perspective against Torix. It suited him, and it kept us alive more times than it didn't. At the same time, I didn't feel like I was actually fighting for a meaningful reason anymore. I was just killing and killing and killing.

I stared at my hands, remembering a few of the first people I killed. I remembered telekinetically choking someone while hiding from Ajax. It was in the middle of a battle, and I didn't mean to do it. The entire time I was numb. I killed many since then, and at this rate, it would never stop.

I would live forever, killing monster and man alike, the monster of all monsters.

I quashed that growing dread. I wasn't some monster made by the forces around me. Giving myself that reminder, I frowned,

"Let's wait until the morning and have a few of the others help us make a decision. That should help us out."

Torix raised a hand to disagree, but he held his words before lowering his arm,

“Of course.”

I turned, walking out,

“Alright. I’ll be in practicing until then. That Sovereign skill won’t unlock itself.”

As I stepped out, Torix’s fire eyes waned,

“Do take care of yourself, disciple. Our demons can overwhelm us when we least expect it.”

I raised an eyebrow at the guy, kind of confused,

“Eh, uh, sure. I’ll keep that in mind.”

I turned and walked out of his lair, pacing back into my room. Once there, I practiced with quintessence and ascendant mana. Whatever Sovereign skill I intended on using, it would require both manas used at once. That kind of doubling down demanded fluidity. There was only one way to gain that.

Practice, practice, and more practice.

Those thoughts flooded my mind as I honed in on my task. I sat down, staring at complex magical shapes I crafted from nothing but energy. Despite my efforts, my earlier doubts leaked into my mind as the hours passed. I remembered Torix mentioning the guild being destroyed and me being left behind.

Something about that was even scarier than death. In my position, I didn’t have time for this kind of hesitation either. People depended on me, and failing them meant lots of people could die. If I focused on saving people now, I could avoid another genocide like the gialgathens.

If I kept pushing forward, I might stop another Springfield from being infected. If I stayed relentless, then I wouldn’t lose more friends, family, or homes. I had to become unstoppable, a force of devastation like Schema expected.

No, like everyone expected. If I didn't, I'd lose everything and every one I found up to this point. Hell, sometimes even having people like Althea felt like a dream. The day they all died, yet I remained – it would be a waking nightmare.

That immortality scared me, the idea of losing everyone seeming inevitable. Something about it was unavoidable, like everyone around me was more fragile than glass. I was metal, and they were pulp. I gripped my hand through the stone beneath me, the once hard, stable material crushing as if it were a liquid.

I watched it fall between my fingers. The sight of something substantial melting in my palm, it made my eyes burn. I took a few quick breaths while my chest tightened as I stared at the destroyed particles. I struggled to breathe for a moment, despite not needing the air. I leaned down, grabbing the sides of my head, squeezing my hair for a moment. I shook my head, choking out a pained laugh.

I mean, I couldn't even really understand what was going on anymore. Galactic Empires, monsters worse than the eldritch, and fighting against something with the mana of an Old One...How did I get in this mess to begin with?

I laughed a bit more, the pressure from the situation overwhelming me. Everyone else was so fragile, even the enemies I made and the people I killed. They were all just a passing moment. I glared at the metal covering my arm. I held it up high.

This, this was forever, whether I wanted it that way or not.

I leaned down, surprised by my sudden emotional breakdown. It all just crushed me. Something like tears leaked from my face. I didn't check to see if they shined because I didn't want to know if they were liquid metal. I preferred not knowing.

Instead of fighting my panic attack, I just let it happen. For a moment, I was weak.

It was...liberating.

I just let myself feel the uncertainty, the dread, and the guilt of my failures. I usually just kind of pushed these emotions down, but bottling up only worked for so long. I

guess I convinced myself I wasn't normal after having been shown so many signs to the contrary. This kind of mental breakdown, it was humbling, hard, and hurtful.

At the same time, it reminded me of who I was. Despite everything, I still felt pain like everyone else. I was human. Well, maybe not entirely, but I was mortal in the ways that mattered.

After a half-hour of wallowing in my misery, the sharp edges of the ache dulled. Like all pain, it passed. I stood up, taking a deep breath. I soaked the liquid tears on the ground and on my skin up, draining them to nothing.

Yeah, I felt better.

Without some massive ball of negative emotions lingering over my head, I set out to practice again. This time I took a different approach. I walked through Elderfire, the darkness draping over the city like a black cloak. After reaching the ancient city's center, I traveled back to Mt. Verner.

The warp drive's electric sizzling buzzed in my ears as I found myself on the second floor of the mountain city. Being underground kept us from being exposed, from Yawm and the Adair's alike. I paced through the place, the machines still.

After getting to the outside of the mountain, I met up with the dimensional golems I left behind. They stayed there under the canopy of the forest, motionless and without purpose.

I extended my consciousness out to them. The connection created, the new, tender minds exposed themselves to me. I couldn't mold their minds like Torix had with a mental link alone. I wasn't that talented at it, and I didn't want to do it that way either.

Instead of doing it directly, I wielded quintessence, and I focused on building the minds of the golems up instead of controlling them.

This was a complicated process, and it required tremendous focus. These guys would fight eldritch and mind mages alike. This meant putting them through a boot camp of sorts. I trained them in mental defense, focusing on fundamental barriers against mental bombardments. More elaborate movements followed, giving them more mobility.

These simple activities acted as a way of letting the golems learn how to use their minds. The process was...slow. They didn't learn fast, and what they did discover was a fragmented, hollow piece of what I was trying to teach them. Building them up might take years at this rate. It was trying to make something work that wouldn't.

Scrapping the mental buildup plan, I changed my strategy. Taking a few steps back, I reviewed my previous inscriptions. Opening my grimoire, I tapped my chin while looking them over. I peered at the pages while trying to keep the mental boot camp going. Even if it wasn't useful for them, it was still practical training for me.

It required much more focus as I split my attention between two things. If it wasn't for how second-hand cipher carving was at this point, then it would be impossible. The informational injections by Etorhma and Eonoth gave me a lot of insight into the dimensional code, however. Using that fluency, I simultaneously mentally attacked the golems while thinking up new carvings to make.

Despite the difficult work, I appreciated the sudden strain. Having my mind cleared let me think with clarity and concision. I was feeling pretty on point, and my results agreed with me. I gained a skill while trying to help bulletproof the golems.

New Skill gained! Mental Construction(lvl 10) – This skill allows the user to help develop burgeoning minds into what they desire.

Several minutes passed, and I gained another skill I didn't expect to earn.

New Skill Gained! Runic Programming(lvl10) – Creating complex decision trees using runic inscriptions is eased, allowing for more developed behaviors.

It was what I was doing, though it sounded worse in skill form. I glanced at several of the formed golems, their rough figures showcasing physical bulk. My initial designs lacked any real thought, most of them just hobbled together chunks. They used a lot of mana to move, and their forms restricted their abilities quite a bit. If anything, improving their designs made the mental framework far more manageable to map out.

Thinking that all out, I etched down a simple design for a new golem using a tree. Wooden strips curled up as I moved my hand through the trunk. When finished, I took a

step back. The design was simple. It used floating pieces, along with a few other adjustments to the golem's combat abilities.

The alterations weren't exactly complicated. If anything, they simplified things quite a bit. I changed their connecting joint structures from interlocking metal pieces to saturated mana wells. This made crafting them effortless since no small, connecting pieces were required.

This put more work into the cipher carving aspect, but I preferred it that way. I was by no means a skilled engineer, but my runic carving held up with the best of them. If I could take some of the difficulty out of construction and put it into etching, then it was a win in my book. This floating joints method also made working with delicate materials easier.

I mean, some stuff, like fire or wind was a real pain in the ass to form and shape properly. Making joints using those airy, soft materials was basically impossible. This kind of design would make that possible. It did come with drawbacks, however.

If something wrenched the golem apart, then the golem would be neutralized. That was easier said than done when my gravity wells were involved, but it was still possible. Having some method of reassembly foolproofed the golems in that regard.

Another issue was the sheer structural integrity of what I made. My gravitational magic and the materials were damn sturdy, however, so I didn't mind that much. Fixing the fall apart element took priority, given the circumstances.

With all that in mind, I crystallized mana, creating a roughly circular orb of quintessence. I added a core to the golem's design, and this would be the central point for coming back together. Revisiting the runic guideline, I added a note to make this core the center.

Once the centralizing aspect was finished, I got to making the actual bodies. I ripped chunks of armor off my arm, throwing it aside. Before it landed on the ground, it melted into a glowing ball several feet from me. After collecting enough material, I molded it into the correct shapes for arms, bodies, and heads.

I created two more mana cores of pure quintessence, placing them on the head of the body. After a bit of runic carving, the golems could sense their surroundings with sight. Basic senses given, I gave the golems three fingers, each curved and floating. These

gravity wells were complex as I added several antigravitational enchantments as well. Several layers of runes later, and the fingers could shift a foot or two from the 'wrist' of the golem.

This gave them a superb ability to grip and restrain. The fingers could be used as piercing weapons, given some creativity as well. After that, I made their bottom halves nonexistent. Instead, I created an antigravity well along with several stabilizing anchor points around it. Inefficient, maybe, but I wasn't about to waste my gravity expertise. I might as well use what I have.

After finishing that part, I made each segment of the golem fit into one another. This lets the creature pull itself together into a single shard of umbral fabric. With a bit of momentum, using them as orbital strikes wasn't out of the question.

Powering all these magical processes required the golem's natural mana reserves. A bit of carving later and my experience with gravity meant the cipher inscriptions holding them together were rock solid. It was the first time I used the cipher for something so frivolous instead of the standard runes other people used.

They worked like a charm, their potency proven. I lifted one of the golem's bodies with a gravity well, inspecting my handiwork. They moved like joints, my intentions for them rubbing off on the design. That was something I learned about the cipher during this exercise.

It didn't act as a direct interpretation like the regular runes did. It served as a more abstract, flexible tool in general. I knew that part already, but I didn't realize that the cipher could work that way without my telling it so. The runes I used for the joints were straightforward, but I wanted something specific while making them.

The cipher made it so.

This eerie realization made the cipher even scarier than before. In many ways, it took on a life of its own once made. Noting that discovery, I worked on the signaller core at the center of the golem's chest.

I melted down a tunnel to the thing's center of mass. After excavating the channel, I placed the crystallized quintessence into the hole. A couple carvings later, and I inscribed a sort of signaller enchant onto the center.

After patching it up, I used lots of molten dimensional fabric as reinforcement. The more I worked on this project, the more I felt like I was retracing the steps of old golem creators. Golem cores, floating joints, all of it felt like stuff I'd heard about before, but I never understood why they did it that way. After working with it, it all made sense.

Once made, I inspected the beings. Simple but effective, the dozen or so creations stood upright as I walked past them. Well, floated upright. They were about ten feet tall, and their central bodies were giant hunks of dark gray dimensional fabric.

Their arms retracted into the main body most of the time. When I pushed one, the arms and fingers disconnected from the main body. It stabilized itself before making a weak attempt to attack me. Yup, it needed a bit more refinement, but this was a solid base to work with.

I went back to creating a mental framework for them. Before getting into the details, I figured having an end goal in mind would produce better results. After a bit of brainstorming, I wanted them at the entrance of a dungeon so I could see how they fare.

Most dungeons on Earth exceeded level 500, but that shouldn't be a problem for my golems. If they performed well enough, who knew, Schema might even give them special status like the Sentinels. If they worked out, then having them clear weaker dungeons wasn't out of the question.

That would take a tremendous load off any people living nearby. It let ordinary people target more dangerous, pressing targets instead of dungeon faring small fry. Maybe with enough of them and some serious improvements, they could help stop Earth from ever becoming a Fringe World. Even when I wasn't there.

Not having to patrol a bunch of tiny dungeons myself was a big bonus too, not gonna lie.

With that in mind, I finished a few of the new outlines of behavior. This acted as the second primary adjustment, and it involved their defensive tactics. I set up a simple response to anything trying to harm the golem: hold and eat the threat. This was possible because the draining of my armor carried over into the golems. When ordered, these guys could assimilate like I could.



Of course, they weren't nearly as developed as I was in that regard. It was enough to fend off most viral eldritch attempting to sink their teeth into these lugs though. That was enough for me. I also gave them a few slamming protocols if something attacked them from far away. They would launch themselves at a threat should it get too far away.

My third and final adjustment came in the form of a simple patrol. I gave the hulking creatures the simple commands to travel. I had them hug the left wall of any dungeon they entered. This meant they would roam around the outskirts of a rift, attracting attention. A labyrinth, for example, could be moved through using this method and on a set schedule.

The metal being would cover the dungeon every few days or so, clearing out any hostiles as it did. If it hit a dead end, it would simply turn around and continue hugging the left wall. This let it clear most of a dungeon. After testing them out, I'd learn the other adjustments I needed to make.

That kind of thing was hard to predict, and testing was a much easier solution than thinking up hypotheticals. Besides, these things were strong enough to climb out of holes and heavy enough to sink along the bottom of pools. This gave them slow, steady mobility that would work well in most dungeons.

This left a few basics on the table. Distinct necessities like the will to battle, searching out enemies, and self-preservation was implanted. I designed them to be responsive rather than proactive. This meant they wouldn't take the initiative in encounters. They would let the other guy start the fight before they finished it.

Most eldritch wouldn't be cunning enough to avoid them and discover their weaknesses. Even if they did, good luck peeling back a three-foot thick wall of metal harder than steel. Any dungeon with something that dangerous would likely have some kind of message about the eldritch inside. That's how it worked in BloodHollow with Baldag-Ruhl at least.

Either way, it took a few minutes to channel the cipher inscriptions required. The mana required wasn't as bad as usual since these inscriptions weren't abstract; they were concrete and exact. That was much easier than the more creative configurations I usually did. Once made, I placed them where necessary.

They floated with runic markings along their seams, fingers, and head. The white quintessence eyes stood out in particular, giving them a sharp, hollow-eyed look. Combine that with their massive size, and the new golems were eerie, ominous, and menacing.

Perfect for killing eldritch.

When the golems moved around, I beamed with pride. They shifted with far less clumsiness, having actual goals in them. A bit of an orange tinge reflected off their surfaces as I stared at them. Turning towards the sky, the sunset in the distance. I got caught up with work again.

After willing the golems to stand hidden beneath some trees, I floated back towards the second floor of Mt. Verner. Once inside, I warped towards the center of Elderfire. The sun rose here as well, a majestic sunset overlapping with trees and desert dunes alike.

Damn, I got lucky the day cycles were similar this time.

Once at the temple, I met back up with Torix, who sent a message to the others. With the meetup already planned, we walked out towards the outside of the temple. Waiting for the others to awaken, he and I stood on the temple's stairs with a slight awkwardness.

Since the earlier conversation, he and I only exchanged pleasantries. I did leave the talk on a rough note. The social discomfort was by no means unbearable, so I stood there and bore it. Torix raised a hand with care,

“You seem lighter. Perhaps you drove your demons back for now?”

I smiled, “Yeah. I did.”

Torix nodded, satisfied with my response. We watched as the others flew, walked, and woke up here. The feast lasted long into the night, so a few hardcore partiers were still laid out in the open. Hod, in particular, sat with his back on the stone steps, his belly swollen, and snoring loud as a foghorn. I gave him a telekinetic nudge, and the shadow birdman woke up. He looked around,

“What Hod miss?”

I scoffed, “Nothing, yet.”

Krog and Chrona landed, and I sighed. I turned to them,

“But you will miss quite a bit if you don’t wake up. We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

#### Chapter 260: A Bloody Compromise

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The giant, smooth-skinned gialgathens landed on the temple’s terrace, their wings sending the sun baked air into gusts of wind. Krog remained the largest of the bunch, his orange and red hide sheening like fire. Chrona’s slender form contrasted his own as her skin sheened a bright silver.

Althea phased into reality nearby, and Spear walked from the center of Elderfire, sand still resting on his cracked pauldrons. Amara remained in Mt. Verner, but Kessiah returned with the members Schema sent us. Each of them narrowed their eyes and winced at any loud noises. The night of fun was kind to them, but the resulting hangover wasn’t.

I stood the tallest of the bunch, the dark gray of my armor sheening with a dull matte finish. Torix remained a few steps below me, his blue fire eyes striking amidst the

sandy dunes and green forest tops. After exchanging pleasantries with the group, I turned to those here,

“How is everyone holding up?”

To my surprise, Althea was the first to answer,

“We’re doing okay on the espionage front. They’ve begun to recognize a few of our patterns, so we’re facing more resistance. Uhm, other than that, we’re still getting info and getting rid of important targets. Locally, I mean. We still don’t know where the rebel’s home base is or anything.”

I nodded, “Excellent. Anyone else? You can be honest here.”

A few of the gialgathens glanced at one another, but they didn’t speak whatever it was they wanted to say. Krog sighed, “The others refuse to talk on the matter. I shall do so for them. These new battles we fight in...they are wearing us thin.”

Krog gestured towards the others with his wings, “The cities are but scorched earth, little remaining of them. We are basking in seas of blood and the cries of our dead. There is little to save left in the cities. They have all fallen to the infection of metal.”

He grimaced, his teeth chipped, and his lips split in places,

“Culling those that have fallen to the Adiares is no easy task as well, but we lived on the saved lives of those we found and carried back. Now we’re wafting like a red wind, crossing over Giess in a storm of death and decay.”

He peered down, “I do not know how much longer we can continue to kill.”

I crossed my arms while cupping my chin, “Thank you for your honesty. Does anyone else have anything else to add?”

The others glanced at one another, but they stayed silent. Krog’s thoughts encompassed their own and then some, his eloquence exceeding what they could muster. After letting his words sink in for a second, I raised a hand while uncrossing my arms,

“We still have three cities to destroy before our mission here is complete.”

A sense of dread rushed over the soldiers. I continued,

“This isn’t to say we can’t change our plans. We have options, and I wanted to get your thoughts before coming to a decision. For starters, The Empire offered us a different set of terms for a different offer. They’ve been attacked by the Adairs, and several of their major cities are being destroyed.”

I peered at those here, inspecting their reactions, “We would be able to save many more people, but it wouldn’t be gialgathens. I understand if this is too difficult an option to concede. After all, I promised each of you that we would fight tooth and nail for the gialgathens.”

Krog boomed, “You’ve done so and more.”

The sign of respect rippled through the crowd, Krog’s reputation legendary among them. A subtle smile ran up my lips, “Thanks. I know what I’m capable of, however. That means I could do so much more. For each of you, we can continue to save the gialgathens that are left.”

Telepathic murmuring rippled through the crowds, all of it open for others to hear. The general sentiment seemed mixed, a medley of arguments intermingling among the masses. Kessiah spoke up,

“I know that I don’t heal every gialgathen we save, but I do heal most. From what I saw, we didn’t save almost any gialgathens last time. Like, literally less than one-tenth what we did last battle.”

Torix took a step forward, “If I may speak on the matter, perhaps I may illuminate the subject. As a point of beginning, let us review a few of the relevant statistics. Doing so shall paint a compelling picture of the battles, along with a few startling trends among them.”

He cast a few spells using his grimoire, and a 2-dimensional chart popped up above us. It showed the number of gialgathens saved. Torix pointed at the graph,

“Here we may find that over 1,200 gialgathens were saved in Polydra. The next city of Astelle resulted in over 800 saved. Fausel gained us fewer members at only 489. Tholosa was a humbling success, resulting in only 42 saved Gialgathens.”

The lich shrugged, “If this trend continues, we shall save three to four gialgathens in the next city, and perhaps a single gialgathen in the next. This isn’t to say that we aren’t prepared for victory, but it is to call into question the meaning behind our current campaign.”

The necromancer spread his arms wide, his umbral cloak and dark bones sheening under the morning sun,

“We gain little, but we will strike against the opponent with meaningful, terrible strikes. If we choose to save the Empire’s citizens, then the difference shall be in the method behind our means. We shall save instead of cull. If each of you are exhausted with this systematic termination, then this is a fine alternative.”

The gialgathens peered at one another, even Krog sighing with a sense of dismay. With their decision made, Krog began speaking. Chrona’s voice overwhelmed his,

“I lack the fatigue that all of you suffer from. Weeks and months of battle can wear down even the most bloodthirsty’s morale, and during my battles with Emagrotha, I too suffered from this same unease. However, I’ve thought about this campaign and kept track of it during this time.”

She raised a tail towards the graph, “This chart indicates the survival rates of the remaining cities, correct?”

Torix crossed his arms, “Correct.”

“Then the survival rate of those outside of the cities of Giess may be different, isn’t that right?”

Torix slowly nodded, “Hmmm, that is correct.”

Chrona turned towards the others here, “That is the crux of the issue. From the battles I’ve seen, the Adair’s focused their efforts on the densest population centers of gialgathens. The reason for that is the same reason we struggled against Lehesion.”

Chrona tapped the side of her head with her tail, “Limited resources. They are taking the most efficient course of action available to them, and we can use their lack of coverage against them. We ride through the smaller cities, gathering those that aren’t infected.”

Torix’s fire eyes narrowed to slits, “That is a possibility I’ve considered before, but I discounted the possibility. There are no doubt many more gialgathens to save that escaped the cities. The difference is in informational leakage.”

The dark lich spread his arms, “We can contain those that we saved in the cities since they are specific numbers and relatively contained operations. Saving those in rural towns requires sending out far smaller groups at a time, many of them lacking any mental defenses.”

He raised a finger, “This means that if they are intercepted and captured, the location of Elderfire can be ascertained. While this threat remains in the cities, we can mitigate this risk by keeping our troops psionically connected.”

He shook his head, “There simply isn’t the same level of security with our forces thinned.”

Chrona tilted her head, “This may be true, but can you not act as the vanguard of this campaign? We need only one mobile group to scour the countryside for survivors. I could act as your companion along with the warpers present here. This would result in a steady stream of incoming soldiers, and we wouldn’t need to fight the wars waging in the cities.”

The gialgathens present perked up, many of them enjoying the prospect of saving their brethren. Torix tapped the side of his temple,

“Though I would love the prospect of helping others, I am necessary for the campaigns in either Giess’s cities or on The Empire’s worlds. I cannot manage the campaigns, organize the logistics such as food and housing, and continue a high effort campaign of roaming the countryside.”

I shook my head, “Actually, I don’t think so.”

Torix turned towards me, taken aback, “Really? Have I contributed so little to our cause?”

I raised my palms to the guy, “No, it’s not that. It’s just what we’re doing isn’t actually saving. We’re doing from here on out is killing what’s left in the cities, right?”

“Well...perhaps.”

“I’m the only one needed for that.”

The crowd went silent. A new dread radiated through the crowd, one not for the enemy but for me. I understood the sentiment. I killed more than everyone else combined and then some. If anyone could wreak havoc unimpeded, it was me. I was our guild’s ace, the trump card, so to speak. Even without support, I could do what was necessary.

The thing was, I wasn’t just effective at taking the enemies out. I was safe as well. I could burrow deep into the ground if Lehesion ever came back. If other more evolved Hybrids came and ganged up on me, I had the mental defenses necessary for the task. I wasn’t some mind magic master, but I could hold my own, given my enormous willpower.

This set me up for blitzing the enemy; I could run in, hit hard, and get out before they could retaliate. If anything, my tactics could change entirely. I no longer needed to keep my allies safe. I could focus solely on mass destruction on a wholly different scale. I mean, why not just orbitally bombard the cities until nothing remained?

This imbued me with an overwhelming sense of confidence. That certainty did not go unnoticed by my soldiers and those present. Considering my track record, it wasn’t as if I hadn’t proved I could back up what I said either.

With that in mind, Krog smiled at me, “And so he is the Harbinger of Cataclysm.” He turned to the other gialgathens,



“What else is to be expected? He is the coming of calamity. He is living metal, a kind stronger than the metal infection the enemy uses. He may devour them if he so chooses, or perhaps he’ll rend them apart in a splatter of orange blood?”

Krog turned towards the other gialgathens,

“It will be what they deserve regardless.”

The gialgathens crooned into the air, their haunting songs reverberating like death and decay. I turned to them, knowing they wanted me to be the monster that killed instead of them. I stared at my hands, but the hesitation lingering. Was this who I was meant to be?

It felt like it. Everything that happened since Schema arrived seemed to bring me to this moment like some unseen hand was pulling me into a coming darkness. I could fight it as much as I like, but in the end, it felt almost like some inevitable fate. Taking on these cities alone could only be done by me.

If I chose not to cause the calamity, then many more would die from the Hybrids the Adair’s created. If I stayed my hand, then the enemy would use the converted for converting even more members. Despite my dread, it was the most logical, effective means at our disposal.

Regardless of my decision, blood would be on my hands. I merely decided whose blood I would wash them with.

I closed my fists, turning towards Torix,

“What do you think?”

Torix rubbed his temple, “I...It seems as though she’s put a measure of thought into this. It seems sound. I would recommend sending at least a few of our troops to the Empire to act as guides for their army. They could inform them of the enemy’s tactics while advising them in real-time.”

The lich lost his words,

“Aside from that...There’s nothing to say. We shall give them The Empire any relevant information we have. When Giess is glassed, we shall begin sending many of our troops to help a week before this planet is glassed. During that time, you could unleash a real catastrophe across their forces.

I turned to the others, “Does anyone else have any objections?”

No one spoke, though Althea seemed stricken with a sense of unease. Aside from her, everyone else peered at me with expectation. In the end, my doubt died at that moment.

I was a monster of my own making, a beast with a bottomless belly. I would ravage the lands and leave nothing left in my wake. The scars that lingered would tell a tale of an endless, immortal being, one drenched in blood and mana. Their spirits would carry the cries of the dead, and their lands would carry the corpses of those that remained forgotten.

I raised a hand, claspig it into a fist. From it, auras of red and white intermingled like blood and milk,

“When I’m finished, I’ll be the scary story they tell their children.” As I finished speaking, the gialgathens roared in unison, a resounding boom that echoed through the desert dunes.

They would be the saviors of many.

And I...I would be the butcher of all.