

New World 261

Chapter 261: A Firelit Sky

We discussed a lot more about the specifics involved with what we were doing on Giess and abroad. I tuned most of it out, feeling a bit numb. That was okay. I didn't want to be fully invested in what I was about to do either way. Tearing the cities of Giess apart would devastate the Adair's cause, no doubt, but it involved killing hundreds of thousands of people.

Those thoughts tumbled in my mind as the deliberation died down. It was midday by the time we finished the discussion, and everyone acted overjoyed. We would save more gialgathens while dishing out more damage. They could think that because they wouldn't be the ones doing damage.

That burden rested upon my shoulders.

I paced towards my room as everyone said their goodbyes. During the night, I'd lay siege towards Agatheo, the next city on Giess. Without anyone else there, I contemplated a few tactics to destroy the city. Repeated Orbital Bombardments, mana bombs, even smothering the city with Event Horizon, these options all popped out to me. One option stuck out, and it was a far more straightforward than those options – throwing rocks. Instead of lobbing myself, I would generate a stone the size of a large cliff and drop it on the city. From high enough up, it would lay waste to the entire region.

Simple. Brutal. Effective. It would be all those things and more. It made the job simple and easy, like pressing a button or pulling a lever. It rested on me with the weight of a mountain, however. No one else noticed my emotional turmoil as I walked towards my room.

In that lonely temple, I prepared myself for the task ahead. All I needed was mana, so I charged crystallized mana stones as I waited. I mapped out the route I'd take to destroy the cities, and they wouldn't last long. If anything, they should've slowed down their hybridization. Because they did it so fast, they unleashed this newfound hell onto themselves.

With my back leaning against a stone wall, I tossed a chunk of crystallized mana into my portal storage. I did this for another hour before a familiar face showed up. She knocked on the open doorway before leaning her head through the opening,

“Hey, anyone there?”

I smiled, a genuine grin, “No one important.”

Althea rolled her eyes, pacing in, “Huh? Really now? We can agree to disagree then.”

I stood up, and we hugged each other. I held her longer than I expected to, and I let out a deep sigh like I’d been holding my breath. As I pulled back, she kept her hands wrapped around my waist. She raised an eyebrow,

“I won’t ask what’s going on since you don’t look like you want to talk about it.”

I nodded, my smile turning sad. Althea pursed her lips,

“Uh, even if I’m, like, super curious.”

I widened my eyes, “I’ll be destroying a city. Well, cities. I don’t know. It’s different when I’m doing something with other people behind me. It’s easy to stand on the front of a moving ship. Now it feels more like I’m dragging the vessel behind me. It’s a lot, even for me.”

She frowned, “That’s hard.”

“Damn right it is...but thanks for noticing. It means the world to me.”

“It’s the least I can do.”

It was my turn to roll my eyes.

“What do you mean? You don’t owe me anything. Hell, I’m the reason you’re wrapped up in this.”

Her eyes narrowed, “That’s not true. We all agreed to go to Giess to get rid of our unknown statuses. We all agreed each time you went to do something as well. You never acted on your own. You let us have our say. Besides, you helped me get out from under Yawm’s thumb. I’d say that’s worth something.”

She peered down, losing steam,

“Uhm, in my opinion.”

“Well, thanks.” I puffed my chest, “I guess I am pretty awesome.”

“Okay, I take it back.”

“Too late. I’m already feeling better.”

Althea phased from my arms, causing me to stumble forward. She popped up behind me, kicking me down. I fell, stopping my momentum with a bit of gravitational manipulation. She pretended to pull my arm back,

“Gotcha.”

I followed her lead, acting as if she almost had me. She counted aloud, “One, two-“

I turned us around with a gravitational vortex. We flipped weightlessly suspended before I let us down with a gentle tug. I pushed her down by her wrists,

“Who’s got who now?”

She acted as if she was struggling for a second before batting her eyelashes, “Oh no! You’ve got me. Ahhhh.”

She blinked at me. I rolled my eyes while pushing myself up, “Okay, how do you even know about wrestling, anyway?”

She wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling me close, “I’ve been reading some old human magazines. There are these fake wrestling ones I can’t get enough of. They’re like...dramas, but all muscly.”

I furrowed my brow, “Wait a minute. You like professional wrestling?”

She blushed, “Yeah, so what?”

I laughed before murmuring, “It’s nothing. I just didn’t expect that.”

She shrugged, “They’re interesting. One guy called Turbo Slam reminded me of when we met. He’s kind of a jerk, but a...lovable jerk, I guess?”

I raised my eyebrows, leaning close to her, “Should I be concerned?”

“What? I’d never go out with the guy. He’s way too hairy.”

I smiled, “You know who you remind me of?”

“Who?”

“Miss Magisteria. She’s a wrestler that my mom loved to watch. We’d always see them on Sunday afternoon after some of the boring football games.”

“What was she like?”

“Miss Magisteria loved to act like she’s weaker than she is before she turns on her enemy.”

“Not her, I mean your mom.”

I frowned, “Oh. Her.” I furrowed my brow, “That’s tough to answer. She died of cancer when I was seven, so I don’t remember her all that well. What I do recall is just general ‘feelings’ she gave me.”

Althea leaned close, “Tell me about them.”

I cleared my throat while thinking. “So, uhm... Well, she was hard-headed. I remember that much. She had a way of getting dad to do whatever she wanted. She was a stay at home mom, so we hung out all the time. I always thought she was the most fun mom out there.”

I peered at the temple wall, “Even though she wasn’t the one making money, she was the one that made the decisions. Without her, dad was just...lost, yunno? It was like he poured everything he had into her and their life. When she passed, it broke him. He was never the same after that.”

Althea raised an eyebrow, “I’ve never heard of her or him. Why don’t you talk about them?”

“Because those were dark times in my life.”

“Darker than facing Yawm?”

I shrugged, “Yeah. Probably. At least when fighting the tree man, I had some choice in the matter. Powerless as I felt, I wasn’t trapped. I got to make a few calls about what happened. Even if it was between two terrible choices, I still got to decide in the end what happened to me.”

I shook my head, “It wasn’t like that with dad. I tried everything, and nothing worked with him. Every time I got close, he would break down whatever relationship we built up. By the time I started avoiding the house, I was sick of him and his constant rants.”

Althea put a hand on my shoulder, “That must have been hard.”

I sighed, “It was, but I’m not that powerless kid anymore. If anything, I’m like a living nuclear bomb. I have more power than I know what to do with. It’s scary sometimes.”

Althea peered off, “Yeah. I get that sometimes too.”

“It’s not all bad, though.” I put a hand on her cheek, “I have you now.”

She pressed her hand against mine, “Only if I have you too.”

“Always.”

We stared at each other for a moment, the tense silence anything but awkward. I wrapped my fingers between hers before giving Althea a light squeeze and letting go. I sighed, “You know Miss Magesteria?”

“Yeah.”

“I made the name up.”

Althea pushed my hand off of her, “Oh come on, don’t do that. That sounded like a real name.”

I smirked, “That’s because any name sounds real in professional wrestling.”

“Whatever. They’re cool.”

She pushed herself up in a fluid motion, launching herself off the floor before landing on her feet,

“I can see you’re doing fine. I’ll just leave then.”

I pulled myself up, hugging her from behind, “Hey, I didn’t mean it.”

She turned to me, “Really? It sounded like you did.”

“I didn’t. It’s cool you like something like that anyway. We should watch it together sometime.”

“What? There are videos?”

“I’m sure someone kept some from before the culling. We can ask around at the home base and find some. It shouldn’t be too hard to track some down.”

Her eyes lit up like stars in a night sky,

“That would be amazing. You promise?”

I grinned, “For sure.”

We hugged each other before she walked towards my door’s entrance. With her hips swinging, she flipped her hair on her way out,

“Just remember, Turbo Slam keeps his promises.”

I scoffed, “Okay, sure. So would Miss Magesteria.”

As she left, a deep sense of nostalgia washed over me. I blinked a bit before relishing the sensation. It reminded me of who I was, where I came from, and when I was a different kind of person. For better or worse, I turned into who I was now. Peering down at my status, I checked the time.

I was almost late.

Leaving with a jolt of gravity, I walked through the hallway, meeting up with the portal specialists from Schema’s camp. They carried more scars than when we first met, and their eyes carried bags from sleepless nights. I stood tall above them, and Spear sat cross-legged, meditating in the courtyard.

I called out to him,

“Hey, we’re about to get started with Torix’s new plan.”

As if awoken from the dead, Spear shifted with sand pouring from his frame. He walked over towards us while swinging his spears. I turned towards the others,

“You guys are ready?”

The three warpers nodded. Spear started the portal chain, getting us to the general vicinity of the area. Through the gateway, a lush, humid forest sprawled out before us. I stepped through the portal with a wave of Event Horizon. The life liquified into mana, clearing the area out to the mulch of dead plant matter below.

Shivering a bit, the teleportationists followed suit. Once on the other side, I turned towards an eldritchian rift, the one Spear had once guarded. The dungeon crumbled about a month ago, making way for an opened breach. The entrance towards an icy glacier collapsed, the freezing doorway smashed to powder. This never melting ice spread from the opening and into a jungled expanse.

From this glacier, several densely furred walruses stared at us, icy picks replacing their tusks. They hobbled towards the portalists before I took a step forward. The eldritch's will to fight disintegrated, each of them quivering in fear at the sight of me. They lowered their heads, bowing to me before I culled them with Event Horizon.

One of the warp specialists murmured,

“Damn. I've never seen that before.”

I shrugged, “It's been happening since my last, er, evolution.” I stared at my arm, “At least that's what Schema called it.” I shook off a sense of unease, “Come on, let's go.”

The warpers kicked into high gear, layering several portals until we were several miles away from the next city. I didn't read up on the details of it, only knowing it was hidden deep in the jungle. Looking at it now, the gialgathens burned down a section of forest on a steep hill. There stone buildings and outcroppings popped up between trees, the ancient temples covered in vines. It was beautiful architecture, reminiscent of Elderfire, though lacking the same desertification.

Shame what would happen to it.

I rolled my shoulders, “You guys can leave now. I’ll send a message when you need to pick me back up.”

They nodded, each of them filing out. The chatty one raised a hand as she left, “Hey, good luck out there.”

I shook my head, “They’re the ones that will be needing luck. Thanks though.”

She gave me a begrudging nod of respect, “Alright. Kick enough ass for all of us.”

As she left, I stood on an outcrop in the jungle. With a silent rise, I propelled myself using gravity wells, slinging myself over the ancient city. I hovered about 3,000 feet over the woods and stony spires, and I lifted my hand overhead. I didn’t need to go any higher for the stone to reach terminal velocity. It would just give the blighted ones more time to react while the friction from the air would eat at the size of the meteorite.

Willing that asteroid into existence, a dark stone formed above my palm, quintessence flooding from my frame. The white aura mirrored a star when viewed from below. They would see a section of starless sky, one blotted by absolute darkness. As the rough, jagged rock expanded overhead, a dark shadow cast over me, concealing my form. It took longer to make than I expected, giving me time to glance at what was beneath me.

I found the Hybrids, their enormous tendrils, and the blighted resting on the tops of buildings and trees. A few dreadnoughts hovered over the expanse, their power cores glowing from the vessel’s depths. I stayed out of their sight, none of them the wiser.

By the time I fully formed the rock over my head, twenty minutes passed. The stone mimicked a small cliffside, each end sharpened to speed its descent. This gave it the size and proportions of your average skyscraper. With a few more minutes of crafting, I reinforced the structure with dark steel. This would hold it together on impact, making it all the more devastating.

With the makeshift meteorite finally finished, I lobbed the massive stone towards the ground while following its descent. I pushed it down from above, further speeding it all while accelerating it beyond terminal velocity with gravity wells on the bottom and antigravity wells on top.

This gave it only a few seconds to speed up, but that was all it needed. It crashed through clouds, peeling through the air like a blot of black falling through space. Friction mounted on the surface, red light brimming forth as portions of the stone heated. It only glowed a dim red at the very end. The city remained unaware until the last moments.

With nothing to stop the impact, I lowered my feet onto the edge of the meteorite. Within a second of it landing, I gave it one last push, jumping from the missile. This sped it up while getting me away from the blast radius.

Despite the short fall, the stone created an explosive, apocalyptic detonation. It was like a nuclear bomb, the light on impact more blinding than the sun. The flash faltered a second later, showing an enormous plume of debris launching from the collision. The shockwave leveled buildings, stripping pavement and concrete from the ground. The sound shattered glass before tearing the buildings apart, and even the blighted tumbled like ragdolls under the meteor's might.

The sound reminded me of my own impacts. It was the kind of loud that left your ears ringing as if they couldn't even comprehend how deafening the noise was. The kinetic, thermal wave followed, washing over those in the jungled city like a tsunami of fire and brimstone. This literal hell crashed over them and liquefied their insides while roasting their dead bodies. The espens washed under this debris, some dissolving from the wave of heat while others disintegrated entirely. Even the Hybrids fell to pieces under the strain of the shockwave, their nanomachine laden insides cooking.

The forest surrounding the city of stone rippled with fire and force. It leveled trees miles away, the wind rippling trees off in the horizon. Fires started nearby from heated stones raining across the landscape, each drenching the land in red. Off in the distance, these pieces of rubble crashed like grenades, carpet bombing the forest and its occupants.

I remained in place near the explosion, anchored by gravity and my own body's tenacity. The shockwave washed over me like a warm wind, almost pleasant like a warm bath. Chunks of stone powdered against my steel skin, and the heat left me glowing yellow. This shrapnel blast lasted about a minute before slowing down, my hearing returning as it did. As the dust eventually settled, the Hybrids sprinkled the surface of the glowing debris.

Their charred, broken exteriors showed their orange insides, splattered in the dirt like cooked lobsters smashed into soil. Their shells shattered, they remained husks dotting

the carnage, their corpses decorating the land with decay and death. I stayed above it all, The orange glow radiated over my own shining frame.

I grimaced at the desolation. A wave of panic welled in my chest before I shut it down. This was necessary. More than that, this wasn't the only city I had devastated. Even in the scope of tonight, it wouldn't be the last. With my own emotions quelled, I pulled back several miles from the city, reaching our landing zone.

Around me, the entire area flattened, the jungle smothered by the wave of wind. The brush uprooted. The trees fell from the epicenter of the explosion. It was silence besides for a few crackling fires nearby, flames spreading from craters of debris. It was an ugly sight.

As I sent the message to return, the portalists arrived minutes later. Gawking at the utter calamity surrounding them, they added to the silence, the kind of quiet that screams in your ears. It reminded me of Springfield after Yawm's plague killed off the populace. We ended up going from house to house, eliminating all of them.

This would've been much easier and less personal. I hoped other cities pulled through on Earth as stared at what happened to Giess. It made the act of vaporizing these infected cities easier on my conscious. Striking these blows against the Adairs gave us the opportunity to help others further down the line.

It freed up resources to extend our reach, and that would end up helping those we took under our wing. Well, less taking under our wing and more like whipping them into shape, but either way, we were helping them out in the end. The eldritch were a permanent problem. We needed permanent solutions for them.

As the fires raged around me, those thoughts held me together.

The portalists lacked my dread, the silence breaking when one of them whistled aloud. They kept their distance from me, my glowing frame hot enough to ignite their armors and skin. I snapped a finger, a wave of quintessence washing cold energy over me. As it did, my armor screeched with an alien, hollowing sound. The talkative warper murmured,

“By Schema...I'm glad you're on our side.”

I rolled my shoulders,

“I am too. Now come on, we’ve got plenty left to do.”

Spear stood beside them, whipping a spear. The electrical buzzing of sheared dimensions rang in my regenerated ears. I seethed,

“One down. Two more to go.”

As I stepped through the portal Spear made, I gave one last look at the carnage. Shaking my head with disgust, I hoped we’d get back to helping people rather than killing them.

Only time would tell when that would happen.

Phil Williamson –

My eyes opened to cobweb-covered corners and dirty windows. I pushed myself out of bed, the sheets unwashed for years now, so they reeked something awful. Rubbing the tired out of my eyes, I peered around at the popcorn ceiling and the nylon wood walls.

Eh, it was a home I guess.

I pushed myself out of the patchwork sheets, my wife having stitched them back together for the hundredth time. It was better than sleeping with holes in sheets, but I wished we weren’t so stingy before the damned apocalypse. I might have some soles on my shoes that weren’t glued on if that were the case.

Compared to fighting those eldritch at night, I could deal with worn-down shoes. It was watching everyone else wear down that really tore me up inside. I walked downstairs, the carpet covered steps creaking underfoot like whiny children. I needed to repair the underlying wood with a few nails and some sawed wood boards to stiffen the steps. It would have to wait till later. I was too tired after guarding the house at night.

From outside the windows of our den and kitchen, I saw that night was coming soon, the sun setting. I sighed, a sort of unconscious complaint I didn't mean to make. My pop always told me that a man kept his discontent to himself. I was the man of the house, so naturally, that meant I couldn't whine about anything.

No matter how much I might've wanted to.

That didn't apply to my son, Jason, however. He was a skinny boy, the kind that grew tall before growing wide. It gave him this gangly sort of demeanor only teenagers held on to for long. I couldn't blame him for keeping that same lanky look either; he was only fourteen when the system came and crashed any chance we had at a normal life. Now he wore hand me down coveralls covered in the same patchwork my blankets had.

It always stung somewhere in my chest when I saw them every morning. Day after day, week after week, I wanted to offer him a better life, but I was just so tired every day after keeping our home safe. In the end, maybe I was just lazy. I couldn't tell anymore. It hurt me just the same no matter how I thought about it.

Those thoughts jostled up in my head as Jason stared down at his status, no doubt dissecting the numbers and whatnot. He helped show me what was going on when the system first arrived. I was clueless as a farmer in a stock market. It was beyond me, I tell yah.

For Jason, it came like second nature. He smoothly adapted to it, just like he did phones and touchpads when we first got those too. It was a shame he'd never be a fighter, though. He had the drive, but that didn't matter. These monsters didn't care if you wanted to get better. They'd kill anything near their level, no two ways about it.

That's what ended up happening. I guarded the first monsters that came to our house after we finished the tutorial. We only had one rifle with a bit ammo, and I was the only one that knew how to use it. That got me a headstart on levels, along with a few perks to boot.

Now I was so far overleveled over the rest of the family that guarding fell to me always. In some ways, I took pride in defending my family. In others, I exhausted myself with the constant fighting. It would never end, but I could never stop. Otherwise, my family would be butchered like pigs in a slaughterhouse.

Jason didn't take too kindly to my out leveling him either. He resented me for it, even now as I put my hands in my jean pockets,

"Hey, son. It's good to see you're doing well."

He didn't even meet my eye, choosing to stare down at something invisible,

"Sure."

I peered away, finding Margret making dinner in the kitchen. It was simple food, a few herbs, boiled potatoes, and grilled corn for dinner. We didn't have meat in the meal, but that was only for special occasions. It wasn't as if keeping cows around would help much, considering they'd just get eaten up by the damn eldritch.

She was washing dishes in water, no real soap left. I walked up to her, putting a hand on her shoulder,

"How you doing honey--"

She shook like I electrocuted her, her entire body going stiff. A glass plate shattered against the floor as she took a few deep breaths. I took a step back, lifting my hands,

"Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head, "No, no. It's my fault. I'm just a little jumpy is all."

She turned to me as beautiful as the day I met her. Sure, the chaos we lived in meant her eyes had bags under them, but she looked gorgeous to me all the same. She jittered about, gaining a twitch since the monsters roamed around us. She got that ever since Sally died. Just remembering that made the hole in my chest burn.

God, I missed her so much.

She'd never be back though, so I sucked up my pain and carried on, smiling at my wife,

“Margret, it’s just me. You know I’ll keep the family safe. I always do.”

She gave me a weak smile, “Of course. Of course. I need to pray more is all.”

I nodded, “Yup. It helps you calm down.”

She grabbed her wrist, covering up scars. She did it without thinking about it, but I noticed every time. I frowned, knowing she had an episode once Sally passed. There was more to her suicide attempt than just her death, however.

After Schema came in and flipped our world upside down, local governments shut down not long after. We couldn’t get any of the anxiety medication for Margret anymore. She didn’t handle it too well after we talked to a few neighbors and figured out that Sally passed. She was torn apart by wolves in the tutorial...

My poor girl didn’t deserve that. No one did.

Margret took the death hardest, though it still left me empty too. Someone had to be strong for the family, and as the man of the house, that fell to me. Jason barely cried, instead choosing to fall into some system games and the like. Avoiding pain wasn’t strength. My pop told me that, and I don’t know if I ever forgave Jason for not caring about Sally like we did.

Maybe Jason did care, but he could do a lot better job of showing it. That much I knew. I couldn’t hate my own son despite that. He worked the farm ever since I took on guard duty. I tried helping for a while, but I ended up exhausted. So exhausted, I began falling asleep as I guarded the house. One time a monster tore three of my fingers off on my left hand because of that. My face was never the same after those wounds, either.

After that, I quit helping out on the farm. It was too dangerous.

Jason hated me for it, but there just wasn’t anything I could do. A man could only handle so much, and keeping the house safe was my limit. Our rifle long lost all its ammo, and now I fought with a club I made from scratch. It wasn’t the best, but it got the job done.

With the maul, I needed all the strength I could muster. The monsters were getting more robust, and I didn't know if I could handle it for much longer. I'd hold on and die with a weapon in my hand if it meant keeping these two safe, whether they hated me or not. It's what kept me going.

That wasn't entirely true, not anymore at least. I found something that helped me pass the hours during the night recently. I looked forward to it as we finished up a bland breakfast. It was morning for me but evening for the others. The time difference kept them closer yet pulled us apart, and that was okay. I didn't help them for something in return. I did it because it was the right thing to do.

That motivation spurring me, I went out towards the watchtower at the top of the house. I found some crystals in a cave a few months ago, and I used them with a few glass panels to make night lights that never went out. It gave me a good view of what was around, enough to shoo away anything munching on our crops or worse.

It got boring quick, the loneliness setting in like some kind of poison in my veins. Before my thoughts spiraled out of control, I opened up my status and looked up a website. Jason hated watching me do it this way since he said I could do it all with a single thought. I told him this way worked, so I stuck with it.

A 'streaming' site opened up, some confounded alien name. As much as the idea of aliens unsettled me, I couldn't deny they came up with some good stuff. This site was one of those ideas, and it even had a few humans on it to boot.

I checked out a few of the names I liked to watch in the corner of my vision while I prepared for the long night. Settling in, I found streams for dungeon clearing, crafting tools, and even magic. It was useful stuff, though most of it was low-level fodder. The only high-level stream that wasn't restricted by a subscription or credit cost was the Harbinger.

Just thinking about it gave me chills. I was level 400, struggling just to survive. Some monster was out there in the stars above, destroying monsters like it was nothing. It gave me hope that I might be able to get to his level one day. It would be a long time before then, so watching someone who already made it would have to do for now.

I was in luck, too; he was streaming right this second. Tuning in, I watched him overlooking some jungled city at night, the evil Hybrids spread out before him. My

eyes widened, and my heart raced as I watched him slam a massive stone into the land. He flattened the whole city like a spatula pressing down on a pancake.

It left me with goosebumps. I thanked the lord that he wasn't against us before the stream showcased an ad for his guild, the Harbinger's Legion. It never mentioned where the guild was, but it did say how to join them. It required a few major hurdles, but it was still a genius move. Who wouldn't want that guy on their side? If they were anywhere near Tennessee, I'd join them in a heartbeat. There were more than just a few issues with joining them right now, however.

They required a screening process along with a training program. Now, I didn't mind the training part. I did bootcamp back in the sixties for Vietnam. If there was one good part about the system, I felt younger now than I did then. Jason could use a good knocking around, and if the guild matched the guild owner, then they'd do just that.

The screening, on the other hand, gave me the heebie jeebies. They needed to inspect your system interface and even your mind. I didn't trust noone going into my head and messing with my thoughts, Harbinger's guild or not. Apparently it was only a 'surface level scan,' whatever that meant.

It sounded like mind control to me.

The other problem was how they handled security. Those kinds of screens and training had to happen at certain locations. If we could get there, then yeah, I'd probably get over my mind screening anxieties. We needed to go towards a neutral, Schema controlled area before talking to a booth from them. They'd do the scan before giving you a location for one of their camps, wherever they were. For us, that just wasn't doable.

Warping was expensive, and it required a certain level before you could do it. We barely kept afloat with the protection of a house. Traveling meant we'd face all kinds of new monsters, and I wasn't ready for it. God knows Jason and Margret weren't either. They'd be mincemeat without someone keeping them safe.

No, it was much better to stay put until someone came close enough that we could dash over for help. Until then, we would bunker down and pray, all of us stuck out here in the middle of nowhere with monsters roaming as far as the eye could see.

At the moment, none of those monsters were out in the open, so I tuned back into the stream as the ad ended. It showed yet another city, showcasing the Harbinger tearing up another settlement of Hybrids. It left me blown away that anyone could do that, let alone a dang human. Enjoying the excitement, a few hours passed with me watching the Harbinger do his thing.

I peered up from the stream as something rustled in the bushes, an alien creak echoing in the wind. I sighed while tightening my grip on my metal club covered in the horns of some monster I once killed. With a leap, I landed onto the ground with a dull thud, my feet cracking the dirt beneath me. I stared at the yellow eyes staring at me, both our eyes wide with the intent to kill. Several more pairs of eyes opened, more than I could count-out.

I grimaced. It was going to be another long night.

Chapter 262: The Last Days

-Daniel Hillside

The warping specialists stumbled into the temple grounds, Spear and I standing above them. I grafted a gravity well onto them while turning to Spear, “Take them to bed. They need the rest.”

The stoic guardian gave me a nod, grabbing and slinging the lightened bodies like sacks of flour over his shoulder. I walked into the temple, hearing the familiar machinations of Torix. Within his lair, he managed pins over a map of Giess, showing various population centers for rural and urban areas. Torix murmured as I walked in,

“It would seem as though the portalists aren’t with you to assist with your report.”

I shrugged, “They exhausted themselves. One of Spear’s landing zones was over 200 hundred miles from a city, so they ended up making a hundred plus portal chain to close the gap.”

Torix winced, “Ah, exhausted is perhaps an understatement then.” He turned from his work, “You seem no worse for wear, though perhaps you aren’t standing as tall as usual...That and you haven’t pulled your helmet off.”

I frowned, keeping my face hidden, “There’s no reason, really. I just wanted to keep it on.”

“Hmm, well, it’s certainly your choice. Did you manage to make a dent in the first city?”

“I got rid of all three.”

Torix dropped a pin in his hand, his blue fire eyes shifting shades. A brilliant white overcame them,

“All three?”

“Yeah. I blew them up with big rocks.” I stared at my hands, “It wasn’t that hard honestly. Just...make a big rock over the city then pull it down.” I shrugged, “They never saw it coming.”

“I...That’s incredible. Are you certain they were actually destroyed?”

“You can ask Schema’s people after they wake up. From what I saw, it was a clean wipe for all the cities with some time to spare.”

Torix tilted his head, “So why did you all arrive just now?”

I pointed at the temple’s exit, “I had to carry the portalists after a certain point while getting to the last city. That slowed us down.”

Torix tapped his temple, “The limiting factor wasn’t destructive potential but transportation...Interesting. This changes everything.”

“Like what?”

“The number of cities we may devastate has exponentially increased. Here I believed it would take the remaining time we had left on Giess for you to maul the remaining locations, yet you’ve exceeded anything I believed possible.”

I frowned, "I mean, I could have done the same thing with an Orbital Bombardment using me as the bomb."

Torix waved his arms, "Such a feat would be nigh impossible to maintain. Surely mental exhaustion would be a factor, given the sheer strain on your mind and body?"

I wrinkled my brow, "Hmm, maybe? It's definitely a lot easier to use a big rock. It's less risky too."

Torix spread his arms, "Regardless, I underestimated you yet again. If we were to destroy cities before the rebels retreat from Giess, we might stop them from rejoining their main forces. It would act as a method of limiting the number of blighted they obtain for future conflicts."

"That makes sense. It's like hitting the enemy while they're sitting ducks rather than waiting for them to get ready."

"Precisely."

"That means I'll be taking care of cities from here on out?"

"If you are able and willing, then yes."

I processed that information in my head as Torix said,

"We shall strike them with the wrath of an Old One. This will allow us to cripple them before they leave Giess. You may drastically raise your level as well, given the number of cities you could destroy. This is the perfect outcome for our guild as a whole."

I stared at my status, my level sitting at 11,750. Torix was right about the rapid rise I could gain from the nightly exterminations. In one night, I won more levels than I had over the last three weeks of city raids. If I did this for the next week or so that we had left, then I could gain several thousand levels, both to my cap and total.

I might be able to give Lehesion a few hard knocks if he came towards Mt. Verner then. Using dungeon cores, I could even accelerate my learning of specific skills too. That, combined with daily training, could get me much closer towards my Sovereign skill. Of course, I needed a specific legendary skill that worked well with my other abilities first, so that would need to take priority.

What kind of skill would I want to gain was the real question. I peered off, thinking about it for a moment. From a destructive standpoint, I was a marvel already. Any more cataclysmic potential, and I'd be a walking, breathing calamity. In many ways, I already was, so I wanted to do something else.

My thoughts drifted towards the golems and their potential to stop the eldritch problem. Yeah, that seemed like a much better way of using my time. It would be working on a weakness, my general utility skills. At the very least, it would be a way of balancing out my current expertise.

Torix waved a hand in front of my face,

“Daniel, are you listening?”

I shook my head, “What? Not really. I drifted off there for a minute. I was thinking about my build.”

The lich crossed his arms, his cloak-like cape an inch off the ground, “Hmmm, perhaps you're more exhausted than you'd like to believe?”

I scoffed, “It's more like I have more to think about now, not that I'm thinking less.”

Torix lifted his chin, “Ahhh, the woes of a leader. I do understand the struggle, and you most certainly have my sympathies. However, I need your undivided attention at this moment. Can you handle the nightly raids?”

I nodded, “I can and will. I'll tear them down one by one, city by city.”

“Good.” Torix eyes me over,

“You know, you have me worried. It’s rare to see you questioning yourself and even rarer for you not to be present during a conversation. I always marked that attentiveness as a strength.”

I rolled my shoulders, “I’m fine.”

“Hm, I’ll put faith in your judgment. That being said, living in a sea of fire and rubble for days on end isn’t good for the psyche, no matter how strong said psyche is. Make sure you’re giving yourself some form of catharsis to keep yourself grounded.”

“Catharsis, eh?”

“Indeed. It’s essentially a method of purging negative emotions through self-expression. Perhaps discovering something you enjoy would alleviate some of the burdens you’re carrying. My teaching is that for me. You need only discover what that is for you.”

I lifted my eyebrows, “I’ll admit, that would be nice.”

The lich shrugged, “Find something that will keep you sane during these insane times then, disciple. Whatever that may be, whether music, theater, perhaps reading?”

I shook my head, “All that’s fun, but I need to get another legendary skill.”

“Then search that out. Use the hunt as a method of anchoring yourself. After all, it’s easy to lose who you are in the throes of war. In the ensuing peace thereafter, you may never find yourself again.”

The lich gave me a glare, the kind a teacher gives a student,

“Do you understand my meaning?”

I laughed a bit.

“Yeah. I need to remember who I am, even when I’m kicking literal mountains worth of ass.”

The dark necromancer scoffed, “Indeed. Now, go find whatever that is.” There was a glint in his fiery eyes, “Though I presume you’ve already found something that has taken hold of your interest.”

Thinking of the guarding golems, I nodded,

“Yeah, I think so.”

If Torix had lips, they’d be grinning as Torix turned back to his work, “Then chase that curiosity. It will take you further than you could ever imagine.”

Letting him catch up on his work, I walked off. It was moments like those that reminded me of Torix’s desire to teach. He loved it, and that passion showed more and more as time passed. Feeling a sense of inspiration from his own joy at learning, I walked towards the center of Elderfire.

There I walked through Schema’s landing point, finding mostly gialgathens but a few humans walking about. They helped the giants with tasks that required smaller hands. Of course, that came with conditions; serving the gialgathens was out of the question. I didn’t want gialgathens thinking that humans ever had to obey them out of expectation. It would always be an exchange of skills.

Passing by the cooperative groups, they stared at me with disbelief. A few gazed in awe but most gawked with some kind of genuine fear racing up their spines at the sight of me. Eh, maybe they’d seen me rip a Hybrid’s head off once or twice on my streams. Either way, even the gialgathens gave me a breadth they usually wouldn’t have.

It was a strange sensation, one of near reverence. Despite those odd glances, I gave several of them a wave. I had to keep up appearances after all. After handling the masses, a wave of ionized air washed over me from the warp drive. I stepped out into the industrial section of Mt. Verner, passing by while letting everyone know to keep up the excellent work.

My visits no longer attracted an unusual amount of attention anymore due to their frequency. Passing towards an exit, I reached the outskirts of the mountain, finding my golems standing right where I left them.

Well, standing wasn't the right word. When idle, the golems sat in piles of dark, jagged clusters on the ground. A sharp eye would spot them as unusual, mainly from the subtle hue of mana radiating off them. Without that kind of mana sense, they were effectively invisible. Given their density and weight, a few of the larger pieces even sunk a few inches into the dirt, exacerbating the hiding effect.

As they woke up, I waved off a few birds resting on their shoulders before clapping the golems awake. Cracking my knuckles, I peered at each of them

“Come on now, rise and shine.”

Their floating joints tumbled about as they rose from their slumber. Confused and disoriented, the young minds stumbled around, some of the golems running into nearby trees. One of them tripped over a different golem, falling back apart. I facepalmed, getting mad Hod vibes.

This was a fight, just like any other. It wasn't the kind I was used too, but I'd win all the same. I peered at each of them,

“Alright, everybody. Front and center.”

The golems floundered over, some of them even mixing up pieces of their bodies. I pinched the bridge of my nose,

“This is going to be a lot of work.”

A lot of work was an understatement. It was an absolute pain in the ass, but not for the reasons I expected. The golems turned out to be diligent, obedient, and determined students. The issues arose from how literally they took anything I told them. Even a slight mishap in my phrasing resulted in substantial splintering in their behaviors.

Once more, I was reminded of why I wanted to craft the minds from scratch but better. After a few practice exams with the golems, I learned a few of the specific mistakes I

made while creating their protocols. Taking notes in the trunk of a nearby tree, I ended up redesigning a few parts of how they did their guarding.

Armed with that knowledge, I went about recreating another set of instructions for them in the cipher. Finishing it up an hour or two later, I created more golems, grafted the new cipher onto them, and tested the changes. Another crop of issues showed themselves, so I went about fixing them yet again.

It may sound exhausting, but it rejuvenated me in actuality. I enjoyed working on something that mattered, and this was a nice change of pace. I even began reaching out with telepathic tethers to communicate with them. They sort of understood words, but my meaning was often lost in translation. When talking by our minds only, misunderstandings were far less common.

It made Torix's mental combat lessons more practical. Speaking of which, I warped back towards Elderfire, got my ass kicked by said lich, then went back to the golems. With a throbbing headache, I kept at it until the sun began setting in the distance. Having made significant progress, I rolled my shoulders and prepared myself for my nightly duties.

Settling the golems down in the trees, I warped back towards Elderfire for another night of bloodshed. Cities burst to ash in waves of light, force, fire, and fury. It happened fast, as fast as clearing out a dungeon, for instance. With the plans set up for me, I went through the motions, using dark meteorites to decimate towns.

It was a strange way of spending time. On the one hand, I made unbelievable progress. We passed our three towns a night goal in just a few hours. Deciding to continue, we pushed further into tomorrow's schedule. This tired the warpers out, but I was okay. In all honesty, this was...easy.

My levels shot up in much the same way. Ever since passing about the 8,000 mark, I hadn't noticed my level ups much. They happened in bursts of a few hundred at most, meaning they never created a substantial change. Diminishing returns ensured that despite getting over a hundred levels at once, they lacked the punch one level used to have.

These city slaying ventures were those same chunks but dispersed several times overnight. It was a kind of progress I never expected to have again. With each city, I sharpened up my sight, my mass increasing. I strengthened as each stone impacted a

settlement. As my weight grew, I suspended the boulders overhead using even less effort. I also generated the masses quicker, building more immense, more hardened stones to smash with.

These subtle alterations made the barrages even more effective, leveling my Orbital Bombardment skill. In many ways, it acted as an unsettlingly effective killer, my ability to erase entire cities from the map unmatched. Without the legalization of nuclear weaponry, this kind of assault was all but necessary. Being able to do so without planning or machinery made my magic sickening to behold.

From city to city, village to village, I tore apart the entirety of Giess. A globetrotter unbounded by distance or time, I ripped the whole of their new civilization apart. When I began my bombings, we only had nine days left on Giess before the scheduled glassing. Including our own evacuation time, that gave us only a week to dish out damage.

And I culled them all.

Torix planned better once he learned the full extent of my abilities. He lined the cities closer together, saving us travel time. It exhausted the portalists less as well. They still suffered intense mental exhaustion, each of them nearly delirious after the first few days. They ended up only willing themselves through twelve more cities.

After the warpers needed rest, Spear and I went onward, slower than before, but still blistering through cities compared to before. Even at this newfound pace, I gained levels on top of levels from that night alone. I got into a flow of destroying a city, placing my points into endurance, and then moving on.

It became routine as all things do. Spear and I trekked through Giess's landscapes on our own. The sheer repetition involved with both bombing the cities and traveling made the evenings drag together, like a night that never ends. Never needing to sleep exacerbated that issue, and it was like living two lives, one of destruction and the other of creation.

Those nights, they wore me down. Even if I held myself together through them, that kind of mission still haunted me. Even Spear tired himself out after a few days, though the indomitable protector refused to show it. All the strain from portaling made Helios's mastery all the more impressive. Spear held his own in that regard, however, so we

pushed forward and hard. After all, each city we destroyed showed an impact, both in levels and in any reports I read.

The Emperor was the primary source of that information. Within the first three days of my attacks, fewer Hybrids attacked Obolis's cities. Each crater I left in my wake meant fewer blighted ones covering the skies on the Empire. Even the countrysides of Giess cleared out some. By the time a full week passed, I had destroyed forty-three cities, settlements, and hive clusters.

Some of them weren't as large as other settlements, and they gave me fewer levels as a result of that. When it was all said and done, I rested at a comfortable level 15,000, the same level as an entirely capped out Fringe Walker. This rapid progress showed itself in my form and stature. I outsized Spear by quite a bit now, and my general aura seemed to match my increase in levels.

It wasn't as if I changed, though I had. The main difference was in what people believed of me. Before, I was the killer of Yawm and a walking army. Now I tread onto the path of a world-destroyer, a being to be whispered of and feared. It happened quick, something I didn't expect but appreciated.

Well, destroying dozens of cities single-handedly tended to do that.

It resulted in what Schema branded as the seven-day harvest. According to Torix during our mental battles, our number of recruits from other guilds over doubled. It was complicated getting them admitted into the guild considering our security concerns. It did give us an influence exceeding Giess and Earth, however.

Regardless of the details, my fame rose by orders of magnitude, at least based on what Torix told me. Time would tell the validity of his claims. It gave me a lot to think about between the cities I culled.

I mean, my increase in levels bolstered Schema's claims. After all, a sentient's levels showcased their worth in Schema's society. Showing my rise despite being a classless, backwater savage, well, it was inspiring to many. It also painted the war against the Adairs as a feeding frenzy rather than the brutal bloodbath it actually was.

Schema milked that illusion for all it was worth. To me, that idea was a bad joke, one without a punchline or any bite to it. For me, those nights passed like bathing in a sea of blood. Killing. Rubble. Fire. The massacres all blurred together, a living fever dream

that never seemed to end. Despite the burden of it all, the rise in levels and popularity was...nice. I wasn't void of an ego after all, and being appreciated livened me up regardless of the mass-murdering context.

It was better than being looked down upon, that much was for sure. I could just imagine how much Helios was chewed out by the Emperor for how he treated us early on. Karma had a way of catching up after all.

We even gained a few offers for allyship from other guilds besides the Empire. It was mainly from alien factions offering to join us and our effort. It turns out, being painted as a hero acted as a fantastic method of getting people excited for a cause.

It was all very strange to me. On the one hand, here I was, killing millions of people. On the other side of the equation, everyone was showering our guild with praise and adulation. It showed a rift between reality and perception, one that Schema actively exploited. The AI was beyond ruthless, and Schema commended my guild for our mass murdering methods.

Those thoughts unnerved me for many reasons. At the same time, I was doing my best with the knowledge I had. At least my progress with my golems kept me sane during all the madness.

I found that programming minds could only take me so far, even with very advanced schematics. At some point, teaching them was required for progress. A day or two into teaching, and suddenly writing new cipher inscriptions seemed better. This push and pull went back and forth during the seven-day harvest.

When I hit that wall with cipher runes, I turned towards teaching. When I stalled from training, I wrote out a few new codes for them to follow. This pattern made my progress steady but never too quick nor slow. In the teaching aspects, I went to Torix for help. He patiently drilled in the basics of teaching via a long lecture with questions.

Was it boring? Well, kind of. Was it useful, though? Absolutely.

Using his techniques, I gained further insight into how learning took place. For instance, one aspect of teaching was to use a student-centered model rather than a teacher-centered one. The idea was surprisingly simple – focus on learning what the students know rather than what they didn't.

For example, a lot of students struggled with math. They used a particular method for solving a problem and came up with the wrong answer. A short-sighted teacher would assume that the student's approach must be completely wrong, so the student should discount their own thinking entirely.

This disengaged the student, mounting their frustration and wasting their time. They could've been almost correct, but a teacher's laziness stopped that progress from being recognized. This style of teaching focused on imprinting a teacher's thoughts onto the students, and it stifled critical thinking.

A wise teacher worked to understand the student's knowledge set. Once known, they could revise the errors and build from that base of knowledge that the student already had. After all, you can have 90% of the process right but still come up with a wrong answer in something like math. Scrapping a method that's so close to correct was like throwing away a house that's 90% built. It would be a huge time and effort sink, one most people couldn't afford.

Especially these golems who had the intelligence of cloth.

The tricky part of this new teaching method was designing a course that enabled this kind of learning. It required challenges that were approachable, challenging, and rewarding. If I did that and let the golems develop themselves, their knowledge would go deeper than the surface level regurgitation my previous teachings resulted in.

It was complicated as hell, but I found much better results from this method of instruction. When it all clicked in my head, this new teaching method was far less complicated than what I did before. Instead of carrying out courses, I just carried the golems to a dungeon. Once inside a cavern or the like, I watched them struggle on their own. As they fumbled against monsters much weaker than them, they learned tactics against certain enemies. If they stalled, I nudged them in the right direction through a few mental conversations.

The tactics they learned proved simple in practice, like how to fight stone gargoyles. If the golems swung at random, they ended up being attacked between their swings. If they waited until after a gargoyle committed to attacking them, then they could land a killing blow as it swooped down. It sounded obvious, but it wasn't to these knuckleheads.

Either way, we made reasonable progress within a week. It wasn't as if these golems could use something like language. As for beyond basic fighting, they comprehended a bit more than when we started. The progress from these tactics slowed down as time passed despite my efforts, so I shifted focus back towards mind magic.

It wasn't anything too grueling, but prodded them from certain mental angles. It was kind of like their minds were spheres, and you could attack from anywhere to crush them. My goal was to get them to guard against an attack from any angle. Multiple attacks or sophisticated tactics were out of the question, but that basic defense would do wonders given their vast repositories of willpower.

These days of cultivating a few quiet, unassuming golems made a world of difference for me. I wasn't changing the universe or anything, but it was a personal, long-term goal that kept me centered. As we finished up our efforts on Giess, I resolved myself to continue studying and researching methods of expanding these golem's minds.

I believed I was onto something here. If I could mass produce these things, people wouldn't have to fight for their lives in dungeons anymore. It was a purely good thing that I didn't have to think too hard about whether it was right or wrong. Instead, I could just dive in with focus and creativity like crafting armor or designing a training schedule.

I looked forward to spending more time on it as I finished my last city slaughter. City wasn't quite the right word. It was more of a facility center, something similar to a power plant underground. I used a sharp stone I developed during my attempts at destroying cities. A simple coating of metal let any rock go far deeper into the ground before reacting kinetically.

It left a cauldron in the ground, the deeper explosion underground causing less annihilation at the surface. Magma pooled at the pit's bottom, glowing orange and red. The dust settled a while back, and now I waited along a stripped hill for Spear's return. A dimensional rip appeared beside me, and Spear hobbled out.

Leaning onto a spear, he suppressed the urge to vomit. I went and picked the guy up, and we headed towards Elderfire. The Sentinel exhausted himself during the last seven days, his constant warping in and out of city ranges taxing his mana. After several hours of travel, I hovered him with a gravity well. He kept his head down as I turned to him,

“What about using portals is so tiring?”

Spear murmured,

“There is a sense of exhaustion similar to motion sickness that takes place. Different individuals carry different tolerances for this kind of transport. Mine vastly outweighs those portalists that Schema sent us. Helios’s vastly outweighs mine.”

“Aren’t you using the spear for it?”

“The spear is a tool. Using it to warp is like using a hammer to smash nails into wood. If you smash a thousand nails in a row, then you’re bound to hit your hand at some point. Continue doing so, and your hand will lose function. One’s concentration during warping is similar, and it can only continue for so long.”

He stared down, sounding sick,

“And...this gravitational travel is not helping.”

I rolled my eyes, “Don’t stare down then.”

Spear murmured, “Please...Flip me upward.”

I did as the guardian asked, and he sighed with relief. Sailing into Elderfire, we floated over a city full of movement. Dozens of crates, sleds, mana driven platforms, and even storage rings were being dispensed. On these carrying devices, food of all kinds was crated towards the center of town. Personal belongings and other possessions stored into the dimensional rings. As for the necessities, those took up the bulk of the physical space fitted into each warp.

Torix stood at the center of Elderfire, peering at the flow of traffic with the intensity I expected from the lich. Unable to help himself, he dispensed timely advice,

“Keep your distancing orderly. Calm yourselves. Time shall pass. You all shall leave... eventually.”

Torix lifted a hand, projecting an image of a human woman and man, “Though tempting, do not eat this species. They are the origin species of our guild leader, and eating them is forbidden, as is to be expected.”

He grumbled, “As is experimentation, but that too, is to be expected.”

The gialgathens kept their telepathic conversations open as they moved, letting others listen in. Several of their conversations entered my mind all at once.

“That’s the species of the Harbinger? I thought they were metal.”

“I believed them beings of pure energy, manifesting as physical monsters.”

“He comes from humble origins. Surprising. I expected more from them, though perhaps they’re hiding their potential. Their species spawned him after all.”

It was about the response I expected. Even when humbled, the gialgathens hadn’t lost their haughty natures, at least not entirely. It wasn’t outright derisive, however, so I took their responses as a net positive. Torix kept them all in line as I floated up to the guy with Spear tailing not far behind.

Reaching beside them, Torix looked me up and down,

“You seem rather well considering you spent the entire night causing various explosions. Spear seems far more affected. Perhaps he should’ve invested more into willpower, hm?”

I shook my head, “He has some kind of portal sickness.”

Torix facepalmed, “Ah, of course he would. It’s a common problem. Perhaps we may garner more portal support from different members that have joined us recently. I’d completely forgotten about it.”

Torix sighed, “Gah, I need an AI to automate some of my tasks. Details are beginning to slip from my grasp. Those details may one day equate to lost lives.”

I peered at Spear, “How does portal sickness work?”

Torix raised a finger, “It spawns from two diverging issues. On the one hand, shifting perspectives and scenery over and over creates a motion sickness in certain people. Just as well, portals require a measure of visualization.”

Torix raised both his hands, “Imagine immersing yourself in a different place while being in your current one. It creates a difficult dichotomy, one where your consciousness almost splits. As it comes together, it creates a refocusing that can be difficult to withstand. This is why many struggle with it. Think of it as a very talent oriented field of magic.”

Torix put a hand on his chest, his chin raised, “As a lich, I do not suffer from said motion sickness. It’s a part of how I organize my senses through my body. These limiters give me a measure of resistance to portal sickness that many warpers lack.”

Torix coughed into a hand, “Though my distance abilities are low.”

Torix turned towards the crowd of gialgathens being warped from Elderfire, “Despite those very abilities, it will be difficult to manage everything given our now splintered operations.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Splintered, huh?”

Torix glanced at a warp-drive as it fired off, “The issue is in partitioning out our base of operations. As is, Lehesion assaulting Mt. Verner would decimate our guild. Therefore, the security of information is absolutely essential for our continued survival. I’ve issued basic mental screening along with a few technical checks that John Mcsmitty enacted. For now, it shall suffice.”

I scoffed, “Man, I can’t get over that guy’s name.”

Torix shrugged, “He works well for what we need him to do. I assume he’s the reason that several Empire scouts discovered Mt. Verner’s location. Regardless, he hasn’t harmed us yet, and we’ve allied ourselves closely with the Empire already.”

Torix winced, “As is, it’s only a matter of time before the Adairs uncover Mt. Verner’s location from the Empire. Our trading with the Emperor has already ceased due to their rebellions. Though they may not uncover our exact location, they shall uncover the planet we’re nestled on in time.”

My eyes widened, “That’s bad. Real bad.”

“Indeed. They may find us yet.”

I shook my head, “That’s not what I’m worried about. The issue is they might just blow us up completely. The earth that is. I mean, the Hybrids and espens haven’t evacuated Giess. If anything, they’ve expanded operations across the planet. That means they have confidence Giess won’t be glassed.”

Torix shrugged, “There’s little we can do here that haven’t already done. Glassed or not, our time here has already come to pass.”

“Yeah, but the thing is-” A loud set of flapping wings interrupted me, so I turned towards the desert skyline. Chrona and Krog flew up towards us. Torix lifted his hands to them,

“Ah, it is good to see our generals alive and well. I assume you’ve saved more gialgathens then?”

Chrona grinned, “We did. I saved fifty-six while Krog over here only saved forty-eight.” Chrona turned to the red and orange gialgathen, “Perhaps fighting in the Harbinger’s shadow has made you soft?”

Krog grumbled, “Your stasis is the only reason you saved more, and you know it.”

Chrona lifted her chin, “Ah, discounting earned skills, I see? I understand. Being humbled is a harrowing process.”

Krog frowned, "We've all been humbled."

Chrona grinned, "Some more than others."

I rolled my eyes, "Come on, guys. Let's focus."

They turned towards me. The gialgathens paused for a moment as if frozen before they jolted upright. Both of them met my eye, and their heart rate spiked. They both kept their composure, but some kind of invisible pressure left them on edge. I looked them over, and it popped in my head.

They were afraid.

I looked back and forth at them, "Uh, you guys okay?"

Chrona nodded, "Of-of course."

I scoffed, "Did a Hybrid pull your tongue out?"

Chrona shook the wave of fear off, "As if they'd ever catch me."

Krog peered at me with reverence, his eyes distant. He shook his head while staring down,

"In our long history, we've never seen a hero of such renown. Incredible."

Hero? Me? Pfff. I was a killer with a few good points.

I scratched the back of my head while looking away,

"Uh, thanks, I guess."

Blood rushed to my face, my face brightening red. Wait, my blood looked like silver, and my skin was gray. Maybe they didn't notice. Yeah, I'd just act like they didn't notice. Torix caught on, however, so he nudged me with an elbow,

“Ho, ho, it looks as though even the great Daniel Hillside can feel a measure of embarrassment.”

I glared at him, but he stood his ground. It felt good that he still acted as my equal. I turned towards the two gialgathens in front of me, each resting their wings,

“Guys, just treat me like you always have. Nothing has changed between us.”

Krog shook his head,

“That simply is not true. Lehesion carried us out of the dark ages. You have done more, carrying us out of extinction. For that, you've earned my gratitude.”

I blinked, “Uhm, I'm glad to hear it.” I waved a hand, “But, er, how is the transition towards Mt. Verner going?”

Chrona peered down, “Poorly.”

I raised an eyebrow, “How so?”

Chrona sighed, “We...are large creatures, and while your planet is lush with life, it is incomparable to Giess. We need large volumes of food, and I don't believe our kind can feast on the deer and cows nearby for much longer.”

“Why not just eat eldrich?”

Chrona's tail whipped behind her, “It is possible, though few dungeons carry edible animals. The issue is that Mt. Verner is not large enough for a population of several thousand gialgathens.”

Torix clapped his hands, “Perfect. We shall use each of you to establish a control zone in our city expansion plan.”

I raised my eyebrows, “City expansion, huh?”

Torix turned a palm to me, “Indeed. It involves opening several more bases, similar to Mt. Verner. They shall remain secret and controlled by trusted individuals I’ve carefully curated. They shall increase the guild’s income tremendously, and our reach will expand as well.”

I frowned, “I don’t know about that. Our guild is easy to defend since it’s all in one place. We also have a tightknit community that we can trust. Accepting everyone would mean our guild loses that elite feel it has.”

Torix nodded, “That is precisely why I’ve set up a specific protocol for joining, a ranking system of authority, and a reward system based upon merit. I intend to maintain a respectable organization but on a larger scale.”

Torix leaned towards me, “After all, we cannot fight an interplanetary rebellion unless we can fight on many planets. As is, our guild has struggled to maintain a battle on even one.”

I bit my lip before letting my hands flop against my sides, “Yeah, you’re right.”

Torix stood upright, “Thank you for listening to my reasoning. Now, I don’t know if you’re weary from your journeys, but perhaps you may assist with moving supplies towards Mt. Verner? You own by far the most dimensional storage space out of anyone in the guild, and your gravitation magic may help us as well.”

He coughed into a hand, “And you may also move goods that are...less legal in nature.”

I gave Torix a thumbs up, “Smuggling, you don’t say?” I turned towards Chrona and Krog, “It wouldn’t be my first time. We’ll definitely work something out as far as the food situation is concerned as well. I mean, I can make animals to eat like we did here.”

Chrona raised her eyebrows while sticking out her tongue,

“The creatures here...they lack taste.”

I shrugged, “When you can feed an army with your own mana, then you can complain. Until then, eat the magic tofu without whining.”

Chrona sighed, “Yes, sir.”

I waved an arm in a circle, “Alright, let’s move some gear.”

Torix pointed in the right direction, and I went to moving stuff. Most of it was necessary, though a bit of it was fluff. It was good the gialgathens were keeping their culture, though, and I wouldn’t want them to stifle themselves just to fit in. It was better they spread their wings and fly, both literally and metaphorically.

Those thoughts drifted through my mind as I picked up a massive haul of produce. Taking an absurd amount of goods, I shoved crate after crate into my dimensional storage without end. Millions of pounds later, I lifted more containers with gravity and moved towards the warp. As the ionization commenced, a mild, vinegary scent wafted in my nose, the air sterile. When the transport ended, I took a deep breath while looking around.

Yup. Things changed around here.

Chapter 263: An Adjustment

The most significant initial change was in the warping location. Though it was apparent why after thinking about it, we weren’t on the second floor of Mt. Verner anymore. I mean, gialgathens were big creatures, more massive than elephants. Getting them out of a mountain base would require the construction of tunnels specifically for the job.

Instead, the warp-drive resided in a gully along the side of the mountain. Nestled between two walls of dirt, a small community of handlers talked with gialgathens nearby. They found this gorge on the southern side of the bluff, facing towards Springfield. Water crashed through this chasm when it rained, preventing trees from ever taking root at its bottom.

Here soft grass covered the ground with shade from trees above. I peered up, finding an open sky with fluffy clouds and warm winds. Earth looked welcoming, the drudgery of Giess behind us. Turning my gaze down, I found the traditional stalls that Schema set up for core conversion and the like. Just beyond them, crates carried the goods of the gialgathens.

There the gialgathens conversed with humans who handled their living situation. Gialgathens would be covering the entire side of the mountain, given their need for open air and clear skies. That required some organization so they didn't end up collapsing the rock walls of Mt. Verner. Living in a hollowed mountain carried its risks after all.

I paced towards them, setting my stored goods beside the groups. After getting a few stares, I jumped up, the ground quaking beneath my feet. It rippled and burst, unable to withstand the forces put upon it. I lifted myself with gravity after, looking towards Mt. Verner.

Hundreds of gialgathens carved out homes here. Most of them preferred the middle of the mountain where it wasn't too cold nor too hot. Some of the Rivarians preferred the more frigid peaks, however, and a few even wanted to nestle along other ravines where moisture pooled. It depended on where we found them and what mirrored the geology of their birth.

Considering their natural vitality and tenacity, gialgathens needed little shelter from the elements or from animals. They kept their homes simple, carving out caves into the cliffsides. These resting places had three main aspects: a sunspot, a dark place, and a landing area. They sunbathed in the sunspots, slept in the dark spots, and, well, landed in the landing areas.

They spruced up their quarters with a variety of extra details despite those humble abodes. Most of them carved certain rocks to indicate the landing areas they wanted. Though unformed, several of the sculptures showed plenty of promise, the gialgathen's mastery of carving unmatched.

Well, besides for me, but that was a given.

Joking aside, the youngest of these giants adapted the quickest as most children do. Without skipping a beat, a few of the gialgathenic children played with the Eltari, Hod's native race. They slid and sliced through the skies, their forms mesmerizing to

watch. It was like watching eagles perform circus stunts, the children's acts of daring both ridiculous and impressive.

Not all gialgathens focused on domestic duties, however. A few prepared for war, several of them being outfitted with armor at a sort of station made for them. Along several rows of landing zones, our guild hand supply lines leading towards the mountain's side. Trucks carried massive plates of orichalcum for outfitting the beasts, giving them protection against the Hybrids.

These gialgathens carried the equivalent of saddles on their back to many of the monsters' chagrin. It was a necessary transition; we needed troops to ride on their backs. The gialgathens were too valuable as transport and aerial support, avoiding the legions of Hybrids that would smother the land below. Not only that, but the humans on their backs served as valued resources in their own right.

They usually carried an informational specialist along with a mind magician from Torix's program. This prevented Blighted Ones from overwhelming the gialgathen's defenses. Combine that with the added mana and combat prowess of people plus gialgathen, and the riding combo was worth pushing for.

Even if the gialgathens had a resistance to the whole riding thing, they needed to get past that, plain and simple. It wouldn't be the first adjustment for them, and it sure as hell wouldn't be the last. That was the price of survival and prosperity, and so far, the gialgathens seemed more than willing to pay it.

Either way, I didn't have any more time to check out how the gialgathens were adjusting. I floated back down towards the ground, several crate workers passing me. After walking through the warp-drive, I found the same desert jungle full of moving gialgathens. Passing through the sea of packages and luggage, I hoisted more gear up and moseyed on.

Rinse and repeat, I carried millions of pounds of gear each trip, speeding up our evacuation. Torix organized those here, and many of the soldiers said their goodbyes, both gialgathen and human. Even if Elderfire turned out to be a temporary residence, it was where they bled and shed tears.

Amidst the desert dunes, they rekindled hope and showed will. It wouldn't be forgotten soon, at the very least.

With the moving finished, I nestled my way back towards Mt. Verner. Torix and I already set up a meeting with the Emperor in just a few hours, so I rested for a few minutes. In my fancy apartment upstairs, I lounged on my bed while checking out my status. The numbers amazed me still.

The Living Multiverse(Lvl 15,000 | Current Influence: The Rise of Eden)

Strength – 45,650 | Constitution – 65,389 | Endurance – 135,833

Dexterity – 23,434 | Willpower – 95,137 | Intelligence – 51,447

Charisma – 17,220 | Luck – 26,300 | Perception – 18,636

Health: 149.6 Million/149.6 Million | Health Regen: 1.4 Billion/min or 24.1 Million/sec

Stamina: Infinite | Ambient Mana 3.586 Trillion

Mass: 8.2 Million Pounds(3.7 Million Kilos~)

Height: 15'8 (4.7 meters)

Damage Res – 99.16% | Dimensional Res – 100%

Phys Dam Bonus – 25.7 Million % | Damage Bonus – 40%

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

They were otherworldly. I nearly passed the 100k mark with my willpower, and my endurance was surely unmatched by now. All my other stats, from strength to my lowly charisma, were higher than most mains in those stats. If anything, these numbers meant little to me now. From a raw specs perspective, there's no way anyone could match me.

Well, unless they were getting help from an Old One, that is.

Those were the waters I tread into, and they went dark and deep. In many ways, I transcended eldritch now, at least any that I'd seen. Maybe Plazia-Ruhl would change my mind if we ever met, but for now, they weren't an issue. My problems stemmed from people above Schema's system.

That meant Lehesion, Old Ones, and maybe a few others drifting in the stars above.

If I wanted to take my power to the next level, I needed some unnatural, twisted skills and knowledge. I would need to expand into frontiers unreached, and even then, mastery of those new fields would be required. Unknown skills, forbidden cipher knowledge, and talking with Old Ones, that's what I would need to do after my class was made.

Talking with Old Ones was out of the question. It was just too damn risky. As far as the other options, time and effort would be required. I was in the long game now, and creativity would move me forward, not brute force. Either way, these gains from tearing Giess a new one were nice.

At this point, I needed a new legendary skill along with red dungeon cores. Blue dungeon cores would be helpful for future cities as well. Considering our newfound status as a galactic power, perhaps I could get a few more of those. I was nearly broke from buying red cores in the past, so buying a bunch of red dungeon cores was out of the question.

Tackling a few fringe worlds seemed like the right direction to take considering the sheer density of rifts. I could spend a few months on a planet, clear it out, then make my legendary skill after that. Of course, doing so was impossible at the moment, but it was a possibility worth considering for the future. As those thoughts tumbled in my mind, a gentle ring buzzed in my ears. It was time for the meeting with Obolis.

I flopped myself upright, pulling myself from my bed. Falling onto the ground like a dancer, I gravity welled my way through my room and Mt. Verner. I reached the third floor, our meeting room already full. As I stepped in, I found several people here, some virtually some not.

Krog and Chrona both appeared as screens from outside. They didn't fit in this space, and we hadn't renovated yet. Hod, Althea, and Torix stayed on one side of the table. On

the other, Kessiah, Amara, and Spear sat together. It was a strange hodgepodge of different species, but we made it work.

This was the backbone of our guild. These were the people my enemies would learn to fear.

I sat at the end of a smooth, metallic table, and we chatted about the war, how we were holding up, and personal victories. Torix managed his status and listened to Althea as she gushed about a few of her difficult kills. Hod gazed longingly at Amara as the eldritch and Spear eyed one another with disdain. Kessiah twirled a tiny sphere of blood over one of her fingers while leaning back in her chair, confident as ever.

The conversations ceased as a three-dimensional hologram appeared of Obolis. He stood in a knee-deep pool of orange blood, a Hybrid skull detached and in his hands. Around him, fires raged, bullets whizzed, and screams echoed. He turned around, inspecting everyone here,

“It is good to command your guild’s full attention. I won’t waste it.”

I nodded, “We won’t waste yours either. How are you holding up?”

He squashed the skull in his hand, the brains splattering about. Obolis smiled,

“As well as to be expected. I’m fighting here on my nephew’s world. Due to the many rebellions he failed to dispatch, he’s been...decommissioned as the ruler here. His brother Helios has also been demoted as well. His reduction in rank stemmed from his failure in fostering a relationship with your guild. It is sad, but they’ve both proven unworthy of the titles granted to them.”

He shook his head while staring down, “Time will tell if they regain that prestige once more...” He peered up, “How is your guild?”

I turned towards everybody, “I’m doing good. How about all you?”

Kessiah grinned, “I’m feeling good.”

Torix mumbled, “Yes. Doing swell.”

Amara hissed, “Worse with this gatekeeper here.”

Spear sighed, “I would not choose to stay here either if not for my commander. That is all.”

Obolis raised his eyebrows, “They’re quite lively. Excellent. We’ll need that vigor in battle here.” He turned to me, “I saw your bombardments of Giess’s cities. The burden of genocide lingers upon you, but so does the glow of victory. Know that you made a difference here with each passing city and marred wasteland you left behind.”

He gave me a small bow, “Brutal in its simplicity, it was remarkable.”

I raised my palms, “I threw rocks at cities. It wasn’t exactly complicated.”

Obolis smiled, “Genius is not found in creating complexity. It is found in making the complex simple. Now, I hate to brush away pleasantries, but we must organize quickly. Lives are lost with each passing second.”

I nodded, “Of course.”

The ancient Emperor hardened his gaze, “When can we expect your support?”

I stated, “Tomorrow.”

Torix gasped before sputtering, “W-w-what? Tomorrow? I...I...By Schema, if I wasn’t already dead, I’d die from overworking.” The lich flopped back in his chair, “Details shall be missed, but that deadline can be met.”

I looked the lich up and down, noting his drooping shoulders and dimmed eyes. The lich showed signs of exhaustion, even if they weren’t exactly normal. I noted that as Obolis raised a fist at us,

“We look forward to spilling blood with you. Of course, your kindness shall not be met without any form of reconciliation.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Like what?”

“I’ve sent Helios and his brother towards Mt. Verner. They shall act under your express command, Harbinger. Think of it as a gesture of goodwill and as an enabler of your destructive potential.”

I covered my mouth by crossing my fingers in front of it. My hands hid a smirk as I dwelled on Helios’s fall. From the ruler of worlds to a commander for an allied force, oh how the mighty had fallen. It was likely a direct punishment for how he treated us early on when we met on Giess. Either way, I didn’t hate the guy, and his warping abilities alone were invaluable for moving troops.

He better be expecting some portal sickness here soon, though.

“Thanks,” I said. “I was wondering if I could ask for something else while we’re already talking?”

The grizzled Albony raised an eyebrow, “Hmm, perhaps two previous owners of worlds aren’t enough?”

I scoffed, “They’re plenty, and thank you for the offer. We need competent people, and they fit the bill. I was actually hoping for one of your treasures before we committed troops.”

A sly look passed over Obolis, “Ah, you’re hungry for the elemental furnace then, correct? Given the nature of your cipheric inscriptions, I cannot blame you. They appear to siphon attributes into your frame, and that alone would bolster your abilities tremendously. Consider it done.”

I shook my head, “That wasn’t actually what I was hoping for, though I’ll take it if you’re willing to give it. I actually wanted the Obelisks you showed us with the software attached.”

I turned to Torix, “Our logistics team could use a break.”

Torix stood up straighter in his seat, a glint in his fiery eyes. Obolis laughed in his solemn, noble voice while resting a hand on his forehead. As he pulled it back, a smear of blood lingered on his face,

“Consider it done. They’ll arrive with Helios and his brother.”

Obolis clapped his hands, sending out a shockwave in the room he lingered in. He turned towards us,

“Message our logistical team when and where you wish to arrive. We shall be waiting.”

The meeting closed, and everybody took a breath. I turned to them, “You guys okay?”

Althea winced, “Even through a hologram, he’s scary.”

Kessiah blinked, “It’s like talking to an Overseer and then some.”

I didn’t notice pressure around him anymore, but maybe I was just used to talking to the guy. We continued the meeting for a little bit before finishing our discussions. With our plans organized, we stood up and went back to business. Althea and I exchanged a hug along with a light kiss before I walked out of the room.

Torix waited for me. He waved me over, Althea and I walking over. Turning to the lich, I smiled,

“What’s up?”

He walked up and gave me a hug, something I didn’t expect. I hugged the guy back before he grabbed my shoulders with his arms extended out,

“Daniel, I cannot thank you enough for the obelisks. They shall make a world of difference for me.”

I gave him a thumbs-up, “No problem. Elemental furnaces can wait. We need you rested for your plans to really work.”

The necromancer lowered his hands, “And so they shall. I’m off to find Helios and see if I can’t begin automating functions right away.”

Torix turned away before Althea gave him a light punch on the shoulder,

“Hey, don’t forget me.”

Torix scoffed, “Forgetting the unforgettable? Impossible.”

They hugged before the lich walked down the hallway. Right as Torix turned the corner, the lich raised his hands,

“Well, isn’t this a pleasant surprise? I see you brought company as well.”

A deep voice spoke out with disdain, “Is it truly pleasant?” Helios continued, “For me, I’d say not. On the other hand, you appear eager to see me, likely due to the obelisks. Take them and leave me be.”

Helios handed Torix a fancy obelisk, eyeing it with hunger,

“Ah, perfect.” He turned to Helios’s company, “We’ll handle introductions later as I simply must automate a few of my duties. My workload has been unbearable as of late you see.”

A lighter voice replied, “Think nothing of it, and I look forward to a proper meeting.”

The lich waltzed away with excitement. The ruler of worlds walked through the corner, another figure beside him of equal size and stature. Unlike Helios, this albony didn’t wear a cape with armor like the other high ranking albony I met. This guy wore fitted robes, desert wear that was folded in such a way that it wouldn’t fall off.

The new albony's demeanor matched his clothes. He walked with a skip in his step, peering around at our architecture. In a lighter voice, he nodded at the hallways,

"Huh, how quaint."

Pacing up to Althea and I, Helios and the new guy met my eye. Helios opened a hand towards this other albony,

"This is Florence, my brother. Please do avoid hating him. However, if you don't accomplish that goal, I wouldn't blame you."

Helios sighed, "As is obvious, how can I expect others to succeed where I have failed?"

Florence turned towards Helios, slapping his back, "Don't worry, brother. That wasn't the first thing I've seen you fail at. It surely won't be the last."

Florence turned to us and let me get a good look at the dude. He wore a black mask with six holes drilled in it, showing none of his face as usual. Unlike a normal albony, Florence didn't let his fur go wild. Instead, he kept it trimmed and kept, doing so with steel bands that bound his white hair.

Compared with Helios and the Emperor, this new guy looked stylish. His peppered fur was accentuated by flowing robes of white and black folded over him. He lacked any armor like Helios or the Emperor. In fact, Helios often glared with a low chin as if ready for a fight. Florence kept his chin high with a confident swagger that his brother lacked.

Florence inspected us, the large albony giving off a jovial and relaxed presence, though he didn't lack an imposing air despite that. Florence spread his arms towards us, peering between Althea and I,

"It's good to meet you both. I'm Florence Novas, and I've just been demoted from the ruler of a world to an assistant in an ally's army."

Helios winced as Florence placed his hands on my shoulders, "And I could not be happier. This will be far less boring than managing simple decisions and pushing

paperwork. Those tasks tire me, as they would many. Working under the Harbinger, however? Now that is interesting.”

Florence let go of my shoulders before nudging Helios,

“Wouldn’t you agree?”

Helios raised a flat palm to Florence, “Don’t inject me into your disobedient tangents. Unlike you, I actually labored for my position, so I valued my post. Losing it is a slap to the face, and being placed in an appointment beside you is like daggers between my ribs.”

Florence draped his arm over Helios’s shoulders, “Come now. Anyone could see that you despised the monotony of running a world as much as I did. If anything, Obolis chained us down as to stifle our growth. This, this is an opportunity to regain the ground we lost.”

Helios seethed, “Ever positive, aren’t you?”

Florence shook his brother, “Come on, we’re in the presence of a beautiful lady and greatness. Speaking of the lady, would you mind if I asked for your name, darling?”

Althea blushed, “Althea Tolstoy.”

“It is a pretty name suiting the pretty lady.” Florence gave my shoulder a firm, familiar pat,

“And you’re the big man himself, the Killer of Yawm and the Destroyer of the Blighted. I’ve been meaning to meet with you, but my position bogged me down. Now that I see you in person, you’re larger in life than even in the legends told about you.”

Florence gave me a small bow, “I look forward to following your command, Harbinger. May you take us to many worlds where we shall see many sights.”

I raised an eyebrow at the guy, kind of taken aback. For all the flack the Emperor and Helios gave this guy, he really commanded a room. He also carried an effortless,

natural charisma. Hell, he gave off the same sensation that an old friend would, and if it wasn't for my stats, I might've gotten caught up in his ambiance.

This made him valuable, so I took note while raising a hand to him,

“It's good to see you're excited. We'll be spilling blood together, so I'll need you to watch my back.”

For a split second, Florence stared at my hand with a moment of indecision. With a smooth gesture right after, he grabbed my hand as if he'd given a thousand handshakes before,

“You'll need to watch both our backs, though, I'm sure you're able. Now, is there anywhere to eat and drink here? I'd like to meet the people here if you wouldn't mind.”

I opened my status, “Send me a friend request, and I can give you the blueprints to this place. It will be a 3-D map of the area.”

Florence tilted his head, “Giving a map of your base to a stranger? Doesn't that seem... unwise?”

I smiled, “If we get attacked, assassins aren't what I'm worried about. Lehesion will crash through this place like a boulder through a glass window. Having blueprints won't change that.”

Florence raised his eyebrows, “Huh...Fair point. I'll keep them safe.”

I gave him a nod, “I'll need a report on what your skills are, along with maybe an interview or something. You seem more like the talking type than a fighter, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. We could use more talkers around here anyways.”

Florence stood taller, “Well...thank you.”

I turned to Helios, “How resistant are you to portal sickness?”

Helios scoffed, "I am all but immune."

I grinned, "That's good. I could've taken out more cities on Giess with your help then, but that's in the past. I'll be needing your help with our transport to the worlds your uncle will be giving us the word to go to."

Helios crossed his arms, "So I am now a glorified wagon. Excellent."

I shrugged, "If that's what you think, then that's fine. Do as you're commanded, and we'll get along just fine." I put a hand on his shoulder,

"You see, unlike some people, I don't feel the need to encase others in ice just to make a point. Either way, I'll definitely think of more for you to do. This is just a quick briefing for now."

Helios shrunk a bit, his shoulders sinking, "Then...then I shall find somewhere to rest until I am needed."

In a flash, he portalled elsewhere. Florence shook his head, "Gagh, he'll cheer up with time. He doesn't know it, but this is, in fact, an act of love by the Emperor."

Althea frowned, "How?"

Florence turned to meet her eye, "It was obvious to anyone who's known him, but he was not happy with ruling his worlds. Even if he believes those positions would give him happiness, that does not make it so; he is a fighter through and through. In time, he'll learn that."

I narrowed my eyes, "You seem to see through people pretty well."

Florence put his hands on his hips, "Does it seem that way? It was just a lucky guess I suppose."

Althea rolled her eyes, "Okay. Sure."

Florence coughed into a hand, “Ahem, now where is that feasting hall?”

I pointed down, “There are several places to check out, though I’d say they’re more like cafeterias or eateries.”

Florence shrugged, “It shall suffice. Both of you rest well and let us kill the blighted in droves.”

Florence turned and walked off, inspecting the nearby architecture as he did. Once he was gone, I turned to Althea, “So, what did you think of him?”

“He was a lot cooler than Helios, that’s for sure.”

I nodded, “Yeah, I think so too. I’m wondering how his worlds ended up rebelling? I mean, the guy seemed competent enough.”

Althea turned up to me, “Hm, we’ll learn eventually. For now, we’ve got a lot of business to take care of.”

I grabbed her by the hip, “Oh, definitely.”

Chapter 264: Family Problems

Stepping over a few scattered clothes, I left our room, Althea sleeping soundly in our sheets. I passed through Mt. Verner’s upper floor, the top floors delegated for only a few suites spread out by hallways. The people here settled down while night encompassed the day. Looking forward to a night of peace, I walked out of the hollowed mountain, stepping out into a waning skyline.

Finding several piles of craggy, dark metal, I snapped my fingers. The golems sprung to life, more animate than before. They still took a few seconds to fully form, but they didn’t mix and match pieces with each other anymore. They created rows that stood as a battalion of sorts, about one hundred strong.

It was an impressive sight. Hard work pays off after all.

Speaking of work, I got back to it, messing around with the cipher inscriptions at my disposal. In the corner of my eye, Florence's friend request came through. After accepting it, I sent him a map of Mt. Verner. I also asked for a talk at some point over the next few days. Settling in, two hours passed in the blink of an eye, my work consuming me as I weighed over a problem with the golem's targetting.

A blip from my status ripped me from my stream of work. It was from Florence. He wanted to go ahead on the talk, so I sent him my location. Fifteen minutes later, snapping twigs and crushing leaves let me know where he was. As he pushed a branch aside, he peered down at me,

"Hah, you enjoy working in solitude, I see. You and I are quite unlike each other in that regard."

I peered up, sitting on a flattened stone,

"This is...I don't know, like therapy for me? I love forests. Always have. I also like working with runes and carving. It keeps me at peace."

Florence tilted his head, "What? You're telling me that helps you focus? If anything, I'd end up depressed working out here." The styled albony flopped down in a cross-legged position,

"No offense."

"None taken." I stared down at my carvings, "You don't mind if I work while we talk?"

Florence raised an eyebrow, "Certainly not. I'll assume your using multi-consciousnesses right now. I was never a fan of them, but their utility in certain situations cannot be denied."

I frowned, "Maybe, but I don't actually know what a multi-consciousness is."

"Oh...How do I put this...they are fragments of your mind delegated to certain tasks. That lich was using them earlier, no doubt. That's the only way he could've handled that kind of workload. That and being a literal genius."

I made a mental note to look that up and do some research on it. I looked up at Florence, “Torix is damn good at working with numbers, hypotheticals, and magic. Since you’ll be working under me, I need to know your talents too so I won’t waste them. This is also an introduction. I’ll be relying on you after all.”

Florence’s black mask sheened from a fresh coat of wood stain,

“I as well...I’ve heard about you from your accomplishments and demeanor. Helios was impressed as well, and that means quite a bit. Obolis’s impression of you shines, however, and that’s means even more.”

“Well...that’s good to know.”

“Isn’t it though?” Florence leaned forward, “You know I’ve been seeking Obolis’s approval ever since I was just a cub. I still haven’t earned it. Within minutes of meeting you, Obolis was sold on your bearing. Earning either of those two’s respect is hard, almost impossible even. I don’t know how you did it.”

I raised an eyebrow, “I’m guessing you’ve tried?”

“Schema knows I have. I remember when I was a child, we were doing a dungeon clearing exercise. It was a simple sort of task, the kind that teaches teamwork and risk management. I led a group of misfits to second place, clearing the dungeon in record speed.”

“You broke the record but still took second?”

Florence winced, “Yes. Helios abandoned his group and outpaced us, setting an even better record by himself.” Florence stared off into the distance, “That’s how it goes when you live in someone’s shadow. You can stand as tall as you like, but when you’re in the wake of a mountain, you end up lost in a sea of darkness.”

I frowned, my grimoire in hand,

“Sounds rough. That’s the first time I’ve heard about school exercises like that though.”

“What? Your race doesn’t educate its cubs?”

“Eh, I was born before Schema’s systemization. I lived the majority of my life without any influence from screens and the eldritch. If anything, I came from a very primitive time.”

“Ah, that explains it. It’s easy to forget given your position...Wait. how old are you?”

I frowned since I hadn’t thought about my age for a long time. For the most part, time blurred together since I didn’t need to sleep. I blinked, counting up the months since the systemization. If I included the time I spent in dungeons and rifts where time was stretched, then I was...Damn, I didn’t know.

I scratched the side of my head, “Hmm, maybe 22? 25? I really need to start keeping track in all honesty.”

“How long are the years on your planet?”

“They’re 365 days, so decently long.”

Florence opened his status, doing a few conversions using tables of his home world’s time. Schema could convert most computations, but some numbers required perspective that couldn’t be handled by an algorithm.

Florence leaned back when he finished,

“I’m...older than you are. I’m 33 on your world.”

“Damn. Good job living that long. You’re obviously doing something right.”

Florence blinked, “By Schema...Here I thought Helios was impressive. He’s a mere child compared to you.”

I shrugged, “I got lucky.”

Florence grinned, “Hah, so did I and so was he. We were born into positions in an established family. I was also given an excellent rank and title due to my talents, though I personally doubt what others see in me. Tell me, how were you gifted?”

“I spawned in a dungeon when the system started, so I ended up ahead of the leveling curve.”

Florence froze in place, his hairs standing on end.

“You...you were spawned into a dungeon? From pre-Schema to post-Schema...in a dungeon...That’s ridiculous.”

I looked back and forth, “Yeah, I know. It gave me a huge leg up in levels.” I banged my thigh, the metal ringing, “It’s how I got this armor too...Though, now it’s my skin. Either way, it put me ahead in a big way.”

Florence pointed at me, “I could count the number of souls who’d survive a dungeon like that on a single hand, and Obolis is one of them.”

I met his eye, “You’d be surprised what you’d be willing to do to survive. You have more in you than you’d think. I know I did.”

Staring at me as if I said something profound, Florence nodded in silence. A moment passed before Florence scratched the back of his head,

“Your people, they’re interesting. I didn’t know what to expect given the nature of this assignment, but they are a simple, industrious people. Perhaps a bit uncultured, but what can you expect from a planet that isn’t even a decade into systemization.”

I frowned, “Uncultured? What do you mean?”

Florence leaned back with his palms raised,

“I don’t mean that as an insult. I’m merely stating a fact. There are certain customs that are expected when speaking with others, at least in galactic terms. Each world is different in how they speak, even the different regions of a world, but there is a general, overarching galactic standard that is expected from most everyone.”

Florence leaned back against a tree, “The humans I spoke with, charming in their own right, but they didn’t know that galactic standard. It’s offputting to snootier races, though I welcome the change.”

“Hm...That’s useful to know. What’s the galactic standard?”

Florence shrugged, “If I’m honest, you’re well past the point of needing to know it. Your gruff, direct speaking suits you better, and your position means no one will question it. They need you, so you can be at ease regarding politeness.”

I etched into the metal in my hand with a pointed finger, slithers of silver falling onto the ground,

“I didn’t plan on following the code either way, but I was curious about it.”

Florence tilted his head, “The most standard approaches involve a beginning sentiment for Schema, such as, ‘For Schema.’ You would then push your hands together and bow like this.”

Florence made a fist with his right hand and pressed it with an open palm. He leaned towards me for a split second before relaxing.

I rolled me eyes, “I don’t really do much for Schema. I’ve found he tends to give you just enough to keep you going.”

Florence frowned under his mask, “I don’t make the rules, that’s just what most large businesses will do before meetings. Afterward, they often resort to the same goodbye gesture. During the meetings, oftentimes self-interest will be disguised as thinking of Schema as well. This creates a hidden sub context to many conversations.”

Florence waved his hands, “Imagine it like this.” He coughed into his hand, making his voice deeper, “This is business person one. Hello, business person two.”

Florence talked in his normal voice, “It’s good to see you, business person one.” He bowed with his hand gesture, “May this be a productive meeting for Schema.”

He spoke in the deeper voice, “For Schema. Now, our business is involved in mining within dungeons. Your mercenary company is excellent, but your prices are simply too steep. Perhaps lowering them would allow us to mine more resources at once, furthering Schema’s aims.”

Florence turned, immersing himself in his imaginary conversation, “Perhaps, but our mercenaries are excellent for a reason; they are paid well. If we reduce their pay, then worse guards will be hired as a result. These failures will result in missing mining groups, and that wouldn’t help Schema, would it?”

Despite being put on the spot, his example gave me a clear, pristine picture of how those kinds of conversations were held. I noted that as Florence turned towards me,

“That was a very...simplified version of what you might hear. That’s just a few of the general customs, however. There are also methods for defining relations with other groups, general attire standards, and acknowledging compromises.”

“Man, fuck. That all sounds painful. Why not just speak directly?”

“It’s just how the customs developed around Schema’s universe.”

I shook my head, “Why haven’t I seen these customs before?”

Florence stared up, tapping his chin with a knuckle, “Hmm, you likely haven’t made contact with any businesses. Your guild deals in blood and the shedding of it. That brings political leaders who understand your position. You also tend to sweep away with those pleasantries by getting straight to the point. ‘Why acknowledge social customs with a backwater savage?’ is what they’re thinking.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Huh. Let them think that then. It’s better than kissing Schema’s ass every three seconds.”

“It’s a choice, that much is certain.”

I pointed at Florence with a sharpened fingertip, “You also mentioned educational programs. We have those under Torix, but it’d be nice to hear about someone else’s courses.”

Florence sighed, “I was never a particularly good student, so I gained very little from the formal education programs we used. For the most part, they involved leveling standards, gaining certain generic perk requirements, learning about common dungeon setups, etcetera. I found that actually clearing dungeons was a far better teacher, but it is undeniably more dangerous.”

Florence stared at my grimoire, “Compiling a grimoire with certain spells was also a part of our programs.”

I lifted the book with a sly grin, “You won’t find these runes in a classroom though.”

“Certainly. Those are the same archaic runes that Obolis tinkers with. They’re powerful but dangerous. One of my cousins was gifted in those runes, and he created a spell that would give him a better handling of primordial mana.”

Florence stared into an abyss, “In the end, his entire soul was siphoned into the spell, and nothing was left but a zombied, umbral husk that cracked like charred paper at the slightest touch.”

I shook my head, “He sounds like he didn’t actually understand the cipher. It’s much better to use these runes to fully realize a subject you already understand, not try and further your understanding of something you don’t. That’s like trying to learn about explosives by mixing chemicals in your hands.”

Florence nodded, “It is and was a recipe for disaster. Obolis said the same, but the old buzzard respected his ambition nonetheless. I would kill for the same sentiment.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Then why haven’t you?”

An awkward silence passed as Florence’s face deadpanned. Florence swallowed before wrestling with his words,

“Huh, you do get straight to the point. Well...Hm...I suppose it’s that I’m lazy. It isn’t as if I enjoyed what I’ve been doing, the whole ruling worlds thing. It’s a very dry, administrative duty. It’s something that suits Helios’s talents, though not his disposition. I, however?”

Florence pinched the bridge of his nose, “I was always someone who enjoyed parties and the like. Sitting in a room and reviewing an endless list of decisions made by other people...It’s exhausting, and I couldn’t take it”

He coughed into a hand, “So...I escaped my responsibilities however I could.”

I narrowed my eyes, and I wanted to ask the guy if he’d run from what I’d ask him to do too. Before saying that, I remembered how I felt when I was forced to kill Yawm or wipe out Giess’s cities. The more I thought about it, the more sense it made that he ran away. After all, responsibility was a hard thing to shoulder, and ruling a world definitely sounded like a chore.

I reserved judgment as Florence pointed at me,

“You must think I’m weak. I understand why, but please, try to understand my position. I failed my exams, yet Obolis threw me into an internship for ruling. I failed the goals of my internship, yet he appointed me as the controller of Belegara. I failed the standard productivity protocols for the planet, yet he still demanded I do it.”

I leaned back. I opened a can of worms bringing this up. Florence dragged his hands across his face,

“It’s obvious I don’t want to do it, but I still am dragged into authority each and every time I fall. Obolis, he means a lot to me, but I am not the person he wants me to be. I wish I was, but I’m not.”

I kept working as he paused. I stirred something up that he obviously wanted to talk about, so I just let the guy vent for now. After channeling some mana into my grimoire, I floated a few glowing cipher inscriptions onto a new golem I constructed earlier. Florence gazed on in awe, his earlier turmoil fading,

“I’ve never seen someone use runes like that. It’s strange yet stunning.”

I scratched the side of my head, “Honestly, this is me trying to compensate for how these golems are about as smart as cloth. I’m trying to get them further along, but they learn so damn slowly. It’s a refreshing challenge since it’s different then what I’m used to doing, but yeah, emphasis on challenge.”

Florence narrowed his eyes, “What are they for?”

“To walk through dungeons and clear them out for people. They’re not ready, not by a long shot, but they have the potential.”

Florence blinked, dumbfounded by what I said. He tilted his head, “What material did you make them out of? You do know that certain eldritch eat dark iron, right?”

I grabbed a piece of my forearm before tearing the skin off. As I did, Florence gazed on in horror. He fumbled backward as I lifted the metal with a gravity well before melting it. I turned to him as my skin wobbled in a glowing orb,

“They can’t eat this. This can eat them though.”

Florence gawked between me and the orb, his eyes growing distant. He stood up, walking over to me,

“You’re supposed to be a soft, backwater savage, but here you are-“

I pushed him back with a telekinetic wave while moving the glowing metal away from him. He stood his ground, his feet dragging through the grass and stones. I tilted my head towards the orb,

“Sorry about the shove, but you’d have ignited if you got any closer. I didn’t want your clothes to catch fire.”

Florence’s jaw went slack as he let out a nervous chuckle. The cackle kept going until it evolved into a heralding, deep laughter. He laughed until he was letting out tears, something about the situation just absurdly funny to the guy.

It was my turn to gawk at him.

“Uh, you ok?”

Florence wiped away a tear from his eye, “You know, you have a way of making my problems seem so small.”

I shook my head with disgust, “Fuck. Was it that obvious what I was thinking?”

“It, in fact, wasn’t. I was talking more about what you worry about. You’re over here thinking about how to end the eldritch or stop me from catching on fire. I’m wallowing over some petty, personal struggle. It’s like I broke a fingernail, and I’m complaining about it to someone who’s starving to death.”

I tapped the orb of metal beside me with a finger, making the sphere wobble above my hand,

“Eh, problems are relative. If you think about it, my problems don’t even revolve around me. I’ll never have to worry about eldritch again, and you catching fire doesn’t mean I’m in any danger. If anything, I have so few problems that I’m trying to make some for myself.”

I turned to Florence, “At least your problems are your own. You have people that expect the world from you. Besides-”

I stared at a golem,

“Sometimes, it’s easier to defy expectations rather than meet them.”

Florence crossed his arms, “You’d be Obolis’s favorite nephew. Of that, I have no doubt.”

“Maybe.”

“Where’s your doubt coming from?”

I reshaped the glowing orb into the middle section of a golem using gravitation. Wielding a burst of quintessent energy, I flash froze the metal. It screeched before flopping onto the ground. It cracked earth and crushed stone as I said,

“Obolis and I would have butted heads all the time. Besides, I wasn’t doing well with my formal education either. At least not when the system arrived. If anything, I was a lot like you.”

“We shall agree to disagree.” He brushed himself off, “I hope you’ve learned what you needed to know. If you’d allow, I’d like to return to my new quarters to rest. This was a fascinating conversation, but we have quite a bit to do tomorrow. I’d like to tackle it with a clear, well rested mind.”

I nodded, “Sure thing. I’ll try and think up what you’ll be doing in the meantime.”

Florence gave me a slight bow, pressing a fist against his palm,

“As always, for Schema.”

I laughed at his sarcasm as he walked off. Turning back to my work, I thought up what he’d be handling during our campaign. The fact he withstood my gravitational shove showed he had some combat chops, though that wasn’t exactly a rigorous test.

At the same time, he seemed better at ambassador style work. Given his connections and reputation as royalty, that seemed the better place to put him. He also understood far more about how galactic connections formed and operated. That information was something my guild lacked outside of maybe Torix, and even then, our lich worked more on hearsay than experience.

Florence lived the kind of politics our guild needed to succeed in. He also took a lot of stress off of me. Even if I was someone who could get a lot done, I wasn’t good at making friends with most politicians. I could make friends with other fighters like me, but that just wasn’t the same. It was an arena I’d never fought in, but Florence had.

The other useful quality Florence owned was his natural sociability. He talked with people in our guild like it was nothing. Anytime I tried that, people were overwhelmed, turning into yesmen in an instant. Florence disarmed people despite his presence, and that was invaluable. It let us get an honest, unguarded opinion of what was going on.

Dwelling on those facts, I thought up a new position for Florence in our guild – the peacemaker. It was a simple title, but it would involve understanding our guild, their problems, and acting on them. I'd have him scout out our guild's positions, understand what was going on, then talk with Torix and me about it. Outside of that, he'd handle negotiations with other guilds, and I would be there with him to get a grip on how they're handled.

I drafted up a set of duties for the guy before moving onto Helios. As much as he knew about management and overseeing a territory, a position like that wasted his talents. Trusting in Florence's judgment, I'd have Helios act as a sort of assistant for me. He'd warp me around with Spear helping out, and Helios could offer valuable advice at times. If I ever got into a fight, he'd act as potent support as well, his void ice and warping abilities useful against most opponents.

Given his reputation, he likely owned other abilities I could use as well. For now, I didn't know them, so I'd delegate the best I could with what I knew. As I got more info, I'd adjust.

After finishing up those tasks, I sent them both messages to meet me in the morning. I peered around right after, the mask of darkness draped over the trees around me. Standing near my side, several golems glowed in the darkness, quintessent mana piercing out of the gloom. I tapped the side of my cheek, thinking of ways to improve them.

It would be another long night of trying new methods. I grinned at the prospect, enjoying the new experiment. Those hours passed in a peace I cherished. I spent so long in a different world with odd creatures, sights, smells, tastes, customs, cultures, and geography. It was alien and unfamiliar, like an assault on my senses at all times.

Earth was a cozy, homely place by comparison, and after spending so long away from it, I missed my homeworld. No eldritch roamed near Mt. Verner, our guild locking down nearby dungeons long ago. No silvers established spire forests that loomed on our horizons. Hell, we didn't even have fancy guilds vying for dominance.

Not yet at least.

This let us enjoy prosperity that few people had, and my visit to Giess drove that fact home. I wanted to keep Earth like this, safe from prying eyes and greedy fingers. Considering our world lock would be ending soon, that dream wouldn't remain a reality for long. At least if I didn't do anything about it.

To my understanding, guilds rushed in the moment a world opened up for expansion. They cleared dungeons, subjugated the population, and ruled over their newfound territories with iron fists. The only way to stop that was to establish cities first.

Doing so opened up our guild for attacks, however. If we opened up dozens of branches, it would be a signal flare for the Adair's. Considering what I did on Giess, they might even destroy the entire planet with Lehesion. At the very least, I couldn't guarantee any of our guild branch's safety.

If I left Earth to incoming guilds, however, I would be throwing my homeworld to bloodthirsty wolves. I couldn't iron out an exact solution, so I tucked away my concerns for the night. Rome wasn't built in a day, and I sure as hell wouldn't be building something bigger than Rome overnight.

So, I immersed myself in my golem's construction, having about a battalion's worth ready at my command. I made rounds to several nearby dungeons, and several of the golems I left in them actually kept the eldritch at bay. Of course, they needed simple enemies.

After having experimented for a while, that's what I found the golems best at. They couldn't clear out a dungeon, but they could keep them clear. It wasn't ideal, but it wasn't a bad result either.

With that in mind, I made a few plans to have a meeting with our dungeon clearing community in the morning. A few leaders showed up in the field, so meeting them wasn't a waste of time regardless considering they ironed out the dungeons here. Having my golems take the workload off them would be a massive utility as well. It would be something our guild took credit for, giving us a leg up in establishing more territory.

If I made enough golems, we might even be able to take some cities far from here, maybe even in another state.

These thoughts drifted in my mind as I worked, almost like a pleasant daydream of what could be. After finishing a dozen more golems, the sunrose in the distance, light leaking through tree branches. I took a deep breath, preparing to leave this sort of sanctuary I made for myself. I rolled my shoulders, willing my golems to hibernate here. They fell into piles of dark metal, a patch of the mountain smothered in them.

Returning to our inner base, I met at the crack of dawn with several leaders of our dungeon clearing programs. We organized ourselves on the third floor, near a combat training center for Torix's students. Sitting on a wooden table, three grizzled veterans met my eye.

The first was an older woman named Isa Bennet. She carried scars over her face, and her leather gear matched her peppered hair, old but not out of date. Beside her, a brawny man named Lester leaned towards me, his attention rapt. He had a darker complexion, and despite his size, he lacked any real wounds. In the back, a smaller framed mage eyed me from underneath a robe littered with runes.

His name was Bryan, and he was a man in his mid-fifties with an awesome beard. It was truly majestic. Cool beards aside, I walked in with the three of them waiting on me. I stayed standing with my weight supported by antigravity wells, no one else the wiser.

Isa stared with thinly veiled reverence, "Hello guild leader. You mentioned something urgent for us. We're here to listen to whatever you have to say."

The others nodded. I spread out my hands,

"I've been creating golems that can keep dungeons cleared after someone's reset the eldritch there. I wanted you guys to try and place them in some of the easier dungeons nearby so that you can focus on the more difficult rifts."

Bryan narrowed his eyelids,

"Hmmm, I don't want to doubt you, but we've tried making golems before. They always fail since eldritch can adapt to them quickly. For instance, if you make a stone golem, it won't be long before stone-eaters are spawning in the dungeon."

I shook my head, “I’ve made these golems out of a substance that can actually eat eldritch. You won’t have to worry about them spiraling out of control once a golem’s been put in place. Trust me on that.”

Lester tapped his chin, “No offense, but that sounds too good to be true. Coming from you, it seems more possible.”

I weighed my hands back and forth, “Eh, the golems aren’t perfect, don’t get me wrong. They’ll need weekly checkups from someone competent, but that’s a much lower workload than clearing the dungeons once a month. I only have a few of them that work as well, so think of this as a test run.”

Isa frowned, her scars wrinkling, “We use the simpler dungeons to teach new recruits and train our soldiers. Losing them would be losing out on a valuable resource.”

I raised an eyebrow, “But you can keep a few of those dungeons nearby for those training exercises. This is more so for maintaining larger areas of control.” I looked at each of them, “After all, we aren’t going to be staying near Mt. Verner forever. I want to expand the guild and to do that, we need cities.”

I turned a palm to them, “To make cities, we need dungeons cleared, and given our resources, this could let us make that happen much quicker.”

Lester kept his chin down, “What if an intelligent eldritch is in the same dungeon as one of these golems? Could they maybe learn to control it and use it against us?”

I nodded, “Yes. That’s a real risk, and that’s why I mentioned weekly checkups along with careful placement. We don’t just want these golems being put just anywhere. Freshly cleared dungeons would be preferred. They could kill off anything as it spawned then.”

Bryan turned to the rift managers, “I’m convinced. I think this is a good idea. We stress our resources every day keeping this area clean. This could let us go out and help a few of the nearby settlements. We could help a lot of people while gaining some much-needed ground.”

Bryan shrugged, “We are lacking iron and a few other resources here...I think it’s worth a shot.”

Isa and Lester thought it over while I waited with patience. After a few minutes of discussion, Isa gave me a begrudging smile,

“You make a hard sell. We’ll do what we can with the golems you give us.”

I grinned back, reaching out a hand, “Hell yeah. Let me know what you guys think and I’ll be back with you all later.”

She grabbed my hand, hers small in mine yet firm. I turned to the others, “Oh, Bryan, your runic markings are pretty good. I think tightening up a few of your forms would take your work to the next level though.”

Bryan peered at his cloak, then back to me, “I...is that the difference between our markings?”

I didn’t want to tell random people about the cipher, so I lied,

“Uh...yeah, pretty much.”

Bryan lifted a finger, “I’ll go try that out while it’s fresh on my mind.”

I raised my hand, “Alright then. Let me know how the golems work out later. You’re all dismissed.”

I walked out, closing a door behind me. As I did, the three of them took a deep breath. Lester spoke out,

“I thought he was going to talk to us about our extermination standards. Thank god that’s not the case.”

Isa gasped, “Tell me about it. I just about collapsed when he walked in.”

Stepping out of earshot, I appreciated each of them putting in an effort to act ‘normal’ around me. Even if they didn’t know how good my hearing was. That meeting

managed, I gave them the location of my golem crafting along with which golems to take.

One meeting handled, I moved onto the next one via my messages to both Helios and Florence. I waited for each of them in the open library at the third floor's entrance. Here Torix's academy educated the masses, and we gave our people the ability to fight against eldritch and Adair alike.

I sat near students and scholars, though no one dared share my table with me. They stole glances while they thought I wasn't looking, and they whispered with hushed voices,

"What is the guild leader doing here?"

"Have you been watching his streams? He destroyed Giess singlehandedly."

"He's terrifying."

They were right, and I sometimes scared myself. Either way, a minute or two passed while I soaked in the smell of old paper and aged wood. Coming in first, a portal appeared nearby, and Helios stepped out of it while peering around. He found me, and walked over with his cape hanging behind him. As he came over, I stood,

"How did you sleep?"

Helios peered at the library's books, "As well as was expected. I was surprised to see that your guild made a bed with the right dimensions. Many worlds forget that detail for higher leveled individuals."

Helios turned to me, "It shows a measure of care I did not expect from your homeworld."

"I'm guessing they must have used the same size they do for me."

"Then that explains why the bed was too large." Helios peered up at me, "Though your size seems to vary often since I've known you."

“What can I say, I’m leveling fast?” I said. I lifted a hand to Helios, “I’ll be doing more of that today with Obolis, wherever he’ll recommend we go.”

Helios tilted his head, “Indeed. We could use a brute of your stature considering what we’re faced with.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Yeah, if that’s how you want to frame it, sure. Either way, I’ve decided what you’ll be doing here.”

Helios showed no signs of nervousness with his body language, outside of an inaudible gulp. Well, inaudible to most. I raised a hand,

“You’re good at fighting, and you like it. You also have a lot of experience with what goes on in the galaxy. I want you to be my advisor, along with helping me and my allies move around with your portalling abilities.”

He leaned back, “Of all things, you would ask for my counsel? Strange.”

“Uh, yeah I would. You ruled a world and have an education from a Schema ruled world’s perspective. I don’t. I’ll need someone’s advice, and even though I respect Torix, he was kind of a recluse. You’re someone who’s been out and about, and that’s something I lack.”

Helios paused, giving his new responsibilities some thought. He scoffed from under his mask, “This is a far higher position than I expected. I must say, I’m pleasantly surprised.”

I gave him a pat on the shoulder, “Just remember, I fight where others won’t. You’ll be helping me get there, meaning you’ll be going to those same hellholes. Try to have fun along the way.”

Helios murmured, “I...I shall attempt to do so.”

Interrupting our conversation, one of the elevators at the center of Mt. Verner opened, and a boisterous group of welders walked out. I could tell by the smell they carried. Among a few of them, Florence sauntered out while finishing a story,

“And she slapped me so hard my mask flew off.”

The group laughed while Florence looked around,

“In all honesty, I deserved it.”

He found us, the styled albony strutting over. As he did, Helios sighed. I grinned,

“You’re already making friends, huh?”

Florence nodded while waving at the workers, “They’re more open to other species than most. I appreciate that, and it makes this place feel more like a home because of it.” He turned to Helios,

“How goes it, brother?”

Helios raised his eyebrows, his disheveled fur ruffling,

“Worse now. You’re late.”

Florence let his hands flop against his sides, “Eh, there’s not much I can do about that now. Anyways, what is it that you need this bright and early in the morning, leader?”

I raised a hand, “I wanted to let you both know what you’d be doing here, and I preferred telling you in person so that we could talk it out if you disagree.”

Helios sighed, “It is not our place to argue with those stationed above us.”

Florence nudged his brother, “Come now, he’s given us the opportunity, so we should take it... Though there isn’t much to argue with yet. What will you have us do?”

I met Florence's eye, "You'll be an ambassador and peacekeeper for my guild. You know how to get cozy with people. That's good. Personally, I struggle with it, and that means I don't really know where the average guild person is at."

I pointed at Florence, "That's where you come in. You'll be responsible for keeping tabs on the branches of the guild, getting to know everyone, and letting Torix and I learn what you know."

Florence put his hands on his hips, "Is that all?"

"You'll also be our ambassador for meetings with other guilds. I don't know fair trade deal values or how to make nice with politicians. You look like you have some experience there. I'll have you advise me when making those deals."

Helios crossed his arms, "Would you mind if I 'advised' you already?"

I frowned, "Sure."

"This is a foolish idea. Florence understands nothing of galactic rates or how to maintain alliances with other nations. His lack of order led to the fall of Blegara, and now we'll be going to clean up his mess."

Florence shrugged, "Blegara never wanted to follow the Empire. The people there are headstrong and iron-willed. You would know that if you'd ever talked to them for more than just telling them what to do and when to do it."

Helios glared, "And it was in your hands to crush their iron wills, yet you failed to do so. Your failure is the reason this rebellion lives on, and it is the reason our soldiers die because of it."

Florence shook his head, "If you believe that Belka is any different, you're lying to yourself. They hate us just as all the other planets under the Empire's control do. The way we rule, it can only last so long."

I looked between them, “Stop bickering. We don’t have time for it. Do either of you disagree with what I’m asking you to do?”

Helios turned to me, “No.”

Florence nodded at me, “Of course not.”

I put my hands on their shoulders, “Alright then. Say, you both seem to have a competition of sorts with each other. It’s a friendly rivalry. How about this – whichever one of you does your job better gets to be the other one’s boss until you’re both not under me anymore.”

I turned my palms to each of them, “How’s that sound?”

Helios let out a long, deep laugh. He lifted his chin into the air, staring down at his brother,

“What about it then? I do enjoy a friendly competition.”

Man, they really let their ego get in the way of their work. Florence turned to me then back to Helios. Florence tapped his sides with his hands, fidgeting around before he squeezed his hands to fists,

“That...That sounds good to me. I’d enjoy giving you a good ass-kicking after all these years.”

Helios gave him a slow nod, “Oh, I’m certain you shall.” Helios tilted his head to me, “Then it’s settled.”

I gave them a thumbs-up, “Alright, you both get to decide what happens to the other after a few months. Torix and I will decide who did the best job overall. Go ahead and get to it.”

Florence turned, walking away with renewed vigor. He stepped into one of the elevators before giving me a salute, “Of course, sir.”

As the doors closed, Helios snickered, “Hah, he honestly believes he has a chance to defeat me? Interesting, but foolish.”

The elevator doors opened before Florence walked back over to us. He coughed into a hand, “Ahem...So, how would I go about doing what you asked me to do?”

Helios let out another derisive laugh before I tapped my chin,

“In all honesty, I don’t know. If I were you though, I would present it like a question to myself. ‘Daniel wants me to learn the guild’s ins and outs, and he wants me to manage the guild’s galactic relations. What’s the best way of doing that?’ That’s how I’d handle it.”

Florence snapped his fingers, “Then that’s what I’ll do. Thanks for the advice.”

He sauntered off, getting to work right away. Helios narrowed his eyes underneath his mask,

“You’re more clever than you first appear.”

I shrugged, “I’m just taking things as they come. Anyways, I wanted to run a few things by you. You know, as my advisor.”

Helios raised his eyebrows, “Hm. Speak of your concerns. I’ll listen to them.”

“So, I’ve been thinking of using educated golems made of my own melted skin to guard dungeons and rifts nearby. Does that sound like a good plan to you?”

Helios stood there, frozen in place like a statue. A prolonged, awkward pause passed over us before the ruler of worlds shook his head,

“I...I misheard you. Say that again?”

“I made golems out of my metal skin and trained them to guard dungeons. Is that a good idea or not?”

Helios stayed very still, contemplating what I said. He lifted his hands with a slow rise before resting his masked face in his palms. He groaned,

“This...This will be more difficult than I first envisioned.”

Chapter 265: The Next Step

I waved off his concerns, “Come on now, I need some advice here.”

Helios let his hands flop against his sides,

“As strange as it may first appear, I have never created golems out of my own skin. Therefore, it’s difficult for me to offer counsel in that regard.”

I tsked, “Well...damn, here I was hoping for some solid advice.”

Helios glared from under his mask, “I am so sorry that I am not of more use. Do excuse me.”

“You know I’m joking, right? Lighten up.”

Helios frowned, “I understand the sentiment. I’d prefer we keep our relationship purely professional, however.”

I rolled my eyes, “Of course you do.” I raised a hand, “Seriously though, I do need some colonization advice.”

Helios lifted his chin,

“Ah, colonization. We refer to the task as ‘conquering’ in the Empire, though you may use a gentler word if you prefer. What do you need to know about it?”

“I’m planning on expanding my guild. I want to know what’s the best way of doing it.”

“It is a simple thing. Enter someone’s domain, restrict access to their dungeons, through force if necessary. Once control is established, clear the rifts for a time, and then establish a city on Schema’s authority. Once established, you may control the populace’s access to their rifts, creating an absolute dominance.”

Helios stared off in the distance,

“If you’re efficient, cities can be established in days rather than weeks. Obolis expanded the Empire from the capital, Olstatia, in a matter of hours. He’s a unique case, however. You can expect to create four to five cities a week. Given how effective you are at clearing dungeons, you might match his pace should you show the same ambition.”

I frowned, “I don’t imagine people would enjoy that method of taking over.”

Helios nodded, “And what weaklings want is irrelevant. They are the subjugated. As such, they shall carry the burden of their weakness, in one way or the other.”

“So, you’re recommending I become a tyrant?”

“Understand this, Harbinger. Your strength is just as much a curse as a commoner’s weakness is. Perhaps you believe that I look down on commoners for their lack of potency. Your misunderstanding is understandable but misplaced. I do not look down upon them; In many respects, I envy them.”

Helios raised a hand, “They never need to think of all that we worry of. They must simply execute their plain labors on a day to day basis without a thought in the world. We are given control of them, which is a privilege, but we are also tasked with their prosperity.”

Helios squeezed his hand into a fist, “This is the mantle of those gifted with power in Schema’s universe. Your success is measured by the success of those under you. As such, the weak reflect the competence of those over them. Their prosperity is your achievement in that respect.”

I narrowed my eyes, “Why not just let people do what they want?”

Helios met my eye, his face hidden under his mask,

“Then they shall organize rebellions that result in the mass murder of millions. You shall understand when we arrive at Blegara. It shall demonstrate the failings of my brother, along with the consequences of freedom.”

I didn’t agree with him, but I wasn’t here to argue philosophy with the guy.

“Speaking of Blegara, when are we going there?”

Helios let his hand down under his cape, “As soon as we are able. It is dependent upon you and your guild.”

I grinned, “Alright then, let’s get going.”

We walked through the guild, heading towards Torix’s quarters. He made his new lair on the third floor, his haven found in the walls of his university. Helios and I met Torix leaning over in a room covered in monitors. Between them, tutorials on programming your own obelisk played in the background. Torix watched several of them while working on his own convoluted set of code.

He peered up at us as we walked in through a sliding doorway powered by personal mana. It was tech from Giess, though altered a bit. Torix raised his hand, and the programs stopped playing. He spread out his arms,

“It’s good to see you, Daniel. Is your minion treating you well?”

I cupped my chin, “Hm, you know, he’s doing okay.” I turned to Helios, “He could be doing better though. He was lecturing about philosophy earlier.”

Helios narrowed his eyes, “It was counsel, nothing more.”

Torix waved a hand, “Ah, wasn’t he demoted from his previous position? Perhaps his advice is limited in its usefulness.”

Torix and I shared a cackle at Helios’s expense. Torix let it drop,

“Teasing aside, are we here to organize our assault, perhaps?”

I nodded, “Yup. Can you get a few gialgathens and our other main members together? I want to let them know what our plan is going forward.”

Torix leaned close, “Perhaps you could share the inner machinations of our guild’s future with me before the meeting, hmm?”

I raised a palm to the lich, “I would, but I don’t want to have to repeat myself over and over.”

Torix snapped his fingers, “Bagh, I’d have hoped for an early insight. Such is life, I suppose...or death in my case. Hah, lich joke.” He opened his status, letting his obelisk send messages at a blistering pace,

“This obelisk is quite helpful, I must say. It’s doubled my workload over the last few days, but it shall halve my workload forever thereafter.”

Helios chimed, “Abuse them as much as you can. Obelisks are like assistants with no soul. They own no limit to the abuse they can handle.”

Torix raised a finger, his glance cross, “Unlike the living.”

I pointed at the obelisk, “When and where is the meeting?”

Helios read from his messages, “In an hour, we’ll gather with your guild’s followers, along with five other gialgathens and mind mages.”

I frowned, “What about the portalists?”

Torix scoffed, “Those incompetents? They’ve been decommissioned from the guild.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Why?”

“There were numerous reasons, but the most astute of them was their spying. They were sending data towards the Overseer and Schema about our guild’s operations. Amara nearly devoured one of them when she found them taking notes on her eldritch experiments...for the second time, I might add.”

I sighed, “Well, that’s what we get for trusting Schema, I suppose.”

“Indeed.”

Helios turned between us, “Why is that an issue? If you have nothing to hide, then there’s no reason to be bothered with Schema’s surveillance. If anything, it adds another layer of security.”

I leaned towards the alby, “You’ve never been wanted, huh?”

Helios leaned back, “No. I haven’t.”

I shrugged, “That makes sense. I came into this system as an unknown, and so have the majority of my guild’s high ranking members. Hell, we have a literal eldritch on our team. Because of that status, Schema leveraged us for his own gain several times.”

Helios scoffed, “And that is what you do with your resources, do you not?”

I frowned, “It sets a standard where you end up just using one another. If our relationship with the Empire ends up that way, we’ll break things off in an instant.”

Helios crossed his arms, “Though we rise to a higher standard, you shouldn’t expect anything more than the baseline politeness from other guilds.”

I shrugged, “That’s the thing. I do have higher expectations. Even if we don’t have anything to hide, I don’t want to give Schema information for blackmailing us in the

future. That's because he took advantage before, trapping us on Earth to kill Yawm. He did it again, having us clean up Giess's mess."

I glared up at the sky,

"Schema is a powerful ally, but he also prefers keeping his allies on a ball and chain. I understand it, but I don't like it."

Helios raised his eyebrows, "Hmmm, to me, it seems like an unnecessary precaution. That being said, you own your own reasons behind your actions. Do what you will."

Torix walked past us, "We shall. Come, let us meet with the others."

We walked through the underbelly of Mt. Verner before reaching a sectioned off portion along the outskirts of the mountain. Here we warped in from Elderfire, a sort of settlement forming. Several gialgathens rested in the ravine's shadow, many of them exhausted.

Among these gialgathens, Chrona and Krog slept. They singed themselves spots in the grass, Krog preferring a clearing in the trees while Chrona rested in the shade of branches. They lifted their heads as I walked up, Helios and Torix trailing behind me. They rubbed the sleep from their eyes with the tips of their tails as Chrona mumbled,

"Excuse our late awakening. We've been tasked with much as of late, and we needed rest."

I raised a palm to her, "It's no problem. We're planning on fighting on Blegara today, and I was wondering if either of you are up to it?"

Krog and Chrona stared at each other before looking back at me. Krog grumbled,

"Why do we fight so soon and for a guild that has given us nothing?"

Helios stepped forward,

“We’ve given high-end obelisks, risked our position in the galaxy to establish trade routes, and contracted two high ranking commanders without payment as a show of support. This is merely the beginning of the Empire’s generosity, yet it is already extraordinary.”

Helios turned a hand to Chrona and Krog,

“Look to yourselves before admonishing us. Your kind has given nothing but taken whatever the Harbinger has given. You both ask for rest on the first day that you actually work for your savior. Up till now, he has been working for you, and without rest, I might mention.”

Helios stared down at them, “If this is the extent of the gialgathen’s gratitude, then I shall make sure to make a note of it.”

I turned towards Helios, “I’ll let them know whether or not they’re giving me gratitude. Also, give advice when I ask for it, not when you want to.”

Helios turned to me, “Your command is noted.”

Krog and Chrona stared down, both of them filled with more than just a little shame. I sighed while thinking about what Helios said. In a way, Helios was right – this was technically their first day on their new job. Still, just like anyone, these giant salamanders had their limits regardless of what we needed from them.

They just arrived on a new planet while surviving a war and genocide. There’s only so much someone can do. I raised a hand,

“Chrona, Krog, don’t worry about joining us today. I didn’t know the both of you were so tired, and that’s something I should have noticed. Take a week off, both of you. During that time, you need to get settled in and meet a few of our guildsmen. I don’t want the gialgathens to be a separate part of my guild. I want them to be interwoven like a...gialgathen, human scarf.”

I shook my head in disgust, “Man, just forget about that example. Damn, that was awful.”

Chrona's eyes widened while she carried a light smile, "Th-thank you, commander. Your generosity will not go unnoticed."

I turned to Helios,

"Also, you'd better remember what you said here later on when you're tired. Don't expect any breaks."

Helios nodded, "Then I shall face my exhaustion as I have many times before."

From the surrounding trees, Hod bled out of a nearby shadow. He cracked his neck while rolling his shoulders, "Hod feel good. How everyone else feel?"

I smiled, "Feeling good."

Hod pushed on his lower back, stretching as he groaned, "Hod think that good. Hod-"

His back cracked, and Hod pulled his hands off his lower back, but his upper body didn't swing back into place. His head hung behind him, his upper body draped over his waist. The poor birdman ran around us while shrieking,

"Hod broke Hod back."

Helios turned towards him, "Where exactly is the injury?"

Hod's head hung upside down behind him. Facing his back towards Helios, the birdman jeered,

"Hod just say problem. Hod back broken."

With a gravity well, I pulled Hod apart from his upper half and lower half. The bird guy stretched like taffy before his back popped into place. He gasped with relief,

"Hod back not broke anymore. Hod thank Harbinger."

Helios turned towards me, “Is he an idiot?”

Torix covered his mouth, suppressing a laugh,

“He did say his back was what was hurt. Perhaps it is your question that was idiotic?”

Helios raised his eyebrows, “Or specific for a diagnosis. I worried without cause. That much is certain, and I shall not make the same mistake again.”

I observed from a distance, letting them talk as they usually would have without me interfering. Whether I agreed with either of them or not, they would need to get to know each other. Having a rocky first few days was expected.

From beside me, a slight, familiar gravitational blip extended into existence. I looked down with a grin, finding Althea phasing onto this plane beside me. I grabbed her by the hip,

“It’s good to see you.”

She leaned her head into the nape of my armpit, “You too. How is Helios adjusting?”

“Eh, he’s doing fine. He understands his new position and what he needs to do from here on out.”

Althea narrowed her eyes at the albony, “Please, keep an eye on him. Don’t forget what he did to us when he had an advantage. I think...I think that shows more about his character than anything.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t forget.”

Helios heard us, but I intended for him to. As he listened, his hair stood on end, and his heartbeat raced in his chest. He was well aware of what might happen to him in his new position, but this was the price he paid for what he did. Since it was up to me, the guy would keep paying and in full.

From the trees, a brustling of branches popped in the foreground. Stepping out of it, Amara and Florence walked beside one another, both of them chatting.

“That’s a fascinating outlook on the eldritch. I never considered the possibility of an alliance of any sort,” Florence said. “It seemed unearthly to me.”

Amara hissed back, “It is, but such is the result of clashing dimensions. There is little that can be done outside of a wary compromise. I believe we may keep one another at bay, both sheep and wolves watching and waiting alike.” She turned a palm to Florence, her eye centered in her hand. It pierced the albony with a sharp, suspicious glare,

“You seem quite curious about us. It’s alarming.”

Florence put his hands on his hips, “I seem curious because I am. You’re a fascinating young lady. Besides, I know what it means to be an outcast like you. I am one as well, though under different circumstances. Since coming here, however, many have seen the good in me despite that less than enviable position.”

A grin glowed from under his mask as he met her eye,

“I merely wished to return the favor and see the good in you, Amara.”

Amara looked away while...wait a minute, blushing? I stayed there stunned at the prospect, Florence somehow wooing an eldritch of all things. Hod stepped up to Florence, pushing a winged hand into the albony’s chest,

“Hod not like new fur man. New fur man bad.”

Florence tilted his head while grabbing Hod’s hand, “Did you spend time grooming your feathers this morning?”

Hod pulled his wing from Florence’s grasp, “Perhaps Hod did.”

Florence brimmed with confidence, “It shows.”

Hod’s blank, white eyes narrowed, “Hod not sure Hod not like fur man two anymore. Hod...Hod confused.”

Florence gave Hod a friendly pat on the shoulder, “Take your time deciding on it.”
Florence walked up to me,

“I’d barely gotten my new job started before you called us into a new meeting. Industrious, aren’t you?”

I turned towards everyone, “Eh, I try. You can use this as an opportunity to get to know everyone.”

Florence turned towards Althea, “I would like that.”

Althea looked away, and I noted her reaction. From the corner of my eye, I glowered at Florence, “Hey, man.”

Florence shrunk, “Uhm...yes?”

“I understand you’re friendly. That’s fine, but I’d like it if you’d respect the relationship between Althea and me.”

Florence nodded, taken aback, “I...of course. Excuse my impoliteness.”

He deflated before my eyes like a balloon popped with a needle. He took a step or two back. He looked a bit crushed, and I was okay with that. At the same time, I didn’t want Florence or everyone else thinking I hated the guy. I pinched my brow with frustration,

“Look, don’t take this that seriously. We’ve just gotten to know each other, and it isn’t like I expect every situation to play out perfectly.”

I gave his shoulder a light tap with my fist, “Just, you know, listen to what I said, and we’re fine, alright?”

Florence perked up while nodding, “Yes. Of course.”

As everyone else arrived, I dwelled on that awkward situation. Talking with people right now was strange, and after thinking about it, I uncovered the reason why; it was my position. Because of my status as a guildleader, my thoughts and words carried weight. I could talk however I wanted before now because I wasn’t anyone special. The scales tipped, and now I owned a meaningful position.

It was a strange transition for me. On the one hand, I liked being able to say what I wanted to say how I wanted to say it. Just as well, it was pleasant having my words and opinion respected. On the other hand, that was the crux of the issue – people respected me too much.

If I misplaced a word or two, people got hurt. I wasn’t exactly the best at conveying succinct, concise emotions with my words anyway. Having to dance around people’s feelings like this was like asking an ogre to win a tap-dancing competition. It wasn’t going to happen. All this gave me a lot to think about as Torix spread out his arms,

“Now that everyone is present, our guildleader, Daniel, wishes to advise us on our guild’s course of action from here on out.”

Damn, I forgot about that. I took a quick, deep breath with my eyes closed, preparing to talk in front of the group. The thought of public speaking still gave me goosebumps, but it was now or never as usual. With a lift of my hand, I used quintessence to make a pillar of fortified earth rise from under me. The elevation let me get a clear view over everyone’s heads, the gialgathens hanging in the back.

Looking closer, several signs of exhaustion exposed themselves on the gialgathens. They normally carried their heads high, but they drooped down in long arches. None of the gialgathens kept their chests upright either. It was as if gravity was fighting a winning war with them, their eyelids heavy.

Revising the contents of my speech on the fly, I turned towards Torix, “I’m going to be talking to the guild as a whole here. Make sure to record and stream this.”

Torix leaned back, “Oh...Ahem, I certainly shall...It is done.”

I turned towards the group, spreading my hands,

“We’ve finished our time on Giess, and I know that the gialgathens here are adjusting to Earth. I want each of you to know that you’re welcome here as long as you work, and you’re not breaking the laws here. That’s all we ask for, and if you do that, you’ll find that this will be a new home for each of you.”

Krog and Chrona let out roars of approval, and I gave them quick nods to let them know they were heard. I turned towards the others,

“We’ve allied ourselves with the Empire, a conglomeration of planets ruled by Obolis Novas. I’ve met him in person, and he’s willing to reward us handsomely for our services. He’s already sent two members of his family to help us, and they’ll be assisting us with our transition from a one location guild to a guild on a galactic scale.”

I tried making eye contact,

“I know that you’re all tired from the endless fighting. We’ve just returned, and I’m already starting another campaign against the Adairs. While I won’t postpone my own duties, I understand that each of you needs rest. Because of that, I want to grant our soldiers a month off of free time. You can dispense with that how you will.”

Kessiah leaned back against Krog while mouthing,

“I guess that doesn’t apply to me.”

I smirked at her, “No, Kessiah, it does not.”

The group let out a light laugh, the kind of laughter that releases some of the nervous tension. I raised a fist,

“I’ll be fighting on the frontlines until you’re all ready to join me. Know that I would never ask more from each of you than I’d ask of myself. I aim to lead by example, and that means setting a good one for each of you to follow. That’s also why I’m working with the dungeon clearing corps to engineer a solution for lower-tier dungeons.”

I let my hands down to my sides, “I know it’s a lot to ask of each of you to fight in two wars, one against the Adairs and another against the eldritch. I’m striving to lessen that burden, one dungeon at a time. It will take effort and ingenuity, but I’m confident that we’re on the brink of a long term solution.”

Amara spread the fingers of her palms, staring at me, “Are we eldritch a problem?”

I turned to her, kind of surprised by her speaking up. It allowed me to touch base on the subject, however,

“Some of you and your brethren are a problem, yes. I don’t intend to kill indiscriminately, however. When we were on Giess, the Adairs did that to the gialgathens by abusing the espen’s bias against them. Yes, certain gialgathens were a lot to handle. That didn’t mean they deserved what happened to them.”

I let those words soak in for a second. Many fought on Giess, and they saw the horrors first hand. The others saw it secondhand on footage, which still left a worthwhile impact. I turned to a palm to Amara,

“Just as I know all gialgathens aren’t evil, I know that all eldritch aren’t evil either. We’ll work with those that are willing to work with us. As for the others, we’ll crush them just like we crushed the Adairs. No mercy. No compromise.”

The others in the group let out a hoopla of approval, and Amara seemed sated for now. I raised my fists, “We’re going to continue fighting the Adairs, and I want each of you to know you’ll be rewarded for what you’re doing here with me. You’ll be able to tell your children you were apart of a great generation, one that fought against the Hybrids and pushed them back into the depths they crawled out from.”

I grinned, “So stay strong, and we’ll pull through this even better than before.”

I sat there with my finished speech, and everyone stared at me. Once the small crowd recognized it was over, a series of claps, roars, and shouts filled the air. It looked like everyone liked it for the most part, and as I stepped off my earthen podium, Torix gave me a nod of approval,

“I must say, that was likely your finest speech yet.”

I rolled my shoulders, “Thanks. I’ve had some practice.” I turned towards Torix, “I think it’s about time we head out to Blegara.”

Spear stepped up to us, along with Helios. Torix steepled his hands,

“I concur. It’s time we show the Empire the might of the legion firsthand.”

Chapter 266: Joining Wars

Without further delay, Helios lifted his hand and generated a portal with ease. On the other side of the entrance, a futuristic, metallic paneling lined the walls of a large room. It was the inside of a ship, likely a dreadnought class by the look of it. After crushing many of them, I kind of got a feel for their inner architecture, and this fit the bill.

Helios peered around while raising his voice,

“On the other side of this portal is a landing bay for an imperial dreadnought. Here, any gialgathens who are rested may join us.”

Helios turned to me, awaiting further orders. I walked up to the portal, waving everyone to come inside,

“Follow me.”

Stepping into the steeled inner sanctum, the greenish hue of orichalcum imbued the air. Lines of light traced throughout the compound’s walls and floors, some kind of fuel source doubling as a consistent kind of lighting. The pulsing, oozing shine was dampened by thickened plates of tinted glass, but it was so bright it still kept the place well lit despite that.

Beyond the walls, elegant ships made way for enormous battle drones. They used smoother linework for the silhouettes of the vessels when compared to the Adair’s ships. From a feel perspective, they seemed less militant and more aesthetically inclined. Whether that translated to effectiveness on the battle, time would tell.

Piloting these ships, albony of all kinds strutted around in various mask colors. Most wore wooden masks without any stain on them, and any member with this kind of cover focused on grunt work. The next tier up where the orange masks, the same as John Mcsmitty's mask. These guys were welders, calibrators, or managers. They handled the technical work that required a bit more skill.

The soldiers that actually piloted the ships themselves were mostly wooden maskers like the grunt workers. A rare few of these soldiers wore red masks like what Caprika wore when we first met. The red maskers rode the best ships, commanded respect from others, and they got the majority of the attention from the calibrators.

As we stepped out, many of those working on the bay level gawked at us. They lunged to one knee, bowing as if their life depended upon it. Helios raised a hand,

“As you were.”

The workers jumped back to work, the mass of movement reviving in an instant. Helios pointed at a wider walkway along the back of the bay,

“If you would follow me, I can show you all where the other commanders are situated.”

After a brusque nod of approval from yours truly, we walked toward the other members. Following us, Kessiah, Althea, Hod, Florence, and Torix kept pace, and we walked through many corridors with dozens of rooms situated in them. I noted the layout as we made our way, ensuring I wouldn't need help navigating the area again.

We found ourselves on a large, wall-less elevator. Stylish yet functional, it zoomed upwards fast enough that we experienced a G or two of force. Rings of plasma fuel zoomed past our eyes before we rose into a grand entryway. Some craftsmen meticulously carved, etched, and molded the metal into the shape of two albony, their individual hairs made to a lifelike level of realism. They lined a doorway covered in symbols, likely patriotic symbols for the Empire.

Helios stepped up towards a scanner that pulled out a large needle. It took a sample of his blood as Florence turned to us,

“We'll be meeting several other members of royalty here. Alastair is the big one, but he's a gentle giant. Ophelia is a completely ruthless schemer. If you want to know

which one she is, just look for the ugly one. We'll also be meeting Victoria. She and Helios have a sort of rivalry for who would be the next successor of Obolis. Recently, she's pulled ahead of my brother in that regard."

Helios glowered at Florence, "As if either of us would ever succeed an immortal."

Florence nudged his brother with an elbow, "You didn't say that when we were cubs. You always dreamed of being the real ruler one day."

Helios stepped through the opening doorway,

"Children's dreams die where the adult world begins."

As we stepped into a fancy control room, Florence mouthed,

"In other words, here's where dreams go to die. Fun."

Peering around, I disagreed. Maybe daydreamers lost spirit here, but for a logistician, this was complete reverie. Monitors detailed many situations across Blegara, showing underwater scenes of chaos. Several obelisks floated near these monitors, interacting with virtualized statuses to organize troops and data. These machines funneled information towards data feeds that scrolled over the faces of a few orange masked technicians.

These orange masks then funneled footnotes of various situations to three albony standing on an elevated platform. These albony wore red masks, each of them standing in front of an expansive glimpse of the world below. My eyes gawked at the planetary view exposing itself in all its splendor.

Blegara was an oceanic world, one with a few sparse islands littering its surface. Along the endless seas, a gradient of shadow drew a line between night and day. In the nightsided half, lights from beneath the ocean lit up in entrancing clusters of glowing radiance. They reminded me of views of Earth's cities during night time, at least before the culling and our Schematization.

My eyes drifted from Blegara to the unsullied view of the stars surrounding the planet. No atmosphere dampened the spectacle here, nebulae splashing like colorful clouds.

The stars shined with the radiance of reflective drops, galaxies drifting in colorful spirals. I was left awestruck just as I was when Obolis showed us his own vision when we first met.

Breaking my admiration of nature, a curt, high pitched voice spoke out,

“Are these the mercenaries Obolis contracted?”

Helios stepped forward, his cape flowing over him,

“No. They are our allies. It would be wise to refer to them as such, Ophelia.”

A thin albony looked over us, unimpressed by our group. She wore a dress of all things, earrings and jewelry worn to match. A mage’s staff hovered along her back, sheathed by a telekinetic force. Her red mask bore black lines on it, maybe some kind of transitional status between her mask’s colors.

She propped her weight onto her hip and jeered,

“And why are you still wearing your black mask? Surely you were demoted to the status of us mere reds.”

Helios grinned under his mask, “It is not an action that Obolis deemed necessary. Think of Florence and my new positions as learning experiences. It is more a hard lesson than an outright punishment.”

Florence leaned over to me,

“Told you. Ophelia’s awful.”

Ophelia pointed at Florence, “Don’t think I didn’t hear that.”

Beside them, a monolithic, red masked figure stood upright. Though he lacked Obolis’s or my height, he stood wider than either of us, and his armor cast a shadow resembling

more a wall than a person. He twiddled his clawed fingers, peering between the two albony,

“Uhm, could we please avoid a fight? We’ll have plenty of that once we land.”

The last of the three albony stepped forward, her armor shining and imposing on everyone around her. It was ebony with golden trim, a red cape standing out behind her. She wore a black mask like Helios and Florence, and her chest stood upright and tall. Though she looked small when compared to the living wall beside her, somehow, she commanded more presence than the other two albony combined.

She met my eye,

“This is the Harbinger?”

Helios nodded. The heroic-looking albony walked over, pressing her hand against her palm, “May this conversation be fruitful for Schema.”

She followed the rules despite her position. That said a lot about her as I raised my brow, “More like may it be fruitful for us. You already know me. Who are you?”

She clanked her heels together while putting a fist on her chest plate, “I am Victoria Novas, the current ruler of Menhir. It is an honor to meet you.” She gave me a bow, “Obolis has told me you are to be respected. Ignore Ophelia’s entrance. She simply cannot control herself when Florence is around.”

Ophelia, the one in a dress, pranced over in heels, “I can speak for myself.”

Althea stared at her in disbelief, “Are you actually fighting with us?”

Ophelia kept her chin high, “Of course I am.”

Althea furrowed her brow, “Then why are you wearing heels of all things? They’re so hard to move around in, and we’re about to, you know, fight.”

Ophelia put her hands on her hips, “Because I make it a priority to actually look good at all times.”

Damn, she was shallow. Althea scoffed, “So you prioritize that over actually surviving, huh?”

Though Ophelia wore a mask and carefully manicured fur over her skin, an intense blush radiated from her. She calmed herself, showing a measure of restraint as she glared down at Althea,

“Ah, so this is the kind of people we’ll be working with. Great. Just great.”

I spoke up,

“You’re not working with us. You’re fighting with us. Change into armor. We don’t want you to die out there, or worse, have people die trying to protect you all because you chose not to wear armor.”

Ophelia peered at Helios and Victoria, waiting for their backup. Victoria gave Ophelia a quick glare,

“Do as he says. Now.”

Ophelia swallowed her pride, stepping towards the elevator we just walked out of. As it went down the floors, Florence spoke between cracks of laughter,

“I...I’ve never seen her get put in her place like that...this is priceless...I can tell, this has already been worth the demotion.”

Helios murmured, “For once, we agree.”

Florence gave me a pat on the back, “By Schema, I’ve never seen someone call her out like that. Well done, well done.”

I spread my arms, “Wait a minute, you all just let that kind of behavior fly?”

An awkward moment passed over the group, and Victoria stood upright once more, “I...we’re sorry.”

I pointed down on the planet, “Remember what we’re doing here. Letting Ophelia walk down there without protection could end in her death. The Hybrids, if they so much as touch you, you’ll need me to dig around under your bones to pull them out.”

I glanced at the broad albony, “Whether you’re big or not, they’ll worm their way in you and parade around in your skin like your just a flesh puppet. Don’t forget that. I’m not saying this because I want to be an asshole. If that was the case, I’d let you all walk down there unprepared.”

Victoria and the big guy peered down, both of them flushing with shame. I lifted a hand,

“Come on, heads up. We don’t have time for pity parties.”

Victoria met my eye, restraining her emotions, “Yes. Of course.”

I pointed at Blegara, “What’s the situation down there? Also, record this and send the talk to Ophelia. We don’t want her to miss the conversation.”

Taken off guard, Victoria coughed into her hand,

“Ahem, well, the situation is dire. Many of the cities have rebelled, with few choosing to continue servitude under the Empire. This has resulted in guerilla warfare, where it is difficult to re-establish order. Because of that, some areas are being purged while uninfected territories are being secured.”

I frowned, “Alright, what does ‘purge’ mean?”

Alastair stepped forward, his large frame contrasting his gentle voice,

“So, it means we’re having to, uhm, wipe the area out. Saving those areas...it costs more lives than it saves. It’s a...l-logistical thing.”

I sighed, “Fine. We’re not participating in that. We’re here to wipe Hybrids out, not murder people.”

Victoria nodded, “Sir, yes, sir. I’ll send what you said over to Obolis.”

Helios turned up to me, “Excellent work relaying the gravity of this situation. You shut down their idiocy better than I could have. However, you may have made an enemy of Ophelia. What she lacks in common sense, she makes up for in her ability to control the Empire’s courts.”

Florence scratched the back of his head, “It might be a good idea to talk to her. You know, make sure she isn’t mad.”

I frowned, “Is that really necessary? She isn’t a child anymore, right.”

Florence weighed his hands back and forth, “Well, yeah, it’s not absolutely necessary, but it will help you out in the long run. Think of it as insurance from rumors and bad first impressions.”

I shrugged, “Eh, I’ll take my chances.”

Florence nodded, “Suit yourself.”

I turned towards Althea, “Hey, thanks for mentioning the heels situation. I didn’t even think about it until you brought it up.”

She grinned, “Thanks. I just noticed it is all. You’re the one that followed through.”

I grinned back before turning towards my group members, “You all ready to kick some ass?”

I got several nods, though Kessia seemed chaffed. I raised an eyebrow, “Hey Kessiah, what’s going on? Why do you look so down?”

She shook her head, “It just sucks that my friends were spying like that. I thought they were some alright guys. I really did. Turns out their just spineless dicksuckers for Schema. It really leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

She scowled, “And it makes you wonder...if they were spying, there’s got to be other people spying in our guild too. Like some of these royals here, maybe.”

I frowned, “It’s something I never considered, but yeah, you’re right. They likely are spying. For now, I don’t know what to do about it. I’ll try to brainstorm a solution with Torix, hopefully, one that doesn’t involve mind magic.”

Kessiah sighed, “Yeah. Sounds good.”

Victoria walked over towards one of the personnel running the ships data streams,

“Send us down to Saphigia. We’ll meet Obolis there.” Victoria stepped over, and she put her hands on her hips,

“It’s Blegara’s capital and where we’ll be establishing our beachhead with Obolis.”

I crossed my arms, “So I didn’t read the briefs you guys sent us. They were over a hundred pages long, and it was more like a textbook than something useful. What kind of planet is Blegara, and what kind of people live there?”

Victoria tilted her head, wrapping her head around what I just told her. She frowned under her black mask, “If you had read the briefs, you would already know.”

I waved my hand, “A summary, people. That’s all I’m asking for.”

“Blegara is an oceanic world with shallow waters throughout. This has left enormous portions of the world covered in coral reefs. We’ll be clearing Hybrids out of those reefs with the help of the intelligence units spread across the world.”

I pointed at her, “That’s what the brief should have said.”

She furrowed her brow, “But then... Yeah, maybe so.”

The dreadnought class cruiser we rode in drifted down towards Blegara, the planet growing in our sight. I pointed at the world,

“What are the people like?”

Helios waved a hand, “Impudent, ungrateful, and rebellious.”

Florence raised his palms, “I’ve seen the most of Blegara, so I think I can weigh in here.” He turned to me,

“The people here are relatively primitive, and I don’t mean that in a derogatory kind of way. They have developed simple language systems, and they have traditions, rituals, and even religions. That being said, they’re in a pre-technology era. The Empire came onto the world right after they reached fringe world status.”

Florence stared down at Blegara, “It’s a difficult world to handle because the populace is so...impossible to communicate with. Even with Schema’s nifty translations, the Vagni speak in disjointed, jagged sentences. Their species that isn’t suited for typical language. To many people in the Empire, they’re closer to eldritch than a sentient species.”

Torix raised a hand, “If I may interject, why would the Empire choose to establish a world here?”

Florence let out a sigh, “Hm... There are several reasons. The world is rich in certain resources, especially biological ones. Pearls, rare corals, and delicious food could fuel luxury for the albony across the entire Empire. That’s not even mentioning the beach resorts or the mining operations in dungeons or under the oceans here. Blegara is a veritable gold mine of high end resources.”

I raised an eyebrow, “You seem skeptical though.”

Florence winced, “The thing is...they, hm, how to put this...The first colonizers didn’t actually think things through in my opinion. This world is in the middle of a dark age. The Vagni had empires and established countries before the eldritch began pouring out of underwater caverns.”

He shook his head, “Now the monsters have become entrenched in the Vagni’s culture. They’ve destroyed their civilizations, and being somewhat primitive, they’ve decided to worship the eldritch as gods. They offer sacrifices, they do blood worship, and they even raise eldritch younglings. It’s fascinating, I tell you.”

Helios glared at his brother, “It’s a destructive cycle. One that must be eliminated from the roots.”

Florence raised a hand, his voice rising, “See, that’s what everyone seems convinced of. I disagree. The Vagni have actually established a relative balance with the eldritch. Despite having the eldritch infesting their waters, they haven’t actually had any world-ending incidents.”

I grimaced, “It’s only a matter of time before that happens. Besides, they drifted into fringe world status. That means the situation was worsening.”

Helios turned to me, “Exactly.”

Florence shook his head, “No, no, no, that’s a misconception. Schema changed his classifications for fringe worlds, and that’s why Blegara fell into that category. I’ve done my research on the world’s history as well, and the Vagni have stories of the eldritch predating Schema’s involvement. They’re ingrained in the mythos of the planet. Even if the tales of eldritch are oral or primitive, that doesn’t mean the events didn’t happen.”

Florence turned towards the group, “Schema would like us to all believe that the eldritch go from nonexistent to pouring out of the ground like monster geysers, all overnight. I don’t think that’s the case, and I have a theory that on worlds where the eldritch naturally manifest, they are actually a natural existence that slowly leaks in.”

I tilted my head, considering what he said. If I thought about it, humans had all kinds of stories about mythic figures and supernatural beings. Overactive imaginations seemed

like the culprit to me. That being said, it wasn't like Zeus or dragons would be any stranger than Schema and the eldritch. If anything, they were far more benign by comparison.

Helios facepalmed before looking up at the sky, "Why do you entertain such thoughts? You have such a gifted mind, yet you waste it away on useless meanderings."

Florence scoffed, "My mind is my own. I dictate whether it's being wasted or not."

Victoria clapped her hands, "That's very interesting and all, but we're piercing through Blegara's atmosphere. Be ready for some turbulence."

I lifted my hand, manipulating gravity without a struggle. Pinning everyone's feet to the floor, I turned to Victoria,

"That will keep everyone grounded while we land."

Victoria looked down at her feet. She pointed her hands at them,

"This...Helios, you said he was fluid with his gravitational magic. To this extent, however, well, I never would've imagined it."

Helios shrugged, "He exceeds even Obolis with it. What else can I say to convey his mastery?"

Victoria listened while leaned backward, so far, in fact, that without her feet being anchored, she'd fall backward. Pulling from her feet, wobbled back and forth, laughing a bit,

"Hah, I can't believe it. This is quite fun."

Remembering where she was, she stiffened back up, "Ahem, as I was saying, good use of your gravity magic and all that."

Althea giggled a bit before grinning at Victoria, "Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

Victoria took the situation in stride, “I would hope so. I wouldn’t want to be surprised at all turns. I’d seem even more like a fool than I already do at times.”

Hod leaned forward, pulling himself into an awkward position to reach Victoria. The humble birdman patted her shoulder while nodding,

“Hod understand Victoria concern. Victoria not super smart like Hod. Not all people be like Hod. Only Hod be like Hod.”

The group laughed besides Torix and Helios, who both grimaced at Hod. That’s the kind of person Hod was; you either hated him or loved him. As the group died down, the main elevator rose back up with Ophelia. She changed her wares, garbed in a robe etched with runes. It was by no means shoddy workmanship either, many of the configurations designed for both form and function. They accentuated her curves, and they carried a beautiful gold and red color that conveyed a sense of grandeur.

Caught staring, Althea elbowed me, “Hey, stop that.”

I pointed at the robe, “But that robe is put together real well. I can’t help but admire the work put into it.”

Althea shrunk back, “Oh...I...okay.”

I grinned down at her, “Wait a minute, did you think-“

She pushed me, the metal beneath me groaning from the force of her shove,

“Hey, stop that.”

I laughed before Ophelia walked up to us. She gave me a subtle glare from under her robe, so Florence leaned over, “Hey, let me be that whole peacemaker thing you mentioned before. I can smooth things over.” He pointed at his feet, “And don’t worry about the turbulence. I’ll be fine.”

I didn't like pandering to a brat, but this was Florence's new job. I didn't want to get in the way of his work, so I unlatched his feet. Florence jogged over towards her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. He waved a hand, "Hey, it's been a while since we had a chat. Mind having a talk?"

"I do. You're awful."

Florence nodded, "True, but so are you. Let's catchup."

They walked off as we pierced through the atmosphere. Waves of heated air streamed past the orichalcum hull, magical runes buzzing to stop the ship from collapsing at the force. I stared at the approaching planet, remembering all the times I'd done this before. I never did this with a ship's protection, however, so it was all very new and fresh.

We reached near the surface after a minute of descending. Passing over a few miles of deep blue ocean, we hovered over a cyan, shallow bay, one at the edge of a crescent moon shaped island. It was a bright and colorful expanse, the fauna brimming with life and fighting for light. No creatures walked or buzzed on the island's surface. Instead, plants warred with one another, their battles stretched out over years instead of seconds.

This island's shores carried moving life in spades, contrasting the barren inland. Fish, crabs, krill, clams, and coral brimmed over one another. These creatures flourished near the underwater city built from the same coral composing the reef. Waves washed over these organic buildings, a sort of harmony with nature established.

Well, harmony outside of the Hybrids whipping the waters.

As my eyes peered into the deeper spots of ocean, battles raged under murky waters. Blood fogged the water along with bits of meat and metal. The spires that covered Giess also spawned here, rising out of the ocean's floor. A variant of Hybrid swam in the waters, more aerodynamic with finlike structure's attached.

These mechanical monstrosities darted through the water at high speeds, biting at albony. The Empire's forces used a variety of gear to assist in the fight, literal propeller packs resting on their backs to assist with movement. Their scaled swimsuits let them glide through the water with ease, and they owned massive lighting structures to help see through the water.

It was losing battle, however.

Their technology didn't outweigh the benefits of evolution, and the Hybrids were faster overall. The water slowed down the average soldier considerably. Snagging one of the breathing tubes also gave them a short-timer before they drowned in the sea. The Hybrids adopted a hit and run tactic because of this. They darted through the water, waiting for munitions to deplete. After doing so, they dashed in, tore the breathing tubes, and zoned the albony so they couldn't reach the surface.

These drowned bodies floated towards the surface after the Hybrid was satisfied with their demise. The sheer number of floating bodies took me by surprise, making the once clear ocean seem more like a swamp of corpses. The giant, writhing spires rose from the depths, picking these bodies up before pulling them back into the deep. They'd be hybridized in an orange soup of nanomachines later.

That is, unless we stopped them of course. I rolled my shoulders as Florence stepped back from the sideline with Ophelia, the last inklings of his conversation bleeding into earshot,

“And that's why he is the way he is. You have to understand, we had every advantage. Our first dungeon was chosen to give us the best chance of going forward. We were granted particular trees that few have access to. Even with leveling support and experience gaining tactics, he still outleveled us.”

Florence grabbed Ophelia by her shoulders, looking her in the eye,

“We had equipment. We had support. We had a vast network of people and skills helping us. Daniel, he had none of that, yet he succeeded. Even if he's gruff and a bit too intense sometimes, he's going to keep us safe out there. We just have to trust the guy.”

Ophelia gave him a reluctant nod, “No, you're right, you're right. I just need to... adjust. I should've been more prepared. That's all.”

Florence gave Ophelia a nudge, “He nearly knocked me onto the ground when we first met too. Literally. I'm sure he does that to all kinds of people too.”

“Oh, most definitely.”

They stepped up to the group, both of them seeing the carnage through the open paneling. Ophelia's heart rate spiked, and she gulped under her red mask,

"It...It really is different seeing it in person."

I stared out, "We're not in person. Not yet at least. Helios, warp us down."

Helios waved his hand, creating another portal towards an underwater coral cavern. Glass spanned over a few of the organic gaps in the coral's coverage, the jagged encapsulation giving a raw feel for the whole area. A few steel cables lined the inner structure, reinforcing the pocket of air.

Helios stepped into the air pocket, along with Althea and I. Turning towards her, I raised an eyebrow,

"You can breathe underwater, right?"

She lifted her neck, showcasing gills, "Of course. You forgot I'm a shapeshifter?"

"Just making sure."

As I mentioned the water, Kessiah pulled out a ring powered by mana. Putting it on, I recognized Torix's signature carving from the corner of my eye. Torix carried a meticulous precision that reflected itself in his runic work, and I'd notice his style anywhere. The insignia let Kessiah hold her breath. Peering over, I didn't see one for Hod.

I pointed at his chest, "You can't breathe underwater, though, can you?"

"Hod not do it. Other Hod not need air though."

Victoria leaned over towards us, "I'm assuming you've handled the situation as well?"

I pointed at my chest, "What, me?"

“Yes. Of course.”

I shook my head, “Air isn’t an issue anymore. I’ll leave it at that.”

Torix cackled, “Hah, he could walk on the surface of stars if he so chose. Water is nothing before him now.”

Her eyes widened while she raised her eyebrows, disbelief spread across her face. I didn’t pursue the issue further since I had nothing to prove. As we entered the coral capsule, I walked up to a wall and touched it. It was a fragile stone, nothing too sturdy. Turning to the others walking in, I pointed at it,

“This doesn’t seem like the most secure place to land for the Hybrids.”

Her chest filled with pride, Victoria stepped out with her hands on her hips,

“I can promise you this, there is nowhere safer on this planet.”

“Why?”

“Because we have the ultimate guardian. Observe.”

From outside the coral cavern, a massive wave of force shot through the water. It created tidal waves around us and rain above us from displaced water. Walking up to a glass panel, I peered outside to see what all the ruckus was about. In the distance, Obolis Novas held a blighted in his hand.

From his fingers, lines of primordial mana oozed like streams of concentrated sapphire. His gray armor carried runic lines of the cipher across it, the primordial mana drenching the inscriptions. That mana radiated from him, creating a sphere of blue mana that created temporal dilation, hastening his movements.

Obolis’s energy infected the blighted sea creature in his hands, purifying it from the inside out. An ethereal creature spawned from its insides, made of pure, blue energy.

The majestic monster of mana swam through the ocean, culling dozens of Hybrids in its wake, swallowing and liquifying them into water as it passed.

Obolis let the intangible beast do its thing as he darted through the water with absurd speed. Immune to liquid around him, he anchored himself with a gravitational sphere while jerking himself into different positions across the oceanic horizon. Finding a new batch of Hybrids, he lifted a hand, channeling mana.

My hair stood on end as he converted the mana of multiple elemental furnaces, the crackling somewhat muted but still heard through the water. Concentrating the burst, Obolis shot out a red torrent of ascendant mana, and it branched through the water in jagged lines. The geometric strands sought out Hybrids, piercing their chests. Once punctured, the energy expanded in all directions from within, pointed branches of red growing from the insides of the Hybrids.

Leaving the forest of bodies behind, Obolis darted once more towards another group of Hybrids. He channeled his personal mana this time, using quintessence to generate growing trails of ice. The pale, jagged border of ice raced across our entire range of sight, trapping the Hybrids within the ice. Wielding ascendant mana, Obolis drained the energy from the ice, darkening its coloration.

As if stopping the atoms within entirely, it turned into the same void ice Helios used. The negative energy resonated across the expanse, cracking the metal hulls and ravaging the Hybrid's innards. They bloomed into orange, expanding bursts, their deaths all but beautiful.

The carnage was mesmerizing.

In yet another quick burst, Obolis jolted towards us. He launched like a bullet, racing towards our confine. Right before crashing into the wall, he generated a portal fluidly. It teleported him into our space. He used gravity wells of his own to dampen his descent, landing without decimating our room.

Water splashed from his side of the portal, however, but only a small amount. With the puddle spreading out, he turned towards those present,

“It is good to see that my family is well, and my allies safe. You shall need to be, for here lies the ravages of war and the onslaught of battle. Here, each of you will earn

your keep and your privilege. Prove your worth, and your actions will echo into eternity, a shout everlasting. That roar grows with every drop of blood we spill.”

He spread his arms,

“Who here wishes to roar with me?”

Chapter 267: The Vagni

The albony around us pounded their chests and let out their own roars. They growled like lions, their imposing minds and wills united under this figure. That figure turned towards us,

“Let us see the Harbinger in his full fury.”

I nodded, “Eh, after that, I don’t think I’ll be all that impressive.”

Obolis raised a palm, “That isn’t true at all. If anything, you’ll surpass me one day, of that I’m certain. A little guidance would go a long way in that regard. For now, however-“

He turned towards the Hybrids in the distance, “You need no instruction in the art of war. Come, let us paint with their blood and sculpt with their corpses.”

Obolis opened another portal towards the surface, “You all shall handle the Northern, Western, and Eastern sections of Saphigia. I’ll handle the Southern section.” Obolis pointed at me,

“Follow the legion’s orders absolutely. They’ve fought in this kind war before, even soaked themselves in it and come out living. I wish the same for all of you.”

They gave a unified snarl as he finished. Obolis grinned, his teeth sharp,

“We’ll take this planet once more. For the Empire.”

He leaped out into the surface of the water. As he did, the portal closed. A rippled echoed out from above right after, and that was where he went. I turned towards those here. Since I was the guy in charge, I needed some information.

“Tell me what you guys can do?”

Victoria stepped forward, “I am a knight skilled with lances and shields. I prefer light magic to focalize various heat attacks. Alastair is a kinetic warrior, and he abuses his natural strength to that end. Ophelia casts living magic, giving her a large range of output.”

Ophelia raised a finger, and a fireball with a smile formed over her hand. It hopped for a second before burning out. I crossed my arms, “Huh, interesting.”

Florence pointed at himself, “I’m terrible at fighting. Absolutely awful at it. If anything, all I can do is heal people. I’d much rather stay back with whoever else is also healing.”

I pointed at Alastair and Victoria, “You’re frontliners, right?”

They nodded. I pointed a thumb at my chest, “You’ll be joining me. We’ll be making a vanguard.”

I pointed at Helios, “You’ll be joining Hod and Althea to offer support for our charge.”

Helios crossed his arms, “As you wish.”

Althea’s eyes narrowed, and a chill ran up my spine at the sight of it. Shy as she may be, in the end, she was a firecracker underneath. I turned to Torix and Ophelia,

“You two will be following them and helping clear out the enemies in our wake. Torix, you can use your mind magic and necromancy to engorge our force with troops to compensate for our lack of manpower. Ophelia, you can wipe out the bits and pieces we leave behind with your AOE abilities.”

Ophelia grinned, “Naturally.”

Torix gave a slight bow, “But of course.”

I gestured to Kessiah and Florence, “You guys follow behind and near them. We’ll be placing bodies out for you guys to heal and stabilize. Stay safe, alright?”

Kessiah gave us a thumbs up, “Sure thing, boss.”

Florence glanced at her before mimicking the gesture, “Indeed.”

He took up other cultures fast. I peered into oceanic abyss, “We’re heading out. Light knight and the big guy, get beside me.”

I stepped forward while Victoria and Alastair lined up at my sides. The knight of light brimmed with excitement,

“I can’t wait. This shall be fun.”

Alastair frowned, “I’m always in front. Some things never change, I guess.”

I lifted a hand, the outer portion of our coral capsule smashing apart. Suspending the ocean with gravity, I looked behind me. Hod let out all of the air in his body, his chest shrinking into a stringy twig. As he breathed in, his body imbued with the might of shadow, and he strengthened into the shadow walker as a consequence.

Florence took a step back, “So, is he alright?”

I pointed at him, “This is how he looks when he fights.”

Hod’s bones cracked, and umbral flames poured from his back and shoulders. Muscled and heaving, other Hod peered up at me,

“I am here to serve, Harbinger.”

Helios shook his head, “His mana is...unusual, to say the least. I would’ve never imagined he was so adept.”

Other Hod looked at Helios, hostility brimming from him,

“Your mind’s limits are shallow, sheep.”

Florence let out a laugh before other Hod turned to him,

“And you are a coward.”

Florence had a cheeky grin on under his mask, “Oh most definitely. I’m more than okay with that.”

I turned towards the ocean, “No more wasted time. Let’s go.”

I bent my knees before jumping. The water rippled as I shot into it, and Alastair and Victoria followed suit. A cold ocean covered me from head to toe, liquid filling into my lungs. It made no difference since I didn’t need to breathe. Despite that, a lingering mental block unnerved me for a split second. My mind screamed that I was drowning before I silenced it.

Another kind of quiet echoed that silence, a muted humming droning in my ears. The ocean swallowed the sounds around us, which would otherwise leave many deafened. It couldn’t devour all explosive echoes, the largest thuds making their way to us.

Turning down, I glared at the Hybrids while my helmet slid over my head. My trademark, helmeted grin crawled across my face, the jagged teeth menacing and feral. Starting with the Western side of the city, I shot myself through the water with gravity wells. Vast swaths of ocean swirled around us, waves coursing outward from the resulting propulsion. Alastair did something similar, creating extended kinetic panels under his feet as I once did. His steps left heavy thumps in the sandy ground where he made contact, tiny eruptions lifting beneath him as he moved.

Victoria took a different approach. She channeled magic for a moment, generating three yellow spheres that floated around her. Their light siphoned into her armor, the ebony armor-wearing albony brimming with energy. She shot through the sea, leaving

evaporated water in her wake. We three landed on the ground of Saphigia, the coral beds contaminated with Hybrids. Here, coral degraded and clams cracked. This entire lot of Saphigia was left with no survivors remaining.

Without needing to hold back, I waved Event Horizon over the sand and stony corals. The Hybrids squealed out with muffled howls. At the same time, I shot forward, water rushing past me. I crushed through a glassy Hybrid before draining its remains in a fluid motion. Four other monsters followed in its death as I darted around the crumbled lot.

My gravity and telekinesis gave me a firm footing, my mobility unhampered by the sea around us. I left Alastair and Victoria behind, both of them unable to keep up for now. They acted as a cleanup crew, handling any Hybrids I missed. Above us, many adapted Hybrids darted above, some in swarms.

As the Hybrids schooled together above me, I peered up. The water splintered the light of the sun, creating an ever-shifting expanse of light fractals. They cast rays across the seabed as far as the sea, towards the sea's horizons. It would've of been beautiful if not for the mass of metallised flesh launching towards me.

The school of blighted demons rushed at me like a concentrated blast of Hybrid. Mana flowed through my bones and blood at a rapid pace, my skin glowing with heat as the energy channeled through me. With an enormous wave of gravitation, I collapsed them into a mass of writhing beast. Cracking under pressure, they crushed as I heated them into a soupy liquid. The water in their blood evaporated, releasing bubbles off the craggy sphere.

With a wave of Event Horizon, the corpses disintegrated as if they were never there. Victoria and Alastair gawked at me, both of them stunned. Beneath them, Hybrids drilled through the sand below for an ambush. I raised a hand and stabbed it into the sand beneath me, a tidal wave of force rippling through the sand around us.

That wave of sand carried charged quintessence that flooded the area with heat. As it neared my allies, I pulled Alastair and Victoria from the ocean floor with a gravitational jerk. Rushing past them, the sandy tidal wave left a sea of molten sand behind.

Pulling my hand from the ground, waves of orange, glowing slush rippled across the landscape, splashing over the decimated lot of Saphigia. Hybrids drowned and burned

in the bright sea. The few that escaped crystallized as the molten sand solidified into dark obsidian.

Many Hybrids failed to break their obsidian prisons. These members clunked back into the rippling, glowing sea beneath them, drowning in the abyss. The few that somehow escaped the obsidian were augmented kinds of Hybrids, both blighted and enraged.

Handling them, I lifted my other hand, massive splatters of molten sand smothering them. They struggled once more against the hardening mush. With a wave of quintessence, I flash froze them, ice forming around their bodies. Once they were encased, I spread my arms wide.

Slamming my hands together, I created a massive sonic wave through the water. It shot up and outwards, resonating with the frozen Hybrids. Their frozen bodies shattered before burning away in the molten pit beneath them. With this patch of Hybrids culled, I stomped my foot.

Through my heel, I drained the heat out of the seafloor. By the time it cooled, the water around us had warmed until the cold ocean turned into an endless hot tub. A wide, expansive patch of obsidian formed over the destroyed area. From my system's voice chat, Alastair's sounded out,

"Uhm, just remember we're trying to save the vagni."

I nodded as more Hybrids awaited us from the front. The largest of which, a mechanical tendril, went to grab me. I reached out a hand, encircling the mass with a gravity well. I collapsed its metal shell with a burst of energy. With another jerk of my arms, I rived the splintered mass apart. Another rush of quintessence flooded the leftover tendril with heat.

It melted, bubbled metal pouring from the tendril's surface. It sunk down onto the ocean's bed in long lines of glowing, yellow metal. I leaped from the obsidian beneath me, sending cracks through the entire patch. I shot through the water, the light liquid brushing past my face like heavy, chilled wind. Landing on the mechanical tendril's root, I reached my hand through it. Finding bodies stored below, I drained the rest of the life out of the massive spire, freeing the albony trapped in its remains.

The orange, nanomachine soup drifted out in the water before pouring towards me. It collapsed like a living, orange cloud onto my skin before Event Horizon disintegrated it

into nothing. Beside me, Alastair landed with a thud. Several aquatic Hybrids darted towards him, and he knocked them into mush with each strike of his fist. Hell yeah, that's more like it.

Victoria followed suit, using lances of light to pierce and purge any Hybrids attacking her. She impaled them, and the impact point spread outward, consuming their bodies. Once engulfed, the Hybrids exploded from the inside out. Their remains showered down from below, sparkling trails of prisms passing through the water. She coalesced these yellow shards, creating sharpened energy spears at her sides.

Reaching out a hand, she stabbed through several more Hybrids in front of her. From behind, a Hybrid shot to her back. I reached out a hand, generating a sharpened pillar of metal behind her. It rose from the ground, glowing white with quintessence. The Hybrid bisected itself from the force of its crash, the halves drifting past Victoria.

Glancing at me, her eyes widened as a Hybrid bit into my shoulder. Its teeth shattered while I turned towards it, casually inspecting the monster up close. I grabbed it as it tried swimming away, letting me look longer. They were similar to Giess's Hybrids, but these were cultivated for a different purpose.

They evolved extended flippers lined with glass that gave them the ability to move quickly. Their jagged metal surfaces filled in with a glassy exoskeleton, so they remained aerodynamic. Some kind of phosphorescent glow ebbed from gaps in their scales as if blue light coursed in their veins. It was some variation of the nanomachine soup, no doubt, but it carried a glow as if it were the concentrated essence of the ocean.

Satisfied with my inspection, my armor drilled into the beast, its entire body filling with branching, dark spikes. They drank its innards before a lifeless husk floated off me, its broken teeth from the bite wafting in the water. A wave of Event Horizon disintegrated it, and Victoria gawked at me as if I were a monster.

Eh, maybe I was. With Event Horizon, I sterilized the water near me, keeping the devastating aura away from the bodies below. From above, spears impaled enemies like skewers, pinning Hybrids to the seabed. Althea took aim with a morphed cannon, pulled from her dimensional storage.

Wielding it with deadly intent, she moved her sight in a fluid sweep, pinning six Hybrids onto the landscape. Ophelia's robe fluttered under the water as she followed up Althea's attacks. The imperial mage cast living, engorged water beasts that swallowed

Hybrids and funneled them into these spikes. From piercing one to piercing many, the spears turned to skewers with Hybrids stacked over them.

Hod finished their attacks, morphing from the shadows beneath the Hybrids on the spears. With tearing slashes, he carved them into chunks, each piece burned by his blackened fire. Near him, Helios eyed the battlefield, his gaze measured. He covered the backs of several team members, encapsulating Hybrids in ice if necessary. Unlike Obolis, his ice was instantly voided, the negative resonance leaving gray chunks of frozen Hybrids behind.

Each of these Hybrids blossomed from within the ice, their apricot-colored blood expanding. These bodies littered the ground we passed, leaving the Hybrids lingering as beautiful yet hollowed corpses. Shifting around them, Kessiah and Florence swam in the water. Florence used basic healing magic and a few other tricks to pull most of the Hybrid gunk out of the albony. Kessiah followed up, doing a deep clean of the individual using vials of her blood.

We made quick work of it, clearing out large areas of the city in seconds. We hastened further as we kept going, despite our rapid initial blitz. Torix was the cause of that, his necromancy pulling its weight. The lich took the corpses floating above, turned them into footsoldiers, and they helped pull agni and albony out of their homes and Hybrid pits.

He disrupted many of the enemy soldiers as well, though quite a few vagni opposed us in conjunction with the Hybrids. It was an odd feeling, seeing one for the first time try and bite my face off. They were kind of like angler fish, though a bright red with green splotches over their upper half. Their eyes lined the sides of their heads, and their teeth were like needles in their mouths.

They roared out sonic bursts to disrupt us, but they lacked any real potency. Unlike the espens or gialgathens, the vagni were highly underleveled. It was so bad that it was rare to see one exceed level one hundred, let alone level one thousand. I couldn't understand how they even survived, and that wasn't considering this was a fringe world.

Yet here they were, fighting a worthy opponent like the Empire thanks to the Adair's help. It didn't add up as we passed block after block of the coral expanse below. I had plenty of time to think about it despite our rapid progress. It turned out that Saphigia was enormous. It rivaled the largest cities on Earth, this ancient city of organic corals spanning dozens of miles.

It carried signs of an old culture, one with surprising depth and majesty. In the marine cliffsides, they carved eldritch gods, their primitive artwork beautiful in its own way. Stylized like the Aztecs, the vagni used thick lines creating images with no gaps between their flowing decorations. They stuck to universal but straightforward symbols like the sun, water, waves, and creatures of the deep.

Across certain parts of the city, temples were made by farming coral into specific shapes. These buildings owned much cleaner edging than most, likely due to their religious significance. Many of these temples housed vagni hiding from the onslaught surrounding them, these civilians caught in the crossfire.

Without fail, they hated us on entering the temple. Their skins flushed even redder than usual, and their teeth grew in length just from spotting Victoria and Alastair. At first, I thought it was just a specific group. It wasn't. The vagni despised any albony they saw, and eventually, I wanted to know why.

Of course, the vagni couldn't speak very well. They used low tones and wails, kind of like whales on Earth. My speech didn't carry through the water, but that wasn't the only way to communicate. After finding many hiding groups of vagni, I telepathically connected with an elderly member of the group.

It caught the priest off guard initially. After sending him my intent, he had no issue whatsoever belting out his grievances with the albony. In a fragmented sort of speech, he signaled,

“They take our temple...ruin them...they mar our way of life...they leave nothing behind.”

I thought back, “What do you mean by mar your way of life?”

“They tear down our gods...they tell us worship new god...new god evil, kill old gods...”

Victoria and Alastair walked into the room, finding me eye to eye with a vagni. They winced as those hiding here gave them death glares, so I turned towards the albony,

“Come on, let's get these guys to Helios.”

I helped them move the group of vagni towards the others for safety. While we traveled, I kept talking with the priest.

“So, Schema was telling you to kill your old gods, the eldritch?”

The priest swam with us, hidden amongst his kin,

“They...they steal from us...they stop us from worship...they tell us make food how they want...they eat our young.”

My eyes widened at his last remark. We reached Helios, the blind albony generating portals towards a secured location behind us. As the priest swam through the divide, he gave me one last wide-eyed glance,

“They...are evil.”

Our mental tether snapped as the portal closed, and his words left me unsettled. Helios looked none the wiser, the albony peering at his claws. He murmured,

“Why the slowdown? You seem unnerved. Perhaps you find the vagni as repulsing as I do?”

I blinked a few times, shrugging my surprise off,

“Yeah. Sure.”

Helios eyed me from under his mask, but he let the issue drop. After that portal closed, three more popped open. Our other team members assembled around us as my mind raced for answers. Simple creatures or not, these guys didn't deserve to be food. They could talk for god's sake, and that was enough for me not to serve them on a dinner plate.

I calmed myself down. This was the observation of some random priest in the middle of a panic, not a record made by someone with a clear head and keen mind. That being

said, I wasn't about to ignore it entirely. This might result in some serious issues further down the line. Confronting it directly, I turned to Florence who caught up behind me,

"Hey Florence, mind if we chat in private for a bit?"

Out of breath, he used rings with enchantments to stave off the water around him as well. He nodded,

"Yes, of course."

We paced off, stepping a few hundred feet away. I met his eye,

"So, we've been fighting these guys for a while now."

He sighed, "I know it all too well. This has been very difficult for me." He stood taller, "Though a surprisingly refreshing challenge. It feels good to work...sometimes."

I waved my hand, gesturing to the cities and ruins around us,

"Here's the thing, every vagni we've seen has been terrified of you guys, the albony."

Florence shrugged, "We're more developed, and what people don't understand often terrifies them."

I leaned over him, "I know what real fear is. This isn't the kind of fear you get when staring at an algebra problem you can't solve. These guys are rabbits, and they're looking at you all like you're wolves."

Florence raised an eyebrow, "You sound like an eldritch, my friend."

I narrowed my eyes, "Stop derailing the conversation."

"Hah, I do that when I'm nervous, huh?" He wrapped his clawed hand around his elbow looking for a way out,

“Hmm, how to say this. We’ve committed certain acts that are deemed inappropriate to some. Therefore, we are...not viewed in a positive light.”

Florence smiled as he finished as if that would dismiss the issue altogether. I raised my fingers as I made points,

“The vagni are underleveled, their temples have all been ransacked, and one of them told me you guys eat their children. I’m not easy to convince, but I can’t just ignore all these signs. Some of this needs an explanation and right now.”

Florence frowned, peering down. A deep discomfort radiated from him, along with more profound sadness. Anguish might have been a better way of wording it.

“It’s complicated.”

I stared, “I don’t have time for complicated. Make it simple.”

Florence leaned down, rubbing his temple with each hand. He took a deep breath and looked me in the eye,

“The vagni were allied with the eldritch when we first arrived. Think of that realistically. They worshipped them as gods. Obviously, we weren’t about to let ourselves get eaten for their irrational worship. Therefore, we culled the majority of the eldritch near their settlements, though there are still remnants of those populations left.”

“I’m guessing they didn’t like that?”

“That’s an understatement. The vagni despised us, and they started a civil war against the Empire. During that time, we discovered that their temples were the center for most of their resistance. Their weapons and militarized eldritch were housed there. Using that knowledge, we came in, crushed them, and ended the war in weeks.”

“What about the whole eating their children part?”

Florence grimaced, “That...that is an unfortunate side effect of our colonization. Just like all societies, the Empire has criminals, poachers, and thugs. Though it is considered highly illegal in civilized society, there are some circles that enjoy eating the vagni’s young.”

Florence’s brow crinkled as he uttered, “It is a miserable practice, but we’ve done all we can to stop poachers from harvesting their young. It’s difficult to police an entire planet, especially one that hasn’t been productive since landing here. The Empire came here to gain resources, not act as saviors.”

Florence turned a palm to me, “That is why what your guild is so inspiring. It’s the kind of guild that many wish they were a part of.”

Disgust spread over my face, “But I’m helping a guild that harvests other sentient species children and serves them with champagne and fruit?”

Florence winced, “I, I don’t know what champagne is, but I can promise you that we’ve done all we can to stop the practice. There just isn’t enough altruists who are willing to help this species. There are even factions that would rather we rid the Empire of them altogether.”

I let my hands flop on my sides, “So genocide? Is that just a thing for every large guild?”

Florence raised his hands, his voice rising, “Do you think I haven’t tried to stop it? I’ve invested a personal fortune in creating protective practices for the vagni. I’ve ruined my reputation by trying to research a solution to coexist with eldritch. Time and time again, I’ve made sacrifice after sacrifice.”

Florence’s eyes widened while he grabbed my shoulders,

“It is never enough. It will never be enough.”

He peered down, “I just...I just can’t do any more than I’ve done.” He let his hands flop against his sides, “I just can’t.”

A silence passed over us, and Florence shrunk in my sight. He shook off a deep sense of sadness before glaring at me,

“I understand you believe the Empire’s policies are evil. Recognize that your time on Giess wasn’t perfect either. Over nine out of ten gialgathens died during your stay there, and the entire planet is about to get wiped out tomorrow. At the very least, we’ve stopped the eldritch from consuming this world entirely, even if we’ve left our fair share of scars behind.”

Florence spread his arms, “I just ask you to understand that it’s hard to do these things perfectly. Situations devolve. Complications arise.”

I peered down, thinking about what he said. From what I understood, Florence didn’t seem like the lying type. If anything, he left his feelings on his sleeves, being too open and honest at times. The other albony viewed that as a weakness, but I considered it a strength. It meant I could actually trust what he said.

From his spill earlier, he’d done everything he could to resolve the issues with the vagni. Even if I tried my best in his situation, I doubt I could’ve done much better. I mean, I left Earth in a state of disrepair and went to Giess to get rid of my own guild’s bounties. It was a safer route for the people I cared about longterm and me. At the same time, the people back on Earth wallowed in poverty during that time. Someone could judge me for that, just like I judged the Empire for what they did.

I couldn’t tell if I was just making and accepting bad excuses, however. It all left a bad taste in my mouth, leaving behind situations like this. Surely the circumstances didn’t have to turn out like this? My eyes widened as I shifted through my memories. I remembered being the espen’s hero, the one they rallied behind to take down the gialgathens. I helped aid the Adair family as they started the Blighted Schism. I still regretted it today.

I winced at myself and how selfish I’d been. Compared to that, Florence was a saint. On an individual basis, he wasn’t that old either, good education aside. Even if Florence had everything handed to him, in some ways, the guy was worse off than I was. The people around him threw him in situations he wasn’t ready for, and even though he called out for help, he didn’t get any. Instead, Florence got jeers and an awful reputation. Despite all that, he persevered.

I’d do the same.

I put a hand on his shoulder, “You’re right.”

Florence narrowed his eyes, skepticism painted on his face,

“I am?”

“Yeah, you are. After this is all over, I want to help you with the whole vagni situation. I think that we can do something if we worked together on it.”

His eyes widened, “You really think so?”

I let my hand drop, “Yeah. I do.”

Florence believed me when I said that. To him, I was a larger than life figure. To me, I was just some dude trying to help out. If anything, I found Florence impressive. It took a lot to give up his standing in society to help the vagni, especially considering they hated him in return. That spoke a lot about Florence’s character.

Either way, I couldn’t just watch the poor guy struggle through this alone. Helping him out here for even a month or two would make a world of difference, and we could handle the issue by then. The situation could be better, and I could be a part of making it better. Knowing that felt good.

I tilted my head back to the group, “Come on, we’ll talk about it more later.”

Florence nodded, “Thanks for this. It’s rare someone listens as you do.”

I grinned, “Eh, it’s actually not one of my strengths. I think it isn’t for the Empire either though. They seem set in their ways.”

We walked back towards the gang, everyone taking out lunch and eating something. Helios stepped through a portal towards another world off in the distance, offering for Victoria and Alastair to join him. They did, and it was the most casual use of portalling I’d seen yet.

It got me thinking about it. I hadn't realized how rare it was for Helios's kind of portalling to manifest. Now it was apparent how unique the talent was. His generation of portals was so fluid that everyone I'd seen thus far looked like amateurs. Well, outside of Obolis, but he was an exception too.

Maybe Helios's blindness was what made him so good at visualizing and using portals. For most people, it was an exercise of the new. For him, it was an exercise of the old, and his sheer experience showed itself in his fluency. He'd made hundreds of portals today, and that was more than the portalists mustered over our entire siege of Giess.

Thinking of Giess made me think about the glassing. It was tomorrow, and it made my stomach drop in my chest just thinking about it. It was like a shadow looming over my head, but not because I thought it would be blown apart. The Adair's had actually ramped-up operations as we pulled out, their harvesting of silvers intensifying with each day. They held absolute confidence that Giess would be fine, and that unnerved me.

I hated complimenting an enemy, but Tohtella wasn't an arrogant individual. She was calculating and soulless, sure, but not arrogant. The Adair family knew something we didn't about the glassing. Seeing Obolis offer to watch the spectacle was mind-boggling in its own right as well. I mean, it was a more systemic sort of issue than one individual mistake, however.

Everyone that grew up with Schema questioned him less than I did in general. To me, the A.I. was a shady sort of drug dealer figure, except instead of drugs for money, Schema offered a different kind of exchange – power for control. People that wanted influence were more than willing to trade their souls for the status he could provide. If anything, the standard morals I grew up with were literally irrelevant at a galactic level.

It created a strange system where everybody stomped on each other to get ahead. The more you stomped, the better Schema treated you. By comparison, Schema's approach to me was a mixed bag. I was a productive worker, yet also a risk. I did listen to most of what he said, but not all of it. That's why I ran into a lot of complications with the nigh omniscient A.I.

My defiance stemmed from not needing him as much as most. I mean, a lot of my personal power stemmed from my work outside the system, such as my cipher runes or unknown skills. Schema accepted my lack of outright obedience since I was capable,

and this put me on the fringe of the system in many ways. This gave me an outsider's perspective.

By comparison, the Empire seemed more like Schema's ideal guild. They were industrious, stable, and controlled. They relentlessly hunted further status, fighting amongst each other for it. It resulted in tremendous success for some, though based on Blegara and the vagni, it left some in abject poverty. It made me wonder what kind of guild mine would turn out to be.

We already culled millions on Giess, and if the Empire had its way, we'd do the same here. Schema seemed content with what the imperials did as well, the whole eldritch worship thing not sitting well with the artificial intelligence. Personally, I didn't want to spend centuries culling planets entirely.

I'd rather build something instead of break everything down, even if that was what I was good at.

Those thoughts left me deep in a state of contemplation before Althea nuzzled up beside me. She looked up with a cheeky grin, "Hey."

I turned to her, wearing a soft smile,

"Man, you can't know how great it is to see you. I missed you while we were on Giess."

She raised her eyebrows, "Really? Why didn't you text me more?"

I coughed into a hand, "Well, ahem, I'm pretty bad at texting. I, uh, didn't want to bore you."

She rolled her eyes before squeezing me close, "Pshh, like I care. I prefer seeing you in person anyways."

I hugged her close, taking comfort in having her with me for once. The blissful moment passed as quickly as it came, everyone finishing lunch. Victoria stood upright,

“It’s time to get back to clearing Saphigia. We’re close to done.” She turned to me, “If that’s alright with you, of course.”

I stood up, and so did the others. I rolled my shoulders, “You’re right. It’s time to get this done.”

We went back to slaughtering Hybrids and saving the albony. Working our way through the city, time passed. The light fractals shifting above our heads waned as the sun crossed above and over the water. Creatures of the night came out in droves, alien beings reaching out from the depths. Their bioluminescent glow made them into tiny stars floating around us, each a different color and hue.

I held Althea’s hand as we ended the day’s work. Florence gasped for air, utterly drained from the grilling work. Victoria, Alastair, and my team also showed some signs of exhaustion, many lacking an alert sort of look in their eye. Seeing that, I turned to those around me,

“Everyone, excellent work. We’ll go ahead and get a good night’s rest and hit it hard tomorrow.”

Florence hit the ground while mumbling, “By Schema, I thought ruling a planet was hard. I had no idea.”

He fell asleep on the spot, so I lifted him with a few gravity wells, keeping him level. Hod molded out of the shadows behind me, his flames weakened from earlier. Torix and I retained vigilance for the others, our builds tailored for it. Once we zoomed back onto the ship, Victoria took hold of Florence,

“I’ll handle him. This is probably the hardest he’s worked in his life, so good job wrestling an honest day’s work out of him.” She glared at Florence, “Somehow.”

As she walked off, Ophelia stared at Florence with an edge of concern, the kind that she tried hiding. I noticed it but didn’t point it out. Of the new team members, the only person that wasn’t tired outside was Helios. The blind albony stared at his nails with boredom, as if this was a typical day like any other.

He raised his brow while looking at me, “Are we finished?”

“Yes. Can you warp us home?”

“Indeed. Before doing so, Obolis wished to speak with you one last time. You wouldn’t mind, I assume?”

I shook my head, “Naw, it’s fine.”

Helios sent a few messages before closing his status. A portal opened, and Obolis stepped out into the dreadnought’s control room from the level below. As the warp closed behind him, Helios lunged to the floor, kneeling as he usually did. Obolis raised a hand to him,

“At ease, as always.”

Helios stood, grimacing as he did so. He might be more drained than he looked. The Emperor lacked any sign of weakness, however, as he gestured a hand to me,

“It’s good to see you. I wanted to discuss a few details of our siege, along with a few personal matters if you have the time.”

“Alright, sure.”

“Excellent.”

Helios turned between us, “I’ll excuse myself until I’m needed.”

He stepped away towards a restroom in a side area. As we walked away, Obolis’s face darkened,

“I’ve never met a better actor, not on a stage nor in life.”

I frowned, “What, me? I can’t act for shit.”

Obolis nodded, “And it makes you trustworthy. I’m of course speaking of Helios. In that washroom there, he’s vomiting his guts out.”

I turned towards the orichalcum doors, listening closer. A slight hacking radiated from them, almost unheard given the constant hum of the vessel’s engines. Yet, it was there, and Obolis heard it with ease. The Emperor turned towards me,

“He will drive himself into the dirt in order to appease me and my wishes. I would ask of you to offer mercy where needed and discipline where warranted.”

“I can do that.”

Obolis walked forward, peering at the glass panel overseeing Blegara. He peered down, “It is my own failings that have resulted in this massacre. To think a people would be led so astray that they believe in an enemy as ruthless as the Adair family. Pitiably as it is, they’ve sowed their own fates, and now they reap the consequences of their actions.”

Obolis turned to me, “What do you think, Harbinger?”

I tapped my teeth together, “Hm...what do I think, huh...Honestly?”

Obolis raised his eyebrows, “I mentioned your merits earlier, honesty being one of them, so of course.”

I pursed my lips before saying, “Well, for starters, it seems like you guys really mishandled Blegara.”

“We are agreed on that matter.”

“And you really should have considered alternatives to essentially wiping out the vagni’s culture and way of life.”

“Most certainly.”

“And you probably could have thought of some way to make eating their children more difficult. I don’t know, the death penalty, maybe?”

Obolis closed his eyes before turning to me, “Perhaps you may offer criticism that is more constructive in nature? A solution, perhaps?”

I peered at Blegara, its vast oceans of blue stretching across the planet,

“I don’t know honestly. It reminds me of how I handled Giess. Looking back, there’s a lot I’d do differently. Just like on Blegara, the situation wasn’t clear cut on Giess. It was complicated and messy and hard to look at. I mean, when you’re in the middle of a situation like that, it’s difficult to make the right decisions.”

Obolis sighed, “I agree...That is why I sent Florence here. What he lacks in will he makes up for in talent. He has a means of seeing through what others find complicated, and I believed that talent would manifest in his rulings.”

He shook his head, “It did not. His ideas spiraled into the forbidden, and his results tumbled into the abysmal.”

I shrugged, “It sounded to me like the guy just wasn’t given the resources he needed to succeed.”

A light grin cropped up on Obolis’s scarred face,

“If it were so simple. Your guild has offered support without needing compensation, likely due to its brevity of existence and recent rise to prominence. As time passes, your guild members will demand appropriate compensation for their time and effort. Otherwise, they will leave your guild for places that will give them what they desire.”

Obolis turned a palm to me, “Offering those resources and remaining competitive with a galactic environment is more than difficult. It requires the management of class and position. I gave the albony an elevated position in the society I constructed for this very reason – I retain the albony’s talent.”

I creased my brows, “Can’t you get people to stick around without something like a payout? Many in my guild follow me because they follow my cause.”

“A cause is fueled by inspiration, and inspiration is fleeting. By comparison, an individual’s ego and fear are far easier to rely on, and I’ve done so with the very framework of my society.”

“Like with Helios. The guy wants status and security. You give him those things, so he follows you.”

“Indeed.”

I raised my hands, “What about people like Florence? He’s talented in his own way, but from what I’ve seen, you guys have done an awful job cultivating that talent....No offense.”

Obolis frowned,

“Truth is a rarity, so there is no need to excuse it. It is as you say as well. Many of those in my society have been raised within a very rigid rule system. This fosters rule-followers, not rule-breakers. For that reason, an individual like Florence is so valuable. Blegara was a place that required someone with their own sense of creativity and insight. The rules I set up would not function here, not without the loss of millions.”

Obolis closed his eyes, “And as such, the worst has come to pass. Regardless of my actions, both those past and those present, we failed here.”

Obolis gripped a hand, squeezing it into a clawed fist. He carried a well-controlled kind of sadness, one that anyone could see. Obolis pulled through that sadness and sighed,

“I’ve done all that I can do here. Now it is too late to save the vagni and elevate them. We can’t have our worlds become lost, and our people killed for others that refuse to be helped. In the end, this is all we can do.”

I disagreed, but that was okay. I intended to solve this problem with Florence anyway. Besides, I didn’t have to agree with everything the guy said anyway. Obolis gave me a smile,

“On a lighter note, I was wondering whether you still wished to view Giess’s glassing or not. Before you seemed rather hesitant. Perhaps that view has changed?”

I raised my brow, “Hm, I don’t know. It still seems risky.”

“It will be a sight for centuries. Glassing is a rarity and knowing when and where it shall occur? Doubly so.”

I took a deep breath, “You seem convinced it’s worth seeing, and you’re a guy that seeks out fun-to-see things...Sure.”

Obolis perked up, clapping his hands, “You shall find the greatest pleasure in viewing it, of that I’m certain. You’ll be offered the finest of luxuries during the event, as will your guildsmen.”

He gestured a hand to me, “Think of it as a final note of your stay on Giess, a closing of that chapter in your legacy.”

I raised my eyebrows, “It will definitely be the end of Giess, one way or the other.”

Obolis scoffed with oozing confidence,

“Schema is absolute, Harbinger. You’ll learn this tomorrow. It will wash away your doubt and allow you to look into the future. It will also be an excellent opportunity for our guild leaders to mingle in a different setting. An evening with wine and pleasantries allows for meaningful relationships to form after all.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Speaking of pleasantries, I was wondering how you did that whole ‘living magic’ thing. It was awe-inspiring.”

Obolis frowned, “It’s simple really, though difficult in practice. You create a centralized orb of mana before granting it a consciousness. Once the mind has been generated, you suppress its will with mental magic, graft the mind onto your magic, and have it enact your will accordingly.”

Obolis shrugged, "It shall only live for a few minutes at most as the energy will naturally scatter outward. You can dramatically augment a magic's potency by having it guided in such a manner, however. Think of it like this--"

He raised his hands, "Have you ever unleashed a calamitous attack that far exceeded a single enemy's worth?"

"All the time."

"Imagine that same attack with all its surplus energy wasted. Now, envision that same attack but with a mind of its own. It would use every ounce of itself to dispatch enemies at will. In that manner, far less of its potency is wasted away into an empty void, hmm?"

I cupped my chin, "Yeah, for sure. It's a good way of avoiding overkill."

He spread his hands with a smile, "My point exactly. Therefore, it is sometimes easier to use an attack to its fullest extent rather than attacking many times. Think on it, for it might be useful in the future."

"I will. Thanks for the tips. That reminds me of my golem creation too. I've been giving them minds through some runic programming. I didn't know you could create a consciousness directly."

Obolis grabbed my shoulder, giving it a squeeze, "With magic, anything is possible. You can even create a mind that suits precisely what you need at a given moment, though doing so takes much in the way of practice."

He turned and walked off, creating a portal from nothing,

"It was good speaking with you, but there is much I must attend to. Goodbye."

I waved, "Cya."

His portal closed before reopening. Obolis stuck his head out,

“Ah yes, perhaps you might want to wear something aside from armor while at the spacial lounge? It might be a treat for your lady’s eyes to see you in another light.”

He smirked, “Just a thought.”

He left with a hearty chuckle as my stomach sank at the idea. Gazing down at my armor, it shivered at my stare. I, not even once, considered wearing clothes over this damn thing. I had no idea how a suit would work.

I squeezed my hands into fists.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Chapter 268: Unexpected Help

But working on something nice to wear would have to wait. I turned towards the restroom’s doors, waiting for Helios to walk out. As he did, the cape-wearing albony looked no worse for wear. He gave me a nonchalant wave,

“I see you and Obolis have finished your talk. Should we go to rest?”

“Yeah. You guys need it.”

Obolis warped us into Mt. Verner, the mountain night shift working a few of the machines on the second floor. Beneath us, the residents slept soundly in their beds as essential workers kept this place up and running. I gave them thanks before we made our way to the top floor.

The others passed out, all of them exhausted from the day’s work. With a full night ahead of me, I started trotting out to work on my golems. Interrupting me as I made my way there, a message from Isa cropped up in the corner of my eye.

Isa Benett(lvl 1,802) – Hello Guildleader. We’d like to have a meeting with you about your golems and their goodness. This would be in order to develop them furtherer as well as discussing details about the operations and stuff. Take your time in responding because we know how busy you is.

Thank you for your time and considerings.

Sincerely, Isa Benett

I raised my eyebrows, the message written strangely. After sending a quick reply that I'd meet right now rather than later, Isa sent a reply.

Isa Benett(lvl 1,802) – Hello Guildleader. Right now? Like, right now? I didn't want to impose upon you in a way that isn't good.

I made a reply that waiting would impose more than having the meeting right now, mainly because I'd have to remember it. I mentioned needing their location as well. Isa sent me her position, a bar called A Gambler's Paradise. It was actually on the fifth floor of Mt. Verner, being a pretty fancy place to get drinks.

In fact, it was damn close to where I already was. I hadn't entirely made it out of the fifth floor where my suite was, and I just began walking past a few of the fancier shops on my way to the main elevator. I walked across two other eateries, reaching the Gambler's Paradise on my left. As I walked in, I noticed the saloon doors and stylized visuals.

The first part I noticed was how rugged everything was. It was like someone took old, worn down antiques and upcycled them into this new place. Barrels were made into cushioned seats, worn boards converted into bar stools, and cowboy gear made into props. They even had gambling tables fashioned out on the edges of the main room.

One one of those tables, I found three people there: Isa, Lester, and Bryan.

They were playing a card game I'd never seen, quite a few empty bottles surrounding them. They gawked at me, utterly horrified that I showed up in just a few seconds after her message. As I stepped up, I leaned against the table and turned to them, "So what's up?"

They glanced at each other, each of them trying to get the other to talk in their place. It was kind of like a strange staring competition. Eventually, Isa cracked. She whipped her head towards me and stiffened up,

“It’s...it’s good to see you, commander, sir, commander.”

My brows furrowed, “Uh...you too. What did you need me for?”

They once again stared at each other, another silent staring competition ensuing. This time Lester cracked, “Would you like a drink?”

I shrugged, “I could, but it would be wasted. My body burns through alcohol like its nothing.”

Lester stared down, appearing disappointed. Bryan gestured towards one of the unopened bottles, “Uh, please partake of the beverage.”

I lifted a finger, shuttling the bottle towards my hand with a telekinetic push. It snapped into my hand before I flicked off the bottle cap and drank some. It tasted awful, like most alcoholic beverages. Anyone I talked with about the stuff before the culling always said I’d get used to it. So far, that wasn’t the case.

That being said, it might be because I wasn’t giving it a fair chance. I gave it another sip, different flavors popping out from the awful. I honed in on a few orangey tones and a hoppy fullness. I finished it, the tiny bottle barely enough to get my mouth wet. I crunched the bottle in my hand before deconstructing the matter.

I gave it a nod, “There’s some citrus in there. It’s...good.”

Lester perked up, his eyes widening, “You noticed the orange peel?”

I nodded. Lester grinned ear to ear as he shoved Isa, “I told you. It’s delicious.”

I peered between them, “Wait a minute, did you make this?”

Lester’s chest rose, “I did. Since Schema came around, everyone has forgotten what a good brew tastes like. I figured someone had to remind them.”

I stared down, noting the strange cards they played with. They were rough around the edges, cut by hand most likely. On top of that, they had a signature style on them. I turned to Bryan,

“And you made this card game?”

Bryan leaned back, overwhelmed that I noticed, “How...how did you know?”

“Your runic carving and the lettering on the cards were the same styles. I put two and two together.”

Isa coughed into her hand, wobbling a bit, “Ahem, we didn’t come here to tell you about ourselves. Or did we?”

I smirked, “It looks like you guys came here for reasons unrelated to work.”

“Uhm. Yes. We did. Now that you’re here, we...we can handle it though. So, we’re handling it. Right now...” She blinked, “So your golems. They are good. Good.”

Man, she was trying to keep her shit together, but it was hard to not laugh out loud. I covered my mouth, trying to look thoughtful,

“Mh, hmm.”

“So...We thought, ‘Hey! Why not get someone to help out since the golems worked so good.’ So...I figured why not start that conversation before I forgot about it.”

She frowned, reaching out her hands, “And then you’re here...like...thirty seconds later. I mean, like shit. Wow. Fast.”

Bryan laid his head down, snickering while Lester kept on his poker face. I nodded, and she continued,

“So we called over a good engineer buddy who wanted to work on golems. He finished his other contract a week back...and he wanted to work on something new. I put two and two together, and I got four...which was him working with you.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Who is the guy?”

“He’ll be here...in like thirty seconds...Not guildleader seconds, though. It’ll be normal seconds. Guildleader seconds are, like...fast.”

Behind me, the saloon doors opened. I turned around, finding Diesel of all people stepping into the bar. He changed his outfit from before, the military fatigues gone. He wore multiple satchels and backpacks on him, draped with eldritch leather belts. He looked like a tinkerer who didn’t have time for a desk, so he brought his desk with him wherever he went.

I spread out my arms, “Hey, it’s good to see you, man.”

Diesel did the same,

“Hey Daniel, it’s been a while.”

We gave each other a quick hug before I turned towards Isa, “So this is the guy?”

She looked between us, confused as could be, “Wait a minute...Diesel, you know the guildleader?”

Diesel scratched the back of his head, looking down, “I do, I do. He and I met when I was still a part of the Steel Legion. We were prepping to take down Yawm, I think. I helped design Althea Tolstoy some cannons, and I still help her out from time to time these days.”

He pointed at me, “We catch up from time to time, but we’re both busy.”

Bryan gawked at us as if we were aliens,

“I...Why didn't you ever say anything, Diesel?”

“Because there was never a reason to...Besides, I don't like to brag. It's not my thing.”

I turned a palm to Diesel, “So you like to work with golems?”

Diesel winced a bit, “Uh, how do I say this. I have a lot of theories about them, and I'm very curious to learn. I've been pretty close to the dungeon clearing corps for a while now, so I let them know about what I wanted to work on next. They said they had a big client who was interested in golems, and they could hook me up with some more work.”

Diesel raised a hand, “I'm not an expert. Hell, I'm not even a beginner, honestly.”

“What? Nonsense. I've seen your work before. You're damn good, and I could use the mental muscle.” I pointed at the three people sitting down,

“This was a good idea. Keep it up, guys.”

They stared at each other in disbelief, each of them shocked that this complete shitshow of a meeting worked out. Isa puffed her chest out while smiling, “Hah...told you guys. Yup, good ideas.”

I pointed outside, “Diesel and I can talk this out and try to match schedules. You guys enjoy yourselves and your time off. You've earned it.”

Isa turned towards Bryan as if I'd already left, “Can you believe that worked?”

Bryan shook his head, wobbling a bit. Isa leaned back, “I mean, I can't.”

Bryan shook his head again, wobbling more. Isa looked at Lester, “What about you? Do you believe it?”

Bryan shook his head again before falling over, passing out. Diesel laughed as we walked out while I shook my head. Eh, I'll admit I had a grin on my face too. As we walked, Diesel pointed at the bar,

"You know, they designed and made that place from scratch. Isa's really into decorating, so she made the place. Those two helped with the other stuff."

I nodded, "Bryan designed the card games, and Lester brewed the drinks. They make a good combo, and I can see why they work so well together. It's nice to see people settling down and finally making places like that again."

Diesel raised a fist, "You're the reason, sir."

I shook my head, "I honestly don't think so, but I'm trying to help out now that I have some time to myself. See, that's why I've been making these golems out on the edge of Mt. Verner. They're supposed to handle dungeons for people so that they can focus on making cool bars instead of killing monsters."

Diesel stared out in the distance, "Ah, man, that's the dream. I know after I finished that contract with the vehicle and power armor designs, I wanted to try something more magically inclined this time. I still didn't want anything too far from my engineer roots, so I figured golems were a good first step."

I frowned, "You know, maybe. For most people, golems would probably be a particular, arduous field. They're very conceptually demanding."

Diesel cupped his chin, "How so?"

"Well, you have to plan them out from start to finish. Golems don't work as well with tinkering. That puts a lot of people's problem-solving methods and throws them in the gutter."

Diesel frowned, "Ah, so they can't use trial and error? That is tricky."

"Hmm, technically they could, but that requires a tremendous amount of time and resources compared to other fields. You're much better off finding the flaws in the design before making it."

“That sounds more like making houses than I expected. You can’t make many mistakes in those. Otherwise, people might die in them. Fortunately, that kind of thing is my specialty.”

“That’s perfect for what I need,” I said while I pointed at Diesel,

“I know you’re probably tired and all, so when would you be able to work?”

Diesel shook his hands, “I actually just got up. I haven’t been leaving the mountain much, and my work doesn’t require me to get up at any certain time. My sleeping schedule’s gotten way out of whack because of that.”

I raised a fist, “Hell yeah, keep it that way. We can get started right now.”

Diesel’s eyes widened, “Right now?”

I gave him a thumbs-up, “Yup, right now.”

We made our way towards the edge of Mt. Verner, Diesel struggling to keep up,

“How do you make this hike every day?”

“I fly.”

“Oh yeah... You can do that.”

I lifted him with gravity, “I can float you over next time if you’d like. It’ll save us time and energy.”

Diesel leaned back, “Please, and thank you.”

We reached the golems, finding them resting in their usual spots. After awakening them from their slumber, Diesel inspected them and how they worked. We discussed a lot of

the details involved with their designs, how I made them, and my blueprints for their consciousnesses.

In general, Diesel was impressed, but he radiated a slight disappointment. That disappointment grew with time, and after a while, I crossed my arms,

“Alright, Diesel, what’s up with that constant look of letdown over your face? It’s like someone shit in your cereal.”

Diesel coughed into his hand, “I, uhm, it’s nothing.”

I frowned, “I’m asking for honesty here.”

Diesel cleared his throat, “Ahck hem...Ack...Ack...hem...Okay, so these are great models, especially considering they’re your first ones.”

“Those are the fourth versions of them.”

Diesel gave me a slow nod, “Oh...ohhhh. So, these are impressive still, it’s just...I thought that you might have accomplished more than this considering who you are.”

“Wait a minute. Are you saying my golems suck?”

Diesel waved his hands, “What? No. Noooo. Not at all.”

I looked at them, “Eh, maybe they do. I know I’ve been struggling with this whole process the entire time. I’ve got great resources, but maybe I’m just not cut out for this.”

Diesel waved his hands, “You’re great at making the runes and the carvings. The materials are amazing too. I don’t understand where you got all the steel for these things.”

I tapped my chest, “From a reliable source.”

“I believe you there. Anyways, you’ve got a few skills for this, but you need a planner or a designer to really take this to another level. I think I can do that with a bit of time to make it happen.”

From a backpack on his side, Diesel pulled out a sheet of blue graph paper, standard blueprint grade. He spread it out over the ground nearby, and he took a pencil out of a satchel on his side.

“Okay, let’s get started. Can you hand me the blueprints you used for your golems? They’ll help act as references for these new ones.”

I tapped the side of my temple, “They’re all in my head.”

Diesel sighed, “Oh boy...It’s going to be a long night.”

Chapter 269: Anticipating an Evening

– Obolis Novas –

I tapped the glass table with the tip of my claw as I pondered in the night. Long ago, I unlocked a perk that dissolved my necessity for sleep. Over the years, it became one of the distinguishing factors between my rule and others. The nights often stretched on into eternity if I found myself lost in my thoughts.

These seas of doubt and turmoil created a stormy state of mind for me. I wrestled with many ideas and the information in my mind, stretching for answers where there were none. It left me exhausted, my decisions mounting in both ambiguity and importance. I always found it strange that the most vital choices often carried the least information about them. I was positioned amongst a crossroad of sorts in that regard.

I despised not knowing what to do next.

My eyes narrowed as I peered at a dimensional slicer gained from a Sentinel centuries ago. Though I didn’t kill the Sentinel, I did orchestrate his death. In doing so, I obtained a rare treasure and eliminated a hated enemy all at once. Those were good times, yet those times did not last.

Standing onto my graphene layered boots, I skulked through a hallway showing many of my treasures. Upon one pedestal, the devastated remains of an Overseer’s gauntlet

lay resting. Within an exhibit, the fossil of an ancient eldritch lay cleaned and preserved. Further still, a Hybrid lay frozen in place for my viewing pleasure. It was grotesque, but at times, I could not tear my eyes from it.

These mementos reminded me of the grand adventures and escapades I'd lived through. The artifacts resonated with the vestiges of old cultures and vibrant lives. They told stories, each their own piece of history, and each echoing a lost epoch, forgotten until I uncovered it. This instilled a great sense of pride but also a tremendous burden.

This burden existed within the lands I conquered and the people I ruled. I used the resources of an Empire built off blood and stone to fuel these excursions into the unknown. I'd done so for centuries, and they'd given me many titles. Of those new names, I preferred Obolis, Finder of Secrets the most. It was the culmination of my life's work and my childhood dreams.

Yet dreams age and die, their luster long forgotten. At the time of my Empire's creation, consolidating an enormous base of resources seemed like a far better way of gaining the necessary funding for my expeditions. My Empire was to serve as a launching point, a catapult of wealth that would shuttle me into the vast void of space.

Now the Empire I built haunted me, my responsibilities weighing around my neck like chains.

I sighed while grasping the sides of my head, fur ruffling outward. I had already canceled three of my expeditions due to the Adair's invasions. I never imagined I'd be at the forefront of some civil war, yet here it had come to pass. This was likely due to my negligence. Granting ownership of worlds to my family was a bold move, one soaked in nepotism and pride. It might've worked with my incessant diligence, but I was off amongst the stars, searching for my next great treasure hunt.

I took a deep breath, breathing out my regret. At times, the truth was stranger than fiction. This rebellion was that concept's magnum opus. They converted entire species into monsters, created beasts worse than even the eldritch, and they used mind control as a means of suppression. Somehow they seemed to think these factors would lead to a better life.

I cracked my neck, my bones now older than some soils. I found solace in knowing the rebellion would be futile. This futility stemmed from a principle I learned long ago – Schema was the most active and powerful entity I'd seen in all my travels. While the

Old Ones exceeded his raw potency, they often worked in archaic and enigmatic ways. This lack of direction meant they were more akin to natural forces, similar to a wandering black hole or supernova. Powerful as those forces could be at critical junctures, they lacked the same potency that a directed existence like Schema enjoyed.

Other primordial beings skulked in the dark along the furthest edges of space as well. These entities rarely interfered with Schema's territory, these behemoths never wishing for an all-out war with artificial intelligence. Schema's ruthless approach made tales of other rebellions into mere rumor and speculation. His brutality in regards to dissent was legendary. That cruelty would showcase itself all too soon, and not merely with the destruction of Giess. This would be the beginning of Schema's wrath.

The A.I.'s predictable and systematic approach allowed me to accrue every resource I ever gained. He uplifted my people and me, and I would believe in him as he believed in me. The ancient construct allowed me to break innumerable laws as long as I sent certain choice pieces to him, along with data on my journeys. I was, in many ways, his most excellent scout. I trekked into the unknown, learned of it, and unveiled that darkness for all to see.

That is what I wished myself to be and to be seen as – the unveiler of the hidden. Schema was all but necessary to that end, and as he helped me, I would stay on his side and help him, to the end. That was what this rebellion was in many ways – a test of loyalty. It was one that exposed the true nature of many.

It enabled Schema to discover those that wished harm upon him and killing the rebels would be an act akin to cleansing. The most celebrated cleanser to come from this conflict was none other than the Harbinger of Cataclysm. He showed tremendous potential with some of it already fully realized. His guild was a collection of anomalies ruling in a forthright yet effective manner. They rallied behind him, and he acted as their symbol. They would thrive in the future, and joining their cause was, in many ways, an investment.

It was regrettable that the first piece of the Empire they laid eyes upon was the vagni. These beings reflected poorly on us, not only in our handling of them but in the race as a whole. By worshipping the eldritch, they put us in a horrendous position, one that, though mismanaged, was doomed for failure from the start. In the end, perhaps I should've followed Helios's pertinent advice when we found the planet.

Kill them all.

I winced at the thought. Old as I may be, my heart had not yet turned to stone. If anything, the vagni's ability to rebel against us demonstrated their latent ability. Reports mention the use of eldrich for their protection, and they organized far better than anticipated. I expected our anti-leveling protocols to keep them weak and hapless. It only fueled their anger at us, our attempts at dominance ending in their enhanced motivation.

I had not lost all of my confidence, however. Once we suppressed this insurrection, more substantial investments would be made into the vagni. They'd earned it, one way or the other. To create that future, the glass viewing tomorrow was all but necessary. I intended to meet several races, particularly ones well suited for dispatching the Hybrids.

Though the Harbinger's Legion was a powerful group, it lacked the widespread assault capabilities we required. Clearing three planets of the rebels would require months, if not years. A more efficient route would be necessary to ensure my Empire's safety. I would need to put my treasure and knowledge on the line. Otherwise, everything I built would be lost.

That was why tomorrow would be decisive. I needed as many of my allies there as possible to showcase the Empire's strength and ability. The Harbinger would inspire many there, as would his companions. Though gruff and in need of polishing, he would act as a selling point for my proposal.

A series of messages cropped up in my status, interrupting my thoughts. I steeled myself. Many called me, and many needed me. Such was the responsibility of a ruler, and I had chosen this life long ago. As I have before, I stood tall. This was both a burden and a privilege, a sacrifice and a boon. With my mind settled, I prepared my speech and the details of our gathering before answering messages and reports.

Sightings of the Hybrids poured in. They settled onto three of my worlds so far. Blegara remained the most infested of them. I showed my teeth, and I sharpened my claws. A seething hatred burned in my chest. I would not stop until this rebellion was utterly stomped into oblivion, living on in memory alone.

The Adair family would come to regret angering the Empire. We were a sleeping giant, one that once awakened would wreak havoc until there was nothing left but scorched earth and rotting corpses. We would crush them under our massive heels. We would smash them under our mighty fists.

And in the end, we would be victorious.

– Daniel –

I frowned at Diesel, “You sure this is going to work?”

He shook his head at the blueprints, “No. Not at all.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“I can’t give good news if there is none...Not yet, at least,” Diesel said while leaning over the blueprints.

It was a thing of beauty. We made it together, Diesel handling most of the design while I let him know what I was able to do. The difference here was that instead of trying out golems and iterating on them as we went, Diesel took a different approach. He relentlessly thought over and reviewed every detail at his disposal, not resting until it was absolutely perfect. I took notes on his methods as I watched, trying to understand his process and techniques so I could use them on my own.

It would be almost impossible to emulate. See, Diesel was a perfectionist through and through. This perfectionism resulted in a far more dynamic and sophisticated design overall. His entire idea for the new golem circled around a single line of thinking; I wasn’t using my resources wisely. Because of this, a lot of my golem’s latent potential was being wasted.

I had to agree, considering they produced a lot of mana, yet none of them could cast a spell. That was the first flaw Diesel pointed out. I argued that getting them to use spells would be all but impossible. He agreed, but only if the golems were constructed as they were.

The new models would be different. Diesel kept my floating joints model, praising me for the idea. Even if he puffed up my contribution a bit, I took all I could get considering how much he bashed my layouts overall. After keeping that, he scrapped almost everything else. He wanted to create what he called a ‘super golem.’ Super golems were multiple golems that worked together in one entity, kind of like a superorganism.

It required a few difficult resources, but we had them at our disposal already. Tools, refining, metal, and all the physical resources were a cakewalk for me to handle. The skillsets for crafting were also relatively simple for me to execute on. After all, we weren't working from ground zero in that department. In that regard, I knew what I was doing.

The other elements of the construct were much...murkier, however.

It required mind magic cipher inscriptions, something I wasn't experienced in. I would be creating several golem minds, tying them together with telepathic tethers, then giving each of them a singular directive. Afterward, they'd each handle different aspects of the golem's defenses and offenses.

The first mind would focus entirely upon his mental defenses and offenses. That was Diesel's idea after I explained the Adair's and their mind magic. This intelligence would be like a shell for the other golem minds. It would fend off most mind magic attempts while the others focused on physical movement and magical casting.

The movement-based mind would be a carbon copy of what I worked on before with many improvements. Most of the gains came from specificity; golems were awful at multi-tasking. By making one mind entirely focused on one thing, it could do that one thing many times better than before. These physical movements were what I concentrated on for the most part, along with basic problem-solving.

Diesel appreciated my work there. He mentioned there weren't many improvements left to make since the golem mind was 'full' of other stuff. He also explained that I was trying to improve something that couldn't really be improved. That's why I was hitting a wall with my golem's progress. There just wasn't any progress left to make using that method.

That left us with the third and final mind. This one would manifest as a magician that managed mana and power. It would use simple incantations to bolster both defensive and offensive capabilities. These magics would be fueled by an implanted grimoire. This would give the golem about thirteen spells to use at any point in time, increasing its flexibility by leaps and bounds.

This partitioning out of different functions also allowed each task to be better overall. In the end, this new approach would result in a golem that would be a fierce opponent

even for an intelligent eldritch. My brainless drones would evolve into dungeon clearing beasts.

It almost made me tear up just thinking about it.

Either way, the sun rose in the distance as we finished up planning the project. Diesel yawned, tired from the night of planning. He rubbed his eyes,

“This was about as good a night of work as we’re going to get, I think. I’ll see if I can’t get a few people to help us out with some of the details before we meet back up tomorrow. It would be nice to have a few more hands-on-deck, and I know a few of Torix’s students who could help us out.”

It seemed like a lot for the golem project, but I trusted his judgment. He worked on large scale projects before, and I sure as hell hadn’t, not like this at least. I let him handle it as we made our way back to Mt. Verner. Once inside, we made our way to the residential district at the lowest part of the mountain. I hovered him to save some time since he helped out so much. That, and the guy was about as athletic as a cheetah with four broken legs.

We reached Diesel’s home, a nicely carved out section of granite nestled along an upper part of a cavern wall. It was on the bottom floor, but it still had a unique flair from a few design choices. After walking through the stairs, a girl walked out of his room, sliding a metal door along a hinge. She was pretty in a quiet sort of way, not needing to broadcast it. She saw me and froze up before Diesel waved his arms,

“Woah, wait a minute. It’s our guildleader, Daniel. Daniel, this is Melissa. Melissa, this is Daniel. Honey, I know he looks ugly, but don’t take it to heart. He doesn’t act as bad as he looks.”

I rolled my eyes before nudging him with my elbow, “Come on now, you didn’t tell me you had a lady friend.”

I raised my eyebrows a few times. Out of her earshot, Diesel leaned over and murmured,

“Stop all that...but yes, she’s a keeper.”

“I thought you were crushing for Althea?”

Diesel shrugged, “I was, I was. After a while, it became obvious you two were going to stick around. I had to move on, and that’s when I found Melissa. She’s amazing, and I’m lucky I found her. It’s crazy how everything seems to work out in the end.”

Diesel smiled, a content kind of smile like he’d found something he never wanted to let go. I gave him a pat on his back,

“You’re doing better than I thought.”

He scratched his nose, “Heh, thanks bud.”

I saw him off before taking a mental note of where Diesel lived. Coming back would save us some transitional time between work sessions. After leaving the guy to his devices, I rode our main elevator back to the top floor. People were waking up, getting ready to begin the day’s work.

Along the top floor, a strip of stores opened for wealthier residents. Of course, anyone could come, but they kept to the middle of the highest level since it gave easy access for serving the top floor residents.

I gave a few waves and nods to civilians as I walked by, enjoying the newfound luxury shops. Exciting places popped up near here from alchemy to herbal stores. They carried ointments and lotions lining their shelves, ready to beautify and comfort customers. In other stores, they stocked animal goods or metalware, focusing on sturdy, everyday tools like silverware or arm braces.

They even opened a spa, a fire mage heating the water by hand to ensure it was kept at just the right temperature. He partnered with an origin mage who created scented salts and water to spruce up the experience. People’s ingenuity always surprised me, and by the time I reached my team, I was in a good mood.

I found Helios and Victoria already up, each of them standing in the middle of a culdesac of guest homes. These rooms were initially made for Amara and Hod, but they preferred sleeping in other places, like the floor. Because of that, we had the rooms

free. Besides those houses, Helios and Victoria spoke with one another, each of them catching up after yesterday's battling.

"It's so refreshing to actually be outpaced for once," Victoria said while spreading her hands.

"I can't tell if you're being serious or sarcastic," Helios murmured.

"You know what I mean. I always lead the charges. Having someone else do it is nice. It's better than always taking the brunt of every exchange."

I stepped up to them, and Victoria gave me a wave. Helios raised an eyebrow,

"Where were you last night?"

I pointed up, "Under the stars, working on golems."

Victoria shook her head, "What? You work on golems?"

"Eh, it's just something I do for fun. I'm having a guy help me out with making the new designs, and I think they'll be damn good at clearing out dungeons. We're running into a few problems with making multiple consciousnesses, however."

Victoria raised a hand, "You do know that there are eldritch that can eat black iron, right?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose, "Yes. Yes I do."

Helios turned to Victoria, and they exchanged a silent conversation. Victoria raised a hand, "Well, if that's the case, Helios and I know a very competent primordial mage that specializes in consciousness generation."

I crossed my arms, "Is it Obolis? I think he's too busy to teach me."

Helios scoffed, “Perhaps, but Ophelia, the woman you chastised in front of everyone as if she were a child, isn’t all that preoccupied. She could help you if she wished to do so.”

Helios cackled as I furrowed my brow. I shrugged, “If that’s how she took what I did, then that’s fine. She’s a part of my team, so it’s my responsibility to keep her safe. I did that, even if she doesn’t like me for it.”

Helios raised his eyebrows, “And perhaps there’s wisdom in that. Convincing her that your intentions were pure will be hell, however. That is if my own experiences are at all applicable. Perhaps you might want to enlist the help of the resident beggar, Florence. His experience in groveling should help you.”

I rolled my eyes, “If groveling is all it takes to get what I want, then that’s easy. I’m not here to save my pride. I’m here to save people.”

Victoria narrowed her eyes under her mask, “You would throw your pride away for something so simple? Lives are made every day. A reputation is built over a lifetime.”

That was a strange perspective. I frowned, “Is there a misunderstanding here? I don’t go around trying to convince everyone I’m some bigshot. Other people got that idea without my intervention whatsoever. All I’ve done is what I’ve needed to do to get shit done. I’ll keep doing that until there’s nothing more I need to finish.”

Victoria tilted her head,

“I, personally, value my pride and esteem highly. For others to do the same, you will need to demonstrate to them that your reputation matters. I’ve shown many that there are consequences for besmirching my standing. That is why I have risen in the ranks so quickly. I shall continue to do so, and I would recommend you do the same.”

I raised a hand, “Maybe in the Empire because it’s set up that way. Outside the Empire, results are all that matter. If you begin to sacrifice results for something intangible like notoriety, you end up accomplishing much less in the long run.”

I peered between them, “That’s why I’ve risen through the ranks, and I didn’t have a ladder already made for me. I built a ladder on my own as I climbed.”

Victoria nodded at me, “It’s fascinating hearing your perspective. To me, an excellent reputation allows one to avoid fights, make better deals, and tolerate less misbehavior. My troops obey me because of my report. Without it, I command them through fear, which clouds the mind. Are you still not convinced?”

I shook my head, “Not at all.”

She gave me a thin smile, “We shall have to agree to disagree. Right, Helios?”

Helios stood there in a state of deep in contemplation before turning to Victoria,

“What I will say is that my reputation fell apart with one misdeed. You treat me well, Victoria, but I know there are others that laugh behind my back. They think of me as a pair with Florence, both of us failures. All of my actions have amounted to no shift in what others believe of me.”

Helios stared at his hands, “What I have left behind are the actions and impacts I’ve had on people. Those cannot be taken away, no matter what others believe to be true.”

Helios shook his head, “Yet they grant me nothing. In the end, I...I don’t know what matters anymore.”

He squeezed his clawed hands into fists. Victoria put a hand on his shoulder, “Helios, you’re a Novas. Hold faith in that position and standing. You’ll rise up once more someday. I know this.”

He peered at her, a soft smile on his lips,

“Yes...Perhaps I might.”

To me, these guys seemed crazy. They could think what they wanted to think, as long they followed my orders. It wasn’t like I needed them to agree with me about everything anyway. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have anyone following me.

Interrupting our philosophical musings, Hod molded from their shadows. Being shorter than them, he reached his bird arms over their shoulders,

“Hod welcome fur people. Fur people fluffy, and Hod like fluffy things.”

I smiled at Hod, “Good-natured, as always.”

Hod’s chin lifted straight up into the air as he gloated,

“Hod is good. Good is Hod. Hod look up words in book. Big book show good means Hod.”

“You mean a dictionary?”

“Hod think...maybe. Hod not good at read.”

Helios rubbed his temples with the knuckles of his hands while Victoria laughed. Hod pulled himself off the floor, using both of them as supports. He swung back and forth while moving his legs.

“Hod fake fly.”

Althea stepped out of our suite, our fancy-schmancy apartment bigger than the other homes here. She walked with light, graceful steps, her casual clothing always a sight for sore eyes. I grinned before walking up with excitement. We hugged, and I spun her around before leaning my forehead against hers,

“Hey beautiful.”

She smiled back, “Hey, handsome.”

Victoria tilted her head, “Ahh, how sweet.”

Helios walked off, leaving the situation, “Disgusting. Tell me when we are to leave for Blegara. I am ready and waiting.”

I shook my head, “We’re actually taking a short break today. Obolis invited us to the glass viewing. You guys can come if you want.”

Victoria raised her hands, “What? Really?”

Florence peeped his head out of a window in one of the apartments,

“What? Are you really sure?”

Victoria turned to Florence, “Were you listening to us the entire time?”

“What? Of course not. My ears are simply highly trained to pickup when parties are mentioned.”

The party goer closed his window before rushing down the stairs and running out his door. Slamming it behind him, he took wide steps to us before spreading his arms,

“A soiree? By Schema, it’s been too long. We have to get ready right now. I’ll get everyone something to wear that’s more suitable. I know a guy that knows a guy that knows a girl. She’s the best, and I have a few favors I can call in.”

I raised an eyebrow, “You’re assuming we don’t have something fancy to wear?”

Florence raised a hand, “But of course not. Your guild is all about getting the job done when it needs to be done, right?”

“So, you were listening the entire time, huh? Well, Yeah, we are about that.”

“And you’ve yet to attend a ball or gala, right?”

“What are you getting at?”

Florence had a cheeky smile on under his mask,

“So it goes without saying that you’ve yet to address your wardrobe. Don’t worry, I’ll handle it for you. Just give me some measurements, and I’ll have it handled.”

I looked at my arms, “I wonder if I could just shift my armor into a suit.”

Florence cupped his chin, “Hmmm, are those the unique fashion to your species? Would you mind showing them to me?”

I molded my armor into the rough approximation of a suit. It was sleek and sharp, too sharp, in fact. Some of the edges and corners might as well have been blades, and mimicking the texture of the fabric was outright impossible for me. This left it smooth and glossy, giving me a cheesy look.

Florence leaned close, inspecting all the intricacies of the garment, “Ah, a three-piece ensemble that accentuates shoulder width and downplays issues with your midsection. Interesting. In your case, a less structured approach would result in a softer appearance, making you more approachable. I think a bit less sheen would contrast your gruffness, making you appear more rustic. What do you think?”

Man, I didn’t think Florence would be this fascinated with fashion. I looked down, “Wouldn’t this be fine?”

Florence scoffed, “Oh yes, so would a burlap sack, yet most wouldn’t go to a galactic ball wearing one.”

“I don’t know, man. I don’t think I can pull off a suit like that.”

Althea looked up at me, “I...I think you’d look nice.”

My heart melted. Fuck.

“Okay, I’ll do it.”

Florence raised a fist, “We’ll show them a more refined side of the Harbinger, one that isn’t unkept or uncouth...At least in his appearance.”

I deadpanned, “Really now?”

Florence turned towards the rest of my guildsmen, “I can have it handled for everyone here, in fact. I’ve got a lot of favors to cash in.”

I rolled my shoulders, “Well, it will definitely be new. That’s for sure.”

Florence pulled out his obelisk, a fancier model. It began scanning me from head to toe. On Florence’s left, a 3-d model popped up of me, though it lacked any real detail. Florence looked at it then back to me,

“Can you take the armor off?”

“It’s my skin, bones, and in my blood...So no.”

Florence raised his eyebrows, “By Schema, do you bleed metal?”

“Yes.”

Florence shrugged, “I’ll make sure these limitations are taken into account. We’ll do our best.”

He went to scanning everyone here outside of Helios and Victoria. After finishing up with us, he skulked off towards the other members not present. As he did, I remembered to extend the invitation to other people. I sent a message to my top guildsmen, along with the new albony that were a part of my team.

After finishing that conversation, I left towards breakfast at a cafe. I hadn’t had eggs and toast in years. The others followed, and the nostalgic flavor brought me back to different times. The albony enjoyed most of our food, though they preferred the meats.

Their species evolved off a diet of mainly cured or dried foods like bacon or jerkies. This gave them a vast variety of meats they shopped from.

Despite that, the sheer novelty of earthen food made it a fun experience for them, and even Helios perked up. I wasn't the only one that could tell either. The albony kept their masks on, using a sliding compartment to let themselves eat. This exposed their teeth, and even with my sharp senses, I never noticed the compartment's outline before. The albony had perfected their visors centuries ago, so their excellence in mask-making made sense.

Once the meal was completed, I made my way towards Chrona and Krog. There was no way in hell I was about to send them an invitation to view Giess's glassing, at least not by status message. Instead, I chose to let them know in person so they didn't get the wrong idea. I found them on the outskirts of Mt. Verner's forests. Chrona sparred another gialgathen while Krog watched as both the battlers glided through the air with succinct, graceful movements. Chrona kept the edge throughout, though she scrambled at times when pressured.

As I neared them, they settled down, landing onto the ground to meet me. They bowed before I raised my hands, "Don't worry about the bowing thing, guys. We're still friends, even if I'm your guildleader."

Krog's eyes showed the strain of sleepless nights, as did Chrona. It left me somber and almost afraid to ask them if they wanted to come to the glassing. I wanted them to know they were a core part of my guild, however, so I raised a hand,

"So, uhm, our guild has been invited to watch the glassing of Giess. I didn't actually want to go, but Obolis insisted. Neither of you has to go through with this invitation I'm giving you, and I know you're both tired. I...I just wanted to make sure you both felt included."

I scratched the back of my head, "Man, this sounded better in my head than when I said it out loud. Jesus Christ, just forget I asked."

Chrona gave me a gentle smile, "Do not doubt yourself. I...thank you for this invitation, but I would rather stay here. This is my new home, and I wish to get myself situated."

Krog sighed, “Our planet’s demise is something the powerful views for pleasure, hmm?” He peered down, “At the very least, it shall bring someone some joy.”

He winced, “I shall not partake in that joy. Of that, I’m resolute.

I bit my tongue before saying,

“So I’m guessing that’s a hard no. So, er, I hope you guys are enjoying Earth so far.”

Chrona nodded, “It is different, though beautiful in its own way. I think of it as a muted version of Giess, one lacking the same vibrance in mana and life. Perhaps that is simply me showing a bias for my home.”

I tapped my legs, “It’s good to hear you don’t hate Earth at least.” A thought popped in my head,

“Did you ever meet with Torix to talk about him learning primordial mana? I can’t remember if I ever mentioned it.”

Chrona tilted her head, “I have, and we decided it wasn’t worth pursuing. He is headstrong and overwhelmingly favored towards dominion mana. This gives him a range of skills that he’s suited for. Primordial mana is simply not one of those skills.”

Krog whipped his tail behind him, “I was a part of the talks. Torix is a prodigy in regard to his chosen domains. That potential is a result of his sacrifices in other areas. I believe he will go far with his own mana and chosen path. You need not worry about him nor his progress. That wily mage will succeed even when given hardship and struggle. It is in his nature.”

I gave them a thumbs up, “I’ll trust you guys on that. Anyways, it’s good seeing you’re both doing well. When things settle down, we should talk again.”

They perked up, and Chrona snapped her tail against the ground,

“We would like that, leader. Stay well, and stay strong.”

I left them to their sparring, each of them blowing off steam. Other gialgathens flew around the skies of Mt. Verner, enjoying the clouds and wind on their wings. It made our base much less secure, but it didn't really matter in the end. We would eventually be forced out of hiding in our mountain. It was up to me to be ready for whatever was coming when they discovered where we were.

Those thoughts raced in my head as I bolted back up to Mt. Verner, meeting up with the others. Ophelia and Helios were already prepped, Ophelia garbed in a luxurious dress while Helios stuck to a new cape. Helios must have brought Ophelia over since she didn't rest here.

It might have been an exchange for hooking him up with his new attire if you could call it that. It could've been a favor for me. Regardless, I wasn't about to waste this moment. As I stepped up, I gestured at Helios to break the ice,

"I don't know how to say this, but I thought you'd make a bigger effort to look different."

Ophelia frowned, "He has. It's in the subtleties of his wares."

Usually, I'd chop that up to useless frivolity, but these guys took this as a matter of life and death. Well, at least compared to me. I looked Helios over with more care, and a few changes cropped up. He groomed his fur for once, and he added a few bands like Florence. His cape lacked the same holes and scrapes that his previous one had, and he polished his armor. He even took several pieces of crystallized mana as practical jewelry.

I peered at Ophelia, "I didn't think that would be enough from what Florence said."

She propped her weight onto one foot while crossing her arms,

"Looking good is more about owning your own style rather than sticking to trends."

Helios rolled his eyes, "And what are you, aside from the master of trends?"

Ophelia tilted her head at Helios, “I like riding those waves. They’re fun, and that’s how I like to dress. That means I’m sticking to my style by following the trends. I think of myself as a fashion surfer that way.”

I turned a hand to her, “Speaking of styles, Florence and Helios mentioned you’re a living mana expert. I was wondering if you could help me with a project?”

Helios winced as I asked, the guy turning away. If he thought I was shameless, then he was right. I also didn’t give too many fucks about it either, though. Ophelia raised her eyebrows,

“So the big man needs my help? Sorry, I’m a little too busy making sure I’m ready for the next battle. I don’t have time for anything else.”

Welp, I had this one coming.

“I’m willing to offer compensation.”

She gave me a small grin, “Like what? From what I can see around here, there isn’t much that’s valuable.”

I stopped myself from rolling my eyes.

“I’m a runic carving expert. I can carve into any jewelry you give me, power it with mana, and you can keep whatever I make.”

Her eyes widened under her mask, “Oh, really now?”

I nodded, “That’s what I plan on working for with the project. It wouldn’t be too out of the way for me to make a few extra enchantments for you.”

“So, what kind of inscriptions can you make?”

“It would depend on what you need. I’m best at configurations that revolve around survivability. I can also help with gravitation, telekinesis, temperature manipulation,

and matter generation. If you also need it, I can power a blue core in just under an hour. I mean, I can kill some monsters too, but you already know that.”

She leaned back, “You can power a blue core that quickly?”

Helios turned to her, “His natural mana generation is likely the highest of anyone I’ve ever seen. It is comparable to an elemental furnace user.”

She lifted her chin, “There aren’t many people that can utilize elemental furnaces to any degree of proficiency. Hmmm, I have a city that’s running low on power. If you power that up to full, give me a gravitational ring that lets me float, and give me a ring with matter generation properties, you have a deal. What do you say?”

She looked dubious during her offering as if she was trying to bite off more than she could chew. The thing was, all of that would take about an hour to finish if I layered my tasks. I’d be having her help me out for months in return. I reached out my hand,

“Alright. You’ll need to teach me how to do the living magic thing, and help me with my golems. You’re okay with that?”

She looked at my hand before grabbing my top two fingers with her petite grasp,

“Oh, that won’t be a problem. Know this – I won’t help you until you give me everything I asked for. You understand?”

I smiled, “Then it’s a deal.”

Helios shook his head before walking off. Ophelia grinned under her mask before hopping away with light steps. She might think she duped me there, but from my experience, none of those tasks were at all difficult. As Helios walked into his apartment, I shouted,

“We’ll be leaving soon, suits or no suits.”

He raised a hand before entering his apartment. As he did, Florence walked out of his own place, stepping up to me,

“I handled the suits and dresses. I called three different outlets I frequent, and I’ve almost got them finished. One of my contacts acquaintances is going to the party, and they’ll bring us the coats and dresses.”

“Hell yeah. Cool.”

Florence spread out his hands, “It will be a lavish night of entertainment. Gagh, you’ll love it.”

I frowned, “That’s usually not my thing.”

Florence pressed his fingers together while leaning forward,

“This is different. It’s about devising strategies and forming relationships. You’ll meet many people from many guilds. This is your chance to set up alliances, show off the strength of your guild, and maybe even make a few business deals. It’s fun, certainly, but it’s also a golden opportunity if used wisely.”

“Eh, if you say so.”

Over the next fifteen minutes, everyone got ready and met back up here. Florence took the initiative in that regard, making sure everyone showed up. Torix was the only person late, and he stared around with a dreadful aura that saturated the very fiber of his being. He wailed,

“I cannot believe we’re actually going to a party of all things. It would seem to me that we’re all wasting our valuable time, and utterly so. It’s shameful, truly shameful.”

I nudged him with an elbow, “Come now, you’ll enjoy it.”

“Bagh, it will take more than a smile to convince me otherwise. I’ve never owned a sociable persona, and my sensibilities tend to misalign with those that frequent various social circles. It would seem most fail to see the value in any of my interests. That is why I often work alone.”

I scoffed, “Heh, me too. Maybe it’ll be more fun than we’re expecting.”

Torix grumbled, “If only that were the case, disciple.”

Once everyone was collected, Helios opened a portal for us. He glanced at us,

“We’ll be arriving on the Nebula Drifter soon. It’s a space station that the Emperor created for his various trips into the nether regions beyond Schema’s influence. Any violence will not be tolerated as it could breach the hull and result in the death of everyone present.”

I shook my head, “Just most.”

“Huh, well, let’s avoid that if at all possible. We want to make great first impressions.”

Florence looked everyone over, making sure we listened. Without waiting any longer, we stepped over the divide, finding ourselves in the living quarters. It was a standard barracks for soldiers, a tight series of bunks interspersed by tiny storage units. It was made of orichalcum and a gray, dull material layered between the green metal. The same plasma linings offered lighting and heating, keeping the space comfortable and visible.

Helios pointed forward. We followed him, everyone squeezing their way through the compacted space. After walking through a long corridor full of other bedding areas, we neared a storage unit for supplies and food. We waited for Florence’s friend, all of us packed in like sardines. A few minutes later, and an avant-garde looking albony in an orange mask waltzed up to us.

He wore a sleek, showy dress covered in various kinds of crystalized mana. They weren’t like Helios’s gemstones which were tailor-made to prevent tampering. These mana bombs were just that – mana bombs. To me, this guy was wearing a vest covered in dynamite since anyone with any sense for mana could use the crystals to destructive effect.

Either way, he wore it with confidence before stepping up to Florence,

“Hello, darling. It’s wonderful to see you again.”

Florence grabbed his hand before bowing to it. He grinned under his mask,

“It’s good to see you’re thriving, Evan. Sorry to get down to business so quickly, but we’re pressed for time. Did you bring us the attire?”

“Of course, of course. Here, take them.”

Evan opened his dimensional storage ring, pulling out a sea’s worth of clothing. He propped them over Florence’s arm before waving at us,

“I’ll see you all at the party. Stay healthy and beautiful, darlings.”

Florence passed the clothes out as needed, and we went into the bunks, using them as changing rooms. With me, Hod struggled to get his new clothes on. That made sense since I’d never seen him wear clothes before outside of rags. I helped him out, using a bit of gravity.

After finagling them on, he looked like a new bird. Honestly, it was just a red pirate looking suit with white, weird-looking pants. It fit well and contrasted his feathering, however, so it made him look dark and mysterious. Well, if you didn’t think of him as a pirate or he didn’t open his mouth.

I couldn’t criticize him much since someone could say the same thing about me too. To fit my clothing, I molded my armor into a thin, even layering over my skin. After that, I wrestled with my clothes until they were finally on. Fitting on a suit was a more arduous process than I imagined it’d be, everything requiring a bit of finesse. With it all put on, I turned towards Hod,

“How do I look?”

“Not like Harbinger. Different person. Strange person. Not normal. How Hod look?”

I grinned despite his vague description,

“Like a million bucks.”

Hod stared at his hands, “Why Hod look like money?”

I gave him a pat on his back, “Don’t worry about it.”

Since Hod gave such poor feedback, I took matters into my own hands. I used origin mana to create a thin block of metal. With two durable gravitational panels, I squeezed and heated the ore into a flat plate. This created a smeared mirror panel I hovered in the air, thin as aluminum foil.

I was surprised by my reflection. I changed a bit from last time. My skin was still grayish, the metal infesting me down to my cells. My hair was still raven-colored and rough. Eh, it was what it was. I found a few more scars on my face, a few of my earlier ones fading with time. I didn’t know what made the scars, in all honesty. If I got scars from every wound, I’d be walking ball of scarred tissue by this point.

I was glad I kept my hair short, at least. Letting it grow out got my helmet stuffy, and I hated having to twitch my neck to get it out of my face. Combine that with a sort-of sharp jawline, and I sort-of looked good. Out of place, but good. The suit did the majority of the weightlifting in that department. Florence wasn’t kidding when he said he knew the best either. This suit fit my proportions to a T, and it was still comfortable.

Satisfied after a few seconds of looking, I crumbled the metal as we stepped out, Florence and Helios waited on us, each of them already finished. The more talkative of the two brothers chose a flowing garment, similar to his previous one. It left more of him shown, which was a surprise. It was still classy somehow, and he whispered to himself about something as we waited. Helios was already finished before we even got here.

A few minutes later, and the ladies stepped out of their rooms. Ophelia was already prepared, but she helped out Victoria, Althea, and Kessiah with getting ready. The albony beautician honed in on her work, making miracles happen with all of them. Despite that, I hardly noticed anyone but Althea. She took my breath away as she walked out in a blue dress that accentuated her hair. I could hardly stand as she walked up to me.

She grinned while putting her hands on her hips, “How do I look?”

“I...I...you look really, really good. Like, wow good.”

She blushed but powered through, offering me her hand. Florence turned towards us, “Does anyone want a prep in etiquette on how to handle themselves? I just rehearsed a lecture for it.”

So that’s what he was whispering about. I pulled Althea to me, “I think we’ve spent enough time on it already. Let’s go.”

Althea raised her eyebrows, “Let’s.”

Everyone stepped out while Florence looked devastated. Torix of all people walked up to him and grabbed his shoulder,

“If it should keep me from this party but for a moment longer, I shall sit here and listen to what you have to say. Aside from that, I am a complete sap for lectures in any and all forms, even those revolving around the most trite, pathetic, and useless of disciplines.”

I raised an eyebrow at the lich, “You know, you didn’t have to come if you didn’t want to, right?”

Torix shook his head, “I’m one of your most important allies. Leaving you to fight this war on your own would be heresy if I say so myself...Though spending my time listening to a lecture sounds far less dry than attending to others chattiness.”

Florence perked up and began his long speech. We left in a hurry, passing more corridors before entering another elevator. Helios turned to us,

“Do try to keep yourselves civil. That is all the advice you will need.”

Once we rose through several floors, we entered into another entryway, much like the other space station. Unlike the previous one, this specific room carried many entrances. Albony and other races walked in and out of these entryways, almost like it was a giant stadium.

I turned to Helios, “How large is this place?”

“Larger than Mt. Verner.”

Althea whispered, “Woah. In space?”

Helios grinned, “In space.”

We walked through the doorway, leading to a set of stairs. Stepping up and out into a room, I gawked at the sights around us.

Man, Obolis really outdid himself here.

Chapter 270: Discussions and Deals

The center of the Nebula Drifter was an enormous room paneled on all sides by glass. It showed the sheer vibrance of space in a way I’d never seen in person. Obolis really enjoyed nebulas and galaxies since they seemed to be an everyday aesthetic for the guy, and he used them to the fullest extent for the natural sense of awe they gave.

These panels of glass were supported by triangular, gray struts composed of the same material as Obolis’s armor. They were subtle, only taking up small sections at the very top and bottoms of the entire view. These enforcements radiated a firm sense of security and power as if they could never break. The floor beneath them contrasted this firmness, every section holding many secrets.

This spawned from the innumerable panels spread about on the ground. Some were propped up, shops set to open and close at a moment’s notice. Many of these fold-up shops took up the center of the space viewing room. Dozens of these luxury stores were fully prepaid, their merchandise free as clerks handed over expensive gifts. The Empire spared no expense, these centers stocked up on delicious snacks, drinks, and entrees to satisfy the hundreds of hungry aliens here.

So many options assaulted the senses, battling for my attention all at once. It gave the entire space an overwhelming feel of effortless extravagance. It was like the luxuries were just an afterthought for the real meat and potatoes of the evening: conversation.

Around us, hundreds of albony spoke with aliens of all kinds. They all looked unusual, but that meant no one really stuck out amidst the sea of strangeness. The open room

hosted several avian species as well, the large, open area of the room host to insectoids, birds, and mammalian species that could fly. Hod spread his wings at the sight of it, floating into the soaring zone to mingle. He perched himself on a landing rack designed with the comfort of sentient species in mind.

As he flew away, many of the aliens noticed our group, but their gaze didn't linger. I let out a deep breath as I watched eyes cease gazing at us. I preferred not being gawked at like some weirdo. Althea shared my sentiment, her grasp on my hand softening.

With our unease settled, we skulked through the place, a profound sense of discomfort coming over me. It was partly from being in space, somewhere so vulnerable. A single meteorite could shatter this glass room and kill everyone here. Everyone but me, and I'd be one of the people expected to save others.

As I planned out a rescue path for my guildmates, Obolis spotted us, the ancient albony towering over the others here. The grizzled Emperor shifted through the crowds like a ghost, stepping right up to us. He wore the same gray armor as always, though he groomed his fur like the other albony present. He turned to Althea,

“You've prepared for this evening well. You look beautiful.”

She looked away, flushing once more. Obolis peered at me, “Excuse me for saying so. I simply had to.”

I raised a hand, “Don't worry. I understand...but thanks for the apology. Florence got a little too friendly earlier, and I had to let him know.”

Obolis gave my shoulder a squeeze, “There's something I will need to let you know as well. You're a selling point for my cause. This means that you're a resource to me as I am a resource for you. That being the case, I'd rather utilize my resource wisely. The same could be said for you as well, couldn't it?”

My eyes narrowed, “What are you talking about?”

“Please, excuse me for this, but understand that it must be done.”

Obolis lifted his other hand, holding a glass in it. He took his claw and tapped it, a ringing sound overcoming the room. As nearby people quit talking, a wave of quiet passed over the party. My heart sank at the sight as Obolis gestured to me,

“This is the Harbinger in the flesh. I understand many of you may not recognize him as he often wears his armor. Please, speak with him and learn who he really is. You shall not regret it, and may your relations with his guild prosper.”

He gave me a pat on my shoulder,

“Good luck. You shall need it.”

My heart sank as the crowd looked at me. They rushed towards me and began talking and talking and talking. An endless stream of voices cascaded onto our group as we became the centerpiece of the party. We were like a new set of toys thrown out into a playpen full of bored children. I fought against this tide, speaking to a few people before being interrupted about fifty times.

Obolis would pay for this one. ‘Using resources wisely,’ my ass.

I raised a hand and pushed everyone away with a telekinetic panel. I turned to everyone while shouting,

“Speak to me one group at a time. I’m not going to sit here and listen to each of you yell over each other to get a word in. We’re civilized, so act like it.”

I used a bit of Event Horizon to really drive the point home in those nearby. A few people even fell down, not exactly high level but high in social status instead. After getting the situation under control, people talked to me. Over and over, they introduced themselves, their guild, their purpose, what they wanted from me, along with various offers they included in all those details.

I experienced intense mental fatigue, quickly becoming fed up with the entire prolonged exchange. Yes, I could remember the names crossing in and out of my ears. No, I didn’t want to. It bored me within a few minutes, the sheer strain of it swamping me. To ease the stress, I used my status to create an evergrowing list of names with a few categories underneath each of them.

Thank you, Schema, for the dynamic list-making.

This let me organize the data some, but I simply couldn't keep up with the demand. After a while, I asked for everyone to let me be with Althea for a bit. We walked up to the edge of the glasswork, peering out into the vast void. Inspecting close, I found the panels partitioned out by hexagonal, gray strings that reinforced the glass substrate. The pillars weren't the only thing holding this together, so it might have been more durable than I first estimated.

Althea leaned into my view, her hands gripped behind her.

"Whatcha doing?"

I noticed her figure, and my heart raced,

"I'm inspecting this glass. It has something supporting it."

"So it's kind of like what they do in Mt. Verner to keep the mountain from collapsing?"

I nodded, entranced by her, "Yeah...Exactly."

She noticed me looking, so she did a swirl, her dress's ruffles spreading out. She gave me a glance of pure confidence,

"I see I've got you on edge."

I got control of myself,

"Always. What do you think about the evening so far?"

"Blegh, it's been so exhausting. There were way too many names for me to remember them all."

“Same. I tried getting that situation earlier under control. I just didn’t want you to feel too uncomfortable. How’d I do?”

“Hmm, let me think. It was a tough situation the Emperor put us in. He really wanted you to meet people.”

“Yeah. The thing is, they’re meeting me, and I’m not meeting them. I can’t remember all these names and faces. If I wasn’t recording them in my status, this would be a waste of time.”

“Sheesh, that’s a good idea. You did more than I did. My eyes kind of glazed over after the fifth person was introduced.”

I leaned back, “What? Fifth? Mine did after the third.” I gave her a begrudging nod, “Impressive.”

She giggled for a moment before I wrapped my arms around her waist. She wrapped her arms around me too, and we did a little slow dance while staring at each other. A piece of light music played in the background. The smells of high-quality perfume and well-made food sauntered about, tantalizing the senses. She was amazing, and for a few moments, I was in heaven.

She grinned at me, noticing my bliss. She poked my nose, “I’ll be back. I’m going to go find Caprika and see if I can’t catch up. I’ve got so much I want to tell her.”

I gave a fake frown, “Don’t be gone for too long. I don’t want to be stuck here by myself.”

She rolled her eyes, “Come on now, you’re the Harbinger. One more conversation isn’t going to kill you.”

Maybe, but maybe not. I turned and stared outside, trying to look profound and deep in thought. I figured people might think I was too busy to interrupt, but my strategy failed as someone tapped my shoulder. I turned around, a bit peeved until I saw who it was.

I raised an eyebrow, “Wrath? What are you doing here?”

The slime queen, shaped in a feminine outline spoke in her grave, matriarchal voice,

“I am here to find someone who shall help our species against Plazia-Ruhl.”

I frowned, “Oh...Yeah. Sorry I haven’t found the time to help you yet.”

“You spoke of helping me, not of a certain time. We’ve warred against that monster for centuries now, and we shall continue to do so. I wonder when you would be able to assist us, however. Perhaps a date may be estimated?”

I tapped my chin, “Hmm, let me think.”

The first goal I needed to complete was this war with the Adairs. That would take a few months, at least. After that, I wanted to establish our presence on Earth. Helping out the Vagni wouldn’t take that long afterward, meaning it would take maybe three to four years before I’d be able to help out Wrath.

I bit my tongue, giving myself a mental slap. I was powerful, but taking on all these tasks could be more than I could handle. I needed to sit down and write out a priority list or something before I ended up getting in over my head with deals. Freeing up some space on my calendar wouldn’t do me any harm, either.

Popping out of the crowd, Obolis peered at Wrath,

“It’s good to see you again. I hope your colonies fare well in these troubled times.”

She shifted, “I would say the same, but given the rebellions, you’ve seen better days. I know this.”

Obolis grinned, “I have a measure of control over the situation. This entire evening is, in fact, a soiree to showcase Schema’s dominance over the rebellion. The glassing shall act as a reminder to you all. That being said, I’d rather my own planets not be glassed.”

Wrath seethed, “There we can agree, Finder of Secrets.”

Obolis turned to me, “It’s good to see you, Harbinger. Do each of you know one another?”

I nodded, “We do. We met a while back while I was pretending to be the Gray Giant.”

Wrath body wiggled in place, “Indeed. This is a wolf who wears a sheep’s skin, as the eldritch would say. We need him in our plight against Plazia. They fear him. I’ve heard them whisper of him in their legends. I wish to use his legend to build my own.”

Obolis frowned, “Ah, so the both of you are at an impasse then?”

Claws rippled under Wrath’s skin, “How would you know of our struggles?”

“I know a little of Daniel’s schedule, and strained would be a gentle word given his position...What if I acted as a negotiator of sorts to ease the situation over? Perhaps an agreement could be made?”

Wrath perked up, spines growing and submerging through her skin,

“I appreciate your kindness, Carnage of Olstatia.”

Obolis gave her a slight bow, “Please, call me Obolis or the Finder of Secrets. I’d rather not dabble into my darker history, whether by name or by action.”

I eyed the Emperor with suspicion. He came at far too convenient a time, and the guy seemed like he was waiting for this kind of situation to occur. Obolis gestured a hand to Wrath,

“So your kind is faced with a behemoth eldritch, one that can swallow worlds?”

“We fight as one, but it is mighty. It waits on calm winds, one day ready to pounce at our open necks.”

Obolis gestured a hand, “And this mighty warrior is preoccupied with his wars and alliances. Perhaps I may untangle the responsibilities for both of you by offering a deal.”

Obolis turned to me, “I can reward you with a few items in exchange for helping Wrath promptly.”

Obolis grinned at Wrath, “And in exchange for offering the Harbinger my resources, your kind may come to cleanse my worlds of the blighted ones. It would be a far greater use of your resources than fighting that hivemind.”

I crossed my arms, “Why would you want them to clear out worlds instead of us?”

Wrath shivered, “Our kind feasts on stone and metal. It would be no difficult feat to shift our diet to the Hybrids instead of the eldritch swarms of our homeworld.”

I tilted my head, “Is that what it’s like there?”

Wrath twitched as memories flooded in,

“It is a hollowed world compared to what you’re used to. We live differently, our bodies made of different parts and pieces. Our colonies war with one another, and we survive through evolution, our faith in nature absolute.”

Wrath lifted her arms, claws piercing her skin. They formed hands,

“And now our kind is faced with a being that has evolved past us. We wish to use an even greater being to fight this entity. There are few we believe actually exceed Plazia-Ruhl. You are the only one of those few that may be willing to help us.”

I furrowed my brow, “Why not just use some technology or magic? I’m sure that could help bridge the gap.”

“To do so is to sacrifice our way of life. If we must do so to survive, then are we truly living?”

I looked back and forth, “Uh, yeah? You would definitely still be alive.”

Wrath pointed at me, “You are no different from us. You wished to survive by your own means, and you lived through perseverance. A single-minded pursuit is what sustained you.”

I narrowed my eyes, “Now how would you know that?”

“We have spoken with the eldritch. They tell tall tales of you, Harbinger. They speak in whispered tones, carrying stories of a being filled with infinite hunger and unending growth. A true monster who is starved enough to devour its own skin and flesh and blood to lessen its endless famine. They say you are never satisfied. Perhaps it is true. Perhaps not.”

Wrath shivered, “What they see, I cannot. I believe in their fear, however. That I can put faith in.”

I shook my hands, “That’s got to be a misunderstanding. I’m not eating myself.”

“To them, it is more real than meat and bone. I sense the truth in their words. They say you bend the laws of nature to your will, and you wield the very fabric of dimensions in your hands. It is written across you, stories of your dominance, and immortality.”

Obolis raised a hand, “Is she referring to your cipher inscriptions? I understood you were channeling mana, but I didn’t think of it as devouring yourself. That seems quite illogical, even for the eldritch.”

Obolis’s eyes widened,

“Unless...you’re using blood magic.”

I frowned, not saying anything. Obolis grabbed his chin, “Ah, so that is how one can explain it...That is why you’re able to manage so many strengths. Hmm, interesting. This changes the situation entirely. No wonder you wish for an elemental furnace to such an extent.”

Obolis grinned at me, “You would be able to not only build yourself using the cipher, but you would also be able to rejuvenate from any harm in an instant by turning mana to flesh.”

Wrath leaned forward, “This monster wishes to devour this universe as well?” She turned to me, “You are no different than the eldritch then.”

I spread out my hands,

“Eat the universe? Really? Holy shit, guys. The scale is different. I’m not over here eating people or planets. At most, I’d be converting rocks or dirt into mana and using that for my cipher augments. I don’t understand why that’s considered so strange to the eldritch. To me, it just makes sense from a pragmatic perspective. That’s all.”

Obolis frowned, “Perhaps it’s merely a difference in perspective then? You are an anomaly, of that I’m certain. Using the cipher as you do would normally result in a stark shift in your personality. It would be as if you were rewriting who you are. Instead, it affects only your physical body, and your mind remains unchanged. I’ve deduced as much since meeting you.”

Obolis raised a finger, his mind revving up,

“Your personality is constant, only shifting as you naturally grow. In that way, your mind and body must be separate entities entirely now. Otherwise, the cipher would warp you into a caricature of yourself. I’ve seen it happen in others. I wouldn’t wish the same onto you.”

I remembered Yawm and what happened to him. The big plant man acted like a megalomaniac, some kind of obsession controlling him. Yawm was also covered in cipher runes that helped him use otherworldly powers. The runic configurations might have manifested in his personality and resulting god complex. That explained why he was so...off.

Those same side effects didn’t apply to me. Otherwise, I’d be acting more differently than I do if what Obolis said was true. My face saturated with confusion as I thought about it further,

“What would that even mean, though? My mind isn’t in my body?”

Obolis shrugged, “I’ve no idea, honestly. Your lack of precedent comes from being unique. This means there’s no history of this before; you walk into uncharted waters alone. In many ways, we can only pray you do not drown in those waters.”

I frowned, “Man, you really know how to cheer someone up, you know that?”

Obolis waved off my concerns, “Perhaps these implications will manifest at a different time. For now, I’d rather discuss more earthly concerns, such as the deal between you two.”

Wrath pointed at Obolis, “Why does it interest you so?”

Obolis stood up straight, “It is simply beneficial for me to be involved. I cannot offer you anything you value, Wrath, but I can offer Daniel quite a bit. He can offer you something you need, but you have nothing you may grant him.”

The surface of Wrath’s body quivered as she seethed, “I own many things I can reward the Harbinger with.”

Obolis crossed his arms, “Such as?”

“I...I can give him my children to feast upon.”

I winced, “Ahem, no thanks.”

Wrath turned to me in despair,

“They are delicious, I assure you. I’ve eaten my species children many times, and I promise you that-“

“Actually, I’m still good with not doing that. I don’t actually like eating children.”

Obolis spread out his arms, “My point exactly. We can create a triangular deal, and I may act as an intermediary so that all parties remain satisfied.”

I narrowed my eyes, “What will you be offering me? Killing someone like Plazia would require a hell of a deal.”

Obolis turned towards me, “Several elemental furnaces, along with instruction on how to use them. I may also grant you a meeting with Baldowah. He is the most predictable of the Old Ones, and he has shown interest in seeing you.”

I raised a palm to him, “I’d actually rather not meet anymore Old Ones.”

Obolis narrowed his eyes, “Ones? You’ve met more than one then. You haven’t met Baldowah based on what you just said, so that leaves Etorhma and...I don’t know.”

Obolis’s eyes lit up with fascination, “What was the entity like?”

I grimaced as thoughts of Eonoth passed over my head,

“It was loud. Very, very loud.”

Obolis rolled his hand with impatience, “Anything else you can add, such as its philosophy, the intensity of the meeting, perhaps its name?”

“I mean this when I say this. You should not mention that thing’s name. It might just talk with you. If that happens, you’ll end up melting into a pile of mush from just the echoes of its voice. Even I nearly died from it.”

Obolis smirked, “I assure you, I’ll be fine.”

My face darkened, “I assure you, you will not.”

My expression contorted further as memories of my blood vessels liquifying washed over me. I nearly drowned in my own blood when Eonoth and I first met. Obolis might

not be so lucky. The Emperor met my eye at that moment, and something in my expression conveyed genuine concern.

Obolis looked away, biting his tongue. He gave his eyebrows a quick rise while shaking his head in disappointment. He peered back at me,

“Perhaps you are right. I’ll drop the issue for now. Moving yet once more to the deal, I was wondering if my offer was satisfactory?”

I nodded, “Yeah. It was for me. I don’t know if I’ll take it yet because I have responsibilities to my guild.”

Obolis turned to Wrath, “What do you think of the deal? It’s a pleasing proposition, isn’t it? We would all prosper in the wake of it.”

Wrath turned to me,

“I would be pleased with this offer. I can throw some of my children in as an incentive if the need-“

I raised my hands, “No, no, that won’t be needed. At all.” I leaned towards Obolis,

“I wanted to bring something up that I noticed. I know you planned for this. If you try to take advantage of me, I’ll learn about it, and I’m not an enemy you want to make. Ask the Adair family if you want to know why.”

Obolis’s face turned somber. He chose his next words with care,

“I watched you ravage the planetside, and the memories of it linger in my mind like the echos of a foregone battle. Know this – you offered to help us without asking for anything in return. The Empire pays its debts in full. This is how I wish to do so...In fact-“

He raised a hand, “I’ll add a grimoire to the deal. It’s a spellbook written in the cipher. It gives incantations of all kinds, though many are admittedly enigmatic. Perhaps studying it will be more useful for you than I, given I couldn’t fully understand it.”

He gave me a knowing grin, “Consider the tome an extra gift given your past services. You may even use the team granted to you for Blegara to assist with your efforts against Plazia. Though young, they are all competent albon. They should serve you well both in battle and in planning.”

I gave him a begrudging nod, “I can’t say yes just yet. Let me think about it for my guild’s sake.”

Obolis’s eyes narrowed, but he swallowed his disappointment, “Take your time.”

I turned towards space, the vastness making me feel insignificant. That was a refreshing feeling since the options laid out to me involved the fates of wars and rebellions alike. Since the possibilities seemed overwhelming, I took a moment to break things down before thinking things over.

For starters, an elemental furnace was a given no matter the scenario. Obolis would hand one over after a few victories on his behalf, regardless of what I decided on doing. Knowing that fact, the furnaces shouldn’t weigh into my decision. On the other hand, the grimoire was interesting. It could hold a few secrets about the cipher I didn’t know.

Each breakthrough could result in a massive power spike for me, my golems, and my crafting. If I constructed better armor and weapons, my guildsmen would be more potent because of it. Even more so, if I ever eclipsed Lehesion, then nothing would stop me from getting Earth on the right track. Colonizing other worlds wasn’t even out of the question either.

This new deal also handled several issues I had with my scheduling right now. Helping out the Empire and the ahcorus would kill two birds with one stone. I could get to helping out the vagni and earth earlier rather than later. With all those factors in mind, I narrowed my eyes and raised my eyebrows, trying to look skeptical. In all honesty, I was already sold.

Before I could say I’m in, Obolis took the bait and turned a palm to me,

“If you accept this deal right here and right now, I’ll grant you an elemental furnace immediately. Tell me, what will you do?”

It turned out that pressure was a great way to muddy someone's judgment. That extra incentive made my decision for me,

"Alright then, consider it a deal."

That's what the grizzled warlord got for stirring the rest of his partygoers to interrogate me and my guild. Obolis noticed my satisfaction in an instant, his eyes widening. He gave me a slow, steady nod,

"Ah, I've been played."

I stopped myself from grinning but poorly,

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just using my resources wisely."

Obolis placed a hand on Wrath and my shoulders. He looked at me then Wrath, "Well then, as the deal states, I'll get an elemental furnace that suits you right away. While I'm grabbing it, you may both work out the details of this arrangement as you need to. The glassing will occur soon, so don't dabble on the details for too long."

Obolis walked off, "It would be a shame if you missed the event in its full fury."

As he warped away, I turned to Wrath, "It will be good to finally work with you."

"Likewise, Eater of Monsters. I shall stay on Svia, our homeworld, and help you hunt Plazia. We know where he lies. We simply cannot conquer his fortress."

I nodded, "I'll see if I can't help with that then."

"When will your kind be allowed to come?"

I tapped my chin, "Within a week, I'd say. Our guild just finished taking Giess on, and now we're all settling down on my homeworld. We need some time to rest and recuperate. After that, we'll head over and meet up to make a plan."

Within Wrath, several glowing spots danced around as she hissed in happiness,

“You give us hope, Harbinger. It will be the end of our plight, long though it may be.”

I sent her a friend request, “Don’t get your expectations too high. I’m not exactly sure I can take Plazia down. I’ll definitely try.”

Spines extended and submerged across her back,

“I...perhaps, you are right. You are our last chance, however, and if I cannot find hope in you, then my hope will die.”

I frowned, “Am I really the best option? I find that hard to believe.”

Wrath peered out at space,

“I have spent years parsing the galaxy for the greatest Fringe Walkers. What I uncovered was a simple truth – none of them can destroy Plazia. They specialize in the hunt for many, but never in the hunt for one. The one I hunt is an ancient hivemind, the deadliest of all known eldritch. This hivemind’s cunning is unmatched. Its armies are neverending. It knows of Schema, and it knows Schema’s limits.”

Wrath shivered with fear, “Plazia dances around those limits without fear, its mind unrestrained by morals or emotion. It has cleared rifts on its own to prevent the glassing of our planet. This has let it linger for so long without retaliation, biding its time as the monster builds its strength. We need more than what we are to fight Plazia. This is why my hunt for Plazia’s eater ends with you, Harbinger.”

She wriggled outward, her form destabilizing a bit. She expanded, golden claws extending out of her deep blue body. She seethed,

“That hivemind is our greatest failure and shame. Our kind could have stamped the mongrel out. It would’ve been more than possible if we attacked the being before it was this strong. We fought amongst ourselves, vying for territory and glory instead. Now all that we fought over is left to Plazia, and we fight over the scraps it leaves behind.”

I crossed my arms, “So why not just hire a team of Breakers? They sound like just what you need.”

“They would rather fight against bounties that guarantee wealth rather than assist our kind. We are poor by comparison to many species, our economies built on flesh and bone instead of steel and cores.”

I scoffed, “No wonder you offered your children then. They’re what you consider valuable.”

“But of course. Our larvae are delicious, and they are considered the spoils of war when one colony conquers another colony.”

A set of claws sprung out of her head, creating a mandibled mouth. Some kind of acid drool leaked out of her face,

“And I have partaken in the spoils of war many, many times.”

I looked back and forth, wondering if there was just a cultural disconnect here. Maybe, maybe not. Either way, I created a gravity well to catch her saliva, not letting it burn the ship. I’d have Obolis thank me later. Wrath’s fangs retracted as she turned to me,

“I will send you the necessary coordinates for my homeworld. May our kinds prosper, together, feasting forever.”

I got the confirmation she accepted my friend request as I blinked,

“Yeah, uh, sure.”

She composed herself back into her feminine form, walking across the room. Keratin spikes disintegrated in her gelatinous frame, those near her giving the razor queen space. She made her way to the snack bar and began indulging in said snacks with great abandon, shoving down unreal volumes of food. Beside her, Hod followed suit. After a minute, they locked eyes.

A competition spawned at that moment. Slime queen and birdman began eating food at an even more voracious pace. Nearby waiters walked past them, dropping platter after platter of exotic delicacies. These foods were wasted as both Hod and Wrath sucked down enough food to feed the rest of those here.

They were both massive balls by the time they finished. The two bulbous, swollen guests turned to each other as Hod finished a single bite more than Wrath. She gave Hod a nod of respect,

“You eat without end.”

“Hod hungry.”

Wrath scoffed, “I like this imbecile. He is both uplifting and a great devourer in his own right.”

They made merry, a crowd around them clapping at the impromptu entertainment. I peered around, looking for other oddities, and I found Althea talking with Caprika, Victoria, and three other alby noblewomen. Kessiah was at a bar, drinking other mercenaries and guards under the table. I hoped she kept it under control, considering her history with drinking.

Florence and Torix showed up a while back, each of them discussing the intricacies of etiquette and politeness. That might have been the only point those two could relate with, but it was somehow bringing them together despite that fact. After my searching glance, everyone continued enjoying themselves. I took a moment to breathe, soaking in a moment of relaxation. Beside me, a portal appeared as Obolis stepped out. He carried a subdued black gemstone in his hand. It revealed markings of the cipher that looked even more ancient than the kind Obolis wore.

Obolis raised it up, inspecting it as he said, “Look behind us.”

I turned, and Giess was shown near the central star of its solar system. Half of the planet was lit, and it cast a shadow behind it that widened with distance. It looked outright minuscule by comparison to the star, hard to even make out amidst the shining light. A section of the transparent panels powered up, electricity tracing the glass substrate via the gray reinforcement. A red circle cropped over Giess, and this circle magnified our view of it so that everyone could see with ease.

Obolis sighed, “Soon, the glassing will commence. It is time I make my mark here.”

With a gravitational wave, Obolis lifted himself up into the air. He took a glass and tapped it as he did before, the resonations silencing the massive crowd gathered around. As they silenced, Obolis spread his arms.

“Hello, my honored guests. We are here today to celebrate many things, the least of which is the death of a world that has spawned an untold number of horrors.”

Many of the albony here raised fists and roared. Obolis raised a palm, settling them down,

“You might ask what could exceed the importance of such an event? I shall tell you – we are celebrating our allies during these dark times. As you all know, my Empire is at the center of this rebellion. Three of our planets have been attacked, the Adair family rallying with the rebels on those worlds.”

He squeezed a hand into a fist, holding his anger back,

“Their disobedience has resulted in the death of millions. They fight for subtle freedom, one that holds no guarantee of safety or prosperity. What madness drove them to such depths, I will never understand. What I do understand is this – we will win this war.”

Albony and other aliens who supported Schema gave out shouts of approval. Obolis grinned,

“But we cannot win alone. The Adairs are a cunning and prepared force, their methods both brutal and effective. During these trying times, I will be dipping into my Empire’s treasury to fund the war. Just as well, I shall be taking choice treasures from my personal vault and giving them to allies who show grit, valor, and a desire to win.”

Obolis gestured a hand to me, and my heart sank.

“Here is the Harbinger of Cataclysm. He, too, lies at the center of this rebellion, acting as Schema’s spearhead. He has earned his titles through his many deeds. He killed the

Destroyer of Worlds, Yawm. He has fought against Lehesion, the Shattered God, and been victorious. He has killed more of the Adairs than all others combined during his siege of Giess.”

Obolis raised a fist, “And he has barely scratched the surface of his potential. This behemoth has chosen to ally himself with my Empire without asking for compensation. Such is the extent of his moral backbone that even when faced against this mighty foe, he chooses the greater good.”

Obolis was really playing this up. He accentuated choice words with a pointed finger,

“Yet our Empire does not accept kindness without returning the favor in kind. In my hands, I carry an ancient elemental furnace. It has been crafted from an umbral jade, ancient runes carved over its surface. It can handle tremendous volumes of mana, even when compared to other furnaces.”

He turned the jade to me,

“Please, take this as a gesture of goodwill.”

I raised an eyebrow, wondering what he was doing. The solution popped in my head a second later. The guy was pulling a classic layering technique. Since he was already going to give me an elemental furnace, he figured why not make it into a show of sorts? It would make him many new allies, and it solidified our earlier deal. Clever.

I saw no reason to argue, so I let the guy have his win. I floated the furnace over, snatching it out of the air. I inspected it for a second, the cipher carvings truly incomprehensible. Yup, this was the real deal. I gave it a slow nod,

“Impressive. Thanks.”

Obolis turned to those present,

“After you all see Schema’s might firsthand, know that you fight on the winning side if you choose to join me. Schema will not be alone in rewarding your valor, as I have just demonstrated. Thank you all for listening and enjoy the rest of your viewing. It will be an explosive show.”

Obolis's speech aside, I peered at the furnace closely, and it was incredible. It used dual layering, triple depth etching, even matching the strata of the stone, adding complexity to its message. It was beyond anything I'd ever seen. Someone must have spent decades searching for just the right stone to convey this particular message. Now it was here, in my grasp.

Oh man, once I figured out how to work this damn thing, Lehesion would be quaking in his boots. Or claws. Whatever, it didn't matter. I put the furnace in my dimensional storage, peering at Giess as Althea walked over. I eyed her, and her beauty was so stunning that my eyes could not be torn from it. We hugged each other, waiting for the glassing.

A moment later, and it began. A vast dimensional crack formed in the distance. A pulse crossed the entire solar system, our dimension wavering. The others around me struggled to sustain this wave, many made nauseous. I stayed standing, unaffected by the sudden shift. As I did, I held Althea up, the shapeless arbiter grabbing her head.

Those around us shook off their unease as an enormous, gray behemoth rose in the skyline. It floated towards Giess, the size of a small moon. Writhing masses of plated flesh rose from its surface. It pulsed with radioactive energy, many fusion reactors brimming underneath its skin. Its many eyes stared in all directions, hunting for more flesh to devour.

It found Giess, pulsing itself towards it. This was a Spatial Fortress in all its might and fury. Even as those around me trembled at its sheer size and malice, a knot formed in my stomach. This wasn't enough to kill an Old One or even Lehesion. Don't get me wrong, the Spatial Fortress was impressive in its own right, but it just wasn't comparable to an Eonoth or Etorhma.

Whatever they used to chain that massive eldritch had made it docile and weak. It moved with a sluggish crawl. Its instincts gave way to controllers who lacked the same voracity. It looked starved for nutrients. I couldn't kill it, but I know who could.

I clenched my teeth. This was going to be a long day.