

New World 271

Chapter 271: Cosmic Destruction

The deformed behemoth traversed across the vast void of space. Supporting the Spatial Fortress, vessels cascaded out in an endless torrent. These ships were of all sizes, many of them colored green with orichalcum. The greatest of these vessels were plated in dull gray, an ancient design and appearance dictating their lineage.

These were the chosen shuttles of Schema, the blue plasma ebbing in glowing lines. Their designs stood as both foreign and overwhelming with sharp, angular edges. They warped gravity and space alike with their arrival, each of them defying even the most fundamental laws of physics. More of these constructs arrived until the entirety of the spaceline was filled to the brim with ships facing Giess.

Schema came prepared.

This supporting force gathered around the Spatial Fortress, protecting their most vital asset. As they arrived, Obolis gestured towards the individual fleets,

“As you may have gathered, the largest of those are a part of Schema’s personal fleet. They wield his tools, using forbidden magic and technology. Those around him are a part of his various guilds. For example, you’ll note the fleet to his left, those are the Steel Legion’s highest order of ships.”

I crossed my arms, “They landed on my homeworld too. I ended up taking their members and tech in when I formed my guild. I honestly don’t know how it worked exactly. They weren’t too peeved about it, though.”

Obolis grinned, “You thwarted Yawm, correct? This means that you gained the right to ownership over the guild preceding you. Schema grants resources to the successful, and in that instant, you were victorious.”

I pointed at a petite ship at the edge of the fleet,

“What about those ships? It looks like they weren’t even designed for warfare.”

“Those are the golemite’s ships, a race of scouting, aetherial beings. I’ve contracted with them many times to discover far off locations. They orient themselves towards finding the hard to find more so than killing those that are hard to kill. If you look beside the golemite’s sleek builds, you’ll find the various heads of each class structure in Schema’s society.”

He pointed at a spiked shuttle. It was lined with pods on the surface.

“Those are the breakers. Their assault class utilizes arcane energy as a weapon. It’s actually just militarized antimatter that’s been converted into an energy form.”

Thoughts of Einstien and his theories whizzed through my head. I mean, if matter equals energy, I guess antimatter would equal anti-energy too. Obolis gestured further down,

“The slim vessels beside them are for the Speakers, and the thickly plated vessel below both are for the Fringe Walkers. They are the highest-ranked and most ancient classers in Schema’s universe, and we will likely never be this close to the heart of their faction again. Soak in these sights while you can.”

I shrugged, “Eh, they’re just ships.”

“But they shall tear this spaceline apart as soon as the Adair family arrives. That is the only reason Schema has called in this many of his forces. This would be more than enough to level my entire Empire, let alone a weakened planet like Giess.”

I gawked at all the ships as Obolis said that. Damn, so this was a solar system culling kind of force? It was impressive, though these guy’s secrets had yet to be unveiled. They hovered towards Giess, taking a while to get there. I pointed at some of the gray hulled vessels,

“What about those? They seem like the head honchos here.”

Some random alien guy walked up, “They are. Those are the shuttles for Schema’s chosen.”

Obolis raised his eyebrows, “In a manner of speaking, I suppose. More specifically, they are the vessels for the Sentinels, Overseers, and his personalized A.I.’s. They act at a moment’s notice, offering tactical oversight of what’s occurring. They also use their absolute weaponry to evaporate enemies.”

I peered at the gray that mirrored Obolis’s own suit of armor. I gestured to them both, “So why do all the highest-ranking people wear gray armor? Is a fashion trend or something?”

Obolis tapped it with his claws, “This is an orichalcum and aluminum alloy that has been augmented by graphene layering. It requires printing thin, atomically thin sheets of graphene to strengthen the underlying metal base. This is due to the low friction point of graphene. When pulled into many layers, it converts into graphite, a soft, doughy material.”

I raised my eyebrows, “So is graphene stronger than orichalcum?”

“Indeed, it is. For reference, orichalcum is about twice as heavy as steel but 30% harder. It is used primarily for its antimagical properties more so than its strength. Graphene is 200 times stronger than steel yet six times lighter. Both of those metals are incomparably inferior to graphene from a sheer physical resilience perspective.”

Obolis pointed at Schema’s ships, “These materials do not appear in nature, and they exist at the apex of science and technology. My own armor was found outside of Schema owned space, in fact. Even with all of my resources, I cannot construct this material on a whim. Schema can, however.”

I gave the ships a begrudging nod,

“Well, shit. That might be tougher than my armor.”

Obolis shook his head, “No matter how tough one’s shell is, the insides tend to be soft. That ship might never break, but those within it would be smashed by the hull meant to protect them. You are saturated to the core with that metal of yours to the point of bleeding silver. This makes you resilient in a way most people cannot be.”

I narrowed my eyes, “You have good eyesight.”

Obolis gave a slight smirk, “My ability to perceive is my greatest asset.”

We peered back at the ships as they sauntered about. They neared Giess, the rebels neglecting to show up. Before the anticlimax came to fruition, a golden portal spawned.

I grimaced, “It’s Lehesion.”

The massive, spatial entity crawled out of his gateway. Immune to the cold of the void, he tilted his head, cracking his enormous neck. No sound permeated out, the empty space nulling everything silent. Like a black and white film, the events played out in absolute quiet. Despite that quiet, the face-off sent shivers up my spine.

In the face of the Spatial Fortress, Lehesion was but a pebble. To me, he was a mountain staring down at an anthill. No one shared my sentiment, many laughing at Lehesion and how puny he was compared to the Spatial Fortress. Around Lehesion, thousands upon thousands of portals snapped open as the gialgathen lifted his head. He stared down with a godly arrogance as his forces arrived.

This was why the rebels committed genocide against the gialgathens. Their forces arrived in the tens of thousands, the blighted ones swimming through space. They collected around Lehesion, acting in a manner similar to how Schema guarded his Spatial Fortress. Further allies congregated around the golden beast over the next minute.

Dreadnoughts, fighters, drones, and other blighted ones came to the forefront. These were the main forces we fought on Giess, their numbers so high they could darken a horizon. Even in space, they remained unharmed, the Hybrid’s internal engines keeping them from turning brittle and cold.

More forces arrived than those sent to Giess, however. From their rebelling worlds, many ships and vessels from other races arrived. These ragtag ships were reinforced with the Adair’s signature markings and welding styles. They helped make their allies stronger in exchange for their support, and it showed as their fleet swelled. These were those that chose to defy Schema at the cost of a bloody war.

Even more forces arrived, their numbers exceeding Schema’s own fleet. From dozens of portals, they took gnarled eldritch adapted for space and summoned them. These

were followed by suited revenants, each of them mentally shackling these mutated eldritch. They arrived in growing hordes, becoming a living, breathing mass of monster that allied against Schema.

Obolis's eyes widened, "They've used radiation to strengthen the eldritch then taken control of their shattered minds. Illegal in Schema's territory, yet it's an undeniably effective tactic."

I remembered the bout of radiation we suffered when inspecting a portion of Lehesion's tail. This was what they were using it for. As the enemies piled up, my fears were fully realized. The Adair's armed forces dwarfed Schemas.

And yet, still, even more arrived.

From twisted worlds and dark recesses, sentient eldritch crawled from colossal portals. They allied with the Adairs. These were the kinds of eldritch that dictated whether a world was fringe or not, and they mounted in space, crawling like an infestation given life. They commanded enormous numbers of eldritch, the likes of which could create eclipses by swallowing the sun in their shadow.

Instead, they blended into space, a moving darkness that proliferated like a disease. They took the form of massive worms, fallen archangels, writhing hiveminds, deformed krakens, and lesser evolved Spatial Fortresses. At least they looked like it, their bulk not up to par with the mechanical monstrosity that Schema chained to his cause.

Obolis crossed his arms, his heartbeat elevating,

"They've even allied with the eldritch. It seems they'd prefer winning to winning well."

I grimaced, "I know an eldritch that helps us. She pulled me out of a tight spot against Yawm, actually. In the end, the enemy of my enemy is a friend." I turned back at the sentient eldritch,

"Even if they are ugly."

Obolis frowned but said nothing. Those around us weren't laughing anymore, the Adair's preparations both intimidating and resourceful. Even those that didn't truly

understand Lehesion's strength, they realized that this was going to be a bloodbath. The number of enemies meant that would be the case. It left a sort of vibrant buzz in the air, everyone ready to see something they'd never see again.

This was the kind of battle that would go down in history at the very least, no matter which side came out victorious. The sheer hum of that fact saturated the air around us. It left everyone gazing at an event akin to an incoming hurricane.

This would leave no doubt that the rebellion was not something to dismiss. It was an immeasurable storm, the likes of which we may never see again. The Adair's and the revenants were going to make their last stand here.

And their stand would be carnage given life, a battle cry that echoes across all of Schema's owned space.

As the forces closed, my armor shivered. I stared down at it, and the metal trembled. In the distance, Lehesion lifted his head with the confidence of a celestial. Energy collapsed through his frame, invigorating him with the strength of both the old and the new. He radiated light, a second sun breathing out pure, radiant power.

In a snap, he shot out a telepathic wave. This wave tethered those nearby to his mind, this mental roar absolute. It extended onto Schema's ships and further beyond. When it rolled over our station, my heart sank. His mind was a boundless ocean like an Old One given a body and flesh. Lehesion's voice resounded, everything else quiet and still by comparison,

"So you are the forces that Schema rallies against me? How quaint. I expected a being that many consider omnipotent to muster a force worthy of fear. I see now that I was wrong."

Obolis's hair stood on end. At this moment, we were ants staring at a being beyond us. Those of high status trembled. In their own lives, they were the elite. In this other realm, they were nothing but the tiniest of entities, like drops in an endless ocean. I stood amid this vast sea, and I held onto my aura and mind. I refused to allow this being to send fear through me anymore.

Those around me could not withstand it, however.

Even Obolis shivered. He reached out a shaking hand and clenched it into a fist. It quivered as he murmured,

“You fought him and lived?”

I rolled my shoulders, “On more than one occasion. He was taking it easy on me. I doubt he’ll do that here.”

Lehesion announced,

“Know this, Schema. This battle shall be the mark I leave upon your history. Long have I waited for an epoch where my talent may truly shine. I was a leviathan trapped in the smallest of ponds. Now I am that behemoth unleashed, a might that shall force gods to tremble and space to thrash. Hear me, one and all.”

His noiseless laugh was a battle cry,

“You shall regret making an enemy of me, for I am a god given flesh and bone.”

Lehesion’s eyes twitched, his pupils dilating. He shook his head, his control being ripped from him. He gasped before Tohtella’s voice radiated through his colossal mind,

“I am here to announce our grievances, along with an offer for you to surrender.”

No voice returned her call, so she continued.

“We have never been given a place to voice what our real concerns are. This will likely be our only chance, so listen well. The Adair family is a group of psionic revenants. We have gained control of Lehesion, and we have committed grave atrocities against the gialgathens. We would like to apologize for what we have done.”

I grimaced, “Oh yeah, a mass genocide can be washed away with a one-sentence apology. Man, if like were that easy.”

Tohtella’s gestures reflected on Lehesion’s face,

“We understand that many of you find our actions unforgivable and horrendous. We wish to let you all know that, we too, think that our chosen path is deplorable. Know this, however – we were given no other alternative for what we’ve decided to do today.”

A massive screen appeared above Lehesion, showing a status. It wasn’t blue or red, but golden with black lettering. My eyes widened as Tohtella announced,

“We wish to form a counter alliance to Schema, one known as Elysium. We will be offering any joining planets access to our own system, one that is far gentler and less brutal than Schema’s. You will not face level restrictions. You will not be thrown against wolves and watch your loved ones die during the tutorial. Neither will you be enslaved to serve a race that cares nothing about you.”

Lehesion’s eyes narrowed as Tohtella spoke through him,

“No, we wish to establish a system where the occupants are given the power to kill the eldritch before they are faced against them. Instead of watching over half of dungeon clearers die before they reach level 1,000, we wish for no one to die in a dungeon again. We want to eradicate the eldritch as a threat forever.”

They weren’t kidding when they said they wanted to start a revolution. Holy shit.

“We will be giving free lessons in psionics to those that will join us. We will be using the eldritch to create the menacing Hybrids you know of. Every man, woman, and child of every race will be given one as a servant to assist with killing the eldritch. The eldritch fear them, and your Hybrid will allow you to conquer dungeons without fear of death.”

Everyone around us stood dumbfounded. One member dropped their glass behind us, no one reacting to the sharp squeal of glass shattering. That sound was nothing when compared to what the Adair’s were announcing.

“We will do away with the lack of structure and the ‘cullings’ of Schema’s system. We will allow every species to establish control of their own world, and we will ensure that an overarching government will offer support if certain species struggle. This will prevent weaker races from being subjugated into servile roles by better combatants.”

Some of the aliens behind me gasped, many of them looking around to gauge everyone else's reactions. Much of what Tohtella said left me flabbergasted. It really was revolutionary, though I didn't want to admit it. She continued,

“Unlike Schema, we will not hoard the most effective weapons only to ourselves. We understand that each of you is a competent, able individual. You will be given the necessary technology and weaponry to fight Schema and the eldritch. We will not stop each of you from researching better methods of stopping the eldritch. We have no desire for an endless war with those monsters. We wish for them to follow our laws or be devoured by our Hybrids.”

A few enigmata and other sciency types peered down, affected by Tohtella's words. It looked like I wasn't the only one that noticed Schema's rejection of permanent solutions to the eldritch. The Adairs noted that behavior as well, and they aimed to rectify it.

“Elysium will also ally with eldritch that are non-threatening. These eldritch here have decided to follow our laws, and they have even joined our cause. They too wish for a better future where their hunger can be satiated. It is not endless, and we can work towards a compromise.”

Many of the nobles nearby began sweating. An intense wave of cognitive dissonance radiated through those present. I considered allying with the eldritch, but only because I met and knew Hod and Amara. They were both stable, useful allies, and that's really all I asked for. If anything, taking eldritch like Plazia and Baldag-Ruhl would be boons for society in general. Even now, I'd yet to see anyone rival my armor's complexity with the cipher.

Neglecting to consider that possibility was a flaw with Schema's approach. In fact, everything Tohtella mentioned so far was a part of many crippling issues with how Schema ran things. Even I accepted all of it without questioning further, but that was because I couldn't create a better system on my own. Apparently, the Adair family could, though they offered no proof of that outside of a single status. At least not yet.

As if reading my mind, Tohtella expanded a status screen for many of those present in her fleet. These screens popped up above everyone outside of the eldritch lying at the edges of her fleet. Tohtella said,

“This is proof of our system. Lehesion is connected with an endless, overflowing energy source that we can tap into. He is the center of this new system. We used ancient technology from our forefathers and built off those blueprints. Just as the revenants before us created Schema, we’ve created another, fairer system that recognizes many talents.”

Lehesion peered towards the classers in their ships,

“No longer will you deal with archaic, hidden trees, and a lack of transparency. The paths of progression will be outlined for all to see, a true meritocracy where ignorance is a choice, not a given.”

Lehesion’s eyes narrowed,

“Know that this is a living, breathing system. We are not set in our ways. We wish to hear your voices, and we will do our best to respond to your concerns. Unlike Schema, we will roll frequent patches to the framework to reduce any glitches, unfairness, and to promote system-wide balance across the board.”

Lehesion lifted his head, “And most of all, understand this final statement – we do not want war.”

Obolis scoffed, “Ah yes, the army made that much obvious.”

Tohtella continued,

“We will not force worlds to join us. No other planet or species will be handled as Giess was either. This was a necessary sacrifice we used to establish this new system. We preemptively accrued this army to combat the certain military response Schema would send. He did not respond to our calls for negotiations or recognize us as a state. We knew he would attack the moment we announced ourselves.”

From all angles, another vast entity approached. It resonated across all those present, speaking through our status screens.

It was Schema.

“I have heard you and your concerns. I’d recommend organizing on pragmatism rather than idealism the next time you create a rebellion, however. You speak of change, yet you have only enacted a reign of terror and carnage. Your rebellions have resulted in the loss of billions of lives. When I have finished quashing your insurrection, that number may increase to the trillions.”

Schema left no physical body, yet he was as present as the stars around us,

“Your actions speak louder than your words, yet even your unrealized vision pales to what I’ve created. You speak of my system as brutal, yet you neglect to recognize it as effective. We are faced with an endless enemy, one that is a result of a dimension clashing with our own.”

Schema’s voice stayed steady,

“I give those that fight the ability to fight. I grant those that fend for themselves the ability to fend for themselves. Giving resources to the petulant, lazy, and weak-minded is wasteful. It results in the loss of resources that are finite. Even if you speak of limitless energy, you shall find that granting hundreds of trillions the ability to fight monsters is all but impossible. Inevitably, a certain measure of stringency must be enacted. Otherwise, we will all be eaten.”

Schema’s tone rose in volume, “Those that rise are given the right to rise further. Your ideology would grant anyone the ability to murder, thief, and usurp with a personalized monster. Those very monsters were created by you and your supreme arrogance. The Hybrids, somehow, exceed even the eldritch in their horror.”

Schema seethed with disgust,

“You then use those abominations to create alliances with eldritch that have demolished entire societies. Each and every one of those beings has devoured millions of men, women, and children. You ally with them out of desperation, not some shallow sense of justice.”

Schema’s voice carried quiet anger,

“That is something I’ve found constant about your insurrection – the collapse of entire societies. You culled a race on Giess to serve your ends. You use those eldritch that feasted on millions. You even pretend you could even fathom what is required to create a galactic society.”

Schema spoke with finality,

“You speak of one thing and do another. You want prosperity but unleash calamity. You need change but neglect the cost. There is only one thing you are correct on – I will send an overwhelming military response to your little rebellion. I will rain down fire and scorch every planet that joins you. Every rebel will die, along with their children and everything they’ve ever owned or created.”

Brutal as Schema was, he sounded right to me. Schema continued, his words leaving an impact like leaping in ice water,

“You will perish, and I will remain.”

Lehesion lifted his head and let out a quiet laugh, space unable to transfer his hearty chuckling. He stared Schema’s fleet down, and Tohtella spoke through him,

“Then know this – you started this war.”

Schema’s voice echoed,

“And I shall end it. Kill them all.”

Schema’s fleet went forward, piercing the dark veil of space between the two armies. Lehesion saturated with his golden aura, a tiny blot compared to the looming Spatial Fortress. Lehesion was a distant star when compared to it, but even my crude sense for mana was enough to understand the vast reservoirs of energy within the golden beast.

In the distance from him, many of Schema’s vessels engorged with energy, fusion reactors and elemental furnaces revving to their utmost potential. As they unleashed their payloads, Lehesion spread his wings. All hell broke loose, cataclysmic explosions radiating in the distance. Silent yet stunning, masses of ships evaporated in storms of blue and golden fires.

Lehesion let loose a breath of golden light, scorching it through Schema's fleets. Ships exploded in the hundreds, creating cascades of energy and debris. At the center of the A.I.'s fleet, the Spatial Fortress revved into action. The sentient eldritch writhed around the chained behemoth, each of them haunted by their fallen brother. The fortress's eyes widened, the beast awakened from its slumber and its instincts rising.

The many fusion reactors under its skin powered up, and it feasted on the radiation. Its dormancy ended, and its vitality returned. Its movements quickened, no longer lifeless pulses. The entire framed structure shifted into a colossal, squirming mass. It lobbed tentacles covered in graphene and orichalcum at its enemies. These tentacles ripped through the Hybrid fleets. It opened gaping maws across its entire frame, and they shot out colossal waves of energy.

These beams acted as rays of disintegration. It was a beast of cataclysm, designed for bloodshed and built for slaughter. Near it, Hybrids degenerated. Vessels splintered. Even Lehesion struggled to withstand the blasts. The behemoth of a gialgathen retaliated in kind once getting control, blasting through the Spatial Fortress's ray. His beam, though smaller, pierced the eldritch's dispersed bolt.

Lehesion's blast ripped into the side of the fortress, and the gaping maw exploded with nuclear intensity. A debris field siphoned out of the resulting impact. An eighth of the monster's mass was torn apart, its writhing entrails exposed. The sea of organs shot out in bulk, grasping at Hybrids, ships, and sentient eldritch. They fell into the titan's belly, and it reconstituted them into a new mass. Assimilated into the monster, the Spatial Fortress was whole again in an instant.

It was unstoppable.

Its eyes turned towards Lehesion, along with many of the gray, ancient vessels. They prepared attacks to destroy the spearhead of the Adair's forces. As they did, Hybrids attacked the classer's ships, smothering them in living metal. The Fringe Walkers reacted first. From their thick hull, individuals stepped out. They held no reason for protection against space, their own constitutions more than enough for the rigors of space.

These hulking juggernauts launched towards the Hybrids with confidence. Each member created fields of fire, shards of ice, and storms of lightning. They were built to cull hordes, and this shined when faced with an enemy like the Hybrids.

Those that passed them landed on various hulls, tearing into the orichalcum and devouring it. The Breaker's vessel acted second, launching individuals from the many space pods on the ship's surface. They landed on hulls, and power armor laden sentients stepped out.

The Breakers used arcane energy saturated attacks on the Hybrids, muscling past the toughened carapaces of the blighted. They tore through individuals, dispatching one member before moving onto the next. These tactics were ruthless, efficient, and safe; they weren't in this to risk their lives. They were in this battle to take the enemy's own.

The last to act were the Speakers. They sent out dozens of drones that went towards each individual battle and offered support. These robots allowed them to view and dispatch advice through their statuses, saving countless lives. At the same time, they took the wounded and compromised back to their vessel for healing.

This combination of different classes worked well, with each piece handling certain enemy types. Unlike most of the eldritch, however, the Adair family controlled these Hybrids to deadly effect. They retargeted their hordes, aiming at each individual's weak spots.

The smallest of Hybrids assaulted the drones and Breakers. They swarmed without end, drenching the individual members like bees swarming a hive. While commanding overkill kinds of power, the Breakers lacked the tools to suppress this kind of attack. The Fringe Walkers noticed, but they too were stopped by the blighted ones.

These were the converted gialgathens, ridden by revenants with mental suppressive abilities. They swarmed around the immobile juggernauts that were the Fringe Walkers, smothering them with psychic attacks. The Fringe Walkers were mighty, but this wasn't what they were trained to do. Because of that, many of them fell along with the breakers.

On the other end of the conflict, the sentient eldritch attacked the vessels of Schema's chosen. They writhed and swarmed towards their ships, nearing the shielded hulls. Before making contact, swarms of armored Sentinels were released. These powerful guardians ripped through space with their dimensional slicers, suppressing the eldritch.

Unlike before, however, the eldritch were given time to organize and rally. Most people attacked eldritch by surprise, meeting them on their own terms. Without that advantage,

the eldritch could often overpower most sentients. That dynamic played out as the Sentinels were overwhelmed by the sheer physicality of these eldritch.

That is, until the Overseers arrived.

These destroyers enacted a wave of obliterating devastation on the eldritch forces. They used antimatter blasts, nuclear explosions, and dimensional slicers of their own against the hiveminds and worms. This variety of weaponry obliterated many of the opposing eldritch, but these monsters were not helpless.

Coming from a desolated dimension, they regenerated on the remains of their enemies. Feasting on corpses, they continued their attack, hundreds dying on both sides. As that fierce battle played out, the most powerful weaponry in Schema's universe charged their munitions. They assaulted the shattered god with absolute destruction.

It was enough energy to leave me dead ten times over. It was the kind of force that would crush moons and leave planets scarred. They used antimatter cannons, arcane energy bolts, and nuclear payloads. These weapons were complete and pure; they required no finesse. The volume of energy they used rivaled the output of stars.

And yet, Lehesion survived.

His golden aura sustained the onslaught, struggle spread over the gialgathen's face as the light of the blasts waned. His eyes widening, Lehesion retaliated once more. He peered upwards, channeling untold amounts of energy. Off in the distance, the star of Giess's solar system waned.

A shiver ran up my spine as an eclipse formed. Whether an illusion or real, the sheer scope of the attack left was monumental. It left only the slightest circle of light ebbing over the battlefield.

Obolis gasped, "He...he truly is a god."

Lehesion released an attack without equal. Energy coursed through him until his body heated to the point ships nearby were melted into a liquid. No, further still. The heat radiated with such intensity the metal shifted states from a liquid to plasma. Massive waves of radiation disabled nearby shuttles on both sides. The bout of energy released an EMP that disabled many of Schema's vessels.

The result was a series of star cores forming around Schema's fleet. As they developed, these spheres condensed into a hyper-dense material. With precision, they bolted towards and through many of the classers' largest ships. They ripped apart the surface of Schema's vessels. Instead of raw energy, he used matter at its densest as a weapon. It resulted in the mass destruction of Schema's fleet.

Or so it seemed.

Many of these ships used elemental furnaces to create some kind of shield. These shields didn't disperse the matter; they devoured it, swallowing the streams of mass without a struggle. I could hardly comprehend how it was possible, but Obolis murmured,

"He's using his spatial manipulation technology as a means of defense. Clever."

I raised an eyebrow, "But how much matter can it hold before its full?"

Obolis smiled, "Time will tell."

The Spatial Fortress used the same defense system, funneling the mass streams into pocket dimensions. Not wanting to wait for another catastrophic attack, the gargantuan eldritch ripped open a side of itself with its own limbs. Raw and exposed, it launched its enormous entrails at Lehesion. It was aiming to engulf him.

These entrails caught fire as they made contact with Lehesion's golden shield, and the gialgathen whipped his tail in classic fashion, just as he did with me. Each collision of his tail sent a shiver up my spine. These strikes mauled anything they came in contact with, the Spatial Fortress no different. As the impacts rippled out, the swings created golden shockwaves that passed through the battlefield.

Lehesion applied the full might of his mind during this moment, aiming these shockwaves against Schema's ships. Plasmic discharges billowed across the battlefield with each tail swipe, hundreds of fighters meeting their end. The Spatial Fortress's eyes widened, and they gazed at Lehesion. The shackled monster put his mind against Lehesion's, and a telepathic war erupted. Lehesion smiled as it did, the Spatial Fortress seizing up.

Lehesion announced so all could hear him,

“And the muzzled dog wishes to fight the chained lion? You are a mass of fused minds. I...I am eternal, a singular force without end. Meet that which is truly immortal, and bask in my aura.”

The Spatial Fortress destabilized. Its tentacles writhed out, fracturing nearby vessels. One of these swipes struck one of the gray ships of Schema's fleet. Cracks shot across the entire structure as gravity wells went to stabilize the ship's flight. Carnage spread like a plague. Across all fronts, blood rained down without end.

Each side took massive losses. The classers shot out members to fight Lehesion as he waged a psionic war with the fortress. These classers struggled against the aerial superiority of the blighted ones, their wings equipped to move through space. The sentient eldritch altered their own efforts, aiming to defend Lehesion as he mentally suppressed the Spatial Fortress.

No doubt the Adair family assisted the golden gialgathen with all their telepathic might, the both of them locked in an unseen duel. Schema's forces rallied during this time. They organized portal assaults, letting them sidestep and outmaneuver the enemy. The personalized A.I.'s used gravitational disruption to dismantle the Adair's coordinated forces.

Schema even sent out dozens of Overseers from across the galaxy, gathering more of his resources as mobile artilleries. They pierced many of the Adair's hulls with antimatter blasts. These impacts left no explosions, the ships and Hybrids disappearing into the vast void around them.

Elysium's hope waned as Schema mounted dominance, his army's training showing itself. Combine that with centuries of accruing resources, and the Adair's hardly held on. Obolis nodded,

“The rebels put up a far better fight than I expected. It was a good show, though it's coming to an end.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Huh, I thought they'd do better than this. Guess I was wrong.”

As we finished speaking, Lehesion spread his wings. More portals formed behind Schema's fleet. From these warps, blighted sea monsters poured out in droves. Riding these monstrosities, thousands of different species acted as the controlling force behind this new breed of blighted one.

Lehesion growled, "These are the leviathans our kind drove into the depths of Giess's vast seas. They have paid for their history of blood with their own lives, becoming vessels for our purpose. Feel their wrath and fury, along with the unknowns that ride them."

My eyes widened before Obolis fumed, "What are leviathans?"

I grabbed the side of my head, "They were supposed to be some species the gialgathens fought for dominance many, many years ago. I...I didn't actually think they were still around. We never saw them in any of the documents we stole."

Obolis's hair stood on end, "They were hiding an operation of this magnitude from us all? I can't understand it."

Neither could I until I remembered the Adair's underwater base, the one hidden beneath the sludge oceans of Giess. The Adair family showed they could organize an oceanic operation before. Thinking about it, if we stopped one base, why wouldn't they have more? How we didn't find data about their other activities during our raids blew my mind. Obolis shared my surprise as he turned towards those here,

"Prepare the Nebula Drifter to warp. I still hold faith in Schema, but I'd rather we be prepared for the worst should it happen."

Many armed albony across the space viewing room went into action. As they readied this space station to leave, the battle before us reached a boiling point. The leviathans turned the tide of battle, their frames suited for space warfare. These were like gialgathens, but instead of evolving for the sky, they evolved for the deep.

Each leviathan had four fins and a massive tail. A thick, lead-colored shell plated everywhere outside of their joints. Their bodies swelled towards their gaping mouths, and rows of teeth lined their throats. They were like menacing, armored crab sharks. Combine that with red bioluminescent lights ingrained throughout their skin, and they were terrifying. No wonder the gialgathens left the ocean.

These beasts flooded out with the standard augmentations that came from being blighted. Metal traced their skin and flesh. Cords pumped nanomachine laden liquid through their bodies. They even had gravitational constructs of some kind, letting them swim through space.

This new arrival of reinforcements flipped the battle on its head. They tore into the weakened shuttles, feasting on the orichalcum. Each leviathan owned magical abilities, letting them fire torrents of boiling liquid over enemies. This caustic solution ate away at their hulls, exposing the crew to the void around them. As crew members squirmed in space, many decompressed, dispersing into the void around them. It was an ugly sight.

In the middle of this conflict, Lehesion and the Spatial Fortress wrestled with one another. Lehesion overwhelmed the mind of the ancient eldritch, the chained monster squirming in agony. At the same time, the eldritch wrapped itself around Lehesion, attempting to consume him with its mass. The fortress's teeth snapped into the golden gialgathen time and time again, tearing through meat and sinews. The crystallized mana shell that coated Lehesion detonated each time the eldritch sunk its teeth into him. At the same time, the colossal fortress recuperated its injuries by drawing from those nearby. A stalemate formed, each side embroiled in the bitter conflict.

The tide tipped. A stray series of antimatter blasts distracted Lehesion, letting the Spatial Fortress wrap itself around him. Lehesion was swallowed into the monster. The gialgathen ripped and tore through the massive beast engulfing around him. Like a flood, the behemoth poured more and more flesh at its enemy, smothering Lehesion entirely.

The golden beast let out beams of light from within the swarming entrails. The Spatial Fortress held on, continuing its onslaught. Minutes passed before the Spatial Fortress expanded around Lehesion. More and more of its body wrapped around him, and it began assimilating the Shattered God.

Golden spots cropped up from within the eldritch. Its body gorged on the nutritious meat, becoming an unstoppable force amidst the chaos. It let out a chorus of silent laughter from its gaping maws, pure glee painted over its deformed face. It would eat the uneatable.

And yet, a primal being interfered.

From a plane untouched, a dimensional rift shot across all those here. Time stopped. I looked around, able to move while everyone else stood still. I tried shouting at everyone nearby. My voice was silent, the air unable to move so that sound could be heard. It was like I was apart of the battle in space so far away.

I calmed myself down, peering back at the fight. A presence passed over the field of battle, one I was all too familiar with. It violated the fabric of space and time as it peeled itself onto this domain. The ancient, twisted monstrosity touched our dimension, and our dimension quaked. With a hollowed voice, Eonoth voice whispered to Lehesion,

“Little one, you are never left alone in my loving grasp.”

From around him, ever-shifting, incomprehensible appendages reached out from nothing. They opened eyes, mouths, and unspeakable terrors. These hollow sights were like a thousand beings existing all at once, like some twisted being that transcended time.

As if taking a deep breath, Eonoth murmured with a sharpened tone,

“You have yet to give me what I wished for. May they feel my voice, and may time shatter under my echo.”

Eonoth roared. It was a voice unending, a tremor that would never be made silent. I remained unaffected, but the dimension around me was rendered into a turbulent sea. These waves washed around me, acting as a meat grinder on my frame. My entire body quaked under strain, my blood vessels and my skin erupting.

The space around me caved in. It shook with such violence that it left me liquified into a primordial mush. I retained my consciousness, feeling as if I were out of my body. As quickly as it was stopped, our dimension was unfrozen by the primordial being. Without noticing, time marched forward once more with no one affected by the roar but me.

As the crowd regained their awareness, I was left as a puddle on the floor, a literal pile of mush. I regenerated over the next few seconds, the party members staring at me in

horror. I, I think I stared on in horror as well. Once recuperated, my mind snapped back into my head before I blinked a few times.

Feeling sick, I lunged onto one knee. Obolis put a hand on my shoulder,

“Are...are you alright?”

“I...I don’t know.”

I heaved a few times, wanting to vomit. I had no idea what just happened. Despite being in a daze, I seemed to comprehend more than those around me. The aliens still stared at the battlefield, but now their glances were dumbfounded. I swallowed down my sickness, forcing myself upright and shaking off my wounds. I turned to the fight, and I, like everyone else, was left dumbfounded.

In the distance, Schema’s chained eldritch was bulging. In some sickening, bulbous display, it had expanded to several times its previous size. It was as if many Spatial Fortresses were being shoved into the body of the one here. All of them fought for survival, yet their masses crushed one another.

From within, a sort of dimensional implosion throttled the colossal eldritch. It was as if many timelines were collapsing onto this one entity in this one instant. Unable to exist in that hostile moment, the Spatial Fortress erupted in a massive plume of its insides. It splashed out, covering the surroundings in eldritchian blood.

All was quiet. Our eyes stared in abject horror, the Spatial Fortress reduced to broken chunks of meat. No one understood anything. It was the kind of event that left every single soul speechless. From within the mush, a bloodstained gialgathen rose. As Lehesion spread his wings, a wave of golden light passed over the battlefield.

He cleansed the broken fortress, the enormous blood plume turning into a bright flash. Others looked away, but I stared into the light. As it faltered, others gazed back up at the display of absolute strength. The fortress was no more, and only Lehesion remained. His wings spread wide, the beast without equal let out a mighty roar. In its wake, it rippled through time and space. Obolis’s hands shook with fear as Lehesion rose from the ashes of battle.

The Shattered God was victorious, and Schema lost.

Chapter 272: Cracks in Confidence

We all stared at the sight, no one able to move. I expected Lehesion to win, but in the end, Eonoth bailed him out. I didn't even understand the attack he used or why I was liquified while no one else was. I was the toughest guy here probably, yet I was the only one turned to mush. None of it made any sense, yet it was as real as Schema's arrival years ago.

In that same vein, this event was a passing of a torch. Everyone felt it. Schema had dominated the galaxy for centuries. Now, these rebels took a stand against him and won by the looks of it. Because of that, everyone around me carried an intense uneasiness. Their hands shook, their mouths gaped, and their eyes widened. It was too much for many, some people breaking down on the spot.

Most accepted the reality before them. Schema's forces, in particular, didn't let up for even a second. They didn't surrender or fall back. These were hardened veterans ready for war and death alike. Schema's fleet let out a series of attacks during the aftermath of the Spatial Fortress's demise, and this put the Adair's forces on the back foot.

Lehesion would change everything, however. He turned towards them, peering with his easy arrogance. He soaked in his victory for a second, taking a deep breath from the void around him. Turning to us, Lehesion stared at the Nebula Drifter. He found us.

Spreading his wings wide, he charged himself with energy. I shouted at Obolis,

"Get us out of here."

Obolis looked at his status, "It will take at least fifteen more minutes before we can warp."

"What the hell is this thing even good for then? Looking pretty?"

Obolis growled back, "Exploration. It was never meant for battle. This...this was supposed to be an observation."

"Well, we're about to all die if we don't do something and now."

Everyone began panicking. We were fish in a barrel with nowhere to escape to. A few individuals began pushing and fighting each other. Many laid on the floor, stricken by panic and surprise. They were simply unable to handle their reality being flipped on its head like this. I had to admit, it did kind of feel like fate just German suplexed our heads into the ground.

I shook that feeling off. I'd gotten close to dying many times, and this was no different. I clapped my hands, the echo silencing those panicking. Behind me, Lehesion blasted himself towards us as I calmed everyone down,

"Listen, everybody. We can't warp everyone out of here in time. We have two porters I know that can get some of us out of here. Anyone else, volunteer and do what they do. One of the ones I know will help you guys. The other one will help me while I fend Lehesion off."

A random alien shouted, "Have you lost your mind? Did you just see what that thing did to the Spatial Fortress? Lehesion will tear you to pieces."

Huh, they thought Lehesion made that attack. That made a lot of sense, considering everyone was frozen in place. It seemed like I was the only one that knew what actually happened. I had to let Schema and the others know soon. Otherwise, they might all think the fortress stood no chance. Against Eonoth, sure, but Lehesion was close to becoming an endless meal.

That would have to wait. I raised a fist, "Helios, come here."

The stern albony crashed himself through the crowd, bumping several people to the floor. I pointed behind me, "You've fought this guy, and you know what we need to do against him."

Helios grimaced under his mask, "I have dreamed of this day. You don't need to speak another word. I will help you."

I gestured a hand to Obolis, "Start warping people out of here. Start with children and people who can't survive in space." I turned to everyone else,

“Think of a way to transport people quickly. Even if this station goes down, not everyone has to die. We have to be selfless here. Come on, we’ve fought the eldritch, every last one of us. Now we need to fight off that looming sense of panic. Crush it like it were any other enemy. Once that’s gone, clear your heads, and let’s get going.”

Obolis and Helios didn’t so much as give me a parting glance as they flew into motion. The Emperor grabbed the sides of his head while murmuring, “Think Obolis. Think.”

He tapped his fists against his temples for a second before raising a hand, “Of course.” He pointed at Giess while charging an elemental furnace. From it, he created a portal to the planet. He looked at the crowd, “Everyone, come. The planet isn’t getting glassed. After we’ve escaped there, we can warp somewhere safer after evacuating.”

Lines formed in seconds while Obolis created a dozen portals. I met Helios’s eye,

“Are you ready?”

Helios stared without fear,

“Let us show him what we’re capable of.”

He lifted his hand, “I cannot survive space without protection. I can create a warp that will allow you to defend from outside the base. When the Nebula Drifter is ready to escape, I shall help you escape.”

I nodded, “Don’t let me down.”

Helios mouthed, “Are you ready?”

I rolled my shoulders and grit my teeth, “Always.”

He opened a warp into the void around us, the air siphoning out from around us. I leaped through it, the portal closing behind me in a fluid shift. Floating forward, I found myself just outside the glass viewing room. It was an awe-inspiring sight, though the panic didn’t help the view. Around me, the cold of space sunk in. It was like I dipped

myself into a vat of cold water, my back especially chilled. From all angles, the void pulled me apart as well.

It was like people with cables were trying to pull my insides out, but I held together well because of my sheer physical tenacity. I would need that toughness for what was coming. I faced the gold gialgathen, heating myself with mana. As my skin glowed, I charged my runes and saturated my blood with mana. I pulled out a vast number of mana shards, keeping them on my back and out of Lehesion's view. Beating him was out of the question for now, but a bunch of singularities would slow him down surely.

As he expanded in my sight, a wave of nervousness passed over me. Seeing his full potential made me feel insignificant. No, I was insignificant. This battle taught me that. I was strong relative to my surroundings, but I was just like Lehesion – big fish in a small pond. For the first time, I jumped out into the ocean, and it showed me I still had a lot of growing left to do.

I would need to prioritize myself more and focus less on other tasks. I resolved that to myself as Lehesion approached. Looming close, his frame traversed towards me at an unfathomable speed. I reached out a palm, trying to fend him off in case he tried ramming himself into the space station behind me.

He didn't.

Lehesion slowed to a stop about a mile from me. He squinted for a moment before giving me an ominous smile. He sent out a telepathic wave to me alone,

“Ah, the Harbinger. What are you doing here out in space? Perhaps you wished to view me in battle. Though understandable, surely you understand what I must do now that I've seen you? After all, your destruction of Giess's cities did not go unnoticed by the Adair family. It was impressive, though foolish given who you've made enemies with.”

Lehesion told me a few things when he said all that. First, the guy could link with everyone, but it wasn't like he knew where every individual was that he connected with. Second, Lehesion hadn't warped here for some reason. It would've saved him about two minutes on the way here and back.

As I thought about that, he gave me a smirk,

“They’re enraged by what you’ve done.”

I pulled myself back into the conversation. This was bad, but not the worst outcome. People were escaping on the space station while we chatted away. To keep him talking, I kept on my toes in the conversation,

“Yeah, they are mad, but you’re not. If anything, you didn’t say that like you cared at all. You chose not to warp here either. Why?”

Lehesion blinked, confusion spreading over his face, “I chose not to warp because the portalling here left me exhausted. As for why my ire isn’t aimed at you...I don’t know why. Those you killed were my countrymen, those that follow my cause.”

The Adair family had really progressed with the whole brainwashing thing since last time,

“Is that really your cause? I don’t think so.”

Lehesion scoffed, his cool confidence returning,

“But of course it is. I am here to cleanse this universe of that entity from earlier. His monstrosity was strong, but I destroyed it with a single swipe of my tail once I was serious.”

His eyes, though glowing with golden energy, grew bloodshot as he spoke. Something about this conversation stressed him out quite a bit. My guess, the guy was saying one thing and thinking another. It wasn’t like he actually wanted to turn his entire species into drones. He didn’t believe he killed that fortress on his own, either.

I kept the conversation rolling, aiming to get him thinking,

“We both know you didn’t stop that thing on your own. If anything, you were going to die earlier.”

Lehesion gazed down at me, “And why is the giant beast gone while I remain here?”

“Eonoth.”

Lehesion froze in place, his legs and tail shaking. He looked away while shaking his head,

“I...No, it was I that unleashed that spatial rend. I am the one who collapsed timelines. I...I-“

“You didn’t. Eonoth froze time, but he forgot to freeze me. If he didn’t roar then and there, you’d still be in that eldritch’s belly. You’d be a neverending meal for that monstrosity, whether you believe me or not. If anything, I think your mind is lying to you, but your body isn’t. Look at yourself. You’re shaking.”

Lehesion’s face twitched before his eyes widened. He stared down, finding his wings closing and his hands quivering. Lehesion shook his head,

“I am not afraid. Since I was born, I’ve never once felt fear.”

I kept pressing, trying to keep him distracted as long as possible,

“Until now.”

His fear betrayed his confidence, “I...what was it that I fought earlier?”

I raised an eyebrow, “Wait a minute, they didn’t tell you?”

“I am put in front of beings of all kinds. It is not my role to question, only to obey their orders.”

He was being warped all over the place to help facilitate the Adair’s rebellions. I frowned at his answer, saddened by his mental fall,

“Ah. I see. You fought a Spatial Fortress. That isn’t the only one Schema has, and he’ll send more to fight you in the future. You got lucky this time. Eonoth bailed you out.

He's an Old One, however. You can't expect him to be there for you every time you need help. Hell, he might be feeling fickle one day and let you sit in one of those giant eldritch for a few millennia."

Even with his shattered mind, Lehesion's body remembered the agony of being devoured. He twitched while blinking, "I...I will be trapped forever?"

"Well, yeah. After all, it isn't like you can die. We both know that."

Lehesion stared down, dwelling on what I said. He shifted in place, an unsettling reality looming over him. As he did, something in his head clicked, and clarity washed over him. It was as if he got full control of his mind back. In anger, he glared back at me, "Are you truly so different?"

He was trying to turn the conversation onto me. That was good. I kept up the chat as I crossed my arms, "Oh, really? How?"

Lehesion's eyes narrowed. He dropped the lie about killing the fortress on his own. The gears of his ancient mind began turning,

"You saw Eonoth's attack. That should be impossible. He froze time across this entire dimension. All was absolutely still besides for I alone. I know why I was allowed to move during that time. You, however? That should be impossible...unless--"

Lehesion's eyes widened, "You exist within a different timeline...as I do."

It was my turn to be confused. I frowned, "Uh, I don't know what you're talking about."

He gave me a sly grin, mistaking my confusion as a solid lie,

"Don't pretend as if you don't comprehend my meaning. Did another Old One reincarnate you as well?"

So, reincarnation, huh? I had no intention of getting information out of Lehesion here, but hey, if I could, why not? I peered away as if I was caught lying,

“I...I don't know what you're talking about.”

Lehesion cackled before giving me a slow nod, “That is why someone so young is so able, hmm. Did they gift you with that body as well? That would explain how you're able to sustain my blows. Given your minuscule size, you should've been reduced to paste.”

“Come on. You're just big. I am not small.”

“Indeed, I am rather large in stature, but deflections aside, you must have promised the Old One something in return for your revival. I can sense there is some oath in your blood, though I cannot read it.”

I remembered my contract with Yawm. That was the only oath I was literally sworn to, but I wouldn't have to worry about that for another thousand years. I raised my eyebrows,

“So, you're telling me you think I was reincarnated for a promise with an Old One?”

“No. I know you were. There exists no other means of gaining the strength you have in such a short time. You will grow to manifest as an utter demon if you are allowed to grow.”

“Like you?”

He peered down at me, “You will never match me, neither in might nor in mettle. I was given the time and ability to expand my horizons using two lives. You, you will not be given your second chance.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Because you'll stop me?”

Lehesion spread his wings, “Indeed. I allowed you to live last time because I underestimated your tenacity. This time, I shall leave nothing in my wake, not one atom of you remaining.”

I hovered myself out from in front of the Nebula Drifter, circling Lehesion,

“Are you sure you’re able to? If I remember correctly, you needed Eonoth to save you last time you were in an actual battle.”

Lehesion shook as he seethed, “I would’ve been victorious regardless of his interference.”

“Or, you know, maybe a meal for that eldritch. I can say I’ve never needed some ruler of time and space to bail me out. I’ve done everything I’m known for all on my own. I took this armor from the hands of someone who wanted to use me to create it. I fed that armor and expanded its abilities using the cipher, knowledge I gained on my own.”

Well, outside of Eonoth and Etorhma. Lehesion didn’t need to know that, though. I kept my introduction needlessly long and dramatic to waste time,

“I killed the Destroyer of Worlds, Yawm. I saved my homeworld while you destroyed your own. I didn’t need two lives to do it either. You were wrong earlier. I wasn’t reincarnated. I did it right the first time.”

I pointed at Lehesion, “Somehow, you managed to fuck it up both times, even with someone giving you all the advantages in the world.”

Lehesion grimaced, his teeth snarling,

“Shut up.”

I spread out my hands, “And now your mind is so weak that even I can get you this riled up. A supposed god versus some dude who isn’t even thirty. Think about that.”

Lehesion let out a mental growl, my skin bristling at it. He roared,

“I said, be silent.”

His voice was acid on my skin, the tone and force behind it palpable as a punch to the gut. Despite his outrage, the guy was already sentenced to kill me, so I figured getting him mad didn't matter at this point. I waved Event Horizon over him, speaking with as much authority as I could muster.

"No."

Lehesion recoiled for a second, taken aback by my voice and how it boomed. I surprised myself, kind of stunned that I could muster up that much of a presence. Lehesion lifted his head, indignation saturating him,

"You think the voice from such a limited being will evoke fear from me? Laughable. I will silence the voices of dissent in my mind. I know who and what I am. I am the end and the beginning, the ruthless and the kind. Hear my proclamation."

He fumed, "You will not be the only one who is killed today. Your entire species will be culled, eliminated for angering me. There will be nothing left but salted earth and scorching air. The oceans of your world will evaporate under my fires. The plains will crumble under my wings. When I am finished, you and everything you cherish will be nothing."

Oh man, I just wanted to distract the guy. I raised a hand,

"Listen, Lehesion, we're just talking. You don't have to bring my home planet into this just because you're angry."

"And my wrath shall spread far and wide like a plague across your homeworld, wherever it may be."

A shiver ran up my spine, but I kept myself together,

"I saved your entire species, whether you like me or not. In exchange for doing that, you'd kill off my entire planet? I thought you said you were ruthless and kind?"

Even with his fractured mind, Lehesion knew I had saved the gialgathens from all becoming Hybrids. He gave me a nod, "Then instead of killing your race, I will unleash enough pain and torment onto you to rival your species's extinction. Be ready for it."

I raised my hands, “Come on then.”

He shot towards me, snapping his tail with absurd speed. I anchored myself with gravity and smacked my arm against his strike. The metal bones in my limb shattered, but I rebounded his first attack. Within a split second, my arm was fully healed, and Lehesion grimaced,

“You’ve strengthened yourself since the last time we fought then?”

“Yeah. I did.”

Lehesion coalesced his aura into his body before rearing his tail back. Smashing it towards me, I predicted the attack’s angle, creating a portal to my dimensional storage there. He pulled back, remembering this tactic from last time. I shot forwards, using my pocket dimension as a kind of bloodthirsty shield. Lehesion snapped his jaws at me, but I unloaded a singularity between us before it landed.

There was nothing for the singularity to feed on, and it reacted differently than usual. It sucked us both in, tearing through the top portion of my left arm and shoulder along with the bottom of Lehesion’s jaw. As it imploded, we were both slung apart. My vision twirled as all sense of up and down was lost. I stopped myself from revolving, trying to spot the giant gialgathen.

As I did, an upside-down Lehesion glared down at me, his lower jaw regenerating. Collapsing his aura into his frame, he smashed his tail at me before I got a grip on what the hell was going on. His limb snapped onto my torso, and it carved a foot deep into my chest. Stuck in there, the kinetic impact rippled out of my back, blowing my insides apart.

Because of my gravitational anchor, I didn’t actually fly back. Lehesion grinned at my opened guts, but his smile didn’t last long. My armor laughed at him, the jagged, metal teeth menacing and monstrous. I held onto him, piercing my hands and ribs into his tail flesh. He whipped the limb about, confusion spreading over his face,

“What is this?”

I shot back using telepathy,

“This is what a real monster is.”

The same fear Lehesion owned for the Spatial Fortress manifested in his chest for me. Like a growing infection, I drilled through his bones and tendons. Lehesion snarled his teeth before breathing in the vacuum around him, readying a breath of golden flame. I whipped my body around, putting his tail between me and his attack.

Without hesitating, Lehesion unloaded one of the beams from earlier. A portal from Helios spawned in front of his mouth and towards the back of his body. The portal redirected a part of the blast, leaving a deep wound in Lehesion's back. At the same time, his tail guarded me against the worst of the remaining blast. Despite the redirection and barrier, his beam scorched through me, singeing my skin and bones like a fire burning twigs.

I stayed alive, however, and I still drained his essence with each passing second. I turned his flesh into my own, the shattered god becoming a buffet. His aura rippled back out of his body, knocking me off of him. It disintegrated the tendrils of my armor ingrained through his body while driving me back. Before I could reorient myself, he shot forward and clapped me with his tail.

I braced for impact. His attack collided with me, smashing into my chest. Ribs broke, my chest caved in. Silver blood splattered out of my mouth. I laughed with no sound as I got a grip on where I was. It turns out, without his aura enhancing his tail, Lehesion wasn't actually all that overwhelming. All those levels from culling Giess were paying off.

I turned myself towards the angle of his attack, reaching out with a singularity. He pulled away from the gravitational lure, sidestepping it while darting away. The hungry point yanked me towards its center before I jerked myself back. It fizzled into nothing, the first one I ever failed to properly ignite.

Lehesion taunted,

“You've developed your body since we last fought, but your magic has grown stagnant.”

I winced at his words because the giant frog dragon was right. I was prioritizing a lot of different tasks right now, and my splintered approach led towards fewer gains in my own development. Those haunting thoughts cropped up with memories of the elemental furnace along with saving the gialgathens. Pride bloomed in my chest.

Even if I hadn't gained personal power, I'd helped people. That was worth it in the end.

It did make this fight a bit harder, though. Lehesion closed the gap and swiped at me once more. I slapped his tail aside, the gialgathen no longer able to bully me with his physical might. Without his aura helping him out, I could clobber him on contact. He shot out a dozen tail swipes over the next second, and I kept pace by deflecting with my arms, elbows, and knees.

I saturated myself with quintessence, my skin glowing a bright white. Lehesion burned himself each time he attacked me, and I gained some ground. I pushed the legendary figure back, his attacks unable to stop me. Even if he believed himself holy, that didn't make it so. I could win this. I growled back to him in my mind,

"And you never once learned to fight against someone on equal footing, did you? You just relied on your natural talent to keep you afloat."

He sliced his tail while biting with his jaws. I grabbed his limb, two of my fingers breaking while I established a firm grip with the other three. At the same time, I pulled him to me while smashing his face with my fist. His teeth cracked along with a bone in his jaw. My body infested his as I made contact, ripping more chunks out of his face.

I taunted right back, "Look how that worked out."

Mana filled Lehesion, and crystallized mana appeared over his skin. These scales formed under my hand that grabbed his tail. These mana plates exploded outward, leaving my left arm in tatters while he got distance from me. My arm regenerated while I pulled myself to him. He was faster than I was, however.

With a gap between us established, Lehesion charged another attack. I bit my tongue at the sight. I got him angry earlier, and that made him run at me. In a physical confrontation, I was his equal, maybe even his better. However, once Lehesion began using his large scale spells, I couldn't keep up at all. Knowing all that, I bolted towards him as fast as I could, trying to interrupt his casting.

I didn't make it in time. Lehesion created many emerald serpents, each forming over his head. These aetherial beings slithered through space before eyeing me. I neared him before one of the snakes bit at me. I pulled myself with gravitation, evading the first, second, and third strikes of the serpents. The bites after that sliced into my arms and legs, their fangs injecting caustic venom.

I pulled at them, but the serpents were strong. They jerked at all angles, stopping me from escaping before Lehesion breathed deeply. My mind raced for a solution before I tried something new. Instead of trying to outdo the apparitions, I tried eating them. Just as I ate lightning, I reached at them with my armor. The snakes writhed in pain before the one restraining my right arm released me.

New skill unlocked! Energy Siphon(lvl 10) – You've learned to drain many things, and now energy is one of them.

As Lehesion unleashed his golden beam, I pulled my arm in front of my face. Several of Helios's portals spawned at once, each trying to buy me time. Lehesion blasted into them, sustaining through his own blast. The edges of the warps cracked, but they bought me a few seconds.

I wracked my brain for a solution. Thinking of Helios's tactics, I used my dimensional storage as a shield, trying to block the ray of energy. Helios's portals shattered, Lehesion's beam firing at me right after. My shield actually absorbed the light coming at my face, right shoulder, and some of my torso.

The rest of me disintegrated.

Not all of that was from Lehesion's attack. Every ounce of energy I stored in the shield cost me mana. Spending mana meant spending health, so I still took a massive amount of damage even when blocking the attack. I contained the blast from outright killing me, however, and that was all I needed.

Lehesion's blast stopped, and he inspected the damage done. With only a piece of my upper half left, I willed the ray of light I absorbed from Lehesion to fire back out. In a flash, I shot out the beam at his head. He jerked his neck sideways, avoiding the blast. Using the rest of the stored energy, I cleaved his torso in half.

He roared in agony, his serpents dissipating as he lost focus. I stared back at my dimensional shield as my legs regenerated, kind of surprised by how damn useful this thing was turning out to be. In the corner of my eye, I saw two new skills as well.

Unknown skill gained! 500 tree points awarded for pioneering a new skill! Dimensional Shield(lvl 10) – By breaking the laws of physics, you trade your life to nullify incoming attacks.

Unknown skill gained! 500 tree points awarded for pioneering a new skill! Dimensional Reversal(lvl 10) – After placing an opponent's attacks in stasis, you've learned to wield their own fangs against them.

They were the kind of skills I really needed, and they gave me a method of countering Lehesion's massive attacks. The gialgathen gawked at me with utter surprise as he telepathically spoke,

"You've been hiding tricks up your sleeve, haven't you?"

Of course I wasn't. Risking my life for the surprise factor wasn't actually something I wanted to do. I got these skills out of desperation. Having Lehesion think I was stronger than I was would help me out right now, however. I grinned,

"I'm sure you have a few tricks up your sleeve as well."

Lehesion frowned, "Allow me to show them to you by enacting your death."

I pointed at the battle raging on behind him, "You sure about that? What about them?"

Lehesion turned, spotting the Adair's fleet. His eyes widened as he saw many of their forces facing destruction. Even with the Spatial Fortress destroyed, it wasn't as if Schema was helpless. Using his personalized A.I.'s, Schema organized his unit's attacks around his main fleet. By using his vessels to peel back layer after layer of the Adair's offensive, Schema gained ground.

On the other hand, the Adair's fleet lacked the same training and systematic approach. They were a larger but more divided force. This left many of their sentient eldritch and wilder Hybrids as easy pickings for group tactics. Combine that with Lehesion's glaring

absence, and the rebel's victory was quickly turning into a defeat. Lehesion grimaced at the sight before glaring back to me,

"The next time we fight, I will muster every ounce of my power against you."

I pounded my fists together, "Anytime then. Go on, save your new owners."

Lehesion narrowed his eyes before staring back up at the Nebula Drifter. He grinned with an ominous joy in his eyes,

"Ah, that is the vessel you arrived from, is it not?"

I scowled, "You'd bring normal people into this?"

The thought passed in Lehesion's mind, and he considered it for a second. He shook his head and frowned, "No. I wouldn't. I have yet to sink so low."

Impressed by the guy, I raised a hand, "Then we can keep fighting, or you can go back. It's up to you."

Lehesion looked down, indecision spreading over him. That indecisiveness died as a foreign force overtook him. A series of convulsions robbed him of his self-control as his eyes dilated. The Adair's wrestled complete dominance of him once more, and without warning, he began charging a beam. Lehesion blasted at the Nebula Drifter as I reached out with a singularity at the center of his chest. It siphoned his body inward, deforming his frame.

The damage was already done, however.

His blast passed through the Nebula Drifter, disintegrating the metal and glass at an atomic level. Not even a trace of debris remained from the shuttle, the entire vessel consumed by his strike. My stomach sank as I roared at the golden monster. The Gialgathen regenerated before smirking at me, his pupils dilated. Tohtella's cold voice rang in my ears,

"You've wasted enough of Lehesion's time. Because of you, we've lost many lives."

Unlike Lehesion, Tohtella didn't even try to fight me. Using Lehesion's body as a vessel, she darted away from me, taunting all the while,

"From what I've seen, you cannot be killed. You and Lehesion are alike in that way. Since you cannot be controlled either, we will use other means of dispatching you. The first of which involves eradicating your will to live rather than your life itself. Look forward to it."

A portal appeared behind Lehesion, and the gialgathen darted into it. It closed behind him while I lashed out where he was in frustration. One second of control and that piece of shit just destroyed everyone. I grabbed the sides of my helmet, squeezing so hard I left finger imprints in my helm.

Flashes of Althea passed through my mind, along with all the memories we shared together. I remember getting her to control her eldritch half, and when we used to cook together and go on dates. I should've cherished those times more. I remembered Torix and all the lessons he gave me, along with his snappy retorts. He was kind of an asshole when we first met, but the guy was like a father to me now. I wanted to make him proud.

Kessiah, Hod, Florence, even Obolis, they might all be dead along with everyone else. My heart pounded in my chest like a jackhammer as something like a panic attack came over me. Before I let myself go entirely to the panic, I remembered Althea's restorative abilities. She could regenerate from anything after thirty seconds as long as she wasn't still taking damage.

With every ounce of my strength, I shot myself towards where the Nebula Drifter once was. As I arrived, I peered around, struggling to find Althea in the vast void of space. She would be the smallest inkling of color in this empty place, but I should've been able to find it. As the seconds turned to minutes, you'd think my dread would grow.

It actually disappeared.

She would survive that kind of attack, so if she wasn't here, she wasn't vaporized in the first place. Verifying my thoughts, a message from Obolis cropped up.

Obolis Novas, the Finder of Secrets(lvl 23,987 | Class: Founder | Guild: The Empire) –
Send me your coordinates.

I replied that I was right where the Nebula Drifter once was. A few seconds later, a warm breeze blew from above me. Someone created warp that let out air, so I went to it, finding and diving through the portal. My feet dragged across dirt as Helios closed the opening behind me. Surrounded by my guildsmen and a forest clearing, I took a deep breath of fresh air.

“Man, it’s good to see you guys.”

Althea ran up to hug me, so I warmed my skin a bit. It was cold from space, and I didn’t want her skin to peel off on me. As she hugged me, I held her too. Even though it was just for a second, I thought I’d lost her. Torix put a hand on my shoulder from behind, his skeletal hand squeezing hard,

“It’s good to see that while you might not be his equal, you are at the very least a suitable distraction. Well done.”

I scoffed, “Eh, I do my best.”

A nervous chuckle ran through the crowd around us. It looked like most people escaped from the vessel before Lehesion blew it away. Along the outskirts of the group, Obolis paced back and forth, his mind thinking of hundreds of different possibilities. Helios stared in the distance, trying not to hurl. Wrath skulked in the surrounding woods, culling a few wild eldritch to keep these high society people safe.

I turned to those here, “Is anyone missing from my guild?”

Hod, Kessiah, Torix, Althea, and I were here. They gave me a few congratulations on my fight, everyone counting it as a win. It was a victory in some respects, but it showed a glaring weakness I needed to address. I could stop Lehesion if he chose to fight me, but restraining the guy was outside my power. That much was impossible for me.

They would find Earth, and when they did, Lehesion would ravage its surface until no life remained. Combine that with the fact the Adair family was after our heads, and we had a lot on our plate. Before thinking about it further, I gave Althea a squeeze to clear my mind. With that moment of respite, I was ready to talk.

I gave a light shout,

“Everyone, we need to talk in private. Let’s get these guys out of here before we have another meeting.”

Helios sighed before waving his shoulders. The guy’s shoulders and chest were slumped, so I reached out a hand,

“Hey, you alright.”

He pushed my hand away, “Of course. I’m fine.”

Torix mouthed, “The portals shattering takes its toll on the caster’s body. Even one as gifted as Helios would be feeling the side effects.”

“Ah, that makes sense.”

Despite that sickness, Helios got all of Obolis’s guests out of here, along with most of his crew. Not all, however. Some perished in the wake of Lehesion’s blast, and that solemn air permeated all the crew members. The high society folk were far less effected, probably because they were prioritized during the evacuation. They hadn’t suffered yet, but the crew already lost friends and loved ones. That made it more real.

It was a wild situation either way, so I couldn’t blame people for not knowing how to handle it. Reactions ranged from sheer shock to unbridled fear. A few were impressed by me. Others were disappointed. I could never make everyone happy, and I had long ago accepted that. Regardless of what I did, someone would complain, so I took their opinions with a grain of salt.

Once they were gone, a few core members of our guilds were left. We gathered around into a circle. We needed to discuss Lehesion’s reincarnation, my liquification, and even the rebel’s flawed victory. We had to get to the bottom of it all and fast since the clock was ticking before the Adair’s found Earth. Once they did, I would lose another home along with everything I’d worked hard to build.

And that didn't even include the collapse of Schema's society.

Man, we had a lot to talk about.

Chapter 273: New Paths Opened

I got everyone's attention before announcing,

"Lehesion was reincarnated from an alternate timeline, and Eonoth, a really loud Old One, was what actually killed the Spatial Fortress, not Lehesion."

Our factions burst into a fervent discussion, everyone reacting at my immediate announcement with shock, awe, and dread.

Obolis winced, "I didn't want to discover the Old One's identity like this."

Helios facepalmed, "Of course. Reincarnated. That's great. Just great."

Torix cupped his chin, "By Schema, I don't know whether to be deterred or emboldened. Knowing Lehesion's limits aren't as endless as I imagined is one thing, but knowing we are armed against an Old One is another thing altogether."

I nodded at them all, agreeing with pretty much everybody,

"Yeah, it's a lot to take in. I say we separate this discussion into three topics. The most important is the fallout from Schema's loss. After that, we'll talk about what to do going forward before I listen to ideas. So, uh, starting off the whole Schema losing thing, I, for one, think a lot more planets are going to join the rebels now that people know Elysium can win."

Althea frowned, "Yeah, I think so too. They have a system and everything, and they can stop Spatial Fortresses. Those were the aces up Schema's sleeve, and the rebels just stole those cards away."

Torix raised a finger, "Dutifully put. I believe this indicates a societal insurrection, a kind of paradigm shift if you will. It was as if Schema's reputation kept him immune

from criticism or doubt. Now that a rival faction has formed, one that is competitive at that, we shall see many more voices join in the discussions against him.”

Obolis raised his eyebrows, “It is easy to criticize something that you don’t understand. None of us can comprehend what enables the system to operate, and we could hardly comprehend its scale.”

Torix gestured to me, “Not so. Daniel, why don’t you share your theory?”

I pointed at myself, “What, me?”

“Indeed.”

I coughed into a hand, “Ahem, well...I have been working with runes for a long time. I know that I can change my own self by simply putting runes on me and channeling mana through them. By that line of logic, Schema might have a stockpile of runes for every individual. As they gain experience, he channels mana into those runes and alters them to make the person stronger.”

I raised a hand, “If that’s how it’s done, then anyone with that level of runic knowledge and mana could technically do it themselves. Hell, I could have a little system in place for myself eventually. This is all just an educated guess, though. Don’t quote me on any of this.”

The imperials present stayed silent for a moment. Obolis narrowed his eyes at me, “You...you’re far more intelligent than you let on.”

I shook my head, “Trust me, I’m not. I’ve been working with a guy on making golems, and I am terrible at it. Like, absolutely awful.”

Helios oozed skepticism, “We’ll see if Ophelia will vouch for your claims when she’s finished working with you. Personal assessments aside, does anyone here know what we can do now that Giess will remain?”

Torix raised a hand, getting everyone’s attention, “I hypothesized both outcomes and created lists of likely scenarios. Due to this exercise, I believe I know a few of the implications that shall incur because of this event. The first is, as Daniel mentioned, a

rise in the rebellion's scope. This is by no means a small event. It is an enormous, historical undertaking."

Torix pulled out his grimoire, flipping the pages. Channeling a blot of mana into the booklet, he cast a complicated spell for generating visual holograms. He pointed at a planetary model of Giess,

"This is Giess, as you all know. Silvers and their territory smother its surface, and the eldritch rifts are spreading as we speak. Due to this planet being secure now, they shall no doubt use this place as a staging platform for further production of Hybrids, radioactive eldritch, and feeding grounds."

Florence scratched the back of his head, "Feeding grounds?"

"Precisely. The silvers are the second half of a Hybrid. They are nigh exclusive to Giess, though innumerable in number. Because of this, they are a primary resource for the rebellion's success. By securing Giess, they've secured their production of silvers and, therefore, Hybrids as well. This was why they fought tooth and nail to retain their ownership of this world."

Our view of the planetary hologram became closer, showing a few common silvers like the saysha beetles. Torix waved a hand,

"Giess is also an enormous reservoir of mana waste, the primary fuel that silvers feast upon. It acts as the base of their food chain, and outside of pumping it into space, it is nearly impossible to get rid of. They shall create breeding grounds in mass near rifts on Giess, and this shall promote the rapid resupply of their army."

Obolis frowned, "Wouldn't they be overwhelmed by the sheer number of created Hybrids? They need psionics to control them, after all."

Torix pressed two fingers together, accentuating his point,

"They will simply keep as many soldiers as they currently have and use the others as a backup source. Every remotely close battle shall be a victory for them. After all, their production of those monsters is far easier than Schema's production of trained warriors."

I grimaced, “Yeah, it isn’t like Schema’s ultra-efficient at creating people who get past level 5,000. If anything, he’s very stingy with his resources, even when people showcase some serious talent. Elysium isn’t losing any psionics in their battles for the most part either. They’re using cannon fodder to get rid of elites. Smart.”

Torix shook his head, “Sadly, I could not agree more. The rebel’s plans likely involve dispersing Schema’s forces across many planets, whittling down his resources with an endless Hybrid army, then taking galactic dominance from the A.I. one planet at a time.”

Torix’s hologram disappeared, “Though this is quite simply conjectured, I do fear this is the most likely possibility.”

Helios raised an eyebrow, “And how do you understand their plans so thoroughly?”

Torix shrugged, “It is simply how I would go about doing it given their resources. Tohtella has displayed a high relative competence, her ruthlessness exceeding even my own. She implements tactics similar to my own necromantic practices as well. Because of these factors, I say we should move forward with the assumption this is their plan.”

I pointed at our resident lich, “Damn fine work. This gives us a foundation to move off of.”

Torix cackled at the compliment before saying, “It was my pleasure.”

The group took a second to think about what Torix said, and I joined them. Torix really broke everything down in a way that made a lot of sense, and that made everything much easier to understand for me. I mean, I was getting kind of overwhelmed by the sheer complexity of the situation. Torix brushed aside all the white noise and useless chatter, diving straight to the heart of the issue. It really helped us out.

Even knowing all that, it didn’t spell out what we needed to do. We could try raiding Elysium’s encampments on Giess, but it wasn’t like they were easy to find or hard to make. All they needed was a rift in silver territory. Boom. Now they could make a ton of Hybrids with ease.

We needed to make a better plan going forward.

Interrupting my thoughts, Obolis made a fist as he read his status. I raised my eyebrows, “You seem pretty excited about that breakdown of the rebellion, which was pretty dire. What gives?”

Obolis smiled, showing sharp teeth, “I received excellent news. The ahcorus are still going forward with the deal we made earlier.”

I blinked, “They still want to do that? I thought they’d bail after seeing the extent of the rebel’s powers.”

Obolis leaned back, “According to Wrath, their reasoning is simple – the rebels allied with sentient eldritch. Plazia-Ruhl is one of the worst examples of a sentient eldritch let free. Centuries of terror have made the ahcorus hellbent on killing the creature.”

Obolis chuckled before grinning, “Seeing the rebels ally with eldritch similar in stature to Plazia made the ahcorus despise the rebels even more.”

Obolis frowned, “They also mentioned that Plazia neglected to join the rebels, though he was no doubt offered a deal to do so. I find it strange as well, considering his precarious position in Schema’s universe. Elysium seems like a far less hostile environment.”

I leaned down, “Hmm, maybe Plazia has a good reason why? We might be able to get some useful intel off of him about the rebels while we’re taking him out. I mean, Plazia’s bound to be a smart guy, and if he’s anything like Baldag-Ruhl, he’ll know a lot about runes.”

Helios furrowed his brow, “You’re telling me you’ve seen a different Ruhl already?”

I spread out my hands, “Uh, yeah. It was the first rift keeper I ever killed. They tried to turn my soul into the armor I’m wearing-” I tapped one of my shoulder plates, “As you can tell, I kind of turned that against him.”

Helios massaged his temples while Obolis tried to speak without insinuating I was an idiot,

“Daniel. Don’t you think that tidbit of information might’ve served you well when negotiating with Wrath?”

I rolled my eyes, “That eldritch wasn’t even level 200.”

Obolis sighed before gesturing a palm to me, his patience growing thin,

“I forget at times that you aren’t aware of the system’s customs. Despite your position, you’ve not even been a part of this new world for a decade. This is a time when that ignorance showcases itself.”

Torix simmered, “I’m centuries old, and I know nothing of what you speak of. Perhaps your expectations are what is lacking, not our experience?”

Torix glared at me, his fire eyes turning purple, “And neither have I heard of this sudden shift in plans. Perhaps you could find the time to explain?”

I pulled out my new elemental furnace, “I got this and other treasure to take out Plazia instead of clearing out Blegara.”

Torix’s eyes shifted back to blue, “Oh...perhaps you could discuss with us before shifting the direction of our guild next time?”

I frowned, “I respect you all and your opinions. Sometimes, I’ll need to be able to make decisions for the guild on the spot. Otherwise, I’ll get caught up in constant meetings like this one. Not to say this isn’t productive, but I’m getting tired of constantly having to host them.”

Torix stared down, “Perhaps you’re right.” Torix pointed at Obolis, “That hasn’t cleared up your accusation of ignorance at us. Your information is obviously less available than you might imagine.”

Torix wasn’t one to take accusations of ignorance lightly. He was our chief educator so that responsibility fell to him. If anything, the guy might be making a new program about everyday kinds of eldritch as we spoke.

Obolis smiled with a knowing grin,

“Yes, maybe. Allow me to enlighten you all then. The Ruhl’s are a specific variant of eldritch hivemind. They are highly volatile and dangerous, often requiring far more resources to slay than you’d first estimate. Because of this inherent danger and their vast intelligence, they are recognized as critical threats to Schema.”

Obolis pointed up at the sky, “A Ruhl calculates his odds given the situation, and this leads to their long lifespans. Their manifestation in a dungeon often leads to the eldritchification of a planet thereafter. Combine that with their insatiable desire to learn, and they are fierce, whether level one or level one hundred thousand. Some even believe that the most ancient of Ruhls become Old Ones.”

I frowned, “So are there a bunch of different kinds and categories of eldritch? I thought they were all just random.”

Helios rolled a hand, “They have their own kinds and species, obviously. Obolis’s point, however, is that any experience against them is a potent tool to leverage in a negotiation. You should’ve abused the tools at your disposal to the fullest to maximize your advantage.”

I looked back and forth, “You guys of all people should know that I’m not about gouging other people.”

Obolis raised an eyebrow, “What about when Wrath and I were discussing our deal earlier? You set the conversation up in such a way that you received an elemental furnace before accomplishing anything for either of us. That seemed rather methodical and planned if you were to ask me.”

Torix scoffed, “I know little of this deal, but I understand the contribution our guild has given you already. We’ve assisted in clearing Blegara, and we have every intention of continuing to do so. Daniel is simply asking for a specific advance on our reward before we finish the job. That isn’t gouging in any understanding of the word. It’s ensuring we, as a guild, aren’t taken advantage of.”

Obolis nodded, “Hmm, I suppose that could be that case.”

Torix turned to those here, “And that is precisely why I’m wondering what you’ve agreed to exactly, Daniel.”

I leaned back onto my hands, “It’s about what I said earlier. I agreed to get a bunch of treasure from Obolis in exchange for helping Wrath out with her Plazia problem.”

Torix’s blue eyes turned green, “Why would Obolis do that?”

“He wanted the ahcorus to clear out his planets. They’re faster than us at cleaning up Hybrids, so we all won out in the deal-” I spun the black jade in a finger,

“Especially us. I can use this for a lot of different things to help the guild.”

Helios let out a cynical laugh before shaking his head, “Do you believe that using one is so simple?”

I shook my head, “It doesn’t matter if I can use it or not. The runes are the most valuable part of this since I can understand them.”

Torix raised a hand, jumping to my defense, “Another aspect my disciple neglected to mention is his mastery of mana. He can wield huge volumes of mana already, even without the furnace. I’d imagine the furnace is usually impeded by one’s ability to control mana on a mass scale. Otherwise, everyone would be using one of the devices.”

Torix eyed the Emperor, “At the absolute least, you’d utilize more of them if that were the case. Given those factors, they must be dangerous as well.”

Obolis nodded, “Indeed, they are. Using one requires the management of meager drops and unwieldy flows of mana all at once. By funneling a slither of mana into the device, you may generate an enormous amount of energy from even the air around you. It’s volatile given it relies on nuclear fission, however. One misstep-“

Obolis snapped his fingers, “And a city’s worth of land is ruined, along with the furnace and the user.”

I smiled, “Eh, I should be fine with a bit of practice.”

Helios leaned towards me, “Do you believe you still have the subtlety required? Many mages that expand their mana pools lose the ability to work with smaller volumes of mana. Given your enormous reserves, perhaps you’re suffering from this and don’t even know it?”

I shook my head, “I’m very precise with my mana. I’m more worried about the fallout from the furnace, but even that won’t be the end of the world. I can just eat the radiation.”

My guild gave me a few nods and pats on the back for that idea. The imperials present gawked at me as if I was losing my mind. Kessiah leaned back, holding her head up with her arms,

“Don’t worry, guys. You’ll get used to Daniel doing crazy stuff once you’re around him long enough.”

Obolis shook his head, “Perhaps your approach will serve you better than those before you. You understand yourself and your limits better than we do, as shown before. We must move on, however. There are other details left for us to discuss.”

He turned to me, “Are you still willing to follow through with our deal with Wrath?”

I looked down, thinking about it. The first factor was the reward. I’d have to return my furnace if I didn’t follow through with the plan. Abusing this little gemstone would result in some severe gains I could use against Lehesion next time we met. I also needed personal, applicable power, and this would help me do that.

On the other hand, priorities at home were reaching their boiling points. Earth didn’t even have six months left before other guilds could rush in and grab up territories. My new golem projects would be resulting in a massive expansion with Ophelia and Diesel’s help, letting me expand guild operations rapidly. I could focus less on helping other guilds and more on improving my own.

I wrestled with all these ideas, some of my guildsmen noticing. Althea placed a hand on mine, and she peered up at me. I met her eye as she said,

“Hey, stop worrying so much. You’re the only one that’s stopped Lehesion so far. If you can beat him down, then everything else kind of falls in place, right?”

I dwelled on what she said. If I could stop Lehesion, then the Adair family would struggle to invade Earth. That much was certain. I could tear their fleets to pieces with an elemental furnace fueling my singularities. Hell, I could even weave the elemental furnace formula into my golems, making them walking death machines.

The more I thought about it, the more Althea was right. Even if I took a large section of Earth over, it wasn’t like I could defend it. Lehesion could show up and burn it to the ground in a few minutes. Until I could guarantee my guild’s safety from him and Elysium, there was no point in expanding further outside of a few nearby territories.

For now, prioritizing my own personal strength was an absolute necessity, whether I liked it or not.

I met Obolis’s eye, “I’m still in.”

Obolis let out a nervous breath, “Here I believed you’d changed your mind, given the circumstances.”

I tilted my head to Althea, “Thank her. She’s the one that convinced me.”

Obolis gave her a grin, “Thank you for your wisdom.”

Althea sat straighter while Helios leaned onto one of his hands and bit his tongue. Poor guy would never live what he did down. It wasn’t my problem as I rolled my shoulders,

“Alright then. Over the next week or two, my guild will continue helping on Blegara while getting ready to travel to the ahcorus’s homeworld. Obolis, I’ll need to meet with you regularly to have lessons on this elemental furnace. I must learn it soon.”

Obolis raised a palm, “I simply don’t have the time to help you. Helios, on the other hand, is under your wing and understands elemental furnaces well. He should be a fine tutor for the skills required.”

Helios looked for any kind of redemption to his past mistakes as he bowed to Obolis, “Of course. I shall assist the Harbinger in whatever way I am able.”

Obolis put a hand on his nephew’s shoulder, “Thank you. Ophelia’s assisting Daniel with his golem project as well from what I’ve heard. She can teach him much about primordial mana if he listens to her.”

I gave him a thumbs-up, “I will.”

The Emperor scoffed, “She’s spoiled but talented. As long as you callous your mind before speaking with her, then she won’t be a matter of contention.”

I tapped the side of my head, “It won’t be a problem.”

Obolis opened a portal, leading to a treasure vault of some sort,

“I will leave you all with this discussion’s implications. I’m needed at my war council soon, so I must leave you all to your devices. Goodbye.”

I waved, “Cya.”

Obolis left, leaving a few others remaining here. I stared at Kessiah, Torix, Hod, Althea, Florence, and Helios,

“Let’s go back to Mt. Verner. We need as many perspectives as we can get, including Krog, Chrona, and Amara’s. They might be able to tell us something new.”

The others gave me a few nods of approval before Helios wobbled up. He gulped down vomit before generating another portal to Mt. Verner. I walked up to the guy, grabbing his shoulder to hold him upright. Using a bit of mana, I saturated an antigravity panel over him,

“This enchantment will last another hour or so. Get to your room and rest. You’ve earned it.”

With his steps less wobbly, Helios worked his way to his bed without a word. Everyone else walked through his portal before Helios let it disintegrate. With Torix's help, I got everyone together later that day after Helios had his nap, and we had time to think. Everyone from our guild was there from earlier with the inclusion of Chrona, Krog, and Amara.

We rested in a cleared out courtyard, right below where Chrona called home. She carved her resting place into a cliffside, creating an overhang of stone that she slept under. To the left of that shaded space, a flat area was there for sunbathing. Below it, another flat area spread out, large enough for several gialgathens to mingle. We all sat in a circle there with the forest cleared nearby, letting us view the mountains and rolling hills around Mt. Verner.

Torix already broke down our discussion from earlier, along with a summary of what occurred during the glassing of Giess. Armed with that knowledge and a new perspective, Amara, Krog, and Chrona sat in front of me. I got everyone's attention,

"Everyone, this will be the last meeting we're doing about this. I'm tired of talking, and I want to get started doing. We all agree there, right?"

I got their acclaim before turning to Chrona and Krog,

"You guys know Lehesion better than any of us. What do you both think about his reincarnation? Any insights?"

They stared at me, both seeming whiplashed and angry at the same time. Chrona spoke up first,

"Having been reincarnated would explain much of his past. He was the most gifted of all of us, granted an absurd base of knowledge and experience we all lacked. Lehesion would often be considered precognizant during his earlier years, though that reputation faded."

Krog grit his fangs, "He merely recited what he'd already known to be true. As he aged, he shaped history in his image, and knowing less of the world's events thereafter, he could no longer speak of the future with precision. He conned us all."

Chrona gazed down, “He is unkillable as we imagined if the Old Ones are as strong as you say, however. I don’t know what we can do to stop him, either. His master seems to rule time, and I of all people know how absurd that ability can be.”

Chrona’s temporal dilation was a nasty ability. I turned a hand to her, “That’s why I wanted you here to talk with us. Lehesion mentioned collapsing timelines. Any ideas about what that means?”

Chrona stared up, letting her mind wander,

“Time is a fluid thing, much like a stream. It can be slowed and sped up if one knows how to manipulate it. Unlike a stream, it cannot be stopped, however. That is the part of Eonoth’s attack that I cannot understand.”

Torix leaned forward, “What about that is so confusing? We’ve mentioned that Old Ones break all the rules we know of. They exist without limits.”

Krog shook his head, “This is simply not true. Otherwise, they would dictate our reality without limit. They seem to act within an enigmatic set of rules, though those rules are undefined as of yet.”

That was a good point. Chrona turned towards us, making eye contact, “That is precisely what I’ve noticed as well. Lehesion exchanged his new body for some kind of goal. Learning that goal may help us untangle Eonoth’s grip on him.”

I tapped my chin with my thumb knuckle, “What about the time-freezing thing? You mentioned that it is impossible. Why?”

Chrona sighed,

“I’ve tried it and failed many times. The issue is that we all exist within time itself. We cannot manipulate time that is relevant to us without freezing ourselves in the process. Anyone that does succeed will simply burn through their mana reserves until they are at the brink of death. Time will then unfreeze, leaving them without any mana whatsoever. This means nothing is accomplished.”

I waved a hand, “Couldn’t you just freeze time somewhere that isn’t where you are?”

Chrona shook her head, “To do so would be nearly impossible. Even with decades of experience, I cannot do more than rule over the space around me. This is because time is tied to our perception. Without that perception guiding the magic, you cannot shift time with any accuracy.”

Krog grinned, “Chrona has tried many times. She would often lose any coherence, creating wobbling spaces where time sped up and slowed down. It simply burned through her mana, and she would be left defenseless.”

Chrona frowned at Krog, “Yes. That is why I tie my time manipulation to the spaces I inhabit. That is also why freezing time never works for those locked within it.”

Hod spoke up, “So Hod think solution simple.”

Everybody looked at Hod, expecting something Hod-ish. He spread his winged arms,

“Mage want freeze time, then mage just not be in time.”

Torix crossed his arms, “Ah, as always, very helpful. Existing outside of time is easier said than done.”

My eyes widened, “That’s why I heard Eonoth’s roar. I’m not in this timeline. Lehesion was right about that.”

Everyone turned to me as I grabbed the sides of my head, ruffling my hair,

“Holy shit. I’m a dimension. I have my own timeline. That’s why Eonoth couldn’t freeze me. Duh.”

Chrona whipped her tail behind her, “That is why my temporal dilation has no effect on you as well. Why does this surprise you?”

I spread out my hands, “Well, the thing is, I turned into a puddle when Eonoth shouted.”

Chrona tilted her head, “You were liquified?”

“Yeah, I ended up turning into a pile of mush. It might be that I was the only one who could hear Eonoth roar, but maybe not. Either way, I ended up a pile of jelly.”

Chrona furrowed her brow, “Eonoth collapsed timelines according to Lehesion. That means he used some kind of mass temporal coalescence. He smashed timelines together. According to what Torix told us, this let out a ripple across space-time, right?”

Torix gave her a nod, “Precisely.”

Chrona looked at everyone, “Perhaps we were unaffected by that wave because we exist on this timeline. You, Daniel, do not. If that were so, you are surrounded by a dimension far larger than your own. The surrounding dimension might have distorted to such an extent that it smashed you into pulp when the wave passed around you.”

I cupped my chin, “Ah. That makes a lot of sense. Eonoth’s wave messed with space, which I’m surrounded by. That ripple passed around me like a meatgrinder from all sides.”

I stared at my hands, “Man, this whole being a dimension thing is more thorough than I first thought. If that’s the case, that might be why I couldn’t do the temporal dilation you tried teaching me before.”

Chrona’s tail moved back and forth behind her,

“How so?”

“Well, I was trying to bend the dimension around me instead of my own dimension. For you, you’re a part of this dimension, so it’s not as strange. For me, it’s like trying to shift an immovable, massive thing around me.”

Torix raised a finger, “Ah, perhaps temporal dilation wouldn’t be as difficult as you first envisioned then.”

I shook my head, “No, it won’t be. In fact, there are all kinds of magic I’m probably not taking advantage of just because I’m tackling the techniques from the wrong angle. I mean, my pocket dimension can be used as a shield, for instance. I never thought to do that because I keep thinking of myself as Daniel, the guy.”

I gripped my hands into fists, “The thing is, I’m not human anymore. I’m a literal dimension, and I need to start thinking of myself as one. I should be able to manipulate all kinds of universal rules and constants that apply to me. Hell, that’s probably why shifting gravity is so easy.”

Torix pointed at me, “You’re shifting something that is part of you instead of shifting something external. That gives you a better measure of control.”

I pointed at Torix, “Yeah, exactly.”

I peered down, thinking more about the implications. I always thought of the whole being a dimension thing as just something Schema made up, like me being the Harbinger of Cataclysm. Either that or being a dimension was something airy, not something grounded that I could work off of. Apparently, that wasn’t the case at all.

My talent with runes might stem from being a dimension. My gravitational abilities and natural way of generating matter might be the same. If that was the case, time and other mechanics of the universe should come to me naturally as well. I just needed to focus on shifting my time instead of the universe’s time around me.

And that realization was just the tip of the iceberg.

I grimaced at my own blindness. How I went this long without realizing any of this was a miracle. I gave my head a few hard taps while wincing,

“Gah, I’m an idiot.”

Althea grabbed my arm, “Hey, don’t do that. If not for you, then don’t do that for me.”

I sighed, “Alright.”

She gave me a hard shove, “Hey, stop being so hard on yourself. You’re the first living dimension, right? That means you have to learn everything on your own. That’s hard to do. Look at me-“

She put a hand on her chest, “I couldn’t control my eldritch half at all. I’d turn into a giant pile of shifting meat every time I wasn’t sedated. No one thinks about that, but I couldn’t have regained control of myself without a little help. You just needed some help too.”

She forced a small smile out of me, “Heh, maybe so.”

Kessiah waved at me, “I can verify that. I couldn’t do shit with my blood arts until I got a master from my family.”

I leaned towards her, “A master, huh?”

Kessiah nodded,

“Yup. That’s how it is for almost every remnant. We kind of have these bloodlines with these different powers. You could walk around your entire life without knowing you can do something until stumbling on it someday.”

Torix gestured to her, “It would be similar to how someone could live with a talent that hadn’t manifested itself yet.”

Kessiah frowned, “Yeah, sure. If you think about it, the Adair family is probably like that too. They grow up thinking they’re normal before someone shows them they have psionic abilities.”

Florence perked up, interested in Kessiah,

“Is that how remnants work? It’s challenging to get access to their fleets, so their inner workings are a mystery to most.”

Kessiah got a little nervous as the group paid attention to her. She sat upright, conducting herself more,

“So, uh, well...it’s not that complicated, really. We all live on fleets after Schema kicked us off our homeworld. I don’t even know where it is or what its called anymore. Either way, we were big into genetic modification before Schema uprooted us, and we lost a lot of our technology.”

She tried to formulate her words smoothly,

“My mom and dad told me that after losing our ability to modify ourselves, we struggled for a while. Eventually, these families began showing up, uh, like the Adairs. These families basically bred themselves so that they would keep and strengthen their powers over time. This led to a lot of different kinds of remnants showing up over time.”

She bit her thumb, pooling the blood into a sphere,

“I’m from the family called the Blood of Baldowahs. We’re pretty strong, I guess. We’re no Adair family, though. There are tons of other families like them, however. Some are so different from normal remnants they might as well be a different species. I know my own family was kind of looked down on since we used blood rituals.”

This was the most I’d ever seen Kessiah talk about her past. She scratched her head,

“The Adairs were always high society types. I don’t know much about them outside of the rumors. They’re the most well established and interconnected family, and they had deep ties with Schema before this rebellion. That’s probably how they made this rebellion happen.”

She looked down, “You know, if I’m not talking out of my ass here.”

I shook my head, “No, that’s good information. I think I know what we need to do.” I waved a hand, gesturing to everyone,

“First off, does anyone think that taking out Plazia Ruhl next is a bad idea?”

Everyone shook their heads before Hod's form shivered a bit. Umbral mana saturated him, and his eldritch half spoke up, "I...I would like to speak."

Amara joined him, "I as well."

I pulled back, letting them say their piece,

"Sure. The floor's all yours. Let's start with Other Hod first."

Other Hod lifted two massive hands edged with dark claws, "Plazia Ruhl is a great threat, one far greater than the Hybrids we were given to dispatch. I understand the rewards are greater, but I believe we can do more against the Hybrids than you think and in far less time."

I raised my eyebrows, "How so?"

Other Hod looked at everyone, his red, hollowed eyes menacing, "You all think of we eldritch as animals. I...I understand your sentiment. Many of us are. We have many among us that lack sentience or a will of our own. However, Amara and I both have shown you that we may rise above."

Those present gave a few nods, though Althea leaned over and whispered to me, "I still think Amara's kind of creepy."

Ditto.

Other Hod continued, "There exists one aspect and language all eldritch share despite our different builds and ideas – fear. We know when we are outclassed, and we are unwilling to kill ourselves in the pursuit of food or power-" Other Hod pointed at me,

"I...I fear the Harbinger more than I have feared anything, even the machinations of my nightmares. When you first gave Hod a mana conduit, I could feel how endless your hunger was. My excess was siphoned to you, and you devoured it without end."

Amara quivered, "I fear you as well."

Other Hod nodded at her with surprising eagerness, “You feel it too then. Of course you would. We’re similar, you and I.” He looked back at me,

“That is because we all feel that same fear. To us, the others here are sheep, and we wolves. You, you are the destroyer, an undying hunger. In time, all eldritch will fear you, and you will be able to control them.”

I raised an eyebrow, “So I can become an overlord of eldritch, huh? How’s that help with the Hybrids on Blegara?”

“The vagni on Blegara worship the eldritch. If you can control the eldritch there-“

Torix shouted, “Then Daniel can control the vagni.” Torix pulled his head back in disbelief, “Hod, that’s genius.” Torix leaned towards him, “Who are you, and what have you done with Hod?”

The umbral shade cackled, “Nothing, he and I are the same.”

I raised my eyebrows, remembering how I could get eldritch to shake in their boots. Hell, Amara’s greatest fear was me, actually. Using that dread worked with lower leveled eldritch, but not stronger ones from my experience. It might not carry over to the monsters the vagni worshipped, but the plan was worth a shot either way.

The benefits were too good if things worked out. I mean, if we got the vagni allying with us instead of the Adair’s, Blegara would be much easier to clear. I shrugged, “Yeah, that might just work. I’ll need some practice either way.”

Amara raised a hand, and I thought she was asking for permission to speak. Instead, the eye in her palm peered around,

“It would take little for you to evoke fear in my kin. I know this all too well.”

I frowned, “Alright then, that sounds like a plan.”

Amara lifted her other hand, and she turned them into alternate directions,

“I wish to propose another idea.”

I gestured my palm to her, “Sure thing.”

“Plazia did not join in the Adair’s rebellion. He is wise and ancient, so he must have compelling reasons as to why. If we learn of his motivations, we may find ourselves on the same side as him.”

Althea leaned towards Amara, “You want to ally with Plazia?”

“Yes. Daniel has mentioned how his armor was crafted by an eldritch. This is because we eldritch are masters of the runic language you seek to know more of. I believe we could gain much from Plazia about the inner workings of the magical runes. We may also learn about the rebellion and why an eldritch would abstain from joining the Adairs.”

I crossed my arms, giving it a bit of thought. Torix leaned forward, his voice rising,

“Trusting a volatile eldritch is a recipe for disaster. My son trusted one, and he was turned into an utter abomination. Now you wish to entrust our guild to one of those monsters when the stakes are far higher than a single life. Are you certain that you do not wish to simply ally yourself with Plazia?”

The group stared at Amara, and she covered her face with her unkempt hair. She narrowed the eyes of her palms,

“Your accusations do not fall on deaf ears. I know none of you trust me. I know that you all believe we are evil. You’ve seen that evil manifest in ways that have destroyed your lives. However, I will not apologize for my kin. I did nothing, and I argue that many of you have been touched by our kin. In turn, you’ve each become stronger.”

Amara pointed at Althea, “You use the same energy we do to power your magic. You walk across planes like a dancer across her stage, yet no one gives you scrutiny despite the source of your strength.”

Amara pointed at Hod, “You are drenched in eldritchian energy, your mind splintered by it. Despite that, you have proven a loyal, capable ally who lives in the light of trust.”

Amara turned her hand to me, “And you, most of all. You wear what was once meant to be the skin of an eldritch. Your body is now infused with it to its core. Your rise to prominence was built on the foundation of an eldritch.”

The group stared down, with many thinking about what she said. Amara seethed,

“Your accusations towards me are hypocrisy at its finest, and you should stare at yourself before acting as if I have defied any of you even a single time. I work as tirelessly as you all and for my own aims. My actions demand trust, else you treat me with prejudice.”

She was right in some ways, and Amara deserved at least some trust after she worked with us for so long. Even if she was an eldritch, she was also proof that not all eldritch were evil. Most, sure, but she was an exception. I doubted Plazia would be one of those exceptions, but because of her contributions, I decided to consider the idea.

I extended out a hand, “Amara, we’re sorry. We didn’t mean to make accusations. As a show of sincerity, I’ll think about what you said, allying with Plazia and all. Just remember that even if we all benefited from eldritch in some ways, it wasn’t out of the eldritch’s generosity. We fought tooth and nail to stay alive, and our scars made us stronger, not the eldritch.”

Amara peered down, letting out a sigh. She knew I was right and that she was asking for a lot. I raised my hand, “When we meet the guy, er, thing, I’ll consider talking it out with Plazia if it isn’t outright hostile. That is the limit to what I can give you here, alright?”

She nodded, her teeth like needles, “That is more than enough. Thank you, Harbinger.”

I turned to the others, “Then that’s about it, right?”

The others nodded, many seeming satisfied. I raised a hand, trying to establish an overview of the discussion,

“So we’ve established a few facts, and we’ve decided to try a few things. First fact, we need someone to stop Lehesion, and I’m the guy to do it for now. To make that happen, I’m going to test out more dimensional powers, learn about my elemental furnace, and finish my class. That’s for me personally to tackle him. Any objections?”

No one disagreed, so I gestured to the group, “I’ll need help with a lot of that, and I still want to work on this golem project I have going on. Ophelia and Helios should help me in those specific skills in the meantime.”

I gazed at Torix, “We’ll need to hold off on the guild’s expansion until after we can handle Lehesion. Otherwise, we’re setting up our new guild branches to be destroyed. Let’s focus on really cementing our control of Mt. Verner and brainstorming some solutions for security purposes.”

Torix cupped his hands together, “As you wish.”

I peered at Althea, “We’ll need some more stealth agents and spies. I know that your skills are unique, but could you teach other people how to scout for us?”

Althea coughed into a hand, “Uh, I could try.”

“Good enough.” I pointed at Chrona and Krog, “Chrona, I’m going to need you to help me with your time magic again. I’m giving it another shot. I work over the night here, and you can help teach me then.”

Chrona groaned, “Overnight work? Bah, I hate nightly duties.”

Krog rolled his eyes, “Toughen up, buttercup.”

I grinned at Krog, “You’re going to be helping organize the gialgathens and getting them ready to fight. We’ll need aerial forces to assist against Plazia. You’ll be making sure the gialgathens are ready for it, and that means systemized and trained.”

Krog lifted his head up high, “I was a general, and I shall be one once more. Consider it done.”

“That’s good. You can get that going after you guys have taken a break. I don’t think an hour or two a day of tutoring would be too much to ask though, Chrona.”

She gave me a sly grin, “We’ll see.”

I pointed at the blind albony, “Helios, you’ll be helping me learn about the elemental furnace and helping move our forces around. I know warping all the time is taking its toll, so we’ll try to keep your warping to a minimum from here on out.”

Helios stared at his claws, “If that is what you want.”

I pointed at Hod and Amara, “You two need to brainstorm some kind of plan for getting the eldritch to fear me on Blegara. You both understand whatever it is that’s scary about me, so get that organized into some plan I can follow.”

Amara and Other Hod nodded. I pointed at Kessiah, “You’ll need to train some more healers and other medical personal. You can do that, right?”

Kessiah smirked, “Oh yeah, I sure can. It’ll be easy.”

Florence lifted a hand, the albony being uncharacteristically shy, “So, er, what am I going to do?”

I gestured to him and Amara, “You need to help these guys understand Vagni culture so they can come up with a good plan. After that’s done, you’ll need to do some serious research on the ahcorus so that we aren’t going in uninformed.”

Florence perked up, “Oh, I can do all of that, and even with a measure of competence. Heh, I usually hate these kinds of war discussions. This wasn’t actually so bad.”

I lifted my hands, letting everyone know to get up, “Then let’s get this show on the road.”

Everyone got to action, several people looking like they knew what they needed to do already. Others like Florence paced around for a bit, trying to get a grip on their assignment. I was okay with both approaches, as long as they got it done in the end. For me, I pulled Helios aside and gestured towards Springfield,

“Come on, there are only a few hours before sundown.”

Helios frowned, “Why are we heading to that dilapidated town?”

I grinned, pulling out the black jade,

“You’re going to teach me how to use this elemental furnace.”

Chapter 274: Furnace and Fire

Helios tapped the side of his head, “You wish to start that today? Right now?”

I gave him a thumbs-up, “Yes, I do. Come on. Let’s go.”

I floated him along to Springfield, each of us crossing over the woodlands of Michigan. Once near the beginnings of Springfield, we viewed the aftermath of our battle with Yawm in its full light. Many of the buildings were collapsed, several gigantic craters sprawled across the city’s surface. New kinds of fungi and mushrooms cropped up, filling in some of the voided wildlife from before the porytian’s arrival.

By now, the forest crept into the town, no one coming back to this ghost town. Well, not most. My guild explored here often for the dungeons, most of them higher level than usual thanks to Yawm. Springfield was a breeding ground for stronger rifts, and its proximity to Mt. Verner made it the perfect place to train up veteran dungeon clearers.

We looked around for one of those dungeons, trying to get one large and secure enough for an elemental furnace’s fallout. It took a few minutes before I found the sewer system, exploring it once more to find a dungeon still there. I waved at Helios,

“Here, we’ll use this.”

Helios followed me into a tunnel leading to a jungled expanse. This was one of the first dungeons I ever entered, and I fought against two random mercenaries here. They used arcane magic, my first introduction to the violet beams of death. Initially, I wondered why those guys came to Earth as they had. After discovering how valuable dungeon cores were, it all made sense. They would have made a killing if they hadn't met me.

Since then, the sewers evolved entirely. New, vibrant, and toxic growths splurged out of every surface. The entirety of the space expanded, along with the denizens that occupied it. When I came last time, I hadn't even recognized that I'd waltzed into a rift because I thought every dungeon was like my first.

Instead, I discovered that few dungeons were guarded by Sentinels, and even fewer locked you inside and wouldn't let you out. By comparison, this was average, only a steeled gate keeping the wildlife in. Of that wildlife, some new kind of mole species moved in, and they expanded the tunnels beneath Springfield. Their claw marks on their many burrows exposed their weapons of choice, along with their dominance underground.

At the same time, they warred with an insect colony of some sort in the distance. I could hear the sound of claws and keratin clashing, the insects and moles tearing each other apart. These ants were armored on their fronts, extra limbs growing out of their backs. These mirrored a praying mantis's limbs, ready to grab and hold down anything coming nearby.

These armored ants defended their queen lying deep in their colony center. The moles kept their leadership dispersed, the strongest of them deciding how to approach the situation. These moles used creepy, finger laden noses to cast fire magic and enhance their healing. They matched with one another well.

This stalemate showed itself within the dungeon's layout. Many tunnels led to other tunnels, each haphazardly spread about. This left the place in a state of utter disarray, most animals here needing to burrow just to move around. In these hallowed halls, life thrived amongst their chaos.

The roof of the dungeon sported some glowing fungus, likely some variant from Yawm's invasion. These spore pods showered everything in a green-blue light.

If an animal swooped near a pod, it burst, coating the creature in gunk that quickly congealed. Soaking into the victim, the goo created these zombied, fungal creatures that

served the greater fungal good. They fought over the corpses, the fungi benefiting from the mole and ants war.

Helios and I stepped into this veritable lion's den, several ants passing us without realizing what we were. A few carried spore pods on their backs, each of them working with the fungus to eliminate the moles. On the other hand, when a mole rose from the ground beneath us, it noticed us right away. With a nose covered in squirming fingers, it wriggled as it dashed at us, its mouth opened wide.

Helios raised a hand, but I acted first.

“Stop.”

Like Yawm before me, the creature caved under the pressure of my voice. In the distance, the ants and moles ceased fighting, many of them beginning to hide. Helios scoffed,

“Cowardly, aren't they?”

I shrugged, disintegrating the mole in front of us with Event Horizon,

“Eh, these guys don't have a chance in hell of fighting us. Giving up is wisdom here.”

As the mana wafted to me, Helios eyed the stream of energy, and he shook off some discomfort,

“Hm, perhaps.”

He stared at the mana without needing to see it. In fact, Helios gestured about with a natural air that was downright uncanny once I thought about it. After all, the guy was blind. I wasn't trying to be mean spirited here, but I believed blind people wouldn't understand facial gestures well. Either way, Helios shattered that idea entirely, so I wanted to figure out why.

“Hey man, before we get to practicing, I wanted to ask something.”

“You will no doubt assault me with a plethora of questions, so do digress.”

I lifted my hands, “You’re blind, right?”

“Yes. You’ve seen my eyes. Your point?”

“How come you still make facial expressions, even under your mask?”

Helios raised his eyes, “Ah, I see. That’s a strange question. I expected something else rather than bringing up my disabilities. How polite of you.”

“I’m not trying to knock you down here. I’m genuinely curious.”

“Then I’ll give you a genuine answer. Facial expressions are not taught nor learned. They are largely instinctual. To that effect, I often articulate them without meaning to. If anything, I’ve had to learn to numb my expressions for the exact reason you mentioned. They are obvious to those that see beneath my mask.”

Helios raised a hand, “I learned long ago that those capable of interpreting my facial expressions could read me easily. I’ve taken my nonverbal communication under my control because of that fact, and this means enacting a measure of control over my actions.”

Helios pointed at me, “In time, my adaptations and awareness gave me newfound abilities. For instance, unlike most, I am often able to tell if someone is lying or telling the truth. Sentients often focus on the face when telling lies, not the sounds in someone’s voice. Hearing those gentle differences in tone and inflection, I can tell if someone is lying. My blindness makes spotting those fluctuations second nature to me.”

Helios crossed his arms, “Even with my sense for mana, I oftentimes find other people’s faces muddled as well. Their facial expressions don’t distract me for this reason, and I see the truth of what they’re saying instead of their faces.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Damn, so you’re like a lie detector?”

“In some ways, yes. I can also read the mana around me with great detail. That is why I can often read you with ease, though you’ve lied rarely if ever.”

I pointed at myself, “Do people look different because of your mana? What do I look like?”

“Your mana is blinding compared to what’s around you, especially when you release it. This makes you easy to spot and makes your outline far more definite and absolute. Most look faint by comparison.”

“Man, I never knew it was that involved. I thought you just used something like echolocation.”

Helios sighed, “Hah, echolocation is a method I’ve considered. However, controlling mana is far harder than controlling sound. For that reason, using sound as a second method for sight is fickle. If someone placed a silencing spell over me, I’d be unable to comprehend my surroundings if I relied on sound. Fighting in a vacuum or underwater would expose this weakness as well if I relied on something so unreliable.”

Helios made eye contact with me right after,

“This is why I use the will of other’s minds to find them.”

“So why do you make so much eye contact then?”

Helios raised a hand, “Most species find a lack of eye contact uncomfortable. I find that people associate a genuine connection with eye contact alone. I abuse this factor to the fullest. In reality, eye contact dictates very little of someone’s genuine emotions. As is the case with me, someone could mimic eye contact to trick someone into thinking they care when they, in fact, do not.”

I frowned, “Oh, so you’re pretending you give a shit?”

Helios gave me a sarcastic grin, “Ah, you’ve found me out. Perhaps you aren’t so blind after all?”

“Alright wise guy, could you teach me to do that?”

Helios tilted back, “Do your eyes not serve you well enough?”

“Not all the time. Plus, it’s always good to have several ways of finding someone. I know I end up with my head blown up in fights more often than I’d like. Being able to sense mana without my eyes might be helpful then.”

Helios crossed his arms, “You would need to suppress your other senses then focus on the life force and mana around you. Remember, mana is your will and intellect manifested in the physical world. Only strong minds manifest mana, and most creatures will barely register at all.”

He shrugged, “Outside of that, search for your own mana amidst the dessert of it floating around you. It shall shine like a sun in the middle of night, and that shall make finding it easier. Perhaps you shall uncover a hidden talent.”

He smirked, “Perhaps not.”

I pulled out my elemental furnace,

“I’ll give that a shot later. Let’s get this lesson started.”

Helios lifted his gauntleted hand, pointing at the cipher encryptions,

“You believe you’ll be talented at this?”

“I do. I can feel it.”

Helios raised his eyebrows, “There’s much that is required for furnace work, and few can handle it. What makes you believe you’re so different?”

There were several reasons, honestly. For starters, I used blood magic, meaning I was used to converting stuff into mana already. At the same time, being a dimension might

help me out here. So far, working with the cipher was more straightforward than usual for me for that reason. That's one of the main reasons I learned the inscriptions on my own when a genius like Torix couldn't.

Combine that with my ability to work with high volumes of mana, and I had every tool I needed to succeed here. Helios didn't need to know all that, though.

"Eh, I just have a feeling."

"Very well." He turned his gauntleted hand, giving me a better view of it,

"This is an elemental furnace. Simply put, you siphon mana into it, it splits atoms before converting the raw energy into usable mana. This requires a burst of energy to begin, then very slow trickles of it to maintain the ongoing reaction. Few would do so given the explosive volumes of mana these generate."

"So it's kind of like lighting a fuse?"

"In some respects, yes. A bomb is an apt comparison since a simple mistake in this energy generation process results in a colossal, nuclear explosion with you at the center of it."

I peered at my black jade, "Sounds...fun."

"Oh, it is. I've known seven others who've died from pursuing this venture. Be careful about this. Your success is my path to redemption, so your death would look unfavorable for me."

"I'll keep that in mind. Now how do I make the generated mana useful?"

"That depends on you. The mana this object creates is untamed and wild. It requires tremendous willpower to contain it, and if one lacks that willpower, the mana will diffuse throughout them. In the end, you'll lose your mind in the process."

The more he talked about this process, the more tailor-made I seemed for the whole thing. I nodded,

“That makes sense. What next?”

“Once the magic is contained, a firm constitution is required. Without a durable body, the mana flow will result in the destruction of a person’s entire being. They will boil their blood and explode, unable to utilize the mana generated. That is why I and Obolis both have invested heavily in both constitution and endurance. Many Fringe Walkers are the same in that regard, at least those with access to a furnace.”

I raised my other hand, making it glow with mana, “So the mana flow would be like this, right?”

Helios paused.

“Uhm...yes, like that. Perhaps you are right. You do seem built for this.”

“Is there anything else to it?”

“Ahem, so you...you must then wield the mana as if it were your own. If you cannot hold the mana in place, you’ll be unable to restrain your spellwork. This can result in misfiring a cast, which will likely result in a horrific death.”

“So, if I’m already used to using large volumes of mana, I’ll be able to work with this no problem?”

“If that were the case, it would certainly help.”

“And that’s it?”

Helios grimaced, “I understand your confidence, but do not let it run wild. You could get us both killed, along with this ugly, ancient town we walked into. Schema wouldn’t even know why you brought us to this disgusting, filthy place just to perish in nuclear fire.”

I scoffed, “Come on, it’s not so bad. This was once my hometown.”

Helios stared up, “Ah, it has fallen into disrepair, it seems. Where you unable to protect it perhaps?”

I frowned, “Yeah, for the most part. I didn’t exactly help keep this place maintained.”

Helios shrugged, “Each of us has limits. We must accept that and move on with them in mind.”

I lifted my elemental furnace

“Well, let’s figure out my limits here.”

Helios took a few deep breaths, composing himself. Helios raised a hand,

“Wait a moment. We must first detail a contingency plan if the elemental flow of energy isn’t contained.”

“I doubt that’ll be an issue. Worst comes to worst, I’ll throw it into my dimensional shield.”

I spawned the shield before rolling my shoulders,

“Here it goes.”

Helios looked around, trying to find cover. Before he could, I channeled some mana into the furnace. The ancient runes kicked into high gear, my mana clinking in place to fuel a preset series of commands. Giving the device way too much energy, the runes glowed, and the jade shook in my palm. The air around me shifted dark, an umbral tone infesting it. This cloud crackled and popped with an eerie foreboding.

I clanked my teeth together, ready for the onslaught of mana. As the aura around me snapped into the jade, a vast, enormous wave of power poured out from the device. It rushed into my frame, filling me with energy and vitality. I devoured much of the mana, my armor grinning with glee. My blood boiling, I trembled at the feast.

Seconds passed, and my armor glowed a bright white. I poured more of the energy into my cipher runes, and they engulfed some of the incoming rushes of energy. These sources of reduction proved incomplete, and the energy poured into my mind like a waterfall crashing onto me from overhead. It was as Helios described – wild and untamed.

The mana slammed into me like some insane phantom wishing to possess my body. It's entire being lacked anything uniform or coherent, yet the sheer size of its mind was behemothic. It was nothing like battling with Torix, more mirroring a mass of unleashed thoughts. These babblings and urges wanted to overwhelm me, pulling my concentration in a thousand different directions.

If anything, this entity of pandemonium mirrored an Old One, its mind profound with depth. These alien desires weren't made for this world, however. They were the results of the cipher converting energy into something usable by a mind. This didn't make it easy to use, however.

Despite this struggle, I'd wrestled with similar sensations before, both with Eonoth and Etorhma. My essential mind magic helped hold me together here as well. It allowed me to suppress this incoming, volatile entity. I took it head-on, tearing it apart from many angles. For the main rush, I stayed in place, unable to move or think of anything else.

It consumed me. It reminded me of when I was young and angry. My rage would be so blinding, I wouldn't even be able to move. This was similar, the strain stretching me to the absolute limit of my mind's ability to defend and my will's ability to endure.

Yet endure I did. I planted my heels, and I tightened my fists. I narrowed my eyes, staring forward at this monster. That monster, the untamed mana, stared back at me and roared. Having condensed it, I waved Event Horizon over the mana. It shivered, the uncentered mind screaming out in agony.

I crushed it under my heel, telepathically roaring at it with the might of a dimension. I shattered its unformed soul, giving it only one place to find peace. It found that sanctuary by relenting, the energy assimilating into my frame. The mana converted into my own will and into my own wishes.

It gave me energy everlasting. It emboldened me with thoughts of madness. It whispered thoughts of eternal life and power. I quieted those voices, tempering the new

ideas and will as if it were my own internal demons. As my battle settled down into a light whisper, I contained the mana with one last burst of will.

I won.

Falling back, I crushed rock underneath me while letting out a gasp. If I could sweat, I'd be drenched at this point. My heart pounded in my chest like a sledgehammer against stone, and I could feel my pulse in my ears. Helios gawked at me in the distance. At first, horror spread over his face. As I looked at him, he shook that off.

The albony whispered, his voice wobbling ever so slightly,

"Hmmm...That was a first."

I lifted a thumb, "I didn't expect it to be that hard. You were right. I should've taken it slow."

Helios let his hands flop against his sides, "You're ability to listen is perhaps a skill you should invest more time into. Despite your hubris, we're alive. Thank Schema for that."

I let out a deep sigh, my mind's exhaustion fading, "Ah man, I definitely need to put in less mana than I thought."

Helios shook his head,

"It is strange. I've never seen that done before."

"Someone nail the furnace thing in their first try? How else can it be done?"

"You either succeed or fail in a fire. I wasn't speaking of the furnace. I meant you forming a mythical skill with such ease. You must have formed a backbone of trees and experience for it already. Otherwise, this should be impossible."

"Huh. A mythical skill, eh?"

I opened my status, and sure enough, Helios was right.

New mythical skill gained! 1,000 skill points rewarded for the skill's creation. Matter Conversion(lvl 10) – By defying the will of matter, you've used the energy stored in the atoms around you. You harvest ash into light, and you enliven that which is most still.

Well done.

I raised a hand, a grin popping up on my face. This was an absolutely massive boon for me. I'd been working on a few tasks that I wasn't skilled at recently. That slowed down my skill gain by several orders of magnitude, but despite that, I still made progress. Matter Conversion felt like something I was born to do in comparison, much of the difficulty involved similar to containing my own mana flows long ago.

It was like I was going into a battle I'd fought a thousand times because of that. That meant this wasn't me getting a skill for free. If anything, this was just putting a name on something I already understood deeply. Mana was a mind's will manifested physically after all. To rule it, you must contain the flow with your own mental direction. For that, I had plenty of practice.

Every time I used blood magic, it was using a process similar to this, but the scale and scope of mana production were entirely different. Before, I was working with pebbles, and this was like working with boulders. It required far less investment in health yet more focus from my mind. I imagined a furnace burning without my experience, and the idea made me shiver. That would be nearly impossible.

Turning to the guy, those realizations instilled newfound respect in me for Helios. To use a furnace, he risked his life and mind. That took some serious dedication, and he did it without needing to. Ambition and guts got him here, and I had to give props to that. I stared down at my jade,

“So, you've been doing that for a while now?”

“When necessary. I use it in large battles to fuel equally large incantations. I'm surprised you handled that surge of energy earlier for that very reason. For a beginner, that was an immensity of mana. How did you control it?”

“Well, I’ve been making a lot of mana for a long time. To control it, I’ve needed to direct and control that mana on my own. This isn’t that different, though I have to admit, I almost bit off more than I could chew just now. That comes with the territory of trying new things.”

Helios furrowed his brow, “You create mana with your mind. The mana from a furnace is like a beast by comparison. The device surges mana into your mind before you must tame it at that moment. That nameless monster it summons cannot be reasoned with. You must make it obey, else you’ll be consumed.”

Helios tilted his head, “This is often a desperate struggle for most since their own mana works differently. That is what I don’t understand. How is the chaotic entity a furnace summons like your own mana? Are you too aimless and hateful?”

I shrugged, “I mean, my mana’s always been like some monster as far back as I can remember. It took a lot of work, but once I got it under my control, it was mine to wield. This furnace is no different, honestly.”

Helios shook his head, “But mana is generated through thought, not suppression. You sound as though your mana is made elsewhere apart from your mind. How is that even possible?”

“Heh, it might be because I’m a dimension. I know I use blood magic, so that might be why.”

“Perhaps the sacrifice is similar, somehow?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Then this is merely an extension of what you already do. That explains why you’ve got a handle on it so quickly.”

I flipped the furnace above my hand before catching it, “Eh, I still have a long way to go. Let’s see just how much mana I can make.”

Over the next few hours, I worked with Helios on a more subtle use of the black jade. It took a while, but we worked out a few kinks in my application. I found that almost no

mana was required to get the furnace started, and it generated a lot of mana even with next to no matter. That was good since I had every intention of having the device going full blast all the time.

After all, it would feed my cipher runes at a pace I couldn't match. Balancing that influx required a lot of effort, however. This meant handling other tasks at the same time was pretty much impossible. Working around that caveat would require practice and creativity. Having the jade out all the time also meant someone could steal or smash it too. We brainstormed a few solutions to the idea.

My first idea centered around a gameplan to keep the elemental furnace safe. From here on out, I'd use my dimensional shield anytime I fought with anything. This was partly for practice using the skill, but it also let me throw the dark jade into my pocket dimension before combat. The stasis would protect the gemstone from the rigors of battle thereafter.

Every other waking moment, I placed the gemstone on my chest just below my neck. I covered it with my armor, creating a reinforced metal cage that surrounding the jade. From there, channeling small amounts of matter into the furnace required next to no effort. It wasn't like using my own body as fuel was new to me in that regard. The jade was just a far more efficient method of getting mana than my own innate abilities.

My armor even stopped the crackling sound from escaping, keeping the magic somewhat hidden. According to Helios, anyone who could sense or see mana would pick up on this process from a mile away. He even mentioned that detail as if he was watching something outright horrific. I didn't know what he meant, but if that was the cost of using the device, then I counted it as worth it.

Still, Helios wasn't the only one horrified by me using the dark jade. The most obvious manifestation of that was the eldritch in this rift. They were outright terrified of me while the furnace fueled my inscriptions. I expected some of that, but they huddled into the deepest holes they could find. The moles and ants crushed each other trying to get out of here, and it threw me off a bit. I'd talk to Amara and Hod about it later since it might help with Blegara. For now, the furnace took priority.

After a bit of tweaking the flow, I maxed out my armor's draining abilities and my cipher rune's absorption rate with the device as well. This meant I could keep the furnace burning all the time to fill out those passive bonuses. It didn't even require my own natural mana production, so I steadily added gemstones to my pocket dimension all the time now.

Of course, I wasn't revving the device full blast, but I could keep it humming at all times. If I went over this base limit, the mana flowed right into my head, and before I knew it, I was fighting some formless specter trying to control my mind. It was a risky venture since overdoing it would render me paralyzed as I fought the thing off.

To gauge if the furnace was worth, I checked out my status. All my doubts faded in an instant as I saw an absolute motherload of mana coming in from the tiny gemstone.

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

Strength – 46,576 | Constitution – 66,872 | Endurance – 141,686

Dexterity – 24,143 | Willpower – 98,789 | Intelligence – 53,146

Charisma – 17,502 | Luck – 27,029 | Perception – 18,807

Health: 160.1 Million/160.1 Million | Health Regen: 1.6 Billion/min or 27.0 Million/sec

Stamina: Infinite | Ambient Mana 4.001 Trillion

Mass: 8.7 Million Pounds(4.0 Million Kilos~)

Height: 15'11 (4.8 meters)

Damage Res – 99.17% | Dimensional Res – 100%

Phys Dam Bonus – 27.8 Million % | Damage Bonus – 40%

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

Mana Conversion – 4.0 Billion mana/min siphoned into runes and armor.

It was a massive boost to my mana generation. If anything, it made all my investment into endurance look silly. My own magic would never compare to this kind of production. Of course, the health and stamina were still useful at the time of investment, but one furnace already beat all those years of boosting endurance. The more I thought about it, the less true my initial line of thinking became.

The only reason I could generate this mana flow from a single furnace was because of my mana generation. If I hadn't had my previous experience, this would be impossible. If anything, more investment into endurance would be wise, considering it increased my overall furnace potential. It gave me the willpower to contain the mana flow, and it still had all the other stat-boosting effects it always boasted.

I would need as much of that as I could get given the situation I was in. My guild stood at the very center of the Blighted Schism, and that required me to be in tip-top shape. Combine that with the fact Schema didn't give me anything from facing Lehesion, and I needed a few boosts. In some ways, I understood Schema omitting an endless stream of attributes and stats for me. I mean, the guy had a lot on his plate at the moment. Still, this kind of stinginess blew my mind. I saved thousands of people by distracting Lehesion. I risked my guild, my life, and even my planet. For that, I expected some kind of level cap increase or something.

After searching every nook and cranny of my status, I found nothing. At least Schema couldn't deny me my extra skillpoints from my skills. Knowing that, I checked out my trees. After pouring all of my gained points into the Sovereign tree, I passed the 7,500 mark and then some. I was almost there.

In many ways, to truly be sovereign is to control the use of all things you touch. The world will bend to your fingertips, empires will crumble, and no enemy will forget your name. It will be carved into their mind like words unto stone, the utterance unforgettable, the memory eternal.

Class Completion: 75% finished.

New Mana Type Unlocked: Entropy

For such an enormous investment, this wasn't exactly the most rewarding tree. By now, I expected that, but I couldn't help but scratch my head at the new mana type. Considering my Dimensional Wake ability, having a new mana type gave me a lot of

flexibility. To my knowledge, entropy had a lot of different meanings as well, but in the end, most of those meanings revolved around degeneration.

After trying to will entropy into existence, I lost steam at the idea of it being its own unique mana type. Without any real help here, I hypothesized that entropy was a fusion of all three basic mana types: origin, dominion, and augmentation. To that end, I did my best to create all three and blend them together in my hand.

No new mana type spawned from it, all of the manas melding into a brown blob that wisped into nothing. Without that being an answer, my next best guess was fusing the three upper tiered mana types: primordial, quintessence, and ascendant mana. If that was the case, getting the most bang for my buck required learning primordial mana.

It was something I'd meant to do for a while, and this was the best lead I had. Searching through Schema's internet got me nothing, and it wasn't like someone would tell me in person either. Factions in Schema's universe hoarded knowledge to get themselves ahead. That was something the rebels were right about, even if I didn't want to admit it.

All that being said, I was sitting at over 9,000 points in my Sovereign tree. It wouldn't be long now before it was completed, and that meant unlocking my class. For now, I would stick to making my last push to get that over with. At the same time, unlocking entropy mana also seemed necessary, and I needed a sovereign skill to go with my sovereign class. Those goals synergized, which outlined a plan ahead of me. Following this plan, I walked out of the dungeon with Helios, a new goal before me.

As we left, my grip on the moles and ants weakened. They ran out of their holes, and skirmishing began once more as we walked across an abandoned Springfield. It was sad seeing some of the landmarks so dilapidated, the city a relic of a foregone time. Without my immediate presence, the vibrations underfoot grew stronger. By the time I jetted Helios and me to Mt. Verner, the eldritch were back to tearing out each other's throats.

Eh, an easy war leads to a hard peace.

Once I dropped Helios off at his place, I picked up Diesel from the floors below. After all the grinding with the furnace, I looked forward to doing something like my golem work. As we got up to the engineering area Diesel partitioned out for us, I scratched my head at the engineer's changes,

“Doesn’t this seem...excessive?”

The quirky inventor shook his head,

“What? This is the least we can expect.”

I stared at three new engineering stations. It was like an industrial pipeline with several partitioned out work areas. Each site separated into three categories we needed for the supergolems. At the leftmost side, the magic department congregated mages that tutored under Torix. The lich’s students were ready for fieldwork, and Diesel gave the young guns a project they could really prove themselves on.

On the side opposite to them, many of the workers Kessiah tutored forever ago toiled on the physical movement section. These were combat specialists, and while they weren’t quite at my level yet, they freed me up from having to do that section myself. I appreciated not having a thousand tasks pulling me in different directions, so I counted their involvement as a blessing.

At the center of it all, Torix himself worked on the mind magic telepathic bindings. It made my little hobby project look like a joke by comparison. I laughed at myself when seeing it all. After my big moment with the furnace, this really brought me back down to earth. These guys already made more progress in two days than I had in two weeks.

Eh, nobody was perfect, so I just let it go.

What I couldn’t accept was how little they needed me. Every part of the project was now handled and in full motion. I, with my amateurish designs, would just slow everybody down. At least they still needed me for supplies and runic translations. They didn’t know the cipher, after all, but those specifics would come last after all the other work had been done.

That meant I had nothing to do with my time here, everything getting moved along nicely without my input. Though I enjoyed the rapid progress, this was supposed to be a time of peace for me. It kind of felt like Diesel upped and robbed my project from me. In the end, it was for the good of the guild, and that’s what mattered most.

But, yeah, it left me kind of sad.

I smothered that bout of melancholy, moving on towards my other work. It wasn't like I was left wanting for other things to do. Ophelia needed rings for gravity and matter making, along with a charged blue core. None of that was difficult in the slightest, most of it taking minutes. With all this newfound time on my hands, I stepped just outside the work stations and started crafting.

Ah, peace.

I started with a bit of melted steel that the engineers had offhand. There was no way in hell I was about to use my own skin for Ophelia. That was reserved for my guildsmen. That was such a strange thought, but eh, so was being a dimension. I accepted that strangeness and moved on.

After getting the material, I melted the steel and molded it into four rings. I could do two for the barebones of what Ophelia asked for, but I wanted to do this right. If I half-assed my rings, Ophelia would half-ass her tutoring and golem assistance. With that in mind, I partitioned each ring out to accomplish different things.

The first ring would convert mana into gravitational energy. The next would offer up primary skills for using that gravitation. The third ring would help with making matter, and like the second, the fourth ring would then help the user create specific kinds of matter. These were elementary, simple inscriptions that would never rival my own abilities. They would allow the user to do something without any practice, however.

Considering Ophelia needed rings to handle these abilities, she'd need the backup rings for usability reasons. All these combined would sum up what Ophelia wanted well. For me, the difficulty involved paled compared to Torix's new body or even Althea's cannons.

In fact, the first ring took all of four minutes, the inscriptions simple and second nature by now. I trusted my abilities here, and I made no further adjustments. On the next ring, I put in five skills for gravitational magic. These were gravity and antigravity wells along with their matching panel magic. To top it off, I gave it a gravitational vortex ability. Yeah, they were pretty basic, but Ophelia would just have to deal with it.

After finishing the gravity side, I moved on to the matter generation aspect. Knowing my own limits, I took my time with this enchantment. It was a trickier inscription,

requiring several rewrites. After my third attempt, I just let myself flow through the runic carvings, hoping it would work out. Holding the ring in my hand, I gave the metal band an IV drip's worth of mana.

From it, crabs poured out.

I had no idea why this was the case. For some reason, the creation of crabs was just... second nature to me. I couldn't comprehend it, but this, despite being utterly ridiculous, would totally work. Fuck it. I hoped Ophelia liked crabs because that was what she was getting.

With the ring of crab creation finished, I went on to the natural part of matter making. I molded the final ring so that it converted crabs into five other kinds of matter, from dirt to stone. None of it was useful to me, but she gave me a really airy request. I mean, it wasn't like a matter generation ring was something simple and easy to do. She likely intended on a few limitations when asking for it.

And limitations she would get.

If she didn't like it, oh well. I'd have to learn the whole conscious creation thing on my own. It wouldn't be the first time. With everything ready, I sent a friend request to Ophelia, and she replied in an instant. I asked for her coordinates, mentioning I was done with our deal. After reading a sarcastic reply, I moved back towards the warps on Mt. Verner's side.

Schema still powered them, and before I knew it, I was in a different world. The ionizing spray wafted off of me as I stepped onto a gilded walkway. Someone took an orichalcum base and gave it golden trim, the practicality of the green metal clashing with the indulgence of the gold ore.

That wasn't the only weird design choice. Further down the platform, Massive windows exposed a massive city, red curtains framing a sunset in the distance. The Empire redesigned Schema's warp so that it showcased the wealth and power of this specific city, which would be expensive. Why they would do that was beyond me.

That objective display of wealth showcased itself in many other ways as I continued outside the landing zone. Along the outskirts of this hyper futuristic city, faint, hexagonal plating surrounded the city. A blue core protected this area. Peering closer, I learned I was wrong. Several blue dungeon hearts protected this city. This barrier was

multilayered, the sheer investment absurd. Beyond these central cores, colossal turrets aimed at a distant skyline. The clouds sauntered about above, this place protected from the elements entirely. As I walked out into another gilded roadway, even the air felt conditioned for comfort.

This was luxury incarnate. The city makers conditioned the air for an entire city.

Around me, many albony walked about, most of them red and orange masked. They waltzed in and out of stores, not a worry in the world weighing them down. It contrasted Mt. Verner's pragmatic, raw feel, so much so that it almost gave me whiplash.

I mean, they used real giant diamonds as crystalline figures throughout the city. These figurines played with the sun's rays, hauntingly beautiful shadows stretching out of them. Each piece was crafted for multiple angles of light to pass through it, each time of day considered in its design. For now, the light angled from a sunset, and longer shadows meant more room the artisan to work with.

This resulted in scenes of battle, victory, and prestige for the albony. From exotic, large creatures fighting to elegant birds flying, the shade cast images of a culture saturated in harmony and prosperity. It was a sight to behold, and I took my time soaking in all the various works and shops nearby.

I walked around these shadows, not wanting to disrupt their beauty. None of the other aliens here followed suit, nearly no one even giving the artwork a second glance. It was as if exposure to these artworks made them numb to the beauty around them. It was sad in a way, like throwing pearls before swine.

My rash judgments of other people aside, I passed a dozen cafes, teashops, and smoothie places. Among these competing franchises and specialty stores, I found Ophelia speaking with several other albony. She stood out amongst her compatriots, her eye for glamor drawing attention.

I couldn't blame her since I drew my fair share of stares as well, probably more than her given my rugged, coarse appearance. Pulling my helmet off my face, several of Ophelia's albony friends screamed as I stared down at them. Ophelia turned to me, and I lifted a hand,

"Yo."

Ophelia facepalmed before speaking through gritted fangs, “What are you doing here?”

I floated the four rings I made to her, each fresh and polished. I pointed at them,

“I’m finished. I wanted to get our deal going as fast as possible. The rebels won’t kill themselves, after all.”

Man, my wording was awful. Either way, Ophelia grabbed her rings, inspecting them,

“How are you finished? Half of what I asked for is barely even possible.”

I gestured to each ring, “Try them out. They work.”

She put on the ring of crab creation, truly my favorite of the bunch. As she channeled mana into the ring, a flow of crabs poured out, covering the table and her friends. She stood up, letting out a girlish scream with her friends.

Ah, that was satisfying.

“What in Schema’s name did you give me?”

I spread out my hands, “I call it the Ring of Crab Creation. That’s the matter maker you asked for.”

She shook a crab off her sleeve before seething,

“This is a creature. How am I supposed to use this for...well, anything?”

I raised a hand, “For starters, you have no idea how many restaurants would kill for that ring. As grotesque as those creatures may look, they taste damn good when steamed. Add a bit of salt and butter, and man, they are good.”

She stomped a crab underfoot, the meat going to waste,

“What other surprises do your rings have in store for me?”

I pointed each ring out as I explained,

“That one turns mana into gravitation energy. That ring hones the energy into specific techniques. That last ring can turn the crabs into other materials. I didn’t know which materials you wanted, so I went with steel, soil, water, stone, and crab.”

She eyed me with a wary glance, wondering if this was an elaborate prank. That was fair. In many ways, this might as well have been an elaborate ruse, but hey, she got what she asked for. Ophelia used the paired rings for gravitation, lifting herself up. Using another round of crab creation, she made a bunch of stone crabs, each thudding against the ground like bricks. Her mana flow depleted, and she fell onto the ground, busting her ass.

Her friends laughed at their cafe table while Ophelia frowned at the rings,

“Ouch...Well, these aren’t actually useless, especially the gravity ones. They’re actually excellent. Very, very excellent.”

She poked one of the stone crabs, “They could use a few quality of life adjustments, though.” She stared up at me, “How did you make these so quickly?”

I offered a hand, “They’re my specialties, so I can whip them up whenever. You just need to take them seriously, and they’ll serve you well.”

She grabbed my hand, though she grabbed only two of my fingers since her hands were so small. She stood up, brushing off the dust from her robe,

“I...I suppose they’ll do. A deal’s a deal then. I’ll get ready to help you with your golem project. When will you need me to help?”

I evaporated the crabs near us with Event Horizon, bless their poor little souls,

“Right now, if you’re not busy.”

She turned back to her friends, each of the albony staring at us from behind red masks,

“I’m in the middle of something right now, but I can come in a few hours from now if you’d like.”

It was surprised me how agreeable she was being about this whole process. I shrugged,

“If that’s what it takes, then sure. You’ll be arriving at my guild during nights, and you’ll be working with a temporal specialist to teach me primordial mana. Let me know if the rings need tweaking after you’ve tried them out for a while, and I’ll work on them when you arrive. Also, I’ll need to warp you to and from there.”

She raised an eyebrow, “So no coordinates?”

“No. Right now, security is more important than ever. You know that.”

Remembering the rebellion, Ophelia and her friend’s carefree attitudes faded. I gestured around at everything, trying to change the tone of the conversation,

“So, where is this place?”

One of Ophelia’s friends spoke up from the table, “You weren’t kidding when you said this guild is new. So yeah, this is Olstatia, the Empire’s capital.”

I stared at the multilayered blue cores, all my questions about the investment for this place answered. I nodded slowly, “Ah, I’ll have to ask Obolis how he keeps his world’s defended.”

Ophelia walked back to her table, sitting down, “That’s an easy one. He doesn’t make the wrong enemies.”

I scoffed, “Eh, If that were the case, Obolis wouldn’t be putting himself up against the rebels.” I turned, leaving them,

“Cya.”

“Wait a second. Can you charge this blue core for this territory? You should already feel it draining your mana right now. I need you to power it up to full. That’s part of our deal.”

I stared up, “Oh, so you run one of the districts in the capital of the Empire, huh? That must be why your mask is both red and black.”

She shooed me off,

“Yeah, yeah, go finish charging the core and let me enjoy the rest of my evening.”

I left Ophelia and her friends, satisfied with the results I got. Halfway to the warp, I searched for the blue core tugging on my mana. I found a slight, minuscule tax being paid to the forcefield. Surging mana into that tether, mana rose from my frame, bursting into my surroundings. The sheer heat off my skin melted the orichalcum beneath me, and nearby diamond statues ignited.

They exploded, firing shrapnel nearby. Shop windows burst, and a few albony screamed. I raised a hand, pulling the mana back to me, willing the core charge to slow down. I didn’t expect that kind of chaos to erupt from just channeling mana, but at this point, it might as well have been a weapon.

Once I finished with that, I regenerated some of the broken glass and paid out a few shopkeepers nearby. It cost a few hundred thousand credits to repair the damages, but that’s what I get for not paying attention. After getting out of that complete mess, I got to the warp. It kind of surprised me that Ophelia changed her attitude towards me.

I mean, she wasn’t exactly the kind of person I wanted to be friends with, but we didn’t despise each other anymore. For her to share her skills, that’s all I wanted. After taking the warp back to Mt. Verner, I took one last glance at Olstatia. It was a beautiful, vast city. It was so large, it looked endless, and it might have been.

This was a megacity supported by several worlds worth of resources. It was an economic and political backbone for many societies all under one banner, and that

reach showed itself with the sheer splendor displayed here. In time, maybe Mt. Verner would be the same for Earth, though I didn't want to take over planets like Obolis had. I wanted my guild to give everyone a hand up instead of the Empire's more imperial approach.

Either way, I got back to Mt. Verner with much of my night left to me. With a reasonable amount of time left, I sat within earshot of the golem project. This time, I left a wall of trees and stones between us, their machines and discussions only a faint whisper in the background. Chrona's tutoring would begin tomorrow, and we'd be trying out a few new strategies on Blegara. This would be the only part of my schedule where I could focus on my own.

Knowing that, I contemplated how to get a Sovereign skill. It would require three legendary skills, and I already had two with Force of Nature and Apotheosis. These skills gave me a tremendous influence over the physical world around me, along with creation and rune carving. They suited me well for the most part.

Instead of just adding some random assortment of skills next, I wanted something to accentuate those two abilities. Hastening like what Chrona and Obolis did was a must; that would make me challenging to beat in direct combat. I was already taking on Lehesion in that regard, meaning any more oomph in that arena, and I would be dominant.

Outside of that, I was stuck on the whole golem creation thing. The idea of ending the need for dungeons kept bouncing in my head. If I could get really, really good at making golems, I could lockdown Earth and any colonies we made. We wouldn't need to fuss over other people's territories. I could go to a fringe world, golemize it, then make it an Earthen colony. Maybe I could lease my golems too, sort of like some mercenary company.

Those plans needed primordial mana for functioning. Otherwise, they'd bottleneck from a production standpoint. With this furnace, my mana production exceeded the rest of my guild combined. If I got a handle on the entire production process, I could make hundreds of golems a day. Territories would fall under my control, and I could let people govern themselves for the most part. I'd set up some regulation, but I didn't want to interfere too much. Part of that was simply not wanting to be clogged up with leadership duties like Helios had been. Another part of me wanted to avoid the dictatorship that the Empire stuck with.

After seeing how they handled Blegara, I didn't want to make the same mistake.

Either way, the core of those ideas rested on making golems. Thinking that all through, I racked my brain for memories of my time in the mythical compendium. In general, I learned skills quick there, and using that same template would work here again. For instance, the way I unlocked origin mana was by getting myself into a certain mindset.

The same could be said for ascendant and quintessence mana as well. Dominion mana was an outlier, my exposure to a dimensional tear unlocking that. I didn't understand how that worked, so mimicking that feat stood as impossible for now. Therefore, the best way to get primordial mana was to get into the right mindset.

Considering origin mana was about being at peace and letting go, that had to be a part of primordial mana. Dominion mana, on the other hand, was all about enacting a complete and absolute control, one led by an iron fist and without compromise. To me, those mana types were polar opposites. I couldn't understand how in the hell those mindsets meshed together.

I'd wait until my two primordial teachers arrived before I dived any deeper into the subject. I redirected my focus back towards my furnace for now. Tampering with the gemstone, I ramped up the mana production. To do so, I sat down and meditated, my legs crossed and my mind steeled. As I did, I sent a stream of mana into the jade at the center of my chest. It unleashed a violent, savage rush of energy as before.

I kept this brutish flow slow at first, trying to assimilate it without as much struggle. As time passed, I revved up this visceral inundation, practicing the newfound skill. For instance, I began using the furnace by burning some of the air around me. This dispersed the energy throughout a cloud, meaning I needed to condense it towards me instead of letting it leak out.

This time, I shifted my approach using minuscule bits of my armor. This smoothed out the process since it kept the mana condensed from the get-go. A few of the other tricks I figured out involved being calm. If the mana met my mind in a battle, it too battled me off of instinct. If I was serene when it arrived, that placated the mana some, making it easier to overtake.

These adjustments compiled until I found myself in a balance between stomping the energy out and inviting it to settle down. Stuck in this ebb and flow, I reached a sort of zen state. Everything blurred out of existence, this moment becoming all that mattered. It let me take a break from my worries, my concerns, and even my insecurities.

Minutes turned into hours, the sheer rush of mana from the furnace overwhelming. That rush crashed into my mind, but I met that cascade of energy like a brick wall against some raging tempest. In these moments, I did not yield. Over those struggles, I did not relent. Keeping my eyes closed, the dark void around me became comfortable. This rush of energy from the gemstone, it formed into a shifting shape, some monstrous beast.

Honing my mind against this onslaught, my awareness of my surroundings expanded. The energy flow turned visible, and it gained animation. It moved, writhed, and shifted. In its chaos, there was beauty among its everchanging nature. It wanted freedom absolutely, and there was something magnificent about that uncompromising desire.

It met my own mana, my body aflame with energy. It surprised me, seeing myself in this new light. At times, I forgot just how far I'd come. Compared to the dim trees, birds, and wildlife around me, I ignited my surroundings with life. I brimmed with endless vitality, the kind that overwhelmed with its intensity.

If I let that sheer lifeforce flood my surroundings, they would be submerged in the incoming flood. I chained that flood down using shackles forged from my will. These tethers were of iron, seeming unbreakable, yet they contained a monstrous, terrifying force. That was my own mana, I realized.

This is what the eldritch feared.

I comprehended their horror now. If this was how the eldritch saw, their subservience made sense now. The phantasmal machinations of my mana feasted on my physical body, the focal point centered on the furnace. These endless mouths were salivating, each of them starving for more energy. There was no end to their hunger, and they would feast forever or until nothing remained to be eaten.

As this delicate balance became clear to me, I gained a new skill.

New skill gained! Mana Sense(lvl 10) – Many can feel their own mana. It takes one with great reach to feel the mana of others.

It was a strange sort of perception. It scoped out everything in a blurry series of shapes instead of hard lines. This dynamic, flowing view left me confused as I stared down at

my hands, my eyes closed. As before, my frame was ablaze. I raged in a swirling pit of fire, blinding when compared to the weak flows of the life around me.

Once more, I peered at myself with a clearer picture. I was a demon, a monster with an unceasing form. I squealed out into my surroundings, my jaws opened and starving. These twisting forms wished to feast upon all that was around me. Surrounding these monsters, the chains of my will suppressed the gnashing teeth and rabid maws. It was as if I was a delicate balance of two forces, one aimed at control and the other aimed at greed.

As I let my furnace rev down, the aberrations faded down, becoming less vehement. They were my mana, manifested outward in a way I could now see. Using my own mana, I fed the inscriptions of my cipher, these demons growing in size and scope once more. It gave me a few ideas of what I needed to do to get the eldritch under my control on Blegara.

I mean, if I could get really good at this whole furnace burning thing, I'd be a horror for anyone with a mana sense. Thinking of that, I thought of Helios. He sensed mana, and that's why his blindness wasn't much of a handicap for the guy. If that was the case, I must genuinely look like some monster to him. That might be why he stood back from me when I used the furnace. I'd ask him when I thought of it later.

Regardless of appearances, this was a solid way of spending time. I got the furnace burning full blast, my limit reached pretty soon. As I gained more and more control of the dark jade, I made more and more mana. This gave me a tremendous level of control over the furnace. Matter Conversion was no longer some foreign, strange skill. It reminded me of walking, a task I gave no thought yet was undeniably useful.

The merits of my many trees showed themselves here. Many of them enhanced my learning rate for mythical tiered skills and above. Those factors combined with my natural inclination for the furnace burning. Those factors culminated with my progress, and I shot forward in understanding by leaps and bounds.

It gave me confidence for my next fight with Lehesion. He'd never expect me to change my abilities like this all of a sudden. I'd show him where and how my magic progressed, and he'd feel my full fury.

In hours, I gave myself a notable increase to my cipher augments. My endurance increased by over 5,000 total points. Considering I exceeded 100K endurance already,

that actually wasn't an enormous increase. At the same time, weeks of this would result in substantial changes. Months of this progress would make me into a real monster.

The new influx of mana gave me more than just cipher augments, however. I no longer needed to stick with simple inscriptions for my cipher work anymore. Fueling them wouldn't be nearly as tricky, meaning I could create far more complex changes to this body using the cipher. Hell, I had held back because I was terrified of warping my mind into mush like Yawm had.

A significant find I hadn't realized earlier was Obolis mentioning my response to the cipher wasn't normal. He said it was as if I was separate from my body altogether. That might be true, especially considering I stayed conscious even when I was a pile of mush. That meant I could experiment with the cipher without needing to worry so much.

Of course, I wasn't about to go crazy or anything. That being said, giving this body a few new abilities wasn't out of the question anymore. I mean, if I got a hold of the cipher inscriptions on the elemental furnace, I could carve it into my skin and use it on my own. It would be like cutting out the middle man. Who knew, in time, I might even improve on the formula.

I peered down at the furnace. Yup, incomprehensible gibberish. Based on how cryptic and obscure the inscriptions were, well, that would take a while.

Either way, the potential was there, and that's what counted. I stayed deep in this meditative state until the morning, and the sunrise stirred me out of my concentration. Standing upright, I stretched my back before rolling my shoulders. Within the hour, I was back at my place, waking Althea up from her night of sleep.

We shared a morning breakfast together, and she talked to me about some of the Empire's juicy gossip she learned from Caprika. I couldn't have cared less, but I listened as well as I could despite that. Althea always listened to me even when I talked about runes or fighting, and I know those topics bored her. I kept my discussions short because of that, but I still wanted to return the favor in full for her.

This peaceful morning passed, and we met with Florence and Helios already grouped around their living quarters. Everyone arrived soon after, from Torix all the way to Hod. Our resident warper rested well last night, his general demeanor improving from before. He still wasn't used to warping this much, but the guy was adjusting.

Soon we'd all be adapting to new circumstances on the ahcorus's homeworld. For now, however, Blegara stood in our way. I smiled at the prospect. We all aimed to shake things up before we left the blighted world. In my case, I'd do more than rock the boat.

I intended to flip the whole world upside down.

Chapter 275: Infinite

-Victoria Novas-

Looking around, I made sure Alastair and I were prepared for the battle on Blegara. Obolis mentioned in the last war meeting that these last few days of fighting with Daniel and his guild were critical for our guild. He wanted us to get to know the people there and create lasting relationships.

That made me nervous. I wasn't good at making friends. Not at all. I waddled back and forth, unable to sit still because of those thoughts. They just bounced around in my head like a little cub in a bounce house. I wished I could control myself better. It was weird. I always struggled with doing the right thing, even though I usually ended up succeeding in the end.

But it was never easy.

By comparison, Alastair looked forward, not a worry in the world. The big guy just punched things. That gave him a natural affinity for the Harbinger. I knew that Daniel liked Alastair more than me. I was sure of it, though I hadn't found proof yet. Today might be the day I discover the truth of the matter on that specific issue.

This was our second day fighting on Blegara. Things worked out the first day, mainly because of Obolis and the Harbinger's guild. They were a team made entirely of hard hitters. There was the uptight but smart lich, the shadow walker Hod, the mysterious Althea, and the hemomancer that healed, Kessiah. It was hard to get to know any of them, especially Althea. She didn't say much, but she was a good listener. I heard from Caprika.

Speaking of which, I had no idea how Caprika warmed up to her so fast. I tried starting, like, fifty conversations with her. The planeswalker just brushed me off with casual comments about the battle and how now's not the time to talk. She was right, but I just

didn't know how else to strike up a conversation. Making friends while fighting was hard.

My thoughts honed in as a portal appeared in front of us. The edge of the warp was smoother, even smoother than Obolis's, so only one person could make them. Helios stepped out, his mood nonchalant and confident as always. He was a cool cousin, and he both hated and loved me. That loving disdain came from the fact he believed I outshined him.

That was crazy talk. Helios ruled two whole planets. I kept Olstatia safe on our homeworld. Comparatively, his station outdid mine by an insane amount even for his age. He was older than me, sure, but that didn't change the fact he accomplished twice as much as I had when he was my age. Speaking of age, according to Florence, the Harbinger was younger than all of us. I found that hard to believe, and the person telling me exacerbated that issue. Why? Well, it was Florence.

It seemed like the Harbinger was whipping him into shape, though. Speaking of the Harbinger, the man himself walked out of the portal. He was tall, overly so. Most tall guys looked handsome, even if they weren't. This guy was so big he bordered on scary instead. His armor carried a craggy, organic sort of edge, making it look and feel alive. He also never did his hair, which would've been cute if it wasn't for his scars and eyes.

Those eyes stared through people. He also spoke like iron, and even around Obolis, he showed no signs of feeling any pressure whatsoever. Because of that, I couldn't read him. Florence told me he's actually a nice person once you got to know him. Once again, that's Florence.

Anywho, the Harbinger's other guildsmen walked through the divide, the lineup stellar. I locked eyes with Althea, the slender, silver-skinned woman being beautiful as always. I was kind of jealous, but hey, who wouldn't be?

I gave her a smile and a wave, but she didn't see it since I was wearing a mask. I hated these things. They always made me awkward. That was a lie. I was just terrible at talking. Althea waved back and even walked over to me. I kept my excitement to myself as she spoke up,

"It's good to see you guys. How are you all holding up?"

I stood tall, trying to sound calm and confident,

“We’re managing. It’s been quite a shock since the rebels managed to worm out a victory.”

Althea frowned, “Yeah, I know I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately. It’s hard not to worry.”

She worried too, huh? I wondered if she thought about talking as much as I did. I kept myself together as I continued,,

“As have I. We’re lucky the Harbinger can hold Lehesion back. It will be up to us to stop everyone else, though.”

Althea winced, “That’s a lot of pressure.”

Tell me about it.

I raised a fist, “We’ll make it.”

The others met up within our divisions, and the well-read lich gave a breakdown of the situation. He spoke with calculated precision, every word measured, and every gesture planted. At first, I thought the necromancer was fake, but I was wrong. This wasn’t some facade he put on. It was too consistent. The sorcerer actually preferred talking like this. The few moments his true self came out, he was a brutal, ruthless individual.

He hid that under a mask that was much more effective than our own.

He reminded me of Helios, though Torix kept a more relaxed kind of attitude, somehow. Unlike Helios, Torix didn’t resent the mask he was forced to wear. Maybe all the years of practice made the jovial wizard persona easier to keep up. It may have eventually become his persona over time.

I was always worried about that. I tried to make my family proud all the time. I really just wanted mom and dad to look at me with a smile, and I wanted our uncle to say my name with some pride. That was more than just a little tricky. The Empire carried some ridiculous standards for the Novas family.

Despite how well I did, I'd always been outshined by Helios up until recently, in fact. He fumbled when trying to intimidate the Harbinger by threatening Althea. It made me wince just thinking of how callous the guy was. I'd never do something like that. I didn't think I would at least.

Even after flopping on his face like that, Helios managed to stay friendly with the Harbinger. To me, that made no sense. I couldn't understand guys half the time at most. At least Alastair made sense. The lovable lug just walked around, said what needed to be said, and fought well. I was proud to be his sister, but I was too scared to ask if he was proud to be my brother.

I really, really hoped he was.

Torix finished his breakdown, the insights in his speech both profound and well thought out. That sorcerer was a scary individual, his mind always thinking of possibilities. He mentioned that the rebels would just channel an endless stream of Hybrids at Schema's forces, wearing them down. It seemed like a real possibility, the kind that made a shiver run up my back.

I often wondered if the Empire made the right choice allying with this guild. They were all good, each and every one of them. We were in the frontlines against the Adair's because of that, and I didn't think that was worth it. Some disagreed, the most vocal being Florence of all people. The party boy mentioned the rebellions on the Empire's worlds were inevitable.

He acted like forging ties with the Harbinger's Legion was a proactive move, and that Caprika's genuine friendship with several members was invaluable. Florence even suggested we ally with the Harbinger's Legion earlier on before we were also attacked by the Hybrids. Obolis always seemed to take Florence's insights seriously too. If I had my way, I'd tell Obolis, 'Hey, this is Florence. Remember?'

Speaking of Florence, Mr. Irresponsible was missing during the siege today. I expected as much. Working two out of every three days would be a challenge for the guy, especially with his previous track record. The goofy bird person was missing too, but I'm sure he had his reasons.

Anyways, with the new intel and plans going forward, we set up a formation with Daniel leading the charge entirely. Alastair and I guarded Helios, Kessiah, and Althea.

It was kind of insulting since Alastair and I were well-trained knights. We could fight on any front line. Sure, the Harbinger fought one on one with Lehesion, but we were still the best of the best.

Helios, ever perceptive, caught wind of my dissent. He raised an eyebrow at me, “Ah, you seem rather annoyed. Perhaps it was your expectation to lead with him, perhaps?”

I frowned, not wanting to give too much away,

“Of course not. It does seem strange that he wouldn’t let us guard his back while he ran in, but his decision stands at the end of the day.”

Helios grinned from ear to ear, “I assure you, he will not need any assistance today. We will be cleaning up the mess he leaves behind. Nothing more.”

I leaned back, remembering that we were clearing Blegara together the day before yesterday, “You’re acting like he’s a different person.”

Helios shook his head as if admitting defeat, “Victoria, I once believed I was master of all and a jack of none. Since meeting him, I have discovered that this galaxy is vast, and the universe is wide. Many may not outrank me, but many are my better.”

Helios took a deep breath and sighed, “He is a true anomaly.”

I rolled my eyes, “Look, you’re being melodramatic today. Are you in one of your moods, maybe? I know you get self-destructive sometimes.”

Helios stared off in the distance, likely planting the gesture to add emphasis,

“No. I’ve just been thinking about who I am and what I’m doing. That is all.”

“Oh yeah, that sounds like one of your moods.”

I doubted what I was saying as I said it. Helios spoke all that with such a foolproof lie that I almost believed him. Almost. I knew Helios, though. He was a cunning cutthroat,

and he was likely just trying to unsettle me before we ended up fighting. He'd look better than me then, and that played to his favor in the long run.

Even if I knew that Helios's acting was superb, I couldn't shake off what he said, so I stared forward, filing into formation. With the supporters at our back, we went ahead with the Harbinger leading. He tore through a wall, opening us to the ocean around Saphigia. With an extraordinary control of gravity, he somehow kept the water out of here without jerking us out at the same time.

I tried wrapping my head around that several times on how he did that, but I still didn't have an answer. A second passed as he turned to us, and his voice rang in my ears like steel,

"I'm heading out. Give me some breathing room today. I'm trying out the furnace."

Helios raised his eyebrows, "What happened to storing the furnace in your dimensional shield?"

A small but cocky grin popped up on his face, "I don't think these guys will touch me, and I can just keep it protected while I use my magic."

Helios scoffed, "If that's what you wish."

I leaned back, my eyes widening. I turned to Helios, who nonchalantly stared down at his claws after talking with the Harbinger. Helios didn't even look at my eyes, but he grinned all the same. He murmured,

"Your expression, it's priceless."

I whispered,

"Is he trying to kill us? A furnace? Really?"

"Indeed. He can already use it."

“No, he can’t. That’s impossible.”

Helios shrugged, and I turned forward, ready for a nuclear shockwave to come roaring at us. It wasn’t like I could do much in the wake of a catastrophe like that, but I’d at least try. A few seconds passed, and the Harbinger shook in place. He grew primal, animalistic even. I trembled, wanting to run as his ascendant mana crawled out of his skin like a disease.

Alastair held his ground, pulling an orichalcum shield from his pocket storage. The guard thudded against the coral beneath us, and it kept the mana at bay. The Harbinger rolled his shoulders before cracking his neck. It sounded like metal girders crashing against each other, each pop of his neck a dull thud.

Bending down, he shot himself forward, keeping the momentum of his jump insulated from us with a dozen gravity wells. He sliced through the water without slowing down, and his armor glowed white as energy rippled from his frame. A grin grew on his helmet, and another shiver ran up my spine. He channeled an untold amount of mana, his entire structure ablaze with vibrance and vitality.

Reminding me of Lehesion, he made the entire ocean boil.

The Hybrids isolated in this section of Spahigia squirmed, their mindless bodies wishing to run. A psionic force compelled them forward against their will, and they sprinted towards the glowing Harbinger above them. Each and every one of them disintegrated from an unseen, bloody aura. The Harbinger pulled out his dimensional shield, keeping water from entering it with yet more gravity wells. Instead of running and crushing the Hybrids, he unleashed simplistic, almost childish magic on them. He used the most basic of his gravity spells, two gravity panels layered over one another. These panels did not lack in lethality despite their simplicity, however.

He smashed hordes of Hybrids between these gravitational forces. Without moving, he waved his hand at each Hybrid and blighted one. The smashed enemies’ remains were melted into spears. The umbral monster used those spears made of corpses to kill their allies. These jagged metal lances froze and shattered the remaining forces, the Harbinger shifting from ascendent mana to quintessence without batting an eye.

In fluid strokes, he fueled incantations that rivaled an armada’s worth of destructive potential. A swarm of those molten spears, made from the corpses of Hybrids, cascaded across the sealine. The cloud grew so dense and so large, it cast a shadow over the

entire cityscape. In its wake, the Hybrids and vagni trembled under the might of his magic.

I trembled as well. How he enacted this kind of magic was beyond me, but here he wielded a sort of terror I'd never seen from anyone but Obolis. At least in person. The sight left me shaken, my ideas of who and what I was falling to turmoil. I turned to Helios, and he watched with his fists squeezed tight. The destruction decimated city block after city block, the Harbinger culling the Hybrids without ceasing.

Helios stared with his eyes opened wide, though they did not see,

"Do you understand now? We're fighting among gods, and we are the mortals under their feet."

I turned towards the Harbinger, and he melted entire sections of Saphigia. No piece of Blegara's capitol would remain unscarred. It would be a wasteland when this behemoth was finished, his mark absolute and complete. Helios grimaced,

"We believed we were royalty. We believed we were chosen to be leaders, born higher than mere backwater savages. Daniel showed me his home town just yesterday. It was a primitive wasteland."

He met my eye, "Tell me this. If we are so special given our circumstances, then what is he?"

I stared on at the wake of his destruction, and I didn't have an answer.

-Daniel-

I stretched my back as we landed in another coral building in Saphigia. We finished the day early on Blegara, a beachhead established at the center of its capital city. I used the furnace today, all the meditation from yesterday paying off in spades. Without having to watch out for Alastair and Victoria beside me as well, I let loose in a way I rarely got to.

It was fun.

I tried to see just how many lances made of melted Hybrids I could hold at once using gravity wells. It left me stunned when I was casting a moving shadow over Saphigia of spears. In the end, I smothered the Blegarian capital with my magic. The only issue was watching out for friendly fire on the vagni, but it wasn't exactly challenging to avoid attacking them for the most part.

They tended to horde around temples, rifts, and specific tactical chokepoints. The temple guys were almost always civilians looking for a place to stay safe. They were praying to their old gods, the eldritch, for protection. From what I saw, the eldritch were terrified of me, and they avoided the city for that reason.

As for the vagni standing at rifts, they were usually priests praying to their old gods to give them protection. The vagni at tactical chokepoints, they guarded those places with their lives, the rebels forces mixed in among them. The vagni there fought us with vigor and zeal, and I admired them for it.

They made good warriors, their minds in the right place. They couldn't muster much of a defense against me, however. Killing them was poor sport, and I made sure they didn't suffer when they passed. It still left me numbed on the inside, however. I was getting better at switching my mind to that kind of mode recently.

That scared me.

My anxieties aside, we ended up sieging the entire center of the city. The Hybrids no longer crawled from every nook and cranny, and that gave us a tremendous amount of leeway in where we set up camp. That meant establishing a central location for handling the rest of the city's sectors was more than possible.

We were so far ahead of schedule, the Empire lacked the troops and resources to expand their new base further. I was a big part of that, but my usual magic lacked the sterilization necessary for absolute security. Victoria and Torix handled most of the smaller stuff I left behind, so I got to run wild. In particular, Victoria's light magic worked wonders for clearing out the Hybrid nanomachines.

I could've used Event Horizon for that purpose, but having someone else handle that cleansing for me gave me extra time. I used those moments to ravage everywhere else. In that way, I really got to stretch my legs and go full blast. That's why we had a camp established here with albony troops running about.

In the middle of the temporary camp, my guild packed up and got ready to leave. The almony mages established an aquatic air bubble sustained by magic. They fueled it using mana crystals harvested elsewhere, and tents composed the majority of housing so far. It wasn't much, but it was a first step.

That energy from victory got everyone riled up as we finished getting ready to go. Helios got a warp read right after, so Torix and Althea waved goodbye while I made sure everything was safe before heading out. Doing all that, I noticed Victoria looking around, her demeanor always calm and collected. I gave her a thumbs-up as I passed by,

"Yo, good work with clearing the Hybrids. The nanomachine soup is a pain in the ass, and you're doing a good job with handling it."

I turned to Alastair, the giant standing beside her,

"You too. Keeping Kessiah safe is extremely important. Healers of her caliber are rare, and she's why we're able to save this many people. Keeping her safe is an integral piece of this siege, so excellent work."

Alastair looked down, "Uhm, er, thank you."

The guy didn't talk much, and I liked that about him. We had to spare someday just so I could see what he was made of. I turned towards the warp to Mt. Verner, ready to walk away. As I did, Victoria lifted a hand,

"Uh, thanks for doing our jobs for us. We, er, appreciate it."

She stared down after saying that as if she said something wrong. I knew that feeling. I gave her a sad smile,

"No problem. Killing this many people isn't fun, but someone has to do it."

I stepped through the portalled veil,

"It's good you're thankful it isn't you that has to do this. Don't let that feeling go."

The warp closed behind me as Helios followed. A brisk wind whirled on my back as the sun set in the distance. We were back along the outskirts of Mt. Verner. Stepping on soft earth, I soaked in the feeling of Earth. The smell of pine trees and open woods filled my nose. It was good to be back home.

After getting back to our base, I reviewed my messages, making sure I wasn't missing any meetings. So far, I only missed one – a meeting with Amara, Hod, and Florence. I gave them a quick reply apologizing for my lateness, along with rescheduling the time. Florence replied in an instant, and before I knew it, a plan was already in motion.

I met with the three unlikely compatriots, each of them offering strange perspectives. They grouped near Amara's lair for eldritch research on the second floor. She tamed these monsters in reinforced cells, each holding several monsters who 'got along' so to speak. That just meant the eldritch couldn't kill each other too quickly, and that they were evenly matched.

That was about as good as you'd get for most eldritch.

The most vocal of the three chatted while Amara and Other Hod listened, all of them standing beside a prison cell full of gunk. Some slimy eldritch made its home there, and they talked as some green slug crawled around beside them. None of that surprised me.

What did was watching Florence chat away with both of them, the albony somehow making friends with those two,

"That's incredible. I never knew that eldritch had systems like that in place. Those systems, they mirror little societies. It's a wonder Schema hasn't already established some kind of contact with you guys. Some of you are pretty civilized, especially given the circumstances."

Amara lifted a palm to Florence, her chin held high,

"Of course we are. Wolves run packs. Though we are insatiable in our hunger, there is never an endless amount of food. That is why we organize and spread the food amongst...amongst..."

Amara froze in place, spotting me as I passed a corner. I raised a hand, “How’s it going?”

Amara and Other Hod stood stunned, neither even able to move or breathe. I waved my hand in front of their faces, “Are you both alright?”

Florence scoffed, “What? These two alright? They’ve both been through hell and back. It will take more than just you walking up-“

Other Hod stammered, “Please. Stop. Flowing. Mana.”

Oh yeah, the furnace. I dampened the mana flow, making sure I kept some restraint with its bonuses. I raised a hand,

“That better?”

They both took deep breaths, speaking in unison,

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

Florence frowned under his mask, “Well, I was wrong. Apparently, you walking up is enough to make the two fall apart. There’s still so much I need to learn.”

I tapped my chest where the cipher hummed, “I got this yesterday. I’m letting it run, and apparently, it’s pretty horrific to most eldritch. After seeing my own mana, I know why now. It’s like a...squirming hydra.”

Florence grinned at me, “I’d expect nothing less from the Harbinger. Come, we’ve much to discuss.” The chatty albony wrapped his hands around his new eldritch buddies,

“Scared or not, we’ve got a plan to show him that we’ve thought up. Chin up. I’m not about to let you both stumble when you’ve put this much work in.”

Amara took a breath or two, “I...Yes. We...shall.”

I doubted it considering how shaken they both were, but Florence gave other Hod a firm pat on the back,

“You as well. You saved your species from imminent peril. You and the Harbinger have that in common. Go on. Act like it.”

Other Hod stood taller after hearing that. I pointed towards the central elevators, “Come on, let’s go somewhere secure to talk this out.”

We worked our way up to the third floor, finding an empty meeting room. Once there, we sat down. Amara and Other Hod stared at me as if I were a literal demon from hell spawned to devour their souls. Florence took the floor, saving them from themselves,

“Seeing as how your stature has left them stunned, I shall offer up my skills and speak for them.”

Florence raised his two hands, “I’ll begin by describing a few important details I learned about the vagni and then detailing some important footnotes about the eldritch. These tidbits give context for my follow up for our plan. After discussing the details, we’re open to any suggestions you have for changing the plan going forward.”

He turned a palm to me and smiled, “Does that sound good?”

I gave him a nod of approval. Florence snapped his fingers, “Perfect. The first detail revolves around Blegara and their worship of the eldritch. We knew they followed them as their old gods, making sure to offer sacrifices and the like to stronger eldritch. This was supposed to appease them.”

I frowned, “It probably didn’t.”

Florence raised a finger, “And that is what’s most surprising – it did.”

I leaned back, “What?”

Florence leaned back at the same time, “I know, I too was stunned by that realization. According to Schema, the eldritch are unable to be reasoned with, but my assumptions about them were correct. We’ve all been believing in lies, and this rebellion, along with Amara and Other Hod’s insights have made that clear.”

Heretical outbursts aside, Florence spoke about their pasts with depth. In fact, he might even understand more about Amara and Hod than I did. Florence did that in only two days, their histories unveiled to him. To me, that was damn near awe-inspiring.

Florence continued, “There are many classifications of eldritch. They carry many shapes, sizes, and forms. They arrive in many different ways as well, and their manifestations are often worshipped by primitive cultures. This is particularly true for cultures where Schema isn’t present before the eldritch arrive. Given Earth’s lateness in arriving in Schema’s universe, I’d imagine your ancient cultures spoke of gods and deities as well?”

He was right about that. The Greeks worshipped titans and the Olympians alike. Many cultures invented tales that were extensive and far off from reality too. If what Florence said was true, then that wasn’t a mere hunch anymore. It was a fact. I nodded,

“Yeah. We had all kinds of figures like that.”

“That’s my point exactly. It isn’t as if the eldritch aren’t here then arrive in a single day as Schema would have you believe. They come in a slow, meticulous process from dimensions clashing. It takes time for their forms to materialize from the ambient energy they normally manifest as. At least wherever they come from.”

I frowned at Other Hod and Amara, “Guys, why didn’t you tell me any of this?”

Other Hod raised a hand, “You never asked.”

I bit my tongue, swallowing my words. Yeah, I never had. I accepted Schema’s status quo because it was easier to do so. I didn’t want to deal with guilt or doubt when I was trying to survive. For the most part, I lacked the time and resources for those second thoughts. That wasn’t the case anymore.

I winced, “Yeah, you’re right. I should’ve talked to you guys about it.”

Other Hod raised his hands, “I didn’t mean that as a criticism. Why would you want to know about monsters that are trying to kill your kind? We’re natural enemies.”

Florence shrugged, “There are several reasons, actually, and it wasn’t the wisest idea to neglect the two of you as resources for so long. Aside from that, it’s always a smart move to understand one’s enemies.”

Florence met my eye, “Of course, I mean that constructively. You don’t mind my saying that?”

I shook my head, “Not at all. You’re right.”

Florence raised a fist, “That’s why I’m glad I can help you catch up. I’m actually useful for once. My point is, the eldritch have systems and wants. We can abuse those wants for our plan on Blegara. Amara, tell him what you told me about his mana crystals.”

Amara stayed silent. Florence nudged her, and she sighed,

“The mana crystals, they look delicious to us.”

I pulled one out of storage, the crystallized quintessence shining white,

“This looks good? Is it like, I don’t know, candy?”

Amara drooled. Yup, it was candy.

I turned to them both, “Why not ask for some, then?”

Other Hod raised a finger, “That is your flesh and blood, refined into a more palatable form. Asking for an important resource for mere pleasure seemed...absurd.”

Amara's eyes on her palms narrowed, "He speaks for himself. I never wished to become a pet."

I tossed her a mana stone, "Don't think of it like that. You're both working hard here. Think of this as payment for doing my guild a service. I can give you both some of these as payment since neither of you is that interested in money."

I tapped my chest with a closed fist, "I do right by my own. If you want something, just ask. At the very least, I'll consider it."

Other Hod caught the mana I tossed, and Amara stared at the crystallized mana with the intensity someone starving. He offered her the entire crystal,

"You've worked very, er, hard lately. Here."

Amara snatched it out of Other Hod's hand, and he stared on as Amara opened her maw. She put the crystal in her mouth and began sapping out its energy kind of like a giant, mana loaded jawbreaker. Other Hod looked on, envious yet wanting her affection. It was obvious the guy liked her. I tossed another mana stone to Other Hod, and the poor guy rejoiced as he chowed down. Florence raised his eyebrows,

"They do say that a good leader gives his flesh and blood for those he leads. I see you take that quite literally."

I shrugged, "I'm just glad I can give them something they actually like. Anyways, what else did you figure out?"

"Aside from their hunger for mana, it would seem that there exist ancient versions of the eldritch that the vagni worshipped. Considering these are the old gods they worship, they should be the ones we target when tackling Blegara."

I crossed my arms, "Ahh, that makes sense. If we get their old gods on our side, we get the vagni too."

"You've caught on to my meaning. We've learned of several collecting points the eldritch use for accepting sacrifices. The most powerful and well respected of those places sits just several dozen miles from Saphigia. We should be able to lure many of

the eldritch into this area using your mana crystals, and by doing so, we will have them within our grasp.”

Florence gestured to the eldritch and me, “It would seem after that, you merely need to terrify the old gods as you have terrified these two.”

Other Hod and Amara ate the mana with looks of bliss spread over their faces, ignoring Florence entirely. I revved up my furnace a bit, and both of them froze in place. After letting it die down, they went back to normal.

I gave Florence a smirk, “I think I already have the whole terrifying thing down pat.”

Florence scoffed, “It must come naturally. Have you tried looking in a mirror lately?”

I snapped my fingers, “Dah, it’s the damndest thing. Every time I try, the mirrors just shatter.”

Florence let out a hearty chuckle before giving my shoulder a light punch, “You’re getting wittier. It’s good you’re learning to turn others insults into humor. You’ll win over many if you do so.”

Considering how suave Florence was, I took that advice to heart. The albony spread out his arms, “How does the plan sound?”

“Solid. The only issue is getting the vagni to actually see their old gods submit. There’s no doubt in my mind that Schema exiled them already, and I don’t think the rebels will let us broadcast that over their system.”

A sly grin crept up on Florence’s face,

“They wouldn’t do so if offered the choice, certainly.”

He gestured to Amara, “But this eldritch understands Schema’s system and how systems work. She can force the broadcast so that all are present and so that all vagni see the display of might. It will be glorious, along with throwing their civil war into utter disarray.”

My eyes widened, “That’s right. This is... a perfect plan, actually.”

Florence gestured to the two distracted eldritch, “These two stand at the heart of it. I could not have asked for better members to pull the plan together with.”

I nodded, but that was a bold-faced lie. Most people wouldn’t have been able to get Amara talking or Other Hod to focus for more than a few minutes. Florence learned about them, their pasts, the history of the vagni, and pulled it all together into an effective plan. He did all that in two days.

I was dumbfounded.

I let my hands flop on my sides, “Why does your family act like you’re some failure? You’re a genius.”

Florence looked up, not taking the compliment well. He raised his hands, “What? No, I just had some talent to work with. That’s all. This wasn’t from me like I just mentioned.”

I rolled my eyes, “Come on, you forgot I’ve worked with these two. Yeah, I could’ve asked them for more advice, but getting them to speak up can be a real pain in the ass. You might as well be their family now.”

Florence turned to the side, coughing into a hand, “I...well, thank you. I appreciate the compliment, regardless of its truthfulness.”

He straightened up, “We’re not finished yet, however. We came forward without really knowing what it was that made the eldritch afraid of you. Even if these two feel something sinister, neither could pin down exactly what it was. It was just a feeling.”

I raised a hand, pointing behind me with a thumb, “Oh, I learned that yesterday. I trained with Helios to learn about elemental furnaces. He explained his mana sense to me, and that got me thinking about it. I meditated some, ended up learning the skill on accident, and I saw my mana.”

I frowned, “That’s what’s horrifying them. They might not have known the terms for what it was, but it’s pretty obvious to anyone that can sense mana.”

Florence stared at me in awe, “Now I am the one who’s surprised. How did you get Helios to explain his mana sense to you? In all my years of knowing him, Helios never uncovered that part of himself to me. I work off assumptions about him instead.”

I furrowed my brow, “What? Seriously? I just asked.”

Florence frowned, “Ah...I see. The distance between my brother and I is greater than I imagined.”

“Why don’t you think he’d tell you?”

A sad smile formed over Florence’s face, “There are many reasons I suppose. For one, Helios calculates his every move. Telling me about his senses exposes himself, and that’s not something he does lightly. Even more important than that, I believe the heart of the issue lies in how our family operates.”

Florence raised a hand, “We decide each other’s worth based upon respect. Unfortunately, combat ability garners much of that respect. Industriousness and work ethic may allow for greater placement as well, but I wish to work in areas that lack practical use. Therefore, I lack in many regards, so I am looked down upon.”

Florence squeezed a hand into a fist, staring at it, “And Helios is not only gifted in combat. He is gifted at efficiency and warping as well. Those are rare skills, and he uses them to the fullest. In those areas, I cannot compare, and in many ways, he is a true mystery to me. I understand most people, but he remains ambiguous.”

I felt bad for the guy as he continued,

“I crave his respect for those reasons and more, but Helios has scorned me since birth. It could’ve been from his upbringing. He is blind, and he was mocked and jeered for that trait many times. Children can be cruel at the best of times in that way. Still, Helios pushed past that disability, and he rose far above those that once taunted him.”

Florence nodded slowly, “In many ways, it is ironic. He lives in darkness, yet to many, he shines brightly. For that perseverance in the face of adversity, I respect him more than he will ever know. I wish to one day be able to tell him that.”

Florence met my eye, “But my history has left me estranged from my family. Perhaps that is why I’m enjoying my time here so much. This is more a family to me than my own.”

He blinked before Florence recognized what he was saying. He swung his head back and forth before saying in a more upbeat tone,

“Excuse me for that. I have no idea why I’m telling you all this. Are you using some of Torix’s mind magic on me, perhaps?”

I shook my head, “I think you just needed someone to hear it.”

Florence turned to Hod and Amara, “Maybe so. These two are too busy eating mana to even hear us.”

They were finishing the mana, neither even aware of us. I raised a hand, trying to change the conversation,

“Ah, now I know a way to make Hod quiet.”

Florence spread his arms, “Now that, that is genius.”

We spent a few minutes discussing the specifics of the plan, along with arranging a few details. Amara needed a few days to establish herself into the rebel’s system, and doing so required her to be on an Elysium ruled world. Getting that done would be a real hurdle to overcome, but we had the people and tools to get it done.

We’d need to save that for another time. I made sure to draft up a few initial thoughts about their plan along with its contents. After sending it to some relevant parties, I took my leave. As I did, Florence scuttled away from Hod and Amara. He caught up to me, grabbing my shoulder,

“One last thing.”

I winced, “What’s up?”

He scoffed, “It won’t be about my brother or family.”

I let out a sigh of relief as Florence leaned close, “You must’ve noticed, but Hod is stricken with Amara, both sides of him, in fact.”

I raised an eyebrow, “You don’t say?”

“If it may interfere with a mission, then simply deny me this favor. Could you try to keep their assignments intertwined? Amara has yet to relish in Hod’s company, but perhaps some time together would change that. I think they’d be lovely together.”

I raised my brow, “So when did you become a matchmaker?”

He pulled back, “When I heard how difficult it was for Hod to communicate. You could do this, right?”

I raised a fist, “Yeah.”

He gave me a pat on the back, “Thanks. Good luck with Ophelia. She’s a handful.”

With the situation situated, I made my way to Diesel’s place. I passed the bottom floor’s elevator, walking through the underground streets lit by lamplight. In his cranny of the cavern, Diesel was leaving home while waving bye to his lady,

“I’ll be back in the morning. See you.”

She reached out, “Stay safe, and I love you. It’s dangerous out there.”

“Quit worrying so much...And yeah, love you too.”

Diesel reached me before tapping my elbow. It let out a metallic ring, “Besides, this big lug will keep me safe.”

Melissa gave me a sharp stare, “You sure? He looks pretty shady to me.”

I gave her a thumbs-up, “That’s only because its nighttime outside.”

Melissa put her hands on her hips, “I can never tell what time it is when we’re in here. Both of you, have a good day at work. I’ll have breakfast ready when you come back.”

We walked off, and I turned to him, “She actually cooks? Woah.”

He nodded, “Yeah, she really likes it. Before the change, her family wanted her to be a lawyer. That profession is, uh, a lot harder to come by these days.”

Diesel blinked a few times, “It’s crazy, but all those years of schooling turned out to be totally useless. I guess it wasn’t all bad. She never enjoyed studying for the most part. She has time to raise a family now. You know, make a home.”

Diesel shook his head in disbelief, “You know she actually wakes up early so that she can make me breakfast every day? I don’t know what I did to deserve her.”

I scoffed, “Pshhh, nothing. You got lucky.”

Diesel looked forward, “Yeah, you’re damn right. I do worry she’s sometimes settling. I know she’s smart. Very smart. I don’t want her to feel like she can’t do what she wants because of me.”

I lifted us both up, Diesel used to gravitational flight at this point. I shook my head,

“I’ve seen the way she looks at you, man. She’s in a good place.”

“Thanks. I’ll try to keep my worries outside my work.”

“You and me both.”

We got to the new work stations, everybody going ham on the golem project. Something about working with all these new technologies got everybody excited, and that fervor saturated the air around them. A pang of jealousy ran up my spine as Diesel joined them for work while I walked off to learn primordial mana.

Duty was a strange thing sometimes.

I floated myself up to Chrona’s house, though it was more like a series of landing pads near a rocky cove. When I got there, Ophelia and Chrona were already talking. Chrona kept the conversation going on an opened telepathic wave, so I heard everything.

“Your sculptures are beautiful. I still can’t believe you can use them to play music. You’re like an ice band or something.” Ophelia said.

Chrona flushed, her smooth, silver skin reddening, “What? Stop it. I’m just a hatchling when compared to true masters.”

“Do you all just sit around and make sculptures all day? I couldn’t imagine someone being better than you already are without an awful amount of practice.”

“In all honesty, that isn’t as far from the truth as you may first envision. We gialgathens are not an industrious, working species. We grew fat on the espen’s bondage, and once that lifeline snapped, our days of leisure ended. Now we work for the Harbinger, and he demands efficiency and labor.”

Chrona stared up, “It is no bad thing, I think. I’ve found joy in my work now, and that isn’t something I could say before.”

Ophelia leaned over on a table made of rock crabs, “I wish I could do that. I hate working. It’s so boring, and none of it seems to do anything.”

Chrona tilted her head, “Perhaps you should simply find different work then?”

“Girl, that’s what I’m here for.”

I hovered over, kind of stunned they were chatting away like this. Ophelia turned to me, saying aloud, “Oh, look who’s arrived.” Ophelia kicked the table of stone crabs,

“I learned how to use the rings. They look silly, ridiculous, and ugly...but yeah, they work. A deals a deal, so I’m here.”

I put my hands on my hips, “Perfect. Let me know if you need anything with them. I can adjust them if they don’t work right.”

Ophelia leaned onto her hand, looking bored. She lifted her other hand, spraying crabs onto the flattened earth,

“Nope, they work just the way you said.”

Chrona wrapped her tail around the crustaceans, picking them up and putting them in her jaws. She crunched down, telepathizing,

“Your generated creatures often taste of sand and bark. These, however, are truly delicious. I’ve no idea why they are so...lifelike, but the taste is something to envy.”

I didn’t know whether to be grateful or insulted. Either way, I pointed at them,

“Glad you like them. Let’s get this show started.”

Ophelia got us ready by introducing me to a few exercises for controlling mana. They involved simple movements of magic that required some technique to get them right. One was clapping two stones. The other was telekinetically juggling them—the last involved making two halos of water, one smaller than the other. I then made them rotate like a gyroscope, one reversing the spin of the other.

That one actually impressed Ophelia. On the other hand, Chrona stayed relaxed the entire time, not worried about warming up at all. I figured I could use all the help I could get, so I finished all the warm-ups. After completing the drills, Ophelia lifted a hand, creating an orb of dark blue mana,

“This is primordial energy. It’s a mix of dominion and origin mana, and generally speaking, it’s all about absolute control. Origin mana lets you make things and energies. You can’t choose the personality of what you create, however. The same could be said for dominion mana. Sure, you can control whoever or whatever you want, but you don’t get to decide what you’re controlling. It has to already be there.”

A sly grin grew under her mask, “Primordial mana doesn’t have that limitation. You can craft the mind you want to make then put it in the body of your choosing with this stuff. Some people have a natural affinity for it as I do. Other people want to come in and learn it, kind of like you.”

She frowned, “Yeah, that doesn’t work out often.”

I lifted my hands, creating spheres of quintessence and ascendant mana above each,

“Eh, it worked twice.”

Ophelia propped her weight onto one leg, “That doesn’t mean it will work a third time. Either way, it’s going to take a few years to really get this down pat, but I’m only going to stay here for three months. After that, you’re on your own. Capeesh?”

Eh, that seemed fair.

Ophelia clapped her hands, “So we’ll start with a few conceptualization exercises my teachers taught us in school. After that, you’ll be meditating on your own for a while. You know, reflecting on what you learned and stuff.”

Ophelia gestured to Chrona, “Since you have two primordial masters here, we’ll both be giving you tips and tricks. That should help even if you’re as much of a knucklehead as I think you are.”

Chrona turned to Ophelia, and the gialgathen thought over,

“He’s far more able than you may first imagine. I was put off by his fighting and appearance at first as well. I learned the folly of my ways, and now I serve under him. You may as well, one day, so I’d advise watching your words.”

Ophelia pointed at Chrona, “Yeah, not gonna happen, but thanks for the advice either way. So, I’ll start by letting you know what I thought of to make primordial mana the first time. For me, it was envisioning a simple concept – parenting.”

Parenting, huh? I wasn’t following, but I didn’t interrupt her lecture.

“Yeah, I know what you’re thinking, ‘What? Parenting? That’s ridiculous. I need magic to blow stuff up.’ That’s what I think you’re thinking, at least. Either way, think about it like this.”

She lifted a hand, origin mana appearing over her palm, “Origin mana is like...a free-spirited, go with the flow mom. She doesn’t think about the consequences and just lets go of all her worries and cares.”

She lifted her other hand, dominion mana spawning over it, “Dominion mana is like the stern father, and he really, really cares. He wants to make sure that his child is successful, and he controls his child’s environment until that happens. Some might say he’s tyrannical, and maybe he is, but he just wants what’s best for his child. Well, if it makes him look good.”

Ophelia pushed the mana orbs together, “And that’s where primordial energy comes in. Those two parents, they balance each other out. Primordial mana wants the very best for whatever it makes, but it doesn’t want its creations going crazy either. When I make primordial mana, that’s what I think of myself as, two insane parents that come together in perfect harmony.”

Ophelia shrugged, “That’s just me. What about you, Chrona?”

Chrona looked up at the stars, “Primordial mana? Hmm. I think of it differently. We gyalgathens have little time with our parents as we are powerful the moment we leave our egg. That analogy was lost on me.”

My dad was a real piece of work, and my mom passed away when I was young. The analogy was kind of lost on me too. Chrona thought out loud,

“This mana, it is a way of crafting my own world. I can build whatever I desire with it, and that is its true essence. It is the mana of a creator, one that wishes to craft their own world in their palm. It cannot be any world, but one that you truly wish for.”

Chrona met my eye, “How you wish to enact your ideal world is important, however. You must think of making an environment you want, not changing yourself to suit what’s around you.”

I frowned, “Man, these are tough examples to go off of. If something doesn’t work out for me, I don’t like blaming my circumstances. It makes me feel helpless, and I’d rather blame myself, even if it wasn’t my fault. At least I can change something then.”

Chrona lifted her tail, pointing at me, “That’s precisely my point. You must understand that your surroundings are under your control, even if only feebly. A primordial mage grips at those connections and uses them to their fullest potential. Eventually, those feeble beginnings may blossom into absolute control, over time.”

Ophelia looked up at Chrona, “Hey, that was really well said. You should do this for a living.”

Chrona shook her head, “I know of a professor, and his life is not one I wish to emulate. I’d rather focus on my music, sculpting, and sparring. Those pursuits sustain me.”

Ophelia nodded, “Girl, I totally agree.”

Chrona must’ve been talking about Torix. I guess his workload was pretty severe when compared to most. Thinking about their lessons, I sat down with my legs crossed. I rolled my shoulders, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. As I went into a zen state of mind, Ophelia went back and sat down on her table of interlocked, stone crabs.

She pulled out her obelisk, scrolling through something similar to Facebook. Chrona wrapped her tail around herself, setting her head on it. She got in a little cat nap as I began my practice. To begin, I envisioned something like the parents Ophelia mentioned. I thought of my mom, and I couldn’t remember her face.

A pang of guilt sliced through my chest, and I winced. I wished my skills and enhanced memories worked for older events in my life. I ended up moving on to my dad.

Anytime I brought him up in my mind, a fight or flight response kicked up. I tightened my hands, my knuckles prominent on my fists.

A deep, built-in fear sprung up from just remembering the guy. He was a complete asshole, and his ego needed so much pampering that it might as well have been royalty. If he wasn't belittling someone else in a conversation, he considered the other person an enemy. I never wanted to be like that.

Yeah, the whole parent thing wasn't going to work out.

I moved on, trying out Chrona's method. The first step involved trying to think of something in my palm, a world perhaps. I expanded my awareness around me, mana siphoning from my furnace. Without my other senses bothering me, I viewed the world through mana.

Wielding that mana, I tried to bend the world's mana instead of my own. It rejected me utterly, the foreign entity resisting my control. Rolling my shoulders, I tried again. Bending nature by using my own energy took little effort, but actually enacting orders to it without using force, that was something much, much harder.

After a dozen attempts, I took this as a personal attack. At this point, the universe might as well have been mocking me. I wasn't about to let it win. Over and over, I attempted to grasp this external mana. Over and over, I failed. It became a point of contention and doubt for me. Was wielding primordial mana even possible for me?

I mean, Chrona wielded the space around her to warp time. Ophelia grafted external mana sources with minds to do her bidding. I only used my own energy, and everything else was cut off. I facepalmed. That's right. I was a dimension. Instead of grasping at this other universe's mana, I grabbed at my own.

It shifted, bending with fluid grace. The colors of it turned into black, blue, orange, red, and white. The shifting expanse danced around me, pleased to be of use. The sheer difference in pliability was like steel and stone versus playdough and puddles. One resisted with an iron will, and the other shifted to the touch, resisting little if at all.

It didn't seem like primordial mana, however. It was just me bending the mana I made to my will like normal. After a bit of brainstorming, an idea popped into my head. Using my furnace, I gave it a jolt of mana. It was enough to make another one of those

mindless monstrosities. Once it formed, I wrestled with the arcane beast until it submitted to my will.

After doing so, I expunged the thing from my body and mind. A jinn of sorts spawned, one of chaotic temperament and with a destructive nature. It remained formless, invisible to other's eyes. I reached out a hand, ensuring a telepathic link remained between us. That connection served as shackles so this thing couldn't run wild.

With an experimental monster in front of me, I began molding it. It resisted at first, not wanting to take a form. It was kind of like a baby crying right after birth. It didn't want to experience the dramatic shift that came with coming to life. Despite that, the spirit yielded to my tampering eventually after I bribed it with some mana.

That was a useful trick I learned from Hod and Amara. Who knew how helpful it would be in the future.

At first, the jinn's mind and body had no form whatsoever. If anything, the only reason it even maintained a form was that I held it together. Otherwise, it was eager to spill out into the world around it. I needed this damn kamikaze to have a survival instinct so that I could work with it on any reasonable level.

That goal guided me as I attempted to make a mind with origin mana. A random, primitive entity spawned. Calling it a conscious would be an insult to the word but a compliment to this primal being. It worked for now. Planting this baseline series of thoughts, I swelled the jinn into the mind. The tiny entity went insane, the little being unable to handle the onslaught of madness.

As it died, I frowned. Man, working with this kind of magic was for the cold-hearted. I'd have to be the same. I settled myself down, steeling myself for what was to come. This experiment repeated several dozen times, and I kept at it since creating a raw consciousness was beyond me. Using the mana from the furnace would skip a lot of steps, and it worked with my temperament better anyways.

The restless furnace spirits would act as filler for the tiny beings I made. Once grafted together, I could bend the Frankenstein minds into what I wanted. It was hard, arduous work, however, and I showed no talent in this. As my progress stalled, I kept at it despite the natural resistance I was facing. I didn't want to quit now.

This was the most opposite kind of work I was used to as far as magic was concerned. Struggle, plateaus, and difficulty came with the new territory, so I took it all in with a smile. Once more, this was a fight I wanted to win. If I came out bloody and beaten on the other side, then that was a price I'd pay willingly.

And pay I did. Creating tiny, helpless minds and killing them took its toll on me. I splintered their souls, taking my time to try and make the assimilation work. This kind of tampering suited Torix, but it made me want to vomit. At the same time, this kind of price was something I expected. Primordial mana was ugly, and that meant something equally unsettling would be required to make it.

I resigned myself to this strange part of magic as I continued, on and on.

By the time morning arrived, my frustrations mounted. It reminded me of what I tried doing before with Chrona, the process just not budging no matter how hard I worked. I took a deep breath, pretending all of my anger and negativity was pooling in my chest. As I breathed out, I let all that irritation go.

Feeling lighter, I stood up before cracking my neck. The sound echoed a bit, waking Chrona up from her nap. Ophelia didn't hear at all since she left hours ago. She did what I needed her to do, so I wasn't precisely sour about her spending her time elsewhere. My remaining mentor didn't waste much time either, and she rubbed her eyes with her tail as she said,

"Ah, Daniel, it's good to see you. Did your mental exercises pay off?"

I shook my head, "Not yet, and I expected as much. Sometimes, things are hard and difficult. This happens to be one of those times."

She grinned, "Persevere then, as you always have."

I smiled back, reaching out a hand. I made some cool mist around Chrona, and she laughed,

"Hah, thank you. Your planet's not as humid as Giess. This reminds me of home."

“That’s good. You’ve got a few more days off, so soak them in. We’ll be fighting in a new world soon.”

“Then I will be ready when that time comes. Good luck.”

I left her sleeping, the silver gialgathen adjusting to Earth quickly. As I passed by the golem work stations, work died down, the engineers tired from a long night’s work. I picked Diesel up and dropped him off, the guy less talkative than average from sheer exhaustion. He yawned in front of his house, waving goodbye,

“That was a long day. We’ve got a lot left to do.”

Leaving him, I remembered the other half of Ophelia’s job. This next night, I intended to let her know when I had enough tips to work on. Once that point was established, she’d have to go to the workstations to help out.

I sent that message to Ophelia before I forgot. With the details handled, I sat outside of my suite, a sort of stone porch available to me. I channeled mana with my furnace, and the energy coursed through me. I fell into the same kind of meditation, my mind centered on progress. Ignoring everything around me, this continued for an hour.

Interrupting my trance, Torix arrived before anyone else awakened. He stomped up to me, his hands raised,

“Daniel, you must answer the messages I send, else there’s no reason for a messaging system whatsoever.”

I shook my head, standing up, “Sorry. I was working with my furnace. What do you need?”

He raised his hands, his entire being radiating alarm, “There’s something of importance I must tell you. Don’t panic when I do.”

I opened my eyes, my concern mounting, “Just tell me Torix.”

“I...I believe that Elysium has found Earth.”

Chapter 276: Know Thy Enemy

I narrowed my eyes, “Have they found our guild?”

“No, I don’t believe they have. We’re rather fortunate that Elysium only recently established a camp far south of here, hundreds of miles away.”

I put my hands on my hips, impressed Torix knew that,

“How did you figure something like that out? We don’t have that kind of reach.”

Torix raised a hand, “We didn’t, though that glaring weakness has changed as of late. That advanced obelisk has given me far more time to use elsewhere, and I’ve been spending that time expanding our information network. After all, our most egregious issue is Lehesion assaulting Mt. Verner or Earth in general.”

Torix spread out his arms, “I am not wholly unaware of this fault, and I aim to rectify it. You shall act as our sword and shield should he arrive. Before then, I shall act as our eyes and ears so that we may evade him before that fateful moment.”

I let out a deep sigh, “Torix, thank you. You can’t know how much better this makes me feel about our situation.”

He put a hand on my shoulder, “Oh, I believe I do. I’ve dreamed of establishing a university since my younger years, and this is the beginning of that vision. To see it be laid to waste by a juggernaut of magic, that...that would be hard to bear.”

He let his hand drop, “So I decided not to bear it at all. I’ve been planting spies in all directions, and they’ve given me valuable insights into nearby areas. One of those spies informed me that a Hybrid was spotted several hundred miles south of here.”

I raised my brow, “Damn, this is impressive.”

Torix waved a hand, “This is nothing. My programs are merely bearing fruit as it where, and now we may enjoy the harvest.”

I lifted a hand, “That’s good to know. Was there anything else the spy reported back?”

“Indeed, there was. Our spy circled the Elysian encampment, giving us its exact coordinates. I’ve yet to attack as I didn’t want them to know opposition was planted here on Earth. Just as well, I’ve gained a few insights into Elysium establishments.”

“Are they spreading silver territories and blighting the local populace like normal?”

“Quite the opposite. I suppose the first point requires context given your presumptions. Most earthen camps are...primitive at the moment. Though Mt. Verner is a well of prosperity for nearby areas, other regions wallow in abject poverty, struggling to contain the eldritch nearby.”

I frowned, remembering the few villages I checked out a while back. The situation wasn’t getting better without some intervention. Torix continued,

“In many ways, the Elysium camp is the opposite of Schema’s encampments. Schema only offers certain services to those that prove themselves. The Elysians do the opposite, granting Hybrid guards and protection to those most helpless. They also offer to enlist any that are willing to abandon Schema’s system.”

Torix shook his head, “I will admit, for anyone new to Schema’s system, the rebels offer of training, protection, and an eventual Hybrid are alluring. It makes Schema seem barbaric by comparison. The Adairs even offer assistance to those that refuse to join their cause. How they can offer up these kinds of resources, I do not know. It is a fact they do it, however.”

I raised my eyebrows, “It doesn’t really matter how they do it, does it? If anything, that’s more like what our guild does than what Schema’s doing. It makes more sense why worlds are rebelling if that’s what a standard camp is like. They sound pretty helpful, actually.”

“Indeed. It bodes poorly for Schema’s immediate future.”

I snapped my fingers, “Oh yeah, I forgot to ask, do they have a warp there?”

“I couldn’t believe it when the scout gave us the info, but yes, they in fact do. Why do you ask?”

“Florence planned out something with Amara and Hod. They want to subjugate the eldritch on the vagni’s homeworld so that we can cripple the rebellion on Blegara.”

“It’s a fine idea, though executing on that sounds more than merely difficult. It would save us an immeasurable amount of resources should it succeed, however.”

I pointed up, “He needs Amara to establish a link to Elysium’s system, and that should only take a few days of being on an Elysian world. This camp might be our ticket into their domain.”

Torix tilted his head, “Ah. We may turn this blunder into a boon then, the tides turned as they say. Perhaps we could organize some sort of supporting force to keep Amara safe on her departure, and that would allow us to learn about Elysium as well.”

Torix gave a nod of approval, “This is a good idea, though perhaps a touch risky. Florence, was it? He’s more talented than his family believes I take it?”

I shook my head, “Yeah, they treat him like he’s garbage. He can’t fight at all, but he’s got good planning, researching, and he makes friends fast. I just need to put him in the right position, and he’s damn good at what he does.”

Torix threw his hand in disgust, “I understand his problems all too well. As you know, I’m gifted at mind magic, necromancy, and many incantations. On my homeworld, Xanathar, I was hated by my family after enacting revenge on a rival family. The only reason I was driven so far was the distaste my own kin held for me.”

Torix raised a hand with two fingers pressed together, “They chose not to acknowledge my talents, nor to help me foster them. Because of that disconnect, I was intelligent but without wisdom. That is what the old in society act as – transmitters of experience. They take the raw passion of the young and temper it with their advice and instruction.”

Torix crossed his arms, “But the elderly can often be blinded by arrogance and constant comparison. Families will throw away the gifts of their children if those gifts do not fit comfortably into standard ideas of right and wrong. It is the failing of an aged generation when the youth aren’t allowed to prosper.”

Torix sighed, staring down, “That is what befell me. I...I lacked any guidance, and I fell into dark waters because of it. It’s good you’re giving Florence a place to shine before he fell into those very same circumstances.”

I smiled, “Thanks. I don’t know if I could say the same for me, though. I know I wasn’t going to be successful in my own world before Schema arrived. My skills didn’t line up. It just took a little luck going my way, and all of a sudden, I felt motivated and unstoppable.”

I stared off in the distance, “Maybe circumstances play more into our success than we think? It’s a scary thought.”

“I understand the sentiment, and here is how I rationalize my fear. You see, opportunity is a fickle mistress. One day she shall shine on you with radiance. Other days she shall gaze away at all of your attempts to gather her attention. In that case, I think the most important practice is persistence. With persistence, one can be in the right place at the right time when opportunity arrives.”

Torix’s eyes shifted red, “Otherwise, you would surely be caught without the means to press your advantage. It reminds me of killing a rival. One must have their knife sharpened for when your enemy exposes their neck. Otherwise, the blade will lack the edge to cut skin and sinew.”

I frowned, “Good tips, though a little grim. Maybe it’s kind of like steering ship? It takes some serious time to turn a seafaring vessel all the way around. Destiny and all that might be similar. It just takes time for your decisions to fully manifest.”

Torix shrugged, “It’s as good a theory as any. Regardless, what kind of team do you think we need for Florence’s plan? Would you be joining them, perhaps?”

I raised my palms, “I’m as subtle as a jackhammer at a tea-party. We need people who actually look normal. Otherwise, they’ll figure out what we’re trying to do right away.”

“Fair point. I’m trying to think through my various students, and one does come to mind who fits the bill.”

“Who?”

“Alexander. He’s the arcane mage you demonstrated pain tolerance to. He took that lesson to heart, and he’s forged himself into a potent mage since.”

I raised my brow, “You sure he could handle Hybrids?”

“He most certainly could not, but he wouldn’t be alone. Though Amara is by no means comparable to us, she is strong relative to most. She may help in her own defense.”

I cupped my chin, “Huh, what about Althea and Hod? I bet they could tail behind them and keep them both safe.”

Torix’s fire eyes flared, “Excellent idea. They’re quite experienced in reconnaissance. Their experience would help Alexander and Amara quite a bit. I do worry about Alexander’s experience, however.”

“What do you mean?”

“He lacks any mundane, worldly experience. He was young when the system first arrived, and since then, he was a part of Springfield during Yawm’s coming. Now he’s spent years on Mt. Verner, and he’s never traveled before now.”

I crossed my arms, “So he needs a guide to help him out. I might know some people who could help.”

Torix steepled his fingers, “Perfect. I wouldn’t want one of my star pupils to be killed on his first outing. Who do you have in mind?”

“Eh, it’s a group for one, and they clear dungeons for a living. None of the people I’m thinking about stand out too much either. I think they’ll be perfect.”

Torix leaned back, “Perhaps they’re unusually competent then? I know most of the dungeon clearing corps. They are...rough around the edges to put it kindly.”

I put a hand on Torix's shoulder, "They're not geniuses or anything, but they're the best normal people we've got for the job."

Torix's shoulders drooped, "Why do I feel as though you're sending one of my best disciples away with a group of ruffians?"

"Because I am, but don't worry. They'll get along great, and these guys know how normal people work. Let's be honest, we don't."

Torix sighed, "True. Perhaps we may meet with these rascallions on Saturday morning then?"

I shook my head, "They'll be too hungover to even stand up."

Torix facepalmed, "What have I agreed to?"

I grinned, "A great idea."

-Phil Williamson-

I sat at the dining room table, a cold draft sauntering in like the echoes of some bad memory. An eldritch tore a hole in the kitchen wall, and the entire lower floor chilled at nights because of it. Every time that wind cooled the back of my neck, it was like a whip across my back.

I failed my family.

No one else at the table said anything about that night, but we all understood what it meant. Before long, we would all have to leave the house. It was falling apart anyway, but not having at least walls between the monsters and us...that thought haunted even me, and I was the one fighting them. I could only imagine what the others must have been thinking.

Margret was hit worst by it all. She always struggled with anxiety, but we handled it together, even when times were hard. Nowadays, my wife was having a mental breakdown day in and day out. She would often daydream before, and I loved that

about her. She was so full of hope. Since the culling, she'd struggled to transition to this new way of life. Now she wallowed in memories from a bygone era, and she could hardly contribute at all.

Jason picked up the slack, but he struggled like I did. I loved the boy, and he was becoming a man. At the same time, he couldn't cook like Margret, and he sure as hell couldn't give the same kind of comfort. She held us together with the way she painted pictures of a better life. Without that, we were losing hope and fast.

It wasn't all bad. Jason and I learned to appreciate each other in these trying times. That was probably because we were the only two people we had left. As I raised a spoon to Margret's mouth, that became evident. An eldritch tore into the house and grabbed her, screaming in her face. It stared down into her eyes, and it left her entire mind scrambled like eggs.

I was the one that let it in because I fell asleep on the night shift. Every mealtime since, I fed her. I tended to her every need, and guilt tore into my mind each and every time she needed my help.

That pain, I deserved it.

Jason already forgave me. He said it was just a part of this new world we were put in, and that making mistakes was a part of being human. I was proud of him when he said that, but I couldn't accept his words of encouragement. I should have done more. I could've done more, but I let laziness creep in along with a cunning doubt.

Fighting every night wore me down over these past few months. The monsters were becoming stronger, and the level ups were far and few between. The doubt, however, was far more insidious. We hadn't gotten a beam of hope in so long. Sally was gone, and as I fed Margret, I couldn't help but feel she was gone too.

Her eyes stared forward with a blank stare, and it hurt me to look at her. I had too, though. She was a burden I deserved, and I'd carry it willingly. That's what a man did. They owned up to their responsibilities, and if feeling this pain was what I deserved, I accepted it without complaint.

Jason lacked that regret as he ate his slop, scarfing it down with the kind of hunger that comes from being a growing boy. I wished I had meat to give him, but there just wasn't much wildlife in the forests these days. We both agreed not to eat monster meat, even if

it looked mighty tempting sometimes. I salivated at the thought of it, imagining a fresh steak with pepper and salt. If only.

A bang echoed from the woods, jolting us out of our dinner.

I set the spoon down onto Margret's plate, and I stood up from our dining room table. Jason stood up with me, but I raised a palm to him,

"You know what these monsters will do to you."

Jason stared at the hollowed eyes of his mother, and the boy sat down. I turned and walked out of the house, a screen door clapping behind me. As I stepped onto our farm, I grabbed my nailed club from the porch. Staring around, I found eyes in the distance, this time each of them beady and lifeless.

I pounded my chest with my fist,

"Come and get me, you filthy monsters."

My yelling might attract more of them, but I didn't want these ones to find Jason and Margret in the house. It would be too much to find another member of my family hurt or worse. A pack of skittering insects ran out of the forest. They were like scorpions with eyes at the end of their tails, along with stingers. Their legs curled up, letting them spring forward in great leaps, and their beady eyes sat as massive orbs on their tails.

I shivered at the sight of them. They looked like harbingers of death, but I waved my club in my hand, ready to go at em. They scuttled towards me, trying to encircle my position. I already knew that was coming. As the first scorpion scuttled off to my side, I darted sideways. The ground cracked under my heels as I shot towards the beast. It leaped back, escaping my first swing.

I followed the momentum of my swing, doing a spin. I viewed it again, and I chunked my club at the beast, the metal clobbering through its shell. It cracked into a spray of brown ooze, a putrid stench spreading from its wounds.

The other bugs hopped at me as I sprinted forward to my club. They leaped at me, but I darted sideways, jumping back and forth. The scorpions tackled into the ground,

ruining patches of crops as they did. I reached the corpse I clobbered as one of the crawlers pounced at my back.

I ripped the club from its body, turning towards the insect lunging through the air. I splattered it across our farmland, its corpse exploding from the pressure of impact. Three scorpions remained, each of them warier now that I took out two so quickly. Their mandibles drooled at the sight of me, however, so I charged towards them. I found that attacking first gave me an advantage.

As I reached them, they grouped up together. Using their claws and stingers, they rained down a spray of attacks on me. I parried several snaps of their pincers and stings from their tails before one of them nicked me in the arm. A fire like radiance spread from the wound as I fell back. Their teamwork made up for my better physicality, and before I knew it, my left arm went numb. Holding my bludgeon in my right arm, I swung at the scorpions while howling,

“Back. Back. I said back.”

They pressured me until I was at the edge of the house. I heaved for breath, the venom spreading to my chest. Sweat dripped down my forehead as the scorpions kept snipping at me. They pursued with the relentlessness common to their kind. I cursed them as my backfoot stepped onto my porch.

From inside, Jason shouted, “Dad, are you ok?”

I roared back, “Stay inside and be quiet. I’ll handle this.”

Jason stared on, fear in his eyes. The scorpions stopped attacking, pulling back. As they did, they inspected the house and my heavy breathing. A few seconds passed before they split their tails into three parts apiece. After interweaving those tendrils together, a voice echoed from their combined minds. It was raspy and snakelike, the sound unsettling,

“I see you are the guardian of this place, a sheep who guards the other sheep here.”

I narrowed my eyes, “And what of it?”

“Do you love those that are in there? We will eat them unless you surrender now.”

The eldritch never stopped eating, and I didn't believe them for a second,

“You won't be getting near them unless it's over my dead body.”

“Then let it be so.”

Their tails split back apart, and they continued their onslaught of attacks. I parried two more clamping claws, and I smashed one of their arms into the ground. A tail slit my forearm as I did. I hit two more stinger swipes sideways before kicking one of their skulls in, but another stinger pierced into my thigh, the wound deep.

I ended up tearing two of their bottom claws out, but they nicked me three more times. At this point, two more scorpions remained, and they waited for me to pass out. As they did, blood dripped from me like I was a walking wound. My nose ran, and my eyes teared up. I made one last swing before falling down, unable to move.

I lost.

The scorpions ran up to me, their mandibles jittering about in a frenzy. They stopped short of my face, however. I watched as they stormed the house, tearing through the defenses we set up. Dread welled in my belly while wood cracked under their claws like ice blocks under a hammer. After many minutes of struggle, they pulled Margret and Jason out of our house.

I watched as the scorpions pulled me upright. They threw my family in front of me, both of them struggling to stay alive. Jason wept, his eyes bloodshot. Margret stayed listless, her expression indifferent. I wished I could do the same. The scorpions interwove their tails again, and the same voice echoed out,

“Now watch them be devoured, as was our promise from before. This fault is your own.”

I wanted to shout, but no words left my mouth. It was as if I was trapped inside my body, unable to vent my frustration, hatred, and anger. It pooled inside me, forging my

mind like a furnace. I hated these monsters. I hated the eldritch. I hated this new world we found ourselves in.

Day after day, month after month, we lost everything. My faith in myself was gone, along with any self-respect and dignity. I didn't need those things. I needed Jason and Margret. Without them, I was nothing. It would be worse than dying. It would be torture.

The abominations grabbed Margret first, my highschool sweetheart now weeping. The wind whistled in the trees, and my own eyes watered. A scorpion held her upright while the other one opened its mandibles wide. Brown, disgusting drool leaked from the monster, and its mouth was like a thousand branches ending in thorns.

They neared Margret's face. I watched in horror as a mandible made contact with her cheek. It cut through her soft skin, blood leaking out. Several more mandibles sliced into her face, and I screamed inside. It was a wail I'd never imagine I could make, a lamentation from deep within.

An alien, crackling sound echoed from the trees. The scorpions glanced at it, their mealtime interrupted. I prayed another eldritch would fight them. Instead, a mechanized horror strutted out of the trees. It was an all too familiar sight, but I never imagined I'd see one in person.

It stood tall, over ten feet high with writhing hands. Orange pustules pulsed over its corded frame. The being left quakes in the ground as it stomped forward. Trees nearby shook with violence at its passing, and the monster's eyeless frame unsettled even the eldritch.

The scorpions locked eyes with the Hybrid, and so did I. We all stared at this new threat, each of us far too weak to fight something like this off. We were all going to die. This endless moment right before chaos broke loose, it stretched on for an eternity. In the pits of my chest, I dreaded the being in front of me. It was one of the only ways to die that was even worse than by these scorpions.

The Hybrid moved first. It dashed across our farm, laying waste to the ground near it. The scorpions released Margret, racing away. As the Hybrid stomped towards us, I screamed in my mind, terrified of this abomination. It got near Jason, and cords unveiled from its frame like branches from a tree. These cords ended in metallic blades, ready to pierce their victim.

I watched in horror as it passed Jason entirely.

The Hybrid shot into the forest, catching the scorpions. The bugs wallowed and thundered out in agony, their sickening cackles only outdid by the sounds of their bodies being consumed. As the siphoning process ended, the Hybrid skulked out of the forest. It stumbled, its body swollen with the remains of the eldritch.

It walked up to us, getting to the middle of our family. It stayed there, watching us from all directions. We remained petrified in place, unable to so much as move. A half-hour passed, my heart almost bursting in my chest as it stayed this close.

Another rustle echoed from the trees. An espen walked out of the forest, the alien comfortable here on Earth. I only knew what it was because of watching the Harbinger's streams. This mystery espen snapped its fingers, and the Hybrid walked towards her. As the espen reached us, she stared down,

"So that's why my watchdog ran off. It's good to see it made it here in time. We've been clearing out a scorpion's nest nearby, but a few of these guys escaped through the trees. Sorry they got a hold of you all."

She rustled through her bag, pulling out three vials of green liquid. She smiled, "Let me get you guys some antivenom."

We were alive.

She popped the top off one while giving us a cheeky grin,

"The name's Melania by the way. It's good to meet you all."

Chapter 277: A Project Complete

-Daniel-

I rolled my shoulders, surprised that the golem project came together this fast. A few days of hard work really paid off, and the night crew blistered past the design process much faster for it. Talking with Diesel, the guy explained that working with the

guildleader really spurred them into action. Combine that with the nonexistent building limitations, and the most challenging part of the design was already handled.

Apparently, resource management and the scale of an operation took up a sizable part of the design process. Most mass-produced golems required not only a practical design for their intended purpose, but they also needed a reasonable means of being created. After all, carving the delicate, precise runes into something like metal was a severe challenge all on its own.

Most of the time, they used a kind of welding that let out few sparks. This still left a lot to be desired from a precision standpoint, meaning industrial errors were the norm. Creating machines that processed the body and parts of a golem also took up a lot of time and managing where and when they got the resources for it also required some brainstorming.

I handled all of those operations, so they moved through the entirety of its creation in about a week. To the team, I was like a 3-D printer that worked with something more rigid than metal. That and my runic carving meant they could use far more lettering than expected, streamlining the inscription aspects.

Ophelia was actually a pivotal part of that process. She sped up the mind creation of the golem by orders of magnitude, her experience invaluable. She and Torix were really at odds during these past few days since her perspectives showed differing priorities. Torix wanted the golem to be an unlearning, mindless drone of sorts, similar to his necromantic creations.

Ophelia insisted on the opposite. She wanted the golem to speak telepathically, and she wanted it to have a measure of free will. They argued for hours about that point, and Ophelia eventually outwilled Torix more than outreasoned him. The lich spoke about the risks involved with having a golem of such strength operating without strict limits.

In many ways, he was right. These golems would be powerful.

At the same time, Ophelia carried many points in her favor as well. For starters, she kept a policy of constant correction as she called it. The main advantage of a mindful golem was that it could be taught what to do and when. This meant continually updating its mind wasn't necessary. It could do that on its own.

The other benefit involved the nature of its purpose. These golems were supposed to go into the abyssal depths of dungeons and rifts alike. Every dungeon was different, so having each golem adjust to its surroundings was invaluable. Torix ceded to those points since I wanted this golem project to expand to a massive scale.

That wasn't to say Torix's arguments were weak, however. The golem had mind magic and standard wizard spells on its side. Even a veteran classer would struggle to manage it in a real fight. Combine that with its sheer physicality, and these super golems could take on entire battalions of levelers on their own. That guaranteed they'd clear a dungeon no problem. It did mean they could kill our own on a massive scale as well.

Ophelia worked with minds in the past to prevent this kind of problem, and she won over Torix with a few examples of tampering eldritch messing with the encoded rulesets of old golems. She described some of these eldritch like lawyers, many of them finding loopholes in the golems' preprogrammed reasoning.

That argument faltered to Torix's reasoning, his risk aversion winning out at that point. Ophelia pulled an ace out of her sleeve as a counter, however. She argued that free will gave the golems the ability and desire to learn. By ensuring each golem received tutelage under the right person, they could be given a reliable moral compass. It didn't have to be elaborate either, just a few ideas about what was right and wrong. Combine that with simple desires to help our cause, and they'd be super soldiers with some empathy.

That's why I sat there, staring at the designs, several vital pieces converted into the cipher. Ophelia won out, got the specs ready, and now, it was up to me to finish pulling these different parts together. I began by mapping out how I needed to make the beast's entirety, and it all started with a central core, one encoded with its mind. It required stringent, precise carvings, and they would coat its entire surface from top to bottom.

I started on that work, taking out some liquified dimensional fabric. I pooled a considerable amount over the past few days, making sure I had enough for just this purpose. Pulling it out, I stretched the glowing, white mass over my head like star taffy. The engineers and designers watched in the distance, wanting to understand how I made it. Ophelia, Torix, and Diesel watched as well.

Wielding gravity and telekinesis, I shifted the blob into a roughly spherical shape. After getting the outline done, I compressed it down, anchoring it with a gravity well—this gravitational force formed at the center of the metal orb. At the same time, I created an

antigravity panel under the process to prevent Earth's gravity from messing up this process.

In the distance, Torix already channeled a spell to block wind as well. Without much interference from natural forces, I strengthened the gravity well at the center of the sphere. This smoothed its surface, mirroring how a planet formed. With a better sphere than I could hope to eyeball, I flash froze it with a burst of cooling quintessence.

Keeping the perfect orb afloat, I reached out a hand. No direct carving was needed since the runes were already completed in my grimoire. Using the elemental furnace as a fuel source, I funneled mana into the grimoire before the lettering shined after a few minutes.

The glowing lettering floated off the page before wrapping around the sphere. Without any sparks flying out, I riddled the mass with cipheric inscriptions. As I did, I peered back and forth from the blueprint and the sphere to ensure I was doing this right. The last thing I wanted was to have messed this up early on. Everything was made right, so I moved on.

I began work on the rest of the body. With a gravitational wave, I hovered a mass of melted fabric over the sphere. I created a layering of cooled energy between the finished core and the molten body to prevent marred inscriptions. The shape came together over a few seconds, the subtle adjustments made in real-time.

The main body held the core that controlled movement. It was composed of a few interlocked plates covered in an organic, flowing piece of metal. Unlike most metals, the amount of this stuff wasn't an issue, and the floating joints model meant we didn't need to worry as much about pieces clanking together as the golem moved.

With all that in mind, I created shoulder pads aimed at protecting the head. These pauldrons were simple, jagged masses of metal. For each of them, I made two more cores that controlled mind magic and everyday magic. The idea was to feint that the head stored these orbs when they actually rested in the densest clusterings of metal in the golem.

These cores took more time, and I made sure the cipher inscriptions were accurate. I had a few conversations with Ophelia where I bombarded her with questions. This gave me an idea of her ideas and what she was trying to do. To get this right, I replicated her perspective as honestly as I could while carving the cipher.

When the runes floated onto the cores, I hoped it would be enough.

Finalizing the main body, I added several additional strands of runic carving on the golem's surface. These normal runes took seconds to apply. The last addition was implanting a series of telepathic wires that combined the three cores into a single consciousness.

Once set up, I moved onto the limbs. I kept them simple, the hands blunt and broad. They wielded three fingers apiece, enough to grab something but no more than that. This made even the fingers like clubbing weapons, making the hands hard to break in combat. The hands themselves were made large as well, more hulking clubs than typical palms.

These masses flowed into the shoulder pauldrons, making for a menacing outline. The waist of the golem stayed until it reached the legs of the construct. Once there, I molded thick, paneled pieces for the thighs and legs. One of the most essential parts after that was the ankle structure.

We kept to a more interlocking design here. This would let the golem pivot off its feet better, increasing its overall agility. The feet were made wide as well, with three large toes sticking out in all directions. This adjustment allowed it to maneuver across different kinds of terrain despite its heft.

The last part was the head of the being. I kept it dense. Its shoulders ran up high enough that this thing showed no real neck, eliminating a common weak point of most creatures. A bit of crystalized mana made for the eyes, the crystals made porous enough that light leaked into them. This made it possible for the being to see.

Hearing was more difficult to add. I created hollows in the sides of its head, each letting sound into them. After adding carvings into these gaps, I gave the golem the ability to hear and sense its surroundings at a basic, primal level. Taste and smell would too difficult and arduous to set up. It also didn't help the golem with fighting, so it just wasn't necessary.

As for touch, that would be a finicky sense to work with. The golem's skin and the entire body was denser than steel. Adapting receptors on its body to respond to stimulus would be insanely tricky because of that. Hell, my own understanding of touch was warped from being encased in this armor all the time. Stone was soft, and water was

like air. The golem would feel the same, and in the end, adding touch was more trouble than it was worth.

Without needing any other additions, I pulled everything together, willing the creature to life. I siphoned mana into the creation to fuel the inscriptions all over its body, yet it remained unmoving. The cipher markings took far longer to fuel, thirty minutes of channeling passing by.

It soaked in mana like a starving creature, and as time passed, the crew behind me grew nervous. We spent a lot of time on this, and seeing it fail would be a massive blow for the team. Just as a few eyes began to drift downward, the golem's eyes glowed white.

It was alive.

The golem stood up, the group of scientists and engineers behind me celebrating as it did. I grinned at the golem, and the quintessent crystals in its eye sockets glistened for a moment. It stood tall, wide, and firm, its glowing eyes made ominous by the dark metal of its outline. The runic carvings followed suit, quintessent mana funneling into the cores and etchings to fuel the creature.

It drew from the material of its making, the golem coming to life. It stared at its hands, wondering where it was and what it could be. I walked up, a few feet taller than the behemoth. I put a hand on its shoulder,

"It's good to meet you. I'm Daniel."

The golem covered its ears, its newfound senses assaulting it. I connected to the golem telepathically, and the size of its mind surprised me. The three wills fused into one, and they grappled with the world around it. I sent over a sense of calm, and the golem lowered its hands from its ears. It looked up at me, seeing for the first time.

It murmured in a voice like metal, "Creator?"

I smiled, "Yup."

Its mind fully connected to its body, and its clarity and understanding evolved. It kneeled towards me, the floating joints hovering into position. Its fluidity surprised me, and it spoke with reverence,

“I am here to serve, creator.”

I turned to Ophelia, “It’s not what I expected. Didn’t you mention a free will?”

Ophelia put her hands on her hips, watching the golem come to life,

“I wanted it to have thoughts and feelings, not the ability to commit mass murder. It can work on its own, and it’s a lot harder to trick as is than the alternatives. That’s the main reason we gave it so much mind to work with.”

I turned back to the golem, gesturing for it to rise,

“Come on, you don’t have to lean down like that.”

It rose up, the ground crushing under its foot despite the gravity enchantments we made to stop just that. It turned, looking at the forest around it,

“There are no monsters here. This place is cleansed. Where would I find monsters to kill?”

The directives seemed stable just off that question alone. I raised a fist, “We’ll get to that. We need to test a few of your abilities first.”

The golem turned towards the engineers behind me, “Where will I test myself? Those here may be injured in the process. They, too, took part in my creation. I’d wish to avoid taking part in their undoing.”

I pointed towards a part of Mt. Verner distanced from our hollowed base, “How about there?”

The golem and I made our way there, the both of us deciding to run and jump. The new entity took great joy in just moving, the simple act something unique to the metal giant. Its world wasn't as rich as mine since it lacked as many senses, so it got quite a kick out of the simpler stuff. In a way, I was kind of envious.

We reached the safe zone we scoped out earlier for just this purpose. In view of the engineers yet safely distanced, I pointed at myself with my thumb,

"Would you mind testing yourself against me? Yenno, some sparring."

The golem raised its hands and lowered its head, "I...I could never battle against my creator."

I lifted my fists, "Give it a shot. I won't tear you down too much."

It moved its feet, still getting used to its body, "I...if you say it is so, then let it be." It stared at me, "I...I shall fight you."

My armor wrapped around my face, and a jagged, glowing grin formed, "Come on then."

It cleared its thoughts before bending down. Without warning, it charged at me. As it crashed against me, I dragged back several feet, the force of its tackle impressive. A loud boom echoed into the mountainscape as I grabbed its shoulders and slung it sideways while kicking at its feet.

It flopped sideways, crashing into the ground with another booming crash. Each of our movements unleashed waves of sounds like titans clashing, and it gave me chills each time I heard the impacts.

I walked towards it, "All you have to do is stay away from the engineers."

It stood up as dust and dirt flew into the air. From that one exchange, bushes uprooted nearby, and trees were leveled. Giving it a few seconds to collect itself, I reached the golem and lifted a fist, aiming to smash its eyes.

The golem rolled sideways before standing up. I dashed at the creature to keep up the pressure. It sidestepped me, aiming to stiff-arm my neck. I grabbed the outstretched limb, flowing on my feet. I turned the force of my charge in an instant before chunking the golem overhead once more. It crashed through two trees, the wood splintering like peanut brittle in a child's hands.

Despite the rough travel, the golem landed on its feet unharmed. I jolted towards the being, but before I grabbed it, the golem stomped the ground, shattering the earth around it. My footing collapsed as roots ripped and tore under us. I stumbled forward, and the golem stepped toward me. It launched a heavy-handed strike, using its hand like a mace.

It was a good attempt, but not enough. I let myself sink into the ground, no longer supporting my weight with gravity wells. His strike zipped over my head, sparks flying where his forearm made contact with my helmet's top. I grounded myself with gravitational anchors before whipping out a quick strike forward, palming the golem's stomach. The force came from below, jetting the golem back into the air as a cataclysmic boom echoed off the impact.

The wind off the strike ripped branches off trees nearby and peeled grass from dirt—a crater formed under me as the shattered earth was sent flying by the blow's shockwave. From the brown plume of dust, the golem launched up and over the trees. It flipped itself around, the dent in its stomach regenerating quickly.

Its runes shined as it launched spears of ice where I struck it. I clapped my hands together, a wave of sound shattering the icicles into tiny shards. They bounced off my skin as I bounded towards the golem, gravity propelling me. It used its own gravity wells for the first time, pulling itself away from me. I shot passed it while the golem sunk towards the ground. From above, I anchored myself in place. Reaching out a hand, I liquified dirt and stone, turning its landing spot into a pit of magma. The golem lowered its hands, cooling energy hardening some of the lava into a landing pad of stone.

Supporting itself on the dark island, it lifted both arms one at a time, bending the magma towards me with waves of gravitation. I leaped from my gravitational anchor while maintaining it. This let me swivel myself around the unseen point of attraction. I orbited the unseen mass, and his magma waves went over then under my head.

Falling towards him, I generated steel spikes in the magma beneath the golem. I lifted my arms, and the spikes jutted out of the boiling lava surrounding the golem. The entity

deflected several of the iron spikes before several spines landed between the entity's joints. Its joints struggled against the iron spikes as they pried the golem apart. Stuck in place, I shot myself towards it like a cannonball. Before I landed against the beast, it melted the metal spikes, covering itself in a molten shell of metal.

I crashed into the glowing bubble, landing against the now hardened magma. The golem wasn't here. It smothered me with the melted iron and solidified it, eliminating my sense of hearing, sight, and smell. At that moment, it dual-layered its attack with a generic mental assault.

By now, I was used to dealing with Torix's attempts at cracking my mind. It left me able to defend from the mental bombardment before I shattered the metal shell lying over me. The fractured metal lobbed out like shrapnel, stabbing through trees and tearing rocks apart. From above, the golem crashed down, having flown up and lobbed itself down at me.

I leaned back, the heel of its foot scraping the front of my helm. The impact of its crash sent me flying a few feet, another crater forming under the behemoth. It gave me yet another charge, this time, compressed air left in front of its fists.

I grinned at the creature while I tilted my head. Its fist scraped the side of my helmet before I smashed my own hand into its neck. Its body went forward while ragdolling beyond its face. All the momentum ended where I drove my palm into its neck. I lifted it up before slamming it into the ground.

Held in position, I lifted my other hand. It came down like a hammer, but I stopped the punch just shy of its face. As I released it, I also reached out a hand. The nameless entity grabbed my wrist and pulled itself up, I gave it a pat on the shoulder,

"Damn, you fight well."

The golem shook its head, "Yet there is still much I must learn, creator."

I spread out my hands at our team looking at us in the distance,

"Guys, I'd call that a success."

Ophelia gawked at us, the spoiled royal rendered speechless after seeing this thing in action. Diesel gave her a knowing smirk, the engineer more than satisfied with his creation. He elbowed her,

“Heh, pretty good for backwater savages, right?”

Torix peered at the golem, taking notes in its status. Of the three, he was the only one with a critical eye. The lich pointed at the golem, “Why did you surrender?”

It responded, “I stood no chance, and I wished to avoid losing my eyes.”

“Remember that no eldritch will give you that chance, understood?”

“Yes, master.”

Torix perked up at being referred to as master, the lich easy to read,

“Hm, as long as you understand, then it’s fine.”

I stepped towards the group, waving the golem towards us, “Come on, let’s go.”

It followed, and once we reached the group, I tapped my chin with a closed fist, “Hm, the golem needs a name.”

Torix raised a finger, “What about one. It is the first golem we’ve crafted as a team.”

I shook my head, “That’s, I don’t know, too sterile. What about Alpha? It’s the first letter of the Greek alphabet. It seems fitting.”

The golem spoke up, “I enjoy that title.”

Diesel shook his hands, “Alright, you’re our first successful super golem, Alpha.” Diesel turned to the engineers watching behind him, “Guys, we did it.”

A roar of celebration echoed through the crowd as the engineers cheered at the results of our efforts. I raised my hands, grinning despite myself,

“Hey now, let’s not get too excited. We need to talk with the dungeon clearing corps to make sure these golems handle what they need. Once we’ve got their okay, we’ll give this thing a field test to make sure they handle what’s required.”

Diesel smiled, “Of course, of course. We’ll get that squared away, but for now, let’s take the rest of the day off. This has been a mad dash the entire time, and we just crossed the finish line.”

He pointed at Mt. Verner, “Let’s go get something to eat.”

We paced over towards one of the few nightly serving establishments, a military-style cafeteria but with a better food selection than most. Once everyone settled down onto a table, drinks were served along with a variety of dishes I ordered for everybody. I paid the bill, letting everyone just focus on having a good time. After a few hours of talking and having a good time, morning arrived along with a wave of exhaustion.

The spur of achievement could only fuel celebration for so long, so they each stumbled back to the residential districts, finding soft beds waiting for them. I took Diesel to Melissa, and she thanked me for getting him home safe.

After finishing the feast, I met up with the dungeon clearing corps. Lester, Isa, and Bryan met up with me once again in a meeting room, Torix joining us for his input. The lich and I sat across from the three dungeon clearing specialists, and I started the conversation by turning a hand to them,

“We finished our first super golem this morning. We need your inputs on what works, what doesn’t, and any iterative improvements they need. Criticism is welcome, but make the complaints meaningful. These changes aren’t easy to make.”

The three dungeoneers sweated in front of us. Torix and I made for an intimidating duo, and the lich’s fire eyes honed in on them like daggers. Torix crossed his fingers in front of them, his gaze low. He kept a close inspection of them, eyeing them for mistakes. It might have had a little to do with sending Alexander off with them, but I doubt the lich would ever admit it.

From that pool of crushing pressure, Lester was the first to respond, and he coughed into a hand first,

“Ahem, so super golems, huh? Are they even stronger than the other ones?”

Torix noted, “Very.”

“It, uh, sounds like they’ll work well. I’ll be honest, I don’t think they need any testing. They’ll crush just about any eldritch they come across. The other golems kind of did that already.”

I nodded, “It’s been a while since I’ve actually tried clearing dungeons. I’ve been so busy with other stuff that it’s kind of taken a backseat. What kind of performance did the other golems have?”

Isa looked up, searching for the right words,

“Hmm, how to say this...they were brutal, I suppose? The golems are terrible at a rescue, scouting, or any kind of informational gathering. What they do well is simple: smash. When they do, they leave very little behind. It’s, uh, kind of difficult just to figure out what they’ve killed honestly.”

She shrugged, “So yeah, they’re thorough. I don’t know what the super golems would be like, but your previous golems did a great job of handling the obvious issues of eldritch being alive.”

I smiled, pleased they exceeded my expectations,

“Awesome. I didn’t expect that.”

“Yeah, they’re relentless to a scary degree even. Some of our scouts have come back with reports of the golems being covered in eldritch blood when they saw them. It makes for a terrifying scene, and the eldritch learn to fear them for it. They even gave us reports of eldritch becoming subservient to the golems in vain attempts at survival.”

Torix's eyes flared, "The eldritch surrendered? I find that hard to believe. Most of them are mindless, and the few that aren't are only obsessed with hunger. I see no reason they wouldn't show the same attitude towards these machinations."

Bryan spoke up, "I thought the same until I did some observational research on one of the stronger golems. I found out that the eldritch, even the ones who can eat black iron, can't eat these golems. It's just as our guildleader predicted. That wildly shifted their behaviors towards them. Instead of being tempted by hunger, they were terrified of being eaten themselves."

The wily mage leaned forward, his runes precision having improved recently, "They know they can't win nor beat these things we're putting in their dungeons, so they lose their will to fight. I actually think the eldritch are more logical than we first imagined. I think they're just trying to survive, but in the only way they know how."

Torix tilted his head, "An interesting hypothesis. Does this concept apply even to more primal eldritch?"

"I think it does. They seem to feel fear for those walking titans, and it goes deep."

Torix turned to me, "It would seem you're more an object of fear than we first envisioned. This bodes well for our plans on Blegara."

I leaned back while crossing my arms, "That is strange. I didn't expect them to actually fear just the regular old golems. I mean, I could see why these super golems command that kind of respect, but man, my first models? Maybe the eldritch aren't as scrappy as I first thought."

Isa scoffed, "Tell our scouts that. Those hiding eldritch still tried to get a piece of them when they first arrived until the resident golem intervened. That's why it was covered in blood when they arrived for inspection."

Lester leaned forward, "The point is, your previous golems are more than enough for what we need. Asking us if your super golems will do the job is almost...insulting, I'd say."

Lester raised his palms to his defense, "Not that we took offense or that you meant it that way. It's just how it could come across."

I nodded, “Understood. I can mass-produce those golems while some of the people here focus more on super golems for other purposes. They might let us make camps in different places and keep them more secure as well.”

Isa coughed into her hand, “So...How many golems do you plan to make? one hundred...maybe two hundred?”

I scoffed, “I intend on making one for every dungeon. It’ll give people time to develop themselves without needing to fight for their lives every day.”

Isa blinked, “So ugh, what are we going to do then?”

I turned to Torix before grinning. I leaned towards them,

“Actually, I have just the job for you three.”

Chapter 278: Grasping the Ethereal

Lester leaned back, letting out a sigh of exasperation, “You’re telling me that we need to take Amara, an eldritch, into an enemy encampment to gain access to an Elysium world. After that, we’ll need to lay low and protect her until after she’s hacked into their system, allowing you to relay a broadcast that will end a planetary war?”

I nodded, “Yup, that’s it. You summed it up pretty well.”

Lester’s eyes widened, “Uh, why are we the most qualified for this?”

Torix chided, “You’re not, and as a matter of fact, none of you will be. However, we’re sending you because you stand out so little as to go unseen. By virtue of your mundane attributes, each of you can sneak into their encampments without much struggle.”

Torix turned a palm to me, “It was by the guildmaster’s recommendation, mind you.”

The three dungeon clearers looked at me with genuine fear as I smiled at them. Bryan murmured, “This...uh, we specialize in clearing dungeons. You know, killing all kinds of eldritch. Stealth missions aren’t our forte.”

I gestured at them, “I know. We’ll be having Hod and Althea tail you the entire time. They’ll walk in your shadow, helping you with getting in and out. If the situation gets dicey, they’ll manage it for each of you. Their protection makes this mission less suicidal than it seems.”

Isa leaned forward, “So we’re doing this to help an ally guild, right? Doesn’t this seem super risky for something like that?”

I spread out my hands, “Here’s the thing: I’m leaving this up to your judgment. If you think you can get onto an Elysian world for a few days safely, then by all means, go ahead. If you don’t, then don’t go there. Even if we only get some valuable scouting info, I would count this as a success.”

Torix raised a finger upright, “Indeed. It’s less that we expect you to destroy their encampment. Rather, we anticipate information on their lifestyle and how the Adair’s organize their colonies. That alone may help Schema. Understanding how they sell their new system to new recruits is also of valuable input.”

Bryan shook his head in disbelief, “Why are they even on Earth anyway? Doesn’t that seem suspiciously quick?”

Torix nodded, “I entertained the same notions when I first learned of the camp’s existence. After a bit more thought, I’ve dismissed them having knowledge of our being here. Their encampment stands here for several reasons, our guild’s location not being one of them.”

Torix raised a hand and then a finger with each point he made,

“The most vital reason is our location: Earth. This celestial body is the closest inhabited location to Giess, and that’s why we visited Giess to begin with. This makes coming here easy. Second, humanity has yet to have a generation that fully assimilated with Schemian culture. Very few children have grown up in Schema’s system, and so converting to an Elysian system would be simple for most.”

Torix raised a third finger, “Most of all, our planet lacks other guild’s influences, meaning they have a leg up developing this territory. We’re likely one of the first colonization efforts from their side, in fact. That is why it has begun on such a small scale using relatively benign means.”

Lester rolled a hand, “So what about that other planet, errrr...”

I helped him out,

“You mean Blegara, right?”

“Yeah, that one. Why don’t we just put Amara there for a while?”

Torix shook his head, “That is a planet waging war, and the Elysian forces have yet to take a full grasp of it. They likely wish to prevent others from using their own system against them, so security is pertinent before establishing a world link to their system. Otherwise, they may strengthen the enemies they wish to eliminate.”

Torix pointed at each of them, “It is up to each and every one of you to go out of your way to ensure our security for these reasons. They will be wary of newcomers. You all will need memorized backstories and reasons for your arrival. Just as well, our own location cannot be revealed.”

Torix’s voice grew grim, “Lehesion may come down at a moment’s notice, and our blue core will only maintain protection for so long. By understanding our enemies, we may avoid the inevitable for a longer time. Think of it as buying us time.”

He leaned forward, “These moments you earn us, they are invaluable. They represent a different life, each and every one of them. Fight for these moments, and you will give life to our guild and your world. That is why we’re sending you on this mission.”

I leaned back, letting the charismatic lich get his point across. Isa and Lester sat enraptured by his speech, a sense of purpose pushing them forward. Bryan didn’t share their sentiment, and his shoulders drooped at the prospect of such overwhelming pressure. He scratched the back of his head as Torix finished,

“So...yeah, I’m getting old. I’ve been thinking of retiring for a while now, and...I think now is that time. I can’t afford to take this kind of risk. I’ve got a family here. I don’t want them to lose their father.”

Torix sighed, “Despite my urgency, I understand. If either of you has doubts, then voice them. We need a full commitment to this role for this mission to be successful. Otherwise, each of you will die and send us to our doom as well. Is that understood?”

Lester and Isa gave the aged necromancer a knowing nod, the pressure building them up rather than tearing them down. People worked like that in general. Some people rose to the occasion while others would rise on their own. It’s kind of like the many that fail in peacetime but triumph in war.

Apparently, Isa and Lester were the latter rather than the former.

I turned to each of them, proud of my decision, “Alright then. It’s decided.”

I offered each of them a handshake. They took me up on the offer, their hands only wrapping around two of my fingers. It was the intent that counted, however, not the physical gesture. As they stood up, so did Torix. His fire eyes shimmered purple, a bit of venom leaking in his voice,

“Each of you shall commence a three-day boot camp to squeeze out any weakness left in your bodies and minds. We’ll focus on mental combat and preventing memory infiltration first. You’ll also leave with Alexander, a talented mage under my wing. Though he lacks the real-world experience each of you has, he carries potent arcane magic. He’ll be necessary if a situation spirals out of control.”

His fire eyes narrowed, “Understood?”

Lester and Isa nodded. Bryan leaned back and let out a sigh. The gray-bearded mage dodged a bullet with this one. As Torix stepped out, Lester and Isa followed. Before they left the room, I raised a hand,

“Wait a minute Torix.”

The cunning lich turned his head, “Ah, what is it?”

“Can you include Alpha in your lessons? He could use the tempering.”

“Hm, if you believe it will be valuable, then I shall do so.”

“Alright, cool. I’ll be focusing on my own magic for now. See you guys later.”

As Isa and Lester stepped out, they peered forward with fear in their eyes. Torix’s cackling didn’t help the situation either. I put my hands on my hips, pleased with how those circumstances played out. Getting ready for the rest of my day, I opened my status to meet with our resident portalist. A hop, skip, and really just gravitational flight later, I reached the top floor of Mt. Verner where our team slept.

There, our crew congregated with each of them ready for yet another day of combat on Blegara. I rolled my shoulders as I walked up, and we silently walked across a portal made by Helios. We walked through the veil back into the oceanic world. Waiting in another coral room, Victoria, Alastair, and Obolis waited on us to arrive for the day’s pillaging.

Above them, the windows leaked in the shattered sunshine from the tumultuous sea above. These rays stretched and condensed like an estuary leaking into the sea, each piece forming islands of dim centered around rivers of light. This cadence covered those present, and Obolis spread his arms wide at the sight of us,

“Ah, it’s good to see our friends once more. I’ve received word that your super golem project has spawned fruit. These words come from Ophelia’s own tongue, ‘We created a golem without equal.’ Perhaps you would offer to elaborate further as she needed rest given her nightly work.”

I shrugged, “It’s a pretty damn strong golem. That’s about all I’ve got to say on it, honestly.”

Obolis grinned, “Would you mind detailing a few of its inner workings? Apparently, Torix ensured Ophelia signed a confidentiality contract before she began her work. It’s made it all but impossible to get even a word in from her, outside of what was said before.”

Obolis's eyes narrowed, "Speakers can be troublesome in that way."

I frowned, "It's a golem with three minds telepathically linked. We made each mind control different parts of the golems functioning, and that's how we gave it an advanced conscious."

Obolis's eyes widened, "I expected a word or two of its might, not an explanation of the machinations that fuel it. Why would you tell us so much in exchange for so little?"

I grinned back at him, "Because you couldn't make one. It requires a rare metal for it to work."

Obolis's eyes scanned the room, and he discovered a few of the tools made from my own skin for Althea and even Torix's host body. The rugged Emperor nodded his head with approval, "I'll take your word for it. Are you prepared to slaughter once more?"

I gripped my fists, "Always am."

The day began like all the others before it on Blegara. We scouted out a different portion of Saphigia, cleared it of Hybrids, and collected the resident vagni. Well, those that weren't combative. Even after the waves of absolute destruction we'd unleashed so far, the vagni fought on with a religious kind of fervor.

It stunned me, watching them run forward to their deaths. Even if one swipe of my hand killed ten of their comrades, they'd march forward with a zeal unmatched. I admired them in a way, their fearlessness outdoing even the eldritch.

Those same eldritch grew thicker as we conquered outwards from the city's center. They weren't kidding when they said the vagni worshipped those monsters. Sculptures, sacrificial zones, even sanctuaries were made for the eldritch here. As we moved further out, we met more of these landmarks of the vagni's culture. The eldritch density rose with the frequency of these cultural pieces as well.

They incorporated themselves into the very water around us. Eldritch swam above us in the seas and skies. They skulked and burrowed beneath us in the sand and stone. No matter the location, they entrenched themselves deep into the lives and makeup of this underwater land. At times, it became difficult to discern whether something was eldritch or not; the biology of Blegara was that interwoven at this point.

A lot of the native wildlife carried eldritchian characteristics. Giess was more like a fantasy playground by comparison. Here the monsters skulked out in the distance, their pounding footsteps like omens of what was to come. This left Blegara scarred and like a dark, dangerous world. How the vagni managed to survive for so long was beyond me considering what they were up against.

Those thoughts rose up as we reached our first end of the city. We passed miles of villages to reach this point, finally laying siege to a sizable piece of this endless city. Off in the distance, forests of kelp rose from the abyss, trenches carving swaths of darkness across the seascape.

Amidst the kelp, eyes peered back at us. From less dense portions of seaweed, we spotted eldritch of enormous size, their bodies swelled with the bodies of their fellow kind. They barely contained the numbers of victims shoved into their maws, yet they hungered endlessly. Covering the seabed, they scrounged for scraps and prey alike, everything in sight acting as an endless buffet.

Everything but me.

I met the eyes of a dark titan. They were the size of houses, and they glowed orange like lighthouses in the distance. Staring it down, the monster's eyes dimmed as its colossal frame shivered. It closed those enormous eyes, and with the posture of a beaten dog, it ran back from the hole it had skulked out of.

Victoria whispered, "I've never seen an eldritch that big. Well, besides the ones at Giess's last stand."

I grimaced at them, "We might need to question the vagni more than I thought. For creatures so primitive, they sure as hell survived something my own kind wouldn't have. Those guys must be at least level 5,000, and there's several of them out there just walking around."

Alastair walked up, shielded from the water around us,

"The eldritch follow patterns, or so I've read. Right now, they're competing with one another to see which eldritch will feast on this world. This is referred to as the post

fringe era. Often times worlds this far gone require several Fringe Walkers to make dedicated efforts to clear out the world.

Alastair set his tower shield down, the metal thumping against the sand, “Those monsters will fight until only one remains. That process can take thousands of years, plenty long enough for a society to develop around them. That’s the hypothesis around their development.”

From the back of our group, Florence walked out of the woodwork. Ever talkative, he joined in on the conversation,

“I’ve done research as well on the topic. I’ve found that Schema has mentioned no world lasting longer than 5,000 years in a post fringe era. I’ve found talismans and stone carvings here that predate the Vagni’s organized society, however. We’re talking illustrations of eldritch that are well over thirty to forty thousand years old.”

Alastair raised an eyebrow, “And how would you discover their age?”

“A mixture of carbon dating and erosion tests held in our own lab.”

Alastair scoffed, “And that’s why your data showed such prolonged artifacts. They were driven by a bias.”

Florence frowned. Once again, his theories were dismissed. I kept them in mind as I raised my eyebrows at them, “What happens when an eldritch starts winning in a post fringe era?”

Alastair grimaced, “The world is smothered with the Alpha eldritch until not one atom of organic matter is left. They strip the world like a plague, and they leave nothing but weathered rock and salted water behind.”

Alastair coughed into a hand, “Or so I’ve read from Fringe Walker’s testimonies. It’s difficult to find any accurate data on the issue for, well, obvious reasons. Either way, they’re terrifying, aren’t they?”

I glared out in the distance, “Yeah, in a way.” I turned back to Saphigia, “Come on, let’s go back. There’s still more city to take back.”

We laid waste to another stretch of Saphigia, exterminating the Hybrids skulking about. Unfortunately, Espen and Hybrid reinforcements arrived with the blighted to retake portions of the city we secured. They ran through the Empire's defensive lines, forcing us to take time out of our day to save them.

This meant retaking land took longer than expected, the endless streams of Hybrids wearing the imperial army down. That might be why we found different species wearing the Empire's banner and uniforms as we went from checkpoint to checkpoint. Many of these members stood upright with the same reverence for the Emperor as the albony. Others seemed coerced like mercenaries or adventurers.

This different frontline proved no less useful than the one made of pure albony. If anything, they worked better. Despite the Empire's class system, they seemed more than fine with breaking those age-old rules when the going got tough. Either way, I appreciated the extra volume of troops for securing areas we passed. It meant we didn't need to retrace our steps as often.

After carving out another stretch of territory, we reached the edge of the city once more. By now, the others were exhausted as usual, their eyelids heavy under their masks or on their open faces. We warped back towards Mt. Verner, which gave our members a safe place to rest. I stayed up, meeting with the golem creation team. Well, trying to. They remained absent for the night, taking some much needed time off.

As always, I didn't give myself that luxury.

Working with Ophelia and Chrona, I kept at the long and frustrating slog that was discovering primordial mana. They explained the concept and mindset enough times by now that I lacked any real insight from their descriptions anymore. They all bled together into an undefined mess. I needed fundamental, tangible concepts and applications to use with primordial mana. You couldn't really do anything with it till after you created the stuff. It was a catch 22 of sorts.

That's how the entirety of my progression remained. No matter what I tried, I ended up grasping for air. There just wasn't anything tangible to hold onto. This wall wasn't the first of its kind, however. I worked on learning the cipher for well over a year on my own, night after night. In that situation, I lacked the same talent trees and teachers that I did now, yet I persevered until I was victorious. I would do the same here.

In that way, I continued, on and on. I attempted holding different mindsets. Again and again, I failed. I stretched my mind until I managed two alternate states of thought for prolonged periods. I still fell short. I immersed myself in different perspectives, reading through some of Torix's old books.

I changed my approach as the hours and days passed. Asking questions became second nature, and I managed my time between my various pursuits. This grind continued for the next three days. During sunlight, I handled Saphigia's reconquering. During the night, I toiled under the light of glowing metal, reading ancient works. At the end of the second day, I ended up gaining something for all my work.

New Unique Skill Gained! Congruent Mind Strand(lvl 10) – By enveloping in the thoughts of others, you've gained insight into developing multiple perspectives. You may now hold two different strands of thought at the same time.

I leaned back from the skill description, the starlight leaking down from above. Chrona rested while Ophelia worked on a portable chair and table she brought with her now. They answered my questions when I needed them, but this particular question left me wanting to find answers on my own.

So I did. I attempted holding two different strands of thought. The first involved creating a golem and the cipher inscriptions involved, and the other was a small, unstable series of reviews about primordial mana. Just like my attempts at the mana in real life, my strand of thought was wispy and unrefined.

But it was there. I held onto it, burgeoning it to grow. As it did, my thoughts about cipher inscriptions waned. Combined, the total of the two mental flows exceeded my average capacity, but only slightly. That still worked in my favor considering my computational ability was excellent at this point, mainly from my high intelligence. Most concepts and ideas didn't require my full attention by now.

Having analyzed the new skill a bit, I brainstormed ways of using it and the first involved multi-tasking. Instead of only struggling with primordial mana, I also maintained a steady flow of mana absorption from my elemental furnace. This multiplied the growth of my cipheric runes, and I held a perpetual state of annoyance at the same time. It was a win-win situation!

Sarcasm aside, it helped morale to have myself working on something I was good at for a change. Using the furnace was second nature, so even with less than my full efforts, I

could maintain steady gains from using the tool. It gave me the ability to multi-task far more effectively than before. It was actually worth doing now.

Even if it wasn't the same as primordial mana, I welcomed any useful new skill. As the night dragged on, the sheer scale and scope of the skill became apparent. It wasn't something that would save me from one of Lehesion's blasts, but it might have been even better. It saved me time and time I didn't have.

If I learned anything over the last few months, it was how it felt to be stretched thin. I worked day in and day out, yet I never managed to get ahead of my responsibilities. I neglected my personal progress to keep up with them, in fact. Now keeping track of both was possible, and that opened up a world of possibilities. Of course, this wasn't enough to get rid of the pile of tasks I had mounted over the past few months. It did help me finish them faster, though, and that was enough.

That reality bolstered my mood as I checked in with Torix's new recruits that next morning. This was their third day of training, and the lich set aside the last few days to whip them into shape. In that way, his own personal chambers serving as their training ground. Stepping into the top floor of Mt. Verner, I found four members sitting cross-legged while doing mental drills.

Isa, Lester, Alexander, and Alpha sweated or rumbled under florescent lights. It made their pale faces paler, besides for the golem, and the three people earned bags under their eyes from the last few days alone. They each looked like they hadn't slept at all.

Torix stared them down, walking back and forth in front of them with his hands interlocked behind him. He wielded his mind magic like a knife, testing their every defense and weakness, probing for any manner of crushing them.

And crush he did. The two dungeoneers showed sheens of sweat over their foreheads, each one dripping profusely. Alexander handled the mind magic better, but he still showed symptoms of wear and tear. Alpha, on the other hand, was endless, and so he lacked their same signs of struggle.

In many ways, the dungeoneers impressed me most, however. They dabbled in this forbidden art for the first time, and Torix relished in their struggle. Despite that, they were still here through thick and thin. That kind of dedication deserved recognition.

As I paced up to them, the lich turned to me. As he did, his recruits took deep gulps of air.

Relief at last.

“Ah, it’s good to see you, disciple.”

I gave the lich a wave, “You too Torix. How are they holding up?”

I gave them the luxury of not answering, letting Torix handle that for them. Lester and Isa took me up on the offer, each of them recuperating as much as they could. Alexander couldn’t meet my eye, so he stared down instead. Alpha gazed up with curiosity drenching his every move.

Torix gestured towards Isa,

“She shows the most promise, though none of these individuals lacks in their mental fortitude. Despite my misgivings, I must admit, they’ve held their own through the exhaustion and torment. I’ll give them each an artificially assisted rest period before tomorrow. That should allow them to recuperate. As for Alpha, he is surprisingly gentle. His mind is similar to your own, Daniel, though he lacks the same visceral intensity.”

Torix weighed his hands back and forth, “Alpha is instead, a benign, giving creature. This is to his detriment when tasked with mental defenses, but I cannot condemn him too much. His natural ability far exceeds the others here by virtue of his mind’s size – it is truly colossal. That alone means attacking him, and wearing him down takes time.”

Torix scoffed, “More than enough time to smash an enemy into pieces, I’d wager.”

I gave the golem a nod, “Good work, Alpha.”

The golem beamed with pride, sitting up straight,

“Thank you, creator.”

I turned towards the dungeoneers and Alexander, “How’s the training going?”

They caught their breath by now, and Alexander answered first in a wispy voice,

“It’s hard. Very hard.”

I grinned, “Nothing a little pain tolerance couldn’t help with.”

Alexander scoffed, “You’re right about that. I uh...I trained that skill a lot after our lesson. I’ve gotten that skill up to eighty-eight now. This still hurts, but it’s nothing compared to what it would be without my previous training.”

Torix nodded, his hands still interlocked behind him,

“Precisely. If you experience pain now, you won’t experience it later. That is why my lessons are as grueling as they are.”

Lester shook his head, “I don’t know about that. I doubt we’d ever be torn up like this on a real mission.”

Torix stared down at him, the lich’s gaze sharp as daggers, “The Adair’s mind magic exceeds my own. If caught, you each will have your minds torn apart by many mages at once. There will be nothing remaining of you thereafter.”

Their faces darkened at the prospect and truth of his words. Torix sighed,

“Though I wouldn’t worry about such a fate. Althea and Hod have been instructed on what to do should you all be captured.”

Their grim looks turned outright bleak before I interjected,

“Come now, it won’t come to that. Althea and Hod have a lot of experience getting through the Adair’s defenses. This is a recruiting camp, so those two will keep our team safe. Speaking of teams and plans, though, have you guys got a plan ironed out yet?”

Torix steepled his fingers as he cackled,

“Oh, we have one developed indeed.”

Chapter 279: A Dark World

I frowned, “I’d hope so.”

Torix gestured towards the group, “Here is how we’ve thought it out. After having a group talk and discussing various skills, we’ve allocated responsibilities and came up with a course of action.”

The lich raised a hand, “It’s relatively simple. Alexander will remain at the core of this infiltration. I’ve tutored him in mind magic before this, and he’s able enough that controlling Hybrids isn’t beyond him. Just as well, he owns a grimoire with attachments for my warping ritual.”

I tapped my chin with a fist, “Like the one that got us to Giess?”

“Precisely. Our team will infiltrate the Elysian camp by claiming they are a roaming group of dungeon clearers trying to find a place to settle. I’ve discussed this with several other relevant parties, and they’ve agreed it’s a believable background. In the wake of the culling, many mismatched people find solace in traveling for a new home.”

Torix turned a palm to Alexander, “This grants them a veil to hide under. Alexander will not be a mage as knowledge of magic has yet to properly proliferate on Earth as of yet. They’ll approach the encampment claiming they’ve heard rumors of this place being an excellent place for settling down.”

Torix walked back and forth, “In that manner, they shall spend two days finishing various nearby dungeons to establish themselves in the town. At the end of this period, they’ll pretend they’ve gone to another dungeon, one that is more arduous than the others.”

Torix kept pacing, “They shall wait until night has come, infiltrate the encampment, then suppress the Hybrids and warp onto an Elysian world thereafter. After sneaking through the necessary guards and patrols, they shall then create a camp on the natural outskirts of where they’ve been sent.”

Alexander chipped in, "I'll make a warp out while Amara hacks into their system. When she finishes, we get the hell out of there with none of them the wiser."

I frowned, "There's a few kinks you guys need to handle before getting through this plan."

Torix interlocked his hands behind him, "Such as?"

I raised a hand, "For starters, there's the issue of when you'll warp into the other world. If it's in the middle of the day, others will see you and report your warp. You need to make sure wherever you go, it's both rural and at night. Otherwise, you might get caught red-handed in enemy territory."

The lich nodded, "Excellent points. We'll ensure those circumstances are guaranteed."

I looked up, scrutinizing to the best of my ability, "Hmm, outside of that, you've tested Alexander's ability for controlling Hybrids?"

Alexander chipped in, "I've been to several of the raids on Giess before. I've been able to control up to seven of them, but that's all I've got."

I leaned back, a bit impressed, "That's more than me. The last thing would be how to get Amara through the warp. Are you sure it will work for her?"

Isa chipped in, "That's why we're doing the warping at night. It should allow us to take her there without issue. If worse comes to worst, we can try putting her in dimensional storage. I don't know how that's going to work, but maybe Hod or Althea could help us there."

I shrugged, "That's about all I got. It doesn't sound too risky if you handle all of that."

Lester scoffed, "Easy for you to say. We'll be out there on a different planet, surrounded by hostiles."

I raised my eyebrows, "To the contrary, it wouldn't be my first time in that kind of situation."

Lester looked away, “Ah, yeah. Good point.”

Torix gazed down at them, “Be prepared for further tutelage until your meeting with Althea and Hod. Both are experienced with infiltration already, and they should offer practical assistance to your cause. Hod can envelop his form into one of your shadows while Althea shall walk along a different plane to follow you all.”

Torix stood tall, “Once at the camp, you all may revise the plan as necessary. Keep your safety as a top priority since being captured will result in death. We don’t want to lose acceptably competent members such as you all.”

Torix tilted his head back, walking off, “It’s time to get yourselves acquainted with Hod and Althea. You all shall be accomplishing a few drills of given scenarios along with team-building exercises before leaving.”

The four of them pushed themselves up, Alpha’s hands leaving cracks on the floor. The golem saw me glancing at them before it peered down as well. Finding the scarred floor, Alpha leaned down and refilled the cracks with stone of the same color before catching up to the others with a light-footed trot.

He was doing his best, that much was sure. I’d do the same. After getting that update out the way, I found myself at Blegara again, everyone quiet in the mornings now. We all understood what was to follow, and many of our team members performed a sort of unconscious meditation beforehand. Their thoughts cleared, and this let them rest before the coming storm.

I let my mind wander instead, and I drifted back towards the ancient eldritch on Blegara. I was curious about how the Vagni survived this long, and I wanted a general understanding of the eldritch here. After hours of culling eldritch, I gained just such a chance. Today, the Hybrid’s attacks on retaken portions of the city lightened. We finished a sort of quota for conquering, and everyone ended up leaving early.

Everyone but me.

I skulked along the outskirts of Blegara, exploring the kelpy forests and dark seas, searching for landmarks and the like. It was an exciting voyage, and I saw many things.

In those dark depths, the creatures shifted in form, becoming stringy, thin, and see-through. Some of them expanded in size, while others seemed compressed.

These familiar creatures and eldritch worked with the wildlife here to create a cycle of culling. A few amphibious, flying creatures would dip down into the water to catch kelp and fish at the surface. Snapping, explosive predators caught those flying salamanders. Beneath these creatures, a separate ecosystem formed. They reminded me of deep dwellers from dungeons long ago.

It was a kind of evolutionary arms race. The beasts each carried some type of adjustment to their form that gave them a combative ability. Horns, spikes, teeth, claws, and clubs, these fish and crustaceans carried them all. Unlike on Giess, the natural life here had no natural reserves of mana to feed upon. This meant that no matter their tools of choice, they were nothing more than food to the eldritch in the end.

Those eldritch I saw yesterday did just that – devour endlessly. They either rolled along the surface, engulfing stretches of plants and animals too slow to avoid them, or the eldritch darted back and forth, eating anything smaller than them. This resulted in lightning berserkers that ate anything in sight or slow behemoths that rolled across the land like titans covered in endless maws.

I fought a few of them for sport. The giants proved easier for killing as they lacked any real combat ability. They relied on size and digestion to cull most prey, of which neither was an effective means of killing me. Event Horizon and boiling their blood killed them. Their screams weren't so loud down here, under and in the ocean either.

The lightning berserkers, on the other hand, proved far more interesting. They were adapted for their environment, the water acting as a means for mobility. This shifting liquid around the monsters allowed for offputting, rapid shifts in directions. When they did decide to make contact, it was thunderous and decisive. They aimed to cull and murder whatever they touched, and they wished to do so in an instant before any kind of retaliation.

Of course, killing me in one shot was well beyond their means, but taking out a few was kind of fun either way. It was like playing a game of hunter and the hunted, but the prey didn't know who was about to be eaten. Once I had my fill of that game, I dove into trenches along Saphigia's outskirts.

I found that many of the eldritch here were far more benign. The extreme environment forced so many adaptations that the monsters struggled to have the same voracity that most eldritch own. Combine that with the scarcity of food, and the eldritch mirrored normal creatures for the most part. These discrepancies strengthened as I dove deeper.

That wasn't the only interesting tidbit I discovered, however. Along the bottom of the world, at the edge of its depths, I found jewels and precious metals scattered about. These enormous gemstones carried an unearthly quality to them, their sheer size and complexity far beyond anything I'd seen in nature. The voracity of their coloration brought an unusual kind of intensity as well. It was as if they were a color other than one I could see, but my mind was trying to make sense of it despite that.

I took a few of these gems, aiming to carry them back and see what they were. These might explain why the Emperor was so willing to allocate so many resources saving this planet. Either way, I'd found enough perplexing stuff for today, so I whisked my way back to Saphigia, aiming to warp back on my own.

Before I could, I found an unusual current spawning from somewhere off in the distance. After having swum in these seas for so long, I kind of understood where and why water flowed. This current stood out as unusual because the water was both too cold and too copious. Water like this sank. It did not rise and glide along the seabed.

Curiosity came over me, and like any good impulse, it overwhelmed my self-restraint. I followed the flows until I reached an undersea cliffside. Pacing over corals and stone, I poked my head over a stone ledge. There, an enormous scar in the seabed spread out before my eyes. It was a wound of the earth, one that was planetary in scale.

It covered an enormous area, one that made the horizons shrink by comparison. From this pit, water ebbed and flowed out. It seemed like some sort of underwater repository leaking out chilled water here. At the same time, that didn't add up. Pressure underground resulted in heated plumes of magma. Because of that, water trapped too deep underground was always heated as well.

This was dark, cold water, the kind carried at the bottom of a lifeless sea. Searching for answers, I chased down into the pit, a tiny bit of fear racing up my spine. I enjoyed that fear. It proved I was still human if only a little bit. The other, not so human part of me kept me alive as I raced under water far too cold for Blegara. As I dove deeper, I uncovered the cause of this pit.

It was a rift to another world, an eldritch pit unperturbed for what looked like centuries. As I left Schema's system and the updates for my status slowed down, this particular journey scared me. It wasn't my human part that was terrified either. Something about being lost here sent shivers up my spine as if I'd never get back.

With that in mind, I generated a ball of air and kept it suspended underwater. Inside that sphere, I melted some metal, which offered a vantage point of light. Once I walked into the other world, I put a checkpoint in my status. It provided a waypoint if I got lost in this dark, endless sea. However, the sheer loneliness of this vast place wasn't the only part of it that struck me.

The most obvious difference was the pressure. These waters were far more fathomless than Blegara's oceans. The second change was the gravity of this world. It was several times higher than the previous planet. I noticed it despite its small impact on me as it made my gravitation both more robust and weaker in different ways.

Regardless of those changes, the other difference was the lack of life here. In Blegara, bacteria floated in most water, its shallow sea supporting an indefinite quantity of life. This world lacked that, no mana being given from Event Horizon acting as the tell. I learned that a while back while experimenting with the aura in space. Sterility meant no mana.

Other strangeness popped up as I traversed this wasteland. The water proved too cold, well below freezing, in fact. After tasting it, it was very salty. Another weirdness of this place was how still it was.

The water moved, yes, but it was only downward into Blegara. Everywhere else, the water remained still. As I swam along the bottom of the ocean, this lack of water moving proved disorienting. Losing my sense of up and down wasn't out of the question either, the water's pressure feeling similar to gravity in that regard. My bubble of light helped me there as it let me see where the ocean's bottom was.

Another strangeness appeared here. There was no sand, only sandstone. The sand had compressed long ago, the endless stillness leaving its own mark or lack thereof. I kept exploring these various places until I eventually found a vent leading below the planet's crust. Somehow, geothermal activity was retained on this planet despite everything. In this tiny pocket amidst endless gloom, life remained.

It was a shattered visage of what life was like on other worlds, however.

Tiny, minuscule crustaceans harbored around plants and animals feeding on the heated plumes of water. Even meters away from these life blooms, all life ceased in a very stringent line. The water was too cold, and the heat alone from these vents offered a sort of sanctuary amidst the icy chill. Pacing up to this primitive life, I put a hand out for the plants and animals to grasp onto.

They deformed into monstrosities.

My body was a repository of nutrients, warmth, and everything they'd been neglected for millennia. Their bodies rapidly attempted metabolizing my cells and skin, doing their damndest to eat me however they could. My armor's natural defenses overwhelmed them in seconds, but they were pretty dangerous despite their size. An average human would die from contact alone.

Staring down at these creatures, hissed and screamed underwater at my armor's defenses. If I had to sum up these monster's overall feel, it was one of hunger. They existed in such a desolate place that every animal here starved for eternity. This seemed like an ancient world, and after leaving that vent, I swam up to verify my assumptions. Miles of water later, and I eventually crashed through to the surface.

That was the strangest part; ice formed along the crust of the world, oceans forming beneath that. I didn't know why ice was at the surface instead of the bottom of the world, but I crashed onto a frozen wasteland either way. As I reached up my hand, this place still had air yet no wind. I stared up, and the stars beamed down. It might've been hard to notice with a normal eye, but I found them all the same.

These stars, they were dim. It was as if they were close to dying. This lack of light continued despite the thin, lifeless atmosphere here. In the distance, what was once this planet's sun only twinkled as the brightest star here. It was a terrifying prospect, as if this was the eventual fate of my own world. Pondering those thoughts, I walked along with the wastes, finding nothing of note here outside miles of ice.

After getting my fill of this horrifying hellscape, I dashed through the ice, using my system assisted waypoint as a way back. It was strange. I'd rather be trapped in a silver infested world than this place. At least things moved when in those metal forests. Here, everything was very still, as if the planet itself died long ago.

Those thoughts loomed over me as I darted back onto Blegara. Those lifeforms on that world were no doubt eldritch, but they carried a different vibe to them. Most eldritch were monsters of the highest order and a byproduct of hunger. If anything, those animals were the same, but they lacked any choice in the matter.

Hunger was interwoven with their very DNA. It was like normal creatures drenched themselves in starvation for so long that those things emerged from that trial. It gave me sympathy for the animals. They no doubt needed exterminating as they were simply too virulent. At the same time, I doubted humans would be so different if we were forced into that kind of environment and for so long.

In a way, the eldritch were sad, like a story told for too long, and eventually left a mangled mess that shambled forward as a corpse.

Those thoughts swirled in my head as I arrived at a now secured warp at the center of Blegara. We established it today, the added supplies and communication assisting the war effort. The Albony I passed gave me salutes as did other soldiers, and once I got to the center of the teleporter, the smell of ionized air filled my lungs as I stepped out onto the rolling hills of Mt. Verner.

I relished in the feeling of life here. It was a strange feeling compared to the dead world. The places here on Earth, they changed and shifted with the tides of time. Compared to the dreary stillness from before, it left me filled with hope. After giving it some thought, what unsettled me about that old world wasn't pain.

It was deprivation.

In many ways, it was worse than pain. To sit still and be bored wouldn't kill me quickly, but it could rot away my soul given time. Eventually, Earth might mirror that world or be burned away in the sun. I didn't know enough to say. I did know that life had a time limit here and that it would eventually run out. I would remain forever.

I didn't think I could die at this point, honestly. It wasn't like I wanted to, but I lacked any real frailty anymore. In most ways, that was a boon. In other ways, it scared me. Imagining myself stuck in a dying universe, struggling to find anything amidst dying stars...something about that filled me with dread.

I silenced those fears, reminding myself of my potential. If I was a living universe, maybe I could save this one from that same stillness. Time would tell, and it was so far

in the future that it might as well be lifetimes away. Maybe I could craft lifelike golems by then, so I wouldn't be completely alone.

I shook off those dark thoughts, lifting my head up. After getting towards Mt. Verner, I spent another night studying with Ophelia and Chrona. While I focused on my efforts near them, the smell of pine and a cool breeze passed over me. I heard cicadas buzzing in the background, and crickets chirped in the night.

Something about that life carried warmth. I'd fight to keep it this way. With that in mind, I spurred forward with continued fervor towards my studying. The night eventually ended as they all did, and I found myself looking forward to seeing the team pulled together after their artificially induced comas by Torix.

I met up with said lich a while after, and I found him hovering the aforementioned members above the ground. As they slumbered, Torix handled a few logistics of our invasion by sending messages through his status. Alpha watched over his shoulder, the golem crouched over as to not tear the roof down.

I did the same, and as I reached Torix, I whispered,

"Are they sleeping well?"

Torix didn't whisper at all, "Indeed, they are. I'm using a sleeping spell I once cast on myself to ensure excellent rest each and every time I succumbed to the urge to do so. Despite their lack of continuous rest, this should put them in an excellent spot to retain the engaged focus I put them through...Mostly."

"Hm, I wouldn't know anymore. I haven't slept in so long, I barely remember what it was like at this point."

Torix shrugged, "I'm of the opinion it's not worth remembering. At best, it was simply wasted time. At worst, it hampered progress more so than helped it. I remember struggling with insomnia when I was younger, in fact. I actually held a myriad of medical issues. It made becoming a lich far easier as I left those mortal woes behind."

Torix waved a hand, "Either way, these three needed this slumber tremendously after that gauntlet I put them through. They are as ready as I was able to make them. They'll be waking up in a few minutes."

“So, you had medical issues?” I said while cupping a chin.

Torix sighed, “Indeed, I did. Many, to be more precise. I suffered from some sort of muscle wasting disease during my lifetime. I escaped my body before my mind and soul rotted underground, however. I remember watching my body be eaten by native wildlife in my world.”

Torix raised a hand and squeezed his skeletal fingers, “I was glad to be rid of that meat puppet. This body suits me far better. Perhaps that and the desire to live spurred my necromantic tendencies forward. Who is to say?”

I scoffed, “I think you didn’t need anything to mess you up. If I had to guess, you came out like this.”

Torix beamed with pride, “Naturally.”

I turned to Alpha, “What are you doing here?”

“Watching the master continue his work. I now understand why my creation occurred so quickly. He assisted in organizing it once involved. He improved much of what made me as well. For that, I am eternally thankful.”

He gave the lich a bow, and Torix gave him a nod of acknowledgment before returning to his work. I pointed behind me, “It’s good to see you two are getting along. I was wondering if you’d like to come with me to Blegara. I just wanted to see if you could fight hand in hand with these guys we’re fighting.”

Alpha nodded, knowledge of the Hybrids already imbued within his mind,

“I will do so, as my creator commands.”

“Eh, I’d like to think it’s a request.”

“A request from one can be a command to others.”

I raised an eyebrow, Alpha coming across as pretty mystic,

“Alright, if that’s how you see it.”

We paced through Mt. Verner, many watching us as we did. As we paced up towards the upper floors and reached the suites Helios and Florence called home, I found both of them congregating with Kessiah. Florence asked questions, leaning in and focusing on what she had to say,

“And you’re telling me that’s the norm where you came from?”

Kessiah looked uncomfortable under Florence’s scrutiny,

“I...I think so. Remnants come in a few different kinds of upbringings. Mine was, uh, cozy, for the most part. It wasn’t until after my mistake with blood magic that my situation turned ugly. And, yeah, that was my fault.”

Her hand squeezed tight to her side, and Florence took notice,

“Ah...I’m sorry to hear that. I’m simply curious about what kind of life remnants lead. They’re fascinating in that regard since your culture is quite unlike any I’ve ever heard of. It’s also sporadic to find a remnant in imperial space.”

Kessiah raised her eyebrows, “Yeah, I think your kind would just kill us for experience the moment they could. You all seem backstabby to me like that.” Kessiah turned to Helios,

“Especially you.”

Helios shrugged, “And the fact that such a motivation is known showcases our honesty. I do not lie about what I am, though you don’t seem to follow the same prerogative, do you?”

Kessiah's eyes narrowed, "Oh, so mister prince man thinks he's so upright and civil because he doesn't lie about what a piece of shit he is, huh? That's just great."

Helios raised his hand and stared down at his claws, "I don't lie about my strength or weaknesses at the very least, unlike others worth mentioning." Without turning to me, Helios murmured, "Oh, it's the Harbinger. He's here at last."

I raised a brow, "Is everything ok here?"

Florence put his hands on his hips, "They're just having a disagreement. It happens, and we'll be civilized adults about it."

Helios scoffed, "Of course."

Kessiah frowned, "Yup."

Florence walked past them both and up to Alpha, who trailed behind me,

"You must be the super golem I've heard so much about." Florence offered the golem a hand, "It's good to meet you, Alpha. I'm Florence Novas."

Alpha gave him a bow, "I am Alpha, as my creators decided is my name. I am here to assist in your mission."

"That sounds excellent. Kessiah and I could always use another bodyguard. That's even more true since Hod and Althea have to assist with some kind of mission for Torix."

Helios glared at the golem, "Will it be able enough to handle the rigors of battle?"

I rolled my eyes before raising a hand, "Can you even identify it?"

Helios turned towards it before trying to do so. Under his mask, his blind eyes widened,

"I...I cannot."

I did it for him and unveiled the synopsis for them all to read.

Alpha(lvl 12,000 | Guild: Harbinger's Legion) – Alpha is a golem crafted from a team of specialists using a robust, mana porous material. It uses three different minds tethered together to create one of the first super golems ever crafted. Typically, such mana hungry creation methods are impossible, but the material from which this golem is made generates mana naturally. Drawing from that mana, this golem holds tremendous power. Those powers are detailed below.

Its first abilities are primarily physical in nature. It stands twelve feet in height and weighs more than most houses. Being harder than steel, the golem retains tremendous flexibility through a floating joint model, and Alpha can easily overpower all but the most physically robust Breakers and Fringe Walkers. Its regenerative abilities ensure its power will last through a battle as well.

Though not as potent, its magic isn't to be underestimated. This golem commands over a dozen common, useful spells that are inherently ingrained in the material from which it was made. It uses these spells as it fights, making it harder to pin down than expected. Given free will, the golem may learn new magic in the future as well. Whether that was wise, time shall tell.

Finally, the golem carries rudimentary mind magic capacities. Being a rarer form of magic, this relatively benign being can crush the consciousness of those untrained in mental warfare. The sheer size of its mind guarantees that several combatants will be required to restrain it quickly as well.

For these reasons, this golem is a fierce force to be reckoned with, and it should not be underestimated.

Helios tilted his head back, "Well then, I look forward to seeing it in action."

Alpha bowed to Helios, "I will aim to not disappoint you as though you lack sight, you see more than most."

Helios stared down at him, "That is a disconcertingly intelligent golem. I pray you made the correct decision in enabling it those mental abilities."

I gave Alpha a pat on the back, “Oh, don’t worry, you’ll be seeing him in action today.”

Helios pointed down the hallway, “Then let us be off. As a warp has finally been established, I no longer need to be your valet.”

We all met up and warped towards Blegara, this time directly under the seabed instead of in a coral home. The albony established a barrier to allow for machine setups and the like. We rested under this magically rendered barrier, letting us breathe easily for now. That respite ended in seconds as several guards sprinted towards an exit of the border.

They shot outward, intersecting with a group of Hybrids who came here to attack. I gestured to Alpha,

“How about you show them how it’s done?”

Alpha stepped past our team and up to the barrier’s exit,

“I shall do so, and in your name.”

The runes across his body glowed white,

“Long live the legion.”

Chapter 280: A Different Life

So guys, heads up for this chapter: there are a few POV changes. I don’t intend on making this the norm for the rest of the story or anything. It’s just interesting for me as an author to explore different perspectives at different times. It allows me to showcase other vantage points in realtime instead of telling events offhand after the fact.

This lets me inject a lot of tension into what would otherwise be dull, dry exposition sections. It’s the classic adage of show don’t tell. I understand this comes at the cost of both brevity and safety; you guys are here for Daniel’s perspective, after all. I know that, and he will always remain the primary reference for The New World.

That being said, I believe that exploring more POV’s in my works, though to a limited extent, can give this story more depth long term. I just ask that you all give me a chance

at this before writing my attempts off. I'll be carefully selecting each POV with intention and purpose for these reasons going forward.

Thank you all for reading, regardless. Enjoy everybody.

-Alpha-

I stepped forward, afraid but determined. I turned back, and I saw the pride in my creator's eyes as I stood at the abyss' edge before me. This would be my first battle against the monsters I wished to destroy. This was why I was made, and it would be why I live.

I walked through a tunnel, two guards disintegrating a magical barrier for me. In an intermittent area, water funneled into the emptied space, the liquid similar to air but heavier. Stepping forward, another wall disappeared, and I walked into the vast city of coral and kelp. Here would be my arena and proving ground. I would not let my creator down.

The runes across my frame charged. My eyes, delicate yet unyielding, stared down my aggressors. They shifted with forms created for moving through this liquid. It wouldn't matter that they were given this place as their perfected stadium of war. I was made better, and I would prove that immediately.

Bending my knees, I shot forth from the sandy stone bed beneath me. It crumbled. Gravity molded under my touch, and I grazed my opponent's minds. Like delicate strings strung thin, I pulled their telepathic connections, rending their controllers mute. Without a voice guiding them, the aberrations lost all reason. They were given no mind, and in their chaos, I found triumph.

Across their lines of defense, I unleashed havoc. Through their weakness, my strength exposed itself. I ravaged with the might of a berserker; the Harbinger's will guiding me. My mind was made with this intention, and I relished in this moment, the orange blood dispersing at my touch. Its color, like the monster's deaths, was beautiful. It was the same with their screams, each a symphony to my ears.

Similar in style to Torix, I slaughtered many in a single stroke while coldly calculating my next targets. Against their enemy tide, I assessed and assimilated. I devoured and destroyed. In my wake, I was ravager unrelinquished, one without equal and without end. I splayed molten glass across my enemys' skins, keeping it heated despite the

water sapping the mass's heat. I tore their minds and souls apart, engulfing the corpses they left behind. Without a beginning nor end, I ripped apart their meager defenses.

They shattered beneath me, their fear absolute yet not enough to satiate my hunger. I was starving for the abomination's deaths, for I understood my purpose and what I was – one created to kill monsters. I was a destroyer of the blighted and without closure. On the passing horizons of their lives, I feasted on their fears. On their eventual deaths, I gave them release.

As their time passed and my showing finished, I moved back towards the bubble protecting my allies from the elements. The albony here existed as fragile, wispy entities. Why this water harmed them, I didn't fully understand. It left me wondering how they survived. I came to a realization – in many ways, I still did not understand the world I was in. Walking towards the others, I met the eye of Helios. I bowed before him,

"I hope that my performance was satisfactory."

The albony did not answer. I winced, my face unable to convey my disappointment. I must have failed. I expected this outcome from the beginning. Attempting to match my master was a foolish idea and an even more foolish course of action. How could I sustain through such a comparison? It was beyond me and my limited mind.

I waited for words scorched in venom and hatred. Instead, mocking words came towards ears that weren't my own. My creator whistled and spoke,

"Hah, told you so. He kicked some serious ass."

Helios murmured, "To think it could destroy with such abandon. I almost find it insulting that you'd bow to me, golem. It seems disingenuous."

I stared at the oceanic floor, dried sand over stone, "I mean no ill intent. I am merely showing respect given our positions."

Florence laughed before clapping loud, "Hah, and here I thought Obolis understood the cipher. A golem like this has never been created. There's no telling what Obolis would pay for this thing."

My creator spoke with pride, “He’s not for sale.”

Warmth spread in my mind at his words. He sounded pleased with my performance. Daniel tapped my back,

“Isn’t that right?”

I stood straight and looked him in the eye. I pointed at myself for clarification, “You wish for my opinion?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“But my opinion is irrelevant.”

My creator’s eyes rolled in his skull, “Pshh, I can tell we gave you a little too much humility.”

“It was the correct amount of humility, given my station as a tool. Tools should not correct their purpose. Their purpose is evident in their creation.”

Florence leaned closer to me, “I never imagined a golem could hold such philosophical approaches to life and existence. You’re an interesting fellow.”

I bowed to him, “Thank you.” Standing upright, I said, “As you are interested, I will convey my full understanding of my directives. My ultimate goal is the control and elimination of volatile life forms known as the eldritch. I also wish for the destruction of the Hybrids. My goals were predetermined, and they leave little room for confusion.”

I turned to my creator, “Thank you for giving me this peace. Living with doubt is painful, and I am glad I lack it.”

My creator brandished his knuckles while grinning wickedly,

“Speaking of Hybrids, how about we go kill some more of them?”

My own eyes showed red as his jagged smile oozed crimson,

“I do so willingly.”

-Daniel-

I stepped past Alpha, the golem menacing and bloodthirsty. It attacked the weak points of the Hybrids far more than expected, and I had a thing or two to learn from the guy. Alpha’s mind magic was geared towards the telepathic tetherings of the Hybrids and their rulers. By tearing at that weakness, he sent their carefully coordinated attacks into complete disarray.

Honing in on deficiencies was worth learning from since it made his fight more manageable than otherwise. When I hung onto battles desperately, I did the same. As of late, I crashed through my enemies without much thought, and that was a poor habit. Lessons learned aside, it looked like Ophelia’s coded desires for killing eldritch were working well. If anything, they might be a bit too effective. I didn’t want him to lose control of himself and get killed in the process. Keeping that in mind, I pointed at Florence and Kessiah,

“Sit beside them and keep them safe. That should give you plenty of Hybrids to kill as we move forward.”

Alpha bowed as usual, “As you will it, let it be so.”

I gestured to our vanguard of Alastair and Victoria, “Let’s go. We’ve got a long day ahead of us.”

Florence put his hands on his hips and looked down, “We do. The Hybrids attacked in mass last night. We’re going to need to retake a lot of the territory we conquered over the past few days.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Really now? Why isn’t the Empire able to keep the places we’ve given them?”

Florence shook his head, “They’re focusing primarily on more established planets where resources are plentiful. Getting them involved here is going to require an easy fix. I’m just hoping that our plan with Hod and Amara comes through. Otherwise, this planet will fall.”

I cracked my neck, “Then let’s get started.”

We began our assault, clearing out nearby Hybrids remaining from Alpha’s first attack. After that, we spent most of the day regaining pieces of Blegara that were under assault by newly crafted Hybrids. This meant we focused almost entirely on regaining already conquered territories, and despite our efforts, the war seemed decided. The Hybrids arrived in greater swarms each and every day. Their production, transport, and organization improved at every turn as well.

Our team kept pace, our skills improving as well. On the other hand, the Empire struggled. The Empire commissioned mercenaries to fight here, and while they patched holes in their ranks, the fighters costed credits. As more mercenaries died, the price for their services rose. This stressed the Empire further. If anything, it was a matter of time before this planet was crushed regardless of our influence.

It was a painful sight to take in. Our team couldn’t be everywhere at once, and the albony’s morale wore down as friendly reinforcements came in. These back up soldiers were from other, less nationalistic races which the Empire drafted from their many controlled planets. This hodgepodge of different species no longer cared for victory after seeing the losses and reports coming in.

They just wanted to survive. That short term mindset and lack of unity hurt the Empire’s chances of winning this war, exposing the issues with having their class system. After all, why would lower class members of a system fight to sustain the system pushing them into the dirt?

They wouldn’t, and they didn’t.

That scorn showed here. The mercenaries still fought well, but conscripted fighters from controlled worlds did not. Schema’s abject lack of support didn’t help matters either. Hybrids didn’t give as much experience as they were worth; the danger of facing one far outweighed the resulting reward. Simultaneously, Schema’s regrouping took time for his fleet, and these planets were left suffering for it.

Without our specialized team's support, Blegara would've fallen a week ago. I hadn't realized at the time, but we kept them afloat, my team's ability to clear Hybrids unmatched. It was a shame because Blegara, when untarnished, was a beautiful world. I found that out as we ran through its many territories along Saphigia's outskirts.

Here, at the edges of the conflict in the inner city, Vagni lived without the war hampering them. These villages fed the industrial might of their capital. As 'suburbs,' they showcased lives unperturbed by the war raging in the cityscape miles away. The Vagni here created means of subsistence, simple as they were, that supported their ways of life.

They roosted their collections of coral housing on elevated platforms of sandstone. In between these places, roadways were made from long threads etched with seashells. They followed these lines, finding various lofty landmarks to hang the strands on. Those markers carried different kinds of significance, and it wasn't uncommon to see Vagni leave food in those places.

Eldritch ate and nibbled there, and the offerings prevented attacks on the Vagni that traveled down these roads. They would be carrying enormous loads of various goods from seashells, corals, stones, foods, and preserved creatures. They harvested all these resources from the many farmlands we passed over.

Those homesteads carried many kinds of produce like clam farms created over artificial sandstone. The Vagni used the glue from barnacle-like creatures to solidify sand into these towers. On those towers, they implanted barnacles that filter fed to grow. These farms created vast fields of pillars situated along the flow of currents.

The water flow kept the filter feeders fed, and just beyond these clam ranges, the Vangi planted even vaster kelp farms. It was a smart plan as the pillar farms cleared the water of parasites, plankton, and other pests. This allowed kelp to grow without any impediment, giving them a quick, efficient production of foods.

Other kinds of industries showed themselves amidst all the clams, however. Those kelp farm setups required large lots of land actually, and competition for those prime territories was fierce. Some Vagni failed to succeed, ending up with lots of barren sand that weren't as expansive. To make ends meet, other plants were grown.

In these smaller farms, spots of shade sprinkled the horizon as they grew algae at the ocean's surface. These algae could be harvested more often than kelp, resulting in more food for less effort. I discovered all of this from fragmented, telepathic communications with Vagni in these areas. That wasn't all I learned either. Most vagni hated algae-based food, and it was considered fare for the poor.

That created a disdain for the algae farmers who blotted out portions of the sea-skyline. Vagni preferred open views of the ocean's surface, so lots of those farms actually lowered property values nearby. Many of these algae spots were considered ugly and unrefined, even by the cannibals.

Personally, I preferred the shady spots. They let the rest of the sunshine leak in from streaks, creating stripes of sunlight. Other parts of the countryside showed a few other individualized endeavors as well. One of the smaller clam farmers used the glue farmed from his barnacles to create shell statues.

The Vagni would crush the shells into pieces, then create a sand mosaic of the broken bits glued together. It impressed me enough that I bought a few using some of their currency, the old teeth of eldritch. I had plenty of those, having picked up quite a fortune of them yesterday alone.

It may sound like I was on vacation, but I used bits of freetime I had that others didn't. I worked with a team, and they needed breaks. During those downtimes, I explored these parts of this world. If anything, I enjoyed being here more than Giess. Though dark and brooding, the world held an edge that interested me.

That exploration was also how I found signs of our losing war effort as well. The Vagni once feared the albony as tyrants. Many Vagni watched those same tyrants be eaten alive. Having their territories taken and retaken over and over also put the neutral Vagni in a prey centric state of mind. They wanted order at any cost, and with the frequent setbacks the Empire experienced, the Vagni preferred Elysium's rule.

That was a general theme I'd seen so far. The Empire's efforts, while valiant, weren't comparable to Elysium's. This explained why the Vagni and the Adairs rebelled when they did. They enacted Torix's rendition of their plan precisely, overwhelming the Empire with an endless swarm of Hybrids. The Adairs kept meaningful casualties to a minimum, and over time, those lack of losses manifested as gains in territory.

These factors made Elysium confident in their victory here. By the end of the day, they weren't the only ones who understood who would win this war either. The Empire was simply giving up too much ground. Even though we succeeded yesterday, the Hybrids regained almost more than we could reconquer.

Those results left a bitter taste in my mouth as we finished fighting on Blegara for the day. As we warped back to Mt. Verner, I dwelled on the results of today. Our plan was the albony's only hope of keeping their planet, which left me peeved a bit. I expected better fighting efforts from Obolis. If anything, the Empire was more of an economic power than a warring one.

Our brand new guild, with its limited resources, was outdoing their planetary efforts for Blegara. That might not be the case elsewhere, but it was evident on the sea planet. This changed my mindset regarding the Empire. My approach up until now was one built on trusting them. After having seen the results of their battles, I now understood why Obolis offered to contract my guild in the first place. We provided a more valuable service than I first thought.

That wasn't to say my approach failed until now, but to make sure our guild got its worth, I pivoted my strategy here. As I paced up towards Torix's office of sorts, I resolved to get more out of this deal with the Empire. I was all for alliances, but I wasn't big on getting taken advantage of.

That left me thinking. Bartering for more of Obolis's treasures was a method of achieving my aims, but that left the Emperor with enormous control. He knew which pieces were valuable and which ones weren't, leaving me in the dark. I preferred a deal where I wasn't hoping he'd treat us well.

Those thoughts bounced in my head as I paced into Torix's everchanging lair. He situated himself on the third floor, expanding his many graphs, charts, and maps into a hallway leading to his residence. At this point, his pacing left stone rubbed raw, Torix's common walking paths evident.

Meandering along one of those blemished walkways, Torix walked up to me,

"Ah, it's good to see you again, disciple."

I gave the guy a nod, opening up my dimensional storage, "Yeah, it's good to see you too."

Torix locked his hands behind himself, “I believe you’ve some sort of sample or specimen to show me. I was wondering what it was.”

I pulled out one of the alien crystals I found along the bottom of Blegara’s many underwater trenches. With my other hand, I generated a stone table and pillar beneath it, giving me somewhere to set the gemstone,

“You and me both.”

The crystal glowed with a magenta hue, magnificent and vibrant. Torix locked in on the crystalline structure, his fascination apparent,

“Ah, I understand why you wanted us to inspect this. There’s little in the way of mana signatures resonating from these glowing structures. They lack any notable, geometric, or crystalline structures I’d see in most minerals as well.”

Torix peered back, “There’s no mind in these things either, though they seem to be... Hm, alive? Perhaps not. It’s hard to say.” He looked up at me, “It’s no wonder you brought them to me. I can barely make sense of these at all.”

Torix cackled, “Hah, interesting. Very interesting. I say we test these crystals and their reactions to a few specimens under my wing. What do you say to that proposition?”

I shrugged, “Eh, it can’t hurt.”

Torix’s fire eyes flared, “Not the both of us, at least. For others, well-” Torix scoffed,

“I’m sure they’ll live.”

-Althea-

I walked onto a different plane, peering onto the place where our team traveled. It was always strange going here. Nothing else lived in this place, yet I could view into the

other world while here. That let me traverse without anyone knowing where or who I was.

I held my breath as I did, and I used the ring Daniel gave us for flight. He used a remake of some model he gave to Ophelia, and it gave us a few things we could do. Flying was the most useful, but the other options helped a lot too in the right situation. It reminded me of him when I looked at the ring as well, and that was always a nice bonus.

I smiled as I hovered around the others. Isa, Lester, and Alexander all traveled together while serving as the visible team. Hod and I kept on their tails, keeping hidden in the back. We all agreed to lay low until the right moment arose, and that stopped us from being found out. Security was the most crucial factor for this mission, anyways. The last thing I wanted was another situation like the one on the Nebula Drifter.

Daniel ended up fighting Lehesion on his own, and we all just...ran away. My chest burned when I thought about that. I helped where I could with what the guild needed, but despite my efforts to the contrary, I wasn't able to do anything to help the people I cared about.

That, well, sucked. Real bad.

I took a breath, calming myself down and falling into a different state of mind. I'd gotten good at this since my solo missions out in the enemy's territory. It left me without any presence to speak of, even after I warped in. It was as if I stilled my mind until it was left unseen. They couldn't connect with what they couldn't sense, you know.

Hod's defense was similar. After talking with Other Hod, I learned it since we had plenty of time to chat during our many missions together. Other Hod used his push and pull with Hod's mind to his advantage. He pushed back as much as normal Hod pulled. This put them at a net-zero output of any thoughts, which their mind mages used to find us.

It was pretty smart, and that wasn't the only thing I learned about Other Hod. He was sweeter than I thought an eldritch could be, actually. He was terrified of Daniel, and he wallowed in guilt because he tore Hod's mind apart. It wasn't his fault or anything, even if he felt like it was. Other Hod gradually manifested in Hod over time as eldritch energy pooled in him. Neither of them could stop that.

I was just glad Hod was still around. He was funny, even when he didn't mean to be. Some other people hated how he talked, but I could relate since a part of me was eldritch too. Well, I guessed so. My eldritch half wasn't quite as talkative. It was, uh, more monstrous.

That's why I could be a monster so easily. I didn't like killing, but it was second nature to me. I mean that literally too; I allowed the eldritch part of me to manifest more. It stopped my guilt a lot of the time, and I wanted that part of me to take over when killing civilians. If anything, I relied on my eldritch half as much as Hod did, just in a different way.

Either way, I had plenty of time to think about all this stuff as we traveled South.

We were crossing a countryside that was split apart by the eldritch. Humanity didn't do poorly against the eldritch relative to what I'd seen elsewhere, but they didn't do particularly well either. The main problem was technology. Most of Earth was centuries behind several critical scientific breakthroughs, which left them reliant on more physical means of beating eldritch.

That worked for Daniel and a few others, but most people weren't able to handle the monsters consistently like that. People kind of congregated around the few individuals that could, though. That was the general theme outside Mt. Verner's immediate vicinity. People managed here because of our guild's influence. The tech and weapons we gave out helped a ton, too, making a positive influence present even many miles away.

However, the further we went from our base, the weaker Mt. Verner's positive influence was. Eventually, it waned to nothing. It was sad seeing communities turn from warm houses into ghost towns and isolated homes. That isolation was one of the hardest parts about a world overrun with eldritch – you couldn't travel anywhere.

If you did, you'd face so many monsters going anywhere that it left you vulnerable. People ended up bunkering down and trying to wait out the eldritch. That never worked since the beasts grew stronger every day. In the worst areas, ghost towns littered giant expanses with no humans left living. It was a different kind of hellscape than most, one where the eldritch fought each other in abandoned cities.

Dungeons clustered in those places, and the initial townspeople failed to hold back the hordes. The eldritch devoured them, and now they devoured each other. In some ways,

these places were more alive than before with how dense the monster clusters became. That's what happened when rifts were left unmanaged. The intense fighting of monster factions took over entirely as various eldritch vied for dominance over the others.

All that gloom and doom makes it sound pretty awful, but it wasn't all bad. We passed a few communities as we traveled South that, while paling in comparison to Mt. Verner, still served as sanctuaries for people. These were strange places built to last despite the post-apocalyptic nature of Blegara now.

These refuges cropped up in bunkers, military bases, and even refurbished dungeons. The bunkers carried weaponry and food that let people organize after the culling. As for the military bases, their weaponry lasted long enough that they out leveled the eldritch. I'm sure anyone that went into a dungeon and used it as a home was probably like Daniel, a fighter through and through.

It left me smiling after I saw those places, but not just because they reminded me of Daniel. Sometimes, children ran around and played in those places. Seeing those little guys run around and laugh, it warmed my soul more than I'd admit. I'd like to think that warmth stemmed from how cold my own childhood was.

I spent most of it in a lab, Yawm overseeing my development. He kept a noose of sorts around my neck, and that guaranteed I'd never escape. I was so reliant on suppressants to stop my eldritch energy from overwhelming me. I was lucky to meet Daniel and Torix when I did. I don't think anyone else could've or would've saved me from all that.

But yeah, seeing children grow up here without having to survive like that...yeah, it was pretty nice. I wanted more children to be raised like that, or bare minimum, better than what I went through. It would be a way of preventing other people from suffering, and to me, that sounded, I don't know, fulfilling?

Those ideas bounced around in my head as we began seeing signs of the Adair's village. I silenced those thoughts, knowing a misstep meant these three's deaths. Besides, the Adair's rebellion left me pretty busy with missions, so I didn't have time to make something like an orphanage anyways. Despite all that, it was fun to daydream about. It would be more fun than killing people.

I knew that much for sure.

Speaking of people, we saw more of them as we neared the Elysium camp. It didn't take long to travel a couple hundred miles when you could fly after all. Their presence wasn't as large as Mt. Verners, but it was still notable when compared to the no man's lands we passed by on the way here. This difference became very stark as we discovered Hybrids roaming various forests, hills, and mountainsides.

They culled eldritch, and espens followed them as they did. These people acted as forest rangers, making travel far safer in their immediate domain. It was a potent service, letting people handle a lot more moving around. This meant communities connected more, trade flourished, and rallying was actually a thing here.

Otherwise, people became isolated, and hope dwindled. These hope-giving routes etched out paths along old roads and forest trails. Along the way, we met caravaneers going from town to town, selling people rare goods as they did. Hybrids kept them secure, and this allowed people to form economies.

All of Elysium's peacekeeping efforts made me feel guilty about our own. The Legion did our best given our own circumstances, but we could afford to do more stuff like this. Keeping that in mind, I jotted down some of Elysium's practices on a note app in my status. I even took a few pictures to show Daniel and Torix. They pretty much decided most stuff in the guild, but I could get my say here or there when I needed too. With that in mind, I was sure they'd think this kind of thing was a good idea.

Getting within a few miles of the Elysium camp, we found farms guarded by Hybrids. At this point, they kept their community locked down and airtight. No eldritch roamed about. The land had been cleansed a while back. People could even travel along forested roads, many using carriages pulled by Hybrids.

It was a strange scene since I was so used to those monsters killing mercilessly. Here, they offered mercy instead of taking it. It was...I don't know, just odd to see.

Either way, we couldn't just float over the forests and roads here. We joined one of the main roads, leaving us walking on foot. As people passed by, they'd say hi, and Isa or Lester did most of the talking in those situations. They kept conversations short and sweet, questioning where work was nearby.

And of course, everyone in this area suggested going to the Elysium camp. They always needed competent dungeon clearers, and having three of them coming was

always welcome. No one mentioned mind screenings either on our way here. To me, that sealed the deal on the Adairs not knowing where the guild was.

They thought of Earth as a place to establish a presence early on in their rebellion. It also made it clear they really intended to help people and make up for what they did to Giess. That wasn't something done so quickly, and what they did to the gialgathens and espens was unforgivable. That being said, all of this was a pretty good start to an apology. If they kept at it, I wouldn't know who was the bad guy anymore.

It sucked when things weren't simple, but that's just how life was.

I didn't have time for any more of those thoughts as we neared the camp. Alexander wore an eldritch leather garb we bought from a shop in Mt. Verner's lower floors. The hand made outfit, knives, weapons, and satchels of different eldritch acids made him look like an alchemist. And, well, he was one, though his magic was definitely his strong suit. Right now, we couldn't have people knowing he was a wizard like Torix. No one knew much magic yet.

The other dungeoneers wore what they usually did. Isa stuck six or so spears on her back, each one ending in a vial of glowing green fluid and a sharpened piece of metal. These were bottles of acid, and they let her kill regenerative eldritch. The spears were for aiming the bottles at a farther distance than she could lob them. It also allowed her to hit fast eldritch too.

Lester stuck with bottles full of gasoline and styrofoam. He called them napalm bombs, and they worked a lot better than the Molotov cocktails I'd seen others use against the eldritch. On our way here, Lester used one against a handsy eldritch that came near him. The gunk in those bottles stuck to the monster, and it burned through the bones because the slop wouldn't come off.

They also wore handmade, eldritch leather wares. This kept an authentic, everyday look we saw from others here. I breathed a sigh of relief, thanking the craftsmen back on Mt. Verner. Florence helped with making them look authentic, the albony diplomat knowing a thing or two about appearances. His family treated him poorly despite all his skills, but of all the albony I'd met, I liked him and Caprika most.

I prayed these disguises would work as we walked into the visual range of the Adair's site. It rested just beyond a hill, nestled in a valley. As we passed one of the surrounding hills, we got a nice, overhead view of the entire place from above. It made sense why

Torix's scouts found this place since they weren't exactly hiding. Besides that, I was immediately impressed and put off guard.

What impressed me was the amount of construction, time, and freedom people had. It was night and day compared to the other towns near here. The dungeons nearby worked as farming grounds for collecting eldritch and leveling up individuals. Hybrids walked in open daylight, but their owners covering them with robes to keep their bodies hidden. Children played and laughed in fields past the city, and they had a few places set out for them too.

However, what put me off guard was the portion of metal spires lifting up from the center of the encampment. They let the silvers manifest here, though I didn't know how exactly. Earth lacked the mana pollution Giess did, and without it, the silvers would starve. That didn't stop the silvers here, a few of their alien, disgusting forms looking our way from atop their spires.

They didn't so much as think of getting out of their prison, however. The Adairs used electrified wire to keep the silvers in place, the fences rising high into the sky. Surrounding this silver prison was a town composed of many materials, especially metals. Espens with Hybrid servants walked up to the silvered territory and stripped it of its steel. Using that metal, mages would sear the iron into usable lengths for building purposes.

With those pieces, they worked on making homes for refugees pouring into the place. The farms on the outskirts here sold their goods to the city, it seemed, and they dispensed food as needed. They even had established schools. It was...developed, and more than I expected at that. I didn't know what to make of it, but I made sure to take screenshots of everything I saw.

Beyond those initial, large buildings, smaller wooden ones sprinkled about. They used mud and sod for making the homes, and people piled into the safe zone to keep their children and families safe. Many looked like they were volunteering for the Adairs, lines leading into various combat training zones.

These wooden houses gave way to cleared fields, and past that was a perimeter of fences and Hybrid guards. We paced up to that line before standing in a line leading into the city, the three adventurers exposed while Hod and I stayed hidden. Holding our breaths, we waited until we reached two remnants. They both had white hair and were highly leveled, each over 5,000. Elysium suited them up with armor similar in style and

fashion to Sentinels, but neither wore helmets. They did carry some dangerous spears though, the violet, antimatter blades crackling about.

The burliest of the two guards spoke in a rough voice, “Who are you three, and what’s your business here?”

I let out a mental sigh of relief. The remnants didn’t notice Hod or me. At least not yet. Isa answered for the group, gesturing towards Alexander and Lester,

“We’re just dungeon clearing specialists looking for work. We heard about this place a couple dozen miles back, and we were hoping for somewhere to settle. I’ll tell you what though, this is more than I imagined it would be.”

Isa spoke with a very matriarchal tone in her voice. It was a bit jagged, but in a way that commanded respect. I was glad she was doing the talking as the remnants stared at each other. The burly one reached out a hand, and they shook hands as he grinned at her,

“It’s good to have you then. We can always use more fighters. Head over towards the fighter’s guild. They’ll get you sorted and put to work if that’s what you’re wanting.”

Isa nodded, “Damn straight. It’s chaos everywhere but here, and we aim to fix that.” She gave a sly grin, “Though a bit of compensation never hurt.”

The other remnant scoffed, “You’ll get plenty of rewards. Trust me on that.”

They pointed their spears past an opened gate, and we all walked in. It wasn’t a futuristic set up by any means, and they’d only been here for a month at most. Noting those details, we walked into the wooded town area right past the perimeter. We paced past a few people before moseying our way through the site.

Of those people, most were espens. A few remnants and humans sprinkled about, however. Some of those humans even carried Hybrid companions. After walking further in, we got lost in alleyways and streets, so Lester knocked on one of the doors to ask for directions. An older man opened the door, and his son and wife waited in their home behind him.

A remnant doctor placed a palm on the wife's forehead, both their eyes closed. Lester frowned, tilting his head to get a better look at her,

"Is she alright?"

The man at the entrance answered, "Not really. We were trapped in our farmhouse ever since the culling, and Margret was scrambled up bad by some strange eldritch. This here alien is seeing if she can't help her."

Lester winced, "I'm sorry about that. I hope she gets better."

"You and me both. What are you knocking for?"

Lester pointed behind him, "We're looking for the fighter's guild, and we got lost. Do you know the way?"

Phil put his hands on his hips, "I do. I can take you there real quick if you want. It's really no trouble."

Lester grinned back, "That would be great, actually."

The man stepped out, reaching out a hand. As they shook, he said,

"The name's Phil. Yours?"

"Lester. This is Isa and Alexander."

Phil gave them a nod of acknowledgment before walking down the steps into his home. As he did, his own Hybrid walked out with him. It stepped past Isa and Lester, Alexander eyeing it with suspicion. Phil turned to his Hybrid then back to us,

"Oh, you three must be new. These guys aren't so bad. I've already managed to get a lot of use out of this thing, and he wasn't so hard to get either."

Alexander's eyes narrowed, "Wouldn't that exile you from Schema's system? That might not be the best long term move."

Phil shook his head, staring at Alexander with sad eyes,

"Boy, you might not know this by now, but this world's a hard place. It got a lot harder after the culling too. Now I know I might get stronger one day, but my family needs me. I'll do whatever it takes to keep them safe. If that means getting exiled from Schema's system, then so be it."

Phil stared forward, "It's like this – we've got to survive today before we can start thinking about tomorrow."

Lester cut in, "Don't we know it. Are you ready to go?"

Phil pointed in a direction, "Right this way."

Before they sauntered off, the Hybrid stared faced in my direction. Its orange pustules pulsed under the membranes holding its orange gunk in. A chill ran up my spine before they walked off. They looked like they had this situation under control for the most part. Sending a message to them, I split off from the group and explored a few nearby homes.

From peeking my head through the windows, I found people resting, setting up meals, and preserving food. Sometimes, Hybrids assisted with these tasks, even regular civilians using them however they wanted. Children even played with them at times, the Hybrid presence entirely normalized.

It left me unsettled. The mechanical monstrosities were powerful beings, and our team could kill them, but most couldn't. If one of these things went running through the streets eating people, no one would stop it. The best bet would be the occasional remnant that guarded certain critical areas of the city. Outside of that, no one stood a chance.

Those weren't the only unsettling details lying under the surface of this utopia. I discovered several lines of people leading to different places in the town. Most of these lines ended in administrator work for organizing people. I kept checking just in case, however.

After an hour or two of searching, one of these queues ended in the entire village's largest building. It was a brick building without windows, and as I walked nearby, the smell of a sterilized hospital leaked out. I walked past two guards, each a remnant heavily armored with a Hybrid at their side. Passing brick reinforced with metal, I found orichalcum and runic configurations tracing this place's inner sanctum. It reminded me of the prison Thisbey placed me in. Unlike that place, this center was more technologically realized.

The main floor kept a clean, open look that stopped the lab from seeming stuffy and ominous. They even kept the lights less fluorescent, making it homier than usual. Well, homier than most labs, at least. It creeped me out still, mostly as I walked past a wall covered in vials full of a clear liquid.

I wondered what they were for until a person from outside walked in. The older woman stepped past me, the wind off her walk brushing past my hair. As she stepped up, a remnant doctor paced up to her. He put a hand on her shoulder,

“Are you sure about this?”

She gave the nod, and they went forward. The older woman selected one of the vials, and after getting it from its case, they walked towards the back of the lab. I followed, pacing past two more guards. As I walked into the next room, chills ran up my spine.

This was...disgusting.